The Total Work of Art in European Modernism

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The Community to Come

In chapter 1 the concept of the sublime in politics or the political sublime was introduced in relation to the founding moment of political modernity: the dissolution of institutions and the return of the social to its origins in the French Revolution. This is the abyss of political foundation, as theorized by Marc Richir: the liminal experience of the passage from the old world of absolutism to a new world, in which the utopian image of community emerged as in a dream from the anarchy of liberty, equality, and fraternity. This dream experience, this popular enthusiasm, constitutes for Richir the sublime instituting moment of the Revolution, sublime because it could not be represented and institutionalized. Despite its provenance in antiquity, the concept of the sublime is essentially a modern invention: the ongoing revaluation of the sublime in the “double aesthetics” of the sublime and the beautiful in European art since the eighteenth century corresponds and responds to the withdrawal of the divine in modernity.¹ It indicates that the sublime has become the privileged proxy of the sacred, and that the ambiguities of the aesthetic judgment of the sublime reflect the rediscovered and henceforth constitutive ambiguity

¹. For the double aesthetics of modernity, see Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2004), 27–32.
of the concept. At the same time, precisely as an aesthetic category, the concept of
the sublime attempts to contain, distance, and master the threatening and destruc-
tive force and fascination of the unbounded. In similar fashion, the privileging of
nature as the sublime object of aesthetic theory can be thought of as a displacement
of violence and terror from the human to the “inhuman” natural world. This dis-
placement points to the need to posit in addition to the aesthetic sublime the po-
litical sublime. In speaking of the sublime in the political, as opposed to politics,
Richir can distinguish between the revolutionary moment of the return of the so-
cial to its origins and its subsequent recollection and celebration in the revolution-
ary festivals. The festivals thus came to be conceived as both the product and the
producer of the sublime re-fusion and regeneration of the social body. In similar
fashion the festival or the festival drama as total work of art came to be conceived
as the aesthetic pledge of the community to come, just as the founding revolution
of modernity pointed to the revolution to come that will claim to realize—as with
the Bolshevik Revolution—or undo—as with the Fascist movements—the legacy
of the French Revolution.

The present chapter consists of two parts: first, two texts that appeal to the
community to come, Romain Rolland’s Théâtre du peuple (1903) and Gabriele
d’Annunzio’s novel Il fuoco (1900), chosen because they represent in particularly
clear form at the turn of the century the two lines of the nineteenth-century in-
heritance, with clear links (in retrospect) to the Russian and Italian revolutions
respectively. In addition, the Italian text leads into the question of the genealogy
of the Fascist aestheticization of politics, addressed in the second part of the chapter.
Both texts have in common in the context of fin-de-siècle decadence the theme of
national regeneration, in the service of socialism with Rolland (1866–1944), who
draws his inspiration from the French Revolution, and in the service of national-
ism with d’Annunzio (1863–1938), who draws his inspiration from Wagner and
Nietzsche. Each author dreams of the total work that will transcend the limits
of the theatre to effect a reunion of art and life through the mobilization of the
masses. Both texts thus stand in the continuity of the conjurations of the total work
across the nineteenth century. Their interest for our purposes lies in their relation
to the postwar totalitarian revolutions. The connection in the case of Rolland is
straightforward; the reception of Le théâtre du peuple in Russia underlined the con-
tinuity (at least initially) between the French and the Russian revolutions (see chap-
ter 10). The connection in the case of d’Annunzio is more substantial in that he is
acknowledged as a crucial figure—together with the futurists—in the elaboration

2. Jeffrey Alexander’s definition of the symbolic action through which the community represents
itself to itself as the infusing of meaning by refusing performance applies particularly well to the French
Revolution’s conception of the popular festival. Alexander understands by re-fusion the temporary re-
covery of the ritual process, which makes social life possible by sustaining myth. “Cultural Pragmatics:
Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy,” in Social Performance, ed. Jeffrey Alexander, Bern-
of a Fascist aestheticization of politics, the focus of the final chapter in this book (chapter 11).

Romain Rolland: *Le théâtre du peuple*

Romain Rolland’s manifesto for a people’s theatre is dedicated to Maurice Pottecher (1867–1960), who inaugurated the first People’s Theatre in Bussang, Alsace, on 22 September 1892, the centenary of the proclamation of the French Republic. In March 1899 a group of young writers associated with *Revue d’art dramatique* announced a competition for the best project for a popular theatre with the aim of establishing a people’s theatre in Paris, to be judged by a jury that included Émile Zola, Anatole France, Octave Mirbeau, Édouard Schuré, Pottecher, and Rolland. Their circular declared the project to be a matter of life and death for art and for the people. If art does not open up to the people, it is destined to disappear with the society it represents. If the people does not find the path to art, humanity will fail its destiny (211). Diagnosis and prognosis are familiar: the crisis of modern art, evident in the elitist posturing of aestheticism, underlines the need for a reunion of art and life. This is the message of Rolland’s book-manifesto, which he called a war machine against an ancient decadent society and intended as the complement to his own dramas on the French Revolution, a cycle of eight plays stretching from 1900 to 1939. Introduced by a speech of Jean Jaurès, Rolland’s *Danton* was performed in December 1900 in Louis Lumet’s Théâtre Civique in Paris to raise money for striking workers, followed by Rolland’s “action populaire,” *Le quatorze juillet*, in March 1902. The aim of the plays was to revive revolutionary energies in order to complete the goals of the Revolution, interrupted in 1794, through the mobilization of the people, which is now more mature and conscious of its destiny (95). Rolland found a congenial director in Firmin Gémier, the cofounder with André Antoine of the Théâtre Libre in Paris in the 1890s: “For Gémier as for Rolland, theater was theater only to the extent that it produced collective movement, emotion, com-motion.” Gémier’s ambition was to break free of the constraints of the theatre stage in order to realize a true spectacle. In his book on the theatre (1925) he writes that there is “nothing more captivating in reality and in art than the spiritual communion of the crowd.” Rolland constructed the last act of *Le quatorze juillet* as an epiphany of the people in which actors and audience merged in revolutionary song. The last play in the cycle, *Robespierre* (1939), ends in similar fashion with “The Internationale” rising above “The Marseillaise.”

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Rolland’s goal of creating a new art for a new world allowed no compromises in the life-and-death struggle between the past and the future. The art of the past is dying, destined for the necropolis of our historicism, the museum. Rolland scrutinizes the theatre of the past in search of resources for the new theatre. Shakespeare is too distant and too obscure for the people; French drama, with the exception of Molière, is judged and found wanting, whether it be Racine’s tragedies, Hugo’s romantic drama, or the Byzantine neoromanticism of contemporary drama, which panders to an idle and degenerate bourgeoisie. Rolland’s yardstick is truth, not beauty. A people can do without beauty; it cannot do without truth, the source of all greatness (33). This truth does not spare those who set out to write for the people: Tolstoy, Gorki, and Hauptmann failed because they aimed their plays at the conscience of the bourgeoisie or at a revolutionary elite of the people. This leaves Wagner sole master of the field: “The most sovereign creator in music since Beethoven was also the most sovereign creator in drama since Schiller and Goethe” (47). The model of popular theatre provided by Die Meistersinger cannot be followed, however, in France because the musical education of the people has hardly begun. The young Rolland, we may recall, had championed Wagner together with his fellow pupil Claudel at public concerts in Paris ten or more years earlier. If the composer is still for Rolland the greatest artist of our time (167), he nevertheless belongs to the past: “The theatre of Wagner is poisoned, despite its grandeur, by unhealthy dreams, which reflect the milieu in which it was born, the aristocracy of decadent art, which has arrived at the end of its evolution and almost of its life. What gain could the people draw from the morbid complications of this sensibility, from the metaphysics of Valhalla, from the mystical-carnal torments of the knights of the Grail?” (47).

Having surveyed the theatre of the past, Rolland has found nothing that can serve the new theatre. What he has found, however, are some kindred spirits—Rousseau, Diderot, Michelet—and some projects of the Revolution. Rousseau’s advocacy of a regeneration of drama and of popular festivals gives him a double claim to be the founding father of popular theatre. Gémier also looked throughout his directing career to Rousseau and to the festivals of Revolution for his inspiration. For the 1903 centenary of the Swiss canton of Vaud’s accession to the Helvetic Federation Gémier devised a grand pageant with 2,400 actors for an amphitheatre overlooking Lake Geneva, which reached its climax when the entire audience became participants in the action. In 1914 he produced an adaptation of Oedipus Rex in the Cirque d’Hiver in Paris. The production was to form the inaugural event in a series entitled Olympic Games, intended to honor Rousseau’s expectation of the withering away of indoor theatre and his vision of citizens exercising their Spartan virtue in martial gatherings. Besides Rousseau, Rolland also draws attention to the prerevolutionary calls by Louis-Sebastian Mercier and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre for the creation of a popular theatre capable of combining the aesthetic conceptions of Shakespeare with Rousseau’s moral concerns to create a national drama.
Rolland discusses at greater length the French revolutionaries from Mirabeau and Talleyrand to Saint-Just and Robespierre, who proposed and debated the question of a theatre for the people, and adds an appendix on the principal decrees of the Revolution concerning theatres and festivals. Thus the Committee of Public Safety proposed and the Convention decreed on 4 August 1793 that from 4 August to 1 September there be performed in Paris “republican tragedies such as Brutus, Wilhelm Tell, Caius Gracchus . . . at the expense of the Republic” (77). In November 1793 the plan was adopted to establish national theatres to complement and complete the public festivals as a national enterprise, because the social and pedagogical purpose of the theatre should not be the object of financial speculation. It was followed in 1794 by what Rolland calls “the founding charter of the theatre of the people” (78), the decision by the Committee of Public Safety to consecrate the former Théâtre-Français to “representations given by and for the people” and henceforth renamed Théâtre du Peuple.” The municipalities were summoned in turn to organize their own free civic spectacles. A People’s Theatre required, however, a repertoire. The committee therefore called on poets in May 1794 to celebrate the principal events of the Revolution and to compose republican dramas, a regenerative task to be supervised by the Committee for Public Instruction.

Decrees were not sufficient, however, to create a national theatre. Rolland ruefully concedes that there exists no French revolutionary drama to be placed alongside the paintings of David or the music of Méhul, Lesueur, Gossec, and Cherubini. In fact, the greatest poet of the Revolution had been Schiller, and its greatest composer Beethoven. Parisian audiences preferred the new entertainments of vaudeville and operetta to republican dramas, leading Rolland to conclude that in its sublime spectacle the Revolution had written its own tragedy. Nor can Rolland draw on any later continuation of the Revolution in the theatre, leaving Michelet as the sole link between the Committee of Public Safety and Rolland’s committee a hundred years later. Rolland’s own ideas about a monumental art for and by the people do not, however, go beyond such generalities as the need to depict on stage the movements of masses, the action of the people. Although Rolland excludes the Wagnerian model of music drama, he regards melodrama as the law of popular theatre, whether Greek or Elizabethan. By melodrama he understands laughter and tears, comic interludes, delight in stage spectacle, that is to say, true emotions, true realism, simple morality (134). Besides melodrama, he calls for national epics.

5. Gémier tried to combine theatre and festival in his national enterprise. He was fascinated by David’s Mountain as the centerpiece of the Festival of the Supreme Being, which he saw as the image of the people’s return to nature, to the sacred mountain on which a tree symbolized the people’s collective soul. It led him to dream of creating a popular religion based on regional festivals: “Each Festival will be tantamount to one act of an immense play that will magnify the life of the people and be enacted by the people itself in that majestic theater whose stage is the soil of France. Thus we shall establish a culte extérieur whose social credo requires the liturgy which is still missing from our civil religion.” Brown, Theater and Revolution, 295.
on the model of Shakespeare’s history plays, which France lacks. While the melodrama confirms the simple morality of the triumph of the Good, the national epic will be directed to creating the new man and his truth: “May the life of all times form a whole indissolubly united, a mountain in movement, a single Being which lives in millions of breasts and climbs by a million paths to the assault of the universe, which it will one day dominate” (144).

Given the absence of any vital tradition of popular theatre, it is hardly surprising that Rolland wanted to go beyond the limits of the theatre. However uplifting, the theatre is always a compensation, a dream compared with the glorious spectacle offered by humanity’s progress. “A happy and free people needs festivals more than theatres: it will always be its own most beautiful spectacle. Let us prepare festivals for the people to come.” (154) To go beyond the theatre, Rolland goes back once more to Rousseau and the French Revolution, declaring that David’s organization of the revolutionary festivals, including that of the Supreme Being, revealed a greater originality than the entire theatre of the eighteenth century (157). Like the young Wagner, he makes the Revolution the source of the avant-garde’s dream of the redemptive sublation of art. Rolland quotes Wagner: “Art commences where life ceases. The work of art expresses our unrealized dreams. Art is the avowal of our impotence” (167). Rolland is happy to accept that this means the end of artistic theatre. Only from its ruins can popular art be reborn. At the same time he is fully aware that the invocation of “the people to come” is also an avowal of impotence: “You want an art of the people? Begin by having a people” (169).

Rolland’s activist avant-gardism had somewhat cooled when he came to write a preface to the second edition of his book in 1913. He speaks of it as a historical document, reflecting the artistic ideas and hopes of a generation, the pure and holy faith of our youth in a coming resurrection. “Forgive the passionate intransigence of this book, this longing for justice which wants to make a tabula rasa of everything in order to reconstruct everything!” (ix). He must now admit that the art of the people cannot flourish in an old soil. But only in order to reaffirm his faith that the moment of renewal is at hand, that the people is awakening. We can hardly imagine that the pacifist Rolland sensed the approach of war, even less the Russian Revolution, only four years away. The Theatre of the People was translated into Russian in 1910 by Lunacharsky and reprinted in 1918 with a preface by Ivanov. Rolland’s ideas also found a more fertile soil in France after the war. On the second anniversary of Armistice Day, 11 November 1920, the Théâtre National Populaire, with Gémier as director, was inaugurated with a festival in front of Les Invalides, coinciding with the translation of the body of the unknown soldier to his grave at the Arc de Triomphe. The festival involved a reenactment of the Revolution’s Festival of Federation, a commemoration of World War I, and an apotheosis of labor in which trade unions pledged to work for the rebirth of France.6 The great period of

the French National Theatre did not occur, however, until after the Second World War under the direction of Jean Vilar. Despite the undoubted impact of Rolland’s ideas, the concept of a people’s theatre suffered from a fatal flaw in its attempt to revive and renew a civic religion born of the moment of revolutionary enthusiasm. The massacres of workers in 1848 and 1871 gave the lie to the revolutionary utopia of the fraternal people. Sorel’s assertion of myth as the motive force of revolutionary action and of the general strike as the civic festival of the proletariat openly recognized that the working class was not the people, not the nation. The enormous crowds of French and German workers in August 1914 bore witness, however, to the triumph of the religion of nationalism over that of socialism.7

**Gabriele d’Annunzio: Il fuoco**

D’Annunzio’s starting point is his identification with a Nietzschean politics and its challenge to socialism as the decadent offspring of Christianity. In August 1892 the Italian Workers Party, renamed the Socialist Party the following year, was founded. A month later d’Annunzio responded with an article in *Il mattino* entitled “La bestia elettiva.” His target is the dogma of 1789, the belief that the sovereignty of the state belongs to the people. The plebs will always remain slaves, mute witnesses to the competitive struggle of elites, from which a more terrible tyranny will emerge to dominate the masses, the state in the guise of the provider of public happiness. And this is as it should be, for force will always be the first law of nature. A new aristocracy is being formed with a will to power beyond the good and evil of slave morality.8 D’Annunzio’s “new aristocracy” points to a third force between socialism and the state, the masses and the elites: the poet as the aristocratic leader who liberates the plebs from the confines of mundane existence through his vision of beauty and national greatness. According to the sociologist Scipio Sighele, d’Annunzio dreamed of transforming the degenerate mob into a noble, purposeful collective.9 Jared Becker interprets d’Annunzio’s celebrated parliamentary switch from right to left in 1900 as a grand gesture, aimed at demonstrating the goal of uniting nationalism and socialism (Maurice Barrès had coined the formula “socialist nationalism” in the 1890s), in order to harness the energies of the masses to national-imperial goals.10 Becker regards d’Annunzio as the chief orchestrator in Italy of the shift from nineteenth-century nation building toward an imaginary of radical nationalism and imperial aggrandizement, making him the embodiment around

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10. Ibid., 48–49.
1900 of the values of an emerging Fascist ideology.\textsuperscript{11} It is thus only appropriate that d’Annunzio should commemorate Nietzsche’s death in 1900 with the poem “Per la morte di un distruttore,” in which he hails the great destroyer and master of regeneration as the new Hermes who is carrying Dionysus into the Forum and the Colosseum. With this telling formula for the aestheticization of politics, d’Annunzio pays tribute to the mythmaker, whose rapidly growing influence reinforced the intellectual revolt against liberal modernity.\textsuperscript{12} The 1880s and 1890s were the crucial formative years of this alternative political culture and its “intellectual revolt” against the whole legacy of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{13} The revolt against liberal, bourgeois society and its materialistic and utilitarian values went hand in hand with an acute sense of cultural decadence and social disintegration, driven by the specter haunting bourgeois society: the growth of the urban, industrial masses and the rise of mass society. This was the context of the birth of Fascist ideology, which Zeev Sternhell treats as “the immediate product of a crisis that had overtaken bourgeois democracy and liberalism, and bourgeois society in all its fundamental values,” adding that “the break-away was so disruptive as to take on the dimensions of a crisis in civilization itself.”\textsuperscript{14} This cultural revolt against the Enlightenment and against liberalism, socialism, and mass society was very far from being a political movement. It needed the enormous shock of the Great War to transform cultural revolt into political movements.

The theme of d’Annunzio’s novel Il fuoco (The Flame) (1900) is the passing of the flame from Germany to Italy, from the dying Wagner to the young d’Annunzio.\textsuperscript{15} Wagner determines the novel’s Venetian setting: the narrative covers the six months from the arrival of Wagner in Venice in September 1882 until his death in February 1883, that is, the passage from autumn to spring. It enables d’Annunzio to combine the classical myth of Persephone with the Christian myth of Parsifal (the progression from the Wasteland to the “Good Friday magic” in Wagner’s Parsifal) in the figure of the great actress, called by her lover, the poet Stelio Effrena, Perdita (based on d’Annunzio’s relationship with Eleanora Duse from 1894 to 1904). Perdita is both Persephone and Kundry. She, the aging lover, belongs to the world of nature. Her rival, the spirit of beauty, a “slender, youthful virgin,” is a singer, who points beyond sexuality to the Holy Grail of Stelio’s dreams, the rebirth of tragedy as the aesthetic means to Italy’s renaissance. The Wagnerian theme is central to d’Annunzio’s self-understanding. In the novel Trionfo della morte (1894)

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 207–11.
\textsuperscript{13} Sternhell, Intellectual Revolt against Liberal Democracy.
he had reworked Tristan. Now he is ready to define himself through emulation of the master, through the translation of the German project of the total work of art to the classical world of the Mediterranean. This translation involves an ambition that goes beyond the theatre to the awakening of Italy, beyond art to the greater art of politics. Behind Wagner stands Nietzsche. Part 1 of The Flame, “The Epiphany of Fire,” is centered around a speech that Stelio gives in the Doge’s Palace, a speech that is intended to be what it speaks of, the moment of the birth of tragedy, the moment of the birth of aesthetic politics, from the spirit of the crowd. The occasion of the speech is “a celebration fit for a Doge in the Doge’s own palace” (19), an imitation Renaissance feast, at which Benedetto Marcello’s long-forgotten opera Ariadne is to be revived. Venice, the city of decadence and death, will stage the rebirth of the Renaissance birth of opera: the aesthetics of the dusk of nations is mirrored in Venice in the last beauty of autumn and sunset, the dying that promises rebirth.

D’Annunzio presents Stelio as the Nietzschean artist destined to transform decadence into regeneration, truth into beauty, and beauty into life, that is, the artist in whom Italy’s past greatness returns. “Raised up in the ascending spiral of words, the soul of the crowd seemed suddenly to reach an experiencing of beauty” (45), which cancels the fatal verdict of time: “In the magical truce granted by the power of poetry and dream, it seemed that the people found the indestructible signs of primitive generations within themselves, . . . and were recognizing their right to an ancient inheritance from which they had been dispossessed. . . . As one, they felt the agitation of a man about to regain a lost treasure. . . . There spread an expectation of a return that had been foretold” (59). Stelio can thus build his speech around the evocation of the god of harvest and autumn, who returns to take possession of Venice in a “supreme Festival.” It is this evocation, this power of poetry and dream, which is to possess and intoxicate the audience. Stelio senses that in “the communion between his own soul and the soul of the crowd, a mystery was happening, something that was almost divine. Something greater and stronger entered the feelings that he normally experienced” (43). This communion forms part of the web of sympathy that defines for d’Annunzio the gift of the poet, who senses and captures in words the magically charged correspondences between the visible world and invisible forces. The poetic power, claimed by Stelio, is described as “the constant process of genesis of a higher life-form in which all appearance was transfigured as though by the power of a magic mirror” (11). D’Annunzio identifies here with Mallarmé’s orphism, claiming for himself the mythical qualities of metamorphosis, inherent in the poet’s attunement to eternal nature. But where the symbolists mobilized the doctrine of correspondence against the Wagnerian union of the arts, Stelio’s speech, with its references to the “musical sense of colour” or to “great symphonic canvases,” places the correspondence of the arts at the service of Wagner’s aesthetics, as interpreted by Nietzsche.

D’Annunzio can bring the two rival doctrines together because he maps the correspondences between inner and outer worlds onto the Nietzschean structure
of Dionysian depth and Apollonian appearance. What the orchestra represents for Wagner, the crowd represents for d’Annunzio: from the reciprocity between the soul of the poet and the soul of the crowd a mystery is born, the advent of the god, who floats as a “living image over the crowd that nourished it with dreams” (64), like the great painting by Veronese of the apotheosis of Venice above their heads. The passage of the god is evoked in leitmotivic images of fire and water that marry Nietzsche’s aesthetic to Baudelaire’s famous sonnet on correspondences:

The water seemed to be made of starry matter, of some unknown changeable nature in which was reflected the myriad images of an indefinable liquid world. It was trembling ceaselessly, and so wave after wave of stupendously simple destructions and creations swept across it, drawing in their wake a harmony that was forever renewed. Between these two marvels rose the multi-faceted, many-souled stories [of Venice] like a forest and like a people, a silent vast mass from which the genius of Art extracted the hidden concepts of Nature. (44)

The transmutation of word into dream image parallels that of music into the stage action. Within the narrative fiction Stelio’s speech seeks to rival the act of creation that gave birth to Greek tragedy, to appropriate in other words Nietzsche’s double aesthetic of the sublime and the beautiful, symbolized by the return of Dionysus, born of the crowd’s “experiencing of beauty”: “And so he came. He came seated on a cloud like a chariot…. He turned his youthful face towards the city with its aura of unspeakable, inhuman fascination, an inexplicable cruel bestiality which contrasted with the profoundly knowing glances that flew from his somber eyes” (44). The “young, longed-for god” is beautiful and bestial, the “savage god” who will shatter the self-possession of the writer Gustav Aschenbach and lure him with a seductive vision of beauty to his death in Venice. Thomas Mann’s novella (1912) must be read as a reply to The Flame, but it was neither the first nor the last of Mann’s warnings about the dangers of d’Annunzio’s aestheticism.16

Stelio’s own defining experience of the savage god is triggered by a discussion about the Theatre of Apollo, which is being built on the Janiculum in Rome as the Italian Bayreuth. Overwhelmed by a “vortex of feelings that stirred within him in a kind of blind fury,” Stelio feels all the components of his inner life dissolving and yet at the same time increasing in a succession of terrifying sounds and images: “It was as though the blasts were bringing him alternately the screaming from some massacre and a distant apotheosis” (96). The Nietzschean superman experiences in suitably grandiose fashion the call to create the Italian total work of art that will

be a “monumental revelation of the ideal towards which the genius of our own race is being led,” a work that will soar above the symphonic music of Beethoven and Wagner as “the lone, dominating voice that...spoke for the multitude” (97). The poet not only speaks for the multitude; he is drawn to the great work by the “obscure desire of human multitudes.” Like the actress Perdita, who both possesses and is possessed by the intoxicated crowd, the “fascinated monster,” Stelio is both mastered by and master of the divine energies his words arouse. The transition from art to action, the birth of a Nietzschean aesthetic politics from the spirit of the crowd, is spelled out in the following passage:

In the communication that had taken place between his soul and that of the crowd, something mysterious, almost holy, had happened. Something greater and stronger had been added to the feelings that he had about his habitual self. An unknown power had seemed to converge in him, destroying the boundaries of his individual personality and giving his lone voice the quality of a chorus. There really was beauty in the masses, and only a poet or a hero could draw out flashes of it. When that beauty was revealed by a sudden clamour in a theatre or a public place or in a trench, then a torrent of joy would swell the heart of the man who had known how to provoke it with his poetry, or his speech or by brandishing his sword. So the words of a poet communicating with a crowd of people could be as powerful an action as a hero’s deeds. (99)17

Theatre, public place, battlefield: the artist as dramatic poet, as political leader, as war hero. D’Annunzio will play all these roles in both histrionic and deadly serious fashion, for the coming of the longed-for intoxication of war changed everything. The mobilization of the masses through war and through the theatre of politics carried d’Annunzio and the Italian avant-garde beyond their dreams of the cultural regeneration of the nation to the new mass politics of the twentieth century.

It is nevertheless clear that all the ingredients of mass politics were present in the decades before 1914. In “The Third Life of Italy,” written for the North American Review and published in 1900, d’Annunzio asks rhetorically: “Where is the leader that we could follow, capable of reconciling grand acts with grand conceptions,” the leader who “knows or divines the latent forces in the hereditary substance of the nation,” the leader capable of shaking and arousing to their very depths the dormant forces of regeneration?18 To the reflections on the crowd by Mallarmé, Durkheim, Le Bon, and Sorel (chapter 4) we can add the elitist

17. We find similar sentiments in Trotsky’s comments on the relation between the orator and the crowd: “No speaker, no matter how exhausted, could resist the electric tension of that impassioned human throng...which had become merged into a single whole.” “On such occasions, I felt as if I were listening to the speaker from the outside.” Leon Trotsky, My Life (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 295–96.

theories of the crowd in Italy in the writings of Gaetano Mosca and Sighele.19

D’Annunzio takes up Mallarmé’s characterization of the crowd as the “chimaera” and his vision of the aesthetic politics to come, the “future spectacle” of the patriotic cult, which the currently existing state and the modern city cannot deliver. D’Annunzio answers Mallarmé’s challenge with the Nietzschean conception of the artist and of art as the will to power. Stelio’s boundless ambition, his aspiration to the privileges of aristocracy, his “insatiable need for domination, glory and pleasure” combine to drive him toward the dream of a “greater, more majestic form of art” and toward the crowds as his “chosen prey” (26). The total work will rise from the ruins of Italy’s past greatness to show the way to the building of a Third Rome. The poet’s task is to liberate the crowd from the fetters and boredom of prosaic life through the revelation of beauty: “This was the mysterious will that could possess a poet in the very act of replying to the multiform soul that questioned him about the value of life and longed to raise itself just once towards the eternal ideal” (47). Stelio’s audience in the Doge’s Palace is, however, only the bourgeois proxy for the “real crowd” outside, “the great unanimous crowd” that is the object of his new sublime feelings—“filling the starry night with a cry that intoxicated like blood or wine.” “His thoughts did not only go out towards that crowd, but towards an infinite number of crowds” (47), in which the artist can simultaneously submerge and inflate his personality in Dionysian intoxication. Stelio’s speech exemplifies, at the same time as it reflects on, the psychology of the crowd: “The great animal life-form, blind to all thought, lay before the man who alone and at that moment was to think on its behalf. It stayed motionless, compelling as an enigmatic idol, protected by its own silence . . . , and it waited for the first sound of the masterful word” (37).

The novel ends with the funeral cortège of Wagner. The pallbearers are Stelio and his disciples; two workmen, “shaped in the mould of the ancient Roman race,” lay on the coffin a bundle of laurels cut on the Janiculum. While the Bavarian hillside toward which the mortal remains of Wagner are journeying still slumbers in the frost, “in the light of Rome their noble trunks were already sprouting new buds to the murmur of hidden springs” (309). More prophetic, however, is the final Venetian spectacle of sunset over the “gigantic acropolis” of the Dolomites, “steeped in glorious blood”: “The whole estuary was mantled in a dark warlike magnificence as though dozens of banners were flying over it. The silence was waiting as though for the blare of imperial trumpets” (301). The aesthetics of the dusk of nations announces the dawn.

19. Scipio Sighele, La folla delinquente (1891); Gaetano Mosca, Teorica dei governi (1884) and Elementi di scienza politica (1896). See Becker, Nationalism and Culture, 9–10, for Sighele’s discussions with d’Annunzio on the latter’s plans around 1900 to write a series of dramas under the general title La tragedia della folla.
The Nietzschean Sublime

With its radical opposition of myth to enlightenment, aesthetics to ethics, tragic culture to Alexandrian decadence, *The Birth of Tragedy* was a seminal text of the new aesthetic politics, which placed the total work of art at the center of its counter-vision of modernity. Nietzsche draws both on the older European tradition, which comprehended politics as the stamping of form on formless, recalcitrant matter, as well as on the modern transformation of the aesthetic relation between chaos and form into the metaphor of creation. Now it is no longer a question of *imitation,* but of birth (and rebirth)—the birth that is simultaneously an act of nature and of the highest consciousness, the fusion of darkness and light realized in the creative tension of the artwork. In this sense, Nietzsche resumes and deepens the aesthetic dimension of European modernism as it unfolds in response to the “death of God.” As the divine withdraws, aesthetics comes with the romantics to take its place, but at the price of a constitutive ambiguity. The theory of beauty must now recognize, indeed subordinate itself to, its other, the sublime, for which Nietzsche’s term is “the Dionysian.”

Nietzsche’s derivation of Greek tragedy from the perpetual strife and periodic reconciliation of the beautiful and the sublime, Apollonian dream and Dionysian intoxication, the plastic arts and music, gives a new, highly significant twist to the *double aesthetic* of modernity. Not only does *The Birth of Tragedy* challenge Hegel’s relegation of the possibility of great art to the past: it rewrites Edmund Burke’s empirical and reverses Kant’s transcendental analysis of the sublime. In the founding text of the modern theory of the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Burke stresses the psychological kinship of the beautiful and the sublime as the expression of two kinds of immediate, irresistible passion, the one governed by pleasure, the other by pain and danger. Burke locates the source of the sublime in *terror,* the strongest emotion that we are capable of feeling. At a certain distance, however, danger or pain can also be cause of delight. It is this mixture of pain and pleasure, sympathy and immunity, in relation to the spectacle of suffering and calamity that explains the sublime effects of tragedy. This pleasure is inextricably mixed with pain, for the pleasure we feel at the spectacle of suffering can scarcely be separated from our fears. Burke accordingly derives the sublime from the passion of self-preservation, and beauty from sexual attraction, while acknowledging the ambiguity of our pleasure in tragedy. The effects of tragedy do not essentially differ for Burke, or for Nietzsche, from our pleasure at the spectacle of real suffering and calamity. Indeed for Nietzsche, tragedy is to be privileged only in that it holds up a mirror to the universal spectacle

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of Dionysian destruction and creation. For Kant, however, Burke's derivation of aesthetic judgment from the passions represents only a first step, since his empirical psychology lacks the determining dimension of moral feelings and the associated ideas of reason. Aesthetic judgment, Kant argues, needs to be understood as an interplay between imagination and reason, the sensible and the supersensible. The sense of the beautiful arises from the harmony between the imagination and the understanding, the sense of the sublime from the disharmony between imagination and reason. Thus, in opposition to Burke's empiricism, Kant grounds aesthetic judgment in the subject, not the object. While aesthetic judgment of the sublime presupposes for both theorists the safe distance of the observer, Kant has a “quite different kind of self-preservation” in mind from that of Burke. The attraction of frightful spectacles lies in the opportunity that it affords us to discover and affirm our moral capacity to resist the omnipotence of nature (Critique of Judgment, par. 28).

Nietzsche’s theory of the sublime breaks with both Burke and Kant in three crucial, interrelated aspects. First, the beautiful and the sublime are not simply opposed; in the highest form of art—tragedy—their essential complementarity is revealed. Second, Nietzsche undertakes a fundamental revaluation of the beautiful and the sublime: self-preservation, whether conceived as natural passion or moral feeling, becomes now a property of the beautiful world of forms and is objectified in the principle of individuation. Third, the mixture of pain and pleasure that we feel in relation to the sublime is explained by Nietzsche in terms of our fundamental ambivalence toward self-preservation. On the one hand, we are seized by horror at the shattering of all forms and limits; on the other, we are possessed by ecstatic joy, which rises from “the innermost depths of human being, indeed of nature,” at the breaking of the principium individuationis. This third aspect is the most important, since it attacks the very basis on which the theory of the sublime is constructed: the aesthetic judgment of the observer and the corresponding calibration of the unequal relation between subject and object. The sublime now signifies the surrender of the subject in Dionysian intoxication to the overwhelming Other, the return of culture to nature. Hence Nietzsche's distinction between spectator and participant: as spectator we perceive nature as the phenomenal world, that is, as aesthetic phenomenon; as participant we become one with nature as noumenon, the abyssal ground of the world. In Greek tragedy and Wagner's music dramas the duality of the world as phenomenon and noumenon, representation and unrepresentable Will, is mediated to us as spectators/participants through the interplay of Apollonian beauty and Dionysian sublime.

Nietzsche’s theory of the sublime, with its location of the sublime neither in the subject nor in the object but in collective experience, leads us to the threshold of politics and back to our starting point in the French Revolution. The French Revolution posed in acute form the question of the sublime in politics. Does the sublimity attributed to the Revolution lie in the mind of the beholder, as Kant maintained,
or does it lie, on the contrary, in the feelings of the actors and participants in the world-historical events that made the Revolution its own sublime spectacle, as Rolland suggests? Rolland echoes Rousseau and Robespierre when he declares that a happy and free people will always be its own most beautiful spectacle. In turn the Revolution as its own sublime and beautiful spectacle fuses the roles of spectator and participant.

Although Kant speaks of the “participation” (Teilnehmung) that the French Revolution arouses in the observer, even at the cost of danger—a participation close in fact to the enthusiasm inspiring the revolutionaries to fervor and greatness of soul—he holds fast to the distinction between the spectators and the actors in this play (Spiel) in terms of the distinction between the respublica noumenon and the respublica phaenomenon. Since the ideal republic is greater than any realization, the spectacle of the downfall of old states and the emergence of others “as if from the bowels of the earth” cannot be the source of the sublime. Only the idea of the republic, namely that those who are subject to the law are themselves its legislators, can be sublime, because it grounds all forms of the state; only the ideal participation of the observer can be sublime, because it testifies to the moral character of humanity, that is, to a capacity of human nature to unite nature and freedom. The “representation” (Darstellung) of the idea in an empirical example, as with the French Revolution, necessarily falls short, may in fact even fail, because its realization can only be accomplished through conflict and war. Kant’s strict separation of spectators and actors protects the free community to come, which arouses our enthusiasm here and now, from inevitable compromise and betrayal. The ideal republic thus stands as the utopian antithesis to the logic of despotism, whose conclusion is war and the mass slaughter of the despot’s subjects. From Rousseau’s to Rolland’s “sentimental” dream of the popular festival, epitomized by the festivals of federation, from the German vision of the beautiful Greek polis to Wagner’s political-aesthetic utopia in the image of Athens, the community to come forms the animating idea of the total work. The continuity of this beautiful dream of community rests on the sublime idea of the transcendence of empirical individuality as the path to recovery of our true communal being. How does this change with Nietzsche?

By raising the Revolution to a “Platonic ideal” Kant protects its sublime unrepresentability from the fundamental ambiguity of the judgment of the sublime, however mitigated it might be by the safety of the observer—an ambiguity that relates not just to the overwhelming power of nature but to power as such and its sacrality, whether divine omnipotence or human despotism. Hence the Janus face of the French Revolution: the golden age of Saturn ends with Saturn devouring

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21. Immanuel Kant, Der Streit der Fakultäten, pt. 2, secs. 6–8. Kant’s sublime distinction between the republic as noumenon and phaenomenon returns in Claude Lefort’s distinction between democracy and monarchies or totalitarian regimes. In democracy the place of power cannot be occupied; it can only be “represented.”
his children. Richir argues that the two faces of the French Revolution—society’s search for self-incarnation from below and the reincorporation of society from above—present the most complete and the most problematic figuration of the abyss of political foundation. He calls the illusion that there can be an unmediated institution of society the transcendental illusion of modern politics that led to the Terror in the French Revolution and to the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century.\(^\text{22}\)

Nietzsche’s counterconception of the sublime comes from his enthusiastic identification with the merging of spectator and participant in the one sublime experience of ecstasy and terror. Nietzsche’s *mise-en-abyme* of modernity replaces the *utopian* meta-political horizon of freedom with the *mythical* meta-aesthetic horizon of nature, thereby spelling out the consequences that he draws from the “death of God”: the subjection of the subject and history to nature. To Kant’s moral individuation of the observer who discovers the idea of a higher humanity within himself beyond the self of self-preservation, Nietzsche opposes Dionysian de-individuation in all its abyssal ambiguity. On the one hand, he waxes lyrical in the evocation at the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy* of the immersion in a mystical feeling of unity that cancels the boundaries separating man from man and man from nature:

Singing and dancing the individual expresses himself as member of a higher communion: he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is ready to take flight. His gestures bespeak enchantment. Now that animals speak and the earth flows with milk and honey, he gives voice to the supernatural: he feels himself a god, he now floats as entranced and elevated as the gods he sees in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic force of all nature reveals itself in the convulsions (*Schaudern*) of intoxication for the highest delight of the Primal Unity. The noblest clay, the most precious marble, man, is hewed and shaped and to the chisel blows of the Dionysian world-artist sounds the call of the Eleusian Mysteries: “You prostrate yourselves, millions? Do you sense the Creator, world?”\(^\text{23}\)

Noumenal nature is personified as the Dionysian demiurge, in whose hands we are transformed into the raw material of his world-art. But on the other hand, what is this “sentimental” vision (in the Schillerian sense) of re-enchanted nature other than the beautiful mask of the sublime annihilation that “redeems” individuation by making us one with the eternal life of nature beneath all phenomena?

If we are to speak of the sublime in politics, as I think we must, we must also insist on the irreducible ambiguity of sublime judgment, which bears witness to the irreducible ambiguity of a power exceeding all human measure, hence sacred. Durkheim addresses the “ambiguity of the notion of sacredness” in the last chapter of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, where he distinguishes between


beneficent religious forces, which guard and maintain the physical and moral order, and “evil or impure powers, productive of disorders, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege,” inspiring fear and horror. For all that these forces repel each other, they nevertheless share a close kinship, which makes them capable of passing from the one form to the other: “The pure is made of the impure, and reciprocally. It is in the possibility of these transmutations that the ambiguity of the sacred consists.”\(^\text{24}\) This ambiguity is tied to the sublime experience of the transcendence of the boundaries of the self that releases collective forces “of such an intensity that they cannot be satisfied except by violent and unrestrained actions, actions of superhuman or bloody barbarism. This is what explains…many of the scenes, either sublime or savage, of the French Revolution.”\(^\text{25}\) The implications of the ambiguity of the sacred were developed by Durkheim’s disciples after the First World War, culminating in the short-lived Collège de Sociologie in the late 1930s. The founders of the college sought to recenter the social in the “general economy” of the transgressive sublime in response to the rise of Fascist movements across Europe, with their total challenge to a “pure” Enlightenment conception of politics, based on progressive and rationalist thinking.\(^\text{26}\) In *Les jeux et les hommes*, Roger Caillois, one of the founders of the Collège de Sociologie, offers an interesting anthropological-civilizational perspective on Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian pairing, which corresponds to two of his four fundamental categories of play, those highlighted in the subtitle of his study, *Le masque et le vertige*. Caillois contrasts primitive societies and their fascination with the mask and possession to modern, ordered societies, which cultivate games of competition and chance: “Simulation and vertigo, or if you prefer pantomime and ecstasy, assure the intensity and consequently the coherence of collective life.”\(^\text{27}\) Ancient Greece stands between the two types of society, the paradigm case of the transition from barbarism to civilization, where the (Apollonian) love of order, harmony, and measure stand out against the (Dionysian) background of magic confraternities of dancers and blacksmiths and disorderly swarms of terrifying masks. Vertigo and simulation embody this transition because they combine opposed attitudes to consciousness. For Caillois it is a dangerous combination because the two attitudes are mutually reinforcing, intensifying the sense of being possessed and dominated by strange forces, and thereby opening the door to collective outbursts of passion, comparable to a total metamorphosis of the conditions of life. The experience of metamorphosis is “so powerful, so irremediable that it belongs naturally to the sphere of the sacred

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25. Ibid., 211.
and perhaps provides one of the principal springs of the terrifying and fascinating mixture which defines it.” 28 The Dionysian thus always threatens the return of the repressed. Caillois’s example is the orchestrated vertigo of the Nazi Party rallies, directed by the charismatic leader.

Only in retrospect can we measure the gulf that separates our two texts, written at the turn of the century. Rolland looks back to Rousseau and the French Revolution and forward to the world community to come. D’Annunzio looks back to Nietzsche as the prophet of an aesthetic politics to come, of a total work of art of quite another nature, implicit in the eternal justification of the world as aesthetic phenomenon, explicit in the metaphor of the Dionysian demiurge that became reality in the “world artists” of the twentieth century, waiting to shape the masses to their total will to power. And it was from the Great War and its blind machinery of death that the regenerated “nation” emerged, not as the community of peace but as the community of death, to find its re-presentation in the spectacle of the militarized masses. In declaring that we can never understand music and tragedy in terms of beauty, Nietzsche prepared the way for the Fascist sublime: the birth of tragedy from the spirit of German music was written against the background of the birth of the German nation from the “terrors and sublimities” of the Franco-Prussian War, to which Nietzsche alludes in his dedication of The Birth of Tragedy to Richard Wagner, dated the end of the year 1871.

28. Ibid., 153.