The Experience of Peril in Secular Criticism

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The Poiesis of Reading

Perhaps we could acknowledge that all that one can really offer in a piece of writing, academic or otherwise, is a reading (conceived in a wider sense). Which is neither to subjectify too much the experience of reading and writing nor to make unwordly demands of them. Conceiving writing as *a more modest writing of a reading* can make one feel less like a performer of these supposedly separable acts, less like an instructor (in its self-centered nature), or one who has to put on the uniform of this or that way of thinking and reproduce it in the manner of a cult. Reading, in this sense, can be the experience of the untying of any identity, any One—to use Stathis Gourgouris's key thematic in *The Perils of the One* (2019). The peril of the One is primarily, as I will suggest, its poverty of experience, and it is of interest, as I will indicate, that the word *peril* from the Latin *perīclum*, *perīculum*, "danger, trial" is formed from the base of *experīrī*—an attempt, or experiment (Proto-Indo-European root *per³*, to try, risk; in Pokorny [1989] 2. E. per 818), which is a common sense with the word *experience*.

A writing becomes a reading and then the reading becomes a writing, generating a chain of associative dissociations that, when added to those experienced by the original author who is being read and those that he or she read and so forth, generate sufficient opportunities to experience reading and writing as creative, imaginative, and experimental fragments, rather than as identities/representations of the One. To my mind, this is directly related to what Gourgouris notes in his preface:

> *Poiēsis* and *krisis* are practices that are enmeshed in my mind. One can never make a judgment without creating a form. And no created form exists in some pure aesthetic plenitude, transcendentally immune from the politics of its own emergence. We can choose to separate, to isolate—perhaps with the provisional advantage of gaining a certain perspective—but this too is a critical decision, a judgment, and it bears a politics, no matter if we choose to ignore the fact of this politics, and it bears a form, no matter if we can't quite conceive or concede this form's existence. (x)

This indeed complicates the locating of one's ease with the *matter* of writing and its politics, the fact that each act of writing points out a way of existence, our linguistic being of the nonlinguistic gives form to the polis, which then has to be read *and* gazed. For, as Gourgouris writes using the philosophical language of judgment, form, the aesthetics of the good and the right, and transcendence (that, philosophically, also took the name of "simplicity," simple being), the act of writing (and any act for that matter) cannot take place without creating a form or at least partaking/reading in a form—which is to say, in my terms, that an act of writing cannot but be a form-creation of reading, and reading the decreation of that form and the creation of another. Hence, the experience of writing and reading can never be an experience of the One. There is, then, a politics to this that is still often disregarded given that both reading and writing are considered to be a separable and subjective act. Yet writing a reading and reading a writing are political acts in the sense that they are fragments in coincident and discordant threads, cast as persons, things, species, moods, words, spaces and times, fictional or not, which in the potency or aptitude of their manner happen as a form of living—that is, the unmappable horizon of any genuine politics.

It takes an act of imagination to connect one's thought with this fragmented experience of reading and writing, for there is no connection other than an image of thought, an act of the imagination not as an abstract projection but as a sociopolitical experience of coinciding with an unmappable

horizon. We are far from accepting this. I remember the comic moment when a professor of law suggested to his academic and practitioner audience that what they should do to break the chains of positivist conservatism is try their hand, to some extent at least, at automatic writing in their drafting of court speeches and academic articles. This suggestion failed miserably with this audience, but the point I take from this is that an act of imagination (especially a "blind" one) is not to be suggested as a substitute for whatever one wishes to do, for that way one is still caught within the realm of representation. It is instead about learning to see the coincidental (to use a term that Gourgouris employs) and compositional of the (legal/political) imaginary horizon and of the horizon's unmappability. It would have, perhaps, been more effective for the dear professor to indicate more directly the madness of law's formation, the boldness of its judgment, seating at the temple of law to secure the fundamental right to determine what is right as if there is only One law (the transcendental image of One law has two names: Authoritarianism and Empire). One law is a colonial strategy: depoliticizing justice and rightness by rendering them transcendental to the "outside" world but immanent to the legal office. If *that* can be an act of imagination, anything can. But, of course, it is not that simple.

The law's repression of its imaginary origin, the highest power represented as a possession that can/could be had, is an actuality that is ordained/ordered so that a person experiences their political life as a Janus: one side "having" power and the other being able to only actualize a limited extent of power. Destined to live a life where the "source" of power (its ideal or natural form) is elsewhere (heteronomy) than in the now of themselves (autonomy). Hence, the age-old discourses that have been produced over many centuries around heteronomy and/or autonomy, across the Western theological, juridical, and political spectrum, revolve around the same paradox of how to form order *in* the world through a transcendental fold, without being able, by definition, to unfold it *in* the world. Critical attempts to unfold the paradox of transcendental heteronomy and autonomy have either redefined the heteronomous (e.g., Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida), the autonomous, or their relation (e.g., Cornelius Castoriadis, Niklas Luhmann, and Giorgio Agamben); and there is also the attempt to think of an immanence that can only fold in on itself, without relation (e.g., Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). Gourgouris follows such a critical trajectory of a redefinition of autonomy via Edward Said's "secular criticism" and his own theorization of "self-alteration" as the understanding of autonomy (with Cornelius Castoriadis in mind).

For Another Secular Criticism

Gourgouris presents his writing as what he calls, following Edward Said, secular criticism. As he explains in the preface, "The term *secular criticism* belongs to Edward Said and I deploy it very much in his spirit, even if not quite in his language, as a kind of open-ended interrogative encounter with the world that not only disdains but uncompromisingly subverts, battles, and outdoes any sort of transcendentalist resolution of social and historical problems" (xi). In philosophy there are few quandaries as long-standing as the one about immanence and transcendence. It is a quandary because they are conceived in the form of a supposedly paradoxical relation: immanence demands transcendence, and transcendence demands immanence. But aside from this philosophical formalism and its many late-modern binary schisms (and false paradoxicity), there is also the capacity of what Gourgouris names here the "secular imagination." The capacity to observe and conceptualize (or not) humanity's capacity to construct and deconstruct its own cognition and re-cognition. A secular imagination in the absence of external and transcendental authority works toward cognition and re-cognition, unendingly open to the contours of one's existence. The secular that Gourgouris is writing and thinking about, for quite a period of time in his work, is not expressed as a response to a questioning from neither a vantage point of transcendence nor an adage point of immanence. This is a critical gesture toward neither progressive transformation (forever it seems in human history conservatives, but not only, relate to this or that transcendence rendering as progress a colonial projection of universalism) nor regressive deformation. It sets forward a rethinking of what forms the entanglement of social autopoiesis, against naive or manipulative transcendentalisms, as much as conservative or radical immanentisms.

We are aware of the shadow theater on the scene of our old rootedness in the abyss of the dark moon; to us it is as terrifying as it must have been to the ancients (perhaps even more so for us, given that we are also aware of centuries-old failures to name it and "overcome" it). Yet, now, many (and this differentiates us, to an extent, from earlier modern attempts) having become aware of their alienation will it to remain so; they will to remain alienated rather than affirm the abyss. They "will" it, since for many "faith" is the old name for this experience that has waned in gravity. Yet the "will" is derived from the same motor of the transcendental production of order, from the same *oikonomia*. The long history of nihilism at the heart of this pseudodialectic of form and critique, foundation and resistant oracle, supra-religious and underreligious appreciation of the chasm that we are made of,

finally affirmed (as per Friedrich Nietzsche's instruction) has had, for many, the opposite effect of more willful anesthetization, not less.

Trying to put our house in order (whether we called it Kingdom, Empire, Nation, World, Planet, *Oikoumenē*), we have been trying to avoid, hide, dislocate our encounter with the abyss at the heart of our existence. Out of an abyss (the absence of a preset essence or destiny for our species), we have instituted the terra nullius of transcendence. Other animals carry on with their lives, but they never have to ask the question "Who are we?" the way we do as a species. Encountering the outside without relation (even a relation of negativity) threatens the *domestication* of the world that is the goal of every transcendentalism. Instead, think of the "world" more like a corner Viennese coffee shop wherein all the round tables are simultaneously having their conversations, and while you can overhear segments from the ones adjacent to yours, you can't meaningfully relate to those other tables. It is the way of the coffee shop to mutter on different yet coincidental surfaces, including the ones you cannot hear or see. The outside folded within yet still remaining a genuine outside, an open. In contrast, the form of the domestication of the "world" as a "single universe," the one and only world or Kingdom, attempts to conceal its own self-contradiction (its continuous crisis and need for control of the many potential worlds that murmur in the open).

Secular criticism, in my reading of Said's gesture, as Gourgouris movingly reanimates it in *The Perils of the One*, dislocates the desire for an inside and an outside as polarities of the One. Instead, what takes place (rather than taking the place of the One) is the coincidence of an internal and an external complexity (what we used to call transcendence and immanence). The outside has no masters and the internal has no slaves. The key question becomes, and I will return to this below, whether it is desirable that the "internal," having no slaves, becomes a house of masters to ourselves. It is a key question because one may suspect that the survival of self-mastery may just be a microreplica of the imperial logic of the One. Is there a worse fate to having no autonomy (under a heteronomy) than imposing the law to one's self, becoming a subject to yourself?

That this is critical and complex is evident in that this is the same seed of a *krisis* of form that is currently being exploited by populist anesthetization turned passionate rallying nostalgia for the old Kingdoms (in this regard, Trumpism, Johnsonism, Bolsonaroism, Putinism, etc., are similar reactivisms). Each time and once more in a desperate attempt to accomplish, to accustom a single universe, a decorated monochrome *kosmos*, despite everything that continuously incides and cuts such grandiose mon-

ocular ego-projections. Instead, against the force of the long-standing promulgated arrogance to name the master, the elusive One, the less grandiose gardener working in the earthly garden surrounding the palace of the One (Said) observes a multiverse, a cultivation through the continuous making and unmaking of the alterity that we are. In this earthly garden, all our power, whatever one makes of it each time, remains our own not in the sense of a possession but in the sense of a *metamorphosis* (a chance each time to encounter alterity within and outside), to the point where one hopes that power is no more imperial, no more a power that aims to conquer (and silence or withdraw) what is outside it (see Zartaloudis 2021). Yet to remove this desire (for a colonizing power that one possesses and masters), one cannot simply eradicate it or aim to forget it. Violent eradication is an available strategy, but it is not necessary, especially since it rarely works. To look into the threshold of the heart, one must look behind the mountains of the sovereign madness of desire and find, in its beating rhythm, an unmapped heart. Thus, becoming an *autonomos* without a law to give to oneself, other than the always spare room for creativity and self-alteration.

Said's cartography of this unexamined heart points, it seems to me following Gourgouris's reading, to a cardiographic dynamism against the One. This is both political and philosophical, a strategy in response to the place previously occupied by institutional religion. Said (1991: 55) writes of secular criticism that "the conversion of the absence of religion into the presence of actuality is secular interpretation." "Conversion" is a critical word here for me in that if one aims to merely *convert* a present absence, one accepts that the system of *presencing*, another name for the tradition of transcendental metaphysics (as Heidegger and, in their own way, Lyotard, Nancy, Derrida, and Agamben have shown), remains intact. The *presencing* of actuality as the outcome of this conversion would be suggestive of the problem at the heart of this. The schema that, according to Agamben, has defined the paradigm of the form of (paradoxical) sovereignty, and which he argues we ought to remove from within ourselves and our conceptualizations of artistic and political action, is this soothing pseudodialectic that presupposes the presencing of an absence (a ground, an origin, the transcendent One) that is precisely presencing a world through its withdrawal in actuality—so that *actuality* becomes the conversion or transformation of a predetermined negativity.

The relationship between the two polarities of what was originally the description of God's power (*potentia*, *dynamis*) in the Western tradition, potentiality (*potentia Dei absoluta*) and actuality (*potentia Dei ordinata*),

is one of the earliest schemas of transcendentalism.[1] In this way, a potential power is always converted into an actual power, and any act is always related to an absence, an exchange, a spending, a debt, a guilt. How one is to think of power, of what it means to act, and in Said's case of what it means to criticize in the manner of a *secular criticism*, is once more at stake as it has been for centuries. Said (1983: 26) writes, "A secular attitude warns us to beware of transforming the complexities of many-stranded history into one large figure, or of elevating particular moments or monuments into universals . . . Secular transgression chiefly involves moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of limits, the mixing and intermingling of heterogeneities, cutting across expectations, providing unforeseen pleasures, discovering experiences." "Experience" is a key word in this passage. It comes to recalibrate the notion of conversion toward a conversation, or an experience of reading. Self-alienation, the late modern condition of knowing that one is alienated and willing to stay in that condition, is essentially a de-experienciation (voiding the very potency of experience). Akin to Michel Foucault's "problematization"—that is, the exposure of the *making* of something into a problem—de-experiencing is the aim of the impoverishment of experience that preemptively renders experience into a nonexperience, not a going through to a limit as the word denotes etymologically, but a representation of the One each time, a nomos brought to actuality, the subjects of the nomos restricted to being its mere administrators (a nation of self-managers).

When secular critique (understood generally) employs antitranscendence in the manner of merely replacing a transcendence by refilling the void, it appears too self-centered, and it just *fulfills* the absentification of the abyss, finding in the now fulfilled absence the equally immaculate gift of an unforeseen pleasure in a new idol. Religion for a significant number of the faithful entails, in one sense, a form of pleasure and a way of life that is at the same time about one's self-cultivation but also about something bigger than the self, which makes religion so human and yet so potentially powerful and unpredictable. The stance of an anticathedral in conventional secularism (most often a thinly veiled Islamophobia or elitism in the West) is too weak and too artificially dogmatic to be taken seriously. For secular criticism to become a creative and positive social practice, it needs to not "tolerate"

1. The bibliography is very extensive on Aristotle's theory of power (see, indicatively, Makin 2006; Witt 2003) and the medieval distinction as to God's power (see, as a starting point, Courtenay 1990).

or eradicate religion but understand it. And as a part of this understanding, it needs to also understand itself better. The conventional binarism in the West between religion and the secular is a rather shortsighted polemic. In fact, as the history of the institutionalization of Christianism shows us, Christianism places beside its *archē* (origin and principle) the critique of the law. The Law (the Father) has his *own* counterpart (the Son) bringing side by side law and critique (see Schütz 2011). With Christology, the immaculate birth of Christ *and* the victory over death grounds the *vera religio* of the One that ends religion, precisely because law and resistance to the law become coexistent in "man."

In Said's sense, secular criticism aims, however, at avoiding false polemicisms and focusing on what he calls "worldly situations" and being "opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems" (Said 1983: 26). If that is so, he maintains, "then it must follow that the essay—a comparatively short, investigative, radically skeptical form—is the principal way in which to write criticism" (26). It means, then, for me, that a reading is the form of reflection that an essay invites, a reading as relatively short, self-questioning, and unguarded as an essay (at least in its continental sense). If, with practice and for a gracious moment, an essay can mark itself as it is marked by its own limit, then in its ephemeral, contingent relation to its readers, it exposes its own enactment to the ancient use of *hermēneia* (Gourgouris 2019: 12)—that is, as a displacement of identity, any essentializing epistemological facade, so as to experience one-self (author-reader and reader-author) in or *as* a certain immanent "otherness." By "otherness," Gourgouris describes "the indisputably historical experience of living in an imperfect world" (45). The self's own imperfection is not a lack or guilt for something never committed but rather a gesture of what Said called "a congeries of things" that are coincidental. What this kind of praxis of skepticism exposes is that writing and reading in the manner of this secular criticism are, by definition, a transformative process. Such a transformative process, as Gourgouris writes, is secular in the sense that "the metaphysical void is elaborated as an actual condition in the world with definitive consequences" (10). It is in the interest of secular criticism, then, to understand better rather than push away certain religious traditions, which, in fact, contain within them some of the most remarkable discourses over the encounter with the actuality of the world.

This encounter with actuality as a particular experience, its time, yet one that is open to questioning and transformation by its very nature, is not defined by an "ensemble of properties" (a preset transcendental/meaning)

that one learns to recognize, enact, and represent. Unable to rid us of the coincidence with the void, the absence of an essence to our existence, in this irreparable trauma that may grow into a potency, such criticism maintains that there is, inevitably, *krisis*, but no final judgment, or at least "not for us." Placing his approach within Aamir Mufti's (2004: 1–9) "critical secularism," Gourgouris (2019: 10) writes that "the Greek notion of *krisis* means not merely judgment or decision, but also distinction, investigation, interrogation, interpretation, all under the rubric of a performative mind—[which] underlines this elaborative, contingent, mutable, non-systemic, experimental nature of critique." What remains in secular criticism, irreparably so, is the questioning of a nous that cannot but experience, a nous immanent to continuous experimentation. Gourgouris associates this with Theodor Adorno's methodical absence of a method, where the essay is conceived as a "form of praxis that belongs to what he calls 'emancipated intellect,' which [Adorno] characterizes variably as homeless, mobile, experimental, heretic, unbinding, nonidentitarian (all these are his terms)" (11; quoting Adorno 1984: 155). There is nothing universalizable in this approach since the critical praxis of an essay is meant to never turn itself into the sovereignty of a principle. It would be of interest to notice how many religious traditions in the world have also arrived at this point. Secular criticism is by its nature against all monovalent, exclusive (sovereign, national, colonial, imperial, etc.), and separatist projects. This needs to be read as opposed also, in my view, to the naïve secularism that is prevalent as the facade of sovereign and neocolonial ventures today that attempt to appear neutral and universal. The strategy of identifying the secular with the state and in that sense with civil society and the rule of law has defined both sides of progressive and conservative or neoconservative liberal discourses, but it is perhaps by now evidently more problematic than perhaps thought earlier. Secular criticism, conceived in Said's sense, cannot be *identified* with anything, let alone with a sovereign state and its law, as this is antithetical to its very fragmented, experiential, and inquisitive nature of quite literally *making* sense.

What would it mean to think of the polis in a nonmonological manner? This polis is somewhere away from the polis of the chosen, the nation, and so forth. Instead, a polis in entwinement and rediscovery is more akin to a contingent neighborhood—perhaps, a neighborhood of lateness (*Spätstil*), to use the term of Adorno's that Gourgouris (2019: 20) couples with Said's late work and that disrupts the acceptability of normality. Such a polis cannot but arrive at its own normality, yet it does not forget its strains and restraints (family, nationality, otherness, religion, cultural difference, bro-

ken hearts and minds, etc.) If for a moment we were all timid, embarrassed even, strangers to ourselves and each other, on the banks of our contingent names, our lateness could be encountered in a way other than a breach of rules of normality. We dream our strangeness, hide it, forget it, suppress it, yet it is there always late, after the fact, and often its vision becomes more apparent during our national, religious, cultural, identarian catastrophes. We could conceive the lateness of our strangeness as a line of neighbor-hood in the middle of time (rather than as an origin or end), one that serves the recognition of a civility of irreparably unresolved beings. This paradoxal way of thinking may sound too abstract, but this is to be expected given that our linguistic being has the peculiar modality of being always an other to our nonlinguistic being. So Gourgouris (2019: 25) puts it with reference to Said's late work on an "anti-humanism humanism": "These apparently self-contradictory assertions are not driven by some perverse desire to confuse but, on the contrary, by stern commitment to elucidate the underhanded and deceitful ways in which identities—here, both the 'humanist' and the 'anti-humanist,' but in essence *all* identities—are produced and cultivated." Attempting to cover up our inessentialism (that we have no fixed nature, destiny, or purpose) through monological transcendence (or immanence for that matter), we invest our societies with a modality of power that becomes the exclusive motor for the production of reality out of a reservoir of potency that is somehow always exhausted.

The Power of Powerlessness

Gourgouris engages, for this reason, with Clastres's study of what he called "societies without power" in contrast to modern societies that are "with the state": "everything for Clastres begins and ends with primitive soci-ety, defined more directly as society without a state, or, as he was eventu-ally to call it, society *against* the state" (30). Gourgouris continues:

> society *with* the state, or society *coupled with* the state, in the very direct sense of the sort of society that desires the state, that desires to become one with the state. (This element of desire for oneness is indeed the epistemological crux of the problem I'm discussing.) So, according to Clastres, we study the primitive not to understand bet-ter the process of civilization, but to understand the moment prior to civilization as an instance that may teach us to overcome the per-ils of civilization. Overcoming civilization does not mean becoming primitive; very simply, it means relearning—*remembering* (and the

> matter of memory is equally crucial in this discussion)—how to free
> ourselves from domination. (31)

The key question becomes, against any nostalgia or primitivism (conservative as much as progressive): "how such societies refused to succumb to the primary division of a command-obedience structure, and what specific mechanisms, rituals, or performativities they developed in order to enact this refusal" (31).[2] The impetus for doing so, in Gourgouris's sense, is to understand the "democratic imaginary" toward an-archic (in the literal, not in the contemporary political sense) self-governing, averse to any kind of monarchical power (33). To achieve autogestion, the tribe, as Clastres shows, must at all costs ensure that its power does not become external to the tribe and that no one in the tribe holds the power in a real sense, otherwise this would immediately produce social inequities (34). With a similar incentive, Gourgouris turns to Étienne de La Boétie, who calls voluntary servitude a condition of being denatured (*dénaturé*) combined with what Castoriadis has named "the self-occultation of society" (38). Gourgouris writes,

> "Voluntary servitude" is, from the standpoint of standard ontological grammar, a nonsensical concept because the agent is placed in the position of both master and servant simultaneously, being and acting as both subject and object of desire at one and the same time. By the same token, in terms of political grammar, the concept of voluntary servitude and the discourse it mobilizes nullify the concept (and discourse) of sovereignty in conventional terms. In both cases—in both grammars—voluntary servitude is an ill-logic that, as Abensour has argued, opens the way to the abyss of unworldliness, to a condition where subjective power loses all contact with the world that makes it be, that gives it meaning. (38)

What voluntary servitude presumes, La Boétie shows in the middle of the sixteenth century, is that power is a construction, while mastery produces nothing without the volunteer servants of a phantasmatic projection of power. Gourgouris writes, "By an incomparable piece of magic, the agent of the action vanishes, producing a void that then becomes the basis for what is perceived as external authority" (39). The original agent, the founder,

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2. See Clastres 1994: 96. I am following Gourgouris's citation in the text as AV followed by the page number.

erases his steps in the name of a power that is presupposed as being else-where than in what is produced in its name.

It is worth noting that this knot, as Jean-Luc Nancy (1997) (who sadly passed as I was writing) names it, the (k)not of negativity, in this instance, has been interrogated in philosophy as the inquiry over transcendental foundations that appear, similarly, as a mysterious projection of shadow theater (the logic of fundamental presuppositions, origins, principles, etc.).[3] Yet philosophy, by claiming to be able to think of everything, inevitably notes the problem of the distribution of questions (and answers), for if there is a distribution, someone is doing the distributing. Does philosophy have/ need a master? The response to this question has come in many forms, to speak only of some modern Western philosophers as examples, whether in Heidegger's critique of negativity and nihilism, in Nietzsche's affirmative nihilism, in Deleuze and Guattari's plane of immanence, or in Agamben's non-negative ontology. Gourgouris (2019: 39) notes "the phantasmatic pro-jection of power" that must soon after conceal its presence in order to glo-rify the authority of its sovereignty or Oneness. In our time this is relatively easy to miss since its very purpose is to point toward the glorified end, to work the present in the name of that end (saving the nation; serving God's will; founding or protecting democracy, the market, culture, etc.). Yet in con-trast to philosophical endeavors, in political, moral, and economic thinking and practices, the problem is not really empirical, whether externally, in the sense of whether one can notice it or not, or internally, in the sense of whether one "knows the right thing to do but does the opposite." The prob-lem lies in the phantasmagorical effectiveness of the call of the master, the "self-occultation" and the voluntary servitude it demands in the name of

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3. Nancy (1997) develops his logic of the knot in a positive sense:

> The (k)not: that which involves neither interiority nor exteriority but which, in being tied, ceaselessly makes the inside pass outside, each into (or by way of) the other, the outside inside, turning endlessly back on itself without returning *to* itself. . . . The whole question is whether or not we can finally manage to think the "contract"—the tying of the (k)not—according to a model other than the juridi-cocommercial model (which in fact supposes the bond to have been already established, *already presupposed as its own subject*: this is the founding abyss or decisive aporia of the *Social Contract*). To think the social bond according to another model or perhaps without a model. To think its act, establishment, and binding. (111)

salvation or peace (the concealment of the problem by an overoptimistic hope). The manner of this negativity essentially effects a separation thesis (masters/slaves) presented as a threshold between the real (actor) and the phantasm (his power), the actuality (the will to serve) and its potency (the reservoir of power within which the subjects partake but which they have exchanged for their security). This is based on the production of a self-referential relation of servitude *as* mastery (voluntary servitude). In denial, this is a phantasmagorical "overcoming" of the threat of nihilism (and the responsibility that the void demands) that threatens both the masters and those all too willing to serve them.

The will to evade the actual absence of an external authority or foundation sustains the ritual conjuring of reality as a conjuring that somehow has all its energy spent in the production of a normality (of servitude). The language of this spending in the Western imaginary is based on a reading of Aristotelian *dynamis*. Aristotle speaks of "power" in terms of *energheia* (act) and *dynamis* (potency), but the truth is that the two are hardly clear from each other. *Energheia* is perceived in numerous interpretations as act/actuality, but perhaps it is the word *energheia* (to be within a potency or power) that we are still trying to understand rather than *dynamis*/*adynamia* (potency/impotency in relation to an actualization).[4] Spent, always-already, philosophers say to note the problem of negativity. An energy spent (i.e., the will to serve as the exhaustion of the potency a subject has as a free subject, master of itself) is a paradox in that while it presents itself as the Master (in potency), it serves (in actuality). Agamben has shown that this paradox mirrors the paradox of divine and secular sovereignty.[5] Yet every energy, *energheia*, every act that is inseparable from its potency (including its potency to not become active/actual that characterizes our peculiar species in a most intriguingly painful way, as Aristotle has shown in the pair that he thinks together as *dynamis*/*adynamia*, retains the capacity to one day realize that it has become its greatest enemy. Sociality becomes security, living becomes warring by other means, an impressively effective mass-narcolepsy.

The once noted paradox in philosophy has shifted in the terms of a capitalist political economy, democratic social mediatization as de-*energheiazation*, the ever-expanding and nullifying spectacle in which

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4. For an introduction to this question, see Zartaloudis 2020, with further references.
5. See Agamben 1998.

everything shines as value and so forth. Gourgouris writes, "La Boétie proceeds to an extraordinary gesture. He exempts from the realm of desire only one thing: 'There is only one thing which, I know not how, men do not possess the force of desiring. It's liberty. . . . Liberty alone, men uniquely disdain for no other reason, it seems, than because if they desired it they would have it. It is as though they refused to make this precious acquisition only because it is too easy' (SV, 181/195)" (40).[6] In my reading, inspired by Gourgouris's, freedom is not desirable in actuality because it is the presupposed Master-position in potency. In this pseudodialectic the form of the exchange spends potency in actuality and pretends to have exhausted it. As a result, to give up your freedom in order to serve the master (who represents your very self) is the supreme act of mastery over one's desires. Interestingly, in a different yet proximate context, the Franciscan monks' renunciation of their will in the name of apostolic poverty was considered to be the supreme gift to God. The will is in itself conceived as something that can be spent, something that is willed *into* action is something that is exhausted/made in its actualization. In this way, the name holder of the paradoxicity that sets up the knot between desire (mastery) and denial (servitude) is the apparatus of the will itself, displacing the person who wills by holding his or her power outside the actualized deed as a debt.

Freedom is considered a paramount need and a pleasure for our species. Yet it really *makes* every difference how freedom is conceived. To sense La Boétie's sentiment, far removed from his time and yet still radiating in ours, the notion that freedom is "naturally" so presumes that paradoxically freedom requires a grounding, a foundation or source other than itself. Gourgouris describes this precisely as follows:

> Let us assume, following a psychoanalytic logic, that any possession produces a lack in turn. In this case, the possession of liberty produces another desire that runs counter to the desire in possession, a desire that is truly other. If we extend ourselves along these lines, we would likely reach the conclusion—perverse, no doubt, within psychoanalytic terms—that the desire for servitude is predicated on the possession of liberty, insofar as this possession produces an otherness as its lack and therefore a desire for it. And, in a peculiar way,

6. The references to La Boétie's *Le discours de la servitude volontaire* are marked by Gourgouris in the text as SV followed by the page number, with reference to the French edition by Lefort and Clastres (Lefort, Clastres, and La Boétie 1976) and the English translation by Schaefer (Schaefer and La Boétie 1998).

> we will have thus returned to La Boétie's original paradox: voluntary servitude, submission as the mastering of a desire. (40)

Servitude as "predicated on the *possession* of liberty" (my emphasis) is the outcome of considering that the will can will its own withdrawal. Such a negative form of self-servitude or self-withdrawal has been exploited by all ideologies across time by turning it into a pseudoparadox. Such a pseudoparadox is the Western form of the individual/collective will *and* sovereignty. In the example of the master and slave relation, sovereignty of the master and the slave's withdrawal of willing their freedom are not only formed interdependently but in the Western imaginary have the same form (Agamben has shown this with great clarity as to both the will/power of the individual and the will/power of the sovereign). A real paradox is a contradiction between two different things, something like a logical cramp, an undecidable, whereas a pseudoparadox is either the setting up of a paradox that is only seemingly so because the two things set in logical opposition are not really different or because they are set up as a pseudoparadox only in order pretend to resolve it when in reality the aim is to evade the true paradox concealed by it.

Only the construction of a potentiality (power) to will anything (as an absolute power) can enable the willing of nothing (nihilism) or the willing of servitude in its actuality (the withdrawal of the will in the present). What Agamben problematizes as the use of a pseudo-state of exception in legal terms with regard to the foundation of sovereignty—that is, as a space within which preemptively the sovereign can will anything, freely and absolutely so—La Boétie conceives, in my reading, at the other binary end of this spectrum as the place of natural liberty, an absolving liberty that can do the "unthinkable"—that is, withdraw itself, become voluntarily servile. Yet while these paradoxes can appear as dice that only philosophers would roll, they have supported the edifices of Western power and its imperialistic political, social, and economic strategies for centuries. Much like Agamben reading Benjamin in suggesting that one should aim toward a real (and not artificial), affirmative state of exception encountering the void of our existence, one could conceive of a real paradox that is actually productive, in contrast to the artificial paradox that is a negativity (a concealment of the void, a will that withdraws itself before the feet of the master, one's own shadow). When the master is one's self, one has to live a double life, a fantasy (of mastery) and a reality (of servitude). I read Gourgouris's orbit as within this critical navigation.

It has been commonplace for those in power, whether mortal or immortal, to invest their power-projection upward to absolute heights, for only then can their actually mundane powers (and their impotencies) be invisibilized. There was one move yet to come, though, for the retired masters of ourselves, which in late modernity seems to be accomplished: to explicitly know that this is a fake mastery, a "self-alienation" to use the old term, and yet to desire nothing more after knowing it to be so. This is the fourth course in the meal of mastery since it follows the paradoxical logic to its conclusion, from a presupposition (Nature) to a position (Mastery, Will, Liberty), to self-absorption (Servitude, Subjectivity) and nihilation (Knowingly serving the fake source of Mastery as one's freedom). For La Boétie what is betrayed and left behind by the assumption of voluntary servitude is the original state, a nature within which freedom reigns. Indeed, to imagine and presuppose freedom as a natural sovereignty is the common root of the problem, whether one imagines it as libertarian (La Boétie) or as brutish (Hobbes)[7]—self-erasing, or self-forgetting, to refer to Gourgouris's expression. La Boétie's logic passes from "voluntary servitude to the involuntary memory of servitude" (41), where the forgettability of the self and the natural liberty of the self are presupposed as an identity. Only if the will to live is imagined as a "bare" (*nuda*) natural state (will) can masters invest it with variable *degrees* of entitlement and freedom, in potency and actuality. But this *phallogocentrism*, to remember Jacques Derrida, attempts to magically transpose a natural liberty (or sovereignty) and a bare life (to remember once more Agamben's and Benjamin's critiques of sovereign power), that are both constructed in such a way so that they cannot be simply ex-posed. When servitude is voluntary to the second degree whereby one realizes that one is voluntarily serving another, but then wills it to remain so, the will *to will* becoming the will *to not will* (an identity of the self *produced* by a negation of the self, a self-absorption, an anthropophagic power), the possibility of exposure is surpassed, out-maneuvered by the cunning vertigo that is this serving of God, Freedom, Nature and so forth, anthropocentrically.

Returning to Clastres, who wrote his famous essay on La Boétie that Gourgouris rereads, the question is reposed as to "whether humanity's desire for submission is innate or acquired and, moreover, for understanding the paradoxical nature of how an acquired desire can in fact become

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7. See Gourgouris's analysis (2019: 41–42).

innate" (42). This question is modal in the sense that it is a modality or a mentality, it is akin to the question of "Is violence natural or acquired?" that throughout history has been posed and answered in many ways, without questioning the presupposition it is grounded in. When the state historically becomes the preferred form of lesser-domination, a government by consent, premised on the monopoly of violence conceived as an exit from the terrible natural state of violence, it exposes this artifice of the "natural" but continues to utilize its schema. What permits this transference? Gourgouris writes, "For Clastres the institution of the state is not merely the establishment of domination over society. It is the establishment of a relation, of a coupling, whereby the explicit signs of domination are occluded by fostering a self-willed love for the state, a sense of necessity, and a drive to become one with it, which produces in turn the modern state's characteristic permeation of all registers of social existence" (43). The state seizes the denaturation process by establishing the difference between the natural and the cultural (or political) so that its citizens can be quite literally "instituted" by being transposed into another "new" state (this is also the logic of "bare life" as a fiction that is used by juridicalization in order to juridify life that Agamben critiques). To love the state and to love the law, to become one with the state and with the law means that your desire and will become an "undeconstructible paradox" in the name of certainty and security. Gourgouris writes, "The 'new law that rules society' is, in this respect, a desire to love the origin, to couple with the origin—of power, of course, but that's the least of it. Insofar as it is also origin, authority becomes the singular source of primary meaning in a situation where social fragmentation erases the possibility of seeking (and making) meaning within the social domain" (43). In a sense, then, in our own situation today, quite far from his time and yet quite close to La Boétie's words, it could be said that the pseudomatheme of freedom (as nature) turning to voluntary servitude (denaturation) is the onto-political presupposition of the economic management of a human being as a legal and moral person (the reenactment and administration of living in the form of the person—a denaturation—in the name of security and freedom). As Clastres puts it, "Such is [La Boétie's] new presentation of man: denatured, yet still free, since he chooses alienation. Strange synthesis, unthinkable conjunction, unnamable reality (AV, 98)" (43).

What is interesting in Clastres is that, Gourgouris explains, "the figure of potential power (that is, the very thing society wants to impede) must not be lost. Its place must remain defined" (47). What remains of the throne/figure of power is an empty figuration, in Clastres's interpretation, defining

a place that is not to be occupied, not now, not ever[8]—which is to say that this paradigm of precaution against the monology of power that Clastres studies has been usurped by modern theories of the rule of law and radical democracy to the opposite direction. Does this schema, in fact, not sustain rather than reject the schema of power that Oneness requires? To have a tribal chief in potency that is prevented from actually being a chief, is at least to us a comic strategy against the pseudoparadoxes of power that negativity gives rise to. It is a radical gesture of affirmation, the affirmation of our limits, in that the temptation to abuse power remains. Gourgouris notes the brief but radical reforms introduced to a similar end against abuse of official power in ancient Greece. In the attempt by liberal discourses, across the spectrum, to act in the name of that empty throne (whether it is named national sovereignty, rule of law, representative democracy, or radical democracy), I sense mostly a compromise of comfort. This way some can assume power without bearing the responsibility, while those that become subjects to this power can have responsibility only for their actuality. The majority of the people has found comfort in this. But, it seems to me, that reality has proven more complex and unpredictable than expected by such discourses and power-investments. Social systems are now autopoietic, widely functionally differentiated, and therefore processual (despite the occasional breakdown or irritation), which is to say that the emptiness of the throne has been overtaken by the autopoietic systemism that observes social systems operate (observe themselves) in a largely self-referential manner, but which remains inaccessible to all (there is no system of systems).[9] The ironic effect of this is that it has displaced and dispersed agency, autopoietic autonomy has nearly erased the self (*autos*) from the seat of a supposed protagonist. The empty throne actually needs no masters, and the masters cunningly are content to have a mastery without power (i.e., without consequences to themselves).

Gourgouris reading Clastres, it seems to me once more at the right moment for us, insists, "The real target is the state, that is, the condition

8. There is a long history in structuralist and post-structuralist thought of engagements with the presupposition of a degree zero—the "empty signifier" in semiotics (F. Saussure; J. Derrida), a "zero-institution" (C. Lévi-Strauss), the "empty throne" (E. Kantorowicz; G. Agamben), and the "empty space of power" (C. Lefort), among others—that in Western conservative as well as leftist ideologies of the twentieth century became of renewed interest, critical or not.
9. For an introduction to Niklas Luhmann, whom I have in mind here, see Hans-Georg Moeller 2012.

of a[n] external, autonomized, singular source of power, which the chief, though a reminder of it, is nonetheless deliberately and concretely prevented from achieving. The production of refusal, of disobedience, is thus not merely an anarchist gesture, but an outcome of defensive protection of the collective cohesion, a defensive affirmation of non-power against the threat of being conquered by power" (47). If there is however nothing left to "resist" in the old-European sense, given the functional differentiation of social systems that have absorbed critique as part of their systemic process, it means that our equally old understanding of political transcendental figures (Nature, God, People, Nation, Law of law) can no longer conceal that they are attempts to hold on to a figure that is equally impotent as its servants. In this predicament, the move that remains, and it always remains for our species, is to look into the eyes of our *planē* (the wandering *and* erring into the unknown that we are), "detached from any message," transforming language as a network of signs into a poetic language where value precedes meaning, anew. To reside affirmatively in this means to render the only externality of language as the unknown, the only self-reliant "elsewhere," and through that to transform the local and the planetary scales of politics using new means. Gourgouris writes,

> This is precisely the order of myth, as I have argued repeatedly—not a desire for transcendence (for no otherworldly telos exists), but a desire for transformation, where the desired form remains permanently unknown and unknowable. The order of myth breaks open the established externality of language we have come to take for granted in monotheistic societies. It produces an order of internal discourse that shields the community from the miraculous Word establishing an autonomous, self-reliant elsewhere. (48)

This indicates the peculiar equality that is found in affirmative nihilism; while one remains particular, "each one is of no more and no less worth than any other" (48). These traces, values before they are signs, or value-signs, register as a collective memory that there is no mystery in mastery (one can will it or will its opposite). The open secret of the instituted tribal memory (let's call it "law") is essentially the absence of a Law of law, not its disappearance because of corruption or underdevelopment but its nonexistence. It is precisely because there is no Law of law, no external source of power, that this must be ritually remembered. The tribe maintains the schema of desire but defies its telos. Gourgouris, notes, differentiating his analysis at this point from Clastres's:

> Indivisibility is the foundational myth, society's law engraved on the body, which not only makes law constantly present but is meant to refute, tangibly, law's externality. The law is literally incorporated; it lives in the temporal domain of the body. The body is the terrain where mythic time and historical time are interwoven. . . . And yet, there is a silence regarding the actual moment when the body becomes open to inscription, open to receive the memory of history. There is something terrifying about this moment, which Clastres stops short of addressing. (49)

The problem is then posed anew:

> The sealed structure of commandment that abolishes any order of command also erases its inaugural gap: the fact that in the actual moment of inscription, in this synchronic cut in historical time, the law as history and the law as ever-present memory reveal a certain doubleness, a certain gap. The erasure of this gap, in the name of defending indivisibility, might also erase the possibility of interrogation of the law, which would be the key in ultimately defending society against the law's external singularity, defending society against the state. (50)

The self-institution of Indian society, Gourgouris notes, retains the relation to a transcendental source, only one that it strategically keeps radically empty of potency, spent (50). The mythic state within which the inaugural law is placed by the Indian society is able to be external, while erasing the command of its *archē*, through a magical withdrawal eased on the basis that the Indians are partaking in mythic time by being composed in the divine realm.

This is not dissimilar to the magical tactics of a long line of Western foundations (including legal ones) where the originator of the *archē* also disappears behind trees, rivers, time immemorial, gods, myth, and so forth; and where the subjected appear to accept this fact by gradually partaking more and more in or as the origin (nature, faith, reason, nation, race, including in Christian foundations of the Western polis and its law, the device of the will). Gourgouris notes critically the similarity and circularity of these magical schemas. He writes, "It is a classic instance of being entrapped in the 'Western' metaphysics of power. It accepts for a fact society's voluntary disavowal of its self-institution: in other words, the self-occultation of autonomy that produces a heteronomous symbolic universe—the bane

of all religions that claim an ontotheological theory of the origin of society" (51). Referring to Claude Lefort's reading of Clastres, in order to enhance support for Clastres's reading of the Indian exterior foundation that does not become authorial or present, Gourgouris emphasizes the opposition of Clastres's reading to monotheistic modernity. Having said that, if one notes the way in which Christian monotheism salvaged itself from the Trinitarian danger of polytheism (via the *oikonomic* logic of Kingdom and *Oikos*, Creation and Government, God and "Man-God," One and Multiplicity), I wonder if the schematism of negativity at play here does not find a juncture between the Indians' anti-Oneness and the Christian economy of powers, where the two meet despite traveling in different directions. I will return to this later.

The price to pay for maintaining this strategy against the One, in Clastres, is that the immanent centrifugal logic of the primitive society is a state of war. Not a state of war against all but a state of war against any attempt to homogenize. Clastres writes of this element, "The war machine is the motor of the social machine; the primitive social being relies entirely on war, primitive society cannot survive without war. The more war there is, the less unification there is, and the best enemy of the State is war. Primitive society is society against the State in that it is society-for-war (AV, 166)" (quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 53). Society-for-war is in fact an exposure of a current and growing aspiration in some of the concentric circles of the Left and the Right in the name of a turn to the centrifugal principle of autonomy (whether in the name of nationalism or liberty or both). Clastres writes, "Each primitive community wants to remain under the sign of its own Law (autonomy, political independence) which excludes social change (society will remain what it is: an undivided being). The refusal of the State is the refusal of *exonomy*, of exterior Law; it is quite simply the refusal of submission, inscribed as such in the very structure of primitive society (AV, 166)" (quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 54). Gourgouris asks critically at this point, "Could it be that prolonged conditions of war may produce war itself as a singular fantasy?" (54–55). This, Gourgouris reminds, is the paradox that Foucault read in Clastres on this particular issue, and with special regard to the false belief that the state and the rule of law have eclipsed war. What is more complex to consider is what Gourgouris observes with regard to the justification of primitive societies in preferring constant war: "The claim is that the continuous upheaval of war as a constant repetition secures ungrowth, unchangeability: a strange proposition, not only logically but politically. I take it as a rhetorical gesture, for no society is possible as an unchangeable entity; in the case Clastres describes, one can say at best that change takes place inordinately slowly,

almost imperceptibly" (55). This interests me because these concepts of growth and change are so endemic to the political and social conceptions of empirical realities that then affect perceptions, policies, and the critique of policies. Growth, change, development, and the like are horizon-forming concepts (predefining a spectrum in order to control it). For what it is worth, I remain cautious of change and antichange moves, politically. Gourgouris's observation that change in a primitive society is almost imperceptibly slow due to the preference for constant warring, points to an element of observing social change as contingent and much slower than one expects. Toward challenging what he names "monological/monovalent attitudes and the very process of identity formation with an elaborate process of self-interrogation, of staging oneself as an other" (56), Gourgouris writes, "Only an internal otherness, whose source would be an immanent desire (constitutive of the human animal) to alter its world, would liberate society's radical transformative potential. A society against the state is a society against external otherness" (58). The observations and theorization of Clastres's are worthwhile, in Gourgouris's pursuit, for pointing toward "the aversion to oneness" (57) as an equal if not primary mode of politics toward a politics of internal otherness. To this I turn in the next section.

Not Another Political Theology

An aversion to oneness as an exterior nomos, in a rather unexpected manner, characterizes in our modernity the society of functional differentiation (so that we have separated systems of law, economics, culture, science, art, religion, etc.). This is even more unexpected perhaps when its similarity is observed with the Trinitarian dogma of Christianity. The construction of the Christian faith at the critical moment when it was chosen by Emperor Constantine to become the Roman Empire's official religion is based, as Anton Schütz and Marinos Diamantides (2017: 29) argue in *Political Theology: Demystifying the Universal*, on the historical need to prove its superiority: "But in order to prove its superiority the new faith needed to stick to a coherent creed—a difficult task, given its components: the extreme theological transcendence of the divine one, and the equally extreme immanence of the crucified." This may seem irrelevant these days to most because its essence has almost vanished, but its image and mode of governance remain. The Trinitarian dogma was not a mere theological abstraction but a political act so that Christianity would not remain a "mosaic of geographically differentiated religions, resembling the colorful disorder of local city-

gods and city-goddesses characteristic of the religious situation under the older polytheist deal. The capital in oneness gained by the new Christian deal would have been lost. Thus, in order to give the Holy Trinity 'standing,' 'identity,' a name under which it could be legitimately governed, heavy construction work was needed" (29). Between the two already evident poles of the Divine Father and the Divine Son/Man, transcendence and immanence, there had to be a convincing settlement, a common polis where the two could cohabit and institute the Kingdom. This settlement (which had been remarkably successful at least up until the eighteenth century) could only be resolved by an equidistant third pole, as Schütz and Diamantides write,

> an equator between the poles, conferring a new type of being-in-time on what would otherwise remain a mere relationship, only a trilateral setting will do, with the third element sharing the same level as the two others that it supplements. The construction of the Holy Trinity from the first Synod (Nicaea 325) onward, of one God in three hypostases or persons, succeeded in creating a God who, without ceasing to be a person, was also a triad of persons, even three persons. (12)

In a manner that is particularly relevant to the focus of Gourgouris's analysis, this formed one of the most successful forms of integrating transcendence and immanence. But it would be a mistake to think that the Trinity can be studied as a collection of separate units that somehow converge toward a *political* imagination of sovereignty. The dogma of the Trinity is much more than just a principle or a theory, it is a theologico-institutional edifice, conceived as "an *oikonomical* intelligence that is constantly at work" (30).

This is Agamben's (2011: 31) core point in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. The Trinitarian Christian *oikonomia* is "an activity of self-revelation and government, of self-revelation in the service of government, and that means, in turn, of care for the world." No longer a theological dogma, a merely elective belief system, but a government of the household-world and its creatures. Self-revelation is coincidental, in this manner, with self-governance and autonomy. This is not the old schema of a transcendental governance structure, an exonomy, but rather the immanent praxis of government in relation to the transubstantiation of the transcendent One (power, potency) in actuality. A praxis that is framed—and this is a core feature of Western legal and political imagination from the Middle Ages to this day—as a binary relation of "absolute" and "limited" power. This model of a power has two faces, like Janus, *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*, or absolute power (potency) and limited power (act), sovereignty

and government or administration. It was usurped by the Occidental king and the prince, then by the nobleman, and later by the bourgeois individual and by the system of representative democracy of the nation-state. Through this program, by no means a matter of linear progression or development, but usurpation and strategy mixed with historical contingency, we find ourselves at the late modernity of functional differentiation—that is, the fact that we no longer live under a stratification where a monarchical superior One steers (or better hopes to steer) every political matter. In this situation the schema of absolute and limited power has not dissipated but transformed and adapted to the absence of the One, whether through its vacuous but effective spectacularization in the name of its nostalgic past glory or through its hooking of all under the spell of individual freedom with the ever-renewed, but unfulfillable, promise of a happy end. Hence, "functionally differentiated," for present purposes, means that we are no longer living in a world in which the political system is endowed with a monarchical–hierarchical superiority in power enabling it to "steer" any and every nonpolitical happening. The Schmittian nostalgic veneration of politics (earlier Western-colonial, now also Putinian-Eurasian), as being gifted with the outstanding and singular honor of speaking in the name of the "highest degree of intensity," does just that: it assigns to politics a monarchical–hierarchical superiority. Its gluttonous desire to make everything the matter of a political/sovereign decision, however, results eventually at the opposite end.

For Gourgouris (2019: 108–9) this resembles "the history of secularization itself, through which it achieves a paradoxical condition: On the one hand, it expands the domination of Christianity even further, to extents unfathomable even by the Pauline ambition of universal expansion. On the other hand, it produces the social imaginary (in the last instance, unavoidably Nietzschean) that will dare proclaim a horizon beyond Christianity, even if such a horizon could only be a void." The naive notion that secularization was the dismissal or even the abolition of religion and that either against it or in its place something else takes hold that is nonreligious, is ahistorical. To start with, and I cannot venture on this for long here, "religion" in the contemporary sense (but also to an extent earlier in human history) refers to so many different and varied occurrences and uses that replacing "it" is in itself a definitional impossibility, as well as an arrogance of immense proportions. As if that was not enough of a problem in such secularist polemics, there is an even bigger problem on the horizon, for apart from, in effect, having then the same difficulty in defining the nonreligious, a greater arrogance is projected—that of a secular future foretold. Gourgouris writes, "In effect,

Christianity is incomprehensible without assuming the impossible identification of the divine and the human in a single figure that is at once both individual and total and, as a sort of protean substance, can assume the form of either or both together, as the occasion demands" (126). As we saw, it is more than a duality, but the real problem is not the dogmatics of this or that religion, it is that these theological doctrines and theses are perceived by secularists as nonmodern, as medieval mindsets that bear no relation to the modern. The modern tradition, however, is intimately related to the differentiation of "modernity" that Christianity originates via the revolutionary Western Church. In addition, we tend to confuse "Christianity" with a merely theological entity because of Carl Schmitt's selective and polemical standpoint, to a significant extent an invention of his own according to which, especially among many of his readers, the Church was replaced by the state (with the singular exception of the expropriations of the German Church after the Napoleonic Wars; see Schütz and Diamantides 2017: 79). What Schmitt, furthermore, famously refers to as "theological concepts" in relation to political concepts at stake are the product of a particular moment in the history of Occidental Christianity, a late invention of the second millennium CE (see chap. 5). Secularization is a much longer process that forms as a distinctive force of Western Christianism. The key example that Schütz and Diamantides provide is "the process by which the revolutionary Western Church, pushed by the Gregorian reform programme, took up the task of supplying European society with a strategy of social differentiation that would lead to the creation of the unprecedented entity called the university; this was followed by a sequence of centuries (including those of the Protestant reform and European religious war) marking the Church's slow retreat towards a merely 'spiritual' role" (80). This secularization certainly began much earlier than what is understood as (late) modernity, and it cannot be dissociated from Christianism. The claim that secularization, then, is intimately linked with the Western Church is historically based. Schütz and Diamantides put this with precision: "Far from acting as an eventual correction addressing theological concepts from a non-religious perspective, secularisation goes all the way back to the inaugural centuries of Western natural theology, understood as a field dedicated to the praxis of presenting and defending claims to validity in relation to God, a specifically instituted process of continuous inquiry—we would speak of an 'academic discipline.' All or most of this happened around the dawn of the twelfth century" (80). This is not to deny that there is a historically competitive relationship between the Church, when it claimed the highest degree of appellate jurisdiction across

Europe, with the prestate principalities and beyond till our time, but that this relationship was indeed the creator of further polarizations and differentiation processes, which, as Schütz and Diamantides write, "were ultimately capable of giving rise to a difference between (secularising) Church and the (secularised) public sphere that has ever since functioned as the sole relevant one (the "difference that makes a difference," in Bateson's classical definition)" (80). It is then not possible to base a critical understanding of secularization on the misunderstandings that Schmitt instigates about a hundred years ago with his imperial romanticism of a power holder with decision-making power. The irony is that a distinctive value of Christianity, as Schütz and Diamantides show, is that "the 'Christianisation' or 'meta-Christianisation' of world society . . . proceeds by successfully subjecting the subject's relationship to no matter which particular religion, to a conversion process towards religiosity that is offer-and choice-based" (94). This is a mode of social existence (a form of life), call it secularization, for it includes a choice-based religiosity. Voluntary servitude is, in this sense, a proximate mode of social existence to the Christian model, and it is a modality that has been subject to many tensions and reformations all the way to its usurpation in capitalist democracies and (neo)liberal policy making.

Similarly, as I noted earlier, one of the high-ranking potencies of Christianism is the polarization from the start of heteronomy and autonomy, law and critique, the father (the master) and the son (the servant who will be resurrected). In a captivating chapter on Paul's Greek, Gourgouris, among else, argues that "Christianity gave heteronomy a rejuvenated politics. Let us not lose sight of a crucial principle: when Paul speaks of 'life in Christ,' he is not speaking in tropes. He is indeed articulating an extraordinary condition by which life exceeds the bounds of the living body and gives itself over to the mastery of another—in this case, the One-and-Only-Other. Strictly speaking, the phrase 'life in Christ' is tantamount to possession" (2019: 133), and a "thanatopolitical reconfiguration of life" (135).

In another sense the "possession" that "life in Christ" entails is, in principle for most Christianism, an opposition to the ideality of a "choice" (of, say, a secular autonomy that becomes in fact yet another form of religiosity). Instead, the phrase of a "life in Christ" can be described and experienced as a path to self-mastery (and, for some, even holiness) inspired and led not by a self-centered will but by a form of transcendent calling (which one can name "God" or "the divine," though one does not have to). This to my mind is tantamount to saying that there is a layer in our species, which is more like a membrane, within which our being marks its existence and is

paradoxically also at the very same time marked by it. Whether we speak of this as a matter of transcendence, or divinity, or the many other names our traditions have used, it does not alter the *fact* of our calling to look into the mirror of the void as a common experience. What is altered, each time, is the *form* of our logic of listening to such a calling; and that is why critique matters to us. The key may be the way fact and form can collide not as two opposite worlds (One/Other, Divine/Secular), but as the paradox that our species inhabits.

To merely concentrate on the rather Western obsession with both the One God and the killing of God, with religion and voiding religion, is perhaps to miss the manner in which our form of subjectivity shaped by the logic of the will as "willing to do this and that" has been constructed through the processes that one claims to be getting rid of. Within this paradox, too, lies a significant portion of the success of Christianity. We can disagree on this, but Christianity has given rise to, among else, a model of government (*oikonomia*) that has been more successful and influential than perhaps one would like to think. I do not have the time here to engage with Gourgouris's fascinating engagement with Pauline theology from an angle that is not often focused upon and his critique of political theories based on Pauline theology (135), but for me it is of interest that Paul's letters can inspire such engagement, whether universalist or messianic. This is perhaps an esoteric sense, but I am hardly surprised when I find that religions and theologies are able to be creatively appreciated outside of an institutional, militant, or monocular approach, as they describe and prescribe traditions of life in ways quite similar to the ways that, for example, literature, philosophy, customs, or folk songs do.

Thus, to speak of *political theology* today remains a confusing way to consider the situation we are in. In chapter 6, Gourgouris takes up the issue and emphasizes the part of "political theology" that is essentially, according to his thesis, a form of "endemic monarchical politics" and that he brings forward along with another instance of monarchical thinking (iconoclasm). Both, according to Gourgouris, occlude their idolatry. The "deregulation of the political" (137) is characterized by the technocratic and undemocratic in governance of the polis (for example, Greece and Italy in 2011–12, he notes, when bankers or financial managers assumed positions of heads of state). Much like the conventional secularization thesis of our time, which believes that "an action has been taken upon . . . something and that this something (the 'theological') has thereby been altered" (138), the governmentality of our time appears like a depoliticization. Yet I wonder if in fact

the potencies for these seemingly radical transformations were in some form already internal in Christianism and the figure of the polis that eventually forms the modern nation-state. Gourgouris focuses here on the presupposition of why such potencies are activated: "Political theology is to be understood from the outset, long before Carl Schmitt came to exist upon this earth, as theology grounded and constituted against an enemy" (139). To instrumentalize these forms means to assume the observance of the monarchical principle, to maintain the form of the One, which inevitably makes into enemies all other potencies. Hence, Gourgouris writes, "This would make political theology a language that expresses and actualizes a monarchical—and, I would add, monological, monomythical, and indeed monotheistic—imaginary" (141).

To return to the Trinitarian schema then, Gourgouris reads the enemy that provides the real impetus to the construction as follows: "The very notion of the Trinity—an extraordinary conceptualization by any philosophical standard—may be said to have been configured specifically in order to battle the inveterate polyarchy of divinities in the Hellenistic world in its very own language. Although the impetus is theological, the reality that the notion of the Trinity confronts and within which it stands is altogether political" (149). The reasons for the development of the Trinitarian dogma (which took many forms and remains a debate today within Western and Eastern theological discourses) are a few, indeed, but the separation of the "political" and the "theological" would be anachronistic and apply a distinction that only makes sense to us today. Gourgouris writes,

> The Trinitarian debates conceal the stakes of political economy in a veil of theology, not the other way around. That is why when the intersection between politics and economy reappears in modernity, however we are to date this precisely, it is not a matter of the secularization of theological concepts. On the contrary, the original terrain on which Christianity imagined itself, fought for its principles, and instituted its signature was a matter of theologization of political-economic concepts. Therefore, what is called secularization in modernity is but a reiteration of the stakes of order and power where the theological veil no longer quite holds. (149–50)

This is not that different from the core point that Agamben makes and that Gourgouris engages with, critically to an extent. I am not sure we can make this sharp distinction between theology and political-economic concepts. There is a strategy, indeed, in the conceived Trinitarian schema in response

to a problem that needed solving (in one of its key forms: Christianism could have been seen as a polytheism), but I cannot separate the theological, political, and economic reasons that come together here. In addition, the philosophical and theological background and, more so, the discursive creativity as to the conception of the Trinity and the debate that follows it is too rich to be read backward as something that was as such fully planned.

What we can be quite certain of is that the logic of Trinitarian government or *oikonomia* reveals from the start that the notion of sovereign power was not conceived as One, at least not in the sense of a single pole of power. It was from the start Two, transcendence and immanence, law and critique/institution, creation and government; and then Three, in my reading, only in the sense that the Holy Spirit provides the image of sense (the signature) relating the two in every direction. It was for this reason (this veiling of the Two), as Gourgouris can be read to suggest, that the Two-in-One was to be glorified by a third in order to protect, once more, the One. I am not so sure, too, that the "original terrain on which Christianity imagined itself . . . was a matter of theologization of political-economic concepts" (149). The terrain of this development with its many twists can be described as a centuries-long exchange and rewriting of terms and roles in the midst of constant tension between orthodoxy and heresy at a time when politics, economics, and religion were not as separate. Within the Trinitarian schema, I would suggest, along with my reading of Agamben's critique (Zartaloudis 2010: chap. 1 and 2), this tension has the manner of an *oikonomia*, which is to say a tension not just between law and administration, potential power and ordinary/ordered power, but also between the *Nomos* and the *Oikos* within the conception of *oikonomia* itself. *Oikonomia* is not just an administrative structure but the other side of sovereignty's idol, the empty but *absolutely* powerful (potent) throne of the One (see Gourgouris 2019: 153). What is most fascinating here is that such absolute power requires in fact an absolutely impotent God or One (a God who reigns but does not govern/act). These are not a primary and secondary plane of power but two coinciding faces. The "theologico-political" is not reduced to mere administration, nor does (the eventually secular) government replace the One. Instead, the two complement each other from the start.

This structure of tension, formed already in the twelfth century, may not be the "original terrain" of Christianity, but it is the original terrain of the institutions (both internal- and external-faced) that Christianity forms and transforms, instituting not just a religion but a socioeconomic system that is intimately, and in part contingently, linked to the system of depoliticized

government that we witness today. Agamben (2011: 59–60) writes, "The function of the Trinitarian economy is to hypostasize, to give real existence to the logos and to the praxis of God and, at the same time, to affirm that this hypostatization does not divide the unity but 'economizes' it." This is akin to Gourgouris's (2019: 156) conclusion, which I think is rather proximate to Agamben's reading, that the logic of *oikonomia* in the Trinitarian schema renders effective the One, rather than reduces it to another form. For Gourgouris,

> The monotheistic imagination is thus a sublime instance of *heteronomy-in-action* in the most concrete terms. For it is not only an extreme instance of self-abrogation at a psychic level: the bizarre act of denying yourself the freedom to create your own law by establishing your incapacity via your own creation of a self-binding divine injunction. It is also an extreme instance of political self-subjugation to a contractual obligation with your own creation of a superior power beyond the order of power. (164; my emphasis)

In my understanding, "heteronomy-in-action" (the empty throne in whose name one *actually* governs) and "autonomy-in-giving the Law of the One to oneself" (Christology) are the twin sides of the imaginary idols that Christianism transformed into ideals, while, it should not be forgotten, interpreting other traditions. Ideals that became a new tradition, or what we call a culture with social, economic, philosophical, moral, artistic, and so forth consequences on the basis not as we tend to think of an omnipotent God but an impotent God who withdraws from the world, while He governs. Gwenaëlle Aubry (2020) has shown wonderfully how the Christian God is constructed as a God without power, an impotent but paradoxically governing God.[10] In this sense, I think, a bipolarization of heteronomy and autonomy cannot fully capture what Christianism achieves, nor the perils of the achievement.

Passage

Chapter 3 of *The Perils of the One* reaches the other side of the river, taking its cue from the other major influence on Gourgouris's work, Castoriadis. The chapter is marked by a quotation from *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* that captures perhaps the heart of Gourgouris's book:

10. Aubry 2020 is an exceptional study now available in a new edition, revised and expanded.

> 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 create an appearance and a being of 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. (1984: ix–x, quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 59)

The word that marks my reading of this quotation is the last word, "passage." To define the event of thought, of thinking, as ultimately offering passage, let's call it just *passage*, and perhaps *just* passage, in the sense of offering a certain justice—that is, of offering justice as just a passage. Passage, it seems to me, entails the notion that forms a core interest in *The Perils of the One* (chapter 3 in particular), that of transition/self-alteration; and it is not lost on me that it is also used in law to refer to the passing of a bill into law, which raises already from the outset the concern of Gourgouris's with identity and form. Then there is the etymology from the Latin *passus*, "step, pace" (from the PIE root **pete-*, "to spread"), which reminds me of Foucault's line as to a face drawn on the sand being washed away (1989).[11] As Gourgouris (2019: 60) puts it, "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."

Poiesis, as much as poetry for that matter, entails no possession. Not possessed by an *archē*, an origin, other than the tumultuous act, the passage from potency to actuality (or not), whereby neither side can exhaust the other. A poietic, rather than sovereign, actuality remains in potency, past-present-future, while potency is the act, the acting, the *poiein*, that cannot differentiate materiality and nonmateriality, desire and means, the *archē* from the *tecture* (to remember, as Gourgouris notes, that there is a certain peculiarity in the architecture of Castoriadis's thought). This is felt perhaps when anyone tries to disentangle their intention, desire, plan, energy, and action from the contingency and the actual event, the environment or

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11. See the last paragraphs of Foucault 1989.

"society" or whatever one wishes to call it, within which it takes its place, momentary or memorable as it may be. Which brings me to self-alteration, the notion that Gourgouris engages with in this chapter, a central concept in Castoriadis. Let's read what he writes:

> 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 a 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. (61)

Who, really, knows what it means to try to separate the self from alteration, the supposed internal from the external, or the self from the other? In a sense, self-alteration would be a pseudoparadoxical notion if it is understood as presupposing one master (the self transforming itself) or equally, two masters (the self being transformed by/to an other). As it is well known, one cannot be anything but a subject unless one is the master and one cannot obey two masters at the same time. In contrast, to conceive the "self" *on*/in the passage is perhaps what Castoriadis does; as Gourgouris notes, "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" (62). To focus on the passage means here to focus on the coincidence of the creative and the destructive. Pushing away the glittering shadows of notions like infinite variation (a high and equally false expectation to that of "nothing ever changes"), as much as of self-reformation, which in itself implies and expects a continuation despite everything, indicates the passage from potency to actuality as a passage that leaves nothing behind. The poietic dimension of our being as a *passage-species* that cannot really separate its active from its passive modalities can only disrupt the reliance on an iden-

tity, a self, a civilization, culture, and so forth, if, and only if, it is observant of what happens to it.

At times it seems that historians have been employed in order to narrate a history that attempts to run counter to this creative predicament. Yet history and writing are not meta-attributes; they take place also within the passage. That means, for Castoriadis, as Gourgouris explains, that

> every society is the "subject" of its imaginary institution in the sense that every society emerges from the magma of its own significations: significations that 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. (71)

How do strangers come to know that they are also strangers to themselves? I think that the answer for Castoriadis and Gourgouris is "autonomously"— which is to say autonomously neither in the sense of self-assurance, self-sufficiency, a self-enclosed and gloriously regained ego, essentially a reborn narcissistic subject, nor by a pure formalism (which is essentially a bad conservatism whether from the Left or the Right) of a "pure or absolute autonomy." As Gourgouris writes,

> 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 reauthorizes itself as an other. That's why autonomy as explicit self-alteration is not some fancy way of considering self-constitution, or *autopoiēsis*. In fact, as an ever-restaged and ever-interrupted *archē*, self-alteration renders all received paradigms of self-constitution unfeasible, unconstitutible claims. (80)

I would perhaps add that this requires a disentanglement of the passage, the *poiein*, from the two classic polarities, the subject/self and the social/ polis. These exaggerated notions (the subject *and* the polis), admirable as

they are historically for their endurance, are part of the problem. The Left often enough has conceived of freedom at this junction in an attempt to redefine it as an exodus, while the Right has conceived neoconservatism in an attempt to restrict the passage to an exodus. Each time the attempt to determine the indeterminate limit (*physis*) remains, for Castoriadis, a political act (a *nomos*). The subject/self conceived as an identity and the social-polis conceived as a container or a normality hinder the autonomization of our social lives, for in this way we narrow the field of our vision and thought. To open the field means to encounter the void, to come to terms with what Castoriadis describes in the last sentence quoted above: "an ever-restaged and ever-interrupted *archē*, self-alteration renders all received paradigms of self-constitution unfeasible, unconstitutible claims." In this sense, the secular (in *secular criticism*) is also an unconstitutible claim at self-constitution and can only indicate the value of a criticism that takes first as its object of critique its very self.

Quite fittingly, then, in the last chapter of *The Perils of the One*, Gourgouris turns to the association of monotheism with imperialist expansion—"a point rarely acknowledged," as he writes (164). "One of the key psychoanalytic contours of Freud's account is that the peculiar imaginary of monotheism develops out of and *as* a traumatic condition" (169). With reference to "Moses and Monotheism,"[12] Gourgouris writes, "the monological principle that runs throughout the problem [Freud] encounters is encapsulated in the figure of this one man, an extraordinary man no doubt (*der grosse Mann*), but nonetheless the epitome of *anthropos*, or, more precisely, the epitome of the human capacity for the violent imagination that underlies the psycho-socio-anthropological process of the historical institution of societies. After all, humans make history, even if not quite as they please" (169). The multisited act of institution is exemplarily manifest in this founding act:

> As sign for trauma, Moses, the Egyptian, is not just an alien at the crux of identity, an other residing at the heart of the self who always makes (*schaffen*) and remakes the self, an other(ed) self who, in Edward Said's inimitable phrase, bears "a troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound" that requires continuous attention and prevents reconciliation, assimilation, self-absorption. Moses is also the cause, the source, of the trauma: the strict and wrathful father who

12. See Freud 1985.

> makes inordinate demands for obedience to the law, who restricts and enforces, who formalizes living practices and legislates constraints. (172–73)

For Gourgouris, on top of the wound of Moses's foreignness and otherness, "another troubling, disabling, destabilizing, and, yes, *secular* (because existentially worldly) wound—the wound of guilt for his murder and the wound of repression" (173). Between the complexity of the absorbed immanence of psycho-social, monological foundations and the otherness of the transcendental world of the heavens that the monotheistic imaginary establishes, religion attempts to "counter the abyssal terrain of being" (181). At this juncture, Gourgouris brings together Marx and Castoriadis. The association of these three thinkers is of great interest as the approach to the countering of the abyss is different among them, yet the focal point similar. Marx writes, "Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general ground of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of human essence because human essence has no true reality" (1975: 175; as quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 183, who amends the translation slightly). Castoriadis writes, "The need for religion corresponds to the refusal on the part of human beings to recognize absolute alterity (ISR, 324)" (quoted in Gourgouris 2019: 180).[13] Absolute alterity, for Castoriadis, is an immanent condition: "Religion covers the Abyss, the Chaos, the Groundlessness that society is for itself; it occults society as self-creation, as source and unmotivated origin of its own institution. Religion negates the radical imaginary and puts in its place a particular imaginary creation. It veils the enigma of the exigency for signification—which makes society as much as it is made by society—insofar as it imputes to society a signification that would come to it from elsewhere (ISR, 326)" (180). For Gourgouris, what is shown here, to my mind, is that whether in a Freudian, Marxist, or Castoriadian manner, the institution of the "*nomoi* of the earth" (religions, monotheisms, constitutions, nations, ideologies, scientific truths, utopias, nihilisms, globalities, secularizations, the Ones in their variety) expose the world's disenchantment over time; they push it out of frame without reckoning with it: "When this *nomos* is occluded and presented as *physis*, this radical otherness of self is externalized and fashioned in all kinds of societal institutions as transcendental otherness. This

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13. Gourgouris cites as ISR: Castoriadis 1997.

is how, on behalf of society, the existential cosmological abyss is overrun by the work of the sacred: 'The Sacred is the reified and instituted simulacrum of the Abyss: it endows itself [*il se donne*] with the 'immanent,' separate, localized presence of the 'transcendent' (ISR, 325)" (180). Transcendence as the unrepresentability of the absolute heterodoxy of the One is what brings together the variety of references and engagements in *The Perils of the One*.[14] What would it mean, however, to reckon with the abyss? The poets have for the most part approached this question as one that cannot be answered in the terms set by a supposed reckoning, whether logically, philosophically, or scientifically. If neither a reckoning nor the pushing of the abyss out of frame with this or that acclamation to yet another idol is what needs to be pursued, it seems to me that what is needed, in the first place, is a more patient and rigorous search of commonalities within our traditions in the direction of learning what a true paradox our being is, the passage that is our species.

Our religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions are richer than their militant institutionalization by states, churches, and markets allows to be seen. All of them are creative potencies that include some of the most astonishing attempts to encounter the cosmological abyss. In the West there is an obsession with "God" and with "killing God" that has turned religions, states, and traditions against each other and against the nonreligious. This war of the One with its perils, as Gourgouris explains, is one thing to attempt to avert through secular criticism. Another, and it seems to me equally crucial, is to recognize that we do not even seem to have the sensitivity and learned awareness of how to use, poietically, our traditions more generally. The widespread lack of knowledge and appreciation of the variety, poietic nature, and richness of our traditions across the planet (including religions and really gifted and cross-cultural worshippers) is to me the gravest peril since it settles debates about religion into blind polemics.

Within our traditions there have always been those who study them, who combine them, and who accept the polyvalence of ways of living without wishing to destroy them and those that disagree with them. Gourgouris writes of secular criticism, in the particular way he perceives it, as the practice of an unfinishable encounter. Spirited and worthy attempts such as Gourgouris's I read as nurturing a *tradition* of secularization (which is a transmission and a betrayal at the same time, like all traditions), rather

14. On the negativity of "unpresentability," see a most remarkable study of recent decades, Agamben 2006.

than a polemic, which is invaluable. If we could leave behind the polemics, appreciating how traditions are painfully made, which it has to be said does not look hopeful at the moment, we would find that the "unfinishable encounter with the abyss" (that has many names, only one of which is "God") is precisely what has been the poietic intuition and practice of many traditions (including many religions) and that among them there is much more in common than we think. But that is a gamble, and a tough one at that, toward encountering others and their traditions—not their "churches," which for the most part in human history have become separate entities and politico-economic strategists to their own advantage. This is not then something that can be pursued, I find, "politically," in the sense of an institutional framework, or between the leaders of different religions; it has to be nurtured socially, in a revolutionary manner even, across cultures and belief systems, and for this we shall need some really courageous and enlightened fountains of learning.

It is quite fitting then that the underlying sense of *The Perils of the One* is theatricality, a praxis that characterizes the human species: "[If] theatricality were to expose the foolishness of presuming the stability of the human by refusing to deny the performativity of existence, of living being, it would just as well derail the capacity of the sacred for interminable self-referentiality and self-authorization, in favor, one might add paradoxically, of restoring the hopeless fragility of the human, its outmanoeuvrable mortality" (197). To this rituality of theater we are born before we act and then reborn when we act. This theatricality or rituality was also adopted by religion millennia ago and in any case ironically now that religion itself is a functionally differentiated system, at least in the West; its self-referentiality precludes the contrast that old secularisms presumed possible in their polemics. Meanwhile, while the fact of our mortality is essentially stable (at least for now) the ways in which we make our mortality our own cannot be stabilized either, and, in this regard, for example, messianisms or other "overcomings" of mortality indicate precisely this. It is at this juncture that *secular criticism* and religious traditions (of criticism) may find a fervent poietic thread that is premised on neither the negation of each other, nor on the negation of the cosmological abyss.

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