

ON SELF-ALTERATION

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To think is not to get out of the cave; it is not to replace the uncertainty of shadows by the clear-cut outlines of things themselves, the flame's flickering glow by the light of the true sun. To think is to enter the Labyrinth; more exactly, it is to make be and appear a Labyrinth when we might have stayed "lying among the flowers, facing the sky." It is to lose oneself amidst galleries which exist only because we never tire of digging them; to turn round and round at the end of a cul-de-sac whose entrance has been shut off behind us—until, inexplicably, this spinning round opens up in the surrounding walls cracks which offer passage.

Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1978)

I am militating politically for the impossible, which doesn't mean I am a utopian. Rather what I want does not yet exist, as the only possibility of a future.

Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi* (1992)

The terrain suggested by a *co-incident* reading of the two quotations above configures the path of this essay's primary orientation. Examining these two writers together is dictated by this path, not by some sort of preconfigured or presently contrived affinity.

Castoriadis' rumination disengages thinking from all Platonic derivatives that map the journey to Enlightenment, which would pertain to a whole range of transcendentalist aspirations, revelations, epiphanies, but also intensions of perfectibility, including any pretensions to arrive at a clearing (*Lichtung*). He sees thinking as a peculiar mode of architecture in which the instrumental is always secondary to the creative. That this architecture is labyrinthine means that it is ultimately without end, despite its many, its ubiquitous, dead-ends. It is without end because, on its own terms, it is interminable and boundless, because the limits that emerge on every turn are of the thinker's own making. Castoriadis' mode is to leave behind the elegy-inducing Rilke for the enigma-provoking Kafka, recognizing in the latter's vein that the labyrinthine galleries of one's burrow are one's thoughts in-the-making, with yet an important deviation: not as ideal projections of self-making (as for Kafka's paranoid architectural creature) but as wondrous openings of self-othering. In this respect, thought becomes quintessentially *poietic*, that is to say, creative/destructive: a (self-)altering force that sometimes produces cul-de-sacs and other times opens windows onto chaos. Indeed, Castoriadis' description of how a dead-end becomes a window onto chaos is one of the most dramatic encapsulations of his entire way of thinking. To think is thus to enact an alterity both toward yourself and toward the world. It is not to derive or emerge from an alterity, and surely not to desire alterity as *telos*—the labyrinth, a space resplendent with otherness, is always one's own.

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In turn, Irigaray's personal account clarifies that the utopian and the impossible are hardly identical. This is not because the utopian may also be in fact possible, but because desiring the impossible is an entirely real and actual way to commit oneself to what is possible in the future. Her emphasis on "what does not yet exist" does not entail investment in a predetermined or providential element that will come to be in the future—some sort of future nascent in the present. Rather, "what does not yet exist" is configured as a permanent condition of alterity within present existence, a kind of unknown variable in the equation of what may come to be possible in the future, an equation that obviously carries no mathematical consistency but remains permeable to the ever unpredictable contingencies of human action. This condition, therefore, knows no time—as X factor, it is *achronos*—but it lies, nonetheless, in place across the entire range of history's temporalities, perhaps as an already inscribed heterotopia. It is a condition open to the indefinite possibility of something whose "nonexistence" as "the only possibility of a future" is a presently existing condition, insofar as without this X the equation (present or future) cannot be constituted.

The coveted object in both quotations, therefore, is some measure of the impossible, of what indeed appears impossible because the horizon of possibility in the perception is rendered inadequate by the reigning preconception. The impetus here is to imagine that human beings are characterized precisely by their daring to make the impossible happen, which has nothing to do with making miracles but it does have to do with encountering and acting in the world with a sense of wonder. Enquiring what animates and encapsulates this daring for the impossible will lead us to the fact that *human-being*, as a living condition, is immanently differential, which to say that alterity is intrinsic to it.

The way of this inquiry is to contemplate an admittedly impossible concept: *self-alteration*. Strictly speaking, self-alteration signifies a process by which alterity is internally produced, dissolving the very thing that enables it, the very thing whose existence derives meaning from being altered, *from othering itself*. In terms of inherited thought, this is indeed an impossible concept—at least, within the conceptual framework that identifies alterity to be external, a framework, I might add, that is essential to any semantics (and, of course, politics) of identity. Such framework cannot but vehemently defend, by contradistinction, the bona fide existence of what can thus be called without hesitation "internality," even if, in a gesture of cognitive magnanimity, it may accept a fragmented, fissured, indeterminate, or even boundless internality. But internality thus conceived, however "open-ended" it claims to be, cannot enact self-alteration because alterity will always remain external to it, precisely so as to secure its meaning. Having said that, let us also concede that this framework of an internally/externally conceived distinction of identity and difference gives meaning to the language I am using at this very moment. It is, inevitably, the framework that enables us to build communicative avenues by positing totalities and identities that we consider recognizable even if we might significantly disagree over their content. I understand that, in this framework, self-alteration is an impossible concept, but I have a hunch that it is nonetheless possible, that it *takes place* in the only way anything can take place in the world—in history, *as* history. At the limit, the conceptual inquiry I am suggesting, labyrinthine though it is in its own turn, configures its groundwork in the world of human action, not in the universe of concepts and propositions.

1. CREATION/DESTRUCTION

Self-alteration is a central concept in Castoriadis' thought, and we could say that he understands it as essential to all living being—perhaps even go so far as to say that it is tantamount to *physis* itself. In this first order, the concept owes a lot to Aristotle's notion of movement as change—in Greek *alloiosis*. But though Aristotle may be Castoriadis' favorite philosopher, Castoriadis is by no means an Aristotelian; for him there is no *physis* without *nomos*. This comes into play particularly when we discuss the world of the human being—the most peculiar of all living beings. In this register, one other word for alteration in the Greek, which we find in Castoriadis' Greek texts, is more provoking: *heterōsis*. It is this meaning that I use as an anchor, in order to examine self-alteration, in the world of the human being, both as a psycho-ontological and as a social-historical dimension.

A basic kind of starting point would be to consider self-alteration in the context of Castoriadis' persistent view of the living being as self-creative and of the human being, specifically, as a social-historical being that exists via its interminable and indeed unlimited capacity for the creation/destruction of form in the world. Hence, self-alteration is articulated in direct connection with self-creation as an ontological standpoint that Castoriadis understands as *vis formandi*, a kind of morphopoietic force or life-power that reconfigures the world by creating radically new forms or indeed, more precisely, radically other forms. It is important to understand the *co-incident* of this notion of self-creative being with a destructive, catastrophic, element. Castoriadis is not consistent on this matter, but one often sees in his writings the formulation *creation/destruction*. Certainly, in his analysis of tragedy (*Antigone* especially) and in much of his discussion of pre-Socratic cosmology, where the emphasis is on an ever-present dyadic cosmological imaginary (*apeiron/peras, chaos/kosmos*), no notion of creation can be configured without a simultaneously enacted destruction.¹ The crucial element here is the simultaneity of two distinct forces. We're certainly not speaking of some monstrous concept, like the neo-liberal notion of "creative destruction" or some such thing. Nor are we speaking of any sort of simple dialectical relation, despite the inherent antagonism of such originary dyadic frameworks; in Castoriadis at least, the matter of dialectics as preferable epistemological mode is ambiguous at best.

This simultaneous or *co-incident* double figure elucidates one of the most controversial of Castoriadis' philosophical figures, the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. Given the texts, we don't really need to wonder why Castoriadis insists on this figure. His entire anthropo-ontological framework is based on the idea that what distinguishes the human animal specifically is the capacity to create form (*eidōs*) that is entirely unprecedented, previously inconceivable, and indeed nonexistent in any sense prior to the moment and fact of its creation. He insists time and again that creation does not entail the production of difference but the emergence of otherness. This capacity for the wholly new, wholly other, is what distinguishes the radical imagination. The *ex nihilo* is there to accentuate the fact that we are not talking about reformulation, or infinite variation, or creative assembly or rearrangement of already existing forms. His example that the invention of the wheel is a more radical and splendid creation in the universe than a new galaxy is well known, for every new galaxy emerging in space is ultimately but another instance of the galaxy form, whereas the wheel is entirely unprecedented.² The often used idiomatic injunction in English encapsulates what Castoriadis has in mind: "you're reinventing the wheel!" means you're not being creative, you're not using your imagination, you are wasting your effort in reproducing what exists (however we are to consider the merits or inevitabilities of this kind of effort).

But Castoriadis—especially in late years and in order to defend himself from likely misunderstandings—insisted on the clarification that *ex nihilo* did not mean *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. Unprecedented radical creation *out of nothing* does not mean with(in) nothing, *in a vacuum*. On the contrary, what makes it radical is precisely that it takes place in history, *as* history—that indeed it makes history anew. There is no way such creation can register as history anew without destroying, in some form or other, what exists in place, whether we conceive this as simply what resists the new or merely what resides there unwitting of whatever will emerge to displace it or efface it. New social-imaginary creations do contribute to the vanishing of social-imaginary institutions already there. That's why we don't have Pharaonic priests, Spartan warriors, or Knights of the Round Table running around in the streets of New York or the suburbs of Paris. That's why the North American Indians, who now exist in the impoverished universe of the reservation, cannot possibly imagine themselves as free roaming and proud warriors, and even if they could—beyond the patented clichés of Hollywood Westerns—they certainly can't be it.

In retrospect, it is possible to construct a description—to write a history—of how and what elements and processes characterize the creation of new social-historical being. A common example in Castoriadis, discussed at various junctures in his work and arguably culminating in the years that made up the seminars of *Ce qui fait la Grèce* (1982-83) is how the specifics of the Cleisthenes reforms that encapsulate the creation of Athenian democracy as new social-historical being are 'traceable'—if that's the proper word—in the complexities of the social-imaginary institution of the Greek *polis*, which Castoriadis duly points all the way back to the earliest Greek textual documentation—Homer, Hesiod, Anaximander, Sappho. In other words, Castoriadis' theory of

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creation *ex nihilo* is not entirely unrelated to various theories of discontinuity in history. I cannot pursue here this line of comparison, but it's a worthwhile path of reflection to consider the line, otherwise alien to Castoriadis, that extends (in the French tradition at least) from Bachelard to Foucault. If we don't adhere dogmatically to the notion of the "epistemological rupture" characteristic of this line—in the same way that we would not heed the accusations against Castoriadis that creation *ex nihilo* ushers some sort of theology in the back door—then we might arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the notion.³

But there is also another dimension to this issue that I don't think has been adequately attended to. In his classic essay "Fait et à faire" (1989), Castoriadis speaks of what grants validity to creation—its encounter with the world. I quote extensively:

Newton certainly did not 'discover', he invented and created the theory of gravitation; but it happens (and this is the why we are still talking about it) that this creation *encounters* [*rencontre*] in a fruitful way *what is*, in one of its strata.

We create knowledge. In certain cases (mathematics) we also create, thereby, the *outside time*. In other cases, (mathematical physics) we create under the constraint of encounter; it is this encounter that validates or invalidates our creations.

And later on:

To the extent that we can effectively comprehend something about a foreign society, or say something valid about it, we proceed to a re-creation of significations, which encounter the originary creation... A being without the re-creative capacity of the imagination will understand nothing about it.⁴

Let us focus for a moment on two elements: "the constraint of encounter" and "the re-creative capacity of the imagination". The first is precisely to emphasize that *ex nihilo* does not mean *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. Not only is radical creation out of nothing always enacted in the world, but it is enacted as and constrained by an encounter. The "nothing" out of which radical creation emerges exists, in the most precise sense, *in* the world; it is not, in other words, some sort of transcendental nowhere. And though we should not at all compromise the notion—we indeed mean out of nothing; we mean, in the ancient Greek sense, to note the passage "out of non-being into being"—we have to allow ourselves the paradoxical capacity to imagine both that this nothing, this non-being, is worldly and that, instantly upon coming to be something, this newly created being registers its worldliness by an unavoidable encounter with what exists, whether in the dimension of logic and calculation (what Castoriadis calls, by means of a neologism, *ensidic*—ensemblist-identitary) or beyond it, in the *poietic* dimension as such.

Second, it is not enough to stick to a kind of straight surging forth of the new, of the other. We need also to put our imagination to work on re-creating the entire domain of the surging forth, the full dimensions of emergence of the new. This too can be understood in different ways. One recognizable instance of imaginative re-creation is the hermeneutical act itself (as Suzi Adams has pointed out acutely). This is at play not only in philosophical work but surely in historical work. The best historians are the ones who can re-creatively imagine the horizon of emergence of the historical shift they are investigating. But in both cases (philosophical and historical), as I've argued in *Does Literature Think?*, one engages in the work of *poiein*—of imagining form in the case of radical creation; of shaping matter into form (which is to say: of signifying form) in the case of imaginative re-creation. The *poietic* dimension in society's imaginary institution pertains indeed to society's creative/destructive capacity, and is essential both to the radical interrogation of (self-)instituted laws/forms that enables in turn the radical creation of new forms—in other words, both to the question of autonomy and the question of self-alteration.

2. SUBLIMATION

This epistemological level of situating self-alteration—but also ontological, to the degree that it conceptualizes a *physis*—should serve as a certain groundwork, shifting though it is, which needs to be elucidated, however, by a psychic dimension, in order to lead us to the social-historical concerns that pertain to the *physis* of human-being as such. For Castoriadis, this is the crossroads between his psychoanalytic writing and his philosophical writing, where self-alteration becomes a key notion entwining the elaboration of a politics of sublimation, on the one hand, and the project of social autonomy, on the other.⁵

As an impossibly quick clarification, let me recount that, for Castoriadis, sublimation is not the transmutation of libidinal drive to the non-sexualized activity of the imagination, as is traditionally conceived in the wider sense of the so-called repression-hypothesis—in two ways: First, if nothing else, on account of an unquestionable human capacity for and proclivity toward non-functional sexuality that foregrounds sexuality first and foremost as a matter of the pleasure of fantasy (that is, the privilege of phantasmatic representation over simple organ pleasure). Because the pleasure of fantasy informs every aspect of human existence, it becomes difficult to contend in what sense sublimatory investment involves indeed desexualized pleasure. In other words, the primacy of phantasmatic (or representational) pleasure still occurs on the somatic or sensuous register. It's not meant to be understood as some sort of abstract spiritualization. Even ascetics experience pleasure in their asceticism, and the *jouissance* of mysticism over the ages is all too evident in a variety of expressions. What matters is the autonomization of desire, which goes hand in hand with the defunctionalization of desire—the *co-incident* is precisely what makes the human imagination independent of instinct or drive and, in this respect, 'functional' in an altogether different sense of the term.

Second: because sublimation is the necessary mode of socialization—or precisely, as Castoriadis says, of humanization—that is, the mode by which the indomitable psyche cathects its primal desire for omnipotence onto the pleasure of social community, at the expense, of course, of this omnipotence but at the gain of the 'security' of ego-constitution through the provision of meaning (with all the traumatic elements this entails). Because, however, socialization/humanization is a social-historical process and sublimatory objects are always part of the imaginary institution of society (even when they are objects of radical interrogation of society, or indeed even when they are objects of society's destruction, suicidal or genocidal), sublimation is not some sort of natural process, with consistent and immanent elements, but always involves a politics. It is precisely the politics of sublimation that makes an inquiry of this properly psychoanalytic domain be at the same time an interrogation of the political ontology of subjugation and heteronomy against which the concept of self-alteration emerges as an emancipatory force.

The problem of heteronomy in sublimation is insurmountable within a certain Freudian register, insofar as it partakes of a basic contradiction in the psychoanalytic epistemological universe, which Freud never quite theorized, perhaps because he never resolved for himself the conceptual struggle inherent in the psychoanalytic project between the phylogenetic and the social-historical nature of the human. I'm obviously referring to Freud's inability to reconcile the fact that, on the one hand, civilization must be condemned for repressing human drives in the service of domination and exploitation, while on the other hand, this same repression of drives (according to the notion of the "renunciation of instinct") must be accepted as a prerequisite for humanity's actualization of its higher potential, a prerequisite of civilization's very existence. This, in Freud, necessarily links sublimation with repression and, given his admitted lack of theoretical elaboration on the work of sublimation, becomes responsible for the dismissive treatment of sublimation at the hands of many psychoanalytic and cultural theorists. Sublimation has thus been tainted with the mark of a pathological condition, which is all the more crucial if we consider its inevitability and necessity: the implication can only be that the human animal is irrevocably pathological by nature. We can say a lot of things about the human animal's biological incapacity, but it's terribly problematic to consider it pathological; the very assumption of 'incapacity' renders impossible the very concept of the normal and thereby its critical dismantling.

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There is indeed another implication, which I cannot address here, but deserves to be mentioned: the fact that a radical indecision arises at the core of psychoanalytic theory and practice, a split between the emancipatory project of liberating repressed libidinal potential and a kind of ingrained conservatism in recognizing repression as the necessary cost for the progress of civilization. Ego-psychology, as we know, bypasses the dilemma by making a conscious decision in favor of the second ‘solution’ and subscribing directly to what we could call the domestication of the unconscious, whereby ‘liberation’ of repressed desire is to be managed by an all-powerful ‘healthy’ ego that will, for all practical purposes, replace the injunctions of the superego with its own. To what extent this entails a double repression in turn, a repression not only of unconscious potential but also of superego activity—thereby occluding the workings of authority for the subject—should be evident. I hardly mean to disavow the standard thesis that recognizes the superego as the psychic locus of heteronomy. But at this point I am not concerned with sublimation as a proto-formative process but as a practico-poietic process, and here the ego (secondarily but for me essentially) becomes key. The ego is the locus of society’s *conscious* agency, and a heteronomous ego becomes the agent of heteronomous sublimation on grand social-cultural scale. This is precisely a matter of the *politics* of sublimation and cannot be exorcised by some sort of ‘pure’ psychoanalysis.

An evocative way to consider this problem is the radical significance of Castoriadis’ reversal of Freud’s classic motto to *Wo Ich bin, soll Es auftauchen* (Where I am, It shall spring forth). That is to say, the creative/destructive capacity of the unconscious will emerge in the ego’s location in such a way as to disrupt the ego’s reliance on gaining signification solely from the social-imaginary institution present in the superego. This disruption hardly means the end of sublimation. Such an end is essentially impossible; were it to occur, it would signify the evolutionary regression of the human animal. But it does mean, potentially, the alteration of the standard ways of sublimation, as we know them in history. In a concrete sense, it also means an altered relation to history as such, meaning, as ceaseless flow of human thought and praxis.

Let us return to Castoriadis’ insistence that sublimation is tantamount to humanization. The point is that sublimation is not merely the hand of civilization upon the human (the classic repression hypothesis), but the process by which one becomes human, insofar as the monadic core of the psyche cannot possibly survive on its own as an organism, driven by its insatiable desire for singular omnipotence at all costs. Sublimation, in other words, does not enact the agency of civilization and it surely involves something more than the creation of civilization: it is an element intrinsic to the process of human existence that makes human existence possible, an *autopoietic* element. Of course, from the standpoint of the monadic core of the psyche, sublimation will always appear as—and *is* in fact—heteronomous rule. From this standpoint, sublimation does entail violent disruption of the plenitude—the closure—of proto-psychic existence and its relentless refusal of reality. At this level, heteronomous sublimation is not a problem; it is a fact. But the level of the monadic core of the psyche is hardly a sustainable standpoint from which to understand (even to view) the complications of human existence. The problem arises precisely at the moment this elemental but *partial* fact is taken for the whole.

What do I mean? Castoriadis’ insistence on the defunctionalized nature of the human psyche, even at the level of the monadic core—a point, by the way, entirely commensurate with Freud—enables us to understand that, though it is indeed the work of the social imaginary institution, sublimation is not enacted as external imposition (nor should we be tricked to think that it is a brute internalization of superego-type injunctions). What enables it to happen is the psyche’s own ability to operate and respond at the level of representation, of imagistic flux (*Vorstellung*). The psyche’s imaginary capacity exists already at the level of drives; it is not a meta-attribute, some sort of *cultured* capacity. It is already present at the moment sublimation is enacted. We might say, it enables sublimation precisely because it provides a language that can translate society’s forms into psychic terms. In this respect, though the monadic core of the psyche experiences a violation and cannot but resist, it also experiences—against itself but from within itself—an elemental pleasure, which is what ultimately allows sublimation to work. Otherwise, given the insatiable autoscopic nature of the psyche, no sublimation would have been socially effective and one can only wonder what this would mean for human history.⁶

This tempers the sublimation-as-repression theory, if not render it inadequate, because simultaneously with the experience of radical violation of plenitude there is an equally powerful experience of elemental pleasure, an immanent pleasure one would say, in the object-investment that sublimation affords. One could choose to pathologize this double condition—which is actually to say, *naturalize* it—or one could choose to view it in social-historical terms, which would entail making a political decision as to the significance and distinction, indeed the value, among the multitude of sublimatory objects in the course of human history. In this respect, the heteronomy of sublimation, simply understood, does become a problem precisely because it is not a *naturally* inevitable outcome, but is rather conditioned by the historical dimensions of social imaginary institution.

3. SUBJECTION

Already, given the terms of this rumination, a trajectory is set up to pass through the conceptual straits of alterity with the enormous body of heterological discourses that shadow it. Be that as it may, the impetus is to attain, in a certain dialectical sense, an *altered relation to alterity*, with an aspiration ultimately to counteract the allure of transcendence that has become elemental in the contemporary lexicon of the Other, to such an extent as to reproduce consistently a cognitive figure of transcendence that is itself untranscendable. At the same time, I am aware that this trajectory thereby plunges us into the chimerical waters of the Self, whose own conceptual lexicon has long been the target of the most radical tendencies in psychoanalytic and feminist theory, as well as today's insurrectionary politics.⁷ This is all the more complicated by the often irresistible association of discourses concerning the subject with discourses concerning the self, which makes conspicuously evident indeed how problematic—that is to say, how political—becomes any theory of subjectification insofar as it must involve a theory (or, in essence, a politics) of sublimation, whether acknowledged or not. In the last instance, we must restate the utterly obvious because it is so crucial: subject-formation is a political matter, as it signifies the inaugural negotiation with power—indeed, with the power of the other, or with power *as* other, but also, inevitably, with power as altering (*othering*) force. It is this latter aspect that problematizes the entire equation, raising, by its very constitution, the question of the political pure and simple: Where does the power of othering, of alteration, of transformation, reside? Wherefrom does it emerge? What is its referential frame? Its location? Its standpoint of interlocution? And finally, what is its mode and terms of articulation?

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler has made a bold intervention in response to these questions, working from the Hegelian basis of the negotiation of power in the dialectics of self-recognition but clearly exceeding it—or more precisely, altering its terms—so that the always theoretically precarious terrain of the construction of the subject can re-emerge in its full complicity with the construction of subjection. Butler's overall understanding of the forces involved in this complicitous relation is profoundly dialectical. Indeed, in a basic sense, it forges an altered relation to dialectical thinking, very much in defiance of recent critiques, which demonstrates the capacity of dialectical thinking to frame questions and responses that outmaneuver the deadlock of identitarian logic. Let us traverse the terms of her argument for a moment, with an eye to their implications as groundwork for an inquiry into self-alteration.

Butler predicates her argument on the rather controversial assertion that subject-formation is always intertwined with subjection: that is, with subordination to the power of an other, or more precisely, to power as an other entity that retains the force of its otherness even when it is (as it must be) 'internalized' in the process of the subject's emergence into being. Internalization here does not mean the ideological assumption of the terms of external power, in the classic sense of all political and psychological figures of subjugation, precisely because, Butler argues, the moment of internalization is itself a formative moment—indeed, a *transformative* moment—whereby the subject's inaugural act of existence signifies both the 'absorption' of power as otherness and the enactment of the forming capacity of this power.

In other words, there is a foundational simultaneity at work in the inaugural moment of subjectification that points both inwardly toward the psychic nucleus and yet outwardly in excess of the determinant domain of the other.⁸ This paradoxical simultaneity, whereby the other both forms the subject and yet is formed by the

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subject, plunges the entire ontological equation into uncertainty and makes signification enigmatic. Butler calls it explicitly a “tropological quandary,” mining from language itself the full range of the Greek meaning of *tropē* (both turn and manner, shift and figure): “The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon itself or even a turning *on* oneself. This figure operates as part of the explanation of how a subject is produced, and so there is no subject, strictly speaking, who makes this turn. On the contrary, the turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain.”⁹ In this respect, the very language of subject-formation turns on a figure of uncertainty, whereby all structural and temporal order (of principles, elements, forces, loci, etc.) makes for an undeconstructible enigma.

Right away then, the discourse of subjection as discourse of subject-formation can hardly be mapped as a specifically directional vector force, the force of subjugation pure and simple. As order (*taxis*) is foundationally enigmatic, no paratactic or syntactic (or even tactical, in the context of strategic) arrangement of power can be assumed. Taking this rhetorical rubric to its full extent, I would argue here the same for subordination (the *hypotactic* element) in a grammatical but also philosophical sense, something that Butler does not address as such but, nonetheless, leads us to by implication. In any case, though power does exist ‘external’ to the subject—by definition, insofar as it is recognized as a formative force—its externality is impossible to determine, precisely because, in a dialectical sense, power is itself subjected to the transformative force of the subject’s inaugural act of making this power ‘internal.’ Conversely, the subject’s inaugural position, as itself ‘external’ to power (to whose formative force it is subjected), is also impossible to determine. There is no *a priori* subject. Rather, the subject enters the domain of determination at the very moment it ‘internalizes’ power as its own, thereby transforming—*altering*—power both in terms of its location and the elements of its force. It is crucial to keep in mind here that this alteration is a moment of rupture, an interruption. Otherwise, internalization would merely signify the worst aspect of heteronomous enslavement, and the significationality in the force of alteration would be entirely lost. This is why Butler repeatedly insists on the discontinuity between “the power that initiates the subject” and “the power that is the subject’s agency” (P, 12).

The logic in the figural encounter that Butler describes resonates uncannily with Castoriadis’ own psychoanalytic account of both subject-formation and social-imaginary institution. The similarity of both registers is quite remarkable, with some important differences in language—Castoriadis does not grant such authorizing force to “power” but prefers to keep in this position the term “society”—and in this respect it deserves a study on its own. For our purposes, however, let me note the following: Whenever Castoriadis speaks of imaginary institution, he always assumes a groundless, abyssal simultaneity at the origin, a simultaneity that thus forms a consubstantial, co-determinant, co-incident origin—what he explicitly calls “the primitive circle of creation”. In his basic terms, every society is the “subject” of its imaginary institution in the sense that every society emerges from the magma of its own significations: significations which society institutes as its own at the very time it is instituted by them, since, like the subject, no society can exist a priori to a social imaginary—there is no vacuum space in history. To say that society is the subject (and conversely, that the subject is an institution of society) is neither to imply a notion of collective consciousness (or for that matter, collective unconscious) nor to assume that subjects are, simply speaking, social-historical products. Society/subject is a dialectical form that has no a priori origin and no teleological meaning. Precisely because there is no historical vacuum, the subject is always instituted as a social form insofar as it assumes the imaginary significations particular to the social-historical moment that pertains to it. At the same time, however, social-imaginary significations at any historical moment are themselves meaningless (i.e., unsignifiable) without the subject that institutes them: confers upon them relevant meaning.¹⁰

Castoriadis conceptualizes this structure in the psychoanalytic terms that pertain to subjectification, as well in the domain he calls “the radical imagination,” which enables him to speak in terms of an ontology of society, of *physis* with *nomos*. At the level of the radical imaginary, the untamable core of the psyche encounters what appears to it to be the pure alterity of societal institution in a moment that signals simultaneously the psyche’s defeat and emancipation: the inaugural moment of subject-formation. I’m reiterating that, for Castoriadis, the

monadic core of the psyche remains insubordinate to the power of societal institution, while thus providing the nuclear energy, so to speak, that powers the institution: it is, at a foundational level, the *instituting* imagination—limitless, indeterminable, unsignifiable, untamable, abyssal flux of image/affect/representation: pure *Vorstellung*. This psychological insubordination, even if consequent source of radical imagination, preserves the constitutive internal schism on which it leans—the fact that the first real stranger that rends asunder the primal corporeal undifferentiation of the psyche is the ego itself, that is, the psyche’s very own renegade ambassador to the outside world. The later psychoanalytic work of Castoriadis elucidates especially this primary production of otherness within, which animates the psyche with an elemental self-hatred that always lies in ambush even in the most extreme manifestations of primary narcissism (self-love). For Castoriadis, the radical hatred of the other, observed indicatively in racist affect, leans precisely on this outmaneuverable psychological self-hatred. What averts racist desire is, in this respect, a specific politics of sublimation that enables an encounter with otherness as difference instead of as existential threat to the self—in psychological terms, radical treason of self. Conversely, a politics of sublimation that empowers racist hatred is always *potentially* genocidal in an intrinsic sense, even if it does not always reach this extent.¹¹

Obviously, the psychic monad as such (as pure *Vorstellung*) is a nonsensical entity in any sort of simple terms of human-being. It is entirely meaningless and its survival hinges on its being endowed with meaning, with signification. Going back directly to Freud, in this respect, Castoriadis speaks of the psyche’s translation of the images/affects/representations of societal institution at the very moment of this encounter, which may be conceived as a moment inaugurally, but is obviously conducted again and again in an individual’s lifetime, insofar as subject-formation is never exhausted in a single instance but is inevitably an open-ended (re) iteration, a historical enactment. In this translation, the psyche receives the instituted significations that signify it as a subject in a given social-historical domain, in which (significations) it then invests—as it must, in order to emerge out of its autistic monadic condition—but in such a way as never to be reducible to the overall instituted signification. Were it to be so, the psyche would be terminally defeated and an unconscious would be unimaginable. This translation is therefore a *poietic* performance, a transformative act that subjects instituted signification to alteration. By the same token, subject-formation is the limitless process (indeed limited only by the certainty of mortality) by which the radical imagination of the psyche retains its capacity to make and unmake (alter) the horizon of possibility of social-imaginary institution by accepting (and acceding to) social-imaginary signification, by accepting (and acceding to) the specific social-historical content it then comes to recognize as its worldly existence.

This relation renders any idea of absolute alterity unfeasible, unsignifiable, except as a condition of perspective. While from the radical standpoint of the psyche the institution of society does indeed appear as pure alterity—as does, conversely, the psychic core appear as absolute alterity to the logic of society (despite ceaseless efforts to explain it or conjure it away, whether by religion, philosophy, or psychoanalysis)—there is no way to signify a location external to these standpoints that would determine the other’s existence. To put it in a rather clumsy way: there is no self to the other, or in another sort of language, the other is not a subject. The other is a force of alteration that enacts and is enacted by the subject—this is the position that power holds in Butler’s conception: a force that brings the subject into existence, yet is nonexistent without the subject. Thus, the crucial element to determine is not the figure of the other but the force of alteration. Butler raises a succinct question in this regard: “how is subjection to become a site of alteration?” (P, 11). The political ramifications of this way of phrasing the question should be obvious: subjection must be (re)considered not as site of enforcement of instituted power but as site of transformative power—in Castoriadis’ terms, of *instituting* power. In Butler’s words, “the act of [the subject’s] appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible” (P, 13).

In this respect, Butler’s inquiry into the complicity between subject-formation and subjection demands that we reconsider the terrain of the other in a way that opens up the possibility of subjectification as self-alteration. This requires us to re-orient ourselves theoretically from attending to the internalization of the other toward recognizing the internal force of othering which, in the broadest sense, constitutes humanity’s creative/

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destructive (*poietic*) capacity to alter the forms of its historical existence, for better or worse. The obstacle in enabling this reorientation resides in the indicative gesture of concealment that seems to occur at the subject's inaugural moment: in order for the subject to emerge as power—or, in order for the subject's power to emerge—the subject seems to conceal the formative force of power, so that, as Butler says, “agency [appears to] exceed the power by which it is enabled” (P, 15). In other words, the subject appears to enact a gesture of self-referentiality at the origin that actually occludes the autonomy of self-reflexivity to be achieved: this is the ideological content of all autopoietic figures in our post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic imaginary, whether variants of the self-made entrepreneur or variants of the autonomous genius of the Artist.

This dissimulation—or to quote Butler, “the metaleptic reversal in which the subject produced by power becomes heralded as the subject who *founds* power” (P, 16)—occurs also at the level of societal institution, except in the other direction, a point that Butler does not address. Namely, as history has shown it to be prevalent, societies tend to conceal their own instituting force, potential and actual, conferring thereby authorization of their origin and survival upon social-imaginary significations that are constructed as instances of transcendent rule: God, the father, the king, the nation, the constitution, the market, etc. Indeed, even in cases of nominally secular societies, these instances of transcendent rule are explicitly rendered sacred, and this sacralization becomes in effect the most profound expression of subjection as subjugation. In this respect, the force of subjection does not merely concern the psychic domain of subject formation, but pertains to the social-imaginary as such. Most social-imaginaries in human history enact a heteronomous institution; that is, most societies submit the self-altering force emerging in the internalization of power to self-occultation, as Castoriadis says all too often. They prefer to (re)institute the perspective of an ‘external’ authority of subjection into pure alterity, into occult heteronomous order.

4. SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

A reconsideration of Irigaray's work may be useful here, if we consider that, of all philosophers in recent decades—only Levinas shares her persistence, but his impetus couldn't be further askew—she has placed “alterity” and “the other” at the core of her epistemological inquiries, thereby granting us, in especially incisive fashion, a novel armory with which to encounter the question of how can a politics of the other not disintegrate into heteronomous politics. My objection to decontextualized uses of “otherness” as an allegedly pure philosophical concept (in ethics, ontology, or even psychoanalysis) or simply as a formal rhetorical category (in aesthetics or politics) still holds.¹² The impetus on that occasion was to draw attention to how certain heterological discourses effaced any tangible indications of otherness by virtue of an avalanche-like process of ever increasing abstraction. At the height of identity politics during the so-called Culture Wars of the late '80s, the Other had already come to mean nothing, while at the same time signifying anything deemed marginal, minoritarian, oppositional, or disenfranchised. As a formal category, and essentially emptied of historical content even when ascribed to specific historical terms, otherness was suffering, I argued at the time, a *catachresis*. I meant the term rather literally, in the Greek sense, as *abuse*: a kind of ultimate counter-utility which, in plain language, entails an essential uselessness. It might be worthwhile, however, to resurrect the rhetorical content of the term in the English language and consider additionally the “catachresis of otherness” to signify an improper transfer of the sense and attributes of the other, an inappropriateness that returns to haunt whoever claims the domain of the other as an alibi for abstracting meaning away from the real historical battlefield. In either case, my concern remains essentially the same: an abstracted, disembodied other lends itself seamlessly to authorizing an empty and total Other—an absolutist, indeed, totalitarian Other. In this sense, even the most articulate heterology becomes an authorization of heteronomy, if it fails to configure otherness as a limit concept—that is, a concept permeated by an undeconstructible *différance* at the same time that it unleashes conditions of *différance* on all other concepts it encounters.

Levinas certainly enjoys heterology as heteronomy, but Irigaray doesn't. At least, there remains a certain *an-archic* element in her thinking, even in the later work of heterosexual affirmation, which refuses to grant to the other the markings of *archē* and *telos*.¹³ The reason is the singular importance that the notion of sexual difference

has held for her throughout the trajectory of her work, despite the obvious shifts in terminology and orientation this work has taken over the decades. Reading Irigaray without latching onto the issue of her various turns and periods—bracketing, that is, the otherwise important historical reading of an oeuvre that does indeed follow a circuitous and at times contradictory path—helps us recontextualize her insistence on sexual difference as a concept that acts like a hinge to the opening and closing of her various pathways: not simply a key concept, that is, whose content remains stable, uniquely comprehensible, and transferable across discourses, but an epistemological threshold whose crossing requires and also produces a continually altered (and altering) mode of raising and thinking about certain questions (even the same questions).

Irigaray alerts us to the fact that sexual difference can never be described in terms or signs of an equation, even a differential equation. Its mathematics, as it were, is incalculable. This is not simply because there is no equality between the different parts, between the sexes, but because the two contrasting elements of difference cannot possibly share a mutual means of measure. Even in the most complex differential equation one equals one. But the other, in this case, is not one—or more precisely, not merely one. She is at least double, or not merely double. She is multiple, though hardly multiplied as mere reproductions of the one. This enables her to be one, to register as singular presence, without ever occupying the position of the one. The other who is always more and less than one is always else than one. And this else cannot be signified even by the mathematical capacity to designate it as X, the unknown one, the variable one, the one that can have many (or any) values, the one who can have many faces or any face. This is because the many faces of X become possible—calculable—only within the terms of the equation, an equation which, in a peculiar self-authorizing way, X, through its unknown presence, makes possible and calculable. In terms of sexual difference, the other defies even setting the terms of the equation, perhaps because she knows (though who knows how she knows?) that any equation to which she grants her otherness will erase sexual difference.

In this respect, Irigaray's insistence on sexual difference transforms it from a concept to an epistemological condition that ultimately reaches beyond the strict referential framework of sexual relations. Incidentally, let us note that Irigaray increasingly opts to reconfigure the phrase as "sexed difference" (*la différence sexuée*), which may be a bit awkward in English, but is nonetheless more precise: sexual difference has meaning insofar as it denotes the fact that difference itself is sexed, not as a matter of sexuality but as a matter of disjunction between the sexes and repression of this disjunction in favor of one sex over the other. Sexual difference therefore pertains to matters beyond sexual relations, strictly speaking, because its specific epistemology is already grounded in a *différance*, a kind of irreducible separation from the presence of a simple difference—let us say, a 'natural' biological difference, or strictly speaking, the 'formal' philosophical difference between Self and Other. This irreducible separation enables the risk to conceptualize otherness as an 'internal' position, as an exteriority within. The tremendous complication of this positioning—always marked by *différance*, as *différance*—is an essential departure point for any meditation on self-alteration, conceptual, epistemological, or psychoanalytic.

In this context, I would therefore suggest that Irigaray's insistence on an epistemology of sexual difference has consistently aimed—despite the different terms, concerns, or textual targets—at disrupting the classic philosophical adherence to the "universal," without which, in any case, no conceptual possibility of the Other would have arisen. Irigaray has always acted as a philosopher—in the Greek sense as much as against the Greek sense. (To be provocative, but also more precise: in as much as she acts against the Greek sense, she has always acted as a philosopher in the Greek sense.) One might argue that her epistemology of sexual difference enables a self-interrogation of alterity—an interrogation of alterity within alterity and by virtue of alterity—that alters in turn any possibility that the politics of the other might lend itself to simple politics of identity. In this sort of argument, one could, very productively, place Irigaray at the core of the Hegelian problematic of subjectification as subjugation that we broached at the outset as a departure point in investigating the trajectory of autonomy as self-alteration. But Irigaray might also be said to reconfigure this Hegelian frame as a mode of interrogating the universalist morality of traditional philosophy—this is at least what I understand her to be doing in the series of texts collected under the title *Sexes and Genealogies*.

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She finds Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, for example, to be haunted by an unacknowledged content of a fissured doubleness, the repression of which cannot be exorcised by a progressive dialectics of the spirit in history. According to her reading of Hegel, this doubleness arises from two instances: 1) the chasm opened between a primary social imaginary (the “law of the ancestors”) and its contemporary manifestation (modernity’s ‘emancipatory’ ethical predicament after the French Revolution)—a symptom of not addressing genealogy in history as a problem, as Nietzsche would shortly thereafter; 2) the fissure the social imaginary opens in its configuration of nature as it passes into history, which silences the fact that both nature and this passage are undeconstructibly sexed. The two instances are obviously interwoven as a genealogical problem—the epistemic framework is not merely the juxtaposition of sexes and genealogies, but the fact that all genealogies in all societies are sexed. But the second instance, specifically, enables Irigaray to underscore Hegel’s implicit (unacknowledged) *double nature* of the spirit. As it becomes (part of) history, a sublated (and in a very real sense always sublimated) nature exceeds itself but is hardly abolished as nature: “History is the soil in which a second nature, a double nature grows: cultural, spiritual nature, which goes beyond its natural potential.”¹⁴ That this soil cultivates a condition—let us say, in Hegelian terms, a civil society—that deliberately (by necessity) occludes this double nature corresponds, metaphorically at least, to the self-occultation of the universal as unmediated exteriority, as objective singularity, which cannot but ultimately assume, even in strict historico-political matters, a theological (indeed theocratic) content.

Against it, Irigaray proposes what she calls “the ethics of the couple”, a differential entity that does not repress the doubleness of nature in history. This requires that “the ethics of the couple” be understood in light of the deconstructive mathematics of “the sex which is not one.” I understand the legitimacy of various objections to the explicitly heterosexual content Irigaray grants to the notion of the couple, though obviously this heterosexual double is not a matter of sexuality but strictly of gender. In any case, such critique will gain further if it diverts its attention from the content of this figure and (re)considers the form. By insisting on the “ethics of the couple” Irigaray challenges the formal identitary monism of the ethical demand that permeates traditional philosophy, not only in terms of Kantian autonomy but Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* as well:¹⁵ “The most powerful goal of interpretation is the analysis of discourse as sexualized [*sexué*] and not neuter. This can be demonstrated with linguistic and semiotic tools. To undertake this task is to complete that extra turn into self-consciousness that Hegel failed to make: reflexion upon discourse itself as a content that is the outcome of its forms, forms that are arbitrary” (SG, 138).

Going ahead to practice this sort of interpretation, Irigaray disputes the capacity of the Hegelian dialectic to account for sexual difference; in fact, she points to sexual difference as the limit point of Hegelian dialectics. She does so because she exempts the law of sex from contradiction, preferring instead to ascribe to it a sort of mimetic performativity: “Sex does not obey the law of contradiction. It bends and folds to accommodate that logic but it does not conform. Forced to follow that logic it is drawn into a mimetic game that moves faraway from life” (SG, 139). Irigaray enables herself to make this argument by taking Hegel literally, at his word, that social action is but an interminable (re)enactment of the spirit. In that respect, she is right to point out the alienation—literally, the despiritualization—that the lack of acknowledgment of sexual difference brings to human relations. Fair enough, but I cannot resist insisting that, whatever might be Hegel’s absolutist aspirations in regards to the various embodiments or even purity of the Spirit, the dialectical method itself is not even possible except as a performative process which is, moreover, not even simply characterized by mimesis but by bona fide impersonation: as a series of instances where one is, becomes, acts as an other—indeed, even as an other within oneself. Irigaray seems cautious here not to be understood in terms of a vulgar Hegelianism, whereby, as dialectics is contorted into confirmation of identity, ultimately “the one is reduced to the other” (139). This is not the occasion to delve into disputes over interpretations of Hegel, but this caution is unnecessary. Hegelian dialectics can be dissociated from the march of the Spirit, as an enormous and vastly varied precession of Hegelian dialectical practices that reject Hegelianism tout court (from Marx, to Adorno and Benjamin, to Žižek, Butler, or, I would argue, Irigaray herself), after all, testifies. Dialectics is a performative method whose content is therefore always provisional and occasional, (over)determined by whatever may be the historical or epistemic demands of the dialectical instance.

Be that as it may, what interests us here is not Irigaray's outright claim that "there is no dialectic between the sexes" but that Hegel fails (as does all traditional philosophy) because "he gives no thought to the living being as a sexed being" (SG, 139-140). To think the two assertions together, one might say, as Walter Benjamin did in his own way, that only a dialectics of the living really matters. Irigaray adds the obvious but deeply repressed qualification: life matters are irreducibly sexed. This is to say, in so many words, that the inability of philosophy to come to terms with sexual difference makes it unfit for matters of life. But Irigaray's grander point, and the one most crucial to our inquiry, is that the universality traditional philosophy produces is essentially anchored in monistic mathematics, capable (even if in relatively rare instances) of contemplating contradiction, yet even then reducing contradiction to singular units of time whereby the integrity of the opposed agents (subject-object, self-other, man-woman, history-nature, internal-external, etc.) ultimately remains total, separate, and closed. Against this, Irigaray argues that the universal is itself nothing more than a mediation: on the one hand, historically speaking, because humanity's yearning for its spiritual nature always comes up against the necessity for its worldliness, and on the other hand, because humanity's worldliness—whatever might be the flights of spirit or plunges into repression—is itself a constant reiteration of the problematic of sexual difference, a problematic that registers precisely in the enormous expenditure of signification energy to efface it.¹⁶

The gesture of depicting the universal as mediation also aims at destabilizing the equation by which the figure of Other lends itself to certain theological imaginaries—monotheistic ones, to be sure. Despite Irigaray's own peculiar investment in a certain recuperation of religious significations (whether her romanticized evocations of early Christianity or her uninterrogated exoticism of Hinduist or Buddhist categories), she nonetheless succeeds in making alterity concrete at the same time that she makes sexual difference historical—in other words, the primary condition in humanity's production of meaning in the real world. In the same way that the epistemology of sexual difference exposes the universal as mediation, it configures alterity as a worldly condition, limited by its interruption of history while at the same time unlimited as psychic energy of human transformation. As threshold to history, sexual difference dismantles the fetishism of absolute, monological alterity—it detheologizes alterity. It is, of course, banal—if not plainly idiotic—to note here that monotheism is the theological symptom of a patriarchal imaginary. The self-congratulatory delusion one sees in various New Age discourses that like to refer to God as She makes for a stunning confirmation of their subjugation to this imaginary, no matter what might be their feminist pretensions. God cannot be a She in the same sense that a world conducted in terms of a female imaginary cannot possibly invent monotheism. A sex which is not one cannot imagine a god who is merely (and only) One. Worshipping the Absolute Other, the One (and only) Other, paralyzes the conduits of an open relation to the other. Monotheism channels an obsession with the power of the One—an obsession with submitting to a monopoly of power—into the worship of the absolute, transcendental Other. This devotion to the One who is the Other makes engagement with otherness literally impossible. It is an instance when subjectification by means of the power of subjection is, very simply, incapacitation, pure heteronomy.

5. PRAXIS/POIËSIS

This raises the most salient political question of all: Can a process of subject-formation that takes place distinctly through a process of subjection conjured as pure subjugation produce an autonomous subject? To put it directly, can—or how can—an autonomous subject emerge out of a heteronomous order? Obviously, in risking the use of the term "autonomous subject," I do not mean to suggest a self-enclosed, self-supposing, narcissistic subject, suspended in the ahistorical void of its own essence. Pure autonomy is itself a theological concept, even in Kant's glorious rationalist mind. It pertains to a self-referential, tautological meaning that the monotheistic mind—in fact, any monomythical mind, as the German philosopher Odo Marquard has so incisively put it—attributes to the one and only power of signification. In a philosophical language, the name "I am that I am" is the name for the total attributes of Being, including, of course, all the possible languages of Being, the plurality of which is abolished by the monistic source that enables them. Thus, such pure ("autonomous") ontology cannot be named, cannot be represented. By extension, it cannot enter history because it cannot 'know' history—it cannot know anything other to what it knows absolutely, which is (and can only be) itself.

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Hence, it cannot change—not merely history, but anything at all, including itself. Not only does this Being not ‘know’ alterity; it has no altering—and most significantly, no *self-altering*—powers. At its most extreme, it may be said to exist as absolute alterity for someone else, someone who believes his/her being to be determined by it, derived from it. In other words, this absolute and tautological equation of Being-in-itself has meaning only in a heteronomous universe of meanings, in a universe whose signification is guaranteed by the presence of an unreachable, unutterable, and unapproachable Other who precludes any alternative authorization.

In the way Castoriadis understands it, very much against the grain of traditional philosophy, autonomy can exist only as project: an ever-presently restaged project whose primary condition or rule (*archē*) is explicitly drawn from the capacity for self-alteration. This means an *archē* that always begins anew, *othered*—therefore, an *archē* that re-authorizes itself as an other. That’s why autonomy as explicit self-alteration is not some fancy way of considering self-constitution, or *autopoiesis*. In fact, as an ever-restaged and ever-interrupted *archē*, self-alteration renders all received paradigms of self-constitution unfeasible, unconstitutible claims. From the standpoint of self-alteration, the autonomous subject engages in a kind of interminable self-determination, whereby both the “self” and the determinant elements are under perpetual interrogation. In literal terms, by autonomous subject I am considering here a subject who makes the law—a poet of the law—whose most prized achievement is the limitless interrogation of the law in its full range: first of all, law’s emergence, and then its referential framework and justification, its authorization and canonical execution, and most of all, its metatextual presumption of authority. To be the poet of the law is first and foremost to recognize the existence of the law not as transcendental dimension but as historical privilege. This is tantamount to thinking of the subject (whether of oneself or one’s society) as a historical entity, whose ground is otherwise abyssal, whose *archē* is indeterminate, and whose *telos* is nothing other than the very project of self-interrogated, worldly, mortal existence.

It is unclear what social-historical conditions are needed for subjectification to take this form. It is safe to say, however, that social autonomy is hardly a natural condition of human-being. It can only emerge as the *praxis/poiesis* within a certain social-imaginary, which surely does not mean that it is the mere expression or application of a certain social-imaginary. On the contrary, in such an instance, the radical interrogation of the terms of one’s existence would be itself the ground of *praxis/poiesis*, in full cognizance of its otherwise ontological groundlessness. Autonomy is impossible without limitless self-interrogation, in the sense that autonomy cannot be attained once and for all but must be, by definition, open to reinstitution (i.e., alteration), whose limits cannot be set outside the process of alteration. Contrary, then, to traditional notions of autonomous subjectivity which, one way or another, cannot avoid equating self-determination with the self-presupposition of both origin and end, Castoriadis’ notion insists on an open figure in which the limits of both “subject” and “autonomy” remain indeterminate as a matter of *physis*. The determination of limit that presumably distinguishes the domain of relation between subject and object, internal and external, individual and society, etc., is always a political determination, a matter of *nomos*.

To conclude, it would be essential to add, following this Castoriadian terminology, that autonomy signifies a particular sublimation: a politics of sublimation that confronts the definitional heteronomy ‘experienced’ by the psyche when it encounters the social-imaginary—the nature of subjection in Butler’s terms; the effacement of sexual difference in Irigaray’s—as the pleasure of/in the force of alteration itself. This sort of sublimation would enact a subject whose psychic reception of society’s *Vorstellung*—enacted, in turn, by the psyche’s translation of society’s imagistic/affective/representational flux into its own terms—would consist in a *poietic* experience: a performative experience of self-othering, which moreover signifies the non self-referential poetic pleasure of altering one’s world. In this respect, it seems apt to recall John Cage’s often quoted phrase “Art is self alteration”—provided, however, that we don’t take it to mean a sort of artistic redemption or self-actualization (in some New Age sense), but that self-alteration names the core process by which our worldly existence can be radically transformed, which is also, after all, the deepest significance of art: the radical transfiguration of form. To this end, self-alteration cannot be conceptualized or articulated if the self remains a notion within the signifying limits of identity. The process of self-alteration is deadly to the sovereignty of identity.

It presupposes—it enables and performs—an *identicide*: the self-dissolution of the self, or in another idiom, the production of non-identity as self-transformative force.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. See “Aeschylus Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of *Anthropos*” in *Figures of the Thinkable*, Helen Arnold trans. (Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-20 and *Ce qui fait la Grèce* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).
2. “The wheel revolving around an axis is an absolute ontological creation. It is a greater creation, it weighs, ontologically, more than a new galaxy that would arise tomorrow evening out of nothing between the Milky Way and the Andromeda. For *there are already* millions of galaxies—but the person who invented the wheel, or a written sign, was imitating and repeating *nothing* at all.” In Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Kathleen Blamey trans. (Cambridge: MIT, 1987), 197.
3. For a recent such example, see Laurent Van Eynde, “Castoriadis et Bachelard: un imaginaire en partage” *Cahiers critiques de philosophie* 6, Summer 2008, 179-178.
4. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Done and To Be Done” in *The Castoriadis Reader*, David Ames Curtis, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 396-397.
5. Castoriadis elaborates on his own theory of sublimation at great length in his signature work *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (MIT Press, 1987), but for a concise depiction of his psychoanalytic theory in general (in which sublimation and, of course, self-alteration play a central role), see also the psychoanalytic section in the collection of essays *World in Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 125-212 and *Figures of the Thinkable*, 153-222. For an elaboration on this intricate crossroads in Castoriadis’ work (and a predicate to this section here) see my essay “Philosophy and Sublimation” *Thesis Eleven* 49 (Spring 1997), 31-43.
6. A learned and thought-provoking discussion of how the psychic monad may enact/be enacted by the autonomous subject is conducted by Sophie Klimis in “DÉcrire l’irreprésentable, ou comment dire l’indicible originaire” *Cahiers Castoriadis* 3 (Bruxelles: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 2007), 25-54.
7. Foremost in the feminist deconstruction of the problematic of the Self, of course, has been the work of Judith Butler in the last two decades. As for the most ingeniously damning invocation of the chimerical abyss of the Self—“whatever prosthesis it takes to hold on to an ‘I’”—in recent political texts I would select *The Coming Insurrection* pamphlet, the First Circle of which should ingested by us all as ineluctable *pharmakon*.
8. Reiterating what I mentioned at the outset, the inner/outer distinction is just a figure of rhetorical usefulness. This isn’t to say that the distinction is meaningless; rather, its meaning is a constructed condition of difference, as will become evident in the discussion that follows.
9. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 3-4. Henceforth cited in the text, as P, followed by page number.
10. Of the numerous texts Castoriadis has written on these matters, the most essential is “The State of the Subject Today” in *World in Fragments*, David Ames Curtis ed. (Stanford University Press, 1997), 137-171.
11. Castoriadis’ distinctive mark for the racist relation to the other is the commitment to the other’s inconvertibility, that is, the absolute barring of the other’s possibility of entering the domain of the self, an important notion to consider in the historical inquiry into the politics of religious conversion. This particular discussion is useful in corroborating the dimension of internal otherness, but it speaks to a much broader domain that cannot be, in this context, adequately dealt with. See Castoriadis’ “Reflections on Racism” in *World in Fragments*, 19-31 and “The Psychical and Social Roots of Hate” in *Figures of the Thinkable*, 153-159.
12. See “On the Catachresis of Otherness” in *Dream Nation* (Stanford university Press, 1996), 267-282. The mentoring in this discussion was conducted at the time—and still is—by Gayatri Spivak’s work.
13. This doesn’t altogether mean she avoids lapsing into a certain heterological transcendentalism on occasion. See, for example, the recent essays “Approaching the Other as Other” in *Between East and West* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 121-130 and “La transcendence de l’autre” in *Autour de l’idolâtrie*, Bernard Van Meenen ed. (Bruxelles: Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 2003), 43-54. But at least, Irigaray is careful to refrain from those positions that declare otherness epistemologically off limits, those who bristle at the suggestion that one can speak from the position of an other. While I understand suspicion against imperializing discourses that preside over monopolies of representation by proxy, the fight is to be conducted strictly on political grounds. It can never be an ontological argument. In presuming to put oneself in the position of an other, one does not strive to *be* the other—the very law of performativity does not allow it. In fact, it makes it impossible. One of the most articulate, radical, and moving examples of how one can indeed speak from the position of the other in full cognizance of the impossibility of *being the other* is, to my mind, Jean Genet’s last work, *Un captif amoureux* (1986).
14. Luce Irigaray, “The Universal as Mediation” (1986) in *Sexes and Genealogies*, Gillian C. Gill trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 133. Henceforth cited in the text as SG, followed by page number. I cannot resist pointing out that this is precisely what Benjamin and Adorno also perceived as a problem in Hegel and attempted to resolve first by “the idea of natural history” and later by “dialectics at a standstill” and “negative dialectics” respectively. The notion of history as second nature (nature’s second nature) is a concept that Adorno never abandoned. Neither of them, of course, addressed this differential relation as a matter of sexual difference, despite various insinuations.

15. Consider that one of the key figures in Hegel's theorization of *Sittlichkeit* is Antigone, whom Hegel never even entertains as being herself possibly an embodiment of *hubris* insofar as she too stages, from her own standpoint (legitimate though it is), a politics of *monos phronein*—the dogmatic singularity of excepting oneself from the polis. I have reviewed this issue at length in "Philosophy's Need for Antigone" in *Does Literature Think?* (Stanford University Press 2003), 116-157.

16. It's essential to note here that, while many have criticized Irigaray's later work as a kind of softening of position, the point is not to restrict ourselves to a mode of evaluation that presumes the polemical to be superior to the evocative. No doubt, Irigaray, in her later work, wrestles with the articulation of an emancipatory humanism, a humanism that proceeds through its own sublation and the sublation of the terms of so-called '60s-'70s French theory in which Irigaray was an unquestionable protagonist. One of the elemental meanings of sublation, let us not forget, is the preservation (*albeit in an altered relation*) of the sublated terms—in this case, the critique of traditional humanism. (Hegelian *Aufhebung*—as method, not as means to an end—is an exemplary figure of self-alteration.) I would argue that Irigaray's wrestling with the project of an emancipatory humanism lends a much greater and sharper gravity to her feminism, and specifically to her pursuit of sexual difference as an epistemological condition that explodes at the core of the history of thought. And I would add that the discomfort with her late humanism is analogous to what is expressed against the late writings of Edward Said—both cases marred by similar misapprehensions, though obviously their domains of discussion are different.

17. A key to understanding what is at stake here would be Anne Carson's sumptuous *Decreation* (2006). I mention it not only because it deserves to be mentioned, but also as a bona fide teaser—for it opens the way indeed to something else, of which at present I cannot but remain silent.