

Fallen angel

Guy Lardreau's later voluntarism

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The French philosopher and erstwhile Maoist militant Guy Lardreau (1947-2008) was the first to admit that much of his work was haunted by a single problem, one posed by the revolutionary political history of the twentieth century.¹ The great revolutions in Russia and China, and several other places inspired by their example, pursued radical change in the literal sense. They had dug down to the root of things, and tried to uproot them. They had sought to break patterns of injustice and inequality so entrenched that they had been suffered, for centuries, as part of the immutable order of things. More than a mere break with historical tendencies, the great revolutions thus aspired to change human nature itself, to shake it to its most apparently 'unchangeable' foundations.² They did not hesitate to take up Rousseau's famous challenge, to 'denature' humanity and make the world anew – and it's no accident that in Lardreau's early work, alongside Mao and Lenin, the key source of inspiration is Rousseau, and a sharply anti-Kantian version of Rousseau at that.³ The most sincere revolutionaries vehemently rejected the sort of critical limitations Kant insisted on, limitations that, for Lardreau as for Marx and so many other Marxists, position him first and foremost as an anti-revolutionary thinker: they had sought precisely to force both history and nature into line with the ideal and uncompromising principles of reason.

To invoke the metaphor first adopted in Lardreau's most famous book, *L'Ange*, co-written with Christian Jambet in 1976, and which endures as the central figure of his last published writings, the modern revolutions can thus be understood as essentially *angelic* projects. The term 'Angel', to cite what is per-

haps Lardreau's clearest explanation of his usage, 'is the name of the possibility that human nature, for so long established in a certain way, might change from top to bottom.' For a particular historical period this possibility took on a 'political face' – the period of *la Grande Politique*, between the French and Cambodian revolutions (FD, 83).

After enthusiastically embracing the apparent consequences of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, Lardreau soon came to the conclusion that any genuinely radical revolution could in actuality lead only to catastrophe. Actual revolutions led to the guillotine, the gulag, and the killing fields of Cambodia. The more ardent a revolution's desire to build heaven on earth, the more hellish its worldly consequences. By the end of his life, the only difference Lardreau recognised between 'legitimate' French revolutionary figures like Robespierre and Chaumette, on the one hand, and reviled war criminals like Goebbels or Pol Pot, on the other, is that, at least over the longer historical term, 'the former succeeded whereas the latter failed. *Vae victis ...*' (FD, 24). Ever since its true visage was exposed in Cambodia, the 'political face' of the Angel has vanished without trace, and without any prospect of return (even if angelic hope as such always persists, as an eternal yearning or possibility) (FD, 83).

Something about the very desire or will to 'bend political power to the highest ends of reason', as Lardreau suggests in several late texts, seemed doomed to 'result in the necessary reversal of best into worst.'⁴ The real source of this necessity, he eventually decides, lies in the quality of such a will itself – revolu-

tionary political will, in other words, seems to operate as a sort of malevolent inversion of Kant's conception of a morally 'good will'. Where the latter figured as the only thing 'in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation',⁵ there is likewise no limit to the evil of the former. Lardreau's great problem, then, is to understand how political projects undertaken with the very best of intentions invariably turn bad, and 'not because the will behind this undertaking became lazy or forgetful, but on account of this will itself.'⁶

Lardreau's chief concern, early and late, is with the nature of such political will. I addressed Lardreau's early voluntarism – in particular as developed in his first book *Le Singe d'or* [*The Golden Monkey*, 1973] – in an article published in an earlier issue of this journal (*RP* 190). What is unusual about Lardreau's subsequent turn away from revolutionary zeal in the mid to late 1970s is that, unlike some of his comrades in French Maoist political circles, he did not simply reverse course, and fling himself with equal enthusiasm into the arms of neo-liberal reaction.⁷ Instead he sought to combine a version of his original revolutionary intransigence, while restoring a strict, broadly Kantian demarcation of rational and moral ideals, on the one hand, and historical reality or actuality, on the other. Only unconditional affirmation is worthy of the ideal, but any attempt to actualise or implement it is itself criminal. In his final, posthumously published book, *Faces de l'Ange déchu*, Lardreau puts it in increasingly strident if not openly 'inquisitorial' terms: the only 'perversion that cannot be forgiven, the only irremissible misdeed or sin ..., is the bad will to realise the Idea' (FD, 170).

Affirmation of the ideal, in short, becomes a more and more emphatically spiritual exercise, purged of all worldly contamination. As a political figure, the angel can now appear only as 'fallen [*déchu*]', as a figure of renunciation and withdrawal. In the end, this logic will allow him to affirm both the enduring reason of the Maoist slogan '*on a raison de se révolter*' – it is right or reasonable to rebel – while embracing the most reactionary (in the literal sense) aspects of French counter-revolutionary thought: the ultra-conservative Catholic restoration urged by thinkers like Joseph de Maistre and Louis Bonald. Like these

bitter enemies of the Enlightenment and of all ideas of historical 'progress', Lardreau concludes that the French Revolution found its essence and 'its highest truth in the guillotine'. If 'with respect to the Revolution, all that matters to thought has come from the Counter-Revolution' (FD, 101n.6), this is because only the counter-revolutionary thinkers were equipped to grasp both the material and the 'Sublime' aspects of the Terror (FD, 24). Bonald had it right: 'only religion can understand politics' (FD, 133).

If his Maoist work of the early 1970s was entirely oriented by 'an act of faith' in the masses and the profoundly rational 'rightness' of their revolt,⁸ we can analyse Lardreau's subsequent attempt to separate the domains of faith and actuality across three distinct through overlapping moments, in a sequence that for the sake of simplicity might be summed up as a retreat from Rousseau's politics to Kant's morality. In *L'Ange* (1976) he still affirms the will to revolt against the evils of the world, while acknowledging that so long as it commits to an actual emancipatory political project then revolt may always be deluded, co-opted and harnessed to new forms of oppression. In *Le Monde* (1978) he withdraws revolt from any political engagement with the world at all, in order to take refuge in an uncompromising 'moral attitude', one that upholds our duty to respect the imprescriptible rights that should apply to every individual in all situations. In *La Véracité* (1993), the explicitly Kantian framework for this moral attitude is re-affirmed but reframed along still more strictly 'negative' lines, in keeping with the purely 'supersensible' and supra-actual quality of our freedom to posit an unconditional moral law.⁹

I

Co-written with Lardreau's long-time comrade Christian Jambet (who shared both Lardreau's political convictions and his erudite fascination with ascetic spirituality and esoteric religion), and long considered a sort of 'cult classic' on the experimental fringes of recent French philosophy, *L'Ange* (1976) retains the same basic political orientation as *Singe d'or* (1973), framed by an archetypal scenario that pits the 'rebel' (the insurgent, the dissident, the heretic ...) against

the 'master' (the boss, the Party, the state ...).¹⁰ In the Lacanian terms that Lardreau now begins to adopt, what defines any master is the command '*cède sur ton désir*' (LM, 85) – 'give up on your desire' – whereas every rebel rejects precisely this imperative. Across both *Singe* and *L'Ange*, 'what I've been constantly saying is that a world without master must be possible',¹¹ i.e. a *world* of absolute justice. The fundamental issue remains a matter of making a stark choice, between the 'side of the people' or that of their oppressors (LA, 42). Popular revolt or submissive resignation: these alternatives continue to define the political spectrum.

In this sense there is no retreat here from the earlier commitment to Maoism,¹² and far from renegation what Lardreau seeks is to 'go still further in my imperfect conversion ...; I still don't claim to be doing anything else than pursuing a Maoist philosophy.'¹³ Like *Singe*, *L'Ange* continues to reject the idea that a world without mastery or oppression might ever come about through some immanent form of necessity or progress, some development of the existing conditions of oppression, on the model of socialism as emerging out from capitalist industrialisation. Genuine, i.e. 'cultural' revolution, in the Maoist sense, remains the contrary of progress or maturation, and of the anticipatory knowledge induced from the logic of progress. To engage in revolution is here to plunge into a project that thwarts all anticipation of what is to come, and all 'planning' for the future. Cultural revolution does not complete or accelerate what is established but breaks abruptly with it, on the model of an apocalypse. To revolt is to resist the temptation to 'know what is to come', to avoid 'predicting the new', and 'the first principle of cultural revolution' remains one of humility in the face of its imminent future. 'I can never say what should come, since if what comes is new then this must exceed what I had foreseen', as a matter of course.¹⁴

Like all of Lardreau's subsequent work, *L'Ange* also continues to affirm forms of an ascetic, self-sacrificing discipline and commitment, at the furthest remove of any *anarcho-désirant* call to 'go with the flow'. As with *Singe*, as far as desire and the body are concerned what is at stake in *L'Ange* remains 'not the liberation but the abolition of the body'.¹⁵ Angel and monkey might thus seem to have more in common than these

titles imply. Unlike *Singe*, however, *L'Ange* is newly concerned with the way that even the purest and most well-intentioned forms of such dedication may nonetheless be accommodated within, or usurped by, mechanisms of domination. A couple of years on from its dissolution, Lardreau is ready to admit that 'the Gauche Prolétarienne might have been one of the discourses that the Master made use of it, and that he will continue to make use of, as a mechanism for enabling his own metamorphosis.'¹⁶ In *L'Ange*, the issue is most starkly posed in the sections of the book that evoke the exemplary experience of those early Christian ascetics (Saint Jerome, Chrysostomos and various others) who both lived and declared an especially intransigent form of 'absolute revolt' against the prevailing way of the world (LA, 93–99). What is primary, in this sequence, is the moment of absolute zeal that inspired these Red Guards of Christ in the decades that followed his crucifixion, 'this surreal crowd that swarms in the deserts of the Orient, these monks with wasted bellies, their bodies lacerated with chains, these ruined figures whipped by wind and rain, these worm-eaten but radiant stylites, these voluntary madmen' (LA, 101). The early monastic thinkers, inspired by a resolutely Manichean conception of reality, propose their own version of cultural revolution *avant la lettre*. They invert every accepted form of value, renounce all inheritance, refuse any loyalty to family and familiarity, deny the body, reject sexual difference and desire, affirm the all-or-nothing simplicity of redemption, pursue a heroic anonymity, adopt a permanent posture of self-criticism, embrace the most severe forms of frugality and discipline. They accept that 'the path of saintliness is a path of struggle *alone*' (LA, 148).

But how then could it happen, ask Lardreau and Jambet, that this uncompromising posture of revolt was so easily and so quickly accommodated within a new configuration of mastery? How could a discourse of pure revolt, directed against the figure of mastery as such, directed against the very survival of society, in turn become the witless 'instrument of the Master,' and allow itself to be used, as a sort of safely marginalised lunatic fringe, in ways that help consolidate the social and institutional mainstream? How, in short, was the uncompromising discourse of *saints* bent to



the base needs of an emergent *church*?

The answer, which applies both to early Christianity and to the revolutionary projects of the twentieth century, relies on conversion of cultural revolution into a merely ‘ideological’ revolution. An ideological revolution is that ‘miracle’ which succeeds in reducing the most subversive of ideals and practices to a ‘docile instrument’ of order, by isolating their most dedicated proponents (now invested with a special ‘vocation’ or ‘profession’) from their fellows and putting them back *to work*, in cloistered obedience to the will of a new master (LA, 115). Whereas cultural revolution rejects every form of mastery in the unmediated dualism of oppression/revolt, ideological revolution mediates subjective responses to socio-historical ‘causes’ and economic conditions and integrates rebellion within a rational historical order or development – and in the process it transforms the critique of mastery into the mere substitution of one master for another (LA, 151–52). The quality of the *will* involved is thereby fundamentally changed. Determined through coordination with the apparent ‘necessity’ of its material base, ‘ideological revolution is, subjectively, a mitigated will [*une volonté mitigée*],

and objectively, a will to mitigation’, whereas the sole ‘law of cultural revolution’ remains a ‘will of absolute purity’ (LA, 110; cf. LM, 19–20), a will to pursue ‘the deliberate, systematic inversion of all the values of this world’ (LA, 87).

Recognition of the means by which the zeal of the early Christian ascetics was harnessed to the needs of a new institutional order allows Lardreau to see how his own cultural revolution had been usurped, how ‘we too have no doubt simply been a moment of an ideological revolution that made use of us, and which in a sense we completely failed to understand’, leaving us as little more than obedient pawns of ‘the will of the Master’ (LA, 135). By 1976, Lardreau had already come to the conclusion that any attempt to change the world by political means, for instance by organising a political party on the Leninist model, could only lead to variations on a Stalinist outcome.¹⁷

A rejection of *all* mastery, Lardreau now argues, must also include a rejection of the very will, striving or desire for a world without mastery. This is because Lardreau now accepts, following Lacan, that desire *as such* is the domain of the master. ‘We have a very elevated idea of the Master, an elevated idea of his

history, and ... like Lacan, we think that nothing that relates to desire escapes him.¹⁸ (Following *L'Ange*, Lacan will figure above all in Lardreau's work as the prophet who spoke an uncomfortable but oft-cited truth to the young would-be revolutionaries of May 68: 'What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one.'¹⁹) Since political and sexual desire obey the same logic, the idea of 'sexual liberation' must thus be dismissed as an especially acute contradiction in terms – which accounts, parenthetically, for Lardreau's critiques of Sade, Deleuze and Lyotard. Genuine revolt must be a-sexual or extra-sexual, and the first reason why Lardreau and Jambet now conceive of the revolutionary as 'angelic' should be taken quite literally. 'This image of the Angel must be understood very simply ...: a body without sex.'²⁰ Or rather – as a body without body, a body purged of all flesh and material desire, one dedicated to nothing other than 'perpetual praise' of its transcendent creator (LA, 104).

The further and deeper reason why Lardreau admits that to wait for the angel's advent is the only way to preserve 'the hope of revolution' is that this serves to illustrate the actual 'conditions of possibility' of rebellion, i.e. to illustrate their necessary *non-actuality* (LA, 36, cf. 79). Not only is cultural revolution doomed to ideological recuperation in history but the alternative, the successful realisation of cultural revolution, would herald nothing less than the end of history and of humanity as we know it, and thus the end of all realisation too.

Pushed to its limit, Lardreau's position now culminates, in effect, in a double wager – first on rebellion rather than submission, and then on rebellion's necessary *failure* rather than possible success. The first wager is a matter of pure incantation, without reason or cause: 'The Angel must come', since the alternative is intolerable despair (LA, 36, 70). Even if mastery has always triumphed, so far, and even if revolt serves only to reinvigorate oppression, nevertheless 'once again, and come what may, we will make the mad wager: the Angel, whose annunciation it is our turn to declare, has always been defeated – but he will finally triumph in an unprecedented revolution' (LA, 152). Lardreau accepts that history has backed him into a corner, but not yet that he must yield; what

remains is the logic of the gamble or wager as such, in its undecidability, demanding that between the two worlds, the world of what has been and the world of what might be, and their respective actors, 'one must choose [*il y a à choisir*]' (LA, 153). Lardreau now makes of this un-reasonable and discontinuous quality of revolt its highest virtue, an index of its unassimilable resistance to integration in the rational progress of history. It is in the form of a pure leap that Lardreau and Jambet seek, 'against all forms of power and domination, and in spite of everything, to maintain the hope that another world is possible', by 'pushing right to the end, right to the point of paroxysm, the logic of rebellion' (LA, 10, 13). If *L'Ange* still retains an account of revolutionary will, it is already stretched close to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from a leap of faith.

The second wager, however, is now indissociable from the first, and becomes more urgently so over time. Every revolt runs the risk of barbaric inhumanity; revolutions can only prevail in a world geared to suppress them through recourse to violence on a massive scale. On this point, after Stalin, after the Gulag, and after the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, the Khmer revolution in Cambodia that began in 1975 marks the point of no return. The shift from cautious anticipation of this revolution to a definitive judgement of its actual consequences, furthermore, marks the stark dividing line between *L'Ange* and *Le Monde*, which Lardreau and Jambet published two years later. Lardreau will then be ready to bet that any and every revolutionary project, once it is put into practice, must always fail. If the practice of political will requires the direct conjunction of an intention or purpose and its execution or actualisation, Lardreau's recognition of the Cambodian catastrophe, shortly after the publication of *L'Ange*, marks the definitive end of his defence of such a practice, and confirms his re-orientation of the will from politics to morality (LM, 13).

II

The concluding reference to the Khmer Rouge, in *L'Ange*, restates in a single phrase the basic argument of the book. 'If the Cambodians are right to revolt' (as

a matter of course), the actual outcome of the Khmer Rouge project, whatever it might be, will not itself resolve or 'suppress our transcendental question, regarding the possible autonomy of revolt itself' (LA, 233). In other words, revolt in Cambodia, like any revolt anywhere else, can always be justified as an end in itself, as an immediate reaction to oppression – and a few years after *L'Ange* was published its authors readily admitted that 'it's true that the Lin-Biaoiist sympathies we had at the time allowed us to hope that the Khmer revolution would be victorious, and to feel sympathetic towards it.'²¹ The rapid accumulation of evidence of Khmer crimes, however, did not so much confound an earlier endorsement of their actual revolution, as cement Lardreau's answer to precisely that transcendental question which already accompanied it in *L'Ange*, and which now receives an unequivocal answer. Khmer atrocities provide clear proof that anyone who still seeks to rebel against or at least limit the violence of mastery and oppression must first deny any *actual* application of 'the possible autonomy of revolt itself', any worldly or political possibility of moving 'beyond the history of the master.'²² From now on, Lardreau will tacitly accept that, as far as justice and morality are concerned, the only kingdom that matters is indeed 'not of this world'.

This conclusion only follows, of course, if we first accept the Khmer's own self-description more or less at face value, as Lardreau seems to do both before and after the revolution in Cambodia – as if they really were nothing more than ruthless idealists who sought to abolish rather than reinstitute mastery, as if they really were driven by a revolutionary pursuit of absolute justice and equality. Lardreau and Jambet interpret the Khmer sequence not as an exceptionally brutal engagement with some of the many constraints that characterise Cambodia's situation (and the situation of weakened peripheral states in the capitalist world system more generally), but exclusively as an illustration of what must always happen when a 'will to purity' fully resolves to purge society of oppression. Such an angelic will, they conclude, *must* ultimately encourage a barbaric 'will to create a community of *bodies without flesh* [*de corps sans chair*], bodies stripped of desire and self-regard, a community without social ties.'²³ In keeping with

this new invocation of necessity and this newly inexorable logic of revolution, the revelation of Cambodia's killing fields marked for Lardreau, as for many of his contemporaries, a definitive break with the Marxian pursuit of political power as a means of realising freedom and overcoming poverty and injustice.²⁴ From now on there will be no better indication of one's relative 'maturity', Lardreau suggests following Kant, than the readiness with which one accepts that we can and must live 'without great hopes or expectations.'²⁵

It should be stressed, however, that such readiness remains as much a wager as was the original revolutionary project itself, albeit now a wager on *failure* rather than success. From the mid 1970s, as Alberto Toscano notes, Lardreau's understanding of revolution in general comes to be shaped by a quite specific judgement of failure and disaster, the failure of Cultural Revolution in Lin Piao's China along with the various failures to imitate or radicalise it abroad.²⁶ Even if one were to agree that the narrow category of 'failure' might be the most economical way to characterise these projects, Lardreau makes no attempt to explain why these particular failures might warrant the extension of this characterisation to *all* revolutionary projects (for instance those undertaken in Cuba and other parts of Latin America). If Lardreau does not concern himself with such political judgements it is because by the late 1970s he has convinced himself that 'what we are living and experiencing today isn't simply the repeated failure of revolutions to fulfil their programme to bring happiness to the people (which justified them in the eyes of simple souls) but the failure of the very Idea of Revolution.' What has failed, and failed definitively, is the very idea that 'political struggle might radically transform people's lives' (LM, 13). This failure is something that has now *taken place*, irredeemably, and Lardreau's judgement stands without appeal (FD, 44, 146).

If the idea itself has failed, and failed irredeemably, then its every instance must no doubt fail as a matter of course, and we might say that for Lardreau what will be at issue from now on, strictly speaking, is not the relative successive or failure of this or that project, but the need for any project to retreat without reservation from the very dimension in which it might

either succeed *or* fail, i.e. to retreat from its very existence and temporality as a project *tout court*. In *Le Monde*, even those fading traces of revolutionary political affirmation that had persisted in *L'Ange* are purged without remainder, so as to count only 'for nothing, strictly' (LM, 279). Long before he writes his last, explicitly counter-revolutionary texts, Lardreau had reached the conclusion that any prospect of 'rational politics' is dead and buried: 'in my view there is no longer any clear and distinct idea of politics – which means that politics is no more'; the 'concept of politics has died' and politics can no longer be thought by any philosophy worthy of the name (FD, 43, 58).

In other words, what is now at issue is the possibility of an alternative idea that might ground the eternal legitimacy of revolt, without running the risk of its actual success or failure. If the political question is inevitably consumed in the violence of social dissolution and re-constitution, from now on the philosophical question will ask whether there might be some wholly 'real' dimension beyond all such constitutional force, i.e. a dimension that might serve both as a secure basis for the determination of the will and as a foundation for the certainty that it is indeed still, always and everywhere, right to revolt.²⁷ Confronted with the world's reality and injustice, where might we find 'the point that resists' the whole way of the world, the point from which we might refuse all the compromises we make to accommodate ourselves to the 'reality' we inhabit? Where might we find 'the granite point from which a certain deduction will be possible', one unmediated by reality or compromise, 'a point of the eminently "real", therefore, in the sense of being irreducible, inescapable, imperative – but one, nonetheless, that "reality" never takes into account' (LM, 40)?

Lardreau finds this point or dimension – and with it the key to his later philosophy as a whole – in Kant's idea of transcendental or extra-worldly freedom, understood in practice as the freedom to posit an unconditionally binding moral law, such that 'freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other.'²⁸ Like most of his readers, Lardreau acknowledges Kant as the first philosopher to posit an unbridgeable gap between (a) the hypothetical, goal-

oriented and context-sensitive imperatives at issue in politics and history, and (b) the unconditionally and immediately binding categorical imperative of the moral law, the law that everywhere obliges us to act only on grounds that all other rational actors could affirm, and in ways that treat ourselves and 'all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves.'²⁹ In Kant's moral law, which transcends all historical particularity and every 'chain' of causation, Lardreau finds that 'granite' foundation he had failed to find in political commitment. 'The moral law, as we know, holds absolutely – it is even the only absolute that Reason can *encounter*, by which I mean: that requires no hypothesis.'³⁰ The law's command is absolute both everywhere and always, for *all* subjects and for all times, and for each time, for each instance, for each subject as *a* subject or as any *one* subject (LM, 98).

Kant's moral law thus furnishes, *Le Monde* argues, a secure basis for universal human rights understood precisely as protections for dissident rebels who might oppose the imposition of any actually-coercive universal norms, and thus rights to safeguard all 'claims made on behalf of the singular, of the particular, against the despotic universal' (LM, 58). Kant proposes not one account of morality among others, but an epochal discovery. 'There is no *Kantian* morality', properly speaking, for Kant's philosophy prescribes nothing less than morality itself, morality in general: "Kantianism" exists only as the enunciation of the conditions of possibility for morality as such' (LV, 149). In due course, Lardreau will come to recognise Kant's insistence on the disjunctive relation between politics and ethics as not only unprecedented but also

insurpassable, for I judge that no philosophy managed to model the problem before him, and none fully confronted it after him. Certainly not Hegel, who dissolves it by making the state, i.e. the highest figure that philosophy could lend to politics, the realisation of the ethical idea; nor Marx, even more so, whose way of thinking obliges him to conceive of the moral problem merely as an accident of politics.³¹

Between upholding the 'moral attitude' that consists in recognising our duty to obey the law, and participation in any worldly or political project that

might try to change society or the course of history, there is now an abyss without mediation. Every philosophy of history and every philosophical conception of the world ultimately seeks, one way or another, to reconcile us with the order of this world, or its projected future order, and thus serves to justify its unjustifiable injustices. To be ‘philosophical’, in one conventional sense of the word, is indeed to submit to the way of the world (LM, 27–29). The freedom to posit the moral law, by contrast, is precisely that – a pure *positing* that is entirely ‘free’, *gratuit*, free of any constituent link with nature or world. What then allows Lardreau to pit his unconditional ‘moral attitude’ against any merely ‘moral conception of the world’ (i.e. any project to improve the world) is precisely its foundation in a purely regulative idea. In Kantian terms,

everything depends on the point that Freedom is an Idea, i.e. that it is impossible to decide between the statements by which it can be either affirmed or denied, if we approach it from the perspective of speculative Reason; forever undecidable for science, what is at stake is only illuminated if one has already made the ethical choice. That Freedom is a postulate means that, whatever rational legitimacy might subsequently be conferred upon it, this legitimacy will only be admissible and convincing for those who have already made the choice to live morally (LM, 30–31).

There is no saving those who might prefer to make the alternative choice, the ‘barbaric choice’ that commits them to the sole dimension of the world. But for those who choose freedom and morality, the essential question is no longer what can we *do* to improve the world, or ‘what pure moral protestation is *capable* of, against the rising insistence of barbarism in our world.’ It is a matter, instead, since duty commands capacity, of accepting the simplicity of the Kantian imperative. It is enough to ask ‘what must I do?’, and to disregard the doing itself as a secondary matter, trusting as a matter of course that ‘we can do all that we must’ (LM, 16–17). Following this line of thinking to its conclusion, ‘we will not say that freedom is real, or that we can affirm things *about* freedom, but that we must simply affirm it, since it is only “*under the idea of freedom*” that we can conceive of a moral attitude’ (LM, 40). The priority is now to dissociate

freedom from its affirmation ‘not merely from *this* world, but from *a world*’, any world. It is enough, and necessary, simply to ‘affirm that “there is freedom” [*il y a de la liberté*], but without affirming it of anything, neither of the world nor of man’ (LM, 38).

Inverting the priorities of *Singe*, in *Le Monde* Lardreau stresses this difference between Kantian and Rousseauist conceptions of autonomy. Kant’s formulation of a self-legislating law, unlike Rousseau’s socialised or actualised version, cannot force anyone *else* to be free. The law ‘cannot itself oppress anyone; it does not proceed before any tribunal, it does not shape any institution, it distributes no power; it is only ever expressed from the point of view of a [singular] subject, posed as such, and as irreducible to every other – and no one can express the moral law for someone else’ (LM, 97). It is precisely the effort to actualise or apply the law that allows a dutiful moral attitude to relapse into a mere assertion of mastery. Kantian autonomy tumbles toward a proto-criminal ‘Rousseauist autonomy’ as soon as ‘a subject comes to maintain that the universality of the law that he [*il*] prescribes for himself must, in actuality, be realised’, and thereby concludes that ‘it is no longer the law that lends form to his will, but his will that gives the law its content’ (LM, 98). To ward against this danger, which Lardreau encounters in some of Kant’s own texts – e.g. those which, like the essays on history, progress and perpetual peace, suggest that ‘Kantian morality *wills* [*veut*] its own realisation’ over the course of human affairs [LM, 35]), and which he might also have found more emphatically in Heidegger’s insistence, reading Kant’s moral philosophy, that ‘what is genuinely law-giving for willing is the actual pure willing itself and nothing else’³² – the solution is to retreat to the purely formal, extra-actual quality of ‘the Kantian imperative, that the subject *can* always will that the maxim of his action be [universalisable], but that he never actually *wills* it thus’ (LM, 99). The supersensible or noumenal domain must be respected as what it must remain, as *réel* in a roughly Lacanian sense, rather than embraced as the basis of a capacity that might be realised in practice.³³

On this condition, by abandoning all reference to the will as practice or capacity in favour of the law as unconditional duty, Lardreau can preserve his old op-

position between submission and revolt, precisely by abstracting the latter from its engagement with any actual target or obstacle. Read in this way (and thus against the voluntarist and indeed commanding or ‘masterful’ grain of so much of Kant’s own moral theory), Lardreau’s Kant offers a kind of ‘autonomy that, because it is entirely cut off from the political conception of the world, does not demand mastery’, while still reminding each and every individual, always as an individual, of one’s categorical duty: ‘do not give up on your desire’ (LM, 97). Do not conform to the way of the world. Precisely because it subtracts itself from the complex chain of causes and interests that shape the world, the Kantian moral attitude amounts to a ‘pure gesture of retreat or withdrawal, of subtraction from obedience, through which, by stubbornly refusing to give up, a subject thereby affirms himself as autonomous. Kant with Lacan, in short.’⁵⁴

The price Lardreau has to pay in order to sustain this new formulation of revolt over submission, however, is exorbitant. Since revolt is now indistinguishable from ‘retreat’ [*retrait*] it not only leaves the world of oppression untouched, it also resonates all too easily with a socio-economic world that is itself beginning, in its incipient neoliberal reconfiguration over the course of the 1970s, to privilege private interests and de-regulated market ‘liberties’ over any residual commitment to public goods and collective projects. It resonates in particular with the familiar liberal appeal to tolerance: you must not yield on your desire, so long as your desire does not infringe on the free pursuit of others’ desires (cf. LM, 104–8). This is another consequence of privileging Kant over Rousseau: rather than seek to fortify and concentrate a common interest in the collective good, Lardreau’s moral attitude aspires only to a gentle or ‘soft autonomy’, one that flaunts its harmless humility. ‘It wants gentleness [*douceur*], the universal tolerance of those small differences in which everyone finds their small joys’ (LM, 110; cf. 16), free from the temptation of any great expectations in political action or historical development.

What must remain excluded from consideration, in this as in every stage of Lardreau’s work, is the sphere of history in a broadly Hegelian or Marxist sense, i.e. as a sphere in which cumulative strivings

for collective emancipation might contribute to actual [*wirkliche*] transformations over time. Lardreau condemns such an understanding of history as one that effectively serves, like earlier forms of theodicy, to validate an immoral logic of instrumental expediency. Understood as a story of progress or liberation, one guided by its promises and ideals, History with a capital ‘H’ lends a *meaning* [*sens*], a direction and a justification to the meaningless and unjustifiable suffering caused by political violence, and thereby tries to render the intolerable tolerable (LM, 24–29). In *Le Monde*, Lardreau and Jambet conclude that *L’Ange* itself, far from abandoning politics for spirituality, had not gone far enough in the dissociation of morality from politics and history. Insofar as the figure of the angel might still hold out some redemptive promise, did it not collude in justifying a history marked by suffering and evil? ‘Did not the Angel give us, in spite of our denials, a point of view on this particular history’ – from a perspective outside it, yes, but nevertheless one that made it possible to recognise an ‘intelligibility of History?’ (LM, 280).

After losing the fight to subordinate it to political prescription in *Singe*, history figures after *L’Ange* only as a domain of exile and alienation. The paradigm for this, as for so much of Lardreau’s later work, is established in the early Christian church, by the division that separates the spiritual, monarchist approach to redemption (guided by an immediate contempt for the flesh, desire, and for all that might align us with the ways of this world) and the rival ‘historicist model’, whereby the Church is established as an institution designed to lead its people through the trials and tribulations of this world, and to accept the world as the sole theatre of salvation.⁵⁵ History is consolidated as that dimension of social existence in which rebellion must always appear as essentially unreasonable, if not mad or *insensé* – the dimension in which it is, and always has been, wrong or unreasonable to revolt (cf. LA, 97). The manichean clarity of revolt prevails solely in the purity of the present, as an abrupt interruption of any dialectical coordination of structural conditions and subjective responses. ‘Our most profound metaphysical thesis, our “esoteric” thesis’, Lardreau argues, is quite simply that ‘the past doesn’t exist’ (LA, 21; cf. 57). As Lardreau observes in his

Dialogues with the great historian of feudal society, Georges Duby, history as such, history in general, is always written by the victorious few, driven at all times by their fundamental 'fear of the people'.³⁶ History does not recall 'the way things were' but only the way the victors decide that they must have been, in order for them to have contributed to what has since become the established order of things. 'Historical memory is not Proustian ...; memory is an instrument of mastery', and it 'retains only that which can be, properly speaking, mastered'.³⁷

What is perhaps more unexpected is the way in which Lardreau's subsequent reflection on mastery itself comes to reframe his understanding of the antagonism between master and rebel. If every actual rebellion leads to a renewal of mastery and submission, could it also be that still more radical forms of submission, on the model of submission to an absolute law, might renew potential rebellion? Could unconditional submission to a *fully* absolute or extra-worldly master, a master beyond any relation 'with' rebels who are themselves confined to this world, open an alternative path to freedom from all worldly or historical constraints?

This is the question Lardreau tackles in his reading of the sixth-century Syriac ascetic Philoxenus of Mabbug, *Discours philosophique et discours spirituel* (1985). Once again he makes no secret of the Maoist roots of the essential choice that separates 'philosophical' from 'spiritual' discourse, the choice between reliance upon oneself, as the selfish subject of one's own petty mind, and the alienating-and-liberating 'subversion through which the subject of thought is affirmed as thought by the Other', i.e. as the thought and will of the creator or master who thinks through me. In the Maoist context, such subversion allows Mao to think of himself as thought by the masses, such that to follow Mao demanded the 'disappearance of all thought of one's own, all "selfish" thought, so as to allow the masses to think me, by thinking their thought in me. Hence that strange paramnesic feeling that seizes any reader who moves from the texts that express this Maoist subversion to our "spiritual" texts, or vice versa'.³⁸ The Maoist militants do not 'think for themselves'; they are a vehicle for the masses who think through them, and who alone de-

termine what must be thought. As Lardreau will later point out, the Counter-Revolution grasped a version of precisely the same point (to opposite ends), when with Bonald it argued that the 'first law' of a revolution is that 'those who believe they are directing it are only its instruments' (FD, 135).

The Christian name for our absolute master, of course, is God, and what distinguishes its properly 'spiritual' mode of devotion is the individual's fully unconditional or absolute submission to the divine will. The Christian ascetic seeks to eliminate all that might block or filter his reception of divine instruction, in its simplicity and sufficiency, so as to be in a position to receive 'the word of God without judging or scrutinising it, without trying to verify it, accepting it with the same immediate self-evidence with which the child accepts the authority of the master'.³⁹ For the ascetic, the decisive question is not whether or not to believe *in* God, but simply that of believing God, believing what God says, and thus of obeying his commandments, without any need for evaluation or justification. If classical philosophy offers the progressive clarification of a *cogito*, an 'I think what I am thinking', this spiritual alternative offers the less reflexive, more abrupt and more brutal 'illumination of a *cogitor*, through which the subject experiences himself as that which is thought in thinking – in the thinking of the Other'.⁴⁰

Spiritual insight thus begins where the subject's *own* thinking ends, through an ascetic dis-propriation of himself that is simultaneously a liberation in the infinite transcendence of the altogether Other, an 'silent illumination in which the Other seizes and captures him, enrolls or enlists him, determines his place and name, and subjects him to the treasure he was seeking, and which found him'.⁴¹ I am no longer, in short, the subject or author of my own thought, and

it is not me who progresses, but God who makes me progress, insofar as I abolish myself as me The sole path that is open to me, that might allow me to render myself worthy of contemplation, is to empty myself of all thought of my own, all thought that is proper to myself [*me vider de toute pensée propre*]: in the absolute silence of the intellect which, by deserting itself, has finally regained, outside itself, its true nature, God can come to imprint, as he originally did, His contemplation.⁴²

Spiritual contemplation is liberation from desire, finitude and mortality, and it proceeds through absolute submission to an infinite master. To rebel against the limits of this world, and against the grain of its historical development, may yet 'succeed', according to this logic, if it is willing to submit to the will of a master who transcends this world altogether.

III

La Vérité (1993), no doubt Lardreau's most systematic and substantial philosophical work, is far from a simple abnegation of his earlier voluntarism. As one of its chapter titles confirms, the book adheres both to the old slogan '*on a raison de se révolter*', and to the old dualism: 'there are people who submit; there are people who revolt' (LV, 250).⁴³ It is now taken as self-evident that 'History, as the place where Reason waited for the highest good to be realised, has failed', but Lardreau insists that this should not be interpreted as renegation of revolt as such. 'Far from this meaning that we must renounce the revolt that was summoned by historical illusion, the only idea that is rendered invalid is the idea that revolt might one day find an end: my thesis does not serve to restrict rebellion, but to generalise it.'⁴⁴ In a late text Lardreau evokes with some sympathy the month-long '*insurrection des banlieues*' in France in the autumn of 2005 as an example of the sort of revolt he can still affirm – a revolt without specific demands to pursue or specific projects to implement, apart from a single insistence, an 'empty' claim made on a pure idea in the most Kantian sense: a demand for 'respect' as such (FD, 158).⁴⁵

If in *La Vérité* the abiding question persists, 'is there freedom, or not?' (LV, 263n.10), what sets it apart, however, from *L'Ange* and *Singe* is the strictly negative configuration of its 'superaffirmative' answer. Lardreau's later philosophy is negative in the same sense as apophatic theology, which provides him with his paradigm. If truth is divine and transcends our finite means of expression, then 'we can say nothing true except the negative – or again: every affirmative proposition is a fantasy, is the truth can only exist in relation to the soul as an event, i.e. as something purely unrepeatable'.⁴⁶ Or in more Lacanian

terms, 'every form of intelligibility stumbles upon a remainder, a left-over, which interrupts its closure. This remainder is the real itself', which persists as 'that which can neither be said or understood.'⁴⁷ Forever lost behind the 'wall of words', this ungraspable real 'tolerates only oblique statements' that evoke its absence. In this context the proper function of fiction, for instance, is not to create imaginary realities that we might 'possess', but rather to indicate the cruel limit of all imagination, to dramatise the irreducible disjunction between discourse and world, and to allow for the experience of 'an object of which no image might form.'⁴⁸ The Greek origins of philosophy itself, Lardreau argues, suggest that it stems from a negative relation with the discourses that pre-existed it, those of the *physikoi*, and then of the sophists; philosophy will distinguish itself, then, by its *lack* of any distinctive object or concern, and thus its lack of any positive relation with 'truth' [*la vérité*].⁴⁹ In ways that are somewhat comparable with Adorno's later writings, a philosopher is mainly recognisable here on account of a critical opposition to a prevailing 'positive' dogma, e.g. to social convention, revealed religion, political expediency, the 'common sense' of self-preservation through adaptation to the status quo. The Dreyfusards, to evoke an example that Lardreau cites in 1998, did not stake their position so much on the demonstrable 'truth' of Dreyfus' innocence as on their quasi-instinctive opposition to the socio-military establishment that condemns him.⁵⁰

A negative conception of liberty, along these lines, will be one that affirms a right to rebel against its every encroachment or oppression (and thereby one that implies the transcendental certainty of our freedom), but as far as actual practice is concerned, it will affirm only a freedom to rebel *against* oppression, and not one that might further become capable of taking the positive steps needed to overcome it, or to establish a more just social order, or to accomplish any particular political goal. Every time rebellions have acquired 'the opportunity to deploy their power, and actually annihilate the regime they objected to', so as then to undertake the task of remaking society, the result in each case has been 'a horror beyond words' (LV, 240). By thus severing the link between a wholly

‘supersensible’ freedom and any worldly practice of emancipation, Lardreau conflates will and wish while at the same time eliminating any practical basis for hope.

This conception of ‘negative liberty’ is itself part of a fully systematic or ‘symphonic’ negative philosophy, again organised along broadly Kantian lines. The alternative approach, which Lardreau rejects, would be one that (following Aristotle for instance) starts out from positively given objects or situations, such that our various interests are more or less directly determined by these objects, e.g. our interest in understanding the natural world, in organising our collective life, in caring for our soul, and so on. If a positive philosophy seeks to establish the truth [vérité] of what it can know or experience, a negative philosophy will privilege the ‘véracité’ of a real beyond experience and beyond our capacity to represent or reconstruct the logic and tendencies that shape our experience. Here as everywhere, Lardreau’s target is any ‘philosophy of life, of fullness, of necessity’,⁵¹ including ‘the party of Hegel and of Marx, the party which refuses that there might be, between what is and what should be, between the real and the rational, any gap at all.’⁵² Between the negative assertion that ‘nothing is all [*rien n’est tout*]’ and the positive affirmation of an ‘absolute immanence’ that might sustain and reconcile all realities, there is only the stark opposition of a *prise de parti*.⁵³ Against his Aristotelian, Hegelian, Marxian, and also Deleuzian adversaries, the ‘constitutional’ approach that Lardreau adopts from Kant and Lacan is instead organised around what falls outside its grasp, and that is thus ‘constitutionally’ free from access or interference.

This remains a ‘materialist’ approach, Lardreau will insist, insofar as it rejects any spiritualist or vitalist alignment within some deeper form of reality, and transcends any enclosure within an immanent ontology. To be a negative materialist is to recognise that

everything cannot be reduced to what we think, and matter signifies the limit or stumbling block that, whatever its progress, mind [*l’esprit*] cannot move beyond, for it does not amount merely to an ordinary insufficiency [of mind or thought] but rather informs the law of its activity A materialist philosophy will

be one that represents to thought, as the last instance or highest authority, the irrepresentable, that is, that which sides with the Real.⁵⁴

The French Counter-Revolution of the 1790s, for instance, qualifies as eminently ‘materialist’ in this peculiar sense, insofar as its critique of the Terror, of its logic and its consequences, rests in the end, says Lardreau, on the ‘brute sensory recognition’ of spilt blood – the fact that ‘*this*, this that I see, and smell, *this* is blood ...’ (FD, 25) – an acknowledgement of blood as *réel*, compounded with reverence for its sacrificial quality. Inspired by Lady Macbeth, the late Lardreau maintains that ‘no trace of blood can be erased’ (FD, 105).

It also remains a *rationalist* approach, in keeping with the axiom that equates reason and revolt, insofar as it presumes that each distinct interest of reason constitutes or ‘produces the reality it is interested in, while also letting fall away a real [*un réel*]’ that eludes it (LV, 211): reason is always ‘interested in something other than that which, since it institutes it, it can know’ (LV, 220). Theoretical reason is concerned with understanding the laws that regulate the way things appear in the world we perceive and experience, but recognises that the world thus constituted is not ‘whole’ or not-all (the subject is never simply a part of the empirical world, and is unable to constitute every aspect of that world), and that there is a real or noumenal dimension that falls outside the domain of appearance.⁵⁵ Practical reason, by contrast, can access this noumenal freedom by indicating its own ‘suprasensible’ vocation, but only at the cost of neglecting the sensible, singular character of any particular individual (LV, 244).

More specifically, practical reason or freedom is here subject to at least three sorts of negative limitation. It is limited, first of all, to a strictly private or individual sphere. Collective power and sovereign force rely in the end on the more or less intelligent ‘exercise of violence, be it that of the prince or the rebel.’ Power remains a matter of positive capacity by definition, one that can make possible that which has hitherto seemed impossible (LV, 222). Whether it be long established or in the throes of revolutionary change, society privileges what it takes to be the collective good over individual dissent, and society as such al-

ways tends to ‘stifle’ the unique idiosyncrasies of an individual, in favour of a ‘particular group’ or class and its shared priorities. The more it affirms a generalised will, precisely, the more a social group tends toward what appears as the totalitarian horizon of every social formation, or what Lardreau derides here as ‘society-without-toilets [la *société-sans-chiottes*], in which the subject will never find any *obscene* recess where surveillance ceases, and where he can enjoy his singular difference.’⁵⁶



Against this logic of collective conformism, Lardreau concludes that the only subject who can affirm the principle ‘*on a toujours raison de se révolter*’ must be the individual *sensu stricto*. On the one hand, individuals not only have no social power, they also have no social *reality*, since the abstract category of ‘an individual’ corresponds to no actual, social-determinate person. The individual as such falls out of the socially constituted world, and for that very reason may evoke the dimension of the *real* (LV, 220).⁵⁷ The individual is thus the only subject who can uphold the moral law, which itself testifies to the real or noumenal dimension *par excellence*, i.e. to a freedom that we can never positively experience or know. The moral law runs counter to established social interests or realities as a matter of course, precisely because it commands us to

act in ways that might be affirmed, indifferently and universally, by *all* individuals, always and everywhere, regardless of their social position or capacity, as effectively ‘interchangeable’.⁵⁸ Only a universal law or right can honour every individual assertion of singularity. On the other hand, the individual is also the only subject who is existentially concerned with his or her *own* happiness or suffering. Again inverting the priorities of *Singe*, Lardreau now affirms a properly ‘pathological’ duty, ‘a duty to make *oneself* happy’, in neo-Epicurean pursuit of a ‘*private happiness* [le bonheur *privé*]’ (LV, 197, 202).

In this fully privatised domain our ethical choices, in short, can no longer be justified through reference to any actually-ongoing historical project or political goal, and must instead proceed ‘in the absence of any project on a world scale’, ‘in the absence of any plan or intention that is not emphatically selfish [*égoïste*]’ (LV, 201). It follows that rebellion is only as legitimate as its object is evanescent and its subject isolated, such that ‘the most pure revolts will not at all be those that boast the most “sublime” ambitions, and that signal a radical will to “change the world”, but on the contrary, those that lower themselves to the slightest objects, the most humble and most transparent things’ (LV, 249).

Freedom is further limited, in the second place, by the fact that its exercise, or existence, can only be presupposed (in keeping with the argument of Kant’s second *Critique*) through the experience of pure commandment or law. What sustains a ‘negative politics’ is solely its capacity to interrupt any proposal that might violate the moral law and the rights that follow from that law: human rights are only worthy of veneration since they condemn, without any concern for context or content, any project that might treat some individuals as means to a positive, socially determined end.⁵⁹ ‘The notion of right’ is precisely that ‘pure idea of a form, without any empirical content’ (LV, 213; cf. LM, 43) which forecloses any such project. Grounded solely in the ‘pure universality of the law,’ free from all natural or historical determination, human rights now ‘represent, with regard to politics, what is ethically impermissible.’⁶⁰

In defending this wholly formal conception of moral obligation, Lardreau’s position is indeed, as

he describes it, 'more Kantian than Kant's own' (LV, 150), and he rallies behind Kant at precisely that point where he has most often been attacked, by Hegel and so many of those who have followed Hegel. Lardreau's negative formalism allows him to respond to Hegel's critique of Kant's abstraction and universalism by interpreting indifference to pragmatic content and socio-historical actuality as a virtue rather than a defect. What sustains the moral law is precisely the fact that it must be postulated, in the most radically abstract sense, as a pure norm that can for that very reason apply to any individual and every situation.⁶¹ Hegel is quite right to claim that Kant has no interest in social reality or actuality – but this is precisely because Kant's sole concern is with the supra-social and supra-sensible 'real' of absolute self-legislation, whose every commandment is immediately 'concrete' in the sense that it applies unequivocally to every individual, in every situation. From Lardreau's 'desiccated' Kantian perspective, it is rather Hegel's position that is abstract, and suspect, since it allows for the suspension of moral criteria in deference to an apparent 'meaning or direction of History' that Hegel presumes rather than proves. Hegel avoids the *real* of moral duty, in short, because he aligns himself with and acquiesces to an imaginary 'reality' of socio-historical progress, which is itself nothing more than the retrospective rationalisation of our actually-established order (LV, 169). If Hegel's subjects are situated according to time, place and the specific cultural resources of their 'ethical life', Lardreau's neo-Kantian 'subject is only practical on condition that he see himself *as if he was himself the law*', the law that transcends every situation. Strictly speaking, 'there is no other *subject* than the law as such' (LV, 183), whose commands apply in the same way across all situations.

In the third and most fundamental place, then, again in line with this affirmation of Kant over Hegel, freedom is both limited and absolutised here by its isolation from the dimension of actuality altogether. Lardreau's freedom is properly nothing other than a freedom to posit ourselves as free from reality or actuality *tout court*, in an affirmation that is absolute and unconditional as it is negative and empty. Of such a pure postulation, 'nothing can be predicated,

since it can only be represented as the power to begin absolutely, as freedom' (LV, 153).⁶² This neo-Kantian approach enables Lardreau to salvage his notion of freedom from both psychological and historical compromises. Understood as a *positive* or natural capacity, for instance as a primordial spontaneity or anarchic appetite, freedom can only be understood as in tension with itself, whereby (as with Plato, or Freud) one part of the psyche must strive to command the other. By contrast, if following Lardreau's Kant we conceive of freedom from the negative experience of commandment and obligation alone, then we can stabilise the ground of freedom in the sole dimension of practical reason – albeit at the cost of confining it to this one dimension.

The same logic allows Lardreau to retain a sublime or 'angelic' conception of politics, by confining it to the vanishing present of a pure refusal or rejection of what is actually established. The angel now figures what can be presented or embodied of our unrepresentable, disembodied freedom, our 'real' noumenal freedom from all embodied desire, all difference, all inequalities, our 'death to the world' (LV, 240–41). As soon as we try to turn this 'real' into the basis of an actually-existing 'reality', however, the angel becomes a figure of death pure and simple, a barbarian figure of absolute lawlessness or crime. In keeping with the Lacanian distinction of *le réel* and *la réalité* (whereby the latter is an imaginary social construct, sustained through collective delusion and conformism), Lardreau classifies this barbarian angel as 'the Angel of imaginisation': exemplified by Stalinist totalitarianism, it incarnates the pitiless determination to make an egalitarian mirage the basis of a new social reality. Through such 'imaginisation of rebellion', 'rebellion abandons the negativity that lent it its power, and is impregnated with a full positivity, and grows into the wish to become, itself, the new state.'⁶³

In a late twist to his angelic typology, Lardreau gives the name 'cannibal angel' to the figure that might seek, refusing all imaginary *réalisation*, to refer us back to the Lacano-Kantian dimension of a 'real beyond reality'. This cannibal angel of *réellisation* incarnates

the will to bring every world back to the chaos that is

its truth, to bring every community back to its essential dispersal, to dissolve every tie [*lien*], beginning with that tie by which a body is a body. The background against which this Angel detaches the liberation of the subject from any relation of authority is nothing other than the ruin of relation in general. Like the Terror as described by Hegel, its politics is a politics of absolute freedom, that is to say, of death. And since, when all is said and done, this Angel will associate only with these dismembered bodies, I will call it the *Cannibal Angel*.⁶⁴

Whereas the barbaric imaginary relates the will to its realisation and deludes its subjects with the ‘positivity of a *content*’ (the promise of a new social order), the cannibal angel preserves the integrity of the real as such, precisely by absolving it from any sort of positivity, realisation, or relation. After initially associating the Khmer Rouge and the Cultural Revolution with the barbarian imaginary,⁶⁵ in his last political writings Lardreau classifies them instead under this other, more ‘complicated’ though no less destructive form of ‘abjection’, ‘that by which negativity, far from renouncing itself, goes right to the very limit of itself.’ The Khmer ultimately deserve to be recognised as a subject of *réellisation* rather than *réalisation* insofar as they were driven less by the ambition to constitute a new imaginary society than by the deathly determination simply to ‘destroy their people, which is to say themselves.’⁶⁶ In less extreme forms, Lardreau suggests that the cannibal figure may at least be compatible with a minimal sense of self-preservation and indeed self-love. Thus understood in its most ‘affirmative’ sense, so to speak, ‘the Cannibal Angel does not “delude” [*ne “leurre” pas*] ... it liberates negation from any determinacy to which it might be applied’ and its mode of subjectivation offers no ‘prognostic, therapeutic, or practical value’, other than a recognition that what is thus liberated from relation and imaginary relations remains a *real individual*, an individual with the ‘pathological duty’ to look after itself.⁶⁷

If we are to avoid social catastrophe, then, Lardreau insists that freedom must remain a pure end in itself, absolved of any means that might realise it and of any relation to an obstacle that might thwart it. The only way to uphold our unconditional duty to rebel against any and every infringement upon our freedom is to restrain our very desire to destroy the

cause of such infringement (LV, 243). Revolt is only justified if it is *for* nothing, or next to nothing – ‘*for two pennies*’ (LV, 249), or for a mere acknowledgement of ‘respect’ (FD, 158). Even a Christian restraint from confronting the injustices of this world is here not restrained enough, if it simply defers the advent of justice to *another* world (LV, 247). In Kantian terms, what Lardreau affirms is a conception of duty purged of any assurance – an assurance on which Kant himself so often insists – that we are actually capable of carrying it out. To the extent that will (as distinct from wish) is a matter of capacity and realisation, this is duty severed even from the will to follow it.⁶⁸ One and the same duty both commands us to continue in the old project of revolt, and to despair of ever carrying it out.

IV

Lardreau’s ultimate position doesn’t simply equate an absolute but wholly abstracted conception of revolt with resigned acceptance of the status quo. In his last writings, he seeks to inject such acceptance with a sort of exaltation of its own, as if a sufficiently radical and unquestioning submission might now itself retain some of the ascetic self-denying and self-overcoming qualities he earlier associated with Maoism and Syriac discipline. Some of the main points of reference here might seem to be as far removed from his early invocations of Rousseau and Mao as can be imagined: the far-right nationalism of Charles Maurras and Action Française (albeit one qualified by a passing appreciation for Blanqui and the Communards of 1871), combined with a fascination for the ultra-Catholic and ultra-royalist partisans of the French Counter-Revolution.⁶⁹ The concision and syntactical contortions characteristic of Lardreau’s later writing are even more extreme in his last fragments, but as always he strives to find continuity beneath apparent contraries. The anti-authoritarian inflection of his early Maoism, he now readily admits, was itself always compatible with unquestioning reverence for another conception of mastery, one in which reverential obedience and radical emancipation from oneself are opposite sides of the same coin.

In keeping with the whole philosophical tradition,

always, I have taken as my maxim the crude slogan of liberation: *sapere aude* – dare to give yourself a master! Everything else is feigned freedom, and real slavery: in my youth, to be anti-authoritarian meant being prepared to shout ‘Long live President Mao! Only cretins saw in this a demand for submission (FD, 120).

And he adds, in his increasingly provocative style, that today ‘I persevere in saying: long live comrade Stalin, long live President Mao, may they live, with the Virgin Mary, for ten thousand years!’ (FD, 120). The path that began with the opposition of master and rebel has come full circle.

It’s precisely the mass veneration that can surround a figure like Mary, or the saints, or a pope (FD, 71–76), that lends Catholicism its trans-historical ‘grandeur’, and allows it to persist as an enduring framework for popular unity, and to preserve the integrity of popular traditions. The greatness of Catholicism seems to rest precisely in the transcendent aura with which it invests the figures it reveres. The Reformation, by contrast, stands condemned precisely for its rejection of all aura, reverence and mastery, and for its reckless assertion of freedom from transcendent authority – a merely selfish and self-centred freedom that can only turn subjects against themselves, as they try to devise substitute forms of self-mastery or autonomy that divide body from mind, and desire from conscience. Catholicism engineers more or less ‘blind’ forms of mass unanimity, and the more instinctive or ‘involuntary’ its reflexes the more immediately they operate, and the more profoundly they resonate; Protestantism, by contrast, begins and ends with all too deliberate schisms. Lardreau is now perfectly ready to accept that ‘the Inquisition is the truth of Catholicism’, and seems willing to embrace it as an acceptable price to pay for maintaining a collective faith; on the other hand, ‘this or that imbecile sect – Mormons, Christian Scientists, Pentecostals [etc...] – are the truth of Protestantism, which only exists in the form of sects’ (FD, 121). As for the fading figure of revolution, it appears from a counter-revolutionary perspective as little more than a wilful, infantile defiance of genuinely ingrained authority – or citing Bonald, ‘the revolution is “the badly raised child elevated to the highest level of power”’ (FD, 136).

It’s hard to imagine how Lardreau might have pushed his ‘dialectic of the will’ any further along the road of absolute negation. In the process, and leaving aside the intrinsic interest of such a properly idiosyncratic and intransigent philosophical project, Lardreau provides a striking and suitably negative lesson for anyone still interested in the concept and practice of political will. The more we absolutise the will, the more we isolate volition from the domain of actuality, the more we empty it of all those qualities and capacities that enable its exercise.

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Notes

1. This article is a relatively direct continuation of a previous piece on Guy Lardreau, called ‘Reason and Revolt: Guy Lardreau’s Early Voluntarism and its Limits’, published in *Radical Philosophy* 190 (March 2015), 13–24, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/reason-and-revolt>.
2. Guy Lardreau, *Faces de l’Ange déchu* (Paris: Le Centurion, 2018), 52, 182; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author’s own. Subsequent references to *Faces de l’Ange déchu* are given in the text using the abbreviation FD.
3. ‘Good social institutions’, Rousseau argues, ‘are those that best know how to denature man, ... to transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity’ (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, in his *Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1959–1995], IV, 249). ‘Good socialisation’ thus effects the ‘most remarkable change in man by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked’, leaving him with ‘his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul elevated ...’ (Rousseau, *Du Contrat social* 1: 8, *Œuvres complètes* III, 364). For Lardreau’s early and emphatic affirmation of Rousseau, see in particular *Le Singe d’or: essai sur le concept d’étape du marxisme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1973), 195–215.
4. Guy Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’, trans. Peter Hallward, *Angelaki* 8:2 (2003), 90; FD, 14.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4:393 (references to Kant are to the standard pagination of the German Akademie edition).
6. Lardreau, ‘The Problem of Great Politics’, 90.
7. Cf. Alain Badiou, ‘Roads to Renegacy’, *New Left Review* II:52 (September 2008).

8. Lardreau, *Le Singe d'or*, 89; cf. 122–24.
9. In what follows, I use the following abbreviations within the text for references to these books: LA: *L'Ange. Ontologie de la révolution, tome 1: pour une cynégétique du semblant* (Paris: Grasset, 1976); LM: *Le Monde, Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que les droits de l'homme?* (Paris: Grasset, 1978); LV: *La Vérité: essai d'une philosophie négative* (Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 1993). All translations are the author's own.
10. The same distribution of roles will allow Lardreau, later on, sharply to distinguish Foucault (who began as a communist and who remained a reader of Marx, a critic of 'progrèsisme' and of the parliamentary 'left', and who 'always embraced the point of view of the oppressed, of the rebels'), from Deleuze ('who, since he was late to wake up from the political indifference that academic study nurtures, since he was never a practising Marxist, conclude that one had to be "gauchiste" or "on the left" as a matter of course, in keeping with the 'soft rebellion' of the Mitterrandistes), Guy Lardreau, *L'Exercice différé de la philosophie: à l'occasion de Deleuze* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1999), 11, 84.
11. Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', *Magazine littéraire* 112–113 (May 1976), 56.
12. Even so severe a critic of Lardreau and Jambet as Alain Badiou acknowledged, in his review of *L'Ange*, that unlike 'so many of their former comrades', they refuse to 'falsify the force and novelty' of the Cultural Revolution and May '68. See Alain Badiou, 'Un Ange est passé', *La Situation actuelle sur le front philosophique* (Paris: Maspero, 1977), 66.
13. LA, 10, 91. Lardreau was always careful to distance himself from *la nouvelle philosophie* as an apparently 'collective' project, and still more as a media phenomenon (cf. Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, 'Une dernière fois, contre la "nouvelle philosophie"', *La Nef* 66 [January 1978], 35–40). It is hard to see how Lardreau's work in particular might be vulnerable to the main objection posed by Deleuze and other critics of the new philosophers, that they represent 'the submission of all thought to the media'. See Gilles Deleuze, 'À propos des nouveaux philosophes et d'un problème plus général', *Deux Régimes de fous et autres textes [1975-1995]*, ed. David Lapoujade (Paris: Minit, 2003), 134; cf. Dominique Lecourt, *Dissidence ou révolution?* (Paris: Maspero, 1978); François Aubral and Xavier Delcourt, *Contre la nouvelle philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). Lardreau always protested against any interpretation of *L'Ange* as some sort of renegation or *retournement* (see Jean Birnbaum, 'Quand un absolu chasse l'autre', *Le Monde*, 28 avril 2008). Nevertheless, Bernard Henri-Lévy may still be entitled to see *L'Ange* as 'the real inspiration' for what he dubbed *la nouvelle philosophie*, insofar as he defines its first principle precisely as 'historical pessimism', i.e. 'the refusal of Providentialism and of the idea that History has a meaning or direction [sens]'. See Lévy, interview with Yorgos Archimandritis, 'BHMazzino' (November 2010), accessed 30 October 2018, <http://www.bernard-henri-levy.com/bernard-henri-levy-et-michel-houellebecq-a-athenes-suite-11858.html>
14. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', 55.
15. Lardreau, *Le Singe d'or*, 229.
16. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', 57.
17. 'We do not shy away from admitting it: we used to be Stalinists because we used to be political', and Lardreau's break with Stalinism, as he describes it in 1976, coincides with his renunciation of politics and of all *militantisme* (Lardreau and Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', 57).
18. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', 55.
19. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII: L'Envers de la Psychanalyse [1969-70]*. : Seuil: 1991, 239; cf. Guy Lardreau, 'Un Paradoxe pratique: conférence prononcée à Lagrasse en août 1997' (unpublished; references are to the French typescript), 21.
20. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Entretien avec Hertzog', 55; cf. LM, 107.
21. Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, 'À propos du Cambodge' [originally published in Italian under the title 'A proposito della Cambogia', in *Spirali* (Janvier 1979), 25–27; references are to the French typescript], 1; cf. LM, 191–92.
22. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Une dernière fois, contre la "nouvelle philosophie"', 36–37.
23. Lardreau and Jambet, 'À propos du Cambodge', 2.
24. Lardreau and Jambet, 'Une dernière fois, contre la "nouvelle philosophie"', 40.
25. Guy Lardreau, 'Ne pas céder sur la pensée', *Le Débat* (September 1980), 45. Deleuze rephrased Lardreau's point more scornfully: 'This is also why the thinking Subject returns to the philosophical stage, since the only possibility of revolution, for the new philosophers, is the pure act of the thinker who thinks it to be impossible' (Deleuze, 'À propos des nouveaux philosophes', 131–2).
26. Alberto Toscano, 'Mao and Manichaeism: An Episode in the Politics of Purity', *Parallax* 17:2 (2011), 51.
27. Cf. Lardreau and Jambet, 'À propos du Cambodge' [1979], 3.
28. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AK 5:29. 'A free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same' (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 4:447).
29. Kant, *Groundwork*, AK 4:433.
30. Lardreau, 'Un Paradoxe pratique' (1997), 13.
31. Guy Lardreau, 'Habent sua fata', *Filozofski Vestnik* 16:2 (1995) [references are to the French typescript], 4–5.
32. 'Unless pure willing', Heidegger continues, 'as the genuinely actual of all ethical action, actually wills itself, a material table of values however finely structured and comprehensive remains a pure phantom with no binding force. This willing of itself is ... what is most concrete in the lawfulness of ethical action. The ethicality of action does not consist in realising so-called values, but in the actual willing to take responsibility, in the decision to exist within this responsibility' (Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom* [1930], trans. Ted Sadler [London: Continuum, 2002], 193).
33. See, for instance, LM, 40; LV, 211; *L'Exercice différé de la philosophie*, 80–81; *Vive le matérialisme!* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001), 27.
34. Lardreau, 'Ne pas céder sur la pensée' (1980), 42.
35. Guy Lardreau, *Discours philosophique et discours spirituel: autour de la philosophie spirituelle de Philoxène de Mabboug*

(Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), 75.

36. Guy Lardreau, *Dialogues avec Georges Duby* (Paris: Les Dialogues des petits Platons, 2013), 79.

37. *Ibid.*, 76-7.

38. Lardreau, *Discours philosophique et discours spiritual*, 138. As Mao put it in a formulation retained in the little red book, 'the masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant, and without this understanding, it is impossible to acquire even the most rudimentary knowledge' (Mao Zedong, 'Preface and Postscript to Rural Surveys' [1941], *Selected Works* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1944-], III, 12).

39. Lardreau, *Discours philosophique et discours spiritual*, 119.

40. *Ibid.*, 140.

41. *Ibid.*, 132.

42. *Ibid.*, 139.

43. Lardreau, *L'Exercice différé de la philosophie*, 11.

44. Guy Lardreau, 'Sur le bonheur' [unpublished], summer 1993, 1, accessed 30 October 2018, http://lesingedor.fr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Sur_le_bonheur_Guy_Lardreau_1993.pdf

45. Lardreau also continues, incidentally, to affirm Gauche Prolétarienne as 'the only Maoist organisation that ever counted', but it counts, now, precisely because when it came to making a choice between pursuing the realisation of its actual political aims on the one hand and self-dissolution on the other, it concluded that only the latter course was consistent with a sustainable practice of revolt. Lardreau summarises its trajectory in a formulation that compresses much of the elusive logic of his own later work: Gauche Prolétarienne was a vanishing political moment, it was 'that instantaneous cut in which Veracity briefly exposed itself in a place in which it does not belong; it was, in the strongest sense of the word, discretion itself: an instant, of the kind in which animals fall silent, and an Angel passes' (LV, 273n.45; cf. 239-40).

46. Lardreau, *Discours philosophique et discours spiritual*, 133.

47. Guy Lardreau, *Fictions philosophiques et science-fiction* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1988), 271-2; cf. LA, 36.

48. Lardreau, *Fictions philosophiques et science-fiction* 145; 45-6.

49. Lardreau, 'Travail et paresse de la vérité' (1998), accessed 14 February 2014, <http://www.editions-verdier.fr/banquet/n44/travail1.htm>

50. 'I say without hesitation that whether Dreyfus was guilty or innocent was of no importance I do not know if Dreyfus was right; I know that his adversaries were wrong' (Lardreau, 'Travail et paresse de la vérité' [1998]).

51. LV, 260n.7; cf. LA, 217; *L'Exercice différé de la philosophie*, 47, 85.

52. Lardreau, 'Habent sua fata' (1995), 5.

53. Lardreau, *Vive le matérialisme!*, 27-28.

54. The French is typical of Lardreau's style, and reads: 'tout ne se ramène à ce que l'on pense, matière signifiant la butée que, quel que soit son progrès, l'esprit ne lève, parce qu'elle

ne se résume pas à une insuffisance ordinaire, mais donne la loi de son activité, qui devant soi incessamment la construit. ... *Matérialiste* sera une philosophie qui représente à la pensée, au titre de dernière instance, l'irreprésentable, soit, qui prend le parti du Réel' (*L'Exercice différé de la philosophie*, 80-81; cf. *Vive le matérialisme!*, 27). Again, 'matter is that which refuses representation; that which cannot be imagined, or symbolised. ... It is not matter than engenders materialism, but materialism that allows matter to exist', i.e. to be posited as existent (*Vive le matérialisme!*, 22-23).

55. As far as theoretical reason is concerned, what can be known of the free or 'real subject' is simply that it must be 'non-constituent and non-constituted' (LV, 51), i.e. independent of the operations whereby, along conventional Kantian lines, the constituent subject orders its world: it endures in an excess in which any actual (constituted) subject counts for nothing, in which collapse all distinctions between matter and form, between the one and the multiple, between God and his creation (46).

56. Guy Lardreau, 'L'Universel et la différence', *La Nef*, Nouvelle série 4 (1981), 86; cf. LM, 24.

57. Lardreau, 'L'Universel et la différence', 84.

58. LM, 11, 83; cf. Lardreau, 'L'Universel et la différence', 78.

59. Cf. LV, 211; Lardreau, 'L'Universel et la différence', 79.

60. Lardreau, 'L'Universel et la différence', 85.

61. *Ibid.*, 80.

62. There are some striking parallels between Laruelle's position here and that of his under-appreciated contemporary Françoise Proust's equally Kantian emphasis on freedom as pure beginning (without actual follow-through or consequence). See in particular Françoise Proust, *Kant: Le Ton de l'histoire* (Paris: Payot, 1991), 14-17 and *passim*.

63. Lardreau, 'Un Paradoxe pratique', 20.

64. Lardreau, 'The Problem of Great Politics', 92-93; cf. FD, 66-67.

65. LM, 19-20, 278-80; see in particular Christian Jambet, 'La Volonté de pureté et l'ange barbare', in LM, 175-223.

66. Lardreau, 'Un Paradoxe pratique', 20-21.

67. Lardreau, 'The Problem of Great Politics', 93; cf. LV, 195-202.

68. As Badiou summarises, Lardreau's argument here commits him to an 'abstract opposition: either politics wants to change the world, and so engages in a "final solution" - in which case it realises itself in barbarian immorality. Or else politics *wills* nothing, it is pure negation, and it is thus suited only to evanescent objects' (Badiou, 'The Imperative of Negation', in *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Bruno Bosteels [London: Verso, 2012], 304, trans. modified).

69. Late in his life, Lardreau was happy to admit to Jean Birnbaum that he considered himself 'to be a "an old follower of Maurice Barrès, or as more spiteful people might say, of [Charles] Maurras"'. See Jean Birnbaum, *Les Maocidents: Un néoconservatisme à la française* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2009), epilogue.