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# Tyranny and boredom

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## ABSTRACT

Half-way through Alexandre Kojève's six-year lectures on Hegel (1933–1939), the dialectic of struggle and work reaches its culmination in the conceptual dyad Napoleon-Hegel as a necessary vehicle for universal emancipation and absolute science. Anticipating the 'leap' into post-historical existence, the figure of tyranny and wisdom marks the exception in which the dialectical process is suspended in favour of dualism. This article departs from the objections raised against Kojève's notion of tyranny to explore the hyphenated dyad Napoleon-Hegel through the cognate concepts of woman, individuality, and boredom. The proposed interpretation of these concepts underscores their role in Kojève's philosophical project while inviting a timely reflection on their potential to reshape social and political realities.

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## Introduction

In Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel, the unfolding of the (philosophical) concept, from the desire for recognition to the (politically) universal and (socially) homogenous state (UHS), is brought to life through a rich compendium of 'conceptual personae' in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the phrase (1994: 61–84). It is difficult to glean the full effects of these conceptual characters from the print editions of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* alone. While the original manuscript version of the lectures provides an ample critical engagement with the existential attitudes of the stoic, the sceptic, the unhappy religious theist, and the (bourgeois) loyal citizen; these figures are out of focus and appear to be lacking in importance in print editions of the *Introduction*, which were compiled thanks to Queneau (1947, 1962) and Bloom (1980 [1969]).<sup>1</sup>

In his reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève lays great emphasis on the proliferation of residual existential attitudes ensuing from the unfolding of the master-slave dialectic, describing many instances of Hegelian transitions as vague, inadequate, or unconvincing. The conceptual figure Napoleon-Hegel, which is our focus in this article, can be situated in the specific context of such instances of dialectical stalemate. Whether intended as a radical answer to the Deleuzean-Nietzschean figure of 'radical negation-destruction' or to its Derridean counterpart, which is always-already tangled in 'the cobweb of deferrals-mediations' (Žižek, 1996: 179), Kojève's conceptualisation of

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Napoleon-Hegel constitutes a strong thematic continuity with his substantiation of the historically anachronistic and logically erroneous co-existence of inadequate existential attitudes with their sublated forms.

Depicted as a more viable vehicle for universal emancipation and absolute science, the dyadic figure Napoleon-Hegel holds the promise of rekindling the fundamental conceptual presuppositions of Kojève's philosophy, namely, the desire for recognition and the UHS. The origins of the latter are rooted in the (classical Greek) philosophy of the universal 'essence' and the homogeneous *logos*, while its actualisation is said to be the prerogative of a tyrannical (or revolutionary) agent. The figure of tyranny is thus procreated by the philosophical idea (of recognition and 'empire'); the former is said to bring about the actualisation of the latter in the guise of 'historical progress,' which, in turn, creates the conditions of possibility for 'philosophical progress' towards wisdom (Kojève, 2013: 186).

Notably, and in contrast with the dialectical configuration of mastery and slavery, Kojève's introduction of the hyphenated figure Napoleon-Hegel at the end of the fourth year of his teaching, will reframe his conception of desire, recognition, and freedom with the theme of tyranny and wisdom, thus marking the exception in which the dialectical process is suspended, albeit momentarily, in favour of dualism. Arguably, it is this dualistic frame, and not the dialectic of mastery and slavery, that was instrumental in foregrounding the claims made in the last years of the lectures and the ones subsequently articulated in the famous footnotes on the end of history and post-historical existence (1980: 158, 162). While it is important to stress the difference between Kojève's framing of the questions of desire, recognition, and freedom, first, with the dialectic of mastery and slavery, and then with the dualism of tyranny and wisdom; my aim in this article is to highlight another overlooked frame, which is equally important in understanding the fundamental concepts and grounding presuppositions of his philosophy.

### **Fessard-Bataille-Strauss: a three-way debate on tyranny**

There is an expansive literature on Leo Strauss's so-called debate with Kojève over the theme of tyranny and wisdom. However, it can be argued that the philosophical significance of said theme extends well beyond the narrow lens of the Straussian school of political thought. Although perhaps still less known to English readers than Strauss, Jesuit Philosopher Gaston Fessard (1936, 1937, 2022) also exerted a major influence on the critical reception of Kojève's tyrant-philosopher and is another important reference point, which will be used to foreground key arguments made in this article. Likewise, Georges Bataille (1990, Bataille, 1988) was from the outset extremely attentive to the figure Napoleon-Hegel and its doppelganger Stalin-Kojève. Broadly speaking, these three interpretive strands tend to agree that the philosopher in the company of the tyrant is at best a scandalous act aimed at *épater le bourgeois*, but in its essence, it is always already tangled in, and complicit with the worst forms of ancient and modern tyrannies. To parry such objections, Kojève levelled his critique against the divided consciousness of the intellectual, between thought and action, setting his figure of tyranny and wisdom against what he disparagingly called 'the cloistered mind' (2013: 164–165) and prejudices of the republic of letters.

Beyond the heterogeneity of their individual intellectual pursuits, the signature themes of Bataille, Fessard, and Strauss were developed in direct conversation with

Kojève's 'Hegelianism'. Fessard was a close reader of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and St Paul.<sup>2</sup> His intellectual encounter and personal friendship with Kojève intensified his obsession with the Hegelian circle of circles, which became a central theme in his subsequent writings. In opposition to his friend's (atheistic) philosophical anthropology, Fessard framed his theological anthropology with the three-fold dialectic master-slave, man-woman, and pagan-Jew to preclude a resort to the figure of the tyrant and reorient the dialectical movement towards divine transcendence. At the height of resistance to the Vichy regime, Fessard was instrumental in popularising the conflation of Nazism and communism into the notion of totalitarianism, which, expectedly did not go down well with Kojève (1991 [1946]). Later, in this article, I will highlight the important resonances of these biographical details with Kojève's furtive allusion to Anatol France's figure of the devil in the *Introduction*.

Similarly, the spectre of Bataille's 'man of unemployed negativity', and his 'acephalic' figure of absolute unknowing, qua Napoleon-Hegel's nemeses, can be gleaned from various passages in the *Introduction*. As for Strauss, his foregrounding of the Kojevian notion of tyranny with the Nietzschean figure of 'the last man' was an effective means to achieve literary success with his academic publications. Interestingly, Kojève did not use the same approach when he communicated his response to the arguments put forth by Fessard, Strauss, and Bataille in refutation of his figures of tyranny and wisdom.

While Strauss was struggling to launch his academic career in North America, both Fessard and Bataille were assiduous attendees of Kojève's lectures. Their respective objections to the conceptual figure Napoleon-Hegel were raised during the informal discussions that took place following Kojève's seminar presentations and continued in epistolary exchange. Fessard and Bataille's repeated attempts to engage Kojève in a public debate were met with failure; notwithstanding, his off-the-record short review of Fessard's books, and a paragraph-long preface to Bataille's unassembled *Atheological Summa*.

Notably, Kojève's deliberate avoidance of the public polemics led by Fessard, during and after the Vichy government, or his silent treatment of Bataille, stand in stark contrast with his lengthy review essay of *On Tyranny, An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero*, which was instrumental in cementing Strauss's intellectual authority in North American academia. The book was published in 1948, a year after the *Introduction*. It was translated into French and appended with Kojève's review essay, in 1954, and then re-translated again into English in 1963. Subsequent editions and re-translations of *On Tyranny* (1991, 2000, 2013) were augmented with the Kojève-Strauss correspondence and a few omitted paragraphs from Strauss's restatement in which he challenged Kojève and Eric Voegelin to provide further responses, while saving 'ample ammunition' for future discussions.<sup>3</sup>

However, and contrary to claims made in numerous commentaries on this illustrious debate, Kojève did not share Strauss's conviction about its relevance, nor did he have any interest in widening its scope to a full-blown public polemic. From the outset, he was weary of the unresolved

question of knowing whether the philosopher ought to govern, whether they ought to only advise the tyrant, whether they ought to abstain from all political action or give up all

concrete criticism of the government and devote their time to theoretical and elevated pursuits

(2013: 178). To end this discussion, which has been taking place ‘for more than two thousand years without leading to any solution,’ Kojève proposed to submit the matter to the ‘Hegelian method of historical verification’ (Ibid), thus making a swift exit from the debate with Strauss. Meanwhile, he published two short review essays, between 1952 and 1956, in praise of the figures of wisdom and feminine boredom in the novels of Queneau and Sagan.

It can be argued that Kojève’s emphasis on the theme of ‘silence’ in his response to Bataille, his insistence on conducting his debate with Fessard in ‘private’, and his ‘boredom’ with Strauss’s ‘world of questions’ (2013: 177), are integral to his exposition of the figure of tyranny and wisdom, rather than anecdotal biographical details of little consequence. A more attentive reading of Kojève’s returns to the dyad Napoleon-Hegel may be useful to unpack the mysteries that lie concealed in its silent hyphen. It is important to stress that Kojève’s conceptualisation of the dualism of tyranny and wisdom is not exclusively framed with his debate with Strauss, and for that reason, it can be argued that philosophical presuppositions of this conceptual figure reside elsewhere, namely, in the significant mutations it had undergone, from its first appearance in the lectures, and the subsequent annotations appended to the print edition of the *Introduction*, through the review essays of Henri Niel, Queneau, and Sagan.

## The end of history and the last dyad

Long before his debate with Strauss, Kojève’s first formulations of the notion of tyranny, in the lectures of 1935–36, have already been deduced from his master-slave dialectic through the figure of the ‘moralising intellectual,’ (1947: 96), and subsequently reframed with ‘the will of the state’ embodied in aristocratic tyranny, and the figure of the loyal citizen (Ibid: 98–99). If the slave is the necessary condition for the recognition of mastery, the master is not in the least satisfied with being recognised by a slave. As such, and although necessary, the condition of possibility of mastery is inadequate or insufficient. For as long as a master is recognised by a slavish consciousness, they will never be able to derive any satisfaction from their action, and when they speak, they will not be able to utter a coherent discourse about themselves. The ‘existential impasse’ of mastery (1980: 46) already constitutes a key hurdle in the path of the dialectic (of the real) insofar as it engenders futile forms of action and incoherent or ‘contra-dictory’ discourses. The notion of tyranny can be read, in this context, as an attempt to move beyond the existential impasse of mastery.

From the outset, Kojève understood that Strauss’s Hiero-Simonides was a less evolved precursor to his Napoleon-Hegel, and for that reason, he framed his misleadingly titled review essay of Strauss with premises derived from his master-slave dialectic. Since Kojève pitched debate at this level, he left the tyrant of his interlocutor with limited options to emulate Napoleon’s achievements. The Straussian conceptual figure of the master-tyrant can maintain its position of power by inspiring fear in the slavish consciousness of its subjects (Kojève 2013: 150), or by means of emancipating its marginalised subjects through a liberal policy of diversity and inclusivity (Ibid: 154). Alternately, the Straussian

tyrant can assume the persona of 'a good liberal' fain to champion free speech, but who will have to 'remain silent, do nothing, [and] decide nothing' (Ibid: 146). In all three instances, the action of the master-tyrant is inefficient, while their discourses remain contradictory if not reduced to silence altogether. Almost two decades before his debate with Strauss, Kojève had already developed an entirely different model of tyranny and wisdom outside the frame of the master-slave dialectic, which begs the question as to whether Strauss's Hiero-Simonides is the precursor of Kojève's Napoleon-Hegel or its so-called indivisible remainder.

The conceptual figure Napoleon-Hegel made its first dramatic appearance at the end of the lecture course of the academic year 1936–37. Despite being as central to his interpretation of Hegel as the master-slave dialectic, Kojève passes over in silence the question of whether the dualism of tyranny and wisdom is conceptualised in terms of an irreducible exception, beyond the dialectical frame altogether. If 'Hegel does not like dualism,' Kojève claims, 'is it a matter of overcoming the final dyad?' (1947: 153). There is no immediate answer to this question, at least not in the *Introduction*. However, the die had already been cast, and the traditional figure of the philosopher as an infinite seeker after transcendental truths is brought down to earth and transformed into 'the immanence of the citizen and the sage' (Ibid: 295). But what happens then, and what happens next?

The (successful) tyrant and the (wise) philosopher are both driven by the desire for universal recognition, which 'tends to extend itself as much as possible' (1980: 83) to obtain satisfaction. The latter is according to Kojève a straightforward Hegelian 'formula' qua a fundamental concept that defines and gauges 'historical progress'. Satisfaction arises from forms of action undertaken as a (revolutionary) negation of a given social and political reality. The accomplishment of these forms of action commands recognition and establishes the authority of its agent, regardless of whether outcome of the those actions is liked or disliked. Thus, and rather than being mutually exclusive, and instead of being cast in the traditional opposition action-thought, for Kojève, tyranny and wisdom have a shared genealogy and a similar teleology, and as such, they should be able to recognise one another.

Taken separately, the notions of tyranny and wisdom have no validity in and for themselves unless they converge or at least intersect and cross paths, albeit with the all-important caveat that their mutual recognition is paradoxically beckoned as the moment of their mutual *disappearance*. The Hegelian wise philosopher disappears in 'science' as 'the sum of all possible knowledge' (Ibid: 35), while the tyrant disappears in the UHS as the ultimate and perfect form of their accomplished action. Surely, Kojève knows too well that the real Napoleon did not disappear in the UHS, he is said to have realised; rather, he was given the British treatment and deported from Elba to the South Atlantic Island of Saint Helena. Although the British were acting in an egalitarian way and providing Napoleon with an island lifestyle like the one enjoyed by their own subjects, he was not treated as a political enemy. In Kojève's view, those who act politically against the state can either succeed or fail. If they succeed, they will be hailed as heroes, but if they fail, they should be recognised as political entities and punished accordingly. 'If the State eliminates [them] in another fashion, it does not "recognise" [them] as revolutionary, as citizen. It treats [them] like the insane, a child, an animal, a non-citizen' (A. Kojève, 2000, p. 390). In his review essay of Henri Niel, Kojève chose not to dwell on Hegel's subsequent amendments to his

conception of tyranny and wisdom after Napoleon's fall. 'What matters is that ... Napoleon disappeared because he had (virtually) ended his work and that this work definitely completed history properly so called, i.e. history as creative of new historical "worlds"' (1970: 40). Kojève thus appears to be more interested in Hegel's recognition of Napoleon than in the latter's fall and banishment.

While other readings of the *Phenomenology* tend to water down the question of recognition with forgiveness and reconciliation, the concluding remarks of the 1936–1937 lectures accentuated the dramatic moment when the philosopher of absolute knowing was left waiting in vain for the recognition of (the real) Napoleon. Kojève's emphasis on the 'revelation' of Napoleon as the Geist incarnated in a new Gestalt is nowhere more apparent than in his striking translation and interpretation of Hegel's words "'Es ist der erscheinende Gott ...'" [as] this is the revealed God, the real, true Christ' (1980: 70). Almost two decades later, Kojève would once again evoke this philosophical thought-event, not without ambiguity, as 'the venerable Germanic apocalypse of universal history' (1997: 24). But it is Hegel, and not Napoleon, who designates the tyrant as the condition of possibility that has created 'new historical worlds,' and opened a new path to philosophy. 'The phenomenon that completes the historical evolution and thus makes the absolute Science possible (...) is the "conception" (*Begreifen*) of Napoleon by Hegel' (1980: 70) as the revealed Man-God. There is, however, an important difference between the conception of tyranny by wisdom, and the conception of tyranny from the standpoint of philosophy; a difference which underscores the incommensurability of the dialectical and dualist frames in Kojève's notion of tyranny.

While the figure of 'wisdom' comes *after* tyranny to 'judge', or to understand and 'justify' the objective reality created by the tyrant (1970: 38), the philosophical idea comes *before* the figure of tyranny qua its grounding 'ideology'; a term which Kojève reserves to the intangible products of the slavish consciousness (1980: 56). As such, his figure of the philosopher is framed with the master-slave dialectic rather than with the dualism tyranny-wisdom. It is this misrecognised genealogy of tyranny that is brought into focus in the opening lines of Kojève's response to Strauss when he reminded his interlocutor that he 'presented himself in his book not as a wise man possessing knowledge, but as a philosopher seeking it' (2013: 143). If every philosopher procreates the conceptual figure of tyranny, which is contained in the presupposition of their own philosophy, the question is to know the presuppositions or 'ideologies' underpinning the philosophical discourse of Xenophon, Simonides, and Strauss to then determine their conception of tyranny. Such a close link between the philosophical presuppositions and tyranny exists even in the case of philosophers like Strauss or Simonides who believe that the ideal of tyranny is unattainable, or that philosophy should remain separate from the sphere of political action. In contrast with the philosopher's alienation from the presuppositions of their philosophical discourse, perhaps due to their lack of self-awareness, if not on account of the contradictions inherent to said suppositions, as Kojève demonstrates in his study on Kant (Kojève, A. 1973); Hegel's 'wisdom' is manifested in revealing the end of his philosophy through the realised end of history. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries,

Hegel is the only one able to accept, and to justify, Napoleon's existence—that is, to 'deduce' it from the first principles of his philosophy, his anthropology, his conception of history. The others consider themselves obliged to condemn Napoleon, that is, to condemn the historical

*reality*; and their philosophical systems—by that very fact—are all condemned by that reality. (1980: 34–35)

putting forth the supposition that Hegel is the embodiment of the idea of ‘philosophical progress,’ which was enabled by the ‘historical progress’ actualised by the tyrant, immediately leads to the following question: which historical evolution will Napoleon’s recognition of Hegel complete, or what will it make possible from the standpoint of tyranny? Following Kojève’s argument, which is formulated from Hegel’s side of the dyad, wisdom completes the ‘historical progress’ achieved by the tyrant with ‘philosophical progress’ towards wisdom. But what if one reads the dyad Napoleon-Hegel from the standpoint of the tyrant? Famously, it was Goethe and not Hegel that Napoleon ‘wanted personally to meet’ (Pinkard, 2000: 232). The tyrant remained oblivious to the wise philosopher’s sighting of the *Weltgeist* on horseback; he was more preoccupied with guessing which narrative parts in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* were real and which ones were novelistic fabrication. Considering these historical truths, of which Kojève was undoubtedly aware, the ‘decisive’ importance attributed to Hegel’s recognition of Napoleon and the speculative suggestion that Hegel was hoping to be summoned to Paris (1947: 154) appear to be pointless.

In his review of Henri Niel (1970 [1946]), which can be read as an oblique response to Fessard’s theological anthropology, Kojève returns to the figure Napoleon-Hegel to revisit the questions left suspended at the end of his lecture course of 1936–37. Once again, Kojève insists on the ‘decisive importance’ of the end of history and ‘the man who was the incarnation of this end’ for Hegel (1970: 37). He reiterates the same idea that the aim of Hegel’s philosophy is to “explain” Napoleon, or to “justify” his Empire’ (1970: 38). ‘The dyad Napoleon-Hegel is the man completing historical evolution through a bloody struggle coupled with the man revealing through his discourse the meaning of this evolution’ (1970: 39). What is perhaps more important, is that in this instance, Kojève directly addresses the dualistic frame in which he cast Napoleon-Hegel with reference to the last paragraph of Chapter VI on ‘evil and forgiveness’. Now what Kojève finds remarkable is Hegel’s ‘both I’.

The Yes of reconciliation in which both I desist from their opposed *empirical-existence* (*Dasein*), is the empirical existence of the I extended to duality, of the I which remains equal in itself there; and which in its complete alienation and in its contrary, has self-certainty’. Through this ‘yes of reconciliation’ Hegel ‘reconciles’ Germany, and himself as a German, with Napoleon. After this ‘reconciliation’, the I of Hegel is no longer ‘opposed’ to the I of Napoleon. (1970: 38)

Commenting on Hegel’s choice of words when describing Napoleon’s victory at Jena, Kojève notes the distinction between the *Welt-seele* and the *Volk-seele*, in the sense that Napoleon is not conceptualised as the soul of the French people, but a universal soul ‘that incorporates the whole of humanity.’ Another nuance is identified in the distinction between *Welt-seele* and *Welt-geist*. Napoleon ‘is not Spirit because he is not fully self-conscious’ of the historical fact that accomplished the end of history. The *Welt-geist* is Hegel, and his *Phenomenology*, qua the achieved optimum plenitude of self-consciousness, because Hegel knows what Napoleon does not know. It is therefore Hegel who sighted himself on horseback in Jena, and it was Hegel who put into a coherent discourse what Napoleon cannot say, but was nonetheless, unwittingly,



keen to hear from the mouth of Goethe.<sup>4</sup> ‘Absolute Spirit or “God” is therefore neither Napoleon nor Hegel, but Napoleon-understood-by-Hegel or Hegel-understanding-Napoleon’ (1970: 39).

### The trickster-tricked: post-historical dualism

*La ‘République des lettres’ est un monde de voleurs volés* (A. Kojève, 1947, p. 94).

Kojève did not share Hegel’s aversion to dualism; he even named the three planes of his system of knowledge after three dyads. His hyphens do, however, tend to get overlooked.

Dualism is a prominent theme throughout the four years of the lectures and a central paradigm in the discursive development of the dialectic of mastery and slavery. But does it make any sense for dualism to still exist after ‘the Napoleonic Wars realise the dialectical synthesis of the master and the slave’ (1980: 44)? If dualism perseveres and co-exists with the synthesis of tyranny and wisdom, is post-historical dualism different from its pre-historical counterpart? In the last two years of the lectures, Kojève will further substantiate post-historical forms of dualism, namely, the divided consciousness of the intellectual and the religious person between the incommensurable planes of transcendence and immanence; theism and atheism. And here, another problem arises.

Before the end of history, the dialectical overcoming of dualism was premised on ‘the existence of [a] *Philosopher* ... ready to become *conscious* of the newly constituted reality ... at each dialectical turning point’ (1980: 85). But who will engage dualism at the end of history if the philosopher, as an eternal seeker after wisdom, is said to have been dialectically sublated in the more evolved self-awareness of the sage? Is it Kojève all by himself who will have the philosophical honour to confront the theologians and intellectuals of his time, or will it be simply a ‘very-very-young-young French girl’ who will have the ‘literary honour’ to reveal the mystery that has so long been closely guarded by the German informer and the Corsican conqueror, by British dandies and French libertines? (Kojève, 1995: 23–24). To answer these questions, one needs to descend from the synthesis of the dualist frame to the indivisible remainders of its dialectical counterpart, and read the *Introduction* backward in parallel with Kojève’s debates with Strauss, Fessard, and Bataille over the theme of Tyranny.

The lecture course of 1935–36 sets the stage for the analysis of the dualism inherent to the existential attitude of the intellectual. In this case, dualism is situated on the plane of transcendence in relation to the three eternal values of the true, the good, and the beautiful, which cannot be actively negated. Kojève believes that there is no such thing as eternal values worthy of the intellectual’s sacrifices. Only a concrete value situated in the real social and political world can be actively negated, in the Hegelian sense of dialectical overcoming. We are thus invited to investigate the hidden agenda underpinning the intellectual’s devotion to eternal values.

The intellectual, Kojève claims, is interested only in themselves and in their ‘isolated particularity’ (1947: 93). Unable to live in the real world of concrete values, the intellectual and the aesthete are self-confined to the ‘fictional’ universe of the ‘republic of letters’, where every isolated particularity is obsessed with the success of their oeuvre. As such, their desire for recognition is nothing else but ‘thirst for celebrity’ (Ibid: 94). Despite their posturing as martyrs of the true, the beautiful and the good, the intellectual and the

aesthete are tricksters who have nothing concrete to offer to society other than the eternal values of the true, the beautiful and the good. But these cunning tricksters are always already out-tricked by their admirers and detractors, their critics and fans, their managers and curators.

The lecture course of 1936–37 emphasised the close connection between the dualistic Christian ideology of the unhappy consciousness and the dualism underpinning bourgeois existence. Each bourgeois person is a ‘legal entity’ defined as ‘property-owner’ isolated from other private property owners. But these legal entities are not situated on the plane of immanence. Their attitude of ‘abnegation’ projects each one of them ‘far away from themselves . . . onto the idea of private Property, of Capital’ (1980: 65). Kojève further contends that if the idea of the master was forced on the slave, the enslavement of the rich and poor bourgeois by capital is ‘conscious and freely accepted’ (Ibid). If transcendence in the republic of letters is defined through the triad true-beautiful-good, its equivalent in the bourgeois world takes the triadic form of the law-money-capital, to which each particular person, both rich and poor, are ‘supposed to devote their action, to sacrifice their sensual, biological Desires’ (Ibid). Neither the republic of letters nor the bourgeois world of abnegation constitutes a community. Both the former and the latter are an agglomerate of isolated particularities, and they both have no concrete value to offer to society, so Kojève says, other than transcendent values that cannot be actively negated on earth, in the spatiotemporal empirical existence.

Kojève famously used the trope of the trickster-tricked to distance himself from many intellectual and political ventures he was invited to join; while cautioning many of his close interlocutors that ‘the tools one may use to fix a broken thing may well be the same ones that had been designed for the specific purpose of its destruction.’<sup>5</sup> In the last two years of his teaching, Kojève would limit his lecture to 20 minutes, and then hand over the remainder of the session to Raymond Aaron and Gaston Fessard to present their own readings of Hegel. Like Sagan’s character Dominique, ‘it was as if [Kojève] was sitting in a philosophy class that was of no relevance to [him]’ (Sagan 2013: 143). He nonetheless had his eyes on a young student in the audience who will later initiate him into political economy and facilitate his transition to civil service in the post-war French government.

### **The truth of the other: religious dualism**

In the last two years of his lecture course, Kojève intensified his critique of the republic of letters and the bourgeois world through his close reading of the existential attitudes of stoicism and scepticism. For while stoicism is empty of content and thus self-condemned to metre out in boredom, its sublated form in scepticism will sooner or later terminate in nihilism. Because of its unviability and limited shelf-life, scepticism will ultimately find refuge in the (bourgeois) religious attitude of the unhappy consciousness to make its earthly suffering less unbearable. The summary of the lecture course of 1934–35 evokes another form of dualism whereby the religious person is trapped within a divided self. Unlike the dualism of the tyrant and the philosopher, which realises and reveals satisfaction qua the supreme end of human existence, the dualism ‘at the basis of Religion’ (1947: 74) will never attain satisfaction. In Kojève’s view, the question of religion constitutes a serious challenge to philosophy because ‘absolute error, or absurdity is, and must be, just as “circular” as the truth’ (1980: 117).

A furtive reference in the sixth lecture of 1938–39 draws an analogy between the unattainable truth of mysticism and (Kantian) scepticism, and the ‘whiteness’ of the truth in Anatole France’s *Well of Saint Clare* (1895), a collection of short stories set in the Middle Ages and aimed as a satire of modern bourgeois religious and moral hypocrisy. The reference is to the scene in ‘The Human Tragedy’ in which the devil appeared to Franciscan Fra Giovanni disguised as a skilful logician. Friar Giovanni was condemned to death as a punishment for offending the powerful elites of Viterbo. While awaiting his execution, he is visited by the devil who will try and reason with him that the truth for which he vowed to die is ‘white,’ a meaningless word unworthy of his sacrifices. The Francian devil makes Friar Giovanni see partial truths in different circles, each with a different colour and in a different language. He then speeds them all up to make them disappear in the ‘universal wheel’ of the white/blank truth (1980: 109).

One can read into the allusion to Anatole France’s devil-logician, and to the blankness of the truth, a triple playful nod; one to Fessard’s desperate attempt to provide a theological reading of Hegel’s circles, one to Bataille’s mysticism, and another one to Strauss’s expertise in ‘the art of dialectic’ which is a ‘distinctive trait of the philosopher’ (2013: 157). However, a more serious interpretation of the Francian tale can be deduced from Kojève’s claim that the secularised notions of freedom and historicity would have never entered philosophical consciousness had they not been revealed by ‘pre-philosophical Judeo-Christian anthropology’ (1980: 234). By analogy, we may read into ‘The Human Tragedy’ an allegorical narrative about the conversion of philosophy to freedom and historicity, rather than the seduction of the holy man by the philosopher-devil. Friar Giovanni is a social monster, who neither works nor struggles; he is complacent in his ignorance and ascetic way of life. It was only thanks to the intervention of the devil-saint, who ultimately convinced him to escape from prison, that he was finally humanised.

However, a modern, dialectical, and secular anthropology is not limited to the dualism of freedom and historicity, rather it is necessarily the undivided triad free-historical-individuality. The problem though, says Kojève, is that from a religious or theological perspective, the category of individuality belongs to the plane of transcendence and particularity. If a given religious discourse designates its converts and followers in relation to an eternal being in whom they will become ‘beneficiaries of an “afterlife”’, they are particularised by ‘its restricted possibilities or its impossibilities . . . that the others do not have’ (1980: 249). In other words, the religious discourse obliterates individuality in the name of particularity, and while the latter cannot be entirely sublated in the universal, insofar as it is grounded in difference, it remains on the same ontological plane as animal life and thing-like objects (Ibid: 250). Conversely, individuality does not have an afterlife, its possibilities are limited, and its realisation is not an infinite task, but a concrete endeavour, which can only be effectuated through the transformation of a given social and political reality.

The key to unlocking the tyrant-philosopher dyad is thus located in the anthropological category of free-historical-individuality. It is the figure of individuality that constitutes a serious challenge, not only to the theological discourse, but also to tyranny and wisdom. Qua synthesis of the particular and the universal, the ontological plane of individuality is situated in identity (1980: 247). On the one hand, individuality retains a radical element of difference, which resists homogeneity (Ibid: 237). On the other hand, and like tyranny and

wisdom, it tends towards universal (and homogenous) recognition, not in a transcendent world, but through the transformation of the given social and political reality on earth. Thus, a hypothesis may be ventured that the silent hyphen of the dyad tyranny-wisdom is nothing else but the category of individuality.

### **Toby, Bony & the woman of fashion**

*Faire tant d'histoires pour mourir à Saint-Hélène, faut être con, dit Julia* (Queneau, 1952 : 192)

A footnote added to the lecture course of 1934–35 evokes Napoleon's annoyance and profound sadness when 'his Malayan gardener took him for a legendary conqueror of the Far East' (1969: 236). Anecdotally, it is alleged that in his exile on St Helena, Napoleon had led a failed campaign to free Toby. By the time Napoleon's remains were exhumed and 'theatrically' escorted back to France on board of frigate *La Belle Poule* and its escort *La Favorite*, 'few could have predicted that within less than two months, St Helena would once again play a formative role in world affairs' (Pearson, 2016: 2). Recent scholarships and archaeological excavations have uncovered mass graves of freed and escaped slaves as well as the discarded remains of those who perished on slave vessels.

Kojève's seemingly light-hearted footnote on the misrecognition of Napoleon is loaded with many uncomfortable truths and serious political implications, none of which is directly disclosed. But what is to be made of the second half of this footnote, which describes the affliction of a woman of fashion at seeing another woman wearing the exact same dress that was sold to her as the 'unique' one of its kind? By analogy, Napoleon's sadness is justified because in Toby's eyes, he is nothing else but an off-the-peg conqueror of the Far East. In the body of the text where this footnote appears, the development of the two fundamental pre-philosophical Judeo-Christian anthropological categories of freedom and historicity is supplemented with the third (modern) category of individuality. Although free-historical-individuality constitutes 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, Kojève attributes a positive value more universal and more absolute than the one generically imputed to the species, kind, or genre.

If the fundamental concepts of desire and recognition are first used to frame the master-slave dialectic, and then extended to engage the dualism of tyranny and wisdom, they are equally important to the framing of the indivisible category of free-historical-individuality. This is perhaps the overlooked question and the missing link in the debate on tyranny. The desire for individuality is at 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' (1980: 237), and such other social, legal, or political entities, cannot contain the desire for recognition, which arises, not from the master-slave dialectic, and not from the dualism of tyranny-wisdom, but from expressions of individuality, which want to be both universal and *unique*, and not simply 'represented' in 'specific-particularity' (1980: 237). As shown in the case of the existential impasse of mastery, or in the case of tyranny and wisdom, individuality can only be satisfied in and through a universal and homogenous state. But this still begs the question: why did Napoleon take

Toby's remark to heart? His alleged annoyance and sadness contradict his indifference to more notable criticism of his action, especially when voiced by the church or the philosophers and intellectuals of his time.

From a Christian standpoint, Napoleon realises vanity: he is thus the incarnation of Sin (the Anti-Christ). He was first to have dared to effectively attribute an absolute (universal) value to human Particularity. To Kant and Fichte, he is the *das Böse*: the amoral being par excellence. To the liberal and tolerant Romantic, he is a traitor (he 'betrays' the Revolution). To the 'divine' Poet, he is nothing else but a hypocrite. (1980: 153)

If Napoleon was indifferent to how he was talked about at the height of his glories, it is because he had a 'German informer . . . enamoured of reason' (1997: 23) who can see, say, think, and write that 'Napoleon's adversaries do not act against him, they just chat away . . . they are pure inactivity, that is, a *Sein*, and therefore Nothingness' (1947: 153). Thus, Napoleon's annoyance at being misrecognised by Toby is indicative of two important articulations in Kojève's reading of Hegel. On the one hand, Napoleon's reaction is underpinned by the transpositions of the desire for recognition and freedom from the dialectical and dualist frame to the grounds of individuality. On the other hand, it is important to stress in Kojève's defence of the conception of Napoleon by Hegel the articulation of a survival strategy. This articulation is evoked with reference to the spirit of Antigone, and the triumph in defeat of Pagan feminine particularity when it returns, in a misrecognised form, in the palaces of 'particular' Roman emperors and in the daily lives of their particularised subjects (1980: 63). In like manner, 'casual and comfortable pyjamas from the effeminate Indies had conquered the free Western world, thanks to the British conqueror of the servile Orient' (1997: 25). Hegel's recognition of Napoleon is the right thing to do because 'if Germany (therefore, German philosophy) refuses to "recognise" Napoleon, it will disappear as Volk; Nations (*Besonderheit*) wanting to set themselves against the universal Empire (*Allgemeinheit*) will be annihilated' (1947: 153). The *Phenomenology* is the book that convinced Germany to recognise Napoleon and the one that saves Germany and German philosophy from total annihilation at the hands of the tyrant. Hegel invites the German to accept 'the wound of the spirit' inflicted by Napoleon on Germany, and to 'willingly integrate itself into the universal empire' (1970: 38). In his survey of the conservative reaction against Napoleon in defeat in British literature, Ellis (2013: 213) notes that 'unlike their German and Italian counterparts, the [British] never experienced the shock of conquest of their homeland, and . . . did not have to engage in the pragmatic art of collaboration with the enemy.'

## Boredom in revolt

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* (Sagan, 2013: 202)

From a biographical perspective, Kojève's short review essays of Queneau and Sagan's post-historical novels of boredom marked the end of his 'debates' with his immediate interlocutors. However, it can be argued that their philosophical importance resides elsewhere.

In his concluding seminar IV on the object relation, Lacan brought Kojève's review essay of Sagan to the attention of a community of practicing and student analysts, alerting them to the secret truths, which will hitherto be blurred out on their couches.

He then tasked his audience with finding out for themselves what these secret truths might be, which an austere philosopher turned civil servant was made party to (Lacan, 2021). Three decades later, Jacques-Alain Miller read into Kojève's interpretation of Sagan an open indictment of the 'social decline of the paternal imago.' For Miller (2017, p. 84), in place of the '*pas-tous*' (not-all), which kept things stable in their particularities, the demise or disappearance of virility (*le viril*) is a gateway to the hell of the '*tous*', '*the all-togetherness*, and *all-sameness* of democracy.' While underscoring Kojève's affinity with Valentin Bru, the 'unemployed rascal' of Queneau's *Sunday of Life*, Miller sensed a secret complicity between the philosopher of the end of history and Sagan's female characters Cecile and Dominique. However, what distances Kojève from Valentin Bru, according to Miller, is the courage to say 'yes' (to the idea of the European Community), perhaps in the same way Hegel said 'yes' to Napoleon. This courage to say 'yes' is lacking in Valentin Bru's virile or heroic posturing (Ibid: 91). Although Miller's reading is primarily concerned with Lacan's famous 'diagram of sexualisation', it highlights useful intersections between the latter and the theme of feminine individuality in Kojève's philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

As early as the mid-thirties, Kojève distanced himself from Bataille's 'college of sociology' and the idea that a 'devirilised society' is the outcome of bourgeois individualism (Bataille, 1988, p. 45). Similarly, his articulation of the feminine in terms of uniqueness and individuality is a marked departure from the Faustian notion of the *Ewigweiblich* or Hegel's alleged fear that woman will place the speculative system in jeopardy (Krell, 1991). In his encounter with Toby, Napoleon was finally awakened to the truth of individuality; a truth that a/any woman of fashion knows so well. If Napoleon secularises the Christian theology of the dead God (1947: 300), woman sanctifies the philosophy of individuality. These two subversive political acts complement each other but also counterbalance one another. While feminist interpretations of Hegel tend to focus on the theme of gender and irony; in his reading of Sagan, Kojève saw something else whose foregrounding premises appear in some footnotes in his 1952–53 study on Kant. The desire of desire, which underpins and shapes the notions of freedom and the moral law, manifests itself positively as desire for recognition, and negatively as boredom (1973: 78–79). The positive and negative are not expressed in terms of value judgement, rather for Kojève, they pertain to the concept of objective reality, which he defines as 'that which *resists*' (1969: 156). Objective-reality is the irreducible-opposition and indivisible category desire-boredom, which resists more than it dreams. When Valentin visits Jena to mimic the desire of his role model Napoleon, Julia observes that it is 'con' (stupid) of Napoleon to 'make such a fuss' (too much history/too many stories), and then end up on St Helena (Queneau, 2011). Julia is bored with the disappointing outcome of Napoleon's struggle for recognition. In a reversal of the Gerardian trope of the male desirer qua triangulator of the in-existent desires of dreamy female characters (Girard, 1966), Sagan's female young characters are the triangulators of the desires of dreamy male characters who 'tend to flaunt themselves quite naked (but with compulsory muscles) or in a state of undress before no means started eyes of young girls' (A. Kojève, 1997, p. 25). It may therefore be inaccurate to frame Sagan's characters, Cecile and Dominique, with the (Hegelian) concept of irony. In the alternative (Kojevian) frame, boredom shares the same plane of immanence with desire.

In his short review of Sagan, Kojève is as cryptic about the boredom of Cecile-Dominique as he was about the dyad Napoleon-Hegel. From the novels themselves, we may infer what may have caught Kojève's eye about the theme of boredom in Sagan. The

characters of Sagan express a peculiar kind of boredom, which finds Bergson naïve and Epicurean ethics insufferable; ‘throw [itself] with relish into Sartre’s *The Age of Reason*’ (Sagan: 127), while sneering at the ‘wretched and disillusioned existentialists’ (Sagan: 132). That boredom can also be quoted from Kant at very bourgeois dinner tables, or dance to jazz while sipping a glass of whisky.

Unpalatable as it sounds, Kojève may have written his review of Sagan out of boredom with Strauss. This speculative claim, which is not intended as a dismissal of the Straussian intellectual legacy, warrants close attention to Kojève’s comments, in his lectures, on the boredom in reference to the existential attitudes of stoicism. In a passage reminiscent of positions expressed in his review of Strauss, Kojève claims that ‘all discourse that remains discourse ends in boring Man. This objection – or explanation – is simplistic only at first sight. In fact, it has a profound metaphysical basis’ (1980: 53). The metaphysical truth in question, which is ‘revealed through the phenomenon of boredom’ (1980: 54), confronts consciousness with the decadence and brutishness of inaction, and forces it ‘to seek something else.’ But this ‘something else’ does not necessarily take the form of the negation of inaction by action, it can also ‘activate thought’ and lapse into solipsism. Perhaps Sagan’s merit, in Kojève’s view, comes down to highlighting this metaphysical truth in such a poignant way for her contemporaries.

Sagan and her individualised characters Dominique and Cecile are not a random or anecdotal reference in Kojève’s work insofar as they bear a great affinity and resemblance to his figure of the Sophia. The latter was a focal theme in his interpretation of Soloviev’s religious metaphysics in the mid to late 1920s. Kojève was particularly interested in the different conceptual terrains opened by the Sophia as she navigates Soloviev’s two-plane system, both within and between the Doctrine of God and the Doctrine of World. The (unconscious) rebellion of Sophia, Kojève contends, can only be explained through anthropological-atheistic categories.<sup>7</sup> After her dissociation from the plane of the divine absolute, and fall into the empirical world, Sophia will ‘freely’ turn her back on Soloviev’s theocratic society of priests, warriors, and prophets. Written in 1934–35, Kojève’s abridged 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 Sophia’s freedom that troubled him the most (A. Kojève, 2018, p. 66). The Kojevian concept of woman is thus framed with the idea of the revolutionary choice; it is an either/or that separates the transcendentalism of the truth of the other from the immanentism of the truth of the other-than-onself in the most radical sense. This choice comes down to ‘deciding for oneself (that is, against God) or for God (that is, against oneself). And there is no “reason” underpinning this decision other than the decision itself’ (1947: 293). It is, therefore, important that individuality and particularity are not conflated or reduced to one another. While particularity is a category of difference and heterogeneity, Kojève would argue that it is an insufficient condition for universal recognition insofar as it can easily be co-opted by, and diluted in religious, social, ethnic, juridical, or political formations that particularise their members through the imposition of a set of possibilities and impossibilities that do not exist outside of their particularised world.

While Kojève describes the (Pagan and bourgeois) spirit of Antigone in terms of the radical difference or heterogeneity which pertain to particularity, by contrast, in an important fragment in the Russian text *Sophia-philosophia* (1941), he portrays the revolutionary women in terms of individuality and the attainment of an advanced level of self-

awareness. 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 an authentic philosophical self-awareness, ‘these women, not only do they want to speak, but they also want to speak about themselves, speaking about themselves’ (Kojève, 1941, p. 19).

## Conclusion

Kojève’s hyphenated silence about the philosopher-tyrant dyad maximises its intended effects as a challenge to all post-Hegelian philosophers to recognise the desire of the tyrants of their time, and their concealed origins in the presuppositions of their own philosophical discourses. Regardless of whether its sphere of action is moral or amoral, whether it is popular or reviled, tyranny is an objective reality that the philosopher of absolute knowing is morally obliged, in the Kantian sense of *Gewissen*, to reckon with rather than shy away from. On the one hand, and instead of substantiating the Napoleon-Hegel dyad, the remaining two years of the lectures were entirely devoted to the development of the existential attitudes derived from intellectual and religious dualisms. On the other hand, the dyad of tyranny and wisdom is deliberately designed to stand in stark contrast with the more inclusive and diverse master-slave dialectic, which we all tend to see and understand as a more accessible reflection of ourselves. If Strauss had turned to ancient wisdom, Fessard to the Pauline certainty of hope, and Bataille to inactive anarchy and absolute expenditure; Kojève is our contemporary insofar as he understood that there are no masters in our post-historical world, no planes of transcendence, but only a mimetic of mastery. As for tyrants, they are far from unique in their individuality. They all look like conquerors from the Far East. Kojève also understood that the dialectical overcoming of the existential attitudes of stoic boredom, sceptic nihilism, and (bourgeois) religious unhappiness would never make them entirely disappear. On the contrary, they co-exist and thrive alongside the more evolved forms through which they were dialectically cancelled out. This is perhaps the true challenge to tyranny and wisdom as it disappears into a bureaucratised ‘science,’ ‘fashioned by automata for automata.’<sup>8</sup> The most overlooked aspect of Kojève’s system of knowledge is neither the dialectical *thesis* of mastery and slavery nor the dualist *synthesis* of tyranny and wisdom; it is rather the infinite *parathesis* of masters without slaves and slaves without masters (1980: 63), suspended between particularity and universality, but equally foreign to individuality, and oblivious to the manner in which the latter continues to shape our social and political realities in silent (and boring) ways.

## Notes

1. Kojève’s lecture notes consist of more than 2,000 folios (*Fonds Kojève*, NAF 28,320, Boxes 10, 11–1, 11–2, BNF). These manuscripts are written up and presented in a rigorous way, alternating direct translations from the *Phenomenology* and substantial commentary.
2. Saint Paul’s ‘Letter to the Romans’ is a key reference text in Fessard’s theological anthropology. Curiously, in his commentary on this Pauline text, Agamben (2005, p. 101) evokes Kojève (and Koyre) as the two prominent examples of the Pauline theme of the messianic in contemporary interpretations of Hegel, but he appears to have overlooked the all-important connection Kojève-Fessard.
3. See Leo Strauss’s letter to Eric Voegelin (April 15, 1949) in Emberly & Cooper and Emberly (1993, p. 61).



4. Girard (1966) reads into Napoleon's fascination with Goethe's narrative the symptoms of the emperor's delusional political pursuit. Mimicking Young Werther's desire for an already married woman, the tyrant's action is, by analogy, a violent striving to appropriate the being of an impossible or unattainable object of desire.
5. Fessard's letter to Kojève, dated August 11, 1937 (*Fonds Kojève*, Box 20, BNF).
6. In his reference to Lacan's diagrams of sexuation, Miller does not refer to the 'pas tout' ('not All') or feminine right side of the diagram. He refers to the 'male' left side, where the 'All' is defined by an exception, which, he says, has been erased. All that remains is just the 'All' of homogeneity and democracy, without the Father, without the master of enjoyment-satisfaction, even in the final form of the Tyrant. It is the de-virilised space of the unisexual, universal worker/automaton that absorbs femininity into its empty masculine template. Miller's ambivalent speculation about what Lacan might have inferred from Kojève's cryptic review essay of Sagan still leaves entirely open the question of the 'feminine side of the Lacanian diagram' (the 'not All'), wherein, perhaps, the question of 'boredom' resonates.
7. Similarly in his review of Sagan's novels, Kojève picks up on this Solovievian theme of the 'unconscious' freedom of the Sophia. Sagan's revelation of the 'latest new world,' Kojève contends, 'may still perhaps be somewhat "unconscious" (in the philosophical sense of the term) or "naïve" (in Schiller's sense, or in other words as opposed to sentimental)' (A. Kojève, 1997, p. 24).
8. Kojève's letter to Strauss, dated September 19, 1950, in *On Tyranny* (2013: 255).

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