

Imaginatively Grounded Figures: Dancing with Castoriadis

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Abstract

This paper argues that twentieth-century philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' innovative concept of imagination is closely related to his treatments of dance. More specifically, it revolves around his concept of "figure," which thereby suggests a productive partnership with my own philosophy of dance, which I call "Figuration." The first and second sections below review the interpretations of Castoriadis' imagination in the two book manuscripts on him in English, Jeff Klooger's *Psyche, Society Autonomy* (which supplements Castoriadis with Fichte) and Suzi Adams' *Castoriadis' Ontology* (which supplements him with hermeneutics). My final section defends Castoriadis against these two critical supplements through a close reading of his magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. There I re-choreograph Castoriadis' use of the Freudian concept of "leaning on" (*Anlehnung*, from the Greek *anaclisis*) as "bending back" (*anaclasis*, following Klooger's misspelling of *anaclisis*). In short, the imagination is like a dancer, bending back to nature understood as "the region which resists" (to varying degrees) the social.

Introduction

The Greco-French philosopher, economist, and radical psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis, though rarely read in North America, has long been a major figure on the French intellectual landscape, as co-founder (with Claude Lefort) of the radical libertarian socialist group (and eponymous journal) *Socialisme ou Barbarie* ("Socialism or Barbarism"). Today, Castoriadis is known for championing innovative notions of individual and social autonomy. More

specifically, he holds that both the psyche and society are built on their own creative illusions, and that true individual and social autonomy lies in admitting and embracing this abyssal self-origin, as a source for free self-creation through legislative self-determination. The opposite of autonomy, “heteronomy,” involves imaginative “closure,” which results from a denial of the abyssal origin (and the latter’s corresponding responsibility for self-determination), and which leads instead to positing a transcendent source (such as “God” or “the scientific laws of dialectical materialism”).

I will briefly elaborate these concepts before proceeding further. Castoriadis’ psyche is that of psychoanalysis, a predominantly unconscious, complex structure that is fundamentally broken by socialization and thus requires analytic transformation. The “individual” (or “social individual”) is a product of socialization, not to be confused with a Cartesian self or subject understood as the simple and fundamental unit of agency. “Autonomy” is the comportment (or, in Castoriadis’ words, an “active situation”) that results from incorporating the knowledge that there is no transcendent basis for being, the cosmos, society, or the self; more precisely it is an embracing of the abyssal and chaotic freedom of legislative self-determination. Put differently, autonomy means living, for lack of absolute truths, according to what are avowedly chosen fictions.

For my part, I first encountered Castoriadis through the sociological theorist Patricia Hill Collins. She bases her theory of “visionary pragmatism” on Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis’ concept of “situated imagination,” which draws heavily on Castoriadis (to whom they attribute “the most systematic account of the ‘creative imagination’” in post-Kantian

philosophy).¹ In articulating this radical conception of imagination, Castoriadis references dance frequently, as both a practice and a metaphor. For example, in an interview from 1991, Castoriadis notes that his personal “image” of the imagination is not any visuospatial art (as one tends to assume from the etymology of “imagination”), but rather music, temporal sister-art to dance:

For me, the *imagination par excellence* is the imagination of the musical composer (which is what I wanted to be). Suddenly figures surge forth that are not in the least visual. They are essentially auditory and kinetic—for there is also rhythm.”²

Thus, it is not unnatural to trace Castoriadis’ concept of imagination to his concept of “figure,” nor unnatural to use dance’s kinetic rhythms as a privileged artistic example of that imagination. Nor, finally, is it unnatural to link Castoriadis’ imagination to my Figuration philosophy of dance.³ The latter will be operative throughout the present investigation, though mostly as a figure near the background, supporting Castoriadis’ imagination in higher lifts, and returning the imagination to its natural ground. It may be helpful, therefore, to conclude this introduction with an overview of both philosophies.

Perhaps Castoriadis’ most concise summary of his philosophy is found in his late essay, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Socio-Historical Domain.”⁴ As this title hints, the historical

¹ Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge, and the Situated Imagination,” *Feminist Theory* 3(3): 315-333, 322.

² Castoriadis 1997, 182.

³ See, for several excerpts of this larger project, Joshua M. Hall, “Core Aspects of Dance: Aristotle on Posture,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 53(1): 2019, 1-16; “Core Aspects of Dance: Schiller and Dewey on Grace,” *Dance Chronicle* 40(1): 2017, 74-98; and “Core Aspects of Dance: Condillac and Mead on ‘Gesture’,” *Dance Chronicle* 36(3): 2013, 352-371.

⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Sociohistorical Domain,” *World in Fragments: Writings on Society, Politics, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3-18.

as such is central in Castoriadis' philosophy and his concept of imagination. But the essay begins metaphysically instead, defining "Being" as "abyss, or chaos, or the groundless"—though an abyss which nevertheless possesses "a nonregular stratification," including "partial 'organizations' that are specific to the various strata we discover (discover/construct, discover/create) in being."⁵ In other words, for Castoriadis, metaphysical being is a partially self-organized chaos, composed of qualitatively different layers. This picture, though, is incomplete. All these strata notwithstanding, "being is time," "Or else: Being is essentially to-be."⁶ In other words, being's strata are sewn from the same fabric, and that fabric is the sewing that is temporality—wherein space is derived from the primacy of time.

Ironically, however, the history of thought, unfolding within this time, obscures being's essential temporality. This history operates instead according to what Castoriadis terms the "basic hypercategory of determinacy."⁷ According to the latter, to be is to be determined, which leaves no room for the flux, development and creation in which time consists. As a result, this history of thought reductively posits only three kinds of being, namely "things," "concepts" and "sets" of things and concepts, which for Castoriadis begs the following question: "What *is* a form and how does it *emerge*?"⁸ That is, if there are only things, ideas, and groups thereof, then how did they get here? Enter the imagination.

Castoriadis clears the stage for the imagination with a reprimand. Why, he poses to the philosophical reader, has no philosopher utilized, as their foundational example of Being as

⁵ Ibid 3.

⁶ Ibid 3.

⁷ Ibid 4.

⁸ Ibid 4, emphasis original.

such, “my dream of last night,” or “Mozart’s *Requiem*,” and thereby, against the creative backgrounds of dream and requiem, seen “in the physical world a *deficient* mode of being”? In this way, Castoriadis indirectly introduces the social into his metaphysical discussion (since the social is the domain of both dreams and musical compositions), which approach provokes the reader to question the traditional assumption that the social is other than the foundational metaphysical layer of being. “Society is a form,” Castoriadis writes, “and each given society is a particular, even a singular form.”⁹ It is crucial to note, however, that there is for him no such thing as “form” per se, because even basic concepts change their intensions and extensions from one stratum of being to another.

The social stratum’s singular form manifests as a unique society, Castoriadis claims, within which “individuals and things are social creations.”¹⁰ Society-forms and individual-forms are the creations of the imagination, at work at the center of the social, which Castoriadis often seems to regard as the principal stratum of being. More precisely, societies and individuals for Castoriadis are products of what he terms “the ‘magma’ of *social imaginary significations* that are carried by and embodied in the institutions of the given society and that, so to speak, animate it.” Examples of these imaginary significations include “spirits,” “nation,” “interest rate,” “taboo,” “virtue,” and “man/woman/child, as they are specified in a given society.”¹¹ Put differently, each historical society “*establishes, creates its own world*, within

⁹ Ibid 5.

¹⁰ Ibid 5.

¹¹ Ibid 7.

which, of course, it includes ‘itself.’”¹² In short, “Society is self-creation deployed as history.”¹³

In summary, in Castoriadis’ philosophy, societies and their creations are imaginary, albeit a kind of imaginary that actually changes the structure of being itself as the self-development of time. It is largely because the imagination is so central, and so powerful—including at both the metaphysical and the physical level—that it partners well with the art of dance generally (given the centrality of physicality therein) and with the Figuration philosophy of dance in particular (which understands “dance” broadly enough to include literal and figurative dances, from ballet to the dance of astronomical bodies and dialectical discourses).

For starters, the root term of Figuration has widely extensive meanings that partner well with the range of Castoriadis’ figural, imaginative philosophy. The Oxford English Dictionary offers twenty-six numbered definitions for Figuration’s root, “figure,” derived from the Latin word for the Greek word *schema*. Included in these meanings are bodily shape, attitude, posture, mathematical form, conspicuous appearance, a diagram of the heavens, a move or set of moves in a dance, a musical phrase, and a metaphor. It thus encapsulates, via its etymology, almost the entire Figuration project, as well as Castoriadis’ life’s work, in a single word.

Another natural source of partnership between our projects is that Figuration is just as committed as Castoriadis to historicity and temporality. Figuration took its first steps from the general acknowledgment that dance is widely neglected in the canonical history of Western

¹² Ibid 9.

¹³ Ibid 13.

philosophy (the primary partial exceptions being Plato and Nietzsche). Given this absence, Figuration proceeded in two stages. First, I performed a phenomenological analysis of my (then) seventeen years' experience as a dancer, instructor and choreographer, to generate a small cluster of concepts that could be considered central aspects of dance. Then I went back to the canonical philosophers who neglected dance and looked instead for these concepts in their work. The idea was—given the impossibility of writing a history of the philosophy of dance based on philosophers' analyses of dance as such—to produce a history of the philosophy of dance derived from philosophers' analyses of phenomenologically-generated core concepts of dance.

I termed these central constructs or aspects of dance “Moves,” named them “posture,” “gesture,” “grace” and “resilience,” and narrowed my focus to the three most distinctive conceptions of each of them in the history of Western philosophy. The result was four three-part conceptions, all of which bear striking resemblances to concepts in Castoriadis, to which I will return below. The first Move is “posture,” defined in part as “the dynamic imitation of stasis.” The point here is that any living animal, even when not obviously moving, is *always* covertly moving, at least internally, in the process of maintaining the appearance of rest. Second is “gesture,” defined in part as “the carrying-across funding language.” This strange word-formation is intended to suggest the etymological meaning of gesture (“to carry across”) insofar as all gesture, including linguistic gesture, is both “funded” (or invested by) and “founded” (or created on the basis of) the movements of bodies. Third is “grace,” defined in part as “a pleasing figure/ground reversal.” The figure and ground here are an organism and its environment, respectively, because in consummately graceful movement, the environment

seems to move seamlessly through the organism. And fourth is “resilience,” defined in part as “a flourishing recirculation.” The intention here is to suggest resilience’s etymological meaning of “leaping back” or “jumping again”—in part because it foregrounds resilience’s definition as always springing back into shape, always ready for more, persisting through time’s deformations.

Having thus constructed the four Moves, I then applied them to what I termed the seven “families” of dance, namely “concert,” “societal,” “folk,” “agonistic,” “animal,” “celestial,” and “discursive.” With the word “families” here, I was attempting to channel Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance,” which refers to named phenomena (his preferred example being “games”) that appear impossible to define with a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, but that can nevertheless be pragmatically understood as constituting a family, in the sense that each and every one of its “family members” possesses traits that are common among members in that family, though perhaps no traits are common to all members.¹⁴ As I noted above, the joint breadth of scope of these families resonates with Castoriadis’ positing of imagination at the core of every stratum of being.

¹⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell), 1991. Connecting this back to dance, language too for Wittgenstein consists of a family of different games, or “language games,” which translates the German word *Sprachspiele*, the root of which (*spiele*), according to philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, “originally meant ‘dance,’ and is still found in many word forms.”¹⁴ Thus, one could also translate *Sprachspiele*’s “language games” as “language dances.”

1. Bending Castoriadis into a Fichtean Idealist

I now turn to the secondary literature on Castoriadis' concept of imagination, beginning with Jeff Klooger's pioneering English-language monograph on Castoriadis. In his Introduction to *Psyche, Autonomy, Society*, Klooger affirms Castoriadis' "steadfast refusal to reduce the social to the psychical or to conflate the two," on the grounds that "the mode of being of meaning in the social context, the social signification, is absent from the psyche, and is something which the psyche in and of itself is incapable of producing."¹⁵ As I will suggest below, however, it is perhaps not the psyche per se and society which Castoriadis separates, but rather the pre-social psyche and society. Rejecting this psyche / pre-social psyche distinction comes at a high cost for Klooger, which becomes increasingly clear throughout his text. Indeed, in the end, Klooger acknowledges the cost: he is unable to explain the functional psyche-society relationship, despite his unsuccessful attempt to force a Fichtean Idealism onto Castoriadis to bridge that gap.

At the heart of the psyche/society relationship for Castoriadis, Klooger relates, is his radical conception of creation *ex nihilo*. Put briefly, metaphysical creation occurs without any guiding model or template—that is, the creation of being per se is unguided. This is not to say, however, that creation does not draw on any existing materials (which would be creation *cum nihilo*, "with nothing"), nor that creation does not take place in any context (which would be creation *in nihilo*, "in nothing"). This distinction also corresponds to the crucial concept of the

¹⁵ Klooger 5.

psyche's "leaning on" nature, to which I will return below. For now, I merely note that creation *ex nihilo* necessarily draws on nature's bodies and its embodied contexts. One of Castoriadis' Freudian examples is the oral instinct, which leans on the baby's mouth and the mother's breast in the context of nursing.

Klooger first attempts to elucidate this conception of creation *ex nihilo* through the example of "figures," specifically the capital letters A and B. Klooger quotes Castoriadis as follows: "To say that figure B is other than A means" that "it cannot be deduced, produced or constructed on the basis of what is 'in' A, whether implicitly or explicitly, or on the basis of what is posited, mediately or immediately, 'with' A."¹⁶ Klooger then affirms the surface-level meaning of this quote, namely that A and B stand for any two beings or entities in the cosmos, such that B cannot be inferred from A, which mean that B constitutes, in Castoriadis' words, a "coming to be *out of nothing* and *from nowhere*."¹⁷

In addition to seeming true at the ontological level of things in the world, this claim also seems true at the level of the physical appearances of the two capital letters. That is, the shape of the letter B differs from that of A in a way that could never be predicted solely from A; nothing in the shape of the letter A directly and necessarily implies anything about the shape of the letter B, which appears instead as an arbitrarily different image. What this implies, as Castoriadis explicitly claims elsewhere (and Klooger affirms), is that there is something about language that appears to resist any attempt to describe the radical freedom of form-creation.

¹⁶ Castoriadis 1998, 195, quoted in Klooger 38.

¹⁷ Ibid 39, emphasis original.

However, it is interesting to contrast the arbitrariness between the mere shapes of letters with what connects the moments/movements of gestural, bodily languages, which manifest the creation of form at a meta-level via their embodied, figural physicality. Although verbal language can be easily reified as static units—individual letters—whose historical evolution in expression is thereby obscured, gestural language resists reduction beyond temporal segments of repeated bodily movements. In short, dancing articulates form-creation as the body performs each move.

Speaking of dance, and its bodies in motion, as he moves further into Castoriadis' concept of creation, Klooger turns to the discussion of (the bodily art of) sculpture, and thereby of figures, as presented in Castoriadis' *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (hereafter, *IIS*). There, Klooger notes, Castoriadis clarifies that “what creation creates in (for example) a bronze statue is not the bronze material, but rather the statue's “*eidos*.”¹⁸ Later in his analysis, Klooger returns to Castoriadis' *eidos*, quoting the latter's identification of *eidos* with the triad “figures/forms/ images.”¹⁹ That which creates these figures, Klooger explains, is the “radical imaginary,” whose most important works are “social imaginary significations” (hereafter, SIS).²⁰ Put simply, SIS are ideas about the meaning of the world, society, and everything in them. Castoriadis claims that these SIS, though completely free, nevertheless “lean on” nature, which phrase is a translation of Freud's *Anlehnung*. To return to my previous example, these SIS lean on nature much like Freud's oral instinct “leans on” the nursing child's mouth and

¹⁸ Ibid 44.

¹⁹ Castoriadis 1998, 3, quoted in Klooger 56.

²⁰ Klooger 56.

her mother's breast. Klooger emphasizes how this vague conception of "leaning on" threatens to undermine Castoriadis' concept of creation, since leaning on is a kind of dependence, whereas independence seems a necessary condition for *ex nihilo* creation.

Before evaluating this criticism, it is important to note that Freud's *Anlehnung* is itself a translation of the Ancient Greek word *anaclisis*, meaning "leaning on"—but which Klooger misspells throughout the book as *anaclasis*, which means "bending back."²¹ The same misspelling occurs throughout the peer-reviewed Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Castoriadis. I did not notice the prevalent misspelling myself, not until it was pointed out to me in the process of having an earlier version of this paper refereed.²² Thus I initially worked with the concept of "bending back", which, it was to turn out, was the result of an error. Nevertheless, I argue that this process has brought out a previously hidden and underdeveloped dimension of Castoriadis' concept. More precisely, "bending back" is in some cases a variation of "leaning on," as for example when I bend my arm at the elbow and lean my fingertips on my own shoulder. In other words, I wish to offer "bending back" as a creative reinterpretation, inspired by an unconscious linguistic change—a voluntary conceptual innovation that rechoreographs around another's involuntary misstep. Following this rechoreographed translation, one could compare (a) society's leaning on nature qua bending back to nature (including the nature contained in the living body, the human psyche, and the social individual) to (b) the dancer's body bending backward in a stretch or difficult choreographed movement.

²¹ I am indebted to one of *PhænEx's* anonymous referees for this insight. Klooger also explicitly makes this mistake in his chapter, entitled "*Anlehnung* (Leaning On)," in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts*, ed. Suzi Adams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133.

²² Again, I am indebted to one of *PhænEx's* anonymous referees for the insight.

Insofar as this “bending back” translation is meaningful, then Castoriadis is not necessarily portraying society as “leaning on” nature—in the sense of two independent objects, external to each other, one of which is propped against the other (such as a book leaning on a bookend)—but perhaps as “bending back” to the nature from which it came in the first place. Think, for example, of the flourished petals of a sunflower, bending back from the black disk at the center of the flower, and toward the roots hidden in the earth. On this interpretation of “bending back”, society is not unnatural. Instead, society is a creation and self-evolution of nature, a relatively new solid formation in the semi-solid ooze of being’s “magma,” which Castoriadis elaborates later as Freud’s “breccia [*brèches*], volcanic rocks in which hard fragments are caught within solidified lava flows.”²³ What this magmatic figure of being implies, ultimately, is that there is more of nature in Castoriadis than Klooger’s interpretation of *anaclisis* allows.

One reason to prefer “bending back” (to “leaning on”) is that Klooger’s rejection of Castoriadis’ affirmations of nature leads Klooger to a series of further interpretive missteps. First, he identifies Castoriadis’ use of the phrase “the for-itself” with “self” simpliciter. The second misstep is more complex, and begins with his positing of separate “selves” (Klooger’s term) at each of the following six levels of being: “the living being,” “the human psyche,” “the social individual,” “society,” “the human subject,” and “autonomous society.”²⁴ Klooger adds that, at each level, the (for-it)self (as I will render Klooger’s fusion of terms) must relate to its world, which requires a highly selective power of representation. “A ‘world’ in this sense,”

²³ Castoriadis 1997, 187.

²⁴ Klooger 68, 69.

Klooger explains, “consists fundamentally of ‘presentations’,” where the latter are “essentially a ‘setting into images’—‘image’ here meaning not just visual images but any arrangement that embodies and conveys meaning.”²⁵ But here Klooger sees a problem. In each of these presentations he identifies “two aspects,” which he names “imaging and relating,” but, he claims, “in practice they are indissociable.”²⁶ The question that arises for Klooger, therefore, is what exactly is the relationship between presentations and the environment they represent?

This question reveals Klooger’s second interpretive misstep, because it is prompted by his maintaining that each of these levels possesses a distinct self, each of which partakes of one homogenous act called “representation.” If, by contrast, one instead distinguishes between (a) acts of the for-themselves located at Castoriadis’ non-organism levels, and (b) acts of selves proper at his organism levels, then this puzzle dissolves. In other words, if every self is the self of an individual body, then since each such body is part of nature, every self is already within nature, and therefore no self requires any external relationship to its environment. I will return to this issue below.

For his part, Klooger then takes his third interpretive misstep away from Castoriadis’ nature. Trying to get clearer on the concept of environment in Castoriadis, Klooger posits external relations between environments and the (for-it)selves of his six levels of being. Klooger notes that Castoriadis refers to the environment as such in terms of Kant’s unknowable transcendental object “X.” But Castoriadis also uses this X, Klooger adds, to represent the

²⁵ Ibid 73.

²⁶ Ibid 73.

individual object or entity that creates (what is usually translated as) a “shock” to the self. The German word rendered by “shock” here is *Anstoss*, which Castoriadis famously borrows from Fichte, for whom the *Anstoss* is that which somehow interrupts or challenges the self-creating self-positing of the Transcendental Subject. Klooger claims that this borrowing from Fichte is extremely significant for Castoriadis. I find greater significance in Klooger’s perception of Fichte’s significance, specifically for Klooger’s interpretation of Castoriadis, and again in connection to nature.

It is due to these missteps away from nature, in my view, that Klooger is forced to admit in his “Conclusion” that he has been unable in his manuscript to solve the central problem in Castoriadis of the relationship between radical imagination and radical imaginary. As Castoriadis usually frames the issue, the radical imagination is the fundamental and creative power of the psyche, while the radical imaginary is the fundamental and creative fabric or structure of society (the most important aspects of which are SIS and institutions). The radical imaginary thus results from the pooling of every psyche’s radical imagination’s creations throughout history, specifically via sublimation. Put differently, each psyche spontaneously creates images *ex nihilo*, and is forced through socialization to redirect its drives into those images. Those images are projected onto a socially shared reality, which constitutes the materials and context for subsequent image-creations from other psyches in that society. In short, the radical imagination is the “psychic sap” harnessed by society through psychoanalytic development.²⁷

²⁷ I am indebted to one of *PhaenEx*’s anonymous referees for this formulation.

As for Klooger's interpretation of this radical imagination/imaginary relationship, he describes the "question of the origin of social significations and institutions, their initial and on-going creation" as "mysterious," before suggesting the following tentative resolution: "we must posit a transformation of a portion of the socialised psyche's radical imagination which in the social individual then becomes the radical imaginary of the society."²⁸ In short, having rejected the psyche's power to transform the X of the environmental shock into an image, Klooger concludes by positing the (imaginary?) transformation of a part of the psyche's imagination into an "imaginary" part of society (more precisely, the transformation of a "portion" of the imagination, whatever "portion" might mean in such a context).

Klooger's foundational mistake here (as was also the case above, regarding selves and environments) is the assumption of a separation, which then appears to require a bridge. In this case, Klooger assumes that the radical imagination and radical imaginary are separate phenomena, even though Castoriadis, on at least one occasion, identifies the two phrases.²⁹ The reason for this identification is that, as I noted above, the psyche for Castoriadis is itself imagination, and society is abyssal imaginary. What Klooger calls the "mere" psyche—what Castoriadis claims cannot create SIS alone—is not for Castoriadis the psyche per se, but rather the pre-social psyche in particular. While the pre-social psyche cannot create SIS on Castoriadis' view, the socialized psyche can, because those SIS simply are what society is, and the psyche, once socialized, is also part of society. To accept my interpretation, though, one

²⁸ Klooger 324.

²⁹ Castoriadis 1998, 142.

must recognize the possibility of a stratum in the magma of being that is nature, relative to which stratum both psyche and society can “bend backward.” And this, Klooger refuses to do.

2. Bending Castoriadis into an Idealist or Hermeneute

Like Klooger, Suzi Adams attempts to bend Castoriadis toward schools of thought he vehemently rejects in his work. In Adams’ case, these rejected schools are the *Naturphilosophie* Idealism of Schelling, and the hermeneutic tradition. Unlike Klooger, however, Adams freely acknowledges Castoriadis’ rejection of these schools, and she tries to compensate for this rejection by finding insights analogous to those of idealism and hermeneutics in the Ancient Greek philosophers whom Castoriadis does affirm in his later writings. More specifically, Adams focuses on Aristotle’s account of the relationship between *physis* and *nomos*. Although she commends Castoriadis for “problematizing” in *IIS* what she calls “the determinist imaginary,” Adams nevertheless objects that he fails to provide a clear articulation of a non-determinist imaginary. This, then, is her justification for supplementing Castoriadis with Aristotle.

To buttress her criticism, Adams begins by quoting Castoriadis himself, from the preface to *IIS*, where he writes that “a properly philosophical elucidation of the imagination is absent” from that book.³⁰ “In particular,” Castoriadis writes in his preface, “the regions considered here—the radical imaginary and the social-historical—imply a profound questioning of the received significations of being as determinacy and of logic as

³⁰ Adams 36.

determination.”³¹ Adams blames the absence of “a properly philosophical elucidation” on Castoriadis’ failure, at the time, to appreciate the Ancient Greeks’ complex understanding of the *physis/nomos* relationship. Instead, Castoriadis in *ISS* posits a rigid distinction between *physis* and *nomos*, and by troubling that distinction, Adams proposes to supply the missing positive account of imagination.

Though I appreciate Adams’ interpretive movement toward affirming nature (via *physis*) in Castoriadis, I have reservations about the degree to which she anthropomorphizes nature, in effect treating nature as a (more literal) dancing partner in the dance of “figure”—rather than, following Castoriadis, treating nature as the (more) figurative partner in that dance, the “ground” of every image on which its “figure” performs. Put in terms of Adams’ criticism of Castoriadis, the elucidation of the imagination might be necessarily limited, and not (as she argues) because Castoriadis erred in making imaginative creation too *ex nihilo*, but rather because *ex nihilo* creation takes place against the necessarily opaque ground of nature. In other words, it might be impossible to fully elucidate the imagination without resubmitting it to the deterministic logic he called “ensidic.” If so, the solution is not to bind imagination with a deterministic rope (no matter how loose or long), but instead to dance with the imagination, in full bodily—i.e., proprioceptive—awareness of the imagination’s gravitational center in nature. More on this point below.

Zeroing in on Adams’ critique, one symptom of what she views as Castoriadis’ inadequate elucidation of the imagination is that, though he distinguishes between

³¹ Castoriadis 1998, 174, quoted in Adams 36.

“cosmological time” (defined as deterministic) and “sociohistorical time” (defined as indeterministic), the “delineation between the two aspects is not always distinct.”³² To illustrate, Adams discusses Castoriadis’ exploration of time in his reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*, especially the role played by Plato’s concept of the *chora*. Castoriadis’ discussion of the *chora* is inexplicably brief and inadequate, Adams objects, given that the *chora* (a) “manifests a residue of pre-Socratic *physis*, and Hesiodian *chaos*,” in which concepts Castoriadis is elsewhere interested, and (b) “shares features of Kant’s transcendental imagination, in that it ultimately neither participates wholly in the intelligible nor the sensible,” on which concept Castoriadis also draws.³³ That is, the *chora* strikes Adams as particularly relevant for Castoriadis’ conception of the imagination because the *chora* articulates creation from a perennial *chaos-as-void* (as in the pre-Socratics and Hesiod), and it forms and shapes sensibility into thought (as in Kant).

Turning to Adams’ own account of Plato’s *chora*, she suggests that “the beginnings of a positive elaboration of time as creation could be reconstructed from the latent possibilities of the *chora* that were left unexplored by Castoriadis.” One might, Adams offers, substitute a “phenomenological rather than mathematical” “starting point” for Castoriadis’ imagination, wherein “*place* as a phenomenological modality of meaning implies a concrete context from which imaginary forms emerge.”³⁴ That is, if the places in the world from which new forms emerge are understood as part of the creation of those forms, then perhaps the figurative “sites”

³² Adams 40.

³³ Ibid 43.

³⁴ Ibid 49.

constituted by historical figures and their texts could also be understood as creating new forms, insofar as one creatively interprets said figures and texts.

To illustrate this creative possibility for interpretation (broadly construed), Adams turns to the traditional opposition between artists and artisans (“craftspeople”), which she finds operative in Castoriadis’ thought. According to this orthodox perspective, in Adams’ words, the “artisan does not incessantly create new forms, but also produces exemplars of the same, whereas the artist creates new forms in order for art to be art.”³⁵ This artist/artisan opposition, in Adams’ view, maps onto Castoriadis’ distinction between “doing” and “signification,” with artisans as the doers, and artists as the signifiers. This analogy is meaningful because, Adams suggests, just as artists have displaced artisans from possessing the title of “true creators” in Western art history, so signification displaces doing as the only “true creating” in Castoriadis’ work. “Gradually,” Adams observes, “a philosophical elucidation of the being of doing” in Castoriadis’ texts “becomes marginalized,” and this marginalized doing includes that of craftspeople (as a subset of “the being of doing” represented by “noncommodified, popular forms of art” in the West”).³⁶ Such noncommodified, artisanal doing-being, Adams claims,

raises questions about Castoriadis’ increasing emphasis on the ever-new positing of new forms as emblematic of creation, and his rejection of a more interpretive and contextual form of creation, which could do more justice to the creative dimensions of artisan activity and folk art.³⁷

Put simply, if interpretation cannot be creation for Castoriadis, then artisans cannot be creators, which seems to suggest a hidden classist bias in his conception of imagination.

³⁵ Ibid 51.

³⁶ Ibid 51-52.

³⁷ Ibid 52.

This emphasis on artisans lends credence to my dancing reading of Castoriadis below, in part because the forms of dance in which I am most interested (in the present article and elsewhere) are popular, blue-collar, and folk (or vernacular) dances. Moreover, both dance in general and folk art specifically continue to be associated predominantly with women (while commercial art has been dominated by men). Finally, all three categories (dance, folk art, and women) are typically associated in the Western imaginary with nature, and the latter is what Klooger and Adams' Idealist interpretations minimize. Thus, while Adams again helpfully diagnoses an important marginalization performed by Castoriadis, the root of this marginalization is not the doing per se, but rather the nature that the doing transforms: the bodies that the artisans' social doings recreate, like the bodies of dancers.

3. Bending Castoriadis Dancingly Back to Nature

My reading of *IIS* consists of a *pas de trois* (a “step of three,” or dancing trio) performed by imagination, dance, and figure. For starters, the latter pair (dance and figure) are already connected in the very terms of what I call the Figuration philosophy of dance. The *raison d'être* of that title can be found in the abovementioned OED entry for “figure,” whose definitions allow it to encapsulate, as a linguistic figure, Castoriadis' foci on mathematics, astronomy and cosmology, his youthful ambition to become a composer, the centrality of metaphor, and the frequent invocations of dance in *IIS*. Moreover, in terms of the intersection of Castoriadis and Figuration, the concepts of posture and gesture are both important concepts throughout Castoriadis' work, and also two of Figuration's four Moves.

Dance first appears in *IIS* in Part I, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” mostly neglected by Castoriadis’ interpreters. Discussing indigenous tribes in Mexico, Castoriadis asserts (contra orthodox Marxism) that each tribe’s agricultural labor “is lived not only as a means of providing food but at the same time as the cult of a god, as a festival and as a dance,” complete with “all those gestures” that, according to Castoriadis, Western ethnologists misinterpret as mere superstition.³⁸ Dance next appears in Castoriadis’ discussion of “the *coherence* of a given society,” which includes the following question: what “produces” a given society’s “particular way of eating and dancing?”³⁹ In this way, Castoriadis reveals his interest in dance early in *IIS*.

Castoriadis’ strikingly original conception of autonomy is also dance-vibrant. Autonomy for Castoriadis does not require generating one’s own discourse without discursive materials and outside of any discursive context, but rather restructuring existing discourses and contexts by reinterpreting them as fictions which one selectively affirms as new laws for oneself. “A discourse that is mine,” Castoriadis writes of Freud’s conception of autonomy, “is a discourse that has negated the discourse of the Other, that has negated it not necessarily in its content, but inasmuch as it is the discourse of the Other.”⁴⁰ This goal of Freud’s, however, is for Castoriadis impossible, though he thinks a modified version can still be salvaged, namely autonomy “understood as referring not to an attained state but to an active situation.”⁴¹ One might hear, in the latter phrase, an echo of Aristotle’s conception of virtue as *hexis*, meaning

³⁸ Castoriadis 1998, 28.

³⁹ Ibid 46-47.

⁴⁰ Ibid 103.

⁴¹ Ibid 104.

less a passive habit than an active comportment within a dynamic situation or context. Thus understood, Castoriadis' practice of autonomy begins to sound like a dance. Note also that Castoriadis here, like Klooger and Adams, rejects much that is central to psychoanalytic discourse, and offers his own spin, thus practicing the self-consciously creative reinterpretation that Adams claims he marginalizes.

Castoriadis' detailed account of his corps of words conjugationally connected to "imagination" and "imaginary" is also dance-vibrant. I will term these words his *corps de imaginer*, or "body of imagining," as a play on the technical term "*corps de ballet*" (which refers to the dancers in a ballet troupe who dance together in a group, as opposed to the soloists). In just its first few pages, Castoriadis' *corps de imaginer* includes the following eight members: "final imaginary," "radical imaginary," "actual imaginary," "central imaginary," "secondary imaginary," "peripheral imaginary," "social imaginary," and "institutional imaginary."⁴² After acknowledging the commonsensical usages of the word "imaginary," Castoriadis' first variation on it is "a final or radical imaginary," which he posits as "the common root of the actual imaginary and of the symbolic," and which he defines as "the elementary and irreducible capacity of evoking images."⁴³ The "actual imaginary," rooted in the radical imaginary, is for Castoriadis a component of the symbolic order, which includes "an original investment by society of the world and [the society] itself with meaning." The meaning invested by the actual imaginary, he elaborates, "can be recognized in both the content

⁴² Ibid 127, 129, 131.

⁴³ Ibid 127.

and the style of its [the society's] life."⁴⁴ The idea that the style in which society acts is imaginatively meaningful, is also vividly true for dance. Perhaps for this reason, when challenging Marx' view that alienation results from scarcity, Castoriadis deploys a dance metaphor. Mocking the idea that humanity could never outgrow its mythic and religious eras, Castoriadis evokes an imaginary future humanity able to "play dance master with the billions of visible galaxies within a radius of thirteen billion light-years."⁴⁵ It seems a significant valorization of dance that Castoriadis deems it a fitting symbol for his imagined pinnacle of human freedom and power.

Returning to Castoriadis' *corps de imaginer*, its most influential members are probably the abovementioned SIS ("social imaginary significations"), which Castoriadis also fleshes out in dance-vibrant terms. SIS, he explains, "do not exist strictly speaking in the mode of representation." In fact, they have "no precise place of existence" whatsoever, and for that reason can "only be grasped indirectly and obliquely." More specifically, and here again Castoriadis' language suggests dance, SIS can only be grasped "as the curvature specific to every social space."⁴⁶ As with Einstein's theory of general relativity, according to which the apparently static shape of (physical) space-time is actually (invisibly and dynamically) curved around the mass of objects, so for Castoriadis' theory, the apparently static shapes of social "space-time" are actually (invisibly and dynamically) "curved" around the mass of significations. Dance, I would add, is similarly bent (literally and figuratively), around the

⁴⁴ Ibid 128.

⁴⁵ Ibid 132n33.

⁴⁶ Ibid 143.

mass (literal and figurative) of its dancers, each dancer performing the same types of movement in unique ways. This results in the figurative bending of both the choreography and the audience's attention around those among the dancing bodies that manifest comparatively more "massive" charisma.

In Part II of *IIS*, the most important dance vibrancies take place in Castoriadis' aforementioned discussion of Plato's *chora*. Full of the rhetoric of "figure" and its variants, this discussion is thus vibrant with Figuration as well, and multiply so. Castoriadis' reading of Plato begins in a section just below the following quote, in which he returns to dancing rhetoric: "change the scale of time, and the stars in the heavens will step to a dizzy dance."⁴⁷ With the dancing stage thus set, "figure" first appears in this *chora* section in the context of Castoriadis' description of time as "the springing forth" of "*other eidē-images-figures-forms*."⁴⁸ Like a dancer in the *corps de ballet*, time springs forth, surrounded by the images of the forms of other dance-like figures. The point here, for the purposes of the present investigation, is that these images are not static, but instead emerge in a way that suggests bodily movement, along with a word ("figure") whose meanings include "the human body" (as noted above).⁴⁹ In short, for Castoriadis, the Real is bodily nature, the opaque ground for every figure, which resists us through our social dance. The most vivid support for the latter interpretation, perhaps, is found in Castoriadis' discussion of evolutionary history, for example in the following passage:

There is something like a natural identity, there is an enigmatic and irrepressible sense, which is at once impossible to explicate and yet without which we couldn't take a single step, in which we can say that the men of the Neolithic

⁴⁷ Ibid 186.

⁴⁸ Ibid 190.

⁴⁹ For more on the intersection of dance with Castoriadis on time, see Joshua M. Hall, "Sociohistorical Self-Choreography: A Second Dance with Castoriadis," *Culture and Dialogue* (forthcoming).

age lived on the same Earth as we do, that as men they were the same as us, and so on.⁵⁰

Put in dancing terms, we sway on the same ground on which our forbearers swayed. We danced before we were us, before being homo sapiens, on one shared spatiotemporal Earth. From this passage, and others like it in *IIS*, it is clear that Castoriadis is a naturalist, at least at certain important moments.⁵¹ At the risk of mixing metaphors, the natural body is the (literal) analogue of the (figurative) “navel” that Freud posits as the necessarily uninterpretable core of any dream (as Castoriadis himself repeatedly notes).⁵² Built from the natural ground, and vibrant with the latter’s gravity, the body helps ground the imaginative creations of dancer and dance.

The most intense valorization of figure in *IIS* is found in Castoriadis’ discussion of the “social institution of time.” To wit, the “social-historical is radical imaginary, namely the incessant originating of otherness that figures, and figures itself,” and that has its being “in figuring and in figuring itself, giving itself as a figure and figuring itself to the second degree (‘reflexively’).” In short, the “social-historical is positing of figures and the relation between and to these figures.”⁵³ It is here that Castoriadis’ thought vibrates most harmoniously with Figuration, since for both philosophies the social world is a world of self-choreographing dancing figures, moving within the figures of self-choreographing dances-within-dances. Moreover, these human dancers within their dancing societies all revolve around a dancing cosmos, as Castoriadis notes in the following passage: “what ‘there is’ (*today*) is a dance of

⁵⁰ Castoriadis 1998, 205.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 151, 152, 154, 155, 185, 198, 266.

⁵² *Ibid* 279.

⁵³ *Ibid* 204.

electrons or other elementary particles, or force fields, local torsions of space-time, and so forth”).⁵⁴ At every level of being, therefore, one finds dancers and the dance.

Surprisingly, the concept of “figure” is rarer and less central in *IIS*’ section on the psyche. Near the beginning of its third subsection, Castoriadis describes the psyche’s “originary mode of being” as “an aim-intention-tendency of figuring-presentifying (itself) in and through representations which is *always realized*.”⁵⁵ In other words, the psyche for Castoriadis is the always-already successful tendency to figure. But what can be made of such a tendency, which never merely *tends*, but instead always *succeeds*? Perhaps it is a kind of bending back of the dancer’s body to the gravity of the nature against which it stands. Castoriadis describes the psyche, in this originary “state,” as “the presentification of an indissociable unity of figure, meaning and pleasure.”⁵⁶ Reifying this originary state into an entity, he terms it “the psychical monad,” which he then describes as “formation and figuration of itself, figuration figuring itself, starting from nothing.”⁵⁷ In other words, dancers dance themselves into their dancing identities.

The dance-vibrancy of Castoriadis’ psychical monad intensifies as he goes on to compare it to Aristotle’s “soul” (which I have parsed elsewhere as “the activity of the body,” or the verb to the body’s noun).⁵⁸ Improvising further on this monad/soul analogy, one could imagine the psychical monad as a solitary dancer on stage, twirling joyfully oblivious to all but his own movement. Or, in Castoriadis’ own dancing paraphrase, “there is always figure

⁵⁴ Ibid 233.

⁵⁵ Ibid 291.

⁵⁶ Ibid 297.

⁵⁷ Ibid 300.

⁵⁸ See Hall 2019.

and ground (but the figure can *itself* become ground and the ground, figure).”⁵⁹ This phrasing is, moreover, an almost verbatim paraphrase of the definition in Figuration of its third Move, “grace” (based on the conception of grace in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*).⁶⁰ Castoriadis’ phrasing here is also an apt paraphrase of Suzanne Langer’s claim that dance consists of “virtual forces.” In both cases (namely Figuration-via-Dewey, and Langer) the dancer moves in such a way that the environmental powers (which move invisibly through us all) move visibly through the dancing body. It is perhaps this dance vibrancy that inspired Castoriadis to immediately offer his own dancing paraphrase, followed by an example of literal dance practice, with the phrase “*corporeal imagination*” alongside the phrase “dancing like the Africans.” He suggested that perceived differences in the ways that Africans and Europeans danced were the result of different fundamental socialization processes. Finally, he elaborates on his dancing paraphrase with a dance-vibrant parenthetical claim, as follows: “‘Body techniques’ are a special case of the corporeal imagination, more precisely, the part that can be codified.”⁶¹ In short, dance technique is codified bodily imagination.

The concept of “figure” returns in one last important dancing role in *IIS*’ final chapter, in a scene where Castoriadis claims that the linguistics distinction between “proper” and “figurative” is (properly) meaningless, since in his view all language is figurative to varying degrees. Returning to dancing figures, Castoriadis then identifies, as Kierkegaard already did before him, that maximally philosophical figure of Socrates as a dancer. More specifically,

⁵⁹ Castoriadis 1998, 323.

⁶⁰ See Hall 2017.

⁶¹ Castoriadis 1998, 334.

Castoriadis describes Socrates as constituting, qua social individual, a figurative dance-within-(other) dances.⁶² More precisely still, in response to the imagined question, “what is Socrates and who is Socrates?”, Castoriadis replies with a reference to “that Socrates-somato-psychical Heraclitean flux, dance of electrons and of representations, caught up, any way you look at him, in an indefinite number of other flux and other dances.”⁶³ With this maximally impressive flourish of imagination, figure, and dance, the present investigation into Castoriadis’ dancing imagination strikes its own final pose, as the stage’s turbulent curtains collide.

The main gesture I wish to highlight at the end of this philosophical *pas de trois* is that its three “dancers”—imagination, figure, and dance—share relationships of analogy with psyche and nature in Castoriadis. Essentially important is the relationship of bending back to origin. More precisely, radical imagination bends back to radical imaginary (both being imagination), figure bends back to ground (both being image), and dancing body bends back to planetary body (both being earthly). In addition to solving the mystery of *anaclisis* (without the idealistic problems Klooger and Adams introduce), this interpretation also helps explain the surprising frequency with which Castoriadis invokes dance in his magnum opus. In short, it is because his imagination has always danced that dance’s earthly bodies present it in its best light, bending back to its natural home.

⁶² For more on Kierkegaard’s portrait of Socrates as dancer, see Joshua M. Hall, “Religious Lightness in Infinite Vortex: Dancing with Kierkegaard,” *Epoché: A Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23(1): 2018, 125-144.

⁶³ Castoriadis 1998, 351.

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