Homage to the Gesamtkunstwerk

Wagner’s *Parsifal* may be thought of as both an end and a beginning. As the completion of Wagner’s programme of recovering and renewing the tradition of religious theatre, it was meant to signify the last stage of overcoming opera. As the paradigmatic example of a new cultic theatre, of art religion in the full sense of the term, it provided a model for the avant-garde search for a synthesis of the arts. How this played out in the theatre, from the Ballets Russes to Brecht and Artaud, will be the subject of the following chapters. In the present chapter I am interested in the reception of the idea of the total work of art in European symbolism, as it is reflected, on the one hand, in the tributes in the media of sculpture, painting, and literature to the leading role of music among the arts; and on the other, in Mallarmé’s and in Scriabin’s ambition to surpass Wagner by creating the absolute and ultimate work. These diverse refractions of the Wagnerian paradigm (the symbolists, particularly in France and Russia, were the artists most strongly influenced by Wagner and Wagnerism) found a common focus in the esoteric doctrine of correspondences, which Baudelaire had transformed into a general theory of the arts and poetry.¹

¹. See in addition to the famous sonnet, “Correspondances,” Baudelaire’s “Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris” (see chapter 4).
Correspondences between the senses—primarily sight and sound but also involving taste (Proust!) and smell—not only made synaesthesia a key to the synthesis of the arts from Baudelaire to Scriabin but suggested a reciprocal correspondence between the arts: if one sense can take the place of another, then one art can substitute for another. It allowed Mallarmé and Proust to affirm letters against music. But in defending literature they both followed the path of abstraction and dematerialization in their quest for the absolute work. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental distinction between the Great Work as envisaged by Proust and by Mallarmé. À la recherche du temps perdu achieves completion and self-redemptive knowledge, whereas Mallarmé’s Book can only gesture toward the unrealizable idea of the total work of art. It is thus an appropriate complement and antithesis to Scriabin’s Dionysian version of dematerialization in his Mysterium, which was to bring about the ecstatic realization—through return to the godhead—of the universal correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. It is an inescapable and necessary irony that the idea of the total work of art should find its absolute impossibility objectified in two works, or rather two grandiose conceptions, for which there exist only preliminary sketches. We are fortunate, however, in having for Scriabin the contemporary testament of his brother-in-law, Boris de Schloezer. For Mallarmé we possess some two hundred sheets of notes, which survived the destruction of material pertaining to the Book and were first edited and published by Jacques Schérer in 1957. Here too we are fortunate in having in addition to Schérer’s elucidations Eric Benoit’s systematic reconstruction of Mallarmé’s intentions.

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In 1902 the Viennese Secession held its most successful exhibition under the title “Homage to the Gesamtkunstwerk.” The centerpiece of the exhibition was Max Klinger’s statue of Beethoven, seated like a Greek god upon a throne. Composed of contrasting precious materials, it was meant to recall Phidias at the same time as it celebrated the modern cult of the divine artist. The reliefs on Beethoven’s throne pay tribute to the two sources of Western civilization—Greek and Judeo-Christian. On the one side Adam and Eve, and on the other the family of Tantalus, symbolize human suffering. At the back the combined images of the birth of Venus and the crucifixion of Christ present the two gospels of redemption in the name of beauty and life and of renunciation and sacrifice respectively. In Klinger’s allegory of (Greek-Christian) art religion, Beethoven is treated as Zeus and Messiah.

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Klinger not only attempts to give plastic form to the German art religion of the nineteenth century; he tries to reconcile the inextricable fusion and con-fusion of the pagan cult of beauty with a Christian longing for redemption. Thus—to digress for a moment—Mahler’s Third Symphony (1895–96) moves from a Nietzschean sense of oneness with the World Will and Dionysian nature in its massive first movement, in which the composer thought of himself as “an instrument on which the universe plays,” to an Apollonian dream vision in the following movements, which trace the ascent of the spirit from nature to animals to man, the angels, and finally divine love. “In the fifth movement, the repentant soul pleads with Christ for mercy and receives the angelic assurance that the joys of heaven will be bestowed. As the motto of the final movement indicates, the suffering son of God now appeals to his father for the salvation of all creatures.” The motto “Father, look upon my wounds! / Let no creature be lost!” clearly evokes the Good Friday music of Parsifal. The last movement opens with a quotation from the adagio of Beethoven’s last string quartet (op. 135) and concludes with a quotation from Parsifal.\footnote{See William J. McGrath’s analysis of Mahler’s Third Symphony in his Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 120–62.}

Klinger’s statue therefore formed the appropriate focus of an exhibition that took as its model “the highest and the best” that mankind has created: temple art through the ages. The Viennese avant-garde’s nostalgia for past ages of organic culture, in which all the arts found their meaning and purpose in the service of the temple, found direct expression in the exhibition. Under the artistic direction of Josef Hoffmann the exhibition was to form a harmonious whole through the mural and plastic decoration of the walls. The central hall was reserved for Klinger’s Beethoven, which was visible from the two other exhibition rooms on either side of the hall. The visitor entered the exhibition through the left side room, which gave a view onto the statue. The three sides of this side room facing the visitor were covered on their upper half by Gustav Klimt’s Beethoven frieze.

The exhibition was thus conceived as a temple space, a plastic Gesamtkunstwerk, which expressed a collective artistic will to a unified style (the international art nouveau movement of the fin de siècle) and to a unification of the arts—but without a unifying cult. Carl Schorske speaks of the Secession’s search for a surrogate religion that would offer a refuge from modern life, and calls the exhibition an exercise in collective narcissism, in which artists (Secession) celebrate an artist (Klinger) celebrating an artist-hero (Beethoven).\footnote{Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (New York: Vintage, 1981), 254.} Perhaps this was not true of the opening ceremony, when the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was performed in an arrangement for wind instruments by Gustav Mahler. What remained after the performance, however, was Klimt’s allegorical depiction of Wagner’s interpretation of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, just as this frieze, restored to its original
setting after an absence of eighty years and the intervening destruction and recon-
struction of the Secession building, built by the Jugendstil architect Joseph Olbrich
in 1898, remains the sole witness to the exhibition and its enormous success with
the Viennese public.

Like the reliefs on Beethoven’s throne, Klimt’s mural is a tripartite composition,
which works with the contrast between light and darkness. The two long sides of
the mural are separated by the dark, narrow facing wall, which depicts the hostile
powers that stand between mankind’s yearning for happiness (on the left hand)
and its fulfillment in and through art (on the right hand). Klimt’s explication in
the exhibition catalogue of his thirty-four-meter-long fresco follows Wagner’s 1846
interpretation of Beethoven’s setting of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy.” The figures on the
left wall represent the longing for happiness, the sufferings of weak humanity, and
their pleas to the outer (the knight in golden armor) and inner forces (compassion
and ambition) needed to fight for happiness. The hostile powers are represented by
the monstrous giant Typhon, whose wings cover the whole central wall, flanked by
his three daughters, the Gorgons (Sickness, Madness, Death), to his left and three
female figures (Voluptuousness, Debauchery, Wantonness) to his right. “The long-
ings and aspirations of humanity pass above them.” On the right wall, these long-
ings are soothed and satisfied by Poetry. Between Poetry and the Ideal Kingdom,
which completes the mural, the opening in the wall reveals the presiding genius of
Beethoven, whose music carries the words of Poetry across the gulf separating the
real world of longing from the ideal world of art, where “True Happiness, Pure
Bliss, and Absolute Love” dwell. The last scene of the mural illustrates through a
heavenly choir of angels and two lovers embracing Schiller’s “Freude schöner Göt-
terfunke. Dieser Kuß der ganzen Welt” (Joy beautiful divine spark. This kiss for
the whole world).

The 1902 exhibition is regarded as the high point of the heroic years of the Seces-
sion from 1897 to 1905, brought to an end by the departure of Klimt and associated
artists. There was another, now forgotten Secession dedicated to the religion of art:
the “Salons de la Rose-Croix,” held from 1892 to 1896 in Paris. The aim of these
annual exhibitions was to “ruin realism, reform Latin taste and create a school of
idealist art.” The nature of this idealist art is made clear by the rules governing ex-
hibition: history painting, patriotic or military subjects, scenes from contemporary
life, portraits, still life, picturesque Orientalism, seascapes and landscapes (except
for those in the style of Poussin), were excluded, along with female painters. To be
promoted were the Catholic ideal, Catholic dogmas, and mysticism, legend, myth,
allegory, dream, Oriental theogonies other than Chinese, allegorical murals, and
sublime nudes. The founder and spiritus rector of the whole enterprise, Joséphin

8. Ibid., 117–22.
Péladan (1859–1918), particularly admired the paintings of Gustave Moreau and the murals of Puvis de Chavannes.

The impetus to create the order of the Rose-Croix came from Péladan’s visit to Bayreuth in 1888. There the three performances of Parsifal he attended made him a Wagnerian disciple, called to become the regenerator of French culture. The opening of the first salon on 10 March 1892 was celebrated by a solemn Mass of the Holy Ghost in Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, followed by the performance of the Prelude, the Last Supper of the Grail, the Good Friday music, and the Finale of Parsifal “by the superhuman Wagner.” Péladan conceived the members of his order as knights of the Holy Grail, dedicated to the destruction of sexual love, to be replaced by aesthetic rites. It is not surprising that his mystical society has been characterized as the dramatization of the idea of a secret, occult brotherhood, a “fictional and original creation” that laid claim to a “fictional religiosity” within the context of art. The salons were not confined to the exhibition of paintings; there were also concerts of music (Palestrina, Wagner, César Franck, and Beethoven during the first salon) and theatrical performances, in particular Péladan’s own plays (Le fils des étoiles with music by Satie during the first salon).

Péladan intended his plays as a theatre of initiation, in line with his derivation of the origins of theatre from the mystery religions of antiquity. He followed here the ideas of Édouard Schuré’s Les grands initiés: Esquisse de l’histoire secrète des religions (1889). Schuré’s book, which reached its hundredth edition in 1927, is a plea for a renewal of religion through a return to its ancient esoteric core. Like the occultists and theosophists of the time, Schuré distinguished between the public, institutional, and dogmatic face of religions and the essential unity of their esoteric doctrines, which teach the inner path of initiation into the secret of human divinity. Schuré regarded the symbolist movement, imbued with a longing for the higher invisible world without being able to believe, as typifying the contemporary situation of art. If this makes Péladan a representative of the symbolist avant-garde no less than Mallarmé or Maeterlinck, as Frantisek Deak argues, we have Péladan’s own contrary evaluation of the contemporary situation of the artist in his Origine et esthétique de la tragédie (1905): “In formative times, he [the artist] plays the role of the avant-garde; in the period of decadence he reaches back to recapture the

10. Ibid., 122, 130.
11. See Pincus-Witten, Occult Symbolism in France, for reproductions of a representative selection of paintings from each salon. Emile Bernard, Jan Torop, Ferdinand Knopff, Felix Vallotton, Jean Delville and Ferdinand Hodler featured among the exhibitors at the 1892 salon.
thread of tradition.” Moreover, Péladan’s most sustained literary endeavor lay not in the theatre but in the twenty novels of his “epic of the people” (éthopée), *La décadence latine*. The final volume, *La vertu suprême* (1900), responds to an early novel of the cycle, *La vice suprême* (1884), with its lurid portrayal of the femme fatale. The crowning moment of the final novel directly echoes Wagner’s *Parsifal*. The hero undertakes a pilgrimage to the abbey of Montségur, modeled on Wagner’s Monsalvat. The abbey is dedicated to the Rosicrucians and their esoteric teachings. The altar is surrounded by a décor evoking a pantheon of religions; the organ plays music from *Parsifal*. The hero, Mérodack, has come to take a vow of chastity, the supreme virtue. His companions refuse, however, to join him, and Montségur crumbles. The Grail castle collapses back into the “twilight of the gods.”

Let us suppose Proust writes in “The Death of Cathedrals,” which appeared in *Le Figaro* in August 1904, that Catholicism died centuries ago and that the tradition of its religious services perished with it, leaving as mute witnesses the cathedrals. Let us further suppose that experts have succeeded in reconstructing the ceremonies once celebrated in the cathedrals and that they have been reenacted in the same way that Greek tragedies are performed in the Roman theatre in Orange. Would not the French government hasten to subsidize the resurrection of these religious ceremonies with far greater cause than it currently subsidizes the theatre in Orange or the Paris Opera? For are not the cathedrals the greatest and most original expression of French genius, the most perfect masterpieces of the Gothic? Caravans of snobs will make an annual pilgrimage to Amiens or Chartres or Bourges to participate in these magnificent reenactments, to “savor the work of art in the very setting that had been constructed for it,” and to experience the emotions that they had previously sought in Orange or Bayreuth. And yet, as we know, the soul of the past cannot be brought back to life, despite the best efforts of actors and singers. The pilgrims will lament the lost glory of the past, when priest and people shared the same faith as the sculptors and painters. “Alas, however, these things are as distant from us as the pious enthusiasm of the Greek people at their theatre performances.”

Proust can now remind his readers that these religious rites have been preserved unchanged since the days when the cathedrals were built: not actors but ministers of the cult officiate, “not through aesthetic interest but through faith and thus the more aesthetically.” And further, the French cathedrals continue to live their integral life in harmony with the purpose for which they were constructed: to be the theatre of the mysterious drama of the sacrifice of the Mass. Evoking this mysterious drama through a detailed description of the symbolism of the Easter Saturday

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services, Proust concludes with his homage to the total work of art: “Never has a comparable spectacle, this gigantic mirror of knowledge, of the soul and of history, been offered to the gaze and intellect of man.” It is the “artistic realization, the most complete there has ever been, since all the arts collaborated in it, of the greatest dream that mankind has ever attained.”

We might term this essay prophetic, since it anticipates Proust’s own artistic dream to construct his magnum opus like a church or cathedral. What he says of the medieval cathedral applies to his own work: “One may dream in many ways, and the dwelling is large enough for all of us to find a place.” And of the beauty of the Catholic ceremonies, which surpasses anything that any artist has ever conceived, he observes that Wagner alone came close by imitating it in Parsifal. The Parsifal reference gains its full prophetic significance from Proust’s original intention to have the Good Friday music as the background accompaniment to his narrator’s reflections on time lost and time recovered in the library of the Guermantes’s town house. Marcel’s quest for lost time is his quest for the Grail; like Parsifal he must not succumb to the temptations of the flower maidens (Les jeunes filles en fleurs) if he is to enter the Grail castle and attain redemption. Enlightenment comes to him at the reception at the Guermantes’s. Confronted by the ravages of (war) time, which reveal the decadence—individual and social—of a superannuated aristocracy (comparable to the decadence of the knights of the Grail), Marcel discovers/recovers his vocation as a writer who will conquer the destructive power of time by transmuting life—his personal life, that of his society and of the age—into art. Proust wrote this moment of mystic illumination at the end of the novel immediately following the writing of the opening episode of the involuntary memory triggered by the taste of the madeleine. Just as beginning and end form a circle, so the completion of Marcel’s quest announces the genesis of the novel to come, which we have already read: two refractions, theoretical and narrative, of the architecture of time recovered. Such an architecture can only reveal itself in retrospect. Proust is expressing his own joy when his narrator refers to the intoxication Balzac and Wagner must have felt when, looking back, they realized that they had composed the Human Comedy and the Ring cycle.

Looking back, we can see how Proust charts the path to his narrator’s self-authorization through Marcel’s creative appropriation of music. The pivotal scene is the performance of Vinteuil’s septet, which seems to Marcel like a message from an unknown country—in Schopenhauer’s words, “a paradise quite familiar and

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18. Ibid., 174, 176.
yet eternally remote.” The septet’s revelation of an unknown type of joy assures Marcel that there exists something other than the nothingness of the pleasures of this world, that is to say, something beyond the world of space, time, and causality, something beyond the destructive power of time. The imaginary musical works in \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu}—Vinteuil’s violin sonata (modeled on that of César Franck) and his septet—thus figure as the ideal redemptive work of art, which symbolizes the higher truth, the absolute, toward which the narrator and the novel strive. Proust is replaying in fictional form Mallarmé’s 1894 Oxford lecture, “Music and Letters”: the challenge, underscored by Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Wagner’s music dramas, that music poses to literature, is taken up by Proust when he makes music the muse of Marcel’s quest for the Grail.

Can literature be both the music of time and the key to time, which opens the way to true reality? Proust finds this key in the experience of involuntary memory. Like music, it is the source of an unknown joy, of a message from a lost paradise; like the Wagnerian leitmotif or César Franck’s cyclic method of composition, it joins past and present and affirms the possibility of return, of original repetition. It is precisely this paradoxical structure that transcends the (irreversible) difference between past and present. Neither the present, as the realm of sensations that excludes the imagination, nor the past, as the realm of imagination separated from the immediacy of sensation, can give us access to these experiences; the unique quality of involuntary memory lies in the paradoxical simultaneity of absence and immediacy, imagination and sensation, such that it conveys an impression that is real without being actual, and ideal without being abstract. This mystic coincidence of opposites contains the essence of Marcel’s redemptive illumination. From it flow the paradoxes of being and time in \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu}. Through the involuntary return of the past, Marcel grasps that he not only lives in time but that time lives within him, awaiting resurrection. They are the same but also qualitatively different times. The one is destructive, devouring time; the other is the saving experience of the pure form of time—time out of time. Behind the momentary fusion of past and present lies the essential correspondence between time and eternity. In turn this structure of involuntary memory defines the task of literature: to give a lasting life to departed life. If literature cannot cancel the difference between past and present, it can bring us to comprehend the paradox of memory. For Proust it signified the awakening of the true self from its fear of death and imprisonment in time, that is to say, the transmutation of the \textit{time} of life into the \textit{space} of literature. This redemption of the visible world into the invisible world of meaning fulfills what Mallarmé understands as the orphic explication of the earth.

\footnote{24. Proust, \textit{À la recherche}, 3: 872–73.}
Confronted by the Wagnerian total work of art, Proust shared Baudelaire’s and Mallarmé’s obsession with an art unifying all the arts. And like them he embraces the doctrine of correspondences. A sound, a smell, a taste, is sufficient to trigger the “miracle of an analogy,” integral to the structure of involuntary memory. Indeed, we could say that this momentary coincidence of the transitory and the eternal exemplifies Goethe’s “All that is transient is a simile.” Moreover, the idea of reciprocal analogy suggests a reciprocity between the arts, which allows one art, literature, to lay claim to the title of Gesamtkunstwerk. Georges Piroué speaks of Proust’s “internalized opera,” which accomplishes what Mallarmé proposed as the goal of the union of poetry and theatre.

The Ultimate Fiction: Mallarmé’s Book

However much it draws on ancient wisdom and Christian and non-Christian liturgical traditions, the symbolist mystery is a specifically modern mystery. The ultimate work, as conceived by Mallarmé or Scriabin, responds to the knowledge of the death of God. Absolute literature lives from the end of the old art religion. It raises the claim to fulfill the task of great art: to make manifest “what beings as a whole are” (Heidegger), the claim to be, in other words, the religion of the death of God, the art religion of modernity. It is precisely this claim that compelled Mallarmé, after two decades of poetic silence, to define and justify his own poetic project—in the closest temporal and intellectual proximity to and distance from Nietzsche—through a profound meditation on Wagner’s music drama and on the essence of the theatre (this most ambiguous face of the nineteenth century). Mallarmé’s closeness to Nietzsche is evident. Both proclaim the eternal justification of the world as aesthetic phenomenon. This is the logic of Mallarmé’s famous observation that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book—or rather, in the Book, conceived as the Bible of the religion to come. Mallarmé’s distance is evident in his critical reserve toward Wagner, which enables him to avoid the extremes of Nietzsche’s position; he recognizes the greatness of Wagner and bows before the mystery of music while yet asserting the greater mystery of letters. He was not interested in a con-fusion of words and music (“Allier, non confondre”), even though he accepted the intimate affinity of music and poetry, the aural arts of time. Music has a double meaning for Mallarmé: it means the art of sounds; second, as he explained in a letter to Edmund Gosse, it is used in the Greek sense to signify the rhythm between relationships, the proportions and ratios informing the abstract

26. Ibid., 119, 273.
architecture of the world. As such, music is a metaphysical rival of poetry, even though we can speak of a division of labor here between the public and the private, the outer and inner faces of the Mystery. Mallarmé makes the distinction in his customary sibylline manner in “Music and Letters,” his 1894 Oxford lecture:

I posit...that Music and Letters are the alternative face extended here toward the obscure; sparkling there, with certitude, of a phenomenon, the sole, I would call the Idea.

The one of the modes inclines to the other and, disappearing there, reemerges with borrowings: twice there is accomplished, oscillating, a complete genre. Theatrically for the crowd that listens unconsciously to its greatness: or, the individual asks for lucidity, of the explanatory and familiar book.

Mallarmé’s staging of the Absolute takes the opposite path to Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, which reconstructs the path from the unrepresentable Will (music) to its redemption in the visibility of the stage action. On a second level, a deeper affinity is apparent, in that both operate with a tension and oscillation between the visible and the invisible, as we can see in Nietzsche’s attempt in “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth” to capture the very formula of Wagner’s music drama:

In Wagner everything in the world wants to deepen and internalize itself into the audible and seek its lost soul; in Wagner everything audible in the world likewise also wants to rise up to the light as visual apparition, wants as it were to gain corporeality. His art always leads him along the double path, out of the world as audible play (Hörspiel) into an enigmatically related world as visual play (Schauspiel) and vice versa; he is continually compelled—and the observer with him—to translate the visible movement back into soul and primordial life and then again to see the most hidden weaving of the inner world as apparition and to clothe it with an apparent body (Schein-Leib).

Wagner, however, was dissatisfied by the naturalism of the contemporary theatre and entertained the idea of an invisible drama as the logical counterpart to the invisible orchestra. Mallarmé shared this dissatisfaction. The mystery of music pointed beyond itself and beyond Wagner to the other face of the Idea concealed/revealed in the mystery of the word. Mallarmé envisaged his opus metaphysicum as a staging of the Absolute through the union of the visible and the invisible, Theater and Book, united and mutually sublated in the presentation of the invisible ur-drama of Man (god, hero, type). The act or rite of presentation was to combine the

The two faces of the Idea, turned toward the crowd and the individual respectively. It had as its prototype the office of the Mass. Instead of the Greek tradition of mimesis, Mallarmé turned to the Catholic tradition of mystery. Against the German identification with ancient Greece, the French man of letters looks to the Christian legacy of medieval Europe as the source of the modern world.\textsuperscript{31} Thus when Mallarmé proposed the renewal of the dying Christian mystery through art—“Let us penetrate into the church, with art”\textsuperscript{32}—he was in fact following Wagner’s reworking of the Christian mystery in \textit{Parsifal}. In three short prose pieces, united under the title \textit{Offices} (1892–95), Mallarmé articulates the same doctrine of the renewal and redemption of religion through art that Wagner had expounded in “Religion and Art” (see chapter 5).

The Catholic Mass provided Mallarmé with the model of presentation for the transposition of things into the sphere of meaning—the ancient, ever-new task of poetry. The transposition of the world into the Book, conceived as a work of negative creation, refuses Wagner’s transformation of the world into Theatre. The Book to come signifies in this sense the antitype of the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}. This appears very clearly in Mallarmé’s and Wagner’s respective theories of the arts. Wagner, we recall, derives the music drama from the three human arts of dance, music, and poetry. They accomplish the transposition into the living presence of performance. With Mallarmé, by contrast, the transposition accomplished by dance, music, and poetry consists of dematerialization,\textsuperscript{33} abstraction, and generalization, understood as the purification of the world from the contingencies of matter, that is, from chance. Against Wagner’s conception of the total work of art as “living represented religion,” Mallarmé can offer no more than an ideal representation, to be accomplished through the reading of the Book. Through this operation, in which the actor is replaced by the poet-operator of the séances, the Absolute objectifies itself and becomes conscious of its self-division (as self and other). Consisting of four parts and two halves, the Book can be read forward and backward to converge in a unity that forms a fifth part, the quintessence of the whole.\textsuperscript{34} The Book as totality is thus realized through this progressive, redemptive consciousness of self-identity.\textsuperscript{35} Reading is conceived as the act, operation, rite, which interiorizes the theatre and reveals the equivalence between the structure of the theatre and the structure of the spirit: the division between stage and audience corresponds to the division between conscious and unconscious spirit, the poet-operator and the crowd. The operation of reading thus demonstrates the mirror relation of reception. In

\textsuperscript{31} Mallarmé, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, 392.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 395.
\textsuperscript{33} Mallarmé regards dance not in terms of the body but of abstract movement or writing, for which his term is “arabesque.” See Mallarmé, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, 541.
\textsuperscript{34} Jacques Schérer, \textit{Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé} (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 105.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 62.
Mallarmé’s words, “The crowd, from which nothing can be hidden, since everything comes from it, will recognize itself... in the work.”\textsuperscript{37} Even though the crowd listens to its own unconscious mystery in music, it will never come to recognize itself in music. Only literature can bring the crowd to self-knowledge and thus to self-redemption—or rather, this will be the role of the Book, the Bible to come: “If in future a religion reemerges, it will be the amplification to a thousand joys of the instinct for heaven in each of us.”\textsuperscript{38}

The universal human spirit, latent in the multiple subjectivities of the crowd, is Mallarmé’s Absolute, expressed obscurely, unconsciously, by Music, elucidated by Letters. This Absolute forms the basis of Mallarmé’s aesthetics: from it arises the im/possibility of the Absolute Work, of the art religion, which will inherit from Catholicism the mystery of the divinity present in the human spirit, that is to say, the mystery of mysteries, encompassing all of mankind’s religious creativity in the self-consciousness of totality.\textsuperscript{39} For Mallarmé the universal archetypes of the quest for meaning—the myths, symbols, and rites of religion—are resumed and objectified in the universal drama of the Mass. The Mass celebrates the very type of the hero in the Passion of Christ and the very type of transformation in the miracle of transubstantiation. Moreover, freed from the constraints of scenic representation, the Mass offers Mallarmé the sublation of the dichotomy Theatre/Book:\textsuperscript{40} its ideal drama of the invisibly present hero enacts more purely the idea of presentation as the means to the circular identity, to the “penetration, in reciprocity,” of audience and hero, the crowd and the god. Through his synthetic myth Mallarmé hopes to capture (in contrast to Wagner’s reliance on Germanic myths) the irreducible structures of the human spirit, that is to say, the ideal timeless source of mankind’s poetic fictions present in the anonymous creativity of the crowd.

The Hegelian drama of the Book, in which self-divided, self-alienated spirit attains self-identity, is conceived as a reciprocal process of reception and creation, that is, as a communion, which effects the passage from the individual to the universal. This passage, central to the communal fusion intended by ceremony and festival, reaffirms the original connection between poetry and the sacred and points forward to a religion to come. However, as we know, Mallarmé’s art religion is most emphatically an art religion, which grasps and presents its truth as fiction, while

\textsuperscript{37} Mallarmé, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, 700.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 654.
\textsuperscript{39} Benoit, \textit{Mallarmé et le mystère de ‘Livre’}, 101–2.
\textsuperscript{40} Paul Valéry sums up Mallarmé’s thinking on the theatre when he writes to Gide on 5 December 1891: “All drama is impossible after the Mass.... The only appearance of Art before everyone—everyone. And the liturgical drama is Perfection—in the Perfection... that a total crowd will give me.” He anticipates Proust’s judgment when he continues: “Throughout the ceremony, the beauty of the ancient words, gestures, the organ, the emotion which swells at every moment of the mystic duration, the spasm of enthusiasm, the little death which constricts the throat at the elevation, then Being. It is the extraordinary spasm of ecstasy, the masterpiece of all the arts.” \textit{Gide-Valéry, Correspondances, 1890–1942} (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 142–43.
yet asserting the reciprocity between reception and creation as proof of the Spirit. This reciprocal proof manifests the “aesthetic relation,” that is, the self-reflexivity designated by the notion of fiction, which Mallarmé declares “the very procedure of the human spirit.”\textsuperscript{41} Everything converges on the procedure of fictioning: the human spirit realizes itself—one is tempted to say in a progressive dialectic of enlightenment—in the sequence myth/religion, Catholic Mass, literature, the Book. Mallarmé’s Book unfolds the modern mystery of divine self-creation. Its “absolute” modernity lies precisely in making the human spirit the medium and source of the Absolute—a (dangerous) conundrum, inherent in the idea of the total work of art and built into the dialectic of enlightenment. Whether we take the romantic idea of a new mythology, Wagner’s idea of the \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}, or the revolutionary festival, they are all premised on a belief in the genius of the people and consequently characterized by the circularity of self-creation.

The conception of literature shared by the “orphic poets” (Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Rilke) places the “aesthetic relation,” the self-fictioning spirit, at the heart of the miracle of language, which generalizes the miracle of transubstantiation through the transposition of facts into ideals,\textsuperscript{42} in order to effect the poetic dematerialization and spiritualization of the material world. These orphic powers find in turn their self-reflexive presentation in the Book, which is finally nothing but a fiction suspended over the abyss. As Eric Benoit puts it, “The Book of the Whole, which will realize ‘the intimate correlation of Poetry and the Universe’ (24 September 1867), is conceived from the beginning as Book of Nothing, Book of Nothingness, Book of Fiction, revealing therein the relation of Poetry and Non-Being.”\textsuperscript{43} However, we must take this process of poetic spiritualization a stage further, bearing Maurice Blanchot’s reservations in mind.\textsuperscript{44} Blanchot argues that the Book is not to be thought of as an unrealized project, and thereby subjected to the fatal hubris of self-creation. It is neither a tangible artifact nor a reconstructable operation; it is nothing other than the idea of the Absolute Work—that is, the conceptual identity of the absolute and the total work of art—which exemplifies its own im/possibility precisely and solely as Virtual Book. Blanchot’s “Book to come” is accordingly the presentation and \textit{mise-en-abyme} of the oscillation of Being and Nothingness in the “real presence” of fiction. Only in this fashion, we may add, can it escape the danger of self-deification and remain the work, the religion to come after the death of God. In Mallarmé’s words, “The Book is thus like God: necessary, present, inexistent. Of God it has the attributes uncontestable, inexhaustible, inexpressible.”\textsuperscript{45} Only in this fashion, we may add, through its refusal of closure, can it shed light on the

\textsuperscript{41} Mallarmé, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, 851.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 522.
\textsuperscript{43} Benoit, \textit{Mallarmé et le mystère de ‘Livre’}, 14.
\textsuperscript{45} Quoted in Marvick, “Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse,” 298.
constitution of society. The Latin *fictio* translates the Greek *poiesis*. As the “very procedure of the human spirit,” *fictio* points to the foundation of the economy in credit and of the social bond in a transcendent/fiction. If this means that politics lives from the sacred, it also means that politics must learn from poetics that it too is based on fiction.46

**The Last Ecstasy: Scriabin’s *Mysterium***

Both Mallarmé’s *Book* and Scriabin’s *Mysterium* lay claim to being the ultimate work of art, the ultimate expression of the romantic longing for the Absolute. Each proclaims the self-redemption of the human spirit as the mystery of mysteries, to be realized in the case of the *Book* through the intellect and in the case of the *Mysterium* through the senses. Gnosis and ecstasy thus form the polar opposites that determine their respective conceptions of the total work. Mallarmé seeks to outbid religious tradition by means of a higher-order schematization of mankind’s “self-fictionings.” This will to abstraction is reflected in the subsumption of all the arts and all genres in the *Book*. Scriabin’s conception of the human spirit is its antithesis. All of his compositions rehearse “The Poem of Ecstasy,” written in conjunction with his Fourth Symphony (1906–9) of the same title. The poem is a hymn to the eternal creative-destructive play of the divine spirit, which finds its redemption in the phenomenal world—“Divine play / In multiplicity of forms”—just as the world finds redemption in the supreme moment of blissful oneness:

I create you,
This complex unity
This feeling of bliss
Seizing you completely,
I am the instant illumining eternity
I am the affirmation.
I am Ecstasy.47

The Nietzschean echoes are unmistakable: the exaltation of the Dionysian Will, the double play of redemption between Apollonian dream vision and Dionysian intoxication. *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, Scriabin’s Fifth Symphony (1910) and last completed orchestral work, also refers to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, which had on its title page an image of Prometheus Unbound. The cover design for *Prometheus*, commissioned by Scriabin from the Belgian artist and fellow theosophist Jean Delville, announces an even grander programme than Nietzsche’s vision of the

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redemptive unbinding of Prometheus/Dionysus. Delville’s design “shows a lyre (the world symbolized by music) rising from a lotus flower (the womb or mind of Asia). Over a Star of David, the ancient symbol of Lucifer according to Theosophy, shines the face of Prometheus. Thus the composer incorporated into his world-view all religions, including ‘Sons of the Flame of Wisdom,’ Theosophy’s secret cult to which both Scriabin and Delville belonged.” Prometheus unfolds the birth of human consciousness from matter and its development, culminating in a delirious celebration of the myriad forms of life, whose dissonances finally resolve into harmony. The fact that Prometheus was performed in the presence of Lenin at a concert in the Bolshoi Theatre in October 1918 to celebrate the first anniversary of the October Revolution marks the momentary and short-lived meeting of mysticism and revolutionism.

Scriabin’s synthesizing intention is evident in the two best-known features of Prometheus: its synaesthetic and harmonic experiments. The score includes a part for a color keyboard (tastiera per luce), whose function, according to Scriabin, was “to bathe the performance space in a vast interplay of colored lights, pervading the very air and atmosphere.” Although the synaesthetic effects of combining sound and color fascinated contemporaries such as Kandinsky and Schoenberg (see chapter 7), the quest for a new musical language beyond tonality led by Scriabin (1872–1915) and Schoenberg (1874–1951) in the years before the First World War was of far greater significance. Scriabin’s famous “mystic chord,” made up of fourths (augmented, diminished, perfect), is the source of both melody and harmony in Prometheus. Scriabin’s attraction to the harmonic ambiguity of the tritone (augmented fourth), which divides the octave into equal halves of six semitones, shows him moving toward twelve-tone music. His move beyond tonality was, however, symptomatic of his mystic desire to move beyond the limits of art and of avant-gardism. The Mysterium signified “the insuperable barrier between all works of art and his unique artistic design.” Boris de Schloezer locates the beginnings of Scriabin’s grand conception in his plan for an opera, which was to conclude with the death of the hero during a great festival, which “crows the attainment of universal unification with the production of a grandiose musical drama created by the hero.” The very plan of the opera—a grandiose musical drama within a grandiose...
musical drama, a great festival within a great festival, a total work of art within a total work of art!—confronted Scriabin with the “insuperable barrier” separating representation from life. By foregrounding the frame of representation, his play-within-the-play would have amounted to the inverse of the total work of art beyond representation.\footnote{After 1945, both Peter Weiss, \textit{The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade} (London: John Calder, 1964), and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, \textit{The Visit}, trans. Patrick Bowles (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), employ this framing technique in their critiques of the idea of redemptive theatre.}

As the “Poem of Ecstasy” indicates, Scriabin identified with the living process of creation. The work of art could not be an end in itself; its function was to attain an intensified mode of existence: “Scriabin valued life above art; in art, he saw the means of enrichment, of enhancement, of subtilization of life, culminating in the acquisition of mystical power.”\footnote{Schloez\c{e}r, \textit{Scriabin}, 99.} The synthesis of the arts, for which the composer’s term was “total art,”\footnote{Ibid., 169.} constituted an essential step toward acquisition of this power at the same time as it anticipated the return to a primal and final harmony. For all his deep appreciation of Wagner (the only composer he took seriously), Scriabin rejected Wagner’s mimetic parallelism of music and drama in favor of what he called the counterpointing of the arts, that is, an interpenetration that denied the separation of the arts in the name of an all-embracing, once-and-future “Omniart.”\footnote{Ibid., 84. According to Scriabin, a faint memory of Omni-art is present below the surface of the modern separated arts and underlies the symbolist doctrine of correspondences. Simon Shaw-Miller, “Scriabin and Obukhov: \textit{Mysterium} and \textit{La livre de la vie}; The Concept of Artistic Synthesis,” \textit{Consciousness, Literature, and the Arts, Archive} 1.3 (December 2000): 9, http://blackboard.lincoln.ac.uk.} To that end, Scriabin wanted to return the theatre to its religious origins by abolishing the duality of actors and audience that Wagner had failed to surmount.\footnote{Scriabin: “The true eradication of the stage can be accomplished in the Mystery”; quoted in Shaw-Miller, “Scriabin and Obukhov,” 7.} “Scriabin refused to separate art from religion; in his view religion is immanent to art, which itself becomes a religious phenomenon.”\footnote{Schloez\c{e}r, \textit{Scriabin}, 233.} It was precisely the separation of the two that had led to a fatally narrow understanding of art, and to the loss of its true meaning and significance, which Scriabin felt he was summoned to recover. This mystic destiny defined his purpose as artist. He had been called to bring the whole tradition of mystical-religious art to its climax. Exceeding his faith in the redemptive power of art, which he shared with the romantics, was his belief in the magical powers of the artist, which he shared with Novalis, whose depiction of the orphic poet in his unfinished novel \textit{Heinrich von Ofterdingen} Scriabin greatly admired. Scriabin’s favorite legend was that of Orpheus: “To him it represented...
the vestigial remembrance of a historic man who once wielded great power, the true nature and significance of which has been lost.”

In the hermetic tradition, Orpheus was one of the line of teachers and transmitters of the wisdom of the ancients. This ancient wisdom, as presented by Madame Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), read by Scriabin in 1906, provides the key to the *Mysterium*. According to Schloezer, Scriabin likened Madame Blavatsky’s synthesis of Indian and pre-Christian esoteric speculations on man and the universe to the grandeur of Wagner’s music dramas. Bearing the theosophical interpretation of *Parsifal* in mind (on which, see chapter 5), Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* and Wagner’s sacred festival drama may be considered the spiritual parents of the *Mysterium*. It needs to be added, however, that Scriabin aimed to transcend his models by realizing the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in (pre- and posthistoric) Omni-art and by transforming theosophy’s secret teachings into the ecstatic moment of apocalyptic revelation. The basic idea of the *Mysterium*—“the union of humanity with divinity and the return of the world to oneness”—anticipates the far-distant conclusion to Madame Blavatsky’s account of Cosmogenesis (volume 1) and Anthropogenesis (volume 2), which situates us as the fifth of the seven races of man in the seven rounds of life and evolution. Two further cycles (Manvantara) are needed to complete the evolution of the universe to perfect enlightenment: “The Cycles of Matter will be succeeded by Cycles of Spirituality and a fully developed mind.”

The prospect of an endlessly distant liberation from the phenomenal world of space and time was unacceptable to Scriabin. “He harboured apocalyptic expectations of a new earth, a new heaven, awaiting the palpitating fulfillment of the promise of that angel who vowed to the ‘eternally living’ that ‘time will cease to be.’” What Madame Blavatsky attributed to two further cycles of evolution, Scriabin entrusted to the boundless “cosmic creative force, in which he was immersed and with which he merged.” This ecstasy of spirit, which enabled him to pass beyond the illusion of space and time to behold “the cosmos directly, in its perennial motion, its dance,” drove his conviction that the end of the universe and the

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60. Ibid., 234. Schloezer quotes Leonid Sabaneiev’s report of Scriabin’s understanding of the orphic power of art as the exercise of a magical power over the human mind “by means of a mysterious, incantatory, rhythmic force.” “Once we accept the principle of effective action on the psychic plane, each performance of a work of art becomes an act of *magic, a sacrament*. Both the creator of a work of art and its performer become *magicians*, or votaries, who stir psychological storms and cast spells upon the souls of men.” The goal of such theurgic art is catharsis and ecstasy. Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 237.


62. Ibid., 67.


transfiguration of humanity were near and that he was the chosen instrument of this imminent consummation of all things. In his notebooks he writes:

But there is a higher synthesis [than of man and society] that is of divine nature, and which at the supreme moment of existence is bound to engulf the entire universe and impart to it a harmonious flowering, that is, ecstasy, returning it to the primordial state of repose that is nonbeing. Such a synthesis can be consummated only by human consciousness, elevated to a superior consciousness of the world, freeing the spirit from the claims of the past and carrying all living souls away in its divine creative flight. This will be the last ecstasy, but it is already close at hand.66

How Scriabin envisaged the performance of Mysterium is largely a matter of conjecture. It is doubtful that he had anything more than a general conception. We do know that the intended site of this last ecstasy was to be in India. English theosophical admirers bought land for this purpose in Darjeeling in 1914. For the theosophists not only was India the font of ancient wisdom, but nothing less than the backdrop of the Himalayas could suffice for the ultimate multimedia spectacle. Scriabin’s notebooks include a sketch of the temple he planned to construct in the shape of a hemisphere, which would appear as a sphere through its reflection in water. Twelve stars crown the cupola of the temple world, which is entered through twelve doors. The twelve external pillars supporting the temple may well symbolize the twelve color chords of Prometheus. The temple would have room for two thousand participants grouped in circles around the Artist-Messiah.67 “The Mysterium was to be inaugurated with a carillon of bells descending from the clouds; dirigibles would be used to circumvent the law of gravity.”68 The ritual was to end on the seventh day with an orgiastic dance, a sacramental act of cosmic eros. Referring to his Seventh Piano Sonata, Scriabin speaks of it approaching the final dance of Mysterium before the instant of dematerialization.69 “Art has performed its mission; the creation of beauty is accomplished, the world is impregnated with the image of the Deity. The Seventh Day is ended; the Mysterium has brought mankind, and the whole universe with it, to the threshold of death…. A blessed immersion into God takes place, a fusion with God, now resurrected and lovingly receiving his sons unto himself.”70 Scriabin seems to have imagined the entire population of the world participating, and the earth itself as the temple.

Confronted by this cosmic task, it is hardly surprising that Scriabin blinked and retreated to working on a prelude to apocalypse, an Acte préalable (Preliminary

66. Quoted in Schloezer, Scriabin, 120.
69. Andreas Pütz, Von Wagner zu Skrjabin (Kassel: Bosse, 1995), 150.
70. Quoted in Schloezer, Scriabin, 270.
Act), which was to precede the final act and serve as a purification rite, involving the physical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical preparation of the participants. As opposed to the Mysterium, the Preliminary Act remained within the boundaries of art, even though designed solely for adepts and not for an audience. It remained on the level of representation, comparable in this sense to the Mass as a repeatable rite. Scriabin worked on the Act in 1914, completing the text by autumn, together with musical material that he did not have time to turn into an orchestral score before his death from blood poisoning in April 1915.71 “Scriabin intended to restore in this work the unity of all the arts . . . sound, light, words and physical movements were to form a close-knit contrapuntal fabric.”72 But beyond the unity of the arts, beyond representation, there beckoned the instant of dematerialization, the instant when time will cease to be. In 1906, Scriabin wrote: “A moment of ecstasy will cease to be a moment in time, for it will compress time into itself.” Schloezër comments that the goal of the Mysterium was to experience “death in time and space.”73 Where Scriabin speaks of dematerialization, Mallarmé speaks of the abolition of the phenomenal world. Each takes the symbolists’ occult quest for essence, for the absolute, to its mystical conclusion: Nothing, nirvana—in Mallarmé’s words, “le Néant, auquel je suis arrivé sans connaître le Bouddhisme.”74

The composer Nicolai Obukhov (1892–1954), a follower of Scriabin, took up the challenge of the total work of art. Escaping from the Bolshevik Revolution, he settled in Paris in 1929. His life’s work was devoted to The Book of Life, consisting of eight hundred pages of short score, a libretto in Russian in seven chapters, divided into fourteen sections. Like Scriabin, he believed there was a higher reality that art could reach. The spiritual power of music could only be realized through the “absolute harmony” offered by the twelve-tone method of composition. Obukhov invented new instruments to supplement the orchestra, such as the Ether, which either functioned as a kind of wind machine or operated to produce sounds both below and above the human hearing range, and the Croix Sonore, constructed in the 1930s, which was similar to the Theremin or the Ondes Martinot. The Croix Sonore works as a symbol of balance, just as the orchestra is governed by its relation to the four elements: air (woodwind and brass), earth (percussion), fire (strings), and water (keyboards). The work is called a “sacred action,” directed to the idea of transformation, for which music is the bridge to the transubstantiation of matter into divine spirit, comparable to the act of transubstantiation in the Mass.75 An ideal

71. The Russian composer Alexander Nemtin devoted many years to creating from the fifty-three pages of sketches a tripartite work lasting three hours with massive orchestral and choral parts, solo piano, organ, and light keyboard. Nemtin’s reconstruction is available in a recording by Vladimir Ashkenazy and the Deutsche Symphonie-Orchester Berlin: Scriabin, Preparation for the Final Mystery, Decca 466329–2.
72. Schloezër, Scriabin, 333.
73. Ibid., 231, 219.
74. Marvick, “Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse,” 293.
performance would involve the arrangement of the participants in spirals within a stage setting. “The ‘terrestrial’ orchestra will be coiled up around the scene. A dome will contain the ‘celestial’ orchestra. Lighting changes will intervene in the ‘Sacred Action,’ a synthesis of cult and orgy (the latter meant symbolically). Such is the ritual where science and religion are married.” Theosophists were attracted by Obukhov’s intentions and arranged for a partial performance at a theosophical venue in 1926, which was complemented by the public performance of the symphonic poem Précéface de la livre de vie on 3 June 1926 at the Paris Opera, conducted by Sergei Koussevitzky. Neither this performance nor a later performance from The Book of Life in 1934 succeeded in persuading the audience. Despite their evident failure to realize their mystic visions, Simon Shaw–Miller is nevertheless right to insist that Scriabin and Obukhov, or Mallarmé and Proust, reveal against the conventional interpretations of the modernist movement “a synthetic impulse at the heart of modernist culture.”

Gnosis and Ecstasy

Mallarmé and Scriabin: two versions of the symbolist apocalypse (Marvick), that is to say, opposed versions of revelation through the mystic paths of gnosticism and ecstasy respectively. They display the alternative faces of the Idea, the division between Music and Letters, and in this sense the dismemberment of Orpheus. Novalis, the predecessor, points in opposite directions in relation to Mallarmé and Scriabin. For the former he points to the path of absolute literature in pursuit of an absolute poetics. Face-to-face with a mute and meaningless universe, Mallarmé ties modernism’s quest for the absolute to the “glorious lies” of mankind’s self-fictionings. Gnosis springs from the “aesthetic relation” between art and truth, which allows us to speak without reservation of Mallarmé’s art religion. Art, more exactly poetics, reveals the ultimate truths of religion—and politics. The price is total, however: the will to totality retreats—as it progresses on the path to self-enlightenment—into the virtuality of Blanchot’s “Book to come.” Construed in this fashion, Novalis stands at the beginning of Calasso’s heroic age of modernism, which attains its self-sacrificial truth in Mallarmé’s via negativa.

A completely different picture emerges if we take Scriabin as our reference point. Novalis now appears as a last avatar of Orpheus, the legendary personification of the ancient ideal of art and its miraculous theurgic powers, capable of transforming and transfiguring life. Scriabin’s Novalis indicates the true path to the future: it lies in undoing the dismemberment of Orpheus, undoing, that is, the historical consequences of the secularization and enlightenment of art.

77. Shaw–Miller, “Skriabin and Obukhov.”
which have severed art’s roots in religion and released the arts into lonely autonomy. If this process of secularization provides the springboard for Mallarmé’s leap into the abyss, it defines at the same time for Scriabin the path of return and the sacred task of anamnesis, which found kindred spirits in German romanticism and idealism. Ivanov, who was close to Scriabin in the last two years of his life, stresses the deep affinity between Scriabin and Novalis’s “magic idealism”: the identification of personal consciousness with universal spirit; the harmony of nature and awakened consciousness; the fusion of the human and the divine in theurgic creativity; the reconciliation of all contraries in “synthetic memory”; collective ecstasy as the means to universal transfiguration. But we could also see this affinity as determined by a comparable response to the sense of historical crisis, triggered by the French Revolution in the case of Novalis and by the 1905 uprising and the First World War in the case of Scriabin. Ivanov’s essay “Scriabin’s View of Art,” written in 1915 to commemorate the composer’s death, captures the apocalyptic expectations that suffused Russian society and consumed Scriabin. Ivanov speaks of Scriabin’s appearance as heralding a turning point in the universal life of the spirit. Scriabin announces the alternative: “that there will either be no more art at all or else it will be born from the roots of being itself and give birth to being, thereby becoming the most important and real of actions; that the time of works of art has passed and that from now on, one can conceive only of events of art.”

Is this not the logic inscribed in Mallarmé’s and Scriabin’s antithetical projects—the reconnection of art and being, the revolutionary-redemptive dream that impelled the avant-garde movements to proclaim across the decade of the First World War the apocalypse of modernism?

79. Ibid., 228.