

EMBATTLED AVANT-GARDES

MODERNISM'S RESISTANCE

TO COMMODITY CULTURE IN EUROPE



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1

Intellectuals, Commodity Culture, and Religions of Art in the Nineteenth Century

In one of his earliest reflections, Walter Benjamin wrote that “color is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual, so that when colors are mixed they produce nuances of color, not a blur.” He gave as an example the rainbow, which is “a pure childlike image. In it color is wholly contour; for the person who sees with a child’s eyes, it marks boundaries, is not a layer of something superimposed on matter, as it is for adults. The latter abstract from color, regarding it as a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space.” As the child views it, color allows for the creation of an “interrelated totality of the world of the imagination.” Unlike most adults, artists continue to participate in this world, which is why they are able to lead us to a kind of imaginative experience in which life presents itself as just such an interrelated totality. “The order of art is paradisiacal,” Benjamin concluded, “because there is no thought of the dissolution of boundaries—from excitement—in the object of experience. Instead the world is full of color in a state of identity, innocence, and harmony.”¹

Just a year before, a forty-seven-year-old Kandinsky had opened some autobiographical reflections by describing the colors that had made the most powerful impression upon him as a child. Among them was the “juicy green” that was exposed as the second layer of bark that “the

coachman used to strip from thin branches for me to create a spiral pattern.” Such primal experiences, he tells us, had provided him with the spiritual resources that had in turn made possible all of his art, an activity that he compared to “hunting for a particular hour, which always was and remains the most beautiful hour of the Moscow day. . . . To paint this hour, I thought, must be for the artist the most impossible, the greatest joy.”²

Despite great differences in age, background, and vocation, Benjamin and Kandinsky shared a sense that our experience of color offered special access to a kind of prereflective immediacy, that this access gave art unique value as a conduit to an absolute realm beyond finite experience, and that in such a linkage of art and spirituality lay the highest sort of happiness. For the young Benjamin, such insights quickened his sense that a new, genuinely post-Kantian epistemology was possible, one that would overcome the splits between subject and object, reason and understanding, forms of intuition and linguistic categories—splits that shut us off from spiritual experience and leave us with a desiccated conception of human existence.³ Because works of art were free to treat color not as “superimposed on matter” but as a medium of intuition that came prior to spatio-temporal intuitions of form, they were able to restore to us a form of experience prior to the “adult” Kantian world and, in doing so, promised a possibility of peering through the cracks and distortions in the patterns and rhythms of everyday finitude, thereby relocating lost traces of the absolute.

The dream of drawing upon prerational, “childlike” resources in order to reintegrate the modern experiential world and reestablish our access to the absolute did not of course begin with the modernist generations. Romantic, Hegelian, and a variety of postromantic attacks on Kantianism and the Newtonian worldview that underlay it were a staple of nineteenth-century intellectual life in Europe, the dialectical twin of the positivism and materialism that such critiques rightly saw as dominating the age. Yet the fact that such attacks, despite their frequent vigor, appeared to be peripheral to the main currents of nineteenth-century European thought until its closing decade suggests that the influence exerted by the Kantian worldview, and the hegemony of scientific inquiry that it sanctioned, derived from more than just Kant’s own formidable intellectual powers. As Jürgen Habermas has argued in his presentation of Max Weber, the categorical separation of truth, morality, and beauty deriving from Kant’s philosophy expressed the irrevocable transition away from a society based on a hierarchical, religiously sanctioned

worldview linked to a single monolithic value system, a transition that is constitutive of the epistemological and experiential conditions of “modernity.”⁴ Kant’s conception of experience legitimated an approach to knowledge that treated natural science, morality, and aesthetics as separate domains, each with its own inner logic, each requiring a specialized form of inquiry that was autonomous from the others. In this view, truth is associated primarily with the scientific understanding of nature, but each of the spheres is rationalized in the sense that its truths no longer depend upon any relationship to some prior cosmological or metaphysical system but rather follow from inquiry proper to that sphere. The way thereby opens for science to pursue ever more specialized inquiries, which become institutionalized as distinct disciplines and professions, and whose results do not need to be coordinated with morality, aesthetic truths, or any general metaphysical understandings. Indeed, scientific truths become wholly inaccessible to everyday consciousness. As Hannah Arendt would later write, “though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved technologically, [the truths of the modern scientific worldview] will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.”⁵ In such a world, immediate experience—like a whittled branch or a Moscow sunset—becomes obsolete and probably illusory as any sort of knowledge.

It is hardly a surprise that intellectuals primarily oriented to aesthetic and spiritual experience would feel uncomfortable in a world where knowledge had not only been sundered into incommunicable bits but in which the forms of it they privileged had been rendered secondary, if not altogether suspect. Yet their sense of a sundered or fragmented experience was by no means confined to epistemology. The stripping away of recognizable and expressible qualities that Arendt had noted in the world of modern scientific understanding was paralleled in the world of nineteenth-century labor. As G. W. F. Hegel was already suggesting in his early Jena lectures, the concrete labor of peasant agriculture or artisanal crafts had given way to an abstract world of factory production in which the laborer no longer brought forth a completed product and in which the “labor of the bourgeois class” had become an “abstract trade with an individualist mindset based on uprightness.”⁶ Moreover, the enormous increase in goods produced for the market, whose circulation was made possible by the abstraction of the money form, had produced a dizzying world of exchange no longer linked to concrete human needs or continuous face-to-face relationships. The world of things had ceased to manifest a space-time continuum and now appeared as a jumble of isolated moments whose

connections were not immediately apparent. In the rapidly expanding urban settings in which such manufacture and commerce took place, life took on an abstraction and depersonalization that threatened a sense of enduring subjectivity, as well as a rapidity of movement and increase in scale that redefined it.

Yet there was also a more positive way to construe the changes becoming manifest in nineteenth-century urban life. One of Hegel's great insights, which philosophically informed sociologists such as Weber and Habermas would later pursue, was that the fragmentation of experience that the Kantian worldview and the material organization of modern life both implied were two sides of a single process: that of the decline of a hierarchical, religious, and metaphysical mode of organizing and legitimating a cultural order. Although the nature of the new regime of modernity that would come to replace this hierarchical cultural order was not yet fully evident, Hegel understood that the modern fragmentation of experience was at the same time the cultural democratization of experience—a process he sought to moderate in antidemocratic ways. Such efforts, however, were ultimately futile. As another of Hegel's twentieth-century students recognized in a classic essay, in the modern world “a democratizing trend is our predestined fate, not only in politics, but also in intellectual and cultural life as a whole.”⁷

Looking back upon the nineteenth century from our vantage point in the twenty-first, I would suggest that with the democratic revolutions of the end of the eighteenth century came a collapse of social hierarchies whose consequences may be summarized in four points. First, the normative basis of social structure and organization moved in the nineteenth century from the vertical to the horizontal, from a social order based on rank and honor to one based on human dignity and rights in which the “essential equality of all human beings” is affirmed as a “fundamental principle.”⁸ This new normative foundation obviously did not mean that actual relationships of wealth and power were equalized or that hierarchies of class, gender, race, or nation were erased. Indeed, to many observers of modernity the opposite has seemed truer: relationships of wealth and power tend toward greater inequality, and empirical hierarchies intensify as democratization advances and system capacities expand. Still, the normative change involved in the requirement that all persons, regardless of class, status, or wealth, be addressed as Mr. or Mrs. and be entitled to equal rights under the law has had profound implications for every aspect of life—political, social, economic, and cultural. Second, the repository of the rights and dignity inherent in this

new, more horizontal culture is the human individual who is conceived as a unique being—as a person with “individuality” who can be “true” to himself or herself, who demands recognition as much for his or her uniqueness as for his or her universality as a bearer of dignity and rights, and who desires to be able to express that uniqueness through creative activity. Third, in such a democratizing culture, value judgments about persons assume increasingly objective forms. Although race, class, gender, and other forms of bias continue to inform these judgments, such intrinsic or ascribed criteria come under relentless pressure, and value judgments about persons are increasingly granted legitimacy only when based on the merit of individual achievements extrinsically measured. Finally, this new democratizing culture becomes linked to the development of public spheres, which, however imperfectly realized in institutional terms, tend normatively to regard all individuals as equally legitimate participants. Similarly, this culture becomes linked to an economic marketplace in which individuals are formally free to enter into contracts that will be legally enforced without regard to the social status or economic standing of the participants; to representative political institutions based on ever-increasing (ultimately universal) rights of suffrage; and to institutions of popular culture such as film and newspapers in which “an increasing number of readers become writers” as “everyone becomes something of an expert.”⁹

Sketched in such broad strokes, modern democratic culture may seem utterly familiar, yet it contains one anomaly important for grasping the cultural life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that is easily missed. While the normative equality bound up with the collapse of social hierarchies implied a process of homogenization that nineteenth-century intellectuals often referred to dismissively as “leveling,” the romantic sense for the “individuality” and even uniqueness of individuals that began to be asserted by writers such as J. J. Rousseau and J. G. Herder opened up a space for heterogeneity that was no less palpable. Thus, even as claims to privilege on the basis of inherited status became normatively less valid, claims to recognition on the basis of individual uniqueness often took their place. Moreover, as Herder was perhaps the first to see, claims to recognition on the basis of uniqueness could apply not just to single persons but to the cultural groups from which they took their identities (nationalities, religions, ethnicities, linguistic groups, professions, and, ultimately, genders and sexual orientations). Indeed, as one student of multiculturalism points out, claims to recognition in our world generally have far more to do with allegiances to cultural groups

than with the inner voices of pure individuality.¹⁰ In the intellectual world of modern art, efforts to assert control over the production, distribution, and evaluation of art by artists seeking special recognition as a group (e.g., futurists) were common. And even where such group claims were absent, it was arguably their sense of themselves as special persons which explains why modernists invariably tied their support of democratic culture to the idea that they would retain control over artistic standards and that art would not be reduced to a commodity.

But let us return to the nineteenth century. With his project on the Paris arcades, the mature Benjamin launched perhaps the most ambitious effort to comprehend the changing dimensions of nineteenth-century urban experience that has ever been conceived. From a mass of notes that would ultimately amount to over eight hundred printed pages, he wrote a synoptic essay in 1935 responding to a request from Theodor Adorno and the Institute for Social Research in New York. Here, in six short kaleidoscopic sections, he argued that four new phenomena had converged to produce a fundamentally changed urban world by the early 1850s: a culture of commodification; an allied entertainment industry based on exhibitions, amusement parks, newspapers, and advertising; visual imaging technologies such as panoramas, daguerreotypes, and photography; and a public architecture based on iron and glass. As he explained in a central section dedicated to the Parisian caricaturist and illustrator Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard (Grandville):

World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria in which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others. The enthronement of the commodity, with its luster of distraction, is the secret theme of Grandville's art. . . . Its ingenuity in representing inanimate objects corresponds to what Marx calls the "theological niceties" of the commodity. They are manifest clearly in the *spécialité*—a category of goods which appears at this time in the luxuries industry. Under Grandville's pencil, the whole of nature is transformed into specialties. He presents them in the same spirit in which the advertisement (the term *réclame* also originates at this point) begins to present its articles. He ends in madness.¹¹

Grandville's accommodation to the new commodity culture represented one artistic response to the new convergence of commodity and visuality in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. But Benjamin was keen to show that another such response in those years had been no less fervent.

In the penultimate section of his essay, devoted to the intellectual as *flâneur*, he crystallized the two interconnected responses:

The art that begins to doubt its task and ceases to be “inseparable from . . . utility” (Baudelaire) must make novelty its highest value. The *arbiter novarum rerum* for such an art becomes the snob. He is to art what the dandy is to fashion. . . . Newspapers flourish, along with *magasins de nouveautés*. The press organizes the market in spiritual values, in which at first there is a boom. Nonconformists rebel against consigning art to the marketplace. They rally round the banner of *l’art pour l’art*. From this watchword derives the conception of the “total work of art”—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—which would seal art off from the developments in technology. The solemn rite with which it is celebrated is the pendant to the distraction that transfigures the commodity. Both abstract from the social existence of human beings. Baudelaire succumbs to the rage for Wagner.¹²

Interestingly, however, market-oriented opportunism and autonomous art do not exhaust the routes that Benjamin saw for intellectuals in this new commodity culture.

In the final section of the essay, Benjamin reflected upon the development of the forces of production which, in the nineteenth century, had been so powerful as to “emancipate the forms of construction from art.” Yet the artistic possibilities that inhered in the new glass and steel architecture, photography, commercial art, and literary montage are not fully realized and “linger on the threshold.” Nineteenth-century artistic intellectuals, he suggested, might have asserted their support for the democratization of culture by exploiting the artistic potentials of newly available technologies, but, in the end, they only “dreamed” an epoch to follow.¹³

The vista that Benjamin’s project opens on to the nineteenth-century cultural and intellectual world suggests, convincingly to my eyes, that the development of a commodity culture was the decisive element in the reconstitution of experience that Europe’s populations underwent with increasing rapidity as the nineteenth century unfolded. He does not suggest, nor do I want to imply here, that the sources of this reconstitution can be reduced to commodification, even when it is understood in the broader context of technological change and urban development that he provides.¹⁴ Yet the central importance of commodification becomes clear when one recognizes its nodal position as a process in which both the fragmentation and the democratization of experience are deeply implicated. Commodification is a necessary condition for the division of labor that in turn makes possible the impersonality and vast scale of modern

economic life, even as it also makes possible the mechanisms of free market exchange that, in some significant measure, all democratic cultures must possess.

Benjamin's 1935 essay seems to me particularly suggestive in the way it evinces the turns in nineteenth-century intellectual life from the coming of commodity culture. Joining forces with the "market in spiritual values," mobilizing autonomous art as a mode of self-defense, and working to develop new potentials for a democratic art out of advances in modern technical and social organization: these were the major options confronting artistic intellectuals in the period.¹⁵ And important forms of avant-garde modernism would develop not only from the last of these but from democratized versions of the others as well. Therefore, in the remaining sections of this chapter, we need first to look more closely at what the historical process of commodification entailed and then to consider briefly several of the key figures and movements that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, responded to commodification with new "religions of art." As we will see, avant-garde modernism marked a break with these "religions" in the sense that the undemocratic and antimodern elements they often mixed into their transforming conceptions of the place of art in modern life appeared out of touch with an increasingly entrenched commodity culture by the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, the persistent effort among some modernists—Kandinsky and the early Benjamin foremost among them—to locate in art the possibility of a kind of ontological revelation cannot be understood independently of this tradition.

COMMODIFICATION AND COMMODITY CULTURE

Few theorists are so inextricably connected with a topic as is Karl Marx with commodification. Certainly no writer of his era reflected more deeply upon the nature and cultural implications of the commodity form, or upon the historical development of the bourgeois class and the market society which the commodity form made possible. It is true, as many recent critiques of Marx on the commodity form have shown, that his conception remained firmly grounded in the sort of productivism that also characterized the understandings of such contemporaries as John Ruskin and William Morris.¹⁶ No one writing in the mid-nineteenth century could have understood the semiotic and consumerist dimensions of the commodity form in the way that more recent developments have brought them to light. Yet the canonical status enjoyed by such passages

as *Capital's* presentation of commodity fetishism and the *Communist Manifesto's* biting condensed history of bourgeois market society are well deserved.

Marx understood that the commodity form excited a strange fascination. For him, this fascination was mostly rather dry, having to do with the “theological niceties” to which Benjamin referred, but the famous passage from *Capital* does also characterize it as “grotesque” and “wonderful,” suggesting some connection to the aesthetic and to desire.¹⁷ Marx saw that the commodity has a “transcendent” aspect lacking in those “common everyday things” produced for use out of “material furnished by nature.” He understood that the commodity was alien, in that it was produced for impersonal exchange, but also magical in the way it thereby transcended immediate use, transformed social labor into an “objective” feature “stamped upon the product,” became as much image as object, and thereby offered a kind of “promise of immortality.”¹⁸ Commodities, he understood, simply “appear” on the market, both because of the discontinuities in production to which Hegel had called attention, as well as because of the way the capitalist marketplace separates production and exchange. Capitalism gives products a “two-fold character” as both “a useful thing and a value.” Fetishism arises “only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged.”¹⁹ Yet Marx did not then go on to ask how the consumer’s participation in buying the impersonally produced image-object complicates fetishism. Despite his alignment of commodities with exchange rather than use, consumption for him remains unproblematically identified with “use” rather than with meaning-giving symbols.²⁰

Nonetheless, Marx did understand that in a culture dominated by the buying and selling of commodities, exchange value becomes the dominant way of understanding all value. Not only is use value denigrated, but all other modes of determining value, such as those that inhere in personal life, politics, religion, education, or culture and art, come to be reshaped by, if not reduced to, exchange. Here his enormously funny disquisition on money is perhaps the central text.²¹ While it probably escaped him that his own theoretical unmasking of commodification might itself become, paradoxically, a fashionable commodity, he surely recognized that critical theorists or artists will have their motives strongly suspected when financial gain accrues to them (a circumstance he himself was not fortunate enough to enjoy). He also appreciated how social and personal relationships are potentially poisoned by their con-

nections to economic exchange, which is why his descriptions of ideal friendship and the utopian social settings in which they occur are invariably decommodified.²²

Perhaps most important, Marx understood commodification as a long historical process involving many economic, social, and cultural complexities. In both the *Communist Manifesto* and the commodity fetishism passage of *Capital*, his contrast system is European feudalism, although the contrast operates in nearly opposite ways in the two texts. Commodities, he argued, had appeared “at an early date in history,” and some of the social features that we associate with them—such as a class of “free” laborers that is bought and sold as “labor power”—had begun to appear then as well, but commodities did not then impose themselves “in the same predominating and characteristic manner as nowadays.”²³ Moreover, this developmental process involved a recasting of social relations and of basic cultural understandings, such as the relationship of sacred and profane, that was so gradual and subtle as to be beyond the consciousness of all but the most perspicacious observers. All societies, he understood, create boundaries between a profane realm in which market relations are permitted and a sacred realm in which they are not.²⁴ Typically, religion, education, art, and the human body itself are withdrawn from market relations, yet societies vary in precisely what and how much are so withdrawn. Marx saw that capitalist societies not only tended to shrink the sacred realm in comparison with precapitalist ones, but that the process of commodification in capitalist societies involved an unrelenting onslaught on nonmarket realms. In the capitalist societies of his own day, “all that is holy” had become “profaned,” and “the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor” were drowning “in the icy water of egotistical calculation.”²⁵

It is with the nearly simultaneous appearance of two novels in Paris in the early 1880s that we first encounter a view of the commodity form that clearly comprehends what I am calling its semiotic dimensions.²⁶ By the semiotic dimensions of consumption, I mean, following Pierre Bourdieu, the ways in which consumption becomes bound up with “acts of cognition” and a “process of communication” which together allow a social code of available meanings to be deciphered and publicly transmitted as symbolic self-representations.²⁷ In the first of these novels, Émile Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (1883), the phantasmagoric, machinelike flow of goods and female shoppers fills the cavernous spaces of one of the city’s new *grands magasins*, a “cathedral of modern commerce, light but solid, made for a nation of customers.” In portraying Au

Bonheur des Dames in all of its overblown grandeur, Zola attends to every detail of retailing and advertising from the Haussmann-engineered boulevards that lead to its shop windows, to the opulent lighting of the interior with its mounds of goods, many of them reflecting their colonial origins, to the inexorability of their early-morning flow on to the displays “like rain from some upper stream,” and finally to the thousands of posters, catalogs, and newspaper advertisements that celebrate this new religion, reveal the social codes embedded within it, and offer related dreams of personal fulfillment.²⁸ The novel’s characters are like so many playthings of these huge new “forces of consumption.” Indeed, it is the store itself that plays the novel’s leading role, boldly stalking the neighborhood like some huge beast, devouring the family-based competitors that had survived from an earlier era, and seducing its young women to become the shoppers and salesgirls that its relentless motion requires.

With the other novel, Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), we move from the public side of the new Parisian commodity culture to its private interior, a villa which a scion of one of France’s leading families, the dandy Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, painstakingly decorates in celebration of his withdrawal from the frightful mass taste that threatens to engulf him. If Zola’s *magasin* is consumerism’s cathedral, then des Esseintes’s abode is an ornate chapel, each of its carefully selected objects displayed with close attention to both its synesthetic effects and its social meanings. Notable among them is a tortoise glazed in gold and studded, not with diamonds (“terribly vulgar now that every businessman wears one on his little finger”) or emeralds and rubies (“too reminiscent of the green and red eyes of certain Paris buses fitted with headlamps in the self-same colors”), but with sapphires (as yet “unsullied by contact with commercial and financial stupidity”).²⁹ In this animal-become-ornament, Huysmans offers us an apt metaphor for the way in which the people of this new consumerist society had themselves become dyads mimicking the commodity form: both themselves and representations of themselves, both physical beings and sets of associations, both functioning bodies and embodiments of meaning.

The world of des Esseintes is one in which nature is turned into “specialties” as surely as in Grandville. It is a world in which visibility functions unceasingly to bring on appetite and desire, in which consumerism is a compensatory system offering solace, supportive illusion, and relief from cosmic boredom, and in which personal identities are constructed and reconstructed in constant interplay with changing fashions and as

publicly identifiable “lifestyles,” themselves the creations of marketers and advertisers. In this world, consumption is far from being the mere ingestion of utilities, far even from status-seeking. Consumption is now firmly grasped as symbolic self-representation, and this opportunity is understood to be built into the commodity form itself as surely as are the sapphires in the tortoise’s shell.

By the 1880s, then, it had become recognized as it had not been thirty years before that the commodity, as an object produced primarily for exchange, has two aspects: its functionality (to endure on the market, it must do what its manufacturers purport that it does) and its attractiveness (to endure it must sell and, in order to sell, its manufacturers must seek to imbue it with a radiance, mystique, image, aura, and set of symbolic associations that attract buyers and that will continue to attract them). Commodities, we might say, are both themselves and representations of themselves, and this representation is not a realistic reproduction but a magical idealization. Moreover, this second side of the commodity form becomes increasingly dominant over time as institutions designed to exploit it become increasingly central to the functioning of the marketplace. We might say, in fact, that capitalism as a whole becomes increasingly aesthetic, as commodities become more and more bound up with images, logos, trademarks, and other visual references.³⁰ In present-day economies this trend reaches an apparent limit in those commodities, like a music video, for which their self-advertisement quality is the product itself. Yet the connection of the aesthetic with the commodity form had already been forged in the world of Grandville, Zola, and Huysmans.

Both Zola and Huysmans approached the new commodity culture of their day with an awareness that manufactured goods were, among other things, projected images that related to one another as words in a language. They understood that each commodity projects associations (a “look”), which will come to be associated with other products of its company of origin and thus with the “brand name” and “trademark” of the company itself.³¹ They understood that each product was created to be recognized as distinctive, to arouse in the consumer a sense of personal discovery as well as possibilities of personal fulfillment and social advance. They understood that product images had come to form a cultural iconography of consumption, one that was in turn associated with a myth of abundance and with variety of social types and possible “lifestyles.” They recognized that this new cultural iconography had brought with it a gendering of the consuming subject as well as a related notion

that consumer institutions structure human action and create human meaning rather than the other way around. Finally, they understood that commodity culture as a whole was part and parcel of a modernizing world that was bent on destroying traditional institutions and values, especially any of them brazen enough to stand in the way of its relentless advance.

Although recent scholarship seems to have settled upon the concept of a commodity culture to refer to the new world that Zola and Huysmans portrayed, it is rarely defined in relation to the larger historical process of commodification.³² In this book, I want to associate the concept of commodity culture with four basic features. First, a commodity culture is one in which the semiotic dimensions of consumption are solidly entrenched in social experience and in which goods become meaningful and acquire value primarily through the practices and social institutions associated with consumption rather than production.³³ Consumption, in other words, becomes understood as symbolic self-representation and as the main locus of cultural taste and value, while production, which had played this role in forms of capitalist society prior to commodity culture, becomes a more narrowly technical enterprise.

Second, in a commodity culture the world of consumption will be structurally differentiated from the world of production. Practices corresponding to design, wholesale distribution, and retail sale, which in earlier capitalist and precapitalist societies operated primarily through the sphere of production, will now be autonomously organized and institutionalized. Moreover, because the separation of the institutions of production from those of consumption means that the knowledge base associated with the former is in danger of being unavailable to the consumer, new intermediary professions will arise that aim to “educate” consumers as well as to inform producers about consumer tastes and desires. These “taste professionals,” as Leora Auslander has aptly called them, will become active in a variety of occupations, including journalism, advertising, interior decoration, architecture, and commercial exhibiting, as well as in the marketing divisions of businesses themselves.³⁴ In these capacities, they become the central cogs in a feedback mechanism between producers and buyers. When this mechanism is fully operational, producers become able to reshape production based on the tastes and desires of their target audiences, which in turn permits them to identify, stimulate, and exploit different “market segments” within the overall population.

Third, a commodity culture is one in which the historical tendency for

commodifying practices to extend themselves into such “sacred” realms as art, education, and religion is well advanced. Even mature commodity cultures, for example, will still have at least some residues of craft production and artisanship operating outside the sphere of commodity production, but these sectors will be under enormous pressure to become integrated into the commodity sphere. Similarly, artists working in every field of creative endeavor, educators at all levels, and even clergy and other religious leaders will come under pressure to participate in commodity culture by attuning their own goals and procedures to its imperatives. Ultimately, these institutions will themselves be understood as bringing forth special sorts of commodities—works of art, university degrees, spiritual experiences. The advance of visual technologies based on photography, cinema, and ultimately television and computerization will play a critical, strategic role in this extension of the commodification process.

Finally, however, at least in the early commodity culture with which this book is concerned, resistance to the profanation of formerly sacred spheres is still likely to be intense. Some of this resistance will be based on efforts to decommodify a form of production by moving it back into the sacred realm where buying and selling is considered inappropriate. But a great deal of it will also involve what might be called style and evaluation control.³⁵ By this I mean efforts by producers to seize control over the process of determining the style and value of a product even while accepting the notion that such products are appropriate for market exchange.

For France, there seems to be rough agreement that the arrival of commodity culture should be located during the three decades that follow the Universal Exhibition of 1855 in Paris, although some scholars might push its advent back into the July Monarchy.³⁶ For Great Britain, the parallel event was the Crystal Palace Exhibition, which took place in 1851 in London and was attended by over 6 million people drawn by cheap transport not only from London but from every corner of Britain and much of the wider world as well.³⁷ In other European countries, the arrival of commodity culture was no doubt somewhat later, and in some places in the world it has yet to arrive, although awareness of it is now global. Some historians would distinguish between a bourgeois form of commodity culture in which access remains restricted to moneyed classes and a later “mass” version in which all classes are included, pressures exist not only to buy goods but to replace them frequently, popular entertainments become fully industrialized (as in Hollywood cinema),

and consumerist behaviors of all sorts become a major leisure and identity-forming activity.³⁸ For this study, the point that truly matters is that by the end of the nineteenth century, there is effectively no way for European artists and other cultural intellectuals to opt out of commodity culture. The most use-value-oriented artifacts will circulate as commodities—despite or even because of their origins. Indeed, those objects that appear to be the least commodified in origin may become the most valuable precisely because they are viewed as genuine or uncorrupted. Similarly, as Bourdieu has argued, intellectuals who withdraw from commodity culture and forgo “economic capital” may actually increase their “symbolic capital” by doing so; whatever their intentions, they come to inhabit a kind of “economic world turned upside down” in which they have an “interest in disinterest.”³⁹

Two implications of this relation between commodity culture and intellectuals deserve emphasis. One is that we must distinguish between commodification and commercialization. To decide to produce art for a commercial market or to refuse to participate in it is largely a matter of personal intent, but whether or not one’s art becomes a commodity operates quite independently of intent. The Picasso painting or the novel by Kafka may become—almost certainly will become—a commodity irrespective of its creator’s intentions, and it will continue to be a commodity long after its creator is dead. Second, we will see that the modernists dealt with commodity culture in various ways, some seeking to bend it to their own designs rather than rejecting it outright, others opposing it straightforwardly and often vehemently. Yet the former always showed ambivalences, particularly on the questions of style and evaluation control, while the latter inevitably allowed commodification to creep into their practices however much they rejected it in principle. The reason for such lapses is quite simple: since all modernists lived in a commodity culture, and since many of them were intent on expanding the audience for art while nearly all of them wished at least to have a good audience for their own art, they could hardly avoid some sort of self-promotion (hiring an editor, contracting with an art dealer) and thus some implication in commodifying practices.⁴⁰

The arrival of commodity culture with its popular newspapers, advertising, international exhibitions, department stores, dealer-critic system in art, and other institutions that promote the semiotic dimensions of consumption is a culminating event in a process of commodification that stretches back, by most accounts, to about 1400.⁴¹ As such, it represents more an intensification of a long-standing historical process than a

sharply defined qualitative shift.⁴² This process is sufficiently complex that even a brief historical summation will not be attempted here. Suffice it to say that it involves the establishment of a set of conditions for impersonal and expanding exchange over large territories; for production governed by a system of wage labor and capital investment that maximizes profit; for the holding of land and other resources as private property; and for the private rather than collective production and appropriation of goods. Thus the classical narrative of the rise of capitalism focuses on the commodification of land and labor with the wage system, the gradual demise of serfdom, and the increased use of money on regional, national, and international levels.⁴³ This narrative tends to stress the progressive extension of the commodity form to ever-widening social and cultural spheres as well as the legal concomitants of that extension.⁴⁴ As this system of commodified production and exchange grows, older forms based on local and subsistence production are displaced. This displacement is a very gradual one, however, and the actual history of commodification involves a coexistence of commodity and artifact forms, with artifacts coming to circulate as commodities even as they decline in overall quantity relative to commodities. The newer literature on the history of consumption also focuses on the ways in which commodification develops and becomes extended, but it attends as well to such questions as the dating of various consumer practices, the degree to which demand should be treated as a causal agent in industrialization and consumerism, the relation of consumption to class formation, and, most important, the changing institutionalization of consumption as the commodity system becomes increasingly differentiated as well as extended.⁴⁵

There is also a large and variegated literature on the ways in which cultural forms such as theater, painting, literature, music, and popular entertainment were affected by the process of commodification prior to commodity culture as well as during and after its triumph.⁴⁶ Here again the fundamental point is that commodification is a gradual process involving many distinct moments over several centuries. Popular entertainment, for example, had been associated since the fall of the Roman Empire with the traveling showman whose spectacle was tightly bound up with the retailing of commodities. Yet, as Asa Briggs has shown, this form of entertainment, which reached local populations on an intermittent basis, gives way in the Britain of 1850 to an urban-based, organized, and ultimately industrialized successor, first through the music hall, then through the rise of professional sports, and finally, after 1895, through cinema—all institu-

tions in which large populations avail themselves of cheap transport and increasing leisure time to go to the entertainment rather than the other way around.⁴⁷ Moreover, as Habermas has argued in his study of the bourgeois public sphere, insofar as cultural goods were already being marketed to urban consumers in eighteenth-century Europe, these goods were “in principle excluded from the exchange relationships of the market.” Although one paid an entry fee for theater, concert, and museum, and directly for books and art, “exchange value still failed to influence the quality of the goods themselves” and a sense for the “incompatibility between these kinds of products and the commodity form” still pertained. In contrast to the world of this earlier, “culture-debating public,” that of the post-1850 “culture-consuming public” is one in which “the laws of the market have . . . penetrated into the substance of the works themselves” as the “consciousness that once characterized the art business as a whole continues to be maintained only in specific preserves.”⁴⁸

Before we turn in more detail to these “specific preserves” and the responses to commodity culture of the cultural intellectuals who dwelled in them, it should be noted that these intellectuals, far from merely “responding” to a set of conditions from which they were removed, were actually constituted as a social stratum by these very conditions. As Christophe Charle has shown in greatest detail, the term *intellectual* comes to be used in a new and distinct way after 1880 to refer to an aspiring elite of the well educated who sought to use their access to the press and other forms of publicity to exercise “symbolic power” and thus compete for influence with other elites more firmly in control of the traditional sources of economic and political power.⁴⁹ In this period, the intellectual field, which had produced a succession of types from the eighteenth-century “man of letters” to the scientific *savants* with whom the naturalist movement had allied, entered into a crisis provoked both by its great expansion, as the numbers of those liberally educated rose precipitously, and by contestations over what sort of moral, social, and political roles such individuals ought to play. As Habermas put the point, basing himself on the older work of Arnold Hauser: “only then [after naturalism] did there arise a stratum of ‘intellectuals’ that explains to itself its progressive isolation from, at first, the public of the educated bourgeoisie as an—illusory—emancipation from social locations altogether and interprets itself as ‘free-floating intellectuals.’”⁵⁰

The precarious social position in which these intellectuals found themselves reflected a complex set of circumstances connected not only with the arrival of commodity culture but also with contradictory cultural

pressures for both democracy and hierarchy, the general expansion of industrializing capitalism, imperialism, and mass politics, and an educational system overburdened by, and ill equipped to deal with, the demands that all these forces placed upon it. Yet none of these forces contributed more directly to the construction of the intellectuals and the manner in which they would enact their new role than did commodity culture. In mass-oriented newspapers as well as in their own “small reviews,” the intellectuals not only found their social voice but learned how to gain attention for themselves by provoking scandals and otherwise developing their capacities for notoriety-enhancing self-performance. Indeed, their sense of being trapped in a commodity culture from which they could not escape could sometimes stimulate the development of these capacities in quite creative ways. As F. T. Marinetti illustrates, there proved to be no surer way for an avant-garde intellectual to gain notoriety than by refusing to pander to an audience, indeed to heap insults upon it as part of a strategic gesture of outrageousness. Yet, having gained attention for themselves through commodity culture, it was also commodity culture that provided these intellectuals with their most fundamental agendas. Could intellectual powers and sensitivities be brought to bear on a redesign, or even an overthrow, of commodity culture? Or might it make more sense to try to renegotiate the sacred-profane divide by recasting the world of art as a kind of religious realm that would at least provide a “specific preserve” for the aesthetically sensitive and might even respiritualize society and neutralize, or even overturn, the excesses of commodity culture? These were two of the questions that already preoccupied their mid-nineteenth-century forebears.

REDESIGNING THE WORLD AGAINST COMMODITY CULTURE

The “bourgeois” society that began to emerge in the first half of the nineteenth century provided for a freedom of artistic creation far greater than in earlier societies where art was more tightly controlled by political, religious, and social mechanisms. Art was becoming emancipated in the sense that experience no longer had to be forced into a priori genres and period styles but was allowed to give birth to artistic form rather than the other way around. Artists became increasingly able to devise their own codes of meaning and to project their visions independent of traditions, preordained social usages, and requirements imposed by patrons. Freed from commissions to decorate the churches, public buildings, and homes of the dominant classes, artists were also progressively

freed from the obligation to express the dominant values of society, often choosing instead to advance critical values of their own. As Adorno argued in *Aesthetic Theory*, art had always stood in opposition to society, but because it was unaware of itself as such, a fundamentally oppositional art had been inconceivable prior to the French Revolution.⁵¹ In the postrevolutionary nineteenth-century world of rising bourgeoisie, industrial transformation, and organized working-class movements, not only did an artistic opposition become conceivable, but especially after 1850, it became the artist's dominant image in society.

As this chapter has been suggesting, the sources of this critical attitude and oppositional stance were complex and various. The newfound freedoms that artists enjoyed no doubt emboldened them, sometimes even leading them into the "dream of transforming pen, brush, fiddler's bow, or maestro's baton into . . . a spiritual power, a moral prestige, and a social authority such as scepter, sword, and crosier had attained."⁵² Yet theirs was an ambiguous and ambivalent freedom no less frequently wedded in their minds to a sense of having been discarded by society and, in still more profound ways, to an experience of existential rootlessness. Notoriously, romantic art and literature convey a sense of homelessness at once social and cosmic. Anxieties associated with the postmetaphysical world of Kantian epistemology and its sundering of experience help to explain this sense, but of equal or greater importance for many artists were the more mundane inadequacies of their new social position, which left them prey to the wiles of an impersonal market whether as writers or musicians seeking gainful employment or as painters needing to appeal to an anonymous buyer.⁵³ Then too, artists could not but be sensitive to the dramatic changes that the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and cultural and political democratization were beginning to wreak on the larger society, changes that frequently provoked in them an aesthetic revulsion against modern life and a corresponding sense of alienation.

Out of this emotional cauldron was born the notion of a new "religion of art," one that might overcome the Kantian fragmentation of experience, restore art to its rightful spiritual place beyond the reach of the commodity world, and make possible a new, harmonious, creative, human community, or at least preserve the conditions for a vibrant world of art.⁵⁴ Historians of romanticism have typically located such a notion at the center of that movement. Another well-known and influential variant is the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. What deserves greater emphasis, however, is the remarkable irony with which this

notion presents us. No sooner had intellectuals been freed from the obligation to provide aesthetic support for the hierarchical world of traditional religious faith than did they seek a new spiritual shelter of their own, under the banner of romanticism, in a quasi-secularized religion of art, one that not infrequently served as a temporary station on the way to a full reunion with the world they had lost.

Despite such defections, however, the tradition of the religion of art endured throughout the nineteenth century and into the modernist era.⁵⁵ Indeed, it is often seen as having intensified in the climate of aestheticism, symbolism, and decadence that prevailed during the century's last decade and a half.⁵⁶ Certainly it was in the shape given the religion of art by these latter movements that modernists encountered it, sometimes with an embrace, more often with a negative reaction, even while remaining half-consciously under its spell. Yet the idea of a religion of art took on various forms in the postromantic era, not all of them insisting as resolutely as did symbolism on the transcendent status of art. One such form was the medievalizing aesthetic associated with John Ruskin, William Morris, and the English Arts and Crafts movement they inspired, a movement as steeped in religious language as any in its era.⁵⁷ It too aroused considerable interest in the era of prewar modernism, and it would become a still greater force for inspiration as design modernism developed after World War I.⁵⁸

More a sensibility and a vision than a unified movement, the intellectual tradition that produced English Arts and Crafts shared romanticism's dream of a reintegrated experiential world with full access to the absolute, but its conception of art was very different from the transcendent realm envisioned by most romantics.⁵⁹ For Ruskin and Morris, as well as for the other progenitor of the movement, the Catholic architect A. W. N. Pugin, the most fundamental index of a civilization's greatness was the aesthetic quality of the objects and edifices it created for use in everyday life. In this broad sense, art for them was identical with artisanship and craft, and the preeminent value for judging art was the quality of the aesthetic pleasure evident in the laboring activity that stood behind it. Thus, while each of them manifested a distinct religious sensibility that made him want to gain access to the absolute by means of an experience of beauty that celebrated it, the path to it that they envisioned did not involve regaining some sort of prereflective immediacy, as Benjamin and Kandinsky would later seek to do, but rather involved reestablishing the connection between art and the good society, one that the domain separations associated with Kant occluded from view. In

Kant's terms, their aim was to reconnect the aesthetic with the practical realm of moral and social value, using Hegel's world of labor as their point of departure. Of course they recognized, however dimly, that the modern division of labor had now been complicated by a dizzying new world of exchange. Their hope was to redesign this world against the shape it was assuming in commodity culture by reuniting the imagination of the artist with the skill of the medieval artisan, "master of his work and his time," who built a world of beauty as a natural extension of his desire to create. Properly guided by simple machines and "little or no division of labor," these artisans had engaged in an anonymous collective activity that, at once, fulfilled them as individuals and enhanced the beauty of their communal environment.⁶⁰ For Ruskin and Morris, to return to this medieval ideal was, however paradoxically, to embark on Benjamin's road toward the democratization of art, even though they rejected the technological advances he quite properly thought of as critical to such a choice. Like Hegel's, their solution to the problem of modernity relied on reintegrating certain features of the static, closed community of European feudalism.

With its cities and celebrated countryside made ugly by industrialism and the social irresponsibility of capitalism, Britain is no surprise as the setting for a religion-of-art movement with a social reading of redemption. The question of the proper response to industrialism and forces of political and cultural democratization had preoccupied its intelligentsia since Edmund Burke.⁶¹ The Great Exhibition of 1851, with its vast array of ostentatious commodities radiantly illuminated by glass and iron architecture, offered fresh symbolic evidence of the emerging direction of modern civilization. Ruskin and Morris both despised it and feared the future it seemed to represent.⁶² In the same year, one of the directors of the exhibition, Henry Cole, was authorized by the British government to set up national schools of art that would promote industry by providing training in the design of mass-produced products. Indeed, the most famous of these schools would soon be built as part of the museum complex on the South Kensington site where the Crystal Palace had stood. This initiative's effect was to separate "fine art," as taught at the Royal Academy, from "applied art," as taught at the new schools, a division that Ruskin would vehemently attack in *The Two Paths* (1859) and against which the Arts and Crafts movement would later revolt.

The profound antagonism that both Ruskin and Morris expressed toward every sign of an emerging commodity culture bore many affinities with romanticism, but it was not any simple romantic reaction or

medievalizing reflex. As with the romantics, their disenchantment with modern life provoked in them a totalizing response aimed at transforming what they perceived as a chaotic and fragmented industrial disorder into a new sort of organic society that, inspired by the ideal of the medieval artisan, would reshape the human environment through the creative reinvention of art. With this totalizing approach they distinguished themselves from later modernist generations who, for the most part, pursued a more modest goal of a reconstructed public sphere with art at its center rather than taking on the capitalist order as a whole. Yet, despite their somewhat differing political commitments, neither Ruskin nor Morris was blindly antimodern or even antimachine. Their medievalism represented their belief in the intrinsic cultural value of having production and design determined by workers, a system they viewed as more practical, better organized, more congenial to human nature, and more conducive to human happiness than one in which these determinations were made by an impersonal marketplace. Their intentions were not so much to return to a bygone age as to overcome the disaggregating effects of modernity, which, in splitting off art from science and morality, had also split up art into high versus low, fine versus applied, or art versus craft, splits that reflected larger diremptions between mental and manual, urban and rural, individual and community, work and play.

Ruskin made his reputation primarily as an art and social critic rather than as a visual artist or creative writer. His influence was nonetheless enormous, most famously through his chapter “On the Nature of Gothic” in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, which became a kind of Arts and Crafts manifesto and which Herbert Read later called “the greatest essay in art criticism in our language.”⁶³ In his lectures of 1858–1859 on the theory and practice of art, Ruskin utilized a comparative social framework to set forth and justify his view of proper aesthetic standards.⁶⁴ Societies that “rejoiced in art,” such as India, did not necessarily produce better art than those, such as Scotland, which were “careless of art.” “Wherever art is practiced for its own sake,” he argued, it results in the “destruction of both intellectual power and moral principle.” To be “helpful and beneficent to mankind,” art must begin by recording the “facts of the universe” and only then make manifest “human design and authority in the way the fact is told.” Practiced according to this standard of “truth to nature,” art will become a source of “comfort, strength, and salvation.”⁶⁵ From this fundamental standard, Ruskin derived a subordinate notion of “truth to materials.”

Artistic form should always be determined according to the intrinsic qualities of the materials being used. Such qualities will suggest how materials ought to be worked, and in a properly shaped object artistry and the intrinsic qualities of the material will be mutually reinforcing. Good art will, in turn, reflect the creative input of its producers, since they will not only understand but find joy in these truths.

The great problem, of course, was that unless producers were free to pursue their work as they saw fit, both art and society would be brought to ruin no less surely than in the debased societies of pure art. Yet while Ruskin clearly judged the capitalist society of his own day to be incompatible with his ideals, he nonetheless implored its manufacturers to refrain from “corrupting public taste and encouraging public extravagance” and, by observing high artistic standards, “to form the market, as much as to supply it.” In them he saw hope for a society that, forgoing the “pomp and grace” of earlier aristocratic cultures, would devote itself to “the loftier and lovelier privilege of bringing the power and charm of art within the reach of the humble and the poor; and as the magnificence of past ages failed by its narrowness and its pride, ours may prevail and continue, by its universality and its lowliness.”⁶⁶

Unlike Ruskin, Morris was not simply a writer with an aesthetic and moral vision but “a Victorian version of the Renaissance man,” who, after beginning in poetry, worked in architecture and painting, and then decided to master as many crafts as he could, while also establishing a business and becoming active in socialist politics, historic preservation, and book publishing.⁶⁷ In 1861, he opened the firm of Morris, Marshall and Faulkner, Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture, and the Metals, which aimed to produce a wide variety of high-quality craft products for sale as commodities. These products sold well for several decades and influenced affluent taste. But this sort of success was a disappointment to Morris, and by the end of the decade, “the holy crusader against the ugliness of his age seemed to be seeking refuge in art rather than in transforming his world by means of it.”⁶⁸ In the 1870s, he turned to socialism.

Morris was faithfully devoted to Ruskin’s notion of truth to nature. For him design innovations were to come from practice, through working with materials and as solutions to functional design issues, not from stylistic experiment. He was harshly critical of contemporary artists who devoted themselves to “noble works of art, which only a few rich people even pretend to understand or be moved by.”⁶⁹ Likewise, he could not

abide those “new aristocrats of intellect,” such as Matthew Arnold, who, although committed to a democratization of culture through education, were too consumed by fear of the working classes to lead them.⁷⁰ Their path was that of a culture of the wealthy that “cultivates art intellectually” while living “happily, apart from other men.”⁷¹ Yet, as many historians have recognized, Morris’s own business experience left him hoist on his own petard.⁷² The handicrafts his firm produced—costly and designed for a refined taste—inevitably reached only a luxury-market niche rather than the popular audience he so passionately sought.

Despite Morris’s intentions and multidirectional energies, his legacy, like that of Ruskin before him, is most profound in his popular lectures, which he delivered over the last two decades of his life. Nowhere is this more true than in his lecture entitled “The Socialist Ideal in Art” (1891), which offers one of the nineteenth century’s most provocative arguments for why modern societies need to rethink the aesthetic implications of the commodification process.⁷³ Morris begins by drawing a line in the sand: every man-made object—“a house, a knife, a teacup, a steam engine”—“must either be a work of art or destructive of art.” The contrary idea of “the commercialist,” that art is confined to those objects which are “prepensely works of art” and “offered for sale in the market as such,” implies that art can be enjoyed only by the rich man and that even he, “as soon as he steps out into the streets . . . is again in the midst of ugliness to which he must blunt his senses, or be miserable if he really cares about art.” The link between art and society could not be clearer: unless you have a society based on the “harmonious cooperation of neighbors,” art will be, at best, a minoritarian enclave in a vast expanse of ugliness. Such social cooperation does not require a Luddite retreat into an age before machines, but it does mean that the “spirit of the handicraftsman” must prevail in the sense that “the instinct for looking at the wares in themselves and their essential use as the object of his work” is what governs economic life. When a worker creates through such a spirit, he is precisely not making commodities for sale, but rather “he is making the goods for himself; for his own pleasure in making and using them.” A society in which art flourishes requires a new kind of market. Instead of the “present gambling-market and its bond-slave, the modern factory system,” such a society will be based on a “market of neighbors.” Such a society will not only be harmonious, human, and happiness-producing, but will be one in which people, in order to have artistic perceptions, will not have to be “born blind.” It will also be one that does not “condemn a vast population to live in South Lancashire while art and education are

being furthered in decent places,” which is “like feasting within earshot of a patient on the rack.”

If we recall the main features of commodity culture as earlier discussed, it becomes evident that Ruskin and Morris rejected all of them. They saw production rather than consumption as the main locus of cultural taste and value. They resisted any structural differentiation between the worlds of production and consumption, preferring the unified ideal of a community of producers meeting common needs through mutual cooperation. They certainly perceived the extension of commodification into society’s more sacred realms, and they adopted a wide variety of tactics to resist commodification including an ideal of decommodified artifact-based production, the development of aesthetically based standards such as truth to materials to replace or at least complement exchange value, the rejection of any notion of a fashion system, and the establishment of themselves as arbiters of taste within the actually existing system of commodity exchange. All of these views marked Ruskin and Morris as members of generations which still believed that a politics of resistance to commodification could be based on a simple “just say no.”

Yet the influence they exerted on later modernisms—in Britain, Germany, and elsewhere—was considerable, despite the datedness of their perspectives. In Nikolaus Pevsner’s classic interpretation, Morris is “the true prophet of the twentieth century,” to whom we owe whatever sense we have that “a chair, a wallpaper, or a vase [is] a worthy object of the artist’s imagination.”⁷⁴ Moreover, the influence of Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement was transmitted directly to the continent in the person of Hermann Muthesius, who was deeply impressed by English architecture and design after studying it under a commission from the German government from 1896 to 1903. Through Muthesius, who was among the founders of the German Werkbund in 1907, Pevsner was able to draw a straight line from Morris to Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. While this view serves to remind us that the Bauhaus sense for the intimate connection between art and the good society, as well as the corresponding need to integrate art and artisanship, did not emerge full blown in 1919, we should also not forget how much loftier the ambitions of Morris and his movement were as compared with what the Bauhaus would quickly become. Morris was never fundamentally concerned with industrial design, nor did he ever contemplate an alliance of art and industry. His aim, like Ruskin’s before him, was the total moral and social reconstruction of modernity around the notion that “art is man’s expression of his joy in labor.”⁷⁵

RECASTING ART IN BAUDELAIRE'S PARIS

“Let us imagine a beautiful expanse of nature,” wrote a twenty-five-year-old Charles Baudelaire, “where the prevailing tones are greens and reds, melting into each other, shimmering in the chaotic freedom where all things, diversely colored as their molecular structure dictates, changing every second through the interplay of light and shade, and stimulated inwardly by latent heat, vibrate perpetually, imparting movement to all the lines and confirming the law of perpetual and universal motion.”⁷⁶ So begins a discussion of color that is usually treated as one of Baudelaire’s first formulations of his doctrine of correspondences—a complex view in which the interrelation of colors with sounds, feelings, tastes, and scents is seen as one of mutual reinforcement tending toward unity and, thereby, toward the transcendent. And so it is. Baudelaire insists that “in color,” no less than in music, “we find harmony, melody, and counterpoint.” Just as the composer “knows by instinct the scale of tones, the tone-value, the results of mixing, and the whole science of counterpoint,” so too the visual artist can “create a harmony of twenty different reds.” Yet we should not miss the fact that Baudelaire’s passage, almost as strongly as the one from Benjamin with which the chapter began, reveals a sense for color as itself a kind of primal world, which, although tied to matter at the molecular level, still “shimmers in chaotic freedom,” thereby offering itself as a powerful medium of intuition.

Baudelaire did not approach the question of color with the same Kantian issues as did Benjamin. Indeed, his aesthetics operated within a Kantian framework of autonomous art that sought to revitalize experience by intensifying its aesthetic dimensions rather than reintegrating them with truth and morality. Yet, remarkably, he would later make the same connection as did Benjamin between the world of the colorist and that of the child. In his famous essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire claimed that “nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and color.” The child’s “vividly colored impressions” are perhaps most closely approximated in adult experience, he suggested, by those we take in during our days of convalescence “after a physical illness.”⁷⁷ It comes as no surprise, then, that Gérard Constantin Guys, the popular illustrator whom the essay used to exemplify the “painter of modern life,” is portrayed as both a “man-child” and an “eternal convalescent.” For the child, this mode of perception, in which a vibrating, fluid world takes on an exceptional vividness, comes naturally; for the artist it requires an act of will. “But

genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with man's physical means to express itself, and with the analytical mind that enables it to bring order into the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed."⁷⁸

For Baudelaire, the creative artist or "genius" depends upon a "supernatural" experience of intuition in which the world comes into view as in the eyes of a child, a convalescent, or someone who has become intoxicated, but in which it remains subject to the careful investigation of "the analytical mind."⁷⁹ The artist is not irrational. As he wrote in his essay on Richard Wagner, "genius" must not be deprived of "its rationality" and reduced "to a purely instinctive and, so to speak, vegetable function."⁸⁰ Yet the extraordinary power that a creative artist such as Wagner wields does not come through his ability to render the everyday world more rationally intelligible but to render it differently intelligible as both luminous and transcendent. Great art leads us to an experience of transcendence, but not so much one that stands above or outside the world as one that uses a state of aroused awareness to fix upon it more intently.

Unlike those of Ruskin and Morris, Baudelaire's conception of art does not seek to reunify the world. One might better say that it becomes the world for its devotee: life is to be lived for art. As Baudelaire explained in an article on the writer Théophile Gautier, who was well known for his celebration of *l'art pour l'art* in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1834), "the loudly-trumpeted doctrine of the indissoluble union between beauty, truth and goodness is an invention of modern philosophical nonsense." Against intrusions "from Geneva or Boston," Baudelaire aimed to defend the beautiful as a realm autonomous from claims of goodness ("the basis and aim of ethical inquiry") and truth ("the basis and aim of the sciences"). Although he conceded that "the novel is one of those complex art forms in which a greater or lesser share derives, now from the true, now from the beautiful," he insisted that the pursuit of truth has nothing to do with poetry and that "if a poet has pursued a moral aim, he will have diminished his poetic power; nor will it be incautious to bet that his work will be bad."⁸¹ Likewise, in his review of the Salon of 1859, he declared that the depressing mediocrity of its paintings owed much to "our exclusive taste for the true," which "oppresses and smothers the taste for the beautiful."⁸²

In rejecting a moral art, as well as every form of aesthetic utilitarianism, Baudelaire was naturally contemptuous of all notions of art as craft. He dismissed Victor Hugo as "a craftsman, much more adroit than

inventive, a worker, much more formalist than creative” in whose writing “nothing is left to the imagination”—which, in Baudelaire’s hierarchy of values, is almost to say that it was not art at all. To Hugo, Baudelaire contrasted Eugène Delacroix, whose great virtue was his “naïveté,” which implied “technical mastery . . . but a technical mastery that is humble and leaves the big part to temperament.”⁸³ Not surprisingly, then, any notion of connecting art and industry was an even greater anathema to Baudelaire, since “when industry erupts into the sphere of art, it becomes the latter’s mortal enemy.”⁸⁴ Unlike Ruskin and Morris, he would have no truck with implicating art in any redesign or overthrow of the industrial world of commodities. His commitment instead was to recasting the world of art as a secular-religious realm that might or might not neutralize the rampant materialism of the age and respiritualize society, but that would at least make possible a realm of beauty for those who knew how to find it. As his view of color and his doctrine of correspondences suggest, the fragmentation of experience was no less a problem for Baudelaire than it was for Ruskin and Morris. Yet for him the solution lay not in a reintegrated totality but in an enhanced spirituality of the aesthetic.⁸⁵

The great investment Baudelaire made in autonomous art, however, did not mean that he embraced a narrow formalism of the sort that seems to be implied by Gautier when he famously wrote that “nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless, everything useful is ugly,” and “nothing beautiful is indispensable to life.”⁸⁶ The young Baudelaire condemned “the puerile utopia of the school of art for art’s sake . . . [as] inevitably sterile.”⁸⁷ To the question of whether art was useful, Baudelaire replied affirmatively in 1851, declaring in Nietzschean fashion that a “pernicious art” is one that “distorts the underlying conditions of life.”⁸⁸ Baudelaire wanted an art that was passionately committed to life, and it was in that sense that he embraced art as a spiritual refuge. In the vocabulary of the day, his affirmation of art’s “usefulness” implied some sympathy for leftist and bohemian “social art,” as Pierre Bourdieu explains in his penetrating analysis of mid-nineteenth-century French aesthetic-political positions.⁸⁹ Yet social art’s materialism and its gross insensitivity toward issues of spirituality pushed Baudelaire closer to Gautier’s camp than to the “realism” of Jules Champfleury, although he could be found at both the Brasserie Divan Le Peletier and the Brasserie Andler, where Gautier and Champfleury respectively held court.⁹⁰ For Baudelaire, a proper opposition to bourgeois civilization meant overcoming every trace of materialism and utilitarianism in a kind of aesthetic out-

flanking of the political field in general, which is why, in 1848, “he does not fight for the republic, but for the revolution, one he loves as a sort of art for the sake of revolt and transgression.”⁹¹

Baudelaire was also contemptuous of those attitudes and practices of the social art camp which he saw as a kind of pandering to the proletariat and which he particularly identified with George Sand.⁹² His highest allegiance was to a cult of art composed of “people who, like me, want artistic matters to be treated only between aristocrats, and who believe that the small number of elect is what makes Paradise.”⁹³ However painful his alienation from society, he was prepared to accept it in return for a world of art vibrant enough to support a flourishing of that “constructive imagination which . . . , inasmuch as man is made in the likeness of God, bears a distant relation to that sublime power by which the creator projects, and upholds his universe.”⁹⁴ The social prerequisite of such constructive imagination was a new sort of cultural aristocracy for whom art would not be devoted to the lowly objects depicted in the realism of Gustave Courbet or Champfleury, but to a kind of divinely inspired transmutation of natural forms that would affirm the triumphant powers of human imagination, as in the art of Delacroix.

Baudelaire died in 1867—before the commodity culture of the department store and of a generally aestheticizing capitalism was fully evident in France, and before the Franco-Prussian War and the resulting Third-Republic politics of *revanche* that made nationalism so prominent in French political culture after 1885. Yet he was certainly attentive to some aspects of the commodification and democratization of French culture, especially as they had emerged in the much-expanded and privatized art market of the Second Empire. Although the Salon was not removed from state control until 1881, a new system based on private galleries, dealers, and marketing practices was moving aggressively to the center of the Paris art world during Baudelaire’s last years.⁹⁵ The prestige associated with the Académie des Beaux-Arts and the Salon had also clearly lessened, and the ambitions of at least the major visual artists no longer had much to do with state honors and commissions. As late as 1847, a depressed Courbet, whose three submissions had all been refused in the Salon of that year, lamented that “to make a name for oneself one must exhibit and, unfortunately, that [the Salon] is the only exhibition there is.”⁹⁶ Yet less than a decade later, he had succeeded in organizing a one-man show of his works not far from the state-sponsored Universal Exhibition, a defiant act that Baudelaire saw as a “remarkable début” that had “produced something like an insurrection.”⁹⁷ This new ability

of artists to promote themselves outside official institutions unsettled these institutions profoundly, sometimes creating rifts within them, as when Napoleon III famously authorized a Salon des Refusés in 1863. Yet no amount of state intervention was capable of curtailing the erosion of the classical system of categories through which state-sponsored art elites had earlier imposed their preference for huge canvases depicting historical and mythological scenes. While even in the eighteenth century a few successful French painters such as J.-B. Chardin and J.-H. Fragonard had managed to free themselves from such constraints by garnering private commissions, the freedom to explore subjective and intimate worlds through landscapes, still lifes, and portraits had remained institutionally compromised through the romantic generation and up to the realists.

After 1851, pressures undermining state hegemony over art became overwhelming because they did not derive solely from the emerging private market system that so emboldened French artists, important as that was, but also from new technologies. As Beatrice Farwell has argued, when Baudelaire referred to a “cult of images” in his *Mon coeur mis à nu*, he was not referring to salon paintings or literary images but to the new prominence, in mass-circulation journals, of lithographs by artists such as Achille Devéria, Nicolas Maurin, and Grandville.⁹⁸ Benjamin also pointed to lithography as the essential development that had allowed “the technology of reproduction” to reach “a fundamentally new stage” in the nineteenth century.⁹⁹ The mass-printing industry exploded between 1820 and 1860, in large part because it learned to use lithography to illustrate journals such as *La Caricature*, *Le Charivari*, and *L'Artiste*, much in the way the photo-mechanical half-tone would be put into service after 1890.¹⁰⁰ In particular, this technology fueled the growth of the *roman feuilleton*, or installment novel, which became enormously popular in the 1830s and 1840s. By the 1850s, some talented artists such as Honoré Daumier were able to support themselves by their sales in this domain and thereby to mock the upper classes in their drawings without fear of economic or political reprisal.¹⁰¹

Baudelaire himself felt the sting of declining state hegemony over the arts when, in 1857, he and the publisher of *Les Fleurs du mal* were prosecuted for, and found guilty of, offending public morality. Six of its poems were banned and Baudelaire received a hefty fine. Yet he was also quite aware of the potential benefits of scandal, even if, for him, they never materialized. As his biographer remarks, “Baudelaire himself understood the significance of his prosecution” and “begged his mother ‘only to consider this scandal . . . as the real foundation of my for-

tune.’”¹⁰² Likewise, his theoretical writing showed a keen awareness of intensifying commodification and some of its ramifications for art, even if he failed to appreciate the coming aestheticization of capitalism and the potential for an activist response to it by artists.

If we look at an old engraving, Baudelaire suggests at the outset of “The Painter of Modern Life,” we encounter a “double kind of charm, artistic and historical.” As art, it will display universal elements like beauty and wit, but it will also show us the “moral attitude and the aesthetic value” of the epoch in which it was created. This latter aspect has its own sort of beauty, which “is always and inevitably compounded of two elements.” Yet individual artists often choose to serve primarily one or the other: either the eternal and variable, as with some religious painters, or, as with Daumier’s drawings, the “relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call . . . contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion.” Baudelaire does not fail to note that the recent invention of lithography has much enhanced the potential of this latter sort of art. Yet he also makes clear that an art adequate to modern experience cannot rest content with merely documenting it, since that would turn art into a mere reflection of fashion. When Baudelaire turns to “Monsieur C. G.,” through whom he projects his sense of how the activity of modern art is properly conceived, we discover a painter who observes as sharply as a Daumier but whose works are all “signed with his dazzling soul.”¹⁰³ As Michel Foucault has rightly reminded us, Guys is not “a mere *flâneur*” but someone who “makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history.”¹⁰⁴ For Baudelaire, Guys represents the dialectical synthesis of beauty’s two moments, one that does not merely present the ephemeral world of fashionable commodities but transfigures it by means of the aesthetic imagination into the eternal as it appears in the passing moment. The result is a spiritual art—one that is “natural and more than natural, beautiful and better than beautiful”—that is achieved not by escaping the profane world of commodities but by fixing intently upon it.

Yet the double nature of Baudelaire’s beauty is not so different from the two sides of the commodity form distinguished earlier. When Baudelaire’s painter of modern life acts so that “materials, stored higgledy-piggledy by memory, are classified, ordered, harmonized, and undergo that deliberate idealization, which is a product of a childlike perceptiveness,” we are reminded that commodities too are both material objects and magical representations of them.¹⁰⁵ And so we may well be led to ask: how did Baudelaire think the art he championed was to be distin-

guished from advertisement? The question becomes still more provoking when we consider that Guys is often paired with Grandville as two of the epoch's most appealing popular illustrators.¹⁰⁶ If, as we have seen Benjamin write of Grandville, the latter transforms nature into "specialties" that are presented "in the same spirit in which the advertisement" operates, what are we to say about Guys?

Although such questions probably did not occur to Baudelaire, he did show great sensitivity to the way commodifying processes like fashion had intensified the self-representing dimensions of the modern self. "The idea of beauty that man creates for himself affects his whole attire, ruffles or stiffens his coat, gives curves or straight lines to his gestures and even, in the process of time, subtly penetrates the very features of his face," declares "The Painter of Modern Life." "Man comes in the end to look like his ideal image of himself."¹⁰⁷ Or as Foucault puts the point: "Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself," who takes himself "as object of a complex and difficult elaboration."¹⁰⁸ Yet if such self-fashioning is so central to modern man; if, like the dandy, he has a "burning desire to create a personal form of originality" and engages in a "kind of cult of the ego," then the question of the relation of advertisement to the sort of art best suited to modernity would seem to become still more acute.

For Baudelaire, however, the dandy is a historically endangered species who thrives best in "periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful."¹⁰⁹ He operates as a prescriptive ideal representing, in Foucault's words, "an indispensable aestheticism," and one that Bourdieu connects with the professionalization of the artist whose quest for a pure aesthetic forces upon him the self-discipline of the "scientist or the scholar."¹¹⁰ But, in Baudelaire's pessimistic view, he is a magnificent "setting sun" because the democratization of culture, far from being an aestheticizing force, actually de-aestheticizes. It would seem to follow, then, that the activities of a painter of modern life such as Guys, however great the power they derive from the profane world of commodities, are ultimately divorced from anything like advertising because, popular illustrator or not, he and his world of art were destined to remain a spiritual refuge for a few privileged devotees rather than one connected with the larger forces of modern life.

Yet why did Baudelaire settle so firmly on the idea that the democratization of culture implied a de-aestheticizing of life? The answer appears to emerge in his review of the Salon of 1859, particularly in that essay's

remarks on photography. As bitter as any Baudelaire ever wrote, this essay recoiled from the “mediocrity” of the latest salon and the “discrediting of the imagination” in contemporary culture that it seemed to represent.¹¹¹ Ironically, it was “progress” in the sense of “the progressive domination of matter” and its link to “our exclusive taste for the true” that Baudelaire located as the main sources of art’s current crisis. Not only were contemporary artists becoming more and more like mechanical technicians—painters not of what they dream but what they see—but visual technologies like photography were also threatening “the impoverishment of French artistic genius.” Photography was a domain infringement, an effort by the world of scientific truth to destroy the aesthetic imagination.¹¹²

The larger problem was that modern industrial technology, when coupled with “the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally,” was producing a tasteless culture of profane literalness. Far from providing new opportunities for art within the commodity culture of a democratizing and aestheticizing capitalism, as Benjamin hoped visual technologies like photography would do, Baudelaire saw them as a scientific profanity that could be tolerated only if they returned to their “true duty” as documenting devices “like printing and shorthand.”¹¹³ Thus, even though he did show more awareness of the semiotic dimensions of commodity culture than had Marx, Ruskin, or Morris, Baudelaire still did not fully appreciate the linkage between commodity culture and the aestheticization of capitalism. For him, self-fashioning was less aided by, than in conflict with, the democratization of culture because the forces of industrial modernization that were advancing the latter were also rendering all of life literal, flat, and meaningless, even art. In a world in which democratization and such aesthetic potential as existed in commodity culture cut in opposite directions, the only hope was that artists might somehow preserve themselves from the corrupting influence of industrialization and democratization, even as they sifted through an increasingly commodified world for elements of aesthetic transfiguration.

Yet the consequences Baudelaire drew from his analysis of a democratizing modernity had not always been as pessimistic as the image of monastic withdrawal that seems to be implied by the 1859 essay. Prior to 1848 especially, he seemed to hold out serious hope that the public might be educated for art. In reviewing the 1845 Salon, he explicitly accepted the traditional role of the critic to orient the public in its potential purchases, and he organized his discussion using painting categories as would a tour guide, even following “the order and rating assigned them

[paintings] by public favor.”¹¹⁴ Yet he was equally clear that the primary standard of judgment he would utilize was originality, rather than the technical skill so admired by the public, and that the key to originality lay in the faculty of imagination. “Every public,” he tells us, “possesses a conscience and a fund of good will which urge it towards the true, but a public has to be put on a slope and given a push,” clearly a job for the “taste professional” who has the aesthetic sensibility the public lacks.¹¹⁵

The political implications of Baudelaire’s remarks at the outset of the 1846 Salon have been much disputed.¹¹⁶ Yet while their ironic tone may render uncertain the essay’s attitude toward the French bourgeoisie, there is no doubt that he singles out for special opprobrium those “monopolists [*accapareurs*] of spiritual things” who, as shapers of critical opinion through newspapers and other media that treat knowledge like something from “a counter and a shop [*boutique*],” actively mislead the public for their personal gain.¹¹⁷ When the subtitle of the essay’s first main section announces the question “what is the good of criticism?” there again seems little doubt that Baudelaire means both to disparage the commercialist criticism of “pharisees” and to underline his own disinterest as someone who, because he is an artist himself, adheres to the rigorously internal standards of the professional.¹¹⁸ Years later, in his essay on Richard Wagner, Baudelaire would make the argument that “the poet is the best of all critics,” since great poets are inevitably led to criticism as part of a spiritual life of self-examination. By the same token, he thought that “for a critic to become a poet would be miraculous . . . , a wholly new event in the history of the arts.”¹¹⁹

As Richard D. E. Burton has argued, however, even in the pre-1848 writings in which Baudelaire’s hope for educating the bourgeoisie for art seems greatest, he was “fully aware that he is arguing from a position of very real weakness.”¹²⁰ His attachment to the bourgeoisie was always fundamentally based on what Clement Greenberg once called “the umbilical cord of gold.”¹²¹ For he believed that, even if genuine art critics like himself were able to make the bourgeoisie understand the superiority of a Delacroix over a Grandville, artists would always need the bourgeoisie more than the reverse and that, short of a revolutionary transformation, aesthetic and spiritual values would remain subordinate to economic and material ones, recognitions that could not but provoke feelings of resentment. After 1851, however, when his lingering hopes for revolutionary change collapsed before the reality of the Bonapartist coup d’état and the subsequent constitutional plebiscite that legitimated it, Baudelaire’s resentment was transmuted into political cynicism and rabid

hatred of everything bourgeois, feelings that effectively ensured that his religion of art would thenceforth serve only as a spiritual refuge for the already converted rather than as an instrument of democratizing evangelism as well.

Ultimately, Baudelaire rejected the notion that modern society as a whole could be repaired in any way that would make it a comfortable dwelling place for artists like himself, but he did not lose hope that it would tolerate an autonomous high culture offering spiritual sanctuary for the few. In this sense, although the aspiration of Ruskin and Morris to reforge an organic society through art was completely foreign to him, he believed no less than they that resistance to commodification could still be a matter of simple rejection. Or, rather, he arrived at that conviction after becoming disillusioned with his efforts at shaping a new role as a democratically oriented “taste professional” engaged in style and evaluation control, one that later modernists such as Apollinaire and Kandinsky would pursue more steadfastly. Yet the difference between their steadfastness and his disillusionment was not an issue of psychology. What they could see that he did not was that modern society was not an anti-aesthetic industrializing wasteland from which all that passed for art and culture could be clearly distinguished. For the modernists, art and culture could not be neatly separated from the public sphere and reconstructed as a world outside of, and in opposition to, a democratizing culture and society. For them, either avant-garde efforts to reconstruct the public sphere with art at its center would succeed, or art, as a sphere of value autonomous from the commodity form, would simply be lost.

WAGNER AND THE POLITICS OF SYMBOLISM IN FIN DE SIÈCLE PARIS

Like Baudelaire, Wagner was part of a generation for whom 1848 was the defining moment. His presence on the Dresden barricades during the spring of 1849 became legendary, earning him such monikers as “the Red Composer” and the “Marat of Music,” and the prose writings that emerged from the experience “made his name all over Europe with a breadth and an intensity that his music had not effected.”¹²² The power of this rhetoric reflected his passionate conviction that the new age of revolutions would sweep away the degraded culture of capitalism and usher in the sort of community life that, as in ancient Athens, was genuine because it was sustained by a public realm in which citizenship and humanity were undivided and culture and politics, indissolubly fused. So strong was Wagner’s sense of the imminence of this ideal’s realization

that, even as late as mid-November 1851, he wrote to a friend that his own cultural creativity was entirely dependent upon revolutionary success. “A *performance* is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*; only the Revolution can offer me the artists and listeners I need. . . . *This audience* will understand me; present-day audiences cannot.”¹²³ A month later, he confessed to the same friend that he had “now completely abandoned every attempt to combat the prevailing mood of stupidity, dullness of mind and utter wretchedness,” which had left the world with only “the corpse of European civilization. I intend only to live, to enjoy life, i.e. as an artist—to create and see my works performed: but not for the critical shit-heads of today’s populations.”¹²⁴

As this formulation suggests, Wagner would work to sustain himself artistically after 1851 by distinguishing between his present audience and an ideal public of a now much more distant “future,” one that would have to be forged by the power of his art. Yet the commercialized cultural depravity depicted in his prose writings of the revolutionary period certainly suggests that such a task would require the Herculean capacities and energies that perhaps he alone enjoyed. In “Art and Revolution” (1849), Wagner condemned “modern art” with a single dismissive stroke: “its true essence is industry; its ethical aim, the gaining of gold; its aesthetic purpose, the entertainment of those who are bored.”¹²⁵ Positioned as it is by modern society, art “sucks forth its life juice . . . from the golden calf of wholesale speculation,” and the result is “prurient vanity, claptrap and, at times, the unseemly haste for fortune-making.”¹²⁶ Yet “art remains in essence what it always has been,” which he characterized in “The Art-Work of the Future” (1849) “as the living presence of religion, which springs not from the artist’s brain but from the *Volk*.”¹²⁷

Like Ruskin and Morris, Wagner sought to restore the vitality of art by underscoring its noncommodified “sacred” status and reviving its connection with popular folkways.¹²⁸ The artist of the future could be identified with the *Volk* because all genuine art expresses its sentiments, ideas, and aspirations and therefore has popular appeal virtually by definition.¹²⁹ Some scholars have gone so far as to see in such ideas a commitment to a democratizing of art.¹³⁰ Yet Wagner’s conception of the public sphere was based on the profoundly antimodern distinction between polis and household, which implied that only those free from the chains of economic necessity could participate in cultural and political life. For him, therefore, any notion of reinvigorating modern art by strengthening artisanship and its connection to art would only make the problem worse.¹³¹ Art could return to its essence under modern condi-

tions only if it were rigorously separated from everything utilitarian and restored to its position as the central religious rite in society, one responsible for community-formation on the model of classical Athens.

Once it was clear that history had refused to cooperate—at least in the near term—with Wagner’s cultural design, he was forced to rely more heavily upon the notion, also developed in the writings of 1849, of art as rooted in the fellowship of, and cooperation among, a community of artists, a *Genossenschaft aller Künstler*.¹³² Thus the famous Festival of Bayreuth, which opened in 1876 with the premiere performance of Wagner’s “Ring of the Nibelungen” cycle, was initially conceived as a community of artists whose work would collectively articulate what remained of an uncorrupted folk spirit. Not surprisingly, however, given Wagner’s grandiose designs for this modern Dionysian festival and its lavish temples of art, in practice the free community of artists soon became the free gathering of patrons, which in turn became a festival of paying customers no different from any other entertainment venue.¹³³ While it must be said in fairness that this trajectory left Wagner himself rather despondent, its end-state—production for a high-cultural niche market—might have been predicted given that it was precisely the same fate as that suffered a decade before by Morris’s company when it tried to forge the basis for a counter-commodity culture.

Yet how we ought to understand Wagner’s later work generally, and Bayreuth in particular, in relation to commodity culture is a matter of some doubt. On the one hand, Wagner has been treated as the foremost artistic exemplar of nineteenth-century “musical idealism,” a culture of listening based on pious seriousness and deep suspicion of fashion and entertainment values.¹³⁴ Even based on the limited evidence presented here, the reasons for this alignment should be self-evident. Yet, on the other hand, Wagner has also been understood—and with equal plausibility—as a kind of mass-entertainment virtuoso who pioneered in the creation of “phantasmagoric” effects. In staging his works at Bayreuth, Wagner used specific techniques of intensifying them as spectacle (hiding the orchestra, dimming the lights) in ways which, according to Adorno, showed his deep estrangement from the public, which was reduced to a “reified object of calculation by the artist.” Wagner’s art thus took on a “commodity function, rather like that of an advertisement: anticipating the universal practice of mass culture later on, the music is designed to be remembered, it is intended for the forgetful.”¹³⁵

However we may wish to balance these perspectives in assessing Wagner’s overall relation to the rising world of commercial entertain-

ment, what is clear is that he continued to be venerated by several generations of artists, including the modernists, and that this veneration primarily reflected the prestige of a single ideal of Wagner's, that of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. Such an ideal was not original to Wagner, although the degree to which Wagner's conception carried forward earlier romantic concepts is a matter of dispute.¹³⁶ For Wagner, the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* referred to efforts to restore art to the position it had enjoyed in the ancient Greek world before poetry, music, and dance were separated from one another. As the young Nietzsche, inspired by Wagner, famously argued, Greek tragedy was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the way it unified the Apollinian and the Dionysian, plastic expression and ecstatic music, a synthesis that overcame Kantian divisions and offered access to unified experience and a tragic wisdom embodying the absolute.¹³⁷ For Wagner, the ideal of restored unity implied the need to conceive specifically modern forms of artistic synthesis and, in the wider sense, a modern form of community in which politics and art would be reintegrated.¹³⁸ Although the reality of Bayreuth was hopelessly distant from any such utopia, the subsequent prestige of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal derived not so much from Wagner's practice or even conception of it, but from the inspiration it provided for a variety of aesthetic-political programs. The futurists, for example, were drawn to it because of their experimental efforts to invent new forms of performance, while an artist like Kandinsky perceived it more as Nietzsche did: as a way of overcoming modern divisions and specializations and restoring a world of spiritual vitality.¹³⁹ Benjamin, as we have seen, regarded it as a defensive stratagem for sealing art off from developments in modern visual technologies, while Apollinaire, in stark contrast, saw it as an ideal that technological innovations in graphic design and typography might finally help realize. Other artists saw it in still other ways, partly dependent on their specific vantage points, for the ideal inspired all the arts including architecture and even city planning.¹⁴⁰

In France, a cult of Wagner set the intellectual fashion for a half decade after the composer's death in 1883 and the appearance during the following year of Huysmans' *À rebours*, which almost single-handedly defined a decadent style to which Wagner was assimilated.¹⁴¹ Although Wagner's death inspired many national movements with quite different aims and characteristics, *wagnérisme* was the first movement to name itself as such (the term precedes Wagnerism and *Wagnerismus*) and was much more avant-garde than its relatively dour Bayreuth counterpart.¹⁴² Its center of gravity was the circle around the symbolist poet Stéphane

Mallarmé, which helped to create and sustain the *Revue wagnérienne* (1885–1888) during its short life.¹⁴³ Paradoxically, however, as Huysmans' novel explained, the patriotic fervor that had swept France after its defeat by the Prussian armies in 1870 “made it impossible for any theater in the country to put on a Wagner opera,” and these *wagnéristes* were actually quite ignorant of his work.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, to some extent they shared the ultrapatriotism of the broader public, and their interest in Wagner, according to one scholar, was as much in finding a “French response” to him as in Wagner himself.¹⁴⁵ Other scholars have gone still further to argue that “Wagner’s reputation thrived on the absence rather than on the presence of his works in France” and that “what was wanted in the *Revue wagnérienne* was less Wagner’s doctrines set out accurately, than arguments to reinforce symbolist tendencies with the prestige of his name.”¹⁴⁶

What is certain is that Mallarmé himself, although intrigued by Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal, which bore affinities with his own utopian musings on “*Le Livre*,” took a rather skeptical view of the German composer in an article published in the *revue*.¹⁴⁷ Part of this skepticism, as private notes by a member of his Tuesday Circle demonstrate, was that Wagner “gave music an obvious predominance, such that poetry was subsumed into music . . . , whereas for Mallarmé the role of poetry was on the contrary the preponderant one.”¹⁴⁸ Such a privileging of music was indeed inherent in the late Wagner’s ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and not merely because of his bias as a composer, but also because of the strong influence upon him, after 1854, of Schopenhauer, whose philosophy treated music not merely as the highest form of art but as the only humanly available mode of access to the ultimate reality behind phenomena, that of the metaphysical will.¹⁴⁹ Yet Mallarmé’s skepticism also had a definite political dimension having to do with Wagner’s unwarranted appeal to “legend.”

The starting point of Mallarmé’s article is “the theater-goer of today [who] scorns imagination but . . . is skilled in making use of the arts . . . to transport him to a place where a special power of illusion will be released.” This theatergoer rejects the “intellectual despotism” of past theater, with its devotion to “the sacred pages of the book,” favoring instead the accessibility and suggestive “atmosphere of reverie” associated with music. With a perfect comprehension of his audience, Wagner evokes the “sacred feelings” associated with the ancient past and brings them “face to face with myth,” thereby leaving them enthralled by “some strange, new primitive happiness.” Yet such an appeal to “ori-

gins” is dangerous in the way it closes us off from “invention” and everything “imaginative, abstract, and therefore poetic.” Here Mallarmé explicitly turned his critique in a nationalist direction by claiming that the “French mind,” unlike those of ancient Greeks and present-day Germans, “shrinks back from legend” and demands an art that is open to “individuality” and “embraces the many aspects of human life.”¹⁵⁰ The implication is that “legend” stymies the creative imagination necessary for a life of freedom because it is so affirmative, concrete, and therefore so potentially manipulative. In contrast, an art based more firmly on poetic symbols, and thus on the allusive potentials in language, will open up the human imagination and encourage creative invention rather than dogmatic repetition.

As this summation suggests, Mallarmé’s response to Wagner involved deep issues not just about the relation of music and poetry in a synthesis of the arts, but about the nature of language and the politics of art as a mode of communication. While the intricacies of Mallarmé’s complex view of language cannot detain us here, a brief consideration of a few of its key aspects will help to clarify those issues.¹⁵¹ By the late 1860s, the young Mallarmé had already come to the view that nothing exists beyond visible reality but that, within it, lie perfect forms (akin to Platonic ideas), which it was the poet’s task to try to capture. True poets were not mere describers of the empirical world but, as he put it in a well-known late essay, visionaries who evoked for their readers “the flower which is absent from all bouquets.”¹⁵² In doing so, however, as this same essay makes clear, poets were the model for a larger politics of language that rejected “speech,” which is “no more than a commercial approach to reality,” in favor of “literature” where “allusion is sufficient” given its goal of evoking an essence. Like literature, music too became an “impalpable joy” when it was freed from the material and utilitarian constraints of the everyday commercial world. The arts in general offered the possibility of “pure works” in which the voice of their creators was stilled in favor of yielding the initiative to the work itself, thereby permitting its recipients to experience and interpret it independently of controlling authorial imperatives.

This goal of freeing reader-spectators to do with works of art what they will is also illustrated by what Mallarmé suggested in the essay regarding a synthesis of literature and music, for which his model was “transposition” rather than hierarchical “structure.” In an earlier essay, to which he alluded here with a paragraph-long extract, Mallarmé had argued that neither literature nor music could be stabilized by connect-

ing it with a reference point in “nature” but ought rather be subjected to “quakes and slippings, unlimited and unerring trajectories, rich reverie in sudden flight, delightful unfulfillment, some special lunge or synthesis, but . . . no sonorous tumult which could be reabsorbed in dreams.” Just as each art form should be free to push away from natural origins to that “beyond” which is our primary source of spiritual pleasure, so too works of artistic synthesis must be playfully “transpositional” such that “one bends toward the other, submerges, then returns to the surface with its treasure; another dive, another fluctuation and the entire cycle is created to perfection.”¹⁵³ So conceived, art becomes a religious experience that is also a vehicle of individual liberation and cultural democratization, rather than one in which reader-spectators are offered revelation as willfully preconceived by the poet-composer.

This startlingly innovative view of language, which Mallarmé deployed in his critique of Wagner and which became the fundamental basis of the symbolist movement, had profound implications for the way that movement was able to reconceive its relation to the public sphere. Rather than promulgating a self-contained religion of art from outside that sphere, which the public could either accept or (more likely) reject, the symbolists hoped that the pursuit of “pure works” of art might open up a space of contestation in which “language” confronted “speech,” a space that would encourage immanent critiques by citizens rather than nonnegotiable demands from artists. Precisely for this reason, Adorno pointed to Mallarmé as the epitome of a politically emancipatory program for autonomous art.¹⁵⁴ Yet, in both Mallarmé and most later symbolists, the potential for cultural democratization built into poetic language was only partially realized, for it coexisted uneasily with a view of artists as a Baudelairean cultural aristocracy or aesthetic caste, which retreated from public life even as it discovered the tools with which to transform it. Thus the early Mallarmé dedicated himself to Baudelaire’s project of creating art as a “mystery accessible only to the very few,” a commitment that is not only continually reiterated in subsequent writings but justified, in a well-known autobiographical letter to Paul Verlaine, on the grounds that the present age was only a “form of interregnum for the poet,” who ought not to get involved with it except “now and again [to] send a visiting card to the living, in the form of stanzas or a sonnet, so that they don’t stone him, suspecting him of knowing that they do not exist.”¹⁵⁵

What made Mallarmé’s posture of ironic retreat all the more remarkable was that, quite unlike Baudelaire, he had an early comprehension of,

and even sympathy for, a rising commodity culture. He wagged no finger of moralistic reproach against photography, and he seemed to have a positive attitude toward its artistic dimension, even once comparing Félix Nadar's work favorably with Baudelaire's poetry in a letter to Verlaine.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, a decade before the appearance of *À rebours*, he had single-handedly written and produced eight issues of a Paris fashion magazine called *La Dernière Mode*. Although recent investigators of this enterprise differ with respect to how much irony we should read into it and what Mallarmé's purposes in it were, there is little doubt that he regarded the new commodity world with genuine fascination.¹⁵⁷ For the magazine did not simply present women's fashion but enveloped it in a wider discussion of many aspects of emerging consumerism, including the performing arts, exhibitions, menus for home entertainment, interior decoration, and tourism. Indeed, even before this episode, Mallarmé had written four articles on the London Exhibitions of 1871–1874 in which one recent historian finds “a complete absence of Ruskinian censoriousness of manufactured shoddiness or any nostalgia for artisanal craft.”¹⁵⁸ In one of these articles, Mallarmé wrote that “the fusion of art and industry [is] truly an effort of the entire modern age,” which is defined by a “double-sidedness” in which “art decorates the products our immediate needs require, at the same time as industry multiplies with its hasty and economical methods those objects made beautiful in past times only by their rarity and uniqueness.”¹⁵⁹ It was an acute observation, far in advance of French government policy. Finally, in the autobiographical letter to Verlaine, Mallarmé confessed that the several issues of *La Dernière Mode* “still serve, when I blow the dust off them, to make me dream at length.”¹⁶⁰

Mallarmé's combination of a novel theory of language opening its contestatory potential and his avid interest in the newly emerging commodity culture suggests a very different kind of religion of art from any we have previously encountered in the nineteenth century. While the poet for him remained a high priest, much in the manner of Baudelaire, Wagner, and even Ruskin and Morris, he did not regard contemporary life as aesthetically flat; nor did he aim to remake it as an aesthetically enhanced organic society. Despite his great personal reserve, he played with the toys that the new commodity culture presented, anticipating in this respect some of the later antics of Alfred Jarry and Apollinaire. At the same time, his search for a new poetic language—one that should be “seen” on the printed page as a visual form, even as it alludes and evokes—shared much with the emerging practices of commercial adver-

tising.¹⁶¹ Benjamin saw him in fact as “the first [poet] to incorporate the graphic tensions of the advertisement in the printed page” and, in this respect, to have recognized that the literary culture of the book was being replaced by the “prompt language” of “leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards.”¹⁶²

Mallarmé’s radicalism, then, was not a matter of overthrowing society or even of making the world safe for his religion of art, but of advancing the artistic cutting-edge, a stance that represented one of the first signs of an emerging professionalism in the French art world.¹⁶³ With this stance, Mallarmé opened up the possibility of a new sort of resistance to commodification, not one that posed an alternative to which the world must conform, but one that could complicate and contest the existing cultural world, foster the public expression of individuality, and even in some ways democratize poetic language. Moreover, Mallarmé developed his cultural politics without appealing to a utopia, without being afraid to engage with commodity culture or to express nationalist sentiments, without blinding himself to the interests that art might share with the state, and most importantly, while recognizing the need for art to find its own way forward, whatever the society and politics of the moment. In all of these ways, Mallarmé clearly prepared the way for modernism. Yet the democratizing potential in his ideas could not be realized so long as artists remained loyal, as he did, to a concept of art as a mystery accessible only to the few.

One of Mallarmé’s followers, who did much to carry forward and extend his aesthetic-political perspective, as well as to democratize it further during the post-1895 period in which symbolist aesthetics began to lose their luster, was the poet, novelist, essayist, and critic Rémy de Gourmont. Largely forgotten after his death in 1915, Gourmont was one of the most celebrated intellectuals of his day: editor of the most prominent symbolist journal, the *Mercure de France*, and responsible according to André Gide for giving symbolism its “philosophical significance”; author of some forty books; a deeply learned man and something of a polymath; an important influence on the Anglo-Saxon modernism of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Burke, and Herbert Read; and last but not least, a good friend of Apollinaire.¹⁶⁴ What will concern us here, however, has less to do with his works and with the influence they exerted than with the ways in which his intellectual trajectory and stance as an avant-garde spokesman reflected some of the larger currents through which a new stratum of “intellectuals” came to be constituted after 1890, a phenomenon to which he himself called attention.¹⁶⁵

The intensification of French nationalism after 1870 reached new levels with the meteoric, political ascendance of the charismatic General Georges Boulanger, who, after being appointed minister of war in 1886, mustered a cross-class coalition of the disaffected in a *revanche* movement against the German occupation of Alsace-Lorraine. After a series of stunning electoral victories, in which “Général Victoire” gained the support of many intellectuals including Mallarmé, his supporters nearly succeeded in fomenting a coup in January 1889 that would have ended the Third Republic.¹⁶⁶ Although the government was soon able to restore stability and Boulanger became discredited, the political passions he ignited remained strong throughout the 1890s. These passions were expressed in many different radical forms including anarchism, socialism, royalism, anti-Semitism, Catholicism, and in “leagues” both nationalist and antinationalist. Boulanger himself was perceived as having failed in part because he lacked a doctrine, and nationalists of many stripes—most prominently Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras—now sought to articulate one, lacing their prose with emotional references to “France for the French,” the need to combat the universalism that “uproots” people from their local soil, and the equally important need to cast a wary eye on the “*mèteques*,” or foreign residents, a neologism derived from the metics of ancient Greece but carrying strong racist overtones in their usage. In the early 1890s, such sentiments were proclaimed amid public images of a parliament dragged down by financial scandals and anarchist bombs exploding in Paris cafés, some of them planted by leading symbolists such as Félix Fénéon.¹⁶⁷ By the end of the decade, the true *cause célèbre* of the age arrived in the form of the Dreyfus Affair, regarding which hardly anyone, and certainly no intellectual, could avoid taking sides.¹⁶⁸ Under its impact the broadly accepting, if not wholly cosmopolitan environment in which the symbolist movement had thrived (the author of its founding manifesto, Jean Moréas, was of Greek origin) gave way to bitter partisan rancor.

Gourmont too was an anarchist in the 1890s, although the bombs he planted came entirely in the form of his hermetic writing. The first of these, which cost him his job as a thirty-three-year-old librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, was an 1891 article in the *Mercure* in which he heaped scorn on the “deafening yelps” of the *revanchistes* and claimed to prefer the “placid Germans.”¹⁶⁹ Four years later, in a more reflective mood, he wrote that “since the discovery of patriotism, since men have begun to quench their thirst with that sour milk, one might say that the tissues of universal life have tightened, folded in upon themselves, impris-

oning the essential cells in a strict and jealous jail. For a Frenchman, to be French comes before everything, even genius, despite the fact that the French are one of the most obviously hybridized of all the peoples waving their guns across the ancient land of Europe.”¹⁷⁰ Yet, in a more circumspect and erudite way, Gourmont had himself participated in national mythmaking when, in 1892, he had published *Le Latin mystique*, a book which followed by only a few months an inflammatory article by Maurras that raised the theme of “Latinity” and the “Latin aesthetic” in ways that created a particular stir among the symbolists, already reeling from the defection of Moréas, who had, with Maurras, created the *École Romane* during the previous year.¹⁷¹ Whatever his precise intentions, Gourmont was not as far above the fray as he pretended to be.

In 1890, Gourmont had published a florid and arcane novel, *Sixtine*, whose ambience and male protagonist are often compared to those of *À rebours*. In 1894, he collaborated with Jarry on a sumptuous but short-lived journal tantalizingly titled *L'Ymagier* [The Image Maker]. Yet, by late 1895 when he commenced a series of short pieces in the *Mercure* that would continue until his death and that would be republished in book form as *Épilogues: Réflexions sur la vie*, Gourmont became dedicated to portraying everyday scenes and subjects in ways that were wholly accessible, thereby calling out to a much wider readership. Soon he was also taking up, sometimes in quite lengthy studies, a startling variety of subjects from psychology and biology to philology and the historical investigation of language. By the end of the decade he had moved firmly away from “the dreamy opacity of symbolist poetry” to “a conception of style based on the creation of striking visual metaphors,” one that would influence the later poetics of British imagism.¹⁷² Yet what is ultimately most striking about this shift is the way it coincided with a broader turn in French intellectual life, away from both symbolist abstruseness and militant social art, and toward professionalism, reconciliation with mainstream culture, national solidarity, and even, as one historian has put it, “the domestication of the artistic élite.”¹⁷³ This turn, which many scholars have dated from about 1895, did not necessarily imply any waning in the public expression of political passion, but it did rechannel that passion in a more culturally democratic and less exclusionary direction.¹⁷⁴

In his post-1895 writing, Gourmont projected himself as a consummate taste professional, a critic of art, literature, and society devoted to developing a knowledge-based expertise and disseminating it to a broad reading public. Yet, at the same time, he continued to cultivate his image

as a representative of the radical avant-garde political gesture, above all through a critical practice he called “dissociation.”¹⁷⁵ At first glance, “dissociation” seems to mean simply a skepticism that refuses to accept “current ideas and associations of ideas, just as they are,” and insists upon breaking them apart and reworking them in “an infinite number of new couplings which a new operation will disunite once again until new ties, always fragile and equivocal, are formed.” Yet two of its aspects mark Gourmont’s practice as distinctive. First, he made a point of aligning this view of language with its implications for the public sphere: “associations” were linked with utility, interest, and pleasure, and for that alone they required contestation.¹⁷⁶ By the same token, “dissociations” implied the disruption of prejudices and commonplaces, and for that alone required relentless pursuit. Second, Gourmont took dissociation as an endless process that refuses to arrive at anything more than provisional “truths,” and certainly not at any firm philosophical position. In this regard, he allied himself with Nietzsche’s concept of a “lie in the extra-moral sense,” claiming that all “true language begins with the lie” and that “science is the only truth and it is the great lie.”¹⁷⁷ As he wrote in one of his *épilogues* at the time of Nietzsche’s death: “we have learned from Nietzsche to deconstruct the old metaphysical edifices built upon a foundation of abstractions. All the ancient cornerstones have crumbled into dust, and the whole house has collapsed. What is liberty? A word. Let us have no more morality unless it be aesthetic or social; no more absolute system of morals, but as many general moralities as there are races and castes, and as many particular ones as there are individual intelligences. What is truth? Nothing but what appears true to us, what flatters our logic. As Stirner said, there is *my* truth—and yours, my brother.”¹⁷⁸

In embracing “lies” as preferable to “truths” that corresponded to nothing deeper than human agreement, itself always provisional and therefore ephemeral, and, typically, to nothing firmer than utility, interest, and pleasure, Gourmont was giving voice to an anxiety widespread among prewar intellectuals, although it was not always so closely linked to its Nietzschean origin.¹⁷⁹ The core insight—that there is no foundation for knowledge or value outside the meanings and purposes humans construct—could of course be taken in many directions. While the positivistically minded responded by seeking to delimit potential knowledge more rigorously, many artistic modernists were encouraged to redouble their Baudelairean preference for the beautiful over the true and the moral, and for creativity and performance over rationality and science.

Yet the insight could have sobering consequences for modernists as well. Within the context of this study, the most important one was to provide yet another reinforcement for the turn away from religions of art that would remake society as a whole, and in favor of the more modest goal of using art to challenge and reinvigorate the existing public sphere. For if knowledge is a continuous human construction and reconstruction, then the idea of a cultural order properly designed once and for all was only an enticing mirage.

Gourmont's Nietzschean outlook also propelled him toward an intense, aesthetically oriented individualism, which again was broadly echoed. For if the world is nothing but my representation of it, then it follows that each individual perceives the world in a unique way and that the "value" of each person's outlook ultimately rests on its being unique and original. Gourmont delighted in declaring that humans are distinguished from animals in their ability to lie and that "an artist is one who lies in a superior fashion, better than other men."¹⁸⁰ In addition to its sheer bravado and asocial irreverence, this notion could be tactically deployed against those like Max Nordau, who attacked modern art as "degenerate" and "nonconformist." "We are of a violently different opinion," wrote Gourmont. "The capital crime for a writer is conformism, imitativeness, submission to rules and teachings. The work of a writer must be not only the reflection, but the enlarged reflection, of his personality. The only excuse a man has for writing is to write himself—to reveal to others the kind of world reflected in his individual mirror. His only excuse is to be original."¹⁸¹

Hard as he may have tried to hold together the role of the professional critic disseminating knowledge to the public with the more radical political gestures prompted by his social alienation and anxieties, Gourmont was ultimately unable to resist a greater attraction to the latter. Like Mallarmé, Wagner, Baudelaire, as well as Nietzsche, he insisted in the end that the individualism he embraced and the art it permitted would never be practiced or even appreciated by more than the few. Indeed, despite his skepticism about truth, he naturalized the division by speaking of "races and castes." For him, the art world was an "aesthetic caste" composed of those who "are qualified to judge the beauty of works" because they do not deploy extrinsic standards like what is pleasurable or what enjoys "success," but are able to say of a work that "it pleases me and nevertheless it is not beautiful; or, it displeases me and nevertheless it is beautiful."¹⁸² This attitude did not mean that he turned his back on the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life. Like Mallarmé he was inter-

ested in decorative art, and he recalled with pleasure the episode of *La Dernière Mode*; indeed, he was largely responsible for restoring its memory to the next generation.¹⁸³ He also was responsible for the “first extended discussion of cinema as a medium in the 1 October 1907 issue of the *Mercure de France*,” yet “he felt free to praise these [lifelike] qualities of the mimetic cinema precisely because the cinema was not Art.”¹⁸⁴ Although he understood that the modern world and the new commodity culture it was bringing to life were too dynamic—too heterogeneous in their manifestations and effects, too continuously innovative, too unpredictable—to be programmatically reconstructed as a fixed hierarchical order, he was unable to accept the implications of this insight for the world of art. Like many others of his generation, he was able to extend the implications of Mallarmé’s strategy for resisting the commodification of art only up to the point at which a surrendering of the notion of an aesthetic caste would have been required.

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Although few nineteenth-century European intellectuals were fully self-conscious about the fragmentation, democratization, and commodification of their experience, these phenomena help us to explain their tendency to create “religions of art.” As we have seen, these “religions” in turn were quite variously formulated. Some treated art as artisanship, others as a realm of antiutility. Some put community first and wished to reconstruct all of modern life as a reintegrated cultural totality; others put the individual first and believed that the goal of cultural contestation should be focused on reinvigorating the public sphere to allow for fuller expressions of individuality. Some who opted for community and total rebuilding appeared to assume that their vision was broadly compatible with a democratizing culture; others who thought in this way were openly antidemocratic. But whether democratic or antidemocratic in spirit, those who created religions of art based on fixed visions of a cultural totality were out of step with the dynamism exhibited in the actual unfolding of democratizing cultures. On the other hand, although they were more keenly appreciative of the dynamism of the process of democratization, those who thought in terms of the individual and cultural contestation almost invariably fell back into defending a hierarchical notion of cultural aristocracy.

There were and are a number of problems with notions like cultural aristocracy or aesthetic caste. But let us leave aside the normative and

political issues they raise and approach these notions pragmatically. Is cultural aristocracy a viable concept in the late nineteenth century, whatever one may think of its legitimacy or desirability? One of its presuppositions is that there is a more or less autonomous world of culture that can be indulged in by some privileged group of connoisseurs or spiritualistic aesthetes while the rest of society not only lives without culture but may even be oblivious to its very existence. Culture in this sense is a refuge more or less in the way a monastery functions for monks. Yet while artist colonies may presumably be created in any free society, the notion that such colonies could incorporate all of "culture" and its appreciation was a problematic notion even in the nineteenth century, when commodity culture and processes of cultural democratization were not yet very advanced. Commodity culture was, after all, in large part an expression of capitalism's tendency to aestheticize itself, given the dual nature of the commodity form. Industry too, as it incorporated new technologies, was developing its own modern aesthetic, as some art-and-industry organizations would soon perceive. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century a significant segment of capitalism was openly moving in the direction of entertainment industries that were manufacturing and marketing "culture" like soap or tobacco. Finally, just as commodification and industrialization were rendering "culture" increasingly complex and diffuse, so too the intensification of the more general process of cultural democratization was making any hierarchical claim about culture increasingly problematic.

Of course, the concept of a cultural aristocracy or aesthetic caste was intimately bound up with the notion that art was transcendent in the sense of providing a form of ontological and spiritual revelation for those capable of following its path. From this point of view, the fact that capitalism and industrialism were becoming more aesthetic or producing culture industries might be viewed as having nothing to do with art. Yet such a view of art came to be increasingly at odds with the way nineteenth-century artists were coming to perceive themselves and their work. Modern artists, like creative people in modern societies generally, tend to see their work as a wholly secular matter of pursuing individual designs and, thus, as capable of being appreciated by all those who open themselves to it. As we will see, even those modernists like Kandinsky, who continued to believe in art as a unique pathway to spirituality, typically jettisoned the notion that this was not a pathway potentially open to everyone.

In the late nineteenth century, the model that was developing for

accommodating specialized claims of knowledge—and in that sense, for legitimating an elite—was that of the profession. From this point of view, to say that an aesthetic caste of artists should preside over art was like saying doctors should preside over medicine. (The fact that the commodification of medicine is increasingly making the latter idea suspect is a matter I will leave aside here.) Assuming that it makes sense to speak of artist-intellectuals as a profession, what might the claim that they should preside over art mean in practice in the turn-of-the-century European world? What it came to mean increasingly, I submit, was that the specialized knowledge of artist-intellectuals gave them the right to be the sole arbiters of the value of whatever this profession judged art to be. This way of understanding the claims of artist-intellectuals implicitly recognized the wide dissemination of what might be thought of as “culture” in modern society, and it did not require the cordoning off of culture as some spiritually privileged domain. Moreover, claims to cultural aristocracy could be abandoned and the related terminology of privilege discarded, even as artist-intellectuals conferred upon themselves the exclusive right to make judgments about artistic value. This is the stance adopted by the group of artist-intellectuals that I am calling avant-garde modernist, and it is the basis for the shift to what I am calling the modernist field of positions. Avant-garde modernists abandon claims to cultural aristocracy, reject the allied notion that they can retreat from the public world into their own private enjoyment of art, and commit themselves to resisting the idea that the aesthetics of production and consumption in a democratizing culture can appropriately be guided by the market alone. These modernists see themselves as an elite of taste professionals, one that is uniquely positioned as the legitimate guide to the production and evaluation of art and culture in modern society and that has the power, at least potentially, to universalize its aesthetic understanding and, perhaps, even creativity itself. Yet in so casting themselves, they continue—like Gourmont—to project the deep anxieties and ambivalences that arise from being would-be emperors over such an embattled territory.