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Supposing that truth is a woman:  
*Kojève's conceptual characters and their role in his system of  
knowledge*

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*Spinello, je suis Lucifer. Où donc m'avais-tu vu, pour me peindre  
comme tu fis, sous un aspect ignominieux?*

**Anatole France**

***Le Puits de Sainte Claire (1895)***

*Napoléon a été profondément vexé et attristé lorsque son jardinier  
malais l'a pris pour un conquérant légendaire de l'Extrême - Orient*

**Alexandre Kojève**

***Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1947)***

In *What Is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari describe the creation of new conceptual characters or the recasting of old ones on a new stage as “thought-events” indicative of progress in philosophy. Alexandre Kojève was not only a seasoned practitioner of the Baylean art of the footnote; he was also the “pseudonym” of a curious compendium of conceptual characters. Decades after their stage debut at the start of the nineteen-thirties, his provocative reprise of the Hegelian *Herr* and *Knecht* is still a matter of dispute among several critical factions. This essay aims to unpack the conceptual triptych tyrant-philosopher-woman, showing that the persona of the philosopher of wisdom intercalates itself between two forms of misrecognition specific to feminine

particularity and to the tyrant of the universally recognised successful action. The philosopher's intervention thus marks two pivotal moments in the system of knowledge. Offering a face-saving way out of the predicament of the tyrant and woman, and as he makes them an offer that they may or may not refuse, the recognition of the philosopher of wisdom hangs in the balance. If the destiny of philosophers is to become the conceptual personae they create [Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 64], my conclusion underscores the continued inadequate reception of Kojève's intellectual legacy in contemporary (Western) criticism, suggesting that the ultimate subjects of misrecognition are both the conceptual character "Kojève" and the thought-event *Système de Savoir*.

### **1. The devil is in the details, or the whiteness of the truth**

In the sixth lecture of 1938-39, Alexandre Kojève illustrates the distinction between three inadequate systems of knowledge with an intriguing parallel between the eternal or infinite task that Kantian criticism assigned to itself and the "whiteness" of truth in Anatole France's *The Well of Saint Clare* [1895]. Kant's "optimistic scepticism" is the scepticism of the eternal 'why,' of humanity 'that always learns,' that ceaselessly marches on like an individual man towards an end that it will never attain" [ILH: 344]. Although Kojève does not specify which tale in *The Well of Saint Clare* he had in mind when he talked about the truth, or its lack thereof, from the standpoint of mysticism and pessimistic optimism; the idea that the truth is white, or that truth is whiteness, appears in the thirteenth chapter in "*L'Humaine Tragedie*". In this tale the narrative development of Franciscan Reverend Fra Giovanni resonates with the Kojevian schemas for mystical systems and pessimistic scepticism. The former establishes the non-discussive "*presence*" of the beyond as "a fixed, definitive, impassable limit to human knowledge" [ILH: 343], while for the latter, truth remains blank and infinitely elusive to human cognition.

Anecdotally, when at the start of those lectures Kojève drew enchanting circles on the blackboard, partly for the amusement of the Jesuit Fathers among his Parisian audience, he was mimicking the pedagogical strategy of the devil in the fourteenth chapter of "*L'Humaine Tragedie*". Like the Francian devil who makes Fra Giovanni see colourful partial truths in different circles and then speeds them all up to make them

disappear in the “universal wheel” of the white truth, Kojève draws various circular diagrams of philosophical and theological systems and then, as if by magic, he makes them all disappear in the Hegelian circle of absolute knowledge [ILH: 340 & 353]. Not to be taken at face value, the intriguingly furtive reference to the *Puits de Sainte Claire* warrants a closer inspection to reveal its intersections and resonances with Kojève’s teaching in the concluding year of his lectures on Hegel.

Reading the first six chapters of “L’Humaine Tragedie” is a truly excruciating experience. Fra Giovanni is the perfect anti-Kojevean character. He neither struggles nor works. He is absolutely freed from desires and rejoices in his ignorance and humiliation. By today’s moral standards, this insufferable ignoramus would be considered a shameless pervert. The contemporary reader would cringe at the stark-naked holy man joining a group of terrified children while at play on a see-saw swing, and recoil at his lack of social distancing with lepers. It was not until he came under the radar of the devil, in chapter seven, that the character of Fra Giovanni will begin to undergo some interesting, albeit involuntary and unwilling, transformations. Embarrassingly, the reader will find the appearance of the devil halfway through the story a rather welcoming event insofar as it promises to put an end to the holy man’s improprieties. Thus, and from the outset, Anatol France elicits and provokes the reader’s sympathy for the devil and a perverse complicity with his work.

The Francian devil is a resourceful pedagogue, an excellent dialectician, and a master of disguise. He had to go through loops and hooves to drill his message in the cavernous skull of the holy man. His efforts came to no avail in chapters eight and nine, and Fra Giovanni (admirably, albeit annoyingly) persevered in his sovereign ignorance. At this important junction in the narrative, the reader, who is now in utter despair, is likely to wish for a master more powerful and more cunning than the devil to deliver humanity from its holy men! Chapter ten precisely fulfils that wish for the reader. What the devil has failed to achieve so far; the “Friends of Order” will accomplish. Fra Giovanni is thrown in the dungeons as a punishment for offending the alliance of worldly masters whose mission is to persuade the poor to observe order so that no change is brought about in the existing structure of power.

We can make sense of the complicity of the Friends of Order with the representatives of the law in “L’Humaine Tragedie” with reference to the Kojevian notions of right and

tyranny. Although autonomous, these two notions are shaped by the same forces: they both emerge from a *desire for recognition*, one specific to tyranny and one specific to the phenomenon of right. They both tend to *expand* if they want to evolve and change. However, their expansion is neither interminable nor aimless insofar as they both tend towards an *end*, a form of *satisfaction*, that corresponds to the fulfilment of their respective desire for recognition. Considering that: “ il n’y a pas de Droit sans Société, en dehors de la Société ou contre la Société (en tant que telle), et peut-être pas de société sans Droit” [Kojève 1981: 75], the law is never confronted to the social in a radical or immediate way. The sovereign ignorance of Fra Giovanni in the first six chapters of the narrative did not constitute a concrete threat to the inhabitants of Viterbo who either ridiculed the eccentricities of the holy man or tolerated his stupidity with exemplary patience and charitable good will. As such, Fra Giovanni’s scandalous acts did not enter into a direct conflict with the system of right in place. By the same token, Kojève does not posit the notion of right as the antithesis of the notion of tyranny. As such, he does not attribute to the juridical idea a political dimension, nor to the political a legal one. He nevertheless considers the conflict that is “immanent” to right to be “internal or dialectical” [Kojève 1981: 183].

Right dwells in the social entity, which is essential to its existence. If right does not want to change, it supports the propagation and expansion of whichever political tyranny that keeps society perfectly stable and unchanged. If, conversely, right wants to change and expand, its “immanent conflict” does not translate into a confrontation with society, whose ruin would spell out the disappearance of right. Right enters into a conflict with a political tyranny only when it impedes its expansion and progress.<sup>1</sup> In that case, right is displaced from the autonomous sphere of legality to become a political enemy of the state. “L’Humaine Tragedie” provides a perfect illustration of a system of right that does not want to change or expand, even though it is aware of its imperfections and inadequacy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Viterbo’s system of right aligns itself with the tyranny in place, i.e., with the *Friends of Order*, the one political force that proved its efficacy in preserving the social entity in which this legal system dwells.

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<sup>1</sup> Kojève notes that unlike Right, which does not destroy the social on which its existence, religion can be anti-social to such an extreme that it can lead to the total annihilation of society [Kojève 1982: 182].

<sup>2</sup> In chapter eleven, the Magistrate acknowledges that the sentence of Fra Giovanni does not reflect a perfect ideal of justice.

The alliance of tyranny and right in “L’Humaine Tragedie” is strikingly depicted in the eleventh chapter of the book, when Fra Giovanni finds himself in the dark dungeons of Viterbo, chained to an anarchist, who wanted to overthrow the Republic by force, and to a learned man of law, who wanted to invent wiser laws for his fellow citizens. Thus, seeing that the holy man is cast in the unwitting and unintended role of a rebel without a cause, the reader may throw up the towel in total desperation, knowing too well that Fra Giovanni, the most ignorant man who ever lived, is undeserving of the misplaced recognition of his fellow prison companions. But, even when the holy man’s defiance of the Friends of Order appeared to the anarchist in agreement with his criminal action, and to the renegade man of law as conforming to his verbal struggles, Fra Giovanni’s naivety and ignorance made him choose to distance himself from the former and the latter. At the end of this chapter, he appears in stark solitude, as if he was abandoned by all humanity; he is with everyone and no one, like a “harper that roams between the hosts in battle array of hostile armies.” This unwilling and unmeditated “sweet revolt” raises him from idiocy to the more humanising position of a political subject deserving of a political death.

The devil re-appears in chapter thirteen (titled “The Truth”) to resume his work and to convince the holy man that the truth for which he vowed to die is “WHITE”, a meaningless word unworthy of his sacrifices. It is this definition of the truth that Kojève attributes to the Francian devil of *Le Puits de Sainte Claire* [ILH: 344] and uses to illustrate the trap of all variants of scepticism, be they rational or mystical, optimistic or otherwise. Now, it is important to note that Kojève omits to add that Fra Giovanni will finally and fully recognise the devil three chapters later, at the very end of the book, and abandon the notion that the truth is white.

At the start of the third lecture of 1938-39, Kojève describes the cognition attained by the religious person in the following (Lacanian) terms: “Si le Religieux est parfait par sa connaissance, cette connaissance est celle d’un *Autre*; et il n’est conscient de soi d’une manière *absolue* que dans la mesure et par le fait qu’il est lui-même dans et par *l’Autre*” [ILH: 292]. Similarly, for Fra Giovanni, it is not the whiteness of the truth that he was unable to grasp, but *the truth of the Other*, the truth of the one telling him that the truth is white. In the next chapter, (titled “The Dream”), the reader is made witness to the holy man’s ineffable mystical experience, such as the one described in various fragments in Kojève’s work, namely in a footnote appended to the third lecture of 1938-39, on the “coincidence du sujet connaissant et de l’objet connu”

in “l’union mystique” [ILH: 296]. Conversely, Kojève’s deliberate omission of the resolution of the Francian narrative freeze-frames the conceptual characters of the devil and the holy man in the *misrecognition of the truth of the other*.

## **2. Bony, conqueror of the Far-East, and the woman of fashion**

In a footnote added selected lectures from the academic year 1934-35, Kojève evokes the character of Toby, the slave gardener who was portrayed in several second-hand accounts and memoirs on Napoleon’s exile on the island of St Helena.<sup>3</sup> As intriguing as his reference to the Francian devil and equally ambivalent, it may not be easy to identify the exact source from which Kojève cites the anecdote of Napoleon’s annoyance and profound sadness when “his Malayan gardener took him for a legendary conqueror of the Far East” [1947: 507]. Nineteenth-century literature was as much fascinated by the devil as it was by the tales and images of the last days of the fallen emperor. We can only speculate that Kojève’s rendition of the first encounter of Toby and “Bony” may have been inferred from the semi-fictional narrative of Russian author Mark Aldanov, whose life and some of his intellectual positions, namely his objections to Berdyaev, share many common grounds with Kojève and deserve an independent study outside the scope of the present essay.

Kojève’s tongue-in-cheek anecdote on the misrecognition of (the truth of) Napoleon brings into focus something else, which would be, historically speaking, anachronistic within the frame of the Italian Renaissance in “L’Humaine Tragedie”. By freeze-framing the conceptual character Napoleon in this moment of misrecognition, the misrecognition of the truth of the other is displaced from the tyrant onto the slave gardener. It is anecdotally believed that in his exile on a virtually desert island in the middle of nowhere, Napoleon had led a failed campaign to free Toby. This episode is described in the book authored by Napoleon’s Irish doctor, Barry O’Meara, *Napoleon In Exile; A Voice From St. Helena* (1853). Perhaps it is worth noting, in passim, the resonance of the title with the vanishing of the Francian devil into a “voice” in the dream of Fra Giovanni; a voice that communicates a truth that can neither be seen nor read. Reduced to a voice for posterity, Napoleon would survey the island and belittle the achievement of the British Empire, which expanded the territories of its tyranny without

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<sup>3</sup> There’s an uncanny parallel between Toby’s blackness and the Francian depiction of the devil as a black, dark handsome creature.

homogenising the people who came under its rule. Kojève will substantiate this argument in his survey of failed ancient and modern tyrannies in “L’ Action politique des philosophes” [1950]. Addressing his Irish doctor, Napoleon laments the plight of the duped subjects turned slaves both within and outside the British Empire:

*This is their liberality to the unfortunate man, who blindly relying on what he so falsely imagined to be their national character, in an evil hour unsuspectingly confided himself to them. I once thought that you were free: I now see that your ministers laugh at your laws, which are like those of other nations, formed only to oppress the defenceless, and screen the powerful, whenever your government has any object in view [O’Meara 1853: 11-12].*

Kojève’s seemingly light-hearted footnote on the misrecognition of Napoleon is loaded with many uncomfortable truths and serious political implications, none of which are directly disclosed or spelt out for the reader. Instead, the tragic overtones of the whole scene are diluted in the rest of the footnote in an astonishingly, perhaps even affectedly, fortuitous way: A woman of fashion is annoyed and saddened when she sees a friend wearing the dress that was sold to her as the “unique” one of its kind [ILH: 507]. By analogy, Napoleon’s sadness is justified because in the eyes of his Malayan gardener he was just like any other conqueror of the Far East. For Kojève, one does not want to be *seen* and *talked about* as that “average man,” but “always as someone other than oneself.”

What is to be made of these two instances where Kojève amplifies the misrecognised truth of the tyrant and that of a woman of fashion within the same frame? In the body of the text where this footnote appears, Kojève supplements the development of the two fundamental “pre-philosophical Judeo-Christian” anthropological categories of freedom and historicity in the Hegelian dialectic with the third “modern” category of individuality [ILH: 505]. Although, he argues that all three constitute one indivisible category, the footnote on Napoleon and the woman of fashion highlights the specificities of the concept of individuality as “irreplaceable unicity and uniqueness.” To this uniqueness, he attributes a positive value more universal and more absolute than the one generically imputed to the species, kind, or genre. Kojève puts his own stamp on this notion of individuality by situating its origins in the desire for recognition. It is not enough to be free and historical in the Hegelian sense, but one must also be individual in the Kojevian sense. The desire for individuality is realised as action. In



order for individuality to be real and not just a fantasy, it must be actively realised in its recognition “*comme individu*” [ILH: 507].

Kojève’s analysis identifies *the desire for individuality* as the origin of societies, states, and systems of right, all of which will sooner or later come short of fully satisfying this desire, which exceeds the boundaries of the social, the political, and the juridical. Hence, “family, social class, nation, race” and such other social, legal, or political entities cannot contain the desire for recognition of individuality, which wants to be both universal and *unique*. Kojève contends that what would satisfy individuality is precisely the same thing that would satisfy a tyrant worthy of the name, i.e., the universal and homogenous state [ILH: 508]. The body of the text that foregrounds the footnote on the misrecognition of Napoleon and a woman of fashion provides a philosophical exposition that validates their seriousness, their equal validity, and the fact that the vanity of a woman of fashion is no different from Napoleon’s desire for uniqueness and individuality. It therefore makes perfect sense that they are brought together in the same footnote and that they share the same affliction at being misrecognised.

If the Francian narrative portrays the *misrecognition of the truth of the other*, the footnote on Napoleon and the woman of fashion portrays the *misrecognition of the truth of the other-than-oneself*. While the devil is the *misheard other* of God and the holy man, Napoleon and the woman of fashion are the *unseen* and erroneously *talked about* other-than-themselves. At first, it may look like for Napoleon to take Toby’s remark to heart contradicts the way Kojève describes him in several other passages in the *Introduction*:

Du point de vue chrétien, Napoléon réalise la Vanité: il est donc l’incarnation du Péché (l’Antichrist). Il est le premier qui ait osé attribuer effectivement une valeur absolue (universelle) à la Particularité humaine. Pour Kant, et pour Fichte, il est *das Böse*: l’être amoral par excellence. Pour le Romantique libéral et tolérant, il est un traître (il “trahit” la Révolution). Pour le Poète “divin”, il n’est qu’un hypocrite [ILH: 153].

If Napoleon was not bothered by how he was talked about at the height of his glories, it is because he had a Hegelian philosopher who can see, say, think, and write that “Napoleon’s adversaries do not act against him, they just chat away... they are pure inactivity, i.e., a *Sein*, and therefore Nothingness” [ILH: 153]. But This Hegelian

philosopher is nowhere to be seen on the island of St Helena, nor was he available to the Malay slave gardener when he was being captured and sold to various masters. Does Napoleon recognise any of these truths? Kojève reads into Hegel's recognition of Napoleon a survival strategy reminiscent of his discussion of "the spirit of Antigone" and the triumph in defeat of Pagan "feminine particularity" when it returns, in a misrecognised form, in the palaces of Roman emperors and in the daily lives of their subjects.<sup>4</sup> Hegel's recognition of Napoleon is the right thing to do because "si l'Allemagne (la philosophie allemande donc) se refuse à 'reconnaître' Napoléon, elle disparaîtra comme Volk; les Nations (*Besonderheit*) voulant s'opposer à l'Empire universel (*Allgemeinheit*) seront anéanties" [ILH: 153]. Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the book convinces Germany to recognise Napoleon and the one that saves Germany and German philosophy from total annihilation at the hands of the tyrant.

In the concluding lecture of 1937, Kojève evoked Hegel's hope to receive an invitation to Paris where he would be recognised as the philosopher of Napoleon's empire. History books recorded a different outcome. Napoleon destroyed and dissolved many Prussian universities, putting its professors out of work and its students back on the streets. Hegel was not among the delegation of academics who met with Napoleon and pleaded with him to spare the University of Jena, and it was Goethe and not Hegel that a 'starstruck' Napoleon "wanted personally to *meet*" [Pinkard 2000: 232]. The tyrant could not care less about the wise philosopher's sighting of the *Weltgeist* on horseback; he was more concerned with guessing which narrative parts in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* were real and which ones were novelistic fabrication. In that sense, the predicament of the misrecognised tyrant on the island of St Helena has something to do with his failure to recognise and acknowledge Hegel. Toby is perhaps the ultimate vindicator of the Hegelian philosopher who acted in accordance with the spirit of Antigone.

In Kojève's political terminology, the concept of the tyrant is the total integration of all possible and realised existential attitudes of consciousness, which coincide with the Hegelian concept of action. The question arises as to whether the recognised and satisfied wise philosopher is dealing with a real tyrant *qua* the optimum sum of the realised and revealed stages of world history. Similarly, a tyrant of a Napoleonic or Stalinist calibre may find themselves in the company of lesser philosophers unworthy

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<sup>4</sup> Kojève admired Soviet statesman Anastas Mikoyan for surviving successive tyrants

of their desires. Kojève settles the question in a cunning way. He explains that a (real) tyrant and a (truly wise) philosopher are driven by the same desire for universal recognition. *Recognition* engenders *expansion*, and if recognition expands, it is because it seeks to achieve *satisfaction*. In other words, Kojève is reassuring the real tyrants and the wise philosophers (of the future) that they have a shared genealogy and a shared teleology. In principle, if they have that much in common, they should be able to recognise one another. If, conversely, the two autonomous planes of discursive wisdom and tyrannical action remain separate, the former is not as wise as it thinks, and the latter is not as successful as it thinks. Kojève wants (political) tyranny and (philosophical) wisdom to intersect, and he makes their absolute satisfaction dependent on their mutual recognition, which is also the moment of their mutual *disappearance*. Now, this is the true sore point in the Kojevian dialectic of tyranny and wisdom that foregrounds the hidden meaning in the footnote on Napoleon's encounter with Toby. If Toby's misrecognition of the tyrant makes him vanish into an "average man," the recognition of the (wise) Hegelian philosopher is offering to make him vanish into the universal and homogenous state.

### 3. "The Future is female"

In the closing chapter of "L'Humaine tragedie" Fra Giovanni is awakened by the devil a short while before he was due to be taken to the gallows. Appearing to be entirely oblivious to the predicament of the holy man, the devil indulges himself in a long monologue on the love-hate of his life, a young woman by the name of Monna Libetta. Fra Giovanni, for the first time, suspects that his interlocutor is not even real, and that he is a deceptive fantasy sent by the angel of darkness. He no longer has the desire to be a martyr and accepts his interlocutor's offer to help him escape from his prison. After he awakes from a long night of Bacchanalian excess and carnal pleasures, he finally recognises the devil in the various disguises in which he previously appeared to his unsuspecting eyes. The humanisation of Fra Giovanni is now complete: "je sais, je vois, je sens, je veux, je souffre." No longer the other of God nor that of his adversary, Fra Giovanni now takes full stock of his unwilled becoming a corrupt form of free and historical individuality, a convicted criminal, outside society, outside the law, and an enemy of the state. Ultimately, it is Donna Libetta who remains as blank as the truth of the devil, to Fra Giovanni, to the devil himself, and to the readers of

“l’Humaine Tragedie”. It is the supposition with which Nietzsche prefaces his war against dogmatism in *Beyond Good and Evil*, and the same gesture with which Kojève concluded his fight against the sceptics and nihilists of his time when he published a review of Sagan’s debut novels. Kojève’s reference to the woman of fashion mimics the Francian devil’s misplaced monologue on Donna Libetta. Napoleon is in exile, humiliated, and stripped of his glories, and the Hegelian philosopher (Kojève) is there by his side, like the devil who visits Fra Giovanni as he was just about to be taken to the gallows, and with total callousness, he likens his sorrows to the ones felt by a woman of fashion sold the wrong dress.

In the summer of 1957, in his concluding seminar IV on the “object relation,” Lacan assigned an unusual reading to his student-analysts in the form of a riddle: Why would a recluse and ‘austere philosopher’ turned special advisor to the French government on international trade publish a short review essay of a young French novelist-debutante named Françoise Sagan? Three decades later, at the height of the Lewinski-Clinton scandal, Jacques-Alain Miller engaged the Lacanian challenge and pictured the spectre of Kojève in the guise of Valentin Bru, the *voyou désœuvré* of the European Community. He concluded that “the social decline of the paternal imago” and the demise of virile masculinity in Sagan’s new is a gateway to the hell of the “*le tous ensemble, le tous pareils* of democracy.” These positions are a distant echo of the repressed fears articulated in Fukuyama’s polemic piece: “Women and the Evolution of World Politics” (1998), and subsequently revisited and amplified in the work of Laurent Bibard, who tasked himself with finding a solution to the feminine invasion of western democracy and to the imminent collapse of sexual difference.

The consideration of feminine particularity as a serious threat to tyranny is not far removed from the way Kojève engages the question of woman in his philosophy. However, what distances him from the misogynist complaints of Bibard, Fukuyama or Miller is his unrestricted and unrestrained enthusiasm for the uniqueness and individuality of the feminine. There is an expansive body of works on question of woman in Hegel’s speculative philosophy that can be explored to foreground Kojève’s treatment of the question of woman. In “L’Inprésentable” [1975] Lacoue-Labarthes saw in Hegel’s uneasiness with Schlegel’s *Lucinde* something more than a concern with the epoch’s “aesthetic dissolution.” Picking up this same line of thought, Krell argued that *Lucinde*’s “sensuous abandon” poses a serious challenge to the Hegelian system

of absolute knowledge: “If woman were purged from the system, spirit would die; remaining within the system, however, woman condemns spirit to a fate worse than death” [1991: 287]. Did Kojève see in Sagan’s Cecile and Dominique Hegel’s “eternal irony of the community”? A closer attention to Kojève’s deployment of “feminine individuality” in different partitions of his system shows that he does not subscribe to the Faustian notion of the *Ewigweiblich* or to Hegel’s alleged fear that woman will undermine the systematicity of his philosophical oeuvre. Cast in various conceptual characters, Kojève’s women appear in key articulations of the system to carry out subversive acts. If it is true that “there has never been a duel between a woman and a man” [ILH: 515], it is not because the master-slave dialectic is reserved exclusively to men, nor is it because woman is destined to work rather than struggle. If we accept that interpretation, we disregard the basic Kojevian premise that nothing in the biological or natural constitution of the fighters predisposes one of them to the fate of mastery and the other to slavery. It is more accurate to consider other forms of action that underpin the struggle to the death for pure prestige.

In his studies of Soloviev, which are all integral to conclusions he brought to bear on the medial plane of his system of knowledge, Kojève was attentive to how the Sophia navigates Soloviev’s two-plane system, both within and between the Doctrine of God and the Doctrine of World. If modern physics can provide a perfectly acceptable translation of Soloviev’s mystical sophiology in the doctrine of God, the (unconscious) rebellion of his Sophia, Kojève contends, can only be explained through anthropological-atheistic categories. In the empirical world, Sophia distances herself even further from the authority and control of the first absolute, and can “freely” choose not to join Soloviev’s theocratic society of priests, warriors, and prophets. Kojève’s French version of his thesis ends on a rather scandalous note: If God is not interested in revealing himself through Sophia’s free and contingent acts, should he not leave her alone? God does not want to obliterate chaos, reveal himself, or bring back the world into his kingdom; it is rather Sophia’s freedom that troubled him the most [Kojève 1935, II: 134]. Kojève explicitly frames the question of woman with the key notion of “revolutionary action” in his system of knowledge, which has been entirely obliterated by the critical obsession with his footnote on the end of history. For Kojève, the revolutionary choice is an either/ or, a radical gesture that separates the truth of the other from the truth of the other-than-oneself in the most radical sense: “il s’agit de se

decider pour soi (c'est-a-dire contre Dieu) ou pour dieu (c'est-a-dire contre soi-meme). Et il n'y a pas de 'raison' de la decision autre que la decision elle-meme" [ILH: 293]

Similarly, the spirit of Antigone and feminine particularity are essential to understand the transition from the pagan to the Christian-Bourgeois world. It highlights important themes in Kojève's philosophy of right, and the distinction between familiar and economic societies as they intersect with tyranny. These threads echo an important fragment in the *Sophia-philosophia* where Kojève argues the fundamental distinction between the revolutionary and socialist realization of self-consciousness through the distinction between the becoming self-aware of women and that of the proletariat. Women, Kojève says, who were trapped in the "pseudo-philosophical theologism of the "revelations" of "divine" men, frozen in the image of the "ideal woman" who never really existed, are raised to the plane of authentically philosophical self-consciousness, these women, not only do they want to speak, but they also want to speak about themselves, speaking about themselves [Kojève 1941: 19]. In the preface to the first volume of *Reasoned History* [1968: 21-22], Kojève will articulate the definition of philosophy in exactly those terms.

With Cecile or Dominique, we are not invited to think gender with irony, but rather gender with boredom. The boredom that Sagan's characters endure is the boredom that finds "Bergson" naïve and Epicurean philosophy insufferable. It is also the kind of boredom that can quote from Kant at boring and very bourgeois dinner tables. Already at the end of 1937, Kojève sent his Parisian audience home, telling them explicitly that the show is over, that history ended, and that the perfect circularity and uni-totality of the system has been demonstrated and validated in an irrefutable and unobjectionable way. He asked his audience for one more effort if they want to be revolutionaries, to recognize 'philosophy as a road that actually leads to wisdom' because "il y a toujours eu une philosophie à la base de toute revolution" [ILH: 404] One can only imagine his horror when he received Bataille's letter, featuring 'the man of unemployed negativity,' a 'negativity empty of content,' and a 'refutation of Hegel's closed system.' [Bataille: 1937] It is also quite possible that he was aware of the publication of Poplavskij's posthumous biography [Tokarev 2016]. Contrary to these positions, Kojève maintained the Hegelian claim that "la verite est un systeme" [ILH: 355], and considered the nihilism and skepticism of failed revolutionaries as the outcome of their short-sightedness and historical amnesia [ILH: 504]. Can a future revolution be founded on the Bataillean system of non-knowing or on Poplavskij's mystical

experiences? Kojève is unconvinced, even though he concedes that ‘inactive anarchy’ also demands to be recognized, and that complacency in unhappiness, albeit less boring than stoicism and less unliveable than scepticism or nihilism, is perfectly enduring and essentially durable (ILH: 73). In his 1952-53 manuscript on Kant, Kojève writes that he agrees with Kant’s ‘notions of the “moral law” and “freedom” having, in the final analysis, one and the same *meaning*... which derives its ultimate source from the consciousness of the desire of desire, that is to say, from the desire for recognition and from boredom’ [1973: 78-79].

#### 4. “One, two, three... but now where is the fourth, my dear Timaeus

In the Francian tale of “Lucifer” a medieval artist is visited by the eponymous fallen angel and reprimanded for portraying him unashamedly in bestial forms, and with such despicable ugliness. The misrecognition of the fallen angel in this tale is left suspended in the painter’s descent into madness and death. Did Kojève see himself, in the presence of the Parisian audience of his lectures as the Francian devil incarnate, but not the devil of “l’Humaine Tragedie” and more like the one misrecognised in the story of the famous painter Spinello? Was Kojève anticipating the misrecognition of the truth he believed he was communicating to his contemporaries? Was he foreseeing the ignominious likeness under which they will subsequently paint him? Like Kant, and from the very start of his intellectual career, Kojève had harboured an almost pathological obsession with systems. He wanted to be one of the great systematisers of contemporary philosophy. He wanted to be recognised not only as the Hegelian gravedigger of history [ILH: 114], but as the philosopher who completed a perfectly circular uni-total system. Kojève may have remained “blank” and very “white” to his contemporaries as he is now to many of ours, in total disregard of his ground-breaking intervention in (Western) contemporary philosophy after modern physics, as he ideally hoped it would be seen.

The study and interpretation of selected passages and one footnote from the *Introduction* have long been a quintessential point of entry to Kojève’s intellectual legacy. Because there has always been a before and after the lectures, it became almost customary in (the Western) critical reception of his work to engage this legacy, philosophically, through the tropes of duplicity and inconsistency, and biographically, in the depiction of irreconcilable selves and incommensurable ideologies, all of which

are ultimately brought to bear on his alleged foreignness and absolute unknowability. The critical literature on Kojève has recently taken impressive leaps and bounds while wearing the two blinkers of biography and Leo Strauss. If the biographers are Kojève's Spinello's, the Straussians are his Fra Giovanni's, and while the former may descend into madness, the latter can persevere in that sovereign ignorance that neither the philosopher nor the tyrant can vanquish or subdue. Kojève acknowledged in the last year of his teaching that "l'erreur ou l'absurdité *absolue* est, et doit être, tout aussi 'circulaire' que la vérité" [ILH: 352].

Thus, we have deduced from the Kojevian triptych philosopher-tyrant- woman, first, the concept of misrecognition as deployed in the system of knowledge, and second, the system of knowledge as concept, and third, Kojève himself as the concept system-of-knowledge. If this system continues to be misrecognised and believed to be an inexistent book, and if the critical reception of Kojève is built on and reduced to the footnote on the end of history and post-historical existence, then his conceptual characterisation of philosophy, tyranny and feminine individuality will not be fully grasped and the territories they sought and opened for contemporary thought will continue to be largely unexplored and unmapped. In 1968, Kojève put successful philosophical publications on the same footing as the success of the Tintin books. His conceptual characters, like Sagan's bored girls, are still mistaken for "aesthetic figures" to produce affects, but not yet grasped as the product of the philosophical concept properly so-called.



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