Cornelius Castoriadis. The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus. Edited by E. Escobar, M. Gondicas, and P. Vernay. Translated by J. V. Garner, and M.-C. Garrido Sierralta. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the combined seminars presented in the book "The Greek Imaginary: from Homer to Heraclitus" by Cornelius Castoriadis. In these seminars he dissects Ancient Greek culture, politics, and religion in an investigative and analytic way. Through ancient Greek mythology and the Homeric texts a lot of information can be derived regarding the everyday lives, ideology, and philosophy of the time; all of the aforementioned will be explicated as well as the way Castoriadis specifically interprets certain aspects of ancient Greek life in his own unique way. Additionally, we will look into the language of the texts, the meaning of the French vocabulary that was used at the seminars and the ways in which it can be accurately translated in English.

Keywords: *Castoriadis; Homer; imaginary; Anaximander; apeiron*

I. On the translation of the title: French, English, and Greek

On the translation of the title, the title in question being "The Greek Imaginary" the following is to be said; John V. Garner, explains that the title was created partly after Castoriadis' ideas that the Greeks have their own "imaginary grasp" on the world, and partly after actual expressions Castoriadis used during the seminars. Furthermore, Castoriadis uses the equivalent of the expression "The Greek Imaginary" in French in his seminars.

The original title given in French for the majority of the seminars was *Ce Qui Fait la Grèce* which as the foreword of this book makes clear, roughly translates to "What Makes Greece." The Greek version of the title, *Η Ελληνική Ιδιαιτερότητα*, roughly translates in English as "The Greek Particularity," but as this title is less relevant with the contents of the seminars, the title chosen for the English version seems "fresh" and "renewed." Additionally, a title such as "The Greek Particularity" could confuse readers into believing that Castoriadis, when appointing something as Greek, he characterizes it in a positive way, but that is not always the case, which is another point that John V. Garner does not fail to mention.

II. On the English translation of the corpus

As with any philosophical piece, the translation of philosophical thought is a difficult endeavor. This translation seems to be complete; nothing having been omitted from the content of the original book. The terms used are accurate, and depict the true meaning of the original work, meaning there is consistency in the terminology, while the readability of the chapters remains intact, and the reader's experience in reading the piece can be considered to have a natural flow, similar to the experience of a reader of the original piece.

Several expressions Castoriadis first used in French might not correlate in meaning with any English counterpart; this translation, however, provides readers with useful notes on every single term that either has no corresponding term or is difficult to translate.

The editor's notes guide the reader and steer them in the direction Castoriadis initiated, while the translator's notes explicate whatever cannot be translated in a sufficient manner, providing either periphrastic translation of a concept or bibliography explaining a subject or term. Whatever the case may be, a reader of this particular translation is aided throughout every chapter.

III. The birth of Democracy and Philosophy

Castoriadis, in these seminars, sets the groundwork for the discussion of how ancient Greek democracy came to be, and how philosophical thought was inexplicably tied to that establishment. He begins by examining our relationship with the past and how we view it. This is important because, as he explains, we view history through a specific lens, one that is shaped by our world-view and ideals.[1] Therefore, it is impossible to have the ability to possess only one definitive recount of ancient Greek democracy and its creation, since there will not only be many different sentiments examining it, but it is also such a complex institution, that there cannot be one singular explanation that does it justice.

The birth of politics, as presented in this seminar, is when the citizens collectively decide that all common affairs should be managed and guided by their own persons.[2] Essentially, it is the settlement where everyone gets a say on matters that regard them as individuals, and the society of which they are a part of. Following that, everyone is put in a position where they have the power to influence the laws that will be emplaced. This coincides with the birth of philosophical thought, as some would say that philosophy is a direct consequence of that political condition.[3] Since everyone is in a position where they can affect the political landscape, they need to be able to support that position, in order to allow ideas and public speech to flourish. It is because of this that philosophy is what we know it to be today.

IV. Homer

Moving on to the discussion surrounding Homer and the Homeric *epos*, he begins by shortly examining the concept of "social-historical creation." He explains that the political and social state of Ancient Greece determined the subject of arts and sciences that developed at the time, which is why we have this kind of authenticity when we study ancient Greek literature, and why these texts cannot be replicated, since, in order for them to be reproduced by a different society, that

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[1] Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary: From Homer to Heraclitus*, eds. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay, trans. John V. Garner, and María-Costanza Garrido Sierralta (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 15; For the importance of the social-historic element in the history of philosophy as a whole, see Cornelius Castoriadis, *Le Monde Morcelé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 311-313.

[2] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 26.

[3] Ibid., 28.

society would have to also copy everything about the living conditions of ancient Greece during that time.[4]

That being said, he begins by discussing the difficulty of dating and identifying the author of the Homerian poems, the discourse regarding whether Homer was a real person that solely created *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or whether it could have been a collective effort, which is a crucial element of ancient Greek literature analysis. There are two main schools of thought surrounding the subject; the Analytic view, that supports that multiple people have contributed to the body of these poems equally and no one can be credited as the "main" poet, and the Unitarian view, that supports that it is a work of one or two people, one of them being who we consider to be Homer. The poems are mainly his, but it is speculated that someone else completed his work with the *Odyssey*.[5]

Despite some of the uncertainty surrounding the poems, one thing we can be certain about is their influence on the ancient Greek society. They were often taught to students, and recited at festivals and important celebrations by rhapsodes. What is interesting about this specific function is that almost everyone knew big portions of these poems by heart, even children, women, and slaves who were not excluded from these kinds of celebrations.[6] The Homeric texts were extremely significant, contained valuable life lessons and role models, and created the standard that the average ancient Greek citizen had to attempt to maintain.

This text, although not in a religious sense, was considered sacred.[7] There was no doubt that by many people the events that were narrated were thought to be true. The heroes of these stories were believed to be real people and were honored as such.[8] In the Homeric texts there was also a big emphasis placed on ancestors and their impact. It is not hard to imagine that the Homeric heroes were loved not unlike the ancestors that were praised in the text. Another important aspect of the poems is the historic aspect, since they are considered to have mirrored the real world of that period. Despite their lyric ambiance and supernatural elements, they provide valuable insight about the ideologies and living conditions of their time.

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[4] Ibid., 44-46.

[5] Ibid., 57.

[6] Ibid., 58.

[7] Ibid., 66.

[8] Ibid., 59.

Castoriadis labels the poems as "meta-tragedies." What differentiates them from regular tragedies is that the hero is largely aware of his fate, and the characters are usually, for the most part, autonomous.[9] Already we can see why the Homeric poems are thematically separated from tragedies such as the Oedipus anthology, where the characters are usually, not only unaware of their fate, but also oblivious of their past and origins. Furthermore, their fate is predetermined; therefore, we cannot consider them autonomous beings, even if at times it feels like they are.

The other aspect about the Homeric poems that places them in a different category than other tragedies is the fact that they do not include *catharsis* in the Aristotelian sense, but *catharsis* in the form of reconciliation.[10] In most ancient Greek tragedies, *catharsis* is the part of the story where the hero gets vindicated even if they are not alive to see it (e.g. Creon losing his mind after Antigone has passed away) and the audience gets some kind of closure, the story wraps up by giving the viewer the sense that everything happened for a reason.[11] In the Homeric poems, there is usually no reason or divine plan behind the misfortunes that the characters endure, and they experience *catharsis* by getting what they want in the end while they are still alive.

A simple explanation for that crucial difference would have to be the Homeric view of death. In contrast to many pieces of ancient Greek literature, the Homeric texts do not romanticize death, nor do they give it any kind of extra significance. You could even say that death is only significant in the way that it cannot have significance; it is considered the ultimate end and the dark fate of all humans, a fate the heroes often cry about. In these poems, nothing is worth more than a life, being alive is celebrated and dead people are often pitied more than they are admired.[12] It is not coincidental that the *Odyssey* is the ultimate ode to survival by any means possible. There would be no way in the Homeric universe for Odysseus to achieve *catharsis* post-mortem. The only way for that story to have a satisfying ending would be for him to finally return home and reconcile with his family.

V. Ancient Greek religion as presented in the Homerian texts

In order to move on to ancient Greek religion, the place it had in society, and the philosophical ideology it represented, we need to talk about the

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[9] Ibid., 68-70.

[10] Ibid., 71.

[11] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 24.

[12] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 73-76.

concept of fate. As we discussed earlier, death is the only inescapable thing, and the most tragic thing about human existence. Fate is every event that is going to take place in one's life, but everyone's ultimate fate is death. Here is where we will find what Castoriadis has labeled as a paradox: death is worse than nothing, but immortality is worse than death.[13]

A human choosing immortality would not only be considered hubris but would also render all human experiences meaningless.[14] A life is valuable because it ends, death is a tragedy, but it is a necessary one; nowhere in the Homeric texts is immortality considered a gift. It can even be observed that even though humans have sometimes been granted immortality by the Gods, it has never been due to their own asking and it is often presented as a burden or a punishment.[15] Additionally, fate has predetermined every action that one will take in his life, it is out of the question for ancient Greek theology to talk about free will, humans make mistakes but they were never their own, they were simply things that needed to happen.

This fact is one of the many things that hugely separate the ancient Greek religion from Christianity. In the latter, God has provided human beings with free will, with which they can either make correct or incorrect choices, the incorrect choices will be labeled as sins. In the ancient Greek religion sins do not exist in that way, people can "sin" accidentally or are put in situations where they have no choice but to "sin," in neither of these cases does their action describe their character or their morality.[16] Another major difference with Christianity is the fact that the concept of humans loving and being loved by their gods is non-existent.[17] The ancient Greek gods aren't loving parental figures, they are flawed and can often be considered villainous and cruel.

They are not presented as beings people are thankful for, but as beings that people have to learn to accept and make peace with. This, we could say, is a more grounded take on religion than the Christian one. Here we can say that religion in a sense parallels life, things do not always work out in people's favor, sometimes we wish we were luckier, or we feel like everything is against us. It is only when we accept that we cannot control some things and deal with everything that is coming

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[13] Ibid., 86-87.

[14] Ibid., 104-105.

[15] Ibid., 95.

[16] Ibid., 89.

[17] Ibid., 98.

our way that we can live a happy and healthy life. Ancient Greek religion is very similar to this, humans must accept the Gods' will, not because they are always right or because there is a larger universal plan that is in place, but because they have no other choice.[18]

Lastly it is important to note, on the subject of what sets ancient Greek religion apart from other religions, that there is no "hope" or promise of a happier and better afterlife.[19] As we already mentioned, death is not a positive thing in the sense that nothing positive comes after it, it may be positive if it is considered the right thing for someone to die for whatever reason, but even if someone loses their life as a noble sacrifice for their people, nothing positive is waiting for them on the other side, the only contentment one can have is while they are alive on earth.

It is also crucial at this point, to mention the social nature of the gods. A lot of religions have a social aspect, but rarely is it as prevalent as it was in ancient Greece.[20] Not only do the gods constantly interact with humans and are actual characters in myths, poems, and ancient tragedies or comedies, but they themselves represent social elements. It is common for ancient religions that gods represent natural elements, which is something that we see a lot in the Dodecatheon (e.g. Zeus representing thunder, Poseidon representing sea) but what is not seen as often is gods representing social elements, like family with Ira or festivity with Dionysus.

As we will have noticed by now, gods and humans aren't all that separate; a human can become a god if the gods desire it, and a god can be as flawed and tormented as a human, just with immortality and more abilities. Once we realize how similar gods and humans are in ancient Greek religion, it will become clear that the only creatures that are presented as completely "other" than humans are the ones that aren't social.[21] This once again proves how important socialization and being part of a community was for ancient Greek ideology, it touches on the fact that the worst fear of the average person at the time was exile, not being remembered and not being welcome, and it was a fear that not even gods could escape.

Additionally, Castoriadis comments on the fluidity of the ancient Greek religion, since it was a religion that had no dogma, allowed

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[18] Ibid., 170-171.

[19] Ibid., 121.

[20] Ibid., 115-116.

[21] Ibid., 127.

multiple traditions, interpretations, and practices.[22] It basically gave everyone the creative space to express anything they wanted through the gods and their symbolisms, especially writers and poets who constantly influenced the public's belief system by using the gods to their liking in their work. This aspect of the ancient Greek religion closely resembles the way their democratic system worked, the inclusivity and plurality that was endorsed as well as the ideological relativity that characterized the ancient Greek landscape at the time.

VI. "Apeiron" and "Chaos"

In his final seminars, from February 16 to March 9, 1983, Cornelius Castoriadis swifts his focus from the mythical figurations that Hesiod presents in *Theogony* (more specifically the idea of "chaos" as a primordial matrix, a substratum) to Anaximander's conception of *apeiron*, and its relation to *chaos* and *cosmos*, that pair of significations that was so important to *The Greek Imaginary* grasp of the world. What is important to note is the double meaning of the word *apeiron*.[23] It signifies infinite, but also indefinite. This second meaning is of paramount importance for what Castoriadis believed that constituted *The Greek Imaginary*, followed by – not merely – cosmological but also ontological implications that are present in the philosophy of even Plato and Aristotle.[24]

As far as Plato is concerned, Castoriadis finds evidence to support his claims in *Timaeus*.[25] In Castoriadis' own words:

> There exists a "demiurge," an artisan who fabricates the world [...] by imposing order on a preexisting substratum. He contemplates the model of this order in [...] the eternal living being,[26] an idea or a system, an "organism" of ideas. The demiurge tries to make of the world something that comes nearer, as much as possible, to this eternal living being. [...] Yet this *kosmos* depends on the imposition of an order on a substratum that, as such, is a rebel against order.[27]

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[22] Ibid., 115.

[23] Ibid., 163.

[24] Ibid., 151.

[25] Ibid., 152.

[26] "Le vivant éternel" in the original text; see Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce Qui Fait la Grèce: D' Homère à Héraclite*, eds. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 177.

[27] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 152.

The key here is this phrase: as much as possible, *kata to dynaton*. The suspected reader already understands the vast onto-theological difference that is implied, comparing this demiurge to a biblical conception of God as creator:[28]

> There is something that is superior to the power of the demiurge, which is the resistance of the substratum to letting itself be defined by an order through and through. The limit of this divinity is precisely the being-thus of a substratum that manifestly is not the pure creation of a personal God.[29] A similar idea is to be found in Aristotle's *Physics*, *apeiron* as a property of matter, the lack of form of the latter ascribing it its inconceivability.[30]

To summarize Castoriadis' idea, *chaos* as inconceivability is a property of the world and at the same time a constitutional condition of philosophy: "The historical possibility of philosophy depends on the fact that the world both is and is not thinkable at once."[31]

Castoriadis goes on to further explicate his idea by analyzing a fragment by Anaximander,[32] referring to *apeiron* but also to the emergence (γένεσις) and decay (τὴν φθορὰν) of beings (τοῖς οὖσι), according to necessity (κατὰ τὸ χρεών).[33] His analysis begins by focusing

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[28] Ibid., 153.

[29] Ibid., 152.

[30] Aristotle, *Physics*, 207a.

[31] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary,* 144.

[32] "Ἀναξίμανδρος [...] ἀρχὴν [...] εἴρηκε τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἄπειρον [...], ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσίς ἐστι τοῖς οὖσι καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν, ποιητικωτέροις οὕτως ὀνόμασιν αὐτὰ λέγων." DK 12A9/B1.

[33] The editors quote the translation by Geoffrey S. Kirk in Geoffrey S. Kirk, John E. Raven, and Malcom Schofield, in *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 107, and 118: "Anaximander [...] said that the principle and element of existing things was the *apeiron* (indefinite, or infinite), [...] from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them. And the source of coming-to-be for existing things is that into which destruction, too, happens 'according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time,' as he describes it in these rather poetical terms." I use the verb "emerge" as a synonym of "come into being," although γένεσις means also "birth." But to be born, implies the existence of a mother and a father – emergence from the matrix of *chaos* is thus more in line with the philosophy of Anaximander (judging by its remaining fragments). Castoriadis also uses the same verb in the original text when referring to *chaos* and existence: "Nous avons donc un monde qui emerge du *chaos* [...]." See Castoriadis, *Ce Qui Fait la Grèce,* 170.

on the term "beings" (τοῖς οὖσι), which in turn brings us to the classical ontological question: *ti to on*, what is a being. For Castoriadis, our tendency to focus on the verb or the substantive is mistaken, the key to understanding the ontological question is the pronoun *ti*: "The *ti* is in a sense undefinable; to make it precise or elucidate it, one can only return to the ontological question itself."[34]

Anaximander, as read by Castoriadis so far, states that the beings (onta) give themselves *diken kai tisin*, justice and punishment. But for what? "[...] [T]here's a reciprocal reference between *adikia* and hubris."[35] For Castoriadis, this hubris is "natural and common to all beings;" and it is existence itself (genesis) that is a hubris that must be paid with death (phtora).[36] Here, we take a step further from the Homeric conception of hubris as *hyper moiran*, namely to transgress one's limits, to go beyond one's lot. It is existence itself that is *adikia*, and so:

> [...] this existing must be destroyed according to the same principle that produced it. There prevails in the end a kind of ontological justice [...]. Since every particular existence implies a delimination, *peiras* [...] it must each time return to the indeterminate.[37]

The possible arbitrariness of Castoriadis' interpretation is not lost on him,[38] although he does believe that if we follow his interpretative thread, the fragment makes sense through and through. We have to note that Castoriadis' interpretation presents a certain kinship with the Judaic conception of sin. The editors of the original edition have added a footnote that perfectly exposes this objection and a possible counterargument.[39]

Anaximander's importance, however, is not limited to the ramifications of the fragment at hand. For, according to Castoriadis, his search for a principle that is in its own nature unrepresentable and indeterminate, signifies a rapture with mythical and religious thought.[40]

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[34] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary,* 170.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 171.

[37] Ibid., 173.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., see footnote 268 for Jaeger's and Gigon's difference of opinion on the matter of the intertwinement of existence and guilt in *The Greek Imaginary*.

[40] Ibid., 184-187. Of course, Castoriadis is not the first to notice this, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*.

What is fundamental, at any case, in Anaximander's fragment, is this inescapable duality between being and the law of being.[41] Castoriadis further elaborates on this duality, by referencing three "polarities:"[42] being/appearance, truth/opinion, *physis/nomos*. These polarities are the basic building blocks upon which *The Greek Imaginary* is founded. Thus, the passage from Anaximander to Heraclitus. Heraclitus' principle is not *apeiron*, but *pyr*, fire;[43] a metaphor – without a shred of doubt for Castoriadis – that combines both the generative and destructive powers of this principle, reigned by a form of justice and law as well.[44] Castoriadis goes on to mention a number of fragments by Heraclitus, not with an intent to over-analyze, but to provide proof for the fact that Heraclitus was extremely critical of his own political and social environment. That very ability to criticize traditional modes of thought is important at any age and should not be taken for granted.[45] Of equal importance are two fragments that underline the relativity of certain religious and social practices of antiquity:

> But this relativity [...] results from or rather is founded in something that surpasses it [...]. It was starting from these considerations by Heraclitus, and Parmenides as well, that the whole of the fifth century became fascinated by the question of knowing under what conditions we can state something true, or even under what conditions statement is possible.[46]

Castoriadis continues by quoting some of the most well-known fragments by Heraclitus referring to the relative nature of the world[47] (and its epistemological implications):

> Of course, they contradict all that men habitually think. They in effect establish, between what appears and what

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[41] "Une dualite inevitable, une dualite ultime," as characterized by Castoriadis; see Castoriadis, *Ce Qui Fait la Grèce*, 204.

[42] Ibid.

[43] For the different interpretations of *pyr*, see the editor's footnote 297, Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 196.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 206.

[46] Ibid., 209-210.

[47] "The sun is new every day," DK 22B6; "We go and don't go into the same river; we are and are not," DK 22B49a.

truly is, a divorce that Heraclitus characterizes as the violation of nature by itself: *physis kryptesthai philei*,[48] "nature loves to hide."[49]

To return to the aforementioned distinctive polarities, Castoriadis makes the following remark:

> In the Greek cities, doubtless in the seventh century [...], there emerged a philosophy *ergō* (in act), and not simply *logō* (in speech), as a political struggle in the interior of the community [...] to call into question the instituted order. [...]. In any case, it's starting from the question of the *nomos*, posited in act by political activity, that the oppositions being/appearing, and truth/belief will adopt in Greece their acuity and their specific profundity.

What leads to this profundity is the special signification of the term *nomos*, conceived by *The Greek Imaginary* as a constituted and at the same time constituting force;[50] a conception implicitly apparent – for Castoriadis – even before the emergence of Presocratic philosophy.[51]

There are different facets to the term *nomos*: for one, language is a law.[52] The designation of the conventionality of language culminates, according to Castoriadis, with Democritus' fourfold argumentation.[53] But most importantly, Castoriadis notes:

> What's at the core of the Greek conception is the understanding, quite early on, that there's a separation between humans and nature [...], which is not a natural given but the product or the result of human acts, acts which posit this separation, which constitute it, and which are of the order of the nomos.[54]

Proof of this conception is to be found in the works of the three tragic poets. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* easily comes to mind: the titan's gifts

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[48] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 212.

[49] DK 22B123.

[50] Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 232.

[51] Ibid., 233.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 235-236.

[54] Ibid., 238.

to humanity signaling a rupture between what society was (lawless, and without arts and institutions) and what it became after Prometheus', albeit divine, intervention.[55] This allusion to the poets (in comparison to limiting oneself strictly to philosophy) is perfectly justified considering their ability to "[express] with a fantastic acuity what one could call the *topoi* of the era, the ideas, the problematics, [...] which are discussed, which are in the air at the time."[56] For Castoriadis, it is exactly in this way of envisioning man as a self-constituting entity that the philosophical and political aspects of the Greek imaginary coincide.

Needless to say, this intersection does not take place in the open space of a *Lichtung*,[57] or at the exit of a cave under "the light of the true Sun,"[58] but inside the crossroads of a labyrinth, possessing qualities that remind us of *apeiron*:[59] indeterminate, not infinite;[60] for it is after all a human creation. Perhaps, in this image, the universal and timeless importance of *The Greek Imaginary* can be elucidated.

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 239.

[57] As Castoriadis so eagerly repeats, ibid., 69; also 179, and 240; For the notion of *Lichtung*, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson (Oxford, and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), 171, and 214-217.

[58] "La lumiere du vrai Soleil." My translation from the original, Cornelius Castoriadis, *Les Carrefours du Labyrinth 1* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978), 6.

[59] On the importance of the notion of *apeiron* in Castoriadis' thought in general, see Cornelius Castoriadis, *Domaines de l' Homme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 272.

60 *Unbestimmte*, not *unendliche*. See the editor's footnote 240, Castoriadis, *The Greek Imaginary*, 150.

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