

# Alfred Rethel's Counterrevolutionary Death Dance

Albert Boime

To the memory of R.W.

This paper focuses on Alfred Rethel's graphic response to the revolution of 1848, when the spring uprisings in the socially divided German territories occurred. Rethel, a prominent Prussian painter at the time, associated himself with the conservative Center Right faction of the Frankfurt assembly, convoked to draw up a constitution for a united Germany. At this time, he had just been able, after countless delays, to commence his monumental fresco cycle on the life of Charlemagne for the town hall of Aachen—the magnum opus of his career. Yet he abandoned this major official commission to undertake a revolutionary project during the period of insurrection in 1848–49. While a dialectical relationship exists between the before-and-after projects, the revolution thrust itself directly into his artistic production and forced him to rethink his priorities. Hence his practice during the revolution assumed some of the unexpected, unplanned, and volatile qualities characteristic of revolution itself.

Rethel's *Auch ein Todtentanz* or *Yet Another Dance of Death* is generally considered the quintessential example of counterrevolutionary iconography related to the 1848 Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The series and its reception, then and now, raise the issue of what precisely constituted a “reactionary” or a “liberal” position amid the welter of political and ideological positions existing in Germany at mid-century. Second, the series inspires the question how a specific political position—in this case, I believe a conservative one—might be represented visually; and, third, it presents the issue of the relationship between Rethel's *Dance of Death* cycle—expressed in a popular realist idiom—and his other major project of the period, the monumental fresco cycle in the Aachen town hall.

Thus far no one has attempted to document the terms “liberal” and “conservative” with precision in connection with the artist, a goal I pursue here by focusing on the political alignments and their cultural expression in Germany during the years 1848–49. In the attempt to disentangle the elusive connotations of these labels, this essay

contrasts the careers and positions of Rethel (1816–1859) and his contemporary Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Wagner functions as a “control” category since he resided in Dresden at the same time as Rethel, and his more radical stance reveals the range of political choices available to his contemporaries.

It is necessary to clarify Rethel's political affiliation and its background to establish the grounds of my interpretation. The artist clearly supported a strong central authority and hierarchical social order, a position that dictated his program in the Aachen town hall. The repudiation of the attempt in 1848–49 to build a radical democracy in alliance with the impoverished peasantry and working classes was initially received by him and his fellow conservatives as a positive outcome of the short-lived “springtime of the people.” This position is reaffirmed by some twentieth-century scholars who interpret the failure of the brief revolution as a “rational” rejection of mobocracy and popular rule. Thus they read Rethel's counterrevolutionary program as an affirmative response to an “evil” action. By classifying Rethel—whom I shall argue was a conservative and counterrevolutionary—as “liberal,” scholars identifying with a centrist position may be projecting their own politics retroactively. Hence the necessity of restoring Rethel to his correct nineteenth-century political niche. If we accept Rethel's condemnation of Left politics as a socially beneficent gesture, then to assign him to a liberal position in today's terms is to qualify his position as politically progressive—a historical *reductio ad absurdum*. Further, to establish such a mistaken congruency between his art and his politics is to depoliticize his authentic authorial voice.

On the other hand, by demonstrating that Rethel's position was essentially elitist, his admitted fear of the Left, of the mob, and of revolution may be seen as part of a coherent world view. At the same time, this alignment of his counterrevolutionary imagery and his conservative politics restores to him his native self. In his traditional view, Rethel perceived the Left's inclusive social ideal as dangerous and as a threat to the social order. The last thing in the world he

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<sup>1</sup>The most recent study of this work is M. Hettling, “Revolution, Tod und Opferkult. A. Rethels 'Auch ein Todtentanz' von 1849,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, LXX, 2, 1988, 443–489. Hettling declares that Rethel's series takes an explicit stand against the Revolution, and is a “vindication and defense of the reaction.” *Ibid.*, 447. For a study of more problematic representations of the revolutionary struggles in 1848 Prussia, see A. Boime, “Social Identity and Political Authority in the Response of Two Prussian Painters to the Revolution of 1848,” *Art History*, XIII, 3, Sept. 1990, 344–387.



1 Hans Holbein, *The Waggoner*, from the 1549 and 1562 editions of "The Dance of Death"

wanted was equality, fraternity, and liberty for all, and, as will be seen, it is not for nothing that he garbs Death in the costume of the Enlightenment in his woodcut series.

Rethel's famous cycle of woodcuts, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, is probably the finest aesthetic product of the 1848 revolutionary period in Germany.<sup>2</sup> It consists of a series of six thematically linked images on the order of a comic strip, each accompanied by a legend in verse form. The cycle was published at the end of May 1849, about three weeks after the short-lived uprising of the artisanate and radical bourgeois in Dresden, where Rethel was then working, and where he had witnessed the suppression of the insurrection by Prussian troops in which several hundred people were killed. The series was received immediately as a major political statement, and reproduced as illustrations for the conservative viewpoint everywhere in Germany and in France. By mid-June a third edition appeared; within a year nearly fifteen thousand copies were sold; the Conservative Alliance of Saxony brought out a special printing, and there were numerous pirated editions.

*Yet Another Dance of Death* unfolds a grim satire in the starkest terms to instruct the populace in the error of revolutionary ways. Rethel's model was the late medieval

allegory of the Dance of Death (in France the *danse macabre*), most notably the pessimistic episodes by Hans Holbein (Fig. 1). In the allegory and its variations, it is not the dead but Death himself who is the protagonist, bringing home the lessons of mortality to people of every station. Death is shown striking capriciously and unexpectedly, and all human creatures, regardless of their earthly status, are equal before it.<sup>3</sup> In Rethel's cycle, Death emerges from the tomb and with calculated vengeance claims the living. He is not the capricious sportsman of the Holbein series, but a scheming politico who destroys those foolish enough to fall for his devious schemes. I will describe below how Rethel manipulates this theme to single out one social group in particular—a conceptual leap that betrays his modern sensibility.

Rethel's series opens with the cry of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" ringing throughout the world with its unequivocal rejection of the old traditions. Death is abruptly called from the grave by a quintet of female personifications of vices—Frenzy, Falsehood, Cunning, Vanity, and Bloodthirstiness—who have overpowered and fettered Justice with whose sword and scales they now arm Death for his revolutionary mission (Fig. 2). Vanity hands him a hat with a cock's feather, while Bloodthirstiness awaits with the scythe so that Death may reap his "harvest." According to the verses tailored to the image, now the man is ready "who can make you free and equal."

The second plate shows Death riding toward an ancient town undergoing the growth pangs of industrial transformation (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> He enters the open space at a steeply inclined angle reminiscent of a line of sight, zeroing in on his target with his scythe slung over his shoulder. Above the town walls rise the old steeply roofed houses and the spires of a Gothic cathedral, now being crowded by factory chimneys. Dressed in an eighteenth-century coat, the symbol of the Enlightenment, and the broad-brimmed hat worn by contemporary radicals, Death anticipates a "rich harvest" in this Rhenish town which he has targeted for his activities.<sup>5</sup> But his disguise does not fool two peasant girls who flee before the terrifying specter, nor the crows who shriek as he passes. The cock's feather on the hat "glows in the sunlight as red as blood," while "The scythe flashes like lightning," according to the verses. The association of the color red with blood states for the first time the leitmotif of the cycle.

<sup>3</sup> Rethel's earlier image of industry, *The Harkort Factory*, is a negative statement on the progress of bourgeois society. See Vaughan, 17, fig. 8.

<sup>4</sup> See J.M. Clark, *The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein*, London, 1947, 7.

<sup>5</sup> This is the so-called "Heckerhut," named for the leader of the Baden uprising, Friedrich Hecker. The bane of the conservatives, Hecker was hardly the fanatical rebel they made him out to be. He and his colleague Struve refused to admit workers and peasants to their councils, and he took to the field only when the preliminary parliament (convoked to work out the details for the definitive parliament at Frankfurt) refused to give republicanism a place on the agenda and voted against a place for him on the committee of fifty named to supervise the election of delegates to the national assembly. Once in the field, Hecker hesitated to fire on government troops and it was their commander who finally ordered the attack on Hecker's ragtag band and easily crushed them. Hecker escaped to the United States and settled on a farm in Illinois. He became a fervent supporter of Lincoln and spoke out against slavery, distinguishing himself during the Civil War when he rose to colonel in the Union Army.

<sup>2</sup> Ponten, 1922, 49–55; Schmidt, 136–148; W. Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting*, London and New Haven, 1980, 225–238; T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois*, Princeton, N.J., 1982, 26–27.

# Ein Todtentanz

Erfunden und gezeichnet von Alfred Rethel.

1.



„Freiheit, Gleichheit und Brudersinn!  
„Du alte Zeit, fahr hin! fahr hin!“ —  
Solch Schrei durchzieht der Völker Kund',  
Da thut sich auf der Erde Grund;  
Es steigt herauf ein Sensenmann,

Der merkt: ein Erntetag bricht an.  
Und wie er steigt an's Licht hervor  
Drängt sich um ihn ein Weiber-Chor,  
Sein Rüstzeug bringen sie heran,  
Dass er sein Werk beginnen kann.

Erechtheit gebunden ist,  
Das Schwerdt stahl ihr die schlaue List,  
Die Lüge nahm die Waag' ihr fort  
Sie bieten's dem Gesellen dort.  
Den Hut reicht ihm die Eitelkeit,

Die Tollheit hält ihr Ross bereit,  
Die Blutgier bringt die Sense her,  
Das ist des Schnitters beste Wehr! — —  
Ihr Menschen, ja! nun kommt der Mann,  
Der frei und gleich Euch machen kann.

2 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 1

Once in the town Death begins to work his deception. Before the door of a tavern filled to capacity, he posts a manifesto calling for Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (thus forging the connection between the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848 and the radical agitation at home) and he entertains a crowd with his sly tricks (Fig. 4). Shouting “Long Live the Republic,” he holds up the scales of Justice by the tongue instead of the handle, and thus conveys the illusion that the clay pipe of the ordinary citizen weighs as much as a kingly crown. The boorish and tipsy artisans, students, shopkeepers, and peasants, momentarily fascinated by the

trick, quit their obscene songs, laughter, games, and fighting. They accept Death as their leader and promise to follow him. One exception to the near-unanimity of the crowd is an old blind woman with a rosary, who leaves the scene while pushing a small boy ahead of her. The closing verses for this image read: “You blind woman, why are you sneaking away?/ Do you see more than the others there?” As in plate 1, the wise and the simple easily penetrate Death’s disguise.

One detail of this plate, until now unnoticed in the literature, is the tavern signboard displaying the Star of David in the upper right-hand corner. Although an emblem





Leipzig, Verlag von Georg Wigand.

3 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 2

associated generally with inns and pubs, it may also convey a coded message to fellow believers. According to tradition, the symbol was used by the followers of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras on their begging tours to notify their comrades that at the place of the sign they would find a hospitable reception. Later, the emblem of Pythagorean religious reform assumed both Freemasonic and Jewish connotations. Since Jews were often wine sellers and tavern-keepers in the period, the odds are that Rethel's positioning of the sign in the tavern scene reinforces rightist accusations of ascendant Freemasonic and Jewish influence on the German uprisings of 1848.<sup>6</sup> This supposition may be strength-

ened by an anti-Semitic caricature made by Julius Diez a half century later, depicting the German-Jewish painter Max Liebermann as a hulking tavern keeper before an identical signboard, alluding to his radical aesthetic sympathies as head of the Berlin Secession (Fig. 5).<sup>7</sup>

In plate 4 *Death now incites the populace to full-scale rebellion* (Fig. 6). Holding forth from a wooden platform used for public addresses, he hands the clamoring throng his sword, inscribed "People's Justice." His cry is the starting

<sup>6</sup> "Shield of David," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 10 vols., New York, 1943, ix, 506.

<sup>7</sup> The cartoon is labeled "Liebermann, the Tavernkeeper of the Berlin Secession." See *Jugend*, VIII, 6, 1903, 97. I am grateful to Karen Lang for bringing this work to my attention. See also P. Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, Cambridge, Mass., 1980, 110, for the anti-Semitic attacks on Liebermann that year.



Du Bürger und du Bauersmann,  
Schaut recht Euch diese Blätter an!  
Da seht Ihr nackt und ohne Kleid  
Ein ernstes Bild aus ernster Zeit.  
Wohl kommt so mancher zu Euch her

Als ob's ein neuer Heiland wär',  
Und spricht von Macht und Herrlichkeit,  
Die er für Alle hat bereit,  
Ihr glaubt es ihm, weil's Euch gefällt. —  
Schaut her, wie es damit bestellt.

3.



Er ist am Ziel. — Sieh, gleich am Chor  
Die Schenk' und mancher Gast davor;  
Beim Brandwein frecher Lieder Klang  
Und wußt Gelächter, Spiel und Jank! —

Er tritt heran mit schlaudem Blick  
Und ruft: „Aufs Wohl der Republik! —  
„Was gilt noch eine Krone viel?  
„Nicht mehr als wie ein Pfeifenstiel.

„Zum Spass will ich's beweisen Euch,  
„Gebt Acht!“ — Er holt die Waage gleich,  
hält sie am Jünglein statt am Ring.  
Sie merken's nicht, sie freut das Ding.

Sie schrei'n: „Das ist der rechte Mann!  
Dem folgen wir, der fuhr' uns an!“ —  
„Du blindes Weib, was schlechtest du fort?  
Siehst mehr du, als die Andern dort?“ —

4 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 3

point for the seduction of the innocent, neatly registered in the legend:

“People, this sword is yours,/ Who else could judge if not you alone?” Beside him on the platform an artisan holds a flag bearing the first four letters of the word “Republic.” The cry of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity reverberates throughout the town, mingled with cries of “To the Town Hall” and “Long Live the Republic.” The populace looks to Death as “the hero of the Revolution,” and as a column of soldiers approaches it shouts, “Blood! Blood!”

Rethel's next plate depicts the fruits of Death's machinations (Fig. 7). People are fighting and dying on a barricade

constructed of crates, loose lumber, and barrels filled with paving stones. Bodies lurch backward violently in midair as grapeshot whistles through space and shatters the barricade. The rebels are supported by snipers firing from the windows of neighboring houses. Death watches from atop the barricade, grasping the blood-red standard tightly in his hand. As the victims groan in agony, he mocks them: “Now I am keeping my promise to you,/ You all want to be equal to me.” Cold horror seizes them as they watch him lift his coat to reveal his skeletal nature. The concluding verses for this image read: “The blood flows freely like the red flag/ He who led them was Death.”

The last woodcut is a terrifying scene of the aftermath of



5 Julius Diez, *Liebermann, der Berliner Secessionswirth*, in *Jugend*, 1903

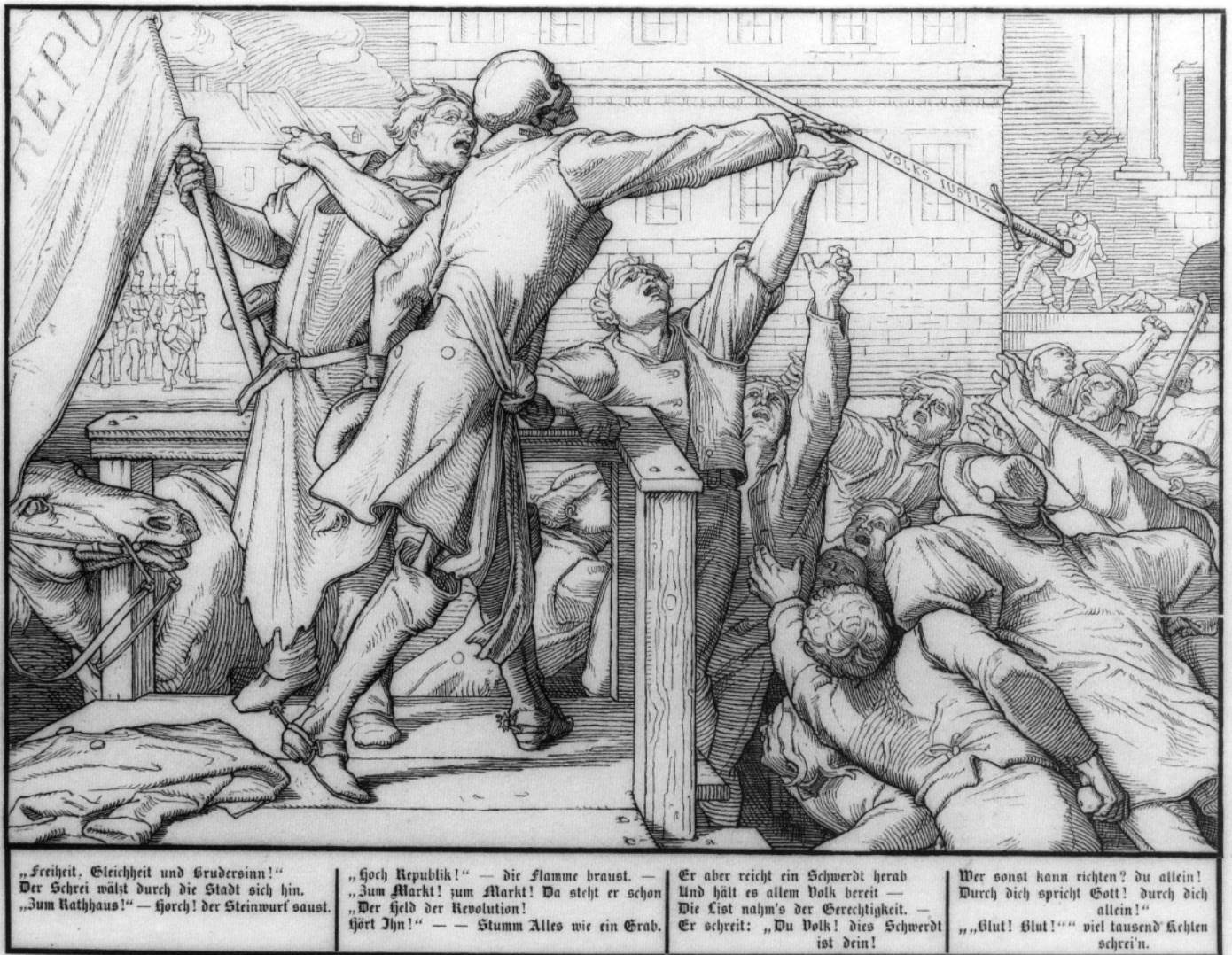
mass carnage (Fig. 8). Corpses are strewn over the demolished barricade and the surrounding houses are in ruin. A mother and her son weep for their dead husband and father, while in the background the retiring soldiers carry off their dead and wounded. Death has now totally unmasked himself and appears in his traditional skeletal form. Wearing a victor's wreath around his skull, he rides across the barricade scornfully surveying the wreckage. A dying man is modeled perversely after a figure in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (whose death there is vindicated by the goddess's appearance):<sup>8</sup> he raises himself up with his last breath only to glimpse the horror of his deception. Those who followed Death now lay pale, "All as brothers, free and equal." As Death rides off, the last victim recognizes the tragic duplicity of "The hero of the Red Republic."

Despite its conspicuous dependence on the medieval broadside tradition, Rethel's visual conception is strikingly modern in its eccentric and unstable perspectives. The painter's experience with fresco enabled him to develop his

narrative cycle in effective rhythmic sequence, unfolding in a vivid space immediately addressing the spectator and puntingly bringing home each point. Every plate in the series is organized along a sharp diagonal movement that commands the spectator's gaze and keeps the action moving at a fast pace. In plate 3, where Death entertains the crowd, Rethel sets his protagonist in the middle ground and organizes the audience in a semicircular movement that opens up in the foreground to evoke the space of the actual beholder. In plate 4 Death holds forth on a platform that opens out to the spectator's space at the left, and in plate 5 we are brought smack up against the danger and violence of the barricades with such vivid details as the mattress on which Death stands and the barrel crammed with paving stones. The final plate confronts us with the corpses—reminiscent of those in Meissonier's *Souvenir de la guerre civile* (Fig. 11)—pushed against the picture plane, with Death now moving toward the beholder. Rethel clearly orchestrated his compositions to unite his readers with the crowd taken in by the wily manipulator and to make them feel the devastating effects of this manipulation.

No one could deny that this is a hostile conception of

<sup>8</sup> Ponten, 1922, 53–54; Schmidt, 143.



„Freiheit, Gleichheit und Brudersinn!“  
Der Schrei wälzt durch die Stadt sich hin.  
„Zum Rathhaus!“ — Horch! der Steinwurf saust.

„Hoch Republik!“ — die Flamme braust. —  
„Zum Markt! zum Markt! Da steht er schon  
„Der Held der Revolution!  
Hört Jhn!“ — — Stumm Alles wie ein Grab.

Er aber reicht ein Schwerdt herab  
Und hält es allem Volk bereit —  
Die List nahm's der Gerechtigkeit. —  
Er schreit: „Du Volk! dies Schwerdt  
ist dein!“

Wer sonst kann richten? Du allein!  
Durch dich spricht Gott! Durch dich  
allein!“  
„Blut! Blut!“ — viel tausend Achten  
schrei'n.

Und Gleichheit! Bringt sie nur der Tod?  
Nein! Allen strahlt Ein Morgenroth.  
Ja, glaubt, die Guten sind sich gleich,

Ob hoch, ob tief, ob arm, ob reich. —  
Du, Bruderliebe, Bürgerhort,  
Der reinsten Lehre reinstes Wort!

Preis 5 Silbergroschen.

6 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 4

revolution. It was received as such from the moment of its publication and thereafter: during the period of the German Empire it was commonly used in schools as a warning against the consequences of revolution. The conservative French journal *L'Illustration* published the entire series on 28 July 1849—a scant two months after the original publication and a year after the magazine had warmly applauded the suppression of the workers' insurrection in Paris (Fig. 9).<sup>9</sup> The publishing house of Goupil presented the album the following year, cleverly inserting the term “Le Socialisme” in its title (“Le Socialisme. Nouvelle danse des morts”) and substituting “La République Démocratique et Sociale” for the “Red Republic” and even “Socialism” for “Republic” to drive the point home to its French audience (Fig. 10).<sup>10</sup> Conversely, even some moderates clearly perceived the series as a distortion of the democratic movement.<sup>11</sup>

Rethel presents Death ironically as the consummate political seducer, in this case as the radical who exploits republican rhetoric to enlist the working classes on behalf of a hidden agenda. His cycle discredits revolution as a positive

<sup>9</sup> *L'Illustration*, 28 July 1849.

<sup>10</sup> “Le Socialisme. Nouvelle danse des morts. Composée et dessinée par Alfred Rethel. Lithographiée par A. Colette. Paris, Goupil, Vibert et Cie. Editeurs, 1849.”

<sup>11</sup> See Champfleury, “La Danse des Morts de l'année, 1849,” *L'Artiste*, sér. 5, 1849, II, 185–186. Champfleury was both attracted and repelled by the series. He recognized that neither Rethel nor Reinick (the versifier) “marched in solidarity with the German revolutionaries,” but he also declared that the authors were “so convinced of their message that even the reddest Republicans would admire it if they understood the Beautiful.” And he concluded that the lesson, “as sinister by the crayon as by the pen, could be as well applied to France as Germany, to Paris as well as Leipzig.”



# aus dem Jahre 1848.

Mit erklärendem Texte von R. Reinick.

5.



„Jur Barrikade!“ „Pflaster auf!“ —  
Da steht der Gau — und oben drauf  
Er, den zum Führer sie ernannt,

Die blut'ge Fahne in fester Hand! —  
Kartätschen pfeifen, hei! das kracht,  
Sie stürzen rings, Er aber lacht:

„Jetzt lös' ich mein Versprechen Euch:  
„Ihr Alle sollt Mir werden gleich!“  
Er hebt sein Wams und wir sie's schau'n,

Da faast ihr Herz ein eisig Graun.  
Ihr Blut strömt, wie die Fahne, roth,  
Der sie geführt, — es war der Tod!

7 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 5

political course of action and sees the workers themselves as totally ignorant and gullible. Revolution in itself has no genuine ideological basis, and is fomented only by alien agitators whose interests are actually contrary to the popular good. Revolution is shown to be destructive of the Church and the feudal order, to unfold in the context of the modern industrial city, to result from demagoguery, and to be carried out by the *lumpen*, misled victims of the lower classes who are easily duped by skillful agitators and *agents provocateurs*. The agitators drive the common people to self-destructive modes of behavior but they nevertheless deserve their fate. There could be no doubt that in the spring and summer of 1849,

when the liberal and democratic coalition was already considerably weakened, Rethel's counterrevolutionary series could be guaranteed an enthusiastic reception among reactionaries, conservatives, and moderate liberals alike.

Despite Rethel's seemingly unequivocal stand on revolution, scholars today with diverse ideological agendas find Rethel's series a rewarding case study and debate the painter's political attitudes toward the Dresden uprising in May 1849. While his series was conceived during the winter of 1848–49, his response to this event is taken as symptomatic of the political perspective that informed his project. Indeed, since the first proofs were in Rethel's



Der sie geführt — es war der Tod!  
Er hat gehalten, was er bot.

Die ihm gefolgt, sie liegen bleich  
Als Brüder alle, frei und gleich. —

Seht hin die Maske that er fort;  
Als Sieger, hoch zu Kosse dort,

Zieht, der Verwesung Hohn im Blick,  
Der Held der rothen Republik.

Geschändet hat man dich, entehrt,  
Zur Mörderfackel dich verkehrt;  
Vom Himmel nahnst du deinen Lauf,

Zum Himmel flamme freudig auf,  
In reiner That, ein heil'ger Brand!  
So segne Gott das Vaterland!

Schnellpressendruck von F. A. Brockhaus in Leipzig.

8 Alfred Rethel, *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849, plate 6

workshop at the time of the insurrection, it is even possible that he modified them under its impact. (The cycle was actually published a few weeks later.) Rethel's contemporaries and most of his biographers—and I along with them—

<sup>12</sup> P. Paret, "The German Revolution of 1848 and Rethel's Dance of Death," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xvii, 1, 1986, 233–255. He essentially agrees with K. Koetschau, *Alfred Rethels Kunst*, Düsseldorf, 1929, 225; Schmidt, 140; and K.-L. Hofmann and C. Prager, "Revolution als Totentanz—Alfred Rethel, 'Ein Totentanz', 1849," in *Thema Totentanz*, Mannheim Kunstverein, Mannheim, 1986. But see Rethel's major biographer J. Ponten, *Alfred Rethel*, Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1911, 1–11; L.H. Hartwig and K. Riha, *Politische Ästhetik und Öffentlichkeit*, Steinbach, 1974, 16.

see Rethel as politically conservative. The problem we face lies in the elusive connotations of the terms "conservative" and "liberal" at any given time, and especially their significance in the period under scrutiny. Recently, the historian Peter Paret has written a major study on Rethel that attempts to rescue him from the "conservative" label and shift him and his project to a "liberal" position. I hope to demonstrate by the conclusion of this paper why this revisionist label fails to comprehend Rethel's historical context.<sup>12</sup>

The need to establish and to justify the "progressive" features of mainstream or avant-garde art by associating them with liberal political movements predisposes historians of art to overlook the clearcut cases representing the opposite



mort est devenue pour un grand nombre de cœurs affligés un dernier refuge; pour ceux-ci, une noble gloire; pour quelques-uns, une vengeance; pour tous, hélas! le terme de tous les mauvais desirs, et de toutes les âpres ambitions. Qu'on nous pardonne ce préambule un peu long pour en

venir à une simple traduction. Si c'est une vanité, la Danse des Morts mettra fin aussi à cette vanité.

PROLOGUE.

Bourgeois et paysan, regarde bien ces feuilles, tu y verras

une image sans voile, une triste image d'un temps triste. Plus d'un homme arrive à vous comme un nouveau sauveur, il vous parle de la puissance, de la prospérité qu'il prépare au peuple, vous le croyez, parce que son langage vous plait; mais voyez ce qu'il en est.



Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité. Adieu les temps anciens, adieu!... Ces cris circulent de groupe en groupe dans les rangs du peuple. Le sein de la terre s'entr'ouvre, et il en sort un faucheur pour la moisson qui va se faire. A mesure qu'il s'élève sur le sol, des femmes se pressent autour de lui et s'associent à son préparatif. La Justice est enchaînée; la Ruse lui a enlevé son épée, sa balance, et les présente au faucheur; la Vanité lui donne son chapeau; la Folie tient son cheval; la Soif de sang lui apporte sa faux. A présent, camarades, attention, voilà celui qui saura vous rendre libres et égaux.



La douce lumière du matin brille comme de costume sur la ville et les champs. Voici venir, dans sa course fougueuse, l'ami du peuple, le faucheur. Il dirige son cheval vers la cité, il sait quelle riche moisson il doit y faire. La plume de coq flottant sur son chapeau reluit au soleil, rouge comme du sang; sa faux flamboie comme une lueur d'or, son cheval gémit, et les corbeaux crient.



Il arrive à son but. A l'entrée de la ville est l'auberge avec ses hôtes, qui, en buvant de l'eau-de-vie, chantent, jouent, se querellent. Il s'avance avec un regard rusé et s'écrie: A la prospérité de la République! Que pèse une couronne? pas plus qu'un tuyau de pipe. Je veux vous en donner la preuve, regardez. Il met la couronne et la pipe dans la balance, en la prenant par l'aiguille. Les spectateurs charmés s'écrient: Voilà l'homme qu'il nous faut, l'homme qui doit nous conduire et que nous suivrons. Mais toi, pauvre femme aveugle, pourquoi te retires-tu? Et verrais-tu plus que ceux qui sont là les yeux ouverts!



Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité! Ce cri résonne à travers toute la cité. « A l'Hôtel-de-Ville!... Écoutez. On entend les pierres qui sifflent l'air: — Vive la République. — La flamme éclate. Au marché! au marché! là est déjà le héros de la Révolution. Écoutez-le parler. Il tient l'épée enlevée à la Justice, la présente au peuple et lui dit: Peuple, voilà ton glaive. A qui appartient-il de juger si ce n'est à toi! C'est par toi que Dieu se manifesta, par toi seul. A ces mots, des milliers de voix répondent par ces cris: Du sang! du sang!



Aux barricades! En avant les pavés! La construction s'achève et à sa cime, apparaît, l'étendard agnellant à la main, celui que la révolte a choisi pour chef. Les balles sifflent, les victimes tombent. Mais lui rit et dit à ceux qui l'entourent: « Maintenant je tiendrai la promesse que je vous ai faite de vous rendre pareils à moi. » Il lève son pourpoint, et ceux qui le regardent se sentent le cœur saisi d'effroi. Leur sang coule rouge comme leur drapeau. Celui qui les a conduits au combat, c'est le faucheur, c'est la mort.



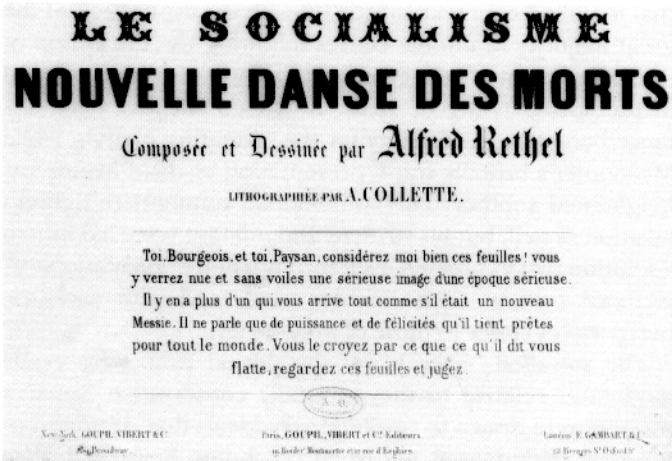
Celui qui les a conduits, c'est le cavalier de la mort, il a tenu sa promesse; tous ceux qui l'ont suivi sont maintenant frères, libres et égaux. Victorieux, il enlève son masque, et du haut de son cheval rit de la destruction, le héros de la République Rouge.

ÉPILOGUE.

Dans la tombe... oui... nous sommes égaux: ni haut, ni bas, ni pauvres, ni riches. O Liberté, qui t'amènera parmi nous? Ah! ce n'est ni le meurtre, ni le crime. Tu ne brilleras dans toute ta splendeur que lorsque l'ardeur de notre égoïsme sera éteinte. Et toi, Égalité, ne viens-tu que de la mort? Non, pour tous luit la même aurore. Riches ou pauvres, grands ou petits, tous les bons sont égaux. Et toi, Fraternité, parole sacrée, rempart du citoyen, on t'a outragé, profanée, on a fait de toi une torche incendiaire; c'est du ciel que tu nous es venue; que ta flamme s'élève purement, gaïement vers le ciel, et que Dieu bénisse la patrie!

X. M.



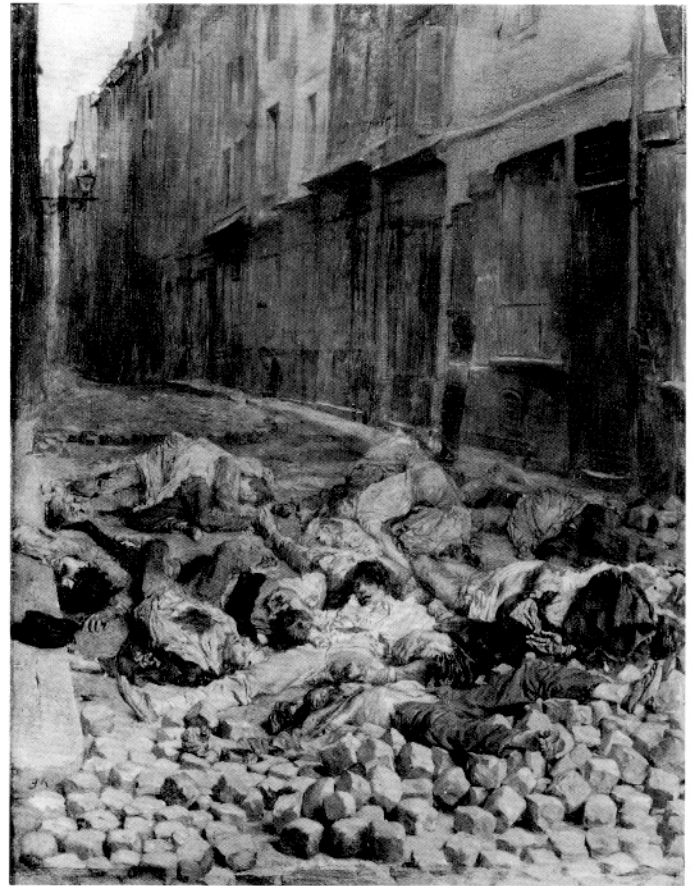


10 Title-page from Goupil's publication of Rethel's *Auch ein Todtentanz*, 1849

point of view. The tendency to equate innovation in the political realm with innovation in the artistic realm and the hesitancy to assign non-progressive tags to the subjects of mainstream art-historical inquiry no doubt springs from the scholar's fear of being identified with this position. This is most striking in those instances involving popular revolutionary movements, where the object of research generally is to isolate a transcendental category of "revolutionary art." Certainly the effort to overturn tradition stimulates visions of a future society differing in its fundamental essentials from the present, and it is tempting to associate the artist with such visions to explain the basis for original expression. But the danger lies in the possible distorting of the historical situation and, consequently, of the place of the artist and work within it.

Innovative forms and styles in and of themselves may be directly related to changing political and social conditions, but if these are often essential characteristics of revolutionary epochs, they are neither necessary nor global ones. Revolutionary circumstances force social and political groups to take sides or to play it safe, and those who oppose change may very well exploit narrative material drawn from these circumstances but nevertheless package it deliberately in traditional forms. Even the apparent anachronistic features of conservative image-making represent an outcome of altered social conditions and thus may appear novel for the artist and his or her constituency. Rethel's series exploits the novelty of anachronism during unstable conditions, but he also drastically transforms it through modern forms, popular physiognomies, and unconventional designs. His synthesis paradoxically aspires to the status of "revolutionary" counter-revolutionary art.

Radical French imagery of 1848 demonstrates a new level of social and political awareness, and it manifested itself appropriately in "realistic" guise. The projection of transformed social relations stimulated a closer analysis of existing ones, and the incorporation into art of previously ignored social groups and their environments now occupied the imaginations of the younger generation. Yet the "realism" that sprang from 1848 was destined to be qualified by the failure of the political mission of 1848. Although realism



11 Ernest Meissonier, *The Barricade (Souvenir de la guerre civile)*, 1849. Paris, Musée du Louvre

represents an attitude that at varying historical moments may be called novel, in fact the style and content of realism most closely approximate the ideological limits that a group imposes on its "reality" at any given moment. The disillusionment of the liberal intellectuals of the period stemmed from their realization that the Republic as they conceived it was an unrealizable abstraction and that their textual and visual systems for expressing it were empty of vitality. Indeed, it would appear that these political moderates did not want something new, but rather an apotheosis of what they felt already existed. Their unwillingness to abandon older political forms cannot be unrelated to the vengeance they wreaked on working men and women who participated in the June insurrection following the closure of the National Workshops, and revealed to them the inconsistency of their position. Nothing can be more chilling in this respect than Meissonier's image of the barricade, *Souvenir de la guerre civile*, an image born of disillusionment and sudden self-knowledge by an 1848 French liberal (Fig. 11). Here is "realism" placed at the service of those forces that suppressed the insurrection and put down the workers' claims as "unrealistic." Although Salon audiences found Meissonier's image hard to take in 1850–51 (it was deliberately withheld from exhibition in 1849), his relentless view of reality vindicated the retreat of the liberals from their initial alliance with the "savages" who were now viewed as justifiably contained.



12 Christian Koehler, *The Awakening of Germania*, 1849. New York, The New-York Historical Society

The suppression of the June insurrection signaled the reaction in Germany as well, where liberals acted analogously to their French counterparts. If realism there could serve a retrogressive position, the conscious flight from realism in some contemporary German cultural practice also carried immediate political signification. One Prussian example is Christian Koehler's *The Awakening of Germania* of 1849 (Fig. 12). A traditional allegorical presentation, Germania is shown rising from a deep slumber on a luxurious bearskin. She has been roused by the personification of Justice accompanied by Liberty (represented by a much younger woman), and now she reaches quickly for her sword, while with her left hand she lays hold of the Imperial crown, simultaneously chasing away the demons of royal Despotism and radical Discord.<sup>13</sup>

Considered "grand and noble" when it was first exhibited, this picture was hardly revolutionary in either form or content. Nevertheless, it makes direct allusion to the revolutionary events of 1848 in Germany and thus must be counted as an example of work inspired by those events. The theme appealed to moderate constitutional liberals who supported the decision of the Frankfurt Parliament—the assembly convoked to draw up a constitution for the entire German nation—to offer the imperial crown of a united Germany to Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia. Koehler's Germania chases away personifications of the extremists of both Right and Left factions, the demons of Despotism with their chains as well as the demon of Discord with his incendiary torch.

The painting is a telling statement on the ambivalent position of the "liberals" in the later stage of the Prussian revolution of 1848. Its allegorizing narrative, its desire to steer a middle course between what they claimed to be tyranny and anarchy, its absence of explicit allusions to the contemporary world, and its popular reception by moderates both in Prussia and, later, in the United States, all suggest

that it embodied a text consonant with the aspirations of the great majority of middle classes following the disruption of the united front of bourgeois and proletarian initially forged in the spring rising of 1848. Koehler's allegory here distanced one aspect of reality for the retreating liberals, while Meissonier's brutally frank presentation of dead insurgents heightened another. This combination summarizes Rethel's position as well, but his strident and militant voice led him to a solution that expressed itself through more "revolutionary" pictorial content than Koehler used, and with eccentric perspectives closer to those of Meissonier.

The so-called "liberals" of the period (who were really moderates relative to the politically conservative Prussian society) were drawn to revolutionary ideals that promised to promote their power, but when revolution broke out, they realized that what was crumbling was not only what they considered social prejudice and feudal obstacles to their material progress, but even those values that they themselves had considered true and eternal. Those who had been liberals before the revolution had become reactionaries by June (the month of the proletarian uprising in Paris); they wanted liberty and representative institutions, provided that they were confined to the limits of their moderate circle. When the hungry, unemployed, and battered workers finally demanded their share of the national wealth, and inquired about their rights, they were met with shock followed by accusations of impudence and ingratitude. Hence the breakdown everywhere in Europe of the tenuous coalition of the liberal sector of the bourgeoisie and the small shopkeepers and artisans that had succeeded in winning modest reforms in the spring of 1848, and hence the disappearance of idealism from both liberal and conservative representations.

The position of all workers had been exacerbated by the economic crisis of the mid-1840s; the potato famine of 1845 was followed by the grain failures of 1846 and 1847. By the middle of 1847 the price of wheat in the Rhineland was 250% higher than it had been in 1845. Wages did not keep pace with prices but remained roughly constant. The bad harvest of 1847 coincided with a commercial crisis that began in England and spread throughout the Continent. From August 1847 through January 1848, roughly 245 firms and twelve banks failed in Germany alone. In the spring of 1847 there were hunger demonstrations in several cities, including the so-called "potato revolution" in Berlin in which women raided markets with inflated prices. State aid was slow in coming, and workers responded with a flood of petitions, increased interest in associations, and readiness for revolution.<sup>14</sup>

The discontent of the German workers had first manifested itself in Silesia four years earlier. Some 5,000 weavers in the neighborhood of Peterswaldau and Langenbielau rose in protest against the ruthlessness of the entrepreneurs who sought every excuse to pay starvation prices, rejected fixed wages in favor of a supply and demand strategy, and increasingly used machines. These weavers burned shops and the houses of the more prosperous master weavers and

<sup>13</sup> *Catalogue of a Private Collection of Paintings and Original Drawings by Artists of the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts*, New York, 1851, 34–37.

<sup>14</sup> O.J. Hammen, "Economic and Social Factors in the Prussian Rhineland in 1848," *American Historical Review*, LIV, July 1949, 825–840. The account that follows is indebted in part to this essay.



13 Karl Wilhelm Hübner, *Silesian Weavers*, 1844. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum

the entrepreneurs or middlemen who hired out the work. They were joined by masons, carpenters, and other local artisans, and the rebellion set off a series of strikes in Breslau, the chief city in Silesia, and even in Berlin itself. The rebellion was brutally repressed under such strict press censorship that it may not be possible for the historian to recover the magnitude of the brutality.

In his *Silesian Weavers*, Karl Wilhelm Hübner, a left-wing artist of the Düsseldorf school, depicted the type of encounter between entrepreneur and weaver that led to the outbreak (Fig. 13).<sup>15</sup> The canvas portrays a forbidding entrepreneur coldly rejecting the linen cloth of a weaver for its imperfections and, to emphasize his point, histrionically flinging it to the floor of his firm. Nevertheless, he dangles one end of the cloth in midair waiting for the weaver's response to his lower offer. The weaver's wife has collapsed, her hope for the survival of her family having been quashed. In other parts of the shop, buyers scrutinize the weave with a glass or offer a pittance for the work while the artisans and their families look on helplessly. In the left background we catch a glimpse of a more sumptuous interior where clerks record the purchase of bolts of cloth. The entrepreneur's elegantly clad son leans nonchalantly on the cloth on the table smoking a cigar. He shows utter indifference to the older man's dramatic gesture. Another family watches the main action with horror, while at the far right two young weavers exit with angry gestures and vows of retribution.

It was the discontent of the declassed master artisans and unemployed journeymen that contributed to the successful alliance of bourgeois and proletariat forged during the

March days. Often ignored by the radicals and distrusted by the liberals, the artisans waged their own campaign against industrialism. Their first tactic was a direct attack on factories and machines, which began early in March and lasted for about eight weeks. When the newly empowered liberals used their civic guards to suppress disorder, the artisans turned to more orthodox channels of political persuasion. They drafted petitions, issued proclamations, founded unions, and convoked congresses. If they chose their leaders from among bourgeois intellectuals or professionals, these were usually types who had proved their mettle under fire or who had earned the workers' trust from knowledge gained through direct contact over a period of time. They were not rabble-rousers suddenly riding into town to provoke riot.

The popular character of the insurrection revealed itself belatedly to Rethel. After witnessing the suppression of the Dresden uprising in early May 1849, he seemed to have had second thoughts about his unprogressive interpretation of events. He characterized the struggle at that time as a "magnificent effort for German glory, which was defeated by the sword of coldly calculating military force." He then went on to confess:

I observed the rise of this movement with mistrust and expected a Red Republic—Communism with all its consequences. But in fact it was nothing more than the enthusiasm of the people in the best sense of the term for the creation of a great and noble Germany, a mission God entrusted to their hearts and not called forth by the radical prattle of bad newspapers and popular agitators.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See W. Hütt, *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule 1819–1869*, Leipzig, 1964, 102–104; H. Gagel, "Düsseldorfer Malerschule in der politischen Situation des Vormärz und 1848," *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule*, ed. W. von Kalnein, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1979, 75–76.

<sup>16</sup> Ponten, 1912, 119. Although the letter is undated except for "Dienstag Morgen," the internal evidence helps us to pinpoint it to Tuesday, 8 May, the last day of the uprising, when it was almost totally suppressed.



Rethel's sudden realization of his mistaken interpretation of the historical circumstances reflects the disillusionment after King Friedrich Wilhelm IV rejected the crown of a united German empire offered to him on 28 March by the delegates of the Frankfurt National Assembly. This rejection also reflected the disinclination of Prussia and Saxony to embrace parliamentarianism, and thus implied the effective dissolution of the National Assembly. The only support that constitutionalism could still find was among the militant artisans and petty bourgeoisie of Dresden, Elberfeld, Düsseldorf, and Kaiserslautern. The uprising that Rethel witnessed in May was essentially of this type, one with which he could eventually identify once he grasped its implications. But his hesitancy is seen in the fact that as late as 4 May 1849, after the street fighting had begun, Rethel still regarded the approaching Prussian troops as the Saxon town's "saviours"<sup>17</sup>—when even the most moderate groups had immediately perceived the action as a breach of political sovereignty.

Rethel's letter to the poet-painter Robert Reinick, who wrote the verses for *Auch ein Todtentanz*, shows his support of the idea of a Prussian Kaiser.<sup>18</sup> This would place him in the camp of the Center Right which advocated an imperial hereditary ruler, subordinated parliamentary authority, and rejected the idea of popular sovereignty. The Center Right advocated a powerful executive with discretionary parliamentary power. Not coincidentally, at the moment Rethel turned to the *Todtentanz* project, he had been actively engaged on the series of murals, mentioned above, for the medieval town hall of Aachen.<sup>19</sup> The competition for this commission on the life of Charlemagne for the Coronation Room was of deep import to German nationalists: it called for frescoes for a space in which thirty-five Holy Roman Emperors, starting with Charlemagne himself, had held council. Rethel's program stressed the theme of the rise of Charlemagne from tribal king to German emperor, concluding with a scene of a later emperor descending into Charlemagne's crypt to seek inspiration from his predecessor.

Although schematized as early as 1840, ideological conflicts between Rethel, the town councillors, and Aachen's religious leaders over the program, as well as the restoration of the town hall, prevented Rethel from executing his project until 1847.<sup>20</sup> He was still working on the mural cycle when the revolution broke out the following year. He continued to work, seemingly unperturbed, until the end of 1848 when he finished a second panel. But instead of proceeding to the next one, he abruptly turned to the *Auch ein Todtentanz* project.

Rethel's shift of attention may have been triggered by the controversy aroused by his program in its initial phase. The competition had stipulated that the panels should represent

key moments from the life of Charlemagne, especially those relating to Aachen as the emperor's favorite domicile. As such, the competition program called for stress on the local patriotic connection. Rethel, however, although a native of Aachen, stressed national and religious, rather than regional or particularist, issues. He completely ignored Aachen in all but one of his projected designs and chose instead to concentrate on the motivations of Charlemagne's actions—the destruction of paganism and the institutionalization of Christianity within the political realm. The artist seized the occasion to demonstrate the medieval integration of Church and State and the unity of Germany under the Holy Roman Empire. Not surprisingly, his own ideal of a centralized, united Germany was prefigured by Charlemagne's prefeudal structure and also justified by Christian ideology.

But Rethel had to contend with both liberal and conservative criticism of his program. On the one hand, a faction in the Aachen town council—aided and defended by the liberal press—vociferously opposed the decoration of the town hall with such a message. On the other, the Catholic clergy complained that his program was too "Protestant" in its depiction of the scene of the Frankfurt Synod of 794, especially regarding Charlemagne's objections to the restoration of images in the Byzantine Church by the Second Council of Nicaea (787). This act later enjoyed the approval of many Protestant apologists, and the Aachen church fathers saw Rethel's text as a form of propaganda in favor of this "unholy" alliance. Furthermore, both the church fathers and the liberals wondered why Frankfurt—relatively unimportant in their view—was represented rather than a scene in Aachen, and together they persistently blocked his plans. Rethel then went back to the *Libri Carolini* in which Charlemagne's objections were stated, and subsequently offered a new interpretation more consistent with the Catholic position on imagery. It was only after Rethel managed to transform the controversy into a national issue that he received the authority to proceed. In 1846 he traveled to Berlin with the purpose of showing Friedrich Wilhelm IV his plans and appealing for his support.<sup>21</sup> As a result of the Prussian king's approval and intervention, preparations for the execution of the frescoes were immediately set into motion.

Of the seven scenes of the definitive program, one dealt with Charlemagne's victory over the infidel, the *Battle of Cordova*; two with his conquest and Christianization of Germany, the *Fall of the Irmin Column* and the *Baptism of Wittekind*; two with his rapprochement with Rome, the *Entry into Pavia* and the *Coronation*; and two with the German extension of his tradition, the *Crowning of Ludwig the Pious in Aachen* and the *Visit of Otto III to the Crypt*. Arranged roughly in chronological succession, the cycle was to begin with Charlemagne's symbolic destruction of the pagan Irmin column after his victory over the Saxons near Paderborn in 772 and to culminate with the visit of one of the emperor's successors to the crypt where Charlemagne's body was embalmed. According to the story, Otto III made this pilgrimage in seeking the inspiration to restore the glory of

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 118–119, letter to his mother dated 4 May 1849.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, letter of 22 Apr. 1849.

<sup>19</sup> Ponten, 1922, 10–40; Schmidt, 76–123; F. Kuetgens, *Die Karlsfresken Alfred Rethels*, Bonn, 1940; H. von Einem, *Die Tragödie der Karlsfresken Alfred Rethels*, Cologne and Opladen, 1968; D. Hoffmann, *Die Karlsfresken Alfred Rethels*, Freiburg, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Ponten, 1912, 56–58, letter to the Oberbürgermeister of Aachen dated 28 Apr. 1841.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100–105, letter to his mother dated 3 Mar. 1846.



14 Alfred Rethel, *The Battle of Cordova*, sketch for fresco in the Rathaus, Aachen, 1849, Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum

Charlemagne's reign in his former German possessions. For Rethel this "historical apotheosis" was filled with topical allusions, and it was to underline the cycle's contemporary message that he chose this scene for its conclusion.

Yet during the course of the cycle's execution its relevance was challenged by current events. Between March and December 1848 it seemed clear that, whatever form of unity there was likely to be in Germany in the future, it would not be along the lines of the feudal system of the Holy Roman Empire. During this interval Rethel—growing disenchanted with the monarch and fearful of the radical Red Republic—began to lose interest in the cycle. As late as 1849 he viewed the project "as a heavy burden, as the destroyer of my enjoyment of life." He returned to the work between 1849 and 1851, and introduced black, red, and gold banners into the last two panels that he painted himself (Figs. 14–15). According to legend these were the colors of the emperor, but in 1848 they constituted the tricolor emblem of national unity, which heretofore had been proscribed as subversive. These murals, however, the *Battle of Cordova* and *Entry into Pavia*, represent victories over the emperor's enemies, and while Rethel hesitated to portray the banner, his source for the *Cordova* had written that the Muslims carried a "red flag" that was eventually submerged in a "bloodbath" of their own making.<sup>22</sup> Rethel's use of the tricolor was perfectly consistent with his political position, for it should be remembered that Friedrich Wilhelm IV himself had adopted it as the Prussian standard. Under the aegis of a powerful ruler, the red, black,

and gold banner stood for order and the assertion of throne-and-altar against anarchy.

Thus *Auch ein Todtentanz* bears a dialectical relationship with the Charlemagne cycle, revealing the political well-springs of Rethel's visual metaphors. There can be no doubt that at this moment he was leaning toward the political Right. The prologue to the series addresses both the "townsman" and the "peasant," admonishing them carefully to consider the series of plates which candidly exposes the evils of the current epoch and to beware the many messiahs who seduce the crowds by their flattery. The epilogue attempts to recover the terms Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity from their revolutionary sense and appropriate them for a traditional standpoint. Instead of the sardonic interpretation of "equality" where the grave is the common denominator, Rethel and his author Reinick substitute the idea that all "virtuous" people—regardless of their station—are equal among themselves. They are outraged to see the term Fraternity (*Brüderliebe* = Brotherly Love) profaned and symbolically enlisted under the banner of murder and incendiary torches; they caution the reader to look to Heaven for salvation, for it is the celestial flame alone that purifies and with which "God blesses the Fatherland."

<sup>22</sup> Ponten, 1922, 26–27; Von Einem (as in n. 19), 22. This was Friedrich Schlegel's translation of the Song of Roland after the so-called Turpin Chronicles.



15 Alfred Rethel, *Entrance of Charlemagne into Pavia*, sketch for fresco in the Rathaus, Aachen, 1850. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum

Rethel rejects not only revolution as an alternative to repression but also all collective action taken by the popular classes to redress their grievances. His expropriation of revolutionary signs and symbols for his own propagandistic message parallels the strategies of aristocratic opponents of the revolution. They harped on the "godlessness" of the liberals and radicals, and appealed to the rural folk who made "little noise" and were "therefore rarely noticed." The conservatives were frightened by growing industrialism and emphasized agriculture as the foundation of national greatness. The reaction loathed laissez-faire individualism in economics as much as parliamentary liberalism in politics, for both were dangerous to legitimate authority. They attempted to undermine the coalition of the middle class with the artisans and peasants by chastising the former and rewarding the latter with offers of reform. The most enlightened of them embarked on a program of material welfare that essentially borrowed its tactics from the radicals. They committed themselves to support the less privileged, calling on their peers to protect the weak and oppressed, while preaching the virtues of faithfulness and obedience to the populace. The nobles discovered that they shared with the artisans and petty tradesmen (often one and the same) a fear of the financiers, manufacturers, and merchants. Both were threatened by the growth of industrial capitalism; both sought security by a reassertion of their corporate rights. Bismarck declared in 1849 that the handicraftsman constitutes the "backbone of the burgher class," and needed protection against the onslaught of factory life. In industry

the conservative strategy was to champion the artisan against the mill owner, reintroducing guild regulation of production. This attitude is evident in Rethel's plate showing Death riding toward an ancient town whose medieval skyline is being displaced by smoking chimneys. Hence the conservatives now made their appeal to the same peasantry and artisanate addressed by Rethel, using the road to reform and popular culture previously exploited by the radicals. Indeed, Rethel and his fellow moderates and conservatives used precisely those methods of deceit and sensationalism to make their point that they condemned in their radical contemporaries.

#### The Case of Richard Wagner

Rethel's conservative position may be clarified by analyzing more carefully the Dresden uprising and its impact on his contemporaries. It so happens that another gifted artist, the musician Richard Wagner, was living in Dresden at the time and has left us a remarkable, if self-serving, memoir of the events.<sup>23</sup> Wagner was only three years older than Rethel and was at a parallel stage in his artistic career. Yet he took a

<sup>23</sup> R. Wagner, *My Life*, New York, 1939, 433–504. Wagner does not mention Rethel by name, but he was in contact with the artist's colleagues in Düsseldorf, including his close friend and collaborator on the *Auch ein Todtentanz* project, the poet-painter Robert Reinick. Wagner's account has to be measured against his biographer's analysis: see E. Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3 vols., New York, 1933, *et passim*, II, 3–17, 35–103.



more sanguine view of the Revolution, which he believed could bring about a cultural environment favorable to his talents. Unlike Rethel, Wagner was no mere grumbling spectator of the events but an active participant who seized the opportunity to promote social change beneficial to him. Although in his mature reflections he attempts to disguise his leading role in those events, they nevertheless spell out the complicated political conditions forming the backdrop to the abortive insurrection. Actually, his political views intersect with Rethel's at several points, but his insight into the need to sustain revolutionary action to bring about change makes him a case study in counterpoint to Rethel and suggests the range of options available to them.

Wagner's position socially was that of the cultivated middle-class professional with reformist ideas based on his perception of personal limitations in a rigidly stratified society. His vision of a new society (enjoying new musical forms), based partly on an expanded audience drawn from the popular masses, was the equivalent of that of the bourgeois reformers elsewhere who identified their sphere of freedom with that of the people. Aside from his idealized projection of *Das Volk*, however, his actual street encounters with the "lower orders" were anything but positive; he had a horror of the unruly crowd and workers who would argue their own case and act without waiting for their cue from their intellectual superiors.

Following the risings in Paris, Vienna, and Berlin in the spring of 1848, a national assembly met in the Paulskirche (St. Paul's Church) in Frankfurt-am-Main to begin the process of drawing up a constitution for a united Germany, while in Saxony the cabinet of Julius Traugott Könneritz had been dismissed to make way for one of more liberal, even democratic, ideas. The king of Saxony, although not personally vindictive, would tolerate no criticism of his divine right; his court comprised self-satisfied military officers and an arrogant nobility which displayed the utmost contempt for the common citizen; and the bureaucracy was immovable: these and many other factors contributed to the alienation of a populace still reeling from the terrible economic conditions of the period 1846–47. Wagner and his colleagues in Saxony had outgrown the traditional subservience to the petty princelings and nobility, whom they despised. Like the radical pamphleteers, they thundered their invective against the courtiers and officials.

Wagner tells us that in Dresden there were two major political unions, the moderate *Deutscherverein*, whose program aimed at "a constitutional monarchy on the broadest democratic foundation," and the radical *Vaterlandsverein*, which used the term "constitutional monarchy" as a pretext for a more revolutionary program. Wagner himself belonged to the *Deutscherverein*, presumably (since the documentation is wanting here) the one with which Rethel would have felt most at home. Wagner in fact expresses in his memoirs some of the same feelings about the journalistic media and revolutionary orators that Rethel did. Wagner claimed that his interest in the pressing social and political problems of the day continued until he recognized that, "The shallow platitudes, which formed the staple eloquence of the orators of the day, proved to me the terrible shallowness of the whole

movement." He also thundered against the newspapers that "played a terrible and prominent role on this occasion."

Ironically, one of Wagner's close associates during this period was both a fiery orator and newspaper editor of the Far Left: August Röckel. Röckel had been Wagner's musical director at the Dresden Opera House, but with the outbreak of revolution he took a lead role in the democratic movement. At one point he was arrested for his written appeal to Saxon troops who supported the popular movement, and when he was released he began the publication of a popular weekly journal called the *Volksblätter* which he edited himself. Röckel considered himself a radical socialist and wanted drastic change of the basis of bourgeois society; he opposed the guild system for its coercive nature and received most of his support from bourgeois liberals like Wagner. It was through Röckel that the musician met Bakunin, who was engaged in organizing the liberal uprising in the early spring of 1849.

The reaction set in dramatically on the first of May when the liberal chambers were dissolved by the new ministry of Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, which the Saxon king had charged with carrying out his new reactionary policy. Röckel, who had been elected a deputy of the liberal parliamentary body, was now at risk since his position had not given him immunity against criminal prosecution. He fled into exile, while Wagner assumed the responsibility for overseeing the publication of the final edition of the *Volksblätter*. It was during this period that tension built up to the breaking point; the emergency deputations, nightly demonstrations, and stormy meetings of the *Vereins* signaled the manifestation that would begin on 3 May. These deputations and demonstrations clamored for the recognition of the constitution promulgated by the Frankfurt National Assembly, and nothing more. But they were shut out by the government. According to Wagner, the *Vaterlandsverein* called a meeting in desperation, whose sole concern seemed to be the handling of the potential problem of the uncontrollable lower classes, who had their own brand of "terrorism" and were "always so ready to react at the dictates of the representatives of democratic theories." Statements such as these by Wagner demonstrate that the Dresden clubs excluded the most radical components of the local society, and that his own thinking on the subject was not so far removed from that of Rethel. Nevertheless, Wagner's perception of the necessary link between revolution and positive social change relativizes Rethel's position as backward even in this moderate milieu.

Wagner recalls being swept along by the crowd toward the Rathaus in the Old Market Place, pushing into the rooms of the town council. That section of the liberals who had hoped for a peaceable understanding with the Saxon king lost hope with the news that the king and his entire court, acting on the advice of von Beust, had fled the palace and had traveled down the Elbe to the fortress of Königstein. The Stadtrat (town council) now summoned those members of the Saxon chamber still in Dresden to set up some kind of provisional government. But it was soon learned that, in accordance with a prior agreement, the Prussian troops were advancing to occupy Dresden. There was now widespread support for defense of the town against the incursion of foreign soldiers. Wagner ordered the printer of Röckel's *Volksblätter* to make

posters directed to the Saxon battalions in Dresden with the headline: "Are You with Us Against Foreign Troops?" Even Gottfried Semper used his architectural skills for the cause, designing a supposedly impregnable barricade. Although there were artisans, proletarians, and peasants who participated in the Dresden uprising, it was led primarily by the militant artisanal and intellectual petty bourgeoisie in support of constitutionalism. They were clearly no match for the disciplined troops of the kings now back in the saddle.

There was a subtle difference between the thought of Rethel and Wagner. Wagner espoused the Center Left's concept of a democratic monarchy, that is, some form of popular sovereignty, while Rethel placed his hope in an emperor with a conservative parliament elected by a restricted franchise. Wagner ultimately supported insurrection when no other recourse was possible, while Rethel found this plan intolerable until it was too late. Clearly all diplomatic processes were exhausted before the May uprisings in Dresden, Düsseldorf, Elberfeld, Karlsruhe, and elsewhere took place. Carl Schurz, the "forty-eighter" who made good in the United States, clarifies the nature of the political situation for us in his memoirs:

The attitude of the king of Prussia, as well as the kings of Bavaria, Hanover, and Saxony, placed before the German people the clear alternative either to abandon, at least for the time being, all endeavors for German unity and political freedom, or to strive for the realization of these objects by means which are termed by governments "revolutionary."<sup>24</sup>

And this classic liberal concluded that the lamentable history of Germany during the subsequent period "demonstrated that those who looked at the situation in the year 1849 in the light of this alternative were entirely right." Although it had become evident early on to left-wing radicals that the moderates of the Frankfurt Parliament were destroying the revolution with their policies and their anxious concern for legality, the constitutional liberals came to this realization only after neutralizing the Left and playing into the hands of the Right.

Naturally, this is hindsight and cannot be used to inculcate Rethel. But what I have been trying to show is that various choices and points of view existed in the period 1848–49 and that Rethel's position was preeminently conservative at the moment he produced his broadsheets.<sup>25</sup> He condemned bourgeois liberal reformists as well as all shades of the republican Left, placing himself in the conservative camp. Here again he reflected the outlook of the moderates of the Right Center of the Frankfurt Parliament, who entered into an alliance with the conservatives against their common enemy on the Left. This may be more clearly glimpsed by looking more closely at the *Auch ein Todtentanz* cycle in the light of its subversion of republican ideology.

Throughout the texts of the series is the repeated use of the "Red Republic" and its sanguinary associative metaphors as the embodiment of all evil. "Red" and "Red Republic" were popular catchwords for reactionaries and conservatives everywhere in Europe who stressed them relentlessly. After the suppression of the workers' insurrection in Paris in June 1848, the terms became even more charged with sinister connotations for the Right. But red was the color of the workers for better or for worse, and had legitimate representation in all the parliaments established in 1848. The workers' radical-democratic party was not a lunatic or anarchic fringe, but a party with legitimate representation. Wagner could note that after the bloody suppression of the insurrection in Vienna of October 1848 he and his peers spoke of the curse of the "Red Monarchy" in opposition to the "Red Republic." The Viennese government executed Robert Blum—leader of the Left in the Frankfurt National Assembly—for his participation in the uprising, the most popular of the radical democratic minority in the Frankfurt Parliament. Although there was no possibility of the Frankfurt Parliament voting a republic, Blum's presence at that assembly insured the legitimacy and hearing of republican ideals. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of its demands for a united German republic, national workshops, and the nationalization of the transportation system, the seventeen-point platform of Marx and Engels written shortly after the Berlin insurrection coincided to a large degree with the program of the anti-feudal liberal constitutional monarchists of the Center Left. Both groups took their chances with a generous electoral law and eligibility requirements for holding office. As always, the out-and-out revolutionaries were a tiny minority at the National Assembly, but their mere existence (which turned into a pivotal role as the Assembly became polarized) was enough to threaten the conservatives. One aristocrat could write in April 1848 that one day the German nation "will marvel that a small but active handful of Republicans and Communists have succeeded in ruining Germany."<sup>26</sup> Ironically, most of the Left came from the Rhineland, where Rethel was born, and from Saxony, where he was living at the time he produced his cycle of woodcuts. Blum, like Rethel, was a native of Cologne, but represented Leipzig, the center of the book trade where Rethel published his cycle. Arnold Ruge, a writer and associate of Marx from the Rhineland, was an out-and-out revolutionary, and the radical lawyer from Düsseldorf, Hugo Wesendonck, also represented the extreme Left in the National Assembly at Frankfurt. The Right was not represented at all in Saxony, with eighty-seven percent of Saxony's representation participating in the left caucuses as opposed to the national average of twenty-four percent.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Rethel's politics while in Dresden were by no means the norm.

Rethel's woodcuts suggest that workers had little to do with revolution, that free from outside interference they would maintain their stable position in the social hierarchy. They

<sup>24</sup> C. Schurz, *Reminiscences*, 2 vols., New York, 1906–07, I, 185.

<sup>25</sup> One moderate "forty-eighter" close to the events could state unequivocally: "There was in the general insurrection of the citizens of Dresden and Leipzig no socialistic element, and the leaders were men of acknowledged worth and position." See E. Oswald, *Reminiscences of a Busy Life*, London, 1911, 133.

<sup>26</sup> F. Curtius, ed., *Memoirs of Prince Chlodwig of Hohenlöhe-Schillingsfürst*, 2 vols., New York, 1906, I, 43.

<sup>27</sup> F. Eyck, *The Frankfurt Parliament 1848–1849*, London, 1968, 136, 201–202.

were victims of diabolical forces intent on disrupting the harmonious links with the past. This followed the aristocratic line that the uprisings were simply inflated riots orchestrated by foreign agitators, by Frenchmen, Poles, and Jews.<sup>28</sup> But even the moderates calling themselves "liberals" opposed almost unqualified manhood suffrage and argued for a more restricted franchise. Their committee report submitted to the assembly at Frankfurt read:

No civic order, whatever its nature, monarchical or republican, will be able to survive or achieve any degree of stability if the right of decision in all political questions is placed in the hands of the great mass, which only too often allows itself to be steered without a will of its own, and which capriciously, day after day, follows now one leader, now another.<sup>29</sup>

Like Rethel, they idealized *Das Volk* as a happy lot while at the same time reading them out of the political structure. Yet this calculated "misreading" of reality in 1848–49 was belied by the statistics of the street fighting. Among the 303 fatalities of the Berlin insurrection on 18 March eighty percent were journeymen, artisan-tradesmen, apprentices, skilled and unskilled workers—all fighting for their economic survival.<sup>30</sup> As Rudolf Virchow, a young physician with a social conscience, wrote home to his father on 1 May: "You are right when you maintain that it was essentially the workers who decided the revolution, although I believe that you in the provinces do not realize fully that this revolution is not simply political but fundamentally social."<sup>31</sup> Clearly, these groups refused to remain "invisible" in the niche assigned them by Rethel and his fellow conservatives.

Similarly, the symbols and slogans of the republican Left were determined not by the intellectuals but by the condition of the German workers. As in Paris, the red flag was associated with the social democrats and the demand for a republic. It was in Cologne that the first outbreak of revolution on Prussian soil occurred. A growing tension among the working classes induced the Cologne municipal council to forestall action on 3 March by entrusting the merchant Ludwig Camphausen with a petition to Friedrich Wilhelm IV calling for the usual liberal concessions: a United Diet for Prussia based on an extended franchise, abolition of censorship, and a federal constitution for Germany. The council's meeting was interrupted, however, by a crowd of workers headed by the Jewish physician Andreas Gottschalk and two former lieutenants in the Prussian army, Friedrich Anneke and August von Willich. The workers forced their way in with a petition calling for universal suffrage, complete freedom of the press, speech, and association, an end to the standing army and the empowering of a civic guard, free education for all, and, finally, protection for labor against the vagaries of the marketplace, and a guaranteed standard of living. The

action of the Cologne workers was regarded at the time as a "movement of Communists," which meant then that the leaders were not merely liberals or even democrats but claimed to speak for the working classes. As it is today, the word "communist" could be extended to stigmatize opponents of every stamp, as in the case of the Austrian general Windischgratz, who referred to his brother-in-law, then prime minister of the Austrian Empire, as a "communist" because he refused to restore the privileges of the landowning aristocracy.<sup>32</sup> Thus by the time Rethel employed the term it had become the conservatives' strategic epithet for every type of reformist action from the liberal-left side of the political spectrum.

The rising in Frankfurt of 18 September over the Schleswig-Holstein affair, a strictly national issue and a test of the Frankfurt Parliament's strength of will, was blamed on the democrats and the "Red Republic," as proclaimed on street placards. Speakers in the assembly soon began to attack workers openly. Moritz Mohl, the liberal representative from Stuttgart, painted a sordid picture of the French workers' uprising in June when those who refused work "raised the red flag and wanted to murder those people who work."<sup>33</sup>

It was generally accepted that just as the French Revolution in February 1848 provoked revolutionary action throughout the continent, so the June repression represented the establishment's attempt to regain the upper hand. The June Days were surely in Rethel's mind when he executed his series of woodcuts. They were the model of everything he feared. We may imagine his shock on reading Marx's celebrated epilogue, "The June Revolution," published in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on 29 June. Marx interpreted the defeat as a victory, as a demonstration of modern class conflict, and as the forerunner of even bigger battles to come. As he wrote: "With the splitting of the French nation into two parts, the nation of property owners and the nation of the worker . . . the tricolor republic now would fly only *one color*, the color of the defeated, the color of *blood*. It has become the *Red Republic*."<sup>34</sup>

Whereas Marx understood the event as positive in long-range terms, Rethel wished to twist this type of heroic interpretation to give it a subversive connotation in his woodcuts. In a letter to Reinick dated 22 April 1849, he complained that the poet wrote of beer and wine in the tavern scene but that he wished to emphasize "the bad liquor [Fusel], the Schnapps, which is a more appropriate sign of Anarchy."<sup>35</sup> Here again the artist reveals his essentially conservative bias. Consider, for example, Wagner's article for the *Volksblätter* of 8 April 1849 entitled "Die Revolution." Wagner, it may be recalled, shared many of Rethel's opinions, but harbored a more benign attitude toward the republican idea. Wagner personifies Revolution as in the Republican allegories popular in France in 1848, seeing "the sublime goddess . . . rushing and roaring on the wings of the

<sup>28</sup> Hamerow, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in T.S. Hamerow, "The Elections to the Frankfurt Parliament," *Journal of Modern History*, xxxiii, 1961, 18.

<sup>30</sup> See R. Hoppe and J. Kuczynski, "Eine Berufs bzw. auch Klassen- und Schichtenanalyse der Märzgefallenen 1848 in Berlin," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, iv, 1964, 200–276.

<sup>31</sup> Hamerow, 102.

<sup>32</sup> P.H. Noyes, *Organization and Revolution: Working-Class Associations in the German Revolutions of 1848–1849*, Princeton, N.J., 1966, 42, 62, 64.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>34</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Revolution of 1848–1849; Articles from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, New York, 1972, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ponten, 1922, 116–117, letter of 22 Apr. 1849.



storm, her august head rayed around with lightnings, a sword in her right hand, a torch in her left,—ever-rejuvenating mother of mankind.” As she descends the princes quake, as do all the conniving ministers and diplomats, the effete courtiers, the corrupt financiers, and all the other frauds and fools who obstruct the progress of *Das Volk*, the embodiment of all the natural virtues. She sends the people her greeting and her blessing, in terms that would have raised Rethel’s hair. Wagner writes:

I am the ever-regenerating, ever-creating Life; where I am not is death [wo ich nicht bin, da ist der Tod]. I am the dream, the balm, the hope of all who suffer. . . . I come to you to break all the fetters that oppress you, to redeem you from the embrace of Death [der Umarmung des Todes] and to pour young life into your veins. . . . From its roots upwards I will destroy the order of things under which you live, for it has sprung from sin, its flower is misery and its fruit is crime; but the harvest is ripe and I am the reaper [Schnitter]; I will destroy every illusion that has power over men. I will destroy the domination of one over many, of the dead over the living, of matter over spirit; I will break down the power of the mighty, of law, of property, . . . I will destroy this order of things, that divides what should be one mankind into hostile nations, into powerful and weak, into privileged and outlawed, into rich and poor. . . . I will destroy this order of things, that cuts enjoyment off from labor, makes labor a burden and enjoyment a vice, makes one man wretched through want, another through superfluity. . . . Down to its very memory I will destroy every trace of this insane order of things, compact of force, hypocrisy, want, sorrow, suffering, tears, trickery and crime. . . . So up, you peoples of the earth. Up, you mourners, you oppressed, you poor. . . . Up, follow my steps in all your multitude and variety, for no distinction can I make among those who follow me. Two peoples only are there henceforth: the one that follows me, the other that opposes me. The one I lead to happiness, the other I tread on, crushing it as I go, for I am the Revolution. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Here surely is the precise category of radical text to which Rethel responded with his cycle of woodcuts; not only its specific content but its rhetorical, sermonizing flavor are echoed, only now in mirror-reverse imagery that mocks Wagner’s statement and subverts its intent. Whereas the Revolution states, “where I am not, there is death,” Rethel states the opposite and replaces the figure of Revolution with that of its negative counterpart. His prologue reminds the reader that more than one person has come forth to

proclaim himself as a new savior, speaking of power, of prosperity that awaits the people. “You believe him because his language pleases you; but see what it is really all about.” Rethel makes Revolution only a disguise for Death, who then employs the same rhetoric to lead the people to their destruction. But if Wagner’s article was written in the name of a perfectly legal and reputable association, Rethel’s project of the following month spoke in behalf of reaction and attested to the great gulf then separating Center Left from Center Right.

Wagner’s article appeared in the *Volksblätter*, a popular title for the left-leaning newspapers that burgeoned after March 1848 and that ultimately descend from the broadsheets of the late medieval period.<sup>37</sup> Rethel’s *Blätter*, with their simple designs and verses, constitute his version of the broadsheets, another attempt to reappropriate the popular forms used so successfully by the Left for the opposite intention. The year 1848 gave rise to a great outburst of pictorial satire in Germany, much of it by liberal cartoonists who ended up executing right-wing caricatures to attack the claims of radicalism.<sup>38</sup> Rethel set out to create the appearance of a modern political cartoon, but using the popular medium to present a morality play closer in spirit to the late medieval allegories that served the Church and State.

Popular poetry and song were also exploited by the Left in this period, a fact alluded to in Rethel’s first plate. Perhaps the most popular political poet and songwriter of the time was Ferdinand Freiligrath, one of the first German poets to address the working class and who collaborated with Marx and Engels on the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.<sup>39</sup> Although he had written several social and political poems before 1848, the events of that year inspired such important works as “Im Hochland fiel der erste Schuss,” “Die Republik,” and “Schwarz-Rot-Gold.” But his most stirring work, written in Düsseldorf in July 1848, was “Die Toten an die Lebenden [The Dead to the Living],” an appeal from the victims of March to their living fellow-fighters to keep their memory alive and not to betray the ideals for which they gave their lives.<sup>40</sup> It is a slashing attack on the reaction and a passionate call to final and decisive revolution under the “red flag . . . waving high over the barricades.” The concept and imagery of the poem may have challenged Rethel to meet his adversaries on their own terms. In the case of *Auch ein Todtentanz*, the fallen on the barricades were victims of a monstrous deceit perpetrated by Death himself and were finally bereft of all idealism. The appeal of Death “to the living” in Rethel is the sirens’ call to destruction rather than the stirring call to the cause of proletarian world revolution.

Rethel’s mean inversion of Freiligrath’s thematics corre-

<sup>36</sup> R. Wagner, “Die Revolution,” in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 5th ed., 12 vols., Leipzig, 1911, xii, 243–249. I have relied heavily on Newman’s translation, but compared it carefully with the original text and made slight changes. See Newman (as in n. 23), 54–55. For a discussion of the wider European—and specifically German—response to the image of the French republic, see A. Boime, “The 1848 Contest for the Symbolic Figure of the Republic as a Vent for Domestic and Foreign Reaction,” *Album Amicorum Kenneth C. Lindsay*, Binghamton, N.Y., 1990, 277–281.

<sup>37</sup> Prior to the revolution there existed a “folksy” type of paper known generically as the *Volksblatt*, roughly akin to community papers today

like the *Pico Post* in Los Angeles. Thus the Leftists succeeded in politicizing the concept in step with the heightening political awareness. For the broadsheet tradition, see K. Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation*, Chicago and London, 1989, 19–34.

<sup>38</sup> W.A. Coupe, “The German Cartoon and the Revolution of 1848,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, ix, 2, Jan. 1967, 159.

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion (somewhat marred by Cold War mongering) by F. Stern, “Remembering the Uprising,” *New York Review of Books*, 3 Dec. 1987.

<sup>40</sup> *Freiligraths Werke in einem Band*, ed. W. Ilberg, Berlin and Weimar, 1976, 128–132.

sponds to the frustration derived, I think, from the conflict between actual social conditions and his ideological position based on the traditional assumptions of his particular class. In turn, scholarly analysis (including my own) of Rethel's series is unmistakably directed by the class assumptions and ideological predisposition of the various authors as they encounter their own social conditions. A case in point is that of Peter Paret's recent writings on Rethel, which present a contrary view to what has been expressed here.<sup>41</sup> Paret attempts to mitigate the onus of reaction that clings to the artist's series. He even describes Rethel as a "liberal," although he readily concedes that the artist was no republican and remained uninterested in the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." Paret attempts to reconcile the "conservative tone of *Another Dance of Death* and Rethel's liberalism" by explaining: "His woodcuts do not condemn all revolutions, merely populist movements of the lower classes whom a clever agitator can rouse to suicidal attacks on law and order."<sup>42</sup>

What Paret accepts as an entirely appropriate stand has to be understood in the context of 1848 and not 1933. The demands of the workers and students for a more equitable social system were more threatening to the privileged classes than their potential for violence. It was fear of losing power that impelled the use of drastic military solutions to peaceful gatherings. In 1848 the movements for reform in the German territories began as models of decorum, and only after having been assaulted by the troops or the citizens' militia did crowds get unruly. Only after every legal channel for redress of grievances had been exhausted, and only following the revelation that promises of reform had been a delaying tactic pending the regrouping of the forces of reaction, did uprisings recur after the Frankfurt Parliament assembled. As Rethel himself admitted, his fears of the Left had been groundless, and in fact he had been duped by the demagoguery and lies of the Right. He learned to his despair that the threat of left-wing extremism was less a menace than the immediate right-wing reaction.

Although Paret recognizes that Rethel's message profoundly appealed to conservatives and disillusioned liberals, he is at pains to detach Rethel, the man, from the reception of his product. This is what leads him to the contradiction that he tries to resolve by suggesting that the woodcuts do not condemn revolution in general<sup>43</sup> but only "populist movements of the lower classes." Hence Paret accepts Rethel's participation in the "bourgeois revolution" that had as one of its aims the desire to arrest and to control the movement of the laboring classes. This helps clarify my argument and the signification of the term "liberal" in 1848–49. At the very least, it would have stood for representative institutions and tolerance for the rights of every

member of the community. Yet Paret recognizes that Rethel rejected "the leveling of all class distinctions" and supported "constitutional reform under a hereditary ruler or rulers, and an increase in participation in public affairs by those who had an economic and cultural stake in the country."

Rethel's position supported a hierarchical social system that suppressed the collective action of the poor and unprivileged, a position coinciding with that of the Center Right of the Frankfurt Parliament. This supposedly "representative" body started life with a majority of members employed by state or local governments, while peasants, laborers, and artisans were conspicuously absent. Within this assembly the Right and Right Center parties dominated numerically, although they were a few votes short of a majority. The initiative for the hereditary rulership sprang from this sector of the Frankfurt Parliament, and formed the basis of the *Erbkaiserpartei* (hereditary emperor party). The idea of bestowing the imperial hereditary crown of united Germany on Friedrich Wilhelm IV also came from the Center Right, although the Prussian king had dissolved the Berlin National Assembly by force in November 1848. The Center Right of moderate liberals dominated the constitutional committee that drafted the Constitution, and it dedicated itself to a strong constitutional monarch with a conservative parliament elected by restricted franchise. Although the Constitution called for manhood suffrage, as designed by the Center Right it excluded large segments of the working classes, such as factory employees, journeymen, domestic servants, and day laborers—those groups absent from the Frankfurt Parliament and from representation in Rethel's woodcuts, but those who constituted the majority of the revolutionaries of March.<sup>44</sup> Only as the moderates became increasingly split between the Austrophile *grossdeutsch* faction and the *kleindeutsch* supporters of Prussia did the Left manage to mediate and push through manhood suffrage. The Austrians deliberately backed the extended franchise to make the constitution unpalatable to Friedrich Wilhelm IV, while the Left yielded its republican hopes by supporting the *kleindeutsch* drive to win the imperial crown for the Prussian king in exchange for a generous electoral law. But as late as January 1849 the "liberals" of the Frankfurt Parliament were still arguing against the enfranchisement of factory workers, journeymen, and servants.<sup>45</sup> This, then, is the historical profile of Paret's liberal of 1848.

In fact, it was the Left and Center Left that approximated more closely our modern notion of "liberal." It was the leftists at the Frankfurt Parliament like Bernhard Eisenstuck who advocated government intervention on behalf of the homeless, who took the lead in the proposal to abolish capital punishment, and who demanded civil rights for Jews. It was the moderate liberals of the Center Right who joined the conservatives in opposition to the forces of movement in 1848–49 and all attempts at a second revolution—bourgeois, populist, or whatever. It was the moderate liberals who sided with the conservatives on the issue of the Berlin National Assembly, and in the end it was they who permitted

<sup>41</sup> Paret, 79–130. This is a reworking of the article referred to in note 12 above.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>43</sup> Except for citing Rethel's adolescent activities in the early 1830s, Paret gives no evidence of Rethel's support of revolutionary action in 1848. Indeed, the one visual document by Rethel we have of the early phase is a particularly nasty depiction of fighters on the barricades carrying a wounded comrade. See Ponten, 1922, 131.

<sup>44</sup> Eyck (as in n. 27), 147, 148, 174, 190, 202, 333, 336–339, 366, 368, 373, 375, 382, 390, 392.

<sup>45</sup> Hamerow, 131.

the reaction to recover their hierarchy and crush those beneath them in the social scale.

Rethel's cycle was counterrevolutionary in both form and content. Frustrated by the limitations of the allegorical mode and "the masterpiece", the artist found a way of venting his anger at working-class rebels in a visual medium based on a medieval format. He had discovered that the way to drive the dagger into his enemies was to borrow their own weapons. He partially succeeded because of the multivalency and fluidity of symbols, but insofar as he effectively retained the older representational structure in powerful tension with modern revolutionary forms, he succeeded, I think, in creating an innovative counter-revolutionary work. Yet Rethel's inspiration ultimately derives from the workers' enthusiastic engagement, while his images utilized the symbolic trappings of the Left such as the barricade and the red flag. In the end, his counterrevolutionary message confirmed the reality of the revolution, insofar as he had to rely on leftist enthusiasm and symbolism to embody it. Analogously, the political reaction borrowed the rhetoric and reformist ideas of the Left to separate itself from the peasantry and handicraft workers. Thus what was "new" and "radical" in their

presentation was derived from the very forces they tried to oppose.

*Albert Boime is currently working on a multi-volumed series entitled The Social History of Modern Art, the second volume of which Art in an Age of Bonapartism, has recently appeared. This article is based on the research for the third volume, Art in an Age of Counterrevolution [Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles, Calif. 90024].*

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