Writing Democracy: a comparative study, in the light of late twentieth-century theorisations of radical democracy, of works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Michel Leiris, with special reference to the *Discours de l'inégalité*, *Contrat social*, *Rêveries du Promeneur solitaire*; *Miroir de la tauromachie*, *Fibrilles*.

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Abstract

This thesis expounds the view that the notion of radical democracy advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, as a political form that accepts contingency, ambiguity and conflict as its condition of existence, is prefigured in complex ways in the writings of Rousseau and Leiris. The absolute difference of Rousseau’s metaphor of the origin, nature, from the social, divests society of any essentialist dimension, thereby opening it to perpetual re-configuration; in this it resembles Lefort’s ‘empty space of power’ in democracy. Similarly, Leiris, in his quest for an ethics of poetry, confronts negativity as the affirmative condition of experimentation and innovation, recognising that what characterises both politics and art is their lack of fixed rules. Aesthetic processes powerfully figure the constitutive tension and indeterminacy of democracy. Rousseau theorises democracy not as a regime, but as the ground of inscription of any political order, for, in the absence of an essential foundation for civil society, its structures can only be sanctioned by the will of the people. The general will, as the generative energy behind social change, resists positive determination, remaining forever available to the advent of new political configurations. As Rousseau and Leiris indicate, this negativity makes fiction an integral part of any definition of social truth. The always incomplete separation of fiction from reality prevents political closure, allowing society to be constantly re-imagined. The autobiographical space, through its social autonomy, emerges as a site in which this re-imagining can possibly occur, as the autobiographer questions and redefines his relationship with society. The mutual indeterminacy of the subject and the social stops them from coinciding in a self-identical way; both coordinates converge in their involvement in an endless process of identity construction. Rousseau, Leiris and theorists of radical democracy expose the non-closure of politics as giving hope of freedom and transformation.
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Reading Conventions and Abbreviations

All references to the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are taken from his Oeuvres complètes, (referred to hereafter as OC), 5 volumes, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de Pléiade, general editors Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond, vol.1, 1959; vol.2 and 3, 1964; vol.4, 1969; vol.5, 1995. The title of the work (or an abbreviated form, see below), page references, and the volume (for the first reference to a work), will be given in parentheses at the end of quotations.

Discours sur l'Inégalité Discours
Du Contrat social Contrat
Économie politique Economie
Essai sur l'origine des langues Essai
Emile ou de l'éducation Emile
Les rêveries du Promeneur solitaire Rêveries

References to Michel Leiris’s Miroir de la tauromachie (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1981) and La Règle du jeu, Paris, gallimard, four volumes, Bifurees (Bi) (1948); Fourbis (Fo) (1955); Fibrilles (Fi) (1966); Frêle bruit (FB) (1976), will be given in parentheses at the end of quotations.
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Introduction

The title *Writing Democracy* refers on one level to the way in which Rousseau, writing in the era immediately before the Revolution that inaugurated modern democracies, anticipates a radically democratic understanding of the political field as being open, contingent, and indeterminate. Duchet stresses Rousseau’s fundamental role in shaping political philosophy, arguing that rather than being the founder of the social sciences, as Lévi-Strauss maintains, Rousseau, by conceiving society as a process of construction, appears to have invented modern political thinking.¹ Michel Leiris, described as Rousseau’s successor in deep introspection and anthropological speculation, also writes at a time of immense political change, analysing his intellectual and affective relationship with the hopeful vision of communism and his subsequent responses to its betrayal in authoritarian political practice. Both writers’ probing critique of the often divisive and stultifying nature of state ideology calls for new understandings of the social that accept difference, ambiguity, and friction as constitutive of political formation. For Rousseau and Leiris, self-excitation becomes the condition for interrogating and re-imagining social truth.

‘Writing democracy’ also refers on another level to the way in which the aesthetic domain, through its autonomy vis à vis social codes and conventions, emerges, in the work of Rousseau and Leiris, as a dynamic space in which the formative tension and indeterminacy at the heart of democracy re-surfaces, in a metaphorical form, to question and disrupt the order and control often sought through political organisation.
This thesis originally began as a study of the relationship between autobiography and modern democracy, taking as its point of departure Claude Lefort's observation that self-exploration is a mark of the democratic spirit, of the same order as the claim to freedom of thought and speech, the desire for independence, awareness of others' difference, and openness to other cultures, all of which characterise the writings of Rousseau and Leiris. However, in the course of research, my original aim was modified as it became clear that although Rousseau's political writings prefigure in complex and detailed ways the theorisation of the political supplied by thinkers of radical democracy, Lefort, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, this link had not been fully studied in the works of the theorists themselves or by other scholars. This necessitated a more general study of modern democracy and of its foreshadowing in the writings of Rousseau and its deep exploration in the work of Leiris. My initial aim has not, however, been completely abandoned, since Rousseau's and Leiris's acute awareness of the interpenetration of the subjective and the objective in any attempt to understand and interpret social facts means that the question of autobiography remains important. In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau observes that his image of man was already a self-portrait. Similarly, Leiris sees the self as his main object of anthropological enquiry, asserting in *L'Afrique fantôme* that we can only touch objectivity through extreme subjectivity. Rousseau's and Leiris's insistent interconnecting of social and political reflection with the writing of the subject suggests the same importance given to the subject as that found in the above theorists, who regard the mutual indeterminacy of the subject and the social as perpetuating the search for a legitimate organisation of community.
My choice of study, which is diachronic and theoretical, rather than historical, might nonetheless ideally embrace a historical perspective, but a limitation is imposed by the constraints of time and length on a thesis. So the field of the thesis is delimited as an introductory exploration of the comparability of selected theoretical and poetic writings of Rousseau and Leiris to the work of certain contemporary thinkers. This exploration provisionally leaves out of account, for the purposes of the exercise, the question of Rousseau's belonging in a tradition extending from Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Locke to Kant, Hegel, Marx. My chosen theorists' embeddedness in these or other traditions is equally set aside. By establishing a dialogue between two diachronically opposed centuries, the eighteenth and the twentieth, and between two different disciplines, literature and political philosophy, I aim to highlight both the continuing relevance of Rousseau's socio-political theory and the political charge of Leiris's anthropological poetic writings. I hope that this bringing-together of seemingly disparate elements not only offers new insights into the works of Rousseau and Leiris, but also into the political theory, showing how this theory can provide fertile ground for examining and re-evaluating the relationship between art and politics.

**Radical Democracy**

Democracy seeks at once to reconcile and differentiate the individual and the collective, to combine the rule of the law with the representation of particular interests, to organise
society in a way that the majority consider just whilst still respecting personal freedom. The conflicting nature of these demands undermines any notion of social plenitude or harmony, so defining democracy as a site of open struggle and competition. What may seem cause for despair — this irreducible friction or disharmony — can potentially found a more radical conception of democracy.

Laclau and Mouffe develop the idea of radical democracy as a political form that recognises and strives to preserve the constitutive ambiguity at the heart of democratic structures. This ambiguity, which comes from the lack of an essential foundation for the social order, enables us to re-imagine social relations as being radically open, plural and infinitely renegotiable. Lefort’s exploration of the transition from pre-democratic to democratic societies, which provides the starting-point for Laclau and Mouffe’s radicalisation of democratic theory, brings this ambiguity to the fore. In pre-democratic societies, power was incorporated in the person of the prince who, as a representative of God, ensured sovereign justice and reason. The social body had a non-egalitarian and hierarchical structure founded on the principle of divine will. With the democratic revolution, the site of power emerges as an empty space, being stripped of any reference to a transcendental guarantor that could ensure social unity. This creates a breach between the agencies of power, knowledge and the law, since their foundations are no longer pre-established by a fundamental logic. As a result, the principles governing the social order are subject to an infinite process of questioning and reformulation:

point de loi qui puisse se fixer, dont les énoncés ne soient contestables, les fondements susceptibles d’être remis en question; enfin, point de représentation d’un centre et des
contours de la société: l'unité ne saurait désormais effacer la division sociale. La démocratie inaugure l'expérience d'une société insaisissable, immaîtrisable, dans laquelle le peuple sera dit souverain, certes, mais où il ne cessera de faire question en son identité, où celle-ci demeurera latent...  

The fact that the democratic invention destroys the organic unity of society does not dissolve unity altogether, but merely deprives it of a pre-defined basis. The instituting of unity therefore has to depend on a process of political competition, on the recognition of the essential division and antagonism at the origin of the social. The need to impose order grows out of a sense of disorder; the lack of order is constitutive of it. In this sense, any political order only exists as a partial limiting of the disorder of which it is born. This lack makes all regimes contingent, modifiable, and transformable. As Lefort observes, in the absence of an essential foundation for the social, what comes to distinguish one society from another is its regime, its specific organisation of human existence. In this sense, the very idea of society contains a reference to its political definition. This prompts Lefort to theorise the political as the ontological level of any particular configuration of society, as the condition of its existence. The political, as distinct from politics, the space of political institutions and practices, relates to the moment of radical indeterminacy which accompanies the instituting of any social order, but which eventually gets concealed as it becomes determined by the policies, structures, and normative values and rules of politics. As the generative energy behind social formation, the political remains forever irreducible to the content of any regime that comes to define social reality.

Whilst allowing for diversity and change, the openness of the socio-political field leaves
it forever in danger of totalitarian rule, where one political party or movement would claim to incarnate the essence of social legitimacy, thereby trying to circumvent the debate and conflict characteristic of democratic politics. In this way, totalitarianism endeavours to reoccupy the ground of the pre-democratic period, by seeking to retrieve the 'missing organicity' of society. In contrast, radical democracy has to acknowledge and institutionalise negativity in order to persevere as a dynamic political form that allows for the constant reinterpretation of justice in the face of new demands and events. For the theorists of modern democracy, the promise of freedom and radical change lies in the fact that democracy resists positive determination. Being defined negatively by the absence of a transcendental agent of power or logic, it cannot be confined to an affirmative set of principles or to a particular mode of organisation, having to remain always available for the advent of new political configurations and associations.

Despite Rousseau's being situated in the era immediately before the democratic invention, his theorisation of the political foregrounds the ambiguities and contradictions which, for the above thinkers, define modern democracy. For Rousseau, democracy 'is' not a political regime, but acts as 'the ground of inscription' for any political order, for, in the absence of a natural or divine justification for civil society, civil institutions and structures can only be sanctioned by the will of the people. He argues that when democracy tries to realise itself as a regime in which the people and their government form a single unit, it eventually collapses into tyranny or social fragmentation. By trying to close the gap completely between the governed and their government, the regime of direct democracy actually eliminates the very condition of political activity: the
ever-present distance between the space of power and those who occupy it. The impossibility of full democracy disallows, on the one hand, its actualisation as an ideal but, on the other, endows it with critical force which, by foregrounding the constant breach between political desire and its translation into political systems, incites the questioning, contestation, and competition proper to politics. As Rousseau’s critique of direct democracy indicates, political life is nourished by the structural incompleteness and division that perpetuates our search for the democratic principles of freedom and equality.

The thesis has two sections, the first devoted to Rousseau. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss Rousseau’s theorisation of the political in the Second Discourse and the Contrat social, demonstrating its proximity to radical democracy. The absolute difference of the origin, nature, from the social, divests society of any essentialist dimension, leaving it susceptible to perpetual reconfiguration; in this way Rousseau’s state of nature resembles Lefort’s idea of the ‘empty space’ of power in democracy. The second chapter considers Rousseau’s re-articulation of the relationship of the universal and the particular in the Contrat social, revealing the mutually deconstructive interaction of these two terms in the building of social reality. Chapter 3, on the Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, relocates the political theory within the aesthetic dimension of autobiographical writing, exploring the way in which Rousseau uses the autobiographical space to question and redefine his relationship with the collective sphere. This space, through its autonomy from institutional rules and praxis, affords the writing subject the freedom to rethink the political beyond state ideology or the normative force of public opinion. The chapter on
the *Rêveries* makes the transition to the poetic anthropological writings of Michel Leiris.

The section on Leiris develops the discussion, initiated in the previous chapter, of the relationship between artistic production and radical democracy through a study of Leiris’s poetics of the bullfight in the *Miroir de la tauromachie* and of his account of his five-week visit to revolutionary China in *Fibrilles*, the third volume of his autobiography, *La Règle du jeu*. Rousseau’s consideration of the role of the theatre in shaping the social space, in the *Lettre à d’Alembert*, inaugurates the discussion, by anticipating the irreducible antagonism and ambiguity that exists, for Leiris, between art and politics. Rejecting conventional theatre as a form of art that merely gratifies and reinforces social prejudices, Rousseau looks to the public festival as a more dynamic type of theatre that could, through its dissolution of conventional theatrical boundaries, dislodge existing prejudices to encourage new representations of the other.

This understanding of art as a possible site of social modification or transformation recurs in Leiris’s exploration of the bullfight and tribal states of trance. Chapter 4, on the *Miroir de la tauromachie*, links Leiris’s complex analysis of the relation between aesthetic experience and social change with Jean-François Lyotard’s thinking on art and politics. This link helps to demonstrate the way in which creative processes figure, in a performative and metaphorical way, the work of radical democracy. The clash between heterogeneous intensities and the homogenising tendencies of structures, which, for both Leiris and Lyotard, characterises the aesthetic domain, creates an opening in the system for innovation, inventiveness and transformation to occur.
The Chapter on *Fibrilles* shows in different ways from the preceding chapter, how the autobiographical space provides a fertile terrain for socio-political critique, as Leiris, reflecting on his time in revolutionary China, anticipates many of the questions raised by political philosophy subsequent to the collapse of the communist regime. Leiris's critique of his overarching project of finding an ethics that could reconcile the life of the poet with that of the citizen offers critical insight into his growing fears about the increasingly rigid and exclusive application of a certain communist ideology in China. The discovery of an all-encompassing rule for either art or politics would be self-cancelling, since it would deprive both of the tension, contingency and incompletion which sustain their activity. Rousseau, Leiris and theorists of radical democracy converge, both in their exposure of and resistance to the illusion of political closure, and in their aspiration to create a forum in which social truth can be constantly contested and reformulated.

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Yves Vargas makes this point when he asserts that, for Rousseau, 'la démocratie n’est pas un régime politique mais le sol d’inscription de toute politique, ou pour le dire autrement, que le pouvoir politique du peuple n’est pas de faire de la politique mais de faire dans la politique autre chose que la politique elle-même, et qui est le cœur même de la politique.' ‘L’immobile souveraineté du peuple’ in De la Puissance du peuple. La démocratie de Platon à Rawls, Yves Vargas (ed.), (Pantin: Le Temps des Cerises, 2000), p. 191.

Du Contrat social (hereafter referred to as Contrat), OC III, p. 432.
Rethinking the Political: Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’inégalité*

This chapter considers the links between Rousseau’s theoretical formulation of the political in the *Discours sur l’inégalité* and the notion of radical democracy. It launches this study with an exploration of Rousseau’s understanding of the functioning of language and the way in which that understanding shapes his portrayal of the socio-political space. Rousseau’s metaphor of nature proves crucial for interpreting his conception of the political. Rousseau, unlike his predecessors, uses this metaphor to divest society of any essentialist dimension, thereby foregrounding the radical openness of that sphere. The negativity of the state of nature, as the starting point for our political development, contests any social theory that aims to eliminate the internal ambiguities of society and thereby master it as an intelligible whole. As Rousseau’s excavation of historical development will show, the moment of change is always opaque to itself and, as a result, purely contingent and openended. The absence of an underlying logic to man’s progress may, on the one hand, rule out a totally stable and harmonious organisation for the social, but, on the other, leaves us forever free to question and re-imagine that sphere in the face of events that challenge our world-view.

This chapter concludes with a study of the political significance of the primary passion of pity. By demonstrating the formative nature of difference for social interaction, an ethics of pity could work to counter the oppressive institutions and structures of civil society, built on the chimera of specular identity. Such institutions try to deprive us of our fundamental freedom by enslaving us to rigid and illusory definitions of happiness that disavow plurality. In such a context, man can only secure
his social status by excluding or even annihilating his fellow beings. Rousseau, through his non-essentialist image of nature, shatters the illusion of political closure, by reinscribing the social negativity that redefines all social relations as open, transformable and contingent.

**Society as a Linguistic Construction**

The apparent fictionality of Rousseau's pure state of nature raises questions about its relation to his political philosophy.¹ This metaphor, which emerges in the first part of the *Discours*, is juxtaposed with the conceptual and historical nature of the second part, which interrogates the political questions of property, contractual law, and governmental formation. Despite its metaphorical and conjectural presentation, Rousseau emphasises its importance for reaching a deep understanding of the present. This creates a seemingly uneasy admixture of literary device and theoretical discourse where both elements are interdependent.² The metaphor of primitive man constitutes a yardstick with which we can gauge degrees of aberration in the civil context. De Man questions how a radical fiction, resulting from a clearing away of all the facts, can facilitate a theoretical study of the foundations of society.³ This seemingly difficult coalescence of the fictional and the conceptual might prompt some critics to detect a fundamental discrepancy in Rousseau's thinking between its literary character and its political and practical consequences.

De Man identifies this tendency in Althusser's interpretation of Rousseau's work. Althusser considers the shifts and displacements in the use of key terms in Rousseau's philosophy as a repression of the political by the literary, affirming that the move towards fictional device in Rousseau's political writings signals the impossibility of
establishing a theoretical solution to real social problems.⁴ As we shall see, this is a reductive reading determined by a limiting definition of what can be termed political and how social reality is constructed. This thesis aims to demonstrate the interpenetration of fiction and reality in any figuring of the social space. It is only through the collusion of these elements that we have the freedom to contest and re-imagine social truth. This incomplete separation of fact from fiction perpetuates the questioning, inventiveness, and conflict proper to radical politics.

De Man's reading of Rousseau's Second Discourse provides a starting point for this theorisation. He refutes Althusser's analysis by stressing the critical force of Rousseau's use of figure as a point of reference for political society. The metaphorical aspect of the first part has important repercussions for interpreting the return to the 'concrete reality' of history in the second half. It is the openly metaphorical status of Rousseau's image of nature which actually enables us to understand the connection between the two parts. Rousseau's description of the transition to modern societies is steeped in, but also transforms those of classical natural law theorists, from Plato to Locke. But his transformation is so radical that today's reader can infer that the reality of society finds its foundations in the figural character of language. Society emerges as a symbolic construction, devoid of pre-established content.

De man uncovers the interpenetration of fiction and reality in social formation through his analysis of the naming of man in the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*. This fictional scene entails important consequences for understanding Rousseau's linguistic model. Rousseau explores how the proper noun, 'man', a term figuring predominantly throughout the second part of the *Discours*, came about. Primitive
man's solitary existence causes him, on his first encounter with his fellow beings, to
denominate them as 'giants'. The fear felt on this encounter makes him misperceive
other men as stronger and larger than himself, when in reality they are physically
similar. The name 'giant' does not therefore relate to the objective data of size, but to
the observer's affective response. His fear is not based on experience but on the
hypothetical danger that the other may pose. We cannot prove or disprove the validity
of such a reaction and its ensuing metaphorisation through empirical or analytical
means, because inner sensation and outer reality coincide in a non-identical way.

The term 'giant' thus functions as a metaphor, forging a correspondence between
inner feelings of fear and outward properties of size. However, what de Man calls 'the
blindness of this metaphor' lies less in its misrepresentation of external reality than in
its conversion of man's fear into fact. The image thus condenses the overall
functioning of symbolic representation: all language can be conceived as a 'figural
metalanguage' that refers more to itself than to external objects.

This conversion of mere possibility into fact seems innocuous if we take the term
'giant' as our point of reference: man stands to gain or lose very little from inventing
this term. However, it becomes more sinister when the poetic image of 'giant', based
on the subject's passionate response to his other, is replaced by the pure abstraction of
the term 'men', based on quantitative comparison. Through prolonged contact, man
begins to notice his physical similarities with other humans, prompting him to invent
the equalising term 'men' to designate his other, thereby domesticating his initial fear,
coming from his sense of difference, through the illusion of identity. This term
facilitates political corruption, by enabling political groups and institutions to claim to
safeguard the equal rights of everyone whilst only serving the interests of a few. The equalising force of 'men' creates the chimera of equality within inequality, sameness within the difference of civil society.

We can identify a structural homology between Rousseau's linguistic model and his mapping of political development. Man's political destiny derives from the blindness of metaphor. Political systems result from a process of linguistic deceit whereby they try to erase any reference to their founding indeterminacy, by posing as the only legitimate social organisation. This process seeks to eradicate the conflict, questioning and renegotiation essential to politics. Civil institutions emerge as a series of symbolic fictions. For example, in the opening scene of the second part of the *Discours*, man uses language deceptively to create the illusion of property. Rousseau underlines the fictional origins of this historically important concept through a speech act: 'Le premier qui ayant enclos un terrain, s'avis de dire, ceci est à moi, et trouva des gens assez simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile.' (*Discours*, OC III, p. 164). The use of prosopopoeia in this scene and others to condense capital moments of historical change confirms once more Rousseau's awareness of the discursive nature of social reality. The concept of property has no extralinguistic reality, since the earth belongs to no one, as Rousseau indicates in his retrospective warning against the dangers of this change: 'vous êtes perdus, si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous et que la Terre n’est à personne' (*Discours*, p. 164).

Rousseau foregrounds, at every moment of political transformation, the division between the symbolic and the real; a division that inevitably results from the negativity of language. Man ignores this fundamental discontinuity as he takes the
metaphorical nature of language as absolute reality. Political systems function independently of nature and man, partly acquiring their consistency from the systematicity of discourse. This discrepancy between man and his institutions allows for the erection of social edifices, such as property, which prove inimical to his happiness. We can thus understand historical development as being contingent. The impossibility of returning to the pre-linguistic stasis of prehistory forces man to contend with the fundamental gap existing between himself and social reality. Historical change occurs as an attempt to secure the precarious civil institutions, to hide the void at their inception.

Whilst de Man’s insistence on the non-essentialist aspect of Rousseau’s understanding of political development draws attention to its openness, his idea that the fragility of political life comes from its basis in linguistic deceit requires clarification. We could argue that the precarious status of any political order stems less from the metaphorical nature of language than its inherent incompleteness. What necessitates the imposition of political order, as Rousseau’s description of history will show, is its essential absence, a sense of disorder. The haunting presence of disorder in order prevents political structures from achieving full legitimacy, leaving them forever vulnerable to events that disrupt their semblance of organisation, by indicating what falls outside of their government. If their formulation depended solely on the imaginary unity given by language, then representation would be enough to provide them with total consistency. For Rousseau, the work of imagination is activated by ‘the unconditioned’ or ‘unperceived’, implying that any attempt to represent presupposes the opacity of the represented. In other words, symbolisation depends on the radical difference of what is being symbolised. The disruptive force of events, which point to
the constructed nature of the social, requires us to imagine political structures, for society to take shape, and yet also threatens those structures by indicating their contingency. It is what refuses linguistic integration that makes political life unstable, not language itself. This ineradicable trace of instability in politics makes it a realm of contestation, metamorphosis and conflict.

Politics survives, then, on representational undecidability, on the impossibility of ultimately establishing social truth. To deny undecidability would lead to political stasis, or oppression, as would the reduction of all representation to mere fiction. The negativity of language, which rules out the possibility of a literal interpretation of any proposition, undermines de Man’s own assertion of the totally fictional status of language, because no proposition can make an uncontroversial truth-claim. Such an assertion is potentially nihilistic, since, in its reduction of all representation to fiction, it risks giving equal status to any representation of social reality, even totalitarian ones. As Rousseau’s image of nature overtly shows, it is the fact that representation always refers back to the negativity of what it represents, which thwarts the desire for full enlightenment. This figuring of the impossibility of transparent representation arguably takes on the status of ‘truth,’ as it foregrounds the always incomplete separation of fact from fiction as the very condition of our striving for critical awareness.

Rousseau demonstrates, in the Discours, the importance of preserving representational indeterminacy. The final stage of political development, the second state of nature, signals, as de Man indicates, the dangers of a literal translation of Rousseau’s fiction of nature into civilisation. The political arena assumes its most
exaggerated form when the state of nature is translated into the civil context; the totalitarian character of this phase re-installs man’s originary equality as it reduces all men to nothing. This emphasises the fact that Rousseau’s metaphor of nature is not a paradigm to be reconstructed in the ethical sphere of civilisation. The critical force of nature lies less in any principles it may seem to advocate than in its highlighting of the lack of any essential link between man and the social structures through which he orchestrates his sense of reality.

‘Truth’, for Rousseau, does not therefore stem from the adequation of language to reality, but in its inadequation. Rousseau’s scepticism about the powers of the linguistic penetrates his choice of rhetoric. The culmination of fiction and concept in the Discours indicates Rousseau’s deep awareness of the way in which they are interlaid. Rousseau’s overt fictionalisation of nature, the origin of society, frustrates any attempt at establishing an underlying logic or truth to socio-political development. Any such attempt will have recourse to metaphor. Rousseau’s image of nature figures a point in history whose radical difference from cognition leaves the desire for ‘the true’ always unfulfilled. This non-fulfilment initiates and perpetuates the constant search for social justice. Whilst the specific content that comes to fill this void proves contingent, the act of doing so proves necessary for society to function. This demands our participation as citizens in the open-ended quest for more just political formations.

We can conclude, then, with de Man that a fundamental coherence exists between the first and second parts of the Discours: the apparent discontinuity between its metaphorical and conceptual dimension is undermined by a structural correlation between the figural nature of language and the construction of moral society. The
cohesion of the two parts suggests that, for Rousseau, civilisation is a discursive construct. The transformation of metaphors into facts risks immobilising the potential for change, as man overlooks the constructed nature of the social space, misconstruing it as an inexorable state of affairs. In this light, I would argue that linguistic deceit actually supports rather than threatens the status quo.

**The Impossibility of Representing Man**

The indeterminacy at the root of civilisation means that knowledge of the human remains forever incomplete. This incompletion enjoins us to move beyond and rethink current descriptions of man and society so as to avoid the oppressive closure sought by civil institutions. Rousseau invents in the Glaucus simile, a potent analogy that emphasises the impossibility of determining man fully through social structures. This simile condenses the over-arching argument of the *Discours* that civil aberrations are caused less by the essence of man than by bad socialisation. He describes man as

semblable à la statue de Glaucus que le temps et la mer et les orages avaient tellement défigurée, qu'elle ressemblait moins à un Dieu qu'à une Bête féroce, l'âme humaine altérée au sein de la société par mille causes sans cesse renaissantes, par l'acquisition d'une multitude de connaissances et d'erreurs, par les changements arrivés à la constitution des Corps, et par le choc continuels des passions, a, pour ainsi dire, changé d'apparence au point d'être presque méconnaissables (...) (*Discours*, p. 122).

The transition from the tranquillity of the pure state of nature to the depravity of civilisation has concealed, not obliterated, the *bonté naturelle* or moral indeterminacy of man, just as the muck and constant battering of the sea has disfigured, not destroyed, the original beauty of the Glaucus statue. This image reveals the tension between Rousseau’s historical pessimism and his anthropological hope. Irrespective
of the detrimental movement of history, where man works against his personal and collective happiness, his freedom to change perseveres. The simile shows the asymmetry between the indeterminate character of man and his representation within the civil context; both terms remain mutually irreducible. This asymmetry, rather than being a cause for despair, actually contributes to Rousseau’s sense of hope, which cuts through his historical pessimism: man, whose moral identity, as we shall see, is not defined by any pre-established goal, can never be completely defined by the concrete content of any regime with which he identifies. Consequently, the social space never reaches a state of completion, where man and the social, subject and object are totally reconciled. They thus remain forever susceptible to transformation and redefinition. In this respect, Rousseau prefigures the thinking of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe who assert that the full identity of the political is always in retreat.  

Rousseau remarks on the paradox that our scientific and intellectual development has actually distanced us from what should be our true object of study: man:

Ce qu’il y a de plus cru cére encore, c’est que tous les progres de l’espèce humaine l’éloignl sans cesse de son état primitif, plus nous accumulons de nouvelles connaissances, et plus nous ôtons les moyens d’acquérir la plus importante de toutes, et que c’est en un sens à force d’étudier l’homme que nous nous sommes mis hors d’état de le connaître (Discours, pp. 122-123).

Man’s elusive identity proves impermeable to scientific research. He paradoxically remains absent from any study which strives to understand him: the abstract systems of enquiry reveal more about their own operations than about their object. We can therefore understand Rousseau’s recourse to metaphor in the first part of the Discours as a response to this ineluctable problem. The openly fictional portrayal of primitive man suggests his deep awareness of the fact that we can never achieve presence in
language. This metaphor seeks to span the breach left by the absent presence of man without ever fully covering it over and creating the illusion of self-identical representation. Unlike the falsely equalising term of ‘men’, his presentation of man forces us to recognise the way that our identity can be articulated in multiple ways.

Rousseau’s recourse to metaphor concurs on several points with a Lacanian understanding of its function. The allegory of the naming of man illustrates how the proper noun, ‘man’, comes about to the exclusion of its concrete referent. Man can only exist for the other through the metaphorical force of language, which refers back to itself rather than to an external object. Similarly, for Lacan, the subject is forced to seek his social identity within language whose system operates independently of him.

The birth of the subject is synonymous with his being barred from ever achieving full presence to himself, since he remains always excluded from the order that represents him. He can therefore only exist metaphorically for the other. Lyotard’s interpretation of Lacan’s theorisation of metaphor, in *Discours, figure*, further elucidates the link between the subject and this process:

Ayant à expliquer en quoi la condensation est métaphorique, il explique en quoi le sujet n’est jamais présent dans le discours que métaphoriquement, et que c’est en s’y perdant qu’il ne peut y être. Jamais, pense-t-il, le signifié n’est donné, et “la clef unique” de la métaphore et de la métonymie, c’est que “le S et le s de l’algorithme saussurien ne sont pas dans le même plan” et que “l’homme se leurrait à se croire placé dans leur commun axe qui n’est nulle part”. Quand il dit signifié J. Lacan pense sujet. Toute la théorie de la métaphore est une théorie de la métaphore du sujet: celui-ci ne s’apprehende que par le biais de la métaphore, c’est à dire en se manquant, justement parce qu’il est signifié par un signifiant. Et le signifiant est L’Autre. La barre entre S et s exprime ce refoulement expressif.10

Just as the allegory of the naming of man demonstrates that what is lacking from signification is man himself, the subject endeavours to fill out his identity through signification, when in reality there is no absolute signifier to represent him. As
Zizek indicates we can consider the subject or man as ‘in the most radical sense “out of joint”; (he) constitutively lacks (his) own place’. The emergence of man exists at the fold of the constitution and dissolution of meaning, as does any study that aims to deepen our understanding of him. It is precisely the impossibility of exhaustively defining man that renders the need to study him even more imperative.

This aporia founds Rousseau’s excavation of man and of his socio-political development. He begins his study with the hypothetical figure of man in the pure state of nature. He divests his presentation of any absolutist tendencies, preferring to draw the reader’s attention to the purely conjectural and poetic character of his secular account. Primitive man is defined negatively against his historical self, as Rousseau endeavours to avoid the errors of his predecessors, who merely reiterated the image of civilised man in their attempt to posit natural man as his true essence. Rousseau therefore strips man of his social accoutrements to arrive at his primitive other.

The principles he identifies in this phase are without a positive character. What emerges is an asocial, solitary being whose sole principle is amour de soi-même: the drive towards self-preservation, with its natural consequence, pity, which can be understood at this stage as man’s reluctance to do others harm unless they endanger his own existence. Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau does not incorporate his notion of amour de soi-même into a system of value. Hobbes maintained that the dominance of this principle forced man to forgo his natural right to independence and to submit to the laws of a sovereign in order to escape from the unruly fight for resources.

In this phase, the concept of pity also has an indeterminate character, merely acting as a brake on the potentially aggressive force of amour de soi-même. However, the
equilibrium between man's needs and the ability of his environment to satisfy them makes violence almost unnecessary.

Rousseau continues to de-substantialise his image of prehistory with his notion of bonté naturelle. Man's natural goodness indicates his lack of a substantive moral character, his amorality. His solitary, free existence means that he does not require, nor has he developed the intellectual capacity for, the abstract concepts of right or wrong. His thought processes remain hidden by the sensory data collated from natural stimuli and consequently his behaviour is confined to the invariable patterns of instinct. He is without the needs, passions and prejudices that, in the civil context, place his personal interests in conflict with those of others. Man's natural goodness, defined negatively as the absence of evil, is thus devoid of pre-defined content. Rousseau is keen to disavow essentialism: already in the pure state of nature, man possesses a reserve of potential faculties such as imagination and perfectibility that leaves open the possibility of change. Natural man is defined by his lack of an essential identity.

The Empty Space of Nature

The indeterminacy of the Rousseauean metaphor of nature contrasts with the closed character of earlier hypotheses of our primitive state. Rousseau criticises the natural law theorists of the seventeenth century for importing into nature faculties and institutions which belong to the civil order. Through their hypothetical models, they aimed to establish a natural justification for the governmental forms of history. Rousseau objected to the ideas of Grotius, since the author of The Laws of War and
Peace (1625) included slavery among the legitimate transfers of natural right. Many of the natural right theorists depicted an image of a primitive state of independence only to legitimise civil forms of dependence. Their portrayal of nature thus often reinforced the prevailing status quo of their era. Conversely, the Discours uncovers the difficulty of conceiving a smooth transition from nature to civilisation.

Rousseau vows that his portrait of nature is a fiction that sets aside the “facts” of human origins as presented perhaps in the Bible or, more likely, by historians, whose facts are always “uncertain”. We can argue that his dismissal of fact has broader implications for his political thinking, since it deprives history of a point of closure. Rousseau’s origin of civilisation can only be determined negatively, as that which is lacking. In this way, the origin can no longer be understood as what causes or founds society, but as its condition of emergence. Its negativity defines history as pure possibility, or more precisely the possibility of possibility. His image of nature, by signifying the lack of essential foundations for society, provides a space, whose radical difference from civilisation allows us to re-imagine politics as a set of more open, contingent and transformable relations. It obtains its political import by revealing the empty space around which socio-political reality is articulated.

We can make a homology between the function of nature and Lefort’s rethinking of modern democracy. Lefort defines the centre of power in modern democracy as un lieu vide open to constant contestation where no universal consensus of opinions can be achieved. He reaches his conclusion through an exploration of the differences between democratic and pre-democratic societies. In pre-democratic societies, power was incorporated in the person of the king or the prince, who was thought of as a
representative of God. Through the displacement of authority from the sovereign to the people, which characterises the passage to democracy, power and law became divested of their transcendental guarantees, and as a result emerge as an empty space. Consequently, notions of right and justice can only be determined through a process of debate or interrogation that continually redefines their principles and content. As Lefort indicates, democratic procedures draw attention to the constructed and therefore open nature of social formation. The purely symbolic nature of power in democracy means that no political party can claim to represent it fully. The void at the heart of democracy becomes the point of reference for articulating new social visions, as political groups and parties compete to fill it with their own definition of social truth.

Rousseau’s image of nature, as a figure of social negativity, destabilises civil institutions and structures by drawing attention to their purely symbolic foundations. The unbound freedom and independence of this primitive phase crystallises the lack of any essential link between those who assume power in society and their status within this natural order. Rousseau denies the movement of history a universal pre-ordained agent of social change, intimating that political transformation has to occur at the ground level of the social. The indeterminacy from which Rousseau’s exploration of political formation begins thwarts any attempt to establish a definitive grounding for society. In this sense, Rousseau’s radical fiction repudiates what Lefort designates as “totalitarianism”: that is to say, a social paradigm that aims to establish a point from which society can be perfectly mastered and known. This is similar to the error that Rousseau locates in the thinking of his predecessors who sought to offer markers of certainty for the process of historical change.
The Opacity of Historical Change

The dichotomy between the natural and social order indicates the difficulty of conceiving the transition from the atemporality of nature to history. The transcendental negativity of the origin leaves any moment of historical transformation opaque to itself. Rousseau foregrounds this impasse in his analysis of the birth of language. He questions the adequacy of Condillac’s account of the origins of language, which maintained that it originated in the mother-child relationship. Condillac’s interpretation may elucidate the way in which we learn a pre-established language, but it tells us very little about how language actually came about (Discours, p. 147). Rousseau affirms the “écart immense” between our primitive state and the need for languages, highlighting the impossibility of rendering transparent the cause that connects the two orders. Even if we set aside the distance between nature and society, we reach an aporia ‘si les hommes ont eu besoin de la parole pour apprendre à penser, ils ont eu bien plus besoin encore de savoir penser pour trouver l’art de la parole’. The difficulty of establishing antecedence in this complex debate leads Rousseau to raise a number of questions he refuses to answer. He eventually renounces the whole debate stating:

Quant à moi, effrayé des difficultés qui se multiplient, et convaincu de l’impossibilité presque démontrée que les langues aient pu naître, et s’établir par des moyens purement humains, je laisse à qui voudra l’entreprendre, la discussion de ce difficile problème, lequel a été le plus nécessaire, de la société déjà liée, à l’institution des langues, ou des langues déjà inventées, à l’établissement de la société (Discours, p. 151).

Rousseau recognises the impossibility of locating the precise moment of origination: the point of origin always presupposes an anterior moment that negates it. Derrida
identifies in Rousseau's presentation of the origins of language a structural critique of simple causal arguments. Rousseau brackets out the idea of a historical causality or a supernatural explanation as regulating the progression from the discontinuous states of nature and society. The radical difference of Rousseau's metaphor of primitive man proves essential for the over-arching argument of the Discours that moral inequality has no natural foundations and is therefore a product of the value systems and institutions of civilisation. If we could find a causal link between the pessimistic portrayal of historical progress of the second part and man's pre-social condition, we would be forced to view the oppression of history as inexorable. This would preclude the potential for social change and annihilate the sense of anthropological hope that surfaces in the Discours.

We can find a number similarities between Rousseau's dismissal of a linear approach to the 'thorny' question of the transition from nature to society and Laclau's deconstruction of classical theories of emancipation. Both writers attest to the impossibility of containing historical change within a causal system. Laclau identifies a number of components that characterise concepts of emancipation, one of which is the 'dichotomic dimension'. Between the emancipatory moment and the order that preceded it, there is an absolute chasm, a radical discontinuity. Laclau stresses that the dichotomy in question is of a particular kind; we cannot conceive it as a simple difference between two coexistent elements or stages, where each element forms its identity in direct opposition to the other. For true emancipation to be achieved, the oppressor has to assume a position of radical difference vis-à-vis the emancipated identity. If we do not acknowledge the alterity of the order that prevents the full identity of the oppressed element, we run the risk of reoccupying the same oppressive
ground prior to emancipation. In other words, if we can identify a mutually constitutive relationship between the two elements, then we can never totally liberate the oppressed from their oppressor. This explains the tendency of Utopianism to result in totalitarianism. Classical discourses of emancipation therefore prove self-cancelling, because in their attempt to reach a state of social transparency, they actually disavow their condition of possibility, irreducible alterity. What makes the idea of emancipation possible, then, historical opacity, actually prevents its actualisation in a permanent and concrete form.

We can detect a similar tension in Rousseau’s diagnosis of the problems that stopped the organisation of early governments from finding more legitimate foundations. Rousseau argues that in the blindness that obscured each moment of governmental change, the new regime attempted to rectify the constitutional problems of its predecessor and found its own organisation on this reform. In this way, it merely repeated the errors of history by establishing a differential relationship with the anterior flawed regime. Rousseau affirms that what was required was to ‘nettoyer l’aire et écarter tous les vieux matériaux, comme fit Licurgue à Sparte, pour élever ensuite un bon édifice’ (Discours, p. 180). However, the opaqueness surrounding the moment of change and the inconceivability of acceding to the originary void subverts this strategy from within.

Although Rousseau is not interrogating the question of emancipation, Laclau’s deconstruction of it deepens our understanding of Rousseau’s criticism of the natural right theorists. In imagining the other of civilisation, nature, they merely repeated the same and therefore saw the transition from one stage to the next as a matter of course.
They imposed an oppressive sense of closure on history by finding the cause for civil
depravity and corruption in the nature of man himself. To expose the absurd injustice
inherent in society and the potential for its transformation, Rousseau must disavow
any constitutive or rational relationship between the two phases. What links them can
only be understood negatively, for it is this negativity, the lack of an essential link
between prehistory and history, that makes possible the (re)-construction of civil
society.

The void existing between nature and civilisation therefore frustrates any aspirations
to ‘absolute’ knowledge. This has what Laclau terms ‘exhilarating effects’ since it
means that

on the one hand, human beings can recognise themselves as the true creators and
no longer as the passive recipients of a predetermined structure; on the other
hand, as all social agents have to recognise their concrete finitude, nobody can
aspire to be the true consciousness of the world. This opens the way to the
interaction of various perspectives and makes ever more distant the possibility of
any totalitarian dream.18

The dichotomic radicalism separating prehistory from history in the Discours leaves
the social forever incomplete. This incompletion permits the perpetual redefinition
and cultural diversification of the social.

Perfectibility

The importance attributed to the transformative power of human beings in the
previous quotation concurs with the way in which Rousseau identifies perfectibility as
the differentiating factor between man and animals. We can understand perfectibility
as the ability to contend with and adapt to those situations that challenge man’s
construction of the universe. This faculty remains a mere potentiality in the pure state
of nature where the physical plenitude of man’s unchallenged existence makes it redundant. The terrible storms which disrupt man’s happy, and yet subhuman, inertia force him to employ this faculty in an attempt to cover over the breach that has been opened in his world. The break that these storms cause to the continuity of man’s primitive phase forces him to assume his human identity, by exposing him to the unknown or unconditioned, death, that requires human activity to conceal it. Perfectibility thus proves inseparable from negativity, amounting to human mutability, which stands in direct contrast to the invariable instinctual behaviour of animals:

il y a une autre qualité très spécifique qui les distingue, et sur laquelle il ne peut y avoir de contestation, c’est la faculté de se perfectionner; faculté qui, à l’aide des circonstances, développe successivement toutes les autres, et réside parmi nous tant dans l’espèce, que dans l’individu, au lieu qu’un animal est, au bout de quelques mois, ce qu’il sera toute sa vie, et son espèce, au bout de mille ans, ce qu’elle était la première année de ces mille ans (Discours, p. 142).

What defines man, his perfectibility, actually exposes him to perpetual redefinition. In this way, Rousseau refuses to articulate his notion of humanity around a single positive essence that is transparent to itself and fully representable in theoretical discourse. Rousseau’s neologism, ‘perfectibility’, is to some extent a misnomer. Despite providing a key to human history, Rousseau does not connect it to a specific goal, either of biological adaptation or of moral perfection. This principle of change has a complex ethical identity that withstands discursive assimilation. Its moral ambiguity means that it transgresses the binary categories of right or wrong: ‘c’est elle, qui faisant éclore avec les siècles ses lumières et ses erreurs, ses vices et ses vertus, le rend à la longue le tyran de lui-même, et de la Nature’ (Discours, p. 142). This distinguishing feature does not offer a specific aim towards which humanity can
organise the field of its existence.

The perfectible nature of man could lead us to draw the somewhat oxymoronic conclusion that his very essence is his lack of one. Man can only progress and change, as he adapts to the vagaries of history, because he is fundamentally indeterminate. If human will and identity are indeterminate, then man cannot conceivably reach a state of plenitude. Perfectibility is activated by the faculty of imagination. Imagination, like all of Rousseau's principles, has an ambiguous value because it broaches history. Imagination transcends the givens of the senses and transports us toward the unperceived. Animals, being bereft of imagination, can never develop beyond the regimented patterns of instinctual behaviour. In order to become human, that is, to utilise his perfectibility, man has to sense what remains outside the realms of cognition. The notion of perfectibility or liberty is inaugurated at the same time as the recognition of death, or more precisely (for death amounts to nothingness) its anticipation. Imagination and death are inextricably linked since the image is death: we only imagine something precisely because it is not present to us. All acts of imagination refer back to what is being represented as a lack or more precisely as the demand for a supplement to fill that lack. For man to develop beyond his originary nothingness, he has to apprehend the possibility of his own death, his absence, and attempt to deny it through the work of imagination. Man paradoxically becomes 'man' precisely at the moment when he becomes other to himself. All human endeavour is circumscribed by this constitutive negativity, which at once enables man's originative powers, by creating the radical openness necessary for transformation to occur and also disables them, by ruling out the possibility of completion or mastery.
Freedom

Perfectibility is synonymous with what Rousseau terms the true ‘spiritualité’ of man’s soul, his freedom. Unlike animals, man can exceed or go against what nature requires with frequently negative repercussions. Natural freedom is merely an inchoate trait distinguishing man from beast, consisting in his not being governed by instinct. It is therefore defined negatively as the absence of any external constraint. Although freedom is to be understood as a metaphysical gift from God, and as man’s defining characteristic, it retains the same degree of ambiguity as all of Rousseau’s other principles. It has no determinant moral content, not being linked to any substantive goal or desirable end. Liberty can therefore be understood as mere possibility, only assuming moral proportions when man enters into the self-other relationships of the civil context. The opacity enveloping social change blinds man to the consequences of his acts of freedom. He therefore often abuses it to make decisions that prove inimical to his well-being and that of others. Freedom paradoxically allows man to forge the oppressive relations of moral society and also grants him the possibility of dissolving them in an attempt to restore justice.

In society, man’s illimitable freedom becomes impossible, since my right to do what I want automatically impinges upon the rights of others to do the same. Unbound freedom is therefore ultimately self-cancelling, leading to a tyrannical situation in which one will could suppress another in the name of its own liberty. The problem that natural freedom poses prompts Rousseau to conceive a moral form of it. Moral liberty can be understood as obedience to the laws one prescribes for oneself, as the
power to do both what is good for the self and what is right for others. To assume his
moral freedom, man has to recognise himself as an other, that is, to see his own personal welfare as depending on that of the collective:

L'homme naturel est tout pour lui: il est unité numérique, l'entier absolu qui n'a de rapport qu'à lui-même ou à son semblable. L'homme civil n'est qu'une unité fractionnaire qui tient au dénominateur, et dont la valeur est dans son rapport avec l'entier, qui est le corps. Les bonnes institutions sociales sont celles qui savent le mieux dénaturer l'homme, lui ôter son existence absolue pour lui en donner une relative et transporter le moi dans l'unité commune, en sorte que chaque particulier ne se croye pas un, mais partie de l'unité, et ne soit plus sensible que dans le tout (Emile, OC V, p. 249).

As his nothingness in the second state of nature indicates, for man to have an individual identity, he has to overcome his amoral insularity and imagine himself as part of a wider whole. To avoid the fragmentation and despotism that would come from man's asserting his unconditional freedom in civil society, moral freedom must involve a context of social dependence. This leads to Rousseau's third form of freedom, civil liberty.

To illustrate the complexity and multidimensional nature of Rousseau's understanding of political freedom, I will now consider some of the material that I will explore in greater depth in the following chapter on the Contrat social. Civil liberty works to forestall the terror of personal dependence that would result from the insertion of natural liberty into society. Social justice requires the shared dependence amongst citizens on the laws that guarantee them against despotism. As we have seen, the negativity of Rousseau's state of nature, as the condition of history, denies our political development any fundamental logic or pre-ordained agent of social change. Consequently, a legitimate civil formation can only be authorised by the will of the people who form part of it. This defines Rousseau's notion of popular sovereignty as
a principle of equality that gives supreme authority to those who are ruled or, in other words, to the subject themselves. In the absence of a transcendental agent of power, popular sovereignty proves inalienable, since it cannot be held by anyone but the citizens themselves. Rousseau's innovation lies in his association of freedom with sovereignty. 20

Civil liberty safeguards our personal independence or moral liberty through a wider political structure that makes us all dependent on the 'moi commun', the common self of the collective. Such a structure can only emerge through a process of identification with the other. Man's lack of originary social identity means that any identity he assumes has to come from without and is thus forever incomplete. It is the lack of shared identity that obliges us to identify with one another through the artificial means of a contract so as to avoid the mass chaos that would ensue from an unrestrained assertion of individual will. In other words, man is united by what fundamentally divides him, the absence of sociable human nature. The fact that we are not naturally social means that we remain forever other to the civil institutions that provide the basis of our social identity. This fundamental otherness affords man a degree of autonomy from social structures, leaving him free to change or modify them.

Civil liberty, as the guarantee of moral freedom, is only effective, if we see the common self of the popular sovereign as our sole means of protecting ourselves from the oppression of personal dependence. Given the lack of a natural bond amongst men, the common self cannot be understood as possessing a pre-determined identity; its identity takes shape through laws sanctioned by the popular sovereign. As we have already said, the need to imagine and identify with a common self emanates from our
fundamental freedom or difference, from our lack of shared identity. Far from eliminating this difference, the common self functions to create a moral context that justifies cultural and social diversity, by making us aware that no individual nor group can claim to represent the true consciousness of the social. Man therefore comes to rely on an anonymous structure whose lack of definable content authorises his individual right within a wider framework of interdependence. Rousseau, through his conception of civil liberty, preserves the negativity or alterity that at once conditions and circumscribes man’s individual freedom: our personal freedom can never be total, always relative to that of the entire community. Thus, Rousseau understands freedom not as a positive fullness devoid of nuance, but as something essentially ambiguous.

The ambiguity he attributes to liberty intersects with Laclau’s twentieth-century perspective on it. Like Rousseau, Laclau construes freedom as a mere possibility, clearly wishing to distance himself from accounts that emphasise the “freedom of the subject with a positive identity”. Freedom arises from the dislocated nature of the social space where the subject’s constitutive lack leads us to acknowledge the impossibility of achieving social plenitude, wherein the subject might coincide in a self-identical way with the system through which he organises his sense of reality. He recognises an antinomy whereby the failure of the structure to constitute the subject fully actually forces him to assume his subjectivity, that is, to take decisions, to act, and to identify with new political orders. A perfect coincidence between the subject and the system would result in social stasis; in other words, we only need to exercise our free will, our power to choose between different options, because things are not immediately transparent to us.
This recalls the depiction of man in the pure state of nature, where as a result of the physical plenitude of his environment, he lives in an idle subhuman state locked in the invariable behavioural patterns of animality. Freedom in this phase has to be understood negatively, for we only really need to exercise our will in a situation of constraint. By stressing the importance of dislocation, Laclau brings to the fore what he terms 'the terror and force at the heart of freedom'. The need to act becomes most acute at those moments when the subject is faced with the ultimate failure of social structures to secure a stable position for him, confronting him with the void on which his identity and his vision of reality is constructed. In this light, we could argue that a fear of the void is what induces a sense of freedom. In the Discours, man becomes aware of his power to choose amid the ravages of terrible storms that create a gap in his world between his needs and his environment. Man employs his perfectibility to try to bridge this gap and restore what he has lost. These traumatic events expose him to his finitude, the anticipation of death imperative for man's intellectual awakening. Fear is one of the first passions to be wrung out of man in the transitional period.

Freedom does not therefore correspond to a tranquil state of fulfilment, but is an active principle that is nourished by unrest and tension, in short, non-fulfilment. The terror at the heart of freedom, the feeling of alterity that accompanies its emergence, makes us vulnerable to being seduced by the illusion of peace in servitude. Rousseau underlines this danger, when discussing, in Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne, the vulnerability of a people recently liberated from tyranny: ‘Après avoir brisé les fers qu'on leur destinait, elles (Les âmes patriotes) sentent le poids de la fatigue. Elles voudraient allier la paix du despotisme aux douceurs de la liberté. J'ai peur qu'elles ne veuillent des choses contradictoires. Le repos et la liberté me
paraisent incompatibles; il faut opter' (OC III, p. 954-955). Freedom demands political involvement in the social space, that is, the constant interrogation and reformulation of it to accommodate new social demands and perspectives.

Laclau determines the consequences of liberty through a series of contradictions which underline the ambivalence of this notion, viewing it at once as 'liberating and enslaving, exhilarating and traumatic, enabling and destructive.' These words echo the ambivalent terms with which Rousseau describes liberty, when he declares it at once the source of man's knowledge and of his errors, his vices and his virtues, his ennoblement and his debasement. The moral depravity depicted in the second part of the Discours constitutes a stark reminder that freedom is not a uniformly positive phenomenon. With the birth of civilisation, we witness the growing fragmentation and heterogeneity of society, which creates more opportunities for man to use and abuse his freedom. As a result of this ambiguity, Laclau affirms, from a twentieth-century perspective, that the possibility increases of more radical attempts at renouncing freedom than those we have known in the past. 'If freedom and dislocation go together, it is in the terrain of a generalised freedom that experiences such as those of contemporary totalitarianism become possible. If this is so, it means that the quest for an absolute freedom for the subject is tantamount to a quest for an unrestricted dislocation and the total disintegration of the social fabric'.

The last sentence of this quotation brings powerfully to mind Rousseau's presentation of 'the second state of nature'. The final stage of man's political development almost takes him full circle, reintroducing the unbound freedom of his primitive phase. However, far from returning man to the peaceful repose of his solitary and
independent existence, it throws him into a state of political unrest, where power becomes so arbitrary that any tyrant can appropriate it. The ‘unrestricted dislocation’ of this moment of development restores the originary equality of man in that the prevailing totalitarianism has reduced him to nothing. Absolute freedom entails the atomisation of the social field, where man acts purely out of competitive self-interest, annihilating the desire for community that gives imaginary consistency to the empty space of political formation. In this context, our shared otherness, which holds individuals in check through their equal incompleteness as social actors, is negated by the imposition of enforced unanimity. However, it is amid the constant cycle of revolutions of this phase that a more legitimate grounding for the political could emerge. The irreducibility of man’s freedom means that an enlightened group of individuals could possibly retreat from the prevailing anomy to draw on their capacity for independent thought in order to rethink and transform the political space. However much a particular political order may attempt to bind man within the tyranny of its system, it always leaves an inalienable remainder which refuses to be systematised, and holds the social space open to change, man’s essential freedom. It is here that we can pinpoint the friction that exists between the historical pessimism and anthropological hope of the Discours.

Rousseau criticises Pufendorf for not acknowledging the inalienable character of freedom and for committing the same error concerning liberty as his contemporaries did with their portrait of the state of nature. Pufendorf ignores the irreducibility of this phenomenon, which makes it impervious to a simple system of exchange. He maintains that if we can transfer our property to the custody of others through the conventions of contractual law, then we can transfer our freedom to somebody else.
Rousseau castigates his logic as 'un fort mauvais raisonnement', because unlike property, which is extrinsic to man, liberty is intrinsic to his very essence and, in this sense, can never be fully devolved to another's authority. To divest man of his essential freedom would degrade or perhaps more precisely annihilate his very being. Freedom can be construed as the inalienable kernel of man's human substance. It exists at the very limits of any social system, constituting at once its condition of possibility and impossibility, since, like any limit, it demarcates the contours of the system which grant it its identity and yet it must, in its unmediated form, remain absent from the system for the latter to function.

As the Discours intimates and the Contrat social expounds, a rethinking of political life would require a careful negotiation of individual freedoms with the collective will. As we have seen, moral liberty requires a political structure to support it, which would protect every individual's freedom from the threat of falsification by competitive self-interest. In this sense, the unbound natural liberty of prehistory has to be mediated by the laws in an attempt to integrate it into civilisation. To be free, man has to remain receptive to the laws, or more precisely to the dependence of his personal liberty on that of the community at large. Receptivity to the laws implies recognition of the irreducible alterity of the other, which denies us the right to enslave that other to our own private will. Our freedom comes from the limit imposed by the lack of a natural foundation or transcendental agent of power for society, making us all dependent on the civil laws. These laws institute this lack as the very condition of our sovereignty, our freedom to organise and re-organise our social sphere. Thus, freedom always involves a degree of constraint, as Laclau asserts "a democratic society which has become a viable order will not be a totally free society, but one
which has negotiated in a specific way the duality freedom/unfreedom". 23

Alienation

The becoming-social of man entails his alienation, as his originary indeterminacy assumes determinate content through his identification with institutions and structures. For Rousseau, man's socialisation correlates with his self-estrangement. If we accept perfectibility, or freedom, as the ontological difference of human beings and if we allow that this difference is contingent on their lack of a positive essence, then we must draw the conclusion that the assumption of a social identity will unavoidably lead to their alienation, for any attempt to determine the identity of man does violence to his originary indeterminacy. In this light, man always remains other to the social systems to which he looks for a sense of normality. Socialised man's otherness to society makes him fundamentally a political being, since this otherness enjoins him to build political structures that unify him across divisions. The inevitable alienation of our historical development rejects any notion of social transparency. Politics exists because man is always 'out of joint', that is, never identical to the structures that are supposed to supplement his lack of essence.

In nature, man lives in an atemporal, monadic state of non-subjectivity, a state of quasi-nothingness. This state does not form a real alternative to the alienated position of civil man. 24 Rousseau underlines the inadequacy of primitive man's existence when he reflects on the consequences of the human race's remaining forever in this phase: 'Il n'y avait ni éducation ni progrès, les générations se multipliaient inutilement; et chacune partant toujours du même point, les siècles s'écoulaient dans
toute la grossièreté des premiers âges, l'espèce était déjà vieille, et l'homme restait toujours enfant' (Discours, p. 160). Man has to accept his inevitable self-estrangement. Far from detracting from Rousseau’s vehement defence of liberty, alienation actually supplies its condition of possibility. Whilst alienation refutes any understanding of freedom as full autonomy or mastery, it enables us to participate actively in the building of society. No structure can fully determine man: it is his partial determination that earns him a degree of freedom vis-à-vis that structure.

The dislocation of civilisation thus proves to be a productive phenomenon that engenders the polymorphous and mutable character of the social space. The intellectual and emotional stasis of primitive man bespeaks the restrictive nature of his prehistoric symbiosis with his universe. The concordance between his animal needs and the resources of his physical milieu collapses the critical distinction between subject and object; it is in the space between these two coordinates that innovation and creativity take place. The closure of this gap destroys the subject as a potentially dynamic site of transformation. A dangerously Utopian view of a commensurable political system, galvanised by the notion of a universal subject, fails to recognise the importance of maintaining antagonisms at the level of politics for its perseverance as a site of metamorphosis.

Given our present reading, it is no surprise that Jean-Luc Nancy should esteem Rousseau to be one of the first thinkers to acknowledge the dislocation inherent to society:

La conscience de cette dislocation est celle de Rousseau : la société connue ou
reconnue comme la perte ou comme la dégradation d’une intimité communautaire (et communicative) et qui produit désormais à la fois, par force, le solitaire, mais par désir et projet le citoyen d’une libre communauté souveraine. Alors que les théoriciens politiques qui le précédent ont pensé tantôt l’institution d’un État, tantôt la régulation d’une société, Rousseau, qui par ailleurs leur emprunte beaucoup, est peut-être le premier penseur de la communauté ou plus exactement le premier qui éprouve la question de la société comme une inquiétude dirigée vers la communauté et comme la conscience d’une rupture (peut-être irréparable) de cette communauté.  

Nancy highlights the fact that, for Rousseau, the formation of communities is a double movement, whereby the coming-together of the human race coincides with its separation. Man begins to forge relations with other men at the moment when he is exposed to his own finitude and that of others: the sense of community grows out of an anticipation of its potential loss. It can thus only be understood negatively. With the eruption of terrifying storms that destroys his natural equilibrium, man is forced to call on the help of others to prevent his own and the rest of his kind’s death. What Rousseau illustrates through his presentation of the emergence of communal living is the fact that ‘the social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society’.  

Man desires community because he is without any fundamental tie with his fellow beings. What unites us in the search for a legitimate form of community is what separates us. In short, we only attempt to institute society because it does not exist in any pre-established substantive form. The desire for community thus remains forever unfulfilled. However, its negativity becomes affirmative, since it allows it to persist as a disruptive force that can show up the inadequacy of our present understanding of social truth. The desire for community cuts through the void of nature to fuel the constant striving to re-configure the social space and widen its grid of representation.
This interpretation prefigures Laclau's notion of the constitutive force of dislocation. Contrary to modern assumptions about the stultifying effects of Enlightenment thinking on political activity, Laclau believes that "new political movements are able to flourish because the foundations of Enlightenment democracy - located in the ideals of 'equality', 'autonomy', 'legitimisation' and 'emancipation' — were structurally incomplete, not just historically unfinished projects." Democratic politics has survived as a realm of open contestation and struggle precisely because the Enlightenment project never succeeded in fully constituting the subject around the ideals of 'equality' and 'autonomy'. For Laclau, a weakening of the foundationalist aspirations of the emancipatory discourses of the Enlightenment can in turn foster a more open society:

It is precisely this decline in the great myths of emancipation, universality, and rationality which is leading to freer societies: where human beings see themselves as the builders and agents of change of their own world, and thus come to realize that they are not tied to or by any objective necessity of history, to any institution or way of life - either in the present or in the future.

Rousseau's thinking already displays similar ambitions. The indeterminacy of nature, as a point of reference for civilisation, divests his mapping of our development of any essentialist dimension, eliminating the oppressive sense of closure he detected in previous studies. His refusal to offer a transparent account of the shift from nature to society invalidates a simple causality as a way of grasping historical change. He thus dissolves any claims to absolute knowledge. Perfectibility or freedom, as the defining characteristic of human beings, means that man can never be totally subsumed by a particular regime. Even at the most pessimistic moments of the Discours, the possibility for radical transformation exists in the indeterminate force of perfectibility.
Political Development as a Process of Misidentification

If we accept that man is essentially perfectible and that the condition of his perfectibility is his originary indeterminacy, then we cannot view the construction of his social identity as a wholly self-determined process. It inevitably involves a movement outside the self towards the other. Man needs to identify with something precisely because there is an insurmountable lack at the moment of his inception. Rousseau presents the movement of history as a series of misidentifications on the part of the polis, who locate their emancipation, a fullness of being, within a political structure that runs counter to their desires. He emphasises the fact that nothing proves inexorable in the process of civilisation: there is no essential link between the act of identification and the actual content of that order.

At every turn, Rousseau crystallises the discrepancy between the real and the symbolic, which the development of man attempts to conceal. The official establishment of property rights forms a case in point. The advent of the first political institution results from a breakdown in the symbolic system, where the precarious status of property in nascent society, as a product of linguistic deceit, gives rise to a scene of plundering and combative competition for ownership of land and resources; a scene reminiscent of Hobbes's bellicose state of nature: "C'est ainsi que les usurpations des riches, les brigandages des pauvres, les passions effrénées de tous étouffant la pitié naturelle, et la voix encore faible de la justice, rendirent les hommes avares, ambitieux et méchants ... La société naissante fit place au plus horrible état de guerre (...)
(Discurso, p. 176). Man 'avili' and 'désolé' finds himself at a seemingly
incontrovertible impasse, unable to return to his anterior homeostasis or to renounce his acquisitions, he is left at the dawn of ruin. The prevailing mutiny makes the rich aware of the inadequacy of their claims to wealth, articulated around the purely symbolic fiction of property, a mere void that opens the way for any individual to usurp their claim. In this general war, where ‘ils faisaient seuls tous les frais, et dans laquelle le risque de la vie était commun et celui des biens, particulier’, the rich must have felt the greatest necessity to impose order and secure their rights. They devise ‘le projet le plus réfléchi qui soit jamais entré dans l’esprit humain’, that is, to reverse the situation by employing the force directed against them to their advantage, by turning their attackers into their line of defence. This results in the first political institution, the false contract.

Rousseau condenses this transcendental moment of history into a speech act. He stresses the specious character of this pact since it only serves the interests of one of the consenting parties, whilst posing as mutually beneficial:

"Unissons-nous" leur dit-il “pour garantir de l’oppression les faibles, contenir les ambitieux, et assurer à chacun la possession de ce qui lui appartient: instituons des règlements de Justice et de paix auxquels tous soient obligés de se conserver, qui ne fassent acception de personne, et qui réparent en quelque sorte les caprices de la fortune en soumettant également le puissant et le faible à des devoirs mutuels. En un mot, au lieu de tourner nos forces contre nous-mêmes, rassemblons les en un pouvoir suprême qui nous gouverne selon de sages lois, qui protège et défende tous les membres de l’association, repousse les ennemis communs, et nous maintienne dans une concorde éternelle (Discours, p. 177).

Notwithstanding the legitimacy of many of the principles contained in this speech, we can conflate its Utopian tendencies, its pledge of ‘une concorde éternelle’, with a contemporary critique of Utopian discourse. Stavrakakis identifies three principal elements in the construction of a Utopian dream. What makes a Utopian discourse
possible is a situation of insurmountable negativity, that is, the impossibility of constructing society as an organic whole; the Utopian fantasy promises to eliminate this negativity; this promise leads to the creation of 'a constant and essential by-product' an arch-enemy who prevents the full constitution of the social space.\textsuperscript{29} These three variables all exist in Rousseau's portrayal of this moment. He describes the precursory situation in terms indicative of this 'impossible negativity', when he writes, 'l'horreur d'une situation qui les armait tous les uns contres les autres, qui leur rendait leurs possessions aussi onéreuses que leurs besoins, et où nul ne trouvait sa sûreté ni dans la pauvreté ni dans la richesse (...)' (Discours, p. 177). As I have already pointed out, it is this social disorder that prompts the rich to create the false contract and to pledge to restore harmony. This promise feeds on the exclusive nature of the pact that strives to ensure justice by eradicating the purely abstract group of 'les ennemis communs', that is, 'les ambitieux,' whom the contractors project as negating full positivity. The dramatic irony of this scene lies in the fact that 'les ambitieux' are in reality those who masterminded this one-sided contract to ensure their own exclusive rights to the ownership of wealth at the expense of the poor. After all, the war is not led by a specific group but by all and against all. At this point, we can detect a 'crucial dialectic' in the pledge of the contract between its universal aims of engendering social stability and the peaceful enjoyment of property for everyone, on the one hand, and its localisation of a particular enemy who has to be excluded from the contract for it to work, on the other. This leads to a paradox whereby 'the fantasy of attaining a perfect harmonious world, of realising the universal, can only be sustained through the construction/ localisation of a certain particularity which cannot be assimilated but, instead, has to be eliminated'.\textsuperscript{30} This dialectic leads to totalitarian coercion because Utopian thinking is driven more by the desire to annihilate an
adversary than to reconcile human freedom and social cohesion. The unilateral character of the contract gives rise to the official institution and legitimisation of moral inequality and instils the divisive master-slave mentality amongst its citizens. For Rousseau, politics consists in the complex negotiation of personal freedom with collective interests, not in the elimination of an imaginary enemy.

Rousseau disarticulates the social fantasy of the contract by juxtaposing its Utopian aspect with violent figures of constraint. He crystallises the founding antinomy of the pact: the credulity of man leads him to seek his emancipation in his enslavement: ‘Tous coururent au devant de leurs fers croyant assurer leur liberté’ (*Discours*, p. 177). The dramatic effect of this image dislodges the seductive fiction of the contractors’ words, laying bare the truly malevolent foundations of the contract. The contradiction inherent to this stage of history concurs with Zizek’s interpretation of fantasy as comprising at once a beatific side, a “stabilising” dimension, that is, a dream state free from conflict and human depravity, and a profoundly ‘destabilising’ dimension that prevents its realisation. Both elements are mutually deconstructive. If a community adopts as its reality a Utopian dream of harmony, then it has to disavow the antagonism intrinsic to this dream. However, we cannot separate the two coordinates of fantasy, since the fantasy of harmony gains its force from that of the antagonistic group (‘les ambitieux’ in the case of the false contract) which in turn prevents it from being actualised. In short, the promise of social concord is only valid in so far as an element in the present stops this from becoming reality now. In this sense, Zizek illustrates how Utopia is not so very far removed from dystopia.

Rousseau demonstrates this on a rhetorical level. The use of violent imagery
throughout the *Discours*, such as the previously cited image of man seeking freedom in servitude, cuts through the social fantasies punctuating man’s development, by reintegrating the violence at their inception. The disruptive force of these figures alienates us from the divisive structures through which we seek unity, thereby reinstalling the non-identification or otherness that enables us to identify with new representations of society. The feeling of alienation that these images generate forces us to recognise the fact that our identity is never fully determined by the wider system and that, as a consequence, we have the freedom to reformulate constantly our social objectives.

This instituting of the false contract demonstrates the fundamental split in the construction of political identities between the act of identification and the ensuing identity. The juxtaposition of contradictory aspects in the above image reveals this split: the polis believe that the pact offers them a means to achieving fullness, their freedom, when in reality their identification with it enthrals them to an order that enervates their ability for independent thought. The poor, despite being gullible enough to believe the fallacious words of the wealthy, had ‘assez de raison pour sentir les avantages d’un établissement politique, ils n’avaient pas assez d’expérience pour en prévoir les dangers (...) les sages même virent qu’il fallait se résoudre à sacrifier une partie de leur liberté à la conservation de l’autre, comme un blessé se fait couper le bras pour sauver le reste du corps’ (*Discours*, p. 177). Man therefore agrees to the contract for legitimate reasons: he wants to safeguard, as far as it is possible, the freedom of each individual. Civil society is thus born of a desire for freedom, not voluntary servitude, as is the case in previous social pact theories, such as that of Hobbes. It is the desire for a more just organisation of social relations which fills the
emptiness of the first political institution. The desire of the polis always surpasses the specificity of its point of reference, the struggle for property rights, in this case; in the same way that the signifier always overflows its signified. Laclau and Mouffe characterise political struggles in this way, when they write in reference to Rosa Luxemburg: ‘in a revolutionary situation it is impossible to fix the literal sense of each isolated struggle, because each struggle overflows its own literality and comes to represent, in the consciousness of the masses, a simple movement of a more global struggle against the system.’  

What Rousseau’s presentation of this moment of history performs, and what the previous quotation makes explicit, is the division between politics and the political. Lefort makes this distinction to counter what he saw as the often narrow views of such disciplines as political science and sociology, which tended to separate political facts from social facts which they associated with another level of reality that comprised the aesthetic, the juridical, the economic, the scientific and the social. Lefort widens the parameters of what we consider the political by not locating it within conventional political activity such as governmental policy or political parties. He maintains that it is revealed in a double movement whereby the force that generates the social surfaces and is obscured:

Apparition, en ce sens qu’émmerge à la visibilité le procès par lequel s’ordonne et s’unifie la société, à travers ses divisions: occultation en ce sens qu’un lieu de la politique (lieu où s’exerce la compétition des partis et où se forme et se renouvelle l’instance générale de pouvoir) se désigne comme particulier, tandis que se trouve dissimulé le principe générateur de la configuration de l’ensemble.  

The political emerges as the ontological level of any social configuration. When we attempt to localise the political, we immediately turn our attention from the political
itself, as the moment of dislocation and ambiguity governing the construction of society, to the level of settled political reality. Politics always seeks to domesticate the disruptive energy of the political within its system. Political reality, which projects the chimera of an ordered society, requires the forgetting of the disruption and undecidability marking its origins. All attempts to obliterate the political through an imaginary and symbolic reduction of it, fail, since it constantly resurfaces to enact social change. Stavrakakis homologises the political with the Lacanian real as that which resists absorption into the system.\(^3\)

The linguistic ruse of the false contract could be understood as an attempt at a symbolic reduction of the political. It strives to contain within its corrupt system the disruptive energy prior to its advent and which sought, albeit blindly and destructively, to reshape the social space. The process of history thus seeks to determine what is essentially indeterminate, man. This explains why we can only conceive the movement towards civilisation as alienating: in forging a social identity, man becomes what he is not. Chaitin makes a similar statement when he asserts that symbolisation (essential for the construction of reality) ‘has the creative power to produce cultural identities, but at a price, the cost of covering over the fundamental nothingness that forms its foundations ... it is culture, not nature, that abhors a vacuum, that of its own contingency.’\(^3\) Man’s perfectibility, as we have seen, implies a fundamental lack of a positive essence. Man identifies with the objective level of social reality to fill this lack. In the process of identification, the objective never loses its externality; in other words, the identity given to man by society is never assimilated to an identity already belonging to him. Political orders can only act as a ‘filler’ for that lack because of their alien characters, and this ‘filling’ is only feasible
because of man's indeterminacy. The object of identification is fundamentally split: it at once gives identity to the subject and constitutes its identity as such. It therefore simultaneously conceals and attests to the lack at its root. The act of identification never supersedes this lack, thereby holding the political space open to infinite acts of identification. The condition of man's freedom, his indeterminacy, proves inalienable, as the dislocation intrinsic to the identificatory process prevents the coinciding of subject and object: man's identity is only ever partially constituted. If freedom is contingent upon indeterminacy, then the process of socialisation, which hopes to determine man and dissimulate his lack, appears refractory to his very defining quality, his freedom. Therefore, the frontiers between object and subject are blurred, but not lost.

We have already discussed the discrepancy between the desire of the polis and its (mis)representation in the false contract. Despite the sense of doom enshrouding this moment of change, Rousseau avers that bonté naturelle still motivates some men even when the vision of others has been distorted by the competitive self-interest of amour-propre. He exposes the tension between the universal aims of certain citizens and the particularity of the system that exploits them. He describes how in the snowball effect of political change, which swept from one society to the next after the establishment of the first contract, weakening the force of pity amongst men and setting them at odds with each other, there remained certain individuals who continued to act in accordance with 'la voix de la nature', the 'âmes cosmopolites qui franchissent les barrières imaginaires qui séparent les peuples, et qui, à l'exemple de l'être souverain qui les a crées, embrassent tout le genre-humain dans leur bienveillance' (Discours, p. 178). A sense of anthropological hope transcends human depravity.
Ricoeur centralises the idea of hope as a critique of any unjust order, arguing that a society without hope is a dead one. This reminds us of the way in which our sense of remorse at what we have lost in the transition from nature to culture proves that a residue of our natural goodness persists despite our bad socialisation and therefore, reflects critically on the injustice of history (Discours, p. 133).

Man remains irreducible to the imaginary and symbolic constructions through which he tries to secure a stable representation of himself. The desire for social change at the ground level always surpasses the concrete content of the structures erected to achieve these ends; a fact which conveys how the political always exceeds the institutional framework through which it represents itself. This idea evokes Chantal Mouffe’s remark that ‘the political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.’ Accordingly, Rousseau, in the Contrat social, refuses to specify one particular order as being the most suited to man. The dislocation between the subject and its object of identification means that the social space never reaches completion, but remains exposed to transformation.

Rousseau’s presentation of our political development emphasises its contingency: any individual can be transmuted into a metaphor of power to fill the constitutive lack that subtends society. The establishment of hereditary rule underlines this discrepancy. The effects of the dangerously Utopian discourse of the first contractors unfold as man progresses historically: his social interaction becomes defined by a drive to exclude and annihilate the other in an attempt to achieve greatness. We reach a
perverse situation where a certain people’s happiness is conditional on the unhappiness of others. It is amid this general state of deception by the tyranny of government that man will accept the elevation of any individual to the status of sovereign, if they believe it satisfies their own self-interest. Man’s obsession with attaining social grandeur to ouud his neighbour means that “il dut venir un temps où les yeux de peuples furent fascinés à tel point, que ses conducteurs n’avaient qu’à dire au plus petit des hommes, sois grand toi et toute ta race, aussitôt il paraissait grand à tout le monde, ainsi qu’à ses propres yeux” (Discours, p. 188). Man’s malleability leaves him vulnerable to being manipulated by cunning political leaders. Rousseau highlights the aberrant nature of this moment of historical change, which opened the way for the most arbitrary form of government to come into force: hereditary rule. Its arbitrariness stems precisely from its attempt to collapse the distinction between the symbolic and the real, by pretending to forge a substantive link between those who hold power and power itself.

An asymmetry exists in the interplay of projection and introjection in Rousseau’s presentation of this moment of history. The political structure, hereditary rule in this case, is the field of the subject’s projections and his introjection of that field is crucial for its articulation as a unified whole. The subject does not internalise his real position within the structure, as an alienated subjugated self, but glimpses closure, fullness of being, a coherent structure — in fact, illusions. Indeed, man voluntarily enslaves himself because he locates the security of a stable identity within the servitude of personal dependence. The resultant precipitate of identity divides man creating a master-slave mentality: the collectivity falsely identifies an individual as the bearer of a legitimate social identity, whilst overlooking their mutual lack. Despite the image
being internalised, it always remains outside. Any identity man assumes expresses his determinability rather than his determinacy.

The violent figures of injustice and the theatrical scenes of the false contract and hereditary rule emphasise the dichotomy between the desires of the polis and their actualisation within an aberrant institution. By exposing each moment of our political development as a moment of misidentification, these fictional devices show the constructed nature of identity and therefore its susceptibility to re-articulation. The rhetorical dimension of the *Discours* strives to shock the reader into acknowledging the radical openness of the political field that allows for polyvalent and diverse discourses to hegemonise its space.

**The Ambiguity of Progress**

The openness of Rousseau’s hypothetical model of history conditions the ambiguous nature of progress. Derrida recognises this ambiguity in Rousseau’s description of progress, but implies that Rousseau remains blind to it, viewing progress as a clearly bifurcated movement either toward deterioration, or toward improvement. In this reading, Rousseau would be arguing against his own textual presentation, which depicts historical progress as simultaneously regressive and progressive. Derrida asserts that this double movement ‘annule l’eschatologie et la téléologie, de même que la différence – ou l’articulation originaire – annule l’archéologie.’ De Man voices a criticism of Derrida, not for his conclusion about the ambiguity of progress and its consequences, but for not attributing this point to Rousseau’s own thinking. He states that ‘it would be difficult to match the rigour with which Rousseau always...
asserts, at the same time and at the same level of explicitness, the simultaneous movement toward progress and retrogression that Derrida proclaims. The end of nature triggers a series of changes that resist easy categorisation. The creation of society destroys man’s independent existence and leads to infinite possibilities of corruption. However, this is counterbalanced by the fact that it gives rise to human love and family life. Likewise, intellectual development marks the end of man’s tranquil repose, but also allows him to move beyond his primitive imbecility to assume his status as a human being. As De Man indicates, this ambivalence manifests itself in the ‘use of progressive and regressive terms’ such as the juxtaposition of ‘perfectionner la raison humaine’ with ‘détériorer l’espèce’, ‘rendre méchant’ with ‘rendre sociable’. Rousseau reinforces this idea by imputing the evolution of society to ‘ce qu’il y a de meilleur et de pire parmi les hommes’.

The ambiguity of historical mutation opposes a vision of society as a fully intelligible whole. Rousseau declines to grant a purpose or positive essence to our development that would transcend the empirical variations of social life and that would be fully representable in scientific discourse. Historical progress emerges as a precarious movement bereft of ultimate meaning. History cannot therefore be absorbed by an eschatological or theological framework where social opacity would suddenly be rendered transparent, and all its inherent antagonisms would be mollified. We are not dealing, then, with a case of ‘determinate negation’ where the negativity of society is waiting for its latent positivity to emerge. The impenetrable and infinite nature of social progress repudiates what Lefort describes as the often theological tendencies of political philosophy. In an attempt after universalism in the secularised modern context, many thinkers have merely replaced God with Reason and in so doing, they
have reoccupied the ground of earlier philosophical aspirations to represent and master fully social totality. Rousseau accuses his predecessors of making a similar mistake in their naturalisation of civilisation. For Rousseau, the problem of the social does not consist in trying to fix its meaning and establish its limits, but rather in the very impossibility of fully understanding its foundations. As the portrayal of the false contract illustrates, the social always exceeds the limits of any endeavour to constitute society. Any attempt to supply the hidden meaning of the social through ideology can only ever be relative, since this meaning remains forever exposed to being overturned as the desire of the polis seeks new discourses through which to represent itself.

Rousseau’s presentation of historical progress as simultaneously progressive and regressive resists the binary structure of conventional ethics based on the ‘definable’ principles of good and evil. At every turn, Rousseau highlights the impossibility of reducing a field, which is defined by ambiguity, to a moral category. He demonstrates the restrictions of adopting a linear approach to the multi-dimensional, and therefore, unsymbolisable, ethics of man. The conventions of moral philosophy are at a loss to categorise our primitive other. In the Discours, Rousseau radicalises and to some extent inverts the terminology associated with ethics by formulating bonté naturelle, our essential goodness, as amorality. Goodness for Rousseau equals indeterminacy. The criticism he directs at Hobbes results from the way in which he too readily incorporates his image of nature into a value system. Natural man’s limited intellectual capacity and unbound freedom means that questions of virtue do not exist for him: he does not possess the thought categories necessary to conceptualise the ethical axes of good and evil. It is the non-existence of virtue in the pre-social state which leads Hobbes to brand primitive man as naturally intrepid.
Rousseau strongly opposes this view by highlighting the impossibility of defining natural man’s essence in light of the moral categories of civilisation. The simple causality which dictates that because our primitive other was unaware of virtue, he was essentially malevolent proves to be heavily flawed: ‘Celui qui n’a jamais réfléchi ne peut être ni clément, ni juste, ni pitoyable; il ne peut pas non plus être méchant et vindicatif. Celui qui n’imagine rien ne sent que lui-même; il est seul au milieu du genre humain’ (Essai, OC V, pp. 395-396). The same logic rules that if man was incapable of being virtuous, then he was equally incapable of being malicious. He remains locked in a monadic state that proves impermeable to questions of right or wrong. The heterogeneity of primitive man to symbolic thinking cancels out binary oppositions.

Ethical complexity far exceeds the reductive categories through which it is defined. The image of natural man uncovers the limits of moral conventions that seek to determine the right way to behave. Rousseau’s image of nature, traditionally construed as a moral guide, serves to divest ethics of a pre-defined logic. He never ceases to foreground the irreducible contradictions of his image. The seductive figure of the Golden Age, where man lives happily in a balanced state interposed between nature and civilisation, is subverted from within by an infinite series of irresolvable antagonisms:

De là les contradictions apparentes qu’on voit entre les pères des nations: tant de naturel et tant d’inhumanité, des moeurs si féroces et des coeurs si tendres, tant d’amour pour leur famille et d’aversion pour leur espèce...Ces temps de barbarie étaient le siècle d’or, non parce que les hommes étaient unis, mais parce qu’ils étaient séparés...Les homes, si l’on veut, s’attaquaient dans la rencontre, mais ils se rencontraient rarement. Partout régnait l’état de guerre, et toute la terre était en paix. (Essai, p. 396)
The difference between goodness and badness, peace and war, cannot be fully ascertained. Derrida argues that Rousseau reveals the neutral origin of any ethico-political conceptuality by annulling the oppositions of classical philosophy. However, we could argue that rather than creating a neutral space, he uncovers one fraught with conflict, a space of radical difference, whose irreducible friction calls upon politics to find solutions to moral dilemmas and yet prevents those solutions from ever being total, because, as the foregoing quotation shows, moral identity is fundamentally indeterminate.

As we saw with the instituting of the first contract, ethical questions always emerge from an aporetical situation where the tension behind social configurations is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Our search for social unity comes precisely from its fundamental absence; man has to recognise and suppress this fact to try to build community. This explains why man feels the need to enter into union with other men at the moment when he senses his distance from them. As Rousseau’s own intense self-excavation in his autobiographical writing will show, the desire of the subject always transgresses and constantly questions the institutional framework which seeks to classify and regulate his behaviour. For this reason, an ethics based on social harmony always fails. The impossibility of society ever reaching a state of equilibrium perhaps informs Rousseau’s statement in the Geneva manuscript, that the golden Age was a condition alien to the human race.

The perversity that Rousseau reveals in the functioning of the laws reinforces the ambivalence that surrounds ethical questions. For Rousseau, the laws appear to have a
mutually deconstructive relationship with what they attempt to repress.

Il faut convenir d’abord que plus les passions sont violentes, plus les Lois sont nécessaires pour les contenir... Il serait encore bon d’examiner si ces désordres ne sont point nés avec les lois mêmes; car alors, quand elles seraient capables de les reprimer, ce serait bien le moins qu’on en dût exiger que d’arrêter un mal qui n’existerait point sans elles (Discours, p. 157).

We reach an impasse: if the laws could really succeed in controlling the force of human passions, we would no longer have any need for them. The more violent our passions become, the more laws are needed; the existence of the laws therefore actually depends on what they are supposed to prohibit. Similarly, the vices that require political regimes to be established make the abuse of those regimes inevitable. (Discours, 189) Rousseau highlights the fact that the conditions of possibility of politics and the law are in fact their very condition of impossibility.

If we aim to define goodness, we cannot but offer a particular definition of it rather than an all-encompassing one. Its indeterminacy and universality means that it transcends our ability to represent or understand it fully through discursive systems. Rousseau refuses to try to establish a totalising and authentic definition of goodness. The double-sidedness of many of Rousseau’s concepts, as our exploration of liberty demonstrates, attests to the way that his thinking resists closure. His excavation of socio-political phenomena foregrounds how civilisation emerges as a fundamentally dislocated field that cannot be represented exhaustively. Its opacity subverts any attempt to construct a positive principle around which it can be definitively organised. As Stavrakakis writes, ‘what lies beyond the successive conceptions of the good, beyond the ways of traditional ethical thinking, is their ultimate failure, their inability
to master the central impossibility, the constitutive lack around which human experience is organised. Rousseau’s presentation of goodness as indeterminacy in the *Discours* concords with this conclusion by not restricting social relations to a simple set of moral solutions. His own non-essentialist comprehension of ethics allows for a plurality of belief systems to coexist.

**The Ethics of Pity**

The inconceivability of an absolute definition of goodness does not mean that Rousseau advocates that man should live in a moral vacuum with no distinction between good and evil, but neither does he wish to immobilise the potential for social change through an ethical system governed by a single principle of the good. The ambivalent movement of progress illustrates the failure of any attempt to organise the fluid character of the social toward a sole moral aim. The fact that the moment of historical transformation is opaque to itself makes the idea of finding a more legitimate grounding for civilisation a mere possibility, not a fully realisable end in itself. For Rousseau, as Alain Grosrichard declares, ‘what makes the social bond possible is the same as what destroys it: there is no power that does not encompass its abuse.’ Imagination exposes man to a void that he perpetually attempts to fill through new representations of himself and of the other. It constitutes the double possibility of transcending the limits of the present to think of new ways of organising social relations and equally of perverting that re-organisation: ‘C’est l’imagination qui étend pour nous la mesure des possibles soit en bien soit en mal, et qui par conséquent excite et nourrit les désirs par l’espoir de les satisfaire’. (*Emile*, p. 304) The illimitable force of imagination at once creates the desire to supplement what we sense as lacking, for example, community, and yet leaves that desire unfulfilled,
because imagination always functions within the negativity of anticipation. The ineradicable gap between our desire and its objects can generate the destructive passion of *amour-propre*, which, as the instituting of hereditary rule demonstrates, propels man into the servitude of personal dependence under the illusion of closing that gap. Rousseau proposes a dynamic means of containing the divisive effects of *amour-propre* in the form of pity.

Pity is the first diversion of *amour de soi-même*, but far from disrupting this principle, it actually conserves it, albeit, in an indirect way. Rousseau describes pity as ‘un frein salutaire’ on the potential violence of *amour de soi-même*, since it deflects its energy from the self to the preservation of the whole species. We can therefore view pity, the source of our love for others, as a necessary consequence of our most primitive passion. Pity only becomes human when it has been awakened by the faculty of imagination which allows man to move beyond the givens of the sensible towards the unperceived. Without imagination, pity would be forever dormant, a mere potentiality, and man would remain locked in his originary monadicism, as Rousseau writes ‘celui qui n’imagine rien ne sent que lui-même; il est seul au milieu du genre-humain’ (*Essai*, p. 396).

As we have said above, imagination can only operate through negativity. Imagination engenders what Derrida calls ‘une reserve de puissance indeterminée’ which never reaches a state of positivity, because it can only expose this reserve of power by showing what actually outstrips it, by showing its impotence. Imagination, by constantly pointing to a lack that it is striving to dissipate through representation, invalidates fullness as an achievable end. Derrida draws a structural homology
between the operation of imagination, 'the faculty of representation and appearance',
and the differential movement of language where the ultimate signified is always
deferred by the perpetual play of signifiers. Imagination becomes determined as
différence. He maintains 'Elle ne crée rien puisqu’elle est imagination. Mais elle ne
reçoit rien qui lui soit étranger ou antérieur. Elle n’est pas affectée par le réel.'^ We
face an impasse where imagination — with no force of its own, being simply
representation — has the power to activate itself and other principles.

If we consider the question from a psychoanalytical point of view, we could argue
that imagination gains its force from what remains unsymbolisable, that is the
repressed which can never be assimilated to a linguistic system, but which inaugurates
the system. Imagination may not be affected by the real in so far as the real remains
impermeable to symbolic representation; and thus the real never forms part of its
contents. However, what drives imagination is the fact that the real resists its
operation and in this way it constantly points to lack. In this respect, imagination
functions rather like fantasy in psychoanalytical thinking, as a defence mechanism,
which at once conceals trauma (the real) through a fantasmatic representation of wish-
fulfilment and yet reveals it through its defensive action.

The becoming-human of pity thus depends on the development of our capacity to
represent: imagination. As a consequence, pity operates within non-presence. It is
precisely because animals do not possess imagination that pity remains, in their case,
forever a virtual faculty, closing them off from the rest of their kind.^1 Man’s entry
into the social presupposes that he has assumed his own lack and repressed it. His
identification with the suffering of the other can only occur on the basis of a
dislocation between subject and object: ‘Nous ne souffrons qu’autant que nous jugeons qu’il souffre, ce n’est pas dans nous, c’est dans lui que nous souffrons. Ainsi nul ne devient sensible que quand son imagination s’anime et commence à le transporter hors de lui’ (Emile, pp. 505-506). For man to feel the pain of another person, he has to hold this pain at a critical distance in order to translate his experience into knowledge; identification with the other can only take place through a degree of non-identification. The discrepancy of subject and object conditions the advent of inter-subjectivity: the convergence of these two coordinates would paralyse all reflection and lock man forever within the insularity of his initial phase. The observer feels the other’s suffering as a lack and is thus propelled to imagine and attempt to symbolise it. The subject is at once inside and outside the act of pity: he is outside in so far as he can only pity another’s pain if he experiences it as such, in other words, as belonging to the other, and yet, inside, because this act refers back to him as a lack, as an absent presence.

Pity never reduces the other to the same, given that its own operation depends on preserving the gap between self and other. It therefore stops identification from ever being immediate and total. The absolute internalisation of the other’s suffering would be dangerous. Imagination, reflection and judgement awaken pity and also limit its force. By always holding the pain of the pitied at a distance, these faculties prevent the observer from merging with the identity of the sufferer. Pity only functions successfully, if the fundamental alterity between self and other, the basis of our freedom, is maintained. This discrepancy is not only crucial for self-protection but also for the protection of the other: the subject has to feel his own strength in order to offer the sufferer aid and defence: ‘Pour plaindre le mal d’autrui, sans doute il faut le
connaître, mais il ne faut pas le sentir. Quand on a souffert, ou qu'on craint de
souffrir, on plaint ceux qui souffrent; mais tandis qu'on souffre, on ne plaint que soi'.
(Emile, p. 514). Total identification would merely spread the paralysing effects of
trauma and preclude the inter-subjective awareness necessary to offer support. Pity, in
an unmediated form, would therefore erase the locus of the subject and its potential
for dynamic action. Full identification would remain purely empirical, never being
incorporated into a universal system of concept. Pity has to be translated into the
realm of concept and law and extended in time to avoid its degeneration into injustice,
where man would enter into association with others to the detriment of his own well­
being or freedom.

The need to transform the moment of pity into a generalisable concept is inspired by
the emotional response of both parties, the spectator and the sufferer. However, this
visceral reaction has to be repressed for the concept to emerge. Therefore, the
emotional response that drives this moment retains its particularity by withstanding
complete absorption into conceptualisation. The incomplete identity of the field of
concept and law means that the affective impact of a particular moment could strive to
widen its boundaries and possibly re-configure its definition of justice. The critical
force of pity, by always exceeding its systematisation, has the potential to disrupt and
question the authority of the law. Any attempt to represent and interpret the universal
always entails a recognition of its absence in a substantial form, and it is this fact
which is ‘an incitement to come to grips with the role of the affects in shaping
political life’. 53

If we accept the centrality of pity for Rousseau’s understanding of ethics, then we also
have to accept the centrality of dislocation between self and other for the overall
dynamic of his thinking. Any act of identification inevitably involves a certain
measure of non-identification. The very process is subverted from within, since the
capacity to identify with the other implies an essential lack of identity. Imagination,
which aims to bridge the gap between subject and object, which is necessary for the
act of pity to take place, always indicates a lack. We can infer from Rousseau’s
analysis of pity that man identifies with the other at the same time as he senses his
difference from him. The lack the spectator experiences makes him aware of his own
vulnerability to pain, his equivalence with the sufferer, and also apprehend his
difference from the sufferer and the strength that gives him to provide help. The space
of non-identification therefore paradoxically allows for identification and association
to happen. The formation of any social bond depends on the tension coming from this
complex interaction of equivalence and difference. The fact that pity, as a form of
ethics, maintains this friction, clearly distinguishes it from the aberrant organisations
of history. The factitious contract and hereditary rule strive to negate this gap in the
social, our lack of an essential social identity, by constructing a fantasy of collective
harmony, thereby denying the shared otherness that necessitates and supports the
involvement of all in producing and reproducing social reality. As De Man stresses,
the corrupt structures of civilisation are galvanised by the normalising term ‘men’
which hopes to dissimulate our irreducible difference under the chimera of absolute
identity.

The process of civilisation can be understood as an endeavour to reduce the other to
the same, that is, to create the illusion of equality within inequality. What is excluded
from the symbolic and imaginary construction of political reality is the radical
difference of man from his representation at the level of the system; it is this which renders him vulnerable to the seductive force of the dangerously Utopian discourse of the factitious contract. Pity allows man to identify with the other, whilst simultaneously retaining his difference, his freedom: his lack of essence. The dynamic of pity could forestall the threat of totalitarianism in the social space, since it highlights that it is our otherness or difference, rather than a fallacious notion of essential unity, that allows us to interact effectively and legitimately with one another.

Rousseau warns against the dangers of an ethics articulated around false images of human greatness and happiness in Book IV of *Emile*, in which he discusses the moral education of the adolescent Emile. Rousseau foregrounds in this discussion the concept of pity for his understanding of goodness, affirming that to develop a positive self-other awareness in the adolescent, it is necessary to socialise him 'par les cotés tristes de la vie', thereby making him aware of the fact that 'il y a des êtres semblables à lui, qui souffrent ce qu'il a souffert, qui sentent les douleurs qu'il a senties, et d'autres dont il doit avoir l'idée comme pouvant les sentir aussi' (*Emile*, p. 505). By exposing the adolescent to human misery, he senses 'l'identité de sa nature', that is, the basis of human attachment: 'il suit de là que nous nous attachons à nos semblables moins par le sentiment de leurs plaisirs que par celui de leurs peines' (*Emile*, p. 503). Man's lack of sociable nature leaves him, as Rousseau describes himself in the *Rêveries*, 'jamais vraiment propre à la société civile' (*Rêveries*, p. 1059). The fact that man is forever 'out of joint' with the social structures that determine him perhaps explains Rousseau's assertion of suffering as one of civil man's common points. Whilst our otherness from civilisation precludes, on the one hand, plenitude, it gives us, on the other, the freedom to create forms of civic unity not based on the oppressive
demand for total identity or sameness, but on the acceptance of difference as constitutive of legitimate self-other relations.

This idea possibly informs Rousseau's statement that to educate Emile through notions of human grandeur and happiness would prove destructive, since it would instil in him the competitive spirit of *amour-propre*, impelling him to strive to exclude or annihilate the other in the attempt to achieve or protect his delusive idea of happiness: 'N'allez point faire germer en lui l'orgueil, la vanité, l'envie par la trompeuse image du bonheur des hommes; n'exposez point d'abord à ses yeux la pompe des cours, le faste des palais, l'attraissent des spectacles' (*Emile*, p. 503). Rousseau reiterates these points throughout *Emile*, underlining the indivisibility of any notion of perfect happiness from hatred and destruction. This recalls Zizek's deconstruction of Utopian discourse: it depends on its obverse, dystopia, as a condition of its identity and function. A moral education based on a fallacious principle of felicity would merely inspire the adolescent to look for an object to whom he could impute his own failure, and whom he could usurp in order to reverse the situation. Likewise, Utopian discourse always posits a conceptual enemy to conceal the irreducible negativity of the social.

From a late twentieth-century Lacanian perspective, Zizek would concur with Rousseau about the divisive effect of pleasure on human interaction. He determines the polis as the struggle of individuals striving to protect their particular organisation of enjoyment from the threat of 'enjoyment theft' by the other. He argues that the national bond linking members of a community is supported by a shared relationship with a 'Thing', a fantasy space that provides a degree of pleasure which the state
could never legislate or order. We cannot understand the ‘Thing’ as having a distinct set of features, since it resists all definition. The ‘national thing’ does not refer to a specific way of life, being nothing more than a belief that the other members of my community also believe and share in this ‘Thing’. It constitutes a void experienced through a fantasy that is at once inaccessible to others and threatened by them. To insulate ourselves from the very vacancy of our ‘Thing’, that is, from the trauma that we never in fact possessed a fully constituted and autonomous national identity, we cast the other in the role of the enemy who prevents our full enjoyment of it.

We can apply this idea to what Rousseau says about the quest for happiness in society, even though he refers to societies that precede the modern nations. The objects of happiness and pleasure motivating civilised man appear devoid of concrete reality. For example, the symbolic fictions of property, reputation and nobility bring the polis together in a collective and hateful struggle to assert the validity of their own unstable identity:

Je remarquerais combien ce désir universel de réputation, d’honneurs, et de préférences, qui nous dévore tous, exerce et compare les talents et les forces, combien il excite et multiplie les passions, et combien rendant tous les hommes concurrents, rivaux ou plutôt ennemis, il cause tous les jours de revers, de succès, et de catastrophes de toute espèce en faisant courrir la même lice à tant de prétendants (...) (Discours, p. 189).

This destructive competition, fuelled by the perverse passion of *amour-propre*, thrives amongst a people who experience reality through the warped fantasy of social organicity. *Amour-propre* functions through a specular effect which converts the other’s difference into a threat to our status and identity; we thus come to believe that we can only safeguard our identity by violently excluding that other. Civil structures aim to close completely the unbridgeable gap between the symbolic and the real, by
creating imaginary unity through the imposition of pre-defined objects of happiness, which disavow social plurality and openness. This sets man at odds with himself and his fellow beings as he attempts to eradicate the other in order to fulfil these collectively determined aims. For Rousseau, in Derrida’s words, ‘le mal a la forme de la détermination, de la comparaison et de la préférence’.

The excess of the belief in the group ‘Thing’ is expressed in the bloodshed of civil wars spurred by the ambitions of certain clans to secure hereditary rights to power. As a result of the weakening of more legitimate governmental forms, and the constant plotting and formation of opposing factions, ‘les guerres civiles s’allumèrent, enfin le sang des citoyens fut sacrifié au prétendu bonheur de l’état’ (Discours, p. 187). The instituting of hereditary rule demonstrates how a sense of group importance results from its members’ investing in a projected fantasy. The powerful only hold what they possess in esteem ‘autant que les autres en sont privés et, que, sans changer d’état ils cessaient d’être heureux, si le Peuple cessait d’être misérable’ (Discours, p. 189).

Envy and rivalry, so much a part of civil life, are rooted in the subject’s wish to protect his illusion of full identity from the threat of otherness. The distinction between an image of suffering which evokes pity and that of another’s pleasure which evokes amour-propre lies in the fact that ‘l’un nous exempte des maux qu’il souffre et que l’autre nous ôte les biens dont il jouit’ (Emile, p. 504). Pity makes us aware of our difference and of the fact that that difference provides the basis for non-destructive and uncompetitive relationships. Scenes of pleasure, on the other hand, make us perceive that difference as failure, thereby creating the desire for sameness that we attempt in vain to fulfil by denying or even destroying others. Rousseau therefore deconstructs the fantasy of happiness in civil society by showing unhappiness to be its
condition of existence.

By structuring the socialisation of *Emile* around the ethics of pity, the adolescent is constantly exposed to the limits of the social space, to its intrinsic lack, to the impossibility of eradicating human suffering through political fantasies of collective concord. The movement of pity serves to foreground the discrepancy between the complex and mutable identity of man and his identity as determined by the master signifiers of the state. It equally highlights the trauma with which we have to contend by endlessly constructing and re-constructing our social space. Rousseau describes man in terms of images of desolation and loss rather than nobility and grandeur: ‘Tous sont nés nus et pauvres, tous sujets aux misères de la vie, aux chagrins, aux maux, aux besoins, aux douleurs de toute espèce; enfin tous sont condamnés à la mort.’ (*Emile*, p. 504). The textual silence that envelops the period of transition from the equilibrium of nature to the unrest of symbolic society attests to the unsymbolisable nature of this traumatic experience.

*Emile*’s moral education works to ensure that he never loses sight of the misery and suffering which the state tries to hide under the fiction of collective unity. The centrality of pity to Rousseau’s moral thinking finds a number of similarities with contemporary theories which underline the need to trace the contours of the ineffable site of trauma in the social sphere. Zizek terms this ‘the ethics of the real’. It calls upon us ‘to mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very “impossibility”, in its non-integrated horror, by means of some “empty” symbolic gesture’. He argues that we ‘must preserve all the traces of historical traumas, dreams and catastrophes which the ruling ideology ... would prefer to obliterate’. By encircling the impossible real, we
adopt 'an attitude ...(which) is the only possibility for attaining a distance on the present, a distance which will enable us to discern signs of the New'. Likewise, Rousseau hopes to show the scope for change in society, by emptying it of its practices and myths to arrive at the indeterminacy of nature. The real always remains refractory to discursive systems and in this way it eludes their systematising force. Its inalienable character means that it can never be domesticated through imaginary and symbolic reduction and therefore it constantly resurfaces to show the limits, that is, the lack, within our mode of representation.

As I have demonstrated, Rousseau announces with the conceptual terminology available to him, the idea of the inadmissibility of human suffering to representation: it can only ever be represented negatively. Pity functions on the condition of a certain non-integration of the other's misery, on a distracted recognition of this lack. The ethics of pity, perhaps not in such a radical way as that of the real, induces us to see through the ideological chimera of a commensurable political system where subject and object converge. Its affective impact works against oppressive forms of unity built in opposition to the other, by reminding us that it is difference, our non-identification, that necessitates our association.

Rousseau points more directly to the political implications of his theory of pity when he draws an analogy between the openness and sensitivity of the Turkish people and their precarious political order:

Pourquoi les Turcs sont-ils généralement plus humains, plus hospitaliers que nous? c'est que dans leur gouvernement, tout à fait arbitraire, la grandeur et la fortune des particuliers étant toujours précaires et chancelantes, ils ne regardent point l'abaissement et la misère comme un état étranger à eux. (Emile, p. 507).
Rousseau intimates here the fact that pity flourishes in a political context that draws attention to its own constitutivity. He may not be advocating the unstable institutional life of Turkey as a political paradigm, but he certainly recognises the importance of antagonism and contingency to prevent the divisive force of *amour-propre* from monopolising the social space:

On verrait fomenter par les Chefs tout ce qui peut affaiblir les hommes rassemblés en les désunissant; tout ce qui peut donner à la Société un air de concorde apparente et y semer un germe de division; tout ce qui peut inspirer aux différents ordres une défiance et une haine mutuelle par l’opposition de leurs droits et de leurs intérêts, et fortifier par conséquent le pouvoir qui les contient (*Discours*, p. 120).

The example of the Turkish political system maintains a clear separation between the identity of the people and their mode of political representation, between the subject and its object of identification, between the symbolic and the real. It is in a context wherein the subject senses this gap that pity is most active. The ethics of pity requires man to live as close as possible to the indeterminacy of nature, as the condition of his political freedom.

Rousseau’s statement about Turkey bears comparison with Lefort’s conceptualisation of modern democracy. For Lefort, democracy involves a constitutive tension, a central ambiguity, that is, the institutionalisation of political antagonism. Democratic ambiguity stems from the fact that society is no longer structured on the theologico-political conception of the prince as the positive incarnation of power. In the theologically emptied context of democracy, power becomes *un lieu vide* exposed to perpetual contestation. Democracy may have destroyed the organic unity of the *ancien régime*, but it has not destroyed unity *per se*. As Stavrakakis comments, ‘it
only means that this unity is not given *a priori* but it can only be the result of political hegemonic struggle. Unity and power cannot be consubstantial with a limited political force or person. Modern democracy is therefore defined by its structural legitimisation of conflict. The exercise of power is periodically redistributed as an outcome of a controlled and regulated contest. Unity paradoxically comes about through the recognition of division and irreducible antagonism. This recognition, together with the dissolution of pre-democratic markers of certainty, constitutes the very ambiguity of democracy:

Elle inaugure une histoire dans laquelle les hommes font l'épreuve d'une indétermination dernière, quant au fondement du Pouvoir, de la Loi, et du Savoir, et au fondement de la relation de l'un avec l'autre, sur tous les registres de la vie sociale (partout où la division s'énonçait autrefois, notamment la division entre les détenteurs de l'autorité et ceux qui leur étaient assujettis, en fonction de croyances en une nature des choses ou en un principe surnaturel.

This ambiguity provides the essence of democracy and any attempt to eradicate it would result in the 'de-democratisation' of democracy itself. Similarly, to deny the inalienability of man's freedom, is to deny him his status as a human being.

The perpetual redistribution of power in Turkish society means that grandeur and fortune become bereft of pre-established points of reference. Power is an empty signifier, always in excess of the signifieds that become attached to it. The contingency of the political system prevents those in power from seeing themselves as far removed from the suffering and misery of the people. In contrast, Rousseau maintains that the action of pity becomes curtailed in a more rigid political structure where power becomes incarnated in a limited political force, as is the case in monarchies. The illusory convergence between the symbolic and the real in these
societies stops the king from pitying his subjects precisely because the political order appears immutable and ‘ils (les rois) comptent de n’être jamais hommes’ (Emile, p. 507). This contrasts with Rousseau’s presentation of an ideal form of government where the person in authority identifies the power conferred on him through elective processes, with the people he serves rather than with own his own self-interest. In light of this, we can argue that in order for a political system to function legitimately, we have to maintain the distance “separating the locus of Power from those who exert it”.

Pity flourishes on the terrain of social dislocation, the terrain of radical democracy. It can be considered a highly democratic passion. The contingent and constant redistribution of power, which is intrinsic to democracy, recurs in the fluid structures of the self-other relationship involved in the act of pity. The feeling of strength that the subject experiences in being exempt from pain and suffering is always attenuated by his own sense of vulnerability, the anticipation of his own finitude. His experience of inner strength only lasts as long as the other person requires his help; it can be easily overturned by a sequence of events which exposes him to his limitations: the spectator and the object of pity may reverse roles over an infinite chain of relations. The fact that the act of identification can only occur on the basis of a certain non-identification reaffirms the dislocated nature of the social space which allows for political transformation, for radical democracy. Pity at once maintains the distinction between self and other, and re-inscribes the universal lack that unites them. These two elements overlap, leading to the plurality of identities and practices that characterise the heterogeneous landscape of modern democracy.
Rousseau refuses to offer a simple set of moral solutions that would eradicate social negativity and thereby lead to fullness. This remains a mere dream to bridge the gap between desire and reality. For Rousseau, ethics consists in staying as close as possible to the limit posed by nature, that is, in decreasing the difference between our desires and our powers. The illimitable force of imagination and perfectibility forecloses the possibility of reaching a perfect equilibrium between what we desire and what we can achieve, since in trying to fill the abyss left by the transition from nature to civilisation, these forces merely point to that lack: 'Le monde réel a ses bornes, le monde imaginaire est infini; ne pouvant élargir l'un rétrécissons l'autre; car c'est de leur seule différence que naissent toutes les peines qui nous rendent vraiment malheureux' (Emile, p. 305)

If we accept that, for Rousseau, reality is a discursive construct, then what he understands by 'le monde réel', in this quotation, has a more complex identity. Rousseau states that if man had remained as close as possible to nature, then the misery and destruction of civilisation would have been limited. What differentiates man from beasts and defines him as human is what in fact exposes him to perpetual redefinition, his perfectibility or freedom. The true essence of man lies not in a positive identity but in his very lack of one. Nature opens a space of indeterminacy that refutes any essentialist or natural explanation of history. When Rousseau talks about reducing the breach between the imaginary and the real, he perhaps has this idea of nature in mind, as transcendental negativity, which constitutes the defining limits of his thinking. He wishes to re-install this originary indeterminacy into the social sphere as far as it is possible to do so without its collapsing into a state of anomy. Our lack of sociable human nature makes alienation the condition of
socialisation: we can only enter society by becoming other to ourselves. This constitutive otherness preserves the indeterminacy of nature by affording man a degree of freedom from the determinate force of social structures. This fact dismantles any fantasy of collective harmony fuelled by the demand of *amour propre* for full identity. Man, in his attempt to fulfil such a chimerical and restrictive notion of happiness, has to exclude the other aggressively, when, in reality, his lack of fundamental identity means that any identity he assumes has to come from what is other to him.

The rhetorical level of the *Discours*, with its use of violent imagery and dramatic prosopopoeia, plays on the reader's capacity for identification. However, these scenes do not encourage us to identify with a positive identity, but with our own misidentification with the oppressive structures of civilisation instituted on the basis of closure and the fixation of the plural and mutable identity of man. A legitimate form of identification has to entail non-identification to preserve the freedom of the subject. The dramatic condensation of capital moments of historical change foregrounds the essential void at the heart of political institutions and therefore, the irreducible gap that exists between the polis and their determination at the level of the system. In this theoretical light, we could argue that instead of reducing the gap, Rousseau exposes it. Recognition of this dislocation could allow for social change. While it is clear that Rousseau does not want to eradicate the desire for political transformation, he aims to alert man to the dangers of trying to realise a Utopian dream at the expense of his very substance, his freedom.

By emphasising the contingent and contextual nature of political structures, Rousseau,
along with contemporary theorists of radical democracy, offers a vision of the political that enables social change by means of a structural flaw. The perfectibility or unconditional freedom that determine man means that he can never coincide with political reality in a self-identical way. The fundamental discrepancy between the subject and the objective level of sedimented political reality opens the way for transformation, inciting the subject to attempt to transcend the limits of the system in the hope of finding expression for his heterogeneous desire. What we uncover at the centre of Rousseau's rethinking of the political is the irreducible tension that exists between a universal pole — the need for a force that acts in the name of the whole community — and the particularism of individual freedom. The only hope for unity emerges with a recognition of this fundamental division. Democratic theory and its practice result from the ambiguity of simultaneously differentiating and uniting individuality and commonality. Rousseau brings this constitutive tension to the fore in his exploration of the conditions of possibility for a legitimate social order in the *Contrat social*. In order to sustain modern democracy, we need to acknowledge the distance between the locus of power and those who exercise it. Such a recognition would require that we accept that there is no external enemy which prevents the full constitution of society, and that the limits of democracy inhere in its very core, in the emptiness of its site of power and the antagonisms that derive from this fact. The metaphor of the state of nature acts as a "signifier of lack" which points to this vacancy within the social, reminding us that the stability projected by oppressive governments is a fantasy that hides the strife they propagate. The internal split of the social may preclude, on the one hand, the realisation of collective concord, but it gives us, on the other, freedom to construct and reconstruct the socio-political field in the face of heterogeneous events. Rousseau provides us, by means of his radical
fiction of nature, with a space through which to do this.

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1 The idea that Rousseau’s portrayal of the state of nature is purely fictional has been reevaluated. Leo Strauss asserts that ‘if Rousseau’s account of nature were hypothetical, his whole political teaching would be hypothetical’. See his Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) p. 267. I shall develop the idea of the ‘philosophical truth’ of Rousseau’s state of nature throughout this chapter.

2 Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida were amongst the first to foreground the distinction and possible difficulties of these two elements in Rousseau’s writing. In the eighteenth century, these two textual levels were not considered as distinct elements.


5 Ibid., p. 151.

6 Victor Goldschmidt implies a less negative reading of the division of land, stating that this division not only works to stop others, but also the owner himself, from trying to occupy another person’s territory. Anthropologie et Politique: les principes du système de Rousseau (Paris: Vrin, 1974), p. 419.

7 Ernesto Laclau highlights the dependence of representation on the radically unrepresentable in his interpretation of de Man’s analysis of the ambiguous role of the zero in Pascal’s theory of number and extension. See his The Politics of Rhetoric (Essex: University of Essex, 1998).

8 Hans Jost Frey makes this point in his critique of de Man’s interpretation of autobiography as defacement. He argues that although de Man uncovers the undecidable nature of any proposition in his reading of the allegory of the naming of man, he undoes this discovery by unreservedly affirming the fictional nature of language. The fact that the negativity of language disallows a literal interpretation of any proposition, also applies to de Man’s own proposition of the fictional status of all language. See his ‘Undecidability’ in The Lessons of Paul de Man, Yale French Studies, 69, 1985.


This apparent impasse reminds us of the Lacanian vel of being/meaning. The option of being does not form a real alternative for the subject, in so far as he cleaves to the maternal object in a desperate attempt after authentic being, only to fall into the asocial non-subjectivity of psychosis, as he refuses to cathect language. He can only become a subject by choosing 'meaning', however, this proves equally as alienating since he undergoes a process of aphanisis, fading, as he seeks full presence in the negativity of language. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 207-214.


Ibid


Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle*, p. 11.


Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 267.

Ibid., p. 265.

*Cascardi, Consequences of the Enlightenment*, p. 212.


Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 175.


*Stavrakakis, Lacan and the Political*, p. 123.

*Lefort, Essais sur le politique*, p. 29.


Zizek, *For They know not what They Do*, p. 269.


The Interpenetration of the Particular and the Universal in Rousseau's *Du Contrat social*

Rousseau rearticulates the relationship between the particular and the universal in the *Contrat*, differentiating his conceptualisation of it from classical definitions. Such definitions attributed the universal an *a priori* substantial content that would eventually transcend and absorb the aberrations of the particular elements of empirical existence.¹ In contrast to many studies of the *Contrat*, this chapter seeks to illustrate the way in which Rousseau grants the particular, unlike his predecessors and his contemporaries², its own dynamic in the infinite process of constructing and reconstructing the social, whilst still retaining the force of the universal. We can broadly locate the universal aspect of Rousseau’s political theory in his notion of the general will. Rousseau possibly secularises and radicalises Malebranche's definition of the general will as the expression of God’s will — the ultimate reason and order of the universe — to re-think it as a secular space devoid of any pre-established content.³ The general will only exists at the moment of its emergence, when the particular wills of society assemble to make or break the laws that define collective good. The general will is a constructed phenomenon whose assumed identity depends on a process of deliberation, interrogation and competition. It thus remains forever susceptible to being re-defined.

Rousseau foregrounds the necessary tension existing between the particular and the universal in any socio-political configuration. This tension arises from the incomplete and contingent nature of the identities of both terms. The general will is never purely general because it is already inhabited by the identity of the particular. Likewise, the particular, in turn, only appears in relation to what transcends it, the popular
sovereign. They enter into a mutually deconstructive relationship where neither element can conceivably exist in an absolute form, with or without the other. Unlike the earlier conceptions of the universal as the hidden essence of the singular identities of the social, Rousseau insists on the anessence of the universal and therefore, on the transient nature of any force which comes to occupy its empty space. The particular simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the Protean representations of the universal.

**Social Plurality**

This chapter also seeks to demonstrate the pertinence of Rousseau’s political theory to modern plural democracies. Rousseau’s theorisation of the social pact has been interpreted as an attempt to homogenise the heterogeneity of the social by imposing moral and political uniformity on its members. This reading of the *Contrat*, as a doctrine for dictatorial rule, partly stems from a misconception of what is seen as Rousseau’s apparent distrust of what he terms “associations partielles”:

> Si, quand le peuple suffisamment informé délibère, les citoyens n’avaient aucune communication entre eux, du grand nombre de petites différences résulterait toujours la volonté générale, et la délibération serait toujours bonne. Mais quand il se fait des brigues, des associations partielles aux dépens de la grande, la volonté de chacune de ces associations devient générale par rapport à ses membres, et particulière par rapport à l’Etat, on peut dire alors qu’il n’y a plus autant de votants que d’hommes, mais seulement autant que d’associations. Les différences deviennent moins nombreuses et donnent un résultat moins général. Enfin quand une des associations est si grande qu’elle l’emporte sur toutes les autres, vous n’avez plus pour résultat une somme de petites différences, mais une unique différence; alors il n’y a plus de volonté générale et l’avis qui l’emporte n’est qu’un particulier (*Contrat*, pp. 371-372).

This quotation has often been misread as an open attack on interest groups or political parties, setting Rousseau’s philosophy at odds with the political life of Western
democracies which is characterised by controlled competition amongst such groups.\textsuperscript{5} Rousseau does not, however, conceive political life as consisting of isolated individuals who are eventually forced to submit to the rule of one political figure or doctrine. His scepticism about "associations partielles" results exactly from a fear of such a situation. The term "association partielle" refers here to those groups or organisations that endeavour to subjugate the others by imposing their moral or political beliefs on them, and thus try to reduce plural difference, implied by the term "de petites différences," to "une différence unique", or what we call totalitarian rule.

This understanding of the above quotation is corroborated by Rousseau's extended discussion of the general will in the article Économie politique, where any political configuration emerges as inherently plural:

Toute société politique est composée d'autres sociétés plus petites, de différentes espèces dont chacune a ses intérêts et ses maximes; mais ces sociétés que chacun apperçoit, parce qu'elles ont une forme extérieure et autorisée, ne sont pas les seules qui existent réellement dans l'état; tous les particuliers qu'un intérêt commun réunit, en composent autant d'autres, permanentes ou passagères, dont la force n'est pas moins réelle pour être moins apparente, et dont les divers rapports bien observés sont la véritable connaissance des moeurs (Économie OC III, pp. 245-246)

Rousseau emphasises here the irreducibility of the social to a single set of moral or political principles, implying the mobile character of political and cultural identities.

The wider society comprises a potentially infinite number of culturally diverse groups, whose varying interests and maxims proliferate beyond that which is immediately discernible in state ideology. Despite being less apparent, the force of these groups is just as real and cannot therefore be denied or totally absorbed by communal structures. The never-ending multiplication of social difference means that the particular and the general have to be differentially or contextually defined. Society
can no longer be perceived as an intelligible objective whole, but in a state of flux which refuses any ultimate determination. Rousseau therefore stresses the relativism of social and political forms, whose identity cannot exist beyond their context.

This interminable unfurling of difference indicates that the distinction between the particular and the general will — a distinction intrinsic to all political collectivities, including even subordinate or partial associations — is a mobile concept whose point of reference is constantly being redefined. What one group perceives as general can automatically be re-described as particular from another perspective, showing the impossibility of definitively fixing these terms: ‘La volonté de ces sociétés particulières a toujours deux relations; pour les membres de l’association, c’est une volonté générale, pour la grande société, c’est une volonté particulière, qui très souvent se trouve droite au premier égard, et vicieuse au second’ (Economie, p. 246). Despite illustrating the relativism of the political domain, this quotation suggests the way in which no group, existing in a wider community, can lead a monadic existence. Rousseau thus repudiates the idea of pure relativism, by underlining the fact that any political identity, indeed, any identity, is always constitutively split between the particular and the universal: ‘Chaque individu, contractant, pour ainsi dire, avec lui-même, se trouve engagé sous un double rapport; savoir, comme membre du souverain envers les particuliers, et comme membre de l’état envers le souverain’ (Contrat, p. 361). Through this two-way relationship, the citizen can be understood as the point at which the particular and the general converge. In asserting his particularity, he refers back to himself as a free citizen, consciously choosing to enter the pact to safeguard his person and property, and simultaneously refers also to something transcending him, the sovereign of which he is already a part. Differential identities
include the identity of the other from whom they mark themselves off, thereby creating their own defining context. The notion of a society of mankind is therefore as chimerical as the notion of absolute difference.

The danger posed by the ‘associations partielles’ results, then, from one group seeking to raise itself above the irreducible plurality of society to a position of transcendence, thereby dissimulating its relational identity to all other associations. Such a situation presents itself in the final stage of political development, as depicted in the Discours: the ‘second state of nature’. The despotic rule of this stage leads to the disintegration of society, as the figure of the despot comes to subsume and destroy all other identities. This social fragmentation dissolves any point of common interest or any desire for community amongst its members, as each subject conceives of himself as a pure particularism, striving to secure his private interests at the expense of others. The aggressiveness of this phase derives from the aberrant passion of *amour-propre* where the individual creates the illusion of self-mastery to suppress or gain superiority over the other. Rousseau demonstrates through his exploration of this phase the inseparability of the particular and the general. The drive of *amour-propre*, as the assertion of the individual, paradoxically engenders absolute equality; all men are reduced to nothing as they struggle to achieve the same illusory goals of happiness. The lack of social bonds eradicates the constitutive limits between the differential identities of the people, giving rise to an indefinite dispersal of seemingly pure differences. Without limits, however, the identity of one group is constantly under threat from another group, since it can no longer secure its identity in relation to its difference from that group, but only (so it imagines) by destroying or subsuming it. A politics based on the notion of absolute particularism therefore proves self-defeating,
since in the absence of systematic limits, differential identities vanish, resulting in the nothingness of the second state of nature where men become equal again through their very lack of identity.

The multicultural society’s problems would not be solved by the frequently proposed expedient of particularism; the dangers of a politics governed by pure differences find a powerful metaphor in Rousseau’s violent image of the second state of nature. The despotism of this phase, coming from an unrestrained assertion of self-interest, leads to anonymity. Rousseau reiterates the link between despotism and anonymity in the *Contrat social*: ‘À l’autre extrémité du cercle l’unanimité revient. C’est quand les citoyens tombés dans la servitude n’ont plus ni liberté ni volonté’ (*Contrat*, p. 349). This undermines critics’ suggestion that the general will constitutes enforced unanimity; it operates to safeguard difference, not to eliminate it. If the sole driving force behind political activity is my right to assert my difference, then we face an ethical impasse where we have to ‘accept the rights to self-determination of all kinds of reactionary groups involved in antisocial practices’. In such a situation, any group can legitimise its claims to power, even those that do not tolerate difference. As a solution, it proves self-cancelling since it leaves the social field open to totalitarian rule.

**Civil Religion**

This danger founds Rousseau’s perception of the enlightenment question of despotism and it prompts him to incorporate the civil religion into his conception of legitimate political form. Before we address the complexity of Rousseau’s notion of a civil religion, it is useful to consider Laclau’s deconstruction of the concept of tolerance.
Undecidability occupies the core of this concept. To conceive it in an indiscriminate form is, as we have learnt, ultimately self-cancelling, since it leads to the paradoxical situation where we have to tolerate even anti-social forms of behaviour. And if we attempt to determine this concept ethically by establishing precise categories of what is acceptable and unacceptable to tolerate, we likewise annul tolerance as a meaningful idea. By setting ethical frontiers, we only have to tolerate what we find morally acceptable, which means that we are not tolerating anything at all. Tolerance cannot be construed as a closed concept in itself, since it proves indissociable from its other: intolerance. As Laclau stresses, it only becomes meaningful when the subject does not agree with what he has to tolerate. The act of tolerating something therefore involves suspending ethical judgement of a particular belief or practice. The grounding of tolerance can only happen in a society which can function with a certain degree of ‘internal differentiation’.

We can understand in this theoretical light Rousseau’s statement about the impossibility of establishing an exclusive national religion: ‘Maintenant qu’il n’y a plus et qu’il ne peut plus y avoir de religion nationale exclusive, on doit tolérer toutes celles qui tolèrent les autres, autant que leurs dogmes n’ont rien de contraire aux devoirs du citoyen’ (Contrat, p. 469). Rousseau refrains from providing precise moral criteria for what we should tolerate. We can infer from the foregoing quotation that for Rousseau the act of tolerating, as for Laclau, consists of suspending ethical judgement of a particular religious dogma on a public level, irrespective of whether it coincides with our convictions on a private level. This reciprocal suspension of judgement allows diverse faiths to exist within one state without their entering into a combative relationship with one another. Rousseau’s point makes us aware of the
necessity of conceiving the civil religion as being distinct from a particular form of faith. This is corroborated by Rousseau’s explanation of the relationship between the religious beliefs of a subject and the right of the sovereign to impinge upon those beliefs:

Any religion is only pertinent to the state in so far as it enjoins those who profess it to perform certain duties to others. Rousseau does not specify the nature of those duties, leaving it up to the hegemonic process of the general will to determine them. The articles of faith are not to be considered as religious dogmas, but as fostering ‘sentiments de sensibilité’. The focus of a religious sensibility would be a sense of mutual dependence, that is, a belief that our happiness does not exist independently of other people’s. The civil religion, therefore, helps to create a context in which a plurality of faiths can coexist by encouraging recognition of their relative equality. Rousseau thus perceives the only negative dogma as intolerance. In this way, he avoids defining tolerance positively by not including it among the affirmative elements of religion but by referring to it through its reverse: intolerance. The exclusion of intolerance from the state operates to safeguard what Laclau refers to as ‘internal differentiation’. A specific religion only jeopardises good communal relations when it claims to hold a transcendental position vis-à-vis all the others, threatening the state with, in fact, civil war, as it attempts to assume this position.
through a process of annihilation. This underlines the importance of not confusing the civil religion, as Felicity Baker indicates, with ‘a natural plenitude’; it can only be conceived as a supplement to a void, that is, the absence of sociable human nature. She argues that ‘the social space [...] must be defined by the absence of violence. The “feelings of sociability”, founded on the passions of hope and fear, generate love and reverence for the contract and the law, because it is these which maintain the empty space.’ So, the insertion of a civil religion in the social pact works, to some extent, to unveil the incomplete identity of all religions, thereby justifying and securing their irreducible plurality.

We can understand Rousseau’s stance towards different religions as being similar to that which he adopts towards partial associations. In an ideal situation, the state would foreclose the possibility of despotism by prohibiting all partial associations. But that solution would remain unrealisable, given the inherence of plurality to any political order. What he proposes instead is the proliferation of difference: ‘Que s’il y a des sociétés partielles; il en faut multiplier le nombre et en prévoir l’inégalité, comme firent Solon, Numa, Servius’ (Contrat, p. 372). By promoting plurality, whereby identity comes to be defined differentially rather than by a specular effect, we can prevent one group from endeavouring to indoctrinate and oppress the other groups, that is, from entering into dictatorial rule. A multiplicity of differences grants the numerous interest groups relative equality, for the distinctions between them become more frequent and smaller, and so decreasing the likelihood of one group trying to suppress the others. The preservation of difference thus proves central to Rousseau’s political theory. In short, Rousseau only opposes particular identities when the latter deny the tension which fuels political life by claiming to represent the hidden essence
of the multifarious nature of empirical existence and suppress plurality.

**Equivalence and Difference**

The relative character of particularity means that it can be understood as a meeting point of difference and equivalence. The social pact begins at this point. Rousseau's understanding of society as the constant deferral of difference leads him to desubstantialise its universal aspect, thereby opening it to diverse content. Therefore, a society compatible with justice never reaches a stage of social transparency, since its identity depends on its contextualisation. His non-essentialist description of the universal derives from the fact that man is defined by an absence of sociable human nature. Man thus possesses no determinate social identity or order. What is common to all of us is our lack of a natural bond and it is this lack that obliges us, without exception, to find artificial means, such as the contract, of instating non-totalitarian forms of unity. The need for the general will therefore emerges through its absent presence in all the individual wills that constitute the sovereign. So we can see that the general will, being defined negatively, is never literally general or universal in its content, since such a scenario would contradict the undeniably plural plane of society. As the source of the idea in Malebranche's theology makes clear, 'general' here means 'not particular', after all, if Rousseau used it in the strict sense of universal, his thesis of a conscious social pact would be rendered unnecessary, since the pact would already exist prior to its institution.

The incompletion of the universal determines the open-ended nature of political life. Just as the particular cannot exist in isolation from what transcends it, the non-essence
of the general will makes it contingent on the particular for its content. The particular has to have a dynamic of its own for the general will to function. What may have initially seemed to be the binary opposition of the two wills gradually emerges as a complex interaction. The borders between equivalence and difference constantly shift in the configuring of the social. Our equivalence does not amount to sameness or to a shared essence, but paradoxically relates to our difference, to our lack of common identity that requires us to participate in the social pact as a way of filling this lack and avoiding the oppressive unanimity of despotism. We learn that whilst the opposition of particular and general interests necessitated the instituting of a moral society, ‘c’est l’accord de ces mêmes intérêts qui l’a rendu possible. C’est ce qu’il y a de commun dans ces mêmes intérêts qui forme le lien social, et s’il n’y avait pas des points par lesquels les intérêts s’accordent, nulle société ne saurait exister. Or c’est uniquement sur cet intérêt que la volonté doit être gouvernée’ (Contrat, p.383).

The relative character of the social does not pose a problem in itself as long as it is contained in a more universal framework, that is, under the aegis of the general will. Through the contrastive force of the nothingness of the second state of nature, we learn that the points of agreement allow the particular to exist in the first place. The necessity of finding such points through the constructed means of a social pact evidently arises from the incomplete nature of the parties involved. However, if it were to complete their identities, and impose homogeneity, it would effect its own dissolution:

_Chaque intérêt, dit le M. d’A. a des principes différents. L’accord de deux intérêts se forme par opposition à celui d’un tiers. Il eut pu ajouter que l’accord de tous les intérêts se forme par opposition à celui de chacun. S’il n’y avait point d’intérêts différents, à peine sentirait-on l’intérêt commun qui ne trouverait jamais d’obstacle: tout irait de lui-même, et la politique cesserait d’être un art (Contrat, p. 371)._
This quotation underlines once more the interdependence of the universal and the particular in Rousseau’s thinking. The articulation of these two coordinates does not emanate from the reduction of one to the other but from the friction between them. An individual or partial association cannot affirm its right to a particular interest or identity without referring to the wider community to which it belongs, because any question of right already presupposes a notion of equality. In other words, if we agree that everybody has the right to their particular interest, then this means that we are all more or less equal under that condition. Every notion of right implies both at once the difference or freedom of the person who exercises that right and their equivalence or equality with the rest of society. Without difference, the question of right becomes futile; without equality, it risks becoming unjust, in so far as a group or individual could always violate the rights of others in the name of their personal freedom. This explains why Rousseau insists on total submission to the contract as the sole means of safeguarding our liberty. It is the unappeasable tension between private and public interests that determines the social as a politically charged realm. The general will therefore maintains diversity so as to hold politics open to change from all levels of the social.

What impels man to enter into the social pact is a desire for order so that his life and property are no longer under threat from the war of all against all. This desire can only grow from a lack in the present, from the prevailing disorder. The object of this point of accord thus reveals itself by its very absence. At this moment, Rousseau preempts Ernesto Laclau’s observation that the “something identical” in community relations ‘can only be the pure abstract, absent fullness of the community, which
lacks...any direct form of representation and expresses itself through the equivalence of differential terms.\textsuperscript{13} Communality, arising in the form of a desire for order, cuts through the multifarious components of the state. As Rousseau recognises, the notion of a wider community (even though never to be fully actualised) has to be present in order for the social to exist as a plural terrain, where the other no longer threatens my person and my property.\textsuperscript{14} Laclau reaches a similar conclusion when he observes that we still need society in that mode of fullness and universality, whose absence is its only mode of presence.\textsuperscript{15}

It is this desire for community, resulting from the impossibility of society, which affords the individual its own role in shaping the collective:

Pourquoi la volonté générale est-elle toujours droite, et pourquoi tous veulent-ils constamment le bonheur de chacun d’eux, si ce n’est qu’il n’y a personne qui ne s’approprie ce mot chacun, et qui ne songe à lui-même en votant pour tous? Ce qui prouve que l’égalité de droit, et l’idée de justice qu’elle produit dérive de la préférence que chacun se donne et par conséquent de la nature de l’homme (...) \textit{(Contrat}, p. 195).

The citizen, in imagining in what communal good\textsuperscript{16} consists, links up with the absent community, by allowing his self to become a metaphor for it. It would be inconceivable that man should contradict the fundamental drive of \textit{amour de soi-même} and wish harm upon himself, and therefore others. Nonetheless, the judgement which guides this will may not always be as enlightened as the will itself, creating a lapse between the desire for collective good and its concrete expression in institutional practices. This discrepancy between our aspirations and social reality sustains political activity, as we constantly strive to overcome it.

Althusser indicates that in the Geneva manuscript the ‘préférence’ mentioned in the
previous quotation is simply another name for a particular interest that could potentially threaten the good functioning of the state if it gained a majority through the suppression of other interests:

Comme la volonté tend toujours au bien de l'être qui veut, que la volonté particulière a toujours pour objet l'intérêt privé, et la voloné générale l'intérêt commun, il s'ensuit que cette dernière est ou doit être le seul vrai mobile du corps social (...) l'intérêt privé tend toujours aux préférences, et l'intérêt public à l'égalité (Contrat, (première version), p. 295).

Althusser maintains that a paradox, emanating from a comparison of the Geneva manuscript and the final version of the Contrat, appears in so far as the particular interest is at once the foundation of the general will and its contradiction. We can, however, interpret this paradox as part of the complexity of Rousseau’s thinking, which invariably underlines the indeterminacy of all conceptualisation. There can only seem to be a paradox here because Althusser takes the particular and the general as binary opposites, but as we have seen, the apparent binarism of the particular and the general gives way to the revelation that the identity of each element is inhabited by the other. This situation acquires coherence, when we consider it in terms of the overriding principle of the social contract: the instituting of man’s fundamental freedom within moral society. If the general will unilaterally determined the particular, then these two categories would vanish, bringing the social to a close and transporting man back to the homeostasis of the pure state of nature. This would deny man what grants him his human status in the first place — his perfectibility. To preserve man’s freedom, the universal can therefore only be defined through the intervention of the particular. Rousseau’s inversion of the classical relationship between the universal and the particular forms the possibility and the limits of his concept of popular sovereignty: the people’s freedom to participate in the organisation
of society depends on the results of their political activity always falling short of full
generality. This apparent failure of the general will is what allows for its renewal,
thereby providing an opening through which new social systems and representations
can occur. In short, its failure is the only guarantee of its partial and continuing
success.

The General Will as a Hegemonic Struggle

The fact that the particular contributes to defining the universal in the *Contrat*
adumbrates, to some extent, Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of hegemony as the
process behind the construction of socio-political objectivity. We can broadly
understand hegemony as the process by which a particular discourse or set of
discourses of norms, values, and opinions expand beyond their immediate point of
social and cultural reference to form the dominant horizon of social orientation. A
particular discourse can hegemonise the socio-political field by partially fixing the
meaning of diverse social struggles around nodal points signifiers such as community,
democracy or collective, which are without precise content, such as community or
collective good, and which by virtue of their indeterminacy can act, by virtue of their
indeterminacy, as the ground of inscription for conflicting and differing perspectives.
Nodal points supply, then, the common points of reference which enable divergent
struggles to come together in the form of contingent collective wills. What makes the
process of hegemony possible, the intrinsic undecidability of social phenomena, that
is, their lack of fixed meaning, also prevents its operation from being fully realised,
leaving the notion of social truth open to being endlessly reinterpreted and
reformulated by other discourses, which can, in turn, possibly achieve hegemonic
Rousseau does not believe that an absolute majority or consensus is truly realisable, recognising that the result of the general will’s activity will derive from a process similar to a hegemonic one. Laclau acknowledges a degree of similarity between the Rousseauean general will and the concept of hegemony, when he describes the ‘universalising effects’ of the particularities involved in hegemonic practices as being ‘not exactly Rousseau’s general will, but a contingent and pragmatic version of it’. In contrast, I aim to show that Rousseau’s general will is highly contingent and pragmatic.

Rousseau clearly defines the political field as an open-ended phenomenon whose eventual configuration cannot be grounded in any inherent logic. We explored, in chapter 1, the implications of the fact he offers no markers of certainty for the foundations of society. He exposes, through the negativity of nature as the origin of society, the absent fullness of community which denies any social actor or mode of organisation total mastery of the collective sphere. This explains his idea of popular sovereignty, described by Wokler as ‘a principle of equality, which identified the ruled element, or the subject themselves as the supreme authority’, being governed by the voice of the general will. We learn that the general will is defined differentially, distinct from the will of all. The will of all amounts to the total sum of private interests, whereas the general will results from the sum of the differences between those interests. If the general will were nothing but the aggregation of the particular interests of the state, then the chaos of civil war would continue, because there would be no common point to unite individuals across their divisions. The fundamental
absence of a natural link amongst men means that what is common to man can only be defined negatively, leaving man’s moral identity open to diverse forms of positive content. This negativity enables social bonds to be constructed and reconstructed as part of an infinite process. Our equivalence therefore relates to our essential difference or otherness from civil institutions. Civil society at once has to attenuate this difference by fostering the belief amongst men that their individual well-being depends on collective well-being and also preserve it so as to give man the freedom to exercise his political right. The ‘moi commun’ of the general will does not therefore possess an *a priori* affirmative identity, being founded on this point of non-identification or otherness common to all individual wills, which simultaneously necessitates and leaves incomplete the search for a moral grounding for community.

Rousseau points out that it is the conflict between private interests that allows their points of accord to become apparent. This process involves the suppression or exclusion of certain interests from temporarily occupying a more powerful position, highlighting the way in which social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. Being defined differentially, the general will inscribes within itself ‘the traces of exclusion which govern its constitution; what, following Derrida can be referred to as its constitutive outside’\(^2\). Already included in the identity of the general will are those interests that had to be subtracted in order to reach a partial state of closure, that is, to build political reality. The division between what is external and what is internal to its representation is blurred. The corollary of this is that ‘the constitutive outside’ already exists on the inside as another possible determination of that space. This means that the identity assumed by the general will is purely contingent, representing its determinability rather than any underlying essence. The common point that comes to
articulate the varying private interests of society is not therefore reached by the overcoming of differences, nor through the discovery of an underlying essence, but by a process of mediation through which differing standpoints come to express shared social objectives and political strategies. Rousseau’s notion of the general will highlights the confluence between the establishment of social reality and the manifestation of power, thereby foregrounding the political as the constitutive force behind the social, not merely as a subordinate realm within it.

**The Law as Liberating**

The foregoing discussion has made it clear that the law, resulting from the deliberation of the general will, does not operate to check the individual *per se*; indeed Rousseau states categorically that the general will can never legislate against a particular member of a community. The law functions, on the contrary, to protect the individual from the tyranny of personal dependence and to safeguard his freedom: “Trouver une forme d’association qui défende et protège de toute la force commune la personne et les biens de chaque associé, et par laquelle chacun s’unissant à tous n’obéisse pourtant qu’à lui-même et reste aussi libre qu’auparavant” (*Contrat*, p. 360).

To ensure the particular its status as such, it has to submit to what is the sole clause of the contract: total alienation; it is only on this condition that the contract can be effective. First, if each individual gives himself wholly to the pact, then the terms of the contract are equal for everybody. Second, total alienation proves essential for the prevention of what we would term today totalitarianism: ‘car s’il restait quelques droits aux particuliers, comme il n’y aurait aucun supérieur commun qui pût prononcer entre eux et le public, chacun étant en quelque point son propre juge prétendrait bientôt l’être en tous, l’état de nature subsisterait et l’association
deviendrait nécessairement tyrannique et ou vaine' (*Contrat*, p. 361). Rousseau repudiates once again the notion of a privileged social actor. This fact helps to define the meaning of Rousseau's expression "total alienation".

By agreeing to the pact, man recognises that his individual and group status do not exist independently of the wider sphere. The social contract places each individual under the supreme direction of the general will of which he forms an integral part, so that by obeying the general will, he is effectively obeying himself, and therefore, remains as free as before: 'Les particuliers ne s'étant soumis qu'au souverain et l'autorité souveraine n'étant autre chose que la volonté générale, nous verrons comment chaque homme obéissant au souverain n'obéit qu'à lui-même, et comment on est plus libre dans le pacte social que dans l'état de nature' (*Emile*, p. 841). Thus, total alienation does not mean that the subject submits to the will of others, which would ultimately deny him his freedom, but that he enters a pact which he has consciously chosen, transferring his force and his property to the community. The instituting of the pact is a mark of his freedom. However, in keeping with Rousseau's conceptualisation of liberty in other works, this free decision is taken in a situation of constraint: here, the terror of the war of all against all. The unbound freedom of nature, having been translated into a partially socialised state, results in anarchy where each individual exercises his liberty to achieve his own ends with no regard for the other. His decision to accept the contract, like all acts of freedom, inevitably involves the suppression of other possibilities or choices. To make the pact viable, the citizen has to forego his natural liberty, his illimitable right to do what he wants. This choice is in reality chimerical: the individual's right to exercise his total freedom automatically impinges upon the right of the others to do the same. The giving of
oneself and one’s property to the community appears at first sight as a moment of self-dispossession, however, we realise on closer inspection that this act actually allows the self to exist within wider society: ‘Enfin chacun se donnant à tous ne se donne à personne, et comme il n’y a pas un associé sur lequel on n’acquière le même droit qu’on lui cède sur soi, on gagne l’équivalent de tout ce qu’on perd, et plus de force pour conserver ce qu’on a’ (Contrat, p. 361).

The citizen, by giving himself to the community at large, gives himself to ‘nobody’, because community is always defined by its absence presence. The citizen preserves his freedom by identifying with the ‘empty space’ of power of the popular sovereign which, by defining all social actors as equally inadequate to fill that space, confers political responsibility on all members of the community. The pact thus makes the citizens aware of their shared dependence on the law, and in this sense, the incomplete nature of their particular identities. In accordance with what we have elaborated so far, it is the recognition of this fact that protects plurality and relieves the particular of the necessity to defend and assert his identity aggressively. Each member becomes ‘une partie indivisible du tout’, part of an equivalential chain of differential identities, where each identity has the right to exist within the terms of the pact, and can only be constrained if it breaks those terms. The process of alienation does not strip man of his person and his property, but safeguards them under the law, granting him the freedom to use and cultivate them in relation to his needs. We can thus redefine the notion of total alienation, the premise of political equality, as partial alienation, in so far as all the subject loses is total possession of his property and the anxiety which accompanies such a position; thus the law is liberating and to some extent de-alienating.
We can elucidate this understanding of the law through Zizek’s interpretation of the function of the symbolic Law in Lacanian psychoanalysis, as explored by Lacan in *La subversion du sujet et la dialectique du désir*. Lacan maintains that the desire that the Law checks is not the subject’s desire, but that of the Other. Before the reign of the symbolic Law, the subject exists at the whim of the primordial Other, or the all-powerful Mother, construed as a figure of omnipotence. The subject conceives itself as totally dependent upon the will of the Other for the satisfaction of his needs, assuming a position of complete alienation where he perceives his desire as continuous with that of the Mother. The subject strives to comply with and fulfill the demands of the Mother in order to gain her love and, in so doing, satisfy his own and her desire. The subject attempts to monopolise and fill the space of maternal desire by becoming the phallic object, at once denying his own lack, implied by his desire for the mother and her lack, implied by the desire he is attempting to fill. The subject is totally subordinated to the momentary whim of the primordial Other who can satisfy and not satisfy his demand. The advent of the symbolic Law liberates the subject from the mercy of the Mother-Other, as he comes to sense that she too obeys the Law. Their mutual dependence on the absolute condition of the Law restrains the omnipotence and self-will of the Other, granting the subject a degree of distance from it. The subject’s desire is no longer reduced to the demand for the Mother’s love, freeing it from the dictates of her whim, and thereby granting it access to its own space of desire. As Zizek observes, this notion of the law stands in contrast to a post-structuralist one where the law checks, channels, alienates, oppresses an earlier “flux of desire”, plying it into an oedipal form; here, instead the Law is conceived as an agency of “disalienation” and “liberation”.
The subject liberates himself from total subordination to the Mother-Other by recognising that she is no longer a figure of full omnipotence, but already has a fundamental lack which subjects her to the rule of the Law, that is, to the rule of the Other: 'what the subject obeys is no longer the Other's will but a Law which regulates its relationship to the Other — the Law imposed by the Other is simultaneously the Law which the Other itself must obey.'

We can note a striking structural homology between the birth of the law in the *Contrat social* and that described by Lacanian psychoanalysis and reinterpreted by Zizek. Just as the symbolic law works to free the subject from its enslavement to the will of the Other, the law in the *Contrat social* works to save the citizen from the tyranny of personal dependence. The war of all against all stems from the subject's aggressive endeavours to defend his property by keeping the other out. This state of total alienation, where everybody strives for the same illusory objects of happiness, results from the destructive drive of *amour propre* which causes the individual to live totally externalised in the gaze and desire of the other. The other assumes the position of an enemy who hinders my full enjoyment of my property and my identity. In reality, he is just an external representation of the irreducible negativity that at once requires the instituting of society and prevents its full constitution. Similarly, Zizek argues that we subscribe to a fantasy of an omnipotent Other, who can satisfy or not satisfy our demand at will, to avoid the lack in that Other that makes fullness inconceivable. A similarity thus emerges between the vain attempts of the owner to protect his property in a situation of mass destruction and the child’s futile endeavours to fill the space of maternal desire: they both deny the impossibility underlying their
struggle. In both cases, the advent of the law coincides with the realisation of mutual lack or in other words, mutual dependence on the absolute condition of the law, destroying the illusory sense of self-mastery under which the subject previously laboured.

In the *Contrat*, this moment of recognition yields important political consequences, for by realising his political equality, the individual becomes responsible for himself and the decisions made by the popular sovereign. No one can perform that function on his behalf, because everyone is subject to the law. The instituting of a legitimate political organisation is conditional upon the individual's cognisance of his own deficiency, and that of the other. The subject consequently depends on an anonymous structure, without a fundamental identity: ‘Ne pouvant se considérer que sous un seul et même rapport il est alors dans le cas d'un particulier contractant avec soi-même: par où l'on voit qu'il n'y a ni ne peut y avoir nulle espèce de loi fondamentale obligatoire pour le corps du peuple, pas même le contrat social’ (*Contrat*, 362). The law itself is already marked by an insurmountable lack; it is this structural undecidability which calls on the particular to take a decision to fill that lack. Given this lack, any decision taken about the social cannot be grounded in a preordained set of rules or formulas, but has to come from its component members, namely the citizens. It is in this light that we should read the following quotation:

Afin donc que le pacte social ne soit pas un vain formulaire, il renferme tacitement cet engagement qui seul peut donner de la force aux autres, que quiconque refusera d'obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps : ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu'on le forcerá d'être libre; car telle est la condition qui donnant chaque citoyen à la patrie le garantit de toute dépendance personnelle; condition qui fait le artifice et le jeu de la machine politique, et qui seule rend légitimes les engagements civils, lesquels sans cela seraient absurdes, tyranniques et sujets aux plus énormes abus (*Contrat*, p. 364).
Everybody is subject to the same structural limitations which prevent any one figure from claiming to symbolise social objectivity in its totality or from abdicating his responsibility as a citizen and thereby submitting to the will of another. Any disavowal of the internal limits of society therefore makes the political sphere vulnerable to totalitarian rule, as the structural undecidability of the law, the condition of the subject’s political freedom, becomes dissimulated by a figure or a discourse which denies the contingency of the prevailing order and its openness to multiple modes of arrangement. The efficacy of the social contract rests upon the citizens’ internalising their mutual lack and the lack within the wider sphere which necessitates the law and their participation in its reformulation.

These metaphors of the advent of the law link up with Lefort’s conceptualisation of the emergence of modern democracy. In submitting to the law, the subject has to submit to a process of dispossession: in the case of the symbolic Law, dispossession of the maternal object and in the case of contractual law, dispossession of property. In both cases, the subject has to see himself as other. The law engenders distance between subject and object — the distance necessary for intellectual and emotional development. The subject must recognise the impossibility of full possession of, and total identification with, the object in order to configure its own space of desire or to conceive collective good. Modern democracy involves the dispossession of power in a substantial form, incarnated in the body of the prince. In modern democracy, the purely symbolic nature of power means that no political party or figure can be consubstantial with it. Democratic politics functions on the basis of maintaining a distance between the person who exercises the power and the centre of power itself. Democracy collapses into totalitarian rule when one figure seeks to possess the space
of power totally by claiming an essential connection between his identity and the socio-political structure. So we can see that dispossession becomes a structural necessity in modern democracy, for the law to take effect; dispossession creates a space in which the subject can construct his own identity, even though the negativity of the wider structure prevents it from ever fully realising this task.

The Structural Undecidability of the Pact

The advent of the contract coincides with a moment of social dislocation, that is, with the war of all against all, the traumatic effects of mass destruction which uncover the failure of socio-discursive structures, such as property, for example, to secure a moral identity for man. Rousseau does not conceive the social pact as a fully constituted, objective whole that has a series of calculable effects. The moment of historical mutation (explored in our first chapter) is opaque to itself, without a pre-determined or determinable outcome. Rousseau underlines the fact that nothing is inexorable in the historical development of man, not even the establishment of the social contract. The contract does not therefore offer the individual a complete and unquestionable guide for understanding himself or the collective sphere or for judging what are appropriate forms of social and political action. The pact, as a symbolic construction built on an irreducible lack, requires the intervention of the citizens to supply its dynamic.

The contract evidently imposes structural limitations on its consenting parties, the citizen and the sovereign body of which they form a part, but does not fully determine them or make them act in accordance with its system of justice. It is not the fact that it is a purely ‘linguistic ruse’ which problematises its efficacy but that, as
a discursive phenomenon, it remains constantly exposed to the dislocating effects of events that cannot be fully represented or domesticated within its sphere. The pact can never fully separate itself from the negativity at its inception. As its condition of necessity and impossibility, the pact has to both at once integrate and manage this negativity to forestall social disintegration or the sterility of political closure. The structure of the Contrat itself leads us to acknowledge this fact: it constitutes a series of supplements such as the government, the tribunal, the civil religion, and the legislator, which all seek to limit the potentially dangerous effects of each element. The impact of these effects can only be felt after the event. For example, Rousseau introduces the government as an intermediary body between the citizen and the sovereign, after he has taken account of the risks inherent in direct rule by the general will. The government exists, to some extent, to prevent a relapse into social chaos; a threat it also poses itself if it were to usurp the sovereign as the source of power. The discussion therefore develops and changes direction as the potential for structural breakdown perpetually recurs. These supplements foreground the fact that the social contract cannot, of itself, prevent political degeneration. This absence of enforcing power pertains to the indeterminate and consequently open nature of the pact itself. The possibility of dislocation is therefore a permanent phenomenon in so far as there is always something which could potentially disrupt the structural unity of the pact, revealing its limits, its incompleteness and its contingency. In short, the contract lacks objectivity, and thence a fully determining capacity, that is, a capacity for offering social guarantees. This structural deficiency means that the pact cannot survive without the creative energy of the citizens which enables them to think through and deal with the problems that arise. The social contract thus exists within the subject-object continuum, where neither the subject nor the object has the power
to master or sublate each other.

The fact that the social pact does not completely determine the identity of its consenting parties does not mean that those parties are defined by an absolute lack of structural determination. In view of the depravity of the pre-contractual state, man can only conceivably begin to forge a more stable identity through the structure offered by the pact. What results is a partially structured identity. Just as the pact comes to supplement the lack in the social, the citizen emerges to supplement the lack in the pact, providing it with the energy to effect change. The citizens not only have to contend with the negativity of the social sphere, but also with that of the pact itself whose structural indeterminacy makes them responsible for the organisation of their collective space. Rousseau’s statement about freedom and constraint (see above) can be heard in the impact of Laclau’s words about the concurrence of the emergence of the subject with a moment of undecidability:

The freedom thus won in relation to the structure is therefore a traumatic fact initially: I am condemned to be free, not because I have no structural identity as the existentialists assert, but I have failed a structural identity. This means that the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-determination is not the expression of what the subject already is but the result of its lack of being instead, self-determination can only proceed through a process of identification. As we can gather, the greater the structural indetermination, the freer a society will be. 31

The indeterminate nature of the contract proves integral for the safeguarding of the citizens’ freedom. Man can only become a citizen through the institution of the pact and yet, to take that decision requires man to behave as if he were already a citizen. The citizen thus emerges at a point interposed between a rift in the social and his contingent intervention to repair that rift, bridging (by his decision) the gap between the discontinuous states of the violence of the war of all against all and the political
stability sought through the contract. He is thus partially self-determined, because he makes a decision, which is not determined by the structure itself because that structure is already dislocated (the contract is not an inevitable corollary of the war) to reconstruct his identity and his milieu. This decision allows him to act as if he were a subject with a fully-developed identity, even though it derives from a moment of unsymbolisable crisis.

The citizen is therefore never fully defined by the structure of the social pact. This fact grants him the freedom to dissolve it, so recuperating his natural liberty, if he chooses to, or is constrained to do so by an unjust appropriation of power whereby the pact is nullified. By drawing attention to the provisionality of his political conception, Rousseau underlines the mutually constitutive interaction between the citizen and the contract:

Les clauses de contrat sont tellement déterminées par la nature de l’acte, que la moindre modification les rendrait vaines et de nul effet; en sorte que, bien qu’elles n’aient peut-être jamais été formellement énoncées, elles sont partout les mêmes, partout tacitement admises et reconnues; jusqu’à ce que, le pacte étant violé, chacun rentre dans ses premiers droits et reprenne sa liberté naturelle, en perdant la liberté conventionnelle pour laquelle il y renonça (Contrat, p. 360).

Far from acknowledging the absolutism of the contract, Rousseau explains here that it only operates with the intervention of the particular, because what is universal is defined negatively. In the absence of a pre-ordained universal agent of power, political justice demands that sovereignty rest with the people; any attempt to deny their inalienable power results in the injustice of tyranny. The pact thus inaugurates a series of decisions where the citizen constantly seeks to construct the impossible object of society. The societal dislocations that threaten the nature of the contract also
provide it with its energy, as the general will draws on man’s perfectibility to reconfigure the social space to overcome any adversity that presents itself. Only when the freedom that the structure allows is denied by one or more of the contracting parties do these moments of disruption become truly disabling. We can infer from the above quotation that what is tacitly recognised and admitted is the fact that the structure is not self-perpetuating or all-determining but necessitates the perfectibility, the freedom of man, to sustain it. This perfectibility, which defines man and forms the basis of the citizens’ decision-making function, is relevant to Laclau’s understanding of the emergence of the subject as the moment of decision. For Laclau, the fact that the structure has failed to provide a substantial identity for the subject paradoxically makes it impossible to do away with ‘the category of the subject’:

So why call the chooser a subject? Because the impossibility of a free substantial subject, of a consciousness identical to itself which is *causa sui*, does not eliminate its need, but just relocates the chooser in the aporetical situation of having to act as if it were a subject, without being endowed with any of the means of a fully fledged subjectivity. The opacity of the decision to itself is one of the other names for this ontological condition. It is not possible to do away with the category of the subject: what it points to is part of a structure of experience.32

The moment of perfectibility, the decision, is a creative act that grows out of an experience of undecidability.33 It is this experience which unifies man across divisions as the constructed nature of the social becomes manifest, reminding him of the fundamental insufficiency or lack marking his identity and that of the collectivity. The ‘moi commun’ of the general will can be construed as this lack that impels the citizens to act as if they were ‘fully-fledged subjects’. This indeterminacy is re-enacted at the moment of the elections in the *Contrat social*, where the formal systems of the state are temporarily suspended, converting the citizen into a solitary individual, a moment suggestive of his primitive state:
À l'instant que le peuple est légitimement assemblé en corps souverain, toute juridiction du Gouvernement cesse, la puissance exécutive est suspendue, et la personne du dernier citoyen est aussi sacrée et inviolable que celle du premier magistrat, parce qu'où se trouve le représenté, il n'y a plus de représentant (Contrat, pp. 427-428).

The general will emerges to place in parentheses the state machinery which administers the laws, highlighting the internal split in the identity of the political leaders between their universality as representatives of political power and their particularity as ordinary subjects, all equally dependent on the law. The elections momentarily reintegrate the negativity of nature that social structures aim to negate, thereby revealing the constructed character of institutional and social unity.

Rousseau’s recognition of this function of the electoral process anticipates Zizek’s understanding of the elections as an irruption of the Real into social reality:

At the moment of the elections, the whole hierarchical network of social relations is in a way suspended, put in parentheses; ‘society’ as an abstract unity ceases to exist, it changes into a contingent collection of atomised individuals, of abstract units, and the result depends on a purely quantitative mechanism of counting, ultimately on a stochastic process: some wholly unforeseeable (or manipulated) event – a scandal, for example – can add that “half per cent” one way or the other that determines the general orientation of the country’s politics over the next few years[...]. In vain do we conceal the thoroughly “irrational” character of what we call formal democracy[...]. Only the acceptance of such a risk, only such a readiness to hand over one’s fate to “irrational” hazard, renders “democracy” possible.34

By suspending the entrenched or ‘sedimented’ political reality and thereby re-inscribing social lack, regular elections cut through the fantasy of plenitude.35

According to Rousseau, the fear that public elections inspire in governments stems largely from this fact, that is, from the way in which they disclose the contingency of the identity of the political leaders and their regime:
Ces intervalles de suspension où le prince reconnaît ou doit reconnaître un supérieur actuel, lui ont toujours été redoutables et ces assemblées du peuple, qui sont l’égide du corps politique et le frein du gouvernement ont été de tous les temps l’horreur des chefs: aussi n’epargnent-ils jamais ni soins, ni objections, ni difficultés, ni promesses, pour en rebuter les citoyens (Contrat, p. 428).

Rousseau sketches here, before the fact, an answer to a question posed by Lefort. Lefort notes that whilst some of the most lucid thinkers of our time (Adorno, Arendt, Horkheimer et al.) have sought to detect the seeds of totalitarianism in democratic structures, they have neglected to address the question why twentieth-century dictators abhor these structures. Rousseau’s anticipatory answer consists of demonstrating how societies of the kind we call democracy draw attention to the way in which the political always exceeds the identity of the political figures that come to represent it. By underlining the absence of a substantial link between the ruler and the centre of power, defined as an ‘empty space’, democracy possibly opens the social to perpetual redefinition in accordance with the public’s desire. Totalitarian regimes are characterised by the way in which they seek to close the gap between the real and the symbolic, by posing as the sole form of social arrangement, as a perfectly closed system. Conversely, democratic processes are self-deconstructive in so far as they highlight the discrepancy between the prevailing order conceived as the identity of the social, and viewed in light of its susceptibility to reorganisation. They at once conceal and reveal the purely artificial process of social construction.

The Sovereign and the Government

The indissociability of the particular and the general in the identity of the citizen also occupies the overall structure of Rousseau’s conception of a just political organisation. The relationship between the sovereign and the government can be
understood in terms of the interaction of these two coordinates. The general will does not determine the type of government; its corollary is that some form of government should be established. This concurs with Rousseau's re-articulation of the relationship between the particular and the general: if the general will determined the particular form of government, we would return to a conception of the universal as the underlying essence of the social. This would prevent social change. The general will emerges out of a lack in the present, and therefore remains fundamentally indeterminate, possessing no identity of its own to transfer on to the particular. Being defined negatively, it does not constitute a feasible method for organising a community, except in so far as it indicates those institutions that are illegitimate, thereby calling for social transformation. The general will creates a space in which reconfiguration can take place. As the energy behind social change, the general will cannot bind itself for the future, since it has to remain available to the advent of new social forms:

De plus, il est contre la nature de la volonté qui n’a point d’empire sur elle-même de s’engager pour l’avenir, on peut bien s’obliger à faire, mais non pas à vouloir, et il y a bien de la différence entre exécuter ce qu’on a promis, à cause qu’on l’a promis, et le vouloir encore, quand même on ne l’aurait pas promis auparavant. Or la loi d’aujourd’hui ne doit pas être un acte de la volonté générale d’hier mais de celle d’aujourd’hui, et nous nous sommes engagés à faire, non pas ce que tous ont voulu mais ce que tous veulent, attendu que les résolutions du souverain comme souverain ne regardant que lui-même il est toujours libre d’en changer (Contrat (première version), pp. 315-316).

This conceptualisation of the general will helps to define the element of anthropological hope in Rousseau's political theory. The appearance of the general will in the civil context momentarily arrests the worsening movement of history to suggest the openness of any structure to change. In this light, Rousseau's political philosophy operates to direct historico-political forms back to their opening to the
radically heterogeneous, to the fundamental absence of order at the root of all attempts to impose political order. This experience of constitutive indeterminacy, that is, of the impossibility of realising a state of full legitimacy, is what makes responsibility, decision, justice and finally the social pact possible. Emancipation emerges in the *Contrat social* in the shape of hope, devoid of any predetermined form and therefore equally free of any teleological connotations.

We can conflate Rousseau’s theorisation of the general will, as an aperture in the present for social transformation, with Derrida’s theorisation of ‘une démocratie à venir’. The term ‘à venir’ does not connote an eschatology or the future realisation of a promised land, but the need to remain open to the other as indeterminacy:

> Il y a ici du concept même de démocratie comme concepte d’une promesse qui ne peut surgir que dans un diastème (écart, échec, inadéquation, disjonction, désajustement, être (*out of joint*). C’est pourquoi nous proposons toujours de parler de démocratie à venir, non pas de démocratie future, au présent futur, non pas même d’une idée régulatrice, au sens Kantien, ou d’une utopie — dans la mesure du moins où leur inaccessibilité garderait encore la forme temporelle d’un présent futur, d’une modalité du présent vivant.\(^37\)

The emergence of the general will, which at once reveals and dissimulates the negativity that limits political intervention, has a similar effect to the Derridean notion of justice. The call for justice can be experienced as a singular event, blasting through the continuum of the present moment, suspending the law and the social field to create an experience of a promise — the promise of the new. Justice and the general will manifest themselves as moments of freedom, caused by structural undecidability and expressed as possibility. Laws cannot be made and broken without this experience of radical indeterminacy that disallows any group, individual or institution from claiming to embody justice. The moment of the general will indicates
that justice is not a realisable state, but depends on an endless process of questioning, deliberation and redefinition.

As we recall, the general will calls for the instituting of the government, but does not determine its specific form. Rousseau is explicit about the impossibility of the sovereign executing the laws in particular cases, that is, of ruling civil society directly: ‘S’il était possible que le souverain, considéré comme tel, eut la puissance exécutive, le droit et le fait seraient tellement confondus qu’on ne saurait plus ce qui est la loi et ce qui ne l’est pas, et le corps politique ainsi dénaturé serait bientôt en proie à la violence contre laquelle il fut institué’ (*Contrat*, p. 432). In the absence of a transcendental agent of power, any just political association has to take root in what we could call an ‘originally democracy’\(^{38}\), since the contract that institutes the association can only be authorised by the will of the people. The notion of originally democracy does not designate a particular regime, but simply the normative condition of any civil formation. This point does not make Rousseau a defender of direct democracy, as has often been suggested.\(^{39}\) On examining direct democracy in the *Contrat*, Rousseau concludes that this regime is so perfect that it is not fit for ordinary men (*Contrat*, p. 406).

In direct democracy, the legislative power is combined with the executive power, dissolving the distinction between the government and the popular sovereign, which, for Rousseau, is at the basis of any just organisation of the state. Without this separation, any regime appears destined for self-destruction. This concurs with everything we have inferred so far about the general will and the sovereign. The general will temporarily puts the normal functioning of the state in parentheses to
allow for its modification or transformation. A sustained suspension of the state would lead to social chaos. In the context of our present theoretical reading further inference may be made, if the popular sovereign and the government were identical, then the sovereign would never be able to enact or demand governmental or social reform without nullifying itself in the same act. Furthermore, in direct democracy, particular interests are more likely to usurp the ultimate authority of the general will. For the state to function well, the abstract and collective body of the sovereign can only act through the laws, since the object of the law is always general, never designating a particular individual or action. It is the government’s role to administer the laws in particular cases. In direct democracy, the people perform both these functions. Consequently, the laws, without the intermediary body of the government, are more likely to be executed to protect the private interests of individual members than the common good.

By describing direct democracy as ‘un gouvernement sans gouvernement’, Rousseau underlines the impossibility blocking the realisation of this regime as an ideal where the government and the sovereign form a single unit. It ultimately cancels itself out because ‘un peuple qui n’abuserait jamais du gouvernement n’abuserait pas non plus de l’indépendance; un peuple qui gouvernerait toujours bien n’aurait pas besoin d’être gouverné’ (Contrat, p. 404). The self-destructive path of this ‘perfect’ state suggests that, for Rousseau, we have to accept division, non-fulfilment and conflict as ineliminable elements of the socio-political domain.

For the republic to be legitimate, it therefore needs the ‘moi particulier’ of the government, which functions as an intermediary body between the subjects and
sovereign (which are one and the same entity), between the generality of the laws and
the particularity of the people’s conduct. The government aims to make effective the
laws sanctioned by the sovereign by applying them to particular contexts. Rousseau’s
analysis of the relationship between the government and the sovereign raises the
question whether the pure and universal demand for justice of the general will can
 correspond to the practical dimension of politics. However, as his critique of direct
democracy illustrates, there is always an ineradicable chasm between the abstract and
pure body of the sovereign and its concrete expression in governmental policy.
Rousseau clearly recognises, here, the impossibility of the universal’s and the
particular’s ever truly coinciding; their coincidence would ultimately annul the
existence of either term. Whilst the principle of democracy has to exist in an abstract
form, as the normative order of any legitimate state formation, its realisation in an
objective form remains constantly deferred to avoid political closure or social chaos.
This corroborates the previous link we made between the general will and the
Derridean notion of ‘a democracy to come’.

Democratic politics, as an endeavour to reconcile the particular desires of individuals
with the collective demand for order, has to fail partially so as to preserve its founding
legitimacy: the inalienable power of the people. The absoluteness of the sovereign
automatically relegates the government to a relative and contingent position. The fact
that the ‘particular self’ of the government never totally accords with the will that
authorises it confirms the inappropriaible and ultimately unrepresentable nature of the
people’s authority. This power therefore emerges, in its abstract form, as an empty
space. Its status as such makes it depend on the particular, the government, to become
effectual and yet ultimately renders that particular inadequate to the task it undertakes.
This unavoidable discrepancy safeguards the supreme right of the people to modify or change their government, if the latter jeopardises public interest. The necessary separation of these elements further elucidates Rousseau’s understanding of the general will as social justice. The inadequacy of all political orders undermines any definition of justice as a permanent or objective state. Rousseau’s notion of the general will stresses the vigilance needed to block any attempt to bind justice to a totalising and reifying set of criteria that would exclude a multiplicity of legitimate perspectives. In this way, the notion of general will, in its pure and abstract form, emphasises the need to scrutinise and move beyond the present description of what is, to strive to enact what should be, because we can never find an all-inclusive and totally just organisation of our community. The government tries and eventually fails, to varying degrees, to respond to this demand, by grounding it in the institution and application of concrete rules and norms.

The particular draws its freedom to reconfigure social objectivity from the gap between the sovereign and the government. Therefore, if the government and the sovereign were indivisible, Rousseau would be literally proposing a totalitarian regime. Totalitarianism can be understood as what Jean-Luc Nancy terms ‘immanentisme’41: a form of society governed by a logic of complete identification, where everything is political, where every area of social life is claimed to incarnate power, abolishing any distinction between the people and the political machinery. It constitutes a fantasy of a completed and transparent society, closed in on itself, of a unified people whose plural identity is denied. Rousseau integrates the possibility of mutation in his vision of a legitimate political order by maintaining a measure of distance between the people and their government. As we have seen, the general will
always remains in excess of its representation at the level of institutional life.

Through this separation, Rousseau adumbrates Lefort’s separation of the political and politics, called by Stavrakakis ‘one of the most exciting developments in contemporary political theory’, since it shows how ‘the political is not reducible to political reality’.42 (This statement intersects with what we have learnt about the difference between the sovereign and the government.) As our discussion of direct democracy shows, Rousseau already recognises the necessity of maintaining a gap between the generative force of the social and its systematisation. Like Lefort’s political, the popular sovereign constitutes the ontological level of the socio-political field and therefore resists being bound spatio-temporally: ‘La souveraineté qui n’est que l’exercice de la volonté générale est libre comme elle et n’est soumise à aucune espèce d’engagement. Chaque acte de souveraineté ainsi que chaque instant de sa durée est absolu, indépendant de celui qui précède et jamais le souverain n’agit parce qu’il a voulu mais parce qu’il veut’ (Fragments politiques, OCIII, p. 485). The political, like the general will, only exists at the moment of its emergence, possessing no substance beyond this point. Liberated from any previous or future obligation, the general will can be understood as possibility itself. For Rousseau, the existence of a community cannot therefore be maintained by the effect of an earlier act of will, but depends on the present will that is active in each legislative decision. Being without a positive or representable form, community implies a perpetual process of production and reproduction. The government and politics, on the other hand, can be understood in spatial terms as a particular set of practices and institutions, in short, as a system.
The Necessity of Political Representation

Rousseau’s insistence on the unrepresentability of the sovereign deepens the links between his theory of the general will and Lefort’s idea of the political. The sovereign consists purely of will, or generative energy and therefore cannot be represented fully by a particular political discourse or figure: ‘La souveraineté ne peut être représentée, par la même raison qu’elle ne peut être alienée, elle consiste essentiellement dans la volonté générale, et la volonté générale ne se représente point: elle est la même ou elle est autre; il n’y a point de milieu’ (Contrat, p. 429). In this sentence, Rousseau intimates the contingent nature of the specific content that latches itself on to the unrepresentable universal space of the general will. The transforming energy of the general will can never be trapped or fully systematised by any structure; it is the force that produces political representation and yet always exceeds it. In the Contrat, Rousseau appears to be against the idea of political representatives, which of course seems anachronistic in terms of the party dominated politics of today. Such a rejection would contradict his misgivings about direct democracy. However, Rousseau does not reject political representation per se, writing in his Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne: ‘la puissance legislative ne peut s’y montrer elle-même, et ne peut agir que par députation’ (OC III, p. 978). The lack of substantial link between the representative and the represented at once supports democratic procedures, by initiating political competition and debate, and also threatens them, by possibly allowing the representatives to place themselves above the law and therefore above the subjects they represent. This danger informs Roussseau’s scepticism about political representation. As with the symbolic law, the law authorised by the
sovereign serves to regulate the relationship of the subjects to the other (those who hold political power) by constantly underlining the fact that these seemingly powerful figures are not beyond the law. Rousseau recognises the provisionality of governmental institutions, when he states that the depositaries of the executive power are not masters of the people, but merely their officers, and the people can elect them and change them according to their need.

Despite Rousseau's reservations about political representatives, he therefore recognises the necessity for them. Whereas he states that the general will cannot err, he maintains that the people's judgement may not always be as enlightened as the affective energy that drives the will. The general will manifests itself at moments of social dislocation, where social negativity momentarily resurfaces, exposing the necessity and the opening for social transformation. At these moments, the people are paradoxically both at once at their most empowered and most vulnerable: empowered because they become aware of their capacity to demand change and vulnerable because this realisation of their empowerment coincides with a realisation of the absence of a fundamental order. In chapter one, we witnessed a failure of judgement on the people's behalf at the instituting of the fraudulent contract. While their motives for entering the contract were sound — they wanted to bring an end to the constant feuding over property and preserve individual and collective freedom — their judgement about the validity of the proposed contract was erroneous; the rich, while furthering their own interests, proposed harmony for all, excluding a purely abstract enemy, so creating a form of concord that was anything but collective. It is precisely for this reason that Rousseau has recourse to a political representative in the Contrat, in the form of the lawgiver, who operates like the law itself, to steer the people away
from the seductive and yet tyrannical force of personal dependence, to prevent the establishment of a false contract.

**The Legislator**

Rousseau shows that if the citizens need the relation of representation in the figure of a lawgiving outsider, it is because constitutively incomplete identities have to be supplemented by a representative:

> Pour qu’un peuple naissant pût goûter les saines maximes de la politique et suivre les règles fondamentales de la raison d’état, il faudrait que l’effet pût devenir la cause, que l’esprit social qui doit être l’ouvrage de l’institution présidât à l’institution même, et que les hommes fussent avant les lois ce qu’ils doivent devenir par elles. (*Contrat*, p. 383)

In order for the contract to be understood and assimilated by the citizens, they need to be, before the advent of the law, what they can only hope to become through living under it and learning thereby that the law in force is right for them: this need for the effect to be in place before its cause has come into being is the famous metalepsis of the *Contrat social*. The lawgiver fills this lacuna in the social space by projecting the illusion of being an envoy from the Gods; this illusion absorbs the metalepsis of the instituting of the contract. He undertakes this ‘entreprise au-dessus de la force humaine’, of trying to make the laws accord with the desires of the general will, and of preventing the people from abdicating their responsibility under the false security of dictatorship, and all this, without trying to use authoritarian means to effect such changes. Rousseau’s invocation of the gods at this moment, which can seem at first contradictory, naïve and deceptive, becomes comprehensible in terms of the overall aim of the *Contrat social*, viewed as an exploration of the conditions of possibility for a legitimate political organisation. Laclau’s deconstruction of classical discourses of
emancipation (discussed in chapter one) can help us move towards this understanding.

Laclau foregrounds the self-defeating nature of 'classical emancipatory discourse,' by demonstrating the way in which the image of an emancipated state is already contaminated by that of the state prior to emancipation, which the mediation of the discourse seeks to surmount. We can put this differently: the identity of the agent of social change — the proletariat in the case of Marxism, for instance — bears a constitutive relationship to the identity of its oppressor, the bourgeoisie. The indivisibility of these identities means that in overcoming the bourgeoisie as its oppressor, the proletariat partly dissolves its own identity, which is precisely what it sought to secure through emancipation.\footnote{45} It is this deadlock which partially contributes something to Rousseau's conceptualisation of the role of the lawgiver: he has to come from the outside, assuming a position of radical otherness to what has preceded the advent of the social pact. If the people were already in a position to understand the legislation, then the establishment of the social contract would be pointless. Likewise, if the people themselves functioned as the sole agent of social change, they would risk merely perpetuating the bad socialisation that led to the anomy prior to the pact. Rousseau therefore aims to avoid the authoritarian consequences of the bogus contract, where the masses seek liberation by succumbing to the private interests of the rich. The illusion created by the lawgiver operates benignly in contradistinction to the malevolent use of illusion made by the rich, since it works to engender belief in the laws that take shape from the activity of the general will. So citizens become dependent upon the general will as a generative energy open to change, instead of experiencing the illusory sense of closure sought by private wills.
Whereas in pre-democratic societies, the divine origin of the laws sanctified the inviolable authority of the prince, in the *Contrat social*, it aims to sanctify the inviolable authority of the people. This distinction is reinforced by Rousseau’s ironic remark in the *Discours* about the oppressive use made of this fiction by governments in the final stages of political development:

> Mais les dissensions affreuses, les désordre infinis qu’entrainerait nécessairement ce dangereux pouvoir, montrent plus que toute autre chose combien les gouvernements humains avaient besoin d’une base plus solide que la seule raison, et combien il était nécessaire au repos public que la volonté divine intervint pour donner l’autorité souveraine un caractère sacré et inviolable qui ôtât aux sujets le funeste droit d’en disposer (*Discours*, p. 186).

As we have seen, the need for political order grows out of disorder and it is the inseparability of order and disorder that leaves all political regimes at risk from the violence at their origins. The contract, as a linguistic construction, does not suffice in itself to conceal this originary violence and give consistency to social reality; for it to become real, it requires the affective investment of the people in its principles. The legislator aims to create a space in which new identifications can occur:

> Celui qui ose entreprendre d’instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d’un plus grand tout dont cet individu reçoive en quelque sorte sa vie et son être; d’altérer la constitution de l’homme pour la renforcer; de substituer une existence partielle et morale à l’existence physique et indépendante que nous avons tous reçue de la nature. Il faut, en un mot, qu’il ôte à l’homme ses forces propres pour lui en donner qui lui soient étrangères et dont il ne puisse faire usage sans le secours d’autrui (*Contrat*, pp. 381-382).

We can interpret the concurrence of self-estrangement and the change engendered by the contract by a further reference to Laclau’s deconstruction of emancipatory
discourses. A radical chasm has to exist between the identity preceding and succeeding the moment of emancipation in order to avoid the aforementioned deadlock. This chasm forms at once the condition of possibility of emancipation and its limit: it enables radical transformation, rather than a simple reversal, to occur, but prevents that transformation from ever being complete, since irreducible alterity, as the condition of change, can never be eradicated from the social field. Rousseau never ceases to underline the more-than-human and possibly unachievable nature of the lawgiver’s task. The lawgiver, as an outsider or foreigner, literally as well as metaphorically, inscribes otherness into the social field, and makes it sacred.

The radical change Rousseau proposes alters the relationship between the represented, the people and the representative, the lawgiver. It is usually thought that the more democratic a process, the more transparent the transmission of the will of the represented by their representatives. Rousseau, like Kant, views maturity as the foundation for enlightened political praxis in individuals and peoples⁶, affirming that a people should not be given the laws of a nation until they have reached this stage: ‘Il est pour les nations comme pour les hommes un temps de maturité qu’il faut attendre avant de les soumettre à des lois; mais la maturité d’un peuple n’est pas toujours facile à connaître, et si on la prévient l’ouvrage est manqué’ (Contrat, p. 386). If we consider the traumatic conditions from which the social pact is born, and the susceptibility of humanity to deception, we can understand why Rousseau sets up a relationship whereby the legislator, as the representative, contributes something to the identity of the represented, the citizens of the pact. Because of the lack in the citizens’ identity, the legislator cannot possibly have a neutral connection to those whom he represents. The citizens become marked by a foreign identity, by the other. We move
from the identity of the people to that of the lawgiver as the privileged position in the act of representation. This move exposes as myth the notion of transparent, immanent identity by making explicit its constructed and contingent nature. Inserting otherness into the social field, the lawgiver provides a context and language through which the citizen can endeavour to construct and reconstruct his political subjectivity in the aftermath of social disintegration. Laclau sees this reversal within the relationship between the represented and the representative as the condition of ‘democratic participation’ in certain cases:

In many third world countries, for example, unemployment and social marginalisation leads to shattered social identities at the level of civil society and to situations in which the most difficult thing is how to constitute an interest, a will to be represented within the political system. In those situations, the task of the popular leaders consists, quite frequently, of providing the marginalised masses with a language out of which...it becomes possible for them to reconstitute a political identity and a political will. The relation representative→represented has to be privileged as the very condition of a democratic participation and mobilisation. In the same way, even in advanced industrial societies, the fragmentation of identities around issue politics requires forms of political aggregation whose constitution involves that political representatives play an active role in the formation of collective wills and not just be passive mirrors of the pre-constituted interests at the level of civil society.\(^7\)

Rousseau’s deconstruction of a simple causal system as a way of accounting for the transition from a partially socialised state to the civil society of the contract makes us think about the impossibility of imagining this moment of change. The lack out of which the need for the pact arises partly comes down to a lack of identity. This aporia in the structure of the *Contrat social* is what necessitates the role of the legislator as an other who could potentially distance the people from their present circumstances and allow them to invest energy in a new political order. The absence of democratic identity at the inception of the *Contrat social* means that it can only be fostered through a process of identification. Through the identificatory process, the subject
seeks a fuller identity to cover over its fundamental lack. The legislator aims to create the sense of a fully-achieved subjectivity for the citizens so that they assume the position of a decision-maker, that is, use their freedom. This experience of plenitude simultaneously expresses and represses the lack at its source. This moment creates the possibility for self-determination, as conceived by Laclau, for it gives the citizens the strength to enter into a series of decisions or acts of identification where they redefine themselves in relation to the wider sphere.

As we wrote in chapter 1, the dynamic of pity provides the foundation for identification. An act of pity entails the same convergence of difference and equivalence, that is, the particular and the general that marks all political identities. The people’s reception of the lawgiver depends on the same dynamic: his foreign status instils difference, fostering the intellectual distance necessary for identification to take place, and his use of the divine fiction creates an imaginary bond, allowing the citizens to identify with his words. The violence at the origin of the social pact is partially concealed by the fantasy of the fiction of the gods’ authorship of the laws, which confers an imaginary consistency on the symbolic construction of the contract. Lacanian psychoanalysis illustrates the concurrence of the symbolic with the imaginary, by showing how ‘fantasy is an imaginary already involved in a signifying function’ because ‘it becomes the simulacrum of what in the order of the signifier resists signification, that is, of the real that presents itself as lost.’ The illusion of the gods cannot therefore be separated from the violence prior to the establishment of the pact. Rousseau indicates, as we saw in the first chapter, that social reality is articulated at the level of the symbolic which is always lacking and hence never a fully signifying totality. Reality can therefore acquire a logical and substantial
appearance only through the imaginary involvement of the subject. In this sense, the social, whose origin is defined negatively, is supported by fantasy which makes it a desirable object of identification. Rousseau demonstrates the fantasmatic nature of political reality through the legislator's invocation of the gods.49

This process of identification dissimulates the negativity of the social field. The concomitant disavowal conditions the advent of civil society, but also poses a threat to it. The fantasy of divine sanctioning operates as a defence mechanism against the real, that is, against the awareness that the fullness of society is impossible and that it is this impossibility that actually necessitates the social contract. As we have said, man is unified across divisions by his desire for order; a desire that emanates from the very lack of order of which the prevailing disorder is an instance. Fantasy works to conceal and reveal what it represses. Man only believes the words of the legislator when he has internalised his own lack and that of the wider sphere, and seeks to fill it through devotion to the laws. Political institutions function on this condition of a fantasmatic closure of the social field. As Rousseau implies, this closure becomes dangerous when political figures and institutions purport to be so complete and sufficient that they believe that they no longer have to depend on the general will for their legitimisation.

The ruse employed by the legislator to establish the social pact opens civil society forever more to impostures. Despite facilitating the implementation of the contract, this fiction therefore also has the potential to jeopardise it. Whilst allowing the people, who are incapable, at that stage, of understanding the legislation, to accept it, it equally allows for its corruption by charlatans who take advantage of the vulnerability
of the people to impose laws which are imimical to common good — an example of the structural undecidability of Rousseau’s concepts. This indeterminacy underlines the non-authoritarian character of his thinking.

The fantasmatic closure of the social field which, as said above, enables political institutions to function, works in an always potentially dangerous manner to exclude the other in order to bind a people to a particular order. This process reminds us of the perversion of pity in the _Discours sur l’inégalité_. The affective force of pity becomes re-directed from living creatures in general to a particular object. This re-orientation of pity, the foundation of moral love, masks the sense of difference which is essential to any act of pity, creating a situation of attempted total identification with the object in question. This desire for full identification drives man to deny and destroy any other person who competes for his chosen love-object. We can connect this perversion to the description of political degeneration in the _Contrat social_. Political forms deteriorate when the powerful over-identify with the space of power, which can only be purely symbolic, perverting the normal course of political right by attempting to prevent anyone else from competing to occupy their position. In the same way that pity can eventually work against itself, these political bodies consequently contravene what they were established to secure, the interests of all, by zealously protecting the interests of a few. Rousseau views this process of degeneration, where the government or the prince usurps the popular sovereign as the source of legitimate power, as almost inevitable. The fragile basis of political organisations exposes them to this constant threat whereby their fantasmatic support obscures their constructed nature, and presents them as immutable. To stave off this decline into illegitimacy, Rousseau proposes periodic public assemblies where the manifestation of the general
will undermines the state’s image of organic unity, bringing the social system back to the heterogeneity at the moment of its inception. Like his writing, his conception of a just political order constantly re-invokes the undecidability occupying its centre.

Rousseau’s use of the fiction of the gods to contain the indeterminate space of social objectivity, acknowledges the radically dislocated nature of that space and its irreducible element of myth. The seemingly rational institutions of any political configuration cannot be separated from the process of mythification that gives them their appearance of order. Rousseau here illustrates the necessary and always incomplete separation of enlightenment from myth. It is through a recognition of the mythic foundations of political reality, that we can hope to avoid the imposition of totalitarian regimes which seek the definitive closure of the social space through a disavowal of their fictional origins. The complexity of this moment of the Contrat social remains commensurate with that of the re-articulation of the relationship between the particular and the universal, already discussed. The citizens have to act as if they believed the fiction to empower themselves to make decisions in an undecidable terrain. The citizen thus assumes an almost mythic identity as a metaphor for the absent structure, that is, for the absence of the transcendental order traditionally signified by the name of God, which defined previous descriptions of the general will. We can perhaps find a present-day theorisation of Rousseau’s recourse to the illusion of the divine origin of the laws in Ernesto Laclau’s observation that at the moment of the decision there is ‘something of the nature of a simulation’:

To take a decision is like impersonating God. It is like assembling that one does not have the means of being God, and one has, however, to proceed as if one were Him. The madness of the decision is this blind spot in the structure, in which something totally heterogeneous with it – and, as a result, totally inadequate – has
to supplement it.\textsuperscript{50}

We hear echoed in these words the fact that Rousseau knows that the citizens are not competent; a fact that reflects the impossibility and possibility of their task as political subjects. The development of an enlightened political subjectivity depends on a recognition of the internal limits of any identity. It is only through this recognition that the particular can operate as a legitimate actor in the social space, without seeking aggressively to deny what allows him a political identity in the first place. Rousseau illustrates the irreducible tension which inheres in any socio-political formation: we can only maintain political freedom, the right to make decisions which affect us and our community, if we acknowledge the insurmountable negativity inherent in the social, and yet these decisions require us to act as if we had a fully realised subjectivity. It is the undecidability inherent in this situation that pervades Rousseau's political theory, and instead of perceiving it as a "contradiction", we should embrace it as that which grants his political thinking a timeless validity, since it demonstrates that the political never ceases to be a question, precisely because it can never be fully grounded in a positive set of principles.

The incompleteness of socio-political structures leaves them forever open to contingent interventions that attempt to repair their fundamental rift. We can conceive the decision to write autobiography as one such intervention, where the writing subject, through a sense of exclusion from the collective representational structures, endeavours to realise himself by redefining his relation to the universal, by uncovering the necessity of accepting plurality, fragmentation and indeterminacy as the condition of his emergence.
Ernesto Laclau cites Plato as an unambiguous example of how, in classical philosophy, the universal is generally conceived as the source of all meaning that will eventually define the particular. He maintains that an epistemological break occurs with Hobbes who is the first political philosopher to conceive the universal as totally empty. However, this empty space comes to be filled by the absolute sovereign, an individual will that raises himself above all other particularities to become ‘the unchallengeable law of the community’. In this way, Hobbes rejoins Plato by totally subjugating the particular to the universal, and thereby denying it its own dynamic. This chapter is greatly assisted by Laclau’s exploration and conceptualisation of the interaction of the particular and the universal in the construction of political identities. See ‘Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject’, in Emancipation(s) (London; Verso, 1996), pp. 36-46.

Rousseau clearly differs from Diderot on this question. Diderot believes that there is a general will or society of mankind that transcends social plurality. His general will therefore precedes the construction of society, existing in the universal reason and understanding that comes into force when the passions have been silenced. Rousseau’s general will is much more particular, being contextually defined. The rectitude of the general will for Rousseau does not come from the work of reason; he argues that although the general will is always right, the judgement that guides it may be erroneous. Rousseau therefore refutes the strict universalism and rationalism of Diderot’s conception of the general will, offering a more contingent and plural understanding of it. See Diderot ‘Droit naturel’ in the Encyclopédie (1753) (Paris: Inter-Livres, 1986), and Rousseau’s first two books of the Contrat social (première version) for his response to Diderot. For a clear discussion of this point, see Patrick Riley, The General Will before Rousseau, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Simone Goyard-Fabre, Politique et philosophie dans l’oeuvre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (Paris: PUF, 2001), pp. 36-38.

Postigliola argues that Rousseau, having appropriated Malebranche’s notion of justice, understood as a rationalist and geometrising generality, overlooked the fact that the general will of the people lacks the divine attribute of infinity. For Postigliola, Rousseau makes the error of using the epistemological categories of Malebranche, speaking about a general will which is ‘unalterable and pure’, when in the Rousseauian city, generality can be no more than a sort of ‘finite whole,’ a ‘heterogeneous sum’. However, Rousseau’s general will is unalterable and pure, because, in the absence of a transcendental guarantor of social justice, it can only rest with the people and therefore can never be fully represented or appropriated by a limited political force or particular regime. Thus, the content or the laws that come to define the general will are open to questioning and reformulation. See Alberto Postigliola ‘De Malebranche à Rousseau: les apories de la volonté générale et la revanche du “raisonneur violent”’ in the Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Vol. 39, (1980), pp. 123-138.


Louis Althusser opines that for Rousseau, the existence of general will is conditional upon the silencing and suppression of interest groups. See his ‘Sur le Contrat social’ in Cahiers pour analyse, no.8 (Paris: Seuil, 1967) pp 5-42, in particular p.35. Etienne Balibar makes a similar point, see his ‘Ce qui fait qu’un peuple est un peuple. Rousseau et Kant.’ Revue de synthèse, no.3-4, July-December 1989, p.393.

Rousseau emphasises his abhorrence of this process of constantly attempting to displace the other in order to achieve one’s own ends in the Dialogues, when he states, referring to himself in the third person: ‘Il ne se met ni à côté, ni au-dessus, ni au-desous de personne, et le déplacement de personne n’est nécessaire à son bonheur’ (OC I. p.852)

This does not imply that the second state of nature is governed by a conscious policy of pure difference, but that the consequences of this stage rehearse the potential dangers of a state which denies the possibility of a common bond or link between its members, even if that point of association cannot be defined positively.


The impossibility of an indiscriminate notion of ‘tolerance’ conditions to some extent Rousseau’s inclusion of the death penalty in the civil religion. He reserves this violent form of punishment for those political leaders or powerful figures who morally and politically persecute others. They therefore disavow the ‘empty space of power’ by posing as the hidden essence of the social, and in so doing, deny the legitimacy of all other identities. The death penalty would thus only be deemed a just form of punishment in the extreme case of the despot. Felicity Baker cogently argues that ‘whether or not we agree with the principle of the death penalty, as it is worked out in the *Social Contract*, we will at least acknowledge that it offers us a chance of imagining a society in which everyone knew they were obliged to resist the ascension of a modern Caligula’, *ibid.*, p.183. Contemporary thinkers underline the impossibility of defining tolerance as a positive political principle without any nuance. Although they would probably not advocate the death penalty as a form of deterrent, they recognise the category of the enemy as an eternal threat to democratic structures. Chantal Mouffe writes that ‘la catégorie de l’ennemi ne disparaît pas pour autant car elle continue à être pertinente par rapport à ceux qui, parce qu’ils mettent en question les bases mêmes de l’ordre démocratique, ne peuvent pas faire partie du cercle des égaux’. This quotation implies the need for some form of exclusion of such figures, *Le politique et ses enjeux pour une démocratie plurielle* (Paris: La Découverte/ M.A.U.S.S, 1994), p.14. Zizek makes a similar point when he states that we cannot fight ‘ethnic hatred’ through its immediate counterpart ‘ethnic tolerance’, but through ‘even more hatred’, that is, ‘proper political hatred: hatred directed at the common enemy’, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), p.11.

Geoffrey Bennington makes a similar point in his deconstructive reading of the *Contrat social*, when he states that ‘la possibilité de la politique tient ainsi au fait que la volonté générale est toujours déjà en mal de généralité, qu’elle ne se referme pas sur soi dans sa présence, qu’elle ne s’arrête pas – et donc que destinataire et destinataire de la loi ne sont jamais identiques, que l’autonomie est en droit irréalisable que le nom de “citoyen” est nécessairement impropre’, *Dudding : des noms de Rousseau* (Paris: Édition Galilée, 1991) p.43.

Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p.57.

The war of all against all is driven by the individual’s need to defend his property from the threat of the other. Although Rousseau largely uses the term ‘property’ to refer to wealth, his idea about it can be applied to a multicultural situation, that is, the right to cultural identity and heritage. This widening of the referential frame is borne out by Rousseau’s exclusion of intolerance in his conceptualisation of a secular, civil religion.

Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p.53.

As we saw in chapter 1, Rousseau does not attribute positive content to his notion of natural goodness. This gives the individual a fundamental role in its social definition. The citizens’ desire for collective happiness grows out of the deficiencies of the social sphere, and is therefore always defined negatively. However, this negativity becomes affirmative in so far as it perpetuates the critical force of political activity. The subject can never be fully realised around the ideals of any political structure. This allows him to contest the organisation of the social space and strive for new, and more legitimate, forms.

Althusser, “Sur le Contrat social”, p. 3.

For a discussion of Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of hegemony, see their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp.134-145.

For a historical location of the notion of the sovereign, see Robert Wokler 'Rousseau's Two Concepts of Liberty' in George Feaver and Frederick Rosen (eds.), *Lives, Liberties and the Public Good* (London: Macmillan, 1986), in particular pp.80-84 (p.80).


Jean Terrel makes a similar point, when he refers to the 'juridical void' caused by the absence of an external guarantor to safeguard the terms of the pact. Rousseau proposes a contract between the community and its individual members, who are one and the same entity. The community therefore becomes the guarantor of the pact. *Les Théories du pacte social*, pp.361-363.

Felicity Baker links this process to the anthropological structure of the double gift or gift-counter gift, one of the cases of gift referred by Marcel Mauss in the *Essai sur le don*. She demonstrates, through this homology, the way in which the process of returning to the citizen, in the form of the dépôt, what he has initially given to the state, changes fundamentally the citizen's relationship to that object, in other words, his ownership of it. The state assumes the function of defending his right to his property, thereby enabling the citizen to enjoy and utilise it free from the threat of usurpation by the other. Total alienation is redefined by this conflation as partial alienation. *Esquisse d'un portrait d'un citoyen*, a lecture given at the University of Geneva in December 2000.

Slavoj Zizek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, pp.265-266.

Ibid., p.265.

Ibid., p.266.

Grosrichard conflates Rousseau's notion of amour-propre with the Lacanian understanding of the imaginary. Amour-propre, like the imaginary, functions on the basis of specularity rather than on difference. Its force can therefore be felt in the political and cultural uniformity sought in and by despotic rule. See 'Où suis-je? Que suis-je?: réflexions sur la question de la place dans l'oeuvre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, à partir d'un texte des Rêveries', in Michael Coz, and François Jacob (eds.), *Rêveries sans fin: autour des Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, (Orléans: Paradigme, 1997) pp.29-47, especially p.34.

Zizek, *For They know not what they do*, p.266.

For a discussion of the symbolic transformation in the move from pre-democratic societies to modern democracy, see chapter 1.

Bennington's application of the notion of deferred effect (l'après-coup), also points to the structural incompleteness which marks the advent and the application of the terms of the contract. See his *Dudding: des noms de Rousseau*.

The idea of identification is obviously essential to the establishment of the social contract and will be explored in relation to the role played by the legislator. Laclau, *New reflections*, p.44.

Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p.56.

Man's perfectibility is awakened during the terrible storms that break the continuity between his primitive being and his environment, throwing him into a traumatic state of opacity. Man uses his perfectibility to surmount this adversity. This is the beginning of a long process of identifications, where gradual exposure to the other engenders a sense of group identity. See chapter 1 for a closer analysis.


The function of the elections, as a mode of reinscribing lack into the social domain, reminds us of the role played by Émile's moral education. Rousseau insists on the fact that the tutor should educate his tuteur through images of human misery in order to foster the primary passion of pity in Émile rather
emotional education operates therefore to sensitise him to the fundamental lack that exists in the social space. See chapter 1.


38 I adopt this term from Simone Goyard-Fabre, *Politique et philosophie dans l'oeuvre de JJ Rousseau*, p.68.


43 For a concise discussion of Rousseau's attitude to political representation, see Luc Vincenti, *Du contrat social* (Paris: Ellipses, 2000), pp.9-10.

44 Geoffrey Bennigton refers to the way in which the structure of the *Contrat social* depends on the 'effet d'après coup' or deferred effect. He demonstrates that the moment of the legislator is no exception, writing 'on a donc à l'origine du politique, un moment de ruse ou de simulacre qui seul peut espérer absorber les effets d’après coup que nous avons suivis jusqu’à présent', Dudding: *des noms de Rousseau*, p.75.

45 'This contradictory situation is expressed in the undecidability between the internality and externality of the oppressor in relation to the oppressed: to be oppressed is part of my identity as a subject struggling for emancipation; without the presence of the oppressor my identity would be different. The constitution of the latter requires and at the same time rejects the presence of the other', Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp.17-18.


47 Ernesto Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p.49.


49 Stavrakakis writes: 'Politics is identical to political reality and political reality, as all reality, is, first, constituted at the symbolic level, and, second, supported by fantasy'. *Ibid.*, p.71.

50 Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p. 55.
Autobiographical Writing as a Site of Contestation, Antagonism, and Transformation: Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.

Rousseau begins the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* by foregrounding the radical nature of his autobiographical project. The need to write about himself grows out of a sense of misrepresentation at the level of collective representational structures. Such structures exclude the singularity and open-ended nature of the self in order to create the impression of control and mastery. Daydream and walking share an unstructured quality, free from any purposeful agenda. Rousseau aims to preserve this freedom from any imposed agenda by adopting a more associative and aleatory form for his autobiography. His project contrasts starkly with the rigid systems of domination in society. In this way, the *Rêveries* weave together the political and the aesthetic by illustrating the potential for poetic resistance to societal constraints. The free-floating and partially formless nature of the ten prose poems that make up the *Rêveries* work towards loosening the systematising and binding force of these structures to show their openness to new representations and transformation from within. Rousseau’s autobiographical writing thus resists the drive of the system towards specularity that forges and perpetuates an identity for the subject to the exclusion of radical difference. Rousseau strips away the malevolent persona imposed on him by others in order to take the self back to its originary indeterminacy. This privative process, reminiscent of that used to reach the metaphor of natural man, withdraws the self from the social space, placing it in a state of solitude. This solitude is always circumscribed by the social, allowing Rousseau to re-evaluate his relationship to the collective sphere by dislodging its seemingly inescapable determining force. The contingency and fluidity defining
walking and daydream also define the self. Any identity that subject assumes results from a process of articulation rather than an *a priori* essence, rendering him susceptible to change. The loosely related prose poems of the *Rêveries* gain unity through their illustration of our freedom to retreat from the prevailing order, however definitive it may appear, and re-imagine social truth.

**Rousseau's Renegotiation of Antagonism**

Rousseau opens this autobiographical work with a statement which underlines his sense of total exclusion and isolation from society. The feeling of being excluded and misrepresented inspires the self-questioning which necessitates and subtends his radical autobiographical project; he writes, 'Mais moi détaché d’eux et de tout, que suis-je moi-même?' (*Rêveries*, p. 995). The answer to this question requires that he excavate his present situation through a movement from the other to the self. The attempt at self-understanding therefore already implicates the social or others from which Rousseau seeks to mark himself off in order to create a space in which new understandings and more fluid representations of the self can emerge. This process recalls the inseparability of the particular and the universal in the shaping of political subjectivities that we explored in the chapter on the *Contrat social*. Particular identities can only appear in relation to that which transcends them, the collective sphere; an absolute particularism would be a self-cancelling one, since through its absolutism it would eradicate the defining difference that confers identity in the first place. This is the light in which I shall interpret Rousseau’s incorporating the social into his self-exploration as a defining
limit to his own singularity. This indissociability of the subject from its wider context modulates the feeling of total solitude, implied by the inaugural sentence of the *Rêveries*, making it a poetic device that functions to justify Rousseau’s radical undertaking by uncovering the affective force behind it. This is corroborated by the fact that Rousseau was not living in total isolation: his wife was nearly always with him and he had daily companions of his choosing. He had renounced the relations that went with fame, but people still made pilgrimages to see him. The passing from ‘eux à moi’ locates the work within the same tension that fuels and gives substance to Rousseau’s avowedly political writings: the tension between the particular and the general.

The initial reception of his earlier autobiographical writings, the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues de Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, makes clear that resistance to his misrepresentation by others cannot be performed through a counter representation of the self. Any dogmatic attempt to mediate and overthrow the dominion of their opinion of him would merely perpetuate the unjust portrayal imposed from without. A blanket opposition to the unanimous plot against him would give his enemies more fuel for their hateful depiction of him, since he would still be operating within the same deadlock of a reductive adversarial system. This becomes apparent when Rousseau discusses the futility of past attempts at active resistance to the terror of his persecution: ‘Je me suis débattu longtemps aussi violemment que vainement. Sans adresse, sans art, sans dissimulation, sans prudence, franc, ouvert, impatients, emporté, je n’ai fait en me débattant que m’enlacer davantage et leur donner incessamment de nouvelles prises qu’ils n’ont eu garde de négliger.’ (*Rêveries*, p. 996) So an aggressive assertion of his
identity, in a vain hope of actively negating his portrayal as an enemy to social peace, would therefore prove counterproductive. Persecutory terror has forced him in the past to adopt modes of behaviour and self-expression which are not always consistent with what he feels has to be expressed.

Rousseau’s description of his adversaries’ portrayal of him as an enemy of society, prefigures, for Twentieth-century readers, the abstract enemy posited by totalitarian discourses to dissimulate the irreducible lack of the social sphere and the consequent impossibility of true social plenitude. He writes, ‘Pouvais-je dans mon bon sens supposer qu’un jour, moi le même homme que j’étais, le même que je suis encore, je passerai, je serais tenu sans le moindre doute pour un monstre, un empoisonneur, un assassin, que je deviendrai l’horreur de la race humaine, le jouet de la canaille, que toute la salutation que me ferait les passants seraient de cracher sur moi, qu’une génération tout entière s’amuserait d’un accord unanime à m’enterrer tout vivant?’ (Rêveries, p.996). Jan Marejko argues thereupon that we can find in Rousseau’s autobiographical writings expressions of victimisation and terror similar to those used by victims of oppressive regimes. However, he also detects in Rousseau, through Rousseau’s desire to liberate humanity and bring about goodness, the same dangerously Utopian tendencies as found in those who impose such regimes on individuals. I aim to demonstrate how Rousseau uncovers the limits of Utopian modelling as a way of organising society by perpetually re-invoking the radical negativity that at once allows for the construction of civil society and yet prevents that construction from being fully constituted, thereby opening it to change. In this way, the Rêveries can be seen to
document Rousseau’s attempt to come terms with and resist the terror of persecution without entering into a dialectical struggle that would merely reinforce oppressive relations.

Rousseau’s feeling of having reached an irreversible impasse, in thrall to the apparent omnipotence of others, creates an aporia from which his desire for a new mode of writing grows. Before turning our attention to the specificity of this project and its transformations, we should consider the way he re-evaluates his relationship with his enemies and indeed with himself. This re-evaluation occurs primarily in the first promenade and is resumed intermittently, but most notably in the eighth promenade. This is the condition of emergence for his new project. Rousseau reaches a degree of resignation in relation to his persecutors and their indelible hatred of him, by recognising the impossibility marking their respective positions. He arrives at this state after a complex exploration of the apparent paradox surrounding his enemies’ attempts to annihilate him. Their efforts to reduce Rousseau to nothing by banishing him prove self-annulling, for ‘ils ont d’avance épuisé toutes leurs ressources; en ne me laissant rien ils se sont tout ôté à eux-mêmes’ (Rêveries, p. 996). What Rousseau thus uncovers in his examination of their antagonism, is the mutually deconstructive nature of their relationship. His enemies draw their consistency from their negation of Rousseau’s position; likewise, Rousseau, before resigning himself to the impossibility of the situation, sought to secure his identity by negating their claims. Rousseau acknowledges the irreducible negativity of their antagonism, when he writes, ‘la diffamation, la dépression, la dérision, l’opprobre dont ils m’ont couvert ne sont plus
susceptibles d’augmentation que d’adoucissement; nous sommes également hors d’état, eux de les aggraver et moi de m’y soustraire’ (Rêveries, pp. 996-997). In the mutual dependence of this struggle for self-assertion, neither party can attain victory over the other, since their struggle holds them in a state of deadlock where neither of them can seem to exist fully with or without the other. Realising this fact proves paradoxically liberating and de-alienating. His adversaries, by taking him to the limits of despair and depriving him of even ‘une lueur d’espérance’, have paradoxically liberated him from their yoke, forcing him to confront the intractable void upon which their fight is constructed. This confrontation makes a space in which Rousseau can begin to experiment with self-representational modes free from the need to dislodge the imposing edifice of public opinion.

He affirms that, unlike Montaigne when he wrote his Essais, he is not writing the Rêveries for others but for himself. He has renounced any hope of truly representing himself so that future generations can understand him better. This desire to be understood impelled him to write the Dialogues⁴; an endeavour which merely reinforced his state of anguish and servitude to others:

C’est cet espoir qui m’a fait écrire mes Dialogues, et qui m’a suggéré mille folles tentatives pour les faire passer à la postérité. Cet espoir, quoique éloigné, tenait mon âme dans la même agitation que quand je cherchais encore dans le siècle un coeur juste, et mes espérances que j’avais beau jeter au loin me rendaient également le jouet des hommes d’aujourd’hui (Rêveries, p. 998).

Active negation of his enemies merely reaffirms their position of apparent omnipotence since it situates Rousseau in a dialectical struggle where his identity can only exist in
opposition to their misrepresentation of him. His earlier endeavours served only to re-inscribe the same power dynamic they sought to disavow. He thus remained their ‘plaything’, dependent on their acceptance of his self-representation. This impasse assumes wider repercussions when Rousseau discusses the impossibility of overthrowing collective structures:

Il se passe bien peu de jours que de nouvelles réflexions ne me confirment combien j’étais dans l’erreur de compter sur le retour du public, même dans un autre âge; puisqu’il est conduit dans ce qui me regarde par des guides qui se renouvelent sans cesse dans les corps qui m’ont pris en aversion. Les particuliers meurent, mais les corps collectifs ne meurent point. Les mêmes passions s’y perpétuent, et leur haine ardente, immortelle comme le démon qui l’inspire, a toujours la même activité (Rêveries, p. 998).

The collective does not, then, admit the potentially disruptive effects of a singular identity. It seeks to eradicate it in order to perpetuate its own system that functions through the exclusion and hatred of particularity. This implies that we can never totally abolish these tyrannical structures and their systematising force. Despite the powerful impression of fatality of the foregoing quotation, Rousseau’s re-evaluation of his relationship with the ‘corps collectifs’ and the freedom this offers him, demonstrates the potential for a more passive form of resistance from the inside. As we have seen, the particular can only exist in relation to its difference from the wider sphere; likewise, the wider sphere needs the particular elements that it aims to eliminate as the condition for establishing norms and standards. So, the universal always contains an irreducible remainder of the particular that refuses assimilation into the system. As I shall subsequently seek to show, we can read the Rêveries as a form of critical poetry that uncovers the connivance of apparently immutable collective structures with the
destabilising effects of singularity that could possibly loosen their controlling operations.

Rousseau brings out the affirmative nature of the friction between the universal and the particular when he reveals how the antagonistic relationship with his adversaries has allowed him to experience the intense, expansive pleasure of his reveries: ‘Ces ravissements, ces extases que j’éprouvais quelquefois en me promenant ainsi seul étaient des jouissances que je devais à mes persécuteurs: sans eux je n’aurais jamais trouvé ni connu les trésors que je portais en moi-même’ (Réveries, p. 1003). Rousseau here underlines the indissociability of the self and the other. Even his solitary moments of indeterminacy, where he gives himself over to the associative movement of differing sense impressions and ideas, are circumscribed by others. This inseparability does not amount to an isomorphic relationship; it consists of tension. Just as the unappeasable tension between private and public interests prevents political stasis in the *Contrat social*, the tension between self and other appears as the condition of exploration and creativity in the *Rêveries*. Rousseau therefore suggests the potential for a space of freedom within the exclusive parameters of the larger domain.

The complex shifts in Rousseau’s re-negotiation of his relationship with others can be seen to have points of intersection with Zizek’s Lacanian analysis of Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of antagonism. In the sense given to the term by Laclau and Mouffe, antagonism refers not to a relationship of opposition or contradiction, but to one of impossibility between two terms, which allow each other to exist in their assumed subject positions, whilst simultaneously preventing each other from achieving full
identity. This clearly relates to what we have said so far about Rousseau's understanding of his position vis-à-vis his adversaries. Zizek modifies this conception of antagonism by linking it to the Lacanian concept of the Real. For Zizek, the idea of an external enemy is nothing more than a fantasy that defends us against the fact that what prevents us from achieving a full identity is our own internal limits, not some outside cause. This move from a symmetrical relationship of antagonism to a state of pure antagonism, where the other is nothing but the external representation of the impossibility of my reaching a state of fullness, can help us go some way to understanding the reasons behind Rousseau's indifference to his enemies.

Rousseau demonstrates that victory for his enemies becomes their experience of loss. Their identity, as remarked above, is already intertwined with that of their adversarial other, Rousseau. Their common differentiation paradoxically marks the failure of difference as such to provide autonomy; each party can only define itself in relation to what the other is not. This constitutive negativity introduces equivalence as the obverse of difference, revealing the vanity of their struggle. His enemies, by tormenting and ostracising Rousseau to an extreme degree, can no longer sustain their fantasy of gaining complete identity through his total annihilation because, having reduced him to 'nothing', they merely confront, as does he, the irreducible void on which their fight is founded:

Dans cet état, affranchi de toute nouvelle crainte et délivré de l'inquiétude de l'espérance, la seule habitude suffira pour me rendre de jour en jour plus supportable une situation que rien ne peut empirer, et à mesure que le sentiment s'en émousse par la durée ils n'ont plus de moyens pour le ranimer. Voilà le bien que m'ont fait
mes persécuteurs en épuisant sans mesure tous les traits de leur animosité (Rêveries, p. 997).

Antagonism results from the relation of equivalence contaminating all differentially defined subject positions, preventing them from fully constituting themselves as an objective whole. The mutual subversion of difference and equivalence means that we can never establish objectivity. It is this fact which frees Rousseau from his enemies’ grip, but far from restoring him to a state of plenitude, it has left him in a state of nothingness which exposes him to the insurmountable negativity of his situation: ‘Tout est fini pour moi sur la terre. On ne peut plus m’y faire ni bien ni mal. Il ne me reste plus rien à espérer ni à craindre en ce monde, et m’y voilà tranquille au fond de l’abîme, pauvre, mortel, infortuné, mais impassible comme Dieu même’ (Rêveries, p. 999). At the very bottom of this abyss, Rousseau reaches a state of subjective destitution. He passes through the fantasy of his enemies as the object blocking his desire for plenitude by stripping them of ‘tout ce qu’ils avaient d’imaginaire’ and reducing them ‘à leur juste valeur’ (little more than nothing) so as to confront a sense of loss. It is this privative process which, as we shall see, confronts the self with its openness to change. He becomes as impassive as God precisely because the internal limits of his situation prevent the other from ever truly affecting his status as subject: his subjectivity derives precisely from these very limits. Rousseau makes the transition from the reality of the antagonistic fight to the Real of pure antagonism.

In the eighth promenade, the need for this transition emerges in a discussion about our reactions to adversity. Describing how certain individuals often posit an imaginary
enemies to shield themselves from the blows of misfortune, Rousseau writes:

when the unfortunate do not know whom to blame for their misfortunes they blame
the destiny they personify and to which they ascribe eyes and intelligence
for tormenting them on purpose. It is thus that a disappointed gambler goes
crazy without knowing against whom. He imagines a fate that torments him on
purpose for tormenting him and, finding food for his anger, he animates and
ignites against the enemy he has created (Rêveries, p. 1078)

Rousseau criticises this defence mechanism of positing a purely abstract enemy,
asserting that a wise man would adopt a more stoical attitude. He argues that if we
accept adversity as a product of blind necessity, without looking for someone to blame,
we still feel the pain it causes, but we do not succumb to aggression and anger.
However, Rousseau immediately exceeds his counsel with a much more radical
suggestion for dealing with setbacks, writing about the benefits of stoicism: ‘C’est
beaucoup d’en être venu là, mais ce n’est pas tout si l’on s’arrête. C’est bien avoir
coupé le mal mais c’est avoir laissé la racine. Car cette racine n’est pas dans les êtres
qui nous sont étrangers, elle est en nous-même et c’est là qu’il faut travailler pour
l’arracher tout à fait’ (Rêveries, p. 1078). It is not enough to take cognisance of the
fictitious nature of our enemies, we have to invert our relationship to them by
acknowledging our own ‘evil’. The ‘evil’ refers here to amour-propre which, after
making us indignant towards others, revolts against the voice of reason (Rêveries, p.
1079). Amour-propre involves a specular process of identification where the subject
lives totally externalised in the gaze of the other. This passion incites the subject to seek
full identity through a process of domination or perhaps annihilation of the other, who
is seen as threatening or preventing my subjective cohesion.’ Amour-propre partakes of
the same desire for control as does the ego. It is precisely this passion that Rousseau goes some way to overcoming by no longer representing himself through a negative relationship to the other, but through a negative relationship to the self. Likewise, pure antagonism denotes the moment when the act of negating the other is brought to a point of self-reference, where the external enemy is recognised as simply a projection of our lack of full subjectivity. It emerges in the Rêveries that the true place of the self is perhaps exactly the absence of one.

**Structural Limits as the Condition of Freedom**

As we have seen, Rousseau inaugurates his autobiography with a question about his position and his identity. Such a question, as Alain Grosrichard indicates, could only emanate from a subject who, as he speaks, experiences himself as never being in his place, because he is fundamentally split in and by language. Many of the images in the Rêveries figure a state of alterity. The sensation of alterity coincides with a sensation of social dislocation, dissolving any markers of certainty for either element: ‘Tiré, je ne sais comment de l’ordre des choses, je me suis vu précipité dans un chaos incompréhensible où je n’aperçois rien du tout; et plus je pense à ma situation présente et moins je puis comprendre où je suis’(995). The failure of socio-discursive structures to offer a stable identity for the subject and its vision of social objectivity uncovers the irreducible negativity of these structures. This negativity prevents such structures from ever fully binding the self within the order of the system to reach a state of positivity: as Rousseau affirms, the more he attempts to understand his position, the more opaque it
becomes.

The void that ‘l’ordre des choses’ dissimulates resurfaces here, distancing Rousseau from his constructed and coherent world view, throwing him into an unsymbolisable state of strangeness: ‘Tout ce qui m’est extérieur m’est étranger désormais. Je n’ai plus en ce monde ni prochain, ni semblables, ni frères. Je suis sur la terre comme dans une planète étrangère où je serais tombé de celle que j’habitais’ (Rêveries, p. 999). His sensation of being suddenly estranged from normality, as if he had fallen on to an alien planet where nothing bears any relation to the self and its experience, exposes the constructed nature of reality. The collapse of normality gives Rousseau a feeling of exclusion and difference from everything around him. Any attempt to find consolation in the outside world merely corroborates his sense of otherness, since he only finds there ‘des objets affligeants et déchirants pour (son) cœur’ (Rêveries, p. 999). This traumatic realisation of the heterogeneity of the self relative to the apparent order of reality makes urgent the need to resume his autobiographical project. Wanting to expel from his mind the painful objects that vainly preoccupy him, he looks for solace in the seemingly solitary undertaking of self-exploration:

C’est dans cet état que je reprends la suite de l’examen sévère et sincère que j’appelai jadis mes Confessions. Je consacre mes derniers jours à m’étudier moi-même et à préparer d’avance le compte que je ne tarderai pas à rendre de moi. Livrons-nous tout entier à la douceur de converser avec mon âme puisqu’elle est la seule que les hommes ne puissent m’ôter (Rêveries, p. 999).

The decision to write the Rêveries grows out of this experience of crisis where social structures appear inadequate to explain his situation. His image of radical alienation
offers a poetic form of Laclau's concept of dislocation. Dislocation refers to the emergence of events which, as they cannot be symbolised or assimilated by the socio-discursive structures, uncover the failure of the wider system to domesticate and order everything within its sphere. The subject, as Rousseau's self-questioning shows, is caught up in these structures to which he looks for an identity. The constant eruption of traumatic events prevents them from being symbolically complete and thus fully structured, so depriving them of the capacity to determine the subject totally. The failure of the structure to provide the subject with a fully constituted identity means that he emerges as a lack within its system. The defective structure requires the subject to make a decision to forge an identity so as to cover over the fissure of the wider sphere. The gap between subject and object grants the self the freedom to enter into different acts of identification to seal its position. This description allows us to understand the subject as partially self-determined. We could interpret in this theoretical light Rousseau's affirmation that his 'âme', his constitutive liberty, can never be appropriated by others. There is always something that proves refractory to symbolisation, giving the self the freedom to resist structural assimilation and to find new forms of self-expression. The failure of the system has an affirmative force, urging the subject to engage critically with himself and his present situation, to repair the rift in the structure. Likewise, for Rousseau, man only assumes his full human status, his freedom, when he is ripped from his symbiosis with nature by terrible storms to confront the breach between subject and object. This rupture constrains man to employ his perfectibility to dissimulate the abyss opened up in his world. Internal limits prove empowering rather than wholly disabling, if we recognise the liberty they afford us.
Consistent with what we have learnt so far about his new stance towards his persecutors, this confrontation with negativity becomes self-referential, inducing Rousseau to reflect on his own position, instead of looking for an external cause: ‘Si à force de réfléchir sur mes dispositions intérieures je parviens à les mettre en meilleur ordre et à corriger le mal qui peut y rester, mes méditations ne seront pas entièrement inutiles, et quoi je ne suis plus bon à rien sur la terre, je n’aurai pas tout à fait perdu mes derniers jours’ (Rêveries, p. 999) This statement anticipates a later one made in the eighth promenade that we have previously examined. ‘Le mal’ to which Rousseau refers here, is amour-propre, the assertion of imaginary power or mastery through the destructive games of rivalry with equals. Rousseau’s desire to distance himself from this evil and possibly restore some order to his sense of self by remembering and recording the freedom and pleasure of his reveries, requires paradoxically a loosening of the drive towards order and control. He thus describes the Rêveries as ‘un informe journal’, a formless diary. He reveals the tension inherent in his project between order and disorder, freedom and constraint in a remark about his aesthetic process:

Une situation si singulière mérite assurément d’être examinée et décrite, et c’est à cet examen que je consacre mes derniers loisirs. Pour le faire avec succès il y faudrait procéder avec ordre et méthode: mais je suis incapable de ce travail et même il m’écarterait de mon but qui est de rendre compte des modifications de mon âme et de leurs successions (Rêveries, p. 1000).

The artist occupies an indeterminate position interposed between the systematising and homogenising tendencies of language, on the one side, and affectivity, on the other, the irreducibly heterogeneous. The desire to reconcile these two incommensurable
elements has to remain unfulfilled to preserve the space for innovation and experimentation. Rousseau seems, then, to invite failure as part of his autobiographical project so as to maintain the structural incompleteness which endows the subject with his creative energy. His passivity suggests a desire to enervate the binding and organising ego functions that work to create the impression of conceptual mastery and control, to give rise to a more aleatory interlaying of sensations and images. He wishes to use a barometer to measure his emotional fluctuations to record them with as little writerly intervention as possible. However, he immediately detracts from the scientific aspiration of this image, stating ‘Mais je n’étends pas jusque-là mon entreprise. Je me contenterai de tenir le registre des opérations sans chercher à les réduire en système’ (Rêveries, p. 1001). Any endeavour to express affectivity in language always runs the risk of imposing a system on that which rejects absorption into any system. The Rêveries hope to preserve the dynamic force of desire, whose boundless energy keeps the textual space susceptible to re-negotiation and re-interpretation, by constantly revealing and concealing the resistance of desire to the determinant work of discourse. The longing for linguistic transparency becomes thwarted as opaque figures remind us of the failure of language to signify everything and of the inconceivability of full enlightenment. These incompossible aspects bring to the fore the unresolvable friction of the aesthetic process. Rousseau’s urge to transmute the singularity of his affective life into a knowable and symbolisable form defines his autobiographical project as a search for the frontiers of representation.

The violent emotion that induces creativity takes on metaphorical form in Rousseau’s
evocative description of his seminal inspiration on the way to see Diderot in the prison at Vincennes. This instant figures the clash between intensities and structures that forms the matrix of the creative act. The multiple ‘illuminations’ that strike Rousseau on reading the question posed by the Dijon Academy provokes in him heterogeneous feelings, impelling him towards artistic production as a means of testifying to social injustice:

Si jamais quelque chose a ressemblé à une inspiration subite, c’est le movement qui se fit en moi à cette lecture; tout à coup je me sens l’esprit ébloui de mille lumières; des foules d’idées vives s’y présentent à la fois avec force et une confusion qui me jeta dans un trouble inexprimable; je sens ma tête prise par un étourdissement semblable à l’ivreesse. Une violente palpitation m’opresse, soulève ma poitrine; ne pouvant plus respirer en marchant, je me laisse tomber sous un des arbres de l’avenue, et j’y passe une demie-heure dans une telle agitation qu’en me relevant j’aperçus tout le devant de ma veste mouillé de mes larmes sans avoir senti que j’en répandais (Lettres à Malesherbes, OCI, 1135).

Self-dispossession forms once again the basis of innovation and knowledge. A statement of disillusionment follows this emotionally-charged scene, as Rousseau acknowledges the discrepancy between what necessity requires him to express and its realisation in his work. He affirms that if he could have elucidated just a quarter of what he felt and saw that day, he would have conveyed nearly all the abuses and contradictions of society and shown definitively that evil exists not in man per se, but in his institutions. The conjunction of pleasure and pain in the previous quotation attests to the irresolvable differences that call for something to be put into language that cannot be articulated. The pleasure of inventing a new idiom to bear witness to the injustice or inadequacy of an existing discourse — the ‘naturalisation’ of man’s slavery — is always shackled to the pain of realising the incapacity of the new idiom ever to testify fully. Rousseau’s political writings emerge from this gap in signification where
the immediate incommunicability of his desire to engender social change struggles to make what has to be communicated proportionate with what can be communicated. The irruption of intense feelings intimate the inconceivability of total resolution in the field of shared values and laws. The interminable flux of irreconcilable intensities into social structures demands the renewal and distortion of discourses to express what is at present illegitimately excluded or suppressed. Rousseau’s autobiographies, no less than his political writings, attest to the incommensurable levels of human experience that exceed the signifying capacity of our existing idioms and so necessitate and justify the constant invention of new ones.\textsuperscript{12}

The idea of being at the limit of representability is evoked in a metaphor that situates Rousseau in a state between waking and sleeping or life and death. He describes how he has been living in a dream-state, where he imagines himself tormented by terrible indigestion and restless sleep, and how when he eventually wakes up, he is relieved of pain and amongst friends: ‘Oui, sans doute, il faut que j’aie fait sans que je m’en aperçusse un saut de la veille au sommeil, ou plutôt de la vie à la mort’ (\textit{Rêveries}, p. 995). This enigmatic sentence suggests the necessity of death or self-dispossession for the aimlessness and freedom of his autobiographical project to take effect. This idea recurs constantly throughout the \textit{Rêveries} as the condition of aesthetic experience. For example, Rousseau combines the desire for a loss of control and order, the expropriation of the ego, with the work of reverie, when he writes of how daydream and waking fuse, ‘quand je les laisse ma tête entièrement libre, et mes idées suivre leur pente sans résistance et sans gêne’ (\textit{Rêveries}, 44). Only by emptying the self of
determinate content can artistic work occur, the movement towards the potentially new. This obscure feeling of quasi-nothingness discloses the radical freedom that the dominant system hides in order to retain its semblance of organisation. In the transitional zone between life and death, a symbolic transformation of the system and indeed of the self can be attempted, by divesting them of their imaginary principles of certainty and order, so as to uncover their potential for diverse determinations.

We find a powerful figure of this state of dispossession, where the identity of the self gives way to reveal its founding void in the second promenade. The moment occurs after a great Dane leaps on Rousseau, when he is engaged in a reverie, knocking him unconscious. What follows is a metaphor of dislocation as Rousseau describes his ‘état singulier’ subsequent to the fall:

Cette première sensation fut un moment délicieux. Je ne me sentais encore que par là. Je naissais dans cet instant à la vie, et il me semblait que je remplissais de ma légère existence tous les objets que j’apercevais. Tout entier au moment présent je ne me souvenais de rien; je n’avais nulle notion distincte de mon individu, pas la moindre idée de ce qui venait de m’arriver; je ne savais ni qui j’étais ni où j’étais; je ne sentais ni mal, ni crainte, ni inquiétude (Rêveries, p. 1005)

This violent moment takes the self back to its openness to the radically different. Rousseau has the sensation of being held in a state of suspension where the sense of possibility for transformation, implied by his feeling of being reborn to life, surges through him, sensitising him to all that surrounds him. This idea of life in death becomes reinforced by the fact that when he finally inquires about his location, he is informed that he is at la Haute-Borne, the upper limit, which, for Rousseau, was
tantamount to saying he was on Mount Atlas, the closest point to heaven. His proximity to death places him at the very limits of self-(non) representation. His only sensation is that of the radical openness of subjectivity where the impossibility of closure has to be accepted just as much as the inevitability of perpetual change.

By erasing Rousseau’s social identity and displaying his openness to change, this scene does violence to the oppressive representation of him in society. Similarly, the metaphor of the pure state of nature, in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, undermines the disfiguring and depraved movement of history by highlighting the radical discontinuity between the two phases of man. Any determination of the subject becomes redefined by the incident at Ménilmontant, as a reflection of his determinability rather than his essence. Rousseau subverts his social defacement by representing the self as being irreducible to a single representation. The ecstatic moment functions in a similar fashion to the general will which, through its suspension of institutional life, discloses the non-fit between the sovereign and the institutions that come to represent it. Desire at the level of the subject always supersedes the attempts to confine it in objectivity.

**Autobiographical Defacement as Resistance**

‘Mais moi, détaché d'eux et de tout, que suis-je moi-même? Voilà ce qui me reste à chercher.’ (*Rêveries*, p.995) Autobiography, as Rousseau’s opening question demonstrates, begins from the premise of an impenetrable self that refuses to yield to taxonomic reduction. This is implied in de Man’s use of the figure of prosopopoeia to
lack means that his identity has to come through an act of identification. The resultant identity emerges as split: it at once represents the process by which the subject seeks an identity and the outcome of that process. The lack which inaugurated this process is therefore already inscribed in the identity as its condition of emergence and its limit. This notion of the subject 'does not only invoke lack but also all our attempts to eliminate this lack which, however, does not stop re-emerging'.

This relates to what we have learnt so far about the crisis that triggers Rousseau to write the *Rêveries*. The failure to secure a stable identity by entering into opposition with his adversaries merely gives him a sense of emptiness. The feeling of estrangement from his social determination incites the desire for a new autobiographical project. This trajectory immediately redirects our attention from his emergence as an empty place to his attempts to represent himself, and, in this way, becomes embroiled in the question of autobiography. The subject of lack takes on political import, since the constitution of his identity can only emanate from socio-discursive structures, as is implied by the movement from 'them' to 'me' in Rousseau's own self-excavation. The constant failure of these structures to provide an adequate identity re-inscribes the lack at their own origin, the impossibility of their fully representing the subject. This failure is also affirmative in its effect: the foreclosure of a fixed identity for the subject means that he never ceases to strive for new social systems and modes of representation with which he can identify. This striving conditions the desire for social change.

The irrepresible re-emergence of 'the fictivity of the face' in autobiography, at once
describe autobiography. The *prosopon* is a face or a mask in Greek; and therefore, the image of prosopopoeia refers to the act of giving face to the faceless. We therefore write autobiographies, de Man affirms, not because we have a face, but in order to give ourselves one. The autobiographical subject does not work from the basis of a fundamental selfhood, but constructs a self through the writing process. The face, which thus allows the faceless to emerge, does not, obviously correspond directly to what it shows. We can understand de Man’s concept of defacement in a twofold manner. The act of giving face already constitutes a moment of defacement in the sense that a granting of form to that which is essentially formless can be construed as a disfiguring. But this process is forgotten, because the urge to create coherence attempts to suppress the inaugural disaccord. The movement of defacement becomes double when this originary disorder, at once the condition of possibility and impossibility of the construction of the autobiographical self, resurfaces:

A systematising urge is at work in prosopopoeia. The face fixes itself into a rigid order and is taken seriously. In order to re-establish itself as the hypothetical figure it is the face must decompose itself again. The removal of the face is the second form of defacement, and serves the disillusioning function of recalling the substitutive character of the face and the forgotten fictivity of the system.

Rousseau, decomposing ‘the malevolent face’ conferred on him by his enemies, exposes the impossibility of definitively riveting the self to a certain identity. The violence of his adversaries’ attempt to control him through a disavowal of the openness of the subject is highlighted by this moment of self-dislocation, the fall at Ménilmontant, whose metaphoric force contains an inherent criticism of any notion of the subject as a substantial entity, given in advance; we could infer that any identity it assumes is always articulated around a fundamental void. The subject’s insurmountable
disruptive and necessary to this mode of writing, partakes of the same dynamic. It is precisely because the autobiographical act can never completely determine the writing subject that autobiography supplies a space in which the subject can endeavour to construct new self-representational modes that explore and re-evaluate the tension between the self and the social. The 'defacing operation of autobiography' does not therefore annul this mode of writing, nor for that matter, ridicule its search for a legitimate form of self-portrayal. Rather, it makes it all the more urgent. The negativity or formlessness at the origin of the self leaves it, as Rousseau's public image illustrates, forever vulnerable to authoritarian forms of representation that erase all trace of their contingency. The vulnerability of the self to 'totalitarian' depictions requires the defacing work of autobiography to reinstate undecidability as the condition of just self-representation. This description might clarify one of the ways in which autobiography can participate in the calling for and the effecting of social transformation.

Reverie as an Opening for Change

De Man's idea of the autobiographer's concealing his absence of a face by constructing one through his writing actually becomes inverted in the Réveries. Rousseau's self-examination leads him not to attribute a specific content to the self, but to strip content away to arrive at the subject's indeterminacy. The metaphors of self-dispossession, examined so far, culminate in an extensive exploration in the fifth promenade of the reveries of the island of St Peter. These moments of intensity reveal that a heightened sense of self, the feeling of pure existence, is synonymous with the dispersal of particular content or identity. Through his reveries, Rousseau is able to suspend the
enthralling, authoritarian structures of social and institutional life to retrieve a sense of freedom. However immutable and inescapable social systems may appear, man never loses his defining characteristic of freedom, which permits him to withdraw from a situation of oppression in order to think beyond his present circumstances and re-imagine his collective space.

Reverie involves a drift away from *amour propre* — egotistical or systematic control — by allowing multifarious sense impressions, affects and ideas to enter into contact with one another. Rousseau’s moments of reverie offer hope amid the general sense of disenchantment. The turn towards reveries comes at a time when Rousseau no longer believes in his own capacity to act reliably, to effect change within situations:

> Ne pouvant plus faire aucun bien qui ne tourne à mal, ne pouvant plus agir sans nuire à autrui ou à moi-même, m’abstenir est devenu mon unique devoir, et je le remplis autant qu’il est en moi. Mais dans ce désœuvrement du corps mon âme est encore active, elle produit encore des sentiments, des pensées, et sa vie interne et morale semble encore s’être accrue par la mort de tout intérêt terrestre et temporal (*Rêveries*, p. 1000).

Rousseau feels powerless to mediate the depravity of his state by acting in accordance with a certain set moral of values. He cannot control the outcome of his actions nor will specific eventualities. This observation implies a criticism of the idea of the human subject as a privileged agent of change who has the power to enact goodness through the implementation of specific principles. A pure negation of the authoritarian relations from which he has decided to take flight would, as we have suggested, merely hold Rousseau in permanent opposition. In order to avoid causing his relations to degenerate
further, he adopts a less aggressive form of resistance to his state of terror and oppression. His reveries, as a source of creative energy and emotional intensity, come to replace object-oriented action as a source of hope and metamorphosis.

Rousseau's happiness on the island stems largely from a state of inactivity, provisionality and openness. He refrains from unpacking his cases of books or arranging his personal belongings because he wants to preserve a sense of non-closure, of mobility, 'vivant dans l'habitation où je comptais achever mes derniers jours comme dans une auberge dont j'aurais dû partir le lendemain' (Rêveries, p. 1043). Rousseau refuses to make a decision that will bind him to a particular future or past arrangement. He wants to maintain the possibility for new occurrences; he aims to live in the present. This desire for indeterminacy concurs with the pleasure Rousseau finds in the unrestrained movement of reverie. He relinquishes the urge to compare, master and understand, and yields to the polymorphous sensory data that surround him on the island. He gives himself over to the ebbing and flowing of the Lac de Bienne, which plunges him into multiple reveries that refuse schematisation:

je me laissais aller et dériver lentement au gré de l'eau quelquefois pendant plusieurs heures, plongé dans mille rêveries confuses mais délicieuses, et qui sans avoir aucun objet bien déterminé ni constant ne laissaient pas d'être à mon gré cent fois préférables à tout ce que j'avais trouvé de plus doux dans ce qu'on appelle les plaisirs de la vie (Reveries, p. 1044)

Here the ego's desire for mastery subsides, leaving the self as a passive receptacle of varying intensities, affects and impressions. This openness proves at once passive and
active: passive in the sense that the self's striving for identity and knowledge is
immobilised and active in the sense that potentially incompossible elements enter into
contact with one another, a movement towards new systems, structures and
representations. Rousseau's state of active passivity subverts the defacing and
restrictive force of his rigid social determination which works to homogenise
everything within its own system of representation with the intention of enslaving him
in order to sustain an illusory sense of power. His reveries' tendency to abstraction, to
the abolition of specificity and the restoration of indeterminacy 'sans aucun objet bien
déterminé ni constant', protects them from the repetitive and normalising drive of the
system. This relinquishing of control disrupts the sense of servitude his persecutors
have tried to impose on him. By yielding to what is heterogeneous and indeterminate he
exposes the chimera of his enemies' feeling of superiority, gained from a false sense of
understanding and full-representation. So power is redefined, from their power over
him to his own openness to transformation; the capacity to conduct new intensities,
rather than the reduction of the other to clear, definite categories that deny
polymorphous possibilities.

The moment of the self, its heightened sense of existence, as we have said,
paradoxically concurs with a expropriation of the self, a loss of its constructed identity:
'Le flux et le reflux de cette eau, son bruit continu mais renflé par intervalles frappant
sans relache mon oreille et mes yeux, suppléaient aux mouvements internes que la
rêverie éteignait en moi et suffisaient pour me faire sentir avec le plaisir mon existence
sans prendre la peine de penser' (Rêveries, p. 1045). Rousseau's total dependence on
external stimuli dislodges the internal operations of the self, sparing him the need to reason or categorise. This moment devoid of full representation figures the insubstantiality of existence. For Rousseau, the feeling of existence is not congruous with a feeling of presence to himself; it is not a revelation of his authentic substance; it corresponds to non-presence, the otherness of his own being. Self-dispossession, as the condition and limit of reflexivity, suspends him at the fold between the constitution and dissolution of meaning.

This state gives rise to a tenuous impression of the instability or transience of objectivity. Our originary indeterminacy forecloses the possibility of reaching a permanent state of plenitude where subject and object coincide to uncover their true being:

Tout est dans un flux continuel sur la terre: rien n’y garde une forme constante et arrêtée, et nos affections qui s’attachent aux choses extérieures passent et changent nécessairement comme elles. Toujours en avant ou en arrière de nous, elles rappellent le passé qui n’est plus ou préviennent l’avenir qui souvent ne doit point être: il n’y a rien là de solide à quoi le coeur se puisse attacher. Aussi n’a-t-on guère ici-bas que du plaisir qui passe; pour le bonheur qui dure je doute qu’il y soit connu. À peine est-il dans nos plus vives jouissances un instant où le coeur puisse véritablement nous dire: Je voudrais que cet instant durât toujours; et comment peut-on appeler bonheur un état fugitif qui nous laisse encore le cœur inquiet et vide, qui nous fait regretter quelque chose avant, ou désirer encore quelque chose après? (Rêveries, p. 1046).

The experience of pure existence vaguely discloses the mutability of the world. Our lack of substance constantly forces us to cathect external systems and objects to take on a form; from this process there arises a perpetual state of flux with nothing solid to cling to; so we can never achieve a state of fully-accomplished subjectivity. The reverie
becomes a spacing in time where the lack of origins or essential foundations for the self and its wider context appear, stemming the flow of history as a fully rational or telological movement towards predetermined ends. The present moment is never present to itself but constitutes a space which is suspended between the past and the unconditioned future, between the regret of not being able to retrieve what has gone before and the desire to transcend that moment and approach the new. The constant movement of history, bereft of immanent logic, denies us the possibility of organising our existence around predefined principles to achieve permanent happiness. Rousseau therefore adopts here an anti-Utopian stance: we can never build an eternal state of plentitude that exists outside the perpetual flow of time and is resistant to historical mutation. Our feeling of existence, as a momentary suspension of time, dissolves our specific temporal determination, revealing the fact that nothing proves inexorable in the process of historical change. This incites a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what is going to happen. Like the metaphor of nature, which denaturalises man’s socialisation through its discontinuity with what precedes and succeeds it, the reverie allows the instability of the outside world to surface, highlighting the discrepancy between its present organisation and its susceptibility to multiple reorganisations.

Rousseau’s existential excavation anticipates Nancy’s conceptualisation of finite history as our exposure to existence as non-essence, or non-presence: finite history does not refer to finished history as the revelation of the authentic form or ‘Idea’ of humanity, but as the opening to a history devoid of purpose or goal, that is, to the heterogeneity of our existence. Nancy therefore endeavours to detach the concept of
history from connotations of knowledge or narrative to rethink it as performance. He invokes freedom as ‘the proper character’ of this happening or event, defining it not as a freedom from causality or destiny, but as the necessity to manage and deal with these factors. Accordingly, in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, man becomes historic precisely at the moment when he assumes his latent faculty of freedom, thereby acceding to humanity. His sudden rupture from his symbiosis with nature awakens in him a feeling of alterity, of his own finitude and that of the other. As Nancy indicates, we do not gain our sense or reason from history: history merely exposes us to our lack of essence, to the instability of the social. Man therefore has to take the decision to become historic, by ‘ennuiciating (his) “we” or (his) community, in order to enter history’. The decision to enter history therefore proves to be a political one, since it implicates man in decisions about how to inscribe his otherness as community. Nancy relates the making of history to writing because writing involves the exposure of ourselves to ‘the non-presence of our present and its coming’. Rousseau’s move to write the *Rêveries* coincides with a feeling of otherness, with a sense of estrangement from his social milieu. It is precisely the absence or negativity of community which, as we shall see, leads him to attempt to rethink social interaction as series of fleeting, tenuous exchanges which preserve the mobility of the self within the communal space. Our alterity, on the one hand, links us to others, urging us to imagine and seek community, and yet, on the other hand, it forecloses the possibility of building a community based on a shared substance or identity. Autobiography, premised on a sense of the self as other, therefore aims in part to express that otherness in the wider sphere that circumscribes it, encouraging us to recognise the fallacy of viewing community as full
positivity. This realisation has an affirmative dimension for us, since it enforces the freedom to engage politically with our common space whose ever-present potential for transfiguration calls on us to renegotiate and redefine our position within it.

The transience of the world frustrates any attempt at establishing a more supreme state of happiness. The rarity and fleetingness of the moments of reverie prevent them from approximating this state of supremacy. However, the perpetual metamorphosis of life incites a longing for a more stable foundation for our being or existence. Rousseau begins by exploring the possibility of our truly finding such a state with a series of conditional statements which gradually give way to a more definitive answer:

Mais s’il est un état où l’âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s’y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d’enjamber sur l’avenir; où le temps ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de désir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entière; tant que cet état dure celui qui s’y trouve peut s’appeler heureux, non d’un bonheur imparfait, pauvre et relatif, tel que celui qu’on trouve dans les plaisirs de la vie, mais d’un bonheur suffisant, parfait et plein, qui ne laisse dans l’âme aucun vide qu’elle sent le besoin de remplir. Tel est l’état où je me suis trouvé souvent à l’île de Saint Pierre dans mes rêveries solitaires (…) (Rêveries, pp. 1046-1047).

This paragraph contrasts strikingly with what Rousseau has previously said about his reveries and the transitory nature of living. Grosrichard describes the recourse to reverie as expressing a desire to reach self-identity, without excess or residue. The sudden conceptual shift, at this point in the fifth Promenade, from the reverie as an instant of indeterminacy to its conception as a instant of fullness, appears to indicate a
The feeling of pure existence and of its absence of any predetermined substance seems to become reconceived as a state of divine self-sufficiency. Rousseau argues that most men, beset by the continual movement of their passions and caught up in worldly affairs, have only tasted this state of absolute happiness imperfectly. If they were to strive for purity, they would experience distaste for everyday activities and would no longer feel bound by the duties it imposes upon them. In comparison, Rousseau’s exile and his feeling of radical exclusion have allowed him to experience this state in a qualitatively different manner, writing ‘Mais un infortuné qu’on a retranché de la société humaine et qui ne peut plus rien faire ici-bas d’utile et de bon pour autrui ni pour soi, peut trouver dans cet état à toutes les félicités humaines des dédommagements que la fortune et les hommes ne lui sauraient ôter’ (Rêveries, p. 1047). Reverie therefore compensates Rousseau for his sense of persecution and social ineptitude. Nevertheless, the inseparability of his sensation of supreme felicity from the social breakdown from which he has fled, deconstructs reverie as plenitude by re-inscribing the ineradicable negativity lying within it. This alerts us to the poetic force of his words, and the need to interpret them in the light of the textual tension they create.

Rousseau demonstrates here the confluence of the Symbolic and the Imaginary in any act of identification. He effects a symbolic transformation through the process of reverie. By divesting the self of its constructed social identity, he reveals existence as non-essence. The fundamental absence of substantial content for the subject and his understanding of social objectivity makes change inevitable. Whilst depriving us of a
fully constituted identity, change gives us our fundamental freedom, allowing us to
cathect and identify with new socio-political configurations. The decision to rescind an
aberrant social contract, through which we sought a sense of cohesion, requires us to
make a leap from a state of subjective destitution to an imaginary feeling of
empowerment. Therefore, in situations of social degradation, we are required to act,
despite our fundamental indeterminacy, as if we had a fully-fledged subjectivity in
order to try to withstand and transcend the process of degeneration. Any experience of
our internal limits is inseparable from the attempt to negate them, in other words, where
we seek fullness and coherence we simultaneously meet lack. Rousseau’s claim to
plenitude is therefore unavoidably coextensive with negativity.

The indivisibility of fantasy and negativity emerges in the *Lettres à Malesherbes.*
Rousseau imagines his own golden age to create a refuge from the slavery of society.
His blissful communion with nature, however, often subsides to uncover ‘le néant de
mes chimères (qui) venait quelquefois la (âme) contrister tout à coup. Quand tous mes
rêves se seraient tournés en réalités, ils ne m’auraient pas suffi; j’aurais imaginé, rêvé,
désiré encore’ (*Rêveries,* p. 1140). What Rousseau terms his ‘vide inexplicable’
reveals itself as positive; it is precisely because he can never fill that space that he feels
‘un certain élancement du cœur vers une autre sorte de jouissance dont je n’avais pas
d’idée et dont pourtant je sentais le besoin’ (*Rêveries,* p. 1140) This limit forces him to
transcend the shortcomings of his present situation to sense what is now missing from
it. The sudden disappearance of all points of identification exposes Rousseau to the
terrifying and yet exhilarating realisation of his freedom, when he feels ‘une sorte de
volupté du poids de cet univers':

Je me livrais avec ravissement à la confusion de ces grandes idées, j'aimais à me perdre en imagination dans l'espace, mon coeur resserré dans les bornes des êtres s'y trouvait trop à l'étroit, j'étouffais dans l'univers, j'aurais voulu m'élancer dans l'infini. Je crois que si j'eusse dévoilé tous les mystères de la nature, je me serais senti dans une situation moins délicieuse que cette étourdissante extase à laquelle mon esprit se livrait sans retenue, et qui, dans l'agitation de mes transports, me faisait écrire quelquefois: "O grand Être! ô grand Être!" sans pouvoir dire ni penser rien de plus (Malesherbes, p. 1141)

Rousseau feels summoned to transcend his particularity to allow his being to fill out the gap in the universal that generates all political activity. The vertiginous state of ecstasy he experiences as he makes the leap from the pain of the inexplicable void to the pleasure of the liberty that this void confers on him, illustrates the necessity of myth — his illusion of plenitude — to elude the collapse into aporetic paralysis. Fantasy only poses a threat when it loses sight of its constitutive lack and starts to masquerade as absolute truth to conceal its fictional origination. The irreducible element of myth in knowledge forecloses the possibility of domination by reason and its demand for specularity by reminding us of what exceeds the grasp of understanding. In this way, Rousseau adumbrates Zizek's assertion that the ineradicability of the Cartesian cogito for Western philosophy results less from its modern estimation as 'the self-transparent thinking subject', but rather from 'its forgotten obverse, (its) excessive, unacknowledged kernel' which disallows its emergence. Rousseau's illuminating commentary shows that whilst the subject of lack may be an impossibility, it is also an active impossibility which never ceases to try to push back the boundaries of its own sphere.
Rousseau’s apparent blindness or bad faith can be understood very differently from the fact that he openly acknowledges the work of imagination in his reveries. He describes how he attaches to their abstraction and regularity ‘des images charmantes qui la vivifient’, whose true object cannot be discerned in the ecstatic state. Without imagination, these moments become ephemeral, less vibrant and intense. Reverie blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, preventing Rousseau from entirely disentangling these two elements:

En sortant d’une longue et douce rêverie, en me voyant entouré de verdure, de fleurs d’oiseaux et laissant errer mes yeux au loin sur les romanesques rivages qui bordaient une vaste étendue d’eau claire et cristalline, j’assimilais à mes fictions tous ces aimables objets, me trouvant enfin ramené par degrés à moi-même et à ce qui m’entourait, je ne pouvais marquer le point de séparation des fictions aux réalités, tant tout concourait également à me rendre chère la vie recueillie et solitaire que je menais dans ce beau séjour (Rêveries, 1048)

This quotation fictionalises the analogy Rousseau makes between his sensation of peace and contentment during the reverie and the self-sufficiency of God. The desire for total fusion of subject and object can only occur through imaginary wish-fulfilment, which, like all fantasmatic constructions, is cut through by the negativity it attempts to dissimulate. Rousseau’s ‘romanesques’ fictions of bliss are always circumscribed by the turmoil of social life and the anxiety it incites; Utopia and dystopia are always co-involved in a mutually deconstructive relationship. Similarly the divine fiction of the origin of the laws in the Contrat social, which aims to bring partial closure to the social space, proves inseparable from the violence at the origins of civil society. In the same way that this fiction and new theories of democracy do not deny social unity, but
recognise that unity is a matter of a symbolic construction supported by fantasy, Rousseau sensitises us to the ineradicable element of fiction in the feeling of subjective cohesion. The incomplete separation of all enlightenment from myth allows for the infinite process of construction and reconstruction of the self and the social. Rousseau's own dismantling of his aspiration to pure happiness demonstrates that any attempt to specify the authentic place of the subject requires the support of imagination, and, in this way, refers to the absence of any such 'real' place. This recognition marks the beginning of ethical and political life.

Reverie as a Figure of the Precarious Equilibrium of Democracy

The progression in the fifth promenade from the reverie as a process of stripping away to reach the bareness of existence, bereft of any particular content, to the reverie as a moment of plenitude, poeticises the interaction of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real in the construction of political identities. Rousseau undermines any notion of a unified self by unveiling its 'vide inexplicable'. Just as Lefort's notion of the centre of power in modern democracy as a lieu vide prevents any political party from being consubstantial with it, Rousseau's exposure of the fundamental indeterminacy of the self prevents it from fulfilling its wish for mastery and power through identification. These 'empty spaces' become the point of reference for articulating new political visions and forms of self-understanding beyond the lure of wish-fulfilment and its illusion of closure. This does not mean that we repudiate principles of organisation and coherence, such as would result in the anomy of the second state of nature. The subject...
requires points of identification or nodal points so as to try to repair the rift in the symbolic. These indentificatory acts can never fully extricate themselves from the unsymbolisable trauma, here called, the Real, at their root. Likewise, the democratic invention operates in a two-fold manner. It at once affords a point of reference around which the social can be articulated and yet prevents it from being reduced to the positive content of that reference. This precarious equilibrium can only be achieved if we accept that every social articulation is split by the antagonism and lack at the heart of democracy. Rather than any ideal, what we have is this ineradicable split that necessitates and disrupts political activity.

This precarious equilibrium of democracy is figured in the aesthetic experience of the reverie. While order is necessary for creativity, it poses a threat when it obliterates all reference to its originary chaos. This emerges in a paragraph that explores the complex composite of repose, agitation, and ideas that forms the reverie. The reverie requires a careful balancing act between inactivity and activity. Rousseau argues that it cannot occur in absolute rest since that would merely lead to stasis or lethargy, nor, for that matter, in a frenzy of activity because that would disrupt the move towards self-dispossession, thereby recalling the outside world and our servitude to others. This tendency should never be fully realised, since it would confront us with the absolute silence of death:

Un silence absolu porte à la tristesse. Il offre une image de la mort. Alors le secours d’une imagination riante est nécessaire et se présente assez naturellement à ceux que le ciel en a gratifiés. Le movement qui ne vient pas du dehors se fait alors au dedans de nous. Le repos est moindre, il est vrai, mais il est aussi plus agréable quand de
légères et douces idées, sans agiter le fond de l'âme ne font pour ainsi dire qu'en effleurer la surface (Rêveries, p. 1047-1048)

We can infer from this passage that imagination functions as a defence mechanism against the risk of self-destruction. The potential for total inertia in the reverie requires imagination to fill the emptying space it uncovers with ideas that aim to symbolise the growing convergence of the outer and the inner world of the individual, subject and object. By allowing vague ideas to surface, imagination instils a degree of critical distance between these two coordinates, whose total fusion would result in death. The radical process of the reverie almost returns the subject to its constitutive void. However, it never totalises its operation since this confrontation with quasi-nothingness invites imaginative attempts at binding affectivity in language in order to represent experience. The reverie, a letting-go, loosens symbolic structures to preserve, as far as possible without falling into the deathly silence of unrepresentability, the free-floating movement of affects and sensations, to create the impression of the illimitable freedom of our ‘âme’.

Rousseau intimates near the beginning of the Rêveries that he needs to make the leap from waking to sleeping, from life to death, to write his self-representational project. As we have seen, the reverie partially realises this wish. What emerges through this process is the confluence, rather than the simple opposition, of life and death. The rhythmic ebb and flow of the lake, possibly interpretable as a metaphor for the binding and ordering function of Eros, the life drive, provides a support through which the unrestrained movement of multifarious and indeterminate emotions and ideas can
occur. The death drive, the move to eradicate tension within the system, by seeking to return to an anterior homeostasis, is evoked by the desire for ‘absolute repose’ in the reverie, which, in an unbound form, could result in annihilation. As the complex equilibrium of the reverie demonstrates, these two drives both have the possibility of bringing life or death to the system. The unity sought through the defensive move to understand and represent could impinge on the free-association of the reverie by reminding Rousseau of his status as victim in the outside world. This could lead to ‘death’ through a sterile repetition of the deadlock with his enemies. The way in which the reverie aims to eliminate this tension through self-dispossession runs the risk of destruction, but also of weakening the control of the system so that it mutates into a new form. The space of the daydream therefore becomes charged with the irresolvable tension between self and loss of self, form and formlessness, in short, life and death. The intersecting trajectories of Eros and Thanatos prevent systems or structures from reaching an oppressive state of closure by either leading to their renewal or their destruction and consequently their transformation. The complexity of the reverie exemplifies the undecidability intrinsic to all of Rousseau’s thinking, making it irreducible to a binary system.34

This constant linking and unlinking brings to the fore the open-endedness of the subject, thereby subverting Rousseau’s persecutors’ claims to a full representation and understanding of him. Their closed image of him and their demand for conformity remain susceptible to being fragmented or debilitated by the boundless energy of imagination or desire, whose drive towards excess indicates the openness his enemies
have to disavow in order to maintain their sense of control. Through his endeavour to represent the freedom and heterogeneity of being, Rousseau shows how ‘the constitutive outside’ of his restrictive social determination already exists on the inside as another possible determination of that space. In the same way that the fantasy of his reveries as plenitude can only exist in relation to what it is trying to negate, that is, the misery of society, his defacement — the rigid identity as ‘a monster’ — can only exist by negating the fluidity and expansive nature of the self.

**The Restrictions of Beneficence**

The desire to loosen the determining force of structures to permit a freer exchange of ideas and affects transcends the seemingly asocial confines of the reverie to work on the domain of social relations, in particular on the act of beneficence. Rousseau seeks to experience, in the space of community, the spontaneous pleasure of daydream through a more flexible form of social contact with others. Such contact permits the performance of beneficent acts without embroiling the self in a reifying and constraining network of exchange and duty. Before exploring these tenuous social exchanges in greater depth, we need to consider the context that gives rise to this desire.

We move from the experience of the unconditional freedom of the reverie in the fifth *promenade* to an exploration of the constraints of social relations in the sixth *promenade*. This exploration is born of a voluntary act of beneficence that turns sour, as a sense of binding duty comes to outweigh the pleasure that the act initially yielded. Rousseau recounts an incident with a small lame boy with whom he became acquainted
on his daily walks. The boy would talk to Rousseau, who would give the boy alms in return. Enjoying the small boy's company, Rousseau frequented the spot of their interaction on several occasions and continued to give the child money. However, he eventually found himself making a detour to avoid the spot. The ostensibly purposeless and unpremeditated detour was motivated by a desire to escape the sense of obligation he had come to feel towards the child. The spontaneity and liberty of his initial act of goodness became absorbed and structured by a rigid and constraining expectation of persevering exchange. The young boy began to view Rousseau as an object by attributing a particular role to him and expecting him to fulfil it. This example of benefaction proves not atypical: what begins as a voluntary decision to act beneficently towards another person engenders an obligation that divests the act of its freedom and converts it into a duty. This creates an aporia in the text: doing good is one of the greatest sources of happiness for human beings, but its repercussions seems at odds with what grants us our human status in the first place, freedom. The desire for openness and indeterminacy expressed in the reverie cannot be easily translated into the civil context; no act can be fully severed from the chain of effects it initiates.

In the same way that Rousseau wants to communicate his singular moments of intensity through the collective structure of language, which, as we have seen, runs the risk of normalising them, he also wants to experience the pleasure of voluntarily doing good to others without incurring the constraints that others can impose. The episode with the lame boy condenses the central problematic of Rousseau's political theory: how to combine the individual's fundamental freedom with the duties of civic life. In short,
this example of beneficence partakes of the same tension between the particular and the general at the epicentre of Rousseau’s political philosophy.

Like the second discourse, the sixth promenade demonstrates the impossibility of establishing a positive definition of the good around which human relations could be organised. Rousseau believes that terror of his present situation has corrupted his vision to such an extent, that he can no longer determine what constitutes the good, for what appears virtuous often masquerades as such to lure him into a trap where he perpetuates the depravity of others. What at first seems to be product of his terrible fate proves, as the incident with the lame boy indicates, to be a generic problem of collective living. If we recall, in the Discours sur l'inégalité, Rousseau refrains from attributing concrete content to his notion of bonté naturelle, defining it negatively as the absence of evil. This fact contributes to the openness of historical change which, deprived of any inherent logic, manifests itself as at once regressive and progressive. The indeterminate nature of goodness in Rousseau’s thinking refuses an ethical system structured around a binary set, where good and evil have distinct characteristics or definable content. Ethics, for Rousseau, cannot be construed as a search for an ideal whose implementation would engender communal concord. The sixth promenade, despite its seemingly narrow focus, complicates any such idea by foregrounding the irreducible negativity and undecidability of the social terrain. Like the Discours sur l'inégalité, this promenade and the Rêveries in general urge us to pass through the fantasy of social harmony and to apprehend its immobilising force by making us aware of the ineradicable limits of the social; limits that, whilst blocking our desire for a fully
Rousseau illustrates here the complex interaction of nature and society which denies either term ethical purity. The natural impulse to do good cannot be unquestioningly transposed into the social context. A spontaneous beneficent act often gets transmuted into an indefinite right on the part of the beneficiary to expect from the benefactor everything that he might subsequently need. As a consequence, the free decision to offer help becomes the obverse of an oppressive system of duty which, like the rigid social determination of Rousseau, negates the mobility of the self. This fact prompts Rousseau to put in question natural penchants as an unfailing guide for conduct, when he asserts: ‘C'est alors que j'eus lieu de connaître que tous les penchants de la nature sans en excepter la bienfaissance elle-même, portés ou suivis dans la société sans prudence et sans choix, changent de nature et deviennent souvent aussi nuisibles qu'ils étaient utiles dans leur première direction’.(Rêveries, p. 1052) With the advent of society, the number of opportunities for man to behave beneficently proliferates and therefore so does the number of binding and potentially paralysing relationships.

It is well-nigh impossible to imagine beneficent acts occurring in the monadic existence of man in nature. Beneficence, as a concept, seems only conceivable in relation to society, which, in turn, also subverts it to some extent. Rousseau recognises this when he delineates its contractual nature. The benefactor and the beneficiary accept an informal contract. When the benefactor agrees to succour the other, he authorises that person to have certain expectations and rights towards his person. Our desire for
independence pushes us to resist the binding restrictions of this contract. However, the contractual process proves almost irreversible, since to deny the beneficiary help in the future would be a dereliction of duty, as it would frustrate and deceive an expectation that the benefactor has legitimised by his initial kindness. We consequently no longer act out of goodness but out of a sense of obligation. Thus, communal life makes it possible for us to experience the pleasure of beneficence, but also makes that same pleasure impossible by converting it into a duty.

We can find in the multi-levelled nature of the anecdote of the lame boy an adumbration of the Derridean distinction between justice and law. The episode figures the inadequacy between justice and the legal concepts or mechanisms, such as contractual right, established to ensure it. The failure of the code of beneficence results in an instant of aporia where the decision between what is just and unjust cannot be grounded in a pre-existent rule. Rousseau could calculate his actions in accordance with the conventions of the code, but only to the detriment of his own freedom. In this way, he may be acting legitimately, but not justly. The call for justice always emanates from a singular case whose singularity places it beyond the generality of the laws. This singular moment, on the one hand, exposes the shortfall of the law and moral codes as an assurance of justice and yet, on the other, demands that legal processes and obligations be brought into play to find a solution to the crisis so that justice is done. The necessary enforcement of a general rule on a particular case that defies generalisation involves an act of violence. Similar to the defacing movement of autobiography that gives form to the essentially formless, this unavoidable recourse to a
set of rules or juridical practices violates the inherent undecidability of the moment of justice. This movement, like that of autobiography, is twofold, since justice ceaselessly reappears to unsettle the formative work of the law, thereby revealing the violence at its origins. Therefore, despite their heterogeneity, these two zones, the ‘incalculability’ of justice and the calculability of the law prove indissociable. Nevertheless, the terms of their interaction are not pre-given, requiring that a decision be taken so as to articulate them. The juridical, ethical and political moment then occurs at the mobile, but persistent, border between the radical openness of justice and the determinate realm of the law. Rousseau reminds us through his interaction with the small boy that justice exceeds the mere application of codes or rules, exhorting us to participate in the interminable process of reinventing and restoring laws or social codes in an attempt, albeit a vain one, to reconcile the particular and the general. This marks our emergence as citizens. Accordingly, as we shall see, Rousseau, in the ninth promenade, suggests a reformulation of the code of beneficence in order to maintain individual liberty.

The aporia of the sixth promenade and the subsequent interrogation of beneficence rebounds upon the wider problematic of civil society. The creation and implementation of the law is mark of man’s freedom, his perfectibility, and the political responsibility that it bestows on him. Man has to make and impose laws precisely to compensate for the absence of a definitive order for the social domain. The laws bring partial closure to the openness of the social field, creating the illusion of organisation out of the chaos from which they were born. The freedom that enables man to configure his communal space through convention becomes dissimulated by the same regulations it seeks to
enforce. The free decision to authorise and obey the law always risks being converted into an oppressive obligation that undermines our freedom. Just as reverie requires imagination to give it a degree of form to transmute creative energy and thereby avoid the annihilation of death, the social space requires the illusion of order, sought through legal and institutional life, to prevent its disintegration and allow for political activity. In both cases, the necessary, but fictional, sense of unity can operate to impose false ends on the critical process, ends which enclose us in a regime that eradicates any reference to its own contingency. This problem, embedded in the aesthetic experience of the reverie of the fifth promenade, emerges in the more obviously political discussion of the sixth, foregrounding the continuity between the two aspects.

Rousseau highlights the irresolvable contradictions inherent in society through the central focus of the sixth promenade. Civil life requires the combination of seemingly incompatible elements: the rule of the law, and the respect for the individual's rights — ensuring our fundamental freedom and finding a form of organisation that is just for everybody. The episode with the young boy and the ensuing discussion imply the impossibility of fully articulating these demands within a collective framework. This fact confronts Rousseau with the irreducible ambiguity of the social space, inciting the desire to resolve it to restore harmony.

He imagines escaping from the restrictions of social interaction through the positive freedom given by Gyges' ring which, according to the story of book II of Plato's Republic, turns man invisible. Contrary to the original story which suggests that man
would take advantage of his invisibility to be wicked, Rousseau argues that the unbound liberty afforded by the ring would prompt him to be as good and beneficent as God. He would use the ring to bring public happiness, and impartially perform acts of justice. His omniscience would allow him to fathom the underlying motives of men, saving him from the destructive emotion of hatred because understanding their true nature, he would pity rather than hate them. Despite using the ring judiciously in nearly every respect, he obliquely acknowledges one point of weakness where he might abuse his position of power: sexual intimacy. This weakness makes him realise the limits of his human condition and the impossibility of a positive universal force that could unfailingly act in the name of the entire community:

If we unravel the political implications of this daydream, we see that it is articulated around the two central tenets of Rousseau’s political theory: liberty and equality. These two coordinates cancel one another out if either term is subscribed to unconditionally. Freedom stems from a feeling of difference or otherness and, as a result, in its unlimited form, would disallow the construction of ethico-political relations. Equality, conversely, results from equivalence and likewise, in an absolute form, would undermine the irreducible plurality of the social that permits freedom. In this respect, the two need to operate within a mutually supporting and yet constraining logic.
Those who hold power have to exercise it on the basis of an equivalentiai relationship with the other members of the community, otherwise the political field lays itself bare to the abuse of authority. Indeed, Rousseau acknowledges that he would himself be tempted to take advantage of his invisibility and omniscience to pursue personal aims potentially at the expense of others. The above quotation condenses the moment of the democratic invention. The foundations of the social can no longer be sought through a privileged social agent who claims to incarnate the transcendental logic that substantiates all contingent moments of the collective. Recourse to any such foundation leads to political stasis and a rigid hierarchy. With this acknowledgement of the internal limits of any social configuration, Rousseau decides to throw Gyges’ ring away. We can thus infer that these limits, which prevent the social from realising itself as an objective totality, also define humanity as human. If Rousseau were to surmount the inherent antagonism which marks the formation of any identity, he would renounce his status as man and place himself above humanity, thereby dissolving his own particularity. The idea of a social actor who could vanquish and dominate negativity to restore harmony is unthinkable. Therefore, implicit in Rousseau’s daydream is the inconceivability of defining the universal as a substantial logical force; such a force can only be experienced through its absence and consequently its embodiment by an individual, as Rousseau’s disclosure about himself illustrates, always contains an ineradicable remainder of the particular. This remainder conditions both at once the necessity and the impossibility of ethical and, for that matter, political systems that seek to incorporate man’s freedom within the space of community. The transitions in Rousseau’s attitude figure the democratic experience: the legitimacy required for
instituting the social can only be found in the sovereignty of the people, and not in some transcendental agent of power or notion of justice.

Rousseau’s experience of this ineluctable ambiguity marks the emergence of the ethical. The moment of the ethical surfaces precisely in the instant when universality manifests itself as simultaneously necessary and impossible. Man’s absence of any primordial sociability, as figured in the pure state of nature, means that the social space is composed of independent beings whose commonality can only result from a process of articulation within a political organisation. This forces us to deal with the unavoidable and yet unanswerable question of how to articulate the universal to block the advent of anomy, whilst preserving multiformity. As we have said in the chapter on the *Contrat social*, the ontological level of the empty space of universality has to be incarnated in a particular ontic content that ultimately remains incommensurable with it. The failure of the code of beneficence as a way of forging and ordering intersubjective relations amongst disparate individuals exposes Rousseau to the moment of the ethical as an awakening to the fact that what obliges us to conceive and construct society is precisely its absence in an objective, substantial form. The irresolvable problematic raised by the episode with the small boy illustrates how there is an investment in a particular order, but ‘no normative order which is, in itself and for itself, ethical’. Rousseau’s subsequent dilemma proves that there can be no simple and logical transition from the moment of the ethical to an investment in a new or already existing order, since what gives rise to the dilemma in the first place — the fundamental void at the heart of the social — prevents that dilemma from being truly
An ethics of the ideal, expressed in Rousseau’s reverie about Gyges’ ring, becomes replaced by an ethics of the real. Rousseau shifts from identifying with the fantasy of social harmony to identifying with the insuperable negativity of society. This shift exposes the lack or inconsistency in the social space that the lure of wish-fulfillment aims to occult. In the same way that he has renounced the possibility of full representation as an antidote to his misrepresentation, he accepts the impossibility of achieving full identity in society:

Le résultat que je puis tirer de toutes ces réflexions est que je n’ai jamais été vraiment propre à la société civile où tout est gêne, obligation, devoir, et que mon naturel indépendant me rendit toujours incapable des assujettissements nécessaires à qui veut vivre avec les hommes. Tant que j’agis librement je suis bon et je ne fais que du bien; mais sitôt que je sens le joug, soit de la nécessité soit des hommes, je deviens rebelle ou plutôt rétif, alors je suis nul. Lorsqu’il faut faire le contraire de ma volonté, je ne le fais point, quoi qu’il arrive; je ne fais pas non plus ma volonté même, parce que je suis faible. Je m’abstiens d’agir: car toute ma faiblesse est pour l’action, toute ma force est négative, et tous mes péchés sont d’omission, rarement de commission. Je n’ai jamais cru que la liberté de l’homme consistât à faire ce qu’il veut, mais bien à ne jamais faire ce qu’il ne veut pas (Rêveries, p. 1059)

The need for structure and organisation in the social field proves refractory to the fundamental freedom of man, which can only surface therein as lack. Any attempt to retrieve this freedom, in an absolute form, results in the rebellion and the destruction it engenders, thereby reducing the self to nothing. Illimitable freedom thus manifests itself as purely chimerical. Liberty therefore has to be redefined in order to realign it with the constraints of the social. Rousseau conceives liberty negatively, that is, not as the positive right to do what we want, but as the right to refuse to do what we do not
It is this negative definition of freedom which, Rousseau avers, distinguishes him from, and sets in opposition with, his contemporaries. He underlines the antinomy surrounding absolute freedom as a guiding principle for collective living: the unrestrained assertion of our liberty automatically leads us to abhor the liberty of others, embroiling us in an imaginary game of rivalry with equals, where we willingly enslave ourselves and others to achieve a factitious sense of power and control. Unconditional freedom therefore enthrals us to the dictates of the other and in this way, annuls itself. A negative definition of freedom, however, aims to prevent the obliteration of the social fabric through the totalitarianism or fragmentation caused by the exercise of unconditional freedom. Its negative counterpart seeks to preserve the right of the subject to repudiate or rescind an aberrant social contract without annihilating others or imposing upon them. Accordingly, it permits multiple social forms and identities to coexist.

The dissolution of markers of certainty for the self and its action in the wider sphere appears to throw Rousseau into a state of aporetic inactivity, where the impossibility of defining and calculating the effects of 'goodness' leaves him with no other option than to flee communal life. Rousseau's bad experiences have, as he informs us, altered his disposition or perhaps revealed his 'véritables bornes'. His seemingly passive response to social breakdown contains, as does the passivity of the reverie, an active element. Dislocation becomes once again the trigger for critical engagement with the self and its position vis-à-vis the other. Rousseau clearly acknowledges this fact:
Mais je n'ai point regret à ces mêmes expériences, puisqu'elles m'ont procuré par la réflexion de nouvelles lumières sur la connaissance de moi-même et sur les vrais motifs de ma conduite en mille circonstances sur lesquelles je me suis si souvent fait illusion. J'ai vu que pour bien faire avec plaisir il fallait que j'agisse librement, sans contrainte, et que pour m'ôter toute la douceur d'une bonne œuvre il suffisait qu'elle devînt un devoir pour moi (Rêveries, p. 1052).

This statement softens the impact of Rousseau's rejection of virtuous acts. Whilst he asserts that he is duty-bound, in his response to his current social crisis, to abstain from beneficence lest he make the chains of civil society heavier, he nevertheless expresses a desire for a new form of relationship that combines the pleasure of doing good with freedom. He cannot fulfil this desire by converting it into a general principle, since that would simply reinstate the same constraints that he hopes to surmount. Just as resistance to the misrepresentation of himself by others cannot come from a counter representation — for that would merely sustain adversarial deadlock — resistance to the binding force of beneficence cannot occur through its replacement by another system, because that would equally risk transforming free choice into duty. In both cases, resistance has to happen from the inside by loosening structures to allow the unfettered movement of the energy that these structures exploit and yet also conceal, to resurface, indicating the possibility for change.

**Tenuous Social Exchange: a reworking of the code of beneficence**

The 'negative virtue' of inaction in the sixth *promenade* becomes transformed in the ninth *promenade*, as Rousseau explores the pleasure found in anonymous good actions.

These moments of tenuous social exchange demonstrate the possibility for doing good
without falling prey to the strictures and objectification of beneficence. Rousseau sketches through these exchanges a freer form of social interaction that does not impede the mobility of the self and its fluid relation with the wider sphere. These exchanges are initiated by Rousseau as anonymous beneficent acts whose anonymity abolishes the customary response of gratitude on the part of the beneficiary, so that the only ‘return’ in the exchange is Rousseau’s pleasure at seeing the happiness of the receiver. This attenuated beneficent exchange links up with the desire for free-association and indeterminacy of the reverie, offering an implicit comment on the impossibility of basing community life on a notion of substantial unity or a single ideal. Echoing earlier statements, Rousseau urges us to think beyond the limits of the Utopian dream of permanent happiness, by making us identify with the transience of the external world and its resistance to paradigmatic reduction:

Le bonheur est un état permanent qui ne semble pas fait ici-bas pour l’homme. Tout est sur la terre dans un flux continu qui ne permet à rien de prendre une forme constante. Tout change autour de nous. Nous changeons nous-mêmes et nul ne peut s’assurer qu’il aimera demain ce qu’il aime aujourd’hui. Ainsi tous nos projets de félicité pour cette vie sont des chimères. Profitons du contentement qu’il vient; gardons-nous de l’éloigner par notre faute, mais ne faisons pas des projets pour l’enchaîner, car ces projets-là sont de pures folies (Rêveries, p. 1085)

Any attempt to systematise the social space to make it accord with a Utopian model works to negate its mutability and contingency, thereby collapsing into the terror of totalitarianism. The Rêveries have the effect of deconstructing these fantasies, by bringing to the fore the violence at the origin of any system. In this way, it shows the breach between state ideology and organisation, on the one hand, and subjective experience, on the other; this discrepancy paves the way for re-imagining socio-
political relations as a more fluid, transformable phenomenon. The aesthetic experience of the reverie uncovered the chimera of viewing art as wish-fulfilment. Rather, this experience redefines art as the letting-go of the space filled by wish-fulfilment, that is, the exposure of wish-fulfilment as a fictional representation, and not a matter of truth. The aesthetic realm works on socio-discursive structures to reveal the irreducible element of fantasy that exists therein. We confront once again the fallacy of trying to realise the full representation of our desire. The unbound energy of desire has to remain unfulfilled to permit the constant reconfiguring of the collective domain. As in the Discours sur l'inégalité, Rousseau is warning us here against the illusions of happiness after which we strive; such illusions can only engender uniformity and therefore unhappiness.

The dangers of imaginary power are figured in the non-egalitarian perverse pleasures of a birthday party at La Chevrette. Rousseau attends the birthday party of the master of the house and after the festivities of the party, he and the other guests make their way to a public fair. A young man decides to buy gingerbread from a fairground seller to toss to a group of peasants. The privileged members of the party follow his lead and then watch as the peasants aggressively compete with one another to obtain a piece of gingerbread. The false act of ‘kindness’ to the poor, enacted by the wealthy guests, reinforces a rigid hierarchy by clearly demarcating and underscoring the boundaries between the rich and the poor. Rousseau vividly evokes the image of human debasement of the ensuing scene, writing that he and the other guests took delight in seeing ‘tous ces manants se précipiter, se battre, se renverser pour en avoir, que tout le
monde voulant se donner le même plaisir. Et pains d'épice de voler à droite et à gauche, et filles et garçons de courir, s'entasser et s'estropier; cela paraissait charmant à tout le monde’(Réveries, p. 1092). This scene dismantles the illusion of greatness that the guests at the party derive from this spectacle of deprivation and struggle, by demonstrating how their own delusions of grandeur, or fullness of being, are dependent upon the identity of the sprawling, oppressed masses. The hierarchical segregation of this non-egalitarian act of goodness becomes subverted from within by the resurgence of the chaos that their fantasy aims to suppress. They can only secure a sense of group superiority through the violent disavowal of the other. This act of exclusion re-inscribes the other within their image of full identity, revealing the fictionality of the feeling of mastery. This scene of injustice illustrates the chimerical foundations of the perverse pleasure taken in social divisions, invoking the desire for a more egalitarian and just form of group pleasure.

Rousseau, ashamed of the delight he initially took in this spectacle, decides to withdraw from the birthday party to make his way into the popular fair where he proceeds to enjoy performing small acts of beneficence. These kind actions constitute a harsh critique of the inequality of the birthday festivities. Their adventitious nature exists independently of the rigid stratification of society, functioning to undermine the illusory organicity of that realm, by foregrounding the possibility of shared pleasure that is not motivated by self-interest or the desire to negate the other.46 Rousseau recounts how he buys apples for a group of Savoyard boys, who have been longingly looking at them in the tray of a fairground seller. This act brings contentment to all
involved: the boys who get to satisfy their longing, the seller who is relieved of her produce, and Rousseau, as an disinterested spectator, who witnesses the pleasure on the faces of the beneficiaries. The equal distribution of pleasure recalls an earlier non-contractual act of beneficence where Rousseau pays for a group of little girls to have a turn at winning wafers from a vendor. Returning home from dinner Rousseau and his wife, Thérèse, encounter a group of twenty schoolgirls accompanied by a nun. A man approaches who sells chances to spin a wheel and win wafers. As some of the girls have no money, Rousseau offers to pay for them to participate in the game. Rousseau fixes the game with the vendor to allow nearly everyone to win a wafer, and his wife encourages those who have been luckier to share their prizes with their peers. This scene of social unity partakes of the same degree of illusion as the birthday party, but whereas the imaginary element of the latter functions to grant the oppressor a false sense of power over the oppressed, it works in this scene to empower all involved by urging them to recognise their openness to each other through shared feelings. The pleasure of these anonymous acts of goodness transcends and uncovers the fallacy of social divisions, erected to set man in opposition against his own kind in order to hide the inequality of society and thus, the artificial foundations of social superiority. Rousseau makes this explicit when he compares the perverse episode of the birthday party with the tenuous social exchanges: ‘En comparant cet amusement avec ceux que je viens de quitter, je sentais avec satisfaction la différence qu’il y a des goûts sains et naturels à ceux que fait naître l’opulence, et qui ne sont guère que des plaisirs de moquerie et des gouts exclusifs engendrés par le mépris’ (Rêveries, p. 1093).
Rousseau returns to the place of the wafer-selling episode, hoping to relive the joy, only to realise the impossibility of re-enacting it. The contingency of this episode renders it impermeable to a system of exchange that is based on the principle of repetition and identity. Their resistance to being structured may, on the one hand, leave the desire for community unfulfilled, but, on the other, preserves the freedom to engage in human interaction separately from wider frameworks that aim to ensnare that desire so as to subject it to rules and norms.

The joy of tenuous exchange is rooted less in the sentiment of beneficence and more in the sensation of pleasure coming from seeing others happy. This shift marks the moment of collective living as an opening to the other through shared affects rather than need or self-interest. ‘Pure’ sensation is already a relationship; it cannot be isolated from a referent in the external world, its ‘moral cause’. In a deeply exploratory passage, Rousseau argues that this may be established from evidence, citing the fact that the external signs of mocking, sadistic pleasure induce pain and indignation rather than joy in an outside observer. What, nevertheless, initially appears as a clear distinction between cruel and innocent pleasure in the realm of signs emerges as more nebulous as the discussion progresses: ‘La joie innocente est la seule dont les signes flattent mon coeur. Ceux de la cruelle et moqueuse joie le navrent et l’affligent quoiqu’elle n’ait nul rapport à moi. Ces signes sans doute ne sauraient être exactement les mêmes, partant de principes si différents: mais enfin ce sont également des signes de joie, et leurs différences sensibles ne sont assurément pas proportionnelles à celles des mouvements qu’ils excitent en moi’ (Rêveries, p. 1094). The continuity implied between
the objective level of signs and the subjective level of feeling becomes somewhat modified as Rousseau recognises, here, the disproportion between the two coordinates. The sensible differences between external signs do not contain equivalent differences in the degree of intensity of the effects that emotionally charged scenes can have on the spectator.

From Rousseau’s discussion, we can begin to forge important links between the aesthetic, political and ethical domains. Rousseau recognises the impossibility of fully translating the aesthetic domain of sensations into that of cognition or understanding. Their disproportionate relationship makes inconceivable a moral consensus based on a deep connection between our perception and its rationalisation in the realm of concept, rules and codes. Rousseau’s probing of this question could lead us to identify the incommensurable as being at the origin of ethico-political activity. The discontinuity between intense sensations and intelligibility disallows the establishment of concrete, flawless principles upon which we can judge the outside world (as is suggested by the fact that Rousseau was seduced by the pernicious pleasure of the birthday party). The differences of intensity between the pleasure taken in the sadistic control of others and that taken in anonymous acts of goodness is occulted as these differences are reduced by language to the common term ‘joy’. This suspends us in a state of undecidability, disclosing the inadequacy of reasoning and structures, that is, objectivity, as a complete guide for determining our moral and political stance. However, it is precisely the discontinuity between aesthetic responses and their systematisation that exhorts us, in the first place, to struggle to translate the subjective level of experience into the
apparent objectivity of reason. Their partial reconciliation can only occur to the exclusion of singular intensities whose radical difference refuses discursive determination. The impossibility of fully understanding the aesthetic responses incurred in self-other interaction makes inventiveness, critical judgement, creativity, in short, imagination crucial for any attempt to give moral and political definition to social relations. The sensations that link us to one another, being without an objective referent, can never be substantiated in knowledge so as to provide a stable foundation for community. Their heterogeneity to understanding produces the negativity, ambiguity and non-consensus that necessitates ethico-political activity. This inadequacy affords affectivity, the subjective level of existence, some freedom to extricate itself from the realm of signs in order to exhibit the failure of semiological categories to grasp moral complexity. It obtains, then, critical force, highlighting the breach between subject and object and thus the necessity for constant evaluation and redefinition of collective values and principles.

The moments of tenuous exchange locate, in contradistinction to the symmetry of beneficence, a mode of subjectivity that does not have to subsume its free or spontaneous affects under the rule of law or duty. The critical potential of these moments lies in the fact that the aesthetic pleasure of doing good can operate independently of a world in which valid social behaviour or activity has to be grounded in a determinable and objectifiable set of relations or principles that can be easily subordinated to universal laws. Rousseau stresses the importance of affectivity in defining the subject’s position towards the outside, exceeding a totally rational view of
our connection with objectivity. Our moral life seems interposed between affects and cognition, remaining irreducible to either realm. It occupies a fluid *entremonde* whose indeterminacy prevents the subject from being fully constituted around ethical ideals, creating a space in which he can establish a sphere of purposive action of his own, without being forced to submit totally to the law.

The perpetual process of reversal and subversion in the *Rêveries* moves through and beyond the fantasy of extreme Utopianism and its catastrophic consequences, by bringing to the fore the constitutive and innovative force of antagonism for the self and for its precarious relationship with the wider sphere. The unifying tendencies of the system, which seek to achieve order and control through the elimination of singularity, can never fully eradicate the violence at the origin of the system. Any dream of complete harmony is always subverted from within by the disharmony that it works to repress. Negation of this irreducible ambiguity results in the stasis and oppression that Rousseau identifies in his experience vis-à-vis his enemies. It is the factitious passion of *amour-propre*, with its demand for total mastery, that provokes the aggressive drive to totalitarianism, as individuals disavow and try to annihilate the other in order to gain an imaginary sense of superiority.

The *Rêveries* demonstrate the clash between intensity and structure, the particular and the general, the self and the social. Rather than seeking to dissipate this tension, the autobiographical writing, like radical democracy, aims to mediate between a logic of complete identity and radical difference without falling prey to the nihilism engendered
by total submission to either term. Mediation can only occur through the constant re-inscription of the heterogeneity that subtends creativity. Through its resurgence in the textual space, the heterogeneous exposes the chasm between the subject and its representation at the level of the system. This chasm initiates the interminable search for discourses or articulatory practices that endeavour to express the incommunicable desire of the subject in the space of communicability. The articulation of identity and difference, as Rousseau’s self-representational writing illustrates, should be constantly questioned and renegotiated, underlining the fact that a perfect balance can never be definitively achieved. The aesthetic dimension, as Rousseau’s Rêveries show and as will come apparent in the following chapters, supplies a fertile terrain on which the tense negotiation of identity and difference can be played out.⁴⁹

¹ Marcel Raymond brings out the connection between the two phenomena in his discussion of the etymology of the verb ‘rêver’. Warburg’s Latin prototype of the verb, reexvagare, suggests that ‘rêver’ first meant ‘wander outside’. As Raymond indicates, reexvagare assumes another layer of meaning because ‘En celui qui rêve ainsi, qui vagabonde à son plaisir, un élément de libertinage est en jeu, ou même un élément orgiaque. Qui rêve s’abandonne’ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la Quête de soi et la Rêverie, (Paris: Corti, 1962), p. 159. Rousseau implies this meaning when he writes: ‘Pour bien remplir le titre de ce recueil il l’aurais dû commencer il y a soixante ans: car ma vie entière n’a guère été qu’une longue rêverie divisée en chapitres par mes promenades de chaque jour’ (Ebauches des Rêveries, OC1, p. 1165)


³ This reminds us of the way in which the law functions in the Contrat social. The law frees the citizen from personal dependence by making him recognise that everyone is dependent on the law. This realisation of shared dependence despoils others of their seeming omnipotence. See chapter 2.

⁴ The Rêveries contrast sharply with the Dialogues. The Dialogues represent a desperate effort to persuade the reader, who is even incorporated into the text through the fictional character of the Frenchman, of Jean-Jacques’s innocence. The Frenchman, after an imaginary dialogue with the malign author, abandons his prejudices against him and offers to help him by preserving the integrity of his documents: the only means of assuring the truth of ‘Jean-Jacques’. However, in the Rêveries, Rousseau concedes the futility of trying to change people’s hostile view of him, preferring to withdraw into the self as a way of re-imagining social truth.


⁶ Ibid., p. 252.
For a discussion of the connection between *amour-propre* and the Lacanian concept of the imaginary, see Alain Grosrichard, ‘Où suis-je? Que suis-je?’, pp. 36-39.


Grosrichard discusses with great clarity the relations between the Lacanian subject and Rousseau’s presentation of the self in the *Rêveries*. He remarks how Rousseau, in an attempt to overcome the aporias of subjectivity, shows himself to be at once lucid and blind. However, as we shall see, this oscillation between lucidity and blindness conditions the emergence of the subject as he endeavours to forge an identity for himself in a radically undecidable terrain that leaves him uncertain of his position. In this sense, Rousseau’s moments of ‘blindness’ are also perspicacious, illustrating the necessity of illusion in order for the subject to be able to convert an instant of aporia into one of critical activity and growth. ‘Où suis-je? Que suis-je?’, p. 32.

In the *Discours*, Rousseau links the notion of ‘l’âme’ with the idea of freedom: ‘c’est surtout dans la liberté que se montre la spiritualité de son âme’, (p. 142).


I owe the explanation of the twofold nature of defacement to Hans Jost Frey’s deconstructive reading of de Man’s somewhat reductive theorisation of autobiography as non-referential. See ‘Undecidability’ in *The Lessons of Paul de Man*, Yale French Studies, number 69, 1985 (p. 125).


Stavvakakis describes these two moments as ‘two sides of the same coin that reveal the dialectic of the subject and the social in Lacanian theory’. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

This reading of Rousseauian reverie is assisted by Lyotard’s notion of active passivity. Active passivity is not the action of the subject, but a passive openness to a multiplicity of heterogeneous affects and intensities whose resistance to categorisation and identification disrupts the subject’s (ego’s) urge towards conceptual control. In reaction to the terror of representation that excludes the singular or seeks to reduce it to the same, we need to transform ourselves into ‘corps assez anonymes et assez conducteurs pour ne pas arrêter, pour les conduire à de nouvelles métamorphoses, pour épuiser leur force métaphorique, la force d’effets qui nous traverse’. The active-passive creative moment works on structures by allowing otherwise barred intensities and affects to irrupt into the system and move towards transforming the system. See *Economie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), pp. 287-311, (p. 307).
the chapter on the *Miroir de la Tauromachie* for further discussion of the importance of *Economie libidinale* and *Discours, figure* for this thesis's attempt to link the aesthetic and the political. Interestingly, the musical listener, for Rousseau, occupies a position that is at once active and passive. The listener gives himself over to the music; his passivity merges with activity when music excites in him the passions it expresses. See *Essai sur L'origine des langues* pp. 419-417 and Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 295.

19 This is not to deny the impossibility of unmediated representation or understanding; the aesthetic reconfiguration of his moments of reverie undoubtedly relies on signification, as Rousseau acknowledges. (See above). He nevertheless attempts to express poetically the moment of existence as a feeling of openness, mobility, indeterminacy, rather than the work of reason. See footnote 33 for an interpretation of the central differences between Descartes and Rousseau on this point.


21 'It means that only freedom can originally open us — or open “being” as such — up to something like “causality” or “destiny”, or “necessity” or “decision” Ibid., p. 163.

22 Ibid., p. 171.

23 'The story of a single person, or of a single family, becomes historical only insofar as it belongs to a community. That means also that history belongs to politics, if politics means (as it does throughout our entire history) building, managing, and representing being in-common as such (and not only as the social transaction of individual or particular needs and forces)’ Ibid., p. 157. Rousseau’s claim that he is only writing the *Rêveries* for himself may at first sight appear to exclude this work from the space of community. However, this withdrawal from the collective sphere becomes a necessary condition of Rousseau’s attempt to empty out the binding and authoritarian relations of the wider sphere to create a space in which a new relationship between the self and the social can be forged.

24 Rousseau shows the imaginary nature of the feeling of community throughout his autobiographical writings. For example, in the *Lettres à Malesherbes*, he writes ‘Aigri par les injustices que j’avais éprouvées, par celles dont j’avais été le témoin, souvent affligé du désordre où l’exemple et la force des choses m’avaient entraîné moi-même, j’ai pris en mépris siècle et mes contemporains; et, sentant que je ne trouverais point au milieu d’eux une situation qui pût contenter mon coeur, je l’ai peu à peu détaché de la société des hommes, et je m’en suis fait une autre dans mon imagination, laquelle m’a d’autant plus charmé que je la pouvais cultiver sans peine, sans risque et la trouver toujours sûre et telle qu’il me la fallait’ (pp. 1134-1135). The desire for community emerges through its absence.

25 'Community is the community of others, which does not mean that several individuals possess some common nature in spite of their differences, but rather that they partake only of their otherness. Otherness, at each moment, is the otherness of each “myself” which is “myself” only as other. Otherness is not a common substance, but it is on the contrary the non-substantiality of each “self” and of its relationship with others. All the selves are related through their otherness, which means that they are not “related” in any case, not in any determinable sense of relationship. They are together, but togetherness is otherness.’ Nancy, *Finite History*, p. 160. This concurs with the presentation of community in the *Discours sur l’inégalité*: the question of community emerges with the gradual alienation of man, that is, his transformation from a monadic entity to state of alterity. See chapter one for a closer examination of the concept of community in Rousseau.

26 'Ces courts moments de délire et de passion, quelque vifs qu’ils puissent être, ne sont cependant, et par leur vivacité même que des points bien clairsemés dans la ligne de la vie. Ils sont trop rare et trop rapides pour constituer un état simple et permanent, qui n’a rien de vif en lui-même, mais dont la durée accroît le charme au point d’y trouver enfin la suprême félicité’ (*Rêveries*, p. 1046)

Starobinski draws attention to the double movement of the reverie. He shows how the lived experience of the reverie, marked by heterogeneity and discontinuity, is eventually subjected to the clarifying process of textualisation that seeks to absorb 'la multiplicité et la discontinuité de l’expérience vécue, en inventant un discours unifiant au sein duquel tout viendrait se compenser et s’égaliser' ‘Rêverie et Transmutation’ in La transparence et l’Obstacle (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 419. The discursive space can never fully erase the traces of radical difference of the extralinguistic.

Starobinski makes a similar point when he illustrates how the luminosity of the reverie is coextensive with the obscurity of which it is born: ‘Mais comme le conflit constitue la condition nécessaire de la rêverie réparatrice, comme il est point de départ obscu dont a besoin la transmutation clarifiante, il reste évident que le trouble conflictuel persiste sourdement à l’arrière plan. De fait, lors même que Rousseau se promet d’oublier de ses malheurs, il persiste à les mentionner. Le projet d’oublier n’est pas le véritable oubli.’ Ibid., p. 424. Even when he talks of inner peace, he cannot do so without reference to his enemies, ‘en paix malgré eux’.

We can also detect a similar tension in Leiris’s texts between the desire for the convergence of subject and object, the self and the universe and the void underlying that desire. Michèle Richman brings this tension out in Leiris’s writings. See his ‘Leiris’s L’ Age d’homme: Politics and the Sacred in Everyday Ethnography’, On Leiris, Yale French Studies, no.81, 1992, pp. 91-110.

This develops further the distinction already made by Grosrichard between Descartes and Rousseau (see footnote 33). Zizek, The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology (London: Verso, 1999)

Imagination reveals itself as an antidote to the disharmony of the world and Rousseau’s sense of alienation from it. The subject can only find tranquility and security through its intervention. This is brought out on several occasions, but in particular when Rousseau recounts how from an early age, his feeling of alterity impelled him to use imagination to find a more stable grounding for the self: ‘Jeté dès mon enfance dans le tourbillon du monde, j’apris de bonne heure par l’expérience que je n’étais pas fait pour y vivre, et que je n’y parviendrais jamais à l’état dont mon coeur sentait le besoin. Cessant donc de chercher parmi les hommes le bonheur que je sentais n’y pouvoir trouver, mon ardent imagination sautait déjà par dessus l’espace de ma vie, à peine commencée, comme sur un terrain qui m’est étranger, pour se reposer sur une assiette tranquille où je puisse me fixer’ (Rêverie, p. 1012). These imaginary productions cannot be separated from what they seek to suppress.

Grosrichard makes a similar point when he explores the differences between Descartes’ own self-interrogation and that of Rousseau. Whereas for Descartes, self-questioning leads to knowledge of the self and its position within the universe; for Rousseau, it reveals the interpenetration of the self and the social. Grosrichard cogently argues that ‘La question “que suis-je?” relève chez Descartes une ontologie du sujet, qui s’inscrit dans une métaphysique dualiste fondant une théorie de la connaissance. La même question relève, chez Rousseau, d’une topique du sujet, inséparable d’une topologie du rapport intersubjectif, et rendent raison tout à la fois de la nécessité et de l’impossibilité d’une morale et d’une politique’. Ibid., p. 31.

The co-involvement of life and death in the aesthetic experience of the reverie links up with Michel Leiris’s anthropological poetics. Like Rousseau, Leiris underlines the mutually deconstructive relationship of life and death, and the potentially destructive and regenerative nature of their tense co-existence. (See the chapter on the Miroir de la tauromachie). This link and the others this thesis aims to make, highlights the relevance and proximity of Rousseau’s thinking to the twentieth century, in particular his refusal to reduce phenomena to binary sets. It is this fact that could potentially reevaluate the conclusion made in a recent study comparing Rousseau and George Bataille. Ansart concludes, despite having sensed the possible importance of expenditure (la dépense) for understanding human activity, ‘Rousseau reste pris dans un monde de pensée qui oppose l’utile à l’inutile, le nécessaire au
superflu, et ainsi de suite. Bataille essayera de montrer qu’une telle logique est impuissante à penser
l’activité humaine’. Guillaume Ansart, ‘Rousseau, Bataille, et le principe de l’utilité classique’ in French
Studies vol LV, no.1, January 2001, pp. 25-35, (p.35). The desire for purposelessness, indeterminacy and
openness, which we have uncovered in the Rêveries, counters this reductive interpretation of Rousseau’s
thinking. The seemingly idle and aimless moment of the reverie grants the subject, by its being remote
from the rigidity of social life, a space in which he may experience the chaos and mutability of the
outside world. The intensity and heterogeneity of this state has the possibility of exposing the subject to
the beyond, to the void around which he and the objective level of his existence are articulated.

35 As I have previously indicated, the reverie is always delimited by the social. This notion somewhat
attenuates the idea of positive or unlimited freedom. However, its poetic force, as moment when the self
opens up to its own existence, creates the impression of unbound freedom.

36 Rousseau’s rejection of abstract definitions of right and wrong, good and evil, emerges in his
discussion of truth in the fourth promenade.

37 Justice can be understood as an experience of the undecidable, an aporetic moment when established
rights or rules are exposed as inadequate to explain or ensure justice for a particular case and are
therefore suspended. Consequently, justice must make a space in which political and juridical
transformations or redefinitions can happen. See J. Derrida, Force de loi (Paris: Galilée, 1994). This
distinction between justice and the law partially matches that between the political and politics. Justice,
like the political, constitutes the generative energy behind the construction and reconstruction of the law;
accordingly, the law is the sedimentation of this energy into a given form. Because of the inherent
undecidability of justice, it is always in excess of the frameworks that aim to guarantee it.

38 For a discussion of the inseparability of the two social logics of freedom and equality, see Laclau and
Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, pp. 164-186.

39 Ernesto Laclau posits this understanding of the ethical. See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj

40 Laclau, Ibid., p. 81.

41 This idea is contained in the nothingness of the second stage of nature where the social fabric is
completely dissolved, as each individual strives destructively for what he wants. See chapter I.

42 See the Lettre à Malesherbes du 4 janvier1762, OC I.

43 I owe the idea of tenuous social exchange to Felicity Baker, and I wish to thank her for drawing my
attention to it.

44 This understanding of aesthetic experience comes from Lyotard’s re-working of the psychoanalytical
notion of the double reversal. For a discussion of the aesthetic reversal, see the chapter on the
Miroir de la tauromachie and also Lyotard, Discours, figure, pp. 379-385.

45 For a comparison of this episode with the other examples of beneficence in the ninth promenade, see

46 See chapter 1, for a discussion of the divisive effect of pleasure on social relations.

47 Rousseau discusses the complex interaction of signs and affectivity in his theory of music, as
elaborated in Essai sur l’origine des langues: ‘nous donnons trop et trop peu d’empire aux sensations;
souvent nous ne voyons pas que souvent elles ne nous affectent point seulement comme sensations mais
comme signes ou images, et que leurs effets moraux ont aussi des causes morales’. (118) Sensations in
themselves are not always sufficient to generate moral effects, gaining their full force from their moral
context. The realm of signs can also have an impact on us through the sensations they produce. This quotation does not imply a strictly mimetic relation between signs and sensations, but affords either realm a degree of autonomy; representations can shape our moral perception of a scene as much as sensations can.

48 The incident with the small boy, at the beginning of the ninth promenade, implies the impossibility of translating our internal life to the outside. Rousseau responds affectionately to a little boy whom he does not know. This affection meets with a suspicious look from the boy’s father whom Rousseau believes forms part of the universal plot against him. The happy moment turns sour when Rousseau feels that he cannot escape the terror of his misrepresentation. The scene demonstrates the gap between self and other caused by the indeterminacy of the world of signs. Rousseau’s desire to express his love for others, by kissing the small boy, gets misinterpreted by the father who cannot separate his vision of Rousseau from his negative portrayal in society. Similarly, Rousseau could have misinterpreted the father’s look as disapproving because of the effect of his present situation. The impossibility of reaching a state of social transparency constitutes the central problem of civil society. However, it is precisely because we cannot attain self-identity through signs that political society exists at all. The indeterminacy of semiological systems incites the non-consensus and deliberation of politics.

49 Laclau and Mouffe describe how ‘the experience of democracy should consist of the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation. But this articulation should be constantly re-created and re-negotiated, and there is no final point at which a balance will be definitely achieved’. Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a Radical Democratic Politics, p. 188.
Poetic Resistance: Michel Leiris's *Miroir de la tauromachie*

This chapter will work towards a conflation of Michel Leiris's anthropological poetics with a certain conception of political resistance. The chapter is located in the aesthetic dimension, exploring it as a privileged space of transgression, disorder, and evil, which is at once integrated and not integrated in the social. We can find support for this understanding of the indeterminate status of art in Rousseau's depiction of the theatrical space in *Lettre à d'Alembert*. His exploration of the theatre proves important for the problematic of this chapter, since it uncovers the ambiguities and contradictions that surround any attempt to tackle the difficult question of art and its relation to the political.

Rousseau foregrounds the way in which the theatre is at once part and not part of the civic order, stating that although it is situated in the heart of the *cité*, it remains impermeable to the laws that govern there: 'Or les lois n'ont nul accès au theatre, dont la moindre contrainte ferait une peine et non pas un amusement. L'opinion n'en depend point, au lieu de faire la loi au public, le théâtre la reçoit de lui....'( *Lettre à d'Alembert, OCV*, p. 21)*. This quotation appears first to underline the theatre's marginal role in engendering social integration. However, the ambiguity of the second sentence undermines this conclusion, suggesting that the theatre has a more complex connection with the dynamic of the social space than we have initially thought. Its ambiguity primarily stems from the connotative value of the term opinion.² Although opinion does not depend on the theatre for its content, we cannot automatically conclude that the theatre follows opinion. For example, the impenetrability of the theatrical space permits evil or transgressive acts or images to be shown on the stage;
as Rousseau demonstrates in his elliptical footnote on the terrifying appearance of the devil in a tragedy performed for the Genevan festival of the *Escalade*. However, he does argue that the theatre is governed by the public, yet leaving open the question how this happens. Opinion can at once mean the received attitudes and values of a given people, to which the theatre has to conform in order to gratify its audience, or an active agency which could dislodge the dominion of commonly-held preconceptions and allow for the emergence of new cultural systems. In short, the theatre can have a stunting or stimulating effect on political activity. Just as the partially alienated position of civil man in Rousseau’s political theory accords him the capacity for independent thought, free from the perversity and aberration of the prevailing political order; we could argue that it is the fact that the theatrical or aesthetic space exists at a remove from the wider social structures that makes it a potential site of social criticism and transformation. The theatre and civic man share the same status of being at once inside and outside the social. Through its autonomy, the theatre could provide a space in which the critical powers of man could emerge to re-imagine politics as a more open field.

From this perspective, the aesthetic dimension occupies an indeterminate position, interposed between identity and difference. Rather than operating as a brute rejection of frameworks, support and apparatus, the aesthetic performs a more complex function, simultaneously violating and participating in the ideological structures which found and mediate our relationship to reality. This understanding of the aesthetic points to the work of art as a possible space through which intense singularity can appear within and disturb a more universal framework, based largely on the restrictive notion of specular identity. Art thus manifests itself as the search for
the limits of representation rather than as primarily representative. It is the
displacement of the field of representation by artistic work that implicates it in and
extricates it from the social domain. The fact that it resists full absorption into the
seemingly rational realm of society grants it the potential to uncover and transcend the
restrictions of this realm. It works to disturb the claims of politics to define and
therefore understand the social exhaustively, highlighting the way in which political
representations remain forever open to being questioned and fragmented by the force
of the contingent.

The Beautiful as the Incommensurable

The *Miroir de la tauromachie* has been described as Leiris’s *ars poetica*. It explores
his conception of aesthetic experience through a complex analogy of art, bullfighting
and eroticism. He considers these three domains in terms of the sacred and sacrifice.

Leiris begins the essay by noting how certain sites, events or objects serve to allow
passions, which normally remain suppressed or concealed, to surface momentarily in
the social context. This affective energy emerges as what is most intimate in us. One
of the central arguments of the essay is that religious and cultural rituals of the past
permitted paroxysmal states, but in the present day such states are dissimulated by ‘un
étroit empirisme camouflé plus ou moins habilement sous l’étiquette de réalisme’
(27). It becomes clear that the affects have not been fully evacuated from the social
sphere, but lurk therein, masked by the numbing effect of familiarity. Through their
disruptive force, these singular affects have the potential to disturb and reinvigorate
moribund structures by sensitising us to the limits of our narrow vision of social
reality. The relationship between routine experience and these critical moments is one
of tension and discharge, a dynamic shared by sex, and indeed art. The central focus
of the essay, the *corrida*, or bullfight, emerges as a site of the sacred where the unbound intensity of the 'remuements souterrains' irrupts to transcend the boundaries of the social sphere that seeks to contain and repress this potentially subversive energy under the guise of order and utility. Through Leiris’s use of the bullfight as a metaphor for the artistic process, we can begin to understand art as a transgressive realm, with the potential to push beyond the space in which it is entangled, but from which it disentangles itself.

Leiris links the beauty of the art of bullfighting to Baudelaire’s radical definition of poetic beauty. This conceptualisation of beauty sets the scene for Leiris’s insistence that the bullfight exceeds its modern social definition as a sport or an aesthetic pursuit without mythic implications. Leiris observes how Baudelaire’s description in *Fusée* of the beauty of a woman’s face as “ardente et triste” supersedes a romantic definition of the beautiful as a static complex of contrasts to assume a more classical definition, as an ideal beauty in which lies “une faille ou une fêlure, passage que s’est frayé le malheur qu’elle doit forcément recéler”(36). Leiris is keen to stress the way in which beauty, for Baudelaire, can be understood as a dynamic rather than static phenomenon: it only exists in so far as we can locate within it a disruptive, contingent force which dislodges it from its “stagnation glaciale”, just as the immobile idyll of Eden required sin to bring it to life:

Composition double du beau dont Baudelaire marque, ailleurs et sous une autre forme, la nécessité : présence indispensable, à côté d’un élément éternel et immuable, d’un élément circonstanciel aux métamorphoses incessantes, cette “modernité” qui empêche de tomber “dans le vide d’une beauté abstraite et indéfinissable, celle de l’unique femme avant le premier péché” (36)

Beauty emerges as a double-sided phenomenon, as the blocking together of
incommensurable forces of beauty have an ambiguous function that defies any attempt to locate it in an ethical sphere organised around “definable” notions of good and evil. What Leiris uncovers through his exploration of beauty is the inseparability of seemingly opposed elements. Both coordinates enter into a mutually deconstructive relationship: the order and logic of ideal beauty cannot conceivably exist with or without the disorder and incoherence of the disruptive energy of its obverse. From a wider perspective, no space can therefore be considered as conflict-free: we cannot demarcate the outside of the system, since the outside already occupies an essential position within its very core. The system is propelled by that energy which constantly seeks to move beyond it in the search of potentially radical change: ‘Ainsi le beau, n’existant qu’en fonction de ce qui se détruit et de ce qui se régénère, se présentera tantôt comme un calme dévoré par la tempête en puissance, tantôt comme une frénésie qui s’ordonne et cherche à contenir sous un masque impassible son orage intérieur’ (pp. 36-37). Leiris foregrounds the way in which the potential for
transformation is already present within the system itself. The indivisibility of interiority and exteriority means that resistance to the controlling tendencies of structures happens internally, rather emanating from an external force. Rather than seeking to overthrow the system in its entirety through violent revolutionary action, which, in its endeavour to surmount negativity and thereby bring a sense of closure to the social space, would merely repeat the oppressive structures of the previous regime, we must recognise and preserve the opportunities for resistance from the inside.

Similarly, from a more obvious socio-political perspective, we can note that for Rousseau, the potential for mutation also occurs from within. He builds the possibility for change into his image of the pure state of nature in the shape of the potential faculties. Imagination and perfectibility work at once both to establish new, and transcend old, social institutions. For Rousseau, resistance to the degenerative movement of history lies paradoxically within the very faculties that help to create and sustain this movement. For example, as an antidote to the prejudicial representations of the other in traditional theatre, Rousseau, in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, offers a redefinition of the self-other relationship as it is constructed in the public domain of festivities. As Starobinski points out, Rousseau's remedy to the stultifying effects of conventional theatre actually consists in extending the theatrical space beyond the circumscribed arena of the theatre to the open space of public festivals. The theatre becomes, in this instance, the general condition of social interaction. The festival, by making the participants into actors (of) themselves, shows how identity is mimetic or performative, that is, without an essential foundation, and therefore ultimately dependent upon identification with the other. It thus bespeaks the fallacy of social hierarchies or divisions that are set up to exclude that other. The
liberating nature of the fêtes rests upon the indeterminate power of imagination. An alternative representation of the social emanates from the participants’ capacity to engage in imaginary acts of identification with one another. By representing nothing, the public festival stages the negativity at the origin of society that at once unites us in our attempt to imagine community and also separates us, because what requires us to unite, in the first place, is precisely the non-existence of community in a substantial form. The Rousseauean festival works to suspend social divisions by temporarily re-invoking the negativity of society that makes us all equal through the incomplete nature of our social identity.

Like the public festival, the simultaneously destructive and regenerative powers of the beautiful invalidate simple oppositions as a way of establishing full identity. The tension of the radically different qualities of the beautiful emerges through the opaque metaphors that Leiris employs to represent its energy. The blocking together of such terms as ‘un calme’ and ‘tempête’, and the oxymoronic force of the idea of “a frenzy that orders” intimates the excess that Leiris detects within it. The beautiful corresponds to Leiris’s conceptualisation of the sacred in so far as it can be understood as the fleeting convergence of contrasting elements, that is, from a wider viewpoint, of subject and object. However, the brevity of this convergence, described by Leiris as ‘une figure’ to highlight its poetic character, renders it almost imperceptible:

Cependant, l’on verra que cette figure même de la tangence n’est qu’une limite idéale, pratiquement jamais atteinte, et que toute l’émotion esthétique — ou approximation de la beauté — se greffe finalement sur cette lacune qui représente l’élément sinistre sous sa forme la plus haute: inachèvement obligatoire, gouffre que nous cherchons vainement à combler, brèche ouverte à notre perdition (p. 37).
The Affirmative Value of the Negative

To advance the ultimate aim towards which the chapter tends, which is to bring this 'lacuna', this 'obligatory incompletion' of aesthetic experience within the scope of a theorisation which can include a radically democratic understanding of the political, I will now explore the ways in which Leiris's negativity may be read as affirmation, not merely as lack. As Mehlman indicates, the *Miroir de la tauromachie* explores Leiris's 'painful discovery' that the 'splendid wholeness' of the work of art is not a viable proposition. However, rather than being cause for despair, the inherent incompleteness that Leiris detects in art actually preserves its innovative and critical dimension. Theorisations of radical democracy begin from a similar premise. The insurmountable negativity at the centre of democracy creates the possibility of radical change and freedom. As we shall see, Leiris's exploration of aesthetic experience brings out, in a metaphorical form, the irreducible tension and antagonism of democracy.

The *Miroir de la tauromachie*, as shown in the above quotation, names the movement from the intensity of the beautiful, composed of incommensurable forces, to the negativity of a breach, which serves to represent this intensity. Mehlman stresses the negativity of Leiris's conception of aesthetic experience, arguing that the brevity of the moment of union between subject and object means that this fusion can no longer be understood as the crucial interaction of the self and the world, but 'between contact (union) and its negation in time (separation). While we cannot deny the impossibility of fully representing the beautiful, and the recurring image of what Mehlman calls the essay's 'vital crevice', we could argue that such an interpretation of Leiris's poetics underplays its affirmative force. The impossibility of symbolising the radical difference of the antagonistic elements that constitute the beautiful leaves
its representation incomplete. This ‘obligatory incompleteness,’ which for Leiris is the highest form of ‘aesthetic emotion,’ provides a space on the objective level of existence for affective energy to push experimentally beyond the limitations of the system. This moment does not simply mark the oscillation of contact and separation in time, but also the irruption of intense feelings whose heterogeneity to existing structures demands the invention of innovative and experimental representational modes that seek to attest to that heterogeneity, to the limits of the system. The inadequacy of the system, its ineradicable negativity, therefore becomes the spur for creativity and inventiveness. We can thus understand incompleteness not as that which must be completed, or as a lack which must be filled, but as an aperture through which potentially transformative energy can pass.

The need to develop an affirmative understanding of lack in Leiris’s notion of aesthetic experience finds support in Lyotard’s critique of what he calls theological modes of thinking, or “the great theatre of representation” which seeks to represent exteriority in interiority as transcendental absence. He associates this conceptualisation of the outside with nihilism, since in its attempt to grasp what lies beyond the system, it resorts to absence and thereby represses or evacuates the intensity of the affects or libidinal energy present. Conceptual thinking operates on the basis of exclusion of radical difference, trying to establish relations of equivalence between incommensurable figures — figures that deny one another’s existence — in an attempt to build a metanarrative or totalising discourse that yields these figures to the categories of knowledge. He criticises such thinking for the way in which it endeavours to establish a gauge or a master scale from which incompossible intensities can be measured and understood, and for failing consequently to concede
the impossibility of integrating everything into a logical taxonomic system. While I must postpone for a while my aim of linking Leiris’s aesthetics to a radically democratic view of the political, Lyotard’s reminder that theory can never integrate everything into a logical taxonomic system can be linked to Lefort’s use of the term ‘totalitarianism’ to designate the attempt to set up a gauge by which we can fully master and represent the social.

The ‘great Zero of representation’ is Lyotard’s expression denoting the external point, the idea of a lack or an absence that is held as an orienting force. The great Zero, being merely another figure of libidinal energy, cannot claim to occupy a privileged position totally external to the system or to provide a full representation of intensity. In fact, theory’s conception of this Zero as a figure of ‘the rigour of the law’ is precisely what links it to the pleasure of sadistic control or mastery:

Bien loin de prendre le grand Zéro comme l’ontologique motif, imposé au désir, de toujours tout différer, re-présenter et simuler dans un report sans fin, nous économistes libidinaux, affirmons que ce Zéro est lui-même une figure (...) Nous allons montrer que non seulement il n’est pas nécessaire d’en passer par lui pour suivre le parcours des intensités sur le labyrinthe, mais plus encore que le passage par le Zéro est lui-même un parcours libidinal spécial, que la position du Signifiant ou de l’Autre est dans le dispositif de la circonversion une position elle-même jouissive, que “la rigueur de la loi” en fait bander plus d’un, et qu’on n’a pas affaire avec ce Rien à une nécessité ontologique, mais à une fantaisie religieuse, donc libidinale, comme telle du reste tout à fait acceptable, disons-le, si elle n’était, hélas, terroriste et déontique. Il faut modeler une idée affirmative du Zéro. 14

The affirmative value of the negative in Leiris can be better understood with the help of Lyotard’s observations. Like Leiris, Lyotard refuses to demarcate the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the system; everything is in fact fuelled by libidinal energy, albeit to varying degrees of intensity. In the same way that Leiris highlights the inseparability of order and disorder in the dynamics of the beautiful, we
cannot dissociate the work of desire from the ordered domain of representation. In this sense, the "orienting Zero" does not pre-exist the irruption of incommensurable intensities into the structure, but actually lives off them, exploiting them in an endeavour to reconfigure them into a knowable and representable form: intensity lurks within knowledge. In this light, we can understand representation affirmatively as the attempt to come to terms with the incommensurable, in the same way that we can understand democracy as an attempt to come terms with social negativity. Lyotard's deconstruction of the idea of a great absence, whose materiality is constantly deferred and located clearly outside the system, leads us to the conclusion that what we actually have is merely different degrees of intensity. Conceptualisation results from a process of 'désintensification' as the force behind it, libidinal energy, becomes attenuated to assume a provisional, metonymic form. Lyotard employs what could be termed a theoretical fiction, the libidinal band, to delineate the space in which our figures of understanding come into contact with the intense feelings invoked by the occurrence of an incomprehensible event - a singular happening which disrupts the order of the referential framework through which things are normally understood. Figures and dispositifs (apparatuses or structures that determine functions towards an outcome) can never fully explain this event because the release of intense feelings brings to light absolute difference that resists theorisation. Lyotard stresses that it is not because we do not completely understand the event that it cannot be represented, but because the intensities that it incites can never be consubstantial with any given structure. The impossibility of ever fully binding or systematising this energy into a recognisable order allows for its constant renewal, as the desire to comprehend and explain the event leads to the construction of new, and reconstruction of old, systems. Lyotard asserts that libidinal intensities never meet
with lack, since their free-floating energy always surpasses the limit of any given structure and therefore possesses the illimitable capacity to invest in new structures and figures.¹³

The tragic image of lack, recurrent in the *Miroir de la tauromachie*, could therefore be understood as merely a poetic representation of what Lyotard calls 'la douleur de l’incomposabilité (qui) ne se réfère pas à un zéro délimitateur, sélectionneur, orientateur. La pensée ne la précède pas.'¹⁴ This pain derives from the split between the intensity of affects and their representation, that is, from the fact that thought can never reconcile these two coexistent and yet contradictory dimensions. Lyotard is not attempting to forestall attempts to find common understanding; any such attempt would fall victim to the same exclusive and nihilistic tendencies he identifies in theoretical thinking in general. Moreover, as Leiris's writing shows, thought can be understood as an infinite endeavour to account for and explain this split. Rather, he wants to highlight the fact that such an understanding will never be complete.

The affirmative force of incompleteness and dislocation relays and takes forward the ‘inachèvement obligatoire’ of the beautiful, that is, to the impossibility of uniting the disruptive, contingent energy of its left side with the harmony and order of its right side. The mutually deconstructive relationship of the two coordinates subverts any attempt to hold them apart. What can at first seem, to readers, the stark negativity of the figure of lack or breach, becomes uncertain when we see that Leiris does not understand it as a lack that should ever be filled, since doing so would lead to stasis. Leiris’s imagery may at first appear to imply the idea of an empty space, with the connotations of a void or a crevice. However, on closer examination, we realise that
this seemingly empty space is charged with the perpetual antagonistic interaction of the two poles, never reaching a stage where there is an absolute discharge of energy:

'Tout se passera, toujours, entre ses deux pôles agissant comme des forces vivantes: d'une part, l'élément droit de beauté immortelle, souveraine, plastique: d'autre part, l'élément gauche, sinistre, situé du côté du malheur, de l'accident, du péché' (p. 37).

Leiris's image of the charged space of the beautiful and Lyotard's critique of 'the Great Zero' reinforces the metaphorical nature of Lefort's notion of the empty space of power in modern democracy. The conflict and competition of democratic politics is caused by the fact that the space of power has to be filled to create a semblance of social order. The centre of power is therefore never truly empty, always being charged with the antagonistic forces that compete to occupy it. However, whilst it is necessary to fill this space, the force that does so is purely contingent and never fully legitimate, since it can only gain victory to the exclusion of other equally legitimate forces. Any attempt to hold the space of power totally empty would deny varying interest groups and political parties their democratic right to question and redefine the terms of social justice in the competition for power. This would lead to social ossification and would prove totalitarian in its suppression of the competition and conflict constitutive of social unity, in the same way that the idea of the Great Zero is exclusive in its denial of the heterogeneous intensities involved in any act of representation. Like Rousseau's image of nature, Lefort's image of the 'lieu vide' of democracy figures the impossibility of acceding to a neutral external point from which social reality can be fully understood and mastered. It is this impossibility that generates socio-political activity.
The Sacred

The relevance of Lyotard's thinking to Leiris's understanding of aesthetic experience becomes more apparent, if we consider the influence on the overall argument of the *Miroir de la tauromachie* of Robert Hertz's notion of a polarised form of the sacred. The sacred is considered to have a right and a left side, as does beauty. The right side is associated with love, respect, gratitude, order and forms a point of attraction, whereas the left side constitutes an inversion of this series, being associated with disgust, horror, fear, disorder; it forms a space of repulsion. As Leiris's innovative use of this concept demonstrates and as Jean Jamin explains, this bipolarity of the sacred is not symmetrical: under the pressure of social constraints, its right side, the function of attraction and cohesion, is accentuated, while the left side appears to find itself under the dominion of its counterpart, being contained within the dialectical structure of sin and expiation. We can link this process to the way in which libidinal energy submits to a process of disintensification as it becomes reconfigured within the apparently ordered and logical space of discursivity.

The sacred comprises at once prohibitive and regenerative properties. Sacred objects and ritualistic acts constitute as much a site of taboo as one of licence, and thus, are a confrontation between repulsion and attraction. The feeling of the sacred is founded on death, a tearing open to the beyond. The resurgence of difference within the social sphere incites fear of loss and destruction. It is this fear that renders the left pole of the sacred repulsive, causing it to be enshrouded in silence and prohibition. Through religious rituals, the potentially subversive energy of the "côté gauche" seems to be dissipated and transformed, drawn into the harmony of the "côté droit". The process
of transformation leads to a discharge of energy as the disruptive force of the sacred becomes checked and channelled in an attempt to deny or hide the disorder and destruction that preceded the edification of the social. The loss of life becomes essential for the activation and maintenance of society.\textsuperscript{19} Representations of the collective sphere seek to negate the very force that drives their production, in an attempt to restore harmony. However, these representations, through the very act of negation of this intensity, are always coinvolved with it.

This theorisation of the sacred, like Leiris's conceptualisation of beauty, blurs the boundaries of good and evil by underlining their constitutive interaction. The sacred both at once aims to recover paroxysmal, singular emotions through sacrifice, festival, and eroticism and at the same time to reinforce the prohibition that galvanises the social sphere into a cohesive form through the realisation of the pending threat that such emotional expenditure poses. In this way, the sacred foregrounds the indissociability of disorder and order within the social space, highlighting the way in which this intense affective energy, which the social seeks to evacuate or simply contain, proves indispensable for the perpetual renewal of that space. This reminds us of the way in which the emergence of the general will in the \textit{Contrat social} at once disrupts and supports social organisation. By temporarily suspending the normal functioning of the state, the general will uncovers the constructed nature of society, its lack of essential foundations, thereby emphasising the need to impose order on the state to compensate for that lack.

Leiris's understanding of the sacred and of its implications for the collective order highlights once more the impossibility of demarcating a clear boundary between the
inside and the outside of the system, between the right and the left pole. The disruptive affective energy of the 'côté gauche', released during sacrificial acts, is never fully discharged from the system; in fact, the system requires this energy to continue functioning. The process of *sacralisation* or making sacred involves the staging of that energy in a ritualistic act, lowering its intensity as it assumes a more localised form within the order of the right side. This operation functions in a similar fashion to Lyotard's principle of dissimulation. We can understand dissimulation on an abstract level as 'the way in which a system always conceals within itself affects and hence other systems that are inconsistent with it and with each other.' The harmony of the 'côté droit' of the sacred dissimulates the disorder of its 'côté gauche', from which it draws its force and yet simultaneously the 'côté gauche', through its transgressive irruption into the social space, dissimulates its 'côté droit'. The intensity that arises from the lack of common measure between systems performs a split function: it is at once recuperated by the system to provide new meanings and information that the system exploits to sustain itself, and yet it disturbs and pushes beyond the system, pointing to its failure to achieve full representation, and thereby, setting it in motion towards new possibilities and creative responses. Similarly, the force of the sacred reinforces the collective structures by perpetuating social taboos, but can also throw these structures into disarray through the paroxysmal passions it releases, allowing for growth and creativity. The principle of dissimulation makes the work of art a site of transgression and transformation: the heterogeneous energy dissimulated within structures prevents these structures from reaching an oppressive state of closure by loosening their controlling and exclusive force, striving to change and radicalise them. We can understand libidinal politics as 'acting so as to release and hide as much intensity as possible in a given system'; such an understanding
owes something to this conception of the role of the sacred.\textsuperscript{21}

**The Poetics of the Bullfight**

The drive to transcend the system, which Leiris detects in the notion of beauty, illuminates his assertion that bullfighting is much more than a sport.\textsuperscript{22} As one of the few remaining sites of the sacred, bullfighting also thrives on the antagonism of incompossible forces. It is the co-presence of incommensurable elements within the bullfight itself which makes it a space of radical difference — a difference that cannot be normalised by the wider structures: ‘il est loisible de découvrir dans la course de taureaux une figure de l’union des contraires nettement distincte d’une simple association de contrastes’ (p. 38). The sacrificial nature of the bullfight not only comprises the risk of death (for the torero) but also an actual death (that of the bull), total difference, which exorcises the fear of the participants and the spectators. The polar identity of the beautiful, existing in the gap between the eternal and the contingent, the sacred and the profane, harmony and disorder, in short, its left and right side, is repeated in the confrontation between man and beast in the corrida. The interaction of these contradictory elements in the beautiful confuses their discrete identities, as does the conflict between the torero and the bull. The torero, through his orchestrated moves, endeavours to impose an ideal geometry on the confrontation, while the bull continually thwarts and disrupts the proposed order. The corrida also deconstructs the binary opposition of harmony and order:

Il n’y aurait encore là que contraste, opposition, si la passe ne se présentait elle aussi comme espèce de tangence, ou convergence immédiatement suivie d’une divergence (approche du torero par le taureau, puis séparation de l’homme et de
la bête, à laquelle l'étoffe indique la "sortie"), à cela près que le contact, à l'instant même où il va se produire, est évité de justesse, au moyen d'une déviation imposée à la trajectoire du taureau ou d'une esquive: léger écart de l'homme, simple torsion de son corps, sorte de gauchissement qu'il fait subir à sa beauté froidement géométrique, comme s'il n'avait d'autre moyen d'éviter le maléfice du taureau que de se l'incorporer en partie, par l'acte d'imprimer à sa personne quelque chose de légèrement sinistre, — jouant sur le mot: par l'acte littéral de se gauchir (pp. 39-40).

The geometric beauty of the act of bullfighting becomes distorted as the torero, in an attempt to survive the pass, is forced to deviate from the line he has set himself and take on some of the disharmony incarnated by the bull. This all-important divergence constitutes the essence of the pleasure of the bullfight: 'En ce qui concerne le mécanisme même de la passe, l'on constate que ce qui en fait la saveur, c'est d'adord ce minime décalage grâce auquel la tangence complète — qui serait nécessairement catastrophique — est évitée: tout concourt à donner l'idée de cette tangence, mais tout reste, en fin de compte, légèrement en deçà.'(p. 41). The pleasure of the successful pass exists at the fold of tension (the anticipation of the seemingly unavoidable contact between the adversaries) and its discharge (the last-minute evasion of death). This alternation reflects the structure Leiris attributes to the sacred.

The pleasure of the bullfight operates as a model for aesthetic pleasure in general. This becomes explicit when Leiris asserts that 'Aucun plaisir esthétique ne serait donc possible sans qu'il y ait viol, transgression, dépassement, péché par rapport à un ordre idéal faisant fonction de règle (...)'(p.43). Like the sacred, aesthetic experience does violence to any system acting as an all-pervasive principle. But Leiris does not set himself in opposition to structure, or seek to locate a realm beyond it, stating that 'toutefois, une licence absolue, comme un ordre absolu, ne saurait jamais être qu'une
abstraction insipide et dépourvue de sens’. The impossibility of delimiting a field clearly outside of the systematicity of language or for that matter, the force of libidinal energy, is already implied in Leiris’s insistence on the pure abstraction of the idea of absolute order or licence. Pure libidinal energy characterised by its formlessness offers no specific place for art. Art can merely approach this limit; if it goes too far, then it effects its own dissolution. Similarly, the dynamic of the sacred is played out on:

un seuil aussi étroit qu’un tranchant de rasoir, mince zone d’interférence ou no man’s land psychologique (...) la crête où s’érige le tabou (qui n’a de sens que comme contrainte tendant à prévenir un sacrilège ou violation possible), limite au regard de laquelle les choses — abandonnant le caractère inorienté, amorphe de ce qui est profane — se polarisent en gauche et en droit. (65)

This passage from the Miroir de la tauromachie concords remarkably closely with Lyotard’s understanding of aesthetic experience, not only in the ideas expressed, but also in its very terms. Lyotard proposes that modern art occupies an entremonde, a term he adopts from Klee (Zwischenwelt). It is the transitional nature of art that enables it to blur boundaries between inside and outside, subject and object, the political and the apolitical.

In this theoretical light, the artist assumes an indeterminate position, located somewhere between order and licence, heterogeneous affects and the homogenising tendencies of the system, freedom and constraint. It is the failure of structures to master and signify everything which leads to a crisis point, where the subject becomes aware of the discrepancy between the intensity of his experience and its depiction at the level of the system. This discrepancy forces the artist to respond by seeking innovative modes of representation. These modes aim to recover the singularity that
structures exclude or hide in order to secure their appearance of organisation and control.

The complex interaction of limitation and creativity, dislocation and innovation participate in the inextricability of freedom and constraint in Rousseau's political theory. Man only assumes his human status when the continuity between his primitive needs and his milieu is broken by the devastation caused by severe storms; this constrains him to employ his imagination and perfectibility, in short his freedom, to surmount this adversity. In this sense, the interaction of freedom and unfreedom conditions the emergence of society: the subject's entry into the social is contingent upon his submitting to a process of alienation; this alienation creates the space in which imaginary identifications, the very basis of collective living, take place.  

Freedom does not stand as an uncontaminated positive value, but can be seen as coextensive with its obverse, constraint. Rousseau elucidates the importance of this necessary and yet contradictory dyad in the Discours, where he illustrates how absolute freedom would entail the total disintegration of the social fabric, in other words, the anomy of the second state of nature. Wider structures are required to protect the citizens' right to make free decisions about collective good, thereby preventing destructive and oppressive regimes that are driven purely by self-interest, from being actualised. Similarly, as we have previously seen, artistic production occurs in the fluid zone located between the unconstrained energy of desire, and the structures of representation; this fraught interpenetration of incompatible aspects prevents art from becoming pure solipsism or conformity. It is the tension between freedom and constraint that nourishes creative and political activity.
Aesthetic reversal as a figure of political reversal

Both Leiris and Lyotard bring this tension out in their exploration of aesthetic experience. The analogy that Leiris makes between the art of bullfighting and the creative process brings to mind Lyotard’s rich elaboration, in *Discours figure*, of the psychoanalytical ‘double reversal.’ Despite the fact that Lyotard primarily theorises the ‘double reversal’ in relation to art, his theorisation could be seen to provide the model for his conception of political reversal. The endless work of critical reversal challenges any political philosophy that believes the truth of the socio-political context lies hidden within the negativity of the prevailing order and that it can be recovered through ideological mediation. The interaction of incompossible elements in aesthetic reversal prevents the system from reaching a state where it is identical to itself. Likewise, the fact that the very existence of the social contract depends upon the alienation of the subjects which agree to it, means that any political paradigm which seeks to (re)install a state of positivity or collective concord, is fundamentally flawed, since in its attempt to surmount alienation, it would actually disavow the tension that allows the social to exist as a politically charged realm. The non-closure of the critical process refuses any ideology that lays claims to being able to predict exactly what will happen and what the collective wants.

If we now turn our attention to Lyotard’s description of the ‘double renversement’, we note that the two terms of the title of *Discours figure* are separated by a mere comma: discourse, the process of representation through concepts, and figure, conceived as radical difference, as that which is unsymbolisable within the flat grid of signification based on binary oppositions. The comma indicates that their relationship is not one of
simple opposition, but is anti-synthetic, that is, mutually deconstructive, like the interaction of the geometric beauty of the *torero* and the almost indomitable energy of the bull. Lyotard connects the figural with unconscious desire which operates on the conscious space of secondary revision, discourse, by disrupting and distorting the binarism of signification through the work of the primary processes of condensation and displacement. So, primary process energy works in a similar fashion to the risk presented by the bull, which continually dislocates the orchestrated moves of the *torero*.

Lyotard’s reworking of the familiar analogy of psychoanalytic and artistic processes can be extended to include the *torero*’s endeavour to control the bull by imposing geometric beauty on its violent disorder: so the analysand, through freely associating, endeavours to homogenise the heterogeneity of unconscious desire within the oppositional system of signification. In this sense, the analysand’s discourse emerges as a compromise formation, that is, a secondary space dotted with traces of primary process energy; in this way it constitutes a secondary reworking of the primary energy of unconscious desire. Consequently, the boundaries between the radically different planes of primary and secondary processes become blurred, but not lost: ‘La difficulté sera évidemment de désinformer ce qui, dans cette élaboration, est secondaire et ce qui est primaire, ce qui est connaissance leurre et ce qui est vérité, les deux étant nécessairement donnés ensemble toujours.’ The indissociability of the two spaces recurs in the dynamic of the *corrida*: the lure of the *torero*’s contrivances, seducing the spectators into believing that he truly confronts and fully masters his dangerous opponent, only exists in relation to what it aims to control and eventually eliminate, the bull. Moreover, the discourse of the analysand also constitutes a ‘leurre de rationalité’ for the analyst, who runs the risk of being seduced by the impression of
clarity and comprehensibility created by the articulated form of language, and as a result, of failing to recognise the work of desire therein. Just as the analysand attempts to undermine the censoring force of discourse through free association, the analyst should attempt to emancipate herself as far as possible from the constraints of secondary process energy through ‘l’attention flottante’ which allows her to detect ‘les craquements, les frôlements, les échos des déformations que le processus primaire y imprime’. By temporarily suspending the binding and ordering functions of the ego, the analyst can potentially run counter to signification and reverse the initial reversal of the analysand’s discourse (the attempt to bind the primary energy of desire in the secondary space of language): the secondary surface is placed in a primary space called the ‘recessus’. Thus, the process of interpretation violates the manifest organisation of language.

The unending operation of the double reversal can be found at work in the interaction of the two opponents in the *corrida*. Leiris describes the fight as ‘une série de déplacements, changements d’axe, retournements de situations’:

> Sembable suite de substitutions (remplacement de la cible humaine par un leurre d’étoffe, déplacement matériel de la cible tour à tour homme et cape ou muleta, écart de l’homme créant un vide que le taureau immédiatement remplit, ce qui nous donne une perception aiguë — et comme cuisante — de la réalité de l’espace), semblable jeu de cache-cache et déploiement de roueries se prolongera jusqu’à la fin de la course (...) (p. 42).

The alternation of the human target with the lure of the red cloth creates a space for the bull to enter into vicarious contact with the *torero*, maintaining the threat of death. The perpetual reversal of the spatial relations of both coordinates conditions the very act itself. The spectators must not be duped by the graceful control of the bullfighter into believing that he possesses total mastery of the danger posed by the bull, that is,
they have to resist yielding fully to the deceptive, calculated techniques of his artistry and experience the threat of death as real. In this way, the torero must at once reduce and heighten the component of risk. The success of the bullfight depends on maintaining an extreme intensity and duration of exposure of man to beast, that is, to death:

Pour que la passe soit vraiment réussie, il faut, entre autres conditions, qu’elle soit très “serrée” (que la corne approche l’homme au point de presque le frôler) et que le taureau passe entier (que toute sa masse, de la tête à la queue, passe devant l’homme avant que ce dernier ait repris position pour recevoir une nouvelle charge) (p. 39).

The desired fusion of the corrida would lead to total destruction, and would therefore annul the act itself. The feints and ruses employed by the torero perform a double function: they at once strive to deflect and foreclose the imminent threat to life posed by the bull, and also, paradoxically, allow for the greatest degree of contact with this threat.

The psychical process of secondary reworking structures the deft manoeuvres of the torero. Lyotard makes imaginative use of two of Freud’s principles of psychical functioning to elaborate his understanding of aesthetic experience: the constancy principle and the Nirvana principle. The constancy principle aims to keep the tension of primary process energy at its lowest by binding it within the secondary processes of linguistic representation. The Nirvana principle, on the other hand, attempts to evacuate all tension from the system in order to return to an anterior state of inertia or zero tension. The total evacuation of energy would amount to absolute difference: death. The secondary processes of language therefore act as a defence mechanism, striving to ward off total destruction. Nevertheless, there is always an ineradicable remainder which gives rise to the unbound energy of desire, the figural, which fuels
the ambiguous metaphorical dimension of a text. Herein lies the very paradox of the defence mechanism of secondary processes: it communicates both at once the act of repression and the irrepressibility of the repressed. Desire works on the discursive space by loosening and undoing its structures, and as a result, leaving traces of radical difference. Artistic pleasure is most intense at the moment of greatest disproportion between the coordinates of tension and discharge, at the moment of near-total difference, which is death. Like the bullfight, ‘ce qui fait l’art, c’est de baigner cet ordre dans le milieu de la mort: zones de déplacements et de condensations, truffées d’îlots d’ordre lié, eux-mêmes mouchetés de condensations et de déplacements.’

Artistic production, like radical democracy, depends on the perseverance of disorder in order, on almost dissolving form and structure so as to allow for their modification or transfiguration.

For the bullfight to be ‘successful’, it has to invite failure. We can discern a double bind in the act itself: the torero is expected both at once to risk his life and confront death, and yet emerge from this life-threatening experience unscathed. Thus, if the torero avoids injury, he is backing down from the desired confrontation, albeit at the last moment; conversely, if he is wounded or killed, he ultimately fails to meet the challenge at hand, literally cancelling the act itself. As Smith indicates, ‘this double bind at the centre of the bullfight…defines it, in fact, as a performative contradiction, a practice or proposition which contradicts itself even as it enacts itself’.

With that idea in mind, we can make further analogies with Lyotard’s exploration of the creative act. The primary process energy of unconscious desire, which drives the aesthetic process, must remain unbound or unfulfilled for its work to take place, or in Lyotard’s terms, it must remain devoid of ‘libidinal finality’. The energy of the
unconscious has to abandon its path towards total discharge or absolute difference, and ‘connive’ with the systematising and binding force of secondary processes: “S’il y a un symptôme, c’est parce qu’une forme, une configuration rigide naît comme compromis, de la double exigence de vivre et de mourir, de la réalité et du Nirvana. Ainsi dès la formation de sa figure profonde, le désir se compromet avec ce qui l’interdit’. Clearly the double bind of life and death of the corrida operates in the work of art, with life nor death being fully realised. As with the bullfight, ‘avant-garde’ art must come as close as possible to absolute difference, death, in an attempt to transcend the normative constraints of the system. The double reversal does not consist in a simple inversion of control, in the domination of the conscious by the unconscious, or vice-versa, but in allowing the space for radical otherness to emerge.

In this sense, the work of art occurs within what Lyotard calls ‘l’espace du dessaisissement’, the space of dispossession. Lyotard foregrounds the importance of holding this space empty of a defined object in order to allow for play, innovation and polymorphism:

La profondeur de l’expérience intérieure est la même pour tous; ce qui est rare est la force de vouloir dévisager la figure profonde du désir, de lui ménager son espace de jeu, d’accepter l’angoisse de laisser ouvert le vide où elle pourra répercuter ses figures. L’artiste n’est pas quelqu’un qui réconcilie, mais qui supporte que l’unité soit absente.

Lyotard underlines the affirmative force of failure in the work of art. The artist has to abandon the pursuit of total unity of subject and object, which, if attained, would amount to death, so as to open up to the contingent, the new, the potential for radical difference. The relinquishment of fusion is also an aim of the bullfight. The desire for ‘tangence complète de nous-même au monde, de notre être avec le tout’ can only
occur in full confrontation with alterity, with death. This confrontation has to be abandoned at the moment of its realisation to foreclose ultimate destruction. The success of the corrida rests upon ‘une déviation imposée à la trajectoire du taureau ou d’une esquive’, an avoidance of complete revelation through death. Just as the unbound energy of desire has to connive with the binding operation of secondary processes to surface in the public domain, the torero, in an inverted form, connives with his enemy, through somewhat balletic moves, to grant a glimpse of the beyond.

What makes bullfighting more than a sport or simple artistry is its quasi-confrontation with death; similarly, what makes art, for Lyotard, more than just art in its Freudian-Marxist sense of a realm devoid of political impact, is the traces of radical difference within the work. The figural energy of primary processes set loose in the ritual works to loosen or even overthrow the system, whose force works to eradicate intense singularity, to make the incommensurable commensurable, to impose oppressive structures. The ‘remuements souterrains’, released by the irruption of the sacred, arises from the affective energy that exceeds the social sphere and holds the potential for reshaping it. Simultaneously, the traces of radical difference in the artistic space serve as important reminders of the failure of structures or of the inadequacy of metanarratives to explain and account for everything. Art and the sacred merge in their capacity to indicate the ‘fêlure’, the split in the wider structures and the exposure of the ‘lieu vide’. Like Rousseau’s radical image of the state of nature and Lefort’s understanding of the centre of power in modern democracy as an ‘empty space’, they illustrate the impossibility of the system’s ever reaching a state of closure. The empty space permits the level of affects or intensities to contest the collective order and incite the need for change; for Leiris, as for Lyotard, ‘the aesthetic could be considered to constitute (...) both the privileged space of critical activity and the
model for all unrestricted affirmation and radical socio-political transformation".35

The bullfight, as a form of the sacred, can only fulfill this role through success in failure. The necessity of renouncing the desire for total mastery or full representation, in both the corrida and artistic pursuits, reveals the importance of the process itself as a form of critical activity. The perpetual spatial shifts in the interaction of man and beast bring to the fore the fundamental impossibility of reconciliation between these coordinates. The alternation between the human target and its substitute, the red rag, reveals a void, upon which the dynamic of the bullfight appears to hinge. Leiris affirms that this process confers 'une perception aigüe — et comme cuisante — de la réalité de l'espace'(p. 42). The emptiness of the space has an even more metaphorical status, when it is immediately charged with the antagonistic presence of the bull. The empty space does not represent the absence of a vital element, whose presence would complete the picture, but serves as an opening through which intensities can pass. The bullfight is propelled by the friction of its irreconcilable dimensions, not by lack. It is the impossibility of mitigating this friction that makes the perception of the space 'cuisante' — a bitter or stinging reality. Similarly, Lyotard argues that the necessity of dispossessing the desired object, of not filling the space of desire with the lure of wish-fulfilment, induces anguish, 'la douleur de l’incompossible'. The pain induced by the unbridgeable split between our affects and their representation is relived in the fear and anguish of the bullfight, provoked by the reality of never reaching 'une tangence complète'. By revealing the 'espace du leurre' of the work of art, with its appearance of rationality and organisation, as 'un espace de dessaisissement', a space of dispossesion or relinquishment, the artistic process performs the work of truth: not wish-fulfilment but the 'unfulfilling' of desire.36 Leiris and Lyotard's figurative
writing depicts, in this way, the fact that the process is deprived of ultimate finality, constantly binding and undoing its own operation, resisting closure. We could argue for both Leiris and Lyotard, understanding the creative process always involves understanding what prevents its completion, in the same way that for Rousseau and thinkers of radical democracy, understanding democracy involves understanding its impossibility.

The Left and the Right Side; Intensity and Structures; The Political and Politics

Lyotard places his figure of the space of desire in a political context in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*. His definition of the political ignores the apparatus of the political machine, giving it a much more ambiguous and, to some extent, transcendental identity as that which 'n’est “pas encore” déterminé, et qui peut-être restera, doit rester toujours à déterminer.'37 Any attempt to delineate the political does not consist in determining certain institutions, locatable within a regulated space, but in determining ‘un espace de jeu pour des intensités libidinales, des affects, des “passions”. Elle n’a rien d’utopique au sens courant de ce mot; elle est ce qui se cherche en ce moment à travers le monde en des pratiques ou des expériences de toutes sortes, dont le seul trait commun est qu’elles sont tenues pour “non-sérieuses”.'38

While Lyotard’s definition does not constitute the definitive answer to an elusive question, it does help to begin to formulate a conception of the political which can articulate theoretically the political force of Rousseau and Leiris’s autobiographical
writing. His definition encompasses those practices which normally fall outside of the scope of institutional life and its depiction of the collective, but which, nevertheless, through their status of being simultaneously part and not part of this domain, question its claim to be an authoritative representation of the social. Contrary to how it may first appear, his understanding of the political does not deny the importance of socio-political structures; as his philosophy illustrates, structures prove essential for the emergence of libidinal energy in the social sphere, even though this energy inevitably exceeds them. Rather, he seems to argue that they form the very material on which the intensities must work in order to weaken their controlling force. The idea of libidinal politics is a strategy that strives to loosen structures and expose them to new possibilities, that is, new connections with other structures, engendered by the unpredictable occurrence of intensities determined within the system as feelings and desires. The space of play opened by art and the bullfight figures this understanding of the political.

Striking homologies link Lyotard’s vision of the political with that of Lefort. As we have already seen, Lefort differentiates the political from the realm of politics, the latter being defined as the activity of parliament, social institutions and political parties, in order to move beyond the reductive definitions of it provided by political science and sociology. He writes that the political emerges in a double movement whereby the force that generates the social simultaneously surfaces and is obscured as it assumes a more determinate form within the domain of politics. If we try to define the political spatio-temporally, we immediately turn our attention from the political itself, definable as the moment of dislocation and ambiguity prior to any reconfiguration of the social, to the level of entrenched political reality, resulting from a partial trapping of this energy. Institutional politics always seeks to suppress the
disruptive energy, lurking within and feeding on its system, so as to sustain its own sense of order through the chimera of organic unity.

This conceptualisation of the political helps us to theorise the singular affects of Leiris's dimension of the sacred in combination with Lyotard's vision of libidinal politics. Structures, despite feeding off and exploiting the energy of desire, dissimulate it by their appearance of logic and order; conversely, this disruptive energy constantly resurfaces, dissimulating the structures themselves by unsettling their organisation. We can attempt a conflation of the tension that Lefort identifies in the relation between politics and the political with the mutually deconstructive relationship of the 'left' and the 'right' side of the sacred (transgression and the law) and with that between intensities and structures in libidinal politics. Politics and the political may be thus viewed not as separate realms, but as different intensities.

The 'lieu vide' of the centre of power in modern democracy must be kept empty of religious meaning to allow politics to survive as a realm of constant contestation, open to transformation from any direction within the social space. At the same time, the abandonment of the pursuit of total fusion of subject and object in the bullfight, as well as in the work of art, allows a space to emerge through which singular affects can question and experiment with collective structures. The fundamental incompatibility of libidinal energy and its representation entails the impossibility of filling the space of desire with an object adequate to its force; the same split exists between the universality of the political, as the ontological level of any construction of the social, and its configuration within the particularity of politics, ensuring the impossibility of any agent's being consubstantial with the site of power. The split can be understood affirmatively in so far as it conditions the perpetual renewal of the political space by
provoking intense feelings and desires. The critical activity of art indicates metaphorically this fundamental split. Critical poetry and radical democracy converge in their relinquishing of the fantasy of perfect unity. Both are nourished by the irreducible friction between the universal and the particular, requiring at once singular intensities and particular forces to enervate the control of the system to enable change and also a wider structure or force to give form to those intensities so as to forestall the collapse into meaningless chaos. The internal split existing in art and democracy provides a space in which incompatible elements can be articulated in multiple and innovative ways which could possibly engender new representations and formations. These articulations remain forever marked by traces of radical difference that indicate the non-closure of the system and the space within it for experimentation and reformulation.

The Sexual Act as a Site of the Sacred

The necessary incompletion of the system is, for Leiris, sensually intimated in the sexual act. The analogy Leiris draws between the subject-object relation of bullfighting and that of eroticism largely depends on the ‘marge d’impossibilité’, the realisation that ‘la communion totale de deux êtres ne pourrait s’effectuer que dans la mort’. The way in which Leiris clearly locates libidinal energy in the bullfight supports the links we have forged between his thinking and that of Lyotard. The prestige of the bullfight emanates from the quasi-union of the antagonist with death, represented by the proximity of the horns of the bull, and the sexual act is similarly
perceived as a way of attaining material union with the world. Both acts are marked by the discrepancy between the transcendental force of desire and its private and public realisation: 'De même qu’on est passé du sentiment de plénitude à la désillusion, ce vide ainsi produit la perception d’un manque et tout ce qu’une telle lésion implique d’insupportable ne peut que provoquer une nouvelle aspiration déchirante' (pp. 53-54). This quotation from the *Miroir de la tauromachie* intimates Lyotard’s idea of the process of ‘désintensification’: the intensity of the sexual passions, in their drive towards plenitude, gives away to disillusionment as we seek to understand and represent them. Their force is returned to us in a figure of lack, a shared wound that results from the essential non-fulfilment of desire, or in other words, the ‘infranchissable abîme entre ces deux termes: l’“en-deçà” et l’“au-delà”’. The sexual act involves a tearing open to the beyond, to our void, which Leiris significantly refers to as ‘our infinity’:

> La détresse infinie (dans laquelle on s’abîme presque infailliblement quand on vient d’obtenir ce que l’on désirait), tout déchirement sentimental prendra réciproquement figure de route ouverte, de prix payé pour un nouveau départ et d’appel d’air, en même temps que, mesure de notre vide — c’est-à-dire de notre infini — il apparaîtra comme une révélation (p. 54).

‘Notre vide’, echoes the nothingness or nihilism that forms the object of twentieth-century existential *Angst*.39 The desire expressed in the essay to blur the borders between the emotional intensity of our existence and theoretical discourse occurs in response to this primordial sense of emptiness. The essay exposes the void as liberating, as providing a space within the objectivity of the system for the subject to experiment, innovate and effect change. Leiris, with deep and tender irony, confers on the concept of infinity the more modest title of ‘our infinity’, clearly differentiating it from the Infinity of theology, the eternal, or that of the physical cosmos, and in this
way, he locates it more within the quotidian.

For Leiris, eroticism consists in voluntarily introducing into the sexual act ‘un élément gauche, jouant comme une dissonance, un décalage et servant de ressort premier à l’émotion’ (54). Similar to the ambiguous identity of the sacred, the sexual act can be seen as at once destructive and productive. The complexity of its identity evokes the intersecting trajectories of Eros and Thanatos that we identified in the Rousseauean reverie. It is commonly held that Eros seeks order, organisation and constancy; whereas the death drive disrupts constancy and tends towards the unsettling of unity, striving to return to a prior homeostasis. This clear division collapses in so far as Eros, through its demand for order and control, can cause sterile repetition and therefore death, and likewise, Thanatos, by disturbing the normal functioning of the system, can revive that system, by allowing it to mutate or change direction. Leiris expounds the indivisibility of love and death in *L’Age d’homme*, where he writes:

> J’en arrive à penser que l’amour et la mort – engendrer et se défaire, ce qui revient au même – sont pour moi choses si proches que toute idée de joie charnelle ne me touche qu’accompagnée d’une terreur superstitieuse, comme si les gestes de l’amour, en même temps qu’ils amènent ma vie en sont point le plus intense, ne devaient que me porter malheur.⁴⁰

Just as Leiris demonstrates the confusion of life and death in the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ aspects of eroticism and indeed, the bullfight, Eros and Thanatos are not identifiable by their respective functions, since Eros can unbind and set energy free as much as the death drive has the potential to bind energy.

The nebulousness of the discrete identities of Eros and Thanatos links up with Leiris’
understanding of the sacred, in so far as the sacred can at once restore or destroy, and therefore, transform the system. Its restorative properties occur through its reinforcement of social taboos, the law, with the potentially repressive and deadening effect such reinforcement could bring. Equally, the free movement of paroxysmal passions dislocates and possibly annihilates the system, leading simultaneously to destruction and growth. Through the mutually deconstructive relationship of its left and right side, the Leirisian conceptualisation of the sacred displaces an ethics of the ideal or the good. Such an ethics aims to find an absolute principle of goodness that would resolve the antagonism inherent in the socio-political domain and thereby establish a state of harmony. We could argue that for Leiris, the disturbing, and yet potentially transformative energy of the violent irruption of affects into the system and their free circulation within it, proves just as positive as their stabilising force. Whilst we cannot determine the nature of the outcome resulting from the ‘remuements souterrains’, the passionate quest for radical change can at least prevent stasis. Their critical impact implies that any discourse or structure is equally open to over-systematisation, fragmentation into affects or to the production of new systems. In this sense, however oppressive or immutable a system may appear, there is always energy within it to dislodge its dictatorial rule. Like Rousseau in the Discours de l'inégalité, Leiris demonstrates the impossibility of providing an authentic, totalising definition of the good - such a definition could only exist fraudulently to immobilise the possibility of social change. The left and the right side, order and disorder, and finally life and death, despite their difference, are always unclear.
Art as a Figure of Radical Democracy

The interpretation of the sacred in the *Miroir de la tauromachie* incites us to recognise the irreducible ambiguity, division and disharmony that are coextensive with any social form. This insight adumbrates the conceptual foundations of the contemporary theorisations of modern democracy. The primary terrain on which democracy emerges is the terrain of social dislocation. Democratic structures have to respond to the unbridgeable gap between a universal pole – the need for a force which acts in the name of the whole community and the particularism of all social forces and desires. This division is not produced by democracy, but actually precedes it, constituting its condition of possibility. Rather than being the cause for resentment, disappointment or frustration, this gap, as Stavrakakis avers, 'should be viewed as opening the optimistic possibility of democracy as opposed to totalitarianism or radical fragmentation; a possibility that rests on the recognition of the constitutive character of this gap, this division, the inherent disharmony between universalism and particularism, community and individual, the government and the governed.' It is the recognition of the ontological nature of this split which invokes the need to move away from traditional forms of ethics, based on the ideal and logic of harmony, towards one which almost 'institutionalises' dislocation, tension and disharmony as principles which allow for social growth, plurality and transformation.

Leiris's anthropological poetics anticipates this need by foregrounding the insurmountable, and yet affirmative nature of lack. The opacity of the sacred, with its excess of affective energy, serves as a constant reminder of the inadequacy of any
representation, any discourse that claims to encompass the social in its full complexity. Leiris criticises the thinking of religious institutions and the discipline of philosophy as restrictive and reductive. Paradoxically, he commences the essay with Nicolas of Cusa’s concept of God as a ‘coïncidence de contraires’, and yet closes it by berating religious thought. Mehlman proposes that during the course of the essay, Leiris performs a sacrifice of God and his cults\(^3\), especially its exclusive process of symbolisation:

Bannir la mort, ou la masquer derrière on ne sait quelle architecture d’une perfection intemporelle: telle est l’occupation sénile de la plupart des philosophes et faiseurs de religions. Incorporer la mort à la vie, la rendre en quelque manièrre voluptueuse (comme le geste du torero emmenant suavement le taureau dans les plis de sa cape ou de sa muleta), telle doit être l’activité de ces constructeurs de miroirs, — j’entends : tous ceux qui ont pour but le plus urgent d’agencer quelques-uns de ces faits qu’on peut croire être les lieux où l’on se sent tangent au monde et à soi-même parce qu’ils nous haussent jusqu’au niveau d’une plénitude porteuse de sa propre torture et de sa propre dérision (p. 66).

Philosophy and religion, in their reconstruction of the wider sphere, attempt to obliterate the presence of death in life, disorder in order, the profane in the sacred, to build a static model, a dangerously Utopian vision to which we are to strive. Even the fleeting sense of plenitude, induced by the event of the sacred, is filled with pain and derision as we take cognisance of the failure of our aspiration to will total fusion or collective harmony. From this we can infer that, for Leiris, the role of art, unlike religion or indeed philosophy, is to preserve or commutate the disruptive energy of death. Art repudiates a conciliatory function by externalising simultaneously the feeling of the pain of loss and the intense pleasure of moving towards the new. In its capacity as a site of the sacred, it alerts us to the energy present within the system, but which the system dissimulates to create the impression of order. The surfacing of this
unsettling energy points to a moment of crisis that needs addressing. In this sense, Leiris pre-empts the clear distinction Lyotard was to make between art and religion. Unlike religion, art does not console, and it refuses synthesis, undermining any attempt to posit the great Zero of representation. It exposes us to the fundamental split between subject and object, to the non-fulfilment of desire, to ‘the pain of the incompossible’.

We can now widen our perspective to include Zizek’s notion of the ethics of the real in our conflation of Leiris and Lyotard’s conceptions of the function of art. Like the moral education of Émile, the ‘truth-work’ of art ensures that we never lose sight of the irreconcilability of our desire and its objective representation. The ethics of the real calls upon us to retain the unsymbolisable mark of historical traumas, to ‘encircle’ the impossible real in order to distance ourselves from the present so as to open up to the ‘New’. It require us to pass through the fantasy of social plenitude and to identify with the affirmative force of lack as the point of reference for constructing new political visions, for it is the lack within the system that gives us partial freedom from the determinate work of structures. Artistic processes, like democratic ones, assume their ethical import through their unfulfilling of the wish for wholeness or full representation. By showing the incompleteness of any system, art can possibly alert us to the necessity of finding inventive and self-critical ways of bringing together incompossible elements which seek not to erase radical difference, but to preserve its generative energy. The critical force of art appeals to the need for vigilance against state ideology and Utopian discourses that try to reduce radical difference to the symbolic fiction of collective harmony. The system contains negativity in its very core and cannot eject it, or claim to incarnate it, in some mythic external enemy, without art proclaiming the indivisibility of man and bull, life and death. This brings
back to mind Zizek's deconstruction of Utopian discourse on the familiar grounds that the promise of collective concord is only valid in so far as there is an element in the present state of affairs preventing it from becoming reality now. A Utopian dream is not that far from its obverse, dystopia.

For Leiris and Lyotard, art enacts this deconstruction by showing how everything that has the appearance of order (as does the discourse of the analysand or the beautiful) conceals something that is repressed within it. Libidinal politics, and the sacred, offer a radical conception of the aesthetic as a realm where libidinal drives remain uncathected; desire remains unfulfilled and disruptive. In both, that realm remains irreducible to systematisation or the restrictions of signification, and will always resist any attempt at restriction, continuing to function critically and affirmatively. We cannot institute art or the sacred as ideals, since their success as critical forces reposes on their failure and innate incompleteness; so works of art cannot merely replace Utopian thought. But, they work to unmask the internal limits of Utopian dreams, by thwarting any attempt to impose ideals or ends on the critical process. Art undoes the endeavours of politics or scientific discourse to raise a particular force or entity above the ever-present antagonism of forces to an absolute or transcendental position. For Leiris and Lyotard, art is embroiled in the movement of desire. Desire works on systems, either to transform or to preserve them and thereby, becomes entangled with the political, that is, the metamorphosis of structures and systems through affects and processes. Its critical force lies in its function of support and disturbance. Art intimated that what lurks in the depth of society is not some paradigmatic ideal or essence which transcends the multifarious empirical level of existence, but rather, heterogeneous intensities that indicate the possibility of (self-) critical alternatives to the rule of concept and the practices of the existing social order.
Rousseau’s depiction of the theatre as being simultaneously inside and outside the social anticipates Adorno’s theorisation of art ‘as being socially determined in its autonomy and at the same time social’. 


2 The Devil, who is at the same time represented by one of the actors, descends on the stage, occasioning, in this doubling of the actual Devil with the actor-Devil, and also, in this blurring of what is reality and what is theatricality, a theatrical effect of intense terror among its audience. Leiris describes a similar theatrical experience in his exploration of states of possession in his ethnographic monograph, *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar*, (Paris: Sycomore, 1980). The participants of the tribal ritual of trance possibly come to embody a spirit or a zâr. Leiris views ‘this fundamental aspect of possession’ as being in itself ‘déjà un théâtre puisqu’elle revient objectivement à la figuration d’un personnage mythique ou légendaire par un acteur humain’. *Ibid.*, p.100. Despite the somewhat ironic tone of Rousseau’s account of the overwhelming terror caused by the dramatic event of the Genevan Escalade, it discloses the potentially sublime effect of the theatre, which can shake up and liberate the audience’s imagination. He compares this play with the insipid productions of contemporary writers, stating that ‘ils font pour épouvanter, un fracas de décorations sans effets. Sur la scène même il ne faut pas tout dire à la vue; mais ébranler l’imagination.’ (*Lettre à d’Alembert*), p.110.

3 At first sight, Rousseau appears to emphasise the first definition of opinion in the *Lettre à d’Alembert*, seeing it as a passive composite of prejudices and received ideas. In his discussion of the theatre as amusement, Rousseau focuses on its blind dependency on ‘le sentiment du public’, rejecting the idea that it is capable of effecting fundamental shifts in attitude. In this sense, the theatre preserves the status quo by reproducing the narrow world vision of its audience. He uses Molière’s *Misanthrope* as an example of the conservative nature of certain forms of theatre. Rousseau criticises the comic portrayal of Alceste, which, instead of exploring the authenticity and critical charge of the character as a moral man intent on being honest, prefers to deride his ineptitude as ‘un homme du monde’. This type of theatre, therefore, limits its spectators’ capacity for independent thought. But I agree with Coleman who asserts that the ambiguity of Rousseau’s point about opinion renders the notion of opinion and its relation to the *moeurs* indeterminate; opinion might constitute a transformative force.

4 Although Rousseau appears to emphasise the specificity of theatricality through his depiction of the theatre as a world apart with its own language, the complexity and opacity of the metaphorical dimension of his discourse prove particularly fruitful for a general understanding of the aesthetic and its socio-political repercussions.

5 Starobinski’s idea that, for Rousseau, the cure always exists within the poison itself corroborates the assertion that Rousseau locates the potential for change on the inside of a given system. *Remède dans le mal: critique et légitimation de l’artifice à l’âge des Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 176.

6 Lacoue-Labarthe radicalises Starobinski’s idea that Rousseau, as a remedy to the perverse consequences of the theatre, generalises its effects. He argues that Rousseau makes theatricality ‘the general law of the social’. For Lacoue-Labarthe, Rousseau’s critique of conventional theatre illustrates
the impossibility of self-presence or transparency, the fact that nothing is ‘present’ without being mediated or represented, that is, everything is ‘staged’. Mimesis only becomes dangerous, for Rousseau, when it poses as a direct and complete representation of reality, thereby disavowing the negativity or incompleteness that define social relations. For example, in conventional theatre, the audience becomes lured by the illusion of full representation into believing that by merely crying at the suffering depicted on stage, they have fulfilled their obligations towards others and are therefore exonerated from performing ‘real duties’. If mimesis, understood as direct representation, produces a cathartic effect, it is in the form of an illusory relieving of the conscience, not an actual purging of the passions. This sense of relief becomes dangerous because it gives us the feeling of being ‘exempt’ from being implicated with others. The public festival functions as an antidote to this stultifying and divisive effect by staging otherness as the condition of all relations, even our relation with the self. See Poétique de l’histoire (Paris: Galilée, 2002), in particular pp. 94-101 and pp. 134-135.


12 Ibid., p. 66.

13 He mainly associates this form of conceptualisation with structuralism. Lyotard particularly criticises the way in which structuralist anthropology tends to reduce cultural phenomena to a code that the anthropologist is to decipher and reproduce. In this way, it represses the intense and contradictory feelings that accompany anthropological investigation. Lyotard’s critique reminds us of Leiris’s re-inscription of the subjective into his ethnographic research as a way of resisting what he saw as the discipline’s often reductive and exclusive demand for objectivity. See Lyotard, Economie libidinale (Paris: Editions de Minuits, 1974), pp. 58-64 and Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, (Paris: Gallimard, 1934).

14 Economie Libidinale, pp. 13-14.

15 Ibid., p. 12.

16 Ibid., p. 23.


20 Williams underlines the fact that it is very limiting to take his summary of Lyotard’s idea of dissimulation as pure origin or as complete. Dissimulation is an active principle whose operation refuses clear conceptualisation. James Williams Lyotard and the Political (London: Routledge, 2000) p.40. See Economie libidinale, pp. 64-70.
Leiris, in his ever self-critical manner, later derides his belief in the mythic implications of the bullfight. In *Fourbis*, he describes how spectators at bullfights often have the delusion of being a ‘demi-god’ playing with death, when in reality they run no risk at all. The bullfight thus loses its critical impact when the audience is seduced by the graceful control of the torero into believing that death is something that can be fully mastered. In this sense, it does not incite us to seek beyond the illusion of art to find imaginative and innovative ways of filling the void. (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 124. His criticism of the bullfight is similar to Rousseau’s criticism of the theatre. Rousseau argues that conventional theatre often limits social interaction, since the audience, by merely pitying the suffering of the fictional characters on stage, feels it has performed its civic duty towards others. *Lettres à d’Alembert*, OC V, pp. 19-25. In both cases, the bullfight and the theatre only become ineffective when their element of wish-fulfilment is taken as a matter for belief not as a work of fiction. For Rousseau and Leiris, aesthetic experience should, by figuring the impossibility of wholeness, encourage us to seek beyond the present description of what is so as to try to imagine what could be.

Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p. 233.

See chapter I

Peter Dews underlines the political implications of the ‘double reversal’, writing that the aesthetic reversal can be construed as the model for political reversal, when considered in terms of Lyotard’s critique of Marxism. Lyotard seeks to eviscerate the dialectical and historicist assumptions of Marxist thought. The endless work of the ‘double reversal’ contests the idea that the proletariat constitutes a privileged agent of social change who, in bringing the system to a critical consciousness of itself, reveals Marxism as the true expression of that consciousness. See Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), pp.128-138.

Lyotard criticises what he terms the Marxist-Freudian tradition which views the aesthetic as a separate realm, a frivolous pastime. He also takes to task Sartre’s observation that ‘art for art’s sake’, that is, aesthetic purism, is a defensive manoeuvre, a negation of political commitment (*Qu’est-ce-que c’est la littérature*?). He counters this opinion by asserting that political purism can be considered just as defensive, since it prevents the questions raised by art from being considered as important in political and theoretical realms. Lyotard opines that because the avant-garde does not grow out of established social institutions or forms, it practises an effective critical politics that no form of political activity (normally bound by the normative rules of the wider system) has managed to practise. See *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, second edition (Paris: Galilée, 1994).


Discours, figure, p. 385.
Lyotard later refines his definition of the political in *Le Différend*, moving beyond a purely libidinal understanding of it to theorise it in terms of language games. For a discussion of politics and the political in Lyotard, see Kevin Inston, 'Lyotard's Politics of Difference and Equivalence' in *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2003.

The ironic turn of this statement reflects critically upon political philosophy and its denial of the indelible presence of desire within the political space. *Economie Libidinale* can be understood as an attempt to deconstruct the opposition of art and theory, by showing how libidinal intensities also exist in the supposedly rational and logical domain of theory. *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, p. 127.


*Discours, figure*, pp. 355-356.


See chapter 1 for an examination of the moral education of Émile and its connection with Zizek’s concept of the ethics of the real.
The Perseverance of Utopian Hope: Michel Leiris’s *Fibrilles*

*Fibrilles*, the third volume of Michel Leiris’s autobiography, *La Règle du jeu*, underlines the irreducible antagonism between poetry and politics. The overarching aim of Leiris’s autobiography of discovering an infallible ‘rule’ for articulating the poetic and the social emerges as ultimately inconceivable in this volume after a visit to communist China. This visit brings into question the role of poetic writing in fermenting and galvinising social change, highlighting the breach between the imaginary dimension of literature and the need, at the grass root level of practical politics, to improve social conditions, the immediate goal of any revolution. His project in *Fibrilles* of documenting his experience in China reveals the inadequation of language to the affective force that drives revolution and its demand for socio-political transformation. The insurmountable difficulty of capturing the immediacy and expansiveness of the revolutionary spirit thwarts his attempt to fuse poetry and politics. His wish to provide an authentic account of China’s social mutation leads him to question his degree of political commitment, that is, his willingness to forego certain beliefs or aspirations for a particular cause. He wonders whether in order to represent communist China, he has to adhere fully to the Chinese socialist project and suppress his anxiety about the rigid nature of its implementation. Whilst the Chinese people’s enthusiasm for the advent of communism gives him hope, his faith in the translatability of this feeling into political structure is unsettled. Leiris is unable to find a representational mode that can fully symbolise the desire for change experienced on his visit, and similarly, the communist regime remains at a loss to channel and fulfil the desire that drives it.
The chasm between Utopian hope and its actualisation in politics causes Leiris to doubt the wider aspirations of his autobiographical project. The discovery of ‘a rule’ for linking poetry and society, if such a discovery were truly possible, would result in an oppressive form of unity that would deny the contingency, mutability and critical impact proper to artistic production. The political and artistic dimension begin to merge here, as the beginning of the collapse of communism, as the ultimate model for socio-political transformation, coincides with that of Leiris’s search for an all-encompassing rule for poetry. What remains, after this collapse, in either case, is the affective energy, the indomitable force of desire, which, by transcending the system, urges us to push back the boundaries of the present to re-imagine social truth. This irrepressible affect forges and yet frustrates the link between imagination and reality, between poetry and politics. The Utopian hope or creative striving, resulting from the void between these two coordinates, precludes a simple sense of defeat at the failure of both projects. Rather, it incites Leiris to explore the antagonism existing between creative and socio-political activity, for this antagonism has the potential to generate and nourish both types of activity.

The Difficulty of Representing the Political

Leiris opens *Fibrilles* with a question that at once attests to and detracts from the plenitude experienced during his visit to China: ‘Comment ces cinq semaines de plénitude (...) se sont-elle vidées de leur substance à tel point que je me demanderais pour un peu si je ne les ai pas rêvées?’(Fi, p. 8). This question immediately identifies the
imaginary element that shapes our experience of political life. The images of fullness and
hope witnessed during his stay cannot be established as an objective truth. He originally
intends to represent two Chinas: the imaginary one based on childhood memories and
artistic representations and the real one, the communist society, based on the
ethnographic observations gathered on his five week stay there. His wish to demarcate
clearly the boundaries between the two sides fails, as his impression of China emerges as
a combination of dream and reality. To evoke China purely poetically would risk both
idealising its reality as a country undergoing major political restructuring and also
perpetuating ethnocentric naivety. Conversely, to deny the work of imagination would be
to reify both the poetic dimension that colours all accounts of cultural otherness and the
experience of 'le merveilleux' or the 'miraculous', that opening to the incommensurable
through imagination that accompanies our exposure to difference. This oscillation
between poetry and ethnography has characterised Leiris's writing since *L'Afrique
fantôme*, where he inaugurated his hybrid of ethnological and autobiographical literature.²

Ethnography, as its etymology suggests, implies writing, being closely linked to the
textual. Self-representation forms an integral part of the ethnographer's work, as Leiris
indicates: 'c'est (...) par le maximum de subjectivité qu'on touche à l'objectivité'.³ The
subject of ethnographic discourse is an errant subject. The self constitutes the
ethnographer's sole instrument of observation and it is through awareness of the
fallibility of this tool, ambiguously placed as it is vis-à-vis the other, interposed between
identity and difference, that he can begin to realign himself with regard to his object of
study. Perhaps error can be accounted for, if the subject's errancy can act as a filter
absorbing the illusion constructed about the other, and facilitating the emergence of new r
understandings of that other. By refusing to subscribe to the fantasy of the ‘omniscient’
researcher, Leiris instates failure as an intrinsic part of ethnography. Failure preserves the
alterity of the other, that is, the space of non-identity that may possibly engender critical
activity and dynamic cultural formations. Leiris’s transformation of ethnological
discourse, his ethnopoetics, demonstrates the unstable state of language, whose operation
is perpetually exceeded by that which appeals for articulation in language. 4 The
ethnopoetic invention of new idioms bears witness to this fissure, to this contradictory
feeling of necessity and impossibility at the root of all attempts to understand alterity. It is
only by integrating this tension into studies of self and other that autobiography and
anthropology can persist as a realm that contests and revises delusive depictions of the
human.

Leiris’s representation of his time in China confronts the same difficulties as his
ethnographic research. His feeling of disquiet at the impossibility of substantiating the
fullness experienced during his stay throws into question his intention of finding the règle
du jeu:

Toutes affaires cessantes, j’examinerai cette question, dût le programme que je
m’étais tracé pour organiser mes approches d’une “règle du jeu” en être bousculé
ou dût-il même — au regard d’autres questions soulevées inopinément —
m’apparaître n’embrasser qu’une masse inopérante de vétailles, en sorte qu’il me
faudrait m’avouer contraint de le refondre sinon de l’annuler, quitte à perdre la
face. Car il n’est pas exclu qu’en m’attaquant à ce problème je touche d’emblée
(ou presque) au noeud de ma recherche et que me soit ainsi prouvée (ce qui
couperait court à toute littérature) l’inutilité de continuer un parcours que je
n’avais, peut-être, conçu aussi long et chargé de tant de rameaux que par
perversité, coquetterie ou réticence vis-à-vis de moi-même, si ce n’est par un
souci artiste de composition en quelque sorte symphonique (Fi, p.8).
Leiris uncovers here the paradox that surrounds his project. If he were able to represent his experience in China in a totalising way, his search for an ethics grounded in poetry would be futile. However, it is the inconceivability of reaching full representation that makes his search all the more urgent. As Leiris indicates, the question raised by the foregoing passage constitutes the central problem tackled by *Fibrilles*. On the one hand, he has to recognise that the search for an absolute rule is self-cancelling, since once attained, it would dissolve the need for poetry altogether and yet, on the other hand, without this wider aim, poetry would slip into pure solipsism or mindless play without wider relevance. He therefore has to conceive a way of giving up the desire to formulate a ‘règle du jeu’ in a concrete form, without giving up the promise held out, in a larger perspective, by aspiring to it.

We can detect a structural homology between Leiris’s dilemma and the paradox of modern democracy. The antagonism, non-consensus and contingency that necessitates the formulation of democratic projects, also prevents those projects from being complete, from totally converting the disharmony at their inception into a state of harmony. Thus, the conflict characteristic of democracy both at once precludes the full constitution of the democratic ideals of liberty and equality, and yet, through the incompleteness it maintains, allows democracy to persevere as a field of critical activity and innovation. Leiris’s striving for an ethics that would reconcile art and politics therefore functions in a similar fashion to our constant striving for democratic principles, in so far as it simultaneously impedes the sterility of total closure and the chaos of dispersal. *Fibrilles* figures the work
of radical democracy in its attempt to integrate and come to terms with the negativity that generates and sustains its project. By recognising the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of an ethics founded in poetry, Leiris perhaps begins to approach his goal of linking art and society in a non-illusory way.

In order to approximate, as far possible, to a non-illusory representation of the social, Leiris paradoxically has to view illusion as an inevitable consequence of his task in *Fibrilles*. To write about his visit, he first needs to understand *de quoi est fait l’envoûtement que j’ai subi* (Fi, p. 24), to define the incantatory charm of China. This immediately locates his account not with the objective measures or details that indicate the progress of the revolution, but the subjective, affective elements that fuel that revolution. In this way, what characterises his stay in China is the elusive, unsymbolisable desire that founds and transcends institutional life and structures. This desire only manifests itself in an aesthetic form through the feeling generated by the national festival, whose bringing-together of heterogeneous aspects and dissolving of social distinctions provides an image of Utopia. The festival, a joyous and ordered parade, conveys affectively the happiness of collective living along with the people’s belief in the validity of Marxist social objectives. This festival therefore becomes an expression of the Utopian hope that sustains the ‘mythic’ effort to build a communist society. Despite the fact that the parade may be a product of propaganda, what counts, for Leiris, is the authenticity of the feeling of ‘envoûtement’ or enchantment that he experiences there. This feeling, the event around which all his impressions of communist China are pivoted, refuses discursive analysis, leading Leiris to disparage his project of
recounting his visit: 'Mais si, voulant analyser le charme de la Chine, j’arrive en dernier
recours à arguer de la grâce faute de pouvoir justifier autrement les faits que j’ai appelés à
témoigner, il est certain que je n’ai rien expliqué’ (Fi, p. 24). The only way of
communicating this incantatory quality is to have participated in the parade, to forgo the
desire to categorise or define it and to allow oneself to be possessed by its singularity.
When its charm subsides, the feeling of plenitude colouring his visit to China seems to be
nothing more than a dream. Whilst the singularity of this ‘envoûtement’ deprives Leiris
of the means of adequately expressing it so as to delimit the defining aspect of his time in
China, it nonetheless indicates the importance of doing so. Leiris is therefore torn
between the exhilarating pleasure generated by this aesthetic event, which calls for the
erasure and redefinition of socio-political boundaries, and equally the pain of not being
able to establish it as an objective truth to substantiate the fullness experienced there.

A poetic statement in the form of an aphorism, written almost immediately after his
return home, explores the tension involved in trying to symbolise this transcendental
moment. The aphorism conjugates two memories, the first, that of a Chinese legend given
in popular theatrical and operatic forms, and the second, that of a temple he visited⁵:
‘Tout le chagrin du monde dans une seule coupe de vin qui ne sera pas bue, telle — près
Hangtcheou — la montagne en suspens dans la grosse larme d’un miroir convexe, au
fronton d’un temple qui n’est pas celui de la Source de Jade’ (Fi, p. 24). Leiris begins to
unravel its meaning by setting aside those details that locate the aphorism in space and
time such as the Source de Jade, the name of a temple near to the one that the image is
actually about, and the true location of that actual temple, Hangtcheou. He thereby
reduces this sentence, constructed around 'the parallelism of two negations', to what he paradoxically terms its 'concrete supports': the goblet of wine, the mountain and the mirror. To begin to recount his time in China, he has to foreground and assimilate the negativity circumscribing his attempt:

Negativity at once permits him to establish the distance necessary for reflection on his time there and prevents him from reifying his experience in a presumptuous, and therefore limiting, affirmation such as would impose false ends or restrictions on its critical effect. He can only hope to do justice to this singular feeling of incantation by following the protocol imposed by the Chinese custom of systematically stressing the lacunae of their actions. The negativity marking his endeavour to communicate this intoxicating charm becomes affirmative here, since it helps to preserve something of the radical nature of this moment, by indicating its resistance to systematisation and full-definition by discourse. Leiris has to create an idiom that attests to the irresolvable friction that is incurred and dissimulated by trying to express the particularity of the affective impact of revolutionary China. His writing thus becomes an interminable process of doing and undoing, forgetting and unforgetting of what has to be repressed in
the translation of the singular into the communal and determinate structure of language.

The imagery of the memories of China oscillates between plenitude and nothingness, affirmation and negativity. The two memories merge in the way that smaller objects contain what, by virtue of its magnitude, exceeds them. In the case of the second memory, the convex mirror of the front of a temple reflects in a reduced form the immensity of the mountain in the background. Likewise, the goblet of wine contains the immense sorrow felt by the lover, Liang Chan-po, when his beloved, Chou Ying-tai, tells him that her father refuses to betroth her to him. These two images symbolise, for Leiris, the impossibility of literally representing the august nature of their referents; they can only ever be suggested in a metonymic and allusive form:

Une montagne dans un miroir, tout le chagrin du monde dans une seule coupe de vin: comme pour un tour de physique amusante, l'immensité reflétée dans un objet de dimensions modestes et, comme si l'extrême de la pureté tragique devait seul être réfléchi par le miroir du théâtre, un tourment que se refusent à extérioriser, sinon de manière allusive et par tout ce qu'ils peuvent mettre d'eux-mêmes dans un échange de gestes et de propos courtois, l'un et l'autre de ceux qui en seront déchirés au point de ne pas y survivre (...). (Fi, p. 25)

The two images preserve the tension involved in attempting to represent the unrepresentable through their play on positivity and negativity. By being reduced to a jewel on the front of a building, the mountain, thus negated by the absence of its enormity, is brought down to a human scale, which affirms its baroque structure. Similarly, by remaining untouched, the goblet of wine becomes connected to the young girl, taken away from her suitor by her father. The nothingness that surrounds the goblet, made perceptible by its abandonment, allows its signification, as a metonym for all the
sorrow of the world, to surface through minimalist means. By giving poetic form to the void at the centre of representation, the images convert negativity into something positive, since they maintain and emphasise the greatness of their referents by indicating the impossibility of fully transposing them into language. Likewise, critical awareness of his feeling of plenitude in China can only emerge through an aesthetic mode that re-inscribes its own limits, thereby intimating the opacity and transcendental nature of the experience at its root. In this way, his writing uncovers the separation between desire and its translation into the system, between the political and politics. Leiris’s account of China therefore acquires its political force, not by a literal description of the revolutionary process, but by its symbolising the space of non-identity that enables the writing subject to interrogate and realign himself perpetually vis-à-vis his object of study. The fact that his account can never be exhaustive — since, in order to take shape, it will inevitably have to exclude the constitutive singularity of the event — leaves it susceptible to reformulation.

Leiris’s exegesis of these memories perhaps explains his choosing to focus on the small and fleeting details that moved him during his visit. However, he laments the fact that he cannot surpass these details to provide even the slightest insight into the totality of China. As with *L’Afrique fantôme*, he has to renounce his wish for a totalising depiction of this nation, thereby stressing the impossibility of studying social objectivity without foregrounding its impact on the subject: ‘Le fait est, toutefois, que les détails en question représentent ce qui, en Chine, a été pour moi une certitude vécue et m’a touché au coeur. De quoi parlerais-je donc, sinon de ces choses qui m’ont ému et auxquelles, malgré leur
exiguité, je puis m’arrimer solidement?’ (Fi, p. 33). The discrepancy between the intensity of his visit and its determination at the level of the system creates a sense of disillusionment, the impression that he has not been sufficiently altered by the world-changing events he has witnessed. This dichotomy operates in a similar fashion to the collusion of fullness and emptiness in the aphorism. His failure to transcend these exiguous details to grasp the whole bespeaks our perpetual struggle to comprehend and shape the space of community, which has no objective referent.

The condition of enlightenment requires it to be indivisible from a sense of disappointment and opacity. Leiris’s revealing discussion of his own writing in Frêle Bruit, a more discursive statement of what we could infer from the figure of the two memories, suggests this:

Si par mes scrupules mêmes, je suis intellectuellement porté à passer du pour au contre puis du contre au pour en une constante oscillation et si, en dehors de nous comme au-dedans de nous, les choses s’usent si vite qu’il n’existe rien de stable sur quoi se reposer, ma seule ressource n’est-elle pas de tenter de m’accrocher à ce qui est le mouvement même et se présente à la fois comme affirmation et negation: création esthétique incessamment renouvelée, travail pour une révolution sociale toujours à reprendre et à porter plus loin? (FB, 392)

The uneven texture of Leiris’s prose undermines the appearance of textual organization, to re-inscribe, as far as possible, the disorder from which order grows, the unreason that enables reason to reason. Revolutionary and creative activity can be understood as an open-ended process rather than an achievable state, and it is only on this condition that these activities retain their transforming properties. Leiris’s writing resumes the task of enlightenment through its aspiration to liberate us from the critically stunting illusion of full objectivity by exposing its indelible mark of fiction. We can only defend
humanitarian values such as freedom and equality by showing their negativity as discursive constructs, which leaves them vulnerable, as Leiris's discussion of communism illustrates, to being contaminated with other non-humanitarian values or restricted to certain sectors of the population. The human proves inseparable from the inhuman; the feeling of heterogeneity or of being 'out of joint' that provokes us to interrogate and look beyond the dominant description of humanity to re-draw its contours. The fact that we can never affirmatively or definitively ground these principles prescribes the endless erasure and re-formulation that typifies Leiris's writing.

**Hope and Despair in Communism**

The combination of seemingly contradictory feelings involved in writing leads Leiris, as we have seen, to doubt constantly his project in *Fibrilles*. He is concerned about how his work will be received amongst his Chinese friends, whose collectivist militancy he admires, but could not be part of. They would hope such a work would give a militant account, charged with wholehearted belief in their great undertaking; they would measure its worth in terms of the help it would bring to the struggling people. This concern makes him confront what he calls his fundamental question:

suis-je à jamais incapable d'avoir en quoi que ce soit une foi suffisante pour que s'estompe mon angoisse personnelle ou bien est-ce la construction socialiste que je dois incriminer, dans la mesure où elle s'effectue — même en Chine — selon des voies trop géométriquement tracées pour qu'une telle angoisse vitale, avec tous les produits techniquement inutiles qui peuvent en dériver, ne soit pas mise hors du jeu dès le principe par les artisans héroïques de cette construction? (Fi, p. 34)
Querying whether the anxiety he feels stems from his own inability to have sufficient faith in the revolution, or from socialism itself, he wonders if socialism is being implemented by means that are in fact too rigid and systematising to assuage his fundamental anxiety, which is about death. The fact that communism is incapable of remedying everything, in particular this primordial anxiety, does not constitute an adequate reason to abandon its principles altogether: ‘Mais ne serait-il pas naturel de s’attendre à ce que des travaux qui visent à combler tant bien que mal le trou de cette angoisse originelle aient en tout cas droit de cité dans une société marxiste, puisqu’une telle société doit par définition tendre à réaliser la véritable société humaine?’ (Fi, p.34).

The Chinese communist project could possibly detract from its aim of establishing the authentic human society, by devaluing or rejecting those ‘produit inutiles,’ or works of art, which, for Leiris, represent a fundamental aspect of human activity through their attempt to fill imaginatively the void left by death. Leiris’s writing permanently underlines the ineradicable nature of the primitive fear of death, highlighting its generative and sustaining effect on cultural and social production. The implementation of communism therefore risks becoming an exclusive and objectifying procedure through its refutation of what does not accord exactly with its modelling of humanity.

In its march towards progress and total rationalisation, the increasingly monologial movement of Marxism could possibly become a process of disenchantment that tries to subsume everything under its ideological framework. Leiris brings this out in his discussion of a Chinese legend represented in the aforementioned opera and also in a popular play that Leiris saw performed, whose wishful imagery of reincarnation seems to
contradict the strict materialism of the Marxist doctrine. The legend of the love of Liang Chan-po and Chou Ying-taî at once combines harsh social critique with the seductive and consoling illusion of immortality. As education is closed to women in the era of this legend, Chou Ying-taî has to disguise herself as boy so as to learn. Her fellow pupil, Liang Chan-po, struck by a strange and new emotion, begins to fall in love with this ‘false boy’. The metamorphosis that the two characters undergo at the end of the story completely dissolves the need for any masquerade; natural history and mythology converge in the transformations that produce the butterfly and the myths that foster belief in survival after death. As we have seen, the father of Chou Ying-taî refuses to offer her hand in marriage to Liang Chan-po, who, stricken with overwhelming grief, eventually dies. Amid thunder and lightening, the young girl, having finished her funeral dance, throws herself into the tomb of her beloved, where they emerge as two butterflies to the idyllic backdrop of a rainbow and flowers. This transfiguration, the terrestrial apotheosis of the lovers, combines metempsychosis and the scientific idea of biological transmutations: the old and the new.

The legend’s protest against two major defects of feudal society — the state of ignorance in which women were kept and the arbitrary and tyrannical nature of parental power in the conjugal rights of their children — concurs with the emancipatory aspirations of the revolution:

Tableau d’un mode de vie aujourd’hui dépassé puisque l’émancipation féminine et la réforme du mariage dans un sens libéral comptent parmi les grands progrès que le peuple chinois doit à ses actuels dirigeants, cette comédie de moeurs dont chaque fragment atteint à la poésie lapidaire d’une dévise ou d’un proverbe recèle une
The sense of the miraculous, the reconciliation of the incommensurable in an imaginary form, is not incompatible with communism. Leiris asserts that this play, made obsolete by China's current leaders, has a signification that is in harmony with the new belief, even its conclusion, where the magical has free rein, could be accommodated by Marxist-Leninist ideas. He justifies this by arguing that the magic performed at the end of the play is as 'materialist' as dialectical materialism, by virtue of its concordance with nature or natural science. The striving for progress and the coming-together of contradictory elements to form the new, which exist in the legend, actually reflect the spirit of dialectical materialism, which sought to challenge religious dogma by insisting on ceaseless progressive development and qualitative novelty. However, the Chinese leaders' dialectical materialism, as their discarding of the legend implies, risks becoming shallow and sterile in its exclusion of the creative and critical activity that occurs in response to what refuses full rationalisation. In this way, it could begin to annul itself by slipping into the same ossified dogmatism that it opposes in religious authority. The pointed socio-political critique and the seduction of magic in the story do not mutually exclude one another, but indicate their necessary interpenetration in the effort to build 'the true society.' This feeling of enchantment links up with the Utopian hope — the energy behind the striving for social change — that Leiris witnessed at the national festival, an aesthetic event that eradicates rigid social categories and distinctions. Leiris therefore pleads that the 'merveilleux' or the 'miraculous', as a fantasmatic expression of what cannot be absorbed by reason, can have a place in the rationale of communism and
its drive towards progress.

According to Leiris, the Chinese authorities only grant a very narrow and precarious status to what does not directly serve the revolution. He underlines the fact that aside from the great effort to educate the masses, he finds there in the 1950s a thriving, rich cultural and artistic life that counters the impression that many westerners had of China, then, as a stern and formal country. But ‘the pivot of all that’ is the building of socialism. The revolutionaries’ demand for the urgently-needed amelioration of living conditions makes the type of activity that absorbs Leiris seem like a bourgeois vestige and a matter of re-education. But Leiris judges it necessary for the development of the collective task:

A l’échelle des collectivités et au niveau de leurs besoins immédiats, il n’est que trop certain que je suis dans mon tort, car l’urgent est — bien sûr — de donner une vie meilleure à des centaines de millions de personnes. Mauvaise conscience mise à part, le rigorisme des fasseurs de plans est cependant pour moi une cause de malaise et m’oblige à me poser personnellement cette question: est-ce agir dans un sens correct (pour soi comme pour ceux qui viendront après) que travailler à quelque chose dont on sait aussi que chacun doit s’y consacrer pleinement (la demie-mesure étant exclue en matière de révolution), mais dont on sait aussi qu’y adhérer sans réserve peut amener à se nier en ce qu’on a de plus intime et tuer ainsi dans l’œuf ce qui serait votre véritable apport à l’œuvre collective? (Fi, p. 35).

Suppressing provisionally the affirmative thrust of Leiris’s self-questioning, we might say that the utilitarian and rational procedure of the revolution already in 1955, awakened in him a fear that it could become totalitarian if its fostering of unquestioning adherence to its dogma evolved into a denial of what cannot be immediately absorbed and categorised by its logic. Leiris’s disquiet stems precisely from his sense of a risk of Chinese communism’s disavowing the singular and the indeterminate; he gently suggests that what constitutes the collective could become reified. For Leiris, remaining faithful to
the collective task of building socialism does not exclude, but rather depends on the individual’s remaining faithful to what he views as his personal and real contribution to the revolution. This contribution would be killed in the bud, if he dedicated himself to a distorting version of it that entailed a denial of his subjectivity. As Leiris indicates, in *Cinq études d’ethnologie*, if art has to espouse a particular ideology, it loses its revolutionary spirit, since it ends up merely repeating stereo-typical ideas that maintain rather than disturb the status quo. Leiris therefore stresses that we can only foster revolutionary art, if we give free rein to investigation and experimentation: 'Travailler sans directives données de l’extérieur, sans idées préconçues — ou presque — et comme s’il allait à la découverte, c’est sans doute le meilleur moyen pour l’artiste ou l’écrivain d’échapper aux stéréotypes et de faire ainsi œuvre vraiment authentique et créatrice.'

Art acquires political import through its break with the conventions of politics

The implementation of communism in China threatens to dissolve its progressive and critical drive by diminishing or rejecting the importance of the subjective level of creativity in re-imagining and giving expression to the collective. The legend of the two lovers implies the need to preserve a space in the social domain which, by not being governed by strict institutional norms or practices, can stimulate new visions of reality:

Liang Chan-po et Chou Ying-taï, dans la légende qui les fait mourir puis se changer en papillons, bénéficient de cette merveille: se métamorphoser sans cesser pour autant d’être soi-même. Dois-je tirer un trait sur tout espoir de me reconcilier, ou bien dois-je affirmer qu’il n’est nullement du domaine de la fable de concevoir, sur le plan de l’action militante, un équivalent de la métamorphose miraculeuse des deux amants? (Fi, 35)
The legend or its artistic portrayal resists the exclusive and rigorous drive to progress by rescuing and preserving the past in reflection. The metamorphosis of the two lovers at once suggests the need to liberate women and to lessen parental dominance and also the persistence of the fabulous in any transformation of reality. The politicians' demand that art should act as an expedient for the revolutionary cause could, by confining it to a determinate ideological framework, impede its ability to transgress and reconfigure social boundaries in its endeavour to represent the unconditioned. The hybrid nature of the legend with its combination of harsh social critique and Utopian dreaming pushes for radical change, whilst maintaining the space of the indeterminate. Leiris, however, asks himself the urgent question whether he must give up the praxis of literature or fable in order to reconcile himself with the Chinese effort.

He perhaps offers a response to this question through his innovative use of the legend. The legend, by highlighting the way that human activity is sustained by what exceeds our grasp, the negativity of death, perhaps exemplifies the power of art to reflect critically on institutional politics. Art, through its repudiation of full rationality, perpetuates the work of knowledge or enlightenment. The rationalising motive of the Chinese communist regime seeks to eliminate or negate the irrational or the singular on which poetry thrives. Irrationality can never be fully separated from or dissolved by the work of the rational, being at once nourished and subverted by it. Without acknowledging the always incomplete separation of all enlightenment from myth, the remainder of the imaginary in any definition of the human, knowledge threatens to become totalitarian in its exclusion of the heterogeneous. Leiris's constant inscription of the distance between self and other
in anthropological fieldwork, his painful recognition of his eurocentricism in *L'Afrique Fantôme*, work to counter determinations of the other that merely propagate and confirm ethnocentric myths. By accepting and exposing as far as possible the aspect of illusion in anthropology, Leiris hopes to prevent this discipline from collapsing into the same bigotry and naivety that it aims to overcome. It is precisely this self-canceling operation that Leiris fears might exist in the application and distortion of communist ideology:

De même que le latin fut pour la chrétienté une sorte d'espéranto et que le symbole du poisson servit de signe de reconnaissance aux tenants de la foi nouvelle, un nom tel que celui de Lénine et des symboles comme la faucille et le marteau ou la colombe inspirée de la gravure de Picasso peuvent aujourd'hui constituer un vivant trait d'union entre des êtres que séparent la race, la langue, voire l'âge par surcroît. Ce qui, à mon sens, est la vertu inappréciable du communisme c'est qu'il relie effectivement par quelque chose de commun des individus qui, sans cela, resteraient tout à fait étrangers les uns aux autres, dispersés comme ils le sont aux quatre coins de la terre. Mais, toute fondée qu'elle soit sur des réalités sociales et non sur des nuées religieuses, une telle communauté n'en est pas moins fluide, car ce monde-là lui aussi possède ses théologiens qui ont tôt fait d'excommunier ceux qu'ils regardent comme hérétiques (Fi, p. 40).

The inappreciable virtue of communism, its unifying of otherwise estranged peoples, is jeopardised by the rigorists' excommunication of those members of society who apparently threaten its perfect order. This exclusive procedure thereby automatically annuls its collectivist aims, reviving the fear and intolerance generated by the religious fanaticism that it endeavours to surmount. The last sentence of the quotation reminds us that the political can never totally divest itself of the theological. The unity sought in religious or ideological belief engenders a state of disunion as it denies difference to secure its status as truth. Communism and religious faith alike can become unifying and divisive forces, when they degenerate into coercion and suppression, so converting hope
Leiris’s exploration of the Chinese revolution oscillates between optimism and despair, as he confronts the impossibility of expressing in language the enchantment he felt at the national festival. The vibrancy of the people he encounters, the emancipation of women, and the democratisation of the Chinese communist party lead him to believe in a new wave of Marxism that could counter its oppressive outcome in Stalinist Russia. The continuity between the past and the present, which Leiris discovers in Chinese society, indicates that the metamorphosis of China has been similar to that of the two lovers in the legend, whereby it manages to retain something of its former identity despite undergoing radical upheaval. China begins to emerge as a manifestation of the miraculous as its imaginary or perhaps Utopian dimension seems to coincide with reality, suggesting the possible coming-together of the poetic and the real. However, this dream is thrown into question as a historical event disrupts Leiris’s enthusiasm, driving a wedge between the hopeful spirit conveyed at the aesthetic event of the parade and its translation into politics. In 1956, the Soviet army violently crushes an uprising in Budapest amongst the oppressed Hungarians to which the Chinese government, despite earlier reservations, offers its support. The central dilemma tackled in _Fibrilles_ of whether to adhere fully to the rigour of the revolution and its founding belief system or simply to submit to the seductive charm of the parade with little concern for political allegiance, reaches a crisis point. His feeling of enchantment becomes stripped of all substance by the non-humanitarian turn that communism seems to take. This occurrence shows how the authoritarian regime begins to suppress its original revolutionary spirit. The stark
realisation of the dichotomy between the oppressive tendency of political systems and the
liberating and unbound energy of the desire at their origins makes Leiris doubt the
validity of his artistic project of reconciling poetry and politics. Leiris is left to conclude:
‘Après avoir désespéré de tant de choses, le temps serait-il décidément venu de
désespérer aussi du communisme?’ (Fi, 45).

Art and Politics

Leiris defers his answer to this question by a series of digressions that suggest the
impossibility of articulating an adequate response. The digressions revolve around a
sequence of dreams of which the most significant involves his friend, Aimé Césaire, the
Afro-Caribbean poet and political figure. This dream, the only one that Leiris feels the
need to decipher, betrays the conflict between poetry and politics that preoccupies Leiris
throughout *Fibrilles*. The dream takes place in Leiris’s country home where Aimé
Césaire is staying. A large group of ‘gens de couleur’ comes to see Césaire, just before he
and Leiris have to leave for a car trip. The group hinders the preparations for the journey
by placing a refreshment stall in front of the partly wall-less room where Leiris has to
change. The following scene ensues: ‘Gentiment, ils m’aident à remettre les choses en
ordre et, une jeune femme de couleur et moi, nous suspendons au fléau d’une sorte de
haute balance, à l’aide de mauvais fils de fer recourbés en crochets à l’une de leurs
extrémités, le tiroir ou autre contenant dans lequel sont rangées mes affaires’ (Fi, p. 52).
Leiris interprets the dream as being structured on two antinomical aspects, locating it
within the wider framework of *Fibrilles*: ‘notre aspiration toute pure et comme animale à
une vie non-claquemurée est reléguée à l’arrière-plan par l’action politique; mais cette antinomie entre exigences naturelles et rigueur d’une idée peut être résolue pratiquement – d’une façon qui, certes, frise l’acrobatie – avec un peu de bon vouloir et d’ingéniosité’(FI, p. 52).

Our desire for unconstrained freedom remains inescapably linked to politics, even while political action relegates it to the background, the image of the scales, on which Leiris and the woman hang the drawer containing his personal belongings proffers, in a metaphorical form, a possible solution to the unresolvable tension between art and politics. To live with the irreducible antagonism between the constraints of political ideology and the liberty of ‘une vie non-claquemurée’ requires the precarious and careful acrobatics of a tightrope walker. This episode therefore condenses Fibrilles’s problematic. After a long convalescence following his attempted suicide, Leiris expresses urgency to write an article on Aimé Césaire, the cornerstone of his dream, describing him as:

le seul de mes amis vivants en qui l’art et la politique – autrement dit le superluxe de l’imaginaire et la grosse quincaillerie des manoeuvres socialement utiles – parviennent à se fondre au lieu de s’exclure l’un l’autre ou de tant bien que mal coexister. Il n’est ni un poète qui a émasculé son art en le subordonnant aux directives d’un parti, ni quelqu’un dont la révolte originelle s’est trouvée déviée ou arrêtée en cours de route par des soucis trop esthétiques (Fi, 57).

Césaire is revealed as the ultimate reference of his dream, since his life reconciles art and political action; he is not just the acrobat who manages through ‘ingenuity’ and ‘good sense’ to find a balance between the Utopian desire for a life free from the movement of history, and the demand for order and duty in political life. The dream about Césaire
begins to sketch a response to the question raised before this obstensible digression.

We have to wait until after his account of his suicide for the dream’s full significance for his dilemma to emerge. During his convalescence, he discovers that art constitutes his reason for living by reconstructing the portrait of the great artist of his childhood, his relative, Claire Friché, ‘Tante Claire’, a Belgian opera singer whose passionate voice particularly marked him as a child. His desire to recover her ‘true’ image, to give textual form to her authentic identity, becomes urgent, as Leiris searches for a point of identification through which he can conquer his sense of nothingness following his growing scepticism about the Chinese communist dream, and give new meaning to his existence. Leiris starts his search by examining photographs of her. His first photograph, taken around the time of the celebrations in Italy for the centenary of the birth of Puccini, depicts Tante Claire as she was in 1903 in the role of Floria Tosca for the French version of La Tosca. The other cuttings taken from the magazine Musica evoke her portrayal of Vita in Vincent d’Indy’s L’Etranger.

On retracing her image, he sees himself as a scholar who is closely studying documents in the hope of recovering the missing evidence that would resolve the enigma, and establish objectivity: ‘Je suis maintenant penché – comme un amoureux ou comme un érudit examinant des pièces d’archives – sur des photographies que je cherche à faire resurgir afin d’y retrouver l’image réelle de ma tante en même temps qu’elles me fournissent, littérairement, ce qu’en langage de cinéma l’on nomme une séquence’ (Fi, p. 143). A cinematic sequence is a series of shots that constitute a single unit. Therefore, the
photographs of Claire, when seen altogether, should produce her real image. What emerges, however, from Leiris's search is the triad: Love, Art, Death. The first two terms come from the opening of the soprano aria of the second act of Tosca, 'Vissi d'arte'. The third term, death, comes from the interrelation of love and death in the story of La Tosca and also from the name of the character Claire plays in L'Etranger, Vita (Latin and Italian for life). As we saw in the chapter on the Miroir de la Tauromachie, for Leiris, life and death are indissociable, each term constituting and limiting the other. Therefore, his extrapolation of the term death from the name Vita is not a contradiction but an indication of the mutually deconstructive relationship of these phenomena. Death is the obverse of life.

In his state of mental and physical dejection, after his failed suicide, Leiris looks for reasons to continue living. As in the Rêveries, this state of dislocation, where the failure of perceived reality to provide a full identity for the subject becomes apparent, reveals the void on which all identity is constructed. This dislocation disrupts and undermines our objectification of the social space. The resultant sense of negativity can, or must, lead to new acts of identification or representational modes that seek to bridge the gap in the system. The feeling of nothingness that both Rousseau and Leiris experience in the aftermath of moral and political disillusionment figures a state close to death. This metaphorical contact with the abyss at the heart of all social activity demands the work of imagination to fill its void, by providing representations of fullness that rebound critically on the present situation by highlighting its deficiencies. The regeneration or transfiguration of moribund or morally destitute structures depends on the emergence of
such figures or myths. Like all forms of representation, these myths are always permeated by the absence or lack that they exist to fill. Their permanent incompletion permits the constant re-imagining of social truth.

Leiris’s desire to resuscitate Tante Claire’s image functions in a similar fashion. He tries to recompose her portrait in the hope of restoring meaning to his life by creating a point of identification. Through this act, he seeks to hide the chasm detected in his previous attempts to secure an identity for himself. Its outcome, the three defining terms, Art, Love and Death, which result from this process, do not constitute the real image of Tante Claire; her actual image is the movement linking these terms. In an effort to communicate the dynamic behind the vague memories of his relative, he has recourse to an abstract symbol, a black equilateral triangle resting on one of its corners. The stark, elliptical nature of this symbol suggests the impossibility of integrating into discourse the energy that defined Claire Friché. However, via this procedure of abstraction leading to the symbol, the stripping-away of the various components of his aunt’s identity, Leiris begins to grasp the significance that she has for him:

Quant à l’infime signe noir – dont je ne remarquai pas que, pointe en bas, il évoque une femme au moment où rien n’existe en dehors de son triangle touffu – il prit bientôt un sens moins pythagorisant que celui qu’il avait comme marque typographique possible: en pleine veille, et quelques jours après que cette espèce de chiffre ou de monogramme eut fait à ma pensée ses offres de service, je tins soudain pour évident que, disposé pointe en haut, il aurait quelque ressemblance avec ce motif oriental en forme de coeur renversé, l’“abre de vie” (...) (Fi, p. 146).

He no longer tries to identify with the ‘fleshless entity’ of his aunt, whose authentic being eludes literal description, but with this abstract sign whose impoverishment refers
negatively to the desire for life she emblematises:

Ainsi, tandis qu’à la remorque de la Bruxelloise voilée par les mousselines du temps et devenue ombre empourprée de fabuleux reflets je m’engageais dans les voies d’une louche idéalité, un travail souterrain s’opérait, si bien caché qu’un moment viendrait où je pourrais m’imaginer détourné de l’entité privée de chair à qui je demandais asile, et rappelé à la réalité brûlante, rien que par le passage quasi mécanique du signe trop abstrait que j’avais inventé à cet emblème dont le dessin lancéolé résume quelque chose que j’ai vécu au présent du désir ou de l’étreinte et non en une rumination anachronique (Fi, p. 147).

His search is motivated by an intense feeling in the present, not by an already constituted space in time. The resistance of the desire she symbolises to reiteration within a linguistic series points to its unbound, elusive quality that can only appear in a derivative form that indicates rather than substantiates its presence. Through his failed restoration of the portrait of Tante Claire, Leiris does reconcile life and art, not by reducing their difference to the same, but through their antagonism. As witnessed in chapter 3, antagonism refers to the moment at which the differences separating two opposed elements fail, thereby revealing the negativity that simultaneously limits and supports the particular identity of each element. Art can never fully represent life because the very process of representation already implies the absence of the represented. This negativity liberates art from the restrictions of the empirical, granting it the energy to outstrip the limitations of the present context in order to provide an imaginative redefinition of it. We cannot simply reduce life and art to the binary set of reality and fantasy, with each domain having fully established its objectivity. Their antagonistic relationship makes them irreducible to such a schematisation. Social crises challenge and incite artistic production to invent new representations of the socio-political domain, which may
register and transcend these crises, thereby providing new visions that highlight the lack in the present. By attesting to that missing fullness, these poetic visions have the potential to push for the reformulation of an unjust situation. This rearticulation of social truth, however, inevitably refers to the constitutive void that links it to and separates it from the situation it wants to describe and surpass. The inherent incompleteness of all poetic or mythical descriptions of the social both at once generates and circumscribes their existence. This maintains the gap between the description of what is and the projection of what should be, and it is that gap that engenders one dimension of social and cultural diversity.

Leiris’s wish to reconstitute Tante Claire’s real image is therefore oxymoronic or more precisely self-annulling. For such an image to be achieved, it would have to equate to life itself, thereby dissolving artistic representation. The fact that the image can never reach a state of presence, that is, never internalise life itself, establishes art as a space in which the tension between reality and imagination can be explored. The image, being defined by the absence of what it represents, approximates to death rather than to life. As the images of the goblet of wine and the mirror demonstrate, negativity becomes positive through its re-inscription of the lack left by the singular or the unsymbolisable that prevents the critical force of what exceeds intelligibility from being ensnared by the imposition of false ends or restrictions. In this way, poetic writing can disrupt our rational view of the world by indicating the contingency of all objectivity, and thence, to its potential for reformulation. As Leiris’s endeavour to revive the lost memory illustrates, art perhaps functions critically more by exposing the limits of representability than by
what it actually sets out to represent. The ineradicable distance between reality and imagination – the gap that sustains Utopian striving – is the very location of creativity. Art becomes, for Leiris, a reason to live because it is ‘une ardeur à vivre’ (Fi, p. 162). This does not imply that one renounces life in the favour of art, but that artistic production constitutes a way of symbolising the nameless force that runs through the fundamental triad: Love, Art and Death.

By endeavouring to identify with the great artist of his younger years, Claire Friché, Leiris sketches an embryonic response to the dilemma that he poses before seemingly digressing to his dream about Césaire. We do not have to choose politics over art or vice versa, but should confront and profit from the irreducible friction inherent in the confrontation of these realms. It is only by aesthetically registering this tension that we can conjoin art and politics without reducing one to the other. Politically engaged art preserves the clash between its description of the present and its potential for re-articulation. This perpetuates the endless search for justice that engenders the production and reproduction of the social.

We can perhaps further our understanding of Leiris’s partial resolution of the problem through Lyotard’s concept of the aesthetic reversal. Through his use of the psychoanalytical notion of the double reversal, Lyotard demonstrates how art is not a space of pure fantasy or wish-fulfilment, but the very dispossession of the space invested with wish-fulfilment. In other words, art exposes fantasy as a compromise formation in so far as fantasy can never fully eradicate the traces of the disruptive energy that it seeks
to repress or defend against. Creativity stems from the enigmatic missing object that urges us to try to reconstitute that object in articulated language in an attempt to make it intelligible. This process requires us to internalise in discourse what remains forever external to it: the object. Desire connives with the figural, the opaque metaphorical level of the text, to produce figures whose unsystematic meaning disturbs the clarity of the linguistic system, attesting to the radical difference that refuses assimilation into the oppositional structure of discourse. Just as Leiris cannot authenticate his image of his aunt Claire, the desire for objective truth remains infinitely unfulfilled. This state of non-fulfilment preserves desire as an indomitable force whose perpetual disturbance of the supposedly rational order of discursivity constantly brings to the fore the impossibility of subsuming everything under reason.

Although Leiris recognises that his desire for the ‘true’ will always remain unsatisfied, it does not necessarily follow that he has to give up his project of finding the ‘règle du jeu’ in a sense of total defeat. What survives after his shattered state is the vivacity, the ardour of the desire that nourishes and constantly surpasses the writing process, his reason for living. His reflections during his post suicidal period begin to carve out a precarious role for art of producing illusion without illusion, striving without resolution. So it emerges that the enchantment of the national parade can never be completely rationalised through its integration and location within a defining linguistic series. The enchantment is purely temporal and unsettles any spatial definition of it. The desire for radical change expressed at the festival delineates the political as a moment that cannot be trapped and ordered within the topography of political institutions. The failure of institutional structures then
demands the creation of new spaces of representation whose discontinuity with the dominant regime and its objectification of the collective possibly allows for the reformulation and displacement of that sphere.

Leiris’s reaction to a golden statue of an artist he sees on a visit to a Chinese temple enables us to comprehend more fully in what the critical force of art might consist. The monk-artist of the statue committed suicide by throwing himself from the top of a mountain after the sorrowful death of his wife. The discrepancy between the statue’s exuberant figure in flight and the woeful tale of the artist leads Leiris to continue his interrogation of the function of art. Leiris’s overwhelming sensitivity to the chapel that the artist decorated stems from its fusion of love, art and death, ‘des réalités étroitement conjuguées.’ (Fi, p. 200) Love and art are unified by the common denominator of beauty. Art is connected to beauty through its transcendence of the sensible and its resultant simulation of eternity. Love also forges a link with beauty through the explosive precipitation of the self into the other. Both art and love thus lead us into a world whose boundlessness can no more be chartered than ‘the vast plain of death.’ The intensity of the Chinese artist’s work and his depiction in the statue poses questions for Leiris about the motivating factor behind his suicide. It is not clear whether he launched himself from the top of the mountain as a disabused man who had come to realise that art could not alleviate his sorrow or as a mystic, who, by taking his ascesis to its very limits and fleeing the ordinary world, sought, in an extreme act of self-denial, eternal plenitude (Fi, 201). The intensity of his art and his portrayal in the statue leaves Leiris dissatisfied with the original explanation of the artist-monk’s suicide. As with his reconstruction of Claire
Friche, Leiris detects behind the image of the supposedly disconsolate widower an excess of life: 'je fus sensible seulement à l’ardeur effrénée qui émanait de cette créature livrée apparentement à rien autre que l’ivresse d’exister et de se dépenser' (FI, p. 202). Leiris’s reworking of this melodrama brings together incommensurable elements, as he concludes that the extreme rage for life does not differ from the rage for self inflicted death; both entail a desire to reach the ultimate state of enlightenment, to erase any distance between the self and the external world; to fuse subject and object.

The energy proper to art is not that of a game or a religion but an energy that strives to discover and expose realities that cannot be completely deciphered. Artistic production vacillates between reality and illusion, forever precluding its confinement to either term. Art probes the anxiety of the void that incites and perpetuates the constant production and reproduction of social reality, by simultaneously revealing and concealing the impossibility of fully integrating or surmounting this constitutive negativity. By maintaining the defining indeterminacy of the human, poetry reflects critically on the perversity of political ideology when it aims to make commensurable the incommensurable through totalising measures:

Pallier les effets d’une présence par sa proximité accrue, fuir en tombant exprès la crainte de la chute, muer en catégorique porte-à-faux l’accidentel défaut d’assiette (évident chez l’artiste et surtout chez le poète car, dans une vie où tout collerait, comment se décoller des choses et les transcender), ces mouvements ne peuvent que dénoncer l’existence de certaines ambiguïtés fondamentales, à moins de relever de la vulgaire sottise ou de porter la griffe du fameux démon de la perversité qui, en maints cas, change malignement l’envie d’échapper à une angoisse en celle d’entrer dans ses voies (démon qu’à l’échelle de l’actualité historique on prendrait aisément pour une éminence grise de la politique occidentale, prodigue en mauvaises farces de ce genre: les tenants d’une Algérie aussi française que possible agissant de manière à creuser...
plus encore le fossé entre Algériens et Français, les anticommuniste américains jetant Cuba dans les bras de l'Union soviétique, pour ne citer que ces deux exemples — à rire ou à pleurer — de troc, délibéré pourrait-on croire, d'une menace supposée contre cela même qu'on redoutait. (FI, 203-204)

Leiris relocates the sources of fantasy and truth in this passage. Politics becomes a fantasmatic space which, by denying the contingency of its own objectivity, declines into the ideological delusion it aims to vanquish. Whilst poetry may appear to deny death through its attempt to create something that is eternal, it can, in practice, yield paroxysmal states, whose destruction of limits permits us to touch the nothingness of death. As we saw in our reading of the *Miroir de la tauromachie*, the aesthetic, as a domain which exists at once inside and outside society, can function as a fraught meeting-point for what is defined as social and non-social. The antagonism between these realms can unleash affects that work to erase or loosen rigid institutional divisions to allow for new social determinations.

Leiris specifies opera as the form of artistic expression where the disruptive force of desire can be experienced most intensely. The fusion of love, art and death erupts in opera, the summit of all art. He now prefers the tragic beauty of opera to the bloody reality of bullfighting as a source of that sort of paroxysm that can potentially take us to the extremes of existence, to the borders of the constitution and dissolution of meaning. His rejection of the bullfight not only stems from the horrific violence of the war, which made him more sensitive to the aggressiveness of this ritual, but also because the overtly fictitious tragedy of opera induces emotions which are paradoxically more authentic. Opera, by re-inscribing the permanent distance between reality and imagination, evokes
the complex and tense passage of the aesthetic process, whereby the artist tries to make
intelligible that which rejects intelligibility. We can infer that the non-illusory illusion of
opera reveals and conceals that which, by exceeding the grasp of human reason, sustains
the interminable search of imagination to widen the sphere of critical thought.

Du Côté de Pékin, du Côté de Kumasi

The unbound desire that Leiris detects in aesthetic experience links up with his
comparison of the two festivals in which he participated on two different Sundays: on ‘du
côté de Pékin’ and the other ‘du côté de Kumasi’. The Proustian division of his world
into two ‘sides’ refers, in the first case, to the national festival that he attended as part of
the French delegation in Peking in 1955, and in the second case, to an Easter mass that
he had heard some years before in a West African township. Despite the ostensible
difference in the two occasions, they both appear religious in character: the Easter mass
at Kumasi displays elements of Christian mythology and the Chinese festivities,
celebrating the revolution, manifest the mystical millenarian strain of Marxist-Leninism.
Leiris’s exploration of these two events limpidly confirms the incomplete separation of
politics and religion, enlightenment and myth.

Leiris finds a Utopian image in the different national identities, the Africans and the
Chinese. While well aware of the stereotypical nature of his portrayal of them, he
discusses their differences, describing how he admires the Africans’ ability to abandon
themselves freely to the pulsations of life, and the Chinese people’s serene air of gravity
and their mysterious appearance that implies ‘leurs rapports de bon voisinage avec la mort’ (Fi, p. 211). He acknowledges that these ideas are naive, and perhaps fallacious, but to his mind they have the seductive powers of great Utopian ideals. However, in a later interview, he castigates this sort of ‘simplistic’ observation as racist,\(^{15}\)

and in *Frêle bruit* he laments the naive notions of exoticism that coloured earlier depictions of distant cultures. In the latter work, criticising what he terms ‘l’exotisme carte postale’, he debunks the myth of the ‘noble savage’ through his commentary on a tale taken from his childhood, *Macao et Cosmage*, an idealised account of interracial love. The denouement of the story serves the cause of imperialism as the white, Macao, despite his wisdom, leaves his savage princess, Cosmage and their natural idyll, to comply with the ‘civilised world’s’ ultimate authority of reason and progress (FB, 87-100). Leiris criticises the way that the tale propagates imperialist ideas of the necessary segregation of culturally different groups and the impossibility for individuals from such groups to live in a lasting union. He also reproaches himself for being seduced by Cosmage’s Edenic charm. He betrays the antediluvian character of this image with the harsh political reality underlying its fabrication: ‘La Nature, d’ailleurs, est-elle autre chose qu’une conception de désoeuvrés, flânant dans leurs parcs à l’anglaise, goûtant dans leurs Trianons un peu du lait de la vie pastorale ou rêvant au bon sauvage à l’heure même où se pratique la traite négrière?’ (FB, 99) This quotation partly anticipates the conclusions drawn by a recent history of the myth of the noble savage. This study refutes the widely-held belief that ‘the noble savage’ fiction comes from Rousseau, and instead identifies as one of its main sources the work of a British anthropologist of the 1850s who fabricated the myth as a weapon for his campaign against the anti-slave movement of the
Leiris's retrospective remarks on his earlier beliefs disclose the possibly overbearing ethnocentrism in any definition of the other, and the dangers of reducing cultural difference to restrictive binary oppositions. Such accounts can only serve to weaken the intensity of differences, whose clash, as we shall see, can generate innovative cultural formations that can possibly dislodge hierarchical structures.

The affective impact of the Western African mass gives Leiris an impression of peace, and immemorial harmony with nature, the Utopian dream that, as he affirms, he has always sought through his relations with blacks. Leiris momentarily re-finds, in the magic of the Chinese national parade, the feeling of harmony and peace of the 'côté de Kumasi'. Both occasions give the vague impression of a final Judgement where everyone is united, in this case, by hope rather than terror. Despite their differences, the two festivals converge in their religious aspect:

Si (à en juger par ma propre réaction et ce que je pus saisir de celle de mes compagnons) la fête de Pékin était d’essence religieuse autant que la fête de Kumasi, entre les deux manifestations il y avait cette différence: l’une répondait à une pure mythologie, le Christianisme avec ses idées de Dieu fait homme, d’âme immortelle et de résurrection; l’autre à une espérance qui ne laisse pas non plus d’être un mythe (car on peut seulement rêver d’humanité maîtresse de son destin) mais un mythe qui, toutefois, enveloppe une réalité — la possibilités de remaniements sociaux tels que le sous-homme ne soit plus qu’un cas pathologique — et qui invite à une action dont les perspectives, nullement surnaturelles quoique démesurées par rapport aux limites de la vie de chacun, n’excèdent pas celles de l’aventure rien que terrestre de l’espèce à laquelle nous appartenons. (Fi, p. 217)

The communist national parade, by unifying disparate individuals through faith in
Marxist Utopia, is just as religious as the Easter mass. However, Leiris emphasises their fundamental difference: the communist myth, unlike Christian mythology, embraces reality in the social changes it wants to implement. Whilst the aims of these changes exceed the life span of any individual, they never surpass the purely terrestrial to assume supernatural proportions.

In its striving to change the future, communism has to rely on the work of imagination, for the future, by its very nature, can only exist as that which remains always unconditioned. However, in its attempt to separate itself from the fear and ignorance generated by religious myth, it tries to subject everything to reason, thereby disavowing its fictional aspect. Marxist-Leninism, as a doctrine that makes all phenomena accord with its totally rational system, is ‘still a mystical doctrine like those of the past’, because depending on pure reason, it has no propulsive power like a machine deprived of fuel. (FL, 217) It can only persevere as a revolutionary force, if embraces its imaginary dimension which, by seeking beyond the givens of reason, propels the movement towards radical change:

Mais cette nouvelle religion, qui se défend d’en être une et donne cyniquement le pas au facteur économique sur les facteurs plus nobles de l’évolution des sociétés, exige la connaissance positive du monde contradictoire qu’on ne peut valablement amender qu’en se fondant sur ses tensions et ses déchirements mêmes. C’est pourquoi, science autant que messianisme, elle a le privilège d’être paradoxalement une religion vraie, à la fois moyen de désembourber la vie et dévoilement de processus naturels. D’où cette règle primordiale, qu’à mon sens tous les militants — et les sympathisants parmi lesquels je me range — devraient regarder comme absolument impérative: éviter que le recours trop vite usuel aux mensonges que les nécessités du combats peuvent paraître justifier place décidément sous la coupe de la mythologie l’ensemble de l’entreprise et, toute rigueur abolie, la désaxe au point de lui faire rater son but, la fin de l’exploitation de l’homme par l’homme, réelle seulement lorsqu’il n’y a plus ni
The new religion of Marxism, which denies that it is such, strives to master the social space fully by attempting to solve its ambiguities solely and cynically through economic transformation. The purely economic paradigm claims to provide positive knowledge of society, but is just as delusive as any other myth of social evolution. Maoism risks betraying the ‘true’ scientific and mythic aspiration of communism to enact social change on the basis of the tensions and contradictions of society, by reducing social reality to economics. For communism to retain its critical powers, its followers have to avoid the all too rapid recourse to lies to further their cause. Such lies abolish any intellectual or political rigour by dissimulating the contingency of all objectivity and thereby totally subjugating the interminable work of enlightenment to that of mythology. Anthropological hope only persists if we recognise that it is precisely the inherent incompletion of all systems of knowledge that ensures and perpetuates the socio-political development of humanity.

Whether Leiris is motivated into a semblance of action by events or given over to reverie, he remains constantly torn between his Mao Tse-tung side and the Kumasi side. On the one hand, he aspires to be ‘truly’ a man endowed with the practical intelligence and courage exemplified by the builders of the New World, and on the other, to recover the freshiness of his experience of the Easter mass, where he was transported to remote realms of memory — and, simply, remoteness. Leiris reproaches himself for the fact that his social conscience only wakes up at a distance, that is, with the enchantment of distant lands and ages that allows him to escape from the ‘boredom’ or ‘constraint’ that would
result from a 'commitment closer to home.' Notwithstanding his own self-criticism, Leiris’s deep affinity with both the Kumasi side and the Peking side brings out the necessary combination of fantasy and reality in constructing society:

Et le fait est que, si je tourne le dos aux prestiges anachroniques de Kumasi et regarde vers l'actualité des communistes de Pékin, les enchantements émanés de contrées ou d'âges reculés ne sont pas étrangers à cette conversion. Pour que je fasse quelques pas dans une voie où la considération des misères voisines avait été impuissante à m'engager, n'a-t-il pas fallu que la nécessité d'une refonte me soit montrée en des pays qui, Chine comprise, m'apportaient une ample mesure d'enchantements de cet ordre? (Fi, pp. 219-220).

The scientific aspiration of communism, its demand for ‘positive knowledge of the contradictory world’, which Leiris much admires, is only tenable, if it accepts the always incomplete separation of fact from fiction. Any endeavour to negate the work of imagination in descriptions of social truth leads to lies and deception and thence to the suppression of critical enquiry. As Leiris indicates, political commitment, the pursuit of liberation, demands constant vigilance against the lies often told to hide any regime’s lack of total authority. Man’s emancipation, his freedom from exploitation, does not consist in finding an all-encompassing, uncontroversial definition of social truth, for such a discovery would inevitably have to disavow its own condition of possibility, the radical alterity that founds any quest for emancipation, but rather in recognising the freedom that comes from the impossibility of supplying such a definition. 17 It is the irreducibility of the social to paradigms that fuels the communist effort to build a just society in the same way that it is the irreducibility of the other to cognition that necessitates and fuels anthropological enquiry.
An Ethics of Poetry?

His questioning of the Chinese application of Marxist ideology merges at one point with his personal doubts about his search for an ethics that would reconcile artistic and political practice. His reflections on the consequences of finding and imposing an ethics show the contradictions inherent to any project of political change. He begins to discredit and deride his wish to discover through art eternal truth. The writing process is constantly being interrupted by events in the present, in particular the harrowing news of the terror of the Algerian war, which throw his self-representation into confusion and re-inscribe the chasm between the act of expression and what is being expressed:

Il est certain en outre qu’une menace comme la menace fasciste, avec la perspective d’enlisement massif dans la bêtise et la cruauté qu’ouvre cette exacerbation mi-déliante mi-concertée du sentiment de groupe en ce qu’il a plus d’archaïque, me fait douter plus que jamais de la validité d’un effort aussi parcellaire que le mien. Entre le moi que je suis et le moi que j’écris, un double écart se creuse donc: avec ces pages qui grippent et piétinent, folle avance que, sur l’éternel retardataire qu’est le je raconté, prend ce je raconteur, entraîné par le cours des choses aujourd’hui plus vite encore qu’hier; désaffection qui m’éloigne de cet autoportrait, déprécié d’autant que son modèle est réduit à l’insignifiance quand tout me dit que je ne suis qu’un fétu bousculé par le grand venir de l’affaire algérienne, elle-même simple détail dans le vaste mouvement qui ébranle jusque dans ses fondements notre monde familier (Fi, p. 220).

The desire for self-identity, for the subject of enunciation and that of the statement to coincide, is constantly frustrated by political events that require the writing subject to re-evaluate and redefine his position vis-à-vis his social space. The absorption of the moment of the subject into the linguistic sphere dissimulates the incomplete nature of his identity, as it becomes determined by a defining sequence. The perpetual influx of
disruptive events exposes the breach between the structure itself and the identity sought therein. Just as the subject of anthropological fieldwork is an errant subject who 'calculates' the errors of judgement incurred in any description of the other, the autobiographical subject emerges at a point suspended between the disarticulation of the structure and its re-articulation, that is, between the erasure of the self and its redefinition. The subject is impelled to record and link on from this structural disturbance in order to realign himself with the socio-political field. The emerging subject, the outcome from structural breakdown, can therefore only be represented negatively through the inadequacy of its determination within that structure. This negativity becomes affirmative in so far as it figures the indeterminacy or rather the determinability of the subject, the condition of ethical and political activity. The recurrence of the incommensurable, which unsettles any attempt to write the self, converts the autobiographical process into an interminable search for justice: the autobiographical subject has to select the most just mode of representing the self in the aftermath of crisis. This act of representation aims to transfigure that situation whilst still attesting to the violence that demands and yet prevents full justice from being enacted.

Leiris's account of his reactions to traumatic political events explores his anguished struggle to endure beyond his suicide attempt and crisis of faith in his political art. At the age of 68, in Frêle bruit, he laments still being haunted by the friction between the demands of the voice from within and the need for political activism from without, 'rude épreuve pour qui l'affronte en poussant l'oubli de soi aussi loin qu'il peut mais, en aucun cas, n'acceptera de mettre en veilleuse ses capacités critiques...' (FB, 389) As Leiris's
endless and tortured self-questioning shows, he never ceases to confront this ordeal that demands that the individual push self-negation as far as possible without suspending, for one moment, his critical faculty. Critical awareness of social and political phenomena, for Leiris, however, automatically entails a study of their affective impact on the subject, on a search for self-awareness. In this way, he seeks a mode of committed literature that combines his need for self-excavation and its corollary, unfettered artistic experimentation and invention, with moral and political concerns.

Terrifying events, such as the Algerian war, throw into doubt the validity of his ‘fragmented’ project, leaving him to wonder whether he should practice literature with full consciousness of its limits or refrain from the game altogether. He considers the extreme reaction of abandoning any political aspirations and concentrating exclusively on his poetic side. Nevertheless, Leiris knows that the notion of a pure aesthetic, devoid of any political or moral implications, would be illusory, for although we may attempt to adhere to a notion of art for art’s sake, that is, to create without being seduced by any larger aims, we always end up going beyond our intention of pure confection. Indeed, by simply making the pure aesthetic into a goal, it automatically obtains wider significance than mere practice (Fi, p. 230). Lyotard would agree with Leiris about the delusive nature of the idea of art for art’s sake, when he argues that this notion proves conservative, and thus ultimately political, because it limits art to a particular status. This allows politics to discard art as being inconsequential, thereby overlooking its possibly disturbing effects on the status quo. So it is an idea that restricts critical thought.
Leiris concludes near the end of *Fibrilles* that his poetic, imaginative side, the ‘côté de Kumasi’, has always prevailed over the side of science and morality, the ‘côté de Pékin’ (Fi, p. 235). However, as his relentless interrogation of his project indicates, his recognition of the predominance of poetry does not constitute a definitive answer to his moral dilemma. His preference for art may lead him, as he suggests, to neglect many duties, but he remains forever aware that there can be no game without rules:

\[\text{Morale} = \text{règle du jeu, c'est-à-dire ce sans quoi il n'y aurait même pas de jeu, remarquerais-je également, jouant à voir dans le jeu - soit dans ce qui semble, par essence, le plus contraire au sérieux - une justification de l'éthique, puisque faute d'une démarcation, d'ailleurs quelconque, entre coups permis et coups défendus l'existence ne serait qu'un montage presque automatique de scènes s'échelonnant de la naissance à la mort, et non cette partie capable de passionner en raison de la difficulté même où l'on est de la mener sans irrégularités} \ (Fi, p. 237).\]

Creative and critical endeavour depends on a process of exclusion. Without any demarcation between what is permitted and what is prohibited, that is, between the inside and outside, symbolic thought is nonexistent. Attempts to represent and understand externality result precisely from a feeling of alienation from that sphere. As Leiris points out, without any prohibition, life would be a series of unclassified incidents that have no impact beyond their occurrence, similar to the amoral, static existence of primitive man in Rousseau’s pure state of nature.

Leiris’s realisation that he is essentially a poet and his subsequent giving up of his mission to find, in a tangible form, ‘la règle du jeu’, entails neither a total renunciation of his commitment to politics, a succumbing to the status quo, nor an ‘aestheticisation of commitment’ where he would totally eschew action and transfer his political commitment
to the arts, but rather an acceptance of the contradictions, ambiguity and conflict incurred
in any attempt to give expression to the subject’s responses to political crises. If it were
possible to attain a definitive ‘gage d’une pérennité conquise par la projection de soi en
objet (l’œuvre d’art)’ (Fi, p. 47), then art would have to reject the real, and create a form
of static beauty or what Leiris calls, in *Miroir de la tauromachie*, the ‘stagnation glaciale’
of Eden. Art, so as not to lose its link with the real, has to re-instate systematically the
negativity from which it is born. As Leiris affirms, the permanent lapse between the
moment of lived experience and its aesthetic reconfiguration makes invention an
inevitable part of translating our inner-experience to the outside:

La formulation écrite de cet immense monologue qui en un certain sens m’est donné,
puisque toute la matière en est puisée dans ce que j’ai vécu, mais qui en un autre sens
m’oblige à un constant effort d’invention, puisqu’il me faut introduire un ordre dans
cette matière indéfiniment renouvelée, brasser ses éléments, les ajuster, les affiner
jusqu’à ce que je parvienne à saisir tant soit peu leur signification (Fi, p. 77).

What Leiris renounces is not the innovative and critical activity arising from his quest for
an ethics of poetry, but rather the sterile closure that would come from its actualisation in
a concrete form. His commitment to the poetic is precisely a commitment to resisting the
often reductive and stultifying effects of the system, to preserving the ambiguities and
incompletion generative of creativity and radical politics.

The absence of a moral calculus for the poet confers on him the responsibility of
ceaselessly reformulating or reinventing ‘the rules of the game.’ The inconceivability of
an all-encompassing ethics of poetry reminds us of the failure in the *Rêveries* of the code
of beneficence as a means of organising inter-subjective relations. Through its
breakdown, Rousseau realises the dichotomy between this moral code and morality itself. Leiris constantly confronts, as we have seen, the painful realisation that the process of discursive assimilation is necessarily exclusive rather than inclusive in so far as it presents as determinate what remains fundamentally indeterminate. The procedure of erasure and subversion throughout the *Règle du jeu* attests to this fraught passage from an experience of the singular to its difficult and incomplete inscription within the defining sequence of language. The impossible, but necessary, translation of this experience into the collective domain of meaning, the point at which the search for the ethical begins, can only occur through creativity and innovation precisely because of the lack of an ethical order which is in itself and for itself ethical. The predominance given by Leiris, at the end of *Fibrilles*, to his poetic side suggests his deep awareness of the inventiveness involved in bridging the permanent gap between the affective level of our existence and its objectification in the realm of concept and laws. As we have seen, any striving for social change, any attempt to re-imagine the present requires the work of imagination. Creative endeavour, being rooted in a feeling of the incommensurable, in a feeling of the breach between what is and what could be, thus becomes highly ethical. Leiris implies this:

Dans le domaine critique et littéraire, un créateur ne peut être un homme satisfait de la culture existante. Ce qui le pousse à la recherche, c’est le besoin de rompre avec ce qui existe et de faire autre chose. De sorte qu’une société, même communiste ne peut prendre des mesures visant à l’ “encourager”, car cela tendrait *ipso facto* à le domestiquer. Elle ne peut que lui garantir l’exercice de son absolue liberté d’investigation. Cela, sans réticences, et en considérant que ses travaux effectués en toute liberté ne peuvent qu’aider la Révolution dans sa marche vers la totale liberté.  

Leiris’s expression of anguish about his level of political commitment and his constant desire to push back the boundaries of representation support his own description of the
artist as someone who, by his being permanently dissatisfied with the dominant order, is always in search of the new. His refusal to find a solution to his dilemma in a form of art that is either totally apolitical or perfectly reconciled with civil society, or in the decision to renounce art in favour of politics or vice versa, gives his writing a political charge. Through his constant self-interrogation, he confronts the negativity underlying any attempt to ascribe ethical meaning to our emotional responses to political crises, whose defiance of pre-defined logics or existing ideologies demands the constant re-writing of the rules of the game.

As we saw earlier, political commitment, for Leiris, involves endless vigilance against the lies told by governments to protect their activities and policies from being scrutinised or challenged. The self-critical nature of Leiris's prose, its resistance to the reifying operation of language, aims to re-inscribe the undecidability of representation that thwarts any claim to objective legitimacy. The disjunctive effect of socio-political events on the writing process fractures the space of symbolisation, impelling the artist to invent idioms that mark the unrepresentable nature of trauma, the impossibility of simply absorbing it within an already established ideological framework. The perpetually undoing movement of Leiris's prose works, then, to some extent, to prevent creative and political activity from becoming a bureaucratic process of merely applying rules or pre-defined viewpoints to ethical dilemmas. His writing underlines the inventiveness and innovation involved in trying to link on from traumatic events, in trying to find a just mode of representing their impact on the self and the social.
Leiris, as we have seen, originally hoped to condense into a single immediately comprehensible block the essence of the changes and events that happened during the writing of *La Règle du jeu*. His impression that the existing volumes have crumbled into a confused mass and that his original end has become obscured leads him to apprehend the necessity of continually integrating the present into his writing so that 'the milestones of time' are never definitively posited. The failure of his project becomes its success as it eludes the stasis of closure, giving it the flexibility to adapt to new insights and ideas.

Digressions and adornments, an aspect of the writer’s taste for the baroque, stall the writing process, requiring constant deliberation and critical judgements of how to continue with his project. His quest for truth cannot bypass what seduces or enchants him. As we saw in our study of the *Miroir de la tauromachie*, beauty, for Leiris, amounts to the coming together of incompossible elements that defy the everyday. The baroque entails the singular or the heterogeneous, in short, the irrational. His taste for this aesthetic mode accords with his antipathy for 'la régularité de la ligne droite'. He normally prefers to take the most indirect route, one that often infringes conventions or rules:

> Mais choisir une voie autre que la plus directe ou mettre exprès de travers ce qu’il serait normal de mettre droit, n’est-ce pas le propre de l’art, qui n’aurait vraiment commencé que quand on s’est permis d’ajouter un surplus ou de donner quelques entorses aux formes exigées par les nécessités d’une technique ou d’un rituel (sophistication qu’à un stade plus avancé le baroque illustre de manière exemplaire puisqu’il montre à la fois la règle et ce qui la viole, la ligne droite et les lignes courbes ou brisées qui tendent à s’y substituer)? (Fi, p. 233).

This pleasure taken in the singularity or the irrationality of the baroque simultaneously
displays the rule and its violation. Our attempt to create germinates in what challenges and undermines the authority of reason. The cracks in the work of logic nourish innovation and invention, in short, the ‘ardeur à vivre’. Leiris’s taste for the baroque keeps him in contact with the friction or conflict that disallows any facile resolution to his quest for the ‘règle du jeu’; it thus perpetuates and constrains his literary endeavour. He immediately draws attention to the paradoxical nature of claiming a penchant for the contingent or bizarre and then proceeding to absorb it into a logical framework in order to justify it. At one and the same time, he detracts from this insight and equally preserves it by refusing to institute it as his guiding rationale. Its critical force is performative rather than descriptive, making and undoing the rules governing the game.

The much-studied incident that opens Biffures, the first volume of La Règle du jeu, indicates the necessary tension between the game and its rules (Bi, pp. 9-12). On finding his toy soldier still intact after dropping it, the very young Michel jubilates, shouting ‘...reusement!’. An anonymous voice intervenes to correct this burst of joy to ‘heureusement!’, thereby making it comply with linguistic convention. His moment of jubilation subsides as he realises the alterity of language as a structure with already implanted meanings and rules that operate independently of him. This event shatters the myth of self-presence within language by foregrounding the prevalence of the signifier over the subject in signification.22 The incident inaugurates the fluctuation between illusion and disillusion, enlightenment and myth of Leiris’s prose. The Règle du jeu becomes a quest to rediscover in language the initial impassioned expression of ‘...reusement!’ that simultaneously sensitised him to and alienated him from the other.
The subject can only communicate or seek identity through the collective structure of language and yet that structure, as a means of communication, has to function to the exclusion of what it supposedly represents, the subject. Leiris's constant making and subverting of statements struggles to figure this precarious point within language where the subject at once emerges and fades. The 'rule of the game', the ethical dimension, reveals itself at the fold of the constitution and dissolution of meaning, the union and separation of self and other, the need for community and its seeming impossibility. As Leiris indicates in the final pages of *Fibrilles*, poetry is at its most basic level ethical in so far as it involves language, thereby automatically implicating the other in its process. The poet, through the very act of symbolisation, thus expresses an interest in the other. However, the opening to the other does not occur through communication in its conventional sense of conveying thoughts or ideas limpidly, but through poetic transgression: 'Tirée de mots qui ne sont pas les miens et adressée à quiconque l'accueillera, la poésie — fondamentalement, expansion aveugle hors de mes frontières — ne me lie-t-elle pas au partenaire indiscriminé qui est un autre par rapport à moi mais mon semblable à l'échelle de l'espèce? (Fi, p. 265) Communication covers two aspects: an aesthetic action, 'émouvoir' and amorous communication ('s'émouvoir')(Fi, p. 284). Love and poetry converge in their ability to push the subject to the frontiers of existence where identity and non-identity, the social and non-social, meet. Leiris, in his usual deflating fashion, detracts from this moment of intense interchange by seeing the other as essential only in so far as it provides a support for an act of personal vanity or self-validation. However, this exposure to alterity, as we shall see, where the antagonism between what is included and excluded in the demarcation of socio-cultural boundaries
re-emerges, can potentially create a space in which those boundaries can shift to reconfigure the social.

The 'reusement' incident condenses in a microcosmic form the conditions awaiting the desire for community on a larger scale. The subject, in order to accede to the social, has to submit to a process of alienation through the symbolic. His identity remains forever deferred along a chain of signifiers whose differential movement debarbs him from ever coinciding with himself. Just as Rousseau theorises the birth of community as concurrent with the alienation of man, Leiris’s exclamation gives poetic form to the fact that the symbolic insertion of the self into a community concurs with its separation from that community. The subject can only represent himself to the other through a system from which he remains forever estranged. This fact constitutes the breach in the structure that gives rise to the desire for community. This desire persists because society, like the subject, comes into being through an external structure, language, that at once promises and denies it an identity. Its appearance is thus concomitant with its eclipse. It is precisely because we can never master society as an intelligible object that we tirelessly try to establish it as such. The game takes place, then, in the space of negativity left by the failed, but ceaseless representations of the self and the social. Consequently, its rule perhaps pertains to the impossibility and necessity of struggling to conceive what is refractory to conceptualisation: community. The lack within the structure thus becomes affirmative, since it generates innovation and inventiveness, the 'game' itself.

Leiris thus remains torn between the need to portray the self and its relation with the
social domain, the need to hide their structural void and the inconceivability of doing so. Being never identical with their mode of expression, both coordinates appear as a lack within language. Any depiction of them therefore has to have recourse to imagination. As we have seen, Leiris continually draws attention to the fictional derivation of all representation, emphasising that the goal of reaching presence within language is unrealisable. However, just as he warns against collapsing myth into truth, or fantasy into reality, he also stresses, as his insistence on the necessity of rules implies, the dangers of reducing everything to illusion. Commenting on his constant probing of the abyss at the root of artistic or social activity, he sharply refutes any accusation of nihilism and takes to task some of the authors of critical studies of his writing:

Je ferais preuve, certes, d’aveuglement en niant le goût que j’ai de me pencher jusqu’au vertige sur nos abîmes intérieurs et j’aurais, d’autre part, mauvaise grâce à ne pas rendre leur dû à ceux dont le commentaire, d’une manière ou d’une autre, m’assiste positivement dans mon effort en me permettant une vue plus claire du point où je suis parvenu. Mais je puis – sans acrimonie bien que fermement – m’élever contre l’opinion avancée par certains comme quoi, sous l’effet d’une impulsion morbide, je m’ingénierais à rabattre mes enthousiasmes et chercherais systématiquement à détruire toutes raisons d’espérer. Se refuser à être dupe n’est pas se proposer de réduire tout à n’être que duperie. Je veux, en vérité, ne rien accepter que je n’aie soumis à un sévère examen, mais, s’il en résulte la mise à bas de beaucoup d’illusions, cela ne signifie pas que je poursuis avec une joie perverse la disqualification de toutes choses (Fi, p. 89).

Leiris’s fascination with negativity does not stem from a nihilistic wish to disqualify everything as illusory; this would lead to a state of meaningless chaos that would validate any form of representation, even totalitarian ones. His debunking of myth works to counter any state of oppressive closure that would dispense with the question of justice. The uneven texture of his writing with its infinite procedure of erasing and redefining...
endeavours to preserve hope through the freedom coming from the contingency of objectivity. The question of justice perseveres precisely because we can never definitively establish criteria for it. Any definition of justice always has to exclude the void at its origins that allows for its contestation and re-evaluation, and it follows from that any definition will generate injustice. Leiris’s writing style assumes political force by showing the inconceivability of providing uncontroversial, totalising depictions of humanity. Such depictions would disavow the justice of cultural or social multiplicity. We can thus infer that hope, for Leiris, originates in the incompletion of our epistemological systems, which confers on us the interminable and arduous responsibility of ceaselessly questioning the legitimacy of present conceptions of social reality in the hope of transcending them.

As we said in chapter 1, we have to accept the philosophical truth of Rousseau’s state of nature which, despite its overtly metaphorical status, functions to foreground the constructed nature of social organisation and thence its openness to transformation. Without that acknowledgement, Rousseau’s social critique loses any sense of hope and, as a consequence, its critical impact. Likewise, we have to recognise the work of truth in Leiris’s autobiography. Its truth does not necessarily lie in what it describes, but rather in what it requires of us. By foregrounding the distance between the dominant description of the human and its possibility for reformulation, Leiris’s writing urges us to contest and rethink our understanding of the other. The lapse between the act of expression and what is being expressed creates an opening that allows the subject to engage in new modes of identification that redirect the determining movement of discourse. The subject’s
structural discontinuity enables him to intervene in that structure through creative
endeavour, which, by highlighting the deficiencies of the structure, can prevent its
outright domination. Leiris’s way of never ceasing to subvert or negate any affirmation
directs attention away from the sedimented image of the subject as our point of
identification towards this state of non-being that needs imagination to supply its content.
In short, his texts try to capture that transgressive moment when the drive of the system
categorise everything within its domain is temporarily suspended, permitting the
emergence of the new.

Leiris’s defence against reifying accounts of existence has something in common with the
sense of failure he experiences on receiving accolades for his work. He feels defeated by
a laudatory comment made by a reader that suggests that he has managed to eradicate the
chasm between his personal life and myth:

mème en admettant que je sois parvenu à transformer ma vie en mythe, elle ne l’est
devenue que par écrit, dans le récit au passé que j’en fais et non pas en elle-même
dans le présent où je la vis. Je fus donc atteint tout compte fait par ce bulletin de
victoire (dont le caractère outrancier ne pouvait m’échapper) à peine moins
malignement que par les hommages de ceux qui saluaient ma défaite (Fi, p. 90).

The idea of definitively reaching a goal is anathema to Leiris, because it denies
mutability. Critical awareness emanates from the opacity of the here and now that
unsettles discursive frameworks, thereby holding reality and imagination apart. By
emphasising this division, Leiris preserves the gap in which Utopian dreaming can and
must survive. He wryly describes himself as the incarnation of a sulking, dissatisfied
child. He recounts a story from his childhood of a young boy and girl who, not valuing
the present, naively want to live in the security of the past. Through successive
disappointments, the two children learn to appreciate the unpredictability of the present.
Success, as a point of culmination, proves paralysing because it detracts from the
heterogeneity of 'the present without presence' that fuels the constant effort to write and
rewrite the self.

Leiris sees division, disorder and ambiguity as the conditions of poetic inspiration, when
humorously discussing his intention of emulating the unstable lifestyles of great poets:
'Veuillier être un poète, ce n'est donc pas seulement vouloir trouver dans le langage autre
chose que ce qu'y trouvent la plupart, c'est vouloir cette vie troublée et divisée qui seule
permet la poésie, qu'à défaut d'un tel destin l'on s'épuiserait en vain à essayer de coucher
par écrit' (Fi, p. 251) He immediately undermines this statement by foregrounding the
discrepancy between the aesthetic configuration of the lived experience and life itself. He
further illustrates the fallacy of his intention through the example of a poet who relies on
his writing to survive, but is stopped from working by a crisis that eventually inspires
new work.

Through Leiris's rather ironic discussion of the link between poetry and disharmony, we
can forge a relation between the poetic dimension and democracy. Democratic politics is
nourished by division, conflict and susceptibility to change, if we try to eliminate these
components, we 'de-democratise' democracy itself. Moreover, if we try to systematise
the poetic by making it conform to certain rules, we strip it of its power to transcend
empiricity and delineate the shady contours of alterity itself. In short, Leiris's
understanding of himself as 'jamais content' and his refusal of totality or complete unity links up with the notion of the democratic subject as one who recognises himself as having no essence, who refuses to see himself as the effect of some external or underlying cause, and who regards change as inevitable in so far as closure is unattainable.

Leiris’s goal of reconciling ‘art poétique’ and ‘savoir-vivre’ so as to remain in the plenitude of myth without forsaking reality is similar to the work of democracy. Democracy is radical when it strives to institute political systems that establish social order, whilst maintaining the element of disorder that conditions democratic politics in the first place. The articulation of Kumasi and Peking, the alliance of feeling with science and morality, offers a metaphor for the impossible but necessary translation of the political, the disruptive generative energy of social formation, into politics.

The Irrepressibility of Utopian Hope

The friction incurred in bearing witness to singular events surfaces in Leiris’s fragmentary account of May ’68 in Frêle bruit, published ten years after Fibrilles.23 His textualisation of this incident strives to capture, as does his depiction of Mao’s China, the fervour and rapidity that colour revolutionary energy before its gets absorbed and normalised by its institutional representation. Leiris appears to move away from the format of the first three volumes of the Règle du jeu of a continuous text composed of tortuous, multi-clause sentences to the seemingly discontinuous structure of Frêle bruit,
mostly consisting of brief fragments that are interrupted by short, laconic poems. As a response to the collapse of communism into oppression and stasis and the failure of his ultimate goal of finding the 'règle du jeu,' Leiris endeavours to evoke as far as possible the immediacy of the revolution in his prose. In other words, he wants to convey the passion and the elusive generative energy that typifies political upheaval without its being diluted and eclipsed by discursive determination. Notwithstanding his sense of historical pessimism, this energy provides a reason to continue believing in the necessity and also irrepressibility of Utopian striving.

Leiris finds an example of the style of writing that he wants to emulate in the highly charged, but stark political slogans on the walls of the Sorbonne in the build up to May '68:

Fusées, relevant de cette spontanéité opposée par les plus radicaux d'entre eux à l'esprit bureaucratique dans lequel la pensée révolutionnaire s'est presque partout noyée. Adages, dont quelques-uns dépassent la saillie graffîtesque, le trait piquant ou le mot à l'emporte-pièce, et me comblent, car c'est à des sentences pareillement lapidaires que, depuis longtemps, je voudrais parvenir (FB, p. 166).

These slogans, through their concision and spontaneous air, repudiate the process of bureaucratisation that seeks to check the revolutionary spirit and channel it into the topography of politics. In order to project an image of an organic whole, the rules and policies of the domain of politics aim to bring fantasmatic closure to the openness of the
social space, which has been momentarily revealed by the discontinuity of the event. Leiris aims, throughout his work, to escape this process of systematisation, by trying to preserve the unsettling force of radical difference. He bemoans the fact in *Biffures* that the stress on science and objectivity in ethnography made him a bureaucrat, distancing him from his original aim of breaking out of his ‘logical armour’ through contact with cultural diversity (Bi, 231). Through his recourse to poetic writing, he sought to emancipate himself from the strictures of ethnographic research, focussing on those singular and disruptive moments when the self is estranged from itself, what Leiris terms ‘bifurs’ (Bi, 286-287). However, at the end of *Biffures*, he laments the fact that the act of connecting these singular occurrences, of tapping into and orienting their indomitable force, has enervated their transformative properties. At this stage in his autobiography, he blames this deadening effect for having stopped him from escaping from his enclosed mental world so as to discover the ‘règle du jeu’. Without constant vigilance, the integrative nature of the textual process threatens to become just as bureaucratic as politics.

The political phrases of May ‘68 suggest the indeterminacy of the desire mobilising the political, by not allying it with a particular discourse or party. For example, ‘LA VIE VITE’ expresses through its interjection of the word ‘vite’ or ‘quick’, an impatience to see the ‘true life’ finally unfold. He later finds this exclamation reduced uniquely to ‘VITE’ to communicate ‘la hâte, sans qu’il y ait lieu de préciser ce dont on est avide et d’alourdir la flèche en indiquant vers quoi elle pointe’ (FB, p. 167). By cutting through and suspending the divisions and structures of sedimented social reality, desire at the
level of the political always exceeds the institutions established to fulfil it. As Rousseau affirms, we can never harness what the general will wants to a particular past or future arrangement, because it has no distinct identity beyond the moment of its emergence in the present. Leiris’s wish to invoke the open-endedness of some of these slogans in his own writing perhaps upholds the separation of the political and politics that we have explored elsewhere in this thesis. He wants to desist from plying this indeterminate force to a specific or determinant end, of trapping it within a textual sequence that denies its potency as the possibility of possibility in the most radical sense. The appropriation of Mallarmé’s axiom ‘UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N’ABOLIRA LE HASARD’ as a political chant conveys this idea of openness and also the critical and malleable nature of art.

We move from the pure possibility expressed in these phrases to the violence of the tear gas and the riot police’s suppression of the protestors. In a disjointed list composed of images of destruction, Leiris depicts the bitter and oppressive outcome of May ’68:

Pavés lancés, voitures culbutées, palissades brisées, gros tuyaux exhumés, arbres coupés, flammes, gaz à faire pleurer ou suffoquer, grenades tonnantes, matraquages policiers: phrase à grand spectacle qui au printemps dernier bafouait, à Paris, les syntaxes. Plus fauve et plus rude que celles étalés sur les murs, elle a réduit à rien la mienne, trop volubile et fuyante comme une eau (FB, p. 171).

This passage exposes the breach between the hope conveyed in the political slogans on the university walls and the violence on the streets. The fractured, disconnected nature of this phrase, appearing in isolation on a single page, makes manifest the difficulty of linking on from the immense sense of loss subsequent to the failure of the political
uprising of May '68. These images cannot be connected to make an explanatory statement of what happened, without dissimulating and disavowing their defiance of all reason. The unbound energy communicated in the slogans becomes overshadowed by the stinging reality of the limit imposed by this broken phrase. This marks a dislocation in the textual space where, as Leiris affirms, the determinate and integrative operation of language has been ridiculed. He also observes that this scene of annihilation has nullified his own attempt at phrasing. He therefore abruptly stops the flow of writing to bear witness to the difficulty of finding a just mode of concatenation for the unspeakable devastation of the aftermath of May’68. The horror and absolute injustice of political terror re-emerges in the derivative form of textual disturbance.

Despite the terror resulting from the attempt to actualise Utopia, Leiris defends Utopian dreaming as necessary for social development: ‘Comme à l’Hebreu sa terre promise, comme à l’Indien son pays sans mal… Qu’il existe (ou s’ébauche) quelque part un pays sans taches ni trous, la vie m’apparaît définitivement dégradée si je perds cette croyance’. He takes solace in the idea that there might exist somewhere a handful of people who are working towards building a society that surpasses the limitations of the current situation. Their efforts would at least announce, if not, engender, a more enlightened civilisation:

Vouloir cela, c’est peut-être compter sur le messie. Et, d’ailleurs, parler d’un pays qui posséderait ce privilège, est-ce autre chose que parler République d’Utopie? Qu’il y ait dans le monde quelques poignées d’être humains – hommes ou femmes, et peu importe de quel climat – travaillant à cette révolution, ne serait-ce pas déjà un gage de chance, voire (moyennant un léger coup de pouce optimiste que j’ai grand-peine à ne pas donner) une promesse? (FB, p. 191).
Leiris acknowledges the fictional origins of Utopia by quoting examples from religious mythology or literature such as Paradise, Jerusalem, El Dorado, or the Elysium of Macao and his girl Friday, Cosmage. He stresses the importance of identification in any process of political change. However, there is always the danger that our points of identification, the forerunners of an enlightened society, become cult figures or objects of quietism, whereby their own vision overtakes and suffocates the critical spirit of the revolution. Whilst he does not doubt the sincerity of his belief in the need for Utopianism, he questions the status of that belief. He wonders whether it is a formal declaration with no real consequence. In this way, it could be understood as a stylistic feature whose substance is purely academic. Despite his reservations about his Utopianism, he underlines the fact that he cannot put it behind him or treat it simply as an archive document. This leads to a parenthesis where he discusses the necessity of finding a way of avoiding linguistic closure so as to be as truthful as he can:

This passage implies and mimes the interminable nature of the writing process that
disallows the completion of any phrasing sequence. The writing subject, to reach a state of non-illusion, has to dismantle the image of a textual totality in which the writer has mastered the material he includes. The incomplete nature of any discursive determination constantly re-emerges to unsettle the textual space, reminding us of the impossibility of fully enclosing anything within it. The opacity that haunts any form of representation, the constant need to add finishing touches to what appears to have already lapsed and become an object of the past, perhaps requires the invention of a tense that could invoke this strange state of not incompletion nor completion, but virtual or supposed completion.

That implication furthers the links that we have already made between writing and democratic politics. The empty space of power in democracy prevents any political figure or regime that comes to occupy it from being consubstantial with it. So any appropriation of power can only result from a violent process that conceals the indeterminacy of that space, thereby denying other legitimate regimes or groups access to it. The prevailing regime has to claim to be the most just arrangement of society in order for that sphere to take shape and not disintegrate into anomy. It thus creates the impression of closure to ensure that the social goes on functioning. Nonetheless, this impression must and can only ever be partial so that the contestatory and mutable character of democratic politics can survive. Democracy, like poetic writing, has to reinscribe systematically the distance between its present organisation and its possibility for reorganisation to continue as a realm of radical political activity.

Leiris delineates his Utopia as an island at a remove from the dominant order. He
proposes a space whose discontinuity with the progressive state of social degeneration could potentially provide a fertile terrain for the development of new social inventions or formations. The need for this space becomes urgent after his crisis of faith in the imaginary horizon of communism and the ‘règle du jeu.’ Despite Leiris’s doubts about the application of Marxism, we can infer that its critical spirit perseveres, for him, in the feeling of injustice generated by politics. However, he recounts in *Fibrilles* that the song he sang on leaving communist China unwittingly foretold the discrepancy between the hope expressed in the national parade and the imminent restrictiveness of Chinese communism: ‘De vos jardins fleuris, fermez les portes, les myrtes sont flétris, les roses mortes’. (FI, 274) At the farewell dinner, he sang this song as a way of expressing poetically the sadness of leaving behind the feeling of plenitude and camaraderie he had experienced during his visit. He did not realise at the time that it echoed and presaged a sad sequel to Mao Tse-tung’s current dictum which Leiris translates as: ‘Que cent fleurs s’épanouissent et que le nouveau émerge de l’ancien.’ (FI, 275) The two images combined assume dramatic irony when Leiris describes the ensuing epoch of Chinese communism in its hard reality as ‘celle des communes industrialisées, qui vient même d’atteindre à son tour l’âge de déraison où l’on fabrique sa bombe atomique’ (Fi, p. 275). The dogmatic drive to rationalisation that Leiris detected in China now joins up with its descent into the irrationality of the atomic age. ‘The hundred flowers’ of Mao Tse-tung’s dictum, a symbol of growth and regeneration, begin to wither, like the flowers in Leiris’s song, as a less tolerant and liberal period of Chinese communism is about to dawn. But the mid-sixties hold nothing that could provoke Leiris to fall out of love with China, he refuses to renounce the emancipatory effort that it represents. On the contrary, he feels
that the times corroborate Aimé Césaire’s metaphor for socialism, which he adopts to
describe China as ‘la tache rouge de l’espoir pour les peuples asiatiques et africains qui
ne sont plus officiellement dominés, mais qu’on s’efforce de remettre d’autres façons
sous le joug’ (Fi, p. 276). Whilst the liberating aspiration of communism remains
pertinent to the present socio-political situation, its translation into the concrete context of
the sixties suggests a disturbing contradiction.

The impossibility of fully determining the concrete object behind any quest for
emancipation finds a metaphor in Leiris’s childhood dream toy, a hybrid instrument of a
drum and a trumpet. This composite object came to indicate Leiris’s desire to conjoin
incompossible elements through the writing process so as to overcome his sense of
nothingness: ‘Parvenir à obturer ce trou (ou supprimer un vide) n’est-ce pas, traduit en
négatif, ce que j’entends quand je parle de découvrir un objet, c’est-à-dire de trouver un
plein, une sorte de pulpe vitale ou de condensé de saveur?’(Bi, 294-295). However, he
feels disappointed when he finds out this strange toy existed in reality. The ‘tambour-
trompette’ or drum trumpet was actually owned by an Algerian boy who, like the young
Michel, dreamed of another object: he preferred to use it as a camera. Leiris conjectures
that the object that comes to fill the space between reality and imagination, the space of
desire, perhaps remains secondary to the desire itself: ‘Qu’à distance on ne puisse plus
décider si la chose qui vous a brûlé d’une folle envie a existé comme chose faisant l’objet
d’un désir ou comme pure expression de ce désir (...)’(Bi, p. 279). Similarly, the
emancipatory striving conveyed at the national festival in Peking, becomes an expression
of the desire sustaining any revolution. The unbound nature of that desire means that it
automatically surpasses its objectification in practical politics. The desire for a better society, communicated at the parade and in the slogans of May '68, anticipates the future, and in this sense, is indeterminate, that is, without a concrete referent. As Rousseau argues in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, the desire to transcend the present moment to effect historical change is always opaque to itself. We can never accurately predict its outcome because what allows us to look beyond the immediate and rethink community life, imagination, constantly supersedes the image it produces. The image, being defined by absence, can never become an objective totality. It is always contaminated by its constitutive lack that mobilises the endless search for a supplement to it. Leiris's fantasy toy and the desire for political change outstrip what comes to represent them in an objective form. Both the drum-trumpet in its imaginary dimension and the feeling of fullness of the parade will remain forever without foundational criteria. It is this non-fulfilment that enables them to bespeak the bogus nature of any claims of full legitimacy. Therefore, emancipation, as the ultimate horizon of all socio-political activity, will always have an important bearing on humanity because it persistently refutes any objective determination.

**Art as Re-enchantment**

Art, for Leiris, resists the disenchanting, rational drive of practical politics. It paradoxically relates to society by virtue of being closed off from it. The autonomy of art, rather than disabling its political dimension, permits it to comment critically on the socio-political field. In *Cinq études d'ethnologie*, Leiris links the work of democratisation with
artistic experimentation; revolutionary art does not propagate a certain ideology, but can, through its reformulation of, or break with, conventions, delineate the contours of the new. Leiris’s ideological disillusionment and a burdening sense of his own finitude give him the impression of having passed from the illimitable to the limited. Not being restricted by normative practices, poetry or art supply his only means of ‘loosening the grip’ of this feeling of confinement:

Je parle ici, bien entendu, d’un art ou d’une poésie irréductibles à l’art pour l’art aussi bien qu’au classicisme pur: l’art et la poésie ne peuvent se faire, comme mon tourment l’exige, porteurs d’illimité que s’ils sont animés par cette ambition démesurées, se mesurer (quelle que soit la forme que prendra ce défi) avec l’incommensurable (Fi, p. 288-289).

Art has the ability to disrupt the status quo through its intimacy with the incommensurable. It has to reject all institutional ties; prevent itself from being converted into an instrument of propaganda.

In Frêle Bruit, Leiris explicitly identifies art as a source of re-enchantment, when meditating on what he terms ‘le merveilleux’, the magical or miraculous, which displaces the metaphor of the sacred in earlier works. We can understand the magical as a form of secular epiphany in which the opaque force that binds together, and yet always exceeds, ordinary existence, reveals itself in a derivative form. The miraculos, as the heterogeneous or the singular, takes us to the limits of reason where imagination strains to unveil the enigmatic object underlying the affective disturbance felt at such moments. These moments appear as a sensual intimation of radical difference that our rational or everyday organisation of the world at once exploits and dissimulates behind a semblance
of order. Poetry responds to and echoes this movement:

Et n’est-ce pas à un mouvement du même ordre que répond la poésie qu’on écrit: fixer les incommensurables par quoi l’on s’est laissé subjuguier ou, à l’inverse, tenter de fabriquer par l’écriture, des incommensurables qui – un temps au moins – pourront nous subjuguier? Merveilleux, poésie, amour, n’existent que si je m’ouvre, sans marchandage, à quelque chose – événement, être vivant, objet, image, idée – que mon désir d’illimité coiffe d’une auréole durable ou momentanée (FB, 341).

The miraculous of which art partakes can only be an echo or aesthetic reconfiguration of the miraculous that the external world harbours in its unknown depths. Don Quijote and Nerval’s madness emanates, for Leiris, from a confusion of these two levels. However, it is only by blurring the boundaries between lived experience and the imaginary that we can give ourselves over to this energy, whose authenticity cannot be substantiated. In its ultimate form, the miraculous pertains to the supernatural, operating independently of man and manifesting itself in those incidents that violate natural laws. Acknowledging that a force generating magical effects not susceptible to rational explanation can be a theological allusion, Leiris nonetheless refuses to conceive it either as divine or as a simple aberration in the mechanism of the universe. He remains faithful to the primary perception of it as inexplicable and unclassifiable. Because of its opacity, such a force sets our imagination in motion as it struggles to present the unpresentable:

Ce qui – sans gifle nécessaire à nos poids et mesures – dépasse le quotidien mais ne se réduit pas à l’insolite, ce qui – ni pièce pour cabinet mental de curiosités, ni mouton à cinq pattes – exalte totalement ou met l’imagination en branle, porte à rêver, “laisse rêveur”, sans doute est-ce sur ces deux terrains-là (EFFUSION ET RÊVERIE dans un cadastre symbolique) que pousse, multiforme, le merveilleux) (FB, p. 346).

The miraculous, as an affective disruption of normality, can never enter cognition in an
unadulterated way, being always entwined with the work of fiction. Its fantasmatic
dimension means that it is indivisible from a void; it could therefore even emerge out of
its own absence:

Y aurait-t-il donc, en face d’un merveilleux par excès, lié à un éclatement des limites
comme sous l’effet d’un trop-plein un merveilleux par défaut, où tout irait comme si
une lacune, un écart ou un mauvais joint, trahissant un flottement dans ces limites
moins frontières que confins du réel et de l’imaginaire, s’offrait comme âppat à notre
folle du logis? (FB, p. 348).

Leiris views this manifestation of it as a fundamental antidote to the anxiety of death.
Indeed, as he indicates, it enters into a mutually deconstructive relationship with what it
is supposed to vanquish: ‘Bref, il semble que le merveilleux aide à vivre en suspendant
l’inquiétude mais qu’il faille, pour y accéder, être d’abord en état de faire bon marché de
celle-ci’ (FB, p. 346). The experience of the miraculous, through its unsettling of a
rational framework, at once generates the pleasure of crossing the borders of the
empirical and of the freedom that entails, and also the pain of touching its founding
negativity. Similar to Rousseau’s reverie, the miraculous requires a degree of self-
dispossession, whereby the controlling and categorising operations of the ego temporarily
decline to expose the subject to new sensations or affects. This loss of self-control takes
imagination, ‘la folle du logis’, to its very limits as it endeavours to present the
incommensurable to understanding.

Despite the distinction between the horizontal axis of the miraculous (the changes in
response from person to person) and its vertical axis (the changes over time), what
perseveres over and above its diverse revelations is that paroxysmal state that can
transport us to a boundless world. In short, it gives us the feeling of the possibility of
possibility. Leiris incorporates a quote from the legendary political activist, Che Guevara, into his meditation on this strange phenomenon, indicating its political overtones: ‘Quand l’extraordinaire devient quotidien, c’est qu’il y a la Révolution’ (FB, p. 346). The oxymoronic character of this quotation suggests the fallacy of construing revolution as an achievable state: its force works as a perpetual disruption of the ordinary, thereby disallowing its location within a particular socio-cultural terrain. The way in which the miraculous disturbs spatial order by causing borders to shift and realign themselves endows it with political consequences.

The political force of Leiris’s conception of the miraculous perhaps comes to light when he explains why he chooses certain areas of anthropological study. Although Leiris does not explicitly defend his interests in terms of their embodiment of this phenomenon, its presence seems implicit in them all. In his anthropological research, he prefers to focus on moments of cross-cultural translation or hybridity. For example, the confluence of Africa and Europe in the culture of The West Indies motivated him, he tells us, to travel there. Moreover, his fascination with states of possession or trance stems from their dissolution or reconfiguration of conventional boundaries. Leiris delineates such moments as a ‘lived theatre’, bringing to the fore the aesthetic aspect of possession:

les adeptes singent les dieux, espèce de théâtre vécu qui se joue sans barrière, même idéale, entre acteurs et spectateurs, chacun pouvant en principe être soudain visité par un dieu, de sorte qu’un ethnographe, porté par son goût de l’ailleurs mais rationaliste comme il sied, peut en être un participant plénier qui, sans se départir de son rôle de regard ni endosser une autre peau, se trouve intégré à la comédie au même titre que n’importe quel comparse (FB, p. 271).
States of trance dissolve the normal boundaries of the theatrical space. The division between actor and spectator, the stage and the audience, self and other, fiction and reality vanish, producing a theatrical effect that suspends socio-cultural stratification. The segregation of subject from object becomes momentarily concealed by the possibility for the subject, the Western anthropological observer in this case, of succumbing to a state of trance, his object of study. This momentary transcendence of the problem confronted by classical epistemologies can only occur through an aesthetic response, without any objective referent. The transposition of this experience of radical difference into cognition reflects, as Leiris underlines throughout his writing, the inconceivable task of the ethnographer. As we stated earlier, this event locates the anthropologist at the fold of the constitution and dissolution of meaning, whereby what refuses understanding demands to be put into language. What surfaces through Leiris’s exploration of this ‘lived theatre’ is that identification with the other is always concomitant with non-identification. At such moments, cultural differences collide precisely because the distinct identities of self and other can never be fully constituted as an objective whole:

Que deux cultures aient l’air de ne s’être entremêlées en louche et fascinante embrassade que pour chacune infliger à l’autre un démenti plus visible, qu’on fasse venir les dieux en des épiphanies qui prennent figure de mascarades, voilà qui satisfaisait mon besoin (rarement désarmé) de fondre le oui et le non, de n’admettre qu’à travers une incessante remise en question, de m’attacher plus qu’à la beauté sublime à celle dont on dirait qu’elle se dénigre elle-même ou, apparemment légère, n’en est que plus déchirante à moins qu’inversement son outrance tragique ne brave le goût avec tant de cynisme ou de candeur qu’on en est presque égayé, — besoin qui tantôt me semble dénoter — s’il va plus loin qu’une coquetterie m’interdisant l’enthousiasme sans détour — une inclination perverse à ne me plaire que dans l’ambiguïté ou dans le paradoxe et tantôt m’apparaît sanctifié par l’idée que le mariage des contraires est le plus haut sommet jusqu’auquel on puisse métaphysiquement s’élever (FB, p. 271).
Similar to the feeling of the illimitable associated with the miraculous, the state of trance, through its blurring of the inside and outside, exposes the unbounded nature of cultural identity. It foregrounds the antagonism that inheres in all socio-cultural formations, whereby the system of oppositional differences that we erect to mark off and protect our identity from the other becomes undermined by the re-emergence of equivalence. The mutual disavowal of the two cultures, or in other words, their common differentiation, which occurs at this instant, can be understood as their point of identification. Their equivalential relationship reveals itself in the fusion of yes and no that Leiris senses in this state. Equivalence, in this context, does not refer to sameness but precisely to its opposite, that is, to the negativity that founds all cultural plurality, preventing any one culture from trying to dominate others by posing as the positive identity underlying and explaining their multiplicity.

This staging of the void, which sustains the constant construction and reconstruction of the social, appears in Rousseau’s understanding of the national festival as a form of theatre. As we indicated in the chapter on the *Miroir de la tauromachie*, Rousseau’s conceptualisation of a dynamic theatrical space in the *Lettre à d’Alembert*, which could ferment and foster social change, adumbrates Leiris’s portrayal of that space. Rousseau equally aims to dissolve the divisions of the theatre to avoid the reification, stasis and intolerance they cause. He proposes the festival as a critical alternative to the stultifying and divisive effect of conventional theatre:

Mais quels seront enfin les objets de ces spectacles? Qu’y montrera-t-on? Rien, si l’on veut. Avec la liberté, partout où règne l’affluence, le bien-être y règne aussi. Plantez
au milieu d’une place un piquet couronné de fleurs, rassemblez-y le peuple, et vous aurez une fête. Faites mieux encore: donnez les spectateurs en spectacles; rendez-les acteurs eux-mêmes; faites que chacun se voie et s’aime dans les autres, afin que tous en soient mieux unis. (Lettre à d’Alembert, OC V, 115)

Like Leiris, Rousseau situates the unifying effect of theatre in a strange interworld, located somewhere between affects and cognition, where self and other merge through a purely aesthetic event that has no concrete object to substantiate its existence. The public spectacle precisely shows or represents nothing, implying how any identificatory act emanates from non-identification. It is the negativity upon which the social is founded that unifies us across divisions as we attempt to build the impossible object of society. Both Rousseau and Leiris intimate that a staging of social plenitude goes together with a staging of social lack. This strange paradox calls upon the imagination to generate new understandings of the other that do not simply further entrench existing prejudices and, as a result, engender oppressive forms of unity based on opposition to that other. The negativity that gives rise to this intersubjective experience temporarily stops the other from being subsumed by the categories of cognition, thereby preserving his alterity and insisting on the need for new understandings of him. This situation of difference through equivalence, unity through division, identity through non-identity provides fertile ground for more dynamic socio-cultural configurations.

The theatre, strangely interposed between the inside and outside of the social space, can function as a meeting-point of the social and non-social. This domain, as a site of antagonism where what is internal to the constructed identity of society makes contact with its constitutive outside, possibly permits the redefinition of what is included and
excluded in social construction. The aesthetic experience of trance or festival causes fiction and reality to converge, thwarting attempts to police their dividing border. This exposes the fictional derivation of the cultural norms and rules that provide imaginary consistency to our perception of normality. This weakening or suspension of our normative and classificatory systems creates an opening for cross-cultural translation or fertilisation to happen.

Leiris identifies in *L'Âge d'homme* an example of this type of social transformation in the post-war phenomenon of jazz. His description of this era retrieves his portrayal of the frenzy and sense of boundlessness associated with tribal possession. Jazz works to counteract the feeling of fragmentation and isolation subsequent to the atrocities of the First World War, by offering a secular version of the integrative aspect of religious communion:

Brassés dans les violentes bouffées d'air chaud issues des tropiques, il passait dans le jazz assez de relents de civilisation finie, d'humanité se soumettant aveuglément à la machine, pour exprimer aussi totalement qu'il est possible l'état d'esprit d'au moins quelques-uns d'entre nous: démoralisation plus ou moins consciente née de la guerre, ébahissement naïf devant le confort et les derniers cris du progrès, goût du décor contemporain dont nous devions cependant pressentir confusément l'inanité, abandon à la joie animale de subir l'influence du rythme moderne, aspiration sous-jacente à une vie neuve où une place plus large serait faite à toutes les candeurs sauvages dont le désir, bien que tout à fait informe encore, nous ravageait.

The mesmerising beat of this new music induces a state of self-dispossession where the cultural determination of the self becomes de-contextualised. Like the spectator of the tribal ritual of trance, the listener of jazz, through the heterogeneity of this aesthetic experience, comes to occupy a fluid zone or perhaps even a 'non-place'. This non-place
forms the point of cultural exchange where the equivalential negativity, which allows for
diversity, vaguely surfaces as the dividing line between self and other becomes blurred.
Leiris makes this idea explicit in an interview, when he affirms ‘Ce que j’aime beaucoup,
c’est l’Autre qui n’est pas tout-à-fait un autre, l’Autre qui apparaît chez vous. Ainsi ce
que j’ai trouvé fantastique dans le jazz, c’est au fond l’espèce d’africanisation des
musiques européennes’. Jazz gives Leiris a distracted sense of the incomplete nature of
his social identity. This incompleteness or dichotomy between the self and its
representation at the level of the system highlights its indeterminacy or determinability.
The instability of identity, as a constructed phenomenon, leaves it susceptible to external
influence or more accurately, its formation, due to its lack of essence, actually depends
on that influence. Cultural identity results from interaction with, and differentiation from,
other cultures.

The clash of European and African cultures in the rhythms of jazz demonstrates how art,
through a process of cross-cultural translation where two cultures collide and contaminate
one another, can show the constitutive non-convergence of differing cultures. Cultures
are not bounded entities; their mode of exchange actually determines them. The friction
involved in their configuration refers the universal claims of any social group back to the
particularity at its origins, illustrating the contingency and mutability of universality. Jazz
assumes its political import by foregrounding the necessity of plurality for socio-political
development and growth. The simultaneous conjunction and disjunction of African and
European rhythms supplies a metaphor for the generative and constitutive properties of
cultural difference. It thereby exposes the destructive and ossifying repercussions of the
imperialist drive towards homogeneity. It deconstructs the idea of socio-cultural supremacy by highlighting how the formation of any culture is contingent upon its attempt to distinguish itself from another. The colonialists' move to try to eradicate or suppress difference proves ultimately self-cancelling because it denies what founds their identity in the first place. The clash of Europe and Africa in jazz therefore dislodges and questions any ethnocentric hierarchy by underlining the improbability of one culture totally subsuming another: the divergence of the two cultures is what constitutes each culture on the most fundamental level. Recognition of this interdependence could provide the basis for dynamic political forms.

Art acquires its political import from its autonomoy, always at a remove from the laws or codes governing society. Its constant oscillation between identity and difference challenges institutional rules and practices that aim to project an image of a unified body of social systems, of a symbolic totality. This oscillation also typifies democratic politics. Democracy calls for, on the one hand, respect for singularity or alterity and on the other, the calculation of majorities, the notion of a community of subjects believed to be representable through collective means. Being irreducible to one another, these two dimensions share a tense coexistence that generates the conflict and division necessary for democratic processes. This gives rise to the aporia at the heart of democracy: we have to assert our right to difference within the collective sphere because the notion of right presupposes equality with others and yet our assertion of this right risks diluting or even obliterating the singularity at its source through its absorption by the normative influence of institutions. Similarly, as Leiris's autobiographical writing shows, the writing subject
has to affirm his particularity within the communal structure of language which operates to generalise and normalise objects to permit communication. Without this recourse to a wider structure, the artist’s sense of alterity would remain mute or enclosed upon itself, thereby nullifying the work of autobiography. The system therefore requires heterogeneity to sustain its operation and at the same time has to exclude that heterogeneity to fabricate the illusion of organisation which holds at bay the threat of chaos. Autobiography as much as radical democracy deconstructs oppressive forms of unity by figuring this fraught and impossible passage from the singular to the general that demands the invention of new idioms which attest to the incompletion of the system: the condition of experimentation and innovation. As with the phenomenon of jazz, the clash in radical democracy could trigger the critical work necessary to allow for the confrontation and interaction of the social and the non-social. This would permit the ceaseless renegotiation of the universal and the particular.

Leiris therefore has to confront the impossibility of reconciling art and society through the objectivity of an all-encompassing ethics. Such an ethics would convert the aesthetic process into a bureaucratic procedure where artistic effect could be calculated or predicted in accordance with a pre-established set of criteria; this would destroy the inventiveness proper to art. Creativity, as Leiris stresses, originates in what defies calculation, paradigmatic reduction, or systems of knowledge. Through the awareness gained throughout the *Règle du jeu* of the irreducibility of art, Leiris re-evaluates his wish for a moral calculus for poetry. The fall of communism has an important bearing on this re-assessment. His change of stance remarkably prefigures the radicalisation of political
philosophy that also occurred in response to the dissolution of this dream. Art and politics have to accept negativity as the positive condition of their survival. The ultimate rule of political and artistic activity is the very absence of such a rule. This confers on us the responsibility of endlessly interrogating and re-enacting justice in reaction to singular events that disturb reified understandings of the collective. The critical force of Marxism and the ‘règle du jeu’ perseveres in those contradictory feelings that jar with the impression of full legitimacy created by the system. These feelings urge us to look beyond the present state of breakdown and re-imagine the social. The impossibility of reaching the imaginary horizons of Marxism and the ‘rule of the game’ without descending into totalitarianism thus connects the ethical to invention and creativity. The persistence of the incommensurable in art holds open the space between the description of what is and the projection of what could be: the very space of Utopian hope.

3 For an excellent discussion of Leiris’s innovative approach to ethnographic discourse, his ethnopoetics, see Anna Warby, ‘The Anthropological Self: Michel Leiris’s “Ethnopoetics”, in Forum for Modern Language Studies, 26.3, (1990), pp.250-258. My exploration of the interpenetration of poetry and ethnography in Leiris is assisted by this article.
5 Leiris first describes the operatic version of the fable (25). When he later talks about a performance he saw, he is referring to a play, a comedy of manners.(32)
6 This understanding of enlightenment is taken from Adorno and Horkheimer’s seminal essay ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’ in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, (London: Verso, 1979), pp.3-42. My discussion of Leiris’s linking of the ‘scientific’ pretensions of communism with the structure of myth is assisted by this essay.
This exploration of the necessary persistence of humanist values is aided by Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in particular pp.116-117.


For a discussion of the need for myth in configuring the social-political field, see Laclau, *New Reflections*, pp.60-85.


See the chapter on the *Miroir de la Tauromachie* for a fuller analysis of the double reversal and its relation to Leiris's work. Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, pp.379-385.

I have retained the westernised form 'Peking', which was accepted in the sixties, because to use Beijing would seem anachronistic.


For a discussion of the irreducible alterity that at once permits and restricts emancipation, see chapter 1.


Leiris, *Cinq études d'ethnologie*, p. 151.

Michael Sheringham makes this explicit when he affirms that ‘It is not by choosing between art and politics, but by the process of writing itself that Leiris can contribute to the social revolution he desires, which is itself after all partly an imaginative construct, a ‘fruit dans ma tête comme dans celle de (mes compagnons (Frêle bruit, p.392), a utopia where class inequality, sexism, and racism have been eliminated.' French Autobiography: Devices and Desires, *Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 280.


Adorno and Horkheimer attribute to art a similar function, locating its original powers in its affinity with the forces of magic and animism — the purposive spirit of the world. In the disenchanted modern world, it is only the autonomy of art that can potentially endow it with the 'aura' that it has lost: It is the nature of the work of art, or aesthetic semblance, to be what the new, terrifying occurrence became in the primitive's magic: the appearance of the whole in the particular. In the work of art, that duplication still occurs by which the thing appeared as spiritual, as the expression of mana. This constitutes its aura. An expression of totality art lays claims to the dignity of the absolute' (Dialectic of Enlightenment, p.19) This concept of
aesthetic potency has informed my reading of Leiris’s empowerment of art through its links with the tribal ritual of trance.


26 The often stereotypical nature of the descriptive level of Leiris’s accounts of cultural otherness, of which Leiris becomes acutely aware, is outstripped by their performative level, which demonstrates how the incompleteness of any cultural identity provides the basis for dynamic forms of cultural exchange.

27 His anthropological study of possession in Ethiopia emphasises the theatrical nature of this tribal ritual. See *La Possession et ses aspects théatraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1980), in particular p. 124. His account in *Frêle Bruit* (quoted above) summarises his depiction of trance as an aesthetic event.


29 Lacoue-Labarthe describes the Rousseauean festival as a figure of the impossible itself, of pure contradiction, in that it shows that nothing is present which is not mediated or (re)-presented, and therefore, nothing is actually present at all. *Poétique de l’histoire*, pp. 134-135.


32 ‘Entretien avec M.Haggerty’, *Jazz Magazine*, no.324, 1984, 35.

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