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### Tragedy and Autonomy in Goethe's *Egmont*

The quest for autonomy remained a constant, passionate concern for philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis throughout his turbulent life. It gave unity and continuity to his explorations into society, politics, economics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. In all regimes, periods, and theories, Castoriadis was looking for not just their emancipatory promise but for their ability to allow for the self-institution of society, the conscious positing of its own laws.

While promoting autonomy as the greatest fulfillment of individual and collective potential, Castoriadis often pointed out its tragic character. He did not use the adjective “tragic” to make an existential, psychological, or aesthetic judgment. Rather, it was to acknowledge the basic character of autonomy as an “ontological opening” (Castoriadis 1997a: 310) that sets forth anew all fundamental questions, and therefore entails several risks: the fear of freedom and the need for external assurance that makes people unwilling to posit human life as an absolute; the necessity of limits to the self-instituting activity of the community; the absence of a norm of norms that would guarantee the validity of man-made law; the uncertainty about good and evil on both the individual and the collective level. Thus the tragic designation refers not to the operations or the outcome of autonomy but to the very modality of human freedom in any truly political society. “The tragic is the search for human measure which remains faithful to the conflictual essence of truth because it cannot have recourse to an outside, higher authority—the search which accepts that there is no other measure than the human one. That is why it is permeated by wonder, questioning, radical doubt, action, struggle and eruptions of liberation” (Lambropoulos 1997: 6). Given Castoriadis’ tragic view of autonomy, a view that highlights the

agonistic nature of politics and justice, of public, collective deliberation and self-creation, it is worth exploring the meaning of autonomy through that literary genre which is most closely associated with it, tragedy itself. Stathis Gourgouris has argued convincingly that, “as document of the predicament of (social) autonomy—of the struggle to give oneself the law without instituting a transcendental finality—tragedy is a form of society’s creative imagination that embodies the chaotic pool out of which society strives to imagine (and institute) itself as other” (Gourgouris 2003: 157).

Goethe’s *Egmont* is an absorbing dramatization of the quest for personal and social self-rule. Goethe began working on the play in 1775, when he was 26 and before he went to Weimar, and completed it 12 years later in Rome, in 1787, during his famous Italian journey. It was published the next year in volume V of his collected works. Goethe did not leave *Egmont* behind, though. Since its early performances were unsuccessful, in 1794 he asked his friend Schiller, who had reviewed the play in a controversial essay, to write an adaptation. Schiller’s drastic changes did not always please Goethe but brought him theatrical success. In 1810, Beethoven composed his incidental music and sent the score to the author who gave it measured praise. After Schiller’s death in 1805, Goethe worked on his own adaptation but, in order to incorporate Beethoven’s music, he later restored the original version.

The scene of the drama is laid in the Netherlands in 1567, after the beginning of the revolt against the Spanish domination. The 17 provinces of the Netherlands, which were part of the Hapsburg Empire, were a center of world trade and a hotbed of social agitation as they tried to preserve their local customs while becoming open to Protestant teachings. Egmont, Count of Lamoraal, was a Flemish statesman with a distinguished military record who was a trusted advisor to the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V. The victories he had won over the French in the

late 1550s had made him a widely admired leader and a popular hero. The son of Charles V, Philip II, King of Spain, named him *Stadholder* (Chief Provincial Governor) of Flanders and Artois. Tensions began to arise between leading Dutch noblemen and the new King over the increasing loss of regional authority as Philip infringed on local privileges and religious liberties. The Spanish court took control over Dutch political affairs, abolishing constitutional rights of the Provinces. Egmont and other leaders resented this harsh policy, which included the introduction of the Inquisition, but Philip ignored their protests and instituted heavier measures against the Protestants. Still, the Catholic Egmont, who was not in any way attracted to Protestant iconoclasm, took severe action against the Calvinist insurrections in Flanders, thus remaining loyal to the Spanish sovereign. While the Provinces were seeking greater religious tolerance, in 1567 Philip appointed the Duke of Alba Captain General and sent him to crush the rebellion against Catholic authority. William, Prince of Orange, appealed to Egmont to join him in armed resistance to Alba's dictatorship. Egmont refused to join the opposition and leave the country, ignoring William's warnings of imminent danger. While Orange turned to German Protestant princes for assistance, Egmont took an oath of allegiance to the crown. Still, upon his arrival, Alba seized him and had him beheaded for high treason in 1568 despite appeals by princes and high nobles. Thus Egmont became an unintended but widely praised martyr in the cause of religious tolerance and political freedom in the Netherlands, which eventually overthrew the Spanish yoke, declaring their independence under William in 1581.

Goethe's tragedy reaches its climax in the confrontation between Egmont and Alba at the conclusion of Act IV. Starting with the question of lasting peace in the Provinces, so that future unrest can be avoided, the two men debate matters of public order, people's welfare, freedom, rule, and rights. It is a fierce dialogue which inherits a lot from Shakespeare and in turn hands

down a lot to subsequent generations from Schiller to Hugo, Ibsen to Brecht, Peter Weiss to Caryl Churchill. Alba wants the unrest curbed, the Provinces pacified, the King's honor avenged, the heretics condemned, crimes punished, liberties restricted, obedience reinforced. Egmont advocates forgiveness for violations, tolerance for faiths, sympathy for suffering, respect for local constitutions, cultivation of public trust, recognition of ancient customs, and promotion of self-rule. Their disagreement is quite complex as they often attribute different meaning to the same words. For example, they argue about key ideas. Alba locates will in the King while Egmont in the people. Alba argues that people are still like children while Egmont finds them mature. Alba identifies justice with punishment while Egmont with mercy. Alba demands obedience while Egmont seeks loyalty. Alba restricts freedom to what is right while Egmont bases it on native rule. Alba finds institutions amenable to outside change while Egmont defends their local validity. Thus, in this wide-ranging debate viewers cannot easily determine who is the true advocate of justice or happiness. Their quarrel about words' meaning instead shows that the two men care deeply about the same issues—the ruling will, public welfare, security, justice, freedom, and civic institutions. What is truly at stake is the question of good governance: Who rules in a collectivity and who determines what is good for it? Who makes the laws of a community and who runs its affairs? Who is responsible for the independence and safety of a people?

The dramatic situation Goethe has created presents a spellbinding microcosm for the study of these issues, one fraught with internal and external tensions accentuating the demands of an extraordinary historical period. For example, the debate on governance takes place against the backdrop of local revolt. Throughout Flanders, there have been tumultuous gatherings, riots in the streets, demonstrations at the gates, mobs in churches, lootings in monasteries. The

popular character of this uprising, which is spreading from city to city, is unmistakable. Another feature of the situation is its iconoclastic fury. The Protestants are questioning not only established dogma but its imagery, symbols, and rituals as well. Their challenge goes to the heart of religious representation to undermine its truth, its history, its sanctity. A third feature is the pronounced regional nature of the events. Although the Dutch Provinces are joining one another in the revolt, they retain an awareness of their distinct tradition and identity. They know they are not all the same, and they each intend to defend their own customs and privileges. Finally, and in a complementary manner, there is a nascent sense of national liberation accompanying the demands of local independence. It is clear to the insurgents that they are not French, English, Spanish, or Italian, and the brewing uprising brings them closer together in a larger ethnopolitical entity, the Netherlands, which seems to demand its own recognition and respect. In short, everything in *Egmont* is in the grips of challenge and change.

It is therefore not surprising that Goethe was preoccupied with this tragedy for more than thirty years of his life. The play is so dense and ambitious, its layers of action and meaning so numerous, that it is very difficult for writer, director, actor, viewer, or reader to keep all elements in proper motion or balance. Here, the drama of good governance emerges in all its tragic glory. What we have before us is nothing less than what Castoriadis calls an “ontological opening”: the great, constant, yet endlessly creative risks of human autonomy when it bursts forth and seeks to express itself.

As we know from Castoriadis, the first principle of autonomy is that, in a collectivity of citizens, supreme authority lies with the deliberative community which posits itself as the source of all decision and rule. “Autonomy here takes the meaning of a self-institution of society that is, from now on, more or less explicit: we make the laws, we know it, and thus we are

responsible for our laws and have to ask ourselves every time, ‘Why this law rather than another one?’” (Castoriadis 1997b: 17-18). Autonomy is far more important than freedom from coercion or independence. That is why the people of Brussels in Goethe’s play are more concerned about their laws than their liberty. Drawing on Thucydides, Castoriadis explains that an autonomous community proclaims that it is absolutely sovereign—self-legislating, self-judging, and self-governing (1991: 106). Autonomy is practiced by citizens and presupposes an acknowledgment of the political sphere that exists in every society. It concerns the particular arrangements and functions of an manifest power. It operates within a polity, an institutional structure of governance. And it is a law-making activity addressed to that very structure. “We thus arrive at the idea that what defines an autonomous society is its activity of explicit and lucid self-institution—the fact that it gives itself its own law, knowing that it is doing so. ... [A society can] be free and reflective—and this freedom and this reflection can themselves be objects and objectives of its instituting activity” (Castoriadis 1997a : 314).

Goethe’s play has several crowd scenes which show the citizens searchingly engaged in this activity—demanding their rights, questioning their rule, reflecting on their institutions, recovering their constitution. The capacity “to plan, to command, to execute” (Goethe 1995: 128) in which Alba takes so much pride resides not with kings, generals, or priests but with the political community. Already in Act I, the counselor Machiavelli asks Margaret of Parma, the Regent of the Netherlands: “Does not a people prefer to be ruled by its own kind, in its own fashion, rather than by strangers who begin by endeavouring to acquire property in the country at everyone’s expense, who apply strange standards, and who rule harshly and without sympathy?” (92) In his confrontation with Alba, Egmont reiterates this idea: “And it is as natural that the citizen should wish to be ruled by those who were born and bred where he was, who were

imbued with the same ideas of right and wrong, whom he can look upon as brothers” (133). Dutch citizens want to be able to deliberate on their laws which are part of their tradition, history, and identity, deciding themselves which ones to keep and which to change.

Thus we arrive at the radical content of autonomy which permeates all action and reflection in Goethe’s play. Castoriadis defines it as “a state in which the collectivity knows that institutions are its own creation and has become capable of regarding them as such, of taking them up again and transforming them. If one accepts this idea, it defines a unity of the revolutionary project” (Castoriadis 1997a: 30). It is clear to everybody in the play that the citizens are engaged in such a project. “Merchants, nobility, people, soldiers” (Goethe 1995: 91) are up in arms to defend their laws and customs, their rights and liberties. They recognize in the Spanish King’s actions not just the oppression of “absolute despotism” (133) but the threat of heteronomy—the monopoly of signification and the closure of understanding. As Egmont puts it to Alba, the King’s “will is to weaken, oppress, destroy the strength of his people—their self-confidence, their own conception of themselves—so as to be able to rule them without effort. His will is to corrupt the very core of their individuality; doubtless with the intention to make them happier. His will is to annihilate them so that they will become something, a different something” (134). The citizens know that historically they have been able to make their own laws, create their own unique institutions, debate the distribution of power in their midst, practice their indigenous governance. They also know that the strong influence of the Reformation is bringing them to a unique, explosive historical moment, one of those radical ruptures of “societies that put into question their own institutions and significations—their ‘organization’ in the most profound sense of the term” (Castoriadis 1997a: 311).

Castoriadis always kept institutions and the social imaginary closely together, defining as autonomous these societies which “call into question their own institution, their representation of the world, their social imaginary significations” (1997b: 17). In Goethe’s play, the Calvinist influence, with its iconoclastic thrust, gives the socio-historical imaginary a radical edge as the Flemish citizens question simultaneously both Catholic and imperial authority—the heteronomy of both interpretation and legislation. Indeed, the play is a magnificent study of representation in all its senses—iconographic, political, social, psychological and others that are left necessarily unexplored in this paper. Everybody in the play—King, Regent, princes, counselors, bürger, soldiers, whether they are locals or foreigners—is asking the same fundamental question: How is the citizen body going to be represented? How are they going to imagine their society, portray their beliefs, function with their institutions, and account for their lives?

Alba sides uncompromisingly with heteronomy: “The King *wills* his will. The King, after long reflection, has seen what the people requires; things cannot go on, cannot remain as they are. It is the King’s intention to restrict them for their own good, if need be to thrust their own welfare upon them, to sacrifice the harmful citizens so that the best may live in peace and enjoy the blessing of wise government. This is his resolve” (Goethe 1995: 133-34). Alba’s greatest challenge is directed to the ideal of autonomy: “What kind of freedom do they want? What is the freedom of the most free? To do what is right! And in this the King will not hinder them. ... Far better to hedge them in, to treat them like children, so that one can lead them to their own welfare like children. Believe me, a people does not grow up, or grow wise; a people remains perpetually childish” (132). His solution invokes a superior authority. To him, the legitimacy of the political lies outside the norms of the community. Egmont, who values loyalty based on trust rather than obedience, asks Alba: “And should not the many put their trust in the

many rather than in one? ... I know my compatriots. They are men worthy to walk on God's earth; each one a world to himself, a little king, steadfast, active, capable, loyal, attached to old customs" (Goethe 1995: 132). To Alba's single King, Egmont opposes the body of citizen-kings. The only legitimate foundation is full and conscious self-rule. In Castoriadis' epigrammatic formulation, autonomy "is only possible if society recognizes itself as the source of its norms" (Castoriadis 1991: 114-15).

To the Flemish people, the local constitution is the absolute horizon of their political engagement and of their persistent contestation of heteronomy. Castoriadis conceived autonomy as "the capacity, of a society or of an individual, to act deliberately and explicitly in order to modify its law—that is to say, its form" (1997b: 340). The constitution is the distillation of this form-creating energy. During an earlier spontaneous public gathering at a square in Brussels, the clerk Vansen reminded his fellow citizens of the noble constitutional tradition their ancestors cultivated: they respected the rule of their Prince as long as he ruled by the rights, privileges, and customs of his Province. Each Province had its own parliament, deputies, and laws. When the regional Prince did not follow the local constitution, the deputies "were after him at once" (Goethe 1995: 100). These were the "ancient rights," the "clear and unambiguous laws" (131) which their descendants must be ready to defend again. They should not ask anybody's permission for the rules they follow and the psalms they sing. As they boast proudly, "In our province we sing what we like" (87). Vansen urges them to remain vigilant about politics as "the collective, reflective and lucid activity that arises starting from the moment the question of the *de jure* validity of institutions is raised. Are our laws just? Is our constitution just? Is it good? But good in relation to what? Just in relation to what? It is precisely through these interminable interrogations that the object of genuine politics is constituted, which therefore presupposes

putting existing institutions into question—be it perhaps to reconfirm them in whole or in part” (Castoriadis 1997c: 112).

Both sides in the dispute are fully aware of the need for change which the Calvinist challenge demands. Alba pointedly asks: “What is permanent in this world? And should one expect a political institution to be permanent? Must not the circumstances change in time, and, for that very reason, must not an old constitution become the cause of a thousand evils, because it takes no account of the present state of the people?” (133) Earlier, Vansen had a different suggestion for his compatriots: The constitution of their own Province says that the local prince “must not impose on [the citizens], make felt, or propose to apply to [them] any power or expression of his will in whatever manner” (101). Consequently, he has no right “to alter the constitution of the Province in any way” (102). Such an alteration would require the active participation of those directly affected by the constitution. As Castoriadis put it, “Society, as *always already instituted*, is self-creation and capacity for self-alteration” (Castoriadis 1991: 144-45). In other words, “Society creates its world” (151).

The citizens of Brussels have been engaged and ought to remain engaged in the project of autonomy, “the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community. Which are the laws we ought to make?” (164). By defying the closure of meaning in organized religion, in the church, the court, the army, and the administration, they gradually come to the realization that “the project of autonomy has to be posited (‘accepted,’ ‘postulated’). The idea of autonomy can be neither founded nor proved since it is not presupposed by any foundation or proof” (172). The same realization comes to the local hero, Egmont, who, even though he has valiantly served the King and opposed the Calvinists, now finds himself defending the mutiny during his confrontation with Alba’s pursuit of “ruthless justice” (Goethe 1995: 91).

Goethe's vast stage depicts Flemish people immersed in politics precisely as Castoriadis defined it, "namely, the activity that aims at the transformation of society's institutions in order to make them conform to the norm of the autonomy of the collectivity (that is to say, in such a way as to permit the *explicit*, reflective, and deliberate self-institution and self-governance of this collectivity" (Castoriadis 1991: 76). The citizens insist on exercising their capacity to collectively and freely reflect, question, and institute, recognizing that politics "pertains to everything in society that is participable and shareable. ... Nothing can escape its interrogation, nothing, in and of itself, stands outside its province" (169-70). Politics itself is the true province of this play about the constitution of the Dutch Provinces. And this dimension raises *Egmont* into a genuine tragedy, which always means a political tragedy—a play about the tragedy of politics. In it, as in real-life politics, foundational questions remain urgently, radically undecided: What is a just law? What kind of right should prevail in a citizen's state? How are justice and governance compatible? What are the risks that autonomy needs but also can afford to take? What are the limits that should not be transgressed? What is the measure of freedom and the harmony of order? These are pressing questions that cannot be addressed once and for all but only again and again, in unique and unrepeatable ways, by those directly involved in each case. Their answers are bound to remain open, redefinable, contestable, and in that sense deeply tragic. Andreas Kalyvas has described succinctly "the tragic dimension of democracy" in Castoriadis' philosophy: "By suggesting that the most minimal ties between politics and morality have been destroyed and, consequently, that political autonomy, conceptualized in abstract and formal terms, can take on any conceivable content, Castoriadis openly confronted the inescapable, dangerous potentiality of democratic politics: its lack of guarantees" (Kalyvas

1998: 20). Goethe's play helps us extend this definition to include not just democracy but all autonomist projects.

Despite certain structural similarities among them, Castoriadis' tragic politics bears no relation to other postmodern notions of undecidability, such as Adorno's negative dialectics, Derrida's aporia, or Vattimo's weak thought. For example, it does not carry their hermeneutic and aesthetic connotations, and therefore does not celebrate ambiguity, paradox, textual pleasure, or the fortunate fall. Instead, it abounds in questions that are perfectly decidable in a given instance yet cannot be expressed in an interpretive, teleological, or metaphysical idiom. To take the case of governance, Castoriadis' dilemma, in Peter Murphy's compelling formulation, "is that, as a responsible thinker, he wants a world where human beings respect limits; yet he *also* wants a world that is not determined in the sense that a traditional (or religious) society is" (Murphy 1993: 56). Castoriadis himself articulated another dilemma, that of justice: "On the one hand, society cannot be without law. On the other, law does not and will never exhaust the question of justice. Moreover, it can even be said that law is the opposite of justice, but without this opposition there can be no justice. Society, once it has escaped religious, traditional or other heteronomy, will be able to live only through this ineliminable gap, which opens it to its own question: the question of justice. *A just society is not a society that has adopted just laws, once and for all, rather it is a society where the question of justice remains constantly open*—in other words, where there is always the socially real possibility of questioning the law and its foundation" (Castoriadis 1980: 104). Next, there is the ethico-political dilemma of the revolutionary violence which is stirring the Protestants in Goethe's play: To what extent and under what extraordinary circumstances can it be justified? Finally, there is the state of civil exigency. Egmont warns that, if citizens brawl for their privileges, "they will recklessly destroy

[them] in the end” (Goethe 1995: 103). What happens when political agitation makes a country “divided against itself” (98), turning “citizen against citizen” (103)? Responses to such riddles can take as many forms as the pursuit of politics.

In light of the tragic pursuit of politics, it is interesting that, after the great confrontation between Egmont and Alba in Act IV, which concludes with Egmont’s arrest, the play veers toward the personal relations and concerns of its heroes, it founders, and loses its direction. In the last scene, which Schiller famously criticized in his review as a “somersault into opera,” Egmont, just before his execution, dreams of “Divine Liberty” in the form of his beloved, announcing that his death will win freedom for the Provinces and handing him a laurel wreath. Under the sound of approaching drumbeats, he calls for victory against the tyranny. This celebration of the war for independence, now for ever accompanied by Beethoven’s triumphal orchestration, drowns the political agitation of the original uprising.

As we know from history, that uprising soon afterwards became a symbol of national liberation, and Egmont, its uneasy, unwilling, conflicted protagonist, a Dutch hero. But we also know that, between 1775, when Goethe began his play, and 1810, when Beethoven composed his incidental music, the world had changed drastically. Combined together, the tragedy and the music constitute the mighty reflection of a revolutionary era on another one, more than two centuries earlier, and that is how we, in our turn, should approach them. In each era, for a brief period, society recognized itself as the only source of norms, and expressed itself through the lucid creation of entirely new institutional, artistic, and legal forms. Each time, the radical political experiment did not last, as it was absorbed and normalized into new heteronomies, new industries of imagination and closures of creation. Castoriadis’ sober reminder remains pertinent to this day: “The result has been that, in modernity, politics as a collective activity (and not as a

specialized profession) has been able to be present so far only as spasm and paroxysm, a bout of fever, enthusiasm and rage, a reaction to the excesses of a Power that in other respects is still both inimical and inevitable, enemy and fatality; it has, in short, been able to be present only as ‘Revolution’” (1997b: 55). From this pronouncement, one could draw the conclusion that Castoriadis is embracing the popular meaning of tragedy as an adventure that ends in misfortune. One could even incorporate Castoriadis’ life in such a mournful narrative and “suppose that he himself was a figure from Greek tragedy, that he had acted with a definite purpose in mind, and had succeeded only in accomplishing something wholly different; that he had wanted to revive and purify the radical left, and had ended up allowing the left to give up leftism. You might suppose that his was the leftism that brought about the end of leftism” (Berman 1998: 38). But Castoriadis did not preach the end of anything. As a Greek who read the ancients in light of modern Greek history, he was preoccupied with the tragic “ethic of mortality” which activates the project of politics. In David Curtis’ moving epitaphic words, “It is only starting from this unsurpassable and almost impossible conviction of the mortality of each one of us and of all that we do, that people can live as autonomous beings, see in others autonomous beings, and render possible an autonomous society” (Curtis 1998: 16). Like Egmont, Castoriadis felt that imagination, creation, and self-determination commence anew each day. “He was convinced that everything, absolutely everything, remains to be done” (Berman 1998: 38). The task of transforming short-term revolutionary enthusiasm into just and lasting institutions of reflexive governance is still ahead of us. We have therefore a lot to learn from the study of political ontology as articulated in both tragic drama and in Castoriadis’ philosophy of autonomy.

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