

The Enchanting Armageddon: Kandinsky's Artistic Credo as a Sorelian Myth

David Chui

Writer's comment: Oddly enough, this was not my initial idea for my essay for Michael Saler's History 147B class. I thought I would write about two of the other authors we had read, Franz Kafka and Henri Bergson. I struggled with it, discussed it with Saler, but just couldn't make it work. Meanwhile, as I was reading Kandinsky's manifesto, I began to think about his ideal of the struggling, starving artist and how it could be seen as a myth in the sense that Sorel wrote about. But because the connections between Kandinsky and Sorel seemed so straightforward I thought, "I can't possibly write anything distinctive about this." I'm normally ambitious about my essays, and because Saler is my thesis advisor, I was even more so with this essay. I have to thank my friend Lindsay for convincing me to write on this topic. If it hadn't been for her, I'm not sure if I would have written anything halfway coherent. Once I sat down to write, this essay wrote itself. It was an amazing experience after my previous struggling over the Kafka and Bergson essay. So any distinctions this essay has earned should be shared with Lindsay. She really helped me out, and I hope she knows how much I appreciate that.

—David Chiu

Instructor's comment: As insightful and compelling as David's essay is, his comments about how it came to be written are equally important. The literal definition of "essay" is to attempt something, a provisional inquiry that may develop in unforeseen ways. Academic pressure can prevent students from writing essays in this original sense; it's easier and safer to write on a cut and dried topic that will secure a good grade and be instantly forgotten by writer and reader alike. David, with the encouragement of his fellow classmate Lindsay, decided to take a risk and follow his instincts, and he reports that the essay seemed to write itself—as so much really inspired work often does. The resulting essay is a joy to read, as we share in the author's exciting links among Kandinsky, Sorel, and Weber, but the process of the essay's germination is inseparable from the fine result.

—Michael Saler, History Department

THE INTELLECTUALS OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY EUROPE were living in a gray world. Many felt that intellectual “progress” had gone too far, that the world had a rational explanation for everything, and in doing so quite literally removed the magic from life. The great sociologist Max Weber wrote of “a world robbed of gods” (282). Many, like the composer Richard Wagner and his one-time protégé F.W. Nietzsche, felt that what was needed was a new mythology for a new age. Psychologist Carl Jung celebrated world mythology, and the poet Arthur Rimbaud lost himself in irrational exuberance that borrowed imagery from Greek mythology and attacked the dry scientific pretensions of his age. Weber himself wrote, “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155).

To propel men forward, a new mythology needed to be created. At least, that is what the French philosopher Georges Sorel argued in his *Reflections on Violence*, written in 1908. He felt that mankind must again long for a transcendent conflict, yearn and fight for some greater purpose, and he proposed the “general strike” as the new Heaven, so to speak. Just three years later, Wassily Kandinsky, in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, would propose a transcendent goal of his own, one in the sphere of art rather than in politics. Sorel’s general strike (a nationwide strike of all the working classes, designed to bring the bourgeois class to its knees) is perhaps fanciful and improbable, but Sorel felt that was beside the point. The point was its ability to motivate action, to *enchant* the proletariat and give the political revolutionary the necessary passion (and Weber would also agree that this passion was necessary) for effective political action. This mythology of a transcendent conflict would be realized in Kandinsky’s work, which would propose an artistic and spiritual revolution designed to enchant a disenchanted world. In fact, however, Kandinsky’s mythology itself is an enchantment, the same type of enchantment that Sorel’s consciously-created mythology provides. Weber himself recognized that this new myth is transcendental and warlike, and as such posited a new charismatic authority. Ultimately, this Sorelian myth (which is realized in Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, perhaps more so than in Sorel’s idea of the general strike) seeks to motivate behavior, thus awakening passion in the revolutionary and re-enchanting him.

It wasn’t just science, but the slow and frustrating progress of political reform that could be disenchanting. Democracy had ossified into bureaucratic political parties that picked candidates from among

their own in-crowd, the “factions” of which James Madison had been so concerned about. The monarchs may have been removed or weakened, but a new creature had emerged: the professional politician. Weber describes Germany at the time as a “leaderless democracy. . . [characterized by] the rule of professional politicians without a calling, without the inner charismatic qualities that make a leader, and this means what the party insurgents in the situation usually designate as ‘the rule of the clique’” (113). Thus Weber felt this leaderless democracy was one, as he put it, that was without charisma and without a calling, in essence without a purpose and a motivation to focus behavior. A good politician, Weber felt, requires “passion in the sense of *matter-of-factness*, of passionate devotion to a ‘cause,’ to the god or demon who is its overlord” (115). This sense of transcendental devotion, and its necessity for effective political action, was recognized by Sorel, who writes of “a notion of an *advance toward deliverance*” (194). Sorel viewed a mythological motivation as essential for any great revolutionary change: “revolts can be spoken of indefinitely,” he writes, “without ever provoking revolutionary action so long as there are no myths accepted by the masses” (205). Thus, both Weber and Sorel perceived a transcendental motivation as necessary for effective political action, and Sorel felt that the key to this motivation would be found in myths.

What constituted a myth for Sorel? It is a vivid image appealing to one’s violent, aggressive dreams, something that is epic and combative:

In the course of these studies, I have established something so simple that I did not believe it had to be emphasized: men who participate in great social movements represent their immediate action in the form of images of battles assuring the triumph of their cause. I proposed calling these constructions *myths*. (200)

The violent nature of Sorel’s mythological constructions is not out of place in this time period. Many were celebrating the Homeric heroes of ages long past, including Nietzsche and Freud, and the new genre of fantasy literature was creating a new modern mythology that was drenched in blood, in such works as E.R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros* and David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus*, and, of course, R.E. Howard’s tales of Conan the Barbarian. In fact, Sorel specifically refers to Nietzsche’s celebration of the Homeric ideal: “We should turn especially to the Homeric heroes in order to understand what Nietzsche wanted to explain to his contemporaries” (212). He then quotes Pericles: “our bravery has cleared a path for us on land and sea, everywhere erecting imperishable monuments for good or evil” (213). Even the sober Weber borrows from this imagery, when he writes that a politician “must be a

leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well" (128). However, Sorel was probably a bit too violent, irrational, and essentially Nietzschean for Weber's tastes. Nevertheless, Weber matter-of-factly reports on the sort of violent mythology underlying the Sorelian revolution: "under the conditions of the modern class struggle, the internal premiums consist of the satisfying of hatred and the craving for revenge" (125). These more base emotions may not be those of the glory-seeking Homeric warfare Sorel writes about, but they are nonetheless aggressive; hence it can be seen that Weber recognized aggression as an essential part of social revolution, for good or ill.

We can see these two qualities, the transcendental and the heroic, in Kandinsky's own philosophy. Kandinsky writings thus create the mythology that Sorel deemed necessary for revolutionary change. Kandinsky, using, appropriately, a geometric shape as a visual metaphor, imagines "a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area" (6). This triangle is a model of society, with the majority of the population at the lower, base end and far fewer people at the end that points up and forward; it is a visualization of the movement of progress. The artist's purpose is to move this triangle forward, to create what Kandinsky calls a "spiritual revolution" (10). This can be compared to the social revolution which Sorel dreamt of, for Kandinsky's movement of the triangle can be seen as a sort of advance toward deliverance: the triangle is a "spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to Heaven," Kandinsky writes (20).

Kandinsky saw himself creating an artistic revolution. He wrote that "true spiritual food is wanting" and believed that "art is on the crest of the road . . . which will show the way to the spiritual food of the newly awakened spiritual life" (7, 9). He chastised the art of the day, which he described as a "blind following of scientific precept" (53). Art that is only concerned with accurate material representation, or which is too focused on technical virtuosity rather than expressing a spiritual "inner need," renders the artist a mere "juggler whose skill and dexterity are worthy of applause," but not "a servant of a nobler purpose" (54). Thus both Sorel and Kandinsky wrote of revolutions in their respective fields, revolutions that pursue transcendental goals.

It is true as well that Kandinsky used the violent, Homeric imagery that Sorel felt was necessary for the new, modern myth. In fact, Sorel himself believed that this same Homeric idealization that he applies to politics could be applied to art:

It is quite obvious that freedom would be gravely compromised if men came to look upon Homeric values (which are quite close to those held by Corneille) as being suitable only to barbarian peoples. A great number of moral problems would cease to force humanity to progress if some rebellious person did not force the people to examine their consciences. And art, which counts for something also, would lose the finest laurel in its wreath. (214)

And indeed, Kandinsky describes the Belgian author Maeterlinck as “one of the first warriors, one of the first modern artists of the soul” (55). He describes his enemies in militaristic terminology: “today one of the largest of the lower segments has reached the point of using the first battle cry of the materialist creed. The dwellers in this segment group themselves round various banners in religion” (10). And Kandinsky agreed with Sorel that the artist violently pushes those spiritually behind him forward. Sorel writes that the artist should “force the people to examine their consciences.” Kandinsky writes, “the men in the segment [in the triangle] next below are dragged slowly higher” by the artists (10). Both men describe violent, forceful actions, using verbs like “forcing” and “dragging.” Interestingly enough, Kandinsky felt that socialist movements, like Sorel’s, fail to accomplish the true and necessary revolution, the spiritual one – the artistic one. But even as he criticizes it, he describes such a movement using very violent imagery: “in economics these people are Socialists. They make sharp the sword of justice with which to slay the hydra of capitalism and to hew off the head of evil” (10). Thus both Sorel and Kandinsky see revolution as a sort of violent struggle.

These two elements, a transcendental purpose and warlike understanding of it, are not mere coincidence. They are an essential part of Weberian charisma. Weber writes, “charismatic domination means rejection of all ties to any external order in favor of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero” (250). Charismatic power is “free . . . of any rationalist deductions from abstract concepts,” thus it can break free of the shackles of disenchanting excessive rationalism, and is just as “free . . . of the sanctity of tradition” (250), thereby rebelling against politics as usual and the traditional conventions of art. “Hence,” Weber writes, “its attitude is revolutionary and transvalues everything” (250). This charismatic power, found in mythology, is thus the ideal method of revolution. According to Weber, charismatic power has two essential elements: “its ‘objective’ law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero” (250).

Thus, the heroes of the revolution, be they political activists or artists, gain their power from a transcendental purpose, the "heavenly grace," and from Homeric warlike power, the "god-like strength." This is not to imply that Sorel or Kandinsky were attempting to follow Max Weber. It is, however, noteworthy that the transcendental conflict is recognized by Weber as a means of circumventing the power of established authority, and perhaps as the only means of enchantment. Thus there seems to be have been a widely understood conception that the new mythology which would re-enchant the world would consist of, as Sorel figured, a new transcendental conflict.

Kandinsky, in essence, has created a Sorelian mythos. It is doubtful that Kandinsky believed, as Sorel did, that belief in this mythology was more important than the veracity of it. Kandinsky likely believed his "mythology" was the truth. But what is most important is that like Sorel's general strike, Kandinsky's mythology was a method of motivating behavior. The Kandinsky myth should sustain the struggling artist through poverty, starvation, rejection, mockery, and frustration: "The artist is not born to a life of pleasure. He must not live idle; he has a hard work to perform, and one which often proves a cross to be borne . . . he is free in art but not in life" (54). Likewise, the proletarian striker is carried through all his sacrifices by the myth that leads him forward toward a transcendental goal. He compares the power of this myth over the striker to the power of the myth of the French Revolution over a soldier in the Revolutionary armies: "When an assault column is launched, the men who march at its head know that they are sent to death and that glory will be for those who climb over their dead bodies, and enter enemy territory; nevertheless, they do not reflect on this great injustice at all and they go forward" (223–24). In both cases, the hero, be he artist or political revolutionary, is called to a sort of self-sacrifice by a greater cause, and can thus lose himself in a transcendental epic struggle, an Armageddon for a new age.

Works Cited

Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Trans. M.T.H. Sadler. New York: Dover, 1977.

Sorel, Georges. "From *Reflections on Violence*" in *From Georges Sorel: Essays on Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John L. Stanley, Trans. John and Charlotte Stanley. New York: Oxford UP, 1976.

Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford UP, 1946.