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The Mystery of Truth: Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin's Enlightened Mysticism

David Bates

“... what truth! and what error!”

—Goethe on Saint-Martin¹

It is hardly surprising that Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803), the *philosophe inconnu* of late Enlightenment Europe, remains almost completely unknown outside of the marginalized and exotic disciplines of esoterism, theosophy, and mysticism. Although influential in certain circles, Saint-Martin failed to penetrate the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, and what influence he did have in philosophy was largely felt outside of this period altogether, revealing itself in figures such as Maistre,² Lamartine,³ and German Romantics like Franz von Baader.⁴ In his own lifetime Saint-Martin was met with incredulity by the forces of rationalism. Voltaire was given a copy of Saint-Martin's 1775 text *Des erreurs et de la vérité* by a friend of d'Alembert. Voltaire later commented to the mathematician, “I don't believe anyone has ever printed anything more absurd,

I would like to thank the journal's readers for their suggestions and corrections; also Harvey Mitchell, Michael Geyer, Jan Goldstein, and Steven Wolfe.

¹ In a letter to Lavater on 9 April 1781, Goethe wrote: “In dem Buche *des Erreurs et de la vérité*, das ich angefangen habe, welche Wahrheit! und welche Irrthum!” Quoted in Bertram Barnes, *Goethe's Knowledge of French Literature* (Oxford, 1937), 84.

² Emile Dermenghem, *Joseph de Maistre mystique* (Paris, 1923).

³ Christian Croisille, “L'Influence de l'illuminisme dans la formation de la pensée romantique: Lamartine et Saint-Martin,” *Le Prérromantisme: Hypothèque ou hypothèse? Colloque organisé à Clermont-Ferrand...* ed. Paul Viallanieux (Paris, 1975), 450-67; and C. M. Lombard, “The influence of Saint-Martin on Lamartine,” *Modern Language Notes*, 70 (1955), 42-44.

⁴ Elme-Marie Caro, *Du mysticisme au XVIIIe siècle: essai sur la vie et la doctrine de Saint-Martin le philosophe inconnu* (1852) (Geneva, 1975); Ernst Benz, *Les sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande* (Paris, 1968), esp. 69-114.

more obscure, more crazy, and more stupid.”⁵ In the *Tableau de Paris*, Mercier described Saint-Martin and his martinist followers as a sect which turned its back on the paths opened up by sound physics, chemistry, and all natural history in order “to run headlong into an invisible world only they perceived.” Saint-Martin taught that the objects we see around us are only “fantastic and deceptive images” and that the truth lies precisely where we cannot see it, Mercier explained. “Physical experiences,” the cornerstone of the dominant sensationalist doctrine, were for the martinists only “errors,” an “eternal source of folly and deception,” wrote Mercier.⁶ One review of Saint-Martin’s works described their effect as analogous to that of a “pyramid covered in hieroglyphs, erected by an unknown man in a public square,” in other words, completely mystifying.⁷ The revolutionary Barnave would link martinism with all the other “metaphysical follies,” which were, he believed, the result of an overly speculative tendency in eighteenth-century thought.⁸

For his part Saint-Martin rejected what he considered to be the anti-spiritual tendency of Enlightenment thought. Responding (as a mature student) to the professor Garat, one of the idéologue followers of Condillac, at the *École normale* in 1795, Saint-Martin wrote:

I always admire how you protect yourself from materialism by endorsing ... the teachings of Condillac. Although I read little, I have just gone through (very quickly, it is true) his *Essai sur les origines des connaissances humaines* and his *Traité des sensations*. Whether I have poorly grasped it, or I haven’t your secret, I have come across almost no passages which do not repel me; and, I can say, have not encountered one which attracts me. His statue, for example ... seems to be a mockery of nature... For me, each of the author’s ideas appears to be an attack against man, a veritable homicide.⁹

Mystic thought, it seems, must oppose Enlightenment. At best, mysticism during the period of Enlightenment will be seen as its “underside”¹⁰ or as the

⁵ See Voltaire to d’Alembert, 22 October 1776, letter D20361, *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (135 vols.; Banbury, Oxfordshire, 1968), CXXVII, 346. Cf. Voltaire to Louis François Armand Du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, 15 October 1776, letter D20347, *ibid.*, 334.

⁶ Louis-Sebastian Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, new ed. (1782-88) (8 vols.; Geneva, 1979), VI, 233-34.

⁷ Antoinette L. G. La M., “Compte rendu,” *Bibliothèque française*, 6 (an IX [1800]), 99-102.

⁸ Joseph Barnave, *Oeuvres*, ed. Bérenger de la Drôme (4 vols.; Paris, 1843), IV, 101-3.

⁹ Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Controverse avec Garat, précédée d’autres écrits philosophiques*, ed. Robert Amadou (Paris, 1990), 387.

¹⁰ See, e. g., the references to Saint-Martin in Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), esp. 68-69.

preparation for coming anti-Enlightenment Romantic doctrines.¹¹ Indeed, the end of the Enlightenment in France saw a marked interest in esoteric thought and a mystic sensibility.¹² However, the attempt to link mysticism and Enlightenment has almost always been a critical attempt to discover the “superstitious” core of eighteenth-century rationalist thought. In this perspective the study of mystic thought in its own terms can only have antiquarian value, for the mystic approach to truth is, it is claimed, always in the form of a secret, revealed knowledge that can never withstand disciplined analysis. Saint-Martin finds his way into history as either a footnote in large books on Romantic thinking, or as the protagonist in largely incomprehensible ones examining esoteric thought.¹³

Here, I do not want to claim that Saint-Martin should be “included” in the Enlightenment, but a sympathetic reading of this complex and commonly misunderstood thinker can, I think, help broaden our understanding of late eighteenth-century European philosophy, particularly its important (though often neglected) transcendental and theological dimensions. It is of course only within the “rationalist” readings of Enlightenment thought that the idea of an irrational or speculative dark side can be elaborated. It may be possible here to redefine the relation between the “mystery” at the heart of mysticism and the pursuit of truth that marked all Enlightenment thought; it was not simply a matter of the sensationalists rejecting metaphysics as error and the mystics rejecting the physical world as deception. The boundary was never wholly effaced, and attention to error and illusion can help elucidate eighteenth-century conceptualizations of this border zone in which humanity wanders. Error was understood to be both an obstacle and a path to a hidden and elusive truth. Saint-Martin’s very metaphors of wandering and errancy will help connect his Enlightened mysticism with the mainstream of epistemological inquiry in late eighteenth-century France.

It is important to recognize that for Saint-Martin the revelation of truth was never simply a matter of secret ritual and initiation. His earliest influences were in fact philosophical. Saint-Martin tells us that his own path began with the seventeenth-century thinker Jacques Abbadie and that he read, while a student of law, the works of Voltaire and Rousseau.¹⁴ He did, it is true, have an early

¹¹ See, e. g., Anne-Marie Amiot, “‘L’Homme de parole’ martiniste, préfiguration du poète romantique, ou: du messianisme illuministe au messianisme poétique,” *Le Prérromantisme*, 380-97; and Annie Becque, “Aux Sources occultes de l’esthétique romantique: l’imagination selon Saint-Martin,” *ibid.*, 414-24.

¹² See Auguste Viatte, *Les Sources occultes du romantisme* (2 vols.; Paris, 1965²).

¹³ For example, Arthur Edward Waite, *The Unknown Philosopher: The Life of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and the Substance of his Transcendental Doctrine* (Blauvelt, N.Y., 1970).

¹⁴ See Saint-Martin’s apologetic *Portrait historique et philosophique de M. de Saint-Martin, fait par lui-même, Oeuvres posthumes* (2 vols.; Paris, 1807); for his relationship with Abbadie, see I, 58; on Rousseau see Nicole Chaquin, “Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin et Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 3 (1971), 195ff.

association with the mystic circle associated with Martines de Pasqually, the shadowy Spanish Catholic who came to France and established a secret society called the order of the “Élus-Cohens.” Saint-Martin had abandoned the study of law for an army commission in Bordeaux, where he encountered the order and was admitted in the fall of 1768. Leaving the army to become Pasqually’s secretary in 1771, Saint-Martin was fully immersed in the martinist¹⁵ reworking of Judeo-Christian thought, encapsulated in Pasqually’s one surviving text, the *Traité de la réintégration des êtres* (1771).¹⁶ Yet, as he developed his own thinking, especially after the death of Pasqually in 1774 during an extended stay in Saint-Domingue, Saint-Martin moved away from the cultist traditions and became interested in the more philosophical, reflective approaches to mystical questions.¹⁷ From thinkers such as Swedenborg he learned of the intensity of the inner, intellectual mystic experience. Saint-Martin’s encounter with Jakob Boehme after 1788 was especially important in this regard. Not only did Saint-Martin incorporate some of Boehme’s ideas into his own work, he also translated the German philosopher’s books into French toward the end of his life.¹⁸ Saint-Martin shunned the ritualistic aspect of the mystic cults, especially later in his life, and tried to reach out to all mankind through his many writings.¹⁹

In his philosophical studies Saint-Martin aimed to penetrate the very relationship between human errancy and truth, the conditions that mediated the world of appearances, and the unifying totality that both encompassed and escaped it. Far from rejecting the “physical” in favor of wild and groundless metaphysical speculation, Saint-Martin explored the tension-filled relationships of experience of the manifest expressions of a “universal totality” within a corporalized and temporalized world.

Saint-Martin’s first major work was *Des Erreurs et de la vérité*, and the title already reveals this basic idea: that truth is always a unity and error the

¹⁵ While technically the term *martiniste* referred to the followers of Martines de Pasqually, it was also applied to the circle around Saint-Martin, especially after Pasqually’s death in 1774 in Saint-Domingue, though distinction between the philosophies was not great for the larger intellectual community.

¹⁶ Circulated in manuscript form in the eighteenth century, this text was published for the first time in Paris in 1899. See Gérard van Rijnberk, *Martines de Pasqually* (Paris, 1935), and Viatte, *Les Sources occultes*, I, 45ff.

¹⁷ As M. Ferraz wrote, in his *Histoire de la philosophie pendant la Révolution française (1789-1804)* (Paris, 1889), 133, “of all the celebrated mystics, [Saint-Martin] is no doubt the most reasonable ... he constantly rejects the theurgical practices by means of which the Jew Martines [de Pasqually] pretended to put himself in contact with invisible powers.”

¹⁸ See Jacob Böhme, *L’Aurore naissante, ou la racine de la philosophie, de l’astrologie et de la théologie* (2 vols.; Paris, an IX-1800), and *idem, Des trois principes de l’essence divine, ou de l’Éternel engendrement sans origine* (2 vols.; Paris, an X-1802).

¹⁹ See Benz, *Les Sources mystiques*, 69-70. Caro, in *Du mysticisme au XVIIIe siècle*, 34, writes that Saint-Martin hints in his first few works about some secret knowledge, but as his philosophy developed, his writings “carried the mark of a more personal inspiration, and of a more liberated method.”

essential characteristic of the varied realm of the multiple. The philosophy of Saint-Martin is not simply a retreat into mysticism; it confronts the human desire to flee from the mystery which is at the heart of his existence. He pictured man arriving at the threshold of truth, unable to cross but nonetheless drawn to the infinite.²⁰ “In this pitiful degradation, no longer seeing the fixed and simple qualities of unity, [man] is reduced to wandering [error] around the temple which conceals them, and to which he is denied access.”²¹ Alone among worldly beings we felt the need to account for the “phenomenon of the existence of things” and to search for the solution to the “great problem” of our own existence. Humanity senses that there must be some kind of relation between itself and the beyond, between itself and this source which our instinct naturally engages.²²

The starting point of Enlightenment epistemology was the idea that the human mind was separated from the truth. Philosophy was in fact the method which would guide us toward this elusive goal. However, the very condition of error made this journey dangerous. As d’Alembert wrote in his *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia*:

Between these two limits [of human knowledge] there is an immense distance where the Supreme Intelligence seems to have wanted to deceive human curiosity, as much by the innumerable clouds it has spread there as by some flashes of light that seem to burst out at intervals to attract us. One might compare the universe to certain works of a sublime obscurity whose authors occasionally bend down within reach of those who read them, seeking to persuade him that he understands nearly all. We are indeed fortunate if we enter this labyrinth and do not leave the true road! Otherwise, the flashes of light intended to lead us there would often serve only to lead us further from it.²³

Although for many Enlightenment thinkers reason might keep us on a straight path, the connection to this sublime truth was very complex and in the end relied on a sometimes mysterious affinity between our own sensibility and the essence of truth itself.²⁴

²⁰ *Maximes et pensées*, ed. Robert Amadou (Paris, 1963), 131: “Nothing is easier than to arrive at the door of truth. Nothing is more rare and difficult than to enter there....”

²¹ *Tableau naturel des rapports qui existent entre Dieu, l’homme et l’univers* (2 vols.; Edinburgh [Lyon], 1782), I, 125.

²² “Réflexions d’un observateur sur la question: Quelles sont les institutions les plus propre à fonder la morale d’un peuple?” (1797), *Controverse avec Garat*, 136-37.

²³ Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Discours préliminaire de l’Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1965), 36-37.

²⁴ See my “The Epistemology of Error in Late Enlightenment France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1996), 307-27, and “Idols and Insight: An Enlightenment Topography of Knowledge,” *Representations* (forthcoming, 2000).

Like so many mainstream philosophers of the Enlightenment Saint-Martin described humanity's separation from truth in spatial terms. What distinguishes his own work is the way he conceptualized the relationship between the errant human mind and the divine truth of the universe. Yet like d'Alembert, Saint-Martin believed that the foundation of any true philosophy was the recognition of essential limitation. Man, he wrote, "throws himself onto these dangerous paths which divert him forever from his true road."²⁵ Separated from the "light," how can we alone light the torch which must guide us along the paths? Clearly, truth and error were not, in Saint-Martin's mystic philosophy, simply defined in terms of access to "divine secrets." According to Saint-Martin, error was caught up with the varied and changing modes of a concrete reality expressed in space and time, a world that concealed the essential unity of all things. For Saint-Martin, though, and for most eighteenth-century philosophers, appearances must be the path to this other reality. He does not, then, advocate the rejection of "mere appearances" (an escapist mysticism), but he does underline the danger of remaining caught in this realm of these appearances, where everything is visible and control seems possible. The task was to work through the errors toward a larger truth. One of the most disconcerting situations for a traveller is to encounter two opposite roads without knowing which one leads in the right direction. Saint-Martin does not counsel inaction, nor does he advocate waiting for a divine sign. The traveller must choose; he must not refuse his "inner conviction."²⁶ In many ways Saint-Martin's ongoing task was the elucidation of this problematic, internal relationship with truth.

In *Des Erreurs et de la vérité* Saint-Martin begins with the observation that man does not seem to acknowledge the obstacles between his own perceptions and "science" (knowledge), as if he never considers the shadows created by any enlightening gaze.²⁷ The material forms of the sensible world cannot be mistaken for the principles which underlie them; the differences conceal what never changes:

it is a truth at once profound and humiliating for us, that here below differences are the only source of our knowledge [*nos connaissances*]; since if it is from here that the relations and distinctions of beings derive, these same differences conceal the knowledge [*la connaissance*] of Unity and prevent us from approaching it.²⁸

The varied forms of nature are linked by the unchanging principles which govern their appearance.²⁹ Science, for Saint-Martin, is the penetration of these

²⁵ *Des erreurs et de la vérité, ou les hommes rappelés au principe universel de la science...* (2 vols.; Edinburgh [Lyon], 1782² [1775]), I, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 1.

²⁸ *Tableau naturel*, II, 143.

²⁹ *Erreurs*, I, 74-85.

forms and the revelation of the principle, revelation in its most fundamental aspect as the manifestation of something hidden, not “direct communication from the divine.”³⁰

The forms of nature are not discrete, independent parts that can be added together to create an increasingly accurate picture of nature. Each particular form, Saint-Martin says, evoking Leibniz, exists in the world as “the extract in miniature of the universal,” and must be “the image of this universal.” Nature, writes Saint-Martin in an echo of Plotinus, is only “the inferior and altered image of unity,”³¹ the very limit at which God’s voice “dies out.”³² In Saint-Martin’s view this is the foundation of human errancy: we are immersed in the world of forms which present to us only the distorted figures of universal Being. Knowledge, then, can only be accomplished through a surpassing of the visible world into the world of principles. And yet how would this be possible when we can perceive only the deceptive products of these principles? Saint-Martin warns: “we can only ever know here collections [*assemblages*], and not the principles which assemble [*assemblent*].”³³

With some images of “distillation” or precipitation Saint-Martin opens up the possibility of insight in the midst of deception and separation. The violent clash of forms can, he implies, occasionally disentangle the heterogeneous elements which confuse and distort the direct manifestation of the principle, which always “accommodates” itself to specific circumstances.³⁴ If man, for example, continually manifests a variety of characteristics, it is possible to separate from him those “heterogenous elements with which he is mixed” and recognize “the integral principle of his being, like the perfect metals found in the midst of the most compounded amalgams.”³⁵ Often a “shock” is required to “faire sortir la vérité.” If truth is compounded with the material which concretely expresses it, it is sometimes possible to manipulate these materials so that they interact, allowing the truth “to precipitate” or “separate itself” from its material constraints.

But this will, Saint-Martin implies, always be a momentary and unpredictable insight. Ordinarily, we cannot translate from the form to the principle. We cannot travel from the “curved lines” which constitute and legislate the corporal

³⁰ *Controverse avec Garat*, 392.

³¹ *Traité des formes*, ed. Robert Amadou (Paris, 1985), 22. To my knowledge, this edition never appeared, but the proofs may be consulted at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.

³² *Maximes et pensées*, 136.

³³ *Pensées sur les sciences naturelles*, published with notes and introduction by Robert Amadou (Paris, 1982), 55.

³⁴ *Erreurs*, II, 45.

³⁵ “Discours sur la question suivante proposée par l’Académie royale des sciences et belles lettres de Prusse: Quelle est la meilleure manière de rappeler à la raison les nations, tant sauvages que policées qui sont livrées à l’erreur et aux superstitions de tout genre?” (hereafter “Berlin Discourse”), *Controverse avec Garat*, 14.

world to the perfect “straight lines” of the superior order.³⁶ The errant paths of the curved dimensions cannot be traced and mapped as the paths to knowledge.³⁷

The rather unusual doctrine of straight and curved lines leads us to one of the key aspects of Saint-Martin’s philosophy, the fallen condition of humanity. Saint-Martin’s version of the fall is not the fable of the Garden of Eden but a philosophical fall from the spiritual into the concrete. “The true serpent,” he wrote, “is the spirit which deviates [*s’écarter*] from the straight line.” Sin is essentially the first error. Man’s original dwelling space was the square, the only pure form (Saint-Martin rather cryptically claims) composed of straight lines. The circular is the beginning and end of all form, a state of confusion, and the prison of *l’esprit*.³⁸ The images of errancy link the first crime of man with the straying nature of all form; this allows Saint-Martin to describe the condition of humanity as an in-between state “above” the endless variation of the temporal and the material and yet “below” the perfection of unity and regularity. Man has strayed from the path and by the very nature of the “curve” he cannot merely retrace his steps and emerge from his predicament. More accurately, in order to retrace these steps the line from which he diverted must be found and recognized.³⁹

The doctrine of the fall is for Saint-Martin less “moralistic” than it is a way of describing the essential paradox of humanity. While it is obvious that man has an intense desire for truth and knowledge, unlike the beasts or other entities which remain within their self-enclosed worlds, this knowledge always seems to elude him. Saint-Martin suggests that it is as if he has lost something which he seeks to find again. If it is true that “[w]e are born in the infinite, we cannot form any idea of our native country,” although the desire is still within us, linking us to a higher dimension.⁴⁰ Saint-Martin explains this paradox as the result of man’s spiritual existence becoming confounded with a material one, two states of being that are “diametrically opposed” to one another; he is at once mortal and immortal, great and small, free in his intellect, but bound to the world by laws independent of himself.⁴¹

Man, it might be said, has “sublime” needs, yet is forever incapable of satisfying them, evidence of some “fatal transposition,” as the mystic “Lodoïk”

³⁶ “Instructions sur la sagesse,” *Présence de Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, textes inédites suivis des actes du colloque sur L.-C. de Saint-Martin tenus à l’Université de Tours*, ed. Robert Amadou (Tours, 1987), 98.

³⁷ *Erreurs*, II, 109, 115; “Instructions sur la sagesse,” 96-97; *Pensées sur les sciences naturelles*, 56.

³⁸ “Instructions sur la sagesse,” 97.

³⁹ *Erreurs*, II, 163-64.

⁴⁰ *Traité des formes*, 5, 10-11.

⁴¹ *Erreurs*, I, 50.

(the Comte de Divonne) once wrote.⁴² Unlike the plants and animals, which manifest their principle to a greater or lesser degree over the course of their life, man finds himself “in opposition with his principle,” which puts him in “disharmony” with the world, which leads him to illusion and lies. Spiritually without limits yet imprisoned in a perishable, transient body, humanity is in “exile” in the world, wandering in the face of appearances.⁴³ Another mystic in this same circle wrote that fallen man has been cut off from the direct light of divine knowledge and sees now only “an indirect reflection, an inferior substitute for the pure and holy light of which his crime has deprived him.”⁴⁴ Sensations arrive without will and they constantly vary, providing no real continuity, Saint-Martin observes.⁴⁵ The body is only an “obscure veil which hides the true light”; it is the source of illusion and the instrument of crime.⁴⁶ It is wrong to confuse the “corporal envelope,” then, with the thinking being trapped within. Sensation and thought are radically different, and cannot be explained in terms of each other.⁴⁷ Nor can we reach for the source of our purest being through the deformed instrument of our body. Man is a “fugitive from himself.”⁴⁸

Breaking through the opposition of “innate ideas” and the tabula rasa, Saint-Martin puts forward the idea that man is what may be called a “table rasée.” For Saint-Martin the mind is where the traces of a more perfect life still exist despite their being mixed with the accumulated (sensual) impressions of our long passage in the corporal world. The right conditions must be sought in order that these roots might spring up and flourish.⁴⁹ Specifically, Saint-Martin describes how errancy can lead to insight, which he sees as access to the universal. The possibility of “inner conviction” in the face of deception and appearance arises because man is already connected to this universal in some way; the pursuit of truth is the search for reunification, an effort at traversing the distance

⁴² Lodoïk [Comte de Divonne], *La voie de la science divine ... en trois dialogues traduits librement de l'Anglois de W. Law, précédés de la voix qui crie dans le désert* (Paris, an XIII-1805), 7. This text was heavily influenced by Saint-Martin's work, and it was addressed to the “hommes de désirs” (a reference to Saint-Martin's *L'homme de désir* [Lyon, 1790]). Divonne helped to spread the ideas associated with Saint-Martin and his circle, as one of Mme. de Staël's visitors at Coppet. See Nicole Chaquin and Stéphane Michaud, “Saint-Martin dans le Groupe de Coppet et le cercle de Frédéric Schlegel,” *Le groupe de Coppet. Actes et documents du deuxième colloque de Coppet, 10-13 juillet 1974*, ed. Simone Balayé and Jean-Daniel Candaux (Paris, 1977), 113-34.

⁴³ [Divonne], *La voie de la science divine*, 4-5.

⁴⁴ Keleph Ben Nathan [Dutoit-Mambrini], *La philosophie divine, appliquées aux lumieres naturelle, magique, astrale, surnaturelle, céleste et divine...* (3 vols.; Paris, 1793), I, 29. Divonne was instrumental in publishing this work.

⁴⁵ *Erreurs*, I, 45-46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 199.

⁴⁷ *Controverse avec Garat*, passim.

⁴⁸ Keleph Ben Nathan, *La philosophie divine*, III, 122.

⁴⁹ “Essai sur les signes et sur les idées relativement à la question de l'Institut: Déterminer l'influence des signes sur la formation des idées” (1799), *Controverse avec Garat*, 173-74.

that separates man from the divine. This distance is only recognized as a gap because in a way it still connects him by drawing him into this open space with the promise of some fulfillment of the journey.

The theological dimension of this relationship between truth and errancy is one way of describing the uneasy disjuncture between the human desire for what lies beyond the immediate and the visible and the failure to penetrate the barriers that constantly block this desire. What is desire, as Condillac had already said, but the recognition of a lack.⁵⁰ As Saint-Martin writes,

Desire results only from the separation or the distinction of two analogous substances...; and when the aphorists [*gens à maximes*] say that we cannot desire what we do not know, they give us the proof that if we desire something, it is absolutely necessary that there be a portion of this thing which we desire in ourselves, and which thus cannot be seen as being entirely unknown to us.⁵¹

Our desire for knowledge of the universal means we share that knowledge in some fragmented state, Saint-Martin suggests. The axiomatic truths of the exact sciences, for example, do not “express” a truth which reason infers; there arises an accord (*convenance*) between the intrinsic justice of these axioms and the “spark of truth which shines in our conception.” Insight and not logical order is the method that leads us to truth. With insights into the nature of the world we begin to gain some understanding, or at least feeling, for the universal source of all things, the “unknown being that we call God” as Saint-Martin puts it. The human soul elevates itself through these insights: “in the discovery of partial axioms it looks to give itself up to this total truth which dominates it...”⁵²

But if human acts are the manifestation of the divine, the individuality of these acts in the concrete world tends to obscure their divine origin. Human reason might be described as “a kind of debris and degradation of this divine light...”⁵³ Therefore if we reveal the universal in our moral activities, we are also in a sense removed from this totality by the very nature of our activities. Humanity operates within space and time, and action is in essence the particularization of the infinite, as the forms of the world are “corporalizations” of the immaterial, “temporalizations” of eternity.⁵⁴ The works of men “are nothing more than transpositions ... limiting themselves to giving things another place.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Condillac, *Traité des animaux, Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Georges LeRoy (3 vols.; Paris, 1948), I, 372b.

⁵¹ *Ministère de l'homme-esprit*, 351.

⁵² *Ecce Homo* (Paris, 1792), 3-6; *idem*, “Cahier de métaphysique,” *Controverse avec Garat*, 243-44.

⁵³ Keleph Ben Nathan, *La philosophie divine*, I, 83.

⁵⁴ “Cahier de métaphysique,” 254, and *Traité des formes*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Erreurs*, II, 241.

Thus for Saint-Martin man is in a sense a “diminished God” (*un Dieu dévêtu*),⁵⁶ who draws from the unity of the divine in his moral acts yet never attains this exalted position.⁵⁷

This is the central idea of Saint-Martin’s work: error is the condition of our being as it seeks to expiate the original crime, which is a deviation from the (straight) path of truth. As the great martinist scholar Robert Amadou comments, for Saint-Martin, “[e]very error is only transposed truth ... a perverted truth.”⁵⁸ It is this critical relationship that informs Saint-Martin’s discussion of the concrete forms of human existence: the nature of language, society, and politics which he turned to in his later writings.

In his first major book Saint-Martin denied that human languages could be simply the product of habit and convention. The diversity of these languages was no proof of their arbitrary nature. These differences, he wrote, were only “an accidental flaw, and not in its nature.”⁵⁹ For Saint-Martin, the many languages of the present were all deviations from the pure first language of man, the pure communication with the divine intelligence, a “secret” and “interior” language.⁶⁰ The origin of convention in language, he went on to argue in his next book, is the lapse into the corporal world, where communication is no longer perfect but conducted through external signs and expressions, which can only be distorted versions of the primitive signs that constituted this originary communication.⁶¹ With Rousseau, Saint-Martin rejected much of the Enlightenment speculation on the origin of language. He thought it impossible the language could be invented before the medium of language itself, that human beings could somehow create among themselves a system constructed purely through convention.⁶²

During the French Revolution, however, Saint-Martin developed a more thorough theory of language. Proscribed from the capital because of his noble status, Saint-Martin had returned to his birthplace, the town of Amboise. After the Terror he was chosen by the residents to represent them as a student (though

⁵⁶ *Lettre à un ami, ou considérations politiques, philosophiques et religieuses sur la Révolution française* (1795), *Controverse avec Garat*, 56. More crudely, man as a limited being “could be called an *excrement* of the infinite.” Keleph Ben Nathan, *La philosophie divine*, I, 352.

⁵⁷ “Cahier de métaphysique,” 254: “And these moral works, which seem the most natural to man, is to draw from the unity; it is, as it were, to *extract the sap* from his marvellous [acts]; finally to make, in the eyes of our fellows and of all the beings, a little God...”

⁵⁸ Robert Amadou, introduction to Saint-Martin, *Oeuvres majeures, Des Erreurs et de la vérité* (Hildesheim, 1975), 17.

⁵⁹ *Erreurs*, II, 230.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 194-271.

⁶¹ *Tableau naturel*, I, 64.

⁶² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (5 vols.; Paris, 1964-95), III, 151; cf. Saint-Martin, “Berlin discourse,” 19.

he was now in his fifties) at the newly opened *École normale*. Back in Paris, Saint-Martin attended the lectures given by the *Idéologue* Garat on language and the nature of mind. On 9 ventôse, an III, Saint-Martin rose to challenge Garat's "sensualist" doctrine, derived from Condillac. Their debate was subsequently published.⁶³ Saint-Martin argued here that the conceptual difficulty surrounding the origin of language proved that man had within him some kind of social and moral nature, expressed in language, an idea which he would develop further in various writings of this period.

Saint-Martin's confrontation with *idéologie* produced detailed reflections on the nature of the sign and the relationship of language and human intelligence. He studied De Gérando's massive work on signs and ideas,⁶⁴ and he worked on responses to a series of prize questions sponsored by the Class of Moral and Political Sciences, a branch of the new French National Institute of Sciences and Arts, which had been created in 1795 to replace the old *Académie Française*.⁶⁵ In 1799 Saint-Martin worked on a question that asked: "Déterminer l'influence des signes sur la formation des idées." Drawing on earlier reflections, Saint-Martin translated his own mystic philosophy into the language of *idéologue* linguistic psychology.

Saint-Martin began his 1799 essay on signs by establishing the relationship of sign and signified. The sign is in general "the representation or indication of something separated or hidden for us." The sign marks an entirely "new region" for mankind, one where material sensation and spiritual thought become one, enclosed under the same seal. The sign in effect operates for something that can no longer make its own appearance, the inner ideas of the spiritual being enclosed in a physical envelope. The idea has become detached from its native country, the "region of ideas," and must travel now through subsidiary means to reach its destination. For this reason Saint-Martin attributes desire as the radical origin of the sign: the idea lacks its own means of expression, it has lost the pure continuity of spiritual identity and must find a way through the sensible world to this higher destination. If the idea is "sovereign," the sign is its "minister," without which its power could not be effected, Saint-Martin explains.⁶⁶ Yet entering into the world of forms, the ministers of our ideas do not always find their way through to the "luminous region" that marks their true goal, for this intermediate zone is like a "mass of vapours" obscuring the pathways. The problem is that signs, being necessarily linked to the region of the sensible, have an inherent

⁶³ Their exchange was revised for publication and appeared in the third *Débats* volume of the *Séances des Écoles normales* (Paris, an IX [1801]).

⁶⁴ Joseph-Marie Degérando, *Des Signes, et de l'art de penser considéré dans leurs rapports mutuels* (4 vols.; Paris, an VIII-1800).

⁶⁵ See Martin Staum, *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Montreal, 1996).

⁶⁶ "Essai sur les signes," 176-85.

tendency to deviation and imperfection, an inevitable inclination toward errancy.⁶⁷ This errancy has taken us so far from the pure realm of ideas, Saint-Martin claims, that we almost cease to believe this region even exists.⁶⁸

The solution to this predicament for Saint-Martin lies not in the perfection of these signs, the goal of the analytic philosophers. Such a task is impossible; there is an ever-present disjuncture between the sign and the idea precisely because the sign navigates the “mixed order” and the idea can live only in the free and simple order of truth. Our mistake is to follow the twists and turns language takes in this process instead of maintaining a distance between our signs and our ideas. In the spirit of Rousseau’s essay on language, Saint-Martin says that “the more our languages have rushed into the torrent, and have become inventive in artificial ornaments, the more they have had the means to develop errors and vices in men, without providing much in the way of real sustenance for our thought.”⁶⁹ We must try to break through the everyday need for external signs, returning to the inner light of the higher order that informs our thoughts. The sentiment of this superior region can be recognized only in brief intervals of elevation, or revelation, as our ideas move us across this space of separation. The light of this region “bursts forth and occasions an affection higher than the idea itself,” which is a “tableau mixte” of light and shadow. This intervention into the sublime is the true goal of our ideas; the idea is in fact only the sign of this infinite desire, and thus participates in the inevitable failures that mark any sign.⁷⁰

In an earlier text, a response to a prize competition of the Prussian academy on the problem of releasing people from error and superstition, Saint-Martin described the activity of “true poetry” as one way of entering this sublime region, which is “complete, calm, luminous, which gives repose to all the faculties.” The poetic voice transcends the specificity of concrete objects and their signs and allows the “real language” to be felt once again, the true voice of our spiritual life to re-emerge. Originary poetry (*poésie primitive*), Saint-Martin wrote,

was worthy of its name, capable of communicating light to men and dissipating the errors which plague him, only by painting the tableaux which were of another order, whose models were not at [the poets] command, that is to say, only by retracing these sublime objects which are

⁶⁷ “Controverse avec Garat,” 413, writing that the institution of speech is the “transmission of the germ of speech,” which can be followed in its development, “save for the varieties that this development can offer in the non-thinking region where it must operate.”

⁶⁸ “Essai sur les signes,” 218-19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 232-34.

almost completely lost to us, only by initiating men into the knowledge of the laws of the supreme director....⁷¹

The poetry of tradition, then, is the continuing history of these divine announcements, these important threads, which are given to man to “guide him in the labyrinth of terrestrial life,” where he always seems to match every step forward with as many falls back again.⁷² This idea reemerges in his 1799 essay on signs. Descending into his corporal existence (the *Idéologue* project, according to Saint-Martin), man will, it is true, learn to control the natural signs, but it is only by ascending along the progression of signs (which for Saint-Martin includes ideas, the “signs” of spiritual desire) that he “will find the sublime region of the mother impression, or of the primordial desire, with the language that is proper to him.”⁷³ The progression of language moves toward reintegration with the source of all reality.

From his first major text on error and truth Saint-Martin was interested in applying his own mystic thought to concrete social and political problems. This interest only intensified during the period of the Revolution. In turning his attention to the problem of human association, Saint-Martin rejected the dominant explanations: that social order was created through the violent action of oppressors or was simply the result of a voluntary accord of some sort. As with language, Saint-Martin saw a conceptual impossibility in the idea that society is purely “natural” (relations of physical need and force) or simply a product of voluntary human formation. The theory of pure force as the foundation of order among human beings is an “atrocious,” according to Saint-Martin, while the idea that discrete individuals came together to form society spontaneously is a “chimera,” a logical impossibility, as he explained.⁷⁴

In the aftermath of Revolution, civil war, and Terror, Saint-Martin would later conclude that if we cannot find within ourselves the elements which could produce this “sublime pact” that is society, it is probable that the materials for this “vast edifice” came from beyond the “simple and reduced human order.” Therefore, for Saint-Martin, the goal of all human association can only be the very point from which it has descended, as the result of some “alteration.” The very disorders and irregularities that continually plague human society offer evidence of a higher order. “In fact, one could say that in the very disorders of his thought, man is a being who searches to regain the point from where he

⁷¹ “Berlin discourse,” 23-24.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷³ “Essai sur les signes,” 235.

⁷⁴ *Erreurs*, II, 3-11; “Berlin Discourse,” 7.

fell.”⁷⁵ If humanity was simply playing out its natural inclinations, this feeling of imperfection (not to mention the imperfection itself) would never arise. The very violence of man’s progression in the world implies that he is not where he ought to be:

it is only by violent and convulsive efforts that men go toward this elevated goal [*haut terme*], and they only climb laboriously toward this first stage of the level, an irresistible demonstration that proves they are fallen; because if they were at their natural point, we would see everything proceed smoothly and regularly....⁷⁶

It is the disjuncture between the desire for order and the inability to achieve it that marks both the separation from and the connection with the divine totality. The goal of association is thus the task of rehabilitation, an expiation aimed at reintegration. And for this reason, Saint-Martin writes, it must be inspired from above.

The individual being, Saint-Martin concludes, is not the starting point of social order but rather a product of this order. By looking at human beings as discrete entities (which they admittedly are from a material point of view) we are inevitably led to the paradox of association: individuals either give up liberty (independence) or have it forcibly taken away. The paradox disappears if, as Rousseau implied in the Second Discourse, we begin with the fact of social communion, understood as a divine gift.⁷⁷

As Saint-Martin sees it, the “general will” is the starting point for social organization, understood as the voice of this community identity. With Rousseau, he agrees that the general will “is not at all formed from the will of all.” Identity is anterior to difference, and is what allows these differences to arise and define themselves.

[N]ever will the general will form itself from particular wills; on the contrary, it is the particular wills that must form themselves from the general will, that is, ...the particular wills must conform to this general will which surely exists before the particular wills, since, according to the principles which direct this work, the general will can only be the unique source of the universal and divine thought....⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *Éclair sur l’association humaine* (Paris, 1797 [an V]), 14-22. This book was published by the Cercle Social, originally a Girondin political club and press that in 1792 published Saint-Martin’s *Ecce Homo*, alongside works by figures such as Condorcet. The links between Saint-Martin and the Cercle Social are sketchy, but see Gary Kates, *The “Cercle Social,” the Girondins, and the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1985).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité, Oeuvres complètes*, III, 207.

⁷⁸ *Éclair sur l’association humaine*, 52-53.

Interests, then, are the inevitable consequence of our material needs; yet these interests, no matter how common to various individuals, will never found a social order, since they are by definition transitory and unstable. They can only ever be the basis of “partial agglomerations.” This kind of harmony is only a harmony among objects, constructed through contingent relations, and thus cannot “link itself” with that “grande harmonie” that would provide a real stability. Integration gives way to reintegration: “Yes, the true social contract is only the adhesion of all the members of the political body to this ancient general will which is before him....”⁷⁹

The general will, then, is the voice that speaks to all men despite the variations and deviations that condition every specific social community. This is why the astounding variety of human societies throughout the world cannot be taken as evidence that no common foundation for order exists. The very ubiquity of social formation points to a fundamental origin of order. No matter how degraded the unity of any one community, it seems as if the “eternal general will” pierces the clouds with the rays of its “inalterable clarity.”⁸⁰

This has important consequences, Saint-Martin believes, for the theory of practice in human communities. The goal of human association must be the recovery of a higher unity, and therefore its guiding force cannot be drawn from the myriad of conflicting desires that exist in any community of fallen individuals. Elections, writes Saint-Martin, cannot be tolerated. They are illusory “because they encroach on regions of which man no longer has neither key nor map.” Instead of leading to a restoration of social order to its higher level, these capricious actions can only lead to its devastation. The universal wisdom, source of the “eternal general will,” alone chooses its ministers and provides them with the means to carry out their tasks. Human elections are useful only for “domestic management.” Thus for Saint-Martin all political thought is really in the end religious thought, and all government is theocracy, an idea that he would explore in greater detail in his reflections on the French Revolution.⁸¹

Unlike many other religious thinkers of the era, Saint-Martin was able to interpret the French Revolution within theological categories, while living and working at the very heart of the revolutionary torrent, even though he was of noble birth and suffered many hardships in this period. Though he became a target of suspicion during the Terror, partly because of his unorthodox writings, and partly because of his personal associations with the Duchess of Bourbon, the sister of Philippe Égalité, Saint-Martin gave money to the army to buy equipment, and this helped him to avoid prison and the guillotine. He was, like other

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 70-72, 91. See Karl Epting, “Die politische Theologie Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin’s,” *Epirrhosis: Festgabe für Carl Schmitt* (Berlin, 1968), 161-84.

nobles, stripped of certain political and financial privileges, and was forced to leave Paris in 1794. However, it seems that he was spurred to address the political challenge of the Revolution by more positive developments, specifically, his election in Amboise to the electoral assembly and his move to Paris to attend the *École normale*.

In a short book published in 1796, his *Lettre à un ami ou Considérations politiques, philosophiques et religieuses sur la Révolution française*, Saint-Martin elaborated on the political ideas outlined in some of his previous work. For Saint-Martin the Revolution was not, despite its disruptive and violently destructive character, and its anti-religious ideology, something to be fought. Writing before Joseph de Maistre's better-known *Considerations on France*, Saint-Martin saw the uprising precisely as the manifestation of divine power. The Revolution was the appearance of a new form of human organization that had broken through the ossified hierarchies and empty structures of Ancien Régime Europe. The Revolution, for Saint-Martin, was an "abbreviated image" of the Last Judgment, a "magical operation" to restore order.⁸²

In his attempt to understand this radical turn Saint-Martin looks first to the effects of revolutionary power and concludes that because it struck most forcefully the clergy and the monarchy, these classes must have had the most sins to expiate. The ministers of the divine intelligence in the human world had closed their eyes to the truth, and abused their position. Thus France becomes, through the operation of revolutionary action, the example of Europe. The king of France was in essence the king of Europe, the leader of the strongest nation in this community of nations. The Revolution that would break down the old order appeared in France precisely because France was the only nation able to defend itself against the concerted forces of Europe, Saint-Martin believed.⁸³ He saw the Revolution as a recovery of sorts; the oppressed had regained rights that were usurped over the course of the preceding eras by the various ruling classes, all with the aid of a "supernatural power."⁸⁴ The Revolution in France, then, was not accomplished through the actions and ideals of individuals or groups; it acted through the human agents that were the (chosen) people of France.

This structure is crucial for Saint-Martin's understanding of this period in European history, for he criticizes the individual leaders in the political realm while maintaining the significance of the Revolution's regenerative power. In essence the actors of the Revolution were completely insignificant or were at best conduits of revolutionary force. The enemies of revolutionary France could not see that the attacks on its leaders were not only ineffective but also advanta-

⁸² *Lettre sur la Révolution française*, 58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 58. See Nicole Chaquin, "Le Citoyen Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, théosophe révolutionnaire," *Dix-huitième siècle*, 6 (1974), 209-24.

geous to France. The Revolution could not be defeated “from above” because the elimination of any one leader meant only that a new one was thrown up to take his place. Individuals were not guiding revolutionary policy; they were “agents employed in this great work.” Europe was in the midst of a crisis, a “convulsion of expiring human powers, struggling against a new, natural and living power” that these old powers refused to recognize, to their detriment.⁸⁵

Saint-Martin saw this disruptive force as the occasion for regeneration. The lesson to be learned from this divine intervention was that human beings were unable to structure their own society solely through their own efforts. Man’s power, writes Saint-Martin, is everywhere limited to “industry and administration,” whereas society can only ever be a product of its own “self-formation.” In other words the foundational act of social organization is necessarily outside the realm of individual creation; the

bodies of a people and governments form themselves from themselves, and are the natural results of time and circumstances which man occasions or allows to be born; and it is for this reason that the mode of this formation must so often escape our calculations [*refuser à nos calculs*].⁸⁶

The foundational laws of society must, Saint-Martin says, have a consecrated air in order to be legitimate, and man can hardly fulfil this task alone, something Maistre would repeat in the coming years. The crisis of the Revolution had, Saint-Martin believed, proved exactly this by destroying the old orders and forcing the creation of a whole new social framework.

The crisis, writes Saint-Martin, awakens the traces of original virtue that lay dormant in every individual. The resistances brought forth by revolutionary excesses and the chaos of political disorder occasion the manifestation of those hidden but eternal principles that were always within us. Providence, like a skilled surgeon, had “eradicated the foreign body” and the people of France were now experiencing the usual effects of a painful operation.⁸⁷ If it was clear that human society had not instantly regained the “pure peace” of harmony in society, this hardly meant that the task of organization was simply the problem of ordering individuals and coordinating interests. Unlike the beasts, whose affections were only ever directed toward specific objects at a specific time and whose organization was only contingent, human beings lived outside of their specific individual relations, they “embraced in their affections ... all species, and lived in the generality of all beings, whatever the interval of times and spaces.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Lettre sur la Révolution française*, 63.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

Order, then, was not something to be constructed out of the specific relations among individual men but rather something to be found at a level higher than them all. Thus, for Saint-Martin, the first step in founding this order was to search for the paths that had become overrun after years of neglect: “if the truth can be obscured by man’s negligence, it can never be lost completely for him, since he always has the means to distinguish it and recognize it.”⁸⁹ The goal of post-revolutionary action was not the total recreation of society but rather the preservation of its guiding principles, the residue of truth that existed at the heart of any social order, even amidst the forces of disintegration. The sovereignty of the people, freed by the “surgical operation” of the Revolution, was not to be invented. Sovereignty had to be reexpressed, rediscovered. As Saint-Martin argues, the sovereignties of individual nations were in fact the “organs” of that “supreme sovereignty which sends down its sanction in them.”⁹⁰

For Saint-Martin, then, the claim of political leaders to speak for the people could only ever be a claim to announce the divine (general) will. The people could find itself only by finding the Truth. The organs of social order were not mere representatives of the common good. They had to be the “reflection of a power superior to them.”⁹¹ Humanity did not create its own law; individuals could only administer and execute law.⁹² The legislator in a sense discovered preexisting laws.⁹³ The true “monarch” was the divinity: “Men who find themselves at the head of Nations or of administrations could only be his representatives or, if you like, his commissaires.”⁹⁴ Saint-Martin’s reference here to the delegates of revolutionary authority who were sent to the provinces to enforce revolutionary law and establish order in the midst of resistance sharpens the image of political action he puts forward in this work. Authority must come from somewhere, even if it is not always visible and cannot appear unproblematically to legitimate the actions of its organs. The structure of revolutionary order was not fundamentally different from a theological political structure.⁹⁵ The problem was locating the source of authority and recognizing the true organ of this power.

What exactly could be done in this revolutionary crisis, according to Saint-Martin? Writing in 1797, Saint-Martin used the occasion of a prize contest sponsored by the Class of Moral and Political Sciences to discuss this problem, responding to the following question: “What are the most appropriate institu-

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹² *Ministère de l’homme-esprit*, 293.

⁹³ “Étincelles politiques,” *L’Initiation*, 4 (1965), 218.

⁹⁴ *Lettre sur la Révolution française*, 104.

⁹⁵ See Carl Schmitt, *Die Diktatur: Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf* (Munich, 1928²), chs. 4 and 5.

tions to found la morale of a people?" In contrast to many contemporary theories, he writes that institutions cannot serve to create a people and its morale. They are not mere means, but instead act as the tangible mediators of an already existing public virtue. Institutions are the "envelope, sign, or bulwark" of social doctrine. The problem, of course, is how to return to this originary code and regenerate our institutions, which were obliterated by the Revolution. The world is filled, Saint-Martin observes, with a bewildering array of contradictory views. The legislator would seem to be caught within an "inextricable labyrinth." The legislator, then, must seek to divine the morale of a people, the unifying force, before establishing concrete institutions.⁹⁶

The paradox, one already elaborated by Rousseau in the *Social Contract*, is that the legislator must discern exactly what is not obvious: Saint-Martin asked, "how could the legislator himself reach this point of sublimity?" The "active classes" who wield power in society often succumb to the temptations of abuse; they resist regeneration as much as the "passive class" is open to it. Saint-Martin sees this as a "restricted circle" which seems impossible to escape; the legislator must "communicate to his nation the spirit of life" and this means he must "himself be impregnated" with this spirit, he must sense within himself the "force and desire to penetrate to the sources where this fire resides." This requires more than mere insight. For Saint-Martin the legislator, in order to "receive this spark," must purify himself of all the "extraneous elements [*substances étrangères*] which, even if [this spark] might arise, would stop it from catching fire." Only the pure legislator could thus "communicate" this warmth to all the institutions. Institutions devoid of this anterior spirit could never have any positive effect.⁹⁷

The desire for this sacred flame explains in part the passion that men have for the "elevated posts," where it is commonly held to reside. But Saint-Martin is careful to say that this flame, like the sun, can transmit its light to all beings and never allows itself to be usurped by any one individual or intermediary body. Saint-Martin does not imply that the divine will can speak only out of the mouth of one chosen monarch. As a result Saint-Martin's conclusion to the Institute's question is less in the form of a concrete "solution" that might be implemented in any one nation, than a pointing of the way, "showing the paths" that might direct us to a solution that must in a sense be seen as coming toward us. The specific forms of legislation and government Saint-Martin leaves to "other writers" with the warning to these "new Pygmalions" that however complex the "statue" so created, it is never a simple task to "seize the flame that could alone bring their statue to life."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ "Réflexions d'un observateur," 141-45.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-64.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

Saint-Martin's writings were all efforts to show humanity that its true path lay outside the visible forms of his material existence. The mystic element was not a retreat into intellectual repose and inaction, however. The role of the philosopher, he thought, was to point the way out of this region, to spur man to recognize his superior nature. Through "negligence or bad faith" man has misunderstood the principle of order and peace, and thus dwells in disorder. He then takes this disorder as evidence of the arbitrary and conventional nature of his existence.⁹⁹ This disorder is, however, simply a result of our separation from Truth, our refusal to exercise the faculties we have; we remain, then, in the world of "lies and error."¹⁰⁰ Yet the very recognition of disorder, of error, reveals our connection to a higher reality. The drive to knowledge is predicated on both the absence of truth and the awareness of its absence. Here, Saint-Martin offers a variation on the eighteenth-century concept of curiosity: limitation is what drives us toward the truth.

In this context Saint-Martin's reflections on truth and its essential mystery are, I would suggest, linked to the Enlightenment concept of progress, which itself relies on this dual recognition of error and of truth. Saint-Martin's enlightened mysticism, like contemporary Enlightenment thought, denied any direct access to truth, and advocated instead working through error to create a path toward truth, a truth understood to be linked in some way to our innermost being. Reading a transcendental mystic philosopher in conjunction with (instead of in opposition to) Enlightenment suggests that despite the fact that the methods of the rational Enlightenment were at times at odds with the more mystical doctrines, we have too often overlooked their similarities. Truth was not unproblematic for Enlightenment philosophers and scientists; the methods of observation and calculation were not seen as easy roads to knowledge. The unity of Truth was not taken for granted, even by the *Encyclopédie*—only God could ever know the secret principles underlying the order of the "vast machine" that is the universe.¹⁰¹ If we can take seriously the philosophical significance of mystic thought, as I have tried to do here, perhaps we can also begin to take more seriously the mystical dimension of "mainstream" philosophy of the period.

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⁹⁹ *Erreurs*, I, 201-2.

¹⁰⁰ *Tableau naturel*, I, 140.

¹⁰¹ *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts, des sciences, et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Paris, 1751-65), s.v. "ordre."