It appears, in fact, that modernist radicalism in art – the breaking down of pseudo-traditions, the making new on a true understanding of the nature of the elements of art – this radicalism involves the creation of fictions which may be dangerous in the dispositions they breed towards the world.

Frank Kermode, ‘The Modern Apocalypse’ (1967)

Modernism appears less as the denial of the realist project and a denial of history, than as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included, among its supposed unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects, the phenomenon of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, total war, nuclear contamination, mass starvation, and ecological suicide.

Hayden White, ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth’ (1992)

The slogan of the First Futurist Manifesto of 1909 – ‘War is the world’s only hygiene’ – led directly […] to the shower block of Auschwitz-Birkenau.


REVOLTING AGAINST THE MODERN WORLD

On 2 February 1938 a certain K. Weisthor sent Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler his report on a lecture presented to SS circles entitled ‘The Restoration of the West on the Basis of the Original Aryan Spirit’. In it he expressed some reservations about aspects of the talk. Nevertheless, he enthusiastically endorsed its central thesis, namely that ‘the bearers of the Aryan heritage in our Aryan Europe must consider the Spiritual aspect, namely the Solar conception’ crucial to the actualization of the ‘Aryan Imperial Idea’. This was because ‘matter, in itself, is merely the visible manifestation of Eternity or of
the eternal cycle, which can be dominated and guided only with the help of the force of Spirit’.4

K. Weisthor was in fact Karl Wiligut, aka ‘Himmler’s Rasputin’,5 member of the ‘Central Bureau for SS Race and Settlement’ and head of the ‘Department for Pre- and Early History’. Until his fall from grace later that year, he exerted a major influence on the esoteric beliefs, liturgy, and symbolic paraphernalia that Himmler devised for the SS, and was probably behind the decision to convert the seventeenth-century castle at Wewelsburg into its ritual headquarters. The lecturer was Baron Julius Evola, author of Revolt against the Modern World, which had been published in German in 1935.6 On the basis of his intense research into the world’s occultist and mystical traditions carried out in the 1920s, he now sought to convince his specially invited audience that the vitality of a civilization was determined by the degree to which it followed the precepts of the perennial ‘Tradition’. Having neglected its moral laws for over two millennia, the West was now reaching the nadir of its cycle of cultural decay and the climax of what is known in Hindu cosmology as the Kali Yuga – the ‘Black Age’ of dissolution. As a result the West now stood on the threshold of a new Krita Yuga, the ‘Age of Purity’, but only on condition that the leaders of Fascism and Nazism recognized the metaphysical dimension of their mission, namely to carry out a total material and spiritual revolution against the putrefying world of modernity epitomized in materialism, individualism, egalitarianism, the loss of hierarchy, and the erosion of higher values.

Once back in Italy, the Baron set about encouraging the leaders of Fascism to be mindful of its ultimate mission to regenerate the entire modern world with two extensive expositions of racial theory based on ‘Traditionalist’ principles, Sintesi di dottrina della razza [Synthesis of the doctrine of race] and Indirizzi per un’educazione razziale [Guidelines for a racial education], both published in 1941. These stressed that the ‘Aryan’ New Man (the inverted commas will be used throughout to indicate the entirely mythical nature of this racial category) must be based on the combination of body, mind, and soul, and not primarily on biological or genetic qualities as Nazi eugenicists claimed, thereby betraying the corrupting influence of modern materialism and the materialistic science of Darwinism.7 In the event, Evola had no perceptible influence on mainstream Nazism or Fascism, which, at least exoterically, flowed along ideological channels far removed from the shadowy worlds of occultist racism dreamed up by ‘ariosophists’,8 and ‘Traditionalists’.9

It was not Evola’s highly idiosyncratic racism, but his virulent attacks on what he saw as an increasingly soulless democratic and communist Europe after 1945 that made him the guru of a new generation of post-war extreme right-wing intellectuals seeking a ‘vision of the world’ to the point where Giorgio Almirante, leader of the neo-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano could refer to