Modernism or the Long Nineteenth Century

If we define modernism (with Heidegger) as the epoch of the rule of aesthetics, the corollary of this definition is the loss of a nonaesthetic relation to art, which Heidegger understands as the inevitable consequence of the decline of great art. This decline cannot be measured aesthetically. It is not a question of the style of the work or the qualities of the artist. Artworks are great when they accomplish art’s essential task: to make manifest “what beings as a whole are,” by “establishing the absolute definitively as such in the realm of historical man.” There is thus a direct correlation between the rise of aesthetics and the decline of great art; the greatness of the “final and greatest aesthetics in the Western tradition” (Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*) is due to its recognition of the end of great art.¹ In turn, this recognition defines the position of art in the long nineteenth century that encompasses for Heidegger the last third of the eighteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries (1: 85).

At the center of the long nineteenth century Heidegger places Richard Wagner and the will to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Even though Wagner failed, even though his work and his influence became the very opposite of great art, Heidegger can

nevertheless conclude that “the will itself remains singular for its time. It raises Wagner—in spite of his theatricality and recklessness—above the level of other efforts focusing on art and its essential role in existence” (1: 87). “With reference to the historical position of art, the effort to produce the ‘collective artwork’ remains essential” (1: 85). It signifies that the artwork “should be a celebration of the national community. It should be the religion” (1: 86). This “ambiguous” evaluation of Wagner comes from Heidegger’s 1936–37 lectures entitled “Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art.” It is clearly directed against a Third Reich in Wagner’s image, a Third Reich that has failed like Wagner to achieve the great collective work of art and to satisfy an absolute need. What Heidegger objects to in Wagner’s conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk is not so much the “quantitative unification” of the arts as the domination of the word by music, the domination in other words of the pure state of feeling that denies what only “great poetry and thought can create” (1: 88). Nietzsche’s struggle against Wagner’s theatricality and against the decadence of the age thus acquires in Heidegger’s eyes a signal importance for the struggle of the German people to grasp their historical determination and find their own historical essence (1: 104). And yet Heidegger’s judgment on Nietzsche is also ambiguous: “Whereas for Hegel it was art—in contrast to religion, morality, and philosophy—that fell victim to nihilism and became a thing of the past, something nonfactual, for Nietzsche art is to be pursued as the counter-movement. In spite of Nietzsche’s essential departure from Wagner, we see in this an outgrowth of the Wagnerian will to the ‘collective artwork’” (1: 90).

As he sees it, Heidegger’s ambiguous judgment on Wagner is tied up with the ambiguity of the long nineteenth century, revealed in the midcentury intersection of two opposed currents, that of the still-preserved tradition of the great age of the German movement after 1770, and that of the “slowly expanding wasteland” of the second half of the century, “the growing impoverishment and deterioration of existence occasioned by industry, technology, and finance” (1: 85, 88). If we step back from Heidegger’s German focus, we can observe that the 1848 revolutions and their defeat mark a new stage in the history of the total work of art that is reflected in Wagner’s own development after 1848. Wagner’s retreat from his revolutionary enthusiasm was reinforced by his reading in 1854 of Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation. Schopenhauer’s distinction between the Will and the world of phenomena, replicated in his distinction between music as the direct expression of the Will and the other arts, led Wagner, notably in his Beethoven essay of 1870, to a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between music and the word in the music drama.2 The Beethoven essay stands between Art and Revolution (1849) and Religion and Art (1880): it signals the passage of redemptive power from revolution to music. The universal revolution of humanity, from which the artwork of the future was to spring, has been replaced by the redemptive power of

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2. Wagner’s Beethoven is a key text for Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of music in Geist der Utopie (1918; 2nd rev. ed., 1923), written in anticipation of the “transcendent opera” to come. See chapter 5.
Beethoven’s music, now declared capable of canceling the modern world of civilization. German music against French civilization: Wagner’s 1849 vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the festival drama and civil religion of a liberated humanity, the synthesis of the French Revolution and German idealism, disintegrates after 1848. It would be too simple, however, to treat 1848 as the defining watershed of the long nineteenth century. There is both continuity and discontinuity across this divide. Nationalism had already emerged as a potent mobilizing ideology in the wake of the French Revolution, just as the internationalism of its revolutionary message remains an active force up to the Bolshevik Revolution and beyond. Nevertheless, we can observe a growing tendency for the vision of political-religious redemption to split apart and divide into esoteric doctrines of aesthetic salvation and an emerging conception of mass politics. Despite this social divergence these two lines retain their link in aesthetics, the common denominator of the modernist epoch. Nietzsche’s own ambivalence in relation to Wagner, which made him first Wagner’s most eloquent advocate and then his unrelenting critic, is matched by that of Mallarmé. Both Mallarmé (1842–98) and Nietzsche (1844–1900) affirm the absolute need of great art at the same time as they assert the primacy of “great poetry and thought” against the seductive power of music. Both are led through their agon with Wagner and the idea of the total work of art to confront the question of *aesthetic illusion* and to ponder the staging of the absolute in the age of aesthetics that is also the age of nihilism.

**The Birth of Tragedy: Nietzsche**

Nietzsche’s passionate advocacy of Wagner was preceded by Baudelaire’s enthusiastic reception in his essay “Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris” (1861). The essay was not in fact prompted by the performance of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opera in 1861 but by the concerts Wagner had given in January and February 1860 in Paris. The essay elaborates Baudelaire’s letter to Wagner of 17 February 1860, in which he thanked the composer for the greatest musical pleasure he had ever experienced. Although this experience was indescribable, Baudelaire ventures to translate it for Wagner: “At first it seemed to me that I knew this music . . . that this music was mine, and I recognized it as everyone recognizes the things they are destined to love.” What appealed to Baudelaire with such power was the music’s sense of grandeur, the combination of religious ecstasy and sensual pleasure that enraptured and subjugated at the same time—the supreme paroxysm of the soul that Baudelaire tries to convey through the image of an ever more intense incandescence. The essay also undertakes a translation of the music into words by means of comparison of three descriptions of the *Lohengrin* Overture—Wagner’s program notes, Liszt’s commentary, and Baudelaire’s own response—in order to identify

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the common elements of these translations: spiritual and physical bliss; contemplation of something infinitely great and beautiful; luminous intensity, amounting to a sensation of space expanding to the ultimate conceivable limits. “Absolute solitude…immensity as such.” “Wagner possesses the art of translating by subtle gradations everything that is excessive, immense, ambitious in spiritual and natural man.” He had been subjected to a revelation, Baudelaire declares, and craves to experience this pleasure again.4

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe attributes Baudelaire’s total submission to Wagner to the poet’s self-recognition in this music, a recognition that allows him to concede the superiority of German art and of drama as the most synthetic and perfect art, the art form par excellence through the coincidence of the arts, while yet translating Wagner back into a statement of his own poetic aesthetic.5 Thus in place of the coincidence of the arts Baudelaire advances his own doctrine of synaesthetic correspondences, which he first mentions in 1846 with reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “Kreisleriana.” Baudelaire repeats here in this opposition the two complementary approaches to the idea of totality and the total work of art that come from German romanticism: synaesthesia, where the reciprocal sympathy of the arts preserves the independence of the individual arts as the path to totality, and the idea of the synthesis of the arts in the collective work of art.6 It would be truly surprising, he writes, “if sound could not suggest colour, if colours could not give the idea of a melody, or that sound and colour were unsuited to translate ideas, given that things have always expressed themselves by reciprocal analogy from the day that God uttered the world as a complex and indivisible totality,” citing as evidence his own sonnet “Correspondances” from Les fleurs du mal (1861).7 Universal reciprocal analogy makes the artist the privileged medium who senses the correspondences between our (fallen) world and the higher world and creates an art that points beyond the visible world to our (forgotten) divine origin—a recurrent Platonic but also gnostic feature of romanticism and symbolism. In recognizing the spiritual affinity of composer and poet, Baudelaire recognizes in Wagner’s music the native language of the subject prior to the Fall, the original totality that still speaks to us in correspondences. Lacoue-Labarthe cites here “L’invitation au voyage”:

Tout y parlerait
À l’âme en secret
Sa douce langue natale.

Such a pre-memory transcends death and finitude with a promise of immortality.8

7. Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, 784.
Nietzsche recognized a kindred spirit when he discovered Wagner's letter of thanks for Baudelaire's essay in Baudelaire's posthumously published works. He copied the entire letter in his letter of 26 February 1888 to Peter Gast, adding: “If I am not mistaken, Wagner wrote a letter expressing this kind of gratitude only one other time: after receiving *The Birth of Tragedy*.”

Nietzsche’s defining opposition in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) between Athenian and Alexandrian culture, tragic and theoretical worldviews, rephrases Saint-Simon’s opposition of organic and critical epochs. As with Wagner, Nietzsche’s philosophy of history reduces Saint-Simon’s cyclic-progressive conception to the stark contrast between an original moment of greatness—pre-Socratic thought and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles—and the following two thousand years of European decadence. If Nietzsche’s manifesto for the total work of art—“the birth of tragedy from the spirit of music”—revisits the theme of the artwork to come that will herald the dawn of a new organic age, it is with the certainty of its advent in the music drama of Wagner. Antiquity and modernity meet in reciprocal illumination across the two thousand years of decadence. Through Schopenhauer, Nietzsche grasps these two privileged moments of the birth of tragedy as springing from the highest creative tension between Will and Representation, the Dionysian ground of being and the Apollonian realm of beautiful semblance. Just as Greek tragedy is close to its origins in Dionysian rite, so comparably Wagner’s *opus metaphysicum* recovers the tragic truth of being at the same time that it transcends it through the release from the bonds of individuation. Collective Dionysian excitement brings forth the god in the dream vision of the stage representation, which holds us fast in its spell of aesthetic illusion. This beautiful vision, however, is no more than the mask of the god, the mask that shelters us from horror. In the moment of tragic insight the veil of Maya is torn aside, and we experience the horror and the ecstasy of the shattering of the principle of individuation: the sublime moment of self-oblivion in which we become one with the god.

Nietzsche’s affirmation of the eternal life of Dionysian nature, the “glowing life” uniting man and nature, is close to Hölderlin’s religion of nature in *Empedokles*. Indeed, Nietzsche’s enthusiastic evocation of the festival of reconciliation between nature and its estranged children echoes Empedokles’ evocation of the return of the golden age and Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”:

Singing and dancing the individual expresses himself as member of a higher communion: he has forgotten how to walk and talk, and is about to fly dancing into the heavens. His gestures express enchantment. Just as the animals now speak, and the earth yields up milk and honey, he now gives voice to supernatural sounds: he feels like a god, he now walks about enraptured and elated as he saw the gods walk in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness amidst the paroxysms of intoxication. The noblest clay, the most precious marble, man, is kneaded and hewn here, and to the chisel blows of the Dionysian world-artist
there echoes the cry of the Eleusinian mysteries: “Do you bow low, multitudes? Do you sense the Creator, world?”

Like Hölderlin, Nietzsche attached the highest expectations to tragedy as the expression of the “innermost life force of a people.” The dissatisfied culture of modern civilization bears witness to the loss of our mythical home. We no longer comprehend how closely art and the people, myth and custom (Sitte), tragedy and the state, are intertwined. The downfall of tragedy, which entailed the downfall of myth, signified the destruction of the Greek art religion by Socratic enlightenment, both cause and product of the dissolution of organic culture. This process of critical dissolution enacts the fatal logic of secularization (Verweltlichung).

Carl Dahlhaus argues that Wagner’s Beethoven and Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy (1872) transformed Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music into a philosophy of history. One could equally argue that they transform Wagner’s Feuerbachian religion of human divinity in The Ring and its revolutionary philosophy of history into a metaphysics of music. Now it is the drama of the world Will rather than the drama of Man that has become the subject of Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s opus metaphysicum. The Ring, conceived prior to 1848, is replaced by Tristan and Isolde. It is for Nietzsche the drama of the endless striving of individuated desire to find redemption in the return to the “innermost ground of the world.” Nietzsche’s interpretation of Tristan and Isolde as a reenactment of the ur-drama of the Will makes us participants in the world theatre. Redemption no longer lies in revolutionary action but in metaphysical insight. Nietzsche’s metaphysical aesthetics (to be understood as pertaining both to sense perception and to art) has the paradoxical consequence of simultaneously depotentiating and potentiating illusion. We are called upon to see through the stage illusion into the heart of the world mystery and at the same time to affirm the eternal justification of existence and the world as aesthetic phenomenon. Aesthetic illusion thus possesses a double truth—that it is only illusion and that there is no truth outside of illusion. Nietzsche can therefore proclaim that art is greater than truth, that the Wagnerian music drama, in renewing Greek tragedy, completes the cycle of history from origin to rebirth. A tragic sense of life, worthy of the Greeks, has been recovered; it will sweep away the delusions of Socratic enlightenment. Aesthetic illusion will triumph over science, in the form of the conjoined truth of the Dionysian and the Apollonian and their double aesthetic of the sublime and the beautiful.

The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche’s metaphysical manifesto of the total work of art, thus stages the absolute and grasps this staging as the second-order truth of the world illusion, which frees us from the illusions of the principle of individuation in order to open our eyes to the tragic truth of existence. The absolute in this sense is


nothing but our life illusion, whether it be religion, science, or art. The Nietzschean
rebirth of tragedy thus calls for a tragic philosophy strong enough to affirm the
will to illusion as the eternal justification of the world and existence, just as tragic
philosophy calls for great art. Great art is defined in Nietzsche’s perspective by the
dual aspect of *aesthetic illusion*—if the Dionysian Will constitutes the noumenal
truth of the Apollonian dream vision, the latter in turn constitutes the phenomenal
redemption of the Will.

Nietzsche’s reversal of the pessimism of his first master, Schopenhauer, pres-
egages the coming break with his second master, Wagner. In *The Birth of Tragedy*,
Nietzsche presents the music drama as the musical goal of European history, which
heralds cultural renewal against the decadence and nihilism of modern civilization
by announcing the coming victory of myth over enlightenment. Nietzsche’s diag-
nosis of contemporary society does not change after the break with Wagner; what
changes is his evaluation of the significance of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*,
which is now interpreted not as the overcoming but as the foremost symptom of
decadence. Once again it is a question of the meaning of aesthetic illusion. Precisely
because art is worth more than the truth, precisely because art is the countermove-
ment to decadence, cultural and political renewal demands the capacity to recog-
nize and respond to great art and the grand style, that is to say, the strength to fight
against the “genius” of the nineteenth century—epitomized in Nietzsche’s eyes by
Victor Hugo’s and Wagner’s sophisticated combination of charlatanry and virtu-
osity. At stake is the struggle against the romantic, musical “genius” of the mod-
erns, for like everything modern, romanticism is ambiguous:

Is music, modern music, not already decadence? … The answer to this first-rank
question of values would not remain in doubt if the proper inferences had been
drawn from the fact that music achieved its greatest ripeness and fullness as roman-
ticism— … Beethoven the first great romantic, in the sense of the French conception
of romanticism, as Wagner is the last great romantic—both instinctive opponents of
classical taste, of severe style—to say nothing of “grand style.”

Heidegger follows Nietzsche in pitting great poetry and thought against the
dangerous seductions of music. Mallarmé likewise felt himself compelled to re-
spond to the challenge of the Wagner cult that had led his closest colleagues to
establish the *Revue wagnérienne* in 1885. That he felt the need to defend poetry

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12. Ibid., Aph. 825 (1887).
13. Ibid., Aph. 842 (1888).
14. See Alain Satgé, “L’oeuvre d’art totale et les symbolistes français: L’exemple de la *Revue wagnérienne*
against music lay not simply in his recognition of the “divine” power of music. Wagner posed the question, in Heidegger’s words, of the situation of art in the nineteenth century, the Hegelian question of the possibility of great art in modernity. To defend poetry against music meant for Mallarmé no less than for Nietzsche the justification of the world and existence through art—in other words, the possibility of the poetic as opposed to the musical total work of art.

The Great Work: Mallarmé

“More and better than Nietzsche, he lived the death of God”—thus Jean-Paul Sartre’s judgment on Mallarmé, “hero, prophet, magus, and tragedian.”15 What distinguished Mallarmé from his fellow poets, “playing consciously in their work and in their life the misery of man without God,” is that he lived out the truth of this comedy, the truth of this idea of poetry.16 The price of his truth, however, was ambiguity raised to an absolute: poetry must negate itself if it is to be equal to the truth of nihilism. The project of a negative poetics (echoing Friedrich Schlegel’s programme of romantic irony), which governed his life’s work, is announced in a letter of the young Mallarmé: “Yes, I know, we are no more than empty forms of matter, but truly sublime for having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend! That I want to give myself this spectacle of matter…proclaiming before the Nothing which is the truth, these glorious lies!”17 This knowledge transforms the poet—henceforth to be understood as a “disposition of the Spiritual Universe to see itself and develop itself”18—into philosopher, the work into the opus metaphysicum, and poetry into the idea of absolute literature: “‘literature’ because it is knowledge that claims to be accessible only and exclusively by way of literary composition; ‘absolute’ because it is a knowledge that one assimilates in search of an absolute and that thus draws in no less than everything.”19 Whether we speak with Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy of the “literary absolute,” born of German romanticism, or with Roberto Calasso of “absolute literature,” the two delineate in Calasso’s eyes the heroic age of literary modernism that “begins in 1798 with a review, the Athenaeum, … and ends in 1898 with the death of Mallarmé in Valvins.”20

16. Ibid., 66.
The heroic age of literary modernism begins and ends with the impossible project of the Book, conceived as a new Bible by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis and as the true modern cult by Mallarmé. Whether we think of this project in literary terms as pointing forward to the vanishing point of the literary absolute, Maurice Blanchot’s “book to come,” or in religious terms as looking back to the religions of the book, to be renewed from absolute literature, it is clear that literary modernism is born with the will to reclaim the absolute, and that the idea of absolute literature amounts to a reformulation of the old art religion. But it is also clear that the new art religion is absolutely ambiguous in nature. The will to fabricate a new mythology scarcely disguises modernism’s founding myth of an absolute poetic creativity, vested in the romantic genius and grounded in the assumption of correspondence between mind and universe. Novalis’s Fichtean and Mallarmé’s Hegelian self-understanding of their poetic role announces a self-deification that privileges the mind as the key to the universe. The discovery of the “intimate correlation” between poetry and the universe allows Mallarmé to assert that the universe will recover in him (“in this self”) its identity, just as Novalis can state in his unfinished/unfinishable novel of the education of the orphic poet, Heinrich von Ofterdingen, that the higher voice of the universe speaks through the poet. Although the positing of a correspondence between mind and universe, micro- and macrocosm, has multiple sources in antiquity, notably in Neoplatonism and in the hermetic writings, the idea of the absolute Book, the idea, that is, of a new religion as a product of poetic invention is distinctly modern.

We find Friedrich Schlegel writing to Novalis in December 1798 that he intended to found a new religion, claiming that he has history on his side: “The great authors of religion—Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Luther—became progressively less and less politicians and more and more teachers and writers.”

Thus across the heroic age of modernism the dream of a revived art religion forms a recurrent counterpoint to Hegel’s relegation of the reality and the possibility of the concept to the past. In other words, we are dealing here with a post-Enlightenment project. Along with Nietzsche, Mallarmé spells out the truth of modernism’s myth of absolute creation—the God we have invented is nothing more than our fiction. Does this truth complete and crown the Enlightenment (as Robespierre and Saint-Simon and Comte or Novalis, Schlegel, Wagner, or

Nietzsche could well argue), or does it confirm the dialectic of enlightenment that haunts modernism? In this altogether ambiguous constellation the modern poet feels called to create a new mythology—but in the knowledge that this creation can only be a consciously produced, second-order creation, assembled from the remains of the old mythologies. As such, it must be a mythology of mythologies, a mythology of reason in the sense that the Book will present the schema, the abstract of all sacred books, all myths, and all knowledge.  

The Book is to be understood as a higher-order art religion and as a higher-order totality, through which mankind and the universe come to self-knowledge and self-identity. Novalis writes to Schlegel in November 1798: “You write about your Bible project; I too have come through the study of science and its body, the book—to the idea of the Bible, the Bible as the ideal of every book. The theory of the Bible, developed, will give the theory of writing and of word formation—which will give at the same time the symbolic indirect constructive method of the creative spirit.”

Mallarmé likewise conceives the Book as the demonstration and exemplification of the symbolic constructive method of the creative spirit, the ideal source that is to be abstracted from the contingencies of chance and history. That is to say, Mallarmé’s Book formalizes and absolutizes the romantic programme of poeticizing the world—hence (with Novalis) the constructive, not to say magic, power deemed to reside in the word, in word formations and combinations (reinforced by mathematical calculations); and (with Mallarmé) the symbolic power to be attributed to the printed word on the page and to the form of the Book. The Book literally realizes the magic powers of Orpheus. As the ideal of all books, the Book raises to a second order the virtue inherent in the word: its capacity to poeticize the world by its transmutation of the world into the cosmos of meaning, or more exactly, its capacity to lead the reader into the workshop of the meaning-constructing spirit. Calasso’s heroic age is defined by a Pascalian wager against a mute and meaningless universe. Novalis’s magic idealism at the beginning of the century yields to Nietzsche and Mallarmé’s open embrace of myth and fiction against cosmic nihilism but also of course against the nihilism of a decadent and materialistic modernity.

The idea of the Book belongs to the esoteric tradition since the Renaissance, embracing such distinct strands as hermeticism, alchemy, Christian Kabbalah, and Bohemian theosophy. These strands have in common an underlying core of ancient
wisdom that constituted the tradition of *philosophia perennis* or *occulta*. The defining components of this diffuse tradition of Western esoterism are clearly integral to Mallarmé’s Book (see chapter 6). The unity of mind and universe is expressed in the idea of *correspondence*, believed to exist between all parts of the universe, visible and invisible. The correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm enable us to read the *book of nature* and give us through this knowledge a magic power—the orphic tradition that informs Novalis’s magic idealism and Mallarmé’s poetic mission of *transmutation*: the great alchemical work of the purification of self and nature. Mallarmé, the poet-inventor who lays claim to the vacant place of the creator God, continues the romantic dream of challenging and displacing the natural sciences as the successor to religion. Paul Bénichou calls Mallarmé the last spiritual hero of romanticism, who carries the romantic sacralization of poetry to its limit in the idea of a Book encompassing the totality of human history. After Victor Hugo and Baudelaire, Mallarmé represents the third and final stage of nineteenth-century romanticism.

Moreover, like Baudelaire, Mallarmé remained faithful to the founding project of romanticism—to provide modern man with a new version of the relations between the temporal and the spiritual. It is, however, a project that has become impossible and leads the poet to withdraw into the silence and solitude of a negative poetics. And yet it is precisely in this isolation that Mallarmé searches for an answer to the challenge of Wagner. Confronted by the prestige of Bayreuth, he oscillates between the rival claims of the Book and the Theatre, the Bible of esoterism and the Theatre of the people. The contradiction between a religion for the few and a religion for the people, between the sacred calling and the isolation of the poet, is built into the dream of a redemptive regeneration of art and society. It draws the poet-outsider on the one hand to the consolation of the invisible church of the elect, on the other hand to the phantasm of the collective artwork, the communal theatre that will consecrate and celebrate the romantic trinity of God-Poet-Humanity. The Theatre and the Book as the two possibilities of the Great Work thus figure as complements and rivals in Mallarmé’s thinking. But how can the Work be private and not public? The esoteric poet, withdrawn from the world, head of a self-anointed avant-garde of symbolists, cannot escape the blatant social contradiction between the dreams of an artistic elite and the crowd, between the aristocratic and the democratic principles. Hence the challenge posed by Wagner’s public resonance and by the undeniable magic of music, into which Mallarmé was initiated, appropriately, on Good Friday 1885, through the Lamoureux orchestral

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concerts, which he called his Sunday religious service. Recalling this concert series, Mallarmé’s young protégé, Paul Valéry, writes:

At the same time intense stimulation of interior life and communion. For a thousand beings assembled, who close their eyes for the same reasons, experience the same transport, feel themselves alone with themselves and yet identified through this intimate emotion with so many of their fellows truly become their equals (semblables), constitute the religious condition par excellence, the sensible unity of a living plurality. This cult, this sacred function, this service, it was celebrated in my youth at the Cirque d’Été.  

Valéry echoes here the sentiments of his master in “Plaisir sacré” (Sacred Pleasure), where Mallarmé declares that music announces the last and full human cult. Music satisfies the need of the multitude for the Absolute, for the Unsayable, for poetry without words. The crowd, listening “unconsciously to its own greatness,” participates in the figuration of the divine, fulfilling thereby its paramount function of guarding the secret of its own collective grandeur that resides in the orchestra. The conductor accordingly contains what Mallarmé calls the chimera, that is, “the sensible unity of a living plurality,” manifested in the reciprocity of music and audience, the crowd and the god.

Mallarmé’s crowd is the chimera, the fabulous animal made up of various animals, which symbolizes the fusion of the many into the one. It is Hobbes’s Leviathan, the still-unconscious General Will, from which all sovereignty proceeds—in the aesthetic, religious, and political spheres. Mallarmé grounds the idea of the total work of art in the self-communion of the crowd as the instituting source of the sublime unity of art, religion, and politics, waiting to be consecrated and instituted in a public cult, in the civil religion of the people. But this is precisely what the banality of modern civilization precludes. The modern city lacks the divine theatre in which the “future Spectacle” can be staged. And yet the French poet senses “the colossal approach of an Initiation.” He even gestures in a later essay, “Solennité,” in suitably fin-de-siècle style to the impending conclusion of a cycle of History, announced by the Overture to a Jubilee. If this apocalyptic moment demands the office, the ministry, of the Poet, it is because a new age demands a new art, that is, a new cult, modeled on and superseding the Mass. The solitary poet denies that he is dreaming when he anticipates like Nietzsche the return of a tragic sense of religion and death, manifested in the return of the God, the Divinity in each of us, humble foundation of the City: “‘Real Presence’: or that the god be there, diffuse,

31. Mallarmé, Oeuvres complètes, 388–90.
32. Ibid., 541.
total, mimed distantly by the effaced actor, known by us, trembling in proportion to all glory, latent if undue to us in that way, that he [the actor] assumed, then renders, imbued with the authenticity of the words and the light, triumphal of Homeland, Honour, Peace.”

In the light of the sacrifices it demands of us on the battlefield, the state owes us such a patriotic cult and with it the apotheosis of the arts that only a capital city can provide. Throne and altar—royalty, military, aristocracy, clergy—can no longer fulfill this task. But can the solitary poet take their place? The tragic fiction, the *opus metaphysicum*, offered by Nietzsche and Mallarmé—is this a fiction to die for? All the ironies of the dialectic of enlightenment that inaugurated the nineteenth century return at the end of the century in magnified form. The solitary poet or the solitary philosopher represents the one, conscious side of the fiction; the crowd the other, unconscious side. Is their reciprocal truth that dreamt of by the German romantics—a mythology of reason, the state as work of art? Or has this sacred truth become a fatal conflation of collective self-redemption and self-destruction? This ambiguity is left suspended with Mallarmé. The reciprocal current that will redeem artist and crowd, evidence and proof of the absolute work, remained the messianic projection of the solitary poet. Mallarmé’s theatre to come designates the empty space of advent, the place of a collective revelation, an epiphany that will refound the city. But this empty stage for the absolute—is it not the setting for the illusory dreams of art religion and of art politics, that is to say, for the apocalypse of modernism?

If we speak of the theatre of modernism in this sense, it is because from the beginning the theatre stands under suspicion. From Rousseau and the Jacobins to Michelet, from Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling to Wagner, the theatre is accorded meaning and justified as the festival of the people, as the civic religion of the city against the reduction of art to nothing but its own private absolute. After 1848, however, with the retreat of the hopes of a revolutionary renewal of society, we observe a reversal of means and ends, adumbrated already in Wagner’s *Artwork of the Future*: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of a liberated humanity turns into a festival theatre for a people to come, a theatre that found its realization in the Bayreuth festival theatre for the bourgeoisie, not the people, and was subsidized appropriately enough by a dream king, entrapped in the solitary splendor of his own private theatre. Now the theatre becomes the index not only of the ambiguity of aesthetic salvation but of the age itself. Nietzsche denounces Wagner as the Cagliostro of modernity—no longer the harbinger of cultural renaissance but the primary symptom of European

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Nietzsche defines decadence as the antithesis of the intention of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is characterized by the loss of a sense of the whole, consequent anarchy of the parts, and the disintegration of style. The will to style is replaced by the will to effect at any price. Wagner represents the modern artist par excellence, because he signals the emergence of the actor in music—that is, “the total transformation of art into the theatrical.” More than that, this transformation announces the golden age of the actor, by which Nietzsche understands the age of the masses. The seductive powers of the theatre and the longing of the masses for theatrical illusion and theatrical redemption belong together. “We know the masses, we know the theatre,” says Nietzsche; they want the sublime, the profound, the overpowering. Wagner’s success spells out the inescapable truth of cultural degeneration: wherever the masses become decisive, the actor alone can arouse great enthusiasm, the actor who is tyrant and master hypnotist. Mallarmé and Nietzsche reflect through the figure of Wagner all the ambiguity of the empty space of advent, opened up by the death of God.

Dialectic of Enlightenment: From the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century

With Nietzsche and Mallarmé we have reached the point at which we can take stock. Looking back, we can see them as the continuation of the two distinct, German and French, lineages of the total work of art, parallel responses to the perceived religious deficit of modern society. Looking forward, we can see that they open the way to a new, dangerously voluntaristic twist to the dialectic of enlightenment.

The first and primary lineage derives from Rousseau and the French Revolution. Its recurrent double focus is that of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*: the sovereign people and the civil religion as the public expression of the General Will. The unity of society is embodied in a religious conception of politics, just as the function of this political religion is to affirm the reformation and regeneration of society. In giving voice to the religion of Man, the civil religion amounts to a self-divinization of society. Its priests accordingly are social theorists, and its theology a *sacred sociology*, a sociology of the sacred instituting power of the sovereign people, of the collective, the crowd. To speak of a sacred sociology implies, however, a recognition of its secularizing logic. It signals a contradiction in terms that is tied up with the process of enlightenment: the knowledge of the decay of the old faith and of the necessity

38. Ibid., 2: 302.
39. Ibid., 2: 300.
40. I borrow the term from the project of a sacred sociology in the name of a “full and total” society as the goal of the College of Sociology established by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris in Paris in 1937, under the impact of events the other side of the Rhine. See Denis Hollier, ed., *The College of Sociology (1937–39)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
of a new faith involves, as we have seen, a dialectic, which drove the Jacobins, the Saint-Simonians, and Comte to decree the invention of a new public cult. In this perspective from above, the public festival figures as both means and end. As end, it is conceived as product of the sovereign people, the solemn manifestation of its indivisible unity; as means, it is conceived as producer of the people. This functional view of the public cult implies an instrumental view of the artist. Summoned, in Comte’s words, to provide the aesthetic complement to the work of scientific genius, art is allotted the task of giving final cultic form to the reconciliation of reason and feeling, science and religion. If we turn to the perspective from below, as opposed to the rationalistic perspective from above, the emphasis—as with Michelet or, as we shall see, with Durkheim—on the spontaneity and creativity of the people likewise leaves little place for the artist, indeed none if we follow Rousseau. The conundrum of creativity is perfectly captured in Wagner’s insistence that the creator of the artwork of the future will be, as with the Greek Gesamtkunstwerk, the people.

The creativity of the people figures in this emphatic but nevertheless unresolved form in the German lineage of the total work of art, conceived as the aesthetic solution to the political contradictions of the French Revolution and as the aesthetic reconciliation of reason and myth in modernity. Athens, not Rousseau’s Sparta, is to be the model of a harmoniously reformed and regenerated society and key to Germany’s cultural identity against French civilization. The sacred sociology of the one lineage is answered by the national aestheticism of the other. When Nietzsche asks whether there are people who understand Wagner’s call “to ground the state on music,”41 he is articulating an understanding of politics as aesthetic foundation, as against the civil-religious understanding of politics in sacred sociology. At the same time of course Nietzsche’s question points to the perennial circle of artist and people, of leader and crowd. Mallarmé’s meditations on this theme “contain” the answer to this conundrum in the same way that the “conductor contains the chimaera,”42 just as Mallarmé’s and Nietzsche’s paradoxes of truth and fiction “contain” the explosive consequences of the dialectic of enlightenment waiting to be unfolded in the apocalypse of modernism.

The dialectic of the rational and the irrational, of lucidity and nihilism, is taken by Nietzsche and Mallarmé to its paradoxical conclusion. They point to the fatal knowledge that gives birth to sociology and with which the founding fathers of the discipline—Émile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber—were forced to grapple. The emergence of the new, institutionalized sciences of sociology and of social psychology was undoubtedly related to the emergence of the new politics of mass society after 1870, which posed in more acute form the problem of social cohesion. The dialectic thus appears particularly clearly in the sociological attempts

42. Mallarmé, Oeuvres complètes, 390.
to come to terms with the irrational forces of religion and the crowd as the “sacred” other and deeper “truth” of secular society. Pareto argued that society is held together only by feelings, which are not true but effective. This knowledge runs the risk, however, of destroying indispensable illusions and thus the foundation of society.\textsuperscript{33} The inherent contradiction between scientific truth and social utility invites the open embrace of irrational but useful fictions. Nietzsche’s mythology of myth signifies in this sense the will to myth. Lucidity supposes and entails the double optic of disenchantment and enchantment, of negative truth and life-enhancing illusion. It is not by chance that Heidegger selects Nietzsche’s \textit{cri de coeur} from \textit{The Antichrist}—“Well nigh two thousand years and not a single new god!”—as the epigraph to the first volume of his 1937 Nietzsche lectures, “The Will to Power as Art.” The whole idea of a reborn art religion from the young Hegel through to the late Heidegger looked to art as the key to religious and social renewal. This, as Heidegger reminds us, defines the task and essence of great art. In “Origin of the Work of Art,” written at the same time as the Nietzsche lectures, Heidegger declares the origin of the work of art to be one with the origin of a people’s historical existence: “Poetry is founding in the triple sense of bestowing, grounding, and beginning.”\textsuperscript{44} Tragic philosophers, however, are no more capable than scientific utopians or sociologists of creating new gods. But does sociology perhaps offer another path to origin?

It is here that Durkheim comes to meet Mallarmé. Durkheim’s lifework was directed to demonstrating that society is a sui generis reality irreducible to its parts. In his late work he seeks to elucidate the unconscious secret at the heart of the social: the religious creativity of the collective. Mallarmé’s chimera and Valéry’s “sensible unity of a living plurality” describe the social experience of \textit{dedifferentiation} that involves

a transformation of consciousness, one in which the relatively distinct individual consciousness of everyday life becomes sentient with others in a common situation and in a common enterprise…. It is a process in which the profane becomes transformed into a sacred context (the transvaluation of mundane values)—quite the obverse of the secularization process that has preoccupied so much of the sociology of religion and its image of “modernization.”\textsuperscript{45}

The experience or better the moment of dedifferentiation, the moment of crowd formation and communal fusion, is the point at which art, religion, and politics


meet and share a common ground, drawing their inspiration from the transformative power of an emergent reality that transcends profane everyday consciousness. This higher reality, the “world of sacred things” is the subject of Durkheim’s last and most important work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). From his study of Australian totemism Durkheim arrived at the two key propositions of his sociological interpretation of religion: first, that men worship their own society without realizing it; second, that religious creation arises from the state of collective excitement in which social life attains its greatest intensity (radical individualism, i.e., the modern privatization of religion “misunderstands the fundamental conditions of the religious life”). Durkheim speaks of the exceptional increase of force that seizes an assembly or a speaker addressing a crowd. Such a “general effervescence” is characteristic of “revolutionary or creative epochs”: “This is what explains the Crusades, for example, or many of the scenes, either sublime or savage, of the French Revolution.” This collective force ordinarily affects us as the “moral conscience, of which, by the way, men have never made even a slightly distinct representation except by the aid of religious symbols.”

Durkheim can insist that there is “something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself,” while admitting that we are living in an interregnum, in which “the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born”: “this is what rendered vain the attempt of Comte with the old historic souvenirs artificially revived: it is life itself, and not a dead past which can produce a living cult. But this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last for ever. A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence…. As to the question of what symbols this new faith will express itself with… that is something which surpasses the human faculty of foresight.”

Durkheim’s dying gods and the coming gods of a new faith reflect Saint-Simon’s distinction between critical and organic epochs. Indeed we can say that this distinction underpins the whole tradition of sacred sociology since the French Revolution, just as it is integral to the distinction between the critical function and the holistic telos of avant-gardism. Durkheim remains faithful to the critical spirit of sociology; it allows him, however, to establish by means of rational inquiry that “collective consciousness is the highest form of psychic life” and that “society has a creative power which no other observable being can equal.” The sacred stands for the ever-present, ever-possible regeneration of society. Like Mallarmé’s crowd, society for Durkheim contains this secret in the same way that symbols express and contain

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47. Ibid., 210–11.
48. Ibid., 394.
49. Ibid., 444, 446.
the truths of collective faith. Mallarmé and Durkheim highlight the festive character of collective communion that makes—in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s words—all cultic ceremonies, whether religious, political, or dramatic, a kind of creation. At the same time we must not forget that Durkheim delegates the advent of a new faith to an unknown future. Pending a future reconciliation of the critical and the organic, the scientific and religious needs of society, Durkheim firmly defended modern postrevolutionary society, based on the individual and an “organic” social differentiation, as opposed to the “mechanical” solidarity of premodern community. The possibility of a modern sacred in individualistic society resides for Durkheim in a Kantian morality that recognizes that science and art cannot take the place of the collective power of religion.

The “secret” of the crowd found a very different reading in the theories of mass behavior and crowd psychology that proliferated in the wake of the Paris Commune and the growing sense of crisis in the Third Republic, occasioned by financial scandals, General Boulanger’s demonstration of the power of a charismatic leader over a crowd, and increasing civil unrest, marked by marches, demonstrations, and strikes. Scipio Sighele’s *La folla delinquente* (The Criminal Crowd) (1891), translated into French in 1892, and Gabriel Tarde’s *Les lois de l’imitation* (The Laws of Imitation) (1890) translated the fears of the bourgeoisie into “scientific” psychologies of the crowd. Tarde regarded the crowd as the product of spontaneous generation, triggered by a spark of passion, which created “a single animal, a wild beast without a name, which marches to its goal with an irresistible finality.” If we may regard Durkheim as the sociological generalization of Mallarmé’s intuitions about the crowd, Gustave Le Bon’s “era of the crowd” can be seen as the generalization of Nietzsche’s intuitions about the age of the actor. Like Nietzsche, he sees the crowd in terms not of a creative or sublime dedifferentiation but of a destructive regression induced by hypnotic suggestion and contagion. The popularity of Le Bon’s *Psychologie des foules* (1895) was doubtless due to its ability to express the cultural pessimism of the fin de siècle and crystallize the bourgeoisie’s fear of the masses. The diagnosis is familiar. We are living in a critical age of transition, harbinger of the great changes that will come from “the destruction of those religious, political and social beliefs in which the elements of our civilization are rooted,” compounded by the entirely new conditions of existence brought about by the scientific and industrial revolutions (e.g., the growth and urbanization of the population). Writing a century after the French Revolution Le Bon declares “the last surviving sovereign force of modern times” to be the power of crowds: “The age we are about to enter

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will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS.”\(^{52}\) Le Bon adds ominously that the most obvious task of the masses in history has been to destroy a worn-out civilization.

Following Tarde, Le Bon postulates the law of the mental unity of crowds—that is to say, the collective mind of the crowd constitutes a new, emergent consciousness, that of a “single being” with its own psychology. It is a consciousness governed by the unconscious, resembling the state of hypnosis. By making the irrational the key dimension of social existence and by elevating the crowd to the sole surviving sovereign force in political life, Le Bon brings the dialectic of enlightenment full circle. He argues that the destruction of religious, political, and social beliefs leaves only the silence of nature, since science cannot replace the hopes and illusions by which men live. It is no longer a question of myth serving as a necessary supplement to reason; science must recognize that the crowd is everywhere and always religious, and that this knowledge must be placed in the service of manipulating and mastering the chimera. The masses do not want the truth: “Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.”\(^{55}\) Everything therefore rests on determining the defining characteristics of the unconscious psychology of the crowd. The religion of the crowd, according to Le Bon, can be summed up under two headings: the crowd’s receptivity to the influence exercised over it by the leader, and by images. Le Bon’s most significant contribution to crowd theory was his analysis of the crowd in terms of its response to leaders. He believed that only the truly magnetic fascination exerted by a leader could tame the crowd: “The crowd demands a god before everything else.”\(^{54}\) This god is supplied by the hero of the masses, who always bears the semblance of a Caesar.\(^{55}\) The Caesarean leader satisfies the religious feelings of the crowd in a double fashion: on the one hand, he is the “veritable god,” the higher being who is feared and worshipped and demands blind submission to his commands; on the other hand, he incorporates the will of the crowd through his fanatical intensity and willpower, which make him capable of harnessing the crowd’s irresistible force by arousing its faith. Because the crowd can think only in images, it can be influenced only by images: “For this reason theatrical representations, in which the image is shown in its most clearly visible shape, always have an


\(^{53}\) Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 110.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 75.

The members of the group were subject to ties just as we see them today, but the father of the primal horde was free. His intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others. Consistency leads us to assume that his ego had few libidinal ties; he loved no one but himself, or other people only in so far as they served his needs. ... He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the “superman,” whom Nietzsche only expected from the future.  

Whether the hold of the leader was conceived as hypnotic suggestion or as unconscious transference, it is clear that Mussolini and Hitler were exactly the kind of leader that crowd theory up to Freud had been predicting since the 1890s.

We should note the opposed conceptions of the religious nature of the crowd in Durkheim and Le Bon. Where Durkheim foregrounds the religious creativity of the crowd without reference to a leader, Le Bon stresses the crowd’s religious receptivity and submission to a leader. Where Durkheim foregrounds the symbolic

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56. Le Bon, The Crowd, 73, 118–20. It is important to recall that Le Bon is writing against the background of what Eric Hobsbawm calls the invention of tradition, dominated after 1870 by the emergence of mass politics: “After the 1870s, therefore, ... rulers and middle-class observers rediscovered the importance of ‘irrational’ elements in the maintenance of the social fabric and the social order.” Here the construction of the nation as an all-embracing imaginary community, transcending class, hierarchy, and regional loyalties, formed the primary symbolic focus of social cohesion. Hobsbawm stresses the theatrical dimension of public symbolic discourse, reflecting the democratization of politics, which found its correlate in the development of new building types for spectacle and mass ritual, such as outdoor and indoor sports stadia, exhibition buildings, etc. Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in The Invention of Tradition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 268.

57. Burrows, Distorting Mirrors, 179.


dimension of religious representations, Le Bon stresses the power of theatrical illusion. Seen thus, they represent the two—positive and negative—sides of sacred sociology, which point to the coming open split between Mallarmé’s esoteric quest for the symbolic Mystery and Nietzsche’s anticipation of the theatrical age of the political actor and the masses—the split, that is, between the avant-garde dreams of a sacred theatre, from the French and Russian symbolists through to Claudel and Artaud, and the Fascist invocations of a new, sacred politics. The immediate inheritor of Le Bon, Nietzsche, and Pareto was Georges Sorel. His proclamation in Reflections on Violence (1907) of myth as the motive force of history, destined to rejuvenate decadent civilization, escapes the supposed fatality of enlightenment only to embrace the creative-destructive force of the irrational. Zeev Sternhell identifies the mythical conception of politics, arising from the Sorelian faith in the power of myth, as the key to the Fascist view of the world. We cannot, however, simply oppose the two sides of sacred society. They also belong together. In that Durkheim resumes the whole tradition of sacred sociology, he also “contains” the dangerous consequences spelled out by Le Bon. Raymond Aron argues that Durkheim’s totalizing notion of society with respect to the question of social cohesion fails to recognize the plurality of social groups and the conflict of moral ideas and leads to a devaluation of political institutions (Durkheim’s definition of democracy in Leçons de sociologie includes “neither universal suffrage nor plurality of parties nor even parliament”): “Unless one specifies what one means by society, Durkheim’s conception may, contrary to his intentions, lead or seem to lead to the pseudo-religions of our age and the adoration of a national collectivity by its own members.” The fin de siècle with esoteric symbolism at one pole and crowd psychology at the other sets the scene for parts 2 and 3 respectively: the avant-garde’s fascination with the spiritual in art and quest for the total work, and the transformation of the total work into the totalitarian theatre of politics.
