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Cry sorrow, sorrow—yet let good prevail!

So be it! Yet what is good? And who
Is God? How name him, and speak true?
If he accept the name that men
Give him, Zeus I name him then.
I, still perplexed in mind,
For long have searched and weighed
Every hope of comfort or of aid:
Still I can find
No creed to lift this heaviness,
This fear that haunts without excuse—
No name inviting faith, no wistful guess,
Save only—Zeus.

Zeus, whose will has marked for man
The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise.¹

THE CHORUS, in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon

In a lecture given in 1992 at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Castoriadis raises the question of the meaning of art. What is the meaning of the inexplicable moment of pleasure, the je ne sais quoi, we experience when faced with a great work of art? Castoriadis’s answer is both illuminating and enigmatic. He suggests that such moments do not disclose a particular meaning, but the being of meaningfulness itself: the ‘meaning of meaningfulness and the meaningfulness of meaning.’² In this formulation, artistic representation

has the ability to dethrone the established significations that structure experience and to confront us with the foundational being of meaning that precedes our representational activity. Thus art has a paradoxical reality, for it is both ‘a window into the abyss’ and ‘the creation of a cosmos’; it unveils the abyssal being of meaning and at the very moment it gives form to the abyss.3

The intention of this paper is to identify the philosophical implications of the paradox of art in relation to Castoriadis’s project, giving particular focus to the increasing emphasis he gave to artistic representation toward the end of his philosophical development. I will suggest that his later interest in artistic representation, particularly in his lectures from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, is not subsidiary to his major works. Rather, in this period Castoriadis identifies the aesthetic as a distinct mode of perception in a way that clarifies and expands his earlier work on the imagination. In particular, this paper will address the extensive role played by the Greek tragedies in the latter years of Castoriadis’s work to develop his understanding of autonomy not simply as self-institution but, paradoxically, as a tradition. Tragedy gives the spectators a critical relation to their tradition, unveiling the chaotic ground of inherited institutions so as to open them for modification. They present antinomic realities in order to disrupt the inherited paths of political reasoning and making epistemic claims, rejecting the possibility of political ‘knowledge’ and revealing that judgment is the only mode of cognition operative in the political sphere, a mode of cognition that is subject to human limitations. Thus for Castoriadis the tragedies have distinct philosophical implications, for they cleave a gap between what Aristotle would later call knowledge (episteme) and practical wisdom (phronesis). From the tragic view, the political project is one of self-limitation whereby each citizen refuses to approach a decision with a pre-determined idea and instead engages in deliberation. Castoriadis returns to the tragedies to retrieve what has been lost in contemporary society: a public institution that orientates its citizens toward the task of self-instituting, a task that does not require us to overcome our limits but to bind ourselves to them.4

4 In recent scholarship Castoriadis’s extensive engagement with art and aesthetics has been largely overlooked. For example, Jeff Klooger’s exposition of Castoriadis’s work in Castoriadis: Psyche, society, autonomy (2009) elucidates the central components of Castoriadis’s corpus while making no reference to art or tragedy. In Castoriadis’ Ontology, (2011), Suzi Adams identifies Castoriadis’s ontological turn with only brief reference to his extensive lectures on the art and thought of ancient Greece. Further, in a recent edition of Critical Horizons (Vol. 13, No. 1, 2012) dedicated to exploring political imaginaries thought the work of Castoriadis, no reference was given to tragedy in order to clarify Castoriadis’s project of autonomous society. While I do not suggest that the neglect of Castoriadis’ work on art undermines these
In the first section of this paper I explore Castoriadis's understanding of the reciprocity between philosophy and tragedy, a move that leads him to figure philosophical thinking in terms of elucidation rather than construction. In the second section I try to show that his understanding of philosophy as elucidation builds from the priority of the image in Kant's notion of imagination. I suggest that Kant provides Castoriadis with a grammar to locate the ground of freedom in the groundlessness of the imagination's representational activity. Yet while the freedom Kant grants to the imagination assists Castoriadis to defend the project of autonomy, it raises the problem of voluntarism: if the imagination is not grounded in reason or sensation, does it not follow that the representations it creates are mere chaos, that there is no criteria to guide our action other than the (non-rational) desire of the will? Castoriadis's close reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* leads him to find a response to this problem by considering artistic representation, turning particularly to the Greek tragedies.

In section three I will suggest that his reading of tragedy develops and matures his notion of autonomy to provide a compelling response to the problem of voluntarism. Yet while his reading of tragedy strengthens his notion of autonomy it also reveals a paradox at the very heart of his project, a paradox between cosmos and chaos, between the institutions that give birth to our thinking and the rupturing energies of the imagination. I will conclude by suggesting that while this paradox leaves Castoriadis as an incomplete thinker, his vision of philosophical thinking as the attempt to elucidate the antimonial ground of human life provides a seminal contribution to contemporary philosophy.

*Thaumazein*: The Beginning of Philosophy

While philosophy has traditionally viewed tragedy as a mode of presentation that threatens its constructive aims, Castoriadis argues that tragedy and philosophy are not antithetical. In his view, tragedy is only antithetical to a kind of philosophy that has overstepped its limit. It is better understood as a mode of presentation that confronts, recalibrates and energises philosophical thinking. This reading of tragedy builds from Aristotle, who saw tragedy as the self-recognition of error in an experience that throws us into pity (*eleos*) and

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terror (*phobos*), cleansing the disordered emotions that inhibit the life of virtue. For Aristotle, tragedy prepares us for the love of wisdom and the mature use of our practical judgment.

However, Castoriadis argues that even tragedy’s most fierce opponent—Plato—can assist us to make the connection between tragedy and the beginning of philosophy. In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates tells us that the proper foundation of philosophy is a sense of wonder (*thaumazein*). In contrast to Descartes who began his philosophical method by blocking off his senses (‘I will close my eyes… avert my senses from their objects’), *thaumazein* discloses a mode of thought that begins from our activity of seeing (theorein), where a particular ‘this’ (a form of *idein*) throws us into an amazed stupor, into wonder. While philosophical wonder and tragic pity and terror are prompted by different events, one turning on an encounter with an object and the other with a sequence of events performed on stage, neither begin from the comprehension of a body of knowledge. Rather, both begin from an experience. Just as the tragic reversal leads to the recognition of error, the experience of *thaumazein* collapses our everyday knowledge in an event that thrusts us into an awareness of the incomplete nature of our understanding. In terms that anticipate Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750), a landmark text that calls for a kind of ‘sensuous cognition’ (aesthetics), such an experience turns on an encounter with the ‘that’, the excess that lies beyond the ‘this’, something that transcends our grasp and draws us into a position of awe. In other words, both tragic terror and philosophical *thaumazein* begin from seeing, and in particular, in a the glimpse of something that far exceeds our comprehension.

Yet for Castoriadis, Plato misunderstood the experience of *thaumazein*, which meant he misunderstood the relation between tragedy and philosophy. Plato held that the excess that we experience visually is really the intuition of the forms that transcend the world of appearance, that are free from the transience that is intrinsic to the corruptible world of sight. Yet given that *thaumazein* begins with sight, Plato has great difficulty explaining where these

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7 For Baumgarten, sensuous cognition moves not from universal to particular but from sensation to concept. To describe this sensuous cognition Baumgarten reenergizes the ancient word ‘aesthetics’. In his magnum opus, *Aesthetica*, he begins as follows: ‘Aesthetics [(that is to say,) the theory of the liberal arts, the lesser theory of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of reason by analogy] is the science of sensuous cognition.’ Alexander Baumgarten. (1750). Williams, M. (Trans). *Aesthetica*. I.C. Kleyb. §1.

forms reside and how we know them. Are they a kind of memory of divine form that precedes our natality? Are they the presence of the infinite that dwells within? Plato is forced to presume the existence of the forms as the best explanation of the experience of *thaumazein*, yet he has trouble explaining how they came into original being. When he attempts to explain the world’s creation in the *Timaeus*, we find that this creation is not a creation but an imitation. The demiurge of the *Timaeus* looks to a paradigm, a model of a perfect world, and with the materials available to him (space and matter) he manufactures a world that is perfect insofar as it is possible. Yet whence this model? Plato’s philosophy leads to a dangerous regress that threatens to tear the ground from underneath the world of forms.

Seeing that Aristotle saw a reciprocity between tragedy and philosophy, it is not surprising that he interpreted *thaumazein* differently to Plato. Aristotle did not subordinate the content of the senses to philosophical thinking but held thought and sensation to be intrinsically connected. In the *Metaphysics* he begins in similar terms to Plato, suggesting that it is due to *thaumazein* that humans ‘both now begin and at first began to philosophize.’ Yet for Aristotle, *thaumazein* does not lead our attention beyond what we see. Rather, it gives us the intuition that there is knowledge beyond what we yet know. In particular, it draws us to reinvest in the world of appearances, to ‘pursue *techne* [art/science] in order to know.’ In Aristotle’s understanding, this desire for knowledge premises the very possibility of human freedom. We are not determined by our sensory experience, for in *thaumazein* we discover the need to go beyond our senses. Yet neither are we determined by the categories of reason, for we must reinvest in the world of sight in order to discover what the categories are. For Aristotle, by throwing us onto our creative resources in order to know, *thaumazein* reveals our fundamental freedom: *techne* reveals that humans are ‘free for [themselves] and not for another.’ For Aristotle, *techne*, our creative response to *thaumazein*, is the mode of being whereby humanity exists ‘for itself’. *Thaumazein* is the beginning of philosophy for it throws us from habitual patterns of behaviour to the cultivation of our possibilities.

Drawing from this conversation, Castoriadis argues that *thaumazein* turns on an encounter with the ‘other thing’ (*l’autre chose*) that escapes our understanding:

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when we are stilled before the amazing, miraculous thing there is what in German we call Wunder and in ancient Greek thaumazein. Such an experience attracts far more than surprised admiration but gets you out of the state you are in, for it contains not only an emotional but a cognitive dimension in which one wants to know.\textsuperscript{13}

In our everyday mode of experience we lack the desire to know because the world is exhausted with meaning. The possibility of being in need of knowledge is unthinkable, meaning that it would take something more powerful than mere surprise and admiration to get us out of the state we are in. Thaumazein provides Castoriadis with a way to explain the experience in which our imaginative closure is pried open with a force that overwhelms us, throwing us into uncertainty and the cognitive awareness of our lack. In the experience of the ‘other thing’ we are confronted with the limits to our cognitive grasp of the world and become aware of the possibility of new ways of making sense of things. We are, according to Castoriadis, dehabituated from an unreflected mode of being and given a restless ‘desire to know’.\textsuperscript{14}

If philosophy begins from this desire to know and if the desire to know comes from thaumazein, then it follows that philosophical thinking is premised on the terrifying experience of finding ourselves to be in error and without ground to stand on.\textsuperscript{15} In this formulation affect and cognition converge into a holistic account of philosophy at the nexus of body and mind. Like Plato and Aristotle, Castoriadis views thaumazein not as the end of philosophy but as its beginning. In similar terms to Heidegger’s assessment of wonder, while

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{13} Castoriadis. \textit{Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos}, p. 156 (emphasis mine).
\item\textsuperscript{14} Castoriadis, \textit{Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos}.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Here we find echoes of Kant's sublime in Castoriadis reading of thaumazein. However, unlike Kant Castoriadis does not provide a rationalist response to thaumazein. In Kant's terms, the sublime ‘is the name given to what is absolutely great.’ What is absolutely great is that which causes us to consider all things as small when they are drawn into comparison. Yet in Kant's framework, no mere thing, no object of nature, can have this characteristic. The absolutely great is not found outside of us but refers to what is inside: the ideas of reason. The ‘beyond’ is not to be discovered in the world but dwells already in the mind. Thus Plato and Kant share a common skepticism of the faculty of sight, holding a version of rationalism to explain the experience of excess, the beyond, albeit in the mind or in the heavens. In Kant's sublime, the harmony of aesthetic judgment is only momentarily disrupted, meaning, given cognition's desire for unity, that we experience the feeling of displeasure and a longing to be restored with beautiful form. See Kant. (2000). Guyer, P. (Trans). \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment}. 5:248. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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thaumazein opens our eyes wide it simultaneously plunges us into darkness.\footnote{16}{In his infamous Rector's Address, Heidegger describes \textit{thaumazein} as 'the initial wondering perseverance in the face of what is', creating the \textit{arche} of genuine science. Yet to be alerted to the task of science means to find oneself in the dark, in ignorance. Heidegger, Martin. (March, 1985). 'The Self-Assertion of the German University and The Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts', \textit{Review of Metaphysics}. 38:3. p. 480 ff.}

It unveils the fact that our grasp of the world—our ability to build concepts that determine the being of beings—is not immediate and complete, but interpretive and fallible, dwarfed in comparison to the excess that shines through the crack opened by \textit{thaumazein}.\footnote{17}{The German infinitive 'to conceptualize' or 'to comprehend', \textit{begreifen}, is derived from \textit{greifen}, 'to grasp'. Like Heidegger, Castoriadis holds that the active, concept-building role of the imagination conceals at the very same moment that it unconceals, providing a false sense of totality. See Castoriadis, C. (1997). Curtis, D.A. (Trans and Ed.). \textit{The Castoriadis Reader}. pp. 319–337. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, and Heidegger. (1997). Taft, R. (Trans). \textit{Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics}. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.}

Thus \textit{thaumazein} de-centres us; it draws us out of ourselves by shedding light onto what we have occluded with our inherited mode of seeing. It does not lead to the task of constructing a philosophical system that could guarantee the truth of its results, but to the task of \textit{elucidation}.\footnote{18}{While Castoriadis draws significantly from Kant, his understanding of philosophy as elucidation confronts Kant's notion of the system as the ideal of science. In the first \textit{Critique} Kant argues that the ideal of science, an \textit{a priori} idea of reason, requires that our 'cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, which alone can support and advance its essential ends.' A system that constructs a rational edifice can, in Kant's mind, guarantee the truth of its results. For Castoriadis, the system merely covers over the uncertainty of the results of thinking. Kant. (1988). Guyer, P. (Trans). \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}. A831, B860. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.}

Elucidation is the task of illuminating the world from a starting point that recognises that we hold only a partial take on reality. It seeks to unveil the things we experience from underneath the cover of our immediate perspective, shedding light on the excess that lies outside. Understood in these terms, philosophy, for Castoriadis, begins with gaining the knowledge of what we do not know, with discovering the limits of our knowledge. It disorients us from familiar patterns of understanding and reorients us toward \textit{techne}—science or art—in order to know.

### Kant, Imagination and Art

By couching philosophy in the reorienting power of experience rather than reason or perception, Castoriadis attempts to navigate between the poles of rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism implies that our particular sensory
experience is deficient to the universal ideas of reason, meaning that philosophy's task is to proceed from reason alone. Yet rationalism removes the creative component of discovery that Aristotle used to demonstrate human freedom, meaning that thought is determined by reason: it is not free (i.e. not 'for itself'). Yet if we reject rationalism and begin with experience, with sense impressions, it follows that thought is determined by the impressions given to it by the senses. Empiricism entails that humans are mere creatures of cause and effect, meaning that it is not reason but sensory intuitions that determine the ideas in the mind. To elucidate a path of freedom between rationalism and empiricism Castoriadis turns to Kant's representational account of cognition, finding in Kant's third Critique a grammar to articulate the mind's break with sensation and the fundamental freedom of imagination.

Castoriadis's philosophical development can be read as a sustained reflection on Kant's third Critique, the Critique of Judgment. In the first Critique, Kant explored the imagination (Einbildung) as the faculty that provides the ground for our experience. In particular, the imagination provides a refutation of Hume's empiricism by opening a conceptual path to suggest that the ideas in the mind are not a posteriori sense impressions. If our ideas were merely the impressions left on the mind by sensation then the mind would be a mere machine in a universe of cause and effect, meaning that the freedom we feel in the moral sphere would be an illusion. For Kant, however, the imagination produces images (Bilde) of perceived objects by spontaneously uniting sense data and a priori concepts, meaning that the mind is not the impression of the sensory world but an active power that freely gives itself the view that it receives. The key to Kant's imagination is spontaneity, which entails that the resulting image cannot be traced causally; it is not the result of a mechanism, for it is an absolutely new and unique presentation.

However, while Kant's imagination refutes the threat to freedom posed by empiricism, it raises the opposite threat to freedom: rationalism. If the imagination is limited to the conceptual faculty of the understanding then it merely plays with the sense data given to it by intuition. In other words, while it is not determined by sense impressions it is determined by its nature, by the rational concepts that frame experience. This problem led to Kant's third Critique where he identifies a reflective capacity of the imagination to make what is

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19 Einbildung comes from the verb bilden, meaning to shape, form or educate. While the reproductive imagination forms images (Bilde) of perceived objects, the productive imagination does two things: it unites sensibility and understanding, thus making experience possible, and it transforms the material of nature into works of art. Inwood, M. (1992). A Hegel Dictionary. p. 187. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
without form or schema an object for reflection. In such a mode of thinking the imagination operates *without* the conceptual faculty of the understanding. In Kant’s terms, the ability of the productive imagination to judge without the aid of the understanding means that it can ‘create’, and, by implication (recall Aristotle), that it is ‘free’.\(^{20}\) Like Aristotle, Kant recognised the link between *techne* and freedom in his separation of the understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*), suggesting that the failure of the understanding (the sublime) is the very beginning of human freedom for it alerts us to the task of knowing that is not determined by the immediacy of sensory intuition or rational ideas but depends on the creativity of imagination. Humans are not just form users but form makers, shaping concepts to synthesize the polymorphic and disparate things they experience, thereby bringing order to chaos.

Castoriadis saw that Kant’s notion of reflective judgment provides the key to understanding the creativity of imagination, for it involves a mode of aesthetic judgment that explains the imagination’s ability to both create sets and use these sets to make sense of its experience. To argue that imagination can operate without the aid of concepts Kant splits judgement into two, describing the judgment of the first *Critique* as ‘determinative judgment’ and identifying a second, new form of judgment as ‘reflective judgment’. Determinative judgment unites image with concept, meaning that it is limited to the concepts it possesses. Reflective judgment, on the other hand, is a kind of aesthetic judgment that can go beyond the limits of our knowledge: it can discover and create. Kant already unhooked the imagination from being determined by sense impressions for it is spontaneously productive. Now we find that because reflective judgment can operate without the concepts of reason it is no longer limited to nature.

The second kind of judgment Kant identifies has significant implications for his understanding of imagination, for it introduces a social element wherein the aesthetic creations of reflective judgment are shared amongst a community. The verb *bilden*, the heart of *Einbildung*, does not simply mean ‘to shape’ or ‘to form’ but also has the meaning of education or self-formation, as in *Bildung*. The *Einbildung* is the self-institution of one’s culture, what Aristotle calls our ‘second nature’ and Kant ‘another nature’; a nature produced ‘out of’ the material that is given to it yet goes beyond that material.\(^{21}\) The imagination is thus


\(^{21}\) Aristotle says that ‘the virtues come about in us neither by nature nor apart from nature’ (*Aristotle, The Complete Works*, vol. II, 1103a 24–5). Virtue is a kind of ‘second nature’ for it does not develop first but is learned through education and discipline. For Kant, human civilization is testament to the creative ability of the imagination that is able to produce
a self-instituting power, positing rules of its own from the example given by others. Kant reveals that a community is not simply governed by the universal duties of the categorical imperative but through laws and rules that are particular to its own practice. The categorical imperative results in public action that gives law to others: ‘Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.’ Actions become exemplary or law-giving leading to the rational ordering of society. In much the same way, the ideas created by reflective judgment are exemplary in that they give rule or law to others, laws that become guides for cognition. Yet unlike the laws issued by the categorical imperative, aesthetic ideas do not give laws that are ‘without contradiction’: they are not rational and are thus liable to being proved false or only partially complete. Thus we find the aesthetic domain of Kant’s reflective judgment to be a pseudo-political domain where self-created laws are shared amongst a particular community. However, if reflective judgment does not possess the rational basis of the categorical imperative, does it entail that the aesthetic sphere is mere chaos, providing rules that are at the mercy of the lawlessness of imagination? In other words, can their validity be assessed if they are disconnected from reason?

Kant’s answer is that reflective judgment is lawfully lawless: it operates without concepts (it is lawless, free) yet in a mode that is analogous to reason (it is lawful). Because reflective judgment searches for laws and concepts of its own Kant argues that we have ‘cause to presume, by analogy, that it too should contain in itself a priori, if not exactly its own legislation, then still a proper principle of its own for seeking laws, although a merely subjective one.’ Kant posits that reflective judgment is analogous to reason for he began to see the menace posed by the absence of a foundation in the aesthetic sphere. Yet he could not ‘ground’ reflective judgment in the ontological realm of determinative judgment, for that would return us to the problem of rationalism. Instead he argues that we have good reason to presume the existence of an ‘original ground’, the supersensible (das Übersinnliche), that ‘ought’ to exist if our cognition is to be coherent. The supersensible is the original, common ground

its own ‘nature’ that far exceeds the material given to it and its own basic needs of survival (i.e. its ‘first nature’). In his terms, ‘The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it.’ Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:314.


between reflective and determinative judgment that ensures their analogous relation. The analogous relation of reason and reflective judgment, to wit, that they both search for laws, reveals that the creations of the imagination are not determined to be chaotic or senseless. They are neither accidental nor the mere construction of the will. Imaginary representations are ordered and yet free, for reflective judgment acts in a mode that is analogous to reason by creating aesthetic ideas. The aesthetic idea is a:

representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is un-nameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language.25

Reflective judgment creates aesthetic ideas in the search for form in the midst of chaos, generating ideas that are indeterminate, inexhaustible, illuminating the un-nameable and animating the cognitive faculties to express themselves in literature and art. Each idea gives a rule to judgment, meaning that each new aesthetic idea can operate according to the rules given by previous ideas. But because aesthetic ideas are only analogous to reason they are subjective, meaning that they can be proved to be incorrect or incomplete by a new presentation. Thus each new idea can also destroy a previous idea, meaning that the aesthetic is a realm of creation and destruction, of the establishment of form that is liable to de-creation. Reflective judgment is a faculty of the imagination that moves from sensuous particular to universal in order to make present what resists presentation, and the only criteria it has to use are the aesthetic ideas it has inherited, ideas that are prone to destruction within the chaotic realm of historical creativity.

What Castoriadis found to be of particular importance in the third Critique is that Kant highlights the significance of community in shaping our cognitive practices. For Kant, the community is the domain in which aesthetic ideas (our second nature, our Bildung) are shared, contested and transformed. Kant’s creative imagination, now bolstered with the faculty of reflective judgment, enables Castoriadis to construe society as a collection of institutions that schematise cognition by generating aesthetic ideas that orientate a society to the world in a shared manner:

The institution of society is the institution of social imaginary significations. In principle, this institution has to confer meaning on everything that might present itself, ‘in’ society as well as ‘outside’ it. Social imaginary signification brings into being things as these here things, posits them as being what they are—the what being posited here by signification, which is indissociably principle of existence, principle of thought, principle of value, principle of action.26

Kant provides a grammar for Castoriadis to reject the notion of the mind as the impression of society on the subject, for society is self-instituted by the productive imagination. The social institutions—the aesthetically crafted ideas—confer meaning on everything as the imagination unites intuition with concept, giving it the view it receives.

Yet Castoriadis argues that Kant’s attempt to hold onto the ideas of reason by splitting judgment into two spheres (determinative and reflective) occludes the ontological significance of the imagination. In Castoriadis’ view, Kant’s third Critique is monumentally important to philosophical history for it unhooks cognition from the categorical determinations of the mind that connects (or limits) reason to the Cosmos, the original and timeless form of the world. In other words, Kant reveals that human creativity has ontological significance, for it holds the capacity to form ideas that are not subordinate to Cosmos but that constitute the Cosmos. However, despite this radical suggestion Kant maintained that the imagination remains inferior to the ontological realm of being, that the chaotic movement of imagination is always subordinate to Cosmos. Even in the third Critique Kant maintains that the infinite is always noumena, beyond our cognition, forever condemning the imagination to finitude by holding aesthetic ideas to be merely analogous to ontological reality.

Castoriadis argues that if the imagination has the primacy that Kant, at times, ascribes to it, then the ontological realm of noumena cannot be other than a representation of imagination.27 Thus the imagination is fundamen-

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27 For example, see Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect in §76–77 of the third Critique. While Kant maintained that the intuitive intellect is merely a ‘regulative principle for ourselves’ to show the limits of cognition, many of his early readers, such as Schelling and Hegel, believed that he provides a way to overcome the limits of his discursive intellect with a constructive notion of imagination as that which brings the absolute into being, i.e. a vision of the imagination as ontological. Kant. Critique of the Power of Judgment. 5:404.
tally creative, constructing the entire world it experiences including the logical basis that determines what is real, coherent and possible. To free the ontological imagination from the regulative limits Kant placed upon it Castoriadis modifies ‘productive imagination’ as the ‘radical imagination’. The imagination is ‘radical’ (from the roots) because it creates.

The term radical I use . . . to emphasise the idea that this imagination is before the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’. To put it bluntly: it is because radical imagination exists that ‘reality’ exists for us . . . it is radical because it creates.

Kant maintained that aesthetic ideas are merely regulative and that only the ideas of reason are constructive of our experience. Castoriadis’ radical imagination collapses the two modes of judgment into one, holding that the aesthetic creations of imagination do not simply regulate the ideas of reason but constitute reality for us. If the imagination has the ontological primacy of creativity, then determinative judgment along with the noumenal realm can

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28 Castoriadis’ notion of the radical imagination confronts the Freudian and Heideggerian imagination. For both Freud and Heidegger the imagination ‘brings-forth’ (poiesis) representations, ‘producing’ or drawing into presence what was already there. For Castoriadis, the imagination creates ex nihilo, linking it closely with poiesis but with an essential distinction. He models the imagination’s creativity not on the Greek artificer who gives determinate form to the pre-existing materials of the world—who ‘brings-forth’—but on the creativity of the Hebrew God who creates the world from nothing. Thus the very structures, meanings and ideas in the imagination are created by each imagination in every case. Castoriadis, C. (1978). K. & Ryle, M. (Trans). Crossroads in the Labyrinth. p. 83. Soper, Great Britain: Harvester Press.


30 While Castoriadis is unable to move beyond a left-Hegelian reading of Hegel as metaphysical artificer, his construction of Kantian imagination as constitutive of ‘reality’ and ‘reason’ has clear resonances with Hegel’s philosophy. What he draws from Hegel is the expansive conception of experience afforded by his reading of Kant’s imagination. In Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos (p. 151) Castoriadis quotes Hegel’s Jena Lectures Hegel to elucidate that that representation exceeds what is given, that, according to Hegel, our ‘night’ without consciousness (bewusstlos) contains a multitude of representations before social form enters into the daylight of reality: ‘The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity—a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present.’ Hegel, in Rauch, L. (1983). Hegel and the Human Spirit: a translation of the Jena lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6) with commentary. p. 87. Michigan: Wayne State University Press.
be only a postulate of the imagination. Thus the ideas of reason are mere postulates, meaning that reflective judgment does not operate in a mode that is analogous to reason but that it *is* reason. For Castoriadis there is no analogy for there are not two spheres of judgment. There is simply one sphere of being: the ontological sphere of human creativity. Every individual imagination posits a unique ontological vantage on the world that constitutes reality, and there is no shared *a priori* ideas of reason available for judgment but simply the shared desire to bring order to chaos.

Yet if there are no *a priori* concepts available to fill the courtroom of reason, then imagination finds itself without ground. In Castoriadis’s words, “The labour of signification is . . . perpetually menaced . . . by the absence of any keystone for this edifice and by the sand that lies in place of what ought to have supported it at its foundation.”

For Castoriadis, we have no reason to presume the existence of a ground. The primacy of imagination reveals that the so-called *a priori* unconditioned ideals of reason can only be the postulates of imagination itself. Reason is not the faculty of the unconditioned but appears to us as the ultimate ‘enselblistic’ faculty, combining and ‘ensembling’ the totality of one’s experience in a form of logic it derives from experience. Castoriadis’s notion of reason as an ‘enselblistic’ faculty provides a critique of philosophy’s tendency to fix our concepts as absolute ideas of reason, exploring reason as the *vis formundi*, the magmatic energy that creates sets and organises its sensory material. He thus shifts Kant’s ‘unconditioned’ from the being of reason to the spontaneous enselblistic energies of the imagination, an unconditioned flux that creates ever-new constellations of meaning and constantly erodes ‘what ought to have supported it at its foundation.’ The ‘ought’ of Kant’s supersensible is revealed for what it is: a spurious projection of the imagination that desires its ideas

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31 For Kant, in the experience of modernity our judgment becomes aware of its task ‘to institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees by according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this court is none other than the critique of pure reason itself: The tragedies also put our ideas in court, but without the guarantee of reason. In the place of reason we have the collective exercise of judgment. Immanuel Kant, *Kant, Critique of Pure Reason*, A xi–xii.


33 In the *Imaginary Institution of Society* Castoriadis coins the word ‘enselblistic’ to signify the act of ‘creating sets’ and ‘ensembles’ out of something pre-existent and undifferentiated. This kind of undifferentiated reality out of which the ensemblist logic creates sets, classes, objects and properties, is, roughly, what he calls *magma*. See Castoriadis, C. (1987). Blamey, K. (Trans). *Imaginary Institution of Society*. p. 343. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
to be fixed in the very fabric of Cosmos. Thus when Cosmos fails, so does the whole critical edifice with it. We are thrown from our stable foundation and are ready to begin afresh, to pursue *techne* in order to know.

However, Castoriadis’ rejection of the unconditionality of reason has caused many critics to charge him guilty of voluntarism. By unhooking the ground of reason from Cosmos and refusing to accept that nature can give any meaningful ideas, the imagination is free from the problems of rationalism and empiricism but seems to be so radically indeterminate that it is mere chaos. The only law imagination has is its own: its will. Kant’s refusal to reject the ideas of reason might obscure the ontological significance of creativity, but his attempt to maintain a distinction between the two spheres of judgment was intended to maintain an ontological ground to his project. Thus while rationalism might lead to one kind of determinism, the absence of an unconditioned faculty leads to another, for if reflective judgment does not act analogously to an unconditioned ideal then we seem to be fated to the lawlessness of imagination.

Castoriadis cleaves a passage from this theoretical cul-de-sac by turning to Kant’s notion of the artistic, aesthetic realm of human creativity. Kant’s aesthetic sphere answers the question of how we are to understand the development of nature in conjunction with the moral destiny of humanity. In other words, it aims to solve the problem of how we can be both free by nature (on the level of spontaneous imagination) and yet on the path to freedom (realising that freedom in the practical sphere in the cultivation of *Bildung*). Kant’s notion of the aesthetic sphere answers this question because it shows how aesthetic ideas orientate us toward our fundamental freedom by exciting the imagination to think beyond nature, to see that the inherited institutions are merely aesthetic ideas that can be modified, improved, transformed. Aesthetic ideas are thus pivotal to the project of autonomy for they dethrone inherited knowledge and empower us to ‘dare to know’, animating the cognitive faculties to express themselves in literature and art. Thus artistic representation

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34 The most significant critique of Castoriadis is that the radical imagination collapses his philosophical project into a version of voluntarism: that thought is reduced to the will which randomly posits whatever it wants. For example, Callinicos argues that Castoriadis is forced to utilise voluntarism as a means to save the revolutionary possibilities of Marxism. This is, I argue, an impoverished reading of Castoriadis that I hope to correct by reading his work in light of Kant’s third *Critique*. Reading his work in this way shows that the imagination is not simply lawless but lawful. See Callinicos, A. (1990). *Trotskyism*. Chapter 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. See also Heller and Fehér. (1991). *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*. London: Transaction Publishers.

35 In Kant’s famous tract ‘What is Enlightenment’ he promotes the enlightenment project of autonomy, stating that ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred
orientates us toward our freedom, and poetry, for Kant, is the most powerful form of art in this regard:

The art of poetry claims the highest rank of all. It expands the mind by setting the imagination free and presenting... the one that connects its presentation with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas.36

Kant argues that poetry sets the imagination free from the limits of sense data and the ideas of reason, alerting us to an aesthetic sphere where ideas are created and destroyed in a kind of art history. In Kant’s words, ‘it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure’, for

The poet ventures to make sensible... that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum.37

Poetry, in Kant’s mind, reveals a mode of judgment that makes sensible what we find in experience but remains enigmatic, going beyond experience in order to draw out the significance of what we encounter. Thus the ideas produced by poets are not concepts but symbols: indirect, figurative presentations of concepts that are not determinate but that ‘strain toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience... because no concept can be fully adequate to them, as inner intuitions.’38 Poetic symbols do not instruct but empower the reader to think beyond the ideas of the text and the established sphere of significations it confronts. Moreover, poetic symbols give rules, they schematize our thinking in a way that orientates us to the world in terms of our creativity:

immaturity... “Have the courage to use your own understanding,” [dare to know!] is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.’ This text was written only three years after his third Critique. Kant. (1991). Nisbet, H. (Trans). Kant: Political Writings, p. 54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

36 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:326.
37 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:314.
38 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:314.
“The product of a genius... is an example... for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary”.39

The works of the imagination are uniquely exemplary. They ‘remodel experience’, giving ‘the imagination an impetus to think more... than can be comprehended in a concept.’40 In other words, art has a philosophically important task: it refines the capacities of our reflective judgment and reveals the chaos of the aesthetic sphere not as something to be feared but as the very ground of creativity. Yet it does not cause us to reject established form for it reveals the importance of tradition and inherited laws. Without an exemplary context of other artworks a new work would be unintelligible and there would be no impetus to ‘think more’, nothing to set the imagination free. Art opens a historical space that results in a critical confrontation with tradition, alerting us to both our need for tradition, that is, for the rules given by aesthetic ideas, but also for our need to confront tradition, to call the imaginary institutions that give rule to cognition into question and to thereby transform them. Art is thus the ultimate domain of self-reflection, providing a tradition that orientates us toward the exercise of reflective judgment that confronts and transforms tradition. It is, paradoxically, the tradition of freedom.

Kant’s notion of the aesthetic sphere provides a grammar for Castoriadis to articulate the reality that there is more than the chaos of freedom at every moment, that the desire of the will is not the basic principle of the social world. Rather, the realization of our freedom is a tradition, a continued attempt to think more than can be comprehended in a concept and to set the imagination free. Artistic representation enlarges our reflective judgment, and the aesthetic sphere of art history orientates society toward a critical engagement with its tradition, revealing that the aesthetic sphere is groundless and thus open to modification and transformation.

However, if Castoriadis is right in arguing that the aesthetic sphere is not simply a subordinate realm to ontological reality but the one realm of being, then the transgressive, reorienting work of art will not just rupture cultural history but also cognitive history. Aesthetic ideas do not simply free the imagination to create ideas that regulate how it makes sense of the world, but ideas that give criteria for how it will act and judge. Without the protection of the ontological realm of determinative judgment to provide an analogy for aesthetic judgment, without the supersensible ground of the critical system, the

39 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:318.
40 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:315.
aesthetic sphere is not fixed on an ever-increasing spiral to its moral destiny but finds itself in a chaos that extends to ontological reality and is thus radically dependent on its own ideas. Our moral destiny can go backwards and has no guarantee of success, and the only lifeline consists in the ideas of our own making. The ability of aesthetic ideas to orientate us toward freedom becomes the only path to cleave open imaginative freedom.

Through considering Kant’s notion of art history, Castoriadis’ philosophical project turned to the vital role of artistic representation to rupture our inherited aesthetic ideas and to orientate us toward the freedom of the imagination. The power of art to situate us before the groundless realm of historical creativity, to free the imagination to think with and beyond the concepts it possesses, becomes the very task of philosophy. The project of autonomy is thus a collective task of maintaining the tradition of freedom, maintaining the legacy of creativity that frees the imagination through the constant creation of aesthetic ideas. And the artworks that are most powerful in alerting us to this task, for Castoriadis, are the Greek tragedies.

Tragedy: Representing the Paradoxical Reality of Human Being

In the third Critique, Kant observes that ‘the presentation of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful art, can be united with beauty in a verse tragedy.’\(^{41}\) This is a fascinating observation that remains undeveloped in his work, sparking the interest of his successors who attempted to draw the beautiful and the sublime together in a reading of tragedy as destruction and reformation. For Kant, tragedy can be sublime in that it is overwhelming, throwing us from certainty to fear. Yet as a work of art tragedy gives a new rule, establishing a new aesthetic idea that situates the spectators in a critical relation to their tradition while recognising that the tradition was necessary for it to come into being. Tragedy is thus epochal, destroying a form of understanding and replacing it with another. The question that remains after Kant is what exactly is destroyed in tragic presentation, and what new rule is given in its stead.

Castoriadis suggests a provocative answer. In his view there is no tragic essence or idea but a public institution that emerged within the heart of fifth-century Athenian culture that orientated its spectators toward a new understanding of judgment and wisdom. The tragic institution orientated the spectators to ‘think more… than can be comprehended’ in their inherited concepts, to see that the current form of society is not determined by the

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41 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:325.
Cosmos and to creatively search for new possibilities. In other words, tragedy marks the initial moment when the aesthetic sphere was uncovered and its spectators were ruptured from tradition and orientated toward their creativity. For Castoriadis, when we read the tragedies two and a half thousand years after their original performance we are confronted with the moment wherein a society ceased to understand itself in terms of the determinative source of nature (physis) and undertook the collective interrogation of its shared meanings in the thematic of self-creation (nomos).

The tragedies destroy the idea of Cosmos as the fundamental nature of the world that provides the ground for morality, knowledge and validity. From the view of Cosmos, reason is an objective power for it turns on our participation in the Being of the world, meaning that chaos must be tamed and banished by reason. From the tragic view, however, chaos is not a force that threatens to encroach upon ordered society from the outside. Rather, chaos is transformed into the creative energy at the foundation of the social order itself: “at the ‘roots’ of the world, beyond the familiar landscape, chaos always reigns supreme. The order of the world [nature] has no ‘meaning’ for man: it posits the blind necessity of genesis and birth, on one hand, of corruption and catastrophe—death of the forms—on the other.”

Castoriadis argues that what the tragedies present for all to see is that ‘Being is Chaos’, revealing that nature can provide no meaning for us and alerting us to the created nature of institutions. In short, they alert us to the task of self-creation. If at the foundation of the world we find not order but a disruptive, creative energy, then reason cannot access timeless truth or guarantee the results of our thought or action. Rather, reason is a fragile faculty that is liable to error. It is a human faculty, capable of discovery, learning, creation and experience.

Yet how can the tragedies present the chaos of being? For Castoriadis, the tragedies act as “a window into the abyss, into chaos, and the shaping of this abyss—it is the moment of sense, the creation of a cosmos by art itself.”

What distinguishes the luminosity of the tragedies from just any kind of art is that they present the abyss without idolatry: they are ‘transparent’. The tragedies, like other well-formed artworks, are not phenomenal but transparent for they unveil the chaos from which all phenomena emerge. They confront the audience with chaos by giving the abyssal ground of reality a kind of form.

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Yet the tragedies are not transcultural texts that give an abstract presentation of ‘chaos’ as an idea, but must be read in their context as unveiling a particular form of idolatry that represented chaos as something determinate. The tragedies reveal the chaos that lies beneath a particular notion of validity that lay deep in the Athenian imagination by presenting traditional realities in a new form. This novel form of art that came to be called ‘tragedy’ provides a significant imaginative shift. Instead of presenting the narration of events by a lone Chorus, tragedy presents the judgments and decisions made by the heroes of the traditional myths, judgments that are shown to determine the course of the events. The spectators observe the heroes act and choose, and are confronted with self-certain characters who believe that their action is guaranteed by the gods, by the very fabric of the Cosmos. Yet when two heroes hold antimonic convictions, both equally justified by the gods or by nature, they proceed to destroy each other by those very convictions. The destruction leads the heroes to recognise that they had acted out of a self-deceived error of judgment: that what they thought to be a stable ground was in fact chaos. Their path of action proves not to be the outworking of necessity but the result of a choice.

By representing ancient myths in tragic rather than epic form, tragedy orients the spectators toward their tradition in a new way. The authority of the lone Chorus is displaced for the antimonic confrontation of opposing characters, and the Chorus become merely one voice among many—the voice of tradition—rather than providing a final interpretation of the events. The tragic form refuses to give an interpretation of the action but instead presents the judgments made by each character and the reasoning upon which those judgments are made. The spectators see the inconclusive character of the reasoning upon which the heroes base their decisions and make claims to legitimacy, becoming the jury faced with the most monstrous of crimes. Their entire cultural history is cleaved open and revealed to be the outworking of individual and fallible choices, many of which were highly dubious.

For example, Homer’s presentation of the battle of Troy in the Odyssey is reconsidered by Aeschylus’ three hundred years later in a manner that calls the entire myth into question. In the Odyssey, Agamemnon is forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that the winds would give a favourable passage for his army on their journey to the battle of Troy. He returns from Troy as the triumphant conqueror only to be killed by Aegisthus, who has taken Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra as his lover. While the death of the heroic king after a long and victorious voyage is indeed unfortunate, Agamemnon’s death is not tragic.

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In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, however, Agamemnon meets a different fate. He returns from Troy claiming that his heroic victory was not simply his own but the act of divine vengeance.\(^{47}\) While he is busy heralding his shared triumph with the gods whose supposed ‘protecting power / Sent forth, and brought me home again,’ Clytemnestra awaits him.\(^{48}\) She plays the role of the affectionate wife, laying out a purple carpet to honour his victory. Yet the carpet is not the victor’s path but a funeral procession. Clytemnestra holds Agamemnon responsible for murdering their daughter and brutally kills him when he reaches their home. The Chorus hold Clytemnestra guilty of a grievous crime and swiftly call for retribution, causing Clytemnestra to respond by claiming that her action was justified by Apollo who helped her to see that ‘The guile I used to kill him / He used himself at first.’\(^{49}\) However, the Chorus also hold Agamemnon guilty, for he sacrificed Iphigenia because he valued his glory and his war over the demands of his family. They recognise that his sacrifice was not necessitated by the gods but was to ‘keep morale from sagging / in superstitious soldiers.’\(^{50}\) It was a sin, an error (*harmartia*) that violated the ‘awe that parenthood must claim’ and resulted in his own death.\(^{51}\) We discover that the battle of Troy was not the vengeance of the gods but the outworking of Agamemnon’s ego.

While the Chorus show that error lies with both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, they prove unable to decide on a right course of action in response. The situation is too complex, too fraught with contradictions for the old voice of tradition to prove capable of a response. The spectators are orientated to critically assess the reasoning that each character gives for their actions, but they cannot make sense of the situation with their predetermined ideas of justice. They must balance the competing elements and search for a new path and recognise the limits therein.

For Castoriadis, when we understand the tragedies in their historical context we find that they turn on the collective realization of error and responsibility, orientating the spectators toward a new foundation of validity. The tragic poets lived in a time of transition, where new institutions were emerging within traditional religious practices. They were ruptured, thrown, and saw the

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\(^{47}\) When Agamemnon returns he addresses his countrymen: ‘First, Argos, and her native gods, revive from me / The conqueror’s greeting on my safe return; for which, / As for the just revenge I wrought on Priam’s Troy, / Heaven shares my glory.’ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll. 810–813.


\(^{50}\) Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll. 806–7.

\(^{51}\) Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll. 226, 133.
need for new ways of making sense of human action. They created artworks that are exemplary, prying open an old foundation of validity and revealing it to be inadequate to deal with experience, throwing the spectators onto their own devices. They are alerted to the inescapable (tragic) reality of judgment: that nothing can guarantee the correctness of action, neither divine law nor reason.

This reversal-recognition structure, the process of being destabilised, thrown, and then coming to a new understanding, signals a new relation to self-understanding in the Athenian imagination based on experience and reflection. Tradition is displaced from its position of authority and the task of learning from experience replaces it. Yet tragic self-reflection is not simply the rejection of tradition for a new form of inquiry. Rather, the tragedies transform tradition, establishing a new, critical relation toward tradition where new tools are drawn from a traditional gamut of references. It is not through the rejection of tradition but through the critical confrontation with tradition that the imagination is freed to think more than the concepts it inherits.

Like many philosophers who turn to Greek tragedy, Castoriadis finds the greatest example of Aristotle’s reversal-recognition structure in the tragedies of Sophocles, and in Antigone in particular. He writes against Hegel who argued that Antigone and Creon represent the natural value of the family (physis) and the self-created value of the state (nomos) that come into conflict in ethical life. For Hegel, Antigone and Creon enact their ethical commitments, thereby bringing each right into material being. When each commitment is held to be absolute, right collides with right and each is shown to be one-sided. The spectators observe the mutual justification of both values and find themselves faced with a tragic world where we can be both right and wrong, and where right and right can contradict each other. Yet this collision is not the final say in the matter for Hegel, for by raising the contradiction in a work of art Spirit is able to reconcile nomos and physis and thus remove the narrow purview of each element of social being by drawing their one-sidedness into a new unity.

For Castoriadis, by ascribing Antigone to a greater historical movement Hegel fails to see Sophocles’ conscious confrontation with his tradition. Sophocles’ does not intend to reconcile nature and law but to show that nature can give no law. In other words, Sophocles uses Antigone and Creon to show that neither nature nor law can be called upon as the final source of justification for our action. While each think that they are being true to their own gods, the gods

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of nature or of the city, both act upon arguments that are not only justified by their own gods but that are equally justified by their opponent’s gods. For example, Antigone claims to uphold the law of the gods on the grounds that a brother is irreplaceable when one’s parents are dead, and that if she had a husband or son it would be different. For Hegel this line is immensely significant, showing that Antigone’s commitment to the gods turns on her natural commitment to her family, meaning that she embodies a universal of ethical life: divine law. However, neither divine nor human law recognizes a distinction between the ethical significance of a brother over a father or husband, and we see that Antigone merely finds a convenient justification for her actions in the supposed divinity of her own law. Sophocles’ tragedy does not disclose a rationalist view of the world where right collides with right. Antigone’s notion of right is not simply one-sided but it is her own. Sophocles exposes the significant dilemma involved in appealing to any fixed notion of right. Appealing to either nature or human law cannot guarantee the right cause of human action and neither can they be harmoniously reconciled. In Castoriadis’ mind, Antigone exposes the risk inherent to the political domain wherein any reference to either nature or law capable of guaranteeing the rightness of political decisions is seen to be limited.

Thus the tragedies provide a new criteria for assessing the validity of a claim to legitimacy: hubris. By exploring claims of legitimacy as the practice of human judgment tragedy presents hubris not as the transgression of some natural or divine limit (i.e. in terms of ethics) but as a transgression of the limits of judgment. In the tragic view, hubris is the transgression of the chaotic aesthetic sphere, revealing that the appeal to divine or human laws can occlude the indeterminacy of the decision at hand. We can read tragedy as a civic practice, a kind of ekklesia that draws human judgments before the scrutiny of the jury, the spectators. Just as the ekklesia orientates the jury to a new mode of assessing validity, so does the theatre (theatron, the ‘place of seeing’) orientate the spectators to a critical relation to their tradition. From the vantage of the

55 For Hegel, Antigone’s commitment to her brother is a necessary law endowed to her by nature: ‘Nature, not the accident of circumstances or choice, assigns one sex to one law, the other to the other law.’ Because she represents the divine law of family life, Antigone cannot be recognised in the public sphere. She can, however, be recognised by her brother, meaning that the ‘loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest.’ In Hegel’s mind Antigone is not so much an agent making choices as the embodiment of a universal. Her action is thus necessitated. Hegel, (1977). Miller, A.V. (Trans). The Phenomenology of Spirit. p. 280, 275. Oxford: Oxford Universities Press.
ekklesia or the theatre we see that nothing can guarantee one’s action, neither
divine nor human law. We have only our judgment, our search for a universal
within a complex array of phenomena, to balance the dissonant parts of our
experience and to decide on a course of action that holds them together. Both
Antigone and Creon prove to be guilty of hubris even though one transgresses
the civic law and the other the moral law, for both transgress the limits of judg-
ment by claiming to have an absolute ground. A political regime that orien-
tated by the limits of judgment must maintain the view that when it comes
to political decision making there is only doxa and that nobody possesses an
episteme of things political.56

For Castoriadis, Antigone and Creon represent two limits of judgment that
provide the poles that society must navigate if it is to realise its autonomy. A
society transgresses the first limit, the religious limit, when it expels chaos and
reintroduces it as God, Nature or Reason. In other words, it occludes the chaos
of judgment when it grounds itself on a determinative ontology that claims
to exhaust the world in its signifying power (in Castoriadis’ mind, even the
Marxism of the First and Second Internationals fall under this category). This
position is represented by Antigone. Antigone is not interested in defending
her action in social terms but takes her conception of the divine as immediate,
connected to the very being of the Cosmos (i.e. to nature, to physis). She feels
that her actions are necessitated by the mandates of nature, and it is not until
she is denied recognition by public execution that she recognises her decision
to follow the gods as her own desire for public recognition.57 When she is sen-
tenced to an execution hidden from the sight of the citizens she experiences
terror for the first time as her certainty wavers.58 Terror is the emotion that

56 Castoriadis, The Castoriadis Reader, p. 274. Here Castoriadis builds from Aristotle’s
assertion that ‘practical wisdom (phronesis) is not knowledge (episteme).’ Practical
wisdom is not knowledge for it is concerned with the ‘ultimate particular’, not an object
of knowledge but a perception. It involves the senses and judging a particular situation so
as to realize a particular goal or value. Thus it is akin to Kant’s reflective judgment while
knowledge is similar to Kant’s determinative judgment. Nicomachean Ethics, in Aristotle.

57 ‘And why should I, in my misfortune, keep looking to/The gods for help? To whom shall
I call out/To fight as my ally, when my reverence/Has earned me charges of irreverence?’

58 The pace of the scene accelerates as Creon and the Chorus break into short, chanted
lines (stichomythia), leading Antigone to utter a cry that reveals her terror: ‘Oh! That
ll. 1001.
leads to reversal, for it means that Antigone begins to doubt the postulates that formerly ensured her identity dwelt in the being of nature.

The second limit is represented by Creon and is the tendency of society toward totalitarian justice. This limit is exemplified by a society that believes it can follow a logic or principle of justice that can guarantee the correctness of its action and political outcomes (i.e. that nomos is absolute). Even a society that breaks from the religious side can swing to the opposite mistake by thinking itself to be infallible. Both government and individuals can use such principles and procedures to cover over the risk inherent to judgment rather than taking responsibility for their own actions. Creon recognizes that divine law is not purposive but that it must be instituted though human law if it is to be actively involved in the society. He cannot accept deviation from the law at the demands of anyone’s god, thus killing his son’s lover and bringing destruction upon his entire household. He recognises the hubris of his path only when his family, his natural connection to the earth, lies in ruins. He does not wait for the people or the Chorus to judge him, but freely banishes himself:

[I] have killed unwittingly  
My son, my wife.  
I know not where I should turn,  
Where to look for help.  
My hands have done amiss, my head is bowed  
With fate too heavy for me.59

For Castoriadis, Creon and Antigone represent two kinds of idolatry that occlude the chaotic basis of judgment by holding their ideas to be stable and determinative. They act in the conviction that the correctness of their action is guaranteed in relation to the being of the world whether it be in the form of law or the gods. Both represent a form of hubris, transgressing an unseen limit of judgment in order to justify the legitimacy of their actions. Sophocles’ tragedy presents the chaotic basis of society that entails that nothing can provide a guarantee for justice, not even the gods or the law. This is not to say that the gods or the laws should be ignored, but that if we hold anything as a guarantee it merely occludes the indeterminacy of judgment—the freedom of the imagination to choose, decide and act—that premises our action, thus preventing us from listening to those who see otherwise.

The climax of Antigone, for Castoriadis, is Haemon’s confrontation with Creon. The Chorus anticipates this confrontation in the famous ‘ode to man’ that celebrates the terrifying ability of human beings to build cities and create institutions while recognising their profound failure to control themselves, orientating us to a proper awe of the most unsettling and enigmatic being: the human being. The ode finishes with an instruction, praising the one who is able to weave together ‘the laws of the land and the justice of the gods to which he has sworn.’ This line criticizes both Antigone and Creon. Antigone’s self-deceived motives are exposed when she argues that she upholds ‘divine law’ on the grounds that, when an orphan, a brother is irreplaceable. As for Creon, his reasons are irrefutable, for no city can exist without human laws just as no city can tolerate treason and bearing arms against one’s own country. Sophocles draws our attention to the fact that neither Creon nor Antigone listen to the reasons of the other, insisting on their own, self-sure notion of right. Both approach the situation with a predetermined universal and base their judgment on a closed order of meaning that is irrefutable from the outside. Until they recognise their error when all is too late, neither accept that their view might not exhaust all of reality. When Haemon confronts his father, he recognizes that he cannot prove his father wrong, for within the closure of his notion of right Creon’s reasoning is sound. Rather, he voices what Castoriadis claims to be the play’s main idea, begging Creon ‘not to be wise alone.’

Not being wise alone calls for an enlarged cognition where we recognise that our own take on reality is but one among many. Haemon’s warning leads Castoriadis to the final lines of the play to argue that Sophocles’ ultimately glorifies phronein over thinking alone:

Of happiness the crown
And chiefest part
Is wisdom (phronein), and to hold
The gods in awe.
This is the law
That, seeing the stricken heart
Of pride brought down,
We learn when we are old.

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60 This is Castoriadis’ own, literal translation of the text. More poetically it is rendered ‘Great honour is given / And power is given to him who upholdeth his country’s laws / And the justice of heaven.’ Sophocles. (1974). Antigone. In The Theban Plays. ll. 354–6.
The law that the stricken heart learns once its pride has been brought down is not a law at all, but wisdom, *phronesis*. We find ourselves having come full circle from philosophy to art and now back to philosophy again. Philosophy begins with *thaumazein*, the dehabituation of conventional modes of understanding when faced with the excess that shines from what we see, leading us to wonder, to awe. Tragedy, to modify Aeschylus' words, corrects our tendency to ‘violate the awe that *life* must claim’. ‘Awe’ has immense significance for imaginative freedom, for it draws us into a position that recognises the excess that lies beyond our cognition. It is the fitting response to the excessive disorder of the world, and tragedy orients us toward a proper awe by confronting us with the error and responsibility we occlude through self-certainty, breaking down our selfSure reasons and exposing the reality that nothing can guarantee the correctness of action. Sophocles’ drama presents the chaos on which society is creatively formed, revealing that through being confronted with human catastrophe we find the highest political virtue to be a process of reflecting on experience, actively listening to the reasoning of others and making deliberative judgments based upon the insights we gain. This is, for Castoriadis, what the ancient notion of *phronesis* means. It is the correct operation of judgment, involving the exercise of deliberation wherein we approach a particular situation without a predetermined idea. It involves the weighing up of our perceptions, the opinions of others and the values we hold in order to make a fallible but well-formed judgment. Thus *phronesis* accepts the reality that our immediate opinions often occlude desires that lie hidden, facts to which we are ignorant and opinions that we have not considered. It is a mode of judgment wherein we are ready to be altered and transformed, where the task is to ‘weave together’ the paradoxical demands of human life.

However, Castoriadis’ eagerness to view art as the unveiling of chaos results in a failure to capitalise on the second lesson provided by the Chorus that has been learnt throughout the course of *Antigone*: ‘and to hold the gods in awe.’ This line is ultimately levelled at Creon who rejected the ethical demands placed on him by divine law. Likewise, Castoriadis seems to move from *thaumazein* to the chaos of being without considering the weight of the institutions that bind us. In other words, he occludes the demand of *ethics* that, for the tragic imagination, cannot guarantee righteous zeal as it does for Antigone but *can* call us to stand in awe of the divine law that ties us to family, our children, the gods and ourselves. While Castoriadis attempts to reject ethics for his vision of the political, aesthetic sphere, we cannot reject the demands placed on us by our ethical mores, by our tradition and the aesthetic rules that bind us, no more than we can escape the imaginary institutions of society. What we can do is call them into question and recognise they are not fixed to any
substantial ground. The historical confluence of law and mythical religion in fifth-century Athens did not cause the Athenians to throw away their understanding of ethics, but turned on the awareness that (1) the divine stands at such a distance that to conceptualise the correctness of an action in terms of divine authority transgresses the limits of human judgment, and (2) that the justice of the gods (ethics) still places demands on us.

In the tragic imagination, the distance felt between the gods and the city does not entail that the divine is rejected but that its presence is far enough removed as to render the human agent totally responsible for their own action. The agent is thus required to give reasons for their decisions that are neither self-justifying nor appeal to an extra-social source, yet they are simultaneously held accountable to the values of the gods (justice, truth etc.) that are veiled but nevertheless active in the ethical sphere. In other words, the tragic imagination holds nature and human law in paradoxical tension: at the same time it presents humans as reason-giving and receiving beings (their nature is to be rational) and yet their rationality is radically disconnected from nature. They have the profound ability to make laws that are binding, but these laws are self-created and not ontologically connected to the being of the world. In the tragic view the human ability to self-legislate does not entail a complete break with nature—it does not present humans standing triumphant over what limits them. The tragedies present the paradoxical reality of the being that is both determined yet free, self-created yet bound by its own creation.

Castoriadis polemically over-emphasises our ability to unveil chaos at the expense of recognising the demands of cosmos in the attempt make his primary point heard: that we have no ground to stand on other than the disruptive presence of chaos. Thus his notion of the chaos of being is often misunderstood as a kind of voluntarism, for it seems that imagination is guided by mere will, reducing the social order to Nietzsche’s will to power. Indeed, if chaos can be made present and victorious over cosmos with ease, then Castoriadis’ philosophical project would collapse into a Nietzschean metaphysics of the eternal return where reason is the original creative disorder, operating in much the same way as Deleuze’s ‘aleatory point’.\footnote{See Deleuze. (1994). Patton, P. (Trans). Difference and Repetition. New York: Columbia University Press, and Castoriadis, Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos, p. 139.} For Deleuze, the aleatory point is an original, random creative disorder, where chaos is an endless reordering and thus cannot be truly novel. The meaning that emerges from the chaos of creation is a reconfiguration of the finite substance available, meaning that we are destined to eternal sameness. Yet if freedom is simply chaos then we face a significant problem, for all would be creativity and we would have no
laws or ideas with which to think or judge. In this figuration, humanity would be determined to be indeterminate; its absolute freedom would turn out to be absolute unfreedom.

Yet Castoriadis’ philosophical project does not allow such a conclusion. The notion of chaos as complete disorder causes the paradox of the imagination—that it is both lawless and lawful—to disappear. The lucidity of Castoriadis’ philosophical project lies in his ability to draw this paradox into the centre, finding in Kant’s notion of the aesthetic sphere an exciting philosophical and political vision. The imagination is normative: it forms, shapes and synthesises the sensory manifold and creates laws to which it can bind itself. Thus it both lawful and without law. Even to speak of ‘chaos’ is to draw an aesthetic idea into presence, one that is historically particular to the life-world of antiquity and yet still orientates us to an indeterminate reality. The world of the imagination is meaningful but this meaning is incomplete and always threatened by its own creativity. Philosophy is the attempt to adapt and refine our ideas yet also to keep them open to question, to orient us toward the continued questioning of our ideas in every moment.

The paradox of tradition and novelty in Castoriadis’ project confronts the nihilism of Deleuze’s aleatory point. The radical imagination is a rupturing energy that does not forever play with the chaotic material of nature. Rather, it creates. It does not reconfigure the material available but goes beyond it, meaning that what it creates is both lawful, for it is only intelligible from within its tradition, and lawless, for it is goes beyond its tradition. It takes rule from the aesthetic sphere of human creativity in the form of imaginary institutions and is instrumental in transforming them. The imagination is lawless yet lawful, free yet ordered, constituting the paradox that grounds philosophical thinking and throws imagination onto its own freedom.

Concluding Remarks

For Castoriadis, the tragedies give insight into the limitations of humanity while holding anthropos as a radical question oscillating between inherited and self-created poles. They reveal that philosophy likewise has a paradoxical task: to unveil our fundamental freedom through an ancient tradition. To undertake philosophical thinking is to attempt to liberate oneself from imaginary institutions through the resources found in the tradition of liberation. In elucidating this task Castoriadis leaves a captivating yet an incomplete project. The task is never complete but a constant, creative endeavour to think more than there is. Castoriadis attempts to extend the radical project of self-alteration begun in
ancient Greece into the present, uniting politics, philosophy and, toward the end of his philosophical development, artistic representation in the same project of elucidation and liberation. The Greek tragedies draw us into a historical moment of rupture where the paradoxical realities of human life are brought into view, dehabituating us from inherited modes of knowing and throwing us into the dangerous task of self-understanding and alteration: of freedom.

Castoriadis argues that art is a window into chaos; it reveals that the social world is always open to question and transformation. Yet it holds the paradoxical reality of our being in tension, for it is at once a window into chaos and the creation of a cosmos. It is lawless and lawful, orientating us toward both our fundamental creativity and the structures we have inherited that give from to our experience. For Castoriadis, in the moment of wonder, of *thaumazein*, we find our desire for complete, exhaustive knowledge to be stilled before the terror and beauty of the fractured world. This moment of ‘disinterested pleasure’, he suggests, is the meaning of Aristotle’s *katharsis*, cleansing us of our desire for self-certainty and opening us to the task of practical judgment. Yet it can only be experienced once we have gone through the pity and terror of artistic presentation, for our participation in the artwork is absolutely necessary. In the moment of awe, of wonder, we are transformed. We enter the beginning of philosophy where paradoxical reality is the very energy of thought.

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