

Joseph  
de Maistre's  
Life,  
Thought,  
and  
Influence

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SELECTED STUDIES

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Edited by  
Richard A. Lebrun

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RICHARD A. LEBRUN

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I would also like to thank fellow participants in the "round table" on Joseph de Maistre that took place as part of the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment held in Dublin in July 1999. Owen Bradley, Graeme Garrard, Benjamin Thurston, and W. Jay Reedy not only agreed to have their contributions to the round table included in this volume, they also assisted by revising their papers for this purpose and by checking my translations of various papers by my French colleagues. Jean-Yves Pranchère checked my translations of his own contributions. I am grateful to Professor Alexander M. Martin of Oglethorpe University for his assistance in providing English spellings for Russian names. I also want to thank the two anonymous assessors used by McGill-Queen's University Press for their very helpful suggestions for revisions of the original manuscript.



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JEAN DENIZET, who passed away in 1991, had been an economist and had served as a director-general of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development).

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RICHARD A. LEBRUN was, until his retirement in 1998, a Professor of History at the University of Manitoba where he still holds an appointment as a Senior Scholar. His publications include *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (1965), *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (1988), and translations of Maistre's *Considerations on France* (1974 and 1994), *St. Petersburg Dialogues*

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VERA MILTCHYNA, a member of the Writer's Union of Moscow, is a translator and historian of the cultural links between Russia and France. Her dissertation was on Chateaubriand in Russian literature in the first part of the nineteenth century. She has published Russian translations of the works of Chateaubriand, Balzac, Mme de Staël, Charles Nodier, and the Marquis de Custine, and is the author of articles on Pushkin and Tiutchev and their relations with French literature, on Balzac's reputation in Russian literature, and on Russian authors, such as Petr Kozlovski and Aleksandr Turgenev, who passed a considerable part of their lives in France. In collaboration with Aleksandr Ospovat, she produced the first annotated edition of the Marquis de Custine's *La Russie en 1839*.

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BENJAMIN THURSTON has just completed a D. Phil. in French literature at Oxford University with a thesis on Joseph de Maistre's theories on the origin and formation of language. His current research project is on biblical discourse in French literature of the Counter-Enlightenment.

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## *Introduction*

The Counter-Enlightenment thinker Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) was an extraordinarily intelligent, well educated, well read, and engaged observer and commentator on foundational developments that have shaped our modern world. His interaction with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, although from the perspective of opposition to these landmarks of modernity, was remarkably open and creative. His reaction to these developments, though hostile, included quite innovative and still valuable theorizing about such human phenomena as the violence and unreason that so often flourish in human societies. The political and theoretical issues that Maistre addressed remain, unfortunately, issues that continue to challenge us today. Part of the rationale for this volume is that studies that help us to understand of Joseph de Maistre and his thought may also stimulate our reflections on a host of general philosophical and political questions.

To appreciate the complexity of Joseph de Maistre's place in the historiography of the Enlightenment, the Counter-Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, there are at least two considerations that must be kept in mind. In the first place, although Joseph de Maistre was French in language and culture, and though he is often thought of as a "French" writer, the fact is that he was never a French subject or citizen. A native of Chambéry in Savoy, at the time of his birth a province of the northern Italian Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, he remained all his life a subject of the House of Savoy. This dynasty was one of the oldest reigning families in Europe, having been founded by the Humbert, the Count of Savoy, in the eleventh century. His descendants had ruled from Turin from the sixteenth century and had enjoyed the title of king from the 1720s when they acquired the Kingdom of Sicily (subsequently exchanged for Sardinia). Though Maistre is well known for his writings about political developments in France, it is important to be aware that his personal political experience, in the first instance, had been in a state

that in the eighteenth century had implemented its own particular version of “enlightened despotism.”

The second consideration to be kept in mind is that ever since his own lifetime Joseph de Maistre has been the subject of very diverse interpretations. With some simplification, it may be said that writers who approved the French Revolution and the ideas it embodied have portrayed Joseph de Maistre as a hopelessly reactionary and somewhat unscrupulous opponent of the Enlightenment and all that it stood for. Opponents of the Revolution, on the other hand, and especially royalist French Catholic writers, much more sympathetic to the man and his views, have praised him as a brilliant and effective critic of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution. Since the family archives remained closed to researchers until relatively recently, biographers especially were long handicapped by lack of access to primary documents.

The basic biographical data may be recounted briefly. Joseph de Maistre was, as has been noted, a native of Chambéry, the capital of the province of Savoy. Educated first by the Jesuits and then in the local royal *collège*, Maistre earned law degrees from the University of Turin. Like his father, he served as a magistrate in the Senate of Savoy (the high court of the province and the equivalent of a French *parlement*), and was named a Senator in 1788. Following the invasion of Savoy by a French revolutionary army in September 1792, Maistre fled Chambéry. He subsequently served as the Piedmontese consul in Lausanne (1793-97), where he also began his career as a counter-revolutionary propagandist, and then as the Piedmontese ambassador to the Russian court in St. Petersburg (1803-17). His post-revolutionary legal career included service as Regent (head of the court system) in Sardinia (1800-1803) and as Regent (justice minister) of Piedmont-Sardinia (1818-21).

Despite his legal career and the inheritance of a substantial legal library from his maternal grandfather, Maistre's private notebooks suggest that he was always less interested in the law than more humanistic subjects such as philosophy, theology, politics, and history. In addition to his native French and the Greek and Latin he acquired as part of an excellent classical education, Maistre read English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German (with difficulty). His notebooks and works testify that he was very well read in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Church Fathers, Greek and Latin classical authors, Renaissance and seventeen-century authors, and all the major figures of the European Enlightenment.

Maistre's first major work, *Les Considérations sur la France* (1797), which offered a providential interpretation of the French Revolution, established his reputation as a defender of throne and altar. Maistre had

read Edmund Burke, and he shared Burke's emotional reaction against the violence, "immorality," and "atheism" of the Revolution.

Maistre's later works reveal a gradual shift in emphasis from politics to fundamental philosophical and theological issues. His *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* (written in 1807 and published in 1814) generalized the political principles on which he had based his *Considérations sur la France. Du Pape* (1817) argued forcefully for infallible papal authority as a prerequisite for political stability in Europe. *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (published shortly after Maistre's death in 1821), explored a host of philosophical and theological issues in witty dialogue form, while an appendix, entitled "Enlightenment on Sacrifices," developed his ideas about suffering and violence. Finally, his *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (published in 1826) blamed the English writer for much of the scientism and atheism of the Enlightenment.

Maistre has been sharply criticized for the extremism of his views, and in particular for his reflections on the social role of the executioner, on war, and on bloodshed. His speculations were certainly original; rejecting what he castigated as naive Enlightenment forms of rationality, he sought to comprehend the irrational and violent dimensions of social and political life. It is not hard to see why he has been depicted in such different ways.

The first enduring portrait of Joseph de Maistre was penned by Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve in articles published in various journals in the period from the 1830s through the 1860s. Though the great French literary critic was repelled by most of Maistre's doctrines and disliked his aristocratic attitudes, he was fascinated, seduced even, by the Savoyard's literary talents. He appears to have acquired biographical information from people who had known the author personally, including members of the Maistre family, and was able to sense the person behind the author and to contrast the author with the private man. As a literary critic, however, Sainte-Beuve devoted most of his attention to an appreciation of Maistre's writings. He enthused that what "Maistre has his marvelous language; with all its rigidity and brittle tones, it is incomparable, and we inevitably surrender to it each time that we hear it or read it."<sup>1</sup> His articles confirmed Maistre's status as a master of French prose, but popularized the view that he was best understood as a brilliant spokesman for an outworn cause. The magic of Sainte-Beuve's own literary style ensured that his portrait of Maistre became so well

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<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Les Grands Ecrivains français: XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, philosophes et essayistes* (Paris 1930), 131.



known that even today it is hard to see the Savoyard except through his eyes.

Though a number of more or less popular biographies were published in the later nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the first full-length scholarly biography did not appear until 1968, when Robert Triomphe published his *Joseph de Maistre: Etude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un matérialiste mystique* (Geneva: Droz 1968). At that time a professor of Slavic Studies at the Université de Strasbourg, Triomphe had the advantage of knowing Russian and thus having access to certain Russian-language materials bearing on the years Maistre spent in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, nonetheless, Triomphe was systematically hostile to his subject, an attitude that Maistre's descendants soon sensed, with the consequence that his work suffers both from his exclusion from access to the Maistre family archives and from a tendentious interpretation of Joseph de Maistre's life, personality, and ideas.

Much has happened in the past twenty-five years, however, to make Joseph de Maistre better known, understood, and appreciated. It was in 1975 that the Association des Amis de Joseph et Xavier de Maistre was established, and this was followed the next year by the founding of the Institut des études maistriennes. These two groups, the first open to anyone interested in supporting Maistre scholarship, the second restricted to active Maistre scholars, have since worked diligently to promote an objective understanding and assessment of Maistre's life and works. The Association has sponsored new critical editions of Maistre's works, organized Maistre colloquia, and supported the publication of the *Revue des études maistriennes*. The first issue of the *Revue* appeared (in mimeographed form) in 1975; since that date eleven more issues have appeared.<sup>2</sup> These twelve issues have published previously unpublished Maistre manuscripts, the proceedings of a Maistre colloquium, and other Maistre studies – with an emphasis on articles based on newly available archival materials. It was the Institut, on the other hand, that negotiated scholarly access to the Maistre family archives containing the original

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<sup>2</sup> The first two issues, which were published in mimeographed form, are dated 1975 and 1976. The review has been published in normal printed form since Number 3, in 1977. Since then the following issues have appeared: No. 4, in 1978; No. 5-6, in 1980 (containing the proceedings of a 1979 colloquium held in Chambéry on "Joseph de Maistre, Illuminisme et Franc-Maçonnerie"); No. 7, 1981; No. 8, 1983; No. 9, 1985; No. 10, 1986-1987; No. 11, 1990; and No. 12, 1996. No. 13, which will include papers presented at a Maistre colloquium in Chambéry in December 1997, is scheduled to be published early in 2001. For English translations of selected articles from the first nine issues, see *Maistre Studies* (Lanham: MD; University Press of America 1988), edited and translated by Richard A. Lebrun.

manuscripts of most of Maistre's works, his notebooks, and a considerable body of his correspondence.

The new critical editions of Maistre's works published in recent years include his *De l'état de nature*,<sup>3</sup> *Considérations sur la France*,<sup>4</sup> the *Ecrits maçonniques de Joseph de Maistre*,<sup>5</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*,<sup>6</sup> and the *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.<sup>7</sup> Also in preparation are critical editions of Maistre's *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (by Jean-Yves Pranchère) and a new edition of *Du Pape* (by Jean-Louis Darcel). In addition, many of Maistre's works remain in print in France in more popular editions.

It may also be pointed out that Maistre's works are now much more easily available in English translation than they were twenty-five years ago.<sup>8</sup> Since that date there have been facsimile reprints of translations made in the mid-nineteenth century: *The Pope*,<sup>9</sup> the *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*,<sup>10</sup> and *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition*.<sup>11</sup> There have also been new translations of the *St.*

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Jean-Louis Darcel, and published in No. 2 of the *Revue des études maistriennes* in 1976. This work was first published in the *Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte 1884-86) under title *Examen d'un écrit de J.-J. Rousseau sur l'inégalité des conditions parmi les hommes*.

<sup>4</sup> Edited by Jean-Louis Darcel, and published by Editions Slatkine of Geneva in 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Edited by Jean Rebotton, and published by Editions Slatkine of Geneva in 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Edited by Jean-Louis Darcel, and published by the Presses Universitaires de France in 1992. This work was first published in the *Oeuvres complètes* under the title *Etude sur la Souveraineté*.

<sup>7</sup> Edited by Jean-Louis Darcel, and published by Editions Slatkine of Geneva in 1993 in two volumes.

<sup>8</sup> In 1975, the only two complete works readily available in English were *On God and Society: Essay on the Generative Principles of Political Constitutions and Other Human Institutions*, edited by Elisha Grierer and translated with the assistance of Lawrence M. Porter (Chicago: Regnery 1959) and my own translation of *Considerations on France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1974). There was, in addition, a collection of excerpts from Maistre's most important works (without critical notes), edited and translated by Jack Lively under the title *The Works of Joseph de Maistre* (New York: Macmillan 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Reprint of the 1850 edition with an introduction by Richard A. Lebrun (New York: Horard Fertig 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Reprint of the 1847 edition (Delmas, NY: Scholars' Fascimiles and Reprints 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Reprint of the 1843 edition (Delmas, NY: Scholar's Fascimiles and Reprints 1977).

*Petersburg Dialogues*,<sup>12</sup> *Against Rousseau: "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People"*,<sup>13</sup> and the *Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon*.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Cambridge University Press included my 1974 translation of Maistre's *Considerations on France* in both hardback and paperback versions in its series of "Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought," in this case using an earlier talk by Isaiah Berlin as an Introduction.<sup>15</sup>

Evidence of the development of serious scholarship on Joseph de Maistre may also be found in recent book-length studies and in doctoral theses devoted to aspects of his thought. There are two new biographies, both based on the newly available family archives, one in English, my own *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant*,<sup>16</sup> and one in French, written by Henri de Maistre, a direct descendent of his famous ancestor, and entitled simply *Joseph de Maistre*.<sup>17</sup> New books on aspects of Maistre's thought include Franck Lafage, *Le comte Joseph de Maistre: Itinéraire intellectuel d'un théologien de la politique*,<sup>18</sup> and Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre*.<sup>19</sup> The latter study was first prepared as a doctoral dissertation at Cornell University.<sup>20</sup> Two other recent and noteworthy doctoral studies are Graeme Garrard's "Maistre, Judge of Jean-Jacques: An Examination of the Relationship between Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Joseph de Maistre, and the French Enlightenment," an Oxford University D. Phil. thesis completed in 1995, and Jean-Yves Pranchère's "L'Autorité contre les Lumières; la philosophie de Joseph de Maistre," a doctoral thesis for the Université de Rouen, completed in 1996. All three of these scholars have contributed papers to the present collection. I should add that a fourth contributor, Benjamin Thurston, is currently completing a D. Phil. thesis at Oxford on Maistre's theories of language.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Translated by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Paris: Perrin 1990. Tragically, Henri de Maistre passed away in 1996, a young man not yet forty years of age.

<sup>18</sup> Paris: L'Harmattan 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Owen Powell Bradley, "Logics of Violence: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre," Cornell University doctoral dissertation, 1992.

Access to Maistre materials has been greatly simplified and much enhanced by the decision made by Joseph de Maistre's descendants in about 1995 to donate his papers to the departmental archives of Savoy in Chambéry. Not only did the staff at the archives do a fine job of inventorying the manuscripts, notebooks, and letters, they also micro-filmed the collection and have now made it available on CD-ROM. It is to be hoped that greater accessibility to these archival materials will encourage scholars to undertake more in-depth studies of this important thinker.

Perhaps it is ironic that this should happen to a thinker with a reputation for being a "reactionary," but at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Joseph de Maistre even has a presence on the internet. A number of his works are available "on line" and he has his own "home page."<sup>21</sup>

The present collection of Maistre essays has the two-fold purpose of bringing together some of the most recent interpretations of Maistre's thought, and making available in English recent French scholarship on his life and work. The majority of the papers come from two sources: issues no. 10, 11, 12 and 13 of the *Revue des études maistriennes*, and a "round table" that was part of the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment held in Dublin in July 1999. The three exceptions are Jean-Louis Darcel's piece on "Joseph de Maistre, New Mentor of the Prince," which was originally presented at a colloquium in Montpellier in December 1998 and which is to be published in the proceedings of that event, Jean-Yves Pranchère's piece on "Maistre's Catholic Philosophy of Authority," which appeared in the April-June 1999 issue of the *Transversalités: Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris*,<sup>22</sup> and Pranchère's study of "The Social Bond according to the Catholic Counter-Revolution: Maistre and Bonald," which was presented at a conference at Besançon in 1966.

The collection is divided into four sections. The papers in the first section, devoted to "biographical studies," all happen to be by Jean-Louis Darcel. As the founder, along with Jacques Lovie, now deceased, of both the Association des Amis de Joseph et Xavier de Maistre and the Institut des études maistriennes and the editor of the *Revue des études maistriennes* since its inception, Professor Darcel would have to be rated as the foremost Maistre scholar working today. The biographical studies presented here deal with previously poorly known or disputed aspects of Maistre's life. The first, on "The Road of Exile, 1792-1817," stresses the

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<sup>21</sup> The Internet address for the Joseph de Maistre Homepage is: <http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/history/maistre.html>

<sup>22</sup> Under the title "Une philosophie de l'autorité: Joseph de Maistre."

importance of the experience of exile in the development of Maistre's thought. The second, on "The Apprentice Years of a Counter-Revolutionary," demonstrates how Maistre's lived experience of the Revolution in Savoy and the émigré context of his work as a minor diplomat in Lausanne contributed to his interpretation of the French Revolution. The third examines in detail two disputed episodes in Maistre's chequered career as a servant of the House of Savoy.

The second section of the volume is made up of papers on "Aspects of Maistre's Thought." The first paper, by Owen Bradley, is a brief summary of the thesis of his recent book on Maistre. All too often and for far too long, Maistre has been misunderstood and even denigrated as a hopelessly retrograde writer. Even those who have approached him sympathetically (myself included) have had great difficulty explaining the more challenging and paradoxical aspects of his thought. Bradley is boldly and completely original in organizing his interpretation of Maistre's social and political thought around his theory of sacrifice. Previous interpreters have not even hinted at such an approach; rather they have often either ignored or downplayed this aspect of his Maistre's thought as something quite outrageous and outdated. Bradley takes the theme of sacrifice, explains it in terms that make it intelligible to modern readers, and then uses it to elucidate the major themes of Maistre's thought.

The second study in this section examines another previously neglected aspect of Maistre's thought, his ideas about economics. The late Jean Denizet, who was himself an economist, uses a couple of relatively unknown and still unpublished Maistre documents to demonstrate that even though the Savoyard had little to say about economic matters in his published works, his understanding of economic and monetary theory was really quite remarkable for his time.

This section includes a stimulating study by Jean-Yves Pranchère on Maistre as a Catholic philosopher. Despite the fact that Maistre always proclaimed his Catholic orthodoxy, various interpreters have had their doubts about this self-identification. Drawing on his doctoral dissertation on Maistre's philosophy, Pranchère provides a careful delineation of the often paradoxical relationship between Maistre's doctrines and traditional Catholic teaching. He shows how, despite his own intentions, Maistre's thought often reflects both the assumptions and weaknesses of Enlightenment theorizing.

Also in this section, Benjamin Thurston offers an ingenious analysis of Maistre's diagnosis of the rhetoric of the French Revolution. Maistre was always extremely sensitive to the power of language and literary style; it is intriguing to see how he critiqued the prose of his opponents. Concluding this section, Jean-Louis Darcel speculates about the intended

readers Joseph de Maistre had hoped to influence. Though his works eventually reached a broad audience, this paper argues that Maistre's primary goal had been to influence rulers and elites.

The third section of the volume is devoted to "comparative studies," and includes my own comparison of Maistre and Edmund Burke, his English predecessor. There are as well two complementary papers on Maistre's relationship to his exact contemporary, the French Counter-Enlightenment writer Louis de Bonald. W. Jay's Reedy's study offers an historical approach that puts both thinkers in intellectual context with respect to the Enlightenment generally and emphasizes the differences between them. Pranchère's longer piece, on the other hand, which stresses the similarities between the two thinkers, provides a close reading from a philosophical perspective of Maistre and Bonald on the "social bond," and offers new insights into the relationship between both of them and Malebranche and Rousseau. Lastly, Graeme Garrard compares the political "realism" of Joseph de Maistre with that of his self-proclaimed twentieth-century German disciple, Carl Schmitt, whose penchant for strong leadership led him to support Hitler. Despite Schmitt's praise of Maistre and his citations from the Savoyard's works, Garrard argues that there are important differences between them that must also be recognized.

The fourth and final section of the book is made up of papers on the "reception and influence" of Maistre's thought and writings. The first is a pioneering study by the Russian scholar, Vera Miltchyna, on Joseph de Maistre in Russia. Her paper examines both oral and literary sources to trace Maistre's presence and influence since 1803 in the country where he lived for some fourteen years and where he wrote a number of his most important works. My own study of Maistre in the Anglophone world, like Miltchyna's work on Maistre in Russia, covers the entire period from the early nineteenth century to the present, and looks at his presence on both sides of the Atlantic. Lastly, the concluding study by Jean-Yves Pranchère is an overview of the persistence of "Maistrian themes" in the writings of recent thinkers. Some, though not all, of these writers reference Maistre, but even where the specific references are lacking, Pranchère's review demonstrates the extent to which Maistre's concerns, theses, and insights remain relevant to our own times.

Attentive readers will soon realize that the scholars presented here are far from being in complete agreement in their interpretations of Joseph de Maistre. Jay Reedy and Jean-Yves Pranchère differ in their readings of the relationship between Maistre and Bonald, and, to take another example, clearly Pranchère and I view the relationship between Burke and Maistre from different perspectives. Given the differences in age, education, and nationalities of the authors, such differing judgements are

probably to be expected, and, I would argue, should enrich the reader's understanding of a writer who, from his earliest publications, has continued to be the subject of lively debate.

Taken together, these papers offer a representative sampling of recent scholarship on Joseph de Maistre in French and English, both in terms of the work of scholars who have devoted much of their scholarly lives to the study of his life and thought and the work of those who are just beginning their careers, and in terms of interest in various facets of the Savoyard's thought and influence. It is to be hoped that these studies will contribute to increasing interest in and better understanding of this exemplary and influential Counter-Enlightenment thinker and writer.

Richard A. Lebrun

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*Part One: Biographical Studies*



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## *The Roads of Exile, 1792-1817*<sup>1</sup>

When the Revolution irrupted into Savoy on 22 September 1792, and the 20,000 soldiers of the Revolutionary army concentrated at Fort de Barraux under the command of General ex-marquis de Montesquieu-Fezensac descended under a driving rain, the effect was total surprise.<sup>2</sup> Without a shadow of resistance on the part of the strong Sardinian army of 12,000 men, a multi-secular order collapsed.<sup>3</sup> Within a few weeks Savoy became the eighty-fourth department of the young French republic. It entered into the new world without experiencing the steps, which, in France, had prepared minds by passing from the absolute monarchy, to the constitutional monarchy under the trilogy of Nation, Law, and King, and finally to the One and Indivisible Republic and its universalizing slogan: Liberty-Equality-Fraternity. For the Savoyards who lived through this turmoil, the word *revolution* right away took on its full sense of rupture and eruption, of the reversal of the existing, and of plunging into a new era. And it is not surprising that images and metaphors of a devastating torrent, of a dike being breached, or again of unchained elements – tempest, storm, volcanic eruption – were born under the pens of Savoyard witnesses to the event. The panic of some, the jubilation of others, was extreme, and strongly marked minds to the point of making

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<sup>1</sup> “Les Chemins de l’Exile, 1792-1817,” *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 13 (2001), 35-48.

<sup>2</sup> The principal sources and documentary references on the period 1792-1817 are Joseph de Maistre, *Livre-journal 1792-1817* (Lyon: Vitte 1923); Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Droz 1968); and the *Revue des études maistriennes*, Nos. 3, 4, 5/6, 8, 10, and 11.

<sup>3</sup> On the invasion of Savoy, we owe the first detailed study to Paul Guichonnet: “Le monts en feu” in *Mémoires et documents publiées par l’Académie salésienne*, t. 100, Annecy, 1994, especially pp. 31-98 on the Church of Savoy and the Revolution, and the article by Christian Sorrel in *La Révolution française dans le duché de Savoie* (Chambéry: ADUS, Université de Savoie), 95-138.

us forget that the stance of the majority of mountain dwellers, prudent and rebellious, towards the new political and, especially, religious policies, was one of wait-and-see: resistance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy has been the object of precise studies that date the first demonstrations to the end of 1792.

Joseph de Maistre has left us a well known account in his private diary, made at the time. Devoid of justificatory or literary intentions, it gives us an unrefined witness to the intensity of the shock provoked by the Revolution's entrance into Savoy. As such, it is worth revisiting.

For Maistre too the surprise was total. Had he not noted some weeks before the day that was for his family an alpha and omega: "Rumours about the imminent French invasion: people are ridiculously frightened"?<sup>4</sup> Even on the eve, he still sat in the Senate under the obligation of registering, without debate or remonstrances, a royal edict bearing on the levying of an extraordinary tax.

Let us look again at the essential text which, in many respects, clarifies the magistrate's choice and announces the work that is to come:

Saturday the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Invasion by the French. Horrible rain. Unspeakable flight of our troops. Treason or the stupidity of the generals; a rout that is unbelievable and even a bit mysterious, according to some people. This is the eternal shame of the government and, perhaps, the destruction of the military state.

I departed on my brother-in-law Constantin's horse. Slept at Annecy, dined at Faverges; I stopped, for a moment, at the Abbey de Tamiers, and went to bed at Moutiers, where my wife (six months pregnant) had just left with my brother the Dean [André, pastor-dean of Tarentaise], my two children, and my servants; I went to join them and we slept at the village of Scez with the pastor where we were very well received. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Saint-Bernard pass. A storm; my wife and my children suffered much; slept at Thuile, diabolical sleep. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, dined at Sales, slept at the City [of Aoste]. Stayed there the 27<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup>. At noon on the 29<sup>th</sup>, I left for Turin on horseback.<sup>5</sup>

These few lines are the outline of the new road of a life, of the engagement of a man, and of the thematic of his first works.

#### THE ROAD TO EXILE

This forty-year old man, indifferent to travel and the spectacle of nature, this stay-at-home yoked to meticulous instruction, austere and often put off by the lawsuits and cases submitted to the Senate, this scholar passionate for philosophy and political and religious controversy, for whom the intellectual landscape of his "bookseller" was the only horizon

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<sup>4</sup> *Livre-journal*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

worth contemplation, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September took the decision to do from now on what he detested: to follow the roads in all seasons. He could have done like the majority of his Senate colleagues: wait and judge the new political order on the evidence. We are far from a travel of apprenticeship, of liberation, of jubilation, dear to Rousseau, or Goethe, or to his contemporaries Chateaubriand and Stendhal, enthusiasts for tourist travel. Exile for Maistre will be a testing road across Europe, a long flight before a triumphant revolution. The stops, short or long, but always provisional, are known: Aoste, Turin, Geneva, Lausanne, Venice, Florence, Livorno, Cagliari, Sardinia in every sense, Naples, Rome, Vienna, St. Petersburg, travel in White Russia, Calais, Paris, and finally Turin, where, in 1821 at sixty-seven years of age, accumulated tiredness and sorrows of all kinds defeated his robust constitution.

The roads of exile were equally painful for him since they separated him from his family; they dispersed the Maistre clan that he called, in a revealing quip, "his one and indivisible Republic," and from his numerous friends left at each stop, to the point that he saw there the mark of an "anathema" that clutched him: a biblical image of the sorely tried just man, the already romantic image of the condemned.

One part of Joseph de Maistre's work, his correspondence, often presented as the most attractive, with its expansive character, its humour, and its bitter-sweet tone, is the immediate product of the exile. The misfortune of being deprived of his family keeps coming back in all of it: letters to his family, like this missive of 1809 to his sister-in-law, Madam de Morand: "Would it please you to know something of me? I will tell you what I tell many people. I am as happy as one can be when one is miserable. I enjoy a multitude of pleasures. But ... but watch out for difficulties!"<sup>6</sup> Writing to his daughter Constance, he evokes the luxury of the Russian court: "as soon as I hear a violin, I feel a heart pang that drives me to my carriage, and I have to go."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere again, it is the plucked notes of a harpsichord that saddens him: "Perhaps you think, dear child, that I resign myself to this abominable separation! Never, never, and never!"<sup>8</sup>

More profoundly, however, in his work itself, the rejection of the present, the valorization of the past, and the fear of the future are in some way the intellectual prolongations of his private drama: the irreparable loss of his small country. To take the route of exile amounts to cutting the bridges, and from now on cultivating the memory of lost faces. The very

<sup>6</sup> *Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte, 1884-87), 11:368. [Letter of 15 December 1809.]

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 270. [Letter of 1 August 1809.]

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 499. [Letter to Constance, 18 December 1810.]

acuteness of remembrance can make present solitude appear even more unbearable. As with Lamartine, the time of happiness, of the social harmony of a patriarchal Savoy forever disappeared, is not situated in the elsewhere of the romantics, but in the pre-revolutionary period. Thus, in 1809, at the time when Napoleon was triumphing on all fronts – “an eagle-eyed vision, immense yet considered fame, unity of action, will of iron”<sup>9</sup> – what homage paid to the detested adversary! Joseph de Maistre confided his confusion to his minister, the Chevalier de Rossi: “What to do against the storm that carries everything away? [...] Young people can adapt to these sad times, but for us who have seen better times, there is no more happiness.”<sup>10</sup> *There is no more happiness*: an omnipresent leitmotif, to the point of provoking weariness.

Thus, Joseph de Maistre submitted to an exile that, as we have seen, he had however chosen on 22 September 1792. He owed to it a brilliant destiny without common measure with the life that would have had to have been his, in a Duchy of Savoy remaining a somewhat neglected part of the States of the House of Savoy: a happy life undoubtedly, and fertile, but restrained by the magistrate’s duty of reserve, by the requirement of prior authorization for any travel beyond the frontiers, by the mediocrity of exchanges and meetings in the bosom of a society where his position of being newly ennobled gave him only a modest place within the nobility of Chambéry, and finally by the lack of openness to other cultures, other religions, and other customs, even if his masonic activities could have in part created cosmopolitan elites escaping the control of political and social constraints.

Paradoxically, the Revolution that ruined him, and that cut him off from his roots and the first half of his life, liberated him for initiatives in the bosom of a society open to merit, and gave him a space, a time, and a role appropriate to his measure.

He entered into the European aristocracy, where his personal merits effaced the modesty of his prior position, and linked him to personages that the troubles, the confusions, and the hazards of emigration forced from their habitual settings: sovereigns, princes, and heirs of European dynasties, ministers of old regime France and of the courts of Europe, and, finally, the learned elites of the lands of reception. The registers of his correspondence, the manuscripts of letters accessible today in the departmental archives of Savoy, reveal the importance and diversity of occasional or lasting, social or personal, public or private ties. We find

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 272 [Letter to the Chevalier de Rossi, 22 August 1809.]

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

traces of some 750 names of correspondents,<sup>11</sup> and the actually available archives include about 300 names of regular correspondents, outside his family.

This partially preserved correspondence lets us enter the immense domain of passing influences that remain largely unknown, especially for Russia. No doubt the re-establishment of normal relations – that is to say free relations – with the tsar's old empire will reveal other collections that will permit a re-examination of the role of the Savoyard diplomat at the heart of the Europe of the Holy Alliance.

Scarcely arrived in St. Petersburg, at the end of a journey of three months from Cagliari, with stops in Naples, Rome, Venice, Vienna, Cracow, Lublin, Vilnius, and Mittau, he noted with humour and a quite understandable vanity his departure from Sardinian imprisonment: "In less than three months, I have been presented to the Pope, the Emperor of Germany, and the Emperor of Russia. That is a lot for an Allobroge who was supposed to die like an oyster, attached to his rock."<sup>12</sup>

#### TOWARDS DIPLOMACY 1793-1803

Let us go back to that day, 22 September 1792, and to Joseph de Maistre's first reactions in learning of "the invasion of the French." The terms that the news inspired in him were not characterized by nuance: treason, incredible rout, and eternal shame.

A first implication: Savoy had been abandoned without a fight – if only for honour – by the Sardinian troops whose mission was to defend it. The precipitous retreat of 12,000 officers and soldiers, among whom figured three Maistre brothers, Nicolas, Victor, and Xavier, appeared to his eyes as treason committed by the military authority and by the political power. If the implication is explicit, Joseph de Maistre, like a number of Savoyards, wondered about the attitude of the old king, Victor-Amadeus III, concerning the cradle of the dynasty and his hesitation in defending it. The official inquest on the negligence of the commander of the Sardinian troops, the old General de Lazary, surprised in the middle of the night by the French offensive, will invoke the absence of precise orders and, perhaps, secret orders to retreat through the passes to protect Piedmont in case of attack, Savoy having been judged militarily indefensible and lost to the French advance.

If Joseph de Maistre subsequently attenuates the violence of his accusations, he will maintain their basis. Like all the European monarchies, the Sardinian monarchy is "worm-eaten," despite the reforms of

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<sup>11</sup> See "Registres de la correspondance de Joseph de Maistre," *Revue des études maistriennes* (hereafter as *REM*), No. 7 (1981), index, 231-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Livre-Journal*, 161.

the state carried out by Victor-Amadeus II and Charles-Emmanuel II, both *enlightened* monarchs: they are condemned if they do not find the way to regeneration. Faced with the ideals of the Revolution, the strength of their evidence and of their power of seduction – one nation, one law, and one army of citizens – the old monarchies are no more than vulnerable great bodies.

From the first hours of his flight before the revolutionary army and the new order that it established, Joseph de Maistre carried within himself his first interpretive essay on this “new epoch of the world,” whose mysteries he will never cease to explore.

Between 1793 and 1797, Joseph de Maistre, named the king’s correspondent in Lausanne, found himself in a privileged observation post. From the terrace of the court of his friend Madam Huber-Alléon’s residence, he could observe with a telescope the Savoyard shore of the Lake of Geneva with its revolutionary symbols: the liberty tree, and concentrations of troops and population. His modest diplomatic role as the agent of counter-revolution is better known today, thanks to documents from the Maistre family archives. It is equally in Lausanne that he is going to establish relations on a European scale and to weave a network of remarkably open friendships.

As a consular agent and, by this title, a representative of the refugee Savoyard community in Valais and in the Vaud area, he was linked to Baron d’Erlach, the bailiff of Lausanne, to the chief magistrate [of Berne], de Steiger, and to the principal magistrates of the Confederation. He utilized his relations to assure the reception, protection, and survival of his compatriots: non-juring priests, monks and nuns chased out and deprived of everything, noble families, and Savoyard refugees of all classes.

As a representative of the Savoyard nobility, he was received in the salons of the Swiss aristocracy, in Lausanne, Geneva, or Berne and in their country residences, where he associated with their guests – French émigrés, Austrian, German, English, and Russian travellers, for whom Switzerland henceforth was the obligatory entrance to the states of northern Italy. It is at Lausanne that Maistre becomes aware of the reality of a white international of European dimensions making common cause against the French Revolution under the paradoxical shield of French language and culture. On leaving Lausanne in 1797, he will keep up a regular correspondence with friends made during his stay in Switzerland, which he represents as the happiest years of his life of exile.

Finally, as a scholar passionately fond of antiquities, philosophy, and theology, he frequents literary and scholarly centres in the cantons on the shores of the Lake of Geneva. In Madam Huber’s entourage, he links himself to naturalist disciples of the great Haller; in that of Isabelle de

Polier, Lutheran canoness, woman of letters, and the editor of the influential *Gazette de Lausanne*, he frequents orientalist and authorities on India who were rivals of her brother, Colonel de Polier, called Polier the Indian. In the Necker family entourage, he meets Madam de Staël and her brilliant retinue of men of letters won over to liberal ideas, but fleeing the dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety to the Swiss shore of the Lake of Geneva. Finally, he establishes Protestant friendships on the basis of controversies that remained polite in form, but intransigent with respect to the issues. We can guess that the Maistrarian pamphlets against the Reform, particularly the Calvinist version, were born from frequenting radical Protestant centres in Lausanne then being affected by revolutionary propaganda against the hegemony of Berne.

Some weeks before his departure from Lausanne, Maistre published his *Considérations sur la France* (April 1797), his first work of real breadth, which would henceforth identify him as the most original of the counter-revolutionaries, provoke his exodus across a Northern Italy conquered by the Directory's armies commanded by General Bonaparte, but simultaneously open for him the doors of European courts and of the counsellors of sovereigns. It is a brilliant role of the Mentor of governments that Maistre is going to find in St. Petersburg after the dark insular stay of three years passed in Sardinia.

#### ST. PETERSBURG: 1803-1817

Joseph de Maistre arrived in St. Petersburg on 1 May 1803 of the Julian calendar to which the Russians were still attached (13 May of our Gregorian calendar), without equipage, without assistants, and without money, to represent a sovereign without states, if one excepts the island of Sardinia. He was awaited by his brother Xavier who would facilitate first contacts for him. As they had always done, they were going to help one another and Joseph will play a determining role in his younger brother's nomination as the Library Director of the Admiralty Museum and his return to a military career interrupted by the dispersion of the Sardinian armies. He meets there as well Russian acquaintances from Lausanne, like Prince Gagarin who had welcomed Xavier to Moscow and encouraged him to live comfortably on his talents as a portrait artist.

The diplomat rapidly integrates himself into the extraordinarily cosmopolitan Russian society of a city that at the beginning of the nineteenth century counts 35,000 resident foreigners (23,000 Germans, 4,000 French, 900 English),<sup>13</sup> which makes it a metropolis in the image of our present-day capitals, to the point where Xavier, in a letter written

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<sup>13</sup> Zinaïda Scharkovskoy, *La vie quotidienne à St-Petersbourg à l'époque romantique* (Paris: Hachette 1967), 36.



fifteen days after the arrival of his brother, complains about scarcely seeing him. Formal visits fascinate him: the Chancellor of the Empire, Count Vorontsov, Adam Czartoryski, a member of the tsar's secret committee. Fifteen days after his arrival, he is received by Alexander I, the first of numerous audiences, while waiting the more discrete conversations in 1812, when the Emperor, rescinding Mikhail Speransky's reform projects and breaking the alliance with Napoleon, and returning to the aristocracy, proposes to a brilliant Russian career to Joseph de Maistre, which the latter refuses. It is possible that exploration of the state archives in St. Petersburg in the coming years will permit us to specify more precisely the exact role played by Joseph de Maistre in Russian politics in the early years of the nineteenth century: the documents in the Maistre collection permit us to catch a glimpse of its importance.

His frequenting of the salons of the Russian aristocracy is better known, thanks in particular to the works that Count de Falloux devoted to *Sofia Svechina* [known in France as *Sophie Swetchine*],<sup>14</sup> and more recently to those of Father Rouet de Journal,<sup>15</sup> historian of the Russian Jesuits and of their entourage in Polotsk as well as in St. Petersburg, who explored the French and Russian archives of the Society of Jesus and the Slavic libraries of Brussels and Paris. The names of Gagarin, Golovin, Narychkin, and Svechina recur there constantly, as well as that of Galitsyn, over whom a scandal will break in 1814-1815 with the famous conversion of young Alexander, nephew of the minister of public instruction and cults. Joseph de Maistre, closely tied to the Jesuits and their college near the Church of St. Catherine, will find himself compromised by the movement of conversions that touched a number of influential families.

Father Rouet de Journal specifies in a few lines the reasons for the seduction exercised by our Savoyard in the salons of the political capital of Russia. One found there, first of all, the practice of luxurious hospitality by these families, whose palaces were a measure of the immensity of their fortunes and whose credit was measured by the importance of their livery. H. Troyat, in his biography of Catherine II,<sup>16</sup> estimates the domestic servants of great Russian families of this period at between three and eight hundred, split between their numerous residences. Holding an open table, and offering long-term lodging for foreign guests of all nationalities, provided that they bore a name, a

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<sup>14</sup> Comte de Falloux, *Mme Swetchine* (Paris: Perrin 1860), 2 vols.

<sup>15</sup> M. J. Rouet de Journal, *Un collège de jésuites à St-Petersbourg 1800-1816* (Paris: Perrin 1922).

<sup>16</sup> Henri Troyat, *Catherine la Grande* (Paris: Flammarion 1977), 421.

flattering title, or possessed some intellectual, scientific, or artistic talent, had been the fashion since Catherine II's time. More profoundly, Russian hospitality was a heritage of the Byzantine East, organized, as we know, around the *oikia*, the enlarged family of antiquity, which had all the kindred properly speaking – intimates, dependents, and servants – living under the same roof.

Joseph de Maistre, vowed to prolonged celibacy for reasons “of financial distress,” as the Sardinian minister wrote to him,<sup>17</sup> and which lasted twelve years – his family will only be authorized to join him in 1815 – busied himself in masking his penury, which reflected that of his court, by devoting the meagre salary of his appointment to keeping up a state that permitted him to save face. He would have died of hunger if he had not found very generous and discrete hospitality among his Russian friends. Their open tables permitted him to “hold on” without falling, giving him the independence indispensable for his functions as an ambassador and the condition of necessity in which he found himself. What he had to hide in the world burst out in vehement recriminations in the letters he addressed to the Sardinian court, where he depicted as his situation unique among the representatives of the diplomatic corps resident in St. Petersburg. On the contrary, the esteem that surrounded his high moral qualities and the rectitude of his life, the friendships that linked him to several families, and finally the homages rendered to his talents as scholar, orator, writer, and controversialist, all made his stay as happy as it could be. Numerous memoirs and remembrances brought back by Russian émigrés after 1917 permitted Father Rouet de Journal to restore the flattering image that Joseph de Maistre's hosts retained of him:

This is a man of high distinction, the finest of scholars, of an exquisite charm in conversation as well as in style, a declared enemy of the French Revolution and having on the questions which are the bases of the life of states not only feelings but long meditated principles. He will therefore be received in St. Petersburg society with a particular eagerness. They will make a circle around him, loving to hear him speak on all the subjects that interested the Russians and their

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<sup>17</sup> See the letter of the secretary of state François Gabet, dated 28 September 1802, on the destiny reserved for the Maistre family: “If you wish you can leave your family in Sardinia, which is in part out of consideration for you, for it is necessary in a foreign country to maintain a certain decor, which cannot be reconciled with our financial distress: a bachelor's life exempts you from many social obligations.” In response to his requests, Maistre will finally get permission for his family to join him in May 1812 – a journey cancelled by the Russian campaign, and realized finally in 1815.

émigré friends; and by his intellectual worth as well as by his lovable simplicity, the enemy of all show, he will impose himself in aristocratic circles.<sup>18</sup>

Is this portrait too flattering? Is it complaisant? It is certainly the reflection "of the aristocratic circles" of traditional Russia. On the contrary, in the milieu won to the principles of the Revolution or attached to the alliance with Napoleon, he is habitually presented as a champion of the past, imbued with aristocratic prejudices, attached to obscurantist, that is to say fanatical, religious convictions. The secret reports of the imperial French police make of him a paragon of the reactionary spirit and judge the man from what they knew of his work. It seems more equitable to rely on the testimony of those who knew him.

More than in Lausanne, Joseph de Maistre is going to enter into relations with the scholars, scientists, and doctors of St. Petersburg. Like London, the city became the refuge of men of science who did not adhere to revolutionary ideas or who had fled the Grand Empire. He frequents especially the Jesuit fathers, of whom several had a scientific education, beginning with Father Gruber, their superior, famous for his knowledge of physics, chemistry, mechanics, and engineering science. We know that he frequented members of the academy of science, which included the astronomer Friedrich Theodor Schubert, members of the college of medicine, including the famous doctor Franck. Often of German origin, these men of science are willing members of the Masonic lodges reopened by Alexander; the philosophy of the Königsberg thinker, Immanuel Kant, was in great favour there. If Kant had never been initiated, his Masonic relations were well known and he is often presented as a "Mason without Apron." Maistre, a Mason himself, could not have been ignorant of this. It is true that our Savoyard's denunciation of Germanic influence on the philosophical, political, and religious plane, and of Kant's particular influence, must be situated in this context. It is no less true that the warnings that he puts out were noticed by Alexander and the Russian ministers, who were more and more uneasy about foreign influences. In effect, the Russians are almost absent from these diverse academies: Joseph de Maistre noted this several times: "I have not seen in this country the shadow of a true talent; science is a foreign fruit to this climate."<sup>19</sup> He will visibly attenuate the harshness of this judgement in 1820, in the sketch for a final piece of the *Soirées*

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<sup>18</sup> M.J. Rouet de Journal, *Madame Swetchine* (Paris: Maison de la bonne presse 1929), 588.

<sup>19</sup> *Livre-journal*, 170.

where he refers to the future: "As for the sciences, they will come to you when they want to. Are you made for them? That is what we will see."<sup>20</sup>

In our evocation of Joseph de Maistre's stay in St. Petersburg, the accent up to now has been on men, but it is appropriate to evoke the role of the city where he writes three of his principal works: the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, written in 1809 and published in 1814; *Du Pape*, written in 1816-1817, and published in 1819; and finally, his masterpiece, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, written in 1809, completed in 1820, and published in 1821 some weeks after his death. These three works are in a significant way conceived as a triptych representing the trilogy unceasingly at the heart of Maistrian reflection: politics, religion, and transcendental philosophy as the way to perfect knowledge.

From his arrival in St. Petersburg, faced with the statue of Peter the Great, whose workmanship by the French sculptor Etienne Falconet he admires, and which he spontaneously compares to that of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, there surges the question: would St. Petersburg be the new Rome? Such is the first impression that is inspired in him by the powerful excess of the city sprung up from the marshes by the builder tsar's will. Was Russia to be the new Rome in the face of the barbarism of the "new epoch of the world" surging up from the Revolution? To this implicit question, it seems to me that Maistre's triple response is to be found in an "esoteric" reading of the three works cited above: it can be the new Rome if it remains faithful to its ancestral politics, the autocracy, the Russian version of absolute monarchy; if it rejoins ecclesiastical unity under the egis of the Roman pontiff; and finally if it pursues true knowledge by a "modern illuminism" that turns away radically from the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

This interpretation might surprise someone who reads Maistre's work without taking account of the Russian context in which the author had been immersed since 1803 and who neglects the importance that Masonic initiation had had on the formation and engagement of the author, and who ignores, finally, the extraordinary development of the lodges in St. Petersburg since their re-opening in 1803, on the basis of rivalries between English, Swedish, and French rites. It is equally to forget that Maistre had lived in the entourage of persons or families who had often played a considerable role in Russian Freemasonry: the Gagarins, the Tolstoyes, the Puskins, the Potockis, the Razumovskiis, and the

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<sup>20</sup> *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, critical edition (Geneva: Slatkine 1993), 2:570.

Steddings.<sup>21</sup> It could only ignore the “war” of the secret societies where one found, exacerbated by the French Revolution, the three currents, deist, mystic, and rationalist, of eighteenth-century Freemasonry.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, my interpretation supposes that our Savoyard, in writing his works, had at first not destined them for publication, that is to say for readers generally, but had conceived them for a privileged reader, the master of the greatest empire in the world, to enlighten him on his missions. His works were a kind of *opera ad usum imperatoris* [works for the use of emperor], Maistrian versions of treatises for the education of the prince, as were the diverse treatises of Machiavelli, Bossuet, and Fénelon. One can see there his loyalty to the program of his Masonic memoir to the Duke of Brunswick of 1782: “The second class of Freemasonry must have for its goal, following the proposed system, *the instruction of governments and the reunion of all the Christian sects.*”<sup>23</sup>

The *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* is probably not the only work in French literature born in Peter I’s city, but it is the only one that in its title as in its localization situates itself integrally in the brilliant cadre of the political, aristocratic, and cosmopolitan metropolis in Alexander’s reign, at the dawn of the nineteenth century. A work born in this city: there would have been no originality in this since the majority of old works were born in capital cities, and places of urbanity, of proximity with the power protecting the “Arts, Letters, and Sciences,” but equally a place that related the writer and his privileged public. Let us go farther. St. Petersburg offers a particular cadre that influences the conversations exchanged between the three protagonists (the Savoyard count, the Russian senator, and the French knight) to rethink the world of their time in a double perspective: the refutation of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its political model, the Revolution will be the controversial part of the work; and the restoration of the religious and political unity of Europe in the uneasiness of an ideologically acceptable reconstruction of

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<sup>21</sup> *Dictionnaire de la franc-maçonnerie*, directed by Daniel Ligou (Paris: PUF 1987, particularly the article on Russia, 1058-1064, and especially, Tatiana Bakounine, *Répertoire biographiques des franc-maçons russes (XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, collection historique de l’Institut d’études slaves (Paris: Institut d’études slaves de l’Université de Paris 1967).

<sup>22</sup> J. de Maistre was notably very hostile to Ignatius Fessler, venerable of the *L’Etoile Polaire* lodge, where he was linked to Mikhail Speransky and to rational and pro-French Masonic circles. If Maistre spared the latter, a protégé of the tsar, he could not ignore his circle’s hostility to Catholicism in general and to the Jesuits in Russia in particular. See the notice in the *Dictionnaire de la franc-maçonnerie*, 541.

<sup>23</sup> See J. de Maistre, *Ecrits maçonniques*, ed. by Jean Rebotton (Geneva: Slatkine 1983), 104.

the old order will be the oratorical part of the work, designed to win the adherence of the reader. The city then becomes the privileged field of observation and investigation. A city born in the eighteenth century, it is the city of the Enlightenment, the city of Voltaire, whose malignancy will be denounced in the violence charged portrait in the Fourteenth Dialogue; the city of illuminism and of the Biblical Society, which will be the object of an indictment in the Eleventh Dialogue. Symmetrically, however, St. Petersburg is the symbolic city of resistance to the Revolution and to its Napoleonic metamorphosis. It is the rampart city of traditional order and of monarchical legitimacy; it incarnates the model of the monarchical revivification of the states "that have passed the great test" announced in the Apocalypse, or that, more exactly, in 1809, were passing it. The bronze hand of the equestrian statue of Peter the Great symbolizes metaphorically the double mission that Maistre assigns to Alexander's Russia: the destruction of the order born of the Revolution and the way to a regenerated monarchical order: "His terrible arm is still extended over their posterity who press around his august effigy: one looks, and one does not know if this bronze hand protects or menaces."<sup>24</sup>

It is the city of the punishing monarch and of the prophetic monarch; it is the anti-Paris – the city that made the Revolution, and which, as a result, is menaced by heaven's fire like Sodom and Gomorrah..

When one reads the *Soirées* for the first time, the political dimension of work is not immediately apparent; one passes from the poetic atmosphere of the preamble to the polemical, theological, and, if you wish, the "metapolitics" of the *Entretiens*. The sub-title of the work, *Entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence*, shows without any possible doubt that it is first of all a political work, that is to say devoted to the meaning, to the organization, and to the development of the city of men.

#### CONCLUSION

At the end of this evocation of Joseph de Maistre's roads of exile, where his work has remained in the background, and in order not to leave it there in the life story of a Savoyard gentleman uprooted from his first country, an uprooting that made him a writer, a thinker of politics and religion, whose fame today is universal, the moment has come to evoke his originality, his zones of light, and his zones of shadow.

Contradictory terms keep turning up in all the notices that are devoted to him: counter-revolutionary and reactionary, ultramontane Catholic and intolerant adversary of separated churches, adversary of the ideology of progress and apologist of tradition, prejudices, and of authority erected

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<sup>24</sup> *Soirées*, First Dialogue, critical ed., 85.

as norm; in brief, a champion of “authority against the Enlightenment” to pick up the title of the remarkable thesis that Jean-Yves Pranchère devoted to him recently.

At first glance, Joseph de Maistre made choices that are at the antipodes from ours, we who are the heirs of the world issued from the French Revolution, as of the revolutions that punctuated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What he honoured is today generally denigrated; what he denounced is today honoured. So then, is it necessary to stick with the judgement of one of his first readers, the Lyonnais, Pierre-Simon Ballanche, who saw in him “the prophet of the past”? The oxymoron invented by this repentant disciple is revelatory of the confusion of a reader faced with the complexity of the thought and the polyphony of the work.

If Joseph de Maistre had been the last avatar of the Great Inquisitor, whose defence he undertook in one of his most provocative works, the one with the most often despised title, the six *Lettres à un gentilhomme russe sur l'inquisition espagnole* (1815), how do we explain an always renewed interest, sometimes a remarkable influence on generations of readers from profoundly different nations and cultures, in our countries of old Europe, but equally from the new world: in the Russia of the nineteenth century and in that of the revival? Japanese intellectuals are discovering him and, in the land of Islam, I remember having seen at the National Library of Tunis one of that country's most brilliant intellectuals fascinated by *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. Can the interest of so many readers and historians of ideas be reduced to an antiquarian curiosity, or even to the bewildered fascination that is aroused by a work that passes for the first radical critique of modernity?

In 1960, the British academic Isaiah Berlin devoted a noted essay to Joseph de Maistre, published in French translation in a collection entitled *Le bois tordu de l'humanité: romantisme, nationalisme et totalitarisme*.<sup>25</sup> This work, and notably the essay devoted to Maistre, has been made the object of numerous commentaries in the international press and in the specialized reviews of political science. Berlin's title announces the author's thesis: “Joseph de Maistre and the origins of fascism,” and the concluding comment summarizes his approach against the current of habitual judgements: “In this way totalitarian society, which Maistre, in the guise of historical analysis, had visualized, became actual; and

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<sup>25</sup> Paris: Albin Michel 1992. [First published in English in 1990. The editor, Henry Hardy, reports that the essay was one Berlin had “put aside in 1960 as needing further revision.” *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: John Murray 1990), x.]

thereby, at inestimable cost in human suffering, has vindicated the depth and brilliance of a remarkable, and terrifying, prophet of our day."<sup>26</sup>

A disquieting turnaround: Joseph de Maistre's thought, which for many readers analysed and denounced, in the name of Christian values, the first version of state terrorism, the Jacobin dictatorship of Public Safety, could this thought be the matrix of the totalitarian ideologies of modern times, this "crooked timber of contemporary humanity"?

This is to make a complete counter sense of the philosophy and intentions of the author of the *Soirées*. The principle texts invoked by I. Berlin are the pages – always the same – devoted to war and the executioner, taken from their context, but even more from the *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, a work of circumstance marked by the terrible year 1812. To see there an apology of state violence exercised as much in the interior (the executioner) as the exterior (war), is to betray on all points the intentions of the author for whom war is in all cases a *scourge*, even if it is "a law of the world."

Joseph de Maistre, first as a magistrate, then as a witness and analyst of the first ideological wars born of the Revolution and of the Empire, asked himself about the two fundamental missions of every ordered society: the substitution of the exercise of justice for the private vendetta, and regulated war for the war of annihilation of people by people. He was the particularly well informed observer of hecatombs of an unheard of cruelty mowing down innumerable armies from Essling to the Berezina. He had trembled as a father and as a brother for two of his dear ones engaged in the defence of Russia. How could he have made himself the apologist of bloodshed? Certainly, he asked himself about the *sense* of bloodshed, which is not the same thing. We know that his meditations were inspired by the constant theology of the Church, that of the Greek Fathers, that of St. Augustine, like that of the Counter-Reformation, particularly the theology of sin, be it original or personal.

Some contemporary historians interested in Joseph de Maistre's political theology are doing their best to appreciate it in relation to its context,<sup>27</sup> which is the only sure and equitable approach. Doing their best to avoid the risks of anachronism or hazardous interpretations, these essays of evaluation were at the heart of the Chambéry colloquia on illuminism and Freemasonry, and on Maistre and the Revolution.<sup>28</sup>

The pages cited by Isaiah Berlin to demonize the Savoyard writer should rather be interpreted within the framework of a Christian gnosis that is made up of orthodoxy and free intellectual speculation. And

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>27</sup> *REM*, Nos. 5/6 and 8; *Soirées*, critical edition, 51-67.

<sup>28</sup> *REM*, nos. 3 and 5/6.



Maistre's fertile originality is precisely there, in our opinion: without departing from a loyalty to the Church, intimately lived and many times proclaimed, he threw out bridges between the past and the present, Antiquity and Modernity, an erudite knowledge of cultures and a life intimately involved in the tragic events and exceptional men of his times, rational analysis and contemplation of the mystery of beings and the ways of Providence, fidelity to the creed and the informal speculations of mystical Masons. It is, as we have seen, what he claimed himself by presenting his *Soirées* as his "cherished work" where he had included "a complete course in modern illuminism."<sup>29</sup>

Joseph de Maistre lived in the period when modern ideologies were being formed. He knew the Utopian seductions of the century of the Enlightenment. In his childhood, he had been brought up with the political Utopia of T el emaque's author, this F enelon to which his whole life long he vowed affection and admiration because he preached a Christian state placed under the unique commandment of charity, that is to say the law of love willed by Christ. The ideal city, Salente, is the place of a return to patriarchal virtues, to social harmony around a virtuous monarch who is the father of his people. This dream of a recovered Golden Age nourished his imagination. For these reasons, he had been susceptible to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's prose and to some of his social and economic ideas. Finally he had adhered to the myth of the good Savoyard sketched by the same Jean-Jacques and recaptured by Lamartine in his *Confidences* and, especially, in his *Jocelyn*. However, the Revolution had broken the charm, had crushed the dream of the virtuous refuge, and the regressive utopia. Only the family, *his family*, survived the great disillusion.

He had been the witness of the first revolutionary Utopia to be incarnated in the history of the country whose language and culture he loved. He had made the observation that the first intentions of liberty, of emancipation, of fraternity, and of the search for universal peace that had animated the philosophes and then the deputies of the Estates-General, had been translated into the oppression of minorities, into subjection in religion, into civil war, and then into a war of conquest. The research and analysis of the causes of the essentially modern contradiction between the purity or the nobility of intentions and the catastrophe of the result is at the heart of the Savoyard's work.

In Antiquity and in the Modern Era, he recalls the recurrent temptation written in the heart of man, that of Prometheus as well as that of Adam, which is called *hubris*, excess, or pride.

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<sup>29</sup> Letter to J.M. Deplace, 11 December 1820, *OC*, 14:250.

Having reached the end, too rapidly, of this route of a life and a work, how can we reply to the question "who is Joseph de Maistre?" He is neither an ideologist of absolute power, nor a "mystical materialist" (Robert Triomphe), nor "a prophet of the past" (Ballanche), nor "a terrifying prophet of our time" (Isaiah Berlin). This cosmopolitan in search of a unity that was impossible to find escaped to the frontiers at the moment when these were in ferment and when the nation was becoming the supreme social, political, and moral value. "I die with Europe," he writes at the end of his life. Escaping to the frontiers, he partially escapes classifications. Whence his contradictions, and those of the critic of his subject.

*The Apprentice Years of a  
Counter-Revolutionary:  
Joseph de Maistre in  
Lausanne, 1793-1797<sup>1</sup>*

The four years Joseph de Maistre spent in Lausanne during the French Revolution (13 April 1793 to 28 February 1797) are certainly the best known of his life. The period in Lausanne, which marked the entry of the Senator from Chambéry into political and literary life, has attracted biographers and historians who have had at their disposal abundant information, particularly precious when it throws light on the genesis of his works. This is equally the period when the author had been the least miserly with information about himself. His journal devotes ninety pages to these years, almost half of the entire journal.<sup>2</sup> By comparison, the subsequent period (April 1797 to April 1801) is represented by only twenty-two pages, and the ambassador's long stay in St. Petersburg occupies only forty pages. The correspondence published in the *Oeuvres Complètes* is certainly not abundant, but it includes important letters to Baron Vignet des Etoles, the King of Sardinia's minister in Switzerland and Joseph de Maistre's mentor in his diplomatic career.<sup>3</sup>

For the essentials, our knowledge of this period comes from the works of three historians who, from diverse sources, many of which have since disappeared, have provided an important quantity of information: Albert Costa de Beauregard with his book *Un homme d'autrefois*;<sup>4</sup> François

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<sup>1</sup> "Les années d'apprentissage d'un contre-révolutionnaire: Joseph de Maistre à Lausanne, 1793-1797," *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 10 (1986-1987), 5-19. (Introduction only.)

<sup>2</sup> *Les carnets de Comte Joseph de Maistre – Livre journal 1790-1817* (Lyons and Paris: Vitte 1923).

<sup>3</sup> Volume 9 in the *Oeuvres Complètes* (Lyon: Vite, 1884-1886) contains twenty-four letters dated from 29 April 1793 to 30 April 1796.

<sup>4</sup> Paris: Plon 1877. The book traces the life of Joseph de Maistre's intimate friend, Joseph-Henry de Beauregard. His great-grandson drew on the archives of La Motte and Beauregard, which conserved correspondence and memoirs exchanged between Maistre and the Costas. A certain number of these

Descostes, principally in his *Joseph de Maistre pendant la Révolution*,<sup>5</sup> and finally, François Vermale with his *Joseph de Maistre émigré*,<sup>6</sup> to which he added a series of peripheral studies devoted to revolutionary Savoy and to figures in the period of the Revolution and the Counter-Revolution.

Today we are in a position to complete our knowledge of this period starting from a very well stocked and largely unpublished correspondence found in the archives of the Maistre family: 162 letters addressed to Baron Vignet des Etoles.<sup>7</sup>

First, it is necessary to establish the importance of these four difficult years, sometimes dramatic but always fruitful, since they are going to transform the senator, the Savoyard magistrate, into a counter-revolutionary actor and thinker.

Schematically, we can discern three periods that correspond to three attitudes that Joseph de Maistre would adopt in facing the French Revolution. First, from Savoy, a possession of the King of Sardinia, he would *observe* with passionate interest the immense event that was overturning the realm whose language and culture he shared. Then returning to Savoy, he would *live* the Revolution on a day-to-day basis, an experience which, however brief, was nonetheless significant. Finally, from the privileged observatory that Lausanne was, he would *combat* the European, and no longer French revolution, by counter-revolutionary action. From this very complete experience is born a work that associates the intimate knowledge of the event – the lived – and the detachment necessary for a perspective on the whole.

#### THE OBSERVER OF THE REVOLUTION

From July 1788 to September 1792, or for four years, the Chambéry native made himself an observer of the Revolution from his native Savoy. The rarity of the documents has given birth to questions about his attitude. Had he been hostile right from its beginnings in Dauphiné in

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documents have since disappeared.

<sup>5</sup> Tours: Mame 1895. Descostes drew on numerous private archives today dispersed or destroyed, notably correspondence between Maistre and Benoit-Maurice de Sales.

<sup>6</sup> Chambéry: Darel 1927, and Volume 64 of the *Mémoires* of the Société savoisienne d'histoire et d'archéologie.

<sup>7</sup> Only twelve of these letters figure in Volume 9 of the *O.C.*. This is to emphasize the importance of the unpublished letters presented here, where the reader will find a complete or partial transcription of these letters. [See the *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 10 (1986-1987), 23-135, for the texts of some 95 letters.]

1788? Or, on the contrary, had he been seduced at the beginning by the powerful movement of social and political reforms elaborated by the Enlightenment and presented for the first time under the form of a complete political program when the Assembly of Vizille met in July 1788? The revelations about Joseph de Maistre's Masonic involvement, his relations with members of the parlement in Dauphiné, and the fact that he had been denounced to Turin and presented as won to the new ideas, have for more than a century accredited the thesis of reformism, of the liberal temptation. The Senator's rebirth would be born from fear in the face of the Revolution's "skid," and the brutality of his reaction, according to Robert Triomphe, would have had the violent character of an abjuration.

The vision of Maistre the repentant reformer, or abjured Jacobin, has seduced some by its romanticism, and others because it fits the grid of the Marxist reading of class antagonism. It does not correspond to the reality such as it emerges from the works published over the last ten years by the *Revue des études maistriennes*. A more precise knowledge of the nature of Joseph de Maistre's Masonic involvement in the heart of a lodge of the Scottish Reformed Rite, of his English reformism and of his reflection on blunders in Sardinia deriving from French absolutism and Josephism, and finally, to the precocity of his counter-revolutionary activities – everything suggests an initial reserve, followed by a hostility displayed from the first revolutionary manifestations in 1789, which provoked in him the "anti-democratic and anti-Gallican" reactions that reading Burke only reinforced.<sup>8</sup>

There had not been a "conversion" to counter-revolution, but an evolution that carried him from reserve to reprobation, and then to "aversion," following in this the evolution of events in France, such as a Savoyard could follow them from a Francophone province of the states of the House of Savoy.

#### THE REVOLUTION ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS

From 12 January to 24 February 1793, or for six weeks, Maistre *lived* the Revolution in Chambéry and in the Savoyard countryside where he travelled. We know very little about this short period, if only because it caused the ex-senator to advance masked. Robert Triomphe saw in this return to Savoy an attempt at cohabitation with the new order of things,

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<sup>8</sup> A contemporary researcher who is far from being sympathetic to Maistre has recently argued this point decisively. See Michel Fuchs, "Edmund Burke et Joseph de Maistre," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1984), 49-58.

*novus reum nascitur ordo*,<sup>9</sup> principally to try to save his property. Even though Maistre had a legitimate concern for the conservation of the family patrimony, which related to his responsibility as head of the family, new facts and probable conjectures do not point in that direction.

It seems that the magistrate, in agreement with the king's principal minister, Count Perret d'Hauteville, had given himself the mission of returning to Savoy to sound out the possibilities of interior resistance to the regime born of armed conquest.<sup>10</sup> For six weeks, he circulated a great deal in Savoy; he met members of the clergy and the nobility who had retired to their properties, and peasants attached equally to their religion and to their legitimate sovereign. Finally, let us recall some facts that leave no doubt as to the nature of his feelings with respect to the Revolution: if he agrees to stand his watch at the *Maison commune*, he refuses to stand a second time; he is horrified by the execution of Louis XVI, "the crime of 21 January"; he denounces the Civil Constitution of the Clergy that marked the act of "birth of the schism"; he refuses to swear an oath to the new regime; and while in Chambéry he produces his first counter-revolutionary writing: the *Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens à la Convention*.

For six weeks, he lived the experience of revolutionary Savoy. He saw the functioning of a revolutionary mechanism elaborated in France over forty months of Revolution and abruptly applied in a few weeks to the conquered province. From this fact, he had a painful consciousness of the *rupture* between the old order of the world and the new world born of the Revolution, established on popular sovereignty that proclaimed religious and political liberty and instituted persecution and the law of suspects, that affirmed equality, and that re-established a hidden hierarchy by the practice of extortion associated with violence that Maistre could observe among the new possessors of power. The gap between the "immortal principles" and their translation on the ground convinced him that, at the very moment the Revolution was triumphing, it carried within itself its own condemnation. He acquired the certitude that state terrorism could not found a lasting new order.

In the last days of February 1793, warned discreetly (by Masonic accomplices?) that arrest was imminent, Joseph de Maistre obtained a

<sup>9</sup> ["A new order is born." Maistre's Latin here appears to be an adaptation of Vergil's "*Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo*." *Eclagues*, IV, l.5.]

<sup>10</sup> In the course of his stay in Turin (October to December 1792), J. de Maistre met influential persons, notably through the intervention of the Marquis de Barol. On 17 December, he addressed a memoir to Minister Perret d'Hauteville, very hostile to the Revolution; on the 24<sup>th</sup>, he dined with him; and before crossing the frontier, he addressed a letter to him. See Maistre's *Carnets*, 22-3.

counterfeit passport and got to Geneva. Madam de Maistre, who had just brought her third child into the world in Chambéry on 26 January, will go secretly to Lausanne several months later, after having confided Constance to a trustworthy wet nurse who will raise her in the Savoyard countryside.

The period that interests us now, that of his stay in Lausanne, represents the coherent consequence of his course; after having observed the Revolution, after having seen its brutal implantation in Savoy, he is going to devote his strength to combatting it. Then in the face of repeated checks to the European coalition, he is going to employ himself in “thinking the Revolution” by unveiling its hidden meaning, its *metapolitics*. Observation, action, and contemplation, three steps that are going to give birth to two types of works: on the one hand, the *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, other polemical writings of 1793, and the study on *la souveraineté du peuple* begun in 1794; and, on the other, the *Discours à la marquise de Costa* (1794) and the *Considérations (religieuses) sur la France*.<sup>11</sup>

This brief recollection of his evolution from 1788 emphasizes the continuity of his personal development.

#### JOSEPH DE MAISTRE IN LAUSANNE

Joseph de Maistre arrived in Lausanne with four certainties about the French Revolution and its causes. First of all, he saw the beginning of the year 1793 as heading towards the Jacobin dictatorship, the necessary as well as inevitable consequence of 1789; there is not to his eyes a contradiction between a “good revolution” – that of the Constituents – and a revolution that had been turned away from its objectives by the intervention of the popular masses, which is what distinguished the French *monarchiens*. All his writings reject the thesis of some sort of “skid” of the Revolution. He is intimately persuaded that he is witnessing the evolution of a process in perfect coherence with its ideological bases and its beginnings. It is principally his reading of Burke’s striking work, the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in January 1791, that will transform this intuition into certainty.

The second and third certitudes concern the causes of the French Revolution. It was born of the errors and abuses of the monarchy whose evolution towards absolutism could only be accomplished by abasing the two orders, the nobility and the Third Estate, whose respective functions were indispensable for the good functioning of traditional, that is to say consensual, monarchy. Their fall had provoked a gap between monarch and subjects, between governors and governed, which translated itself,

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<sup>11</sup> Original title given by Maistre to his first important work.

when faced with a crisis, into equally deadly alternatives: inaction or repression.

The Sardinian monarchy, despite being less corrupt or denatured, had no less followed a parallel path since Charles-Emmanuel III: enlightened despotism and its Catholic version, Josephism. The Savoyard magistrate had observed its unfortunate effects on the ground: governmental centralization, ministerial arbitrariness, "civil servants" of authority named by the discretionary power of the king and rendering account only to him, and decisions taken in Turin and applied in Savoy, necessarily with brutality. The Senate was no longer a chamber of registration but only a court of justice. Revolutionary propaganda found the ground well prepared. What a course had been followed between Victor-Amadeus III's triumphant visit to Savoy in 1775 and the disintegration of the last years of the old regime!

The Revolution, daughter of the ideology of the Enlightenment, is however a fragile order because of its claimed foundation of rationality, and by this token, the negation of the specific history of each people. For Maistre, it destroys, but will not know how to build a lasting order.

The Revolution called for a regeneration, an act of faith that required not a rational but an intuitive certitude; whence the necessity of counter-revolution. This is more urgent to the Savoyard royalist's mind because the Europe of the monarchies is directly menaced. The counter-revolution must be developed on two levels, internal and external: the regeneration of the Sardinian monarchy and a counter-revolutionary offensive copied from the methods used by the adversary.

Maistre was not yet conscious of the vanity of this plan, due entirely to the desire for revenge which animated it: how could this "band of beggars," heroic certainly, resist the concerted and organized counter-offensive of monarchies, even if the conflict opposed them to the most populous nation of Europe?

JOSEPH DE MAISTRE AND VIGNET DES  
ETOLES: CONVERGENCES AND  
CONTROVERSIES

The letters addressed to Baron Vignet des Etoles, charged unofficially first with the interests of the King of Sardinia in the thirteen cantons before receiving his letters of accreditation in October 1793, permit us to follow week after week the reflections and actions of Joseph de Maistre, installed in Lausanne, to put himself in the service of his sovereign. The reader will immediately be struck by the liberty of tone that breaks with the habitual style of diplomatic usage. To understand the reason for this,



we must first note the personality of the future ambassador and recall the old ties between the two men.

Amé-Louis-Marie Vignet,<sup>12</sup> Baron des Etoles, was born in Thonon on 29 February 1739, into a robe family ennobled through a position as honorary senator of the Senate of Savoy and titled in 1757. On completion of brilliant studies in Turin, he was attached (at eighteen!) to the secretariat of the controller general of finances for whom he very quickly became a trusted man. He participated closely in the program of fiscal reforms undertaken by the old king, Charles-Emmanuel, principally concerning the duchy of Aosta of which he became the first intendant in 1773. In 1784, in difficult circumstances, he became the intendant general of Savoy. This great servant of the Sardinian state, associated with the policy of centralized reform of Charles-Emmanuel and of the new king, Victor-Amadeus, met grave difficulties in the application of the reforms in Savoy. Discouraged, he resigned and was put on leave of absence in 1785. From his retreat in Thonon, he was a distressed witness to the disintegration of old regime Savoy. He busied himself addressing reports designed to enlighten the king on the deterioration of the situation and emergency measures to take, just as Joseph de Maistre was doing from Chambéry. As we see, many things brought the two men together: family ties, loyalty to the sovereign, a desire to serve the king by enlightening him directly, and by denouncing the inertia or incompetence of the political personnel in place. Their real divergences on the means of regenerating the old monarchy gave occasion for friendly contradictory debates between the old intendant, very well informed on the secrets of the political life of the court and of the Sardinian state, and the "young" Chamberlain Senator, impatient to play a foreground role. Their friendship, the confidence between the two men, and their community of preoccupations explains the extreme liberty of tone of the significant passages that we offer to the reader.

Another question poses itself. How do we explain why, in these letters, Joseph de Maistre criticized so harshly and so repeatedly the policy of the Sardinian state to which he remained loyal his whole life long? The intimacy between the two correspondents does not alone justify this. The principal reason lies in Joseph de Maistre's hostility with respect to the Sardinian monarchy's evolution, since Charles-Emmanuel III's reign, towards enlightened despotism or more exactly towards Josephism.

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<sup>12</sup> Consult the excellent study by Jean Nicolas, "Un intendant des Lumières: Vignet des Etoles en Val d'Aoste," in *L'Età dei Lumi, Studi storici sul settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi* (s.l.: Jovenne editore 1985), 695-735.

From the 1780s, from the school of English political thought, but more traditionally in the clear line of the Aristotelian concept of power, Maistre thought that necessity is the foundation of political power. The state has no other goal than to limit each man's will to domination (the *libido dominandi* of St. Augustine), so that the society of man be ordered. This requires a power that judges and is not judged. This can only be the power of one and the history of pagan and Christian humanity argues in favour of monarchy to assure the efficacy, the longevity, but also the limits of human power.

The power of one, a power delegated not by man but by God, and not absolute, that is to say not despotic. The monarchy must be limited by the moral law, by the very object, civil peace, that political power aims at, by the laws and customs of the state, and finally by intermediate bodies that dispose of a power delegated by the sovereign and that are the heirs of representative bodies of the old communities of the nation.

Such is the outcome of Joseph de Maistre's political reflection towards 1788. In effect, the substitute, become senator, had suffered in seeing the venerable institution that was the Senate of Savoy diminished and degraded by a king who wanted more and more to be an enlightened despot.

This is the whole dilemma between political immobility in the name of tradition and reformism in the name of necessary evolution that was posed by Joseph de Maistre. The originality of his position is that he simultaneously refused both conservatism and revolution, at the risk of being misunderstood by and being displeasing to both sides.

Another explanation of the accusations Joseph de Maistre laid against Turin is more circumstantial; they bear on the policy adopted by Victor-Amadeus with respect to France.

From 1789 until 1795, the old sovereign thought that the French Revolution constituted no more than an event in internal French politics, and that revolutionary France would return to the constant strategy of monarchial France: of being the protector of the small powers of Europe, of the buffer states between the two great nations of the continent, France and Austria. In his mind, the National Convention had an interest in protecting Savoy and even of restoring Savoy and the County of Nice to him, to recreate in the extension of the Rhenish states and Switzerland a neutral zone between the two powers. Did the Sardinian realm not have the vocation of remaining the guardian of the Alps?

Victor-Amadeus never wanted to hear the counsels that some lucid minds never ceased to lavish on him. He did not take account of the warnings of Burke, Mallet du Pan, and Maistre, who denounced the messianic claims of the new power, its will to extend itself over all of

Europe, then the whole world. The conquest of Piedmont in 1796 opened the kings eyes belatedly, but there was no more time.

#### DIPLOMATIC MISSION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY ACTION

The correspondence with Vignet des Etoles displays clearly the modest nature of the mission that was confided to Joseph de Maistre, first unofficially, then officially from August 1793. However, it is not necessary to underestimate its importance too much, as Robert Triomphe did. Behind the title *Correspondant de S.M. le Roi de Sardaigne à Lausanne* were activities whose nature must be made more precise.

To begin with the most modest, J. de Maistre was charged with transmitting missives that the minister sent to his ambassador in Berne and the latter's responses. Important mail was sent by courier when the occasion presented itself or when important content justified it, but more often by post for reasons of economy. Maistre was therefore one of the relays of which the principal points between Berne and Turin were Lausanne, Martigny, and Aosta. Tedious but necessary tasks consisting of receiving the messages, registering them, and sending them on their way by putting them into trustworthy hands or by consigning them to the Lausanne post office, with a double imperative: rapidity and safety. The preambles of many of the letters are devoted to following up previous letters, to explaining the delay of a particular missive, and untoward incidents, such as the Lausanne post office's red tape. Several letters detail at length the menace that French spies posed for diplomatic mail. In 1794, Joseph de Maistre was even betrayed by a porter who delivered important letters to representatives of the National Convention, undoubtedly for a reward and a certificate of patriotism.

How well did Joseph de Maistre carry out this thankless mission? His good will and his scruples are evident, but several times he was reproached for his distraction and a certain lack of organization. It happened that he forgot letters or sent them in the wrong direction; from which there were embarrassed and sometimes long explanations which call on our part for the omission of long passages devoid of interest.

#### AN INTELLIGENCE AGENT

A more important mission, intelligence, fell to the Lausanne "Correspondant." This was even the essential part of his task between April and October 1793, in the course of the period that preceded and followed the attempt to reconquer Savoy through Faucigny, Tarentaise,

and Maurienne.<sup>13</sup> Joseph de Maistre had constructed an extended network of royalist informers who had remained in Savoy or who had taken refuge in Geneva or in Valais. During these months when information had a primordial character, almost every day he addressed reports to Count Perret d'Hauteville, the king of Sardinia's minister of foreign affairs, joining to them messages from his correspondents or agents. He often made of them a summary report such as we find in his letters to Vignet des Etoles. The reader will find a certain amount of information touching on the men and events of the Revolution in Savoy. Some reports of this period, under an allusive form alas, reveal the role played by Maistre in the opening of negotiations between Turin and insurgent Lyon with a view to establishing a junction between the Piedmontese armies and the Lyon militias commanded by General Précý. These negotiations were interrupted, then disavowed by Turin; and Maistre will mention the shame that he experienced at having contributed involuntarily to the birth of illusions in the city besieged by troops loyal to the Convention.

#### A POLITICAL CORRESPONDENCE

However, the interests of the agent-diplomat of intelligence were not limited to Savoy and Lyon. He linked himself in Lausanne with a number of French émigrés, agents more or less accredited to the French Princes, who were in transit in the Valais. Vignet des Etoles several times warned him against the danger of certain company open to compromising the Sardinian cabinet or, more immediately, the stay of the hundred families of refugee Savoyards who benefited in Lausanne from a kind welcome on the part of the municipal authorities, provided that they did not draw attention to themselves. Lectured on this point by his friend, Joseph de Maistre, in his letters, mentioned much less than he did. He masks his relations with a number of important counter-revolutionaries, like Mallet du Pan, d'Antraigues, or d'Arthès. He minimizes the frequency of his contacts with the constitutional party that formed around Madam de Staël and that brought him a mass of information about men and events in Paris.

A number of letters passing on news received from different sides increased interest in the former senator's correspondence in 1793, 1794,

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<sup>13</sup> The best study of military operations in the Alps between 1792 and 1796 is that of Leonce Krebs and Henri Moris. Nourished from the documents of the major states, from correspondence from the Sardinian and Austrian side as well as the French side, it is irreplaceable for following the details of operations. It permits us to observe that Joseph de Maistre was generally well informed by his network of officers – relatives or friends. *Campagne dans les Alpes pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Plon 1891-1896), Volume 2, 1794-96.

or 1795. The Sardinian government was not deceived in this. Over the months, one discerns the growing interest of minister Perret d'Hauteville for the extent of the information and the quality of the reflections on all the fronts where monarchical Europe found itself menaced. Read first by the cabinet, the Savoyard's letters were read by the minister himself, and then by members of the royal family, notably the Prince of Piedmont.

The number of J. de Maistre's informers and the extent of his centres of interest present a reverse side. It seems that he lacked discernment in his choice of men. Too confident in his informers recruited for their royalist convictions, he could only with difficulty judge the accuracy of the transmitted information. It seems even that he lent a more attentive ear to ardent firebrands announcing the imminence of massive uprisings of Savoyard peasants than to realistic observers who did not underestimate the effectiveness of the revolutionaries nor the audience of those who were their beneficiaries in the principal localities. Not only did Maistre allow himself to be abused, but he wanted, if not to deceive the Sardinian government, at least to carry weight in the decision that it was slow to take to pass to the offensive to reconquer the lost province. The Duke de Montferrat, the king's brother, in a severe letter of September 1793, denounced the erroneous information transmitted from Switzerland. If the person aimed at was not Maistre, but Mirani, his informer in Geneva, the extreme vivacity of Maistre's reaction shows that he sensed himself a target of the indictment.

We can recognize extenuating circumstances for him: the difficulty of verifying information, the necessity of a rapid relation of events, the inevitable price of the engagement of the counter-revolutionary – which endorses favourable news and minimizes difficulties or reverses. Much later, Maistre will recognize in a confidence made to his daughter Constance that he was not exactly the man for the job, in the measure that he was made less for action than for contemplation: *Ipse fecit nos, et non ipsi nos* [He is the one who made us, and not ourselves], he had been accustomed to say to justify himself.

The vivacity of his imagination and his taste for brilliant speculation led him astray more than once; and, in the course of one letter, he recognized this by attributing the error to a nature whose impulsiveness he tried to control, with only partial success.

#### THE PROVIDENCE OF SAVOYARD REFUGEES

The third aspect on which one can put the accent is the consular function assumed by Joseph de Maistre in Lausanne. Representing the king of Sardinia, Maistre was his spokesman with the cantonal authorities and

represented the Savoyard refugee community whose interest he defended. The stay of foreigners was strictly regulated in this difficult period when the Swiss cantons were trying to preserve their neutrality. French émigrés were admitted only in transit and not without difficulty. From the fact of Joseph de Maistre's friendly relations with Baron d'Erlach, the bailiff of Lausanne, then the more formal relations with his successor, M. de Büren, the lot of the Savoyard refugees was less severe. Remaining loyal to their Sardinian sovereign, they could benefit from a different statute than that of the French émigrés, officially French citizens.

Joseph de Maistre was an effective shield in the defence of his unfortunate countrymen. The correspondence lists his innumerable interventions to obtain an asylum, sometimes temporary, for families from the Savoyard nobility, but also for commoners loyal to the king. He also protected the most sorely tried, with a very particular attention to refractory priests, religious, and elderly persons. He furnished passports liberally to those who looked for asylum further afield, fighting step by step with Vignet des Etoles, who gave him more restrictive orders on this point. Against formal orders, it seems that he furnished passports to French émigrés by invoking attachments with Savoy, however tenuous.

Moreover Maistre was denounced for having furnished false passports to counter-revolutionaries. The complaint addressed by the municipality of Chambéry to Barthélemy, French ambassador to the Swiss cantons, led to an instruction. If Joseph de Maistre was officially exonerated of this grave accusation, all the same in several cases he issued Savoyard émigré passports to individuals who visibly were not. If he took such risks, it was because his counter-revolutionary convictions led him to go beyond traditional diplomatic usages. He utilized as best he could the means – very limited – that his diplomatic status gave him. He defended his own, beginning with the members of his family. But this correspondence confirms equally that, beyond family, dynastic, and religious solidarities, his action was enlightened by a real Christian charity towards the most deprived.

#### FROM YEAR II TO YEAR IV

Depending on the year, the correspondence with Vignet has a different tonality. That of 1793, from May to October, tended towards hope of an imminent re-conquest. It is a call to counter-revolutionary action and expresses impatience with the slowness of the Sardinian cabinet; there is an optimism close to euphoria, in the image of the exaltation that took hold of the Savoyard community in Lausanne at the prospect of an imminent return to their country. The reader sees there the illusions of the royalist looking for all the means to force a decision for the offensive. Joseph de Maistre describes there at length the genesis of his *Lettres d'un*

*Royaliste savoienne*, drafted with Vignet's collaboration, and published in Lausanne to be diffused in Savoy and to serve the monarchist cause.

After the bitter check and the evacuation of the three Austro-Sardinian columns that had tried to reconquer Savoy, comes the time of revolt against the negligence of the court and the military leaders, but also that of doubt about the future of old monarchies and, simultaneously, that of questioning the meaning of the French Revolution. One will read in Joseph de Maistre's letters the intuition, then the certainty, that the Revolution marks the end of authentic monarchy. The dread that is his to be the witness of "the death" of European secular governments is of a religious nature: if the Revolution triumphs over all the difficulties, which at first glance are insurmountable, it is that it is obviously a punishment that is striking down the worn out, and Maistre adds, corrupt monarchies of the old Europe. From his political analysis, powerless to render an account of this immense event, Maistre has the sudden illumination of its metapolitical meaning. This shift will find its first literary expression in the very beautiful *Discours* to the Marquise de Costa on the death of her son (August 1794). The letters from this period permit us to follow its development.

The year 1794 is also the culminating point of the Terror. It obliged all those that it menaced to flee, to search for an asylum, to find again in prayer and religious practice consolation and hope. To assure the rescue of families dispersed by "the revolutionary torrent" becomes the primary task of the diplomat. There is not a letter that does not devote one or several paragraphs to this preoccupation; the majority of them could not be published in unabridged form.

Finally, the year 1795, the last year for which a regular correspondence is preserved, presents evidence of the least interest. Why? In 1793, Joseph de Maistre was at the heart of the information and the action; in 1794, he did his best to be the protector of the Savoyard refugees. In 1795, he could no longer be the former, and much less be the latter.

The privileged observatory was no longer on Lake Lemán, but in Basel, where negotiations, at first secret and then avowed, were engaged in between the National Convention and the two allied powers, Prussia and Spain, desirous of establishing the bases of a separate peace with revolutionary France. Joseph de Maistre found himself left out of all these negotiations of which the preliminaries were confided to Ambassador Vignet des Etoles, better placed in Berne to follow the dealings.<sup>14</sup> Since

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<sup>14</sup> On Vignet des Etoles' role, see his secret correspondence with Perret d'Hauteville utilized in our study, "La Sardaigne et les préliminaires des Traités de Bâle 1794-1795," *Revue Savoisiennne*, Annecy, 1977, 71-99.

the king of Sardinia remained uncompromising on the restitution of Savoy and Nice, the talks were very quickly broken off.

Moreover, the evolution of the Convention towards moderation – the Thermidorian Convention, the anti-Jacobin reaction, and the reduction of the persecution against priests and nobles – reduced the role of protection that had been Joseph de Maistre's some months earlier. In a parallel way, the stronger and stronger pressure of the Army of the Alps on Piedmont and the dislocation of the coalition transformed the diplomat into a fatalistic spectator in the face of the shipwreck of the monarchy.

#### CONCLUSION

After having recalled the principal events that fed the correspondence addressed to Vignet and that explains its tone, it is advisable not to forget what is essential for us. Through the substantial fragments that are published, it is above all the personal adventure of a man become a writer by the Revolution that it is given us to read. The four years of his stay in Lausanne, that Maistre will later describe, in a letter to Baron de Chambrier d'Oleyres, as being "the sweetest of [his] life," had permitted the blooming of his personality and his vocation.

Arriving in Lausanne as a senator from a province where he had sensed himself to be cramped, learned, curious about political science, and versed in esoteric speculation, he will leave Switzerland as a diplomat whose scope and experience were without common measure with his modest initial attributions. Having arrived in Lausanne, in April 1793, as an author of occasional memoirs, it is the thinker of the *Considérations sur la France* who takes the route to Turin in February 1797. The correspondence published here permits us to reconstitute his itinerary.

Joseph de Maistre remained four years in Lausanne, from 1793 to 1797. He played a notable role in the society of the city during this period: "Correspondent" of the Sardinian king – what we would today call a consul – he had been intimately linked to the political world, to the brilliant society of literary salons, and finally to the world of the emigration.

Associated with the principal families of the Vaud area, an active agent of the counter-revolution, a discrete propagandist for Roman Catholicism in this old reformed land impregnated with illuminism, his presence in Lausanne had not been insignificant or fleeting. Two months after his departure there will appear at Neuchâtel his first important work [*Considérations sur la France*] saluted by the *Gazette de Lausanne* as a masterpiece of political and metaphysical analysis of the French Revolution.



And yet, in the new and voluminous *Histoire de Lausanne* published recently,<sup>15</sup> his name is not even cited. That is to say that there is work that remains to be done to bring Joseph de Maistre out of the silence where many would still like to relegate him.

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<sup>15</sup> Ed. Privat et Payot, under the direction of Jean-Charles Biaudet.

*Joseph de Maistre and the  
House of Savoy: Some  
Aspects of his Career*<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen years ago the Institut d'études maistriennes was created in Chambéry. It is not up to me to judge the presentations, articles, studies, and works published under its aegis, in the context of the Centre d'études franco-italiennes, I can at least recall the objectives the research centre established for itself.

Among these objectives is our concern to provide light on the shadowy zones that rightly intrigue the critic and whose persistence detracts from an as exact as possible appreciation of the man, the writer, the philosopher, and the politician.

Joseph de Maistre has been compared by his biographer, Robert Triomphe, to an Alpine summit. Every summit has both a sunny side and a shady side. It is not surprising that the obscure face is more attractive to the researcher, and there is nothing unhealthy about this investigation if one does not lose sight of the sunny face.

In this perspective, Jean Rebotton has looked at Maistre's youth, the period of his education, and at the young magistrate's Masonic activities. For my part, I have sought to understand his simultaneous and paradoxical engagement as a penitent, as a congregationist, and as a Freemason. The recent and numerous works of the historians of pre-revolutionary Savoy, in the first instance those of Jean Nicolas, and, moreover, a methodical exploration of the Maistre family archives have, it seems to me, permitted us to shed new light on some of these points.

Several controversial aspects of Joseph de Maistre's career as magistrate and diplomat engage our attention in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> "Joseph de Maistre et la Maison de Savoie: Quelques aspects de sa carrière," *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 11 (1990), 75-89. This article was first published in *Culture et pouvoir dans les Etats de la Maison de Savoie du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à la Révolution* (Geneva: Slatkine 1985), 285-301.

I am going to look at the relations of the magistrate with political authority, with the minister and the court of the king of Piedmont-Sardinia, in two different periods in his life: his career as a magistrate between 1774 and 1792, and his stay in Cagliari, as *Régent de la Royale Audience*, (1800-1803).

We know that his career was not as easy or as brilliant as it could have been: the states of the House of Savoy were an artificial and disparate construction in the history of monarchical Europe that would necessarily be stressed by the revolutionary upheaval and, especially, by the ideological emergence of the Nation-State that the French Revolution was going to promote with messianic zeal. Joseph de Maistre knew that he had tied his destiny to a condemned state: "When these complicated old institutions, worm-eaten so to say by time, and that only subsist today because they subsisted yesterday, come to be overturned by some violent and unexpected blow, they no longer get up."<sup>2</sup> What was true for Austria was even truer for the mosaic-state of the Savoyard sovereign.

Maistre spoke many times of his enemies in Turin who had nick-named him "brother Joseph," making allusion to his Masonic involvement, or again, "the Frenchman," to denounce his francophilia; much as has been said as well about his "stiff and dogmatic" temperament, as his friend Joseph Henri Costa wrote of him, or again of his sharp tone, "little made to succeed here, where they know nothing, but where, on the other hand, spines have the suppleness of wicker."<sup>3</sup>

Joseph de Maistre's relationship with political authority was not servilely submissive. This man, whose culture was vast and whose erudition was truly encyclopedic, always proclaimed his right to criticize and to remonstrate when confronted by power; this by character, but also by his concept of the advisory role that intermediate bodies were naturally led to play with respect to the sovereign.

In his correspondence he made use of a playfully abrupt frankness that makes one think of Alceste in *Misanthrope*. One of his letters to the Baroness de Pont illustrates well this climate where sincerity and artifice are mixed closely together:

<sup>2</sup> *Oeuvres complètes* (Lyons: Vitte, 1884-1887), 10:189. [Maistre to the Chevalier de Rossi, 31 August 1806, writing about Austria.]

<sup>3</sup> Albert Costa de Beauregard, *Un homme d'autrefois* (Paris: Plon 1877), 405-6. Joseph-Henry Costa's judgement on the ignorance of the political milieu in Turin is unjust: let us evoke the names of Prosper de Bable and of J. Galeone Napione, brilliant disciples of Count Jean-Baptiste Bogino (1701-1784), strategic minister and reformer under Charles-Emmanuel III. The bitterness of the Savoyards proves their isolation, culturally, and politically as, more and more, Piedmont turned its eyes towards Italy.

I will always continue to say what appears to me to be good and right, without paying the least attention to the world. *It is not for that that I count, if I count for something* [...] I have always made my way through the storms, greatly surprising spectators who see me sleeping calmly. I have done things in my life capable of losing five or six public men. They have been angry; they have said everything that you can hear – and I am still standing [...] there is in my manner of speaking something original, *vibrante* as the Italians say, and trenchant, which, especially in moments of warmth or inadvertence, has the air of announcing a certain despotism of opinion to which I have no more right than any other man, etc.? I know all that, Madam; nature driven out through the door will come back by the window. [...] If I could acquaint you with my inconceivable star, Madam, if I could make you feel the *hidden* hand that *visibly* leads me, without my being involved in it, you would approve the kind of reasonable fatalism that I have adopted.<sup>4</sup>

What exactly is this all about? Did his Masonic membership do him a disservice? Or the liberalism of his youth, or his francophilia? It is vain to ask if he had enemies in Turin. Every public man, when he has shown independence of mind, has enemies. However, we can ask ourselves about the real or mythic existence of an anti-Maistre clan in Turin, at least of prejudices sufficiently active to have noticeably retarded the development of his career.

#### THE MAGISTRATE'S CAREER, 1774-1792

It has been customary to say that Joseph de Maistre had an abnormally slow career as a magistrate.<sup>5</sup> Having entered the office of the *avocat fiscal générale* in December 1774, he will only be named a senator in June 1788. Thirteen and half years of waiting can appear long for the son of a second president of the Senate of Savoy. Moreover, his correspondence contains numerous enough allusions to his enemies beyond the mountains. We know as well that he had been reproached for his involvement in Freemasonry and that he experienced the need to justify himself for this in April 1793.

To my knowledge, it was Albert Blanc who, in the middle of the nineteenth century, revealed the existence of a police dossier concerning the Chamberian: “they threw into a file in Turin the seeds of distrust, the

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Baroness de Pont, 20 May 1805, *O. C.*, 9:400

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Droz 1968): “The judicial career of Maistre, eldest son of President François Xavier, should have been rapid enough. In fact, it was no more rapid than that of the father, a new-comer in the trade.” 84.

half-revelations presenting M. de Maistre as a dangerous man inclined to new ideas. This accusation will remain in the files of the top police.”<sup>6</sup>

Count Rodolphe de Maistre, in the biographical notice placed at the head of the edition called *Oeuvres complètes*, seems to retreat and retains only the suspicion of Jacobinism and the denunciation of the senator “as a mind inclined to novelties, and of whom one must be careful.”<sup>7</sup>

That in the climate of extreme confusion that reigned in Savoy and in Piedmont after 1788, Joseph de Maistre had been denounced, with many of his colleagues of the Senate, as a proselyte of change, is not surprising, and we find traces of this in the correspondence of the Senate’s president, Lovera di Maria.<sup>8</sup>

However, we are obliged to declare that there is no trace in the public or private archives, notably in the correspondence of the governors, of marks of distrust with respect to Maistre and his friends that could have retarded their promotion in any way before the revolutionary period.

Let us go further. An attentive study of the entry and exit from the office of the *avocat fiscal générale* between 1766 and 1791 permits to follow exactly the career pattern of supernumerary substitutes, then effective substitutes, and finally the nominations to the position of senator or the top administration of the realm. In consulting these lists, we note first that promotions were made by seniority, following an immutable procedure: the majority of substitutes were named senator as soon as a vacancy occurred among the fifteen senators, named by the king in principle for life, or until called to other administrative functions. Slow promotion, always uncertain, since dependent on royal decision, marked the crowning of a magistrate’s career, with “the supreme objective,” writes Jean Nicolas, “attained towards the average age of forty-five or forty-six years.”<sup>9</sup> A much sought after promotion integrated the new senator *de jure* into the nobility of the duchy if he was of commoner origin, at least if we refer to the long list of requests of the Senate recalling the privileges of the sovereign courts of the province, and in the more ambiguous measure of several ducal and royal edicts of the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cited by F. Descostes, *J de Maistre avant la Révolution*, 1:23 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> *O.C.* (Lyon: Vitte 1884-87), lviii.

<sup>8</sup> See extracts of the letters of 4 September and 6 November 1790, cited by Jean Nicolas, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 1, 1971, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Nicolas, *La Savoie au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Maline), 2:612.

<sup>10</sup> On this controversial question, consult the two competing theses: Jean Nicolas, 21, 46, 615, and 902-03, and Henri Arminjon, *De la noblesse des sénateurs* (Annecy: Garder 1977).

The nearer we approach the 1780s, the slower are the promotions, the number of substitutes having increased substantially after 1775; one goes, in effect, from five effective substitutes in 1782 to seven in 1788, while the number of senators remained stable. Some examples will illustrate the traffic jam that reigned in the corridors of the Senate.

*The period from 1766 to 1768:*

– Pierre Clément Foncet de Montaille: entered into the office of the *avocat fiscal général* in 1766, was named senator 20 December 1773, a wait of eight years as a substitute;

– Jean-François de Ville: entered the office in 1768, became a senator on 6 December 1777, a ten-year wait.

*The period from 1771 to 1790:*

– Jean-Antoine Bonjean: entered the office in 1771, became a senator on 31 January 1780, a nine-year wait;

– Jean-Baptiste Salteur: entered the office on 27 November 1773; became a senator on 5 May 1785, a wait of eleven years and six months;

– Joseph de Maistre: entered 6 December 1774, a senator 3 June 1788, a thirteen and a half year wait;

– Etienne Aubriot de Lapalme: entered 13 December 1776, senator 7 March 1789, a wait of twelve years and three months;

– Gaspard Rose: entered 19 December 1777, senator 27 April 1789, a wait of eleven years and three months;

– Jean-Baptiste Rolf de Marigny: entered in 1778, senator 1 August 1790, a wait of twelve and a half years.

When the wait became too long, because of the lack of a vacancy – and this, it appears, is what happened in Joseph de Maistre's case – the king named in excess or provisionally. There is an echo of this reported by a certain Fortis, in a letter of 1788:

There is nothing except that it is said that Monsieur Count Maistre, who has been in Turin for some time, will be named a supernumerary senator, and that *M. L'avocat des pauvres* Vignet will be titled as senator with the reserve of his right of seniority until he is placed.<sup>11</sup>

However, another element was also taken into account: the age of the person to be promoted. The Senate, the summit of the Savoyard magistracy, represented, as has been said, the crowning of a career and the acquisition of envied privileges. On average, it was achieved at forty-five years of age. A rapid promotion could recompense particularly brilliant substitutes towards the age of thirty-five. Moreover, this is precisely the age at which Maistre and Salteur were named. Gaspard

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<sup>11</sup> Unpublished letter of 19 April 1788. Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble, Fonds Vermale, R 9 700, p. 63.

Rose, their common friend, had to wait until he was forty-one, Joseph de Juge, thirty-nine, and Etienne Aubriot de Lapalme, forty-three.

If Joseph de Maistre remained the head of the substitutes for three years (from May 1785 to May 1788), while his colleagues waited scarcely more than two years, it is perhaps equally because of his youth. The king could not have neglected the usages that ruled the advancement of the life of the Senate by too rapid promotions without creating a climate of discontent, jealousy, and intrigue prejudicial to the functioning of the institution.

That the substitute Maistre had found the time long and that he had fidgeted in the face of the slowness of an administration in a state of crisis is most natural. However, there is nothing that proves that he had been the object of a particular mistrust. Let us not forget that he is counted as one of the youngest senators named.

If the royal authority wanted to impose a longer wait on a brilliant and gifted, but young and impulsive, subject, then this is after all the mark of a wise sense of the government of men.

#### THE SARDINIAN PERIOD, 1800-1803

During the Revolution, relations between Joseph de Maistre, correspondent of the Sardinian minister of foreign affairs in Lausanne, and King Victor Amadeus III's entourage were not easy; they reproached him for certain of his counter-revolutionary initiatives, and, especially, for his liberty of tone and his criticism, willfully acerbic, of governmental immobility. It is not surprising that his *Lettres d'un Royaliste savoisien* had been censured, and then their sale forbidden. Among others, this short passage from the Third Letter had shocked the "Excellencies" of Turin:

It is too certain that the different governments of Europe have not understood the French Revolution at first; and when, after four years of unheard-of excesses, they have begun to sense the danger, it is still true that they are deceiving themselves on the remedies as they were mistaken on the sickness.<sup>12</sup>

In his private correspondence, the vivacity of his judgments came close to irony. That was known.

From the end of 1794, the old king, fatigued and desperate from the victories of the Revolution, confided affairs to the prince heir who ascended the throne on 28 February 1796 under the name of Charles-Emmanuel IV. The new king was well disposed towards Joseph de Maistre and called him to Turin. He was going to name him a Councillor of State when the affair of *Considérations sur la France*

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<sup>12</sup> O.C., 7:13 1.

broke. On 28 October 1797, Bonaparte intercepted a letter from Count d'Avaray, councillor of Louis XVIII, revealing the identity of the anonymous author of the counter-revolutionary pamphlet and letting it be supposed that he was in close relations with the pretender to the French throne.<sup>13</sup> The "inconceivable" star of the Chamberian put a momentary end to all hope of employment in a country become officially, by the Treaty of Paris (15 May 1796), the ally of revolutionary France. Under pain of being accused of a double play, conforming to Article 5 of the treaty, the king could only disavow the imprudent "functionary."

Maistre had to flee Turin and find a precarious refuge in Venice. The advance of Russian troops into northern Italy would give him hope; in the spring of 1799, Verona, Milan, and then Turin were liberated and provisionally removed from French occupation.

In July, Maistre wrote to Count de Challembert, the king's first minister, to solicit a position.<sup>14</sup> If we believe his *Carnets*, this letter was at the origin of his nomination as *Régent de Chancellerie*, which made Joseph de Maistre the second personage, after the viceroy, on the island of Sardinia.<sup>15</sup> We can doubt this explanation. How could a simple letter, at a time when the realm found itself limited to a poor and backward island, have been able to count for a coveted position. In fact, Maistre had important backing at his disposal. To begin with, that of the king, who wanted to repair the unfortunate mishap of 1797. Also however, that of Count de Challembert and of the under-secretary of state, François Gabet, an old relation of the Chamberian.

The state of anarchy that reigned in the island required restoration of order in administration and justice under the direction of a career magistrate at once loyal and sufficiently independent to re-establish a state of law, a foreigner to the island to be in a position to impose himself on the quasi-feudal factions, and, finally, capable of imposing his authority, but also with enough flexibility not to risk re-opening complaints following from recent and bloody riots by the islanders.

Joseph de Maistre had appeared to be the man for the situation. The expectations of the letter of nomination and of the letter awarding him the cross of the order of Saints Maurice and Lazare were flattering to him:

... His Majesty recalls with pleasure [the services] that you have rendered him during the time you occupied the office of Senator of the Senate of Savoy, and

<sup>13</sup> See the Introduction to my edition of Maistre's *Considérations* (Geneva: Slatkine 1980), 52-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Carnets intimes* (Lyon: Vitte 1923), 139-40..

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.



counting on the true attachment that you have shown him, has deigned to name you to the Regency of this magistracy of Cagliari in place of President Cocco, who His Majesty reserves to himself to reward by some honourable distinction.<sup>16</sup>

The King recalls with pleasure, Monsieur, that you have constantly given him proofs of zeal, of loyalty, and of a particular attachment, and that as a consequence of these laudable sentiments you have made the sacrifice of your fortune in Savoy, that your services in the magistracy as well as in diplomacy in Switzerland have been distinguished, and wishing to give you a testament of his approval, His Majesty deigns to decorate you with the Cross of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazare.<sup>17</sup>

His mission remained imprecise. The king asked him “in concert with S.A.R. [the viceroy Charles Félix, the king’s brother] [to] give such dispositions as [his] experience in affairs, and [his] knowledge will suggest [to him].”

Maistre thus had *carte blanche*, and his position with respect to the viceroy implied an association rather than subjection. He disembarked on the island on 12 January 1800. From the first months he became involved in conflict with the Duke of Genevois and, with the passing of time, more and more violently.

We know the insistent and painful recriminations of the author of the *Soirées* in St. Petersburg each time that he evoked his stay of three years on that “unfortunate island” and the causes that he invoked to explain his check.<sup>18</sup> A self-serving plea certainly, and one that must be examined with a critical mind. However, we also know the harsh concepts that were held by Charles Félix on the government of men as well as on the exercise of justice.<sup>19</sup> On form as well as substance, the military man and the magistrate could only diverge.

Robert Triomphe reproduces in his thesis the viceroy’s very hard judgments about the regent,<sup>20</sup> as revealed by F. Lemmi.<sup>21</sup> However, instead of presenting an equitable critique of the respective wrongs, he employs them with a spite calculated to reduce the conflict to meanness, derisory questions of pride, and quarrels about precedence. It was really

<sup>16</sup> Unpublished letter of Count de Challembert, 15 August 1799. (Maistre family archives.) We present these extracts in a modernized written form with modernized punctuation and spelling.

<sup>17</sup> Unpublished letter from the same, 28 October 1799. (Maistre family archives.)

<sup>18</sup> See his correspondence, *O.C.*, 9: 120-1, 156-67, 410-11, 412-16, and 457-63 especially.

<sup>19</sup> Domenico Carutti, *Storia della corte di Savoia durante la Rivoluzione francese et l'Impero* (Turin: Roux 1892). See 2:155-9.

<sup>20</sup> Triomphe, 186-7 and 191.

<sup>21</sup> *Guiseppe de Maistre en Sardegna* in *Fert*, III, 1931, 240-68.

quite a different question and the texts that we will produce show this amply. Domenico Carutti had understood well the nature of the conflict: "Count de Challembert thought that the island had to be straightened out with the rule of law, and the Regent (de Maistre) held the same opinion; Charles Félix on the contrary and the Chevalier Manca [the viceroy's councillor] intended to rule with a military government; hence the disagreements."<sup>22</sup>

The personal clashes between Charles Félix and Joseph de Maistre expressed two conceptions of monarchical power that, in the king's entourage and the government, sought to assure themselves of pre-eminence: enlightened despotism, which had numerous partisans at the Sardinian court from the time of Charles Emmanuel III, and the traditional monarchy limited by the powers of intermediate bodies.

On the ground, the disagreement between Charles Félix and Joseph de Maistre translated the opposition that existed at the summit of the state between Count de Challembert, first minister, and the Count de Roburent, first *écuyer* of the king and head of his military staff. The struggle for influence was all-the-more lively because the new king had neither a taste for government nor knowledge of public affairs.

In a troubled epoch, it is not surprising that the partisans of Josephism prevailed over legalism.

These incessant conflicts and his inability to chose a coherent line of conduct made the king determine to retire from affairs, a retreat that ended with his abdication on 4 June 1802. Charles Félix had asked several times, and in vain, for Joseph de Maistre's recall. He will do it again, on 30 August 1802, and will address a new, more insistent missive to the new king Victor Emmanuel I,<sup>23</sup> accompanied, it seems, by a veritable formal demand. From the end of 1801, however, the relations between the two men were at the strained point that rendered inoperative all attempts at accommodation.

Tired of his brother's recriminations, Charles Emmanuel ceded to the pressures and on 12 October 1801 prescribed to Count de Challembert the sending of a letter of reprimand to the regent. The king knew that in troubled times it is armies, and not magistrates, that save empires. He made a choice dictated by the difficult circumstances the realm of Sardinia was going through, sacrificing his personal sympathies for Joseph de Maistre.

<sup>22</sup> Carutti, 158.

<sup>23</sup> Letter published for the first time by Lemmi, and of which a significant extract will be found in Triomphe, 192.

Monsieur

In establishing you, Monsieur, as Regent of the Magistracy of the Royal Audience, the King flattered himself that you would have deployed an activity and an energy appropriate to second his views, directed to a prompt and exact administration of justice, principally in criminal matters, and thus brought about an end to the quantity of thefts, murders, and other grave excesses that harm society so essentially, and that profoundly afflict his paternal heart. However, a sad experience teaches us every day that these same disorders continue, and the scandalous facts happening in the villages of Tiesy, Dorgali [illegible], Orgosolo, Otsieri and others, prove it only too well. His Majesty has ordered me to let you know his displeasure, and to charge you expressly not only to put your hand to the prompt expedition of criminal proceedings, but again to watch with as much care over the conduct of the sitting judges of the Magistracy, as of the local ones, so as to awaken them and solicit their zeal if they show too much indolence, and even to use the most severe means that are in your hands, if you perceive some negligence, abuse, or punishable delinquency on the part of some of the subaltern ministers of justice. He orders me at the same time to recommend to you in general everything that relates to the administration of distributive justice, criminal as well as civil, in the hope your attentions will produce the happy effect that is awaited.

In fulfilling the precise intentions of His Majesty I reiterate to you the assurances of the respectful sentiments with which I have the honour of being, Monsieur, your very humble and very obedient servant.

Caserta, 12 October 1801

De Challembert<sup>24</sup>

This severe, but not wounding, letter of disapproval, was put into Maistre's hands by the viceroy. However, he received at the same time, without Charles Félix's knowledge, two confidential letters of the same date. The first, written by François Gabet, under-secretary of state, singularly limited the scope of blame and revealed the essentially political nature of the circumstances that had determined the king to disavow the regent:

I have had the regret, Monsieur, to be the material instrument of a letter that has been addressed to you by this courier, which testifies to you in substance by order of the King the displeasure of His Majesty at the poor administration of justice, criminal as well as civil; and it would seem by it that you are made solely responsible for abuses in this matter. Although I am involved in this and must only be involved in this insofar as it involves my duty, I know what one can justly think on this article, and that if this reproach is well founded as one can easily believe, it is equally undoubted that it must not be thrown on you, since not only are you not the cause of the evil nor have you authorized it in any way (it comes from causes that are too old), but that it cannot and must not depend on you to bring it to an end. After that, I must not any longer dissimulate from you that the one who has signed the letter is equally distant from imputing the

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<sup>24</sup> Unpublished letter (Maistre family archives.)

wrongs to you since it is very true that he has supported you on all occasions; that he knows as well the efforts that you have taken, uselessly up to now, and that it is only unwillingly that he had to obey sovereign orders. On this, Monsieur, you will judge of the side where the blow has its origin, and I am moreover persuaded that you will be infinitely less sensible. I would even think, in analysing well the situation, that it should not affect you personally and will only produce the effect of authorizing you more effectively towards your subordinates to second the charitable intentions of the King. Some example of severity towards those who will be lacking and have a poor attitude will not compromise you yourself and be without consequence for the common good, would be a thing that would be very useful to you because it could at least force malice to make a diversion! However, in that regard you are more than ever the person to see what might be appropriate. My unique goal is to render to my leader [Count Challembert] a well merited justice in telling you that he esteems you, that he is pleased with you, and that he truly has no reproach on this question, and I cede to the movement of constant recognition that animates me in your regard in fulfilling this duty towards both of you.<sup>25</sup>

A second confidential letter, from Count Challembert, must have spread some balm on Joseph de Maistre's heart by emptying the substance of the content of the official letter. The one truly responsible, the king's brother, not being able to be disavowed, Maistre served as the scapegoat, for the sake of form. Nevertheless, the latter noted with bitterness that King Charles-Emmanuel had decided in favour of the viceroy, and that, in these conditions, he could not have there "a healthy magistracy." The first minister, with whom he had frequent and confidential relations,<sup>26</sup> had not won the case and looked for a way to mask his own weakness from him by holding to a language that he did not want to hear: that of the flattest bureaucratise:

I know only too well, unfortunately, that the Prince has for you a coldness, as disagreeable in particular as it is harmful to the administration of justice that is confided to you. What has been its cause and what sustains it? I have no idea, and I can only make guesses in this regard. Is it an incompatibility of humour, of character, or of mode of acting? Is it simply the effect of a policy that is however misunderstood? Is it the fruit of the bad services that evil minds have rendered to you with the Prince? Is it a distaste and kind of disdain that military minds are always inspired with in regard to the Magistracy, without calculating the evil that they do to the public by diminishing too much the consideration

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<sup>25</sup> Unpublished letter of François Gabet (copy). Maistre family archives.

<sup>26</sup> From August 1801, J. de Maistre had engaged in confidential correspondence with the minister that did not pass through the viceroy's office. See Maistre's *registre de la correspondance*, REM, No. 7 (1981), 66-77. The information that we produce contradicts Triomphe's affirmation according to which Count de Challembert had been "Maistre's enemy." p. 192.

necessary to anyone who occupies a position in whatever career there is, military, judicial, or ecclesiastic or in any other department whatever? It is perhaps a mixture of all of this, without you having done anything wrong, and with the Prince having perhaps been too ready to lend an ear to critics and detractors. Whatever it is, I can assure you that it is not up to me to end this coldness, and I have the consolation of having many times, and as much as is in me, employed all the means appropriate for me to win for you the good will and esteem of His Royal Majesty. However this consolation is greatly weakened by regret at not having succeeded.

You ask my advice, but what could I give you that you have not already given yourself in a more efficacious way and which you have probably put into practice? To hold to a private and public conduct conforming to the taste of the one that you want to please, to look for means to content him in what he wants, to try to have friends near him so that their good offices diminish the bad impressions of detractors, etc. But whatever I tell you, I know well that you know all this better than I, and that it is not in this way that you have sinned. So I have only the wish to present to you the assurance to render you on all occasions all the services that depend upon me. For the rest it is up to you to do everything that you think you can do to be useful and to be patient until we come to happier times, by considering especially that you are not without companions in the test of disagreements ....

De Challembert<sup>27</sup>

As soon as Joseph de Maistre was in possession of the official letter of disapproval, he addressed on 12 November 1801 to Count de Challembert a memoir of defence transmitted by the viceroy.<sup>28</sup> He there exonerates his subordinates, the judges and magistrates of the island, of all responsibilities in the failings of justice, and, with better reason, in the situation of anarchy denounced by the sovereign. Maistre begins by confirming the gravity of the situation:

... Since His Majesty is informed, I can only applaud the accuracy of the picture that he has traced. Do not, I pray you, make any difference between criminal and civil justice. The one presents perhaps a more scandalous aspect than the other. If one takes only the poor, they alone are held to paying their debts. Intrigue, party spirit, and patronage mock the laws and hide them a little. In the trip that I had the honour to make with His Royal Highness, I heard only complaints on the failure of justice. This is the universal cry: but each one wants it for the others and no one wants it for himself.

He then re-establishes responsibilities for the state of things: the maintenance of order is not the responsibility of the magistracy:

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<sup>27</sup> Unedited letter of 12 October 1801. Maistre family archives.

<sup>28</sup> This memoir is too long to provide in its entirety; the reader will find here the most significant passages. Maistre family archives.

Two excellent Princes<sup>29</sup> full of good intentions and masters of all the force that the state of affairs dispose are making vain efforts to re-establish order. Assassinations occur under their eyes and by a really desperate calamity these turn the finest establishments against the goal that dictates them. If there are remedies to these great evils, they surely do not depend on us at this moment.

He then eulogizes the Sardinian magistracy under four points that can be summarized in this way:

1. The state of justice in Sardinia is neither worse nor better than in the past.
2. The magistrates are working better than before: the number of decrees rendered is the proof of this.
3. On the other side, the number of magistrates and judges is no longer in relation to the number of cases to be judged, either criminal or civil.
4. The task of the magistrate ends when the crime or offence has been judged and punished; it is not in his power to prevent them. The recovery of society rests on religion, legislation, and government.

This was to throw the stone into the neighbour's garden. And the Savoyard concluded his plea with a brusque haughtiness that is quite characteristic of his manner and which, probably, had been one of the causes of his difficulties with the viceroy:

This is what I have the honour of saying to you on the magistracy in general. As to the chief of this magistracy in particular, there is nothing to be said for him. Well before the age he has achieved, each man has a fixed reputation which is the price or the pain of his actions, and nothing can change this so that apologies are as useless as criticisms.

On 9 December 1801, Count de Challembert acknowledged reception of the memoir and, after the evocation of various current affairs, returned briefly to the affair that he considered closed:

As for what respects you, I feel better than anyone the solidity of what you tell me, and this is why I always groan the more on the pain and the embarrassment of your position.

I received your official letter of 12 November, and my only response is to assure you that I have not failed to put it under the King's eyes.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The viceroy, Charles Félix, and the Duke de Maurienne; the latter, with whom Maistre had better relations than with the viceroy, died on the island in October 1802.

<sup>30</sup> Maistre family archives.

Joseph de Maistre had to remain another year in Sardinia. After the grave crisis whose principal cause has just been related, it does not seem that a *modus virendi* was found between the two men.

In the course of the first part of 1802, the king progressively retired from affairs, until his abdication on 4 June. The government took care of current affairs. The viceroy and the regent had to support each other, not without the first subjecting the second to humiliating treatment. J. de Maistre continued to inform Challembert secretly on the affairs of the island.

As soon as the new king ascended the throne, the viceroy asked for Joseph de Maistre's recall in a menacing letter dated 30 August, where he asked the sovereign "to recall to the court, so to remove him from here where he can no longer remain without making a public disgrace."<sup>31</sup>

At that moment Joseph de Maistre's nomination to St. Petersburg was decided, without our being able to establish a link of cause and effect between the demand for recall and the new appointment.

On 23 October, the regent received a note from the king dated 28 September,<sup>32</sup> accompanying a letter from de Challembert and Gabet detailing the modalities and the objectives of the mission. Maistre learned that he was named "provisionally," while retaining his title as regent, and without that of plenipotentiary minister. Promotion-sanction, as it has been affirmed, or by reason of economy, as specified in Count de Challembert's letter? Or both, since the promotion could not have the character of appearing to disavow Charles Félix, who had asked for sanctions. Nothing in the present state of the documents at our disposal permits us to decide. In any case, one can observe that the ambassador in St. Petersburg was second in importance after London and it is hardly believable that the king had named to this post a diplomat who had been at fault in other functions.

Whatever the case, for Maistre it was the entrance into diplomacy with a brilliant destination, but by a small door.

Joseph de Maistre negotiated fiercely to obtain titles and conditions relating to the mission that had been confided to him. Thanks to interventions where Count de Challembert had "the major influence," the king ceded on the title "Extraordinary envoy and plenipotentiary minister," but he was uncompromising on the Great Cross [of St. Maurice and St. Lazar ], and especially, on the rapid departure of the new

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<sup>31</sup> Triomphe, 191.

<sup>32</sup> And not 7 October, as he says by error in the *Carnets*, 149.

ambassador, who was not authorized to have his family accompany him.<sup>33</sup> It would take too long, in the context of this communication, to give all the circumstances of this decisive episode in the Chamberian's career as well as the details of the instructions sent to guide him well on a mission essential for the financial survival of the Sardinian realm.

In the first weeks of his mission, the tone of his diplomatic correspondence drew for him counsels of moderation on the part of the king, which were transmitted to him by Gabet, become secretary of state. In conclusion, we can cite this compliment, full of nuances:

The king [...] has made you a quite flattering eulogy, and one that testifies to how much he counts on your zeal, your talents, and your knowledge; however, while laughing, he had the goodness to tell me that your pen is like lightening, and that its velocity can sometimes move away from reflection; that a turn of phrase can present itself as a bon mot to the one who writes it, while a different interpretation can make it appear as an insult to the one who is its object; and, finally, that a man warned is worth two ...<sup>34</sup>

Having been warned, Maistre none the less continued. "I have said, I have done things, in my life, capable of losing five or six public men." This is perhaps what cost him twice, the position of minister of foreign affairs: the first time in the spring of 1803, when they thought of him to succeed Count de Challembert, and a second time in 1815, at a time when it was a question of replacing Count de Valaise.

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<sup>33</sup> François Gabet, in a letter dated 28 September 1802, comments in these terms on the government's decision concerning the lot of Maistre's family: "If they want you to leave your family in Sardinia, it is equally in part by consideration for you, for it would be necessary in a foreign country, to keep it in a certain decor, which is not reconcilable with the distress of finances; a bachelor's life exempts you from many social obligations." We see that Robert Triomphe's allegations concerning this episode read like a novel. See his thesis, p. 190: "... the husband and the wife before leaving each other made their wills; by the husband's will they would have to remain twelve years without seeing each other," and, p. 193: "The happiness of walking away from the family hearth was not something that one admitted."

<sup>34</sup> Unpublished letter of 15 July 1803. Maistre family archives.



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*Part Two: Aspects of Maistre's Thought*

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## *Maistre's Theory of Sacrifice*<sup>1</sup>

Joseph de Maistre's "Eclaircissement sur les Sacrifices" (1810)<sup>2</sup> is an unjustly neglected work of a most unjustly neglected author. Written concurrently with his masterwork *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, "Enlightenment on Sacrifices" provides a theoretical underpinning to Maistre's notorious, often mysterious, and sometimes repellent reflections on punishment, war, the French Revolution, and the ways of Providence. The present essay outlines Maistre's theory of sacrifice, describes how he applied it to historical events, processes, and institutions, and begins to explore the significance of Maistre's theory for modern European intellectual history.

Western discourse on sacrifice is as old as the West itself and as new as the latest theory.<sup>3</sup> For not only Moses and Homer concerned themselves with such things. Sacrifice has of course always been a dominant theme of the Christian imagination, a theme taken up by many modern

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin, July 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Maistre, "Eclaircissement sur les Sacrifices," *Oeuvres Complètes de Joseph de Maistre* (Lyon: Vitte 1884), 5:283-360. Translated as "Elucidation on Sacrifices" in *Saint Petersburg Dialogues*, Richard Lebrun, ed. and trans. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press 1993) 353-91.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Calasso's *The Ruin of Kasch* traces world history as the history of sacrifice from the Vedas to Pol Pot, providing along the way some unusually insightful remarks on Maistre. Calasso's provocative general thesis is that modernity has become a regime of sacrifices forgetful of ritualized limits and thus infinitely deadly. "History is summed up in the fact that for a long time men killed other beings and dedicated them to an invisible power, but that after a certain point they killed them without dedicating the victims to anyone. ... Afterward, nothing remained but pure killing." *The Ruin of Kasch*, trans. William Weaver and Stephen Sartarelli (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press 1994), 135.

Western intellectuals, theists or atheists, working on the borders of religious questions. In Hegel's dialectic, Kierkegaard's Abraham, Nietzsche's Dionysus, and Freud's primal parricide, sacrifice provided a trope, logic, or figure with which to approach the most troubling and intractable problems of human life. Sacrifice has entered into contemporary reflection through the work of Georges Bataille and René Girard, in which it shapes every word.<sup>4</sup> The theme of sacrifice appears continually at key junctures of Lacan's seminars, and it plays a central role in Derrida's most recent publications.<sup>5</sup> Within this almost infinite context (which far exceeds the above brief list), Maistre's historical significance was to translate this ancient theological device into a concern of modern social theory.

More specifically, Maistre was the first European to develop a sociologically oriented theory of sacrifice based on a comparative study of global religious practices. Much valuable work has been done in recent years on the history of anthropology, yet Maistre's theoretical contributions remain unnoticed. Thus two of the most important authors on the subject, Catherine Bell and Susan Mizruchi, have sought the historical origins of modern theories of ritual, both concluding that these sources only emerge in the late nineteenth century with the work of Tylor, Robertson Smith, Frazer, Durkheim, and Hubert and Mauss.<sup>6</sup> That Maistre had broached the subject of the social role of ritual sacrifice a century earlier thus in itself deserves close historical attention.

The historical significance of Maistre's work is clarified by Mizruchi's explanation of why "a preoccupation with sacrifice was unique to [the] late nineteenth century." Sacrifice entered social theory, she argues, because of the social and spiritual instability of the period, the "challenge posed by science to the social dominance of religion," and "heightened perceptions of threats to social unification and order" (Mizruchi, 26).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Bataille's *Visions of Excess*, Allan Stockl, ed. & trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985), and Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1979).

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton 1978), 275, and "The Splendors of Antigone," in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton 1992), 243-56, and Derrida's *Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995) and "Eating Well," trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, *Points...*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995), 255-87.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997); and Susan L. Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998).

This specifically modern malaise was Maistre's own, shaped by his exposure to the French Enlightenment and Revolution. Maistre's witnessing of the Terror and the Wars of the Revolution, his previous major role in the highly ritualized institutions of the Savoy Parlement and the Masonic lodges, but also his upbringing in a highly traditional and indeed grim religious culture all did much to encourage his study of sacrifice and notably his insistence upon the pervasiveness of violence, punishment, sin, and ceremony in human societies.

The historical significance of Maistre's essay is further underlined when Mizruchi explains just how the theory of sacrifice proposed by Hubert and Mauss surpassed its nineteenth century predecessors. Against the one-sided oversimplifications which had treated sacrifice only as gift (Tylor), as consecration (Robertson Smith), or as murder (Frazer), the great advance of Hubert and Mauss was to stress "the basic ambiguity of a rite that is simultaneously communal and expiatory, sacred and profane, nourishing and annihilating" (72). This fundamental ambivalence and equivocality of ritual sacrifice, which Mizruchi considers a uniquely modern insight, was again central to Maistre's analysis. Historians of modern social theory therefore have much to gain from an understanding of Maistre's work on sacrifice.

If Maistre's theory thus anticipates more recent concerns, the sources from which he worked, both inside and outside the Western canon, were anything but modern. Chief among the intellectual influences on his work was the Judeo-Christian canon and Catholic traditionalism in particular, which takes fallen man, his flesh, and its limits as the starting point for all reflection on human existence. Yet Maistre's theory leaned heavily as well on Christian heterodoxy, notably Origen, whose influence pervades every page of his writings on sacrifice. These theological sources were supplemented by texts produced by classical civilizations and, perhaps most significantly, from the colonial encounter. Citations in the "Eclaircissement" refer to Genesis, Leviticus, Isaiah, the Psalms, the Gospels, and Paul; Homer, Ovid, Plato, Porphyry, Plutarch, Macrobius, and Josephus; Augustine, Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen; Carli's *American Letters* and the *Asiatic Researches* of William Jones, which provided early translations of Mezoamerican and Vedic texts. Maistre thus concludes of the sacrificial paradigm that "if one glances over the spectrum of the human mind from Origen to La Fontaine, one will see how natural these ideas are to mankind" ("Eclaircissement," 356n).

## "ENLIGHTENMENT ON SACRIFICES"

The title of Maistre's essay itself deserves comment for its bizarre and even scandalous juxtaposition of terms. To pair "éclaircissement" with "les sacrifices" is to confront the Enlightenment project with its greatest obstacles or adversaries: religion and violence. Today this gesture inevitably recalls the provocations of late twentieth-century continental thought, which likewise typically point toward extremities beyond the reach of enlightened reason. I would by no means contend that Maistre was two centuries ahead of his time or that postmodernism is merely counter-enlightenment in the latest garb, claims that would fly in the face of all historical sense. I would argue, however, that their shared emphasis on excess and alterity raises shared questions of intellectual responsibility. Then as now, intellectual responses to violence and irrationality may be more or less violent and irrational themselves, more or less responsible, more or less critical or symptomatic of the extremities they recount. Before addressing this question to Maistre's writings, one must note at the start that what he means to offer us is not a "sacrifice of enlightenment" but an "enlightenment on sacrifices" that will ground his general theory of society.

Why Maistre accorded such an essential social role to sacrifice may be explained briefly as follows. He was convinced that social unity ultimately rests upon religion, understood in the broadest sense as the sanctioned source of society's symbolic and imaginary cohesion. This religious order rests in turn upon ritual, upon the communal practice which establishes and re-establishes religious unity. And ritual, finally, rests upon sacrifice, where the symbolic order of religion comes into contact with bare life and restores human disorder to union. The argument reveals the traditionalist religious origins of Maistre's theory, which treats religion as the paramount human concern. Yet the argument equally demonstrates his effort to find a social logic within the practices of religious traditions, which he considers in the broadest possible latitude. To that effort and that logic we now turn.

Maistre's account of sacrifice rests upon two assertions about the nature of human life, one concerning human history and the other human nature. In the history of all civilizations, Maistre observes the universal practice of ritual sacrifice in some more or less refined form. Sacrifice is "the fundamental rite of nations" (304). It is "always the basis of every variety of religious practice, regardless of place, time, opinions, or circumstances"; it is the basis of "every common institution" (285 & n.). These statements, among many others, demonstrate that Maistre's primary intent was sociological rather than theological. Maistre considers sacrifice as a human rather than a divine work, as a social

practice. His essential concern is everywhere with how sacrificial rituals are performed, with how they address, frame, and handle the sacred, and with the human causes and effects of sacrifice. His essay must therefore be seen as a very early example of what was to become the sociology of religion.

Maistre's assertion of the universality of sacrificial ritual places European history, culture, and religion within a global context alongside Egypt, India, Israel, and the Americas. This comparative account provided Maistre a critical perspective, we shall see, on the culture of his own place and time. Here Maistre has his place in the long French tradition from Montaigne and Rousseau to Leiris and Lévi-Strauss, which seeks in ethnography a step outside the limits of European civilization. Like that tradition as a whole, he excoriates the narrow rationalism and bad faith of Western interpretations of traditional cultures, pointing out the "deplorable levity," "accusatory rancour," and "scorn for our unfortunate species" with which we dismiss them (334).

If sacrifice is a universal practice throughout human history, Maistre believes that this is because it rests on a universal attribute of human nature, our defining ambivalence. His essay on sacrifice begins with a litany of citations on human disequilibrium, from Augustine's lament that "there is such a difference between myself and myself" to Pascal's remarks on the "so obvious duplicity of mankind." For Maistre, the theoretical problem thus posed is to explain

how a single person can combine simultaneous oppositions; how he can love at the same time good and evil, love and hate the same object, desire and not desire; [...] in a word, how one person can be not one. (289-90).

In order to account for this human equivocality, Maistre relies on the Judeo-Christian myth of fallen man, who suffers in his sin the disequilibrium of flesh and spirit. Yet Maistre is not wholly content with this received idea. "I listen with respect and terror to all the threats made against the flesh, but I ask what it is." For, he observes, were "this power that opposes us" merely material, a flesh devoid of all thought and feeling, it could not throw our minds into disarray. Rather, our mental life itself must be guided by "two distinct powers," one "the intelligent principle" and the other "the soul of the flesh." Maistre then turns to a citation from Origen's *On First Principles* to lead the discussion back from human duality to sacrifice: "for, they say, we have two souls, the one good and heavenly, the other inferior or terrestrial, [...] and we believe that this soul of the flesh resides in the blood" (291).

It is upon this latter power, Maistre comments, that "the universally acknowledged malediction falls," and so, "since man was guilty through his sensible principle, through his flesh, through his life, the curse fell



on blood, for blood was the principle of life, or rather blood was life." That our bodily vitality, our life itself, resides in our blood, he observes, is an opinion shared by "ancient oriental traditions" and modern physiology (297). He thus concludes that sacrificial bloodletting "has its root in the very depths of human nature." It is rooted in our ambivalence, which is rooted in turn in our blood.<sup>7</sup>

The vitality of blood, or rather the identity of blood and life, being posed as a fact that antiquity never doubted and that has been renewed in our days, it was also an opinion as old as the world that heaven, provoked against flesh and blood, could only be appeased by blood; and no nation has ever doubted that there was in the effusion of blood an expiatory virtue (300).

In this way, the ambivalence of human mental life carries over into religious practice. For sacrifice demonstrates that the sacred is ambivalent in its essence: both holy and profane, joy and terror (307-8). Maistre's work on sacrifice thus challenges not only the Enlightenment's happy vision of human nature but its happy vision of religious life. Addressing the question of whether sacrifice should be understood primarily as gift or as victimization, he does not hesitate.

It is not at all merely a matter of a present, of an offering, of first fruits, of a simple act of homage and recognition offered to the divine sovereign [...]; for on this supposition men would have sought in butcher shops the flesh that had to be offered on their altars [...]. It is a matter of blood; it is a matter of immolation properly speaking; it is a matter of explaining how men of all times and all places could agree in believing that there was, not in the offering of flesh (this must be noted carefully), but in the shedding of blood, an expiatory virtue (328-9).

This, then, will have been Maistre's first contribution to the modern sociology of religion: to restore to the sacred its full equivocality and to situate that equivocality in the universal religious practice of sacrifice.

His second contribution was to have discovered the logic of sacrificial rituals in the equally universal ideas of substitution and reversibility. Substitution refers to how sacrificial violence is deflected onto victims outside the community, reversibility to how innocent victims compensate, pay the price, for the faults of the guilty. The "entire theory" behind the practice of sacrifice

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to observe how radically Maistre's talk of blood differs from nineteenth-century racist biology: blood embodies not our unique purity and glory but rather our impure degradation which we share with all peoples. The health of nations rests not on the preservation but the shedding of their (own) blood.

rested on the dogma of reversibility. One believed (as one always has and always will believe) that the innocent could pay for the guilty; from which one concluded that, life being guilty, a less valuable life could be offered and accepted for another. One thus offered the blood of animals (300-1).

Reversibility is the primary and essential assumption, because only if the innocent pay for the guilty does sacrifice have any meaning or indeed have any effect beyond shunting aggression onto a convenient victim. If reversibility thus gives sacrifice its meaning, substitution provides its logic.

Maistre insists that the choice of the innocent animal victim is not arbitrary. The logic of the substitute carries a double demand. On the one hand, the victim must differ from the supplicant community if he is to deflect and bear off its curse. On the other hand, the victim must resemble the supplicants if he is to replace and stand in for them. In animal sacrifices, therefore, the victim was never taken from species that are "carnivorous, stupid, or foreign to man" but always from "the most precious, most gentle, most innocent, those nearest to man by their instincts and habits." Maistre thus concludes his account of the general economy of sacrifice by observing that "not being able to immolate man to save man, one chose among all the animals the most human victims" (302). Sacrifice, which appears at first sight to be the height of egregious inhumanity and irrationality, has been shown to have a logic of its own and a necessity rooted in universal human nature.

Yet the enlightenment on sacrifices Maistre offers us does not stop there. Having explained the logic and necessity of the sacrificial economy, he proceeds immediately to its abuse, to the "abominable custom" and "horrible superstition of human sacrifices." The victimization of our fellow humans, he insists, is a "corruption" of the rationale of sacrifice. It "stems entirely" from the "innate dogma" of substitution, which it has "abused in a deplorable manner" (305-6). This abuse arose out of the sacrificial logic of substitution itself in the form of a double "sophism" that extended that logic "by a false induction to a case to which it does not apply."

First, the importance of the subjects from which the anathema had to be displaced. One said: to save an army, a city, even a great sovereign, what is one man? One also considered the particular character of the two kinds of human victims already consecrated by political civil law; and one said: what is the life of a criminal or an enemy?

"It is very likely," Maistre hypothesizes, that the first human sacrifices were performed on criminals condemned by the law. For the "ancients" of every nation believed that "every capital crime [...] bound the nation

and that the criminal was sacred or dedicated to the gods until, by the effusion of his blood, he had unbound both himself and the nation” (306-7).

This “system of the ancients,” Maistre observes, “from a certain point of view does honor to their good sense.” He seems to imply that this “system” deserves some praise for maintaining a reciprocity between transgression and punishment in which victimizer serves as victim. Yet by way of truly vicious sophistry, of “fatal reasoning,” this balance and this good sense collapsed into a “horrible public law”:

Unfortunately, men being penetrated by the principle that the efficacy of sacrifices was proportional to the importance of the victims, from the criminal to the enemy was but one step; every enemy was criminal; and, unfortunately again, every stranger was an enemy when one had need of victims (309).

This passage provides a powerful and sophisticated indictment of scapegoating as a paranoiac device by which a community expends its internal violence upon a harmless outsider who pays the price for its disorder. Essential to Maistre’s theory of sacrifice, then, is a critique of the abuses of sacrificial thinking.

Yet this critical perspective quickly threatens to be lost when Maistre seeks out the truth behind the sophism. Had human sacrifice not derived from some prior truth, “the man who would have proposed sacrificing another to propitiate the gods would have been put to death himself or declared a madman.” This leads Maistre to the general observation that

among the most monstrous practices and those that have most dishonored mankind there is not one that we cannot deliver from evil [...] by showing in them the residue of truth, which is divine.

This residue of “incontestable” truth is the “degradation of man,” his “original thingliness” [*réité*], and “the necessity of reparation” by way of “the reversibility of merits and the substitution of expiatory sufferings” (310-11). Ritual murder, it seems, can somehow be redeemed.

Maistre’s essay ends with a chapter entitled “The Christian Theory of Sacrifices,” which aims precisely to demonstrate how sacrifice is delivered from evil.<sup>8</sup> Opening with the question “What truth is not found in paganism?,” it proceeds to uncover the kernel of Christian truth embedded in pagan theology (335). Above all other truths, “paganism

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<sup>8</sup> Note how the structure of the essay thus repeats the dynamics of sacrifice itself, moving from the unity and generality of common religious practices, through their abuse and crisis in human sacrifice, to their remedy and restoration in Christianity.

could not be mistaken about an idea as fundamental and universal as that of sacrifice, that is to say of redemption by blood." While "how much blood was needed" remained unknown until Christ's death, the guiding principle of reversibility was universally acknowledged as the path to salvation, "the marvellous efficacy of the voluntary sacrifice of innocence dedicating itself to God as a propitiatory victim" (346). The achievement of Christianity will have been to purge this higher mystical truth of its fleshly dross.

The "great sacrifice" on Calvary devoted a wholly perfect victim capable of redeeming with his blood the world as a whole. Then came the "diminished redemptions" offered by Christian martyrs as willing victims in order to purify fallen man by taking the sins of the world on their shoulders (349-57). After their exemplary sacrifices, there remains no need to give death, and Christian sacrifice becomes something symbolic and non-violent. Ritual slaughter is replaced by personal asceticism as the means of purification, victimization by voluntary self-discipline (349). The abuse of sacrifice is thus redeemed. But what of our abiding need for blood?

In closing his essay, Maistre emphasizes above all how the Mass will "perpetuate until the end of the world" the sacrifice of Christ "performed materially only once." Because it was the flesh that separated man from God, "God became flesh to unite himself to man by what had separated them." This redemptive sacrifice is repeated eternally in that "divinized and perpetually immolated flesh," the eucharistic host (358), the etymology of which Maistre traces back to the Latin *hostis*, meaning enemy or stranger, a word "so ennobled and denatured in our Christian languages" (309n.). In communion, the "theandric blood penetrates the guilty entrails to devour their impurities" and "lays hands on the elements of man, transforming them without destroying them" (359). Sacrifice is thus sublimated, internalized, rendered harmless, spiritual, and symbolic. Through this sublimation process, Christianity certifies the age-old dogmas of social union through "the communion of the flesh and blood of victims" (358), of mankind's "radical degradation," of the innocent paying for the guilty, and above all of "HEALTH THROUGH BLOOD" (360).

The above passages, affirming an end to victimization, affirm at the same time that the abuse of sacrifice is to be redeemed. As his argument progresses to ever greater levels of abstraction, Maistre seems determined to redeem redemptive violence itself, to demonstrate its higher truth. This raises the question of whether slaughter should ever be redeemed, or whether that would simply be to succumb uncritically to the lure of sacred violence. Because sacrifice is such a widespread religious practice and because it is a central theme of modern intellectual history, this

question takes on great significance, but for the same reasons it does not admit a ready answer.

Instead, I would more humbly propose a heuristic distinction between what I would call thinking sacrifice and sacrificial thinking, between *penser le sacrifice* and *la pensée sacrificielle*. As a rule, alas, this theoretical distinction is belied by practice. Yet it may serve to alert us to the difference between those interpretations of sacrifice that maintain a critical distance from their subject and those that fall prey to its highly dubious attractions, acting out (if only in words) rather than critically analyzing its equivocality. That any account of sacrifice will likely embody both of these tendencies makes the distinction more important rather than less.

The remainder of this essay will attempt to bring this distinction to bear upon Maistre's third great contribution to religious sociology, his application of the sacrificial paradigm to European history in his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. For in the second and seventh dialogues of that work he traces a sacrificial logic at work in capital punishment, war, revolution, and Christian theology. The relevant passages are among his most powerful and most notorious. I by no means propose to sound these passages to their depths but only to trace in outline their force and their danger in light of this distinction which I would like to uphold between critical and symptomatic responses to sacred violence.<sup>9</sup>

#### SACRIFICE IN MODERN EUROPE: THE *SOIRÉES*

The notoriety of notorieties in all Maistre's work is his well known passage on the executioner in the second *Soirée*, a passage that is certainly troubling but that has too often been read simply as endorsing capital punishment. For this "undoubtedly shocking subject" as he calls it, displays all the equivocality of sacred things. Capital punishment for Maistre, as an instance of sacrificial violence, is at once universal and ambivalent, both necessary and horrifying.

From the sovereign's "divine and terrible prerogative" to punish crime, there results the "necessary existence" of this "inexplicable being," the executioner. He is "found everywhere, without there being any means of explaining how, for reason discovers in human nature no motive capable of determining this choice of profession" (*Soirées*, 4:31-2). Universal and necessary though he be, enlightened reason is powerless to explain him.

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller account of these subjects, see my *A Modern Maistre* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), in which a chapter is devoted to each of these topics.

After further emphasizing how strange and marginal a "member of the human family" the executioner is, Maistre proceeds to picture in appalling detail this man's workaday life, sacred and inhuman at once.

He arrives at a public square thronged with a pressed and palpitating crowd. He is thrown a poisoner, a parricide, a blasphemer; he grasps him, stretches him, lays him on a horizontal cross. He raises his arm: then there is a horrible silence, and one hears nothing but the cry of bones that break under the bar and the howls of the victim. He unfastens him; he lifts him onto a wheel: the broken limbs are twined round the spokes; the head hangs; the hair stands on end, and the mouth, open like a furnace, only sends out at intervals a few bleeding words begging for death. He is done (4:33).

Despite the horror of its contents, this passage describes a scene that is wholly religious in form: a gruesome liturgy performed before an enthused assembly of communicants.

What is likely most troubling about this description is the dehumanization of the culprit, who is steadily reduced to the status of a thing, a disjointed aggregate of broken bones, head, hair, and mouth. This again raises the difficult question of whether Maistre's account is critical or symptomatic, whether it questions or endorses this dehumanization, whether in short this passage is an instance of "thinking about sacrifice" or of "sacrificial thinking." What makes this question difficult to resolve is Maistre's double emphasis, as in all his writing on ritualized violence, upon both the barbarity and the necessity of executions. His description of the criminal as a "victim" should dissuade us from reading these words too quickly as unqualified praise of capital punishment.

More striking yet is how the unmitigated horror of this scene threatens to implicate society as a whole and government in particular. For Maistre stresses that

all grandeur, all power, all subordination rest upon the executioner: he is the horror and bond of human association. Remove this incomprehensible agent from the world; in the very instant order gives way to chaos, thrones collapse, and society disappears (4:33).

Authority and violence march hand in hand. Indeed, Maistre had underlined at the outset that the executioner exists precisely because of the sovereign's right to punish crime.

Moreover, the above account of the executioner's performance is framed by the appearance of representatives of the state. Before the torments begin, "an abject minister of justice appears at the executioner's door to warn him he is needed. He sets out." The abjection of crime and punishment thus ripples out from culprit to executioner to minister, whose appearance signals the start of the torment. Once it is completed,

the executioner “holds out his bloodstained hand, and justice throws him from afar a few pieces of gold which he carries off through a double row of men drawn back in horror” (4:32-3).

This contact between gold and blood in the executioner’s palm, between justice and horror in his action, dramatically exposes the violence of applied law. While the minister of justice would like to put this sovereign violence at a distance, Maistre’s own account stresses how sovereign legal authority is inevitably accompanied with an inhuman power over life. Although he concludes that it is ultimately crime rather than justice that constructs this theater of cruelty, Maistre’s analysis underlines the dark truth of law’s proximity not only to justice but to cruelty and even victimization. That he voiced this unwelcome claim shows that Maistre’s work, even in its most equivocal moments, is not without critical potential. One might indeed ask whether it is his callous indifference to violence or our own that most gives rise to the uncanny horror of this scene.

Only slightly less infamous than his account of the executioner is Maistre’s assertion that war is “divine.” Here too, however, we should hesitate before ascribing the infamy to Maistre himself rather than to his subject, of which he again emphasizes the full irrational horror. The account of war in the seventh *Soirée* is indeed prefaced by a thought experiment meant to throw our preconceptions about military glory into utter disarray.

Maistre asks us to imagine a recently arrived extraterrestrial who is told that on this planet “vice and corruption demand that man in certain circumstances dies by the hand of man; and that this right to kill without crime is reserved to the executioner and the soldier.” Informed that one of these “professional killers” is considered as honorable as the other is infamous, the “foreign intelligence” is asked “to divine upon whom the anathema falls.” Without hesitation, the voyager heaps praise on the executioner. After all, he kills only convicted criminals and only so often, while the soldier kills “without measure, and always upright men.” The former is lauded for his “grandeur of soul” and “noble disinterest,” for devoting himself to a vocation that is “respectable, without doubt, but so painful and so foreign to your [human] nature.” As for the soldier, he is, “all things considered, a minister of cruelties and injustices,” a performer of “useless horrors and atrocities.” Our honored guest would be thoroughly mistaken, however, and the task thus becomes to explain the divine glory surrounding the barbarism of war (5:4-6).

If Maistre approaches war as a religious phenomenon, it is above all because this “great human absurdity” exceeds any human explanation. Not only do war’s causes, course, and consequences escape every rational calculation. What is most mysterious is that we go to war at all. “Given

man with his reason, his sentiments and his affections, there is no way of explaining how war is humanly possible" (5:2). The "horrible enigma" of our inexplicable attraction to war is again attributed to mankind's constitutive ambivalence: "nothing is more contrary to man's nature, yet nothing is less repugnant to him; he does with enthusiasm what he holds in horror" (5:24). Thus a boy "brought up in horror of violence and blood," who couldn't kill his sister's canary, will "dash from the paternal hearth" to seek out "what he calls an enemy without knowing what an enemy is" (5:17-8). The shock, pathos, and irony of Maistre's tone here is much more that of a distance taken than that of a paean or apologia.

This distance threatens to be lost, however, when Maistre asserts that the only reason he can imagine why there exists no league of nations dedicated to the cause of peace is that there must be some "occult and terrible law demanding human blood" (5:14). The demand for sacrificial violence "is not satisfied by the blood of animals, nor even by that of criminals spilled by the sword of the law," and carries over into war. Were all criminals "struck down," Maistre adds, there would be no more war. For war ultimately results from a nation's accumulation of unexpiated crimes. True to his sacrificial paradigm, Maistre thus reads war as an expression of communal disorder that finds release in outward slaughter. We shall return to this "law of violent death" below. Here what must be remarked is the incantatory tone with which Maistre evokes it and, more troubling yet, his seeming acceptance of inevitable ritual slaughter.

These dangers are qualified significantly, though not altogether erased, when Maistre insists that war maintains its "indefinable aura of honor" only when contained within well defined limits. He thus praises the armies of the seventeenth century, when everything, even warfare, was included within a broader cultural equilibrium and sense of limits maintained by religion. He admits, of course, that seventeenth-century Europeans "killed each other, burned, ravaged, and even, if you wish, committed thousand upon thousand of useless crimes." Yet ritualized limits kept this carnage within bounds. Warfare remained a seasonal undertaking, and, most importantly, "soldier fought only soldier. Whole nations were never at war, and everything weak was sacred amid the lugubrious scenes of this devastating plague" (5:19). Indeed, Maistre asserts in general terms that whenever a soldier attacks a civilian he loses all honor; he becomes an executioner, a guilty executioner subject to the punishment of the law (5:6-7).

Ritualized limits, Maistre maintains, not only established a boundary between combatants and civilians but also preserved civilized conduct between the opposed armies themselves: "Mutual respect, the most exquisite courtesy, were able to show themselves amid the fracas of



arms.” Evoking the religious festivals described in the “Eclaircissement,” Maistre observes that “more than once dances and entertainments provided interludes to combat. The enemy officer invited to these feasts came to speak laughingly of the battle to be fought the next day” (5:20).

Here we can see clearly that when Maistre calls war “divine” he is referring to the sacrificial economy that places disorder and transgression within a higher ritualized order. War is sacred because of its irrational bloodshed, but only because that bloodshed is kept within strict limits. What Maistre praises is not war itself but the limits of war. While he no doubt paints a far too sunny picture of seventeenth-century warfare, it is essential to observe that what he praises is precisely not the total war to which the discourse of sacrifice has often been applied in modern times. Throughout the above passages, indeed, there is an implicit attack on the wars of nations inaugurated by the French Revolution, an event which Maistre interprets as a sacrificial crisis in which bloodshed reigns in the absence of all ritual bounds.

There are few direct references to the Revolution in either the “Eclaircissement” or the *Soirées*.<sup>10</sup> For present purposes, two citations from the former will suffice. In his chapter on human sacrifices, Maistre asserts that the abrogation of religious law, the “law of love,” led directly to the Terror.

An illustrious nation, which had reached the highest degree of civilization and urbanity, lately dared, in an access of delirium of which history gives no other example, formally to suspend this law. What did we see? In the blink of an eye, the mores of the Iroquois and Algonquins; the holy laws of humanity crushed under foot; innocent blood covering the scaffolds that covered France; men curling and powdering bloody heads, and the very mouths of women soiled with human blood. There you have natural man! (“Eclaircissement,” 324-5).

On the face of it, this is simply a typical example of the scare-hell counter-revolutionary rhetoric pioneered by Burke, complete with the requisite racist remarks on Native Americans. The same seems to hold true for the essay’s other reference to the Revolution, in the chapter on Christian sacrifice, where Louis XVI is called an “august martyr” notable for his “so pure, so submissive, so prepared” heart (347). Such imagery was a staple of reactionary propaganda.

Unlike Burke’s sublime rhetoric and horrific imagery, however, and unlike that of other French counter-revolutionaries, Maistre’s sacrificial

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<sup>10</sup> Maistre’s book on the French Revolution, *Considérations sur la France*, teems with sacrificial themes, notably in chapter 3, “On the Violent Destruction of the Human Species.” The entire analysis approaches events in France from the perspective of religious sociology. See chapter 8 of my *Modern Maistre*.

language was not merely an exotic commonplace meant to excite aesthetic revulsion, fear, and vengeance. Rather, it was part of a general sociological account of sacrifice which placed the Terror within a global history of ritual violence. Moreover, Maistre's understanding of the sacrificial mechanism led him to oppose resolutely (and almost alone among counter-revolutionaries) both foreign invasion and royalist revenge which, he insisted, would only exacerbate and prolong revolutionary conflict. Finally, he insisted that the Revolution was a direct application of the laws of Providence, which punished a wicked nation now denuded of the beneficent artificialities of civilization and reduced to its "natural" sacrificial bedrock. As a manifestation of Providence at its purest, the Revolution demanded Maistre's respect and even admiration as a sacred event which must be allowed to go its course.

Maistre's remarks on Providence, to which we now turn, provide at once the most metaphysical and the most old-world religious, the most provocative and most questionable claims of his theory of sacrifice. Yet while his vision of a sacrificial Providence seems to present *prima facie* evidence of an intransigent theological traditionalism, it is here that Maistre relies most heavily on the hardly orthodox views of Origen. And while his speculations thus verge on unalloyed theistic cosmology, at the same time they show the limits of any idealist view of the world and our place within it.

Maistre prefaces the above discussion of war with several paragraphs of reflection on "the general law that weighs upon the world," of which the "law of war" is "only a chapter." This is the "decree of violent death written at the very frontiers of life," in which slaughter is rooted in life itself. Maistre thus notes the countless deaths and killings of plants; he points to the existence of animals of prey "charged with devouring the others" among insects, fish, reptiles, birds, and mammals. There is thus, he concludes, "no instant of time when one living being is not devoured by another" (*Soirées*, 5:22).

At the summit of this hecatomb stand we humans, who spare nothing that lives, who "kill to amuse themselves and kill to kill." Maistre demonstrates that even beneath our most civilized human pursuits there lurks not the specter but the reality of sacrificial violence. He thus notes the death of animals at the hands of science and industry. Even the most apparently innocent human behavior rests on the slaughter of other animals.

Man demands everything at once; from the lamb its entrails to make his harp resound, from the whale its bones to make corsets for young virgins, from the wolf its murderous tooth to polish his pretty works of art; from the elephant its tusks to make a child's toy; his tables are covered with cadavers.

This “law of permanent carnage” that governs life by no means stops at man. “Yet what being will exterminate him who exterminates everything else? Man! It is man himself who is charged with slaughtering man” (5:23). Thus war and capital punishment.

Finally, Maistre concludes his reflections by explaining how this universal sacrificial violence is “provided for and ordained in the great scheme of things,” that is, how it is providential.

Thus is accomplished, from maggots to man, the great law of the violent destruction of living beings. The entire earth, continually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar where all that lives must be immolated without end, until the consummation of things, until the death of death (5:25).

This “death of death” is Origen’s doctrine, declared heretical after his own death, of apocatastasis, which holds that the providential function of evil is to do away with evil until the redemption of all things, evil included. Providence thus becomes a sacrifice writ large: the redemption of a defiled community which is restored to order and equilibrium by the letting of victims’ blood.

These passages magnify the basic ambiguity of Maistre’s theory of sacrifice by expanding it to a cosmic scale. Thus his account of the suffering of other animals at the hands of men brings home the unwelcome truth of how much civilization rests upon the abuse of nature. Yet this critical perspective is undermined by the implication that, wholly gratuitous as it may seem, this slaughter of innocents ultimately serves a higher providential purpose. As for Providence itself, it is important to observe that Maistre understands eschatology not in apocalyptic but in what one might call “counter-apocalyptic” terms: the end of history is to be not death and destruction but rather the death of death and the destruction of destruction, not the appearance but the disappearance of all-consuming violence. Yet here too death and destruction are granted a higher meaning and purpose. That destruction serves to limit or avert destruction, death to avert death, is the logic (or sophism) behind all sacrificial killing.

In this way, Maistre’s providential explanation of sacrifice threatens, and even seems intended, to redeem the notion of redemptive violence. Bloodshed thus appears not only necessary but even beneficial as part and parcel of cosmic betterment. Here Maistre’s effort to “think sacrifice” seems to remain mired in “sacrificial thinking” by his dogged effort to give higher meaning to the horrific. In its description of universal immolation, his language at times reaches a level of fervor not found elsewhere in his work, which must give us children of the twentieth century pause in how it seems to have succumbed to the allure of sacred

violence. In closing, I would like to briefly address in more general terms some such dangers to which any theory of sacrifice is prone.

#### SACRIFICE AND THE ABUSES OF THEORY

These dangers can be seen in Pierre Saint-Amand's *The Laws of Hostility*, which presents some important tendencies of contemporary criticism in a usefully exaggerated form. In a series of brilliant counter-readings of the Enlightenment canon, Saint-Amand demonstrates its systematic inability, or even willful refusal, to confront ever-present human violence. With the guidance of Girard and Derrida, he seeks to unearth from within its own writings what the eighteenth century had tried to ignore, namely, that "inscribed in every process of institution is a place of violence, often in the form of sacrifice."<sup>11</sup>

Yet for political theorists of the eighteenth century, guided by their faith in progress and the irreversibility of the civilizing process, "it is as if the time of violence is gone forever [...]; from this point forward, violence can only be conceived as that which lies beyond the realm of theory" (2). On these assumptions, violence became for the Enlightenment something wholly primitive, barbaric, an aberration foreign to human nature. "All forms of violence – as the inverse of a reasoned social contract – belong to this unthinkable theoretical space" (6).

In the very gesture of reawakening the question of sacrificial violence, however, Saint-Amand's own rhetoric comes dangerously close to succumbing, and even urging that one succumb, to the dizzying allure of the sacred.

This book shatters the philosophes' optimism, sacrifices it one might say, to the advantage of the violent relations that haunt mankind... It admits the emancipation of the citizen only by invoking passionate frenzies: rivalries, sacrificial exclusions, violent contagions, delirious envy (14).

The power of sacred violence is here not so much clarified as acted out. Indeed, Saint-Amand's insistence upon Girardian mimetic conflict, the ignored ritual violence of all sociability, itself seems driven by mimetic rivalry, replete with the degradation of enemies (the philosophes somehow accused en masse of both naive sentimentalism and scandalous hypocrisy) and the embrace of extreme solutions. One might protest that his book was intended precisely as a "performative text" which enacts its

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Saint-Amand, *The Laws of Hostility*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1996), 2.

essential theme. Yet the innocence or wisdom of such theoretical performances is precisely what I would question.

When set beside such an argument, the significance of Maistre's theory of sacrifice becomes clearer. Maistre provided from within the Age of Enlightenment itself, a century before Sorel or Bataille, a rigorous reflection upon the constitutive role of ritualized violence in social order. More importantly, while he believed that violence to be ultimately inescapable, Maistre nonetheless sought, both in theory and in practice, to maintain a critical distance from it and to support those institutions that, without ever escaping it entirely, limit its spread. In this sense, a very important sense I would argue, Maistre may have been far more enlightened, not only more ahead of his time but more a friend of humanity, than many more recent writers on this most equivocal of human traditions.

The danger in Maistre's argument, I would suggest, resides not in such virile hyperbole and exorbitant denunciation but rather in a second, more subtle, complementary tendency of sacrificial thinking: formalism. For in the face of barbarism detachment may have a violence of its own. At times, Maistre's effort to find order in disorder, to find the universal abstract form of atrocity, takes on an almost compulsive quality. His reduction of sacrifice to a formula of substitution and reversibility or an allegory of providence, to a metalanguage in short, while providing a speculative consolation of sorts, often entails a loss of empathy for the victims of ritual violence (the royal family notwithstanding). This formalist tendency is qualified by Maistre's attribution of the origins of human sacrifice to "sophism," in which life is betrayed by a logic that treats slaughter as a purely formal matter. Yet his own analysis itself implies throughout that sacrifice is legitimate so long as it follows "good form." Such a position threatens to replicate within Maistre's theory the inhumanity of its object.

As Derrida has observed, "one of the meanings of what is called a victim [...] is precisely to be erased in its meaning as victim."<sup>12</sup> Maistre's abstract and at times formulaic answers to the horrendous questions raised by sacrifice, one might argue, repeat sacrifice's own elimination of fleshly life in the name of a higher truth. That is, his depersonalized, decontextualized, reified account tends to lose altogether the "who" of the victim. While he shows us capital punishment, for example, from the perspective of a spectator, at times from that of a priest of the law, and even once from that of his dog, we never once see juridical violence

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida, "Passages – from Traumatism to Promise," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Points...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 389.

through the eyes of its victims. In fact, Maistre never shows us the victim at all outside the scene of victimization: he is thus already depersonalized before the executioner begins his work. The victim is allowed no protest, his uniqueness is effaced, as his singularity is excluded from Maistre's general considerations.

Here one has the double bind of any theory of sacrifice, the two ways in which "thinking sacrifice" falls into "sacrificial thinking": on the one hand a demonic rapture that denies all limits, and on the other a formulaic neutrality that denies all empathy. One is tempted to conclude that this double bind itself reflects that human ambivalence which Maistre finds at the source of sacrifice: humans as creatures at once of flesh and spirit, instinct and intellect, frenzy and formalism. Rather than the closure of metaphysical symmetry, however, what is demanded here, I would argue, is greater theoretical humility before what cannot be normalized, sublated, or overcome on the level of theory, what may perhaps simply have no higher meaning at all.

Sacrifice is an extreme practice that calls forth extreme responses. Both its devotees and its theorists look to it for an ultimate answer to their ultimate questions. Confronting the universality of sacrificial practices, Maistre concludes that sacrificial rituals, more or less sublimated, are necessary in order to give meaning, form, and limits to human violence. We may well dispute the need to make violence meaningful, but it is hard to argue with the need to contain it within meaningful bounds.

In demonstrating the essential role of ritualized behavior in maintaining social order, unity, and peace, Maistre made an important but seldom recognized contribution to the development of modern sociology and anthropology. Reactions to his work have instead always isolated, emphasized, and indeed much exaggerated his reactionary politics, treating him accordingly as unambiguous friend or foe. Maistre himself thus has become a sacred figure of sorts, whether pure or impure, an object of unqualified adulation or repudiation. Such fetishized or formulaic responses have so far foreclosed the theoretical effort necessary to think through his significance in the history of modern European thought. This paper, by examining the force and limits of Maistre's theory of sacrifice, has sought to encourage the closer and more responsible consideration that his work very much deserves.

## *Joseph de Maistre Economist<sup>1</sup>*

That Joseph de Maistre interested himself in economics is not surprising. In the second half of the eighteenth century, all cultivated men in Europe were interested in the economy. This was especially so in Savoy, which sought to catch up on the lead taken by France and Switzerland. Jean Nicolas has described the strength and the excesses of the physiocratic current towards 1760.<sup>2</sup>

Large landowners multiplied agricultural innovations in the hope of increasing the *net product* of their lands; many ruined themselves in the process. Lawsuits, with the communes or with their neighbours, born of these innovations, came before the Senate. Even through his profession, the young magistrate would have been led to reflect on the economy. However he was also fascinated by the novelties of his time. In 1775, his *Eloge de Victor-Amédée III*, his first public work, contained numerous allusions to the economic development of the province, to roads, bridges, the draining of marshes, etc. He was in the same frame of mind sixteen years later, in 1791, when he posed his candidacy for the post of Intendent General of Savoy. He did not obtain the position, but this step, maturely considered, shows the interest that he had in economic problems and the real competence that he had for them.

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<sup>1</sup> "Joseph de Maistre économiste," *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 11 (1990), 5-25.

<sup>2</sup> *La Savoie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Maloine 1978) 2:802 and following. Read in particular the misadventures of the Marquis Alexis Costa, whose mania for agriculture menaced the family patrimony. His son Henry, Joseph de Maistre's friend, wrote to his wife in 1782: "This madness of wanting to enrich ourselves will someday lead us to the poorhouse."

His library from this period is the best witness to this interest.<sup>3</sup> Section 10 of his own classification, entitled “Politics. Economics. Public Law,” contained seventy-two titles of which thirty-two are books on economics. A glance at these titles teaches us many things.

With which economic school did Maistre align himself? In the 1780s the battle was still undecided between the physiocrats and the English school, which was going to dominate in the nineteenth century, the school of which Adam Smith is the star. Effectively we find the works of the physiocrats, Quesnay, Dupont de Nemours, and the Marquis de Mirabeau, whom Maistre will admire all his life. However, we also find Adam Smith’s *Richesse de Nations* in the 1790 French translation;<sup>4</sup> and it must be added that he bought, the same year, the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* by Adam Ferguson, Smith’s friend, and like him Hume’s disciple, and whose book, though less known, played an essential role in the history of economic thought. Let us note especially that Maistre possessed two important books by Necker: the one written against Turgot, then the Controller General, *De la législation et du commerce des blés* (Paris 1775), and also the defense of his first term as Controller General of Finances, *De l’administration des finances de la France* (1784).

Within the field of economics, what were Maistre’s main interests? Here again the list of titles is significant. Of thirty-two works, fifteen were devoted to money, banks, the business of banking, interest rates, and exchange rates.

This glance at Maistre’s economics library at Chambéry will serve us as a guiding thread. We will study first Maistre’s position in the conflict between Necker and Turgot. We will seek to understand why Maistre, the liberal, chose Necker against Turgot.

The second part will be devoted to Maistre’s ideas on money. We will base ourselves on two unpublished documents that Monsieur Jacques de Maistre has very willingly communicated to us – the one, a relatively long, fifty-four page manuscript, edited at Turin, Aosta, and Venice between 1797 and 1799, is written in Italian: this is the *Memoir in Italian on Paper Money* which is mentioned in Maistre’s journal. The second document, much shorter (seven pages), is dated Cagliari, 28 July 1802.

<sup>3</sup> The details that follow are taken from No. 9 (1985) of the *Revue des études maistriennes*, and notably from the extraordinary study by J.-L. Darcel of J. de Maistre’s libraries.

<sup>4</sup> *Recherches sur la nature et les causes de la richesse des Nations*, translated from the English ... and followed by a volume of notes by the Marquis de Condorcet. Paris: Buisson, 1790, 5 vols. It is very little known that Condorcet had written a volume of *Commentaires* on the *Richesse de Nations*. His most recent biographers, E. and R. Badinter, make no mention of it.



It is an official note to the Duke de Genevois, the Viceroy, on a project for a state bank designed to manage paper money. The two documents may be compared to the works of English economists who were going to face the problem of paper money between 1800 and 1815. Maistre is not inferior to Malthus, Ricardo, Thornton et al.

It must be added that his economic thought enlightens us on his political thought as well as on his philosophical and religious thought. It is remarkable that they are so very tied to each other and that they evolved at the same time.

#### MAISTRE AND NECKER

Maistre varied in his opinions on the economy, as he varied them on matters of political organization, indeed on matters of religious philosophy. All the first notebooks show him enthusiastic for the physiocrats and for the elder Mirabeau in particular. He professed the integral economic liberalism of the time. He was for free exchange, he was for total freedom for the grain trade whatever the circumstances, and he was against all state intervention. In a 1774 notebook entry, we find a note where he developed the idea that Colbert had ruined France.<sup>5</sup> Such we will find him at the end of his life; read, for example, the preface to his *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, which can be found in the *Oeuvres complètes*. Maistre uses economics to show that in politics that “whatever common sense first perceives as an evident truth is almost always found, once tested by experience, not only false but disastrous.”

He cites as examples:

– *Food shortages*. The common sense response: the exportation of grain must be proscribed. The response from experience: on the contrary, it must be encouraged.

– *Rates of exchange*. If rates have a tendency to weaken, one must, common sense says, prevent coins from being exported, and look after the equilibrium of purchases and sales. The response of experience: “these means have never been employed without worsening the rate of exchange, nor can the opposite course be taken without improving the rate of exchange.”

However, between the beginning and the end of his life, there are the unknown years from 1776 to 1793, for which we do not have entries in his notebooks. We have only some texts. For his religious philosophy, there is the *Mémoire au Duc de Brunswick* (1782), a very rich document where we find many theories that will be developed in his later work. In

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<sup>5</sup> See Richard Lebrun’s fine article in No. 9 (1985) of the *Revue des Etudes maistriennes*.

economic matters, we have a document as well, a letter to Baron de Rubat of 16 January 1785 on Necker's economic policy.<sup>6</sup> It is far from having the scale or interest of the Brunswick Memoir. However it gives us some precious indications of Maistre's views in 1785. Let us recall that Necker, a Genevan, a Protestant, a Parisian banker, and a resident minister of the Republic of Geneva, was called to the direction of finances in March 1776, after Turgot's dismissal. In January 1781, he presented the *Compte-Rendu au Roi*, the first document to be published in France on the budgetary situation and on the Royal Treasury's debt. In the eyes of the Court, it was an ill-timed publication. In May, under the pressure of his adversaries, Necker was dismissed.

After the experiments of Calonne and Brienne, Necker will be recalled in 1788, and then dismissed again in 1789. He was very popular then; it was his dismissal that provoked the uprising of 14 July and the taking of the Bastille. He was immediately recalled by Louis XVI, but it was too late. He led a combat in the background against the Constituent Assembly, and was then dismissed in 1790. Having become very unpopular, he simply left France, and took refuge at Coppet, which he did not leave until his death in 1804.

On its appearance in 1784, Maistre had bought the book Necker published on his first term as Controller General, his *De l'Administration des finances de la France*, cited above. This was what we would today call a *white paper*, where Necker, a master of communication, assembled all the documents relating to the actions he had taken. It was preceded by an introduction drafted by himself. Maistre's letter to Baron de Rubat was devoted to this introduction; he acknowledged that he had not had the time to read the rest of the work (three volumes).

This Baron de Rubat was a Frenchman, the Lieutenant of the Baillage of Belley, that is to say a magistrate. Maistre was under his jurisdiction for his vineyard at Talisseau; he writes to him as a close enough friend and with a tone of confidence.

Here is the end of his letter:

I devoted one night to you, Monsieur Baron, to scribble these observations; I thought that while a magistrate's days are owed to the public, the nights at least are fully his. Unfortunately, the incoherence of ideas and the extreme negligence of style will probably persuade you that I was sleeping. However you asked for

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<sup>6</sup> The letter to the Baron de Rubat was published by F. Descostes in *La Quinzaine* (15 June 1896, 429-40). The number of suspension points indicating omissions must be noted. Maistre's commentaries do not always correspond to the Necker texts cited at the bottom of the page. And finally, the indication of source is very vague: "Copy from Baron Blanc's archives."

my opinion in writing, and one refuses nothing to friendship, even if by obeying, one must become a little ridiculous.

The letter to Rubat is therefore a quickly written text, scarcely reread, and certainly not intended to be made public. His sincerity in writing is only the more certain.

Before dealing with the economy, it must be emphasized that the Maistre of 1785 was politically, as liberal, if not more so, than the Maistre of the *Eloge de Victor-Amédée III* (1775). Necker had written: "Since the progress of enlightenment has brought together the men who are governed with those who govern them, ministers have become actors in the theatre of the world which occupies itself with them more and which observes their conduct more severely, [...] which renders all administration, and especially that of finances, infinitely more difficult and more laborious." Maistre comments: "Undoubtedly one can still find among us a great number of men who would make observations about the immense disadvantages of reasoners who agitate men's minds and who often impede the course of administration by taking away public confidence in it. [...] this enlightenment (good or bad) is naturally too disseminated for governments to wipe it out or even to stop its propagation. [...] Leaders of peoples and their first agents can no longer, in our days, excuse their mistakes with the difficulty of perceiving the truth; one has only one thing to reply to them: *Let them write and read.*"

In the *Eloge* in 1775, he had written: "I am not unaware that the unbelievers loudly claim freedom of thought. But this is to play on words. What prevents them from thinking?"

We are also far from the somber vision of the world and of man that is sometimes credited to the young Maistre. He had heard that Necker had been reproached for the "egoism" of his Introduction. Maistre responds: "To reproach a man for relating everything to himself, is to reproach him for being a man, this is to say a sensible being who, by the laws of nature, also necessarily gravitates towards happiness like a satellite towards its planet." It is again happiness that will be the question further along. "M. Necker has strongly desired the happiness of France; an almost universal cry of admiration credits it and confidence carried to the heights demonstrated to him that he was capable of achieving it."

This idea of the happiness of peoples, the first objective of politics, will be repeated in the *Etude sur la Souveraineté*: "The best government for each nation is that one which, in the area of land occupied by that nation, is capable of procuring the greatest possible sum of happiness and power, to the greatest number of man, during the longest possible time." This is not a borrowing from Bentham, whom Maistre does not appear to

have known; Bentham does not appear in his library and he does not figure in his notebooks.

One of the rare points where the letter to Rubat criticizes Necker is the latter's eulogy of France's monarchical government; "this happy mixture of enlightenment, freedom, and sensibility." What else could have been said by this foreigner living in France, accredited to its government, having been Louis XVI's minister, and hoping to become such again (as Maistre observes at the end of his letter)? Maistre indicates briefly that he could not rally to this eulogy: "It seems to me that our ideas on the French government are not too much in agreement." For him, as we know, Richelieu, and especially Louis XIV, had put an end to the old French constitution; monarchical power had invaded everything. There was no longer an independent nobility; there was no more representation of opinion; there was no more liberty of provinces, cities, or professions. It is in the letter to Rubat that he speaks of the last years of the *sultan* Louis XIV, considered as an oriental sovereign, uniting in his hands all the powers, including those to dispose of the liberty and the lives of his subjects.

This is a sketch of the theory that will be developed in the *Essai sur la Souveraineté*, with its opposition between European monarchy, which is given a magnificent eulogy, and its antithesis, *oriental monarchy* or despotism. Maistre, very soon the victim of anonymous bureaucrats in Turin, will never vary in his hostility to arbitrary regimes. Here his thought remains constant; there will be a deepening in Lausanne, but not an evolution.

We know with what rapidity Maistre became conscious, in the summer of 1789, of dangers that had begun in France; he will be more clear sighted than his friend Henry Costa and his Senatorial friends. However, to judge by his letter to Rubat, in 1784-85 he was in tune with those who, in France and in Savoy, were asking for liberal reforms and the end of absolutism.

Let us come now to the more economic points. In the first place, Maistre congratulated Necker for having subordinated all his conduct to the conquest of *opinion*. The letter to Rubat was written some weeks after Maistre had pronounced before the Senate, on 1 December 1784, his "Discourse on the exterior character of the magistrate," a discourse which had been devoted to the strength of opinion, to the impossibility of acting if one has lost its support, and to the means of conquering this support and preserving it. This magistracy of opinion, which he often called the "queen of the world," will be found in all this works, in the *Etude sur la Souveraineté*, in the *Considérations*, and in the *Soirées*. He extended it to all subjects: it is the base of the reflections on war in the

*Soirées*: "It is opinion that wins or loses battles." We will find it immediately in his monetary theory.

There is not a more central idea, one nearer to the heart of all Maistriean thought. Robert Triomphe was quite wrong to be ironical on the Maistriean vanity that believed it had found its own ideas in Necker. There is no vanity here, but a striking meeting between the thought of the two men. Here is Necker: "Let us rally to defend it [public opinion] against those that it bothers and who would like to destroy it. It alone halts the disastrous progress of indifference; it alone, in the middle of a depraved century, can again make its voice heard and seems to hold *great days* like the sittings of courts of honour."

The Great Days in the old monarchy were, in origin, great court sittings, held in the provinces, where the king rendered justice to those who solicited it. Here it is a word carefully chosen to evoke the Assemblies of the Nation, traditional in the old regime, without pronouncing the name *Estates General*. Necker already announces in 1784 what he will do in 1788.

Maistre approves this passage, saluting "this superb expression *sittings of courts of honour*."

However his enthusiasm will go especially to the passage where Necker justifies his *Compte rendu* to the king.

Here is the passage: "Undoubtedly one could see at the head of finances men who would not have liked to see their administration presented in the light of day; they would have feared to have their carefree attitude or the laxness of their principles observed; they would have feared to remember that all their resources had been made up of taxes established without consideration and without measure or of injustices exercised towards the creditors of the State ..."

It is clear that Turgot is the target here. Necker having disqualified this "small policy founded on dissimulation and trickery," proposes to "attach himself to a great idea of administration founded only on frankness and virtue."

Maistre is enthused. "A truly admirable piece that I have just read, I do not say with pleasure, but with rapture. It is impossible to write anything more true, more noble, more lively, and I do not see an expression capable of rendering the feelings that it made me experience."

He also praises Necker for not having tried to do everything at once, which was, Maistre says, "the great error of Turgot (otherwise an excellent man)." He approves developments based on "the necessity of doing nothing abruptly in administration."

Nothing here can surprise us; Maistre always maintained that it was necessary to innovate, indeed reform, only with "fear and trembling." He

always insisted on the role of time in everything that touches social organization. Necker expressed himself in almost the same terms.

The essential criticism that Masitre made of Necker was to have preferred loans to taxes. Again, Necker did not pronounce himself formally. Maistre especially reproaches the Genevan for having passed over this point "as nimbly as over burning coals. He would have had to treat this important question *if and when* it would be better to tax than to borrow in public financial difficulties." Maistre certainly thought that the financing of the war for American independence – this was Necker's problem – required recourse to taxation. However he also knew that the privileged and the Court were opposed to all increases of taxes and did not push his criticism. He writes only: "Whatever the case on this question on which it would probably be necessary to take a middle position, it is worth the pain of being studied in depth, and it is a singular affection for M. Necker scarcely to pronounce the word loan in his whole introduction."

The criticisms, we see, are moderate. The letter to Baron de Rubat is in the end very favourable to Necker, and, by the same token, unfavourable to Turgot. This judgment may surprise us. Between Turgot and Necker, historians, for two centuries, have decided in favour of Turgot. Turgot is the remarkable economist of the *Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses* (1766), which some affirm inspired Adam Smith.<sup>7</sup> He is the effective Intendant of Limousin; he is the courageous minister who established complete freedom in the grain trade. In the face of the "flour war," provoked by this measure, he remained firm. Necker, on the contrary, owes his nomination to intrigue and he is especially the "man of expedients."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Today this question is generally decided in the negative. The course notes, taken by one of Adam Smith's students before Smith came to France and met Turgot, have been discovered. See *Turgot, économiste et administrateur* (Paris: P.U.F 1982), xiii.

<sup>8</sup> "The man of expedients" has become a stereotype formula for Necker, which will be found in textbooks. However the example comes from on high; Léon Say employed it in his *Turgot* in the collection "Les grands écrivains de France" (Paris: Hachette 1898). Florin Aftalion also utilized it; see his *L'économie de la Révolution française* (Paris: Hachette, Pluriel 1987).

This hostility to Necker is not peculiar to liberal economists. François Furet has indicated that it was common to counter-revolutionary historians looking to exonerate the king by making a case against bad councilors: "Necker in the first place, the Protestant banker ... the perfect scapegoat." See *Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 1989 article entitled "Ni Dieu, ni Maistre." Maistre, in fact, was the exception to the rule; favourable to Necker in 1784, he never attacked him subsequently.

How do we explain Maistre's attitude? Was he again a victim of his taste for paradox? Did he want to spare his Costa friends? Henry and Geneviève Costa, installed since 1782 at the Chateau de Beauregard, on the south bank of the Léman facing Coppet, passed their winters in Geneva for the sake of their son's education. They were linked there by friendship to the Calvinist high society of the city. Maistre passed part of his judicial holidays at Beauregard; in winter, he frequently visited the Costas in Geneva. He made the acquaintance of their Protestant friends, and of Madam Huber-Alléon in particular, whom he will find in Lausanne, and of whom he will say in his letters from St. Petersburg that she had been an incomparable friend for him. Madam Huber-Alléon was Necker's relative. The Costas thus gravitated towards a circle of friends and admirers of the ex-controller general of finances. It is certain that Maistre could not, without harming the Costas, express criticism, even moderate, of Necker's actions. If he had been popular in Paris, he was idolized in Geneva.<sup>9</sup>

All this is true, but cannot explain the almost eulogistic admiration of the letter to Rubat. If Maistre had had doubts about Necker's politics, nothing obliged him to reply to Rubat; it would have been easy to elude the latter's request.

We believe that he was perfectly sincere in his eulogy of Necker and we believe that his eulogy was not unjustified. In the last ten years, judgments laid on Turgot and Necker have begun to be modified. Under the influence of English and American authors, who have given our history a more impartial reading than our own, justice will be done to Necker from now on.<sup>10</sup> As for the relations between Maistre and Necker, there was, in 1784, a convergence of views between the two men.

Both were practitioner economists and in consequence pragmatists. Both distrusted theories, and especially global theories subject to

<sup>9</sup> Sainte-Beuve reports in his first article on Joseph de Maistre that Madam Huber-Alléon had made Maistre promise never to attack her cousin Necker. Let us accept this confidence for which Sainte-Beuve does not cite the source; it does not suffice to explain the letter to Rubat. Maistre may have promised not to say anything bad about Necker; he had not promised to say good things.

<sup>10</sup> The foreign authors are: J.F. Boshier, *French Finances, 1770-1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970) and R.D. Harris, *Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancient Regime* (University of California Press 1979). These works are cited by H. Grange, Professor at the Université de Dijon, in his contribution to the Colloque de Limoges on *Turgot économiste et administrateur* (October 1981), published by P.U.F. Michel Lutfalla has published a remarkable article on Necker in the *Revue d'Historie économique et social* (No. 4., 1973). Finally, see the notice devoted to Necker by Marcel Gauchet in the *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution française* (Flammarion) by François Furet and Mona Ozouf is a just rehabilitation.

becoming ideologies cut off from the real world. They were both concerned about the concrete man, often a victim of reforms dictated by abstract principles and not drawn from experience.

Necker was an economist in opposition to the physiocrats and the English school just born with Adam Smith. He never cited the latter, who was hurt by this; he never cited any economist. His principal book, *Sur la législation et le commerce des blés*,<sup>11</sup> does not contain theory, but a mass of observations based on market practice. If Necker spoke of speculation in grain, he compared it to the effect of the Treasury; the relations, he said, are identical. He had shown, in his *Eloge de Colbert* (1773), that manufactures are indispensable to the prosperity of agriculture, correcting the error of the physiocrats.

He explains in the *Législation* that the international exchange of grain against manufactured products is unfavourable. This consideration – which we believe new – had been, he said, at the base of Colbert's policy. He adds further along that the international commerce of manufactured goods is more profitable than that of grains.<sup>12</sup> Again, a very current proposition.

Another of his ideas is that the general laws of those whom he calls *economists* result from averages established over long periods, where the risks balance out. Now the task of the practitioner or of the government is precisely to face risks: severe winters, too dry summers, shortages, and wars. In these circumstances, general laws are of no utility to him. To act, he must refer to the history of comparable circumstances, and to his personal experience. He has a formula that turns to black humour to show how little the statesman can draw on general laws. "What does the misery of the people, war, matter [...] if he (statesman) could console himself with this reflection that at the end of a given time the population will proportion itself to the means of subsistence."<sup>13</sup>

For very good reason, the man of government must take care not to create *shortages* himself by taking brutal measures dictated by uncertain theoretical views. This is what he reproached Turgot for, in 1775, when the latter prepared himself to annul in a single blow all the restrictive measures concerning the grain trade.

Maistre could only adhere to these concepts. These are the ideas that he defended in politics: to base oneself on experience, to take account of the teachings of history, and always to act only with extreme prudence.

Necker addressed a second reproach to the economists, that of ignoring collective psychology. "There is a great vice in political

<sup>11</sup> Recently republished, Paris: Editions Edires 1986.

<sup>12</sup> *Législation* (Edires edition), 25 and 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Administration générale des Finances*, op. cit., 32.



economy: it is that the effects of opinion and imagination are never taken into consideration."<sup>14</sup> Necker was thinking here of the effects of contagion, of imitation, that play so great a role in the economy, in great speculations, in stock market panics, and also in the aggravation of shortages. René Girard has built his work on these *mimetic effects*; after him a team of researchers tried to write a new economics that takes account of these phenomena. Maistre, so close to Girard in his *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, also knew the strength of these mimetic behaviours; he demonstrated it in action in war and in the great gatherings that he counselled be avoided. It is a part, and not the least interesting, of his theory of opinion.

Both Maistre and Necker are practitioners, although on a different scale. From which comes the importance that they attach to circumstances, to observation, and to experience. They want to be constantly aware, listening to opinion, ready to intervene on the least alert.

In his letter to Rubat, Maistre picks up what Necker says on the importance to be attached to details. "M. Necker is quite right to guarantee that the minister who ignores the science of details will be the dupe of subordinates; but up to what point must he involve himself in details? A good question about which the author should have said something, for the one who wants to do everything does nothing. I would think that the choice of subordinates, a great reputation for vigilance, and punishments distributed appropriately and without mercy, can up to a certain point dispense the administrator in chief from descending to the least details." A remarkable proposition.

Maistre and Necker are also in agreement on a more human vision of the economy. In the criticism that Necker made of the excesses of economic liberalism there is an affectivity that one does not find in Turgot. Let us listen to him replying to the objection that the free export of grains, if it causes an increase in prices, will by the same token have a fortunate influence: the rise in prices will develop cultivation and production.

What argument do they propose to us? First, is there some parity, either in morals, or in feelings, between the thousand citizens who perish and the hundred thousand prepared for by the present generation? It is man who knows happiness and who suffers; it is man who has life and is constrained to renounce it; it is he who is my fellow man; it is with him that I have made an alliance; it is for him that laws are made; they do not oblige men to multiply upon the earth, but they inflict death on those that do; and I can understand nothing of this cold

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

compassion of mind for future races that must close our hearts to the cries of the ten thousand unfortunate beings who surround us.<sup>15</sup>

Maistre will write more soberly in the *Considérations*: "Let us not give in to the dreams of Condorcet, that philosopher so dear to the Revolution, who used his life to prepare the unhappiness of the present generation, graciously willing perfection to posterity."<sup>16</sup>

The idea is the same: let us not impose sufferings on the men of our own time by justifying them for the uncertain and probably illusory advantage that will result from them for the generations to come.

If Maistre had a lively interest in economics, he wrote little on the topic. The only document of some length that we possess is the letter to Rubat. It provides us with one piece of information: Maistre admired Necker's economic ideas. Hence the interest focussed here on Louis XVI's minister. It is interesting to note that by their common formation as practitioners, and by their aversion to abstract theories, the two men are close to one another. They are also close by their Christian faith. Necker was a sincere Christian. In 1788 he published a work entitled *De l'importance des opinions religieuses*, a work for which Maistre could only have had sympathy. Later, in 1800, he wrote a *Cours de Morale religieuse*. This Christian influence is to be found in his economics: in his care for the most deprived, his obsession with not aggravating their condition, and with supporting them in the measure that was possible. He will defend public assistance against the attacks of the Encyclopedists, and he will develop it during his ministry. He is the first to speak of the duty of social justice.

This Christian morality is also understood in the Maistrian society. How otherwise justify his fundamental theory of spontaneous order? Although it is expressed in almost the same terms as the theory of Friedrich Hayek<sup>17</sup> on the incapacity of man to create by his reason a social order (a refusal of constructionism), it has very different bases. With Hayek, the spontaneous social order, the only viable one, establishes itself by trial and error, the effective forms alone are retained by natural selection. Maistre, on the contrary, bases himself on constancy of human nature (as molecular biology recognizes today, the genome of the human species has not varied since the appearance of *homo sapiens*), and

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<sup>15</sup> *Sur la législation et le commerce des grains*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Slatkine edition, 93. [See *Considerations on France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), tr. by Richard A. Lebrun, 29.]

<sup>17</sup> The best exposition is to be found in F.A. Hayek, *Droit, législation et liberté* (Paris: PUF 1980). For a good commentary, read John Gray, *Hayek on Liberty* (Basic Blackwell 1984).

on the *sociability* that is one of its essential elements. However, if this society in its majority does not practice a social morality (in Maistre's case a Christian morality), it collapses. Without this respect for a social morality, there is a contradiction in Maistre's intellectual construction. One cannot have a spontaneous order *à la* Hayek if one's view of order is at the same time the Maistrian vision, Christian as well, of a *double* man, divided between attraction for good and attraction for evil, and always menaced by ceding to the second.

#### MAISTRE AND MONETARY PROBLEMS

In 1792, Maistre became conscious of an imminent attack on Savoy by French troops only on the day when the Senate received for registration an edict from Turin authorizing the issue of four million livres of bank notes.<sup>18</sup> A refugee in Lausanne from March 1793 to January 1797, he had lived there sheltered from monetary torments. It is then from his stay in Turin in 1797, then Aosta, then again in Turin, and in Venice, in 1798-1799, that he experienced the disadvantages of banknotes that lost their value more or less rapidly. Long curious about money and exchange problems, he applied his mind to analyse the problem of paper money and its depreciation. He then wrote, in Italian, a *Memoir on the State of Piedmont Relative to Paper-money*. This document was known by a reference to it in Maistre's *Journal*: "9 June 1797. I sent to M. le Mis de Fallet my Italian memoir on the State of Piedmont relative to paper money."<sup>19</sup> However, up to now it has not been studied. Monsieur Jacques

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<sup>18</sup> The transformation of Livres of Savoy or Livres of Piedmont (distinct, but having the same value), in 1989 French francs, is made on this approximate basis: 1 livre of Piedmont-Savoy = 20 1989 francs. Our sums are taken from René Sedillot's evaluation (*Histoire de France*, Sirey ed., 1979), according to which 1 livre tournoi of 1789 = 6.95 1978 francs. From 1978 to 1989, the cost of living index in France multiplied by 2.26. 1 livre tournoi of 1789 = 6.95 X 2.26 1989 = 15.7 francs of 1989. On the other hand, we know that at the end of the eighteenth century, the livre of Piedmont was worth 1.2 livre tournoi. (J. Nicolas, *La Savoie*, p. 1127.) Therefore, 1 livre of Piedmont-Savoy = 19 francs of 1989. It is convenient to round this to 20 francs.

We know that J. de Maistre received, on his marriage to Françoise de Morand, a dowry of 22,000 livres, of which 3,000 was cash. The order of size in today's French francs is 440,000 francs, of which 60,000 was in cash. Madam de Boigne tells us that the Marquis de Baro, Maistre's rich Piedmontese friend, had 500,000 livres of rent per year, which represents 10 million of our francs.

<sup>19</sup> Ottavio Faletti, Marquis de Barolo (1753-1828), in French Fallet, Marquis de Barol. He and Maistre being the same age, they probably knew each other at the University of Turin. Barolo in 1781 married at Chambéry, Pauline d'Oncieu de Chaffardon, younger sister of Méraldine, the intimate friend of Françoise de Morand

de Maistre has very kindly, at our request, looked to see if this document was to be found in the archives at Guiry. He communicated to us a fifty-five page manuscript carrying exactly the same title as the one J. de Maistre sent to Barolo. The problem is that the manuscript carries on the first page, at the top left, the notation: "Turin 1798" and on the last page: "Venice, 13 March 1799." It must be admitted that there had been a first state of the document completed in June 1797, put in clean copy, and sent to Barolo. Maistre would have taken up his manuscript again and revised it. The Guiry manuscript includes, in effect, numerous strike-outs (sometimes entire pages that have been rewritten and that carry the same pagination as the old ones). This second version was completed in Venice in March 1799.

Let us add a word on Maistre's Italian; it has been characterized as "barbarous" by our translator. In Piedmont, and even in Turin, everyone expressed themselves in the Piedmontese dialect, including the Court. Victor-Emmanuel in particular spoke only Piedmontese. Maistre kept in his Italian traces of the dialect that he had used orally.

The translation of this document would add nothing to Maistre's glory. Less at ease in Italian than in French, he has some brilliant formulations, but the composition and the order of ideas leaves something to be desired. However there are some spectacular intuitions that justify the following summary.

Masitre begins by defining paper money, such as it existed in Piedmont and in Savoy: notes payable on the public Treasury (there was not then a central bank in the realm and it was the Treasury that issued notes). If the Treasury cannot exchange the notes that one presents to it for coin, it is theoretically bankrupt. In fact, notes circulate in the economy even if exchange for coins is impossible. *Opinion* alone sustains the exchange.

Maistre invokes the example of England. No Englishman has the illusion that there is to be found in the Bank of England a thousandth of the total value of notes in circulation; and yet the notes are accepted in payment in all exchanges without depreciation.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, a

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[Maistre's future wife]. The ties between the two men became closer after Maistre's marriage. Barolo left numerous works on philosophy and history. He also, apparently, interested himself in economics.

<sup>20</sup> This passage is surprising because it makes no reference to the suspension of convertibility of note to coins decided in England in February 1797. Maistre, it is true, was cut off from English newspapers since his departure from Lausanne, which evidently did not penetrate into Piedmont occupied by French troops. By a curious coincidence, Maistre left Lausanne on 25 February 1797 and it was on Sunday 26 February that the Bank of England made its decision.

pessimistic opinion, whatever its origin, can discredit notes in a few days, even if the Treasury possesses an important reserve of coin.

Maistre shows by examples that the depreciation or appreciation of notes is very difficult to explain in a rational way. Even a return of confidence in a government may not be accompanied by an appreciation of its notes. He cites an example: the re-conquest of Belgium and Holland by the post-Thermidorian Convention in 1794-95: all observers had believed that these victories would reinforce the value of the assignats. Nothing came of it.

One can no longer rely on issuing too great a quantity of notes to anticipate their devaluation in relation to coins (quantitative theory). Most often the bills will retain a stable value for a certain time, then once freed by a single unknown threshold, the notes will begin to decline. The decline is not proportional to the quantity. It can be slow, then accelerated. All strictly quantitative calculations generally prove false.

What was the condition of Piedmont with respect to banknotes when Maistre was writing? It seemed to him that the depreciation of notes in relation to coins had attained about 33%; those who paid in notes for an object worth 100 livres in coin, would pay 150 livres in notes. No official statistic risked stating this loss. "But *opinion* did not doubt it or blunder about it; following a discernment of great subtlety (the wonderful result of a thousands and thousands of individual opinions), opinion evaluated the loss at 33%."

It even seemed to Maistre that after a few months this level of depreciation remained stationary. It is on this observation that Maistre finds the remedy that he proposes.

Before arriving at the remedy, he attempts a complicated economic calculation to show that at the moment when he is writing, monetary circulation – coins and notes, coins being very rare – is not excessive, if one compares it to what it was in Piedmont before September 1792. He seeks to evaluate the circulation at this last date, "in happy days," according to his expression. At the conclusion of a calculation of which we will not give the details, but which necessarily takes account of the fiscal pressure (fiscal receipts on net national product) in France and in Piedmont, and the ratio of money in circulation to the national product that he thinks to be identical in the two countries, he comes to the conclusion that the monetary circulation in Piedmont, *in happy days*, was 50 millions of livres of Piedmont.<sup>21</sup> As the circulation was evaluated at

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<sup>21</sup> If one calls FR the fiscal receipts, Y the net national product, and M the monetary circulation, one has:

$$FR/Y \text{ // } M/Y = RF/M$$

FR/Y is the ratio of fiscal pressure

the time he wrote, in an impoverished Piedmont, as between 35 and 40 millions, one cannot conclude to an excess of monetary mass.

Certainly, adds Maistre, these evaluations are uncertain. He cites in this regard the Marquis de Mirabeau, "honest father of a too famous son": "It would be easier to count the swallows of springtime than the money that circulates in a state." Let us suppose therefore that the quantity of money is today much greater than is generally believed. This is an excessive quantity, say certain people, which raises the prices of things. However they forget that wages paid in banknotes are raised in the same proportion. One recognizes the notion of *real wages*, very familiar today, but perhaps enunciated then for the first time. A few lines further along, he shows that the influence of money on prices must take account of the swiftness of circulation. The idea was then current: it is in Adam Smith, Cantillon, and undoubtedly many others.

Maistre then raises the question of knowing, if, in the monetary mass one should not count letters of exchange. This question will also pose itself to the great English economist, Henry Thornton.<sup>22</sup> The latter responded in the affirmative; Maistre responded in the negative, with the argument that letters of exchange are accepted spontaneously by creditors; paper money, on the contrary, circulates thanks to an obligatory circulation. It is the obligatory circulation of banknotes taken at their *nominal value* that, for him, is the essential evil.

M/Y is the ratio of monetary mass to the net product

FR/M is the ratio of fiscal receipts to the monetary mass

Maistre assumes a ratio FR/M for France of 0.25.

This is the quotient of a ratio of fiscal pressure equal to 0.5 or 50% (this is still ours today) and a relation M/Y equal to 2.

For Piedmont, he thinks that the ratio of fiscal pressure on the eve of 1792 was clearly weaker than in France; he takes 0.4 or 40%. On the contrary, he estimates that the ratio of M to Y is the same as that of France, which is credible. He arrives at:

$$FR/M = 0.4/2 = 0.2$$

As the fiscal receipts in Piedmont were 10 million Livres, the monetary mass M was:  
 $10/0.2 = 50$  million Livres.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Thornton, 1760-1815, was the English economist who played a preponderant role in the long discussion opened in England on banknotes after the declaration of non-convertibility of notes in 1797 (obligatory circulation was only decreed in 1814). Thornton was a merchant banker. His great work was *An Inquiry into the Nature and Effect of the Paper Credit of Great Britain* (London 1802). Resuming the great English debate on paper money, Schumpeter wrote in his *History of Economic Analysis* (New York 1954): "The contribution of Thornton surpassed all others from the point of view of understanding and analytic faculties." Citation drawn from Philippe Beaugrand, *Henry Thornton* (PUF 1981). Outside of an unimportant disagreement on the classification of letters of exchange, Maistre's positions are those of Thornton, although he had never read him.

Having established these premises, Maistre arrives at the solutions that he advocates

He excludes as false solutions:

1. The recall of notes by the *sale of confiscated property*. He observes that the operation had been disastrous in France.
2. The recall of notes by the *sale of the royal domain*. This is already more acceptable; these sales do not present the same political and moral disadvantages. However "it is always a misfortune to sacrifice permanent resources to resolve a temporary difficulty."
3. *Borrowing*. He condemns it; one is going to replace a fictitious debt, that of the banknotes, by a real debt carrying interest.

A fictitious debt? What does he want to say? We are here at the essential point. He is going to express it a little further along in an admirable phrase: "It is written on the note: payable by the royal treasury. However the observer's eye discovers another thing: credit of the nation to the nation."

If he had only written this phrase, his memoir, despite its faults, would remain the proof of an extraordinary foresight. The banknote was going to present itself for more than a century, up to 1918, in all countries, under the pretext of a fallacious "*good for coins*." And the majority of economists did not see it any other way. It required genius, in 1798, to see what they were in reality: an advance by the collectivity itself to itself, a means of paying itself.

It is because he understood this, that he can make these realistic suggestions.

1. In no case must the Treasury envisage reimbursing the banknotes at their nominal value, even partially. "Let the state not adopt a superstitious system [...] Let there not be any illusion about being the debtor of the nominal value. [...] This would be not only an act of injustice, it would be soft-headed madness."

An act of injustice because the majority of the bearers would present themselves with notes that they had accepted at 67% of their value. Reimbursement at the nominal value would be an ungodly enrichment.

"Soft-head madness," because even the partial reimbursement of the so-called debt would require an aggravation of the tax system that would disorganize the economy. Maistre sees the danger of deflation and opposes it.

2. To give life to obligatory circulation at the nominal value would also be unjust. The same argument: the majority of the bearers have received the notes at their actual value (67% of the nominal value) or a more elevated value, but they cannot give proof of it. "One cannot know the true losers, or one cannot recognize them."

3. There is only one realistic solution. Order that all the banknotes will be accepted at their real value in coins. For this, Maistre proposes that there be established an official exchange where there will be exchanged publicly, every day, notes against coins. The exchange rates will be public. It is at this exchange rate that notes must be accepted in all exchanges. The debtor of an old debt, is he acquits himself in banknotes at the exchange rate of the day, will not ruin his creditor.<sup>23</sup>
4. Maistre, not to offend public feelings, sometimes proclaimed that the goal of the sovereign is to return the value of the banknotes against coins to their nominal value. At other moments, he is clearer: "Let the sovereign, in place of parity, proclaim and stabilize the exchange; this will be the first step on the way to regeneration [...] the depreciation of the banknotes must be considered by a wise and courageous public policy as a natural and necessary consequence."

At this point in his demonstration, Maistre is bothered by the example of the assignats. In France, on 19 February 1796, they solemnly burned the plates for the assignats. "Forty thousand million in assignats disappeared; they sell and buy uniquely in coinage."

Maistre believed in the future of banknotes, "credit of the nation on the nation." He did not believe in the return to a purely metallic currency. He did not dare propose more than his project for a daily exchange of banknotes against coins, in letting it be hoped that by this means, the value of banknotes would progressively be improved.

It is quite evident that he was right against those who hoped for the day when one would return to coins and only coins. He completed his memoir in April 1799. In November, it will be Brumaire. On 13 February 1800, there will be the creation of the Bank of France, charged with issuing banknotes having the same value as the coins and conserving this value until 1914.

The manuscript that we have is certainly a copy of the document sent to Barolo, a copy edited subsequently, corrected, but not put into clean copy; the composition in bad Italian does not simplify the reading. The repetitions are numerous and there are some contradictions. Despite the faults, for an economist, the memoir is a remarkable document.

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<sup>23</sup> Maistre had been the victim of a dishonest debtor. He had sold his property at Trousse to a certain Count de Cevins, on 21 July 1791, for the sum of 54,000 livres of Piedmont (1,080,000 1989 francs). The latter had paid him, on 17 May 1792, the sum of 255 louis (or 80,000 1989 francs). The French having entered into Savoy in September 1792, Cevins rallied to the new regime and settled the remainder of his debt in assignats, with a loss to Maistre of 70% if it had been paid in 1793 or 1794. Remorseful, after the re-establishment of the monarchy, Cevins in his will would ask his heirs to repair the wrong. This tardy repentance was not followed by any effect.



Maistre's psychological and non-mechanical theory of the value of money, his intuition as to the true nature of paper money, and his extraordinary foresight that it will be the money of the future, would have done honour to any economist of the period.

THE CAGLIARI MEMOIR ON THE  
CREATION OF A BANK FOR THE  
EXTINCTION OF BANKNOTES

Two years later, on 28 July 1801, Maistre returned to the topic of paper money. He was then in Cagliari, "*Régent de la Chancellerie, Chef du Tribunal suprême de l'Audience royale en Sardaigne*" (this is the title, little known up to now, that he employed at the top left of the manuscript that we are going to summarize).

The document is entitled; "*Mémoire sur le projet d'un banque proposée dans la junta du 27 juillet pour l'extinction des billets*" [Memoir on the project of a bank for the extinction of banknotes proposed in the junta on 27 July].

Maistre, in this official document, is obviously less free than in the composition that he had edited in Turin and Venice as a private individual without responsibilities. Nevertheless, he does his best to remain loyal to this ideas without shocking too much those of the Viceroy, with whom he had difficult relations.

He begins by recalling his hostility to obligatory circulation. "Universal experience has taught us that all coercive laws to sustain banknotes only succeed in accelerating their fall."

He then declares his hostility to the bank project without putting too much emphasis on forms: "The mass of the Sardinian people do not know what a bank is. It will only see in this that one wants to create a shop where one exchanges banknotes against coins."

"The Government cannot count on that public spirit, on that delicacy, that patriotism of certain enlightened nations [...] The first courier will carry away all the banknotes of the realm, and the Bank will fall. [...] I regard it as demonstrated that the projected operation will accelerate the fall of the banknotes in a frightening way."

Since one can only combat a project effectively by proposing another project, he makes some positive suggestions.

If a State Bank appears to him to be hopeless, he would willingly accept "a bank created by leading merchants, with all the requisite sureties [...] The persons who project a Bank [a state bank is implied] must give us an example of some bank that has succeeded in the hands of some government."

To get rid of banknotes, everything comes back to two words: Pay (that is exchange at par) and Burn. Moreover this is impossible; we do not have the necessary funds.

a) "The idea of accepting the notes at par and burning them is childish."

Maistre proposes a more effective use of available funds. It is necessary to buy banknotes secretly through trusted merchants; these banknotes will be burnt. Not by the *junta*, not by useless speeches; any public declaration will only cause evil. On the contrary, the secret purchases will increase the value of the banknotes, which is desirable. "The evil is not having banknotes, but banknotes that depreciate."

We see that Maistre remains loyal to the ideas of the previous memoir. He believes in the future of banknotes; he combats the idea of abolishing them and returning to a purely metallic currency.

b) He asks again that they avoid all "severe means that can only do evil."

One must, on the contrary: pay modest wages in cash; maintain the usage of payments half in coin, half in banknotes, and "close our eyes to the small exchange charge that is inevitable."

c) It is necessary to renounce the idea of exchanging banknotes at par.

We see that Maistre follows the line of the first memoir. To be positive, he preposes an ingenious project that did not figure in his preceding work. He would proceed by stamping a certain number of banknotes with a difficult-to-counterfeit stamp. These banknotes will be exchanged against coins for the happy beneficiaries; one would declare that the number of these banknotes will be progressively increased. Maistre suggests beginning with a small number of banknotes thus stamped: no kind of doubt on their immediate presentation at the Treasuries, where they will be awaited with the necessary funds for their reimbursement. They will immediately be put back in circulation to be reimbursed anew. Maistre affirms that progressively the stamped banknotes will not longer be presented for exchange. Thus the public will gradually regain confidence in the notes, the confidence passing from the stamped banknotes to those that are not. A project more ingenious than realistic.

Maistre, wanting at all cost to avoid the State Bank, without giving the impression of a man who refused everything, had to give proof of some imagination. We see that he did not lack that.

In his second memoir, Maistre pretended to believe in the necessity of retiring and destroying the banknotes in circulation. He was in enough trouble with the Viceroy, and could not confront him openly. However he succeeded in slipping in the phrase: "The evil is not to have banknotes, but banknotes that depreciate." For the rest, he firmly opposed the creation of a bank, effectively doomed in Sardinia at this time.

## CONCLUSION

In his letter on Necker, as in his two essays on banknotes, Maistre appears to us as at once a pragmatist and a visionary.

This is true in the case of Necker. He preferred him to Turgot because Necker is a practitioner, a man who distrusts theories. He dreads Turgot's ideology and intransigence. He is also a great clairvoyant since, after two hundred years in which it was the fashion to mock the Genevan, a reaction has been produced in his favour.

That Maistre interested himself in money is again a proof of his pragmatism. The great English economist, J.R. Hicks once wrote: "Monetary theory is less abstract than the major part of economic theory; it cannot avoid some relation with reality, which is sometimes lacking in other economic theories."<sup>24</sup> This is an observation that underlines the practical, experimental, turned towards the real and the useful, character that is the characteristic of Maistre, in economics as in all his work. The great memoir of Turin is a long argument in favour of the banknote, which he presents not as a trick for difficult times, but that which is going to become a normal means of payment. He interests us even more when he demonstrates that even their partial withdrawal would be dangerous, both because this would cause a monetary deflation and because it would require a fiscal effort that would be equally deflationary.

This man who has been claimed as a reactionary, attached to all the usages of the past, shows himself on the contrary much more open to monetary innovation than the majority of his contemporaries; he understands its functioning much better than they did.

Schumpeter wrote: "Rare are the men who can transfer themselves into domains very different from each other without risking disaster." Maistre merits this compliment.

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<sup>24</sup> Sir John Hicks, *Critical Essays on Monetary Theory* (Oxford 1967), 156.

*Joseph de Maistre's  
Theory of Language:  
Language and Revolution<sup>1</sup>*

Ever since the appearance of Maupertuis's *Réflexions sur l'origine des langues et la signification des mots* in 1748, the Berlin Academy had been at the centre of a vigorous debate on the origin, formation, and function of language. Arguments of considerable ingenuity were put forward, including seminal works by Süßmilch, Michaelis, and Herder. Such studies were much more than finger exercises for philologists, however; a given account of the genesis and development of language would situate its author in a wider polemic of political and religious contention. At the same time, there was an abiding fascination for, and curiosity to explain, the multiplicity of modern tongues; a proliferation and division which seemed staggering, and all the more so as knowledge of American and Asian languages improved. It was extremely rare for eighteenth-century thinkers to regard the great number of languages spoken across the globe as cultural assets, as valuable in themselves and worthy of preservation. Two quite distinct factors made such an appreciation highly unlikely: firstly, the explicit equation of the multiplication of tongues with punishment in Genesis 11; and secondly the Enlightenment aspiration to universal comprehension, founded upon a belief in the invariability of human nature and a rationally explicable universe. It is therefore hardly surprising that considerable attention was given to the project of inventing or propagating a universal language. Ideally, such a language would bring to thought and expression the clarity and precision of mathematics. More modestly, it would be a *lingua franca* understood by educated men from Moscow to Madrid.

Towards the end of the century, the French language seemed to many to have successfully claimed the latter title. Such was evidently the opinion of the Berlin Academy, which, in its prize essay competition of 1783, invited responses to the following questions: "What has made

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin, July 1999.

French a universal language?”, “Why has it merited this prerogative?”, and “Is it to be presumed that it will preserve it?”.

The most celebrated answer to these questions was composed by Antoine Rivarol. In a wide-ranging panegyric of *ancien régime* French, he observed that traditional, antagonistic concepts of political identity and nationhood were becoming obsolete as more and more people came together “in a republic under the domination of the same language.”<sup>2</sup> Rivarol made quite clear the link between political discord and linguistic fragmentation: if men saw but darkly now, it was because they spoke darkly, in a muddle of tongues. The French language, by contrast, was an instrument of civilization, of dialogue, of concord between nations, a guarantee of order and understanding. “From now on,” he wrote, “the interests of peoples and the wills of kings will rest on a more fixed base; one will no longer sow war in the words of peace” (80-1). If French had become the language of peace treaties and diplomacy, it was not the result of accident. Its modern hegemony was promoted by various historical factors, chief of which was the establishment of social stability within the kingdom under Louis XIV (55). Rivarol went on to note that there was an order within the very structure of the French language which defied the dangerous movements of the passions: “French syntax is incorruptible” (73). It was this inherent syntactical order together with the standards set by the immortal examples of classical French literature which assured the language’s stability in times of trouble. For Rivarol did not ignore the forces which threatened the universalism and the clarity of French; his confidence was tempered all the while by an awareness of what could undo the gains of centuries: the capriciousness of “the ear and the imagination” (76), political disruption, and the baneful rise of a “metaphorical style” (83), an unchecked emotionalism and flightiness in speech, a language thick with bombast, hyperbole, and poetic conceit, “this perpetual lie of the word” (83).

Although written in the closing years of the *ancien régime*, Rivarol’s audit of the French language was not an immediately anachronistic document. In fact, its principal themes and ideas would recur throughout the years of Republic and Empire in writings which bore witness to unprecedented change in both politics and language.

Jean-François de La Harpe’s ferocious onslaught against the manipulation of language by anticlerical revolutionaries, *Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire*, was published in 1797. It was a work which attempted to describe the Revolution “by an examination of its language,” and to show “the establishment, the legal consecration of this language,

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<sup>2</sup> Antoine Rivarol, *L’Universalité de la langue française* (Paris: Arlea 1998), 27.

as a unique event, an unheard of scandal in the world, and absolutely inexplicable except by divine vengeance."<sup>3</sup> The Revolution had its own jargon; there was, on La Harpe's account, no distressed cacophony of individual tongues, no plunge into semantic chaos: the abuse of language was orchestrated, deliberate. A partisan political discourse had come into being, distinct from *ancien régime* French, but sufficiently homogeneous to allow rational deconstruction and decipherment. For all its surface irregularities and obfuscation, the revolutionary jargon had an invariable, internal logic and coherence: "It must not be forgotten that the characteristic feature of *revolutionary* language is to employ known words, but always to invert their meaning; and this suffers no exceptions."<sup>4</sup> La Harpe proposed a "correct" way of reading this language, an exegesis adjusted for the subterfuge and dissimulation in every line. He accused the revolutionaries of resorting to crass propaganda, of faulty reasoning, of taking refuge in a secret language, of camouflaging violence with rhetoric, of transgressing fundamental rules of grammar. With this last criticism, he reaffirmed Rivarol's diagnosis of barbarisms as symptomatic of moral disorder and political confusion. For it was not mere pedantic rigour which spurred La Harpe's attack on the revolutionaries' disregard for syntax and grammar; the solecisms which he ridiculed in *Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire* were not trivial or innocuous errors, but the heralds of a new barbarity. Once men lost the ability to think straight, to reason clearly, to express themselves lucidly, then it was not to be wondered at if they arrived at faulty conclusions and lost sight of moral imperatives. La Harpe could thus denounce in the same breath an inattention to grammatical propriety and the savagery of anticlerical persecution.

*Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire* was one of the first works to identify the Revolution with a specific form of language: a neological and euphemistic political discourse, awash with solecisms, and parasitically related to *ancien régime* French. If it was not shattered, the universal tongue which Rivarol had praised as the language of humanity was at least badly fractured.<sup>5</sup>

The question arose, during the Consulate and First Empire, of what ought to be done with the linguistic heritage of both the *ancien régime* and the Revolution. This was a genuine problem for lexicographers of the time, caught between the expediency of active forgetfulness and the need to recognize and order major shifts and novelties in the French language.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François de La Harpe, *Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire* (Paris 1797), 14n.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> *L'Universalité de la langue française*, 80.

Compilation of the famous *Dictionnaire de la langue française* had been the responsibility of the French Academy until the suppression of this body in 1793. This ruling brought work on the fifth edition of the dictionary to a sudden halt, but the National Convention subsequently gave instruction that the partially revised work be handed over to a bookseller to be completed and published. It was not until 1798 that this fifth edition was offered to the public. The dictionary consisted of two main volumes and a *Supplément, contenant les mots nouveaux en usage depuis la Révolution*. This appendix was a register not only of the neologisms thrown up by the Revolution, but also of the new meanings which already existing words had come to acquire. The majority of the entries had to do with the metric system, the Republican calendar, and political factions of the 1790s, although the most controversial were words relating to dechristianisation and the Terror: *fournée, guillotine, lanterner, mitraillades, noyades, septembriser, terroriste*, etc. Was such vocabulary to be formally accepted into the language? The fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire* did not provide a conclusive answer to this question. The format itself, an appendix to the main work, only underlined the ambiguous status of the terms.

In the year following publication of the dictionary, the decision was taken to transfer lexicographical responsibility to a commission of twelve members, four from each class of the recently founded National Institute, viz. the natural sciences, the moral and political sciences, and the fine arts.

These shifts in lexical authority and the government's tolerance of linguistic radicalism were abhorrent to André Morellet. In a work entitled *Du projet annoncé par l'Institut National de continuer le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, he criticized the fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire* as the work of amateurs, and denounced the suppression of the Academy as a muddle-headed and dangerous decision. However, although he was hostile to recent events, Morellet had an understanding of language which was not in fact dissimilar to that of the National Institute. Let us examine his arguments in more detail.

Since the establishment of the Academy by Richelieu in the seventeenth century, the French language had made numerous gains: a richer vocabulary, increased structural regularity, greater precision and clarity, and more rigorous definitions of the meaning of words.<sup>6</sup> Morellet saw all this threatened by the collapse of the nobility and of political order during the Revolution. It was precisely the aristocratic associations of the *ancien régime* (the Academy above all, but also the court and the salons)

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<sup>6</sup> André Morellet, *Du projet annoncé par l'Institut Nationale de continuer le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (Paris 1800), 14.

which had preserved "this decency, this tone of politeness, this measure, this tact for the proprieties, this refined taste" (15) in letters and social intercourse, and no league of natural scientists, political philosophers, and obscure grammarians had the knowledge and authority necessary to stem the rising tide of barbarism. In many respects, Morellet stood close to both Rivarol and La Harpe in his understanding of the nature of language. He shared the former's belief in the synonymity of political and linguistic order, his conviction of the aristocracy's role in refining and protecting the language, and also his ideas on the deleterious influence of the passions upon the clarity of human communication. In response to the suggestion of a member of the National Institute that a new dictionary should contain "*definitions worthy of freedom*" (22), Morellet warned, "If the love of freedom, or what may be falsely taken for such, influences definitions, one can wager that this will prejudice their accuracy, for the effect of all passions is to alter the aspect of objects and to present them under false colours (23)." With La Harpe, Morellet shared the opinion that there was "a kind of jargon and a revolutionary slang" (27), a language which bound together the initiated and excluded all others, an alien speech within government. The revolutionary terminology which he found in the *Supplément* he regarded as the product of vice and cruelty, a temporary aberration which ought not to be recorded for posterity, but rather "which it is necessary to wipe from the dictionary forever, like traces of blood from the apartments of a palace" (27).

Morellet conceived the French language to be a polite means of communication, both social and literary; an instrument of civilization and virtue which needed to be maintained by aristocratic forms of society and watched over by men of learning: recognized authorities on linguistic usage, poets, grammarians, great writers; certainly not economists, chemists, or mathematicians. He therefore believed – and it was a belief he held in common with the National Institute – that language could be brought under human control if only the right institutions were in place. There is no suggestion in his work of a providential corruption of language, of ineluctable and unknown pressures affecting human speech. For Morellet, the question was "who will control language?", not whether language could be controlled in the first place.

For Joseph de Maistre, as for his contemporaries, philosophical inquiry into the origin and nature of language was not an idle or purely academic pursuit. His reflections on, and criticisms of, the French language are much more than footnotes to a neatly circumscribed body of absolutist and ultramontane doctrine. They are, rather, integral to a theory of language which stands at the centre of his political and religious thought.

The invasion of Savoy by French soldiery in 1792 was seen by Maistre



not only in terms of material conquest but also as the imposition of alien ideas and forms of speech. Writing only ten years after Rivarol's famous discourse, Maistre was quick to perceive that the vaunted universalism of the French language was a double-edged sword. In the *Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens à la Convention Nationale*, French was "this universal language that we speak just as you do,"<sup>7</sup> something which transcended national boundaries, a force for reconciliation and understanding which could be invoked in the manner of common ancestors ("all subjects of Charlemagne"<sup>8</sup>). There was nothing original in this; whenever men had spoken of a universal tongue in the past, it was invariably as an agent of concord, a benevolent instrument of international peace. In the *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, however, the universalism of the French language was identified as a source of insurrection and complaint, an idea undreamt of by Rivarol: "A German, English, or Italian brochure on the *rights of man* would entertain at most a few valets in each country; written in French, it will stir up, in the blink of an eye, all the madmen in the world."<sup>9</sup> The political and social disorder unleashed throughout Europe by the Revolution was understood by Maistre as the result of men's speaking a common tongue. He pointed out that history abounded with examples of popular uprisings and unseated monarchs, but that in each case the effects of such disturbances were confined by the boundaries of the native language. The doctrines of the French revolutionaries were not particularly original, so how was it possible to explain their immense success?<sup>10</sup> Although Maistre found many parallels between the dethronement of Charles I and the French Revolution, there was one important difference: whereas seventeenth-century English was but an unexceptional national tongue, eighteenth-century French was "a kind of currency universally recognized among all peoples for the exchange of thoughts,"<sup>11</sup> a lingua franca of European dimensions. "Today, Europe is agitated because these same systems are being preached by the French, and when one preaches in French, Europe listens and understands."<sup>12</sup>

When he came to account for the universalism of the French language, Maistre largely bypassed the pseudo-scientific theories characteristic of the eighteenth century. Although he mentioned both geography and the

<sup>7</sup> *Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens à la Convention Nationale, Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte 1884), 7:76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien, O.C.*, 7:139-40.

<sup>10</sup> *Fragments sur la France, O.C.*, 1:196.

<sup>11</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien, OC*, 7:140.

<sup>12</sup> *Fragments sur la France, OC*, 1:196.

physical structure of the vocal organs (193), these material factors were no more than partial explanations. There was something inscrutable, deep hidden, in the form and progress of the French language, whose "hidden character is still a mystery, despite all that has been said on this subject" (191-2). If it was not given to man to know the reasons for this linguistic hegemony, he could be sure that it was not an arbitrary or futureless condition. For according to Maistre's providential interpretation of the Revolution, it was the French language which was the vital agent of change, the means by which the nation fulfilled its destiny:

Providence, which always proportions the means to the end, and which gives to nations as to individuals the necessary organs for the accomplishment of their goals, has precisely given the French nation two instruments, two *arms*, so to speak, with which it moves the world – its language and the spirit of proselytism that forms the essence of its character. Consequently, France constantly has both the need and the power to influence men.<sup>13</sup>

It was not, properly speaking, historical causes which would explain the reasons for the universalism of the language, for to concentrate on these was to neglect the "Wherefore?", to overlook the ultimate ends served by the dominance of French. To situate a language within a teleological or providential framework like this is not necessarily to provide a definition of what these ultimate ends are. The intimations are indeed faint in Maistre's work, but we shall see that, despite the fact that he attributed the promotion of schism and revolt throughout Europe to the universalism of French, he nevertheless held to an older conviction: that a common language would finally unite mankind.

Maistre's audit of *ancien régime* French was as a language of measure and clarity, a reflection of the society which it held together, a universal tongue of learning and civilization. Yet almost all of his works were written at a time when he judged the roots of language to have dried up, and the words men spoke to have become dim and confused. What was the nature of this sudden change, and what did it betoken for the future?

Maistre drew attention to the literary manifestations of this linguistic corruption in *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*:

What has become of this style of good French writers, so clear, so polished, and so elegant? What has become of this taste, so sure and so refined, that Europe had agreed to take as a model? We no longer see anything more than a verbal bloatedness that hides an intellectual emptiness – an insufferable pretension, forced metaphors, an extravagant neologism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:24-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:471.

Revolutionary pamphlets and legal texts were thick with solecisms, newly coined phrases, cryptic sentences, words without wisdom – evidence not only of a contemptible ignorance of grammar, but also of a profound inability to think clearly. This was Maistre’s line of attack in the *Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens*. Following the French invasion of Savoy, the Republican Assembly in Chambéry had drawn up a law which enabled it to seize the property of the clergy. Line by line, Maistre examined the preamble to this law, highlighting its sophistry and faulty syntax. In reading such a document, he wrote, “one recalls Mirabeau’s observation in his *Prussian Monarchy: That it is impossible to reason well in a country where one writes ridiculously*.”<sup>15</sup> A darkness in language, an inability to express oneself lucidly, to avoid paralogsms and ambiguity, was “the unpardonable fault, the mortal reproach for the philosopher, as for the poet or the novelist.”<sup>16</sup> The linguistic criticisms which Maistre leveled at the architects of the French constitution and the apologists of the Terror were similar to those which he aimed at Bacon,<sup>17</sup> Locke,<sup>18</sup> and Rousseau.<sup>19</sup> His disparagement of Grouvelle’s prose in the *Observations critiques sur une édition des lettres de Madame de Sévigné* was likewise based on this equation of verbal imperspicuity with conceptual incoherence.<sup>20</sup>

Solecisms were easy targets for Maistre’s sharp-eyed irony, but his criticisms of the revolutionary discourse went further than this. Not only were new words being invented, but the very sense of existing vocabulary was continually being redefined. A revolutionary and a royalist might therefore share the same language, use the same words, but nevertheless be unable to communicate meaningfully with each other. The term *émigré*, for example, had been applied by the Allobroges National Assembly to the soldiers of Victor-Amadeus III who had fled Savoy after the French invasion. To use the word thus, wrote Maistre, “it is necessary to violate the laws of language as well as those of good sense,” since soldiers were “men as essentially roving as their flags.”<sup>21</sup> In his criticisms of the fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire*, Morellet similarly found fault with the semantic licence of the lexicographers. The definition of *émigré*

<sup>15</sup> *Adresse de quelques parents, OC*, 7:48n.

<sup>16</sup> *Fragments sur la France, OC*, 1:194.

<sup>17</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon, OC*, 6:192-3.

<sup>18</sup> *Cinq paradoxes, OC*, 7:327.

<sup>19</sup> *Examen d’un écrit de J.-J. Rousseau, OC*, 7:510.

<sup>20</sup> *Observations critiques sur un édition des lettres de Madame de Sévigné, OC*, 8:36.

<sup>21</sup> *Adresse de quelques parents, OC*, 7:51.

given in the *Supplément* reads: "used particularly of Frenchmen who, without being authorized to do so, have left France since the Revolution, and who have not returned there within the period allowed by the law."<sup>22</sup> Such a definition was local, contingent, and had no place in a dictionary. "This is to define it," wrote Morellet, "as would a military commission, ordered to report on the emigration, and to have the emigrant shot."<sup>23</sup> La Harpe also shared the belief that the universalism of French was being upset by this breaking up and reordering of the relationship between signs and ideas. Not only were words being used with new meanings, but certain words had simply been suppressed and replaced by others. The word "religion," for example, had been wiped from the tables: men now spoke of "fanaticism" instead. Maistre too picked up on this kind of linguistic abuse. In *Étude sur la souveraineté*, he wrote:

If you ask these men what they have done, they will talk to you of their influence on opinion; they will tell you that they have destroyed *prejudices* and above all *fanaticism*, for this is the high-sounding word of the moment. They will celebrate in magnificent terms the sort of magistracy that Voltaire exercised on his century during his long career; but, in the last analysis, these words *prejudices* and *fanaticism* signify the belief of several nations.<sup>24</sup>

Just as redefinition and substitution (that is, tampering with the relation between words and ideas) were characteristic of revolutionary discourse, so was the tendency to employ abstract terms, words which did not correspond to any "precise and determinate idea."<sup>25</sup> Contemporary pamphlets and speeches were full of references to the sovereignty of the people, the rights of man, liberty and equality, but all this was only so much straw, mere cant and political rêverie. These empty notions and fictitious values functioned, however, as the premises of revolutionary argument, and it was precisely their semantic indeterminacy which was their greatest strength. "Thus it is that in times of factions one invents vague and convenient phrases from which one subsequently draws all the conclusions that one needs."<sup>26</sup> It was almost impossible to combat dialecticians who had recourse to such jargon: all was insubstantial, shadowy, vague. The word "nation," for example, was a "a high-sounding word of infinite convenience, since one makes of it whatever one wishes."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Supplément au Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (Paris 1798), 769.

<sup>23</sup> *Du projet annoncé par l'Institut National*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> *Étude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:403.

<sup>25</sup> *Adresse de quelques parents*, 7:60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, 1:48.

In *Considérations sur la France*, Maistre drew attention to both the metaphysical bias of revolutionary discourse and the consequent depreciation of empirical differences and exceptions. The highly abstract language of the republicans made men deaf to the inconsistencies and contradictions – the paradoxes, even – of all social interaction. “One must not be the dupe,” warned Maistre, of that ideal equality that is only a matter of words” (133). When men talked in terms of absolutes and universals, it was not to be wondered at if their political schemes bore the stamp of their idealism. Thus a constitution fit for every nation was no more than “a pure abstraction, a scholastic work designed to exercise the mind according to an ideal hypothesis” (75).

Another characteristic of revolutionary discourse was its interminable repetition of empty dogma and ready-made phrases. It was a clumsy, mechanical language, full of “high-sounding words they believe they understand by pronouncing them so often.”<sup>28</sup> Journals and pamphlets of the time were crowded with monotonous euphemisms, dry formulae, relentless bombast, and witless verbiage.<sup>29</sup> Just as the abstract bias of this language made men intolerant towards, or forgetful of, differences and irregularities in the real world, so too did this uniformity of speech, this dominance of slogans in oratory and journalism, tend to obscure all asymmetry and dissension. In a footnote to the third of the *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, Maistre wrote:

What’s more, when we reflect on these extravagant declamations with which the Commissioners of the National Convention litter our crossroads, we cannot but think that these people have molds for these sorts of documents that they produce without taking the trouble to think about them. Thus they talk of the *mistresses* and the *valets* of Chambéry as they would talk of them in Paris; and if they made an address to the *Sovereign People* of Peking, they would speak, perhaps, of the influence of *confessors*.<sup>30</sup>

If this abstract, mechanical jargon was absurd, it was also dangerous. La Harpe, for example, believed that the persecution of the clergy was allowed to go unchecked because it had been legitimized as an appropriate response to what was called “fanaticism.” The dramatic severance effected between words and reality was a theme of Maistre’s earliest works. In the *Discours à Madame La Marquise de Costa*, he railed against the hypocrisy and dissimulation of revolutionary language, the smokescreen of metaphysical verbiage which hid all manner of vice and cruelty:

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<sup>28</sup> *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, OC, 7:89.

<sup>29</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, 7:429n, 480n.

<sup>30</sup> *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, OC, 7:136n.

This was even the primordial and characteristic trait of French liberty. One would rather forgive this bacchante her inexpiable crimes than her philosophical efforts to excuse them or to give them respectable names. She spoke only of virtue, of probity, of patriotism, of justice; and wise men, filled with consternation, saw under her civic standards only apostate priests, disloyal knights, corrupt sophists, phalanxes of executioners, a crowd of madmen, and the hideous assembly of all crimes that can be committed without courage.<sup>31</sup>

Just as he judged Rousseau to have bequeathed an equivocal and conceptually incoherent political discourse to the apologists of republican government, so Maistre held the other "philosophes" responsible for a cult of linguistic aestheticism which legitimized barbarity. He saw that, in a society dependent upon textual authority, moral judgements could be perverted by a simple metaphor. In *Étude sur la souveraineté*, he quoted with approval the following passage from the *Accusateur public*:

You were put aside for a moment, Diderot, while orders were signed to drown people! ... The only fruit of your vigils was to teach crime to cover itself with polished language in order to deal more dangerous blows. Injustice and violence are called *caustic proprieties*; blood flowing in torrents, *perspiration of the political body*.<sup>32</sup>

The dominant revolutionary discourse thus had a literary character – ironic, euphemistic, rich in imagery and metaphor – inherited from the "philosophes." This made it possible for men to talk about the Terror, to justify it even, from an aesthetic perspective.<sup>33</sup>

For Maistre then, the revolutionary language was, despite its solecisms and irregularities, sufficiently homogeneous to be susceptible of both imitation (*Discours du citoyen Cherchemot*) and translation (*Bienfaits de la Révolution française*). There was, for example, a radical difference between the form of language adopted by a monarch and that of common barrators: "the king must not speak the language of revolution."<sup>34</sup> Among the passages culled from Hume's *History of Great Britain* concerning the Civil War and the Restoration which compose the final chapter of *Considérations sur la France* is a reference to the "distinctive language" of Puritan fanaticism: "it was a new jargon invented by the fury and hypocrisy of the times."<sup>35</sup> The same phenomenon had repeated itself during the French Revolution. In *Bienfaits de la Révolution*

<sup>31</sup> *Discours à Madame La Marquise De Costa*, OC, 7:249.

<sup>32</sup> *Étude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:404-5.

<sup>33</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:500.

<sup>34</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:101.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

*française*, Maistre set out to decode this “distinctive language” and thus to see the revolutionaries condemned by the words of their own mouths. His strategy was to decipher the sentences of republican journals in order to reveal what he had already identified in *Considérations sur la France* as the disjunction between a dominant revolutionary discourse and social realities anchored within monarchical traditions. The language of the revolutionaries was parasitic, strange, but also ridiculous, artificial, a Parisian plant which could not take root elsewhere in France. Outside of the capital, the idiom became meaningless<sup>36</sup> and its sonorous formulae were subverted by the common people.<sup>37</sup> It was a foreign tongue, its characters were hieroglyphs,<sup>38</sup> a cryptic jargon far removed from the refined language of *ancien régime* society.

Maistre saw that the revolutionaries wished not only to displace “old forms of politeness” with new vocabulary,<sup>39</sup> but also that they designed entirely to suppress the teaching and use of ancient languages as part of a strategy to exclude all that would not fit into the narrow categories and norms of revolutionary discourse. “The philosophic sect that reigned over opinion in France during the second half of this century had declared war on Latin.”<sup>40</sup> As a consequence of this, Maistre foresaw an era of universal ignorance and barbarism (445, 451). Unlike the abolitionists, who regarded Latin as the tongue of obscurantist dogma, the jargon of ecclesiastical power, so much dead wood, Maistre – in accordance with his organic conception of language development – praised it for its antiquity, the data it had preserved about early civilizations: “Languages contain a hidden and profound metaphysics, and much invaluable information on the origin of nations” (445).

The attempts by the revolutionaries to substitute certain words, to eliminate others, to propagate abstract terminology, and to suppress Latin, were linked to an understanding of language as a human invention which involved the arbitrary relation of signs to ideas. These signs could therefore be deconstructed, reordered, and made to stand in new relations to given ideas. Even if the revolutionaries did not all share the dream of a perfect system of communication, many held to the belief that language could be ameliorated, adjusted, stemmed, and channeled according to the needs of the Republic and the dictates of emergent political forces. Maistre utterly rejected this idea. While he recognized that the Revolution was essentially a linguistic conflict, a struggle to dispossess men of

<sup>36</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savosien*, OC, 7:136n.

<sup>37</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:409-10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 414n.

<sup>39</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:53.

<sup>40</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:446.

language<sup>41</sup> and to impose an alien speech upon them, he also perceived the vanity of such projects. Unlike the members of the National Institute, unlike Morellet, who hankered after the restoration of the Academy, Maistre regarded the interventions and prohibitions of academic bodies or specially appointed committees, the technocratic meddling with the very foundation of human society, as misconceived and ineffectual. The Directory did not have the power to alter the meaning of words by special decree,<sup>42</sup> and it was erroneous to claim that words were arbitrary signs.<sup>43</sup> Man could neither invent nor control language. Maistre's providential model of language change effectually nullified all schemes to reform French in accordance with programmed criteria.

"What an enormous power is that of words!" wrote Maistre in *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (5:90). He perceived, however, the paradox of language: its strength and its weakness. "Words are nothing and yet it is with this nothing that genius is intimidated and the route to discoveries barred" (185). All babble about written constitutions, the rights of man, etc., was as sand thrown against the wind. The mountains of paper blackened by the ink of republican journalism<sup>44</sup> were only insubstantial scribblings, noisy but impotent posturings, spiders' webs of the imagination. In fact, the language which the revolutionaries used to deceive men was as a veil before their own eyes. Their reliance on words, on textual authority, blinded them to the signs and portents which compassed them round about. In reality, a text or language of far greater significance was being composed in tandem with the fleeting untruths of revolutionary discourse. "When seditious blind men decree the indivisibility of the Republic, see only Providence decreeing that of the Kingdom."<sup>45</sup> To see beyond the surfaces of things, to pierce the shadows of political jargon, to bypass the poverty of human language ("What are our words and our writings, and all these efforts to persuade, and all this vain apparatus of syllogisms? *They are as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal!*"<sup>46</sup>), and to behold the divine script of human history: this was what Maistre urged. The blind may talk of the indivisibility of the Republic, but look – if you have eyes to see – at what is really achieved: the indivisibility of the kingdom. Maistre referred repeatedly to the Revolution as a sort of divine script, a metatext, a language which the

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<sup>41</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savosien*, OC, 7:161.

<sup>42</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:99.

<sup>43</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, OC, 4:99.

<sup>44</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, 7:471.

<sup>45</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, 1:21.

<sup>46</sup> *Réflexions critiques d'un chrétien dévoué à la Russie sur l'ouvrage de Méthode*, OC, 8:398 (Latin), 446 (French).



impious, like Belshazzar, could not comprehend. The Revolution was “the *preface* [...] of the frightful book which we have since been made to read.”<sup>47</sup> The suppression of institutional Christianity throughout Europe was interpreted in the same terms: “If Providence *erases*, it is no doubt in order to *write*.”<sup>48</sup> Only this form of writing was lasting, meaningful; the orators and philosophers had created a language which was as evanescent as themselves: “Where is Mirabeau? Where is Bailly with his *wonderful day*? Where is Thouret, who invented the phrase *to expropriate*?”<sup>49</sup> Maistre exhorted men to turn away from this human discourse and to read the permanent characters of the divine script.

If Maistre did not regard the universalism of the French language as having been undone by the Revolution (if anything, the contrary was true<sup>50</sup>), he did, however, fear linguistic division at other levels. It is important to note that Maistre’s understanding of changes in language was influenced by what he regarded as historical precedents. In the tenth dialogue of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, he wrote, “The two greatest epochs in the spiritual world are without doubt that of *Babel*, when languages split up, and that of *Pentecost*, when they made a marvelous effort to reunite.”<sup>51</sup> In *Étude sur la souveraineté*, Maistre drew a parallel between the *confusio linguarum* recorded in Genesis 11 and the splintering of sovereignty in a republic. The efforts of the National Convention to draw up a constitution resulted only in a cacophony of incomprehensible voices and irreconcilable demands: “But the work is called *Babel*, this is to say *confusion*; each speaks *his own language*; no one understands anyone else, and *dispersion* is inevitable.”<sup>52</sup> In *Viri christiani russiæ amantissimi animadversiones in librum Methodii*, a similar analogy was made, this time between the scattering of the patriarchs and the breaking up of a universal scientific community. In reckless imitation of the French, other European countries had abandoned Latin in favour of the vernacular, destroying the gains of monolingual civilization:

Would to God that all educated men in the world wrote only in Latin, especially on everything related to science! Would to God that they were all of one *tongue*, as they were before this confusion of languages that France has introduced into the world. Today, all the nations of Europe, in a mad imitation of the mad, and

<sup>47</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:262-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:24.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:13.

<sup>50</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, OC, 4:124.

<sup>51</sup> OC, 5:168-9.

<sup>52</sup> *Étude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:369.

as if they were tormented by the French disease, write each in its own language, not only books of literature, but also works relative to the most serious and recondite sciences; the result is that the mind of man, even before it can begin to occupy itself with the essentials, has worn itself out lifting the useless burden of words.<sup>53</sup>

If Babel provided an explanation of fracture and discord, then Pentecost was the model of redemption, of a new unity. In the closing pages of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, Maistre drew attention to the accelerated communication between languages. Within Europe, French was still "the *universal language*": "everyone understands it, everyone speaks it."<sup>54</sup> It had put down deep roots in English soil as a result of the exile of the French clergy: "this is a second conquest perhaps, which has not made any noise, for God does not make any, but which may have more fortunate consequences than the first" (125). In addition, the overseas expansion of English power had stimulated the study of Eastern tongues, such as Arabic, Persian, and Bengali (125-6). This unprecedented traffic of languages across the globe seemed to herald a future state of concord: "Everything announces that we are on the road to a great unity that we must *welcome from afar*" (127). For Maistre, linguistic division remained a form of punishment, an unnatural condition which perpetuated religious and political disunity. Although he attributed the spread of revolutionary doctrine in Europe to the universalism of the French language, he nevertheless held to the belief that the peoples of the earth would one day recover a single tongue; that clarity in thought and communication could not but bring men to see error and falsehood for what they were; and that Providence would undo the confusion and disarray which had plagued mankind since Babel.

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<sup>53</sup> *OC*, 8:391-2 (Latin), 437-8 (French).

<sup>54</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, *OC*, 4:125.

*Joseph de Maistre, New  
Mentor of the Prince:  
Unveiling the Mysteries of  
Political Science*<sup>1</sup>

Joseph de Maistre, it has often been noticed, did not create an ideology of Counter-Revolution; his works are fragmented essays, sometimes unfinished, often published after his death. In twenty years, from *Considérations sur la France* to *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*,<sup>2</sup> they touched on topics from political history to philosophical and religious controversy without constructing a doctrine in the sense that we would understand it, which is surprising on the part of the most radical denigrator of modernity. Diverse reasons for this have been advanced: his rejection of a rational organization of society led him to condemn all intellectual constructions, which he scornfully assimilated to the school compositions of system makers or in-house constitutions; the little time that his life as a magistrate and diplomat left him to devote to his literary work; his inability, finally, to produce a formal treatise as shown by the abandonment in 1796 of his study on sovereignty, which he had however conceived as an *anti-social contract*.<sup>3</sup> So, was it refusal, impossibility, or incapacity on his part to do the work of a theorist?

Here I would like to present another problematic, perhaps richer in new perspectives, in any case little explored. Since we attribute to him the status of writer, to believe that he wrote for a public would appear to

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<sup>1</sup> "Joseph de Maistre, nouveau mentor du prince: le dévoilement des mystères de la science politique," paper given at a colloquium in Montpellier in December 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from some memoirs written in Chambéry prior to the Revolution, his first works were born in exile during the course of his stay in Lausanne from 1793 to 1797. Then six years of tribulations and temporary refuges interrupted his writing. His stay in St. Petersburg was most fertile between 1807 and 1817. After that year, which marked his return to Turin, Maistre no longer wrote, but revised his manuscripts, particularly *Du Pape* and *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.

<sup>3</sup> See my edition (Paris: PUF 1992) in the *Questions* collection, 280.

satisfy the evidence, but in his case this belief can sustain an illusion. He never put himself forward as a writer as did several of his acquaintances and correspondents, such as G. de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Lamennais, Ballanche, or Bonald. A number of his works remained in his portfolio and those that were published had been released with reticence, sometimes with the greatest reluctance. Everything happened as if it was not the public that his works were aimed at, but – let us risk the hypothesis – the prince, the holder of sovereignty, the unique interlocutor very consciously challenged by the Freemason invested with a mission. It remains for us to justify this suggestion as a well founded supposition.

In the first place, it is appropriate to recall that Joseph de Maistre's works were born in circumstances of which he was at the same time an observer and an actor: the attempt to reconquer Savoy by the king of Sardinia in 1793; the possible re-establishment of the monarchy in France in 1797; the prospect of a constitutional empire in Russia in 1808, and the urgency of rethinking the new political and religious European order in the context of the regenerated old monarchies.

Converging indications stemming from the attentive study of the manuscripts<sup>4</sup> permit us to suggest that his works were not intended for publication, but that their first destination was to enlighten the sovereign, to weigh on his choices or those of his entourage. We are in the presence of warnings or pleas produced by an expert in political science and a mystical Freemason who is unveiling his secrets to his privileged reader, in principle all-powerful.

With the works of his Russian period, in which Martinist mysticism is openly displayed, we are even in the presence of a Masonic dialogue between brother *Josephus a Floribus* and brother Alexander, initiated into the order in 1803, a little after his accession to the throne, by the mystic Freemason Ivan V. Boeber, if one is to believe the directory of Russian Freemasons drawn up by Tatiana Bakounine.

We see then the consequence in terms of intertextuality, the text that we know will be the established version for the use of the profane of a hypertext originally intended for an initiated prince, to bend his decisions in the direction of Maistrian Catholic illuminism. The work would truly have a double explanation: an esoteric reading of the secrets of the world being born of the Revolution, and an exoteric reading, partially re-coded, that Maistre resolves to deliver after the failure of his mission as clandestine advisor.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph de Maistre's manuscripts were the object of a gift by one of his descendants to the departmental archives of Savoy, where they are available in Chambéry or on CD-ROM.

This interpretation is not new. It was already developed by Emile Dermenghem in his *Joseph de Maistre mystique*,<sup>5</sup> then more recently by Henry Corbin and Gilbert Durand,<sup>6</sup> both familiar as we know with Masonic thought and writings.

On Joseph de Maistre's Masonic involvement, on its precociousness, its depth, and its permanence, I refer to Jean Rebotton's enlightening research.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless it is useful to recall that in his 1792 *Mémoire au Duc de Brunswick*, to the grand master of the Stricte Observance Templière, Maistre assigned to Masons of the second grade the double mission of "the instruction of governments and the reunion of the churches":

One adds that very often princes and the agents of their power desire to find the truth, without being able to flatter themselves with finding it. On these delicate occasions when the passions so often divert the most perceptive impartiality, a society devoted by its most sacred motives to assuring the triumph of the truth could render essential services, either by sending it indirectly to the agents of the authority, or by entering into correspondence with them, if they belong to this order, which can easily happen.<sup>8</sup>

A few pages further on, with respect to *transcendental Christianity*, the object of study of the third grade of Masons, he writes: "Everything is mystery in the two Testaments, and the elect of both are true initiates. Therefore it is necessary to interrogate this true antiquity, and to ask it how it understands the sacred allegories."<sup>9</sup>

Maistre had remained faithful to this program his whole life long, even if in counter-revolutionary contexts the accusation of Freemasonry restricted him to the most extreme prudence; his correspondence testifies to this. He privileged the personal interview where his "imperious eloquence" did wonders: his *Carnets intimes* preserve the traces of numerous audiences requested and obtained, notably with Tsar Alexander. He utilized the mediation of a work in manuscript when, depending on the circumstances, he became *persona non grata*, following a strategy

<sup>5</sup> 1923, and republished by La Colombe in 1946.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 5-6 (1980), Actes du colloque sur Joseph de Maistre: illuminisme et francçonnerie (Paris: Belles Lettres).

<sup>7</sup> "Maistre, alias Josephus a Floribus, pendant la Révolution," *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 5-6, 141-181, and Rebotton's edition of *Ecrits maçonniques de Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Slatkine 1983).

<sup>8</sup> *Ecrits maçonniques*, 104-05.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

that makes one think of Alceste<sup>10</sup>: “It matters little to me [...] that they say this or that of me, or that they lend me such or such view. I am going straight to what appears to me just and true; and I will let myself say it;”<sup>11</sup> or again, “It is necessary to listen to people who know politics, and not to treat them as wrong-headed [...] when they show very respectfully at their fingertips an abyss where we are headed.”<sup>12</sup>

#### WORKS OF THE PERIOD 1793-1803

The works of this period are in this respect the most difficult to interpret. We know, for example, that the *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, four in number with a fifth letter sketched, had been intended to serve as royalist propaganda at the time of the aborted re-conquest of Savoy in 1793. Edited and published under the patronage of Jacques Mallet du Pan, they belong to that genre of pamphlet designed to act on opinion. However, Maistre took care to send his manuscript to Turin where his involvement in Freemasonry was known and had earned him exceptional suspicion. Masons were numerous at the court of Turin, even if the lodges had been dissolved on the king's order after 1789. No document, no indication permits identification of addressees in Turin known by the author to belong to the order.

*Considérations sur la France* is more interesting. The work was written at the beginning of 1797 in Lausanne in an environment where Masons were numerous and divided into two rival obediences: the Grand Orient won to the emancipatory ideas of the Revolution, and the mystical lodges attached to the Reformed Scottish Rite in which the *Philosophe inconnu*, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, was held in great honour. One can conjecture that Joseph de Maistre's friend, Isabelle de Polier, director of the *Gazette de Lausanne*, was at the heart of this active circle of mystical Masons. All her archives having disappeared into an East Prussian château at the end of the Second World War, one can go no further. However, Maistre's *Considérations*, which develops a providential thesis and a mystical reading of the Revolution from a Martinist perspective, already offers a double reading.

Another indication can be picked up. The title page of the manuscript reveals that the original dedication was to Niklaus-Friedrich von Steiger

<sup>10</sup> [Alceste, the main character in Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, was portrayed as a cantankerous gentleman devoted to attacking the hypocritical flatteries of polite society.]

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Louis-Amé Vignet, Baron des Etoles, Lausanne, 4 July 1793, *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 10 (1986/1987), 35

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Etoles, Laussanes, 16 August 1793, *Ibid.*, 47.

(1729-1799),<sup>13</sup> first magistrate of the city and republic of Berne and an ardent adversary of the Revolution. Can we imagine that Joseph de Maistre would risk compromising Berne's highest authority by the publication of such an explosive counter-revolutionary pamphlet? Is this not, on the contrary, an indication that the manuscript of the *Considérations* was intended for Steiger to prolong their discreet conversations in Lausanne between 1793 and 1796? Having been led to publish it, at the request of Louis Fauche-Borel, an agent of the Count de Provence, Maistre revised his manuscript and removed all reference to the person to whom it had been dedicated.

However, the majority of Joseph de Maistre's works were conceived in St. Petersburg. There he found himself put in a less subtle way in the privileged although ambiguous relationship between his role as the Sardinian ambassador and his situation in the immediate entourage of the tsar, and then with Alexander himself.

WORKS OF THE RUSSIAN PERIOD:  
1808-1815

From his arrival in St. Petersburg in May 1803, Joseph de Maistre rapidly integrated himself, thanks to his brother Xavier, but thanks even more to Masonic friendships. This is something that we are coming to know today, thanks to the fact that he lived in the entourage of persons or families who played an important role in the beginnings of Freemasonry in Russia as well as in Russian political life: the Gagarins, the Tolstoys, the Pushkins, the Potockis, the Razumovskis, and the Steddings.<sup>14</sup> If his position as a foreign diplomat obliged him to keep out of things, he would still be informed about "the war" between the various Masonic obediences, where one found three currents of eighteenth-century Freemasonry (deist, rationalist, and mystical), and their political positioning in the face of the Revolution and the Empire: Anglo-Saxon liberalism, pro-French reformism, and adversaries of the Revolution. The first two represented Maistre's adversaries, the last his allies. In a recent book, Franck Lafage has drawn up a very enlightening summary of the state of the question.<sup>15</sup> The Russian archives now offer a passionate field of study for the most cosmopolitan city of Europe, the personality of

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<sup>13</sup> See my edition, (Geneva: Slatkine 1983), 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Dictionnaire de la franc-maçonnerie*, Dir. Daniel Ligou (Paris: PUF 1987), 1058-64, and especially, Tatianna Bakounine, *Répertoire biographiques des francs-maçons russes (XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves de l'université de Paris 1967).

<sup>15</sup> *Le comte Joseph de Maistre. Itinéraire intellectuel d'un théologien de la politique* (Paris: L'Harmattan 1998). See especially, Chapter III, 121-97.

Alexander I, the debates over ideas, and the stakes of the time. Undoubtedly works now in progress will permit us to situate better the role of the minister of the King of Sardinia<sup>16</sup> in the very bitter struggles for influence that took place in the tsar's entourage. It is in this context that we must situate the origins of the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines*, of which the initial manuscript is dated May 1809.<sup>17</sup>

The interpretation of this essay must be situated in the context of the Franco-Russian Alliance signed at Tilsit (July 1807), its consequences, and the project of a Russian constitution, which had been confided to Mikhail Speransky. The essay contains sixty-seven articles where Maistre, apparently without aiming at the project of Alexander's principal minister and councilor, challenges English and French constitutionalism in such a way that his refutation appears as a continuous critique of the imperial constitution then in gestation. The thesis of Maistre, who we recall is a jurist by education and profession, is to fix the limit of law and, in consequence, of written laws: the law stops where the right of the sovereign commences, that is to say his plenary mastery – *absolute* – of sovereignty. This is what condemns every constitution, whether it be imposed as in France by a usurping assembly or whether it be granted as Alexander envisaged doing or as Louis XVIII will do in 1815.

Maistre refutes Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* by opposing to him jurisconsults, ancient and modern, including the famous Genevan, Delolme, and contemporary theologians like Bergier. Following Article XIX of the *Essai*, after having abundantly cited Plato and St. John Chrysostom, a Father of the Eastern Church dear to Orthodoxy, Maistre's text is weighted down with recollections of Saint-Martin's theses, transparent for readers familiar with that philosopher's work.<sup>18</sup> Half of the articles review ancient and modern times to justify the immutable law recalled in the conclusion: "On the one hand, the religious principle

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<sup>16</sup> Numerous memoirs still remain to be exhumed from depositories that were prohibited from being consulted in the Soviet era.

<sup>17</sup> The manuscript was reviewed and augmented in March 1812 and completed in June of the same year. The first edition appeared in St. Petersburg in May 1814 with Pluchart; the Parisian edition appeared with the Société typographique in October–November 1814. Consult the excellent edition we owe to Robert Triomphe, Publications de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> R. Triomphe identified these echoes of *Homme de désir*, *Erreurs et de la vérité*, *Lettre à un ami sur la Révolution*, and finally *Eclair sur l'association humaine*. See his edition of the *Essai*.



presides over all political creation. On the other, everything disappears as soon as it is withdrawn" (LXVI). In the last article there surges up the Masonic allegory of "the eternal Architect" whose eye observes "Europe guilty for having shut her eyes to these great truths," and that is getting ready to expiate "certain crimes perpetrated by individuals, by nations, and by sovereignties" (LXVII).

Beyond the apparent generality of the reflection on "the generative principles of political constitutions," it is Russia, it is the tsar's bad councilors, it is the sovereign himself that are pointed to as the disturbers of the political harmony willed by God. This mysticism reveals an imagination that in political analysis corresponds to the vision of the world developed by European Romanticism. Who else was the admonition aimed at in 1809, in St. Petersburg, where Joseph de Maistre wanted to be the theologian of politics? Nothing permits us to say to whom the manuscript was destined. It could have been Alexander, Speransky's adversaries, the Duke de Serra-Capriola, with whom Maistre was very closely linked, or Count Razumovskii, who will be the addressee of Maistre's *Cinq lettres sur l'éducation publique en Russie* of 1810 – all of these will play a decisive role in the eviction of the reforming minister and in the return in 1812 to autocracy, the Russian version of absolutism.

We see shadowy zones that literary history has yet to dissipate to situate accurately the genesis of the text and its consequences. The writer's papers, accessible today in the departmental archives of Savoy, can contribute much here, although we know that the activities of the initiate left few written traces. Perhaps the archives of St. Petersburg will provide some echo of the reception of the manuscript beginning in 1809, and in this case at the time of publication in May 1814.

Even before the rupture of the Franco-Russian Alliance in 1812, which will result in the invasion of Russia by the Grand Army, Maistre intervened, especially in a series of five letters (June-July 1810) destined for the minister of public instruction, the mystic Mason Alekseis Razumovskii, letters to which it is convenient to attach a series of small works.<sup>19</sup>

The third letter specifies clearly the role that author sets for himself:

I do not at all claim, M. Count, to change a nation's ideas or to propose impracticable things; however I pose principles and I cite examples. Subsequently it will be for statesmen who know men and things to take the precautions

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<sup>19</sup> Published under these titles: *Observations sur le prospectus disciplinarum*, signed Philorusse; *Mémoires sur la liberté de l'enseignement public*, signed Philalexandre; *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, and finally, *Reflexions critiques d'un chrétien dévoué à la Russie*, dated 1812, in OC, 8:163-447.

that they will judge appropriate to the goal as they will and as much as they will.<sup>20</sup>

So it is clearly as a new mentor that Maistre situates his role. It is that of the guardian of the true foundations of political science and of the chronicler of the "examples" presented by past and present civilizations. His quest for unity led him to take into account the totality of space-time; to the observation of the present, he associates the prospective approach and the retrospective look linking the sacred and the profane. Moreover, his vast culture, going from Greco-Roman antiquity and Judeo-Christian foundations to the cultures of the Orient, India, and China such as he could know them from the memoirs of Jesuit missionaries in China and of those of Indian experts in Calcutta, is opened in St. Petersburg to Germanic and Slavic cultures. What diverts his French readers undoubtedly is his impressive cosmopolitan culture that takes him across cultural and temporal boundaries, even if he reads Russian society, and German and English philosophy with Catholic ultramontane prejudices. Joseph de Maistre's universal aims incontestably make him heir to the encyclopedism of the Enlightenment, opposing to it a Counter-Enlightenment encyclopedism. His approach, as Franck Lafage rightly emphasizes,<sup>21</sup> is close to that of the theosophists of German romanticism, Heinrich Jung-Stilling, Karl von Eckarhausen, and Franz Xavier von Baader.

#### DU PAPE AS POLITICAL UTOPIA

From his adherence to Catholicism, from his frequenting of Christian sources, and from his claim to universal erudition, will be born *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, whose manuscript dates in its essentials from the years 1809-1810.<sup>22</sup> We know that this work circulated in manuscript form in St. Petersburg high society and that its publication would occur then years later, on the insistent demand of his daughter Constance, not without strong resistance from its author. Here, equally, everything happened as if publication of his masterpiece had not been Joseph de Maistre's first aim.

However his last large-scale work is *Du Pape*, which, one too often forgets, is a work written in Russia, since the original manuscript carries the date 1817. This apology for Catholicism designed for Russian readers goes even further than the classic parallelism between the temporal power of the king and the spiritual sovereignty of the pope, otherwise

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<sup>20</sup> *Sur l'éducation publique en Russie*, 13 (25) June 1810, OC, 195-6.

<sup>21</sup> *Le comte Joseph de Maistre*, 145-50.

<sup>22</sup> (Geneva: Slakine 1993), 1:14-22, 69-70.

equal to temporal sovereignty. Maistre imagines a utopia, making the pope *the* universal sovereign. This vision was already evoked in his *Lettre à une dame russe* of February 1810:

And if we wanted to get everyone to agree on a monarchy tempered by fundamental laws and customs, with estates generals for great occasions, composed of a sovereign who would be the pope, with a nobility formed by the episcopal corps, and a third estate represented by the doctors and ministers of the second order, there could be no one who would not applaud this plan.<sup>23</sup>

The allegory obviously represents the Roman Church, but it is sufficiently ambiguous that it does not exclude a universal temporal sovereignty. And here we enter into the utopia of a humanity reconciled with itself and with God under the protection of the pope, a *restoration* of a mythic medieval Christendom reconstituting the seamless robe, the lost unity finally found again.

This grandiose vision of the new Europe that Maistre carries within himself, in which the allied dynasties will be pacified, in which divergent national interests will be transcended by the common pastor, reveals a powerful imagination progressively liberated by contact with Slavic mysticism.

The “metapolitical” vision of the political unification of Europe is perhaps an extension of the experience in which Maistre had been closely entangled, that of the survival and success of the Society of Jesus, assembled together in non-Catholic territory. This was the extraordinary history, in effect, of this institute founded in the sixteenth century to assure the defence of the Counter-Reformation papacy, chased from Catholic states after 1759, suppressed by Rome in 1773, and having found refuge and received the mission of the education of elites in a Protestant land, the Prussia of Frederick, and more still, in the Russia of Catherine, Paul, and Alexander. Yes, unity is possible tomorrow since it already exists experientially.

*Du Pape* concludes with a half-religious, half-developed hymn that occupies the last chapter XVIII.<sup>24</sup> It is dedicated to the “holy Roman Church,” presented “as a superb spectacle,” constructed like a Baroque glory of the churches of the Counter Reformation, or like one of those allegories cherished in the mystical lodges.

The hymn begins with the alternate and reconciled voices of Bossuet and Fénelon, who like prophets accompany the cortege of Roman pontiffs, “supreme agents of civilization, creators of the monarchy and of European unity, guardians of science and the arts, founders and born

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<sup>23</sup> *OC*, 8:143.

<sup>24</sup> See the first edition (Lyon-Paris: Rusand 1819), 2:674-81.

protectors of civil liberty, destroyers of slavery, enemies of despotism, indefatigable supporters of sovereignty, and benefactors of humankind."<sup>25</sup> Accompanied in the cortege by all the saints, they mount towards the "ETERNAL CITY," like a human caravan going from the old Pantheon to the Christian Pantheon, St. Peter's of Rome. *Du Pape* concludes, like the book of the *Apocalypse*, with a vision of the "holy city," the "heavenly Jerusalem," the lighthouse book of mystical Masonry.

Thus, Maistre's theological-political speculation, if it is read in the perspective of a "modern illuminism," is clearly a utopia of the ideal city in the sense defined by Claude-Gilbert Dubois, being put together again from "medieval millenarian currents" for which "the radiant city is not above history but the end of history."<sup>26</sup>

To see in Maistre only a "remarkable and terrifying prophet of our time" as Isaiah Berlin does is reductionist.<sup>27</sup> In *Du Pape*, his ultimate work, he conceives a political utopia in a straight line with the visionary of Patmos. His vision of a Europe of regenerated monarchies, absolute in law, but in fact limited by the delegated powers of constituted bodies, under the spiritual magistracy of the pope as guarantor of "the divine character of sovereignty" and of "the legitimate liberty of men"<sup>28</sup> is in a sense a perfect utopia since it remains to this day in the state of an ideal construction. It is revelatory of the crypto-Masonic involvement of a writer who declares that since the Revolution he has broken with this "foolishness of Freemasonry" and who never ceased to remain faithful to it in his heart and to drink from it in his imagination. The mystic obediences of contemporary Freemasonry are not deceiving themselves by devoting frequent workshops to Maistre today.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 676.

<sup>26</sup> "Problèmes de l'utopie," *Archives des Lettres modernes*, No. 85 (1968), 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Le bois tordu de l'humanité* (Paris: Albin Michel 1992, *Idées* collection); the essay on Maistre is published on pages 100-74 under the title "Joseph de Maistre et les origines du totalitarisme." The citation is from page 168.

<sup>28</sup> *Du Pape*, cited edition, LIII, Chap. IV, 514.

<sup>29</sup> Intentionally, I have not envisaged here the more complex case of the *Soirées*. Pierre Glaudes in his "Joseph de Maistre et les figures de l'histoire" (*Cahier romantique*, No. 2, diffusion Niazet 1997, 95-141) devotes an excellent essay to the art of serious conversation that the *Comte* of the *Soirées* and his two companions carry to rare perfection by privileging "the oblique way" (128). With respect to Joseph de Maistre's masterpiece, he invites the reader to go beyond the philosophical dialogue between three friends conversing in a northern *locus amoenus*. The reunion can mask a free "session": a reunion of men, of different origins and cultures, practising a mutual tolerance made up of listening and respect because they recognize each other as equals. From their dialogue

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reuniting the three ages of life, the three grades, is born a work that is thoroughly cosmopolitan in the Masonic sense, since it is born of the harmony of the three ways of knowing, the three cultures of the West: the Roman (the Count), the Slav (the Senator), and the Germanic (the Chevalier). Let us recall, in effect, that the Chevalier de Bray, Bavarian ambassador to St. Petersburg, if he was of French origins and an admirer of Napoleon, was an excellent connoisseur of German philosophy and literature. In 1805 he had married a Livonian countess of German origin and would leave descendants in Bavaria (See Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Droz 1968), 578-82). Ten years after the creation of the *Soirées*, Joseph de Maistre hesitated to publish the book after having laboriously completed and revised his manuscript. Is this an admission of an original destination other than publication? Originally, was the *Soirées*' unique reader named Alexander?

*Joseph de Maistre's  
Catholic Philosophy  
of Authority*<sup>1</sup>

Joseph de Maistre wanted his books to bring philosophical reinforcements to a Catholicism shaken by the revolutionary crisis. In 1819, in the preliminary discourse to *Du Pape*, he presented himself as a man of the world whose advocacy was justified only by the state of the Church, almost destroyed by the French Revolution. At the moment when the “Church was beginning again,” in the “kind of interstice” that preceded a resumption of theological studies, Maistre intended simply to take the part of those “faithful allies” who, without substituting themselves for theologians, can defend the Church by means of their own profane arguments.<sup>2</sup> Maistre always declared that he would retract in advance errors that his writings might contain, and the sincerity of his faith is patent. And yet, if one wanted to find in the Catholic tradition a discourse that resembled the one that Dostoevski gave to the Grand Inquisitor in his *Brothers Karamazov*, one would undoubtedly turn to Joseph de Maistre; not only because he effectively produced an apology for the violence of the Spanish Inquisition,<sup>3</sup> but also because his work in places takes up the cynical principle of a deliberate dissimulation of the truth – witness for example the affirmation that “the principle of the sovereignty of the people is so dangerous that, even if it were the case that it were true, it would not be necessary to permit this to be shown.”<sup>4</sup> The Maistrarian work thus presents itself under two incompatible and inseparable aspects: it is at once a profoundly ideological work, diverting Catholicism to the partisan defence of the old regime, and an authenti-

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<sup>1</sup> “Une philosophie de l’autorité: Joseph de Maistre,” *Transversalités: Revue de l’Institut Catholique de Paris*, No. 70 (avril-juin 1999), 71-92.

<sup>2</sup> *Du pape, Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte 1884-1886), 2:xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> In his *Lettres sur l’Inquisition espagnole* (written in 1815, posthumous edition in 1822), *OC*, 3:285-401.

<sup>4</sup> *OC*, 9:494.

cally philosophical work, resting his political choice on an essay in Christian philosophy.

The paradoxical character of this philosophy is reflected in its situation in the heart of the history of ideas. Maistre's work belongs first to the history of Catholicism: it takes its sources from Catholic thinkers – Bossuet, Fénelon, and the theologians so influential in the eighteenth centuries – Huet, Bergier, and especially Nicolas Bergier.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century, part of the French clergy recognized themselves in this thought, which seemed confirmed by the political philosophy of the *Syllabus*, or finally by the defeat of Gallicanism, so opposed by Maistre, and by the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility. However, from the nineteenth century, the “Renaissance of Thomism” meant the death of Maistrian authoritarianism. Thomist theologians are in agreement in noting that Maistre's philosophy was strictly incompatible with Thomist positions – to the point where one of them could write that “Maistre is not a Catholic political philosopher.”<sup>6</sup> Maistre thus figures as a case of heterodox orthodoxy: a thought conceived in the defence of Catholicism, but whose ascendancy was first vindicated by Auguste Comte, and in which some today see a prefiguration of Nietzschean nihilism.

Paradoxically, Maistrian thought also belongs to the history of Enlightenment rationalism. Paradoxically, for all Maistre's work presents itself as a polemic against the rationalism of the Enlightenment – and, more generally, against the spirit of modern times, inaugurated by Protestantism, and of which the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were only, according to Maistre, the ultimate productions. What defines the modern spirit is “hatred of authority.”<sup>7</sup> To this hatred of authority, Maistre opposes a defence of the “Catholic principle,” which is nothing other than the “principle of authority” taken in all the rigour

<sup>5</sup> On Maistre's relationship to the Catholic tradition, see J.-L. Soltner, “Le christianisme de Joseph de Maistre,” *Revue des études maistriennes*, 5-6 (1980), and R. Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1965), 70-7, and 108-15.

<sup>6</sup> Max Huber, *Die Staatsphilosophie von Joseph de Maistre im Lichte des Thomismus* (Basel/Stuttgart: Helbing & Lichtenhahn 1958), 10 and 60. However it must be noticed that what goes for Maistre's political theology does not necessarily apply to the theodicy of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. Commenting on this, A.D. Sertillanges concludes that Maistre “undertakes an apologetic work of undisputable value and on some points without peer,” so that “in his writings, despite their excesses, the essential of the most profound truths subsists.” *Le problème du mal* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne 1951) 1:290-1.

<sup>7</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:525.

of its consequences.<sup>8</sup> "Authority," declares Maistre, believing that he speaks in the name of Catholicism, "is the basis of our system."<sup>9</sup> In fact, his whole work seeks to show that authority forms a system: the metaphysical authority of God is necessarily realized in the political authority of the sovereign and in the spiritual authority of the pope. The remarkable point however is that this systematic defence of authority is itself tributary to Enlightenment rationalism, since Maistre thinks of authority on the model of the notion of sovereignty, in common with the thought of Pufendorf, Rousseau, and the physiocrats.

In his *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt, who was Maistre's heir, maintains that modern theories of the state rest on secularized theological concepts.<sup>10</sup> One can agree with Carl Schmitt in considering that the Maistrian philosophy of authority is a "political theology," according to a structure that is found in an identical form in Bonald. Starting from the "perfect identity of principles and of constitution between religious monarchy and political monarchy," Bonald concludes that "Catholic philosophy is a philosophy of general authority."<sup>11</sup> For Maistre, conforming to the affirmation of *Du Pape* that "theological truths are no other than general truths manifested and divinized within the sphere of religion," political truths and theological truths reciprocally reflect each other: papal infallibility can be demonstrated "in virtue of social laws alone"<sup>12</sup> and Maistre can write that "in a civil society, a *rebel* is nothing other than a *political heretic*; and reciprocally, a *heretic* is nothing other than a *rebel* against the authority of the Church."<sup>13</sup> However these same statements cannot easily testify to a secularization of theological concepts: the Maistrian philosophy of authority shows rather well how the modern concept of sovereign authority, applied to Catholicism, tends to produce a de-theologized representation of the theological itself.<sup>14</sup> In summary, one can study how, on the basis of the notion of sovereignty, the system of authority is deployed according to Maistre: how the immanent analysis of sovereign authority leads to recognition of the

<sup>8</sup> *OC*, 13:28.

<sup>9</sup> *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, *OC*, 5:252.

<sup>10</sup> C. Schmitt, *Théologie politique* (1922), trans. by J.-L. Schlegel (Paris: Gallimard 1988), 46. The expression "political theology" is utilized by C. Schmitt to characterize above all the thought of Maistre and Bonald.

<sup>11</sup> Louis de Bonald, *Démonstration du principe constitutif de la société* (1830), in *Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine 1982), 12:224 and 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Du Pape*, *OC*, 2:1-2 and x.

<sup>13</sup> *OC*, 8:411.

<sup>14</sup> See P. Macherey, "Le positivisme entre révolution et contre-révolution: Comte et Maistre," *Revue de synthèse*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, No. 1 (Jan.-March 1991).



theological foundation of political authority; how the structure of this political authority reproduces itself in the theological authority of the pope; and how, finally, the foundation of theological-political authority, the authority of God himself, is modelled on the logical structure of sovereignty, so that the ontological foundation of sovereign authority appears finally, in the system of authority, as founded by that very thing that it must found.

## I

The original centre of Maistreian theological politics resides in political philosophy. Maistre's first great counter-revolutionary books, and in particular his *Considérations sur la France*, were preoccupied only with the defence of the divine right monarchy overthrown by the French Revolution. "Satanic in its essence,"<sup>15</sup> the French Revolution, which is the impossible essay of a society and a humanity without God, is as much a religious event as a political event: it is a perhaps decisive moment in the struggle that weaves the web of world history between God and the Devil.

What does the Satanism of the French Revolution consist of? It consists in the overthrow of the right of sovereign authority, which is by definition a divine right, a right founded on God: "sovereignty comes from God, since he is the author of everything, except evil, and in particular he is the author of society, which cannot subsist without sovereignty."<sup>16</sup> The revolt against political authority is then, inevitably, a revolt against the author of this authority: the revolutionary overthrow of the monarchy is in itself an "insurrection against God;"<sup>17</sup> regicide has the meaning of a deicide. Inversely, Maistre declares, "the Catholic never resists legitimate authority,"<sup>18</sup> because he knows that sovereignty is "essentially sacred, an emanation of Divine power" that Christianity "has taken it under its particular protection by enjoining us to behold in the sovereign a representative and an image of God himself."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This expression, which figures in the *Considérations sur la France* (OC, 1:55), is also to be found in *Du Pape* (Preliminary Discourse, OC, 2:xxxii).

<sup>16</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:314.

<sup>17</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:303.

<sup>18</sup> OC, 8:493. Let us be clear that the duty of non-resistance does not imply a duty of obedience. Maistre excludes active resistance, but not passive resistance. In *Du pape*, after having formulated the principle that "for no imaginable reason is it permitted to resist authority," Maistre adds in a note: "when I say for no imaginable reason, it goes without saying that I always exclude the case of a sovereign commanding crime." (*Du Pape*, OC, 2:181.)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

The argument may surprise us: why must the revolutionary claim of the sovereignty of the people mean the negation of God's authority? Did the revolutionaries not place the declaration of the rights of man under the auspices of the Supreme Being? And, inversely, did not authors like Suarez and Bellarmine, to whom Maistre refers with deference, oppose to the absolutist theoreticians of the divine right monarchy the thesis that sovereign power originally resided in the people? If Maistre made no place for these objections, it is undoubtedly because of the lack of a precise knowledge of the Thomistic tradition; it is especially because the very definition of sovereignty seemed to him to imply divine right monarchy. In effect, what is sovereign power? It is the power that *constitutes* society by organizing it and unifying it under laws. "A society exists only through a sovereign,"<sup>20</sup> because the sovereign promulgates, decides, and makes respected the law without which society disappears into civil war, into the state of war of all against all described by Hobbes. Sovereign power is defined by this very fact as an *absolute* power, which submits itself to no juridical authority since it is itself the power that establishes the law as the last authority. "Every kind of sovereignty is absolute by nature; whether it is placed on one or several heads, whether it is divided, however the powers are organized, in the last analysis there will always be an absolute power that will be able to commit evil with impunity, which will therefore, from this point of view, be *despotic* in the full sense of the term."<sup>21</sup> This point carries a decisive consequence: because it has the function of deciding the law, the sovereign power is structurally monarchical. The absolute power on which the legislative edifice rests must be *one*; and it can only be an authentic one if is attributed only to one. The unity of the sovereign can only really be assured by the unity of the sovereign, this is why sovereignty really exists only in monarchy.<sup>22</sup>

It must be emphasized that Maistre here is only drawing the lesson of authors from whom he inherited the concept of sovereignty: Charron, one of his favourite authors, who repeated in his *De la Sagesse* the Bodinian analysis of sovereignty as a power that can only be united in a single person;<sup>23</sup> the physiocrats, who had laid down with Quesnay that it was

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<sup>20</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:324.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 435, 452, and 465-6.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Charron, *De la sagesse* (1604), I, 49 (Paris: Fayard 1986), 321. Maistre, who all his life professed his admiration for *De la Sagesse*, read with equal enthusiasm Charron's other essay, *Les Trois Vérités* (1593), a work of Catholic apologetics from which Pascal had drawn much and from which Maistre picked up anti-Protestant argumentation.

necessary that “the sovereign authority be unique and superior to all the individuals of the society;”<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, finally, who Maistre abhorred as the democratic theoretician of the social contract, but from whom he inherited, with the maxim that “everything that breaks social unity is worthless,”<sup>25</sup> the affirmation of the indivisibility of sovereignty. Against Rousseau, Maistre asserts that the idea of social contract, which ignores the fact that “popular agreement is not possible,” also ignores the fact that, if it were possible, the social contract, far of being able to found the authority of the sovereign, itself only owes its authority to the sovereign who guarantees it: “an agreement is still not a *law* at all and obligates no one unless a higher power guarantees its enforcement.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, at the same time that he denounces as intrinsically contradictory the idea of the sovereignty of the people over itself, Maistre picks up Rousseau’s thesis of the invincibility of the sovereign power, constitutive of the social order: “The supreme authority cannot be modified any more than it can be alienated; to limit it is to destroy it. It is absurd and contradictory for the sovereign to acknowledge a superior.”<sup>27</sup>

This last proposition introduces us to the very heart of the theory of sovereignty. The sovereign, by definition, cannot have a superior: this proposition does not mean that the sovereign authority is arbitrary. The sovereign power founds the right of its authority on the necessity of an ultimate judge capable of deciding on law and right. This even indicates that the sovereign power is a power of right: it is the power of the law and of right, the power that gives to law its *force of right*. For this very reason, while the sovereign power is a juridically constituted power; conforming to the absolutist tradition, Maistre never ceases to emphasize that the absolute monarchy is not a despotism of the Oriental type but a state of law in which the sovereign power holds its legitimacy in conformity to the fundamental laws of the state.<sup>28</sup> The absolute monarch himself is subject to the law, since he holds his absolute right from the constitutional laws of the realm (for example, in the case of France, to the

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<sup>24</sup> Quesnay, “Maximes générales du gouvernement économique d’un royaume agricole, I,” in *Physiocratie* (Paris: GF-Flammarion 1991), 237. Maistre never disclaimed his admiration for the physiocrats; see, for example, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:226-7.

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contrat social*, IV, 8, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade” 1964), 3:464.

<sup>26</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:236.

<sup>27</sup> *Contrat social*, III, 16, cited by Maistre, *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:418.

<sup>28</sup> See *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:443; *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:238-9; *Du Pape*, OC, 2:408 ff.

Salic law); the *absolute* right of the sovereign can not abolish the laws that found him as an *absolute right*. Also the irresistibility of the sovereign power is itself only in a sense nothing other than the juridical irresistibility of the law itself; and the crime of the French revolutionaries was precisely that of having denied the right of the monarchy in the name of an idea – the sovereignty of the people – that, contradictory in itself, was the very negation of sovereignty and therefore of right. In denying the *right of authority*, the Revolution denied the *authority of right*.

However it seems that we are then taken into a vicious circle. All law holds its authority from its author, who is the sovereign; however the author of the law himself holds his authority from a law. Maistre writes at the same time that “law is only truly sanctioned, and properly *law*, when assumed to emanate from a higher will,” and that “the essence of a fundamental law is that no one has the right to abolish it,” which supposes that *no one* made it.<sup>29</sup> The solution to this contradiction is furnished by the divine origin of sovereignty. Since an authority supposes by definition an author, the authority of a law without an author can only be explained by the authority of a divine author: the “superior authority” alone capable of guaranteeing the political authority of the sovereign can only be the authority of God. Thus it is the simple analysis of the notion of sovereignty that obliges us to recognize the truth of the famous maxim of the *Epistle to the Romans*: “*nulla potestas nisi a Deo.*”<sup>30</sup> The foundation of political authority in God is the ontological principle without which the logical essence of sovereignty would remain unintelligible. It is only on the condition of being founded in God that sovereign authority can, without contradiction, be *absolute* as to its right of constraint with regard to men and *limited* by the right that the divine power has over it. The authority of God, alone capable of founding the absolute right of the sovereign, is also that which limits it by subordinating it to a superior authority.

Thus understood, the divine right of sovereignty leads inevitably to an historicism. The fundamental laws by which the sovereign holds his authority can only be the immediate work of God;<sup>31</sup> this proposition implies, since God does not manifest himself in person in the course of political history, that the fundamental laws are made by God across the long process of historical maturation. The fundamental laws, diverse according to time and country, are God's work in the measure that they are without human author; and they are without human author in the

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<sup>29</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:236-7.

<sup>30</sup> [“For there is no power but of God.” Romans 13:1.]

<sup>31</sup> “Each form of sovereignty is the immediate result of the will of the Creator, like sovereignty in general.” (*Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:329.)

measure that they are the work of circumstances, or that they result from a history than no one can master and than no one can anticipate.<sup>32</sup> In political matters, declares Maistre, “God makes his will known through his prime minister in the province of this world – *Time*.”<sup>33</sup> Legitimacy is shown by duration and by history. This is why Maistre never ceases to emphasize that the real constitution of a country cannot be written; history, which is human work, cannot fix God’s work, which is thus beyond the consciousness of individuals who realize themselves in a permanent historical evolution. The true fundamental laws are those that are received and commonly accepted without having the need to be written, unconscious beliefs as they develop by themselves. The constitution of a people is in the end nothing other than its national character, which is itself an historical reality in movement.<sup>34</sup> In this way historicism confirms the thesis of the irresistibility of sovereign power. If the fundamental laws are historically fluctuating and consequently uncertain in their content,<sup>35</sup> it is impossible to appeal to them against the sovereign. Maistre willingly cites Pascal who said that to appeal to the fundamental laws is a “game certain to lose everything.”<sup>36</sup> In summary,

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<sup>32</sup> “In the formation of constitutions circumstances do everything and men are only part of the circumstances. Commonly enough, even in pursuing one goal they attain another.” (*Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:68.)

<sup>33</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:265.

<sup>34</sup> “No real and great institution can be based on written law, since men themselves, instruments, in turn, of the established institution, do not know what it is to become.” (Ibid., 259.) “A constitution in the philosophic sense” is “only the mode of political existence attributed to each nation by a higher power.” (*Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:369.) “What is really constitutional in every government is not what is written on paper; it is what is in the universal consciousness.” (Ibid., 1:447.)

<sup>35</sup> “Not only can different Governments be suited to different peoples, but also to the same people at different times!” (Ibid., 328.) [In fact, in this case, this is an unacknowledged citation that Maistre has taken from Rousseau, *Contrat social*, Bk III, chap. i.]

<sup>36</sup> Pascal *Pensées* (Brunschvicg no. 294, Lafuma No. 60), *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: “Bibliothèque de Pléiade” 1954), 1150; cited by Maistre in the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:280. See, as well, *Du pape*: “The ready reply is: “Have fundamental laws – a constitution,” but who will establish those fundamental laws – who will put them in execution? The body or the individual who should have this power would be the sovereign, since he would be stronger than the sovereign; so that, by the very act of establishing the constitution, he would dethrone the sovereign. If the constitutional law be a concession by the sovereign, the question is reopened. Who will prevent any of his successors from violating it?” (OC, 2:171.)

it is impossible to oppose the sovereign with fundamental laws, which only have the force of law through the sovereign that they legitimate. "There is no middle ground; it is necessary to deny the government or to submit to it."<sup>37</sup> The alternatives are between sovereignty, by definition absolute, and anarchy, that is to say the absence of law.

## II

Pascal's statement refusing the appeal to fundamental laws figures in the famous fragment of the *Pensées* which, repeating Montaigne, evokes the "mystical foundation" of authority: "custom makes all equity, by the sole reason that it is received; this is the mystical foundation of authority. He who takes it back to its principle destroys it."<sup>38</sup> The thesis of the "mystical foundation" of authority, although Maistre does not use the expression, characterizes perfectly his theory of political authority. Not only does Maistre think like Pascal that there are no universal natural laws and that legitimacy is identified with the force of custom and opinion, but he holds as well that the foundation of political authority is "mystical" in the strongest sense of the term, that is to say that it is *hidden in God*. At the origin of legitimate authority, "no power has any other foundation than possession,"<sup>39</sup> there is always usurpation – or more exactly what Maistre, concentrating the difficulty in an oxymoron, calls "legitimate usurpation."<sup>40</sup> This usurpation is nothing other than the way in which God's action manifests itself in history. This is why Maistre does not hesitate to utilize the expression to describe the formation of papal authority; it is with respect to the authority of the Holy See that he writes: "everything reduces itself to what I call *legitimate usurpation*; the sovereign acts, obedience is general, tranquil, and constant; the opposition, if there is any, is particular, turbulent, and passing; finally the Sovereignty is seated, and on its throne is written: *I possess because I possess*."<sup>41</sup>

If Maistre can describe the historical maturation of political authority and that of spiritual authority in the same terms, it is because the two authorities found their respective right on the same reasons. Maistre very quickly perceived, after having written his first counter-revolutionary books on the defence of sovereignty, that the divine foundation of

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<sup>37</sup> *De l'Eglise gallicane, OC, 3:190.*

<sup>38</sup> Montaigne wrote: "the laws maintain their credit, not because they are just, but because they are laws. This is the mystical foundation of their authority; they have no other." (*Essais*, III, 13 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1985), 1049.)

<sup>39</sup> *Du Pape, OC, 2:259.*

<sup>40</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques, OC, 1:232.*

<sup>41</sup> *OC, 13:124.*

political authority had as its correlate the authoritarian essence of religion. In the same way that sovereign power is monarchical and absolute or it is not, in the same way the Church “is a monarchy or nothing.”<sup>42</sup> Temporal authority and spiritual authority obey the one and same general law: “No human society can exist without government, nor government without sovereignty, nor sovereignty without infallibility. [...] This indispensable supremacy can only be exercised by one organ; to divide it is to destroy it.”<sup>43</sup> The Church is impossible without a sovereign; and this sovereign must be infallible by the simple fact that he is sovereign. The infallibility of the sovereign pontiff in matters of faith thus follows from the necessity, present in every society, of a court of ultimate decision having the power to decide without appeal on law and right: “*Infallibility* in the spiritual order of things, and *sovereignty* in the temporal order, are two words perfectly synonymous. The one and the other denote that high power that rules over all other powers – from which they all derive their authority – that governs, and is not governed – that judges and is not judged.”<sup>44</sup> The structural homology is perfect: in the same way that the absolute power of the monarch is submitted to the sacredness of the fundamental laws, in the same way the infallible authority of the pope is submitted to the sacredness of dogmas.<sup>45</sup>

This structural homology is confirmed obversely by the homology of Protestantism and the revolutionary ideal of the sovereignty of the people.<sup>46</sup> Maistre never ceases to repeat that the French Revolution is the direct consequence of the Protestant Reform.<sup>47</sup> This thesis, which cannot easily be based on the historical facts, has for its essential argument the idea that “the heresy of the sixteenth century,” by the simple fact that it unleashed general pride against authority and put discussion in place of

<sup>42</sup> *De l'Eglise gallicane*, OC, 3:113.

<sup>43</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:157.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 and 28.

<sup>46</sup> “Protestantism is positively, and literally, the *sans-culottisme* of religion. The one invokes the *word of God*, the other, the *rights of man*; but in fact it is the same theory, the same direction, and the same result. These two brothers have broken sovereignty to distribute it to the multitude.” (*Réflexions sur le protestantisme*, OC, 8:97.

<sup>47</sup> “The French Revolution was only a direct consequence, a visible and inevitable conclusion of the principles posed in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century” (OC, 8:487.); “the fatal doctrines of the eighteenth century are obviously only the immediate consequence of the Protestant principle” (OC, 14:286). See as well, *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, OC, 4:366 and 375.

obedience,<sup>48</sup> is the first manifestation of democratic individualism. In the same way that the French Revolution, by replacing divine right by the rights of man, had been in its principle a religious event, the Reform, directed against the *monarchy of Catholicism*, had a political meaning in its very religious principle. It matters little that Luther and Calvin had not attributed political sovereignty to the people; the essential is that in challenging the authority of the pope they showed that their first maxim was "contempt for all authority."<sup>49</sup> The divine right of authority is not to be divided; the refusal of the divine right of temporal monarchy is implied in the refusal of the divine right of the spiritual monarchy of Catholicism, whose "fundamental principle" is "the infallibility of teaching from which results blind respect for authority, abnegation of all individual reason, and in consequence the universality of belief."<sup>50</sup> As well it must be noted that the Protestant claim of the right of private interpretation suffers from the same impossibility as the revolutionary claim of the sovereignty of the people. One can oppose no right to the right of authority, because the right of authority is the condition of right and so to say the *right of right* itself.

"Christianity can only be defended by the Catholic principle, which brings everything back to authority."<sup>51</sup> Maistre opposes to Protestantism the same argument that he opposes to the constitutionalism of the revolutionaries: one cannot limit the authority of the sovereign by the text of a law, Holy Scripture, or written constitution, because the writing can no more fix the content of the law than it can fix the shared belief that is the true constitution of a country. Citing Plato's *Phaedo*, Maistre emphasizes that Holy Scripture itself, because it is only writing, that is to say a dead letter incapable of "defending itself in the absence of its father," responds to questions posed to it "by guarding a divine silence."<sup>52</sup> To adore "writing" comes down to adoring a "mute word," that is to say a "false god"; writing only becomes "word, that is to say, life," if it is vivified by the living word of God. Only Catholics believe in the "word" of God, because they alone believe in a living word, that of the Church and its leader. In opposition to this, the very foundation of Protestantism is absurd; it is a "madness" that substitutes "the exclusive authority of a book to that of the teaching minister, older than the book and charged

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<sup>48</sup> *Réflexions sur le protestantisme*, OC, 8:66.

<sup>49</sup> *De l'Eglise gallicane*, OC, 3:367.

<sup>50</sup> *Réflexions sur la protestantisme*, OC, 8:65.

<sup>51</sup> OC, 8:488.

<sup>52</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, OC, 1:259.



with explaining it to us.”<sup>53</sup> How could Holy Scripture *found* the faith when it itself only has authority through the tradition of the Church, which distinguished the authentic from the apocryphal,<sup>54</sup> and which only makes sense through the tradition that explains it? Since “we do not all read the same things when we read the same books,”<sup>55</sup> to make the Scriptures alone the touchstone of faith comes down to abandoning the faith to the arbitrary individual. “Without an infallible tribunal, everything is in the air, since each sees what he wants in the Scripture.”<sup>56</sup>

There is a profound solidarity between the affirmation that “one cannot have *faith* properly speaking outside the Catholic Church”<sup>57</sup> and the remark that “Christianity has been, like all great things of the world, submissive to the universal law of *development*.”<sup>58</sup> The explication of the faith, which is the history of the Church, is a permanent process. The faith will always remain partially implicit in that it will never come to an end in bringing to consciousness the totality of its reasons, its content, and its consequences.<sup>59</sup> The believer will never finish learning and understanding what he already believes. One formidable objection arises

<sup>53</sup> *Réflexions sur la protestantisme*, OC, 8:65.

<sup>54</sup> On occasion Maistre cites the famous formula of the *Contra Epistulam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti*, V, 6: “Saint Augustine once said, with the aptness that is his own: “I would not believe in the Gospel, if the authority of the Church did not make me believe it.” (OC, 8:417-8.)

<sup>55</sup> *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, OC, 5:55.

<sup>56</sup> OC, 8:514.

<sup>57</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:532.

<sup>58</sup> *Amica collatio* (1820), ed. by Dominique de Maistre in *Études*, 73 (Oct. 1897), 14.

<sup>59</sup> To Madam Swetchine, desirous solely of deciding for or against Catholicism from full knowledge, Maistre addressed the following warning: “now you are reading Fleury, condemned by the Sovereign Pontiff, to know what you should hold about the Sovereign Pontiff; this is very well done, Madam. But when you have finished, I advise you to read Dr. Marchetti’s refutation of Fleury; then you will read *Fébronius contre le siège de Rome*, and right after (in your quality as judge who understands both parties) the Abbé Zaccaria’s *Anti-Fébronius*. There are only eight volumes in octavo; this is not a breeze. Then, if you believe me on this, Madam, you will learn Greek, to know precisely what is the meaning of that famous *Hegemony* that Saint Iranaeus attributed to the Roman Church in the third century, according to an old tradition. [...] The famous Cardinal Orsi, having undertaken a refutation of Fleury, found so many errors that he decided to write a new ecclesiastical history, believing that the unique refutation of a bad history would be a good history. So he undertook a new history, and he died at the twentieth volume in quarto, which did not finish the fourth century.” (OC, 13:122.)

from this: how can the believer know what he believes? The response is that the faith is not first a faith in dogmas, but faith in the person and the word of Christ. Then even if he is not capable of making the content of his faith perfectly explicit, the believer can know what he believes in because his faith consists in believing *in* someone, the God who became incarnate and whose word is continued by the Church. So faith supposes that it is possible to identify the Church without ambiguity; to keep his word, God must *have only one word* – the infallible word of the pope. The *hermeneutical circle of the faith* – “it is necessary to understand to believe, but it is necessary to believe to understand,” according to Paul Ricoeur’s formula<sup>60</sup> – implies *papal infallibility*. This is because faith is faith in the word of a person – of the divine Person – that Maistre can write that hierarchy has more importance than dogma<sup>61</sup> and that “the Sovereign Pontiff” is himself the “capital dogma of Catholicism.”<sup>62</sup> The Christian faith is only possible if the word of Christ is continued in the word of *one* Church, and the unity of the Church itself supposes an infallible sovereign. The inevitable conclusion is that “the Sovereign Pontiff is the necessary, the only, the exclusive basis of Christianity,” and that “*without the Sovereign Pontiff there is no real Christianity.*”<sup>63</sup>

The fundamental political alternative was between the absolute power of a necessarily unique sovereign and the violence of civil war; and we see that this alternative inscribes itself of itself in another alternative, which enlarges and reproduces it: the alternative of Catholicism or nihilism (or of “nothingism” to use the word utilized by Maistre). “The first character of a true religion is to rest on authority.”<sup>64</sup> Because it is the only authentic religion founded on authority, Catholicism is the only *true religion*, and therefore as well the only *religion of truth*. Either the word of God is held on earth by an infallible representative, or men are reduced to only having faith in their individual reason; there is “no logical middle between Catholicism and deism.”<sup>65</sup> However deism, which is only an idea

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<sup>60</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité* (Paris: Aubier 1960), 2:327.

<sup>61</sup> *OC*, 8:142.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>63</sup> *Du pape*, *OC*, 2:475, xxiii and xxxv.

<sup>64</sup> *Mélanges B*, 599, cited by E. Dermenghem, “Pensées inédites de Joseph de Maistre,” *Le Correspondant*, Vol. 251 (25 March 1922).

<sup>65</sup> *OC*, 13:384. The argument was already present in Bergier: “all consistent and true men must chose, either to be Catholic, or to be deist; there is no consistent middle to reason about. [...] In matters of faith, it is necessary, either to admit a living authority to decide Doctrine, or it is necessary to hold to reason alone.” (*Le Déisme réfuté par lui-même*, 1765, ii, 11, § 6 (Paris: Vrin 1981), 140.)

of reason, cannot produce faith; since faith is possible only under the form of the faith in an authority visible and manifested by God, to be deist in fact comes back to *believing nothing*. Therefore in the last instance there is no middle between Catholicism and atheism: "everything comes back to the great axiom: Catholic or nothing."<sup>66</sup>

### III

In applying the rules of political sovereignty to spiritual sovereignty, the system of authority showed its coherence; however one can think that by the same stroke it exacerbated the tensions or contradictions immanent in the very notion of sovereignty. It is not without reason that Carl Schmitt could perceive in certain passages of *Du pape* the elements of a properly decisionist thought, operating "a reduction of the state to the moment of decision, a reduction pushed to the end in the sense of an absolute decision, a pure decision, without reasoning or discussion, not justifying itself, produced therefore out of nothing."<sup>67</sup> Decisionism was latent in the affirmation that the fundamental laws, being historically variable, cannot be opposed to the sovereign power; it becomes really menacing when the parallel between temporal sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty leads Maistre to justify papal infallibility as if it were *indifferent* to the truth of the dogma: "Should there occur one of those questions of divine metaphysics which must necessarily be referred to the decision of the supreme tribunal, it concerns not our interests that it be decided in such or such a way, but that a decision be pronounced without delay and without appeal."<sup>68</sup> In such a declaration, concern for the truth of the dogma is purely and simply sacrificed to the need for fixing the faith; papal infallibility is no longer the infallibility of the word of truth, but simply the infallibility of an arbitrary word whose sole function is to assure, *by its very arbitrariness*, the unity of the Church. This decisionist definition of the Church's magisterium could be read as the formula of a *Dechristianized Catholicism* that anticipates what will be proposed explicitly by Maurras.

We should certainly not overestimate the scope of Maistre's decisionist statements. His Catholicism remained Christian; the theodicy of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, centred on the sacrifice of Christ, founded itself on a "rational philosophy"<sup>69</sup> that meant to show by reason the truth

<sup>66</sup> *Religion E*, 30, as cited by Dermenghem. Bonald formulates the same alternative. See *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:268; it will be found as well in Newman.

<sup>67</sup> C. Schmitt, *Théologie politique*, 74.

<sup>68</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:155.

<sup>69</sup> OC, 12:438.

of Catholicism. Certainly, faith is not integrally reducible to reason; if religious truth is disposed to manifest itself by only "one possible and imaginable canal, that of authority,"<sup>70</sup> even the most learned theologian cannot transform his faith by rational deduction, so that "authority should be the fundamental ground for decision."<sup>71</sup> However that this authority be the first ground for decision does not mean that this ground cannot be confirmed and reinforced by the arguments of reason. On the contrary; the tradition of the Church presents itself as a rational tradition, as the tradition of a knowledge always better argued; conforming to the common etymology that attaches authority to the idea of augmentation,<sup>72</sup> the Church founds its authority, in a non-authoritarian way, on the *continuing growth* of its knowledge. Maistre unceasingly recalls that faith is justified by reason, that not even religious authority can impose a belief that contradicts reason,<sup>73</sup> and that in consequence "truth has no sovereign."<sup>74</sup> In this respect, decisionism represents only a subordinate moment in Maistrian thought; we should emphasize here that the juridical-theological parallel of *Du Pape* had even in Maistre's mind the worth of a simple *analogy* in the service of a definition of infallibility which is, itself, theologically impeccable.<sup>75</sup> Maistre indicates moreover

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

<sup>71</sup> *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg, OC*, 4:108.

<sup>72</sup> "The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, "to increase," and authority or those who command constantly increase: this is the foundation." (H. Arendt, "Qu'est-ce que l'autorité?" in *La crise de la culture*, trans. under the direction of P. Lévy (Paris: Gallimard/Folio 1989), 160.) We know that at Rome authority was the property of the Senate. It was necessary that the "authority of the Senators" ratify beforehand any proposition of law submitted to the people. Authority thus designated the strangely "constraining" force of an opinion that could not have the value of constraint since it was not an order and was not founded in a "power."

<sup>73</sup> Evoking the doctrine of the Trinity, Maistre declares that "no authority in the world, for example, has the right to reveal that *three and one are the same*," an intrinsically contradictory proposition, but religious authority can reveal that "*three persons have only one nature*," because the distinction between person and nature suppresses the contradiction. (*Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg, OC*, 4:218.)

<sup>74</sup> *De l'Eglise gallicane, OC*, 3:193.

<sup>75</sup> See on this point G. Breton, "*Du pape*" de Joseph de Maistre (Paris: Beauchesne 1931), 93 ff. *Du pape* defines infallibility exactly as it will be done by the Vatican Council that will promulgate the dogma in 1870: "The defenders of this great privilege say, then, and say nothing more, than that the Sovereign Power, speaking in freedom to the Church, and as the schools say, "ex cathedra," never erred, and never will err, in a matter of faith." (*Du Pape, OC*,

the limits of his own argumentation by pointing out the difference “between civil society and religious society” which is “that, in the first, the sovereign can be mistaken, so that the infallibility that one accords to him is only an assumption,” while “that of spiritual government is necessarily literally infallible; for God not having wanted to confide the government of his Church to beings of a superior order, if he had not given infallibility to the men who govern it, he would have done nothing.”<sup>76</sup> Here we see that Maistre’s decisive argumentation in favour of papal infallibility does not hold, in the end, to the analogy between spiritual sovereignty and temporal sovereignty, but in the absurdity that would have to admit that God could found a Church without giving to it the infallibility of its leader.

We can nevertheless ask ourselves if the Maistrian argumentation is not in the end *snowed under* by its decisionist moment. The analogical reasoning is not necessarily faulty; the definition of the Church as a monarchy figures already in Bellarmine. Maistre could have found it in Pierre Charron, whom he repeats literally when he criticizes Protestantism. However these authors do not compare the Church to an absolute monarchy; they compare it to a monarchy limited by written laws and by a parliament. Maistre’s reasoning takes for its model an absolute monarchy whose fundamental laws are literally *imperceptible*. The difficulties that are born here are multiple. First of all, Maistre finds himself in the incapacity of resolving the question of the rights that the temporal authority and the spiritual authority have over each other: *Du pape* recognizes explicitly that this is an *undecidable* question. Temporal sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty being both absolute, each can appreciate more its absolute right to dominate the other;<sup>77</sup> the Church has the right to excommunicate the prince, and the prince has the right to kill the pastor.<sup>78</sup> Maistre neglects as well an important difference between the two types of authority; while the *infallibility* of the word *ex cathedra definitively fixes* dogma, the *irresistibility* of the right of decisions taken by the sovereign power in no way excludes the fact that the sovereign *can return* to these same decisions to annul them. So the analogy of the two sovereignties leads to two symmetrical difficulties. Either sovereignty is thought of on the model of infallibility, as the power to declare the law fundamental; in this case its irresistibility becomes unintelligible since

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2:112, and Breton, 94.)

<sup>76</sup> *OC*, 8:145.

<sup>77</sup> Let us emphasize that *Du pape* does not assume the thesis of the indirect power of the pope over sovereigns, which Maistre presents as a simple “hypothesis” having worth as an *ad hominem* argument. (*Du Pape*, *OC*, 2:181.)

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

it must be admitted that the sovereign is definitively held by the fundamental laws that he declared. Or else infallibility is thought of on the model of sovereignty that is not bound by historically changing fundamental laws; in this case, it must be admitted that dogma itself is changing. What Maistre calls the "development" of Christianity will not be so much the explication of a content present from its origins as a process of historical invention, woven of variations and metamorphoses. From the fact that each one sees what he wants in the texts of the tradition, does it not follow that each interpretation of these texts by the Church calls in its turn for a new interpretation, susceptible to changing the meaning of the preceding one? It is remarkable that Maistre was sometimes quite ready to assume this last perspective, for example, when he remarks "that for three whole centuries there remained doubts in the Church on the eternity of punishments and also on the divinity of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>79</sup> or, in a more fundamental way, when he announces the imminent renovation of Christianity by a Third Revelation of the Holy Spirit to complete and transform those of the Father and of the Son that have already occurred.<sup>80</sup>

If Maistre looks for no logical solution to these difficulties, it is that the solution seems to him to be furnished by the simple existence of God. God, who sustains the Church, guarantees the agreement of the word *ex cathedra* with tradition;<sup>81</sup> God who makes history, is the master of assuring the submission of the sovereign to the fundamental laws and the agreement of temporal sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty. The divine origin of authority thus annuls the relativist and decisionist consequences implied in the authoritarian notion of sovereignty. That authority can take the non-authoritarian form of the continuing and rational growth of a tradition loyal to itself, which guarantees the founding authority of that tradition: God himself – conforming this time to the authentic etymology of the word "authority," which designated in the beginning the capacity

<sup>79</sup> *Amica collatio* (1820), 14. Certain of the propositions of *Du Pape* even sound very strange: Maistre concedes for example that "the pope *alone* cannot revise a dogma decided by himself and the bishops assembled in general council" (*Du Pape*, OC, 2:20) – which could be taken to mean that the Church as a body can retract a dogma.

<sup>80</sup> The last dialogue of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* foresees "a third explosion of all powerful goodness in favour of humankind." (*Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, OC, 5:241.) Maistre's notebooks confirm unambiguously that he intends by this a "Third Revelation."

<sup>81</sup> Maistre judges it to be unthinkable that a Catholic can ask *who* will sustain the pope in the truth, as if the Church was a "human edifice" and the pope, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, an "ordinary man." (*Du Pape*, OC, 2:153.)

to “produce existence” and returns to the metaphysical idea of the “creator act” of a divine power.<sup>82</sup>

The decisionism is contained (in the sense of diked) by the foundation of authority in God. However one can ask if it is not also contained *in it*, so that it would contaminate the very authority of God. Thus it is that the temptation of a *metaphysical decisionism* surges in the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* when Maistre defines God’s justice by the sole right of sovereignty: “What, then, is an injustice of God with respect to man? Is there by chance some common legislator above God who prescribes to him how he must act towards man? Who will judge between him and us?” Thought of on the model of the rights of sovereignty, God’s justice is so near being reduced the arbitrariness of decision that Maistre does not even hesitate to imagining the theodicy of an unjust and cruel God:

Allow me, I pray you, to set up this fine argument: *God is unjust, cruel, pitiless, God takes pleasure in the misfortunes of his creatures, therefore* – and here is where I take the grumblers into account – *therefore*, apparently, *there is no need to pray to him*. On the contrary, gentlemen, and nothing is more obvious: *therefore it is necessary to pray to him and to serve him with much more zeal and anxiety* than if his mercy was limitless, as we think is the case. [...] The proof of God’s existence preceding that of his attributes, we know *that he is* before knowing *what he is*; and we can never know completely *what he is*. So here we are, placed in an empire whose sovereign has published once and for all the laws that rule everything. In general these laws bear the stamp of wisdom and even a striking goodness; nevertheless some of them (I assume for the moment) appear hard, even *unjust*, if you like. This being the case, I ask all the discontented, what are we to do? Leave the empire, perhaps? Impossible, it is everywhere and there is nothing outside it. Complain, take offense, write against the sovereign? This will result in being punished or put to death. There is no better course to take than that of resignation and respect, I will even say *of love*, for as we start from the supposition that the master exists and that it is absolutely necessary to *serve* him, is it not better (whatever he is) to serve him with love than without?<sup>83</sup>

Undoubtedly this argument must be read as an *ad hominem* argument. Maistre, a virulent anti-Jansenist, elsewhere condemned in an extremely

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<sup>82</sup> E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1969), 2:149. “They persist in translating *augeo* by “to increase;” this is accurate in classical language, but not at the beginning of the tradition. [...] In the most ancient use, *augeo* means not the fact of increasing, but the act of producing outside its own proper self.”

<sup>83</sup> *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg, OC*, 5:104-06.

sharp way the idea that God's justice could be reduced to his will.<sup>84</sup> However the very fact that he could accept the terms of the hypothesis of a despot God is the sign of the tension that runs through his "system of authority." The source of this tension can be seen in the properly historicist way in which Maistre formulates his providentialism, of which the general principles are moreover very close to the rationalism of a Malebranche.<sup>85</sup> When it exposes the links between faith and reason, the Maistrian philosophy of authority preserves the rights of reason and indissolubly links reason and authority as two principles that enlighten each other. It is not the same in the field of philosophy of history, and particularly in political history. The providentialist thesis is that "nations, like individuals, are only [...] *instruments of God*, who forms them and who uses them, according to hidden designs, which we can at most surmise."<sup>86</sup> God's aims are here unfathomable, since in the course of history, by God's will, the most diverse political and social regimes succeed each other: the absolutism of the divine will founds the relativity of political norms. "Each people fulfils its mission; we despise the Orientals, and they despise us. Who is to judge between us?" (549). All that it is possible to know by reason is that God requires that we obey the sovereign authority that founds the social order; for the rest, only the great facts of history permit us to recognize God's will. The unique rule is that "what is, is good," or that "what is must be" (451, 318). Thus it is that "despotism, for a given nation, is as natural, as legitimate, as democracy is for another" (329), and slavery, lasting all through antiquity, had been willed by God and had been in consequence by natural law, if one agrees to understand by "natural law" not a universal law, but an historical and providential law.<sup>87</sup> Properly speaking, there is no natural law: outside of the absolute law of sovereignty, which alone is the universal law, all law is historical – which is expressed in the maxim according to which "history is the first master in politics, of more exactly

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<sup>84</sup> "The atrocity of Jansenist dogmas," according to Maistre, consists in the thesis that God "saves or damns, for eternity, with no other motive than his good pleasure," and that "*there is no other justice in God than his will.*" (*De l'Eglise gallicane*, OC, 3:18-21.)

<sup>85</sup> The importance of Maistre's debt with respect to Malebranche has been emphasized by among others E. Bréhier (*Histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: PUF 1989), 515). Maistre explicitly recognized this debt in the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (OC, 5: 170) and in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (OC, 6:447-52).

<sup>86</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté*, OC, 1:553.

<sup>87</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:337 ff.



the only master."<sup>88</sup> *Alone* master in politics, history declares the will of God in that it is absolutely impenetrable to reason; history is the norm that owes its authority to the simple decision of God. In the measure that history alone lets us know the political will of God, the proposition according to which history is the unfathomable decision of God reverses itself: *the will of God is for us nothing other than the unfathomable decision of history*. Recognized as valid in the historical and political field, radical historicism tends of itself to overflow into the fields of morals and metaphysics.

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<sup>88</sup> *Etude sur la souveraineté, OC*, 1:426.

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*Part Three: Comparative Studies*

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## *Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke: A Comparison<sup>1</sup>*

When Joseph de Maistre read Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* early in 1791 (within a couple of months of its publication), his immediate reaction was to acclaim Burke's assessment of events. In a letter to a close friend, Maistre wrote: "I'm delighted, and I don't know how to tell you how he has reinforced my anti-democratic and anti-Gallican ideas."<sup>2</sup> Although Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) was almost a generation younger than Edmund Burke (1729-1797), their names are very often linked as exemplars of a conservative reaction against the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Maistre's initial enthusiastic assessment of Burke's *Reflections*, his occasional references to Burke in his own works, and striking parallels in their judgments of the French Revolution and in their views on religious and political issues in general, have led one commentator to characterize Maistre as Burke's first and most eminent Counter-Revolutionary disciple.<sup>3</sup> While the relationship between these two writers is important and fascinating, the matter is not as simple as mere discipleship.

Despite their reputations as two of the most important controversialists writing in opposition to the French Revolution, surprisingly little has been written about the relationship between them. Most Burke scholars have simply ignored Maistre. There have, of course, been brief treatments of the similarities and differences between Burke and Maistre in general

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<sup>1</sup> Paper given at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin, July 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Maistre to Henri Costa de Beauregard, 21 January 1791. *Oeuvres complètes de Joseph de Maistre*, 14 vols. (Lyon: Vitte et Perrussel 1884-7. Hereafter as *OC.*) 9:11.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Ganzin, *La pensée politique d'Edmund Burke* (Paris 1972), 347, as cited by Jean-Louis Darcel in his Introduction to his critical edition of Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* (Geneva: Slatkine 1980), 23.

studies of the counter-revolution.<sup>4</sup> A few Maistre scholars have commented on his admiration of Burke and his possible debt to the older writer,<sup>5</sup> but until recently there had been only one brief article that addressed the issue directly.<sup>6</sup> The most detailed comparison that I have found is in Jean-Yves Pranchère's doctoral thesis in philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Comparison of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre is complicated by at least two circumstances. In the first place, both were controversial personalities whose complex views have been the subject of highly diverse interpretations. Secondly, interpretations of both writers have been greatly affected by disputes concerning interpretation of the Revolution they both opposed. Scholars sympathetic to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution have often found it hard to be fair to either Burke or Maistre, while others more hostile to these great landmarks of modernity have tended toward uncritical admiration.

Comparison of the biographies and personalities of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre suggests some striking parallels as well as significant differences. Both were bourgeois in origin, the sons of lawyers, trained in the law themselves, "provincials" in relation to the cultures in which they made their reputations, and "new men" who eventually succeeded in becoming known to and influential among the highest authorities of their time. Both were emotional men who reacted with indignation and horror to the violence and what they perceived as the immorality of the French Revolution. Both, in fact, had been more "enlightened" and "liberal" in their views and attitudes prior to the shock of the Revolution. Both were great literary stylists who excelled in the use of irony, and both were quite ready to use their rhetorical gifts to pour scorn on their opponents. Both had a penchant for prophecy. Burke did

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Beik, *The French Revolution Seen from the Right: Social Theories in Motion, 1789-1799* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society 1956), 60-71, and Jacques Godechot, *The Counter-Revolution: Doctrine and Action, 1789-1804* (New York: Howard Fertig 1971), 50-66, and 84-96.

<sup>5</sup> See especially, Jean-Louis Darcel, in his Introduction to his critical edition of Maistre's *De la Souveraineté du peuple* (Paris: PUF 1992), 79-85, as well as Jean-Pierre Cordelier, *La Théorie Constitutionnelle de Joseph de Maistre* (Paris 1965), 72-94.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Fuchs, "Edmund Burke et Joseph de Maistre," *Revue d'Université d'Ottawa*, 54, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1984), 49-58. A specialist in neither Burke nor Maistre, Fuchs takes a rather unsympathetic Marxist approach to both authors. An older comparison may be found in Bruce Mazlish, "Burke, Bonald and de Maistre: a study in conservatism," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1955.

<sup>7</sup> "L'autorité contre les lumières: la philosophie de Joseph de Maistre." Doctoral thesis, Université de Rouen, 1996. See, especially, 47-9 and 100-38.

not live long enough to see his prediction of a popular general coming to power in France fulfilled in Napoleon, but Maistre could later boast about the accuracy of his prediction of how the Restoration would occur. Both earned their enduring reputations by writing against the Revolution and all that it implied.

The major differences between these two writers relate to time and circumstance. Burke was an English Protestant who spent most of his life as a working politician in a parliamentary system; he was almost at the end of his career by the time of the French Revolution, which had relatively little direct impact on his personal life. In writing against the French Revolution Burke earned himself a place as a father of modern conservatism, but it must be remembered that what he wanted to “conserve” in England was limited constitutional monarchy and traditional English liberties. From a continental perspective, Burke has often been counted a “liberal.”<sup>8</sup>

Joseph de Maistre, in contrast, was a Savoyard Catholic who spent his life as a magistrate and diplomat, with no experience of electoral politics. In the prime of life at the outbreak of the Revolution, his world was completely disrupted by the French invasion of his native province in 1792. For Maistre, the Revolution meant the practical loss of his profession, most of his property, and long lonely years of self-imposed exile in Lausanne and St. Petersburg. In writing against the Enlightenment and French Revolution and in favour of traditional Christianity and what he called traditional “European monarchy,” Maistre inevitably came to be counted as a “reactionary” for advocating a return to Roman Catholicism and the monarchical absolutism that had preceded the Revolution.

Burke’s biography is well known. Although he joined and identified himself with the eighteenth-century British Whig establishment, both his contemporaries and his most recent biographer, Conor Cruise O’Brien, have stressed his Irish origins and ties.<sup>9</sup> Born in Dublin in 1729, the son of a “conforming” Protestant lawyer and a Catholic mother, Burke

<sup>8</sup> Pranchère, for example, who contrasts Burke’s “liberalism” with Maistre’s “Catholic counter-revolutionary” stance, points out that Burkean traditionalism is based on the heritage of two revolutions, one religious (the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century) and one political (the Glorious Revolution of 1688). *Ibid.*, 47-9. See as well Pranchère’s article in this volume on “The Social Bond According to the Catholic Counter-Revolution: Maistre and Bonald.”

<sup>9</sup> See especially, Conor Cruise O’Brien’s Introduction to the Pelican Classic edition of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1968), 28-30, as well as his *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992).

graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1748. He then went to London to read for the law, but never practised that profession. His first literary works were published in 1756, about the same time that he married Jane Nugent, a Catholic. In 1765 he became private secretary to Lord Rockingham, and the next year was elected to Parliament, where he would sit continuously until 1794. Over the years, Burke's political pamphlets, his parliamentary speeches, his role in opposing the government's American policy during the crisis that led to the American War of Independence, and his role in the impeachment of Warren Hastings, won him renown, but never the cabinet rank he might have expected to attain. By 1790, when he wrote and published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke was in the twilight of his parliamentary career. Interestingly enough, there is no evidence that Joseph de Maistre knew or read anything that Burke wrote prior to 1790 or that he paid any attention to Burke's political career prior to that date.

Joseph de Maistre was born in 1753, in Chambéry, the capital of Savoy, at that time a province of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia.<sup>10</sup> Although French in language and culture, Maistre would always remain a subject of the House of Savoy. His father too was a lawyer, a distinguished jurist who became the Second President of the Senate of Savoy, the high court of the province, and who was awarded the title of Count for his work in codifying the laws of the realm. As the oldest surviving son, Joseph was expected to follow in his father's footsteps, and after training by the Jesuits and in the local royal college, he was sent to Turin to complete his law degree. Like Burke, he received an excellent classical education, and like Burke, he would sprinkle his works with classical tags. On his return from Turin, Maistre followed a judicial career, attaining the rank of Senator just on the eve of the Revolution. He also involved himself in Freemasonry, first with an ordinary "blue lodge," and then with a more esoteric "illuminist" lodge. This link may appear odd for a future Catholic apologist, but the lodges were opportune places for an ambitious young man to make friends useful for advancement and to discuss political reforms.

A close and sympathetic observer of developments in France in the years immediately preceding the Revolution, Maistre looked to the magistrates of the French parlements as the natural leaders of moderate reform, and he approved their efforts to force the king to call the Estates-General. Initially enthusiastic about reform possibilities, Maistre was soon disillusioned by events in France. He opposed the joining together

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<sup>10</sup> For details of Maistre's biography, see Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1988).

of the three orders in the Estates-General, and by mid-June 1789 he was predicting that a “deluge of evils” would follow such “leveling.”<sup>11</sup> By September he was thinking of taking up his pen to oppose the current of events, though at this date it was still to writers cherished by the Enlightenment – Montesquieu, Bacon, and Mably – that he looked for support in judging the French National Assembly.<sup>12</sup> In December 1789, Maistre spent an evening with a good friend of Jean-Joseph Mounier, who passed on details of the “October Days.” (Mounier had been the presiding officer of the National Assembly when the women of Paris had arrived at Versailles to demand bread, and had been an eye-witness of the women’s invasion of the royal palace, the killing of members of the royal bodyguard, and the forced march of the royal family back to Paris.) A man of vivid imagination, Maistre was deeply moved by accounts of the blood and violence of the revolutionary process. He acknowledged to a friend: “My head is forever fermenting with all these affairs to the point that sometimes I cannot sleep.”<sup>13</sup>

We have no contemporary evidence of Maistre’s views on French events through the course of 1790. It is only with his letter to his friend Costa of January 1791, the letter in which he acclaimed Burke’s judgment on France, that Maistre clearly enunciated intransigent hostility to the Revolution.

Maistre’s immediate reaction to Burke’s *Reflections* is worth quoting in full, for read carefully, it reveals the key components of his debt to the English writer:

Have you read Calonne, Mounier, and the admirable Burke? What do you think of the way this rude senator treats the great gambling-den of the Manège and all the *baby*-legislators? For myself, I’m delighted, and I don’t know how to tell you how he has reinforced my anti-democratic and anti-Gallican ideas. My aversion for everything that is being done in France becomes horror. I understand very well how systems, fermenting in so many human heads, are turned into passions. Believe me, this abominable assembly cannot be too much abhorred. See how thirty or forty rascals accomplish what the Black Prince and the League were unable to do: massacres, pillaging, fires are nothing, it only takes a few years to heal all that; but public spirit annihilated, opinion vitiated to a frightening degree; in a word, *France putrefied*, that is what these gentlemen have done.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Costa de Beauregard, *Un Homme d’autrefois* (Paris 1878), 83.

<sup>12</sup> Undated letter to Henri Costa. Cited in François Descostes, *Joseph de Maistre avant la Révolution* (Paris 1893), 2:332-4.

<sup>13</sup> Maistre to Costa, 7 December 1789. Cited in Descostes, *Maistre avant la Révolution*, 2:89-90.

<sup>14</sup> Maistre to Costa, 21 January 1791. *OC*, 9:11.



In the first place, it seems clear that reading Burke reinforced Maistre's own emotional reaction to events in France. If Isaac Kramnick's interpretation is anywhere near the mark, deep "rage" was a central component of Burke's response to the revolution in France.<sup>15</sup> Without speculating on the psychological mechanisms that may have been at work (and they were probably different in the two men), it still seems reasonable to interpret Maistre's reaction to Burke as an instinctive recognition of an emotional revulsion akin to his own. The terms Maistre uses here to describe his own reaction to the Revolution, "aversion" and "horror," may be contrasted with Burke's "rage," but one still suspects that an emotional dynamic may well have been more important than any particular ideas he found in Burke.

On the level of ideas, however, Maistre's own words suggest the essentials of what appears to have been involved. "I do not know how to tell you how he has reinforced my anti-democratic and anti-Gallican ideas." We know, from entries in his early notebooks and from early correspondence, that Maistre often responded most enthusiastically to authors who expressed ideas he already held.<sup>16</sup> In this case, Burke's position was not strictly "anti-democratic" or explicitly "anti-Gallican." Burke never advocated abolition of the popular representation provided in the existing English system, nor, as an Anglican, was he an apologist for papal authority. Nevertheless, it is not that difficult to understand how Maistre could have interpreted Burke's ideas in such a way that they could have been made to support his own anti-democratic ideas and his doubts about even the cautious Gallican position he had upheld as a member of the moderately "Gallican" Senate of Savoy.<sup>17</sup> The important point is that reading Burke appears to have stimulated Maistre's own thinking on these important issues.

In addition to reinforcing his anti-democratic and anti-Gallican ideas, this letter also suggests that Burke helped Maistre appreciate how "systems" (of ideas, presumably) can turn into passions. This understanding probably strengthened Maistre's hostility to the sceptical, destructive side of Enlightenment thought, but he had worried about this before reading Burke. The *Reflections* also appears to have helped Maistre recognize the crucial role of an active and determined minority ("thirty

<sup>15</sup> *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York 1977).

<sup>16</sup> See Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 102.

<sup>17</sup> As Robert Triomphe observed, Burke "links the religious question to political questions in such a way that a Catholic, if he wanted to reason like him, would be led naturally to ultramontanism." *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Droz 1968), 139.

or forty rascals") in a period of political crisis. If such a minority could annihilate public spirit and vitiate opinion, the appropriate counter-revolutionary strategy, as Burke also demonstrated, was an equally vigorous campaign to rectify public opinion. Just as Burke deliberately undertook to change English perceptions of events in France and to alert his countrymen to the dangers inherent in following the French example, so would Maistre, as he described the purpose of his first counter-revolutionary pamphlets, "work on opinion, to undeceive peoples from the metaphysical theories with which they have been done so much harm."<sup>18</sup>

While it is clear that Maistre was impressed by Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, it is not easy to make an accurate assessment of how important Burke was for the development of Maistre's own thought. One approach to the problem of assessing Burke's influence on Maistre is to review his citations from his English predecessor; another is to compare Maistre's treatment of important questions with Burke's views on the same issues and to assess the similarities and differences.

The direct evidence from citations turns out to be quite limited. In the notebooks in which Maistre recorded excerpts from his wide reading, there are only about a half dozen very brief and insignificant citations from Burke.<sup>19</sup> In Maistre's published works, on the other hand, there are about a dozen references to Burke, but these too are usually quite brief. In addition to the *Reflections*, Maistre cites Burke's *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (of January 1791), his *Letter to a Noble Lord*, and his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. The most extensive and most commendatory reference occurs in Maistre's manuscript *Réflexions sur le Protestantisme dans ses rapports avec la souveraineté* (written in 1798), where after citing Thomas Paine's reproach to the effect that Burke had "facilitated the return of the English to Catholicism,"<sup>20</sup> Maistre praised Burke in these terms:

<sup>18</sup> Maistre's own words in the preface of a combined edition of his earliest propaganda efforts (the "Adresse à la Convention Nationale des Français" and the *Lettres d'une Royaliste savoisien*), *OC*, 7:39.

<sup>19</sup> Four of these references are to Burke's *Reflections*; one is to Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*, and one is to the fifth letter of Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. On Maistre's notebooks, see Richard Lebrun, "Maistre's Reading," in *Maistre Studies*, ed. by Richard Lebrun (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America 1988), 42-64.

<sup>20</sup> In a note in his *Rights of Man*, Paine said that Burke "had shortened his journey to Rome by appealing to the power of this infallible Parliament of former days."

Undoubtedly, this great patriot, this great writer, this prophet who discerned the French Revolution, is guilty because he does not want to believe that the people had the right to vote in the crossroads for the overturning of the constitution; because he teaches that the united and legally established will of the three powers is an oracle before whose voice all must bend; because he believes that the English are bound by the vow of their fathers who formed, who accepted, and who consecrated this constitution, thus depriving their successors of the right to remake it, and insolently claiming *infallibility* for themselves. Burke is guilty, *he approaches Rome*; the accusation is remarkable.<sup>21</sup>

In a letter written in 1793, Maistre had asked a correspondent to provide him with a citation where (supposedly) “Burke had called our Holy Father the Pope: *the respectable head of Christianity*,”<sup>22</sup> and even though he does not appear to have received an answer to this enquiry, in his *Du Pape* (1819) Maistre cited Burke to this effect. In this case, Maistre was defending the record of the popes as temporal rulers:

As a temporal prince, he is equal in dignity to all other princes; but when to this title is added that of “supreme chief of Christianity,”<sup>a</sup> [note a: This is the remarkable title the illustrious Burke bestowed on the Pope, in one of his works or parliamentary discourses which I no longer have at hand. A great truth acknowledged by a great personage.] none can claim to be his equal.<sup>23</sup>

In both these instances we see Maistre reading Burke as sympathetic to Catholicism, and trying to exploit this presumed sympathy for his own purposes. Probably because of his Irish birth and Catholic relatives and because of his efforts to ease the conditions of Catholics in Ireland, Burke was dogged all his life by a reputation for Catholicism. All his own statements, however, testify that in church matters Burke was an Anglican in the eighteenth-century latitudinarian tradition. As Frederick Dreyer summarizes the evidence:

His tradition of churchmanship was broad and low. Like the latitudinarians he was tolerant and open-minded in matters of dogmatic orthodoxy; he regarded matters of liturgical practice as questions of convenience and expediency. Finally, and perhaps most important, he was latitudinarian in the matter of

<sup>21</sup> *OC*, 8:90-91.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Countess Henri Costa de Beauregard, 18 March 1793, *OC*, 9:37.

<sup>23</sup> *The Pope*, Trans. Aeneas McD. Dawson (New York: Howard Fertig 1975), 212. Michel Fuchs suggests that this expression seems to have been taken from Burke’s parliamentary speech of 2 March 1790, but admits that there is a good chance it was spurious. See “Edmund Burke et Joseph de Maistre,” 50n7.

church authority. He looked upon all churches as merely human associations, administering a purely human jurisdiction.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, however, as Conor Cruise O'Brien observes, "his family background was such – and his family feeling so strong – that he could not possibly contemplate attacks on the Church of Rome with any of the feelings of a proper Englishman."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Maistre was picking up on a certain emotional tone in Burke's *Reflections*.

In any case, not all Maistre's citations from Burke are so problematic. Some are merely factual references, and in other cases he cites striking phrases that appear particularly appropriate. For example, in *Du Pape* Maistre is pleased to quote Burke's description of the French Constituent Assembly as "detestable fools aspiring to be knaves."<sup>26</sup> Other instances are more substantive. For example, against Rousseau's views on the state of nature, Maistre cites Burke as a trustworthy authority in opposition, observing that "Burke said with a profundity that it is impossible to admire enough *that art is man's nature*."<sup>27</sup>

These specific references to Burke in Maistre's notebooks and writings are interesting, but they are of only limited help in understanding the relationship between these two writers. For a deeper appreciation of this relationship we will have to turn to a systematic comparison of their views, beginning with their judgements of the French Revolution.

As we have seen, Maistre acclaimed Burke's *Reflections* and credited him with having "discerned" the Revolution, and their overall assessments of the Revolution are strikingly similar. Both thought it a bloody catastrophe, and compared its nature and importance to the Protestant Reformation. Both were scandalized by what they perceived as its immorality, and both thought that fanatical atheism was one of its principle features. Both feared that the French Revolution would lead to the disintegration of Christian Europe. Maistre, however, came to stress a providential interpretation of the Revolution much more than Burke, and by the time Maistre published his *Considerations on France* in 1797

<sup>24</sup> See Frederick Dreyer, "Burke's Religion," *Studies in Burke and his Time*, 7 (1976), 201.

<sup>25</sup> Introduction to the Penguin edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> *OC*, 2:399, citing Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*.

<sup>27</sup> "On the State of Nature," in Joseph de Maistre, *Against Rousseau: "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People,"* Trans. by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1996), 17. Maistre also used this quotation, which will be found in Burke's *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in his essay "On the Sovereignty of the People," *Ibid.*, 52.

(the work that first made his reputation as a defender of throne and altar), his views on the Revolution will have evolved beyond Burke's position.

Maistre's first effort at counter-revolutionary propaganda, his *Letters of a Savoyard Royalist*, published between May and July 1793 for clandestine circulation in French-occupied Savoy, while never mentioning Burke, denounced the Revolution in terms that were generally similar to those of his predecessor. One of Burke's most decisive complaints against the French Revolution was that "their liberty is not liberal."<sup>28</sup> In his *Savoyard Letters*, Maistre denounced revolutionary practice in the name of the very principles that animated it: in the name of liberty, equality, and the rights of man, it had violated liberties, consciences, and property. Similarly, just as Burke had opposed practical wisdom to theoretical reason, so Maistre reproached the revolutionaries for trying to give immediate implementation to metaphysical principles. Maistre also praised the wisdom and moderation of the Piedmontese monarchy's rule in Savoy in the decades before the Revolution, just as Burke had commended the moderation of Louis XVI. In short, what Maistre offered in his *Savoyard Letters* was an essentially political critique of the French Revolution and a reasoned argument in favour of monarchical government. The letters also suggest the dilemma of a purely political royalism in an age of democratic revolution. Praising the "exalted loyalty" of earlier generations, Maistre complained that loyalty had now become a "matter of calculation." But his own appeal was precisely to enlightened self-interest. He entreated his readers "to learn how to be royalists," and told them to "Love your sovereign as you love *order* with all the strength of your intelligence."<sup>29</sup>

In 1798, after the publication of his *Considerations on France*, Maistre burned the manuscript of his *Savoyard Letters* as a "fruit of ignorance" composed at a time when he had "not the least *illumination* on the French, or better the *European*, Revolution."<sup>30</sup> In effect, between 1793 and 1796 Maistre had worked out the providential interpretation of the French Revolution that gave the *Considerations* its appeal and importance, and that most distinguished Maistre's interpretation from Burke's analysis. Burke had occasionally hinted at such an interpretation, as for example when he characterized the revolutionary regime in France as a "base oligarchy" and suggested that "one would be tempted to think some great offences in France must cry to heaven, which has

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<sup>28</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Pelican Classic edition, Penguin Books 1968), 174.

<sup>29</sup> *OC*, 7:157.

<sup>30</sup> *Les carnets du comte Joseph de Maistre*, ed. by X. de Maistre (Lyon: Vitte 1923), 127.

thought fit to punish it with a subjection to a vile and inglorious domination,"<sup>31</sup> but this perspective does not appear central to his thought.<sup>32</sup> In Joseph de Maistre's view, on the other hand, never had "the Divinity shown itself so clearly in any human event" than in the French Revolution.<sup>33</sup> Providentialism, in fact, became the key element in Maistre's interpretation of the Revolution, and, as well, in his theories of society and government.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps because his providential view of events precluded Burke's "rage," perhaps because he was a genuine Francophile who shared and admired French culture and who believed that preservation of a strong French nation was essential to the European balance of power, Maistre could never share Burke's enthusiasm for a counter-revolutionary crusade against revolutionary France.

There were other significant differences as well in their understanding of events in France. Burke, for example, thought that the government of the old regime "well deserved to have its excellencies heightened; its faults corrected; and its capacities improved into a British constitution."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 313. See as well, an earlier passage where Burke states that "when kings are hurl'd from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama [...] we behold such disasters in the moral, as we should behold a miracle in the physical order of things." *Ibid.*, 175. Similarly, in the first of his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke writes of "the awful drama of Providence now acting on the moral theatre of the world." *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Boston, Little and Brown 1901. Hereafter as *Writings and Speeches*.) 12 vols., 5:234.

<sup>32</sup> As Frank O'Gorman puts it, Burke's inquiries were not directed "towards explaining [...] the operation of Divine Providence." *Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy* (London George Allen & Unwin 1973), 143.

<sup>33</sup> *Considerations on France*, trans. by Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge University Press 1994), 8. The title of Maistre's second chapter, "Reflections on the Ways of Providence in the French Revolution," provides the key motif of this entire work.

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter Five of the *Considerations*, entitled "On Divine Influence in Political Constitutions," as well as Maistre's *Essay on the Generative Principles of Political Constitutions and other Human Institutions*. The second work is available in an excellent English translation by Elisha Greifer under the title *On God and Society* (Chicago: Henry Regnery 1967).

<sup>35</sup> *Reflections*, 236. In his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (of 19 January 1791), Burke qualified this remark, saying that "When I studied the British Constitution, and wished it to be studied, I did not mean that its exterior form and positive arrangement should become a model for you or any people servilely to copy. I meant to recommend the *principles* from which it has grown, and the policy on which it has been progressively improved out of the elements

Maistre admired the British constitution, which he characterized as “the most complex unity and the most propitious equilibrium of political powers that the world has ever seen,”<sup>36</sup> but he thought it absurd to try to transplant it to France. For Maistre, nations and constitutions were divine creations, and it was folly for men to imagine that they could organize a nation and constitute it “with a little black fluid.”<sup>37</sup>

Other disparities in their views of the French Revolution are probably related to the timing of their judgments. When Burke first “reflected” on France in 1790, he had only contempt for the Jacobins, seeing them as nothing but atheistic radicals capable only of destruction. By late 1796, when he wrote his *Considerations on France*, Maistre could recognize and acknowledge that it was the energy of the Jacobin dictatorship that had saved France from defeat and partition by its enemies.<sup>38</sup> As is evident from his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796-97), Burke eventually came to a similar conclusion with respect to the abilities of the Jacobins.<sup>39</sup>

When we turn from the French Revolution to more general topics considered by these writers, we find a similar mixture of agreement and diversity. Themes common to conservatism in general may be found in both. Both had a reverence for established institutions and customs; both distrusted innovation. For both, political wisdom was something to be garnered from historical experience, not from the theoretical speculations of isolated thinkers. Both defended prejudice as embodying time-tested wisdom. Both were sceptical about the natural goodness of human nature, and believed that strong government was required if men were to live together in a peaceful society. Both stressed the absolute, unitary nature of sovereignty, believing that sovereign power, by definition, was unaccountable to any higher body. However both believed that institutions such as venality of office had provided useful checks to the absolutist bent of the French monarchy, and both insisted that sovereigns were bound by divine law and an objective moral law. Both believed in a natural aristocracy, although as ambitious new men themselves, both also believed in careers open to talent. It should be added, however, that the rationale and manner of their defence of their similar conservative

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common to you and to us.” *Writings and Speeches*, 4:47.

<sup>36</sup> *On God and Society*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> “When we think about it, we can see that once the revolutionary movement was established, only Jacobinism could have saved France and the monarchy.” *Considerations on France*, CUP ed., 16.

<sup>39</sup> “It is a dreadful truth, but it is a truth that cannot be concealed: in ability, in dexterity, in the distinctness of their views, the Jacobins are our superiors.” Letter II, *Writings and Speeches*, 5:345.

positions appears to have been somewhat different. Burke, in a quite British way, characteristically defended his positions with utilitarian and empirical arguments. Maistre, on the other hand, more often argues from a providentialist or sociological perspective.

Another significant difference is that Maistre's tone is often much sharper, often, in fact, deliberately provocative. For example, both authors develop the theme that if men's wills are not restrained by internal discipline they will have to be restrained by external constraints. Burke puts the argument this way:

Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites [...] Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.<sup>40</sup>

Maistre puts the same idea in the form of maxims:

Man, in general, IF HE IS REDUCED TO HIMSELF is too wicked to be free. [...] *the human race, in general, is only susceptible of civil liberty in that measure that it is penetrated and guided by Christianity.* Everywhere that any other religion reigns, slavery is the law, or rather, where Christianity is weakened, the nation becomes in precise proportion to this, less susceptible of general liberty.<sup>41</sup>

Maistre's prose characteristically displays a verve and sharpness, a "ferocity," that suggests an extremism that a more careful and more complete reading of his work often belies.<sup>42</sup>

Curiously enough, given their reputations as defenders of traditional society and government, both Burke and Maistre accepted Adam Smith's economic ideas. Although not a merchant, trader, or industrialist himself, Burke lived through the first stages of England's industrial revolution. While he had some sharp things to say about the traders and speculators who were making fortunes in confiscated church property in France, there is good evidence that Burke fully accepted the reality of a competitive, self-regulating capitalist economy motivated by profit and accumulation and in which wage relations are assumed natural and

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<sup>40</sup> *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly, Works*, 6:64. Also in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. By Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1992), 69.

<sup>41</sup> *Quatre Chapitres sur la Russie, OC*, 8:282-3.

<sup>42</sup> For perceptive comments on the "ferocity" that often characterizes Maistre's statements, see Pranchère, "L'autorité contre les lumières," 49, and 54-5.



equitable.<sup>43</sup> Most of Maistre's life experience, on the other hand, was limited to relatively backward areas like Savoy, Sardinia, and Russia. Yet he read Smith (and Thomas Malthus), and seems to have found their arguments persuasive. At the same time, however, Maistre continued to defend and practice charity in the traditional Catholic sense.<sup>44</sup> In any case, in contrast to Louis de Bonald and Félicité de Lamennais (with whom he is often linked), Maistre, perhaps hardly aware of the extent of the economic changes that were occurring in his lifetime, had no critique of either the changes or the theories being advanced to explain and justify the changes.<sup>45</sup>

With respect to the origins of legitimate government, while both writers put the ultimate origin in God, Maistre, with his providentialism, tended to stress divine agency over that of men, while Burke put more stress on human agency, arguing that it is prescription that legitimizes authority. For Maistre, all stable government (and monarchy in particular) was, in a sense, of divine right, while Burke specifically repudiated the notion of divine right monarchy. Their divergence of views on this issue is especially evident in their conflicting judgements of the English "Glorious" Revolution of 1688. Burke devoted much of the first half of his *Reflections* to expounding the conventional Whig justification for the expulsion of the Catholic Stuarts. For Joseph de Maistre, on the other hand, there was "no doubt that William of Orange was a usurper, deserving to die on a scaffold."<sup>46</sup>

On the role of religion in society, both agreed that religion was essential for social stability, and that church and state should work together towards that goal. However Burke seems to have regarded such cooperation as essentially a matter of common sense, while Maistre raised the issue to the level of philosophical principle. In the *Reflections*, for example, commenting on the Revolution's treatment of the Church,

<sup>43</sup> On Burke as a bourgeois political economist, see especially C.B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980), and more recently, Francis Canavan, *The Political Economy of Edmund Burke: The Role of Property in His Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press 1995).

<sup>44</sup> When he travelled through France on his return from Russia in 1817 (a famine year), Joseph de Maistre distributed bread or alms at each posting station. See "Un portrait de Joseph de Maistre tracé par sa fille Constance," *Etudes*, 125 (1910): 500.

<sup>45</sup> On Bonald, see D.K. Cohen, "The Vicomte de Bonald's Critique of Industrialism," *Journal of Modern History*, 41 (December 1969): 475-84, and David Klinck, *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist Louis de Bonald (1754-1854)* (New York: Peter Lang 1996), 149-50.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to the Chevalier de Rossi, 1 February 1808, *OC*, 11:36.

Burke observes that "All other nations have begun the fabric of a new government, or the reformation of an old, by establishing originally, or by enforcing with greater exactness some rites or other of religion."<sup>47</sup> Maistre, in contrast, not only rails at length at the "Revolution's antireligious character,"<sup>48</sup> but elevates the issue to one of metaphysics. Even in constitutional matters (or perhaps especially in constitutional matters), he maintains, "man cannot act the Creator without putting himself in harmony with Him."<sup>49</sup> He believes that it is a "divine law" that "every time a man puts himself [...] in harmony with the Creator and produces any institution whatsoever in the name of the divinity [...] he participates in some manner in the power whose instrument he has made himself."<sup>50</sup>

Burke's fulminations against metaphysics have often been noted, though commentators have argued persuasively that his writings are informed by a consistent philosophical perspective.<sup>51</sup> On one level Maistre could be as suspicious of abstract theorizing and as insistent on recourse to experience as Burke. In the Preface of his *Essay on the Generative Principle*, for example, Maistre begins by describing politics as "perhaps the thorniest of sciences," and asserts that "whatever common sense first perceives in this science as an evident truth is almost always found, once tested by experience, not only false but disastrous."<sup>52</sup> It is experience, not theory, that, according to Maistre, proves the superiority of hereditary to elected monarchy, and that proves the folly of a nation attempting to achieve a favourable balance of trade by regulation. At the same time, however, Maistre insisted that politics involved metaphysical issues that had to be addressed. As he put it in the same Preface:

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<sup>47</sup> *Reflections*, 124-5.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter Five, "The French Revolution Considered in its Antireligious Character," of his *Considerations*, is entirely devoted to this topic.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4. See, as well, Maistre's *Essay on the Generative Principle*, where he develops the thesis that "Since the principle of every constitution is divine, it follows that a man can do nothing with one unless he seeks the aid of God, Whose instrument he then becomes." Section, XXX, *On God and Society*, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Dryer, for example, contends that "in the main the principles he appealed to were remarkably coherent and persistent." Frederick Dryer, *Burke's Politics: A Study in Whig Orthodoxy* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1979), 4. See, as well, Joseph L. Pappin III, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke* (New York: Fordham University Press 1993).

<sup>52</sup> *On God and Society*, xxiii.

It is said that German philosophers have invented the word metapolitics to be to politics what metaphysics is to physics. This term seems very aptly invented to express the metaphysics of politics, for there is such thing, and this science deserves profound attention.<sup>53</sup>

Maistre thus maintained that the “moral order has its laws, as does the physical, and their investigation is quite worthy of occupying a true philosopher’s meditations.”<sup>54</sup>

Burke began his career writing philosophical works (*On the Sublime and the Beautiful* and *A Vindication of Natural Society*, both published in 1756), but his later writings were devoted entirely to contemporary political issues. In contrast, Maistre began his literary career with political pamphlets, but in his later years wrote on general philosophical questions (i.e., his *St. Petersburg Dialogues* and his *Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon*). While not a professional philosopher, Maistre seems to have been much more aware than Burke of fundamental philosophical (and theological) questions and more ready and able to wrestle with such issues. For example, he worked out a coherent epistemology (an interesting theory of innate ideas) that provided a foundation for his political and social theory.<sup>55</sup>

Both Maistre and Burke were critical of the more radical aspects of the Enlightenment (with both believing that the French philosophes had conspired for the destruction of Christianity), but Maistre was much more thorough and systematic in his critique. Both, for example, were highly critical of Rousseau, but Burke never went much beyond denigration,<sup>56</sup> while Maistre undertook a systematic critique of Rousseau’s ideas on the state of nature and popular sovereignty.<sup>57</sup> Moreover Maistre undertook similar systematic critiques of what he took to be the characteristic ideas and thinkers of the Enlightenment. He eventually devoted an entire volume to his critique of eighteenth-century scientism and Francis

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv-xxvi.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii.

<sup>55</sup> See Richard A. Lebrun, “Maistrian Epistemology,” in *Maistre Studies*, 207-221.

<sup>56</sup> In his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, Burke characterized Rousseau as the “great professor and founder of the *philosophy of vanity*.” *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 4:26.

<sup>57</sup> See *Against Rousseau: “On the State of Nature” and “On the Sovereignty of the People.”*

Bacon, the writer he blamed for its origins.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Maistre's *St. Petersburg Dialogues* contains a substantial critique of John Locke's sensationalist epistemology.<sup>59</sup>

Joseph de Maistre's critical stance towards John Locke points to another important difference between Maistre and Burke. Although there has been considerable debate about how closely Burke followed Locke, he never publicly criticized his predecessor's ideas and it can be plausibly argued that "in basic political theory, Burke adhered to a Lockean framework."<sup>60</sup> While Maistre never undertook a systematic critique of Locke's political theory, he clearly judged it to be mistaken and dangerous. In his *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, Maistre concluded his treatment of Locke's epistemology with the following remarks:

After having laid the foundations of a philosophy as false as it is dangerous, his deadly mind turned towards politics with a no less deplorable result. He spoke about the origin of laws as badly as about the origin of ideas; and on this point he laid down principles whose consequences we are now seeing. These terrible seeds would perhaps have withered in silence in the coldness of his style, but nurtured in the hot houses of Paris, they produced the revolutionary monster that has devoured Europe.<sup>61</sup>

Although Maistre's critique of social contract theories focussed on Rousseau,<sup>62</sup> the same criticisms would apply to Locke's ideas as well. To the extent that Burke remained within the eighteenth-century tradition of "natural society" politics, assuming that civil society and governments were historical man-made arrangements,<sup>63</sup> Maistre could have applied his critique to Burke too.

Perhaps the most intriguing (and even confusing) point of comparison between Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke relates to the concept of natural law. Burke, for his part, often referred to natural law, and

<sup>58</sup> See Maistre's *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, written in St. Petersburg in the years from 1814 to 1816, but not published until 1836. *OC*, 6. Larry Seidentop judges that "it is Maistre's attempt to correct mistaken ideas about science and to define the proper role of science that distinguishes him most from writers like Vico, Burke, Fichte, and Bonald." "The Limits of the Enlightenment: A Study of Conservative Political Thought in Early Nineteenth-century France with Special Reference to Maine de Biran and Joseph de Maistre." Oxford University D Phil thesis 1966, 406.

<sup>59</sup> *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, 165-97.

<sup>60</sup> Dryer, 69.

<sup>61</sup> *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, 193.

<sup>62</sup> See Maistre's "anti-Rousseau" essays in *Against Rousseau: "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People."*

<sup>63</sup> See Dreyer, *Burke's Politics*, 24-36.

frequently used natural law arguments in his political discourse.<sup>64</sup> Joseph de Maistre, on the other hand, despite his self-identification as a thinker in the Catholic tradition, seldom mentioned natural law and very rarely employed natural law arguments. I have argued elsewhere that the most significant characteristic of Maistre's political thought, in comparison to traditional Catholic political thought, is the absence of the traditional concept of natural law.<sup>65</sup> A full explanation of this anomaly is beyond the scope of this paper, but it would involve consideration of the circumstances in which both men were writing as well as an examination of the context and way in which each used natural law concepts and terminology. In broad terms, however, it can be noted that Burke tended to use traditional natural law concepts and arguments in ways that were commonplace in the early Enlightenment and in England in particular.<sup>66</sup> There is continuing debate as to how central natural law concepts were to Burke's thought. In many cases, Burke's use of natural law arguments may have been more a matter of rhetorical flourish than the fundamental basis of his political beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

Joseph de Maistre's avoidance of traditional natural law terminology and arguments seems to have involved at least three factors.<sup>68</sup> In the first place, evidence from his notebooks suggests that Maistre tended to understand natural law in an essentially Stoic sense as an innate law placed within man by God rather than in the Thomistic sense of a rule of reason.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, Maistre's epistemology of innate ideas was more compatible with the notion of an innate natural law than with the scholastic view that the principles of natural law were something that

<sup>64</sup> See Dryer, *Burke's Politics*, 6-23, for a good summary of Burke's commitment to natural law and his use of natural law arguments. See, as well, James Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler; Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1994), 37-48, for arguments against interpreting Burke as a natural law theorist.

<sup>65</sup> See Richard Allen Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1965), 108-15.

<sup>66</sup> See C.P. Courtney, "Edmund Burke and the Enlightenment," in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants*, ed. by Anne Whiteman, J.S. Bromley and P.G.M. Dickson (Oxford; Clarendon Press 1973), 304-22.

<sup>67</sup> See Dryer, 6-23. Dryer's interpretation challenges that of Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1958), who makes natural law a source of Burke's conviction and inspiration.

<sup>68</sup> See my chapter, "Joseph de Maistre and Natural Law," in *Maistre Studies*, 193-205.

<sup>69</sup> In his notebooks, Maistre expresses explicit agreement with Pierre Charon's description of natural law in his *De la Sagesse*, *Ibid.*, 202-03.

could be discovered and elaborated by the use of reason. Thirdly, Maistre was writing at a time when attacks on established institutions were often being justified by appeals to natural law. To be sure these appeals were usually based on a secularized "natural rights" version of natural law, but since a clear recognition of the differences between this version and the older scholastic version is a relatively recent achievement,<sup>70</sup> we should not be surprised that Maistre, failing to recognize these differences, avoided natural law terminology.

Maistre may have abandoned traditional natural law phraseology, but it may be noted that his fundamental assumptions and concerns remained those of traditional Catholic moralists and political thinkers. He followed that tradition in insisting that political theory must be based on metaphysical foundations. He was no less convinced than earlier Catholic thinkers as to the existence of an objective moral law. Characteristically, Maistre would characterize a perceived regularity in the workings of society or government as "an eternal law of the moral world," or as "a divine law as palpable as the laws of motion."<sup>71</sup> Analysis of the meaning, originality, and relative success of Maistre's attempt to discover, explain, and defend his own version of the laws of moral order remains an ongoing task for Maistrian scholarship.<sup>72</sup>

In summary, in contrast to Burke, Maistre had broad interests in science, philosophy (epistemological questions especially), and theology. Despite his reputation as a reactionary defender of traditional religion and monarchical government, he was a remarkably original thinker whose thought occasionally anticipates twentieth-century themes in astonishing ways.<sup>73</sup> Edmund Burke, on the other hand, can to a very large extent be understood as an orthodox Whig eloquently defending his understanding of an inherited position.<sup>74</sup> His reflections may have

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Heinrich A. Rommen, *The Natural Law* (St. Louis 1948), 75-109, and A.P. d'Entrèves, *Natural Law, An Introduction to Legal Philosophy* (London, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 1970), 59-62.

<sup>71</sup> These examples are taken from *Considerations on France* (21 and 43), but Maistre's works are replete with similar expressions.

<sup>72</sup> For the most recent treatment of these issues, see Pranchère, "L'autorité contre les Lumières," 551-66.

<sup>73</sup> See especially, Isaiah Berlin's essay on "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. by Henry Hardy (London: John Murray 1990), 91-174, and Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1999).

<sup>74</sup> See, especially, Dreyer, *Burke's Politics*. Dreyer concludes that Burke did not make a major contribution to the development of political theory. *Ibid.*, 83.

stimulated Maistre's thought, but Joseph de Maistre appears to have been the more profound and provocative thinker. Burke was undoubtedly more influential in the short run, but continuing and growing interest in Joseph de Maistre and his ideas suggests that he may turn out to have been the more significant of the two.

*Maistre's Twin?  
Louis de Bonald and the  
Counter-Enlightenment*<sup>1</sup>

The title of this paper indicates reservations about the tendency to identify the thought of Joseph de Maistre with that of Louis de Bonald (1754-1840).<sup>2</sup> By questioning that habit, I do not wish to deny a number of basic and important similarities between these thinkers. And there is nothing amiss about scholars seeing them as kindred proponents of what is conveniently if loosely referred to as the "Counter-Enlightenment" or the "Counter-Revolution." It cannot be denied that Bonald and Maistre – no less than Edmund Burke, Ludwig von Haller, Donoso Cortés and a host of worthies of the post-Revolutionary Right – shared numerous general principles and prejudices and took the philosophes and the French Revolution to task on the same issues. Equally indubitable is the fact that both thinkers were advocates of "traditionalism," a slippery and artificial contrivance which the Catholic Church began to view with suspicion after it was democratized by Felicité de Lamennais and his associates in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paper given at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin, July 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For an early proposal of this filiation, see Emile Faguet, *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1890-1903), 1: 93.

<sup>3</sup> A good discussion of how the "traditionalism" of Bonald and Maistre (to conflate their positions for now) relates to Menassian ideas is Bernard Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1985), especially 177-82. See too Louis Gillou, "Joseph de Maistre and Lamennais, 1820-1821," *Revue des études maistriennes*, no. 8 (1983): 85-100. But there were also fideistic and even deistic dangers inherent in any resort to "tradition," dangers that manifested themselves in the theology of Louis-Eugène-Marie Bautain, Augustin Bonnetty, Vincenzo Gioberti and others. Consequently, the Papacy began by 1840 to question and then to condemn traditionalism as a variety of fideism by the 1840s, eventually coming to see Thomism as a better, rational defense of Catholicism. Bonald himself turned against Lamennais' employment of traditionalist arguments; see "Réponse a la lettre de M. de Frénilly, au sujet du dernier



Nonetheless, the habit of joining together Bonald and Maistre as if they were the Castor and Pollux of a monolithic mentality obscures as much as it clarifies. For all the kinship of their opinions, these Franco-phone ideologists – and whatever else they were, they certainly were ideologists – are actually quite distinguishable as writers and as theorists. This point should come as no great surprise. After all, a good deal of scholarship in recent decades has shown that there was no such thing as a single “Enlightenment.” The epistemological, ontological, ethical, and sociopolitical orientations of that “movement” were extremely complex, varying not only from country to country and generation to generation but even from thinker to thinker over the long span from about 1689 to 1789.<sup>4</sup> If that is the case, why should we expect the “Counter-Enlightenment,” the response to that complexity, to be any less variegated? The latter movement also took on particular emphases, modalities, and traits in the hands of its assorted exponents.

Burke is usually seen as the founding spokesman of the European Counter-Revolution, largely perhaps because of the prescient eloquence of his *Reflections* (1790). But neither Maistre, nor Bonald, nor even a German reactionary such as Friedrich von Gentz, qualify as his whole-hearted disciples. None of these alleged acolytes – Bonald least of all – wrote with an intimate understanding or deep admiration of the British political tradition; none of them agreed with most of Burke’s comparatively moderate preferences; and none of them drew upon the Anglo-Irishman’s extensive parliamentary experience.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I would

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ouvrage de l’abbé de la Mennais,” *OC*, 3: 777-88. Cf. Marin Ferraz, *Histoire de la philosophie en France au XIXe siècle: traditionalisme et ultramontanisme* (Paris, 1880); and Louis Foucher, *La Philosophie catholique en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> A description of the “double bind” of the Enlightenment’s nuanced, problematical epistemology is given by Daniel Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge, 1993), 2. On the other hand, Wilda Anderson isolates just two positions by contrasting the particularistic empiricism emphasized by Diderot (more akin to Maistre’s epistemology) with the universalistic rationalism cultivated by d’Alembert (more akin to Bonald’s) in *Diderot’s Dream* (Baltimore, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock, “Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas,” in Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time* (New York, 1973), 202-32. For Bonald’s brief praise of Burke, cf. *Théorie du pouvoir*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1859-64) 1: 441, n. 1 (All translation from this edition of Bonald’s works are my own). Cf. Michel Fuchs “Edmund Burke et Joseph de Maistre,” *Revue de Université d’Ottawa* 54 (1984): 49-58; and my “Burke and Bonald: Paradigms of Late Eighteenth-Century Conservatism” *Historical*

suggest that all these opponents of the Enlightenment both quarreled with and were influenced by a different set of the intellectual, affective, and discursive currents that swirled throughout the eighteenth century. Burke's "prejudices," for example, were shaped by the partially fabricated tradition of his country's "ancient constitution," by the principles and rights embodied in the anti-absolutist outcome of the Glorious Revolution, and even by John Locke's Whiggism to a degree unimaginable and undetectable in a Continental thinker.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it was this "enlightened" legacy of English history and English ideas that made Burke a staunch defender of certain rights denied to the Irish and to the Americans.

But here we must return to the comparative case of Maistre and Bonald. One of the few distinctions usually made between them revolves around the claim that Maistre was a writer of arresting prose while Bonald's works were encumbered by turgidity. I do not want to take issue with a judgment that seems so hard to deny.<sup>7</sup> The question is what significance do we attach to this distinction? Is it only a matter of unequal literary skill, merely the result of dissimilar abilities and personalities? No doubt those variables are pertinent. But I would suggest that less superficial and temperamental factors are also involved.

In one of his later essays, Isaiah Berlin interprets Maistre as a thinker whose relevance for the twentieth-century stems from his premonitions of the irrationalism of the modern age, premonitions which fascism eventually manifested and transmuted into horrific deeds.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Owen Bradley reads Maistre's condemnation of the "Enlightenment project", particularly its emphasis on the absurdities and ambiguities of human behavior and on the arational rituals of human societies, as indicative of a thinker who came close to being a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.<sup>9</sup> An article by Graeme Garrard persuasively argues for parallels

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*Reflections* 8 (1981): 69-93.

<sup>6</sup> On the artificiality of many traditionalist perspectives, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, "Introduction," *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> The twentieth-century Romanian/French writer E. M. Cioran – himself a connoisseur of despair – appreciated Maistre as a master of misanthropy "[I]mbued with a bracing rage" and whose writings evince a "fusion of the acrimonious and the elegant" (Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations* tr. R. Howard [New York, 1991], 24-5).

<sup>8</sup> Berlin, "Joseph de Maitre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. H. Hardy (New York, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, *A Modern Maistre? The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Lincoln, NE, 1999).

between Maistre's diagnosis of civilization and its discontents and the ruminations of Freud on that subject.<sup>10</sup> Whichever of these readings one finds most convincing, they do have one thing in common; each is sensitive to Maistre's uses of irony, sublimity, and paradox as well as to his dread of the hubris of the philosophes' materialism, scientism, and agnostic humanism. All three call attention to Maistre's obsession with the dire consequences of secularizing, science-obsessed modernity for individuals and societies alike. They provide evidence that, though a Freemason and well-read in the works of the Enlightenment<sup>11</sup>, Maistre was enough of an old-fashioned (or "new-fashioned"?) Augustinian to be convinced that human nature's darker, less beneficent, and less accessible side is closed to rational reductions or liberal reforms. He was also adamant in his belief that that aspect of humanity is better fathomed and restrained by religion than by any "social science" (whether that of the abbé Sieyès or Adam Smith) that promises an easy understanding and improvement of civil relations and governmental agencies.

One obvious point about the Maistrean sensibility should be emphasized at the outset: it was rooted in the anti-Pelagian beliefs that Christian theologians and orators had articulated over many centuries. In this regard, Maistre's youthful association with the Pénitents Noirs and the Jesuits of Chambéry (recently studied by Jean-Louis Darcel<sup>12</sup>) was the proximate shaper of his values and vocabulary. Hardly less significant, however, were his connections to the culture of the "late Enlightenment," particularly to the mystical Freemasonry of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz and to Martinist Illuminism.<sup>13</sup> The Savoyard's acquaintance with the Illuminist theosophy of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin is crucial for explaining several features of his world-view as well as the arresting language through which it is expressed.<sup>14</sup> Maistre's contempt

<sup>10</sup> Garrard, "Joseph de Maistre's Civilization and Its Discontents," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 429-46.

<sup>11</sup> The best biography in English is Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Kingston, Ont., 1988).

<sup>12</sup> See Darcel, "The Sources of Maistrian Sensibility," in Richard Lebrun (ed.), *Maistre Studies* (Lanham, Md., 1988), 100-24.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre: Etude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un materialiste mystique* (Geneva, 1968); and Antoine Faivre, "Maistre and Willermoz," in Lebrun (ed.), *Maistre Studies*, 100-25.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Amadou, *Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin et martinisme* (Paris, 1946). Perhaps Maistre made use of this Martinist legacy in his later years as ambassador to a Russia whose ruling elite admired the hybrid religious revival conducted by Count Palace (another Savoyard), Franz von Baader and Madam de Krüdener. It may even be tenable to claim that Maistre was a more cosmopoli-

for facile praise of mankind's benevolence and rationality – which he detected even in so cynical an iconoclast as Voltaire – together with his notorious paeans to war, sacrifice, and the executioner,<sup>15</sup> redeemed religious obscurantism and self-abnegation with language designed to evoke both awe and fear. But such a means of honoring the power of the incomprehensible was congenial to a diversity of “late Enlightenment” reactions against the “geometric spirit” and science-worship that enthralled Condorcet and the *Idéologues* in the years of the Revolution and Napoleon.<sup>16</sup> Taking note of this rhetorical pedigree makes it easier to grasp why Maistre never accepted the premise underlying Bonald's entire *oeuvre* – namely, that it is possible to construct a rigorous social science at once Christian, traditionalist, and anti-democratic.

Maistre's diatribes against scientific humanism are grounded in Christian but also in what might be described as pre-Romantic assumptions about the centrality of our psychological drives or feelings in social and political affairs.<sup>17</sup> Discomfort with a rationalized “cosmic optimism,” and an appreciation of history as “experimental” politics rather than as the distillate of a preformed providential pattern, brought Maistre closer

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tan thinker than the very Gallocentric and rather provincial Bonald.

<sup>15</sup> Maistre's infamous portrayal of the mysteries of sacrificial bloodshed occurs in *Les Soirées de Saint Petersburg*. In the Seventh Dialogue of that book, Maistre notoriously observes that,

Throughout the immense realm of living things, manifest violence is the rule [...]. A power both hidden and palpable shows itself constantly occupied in demonstrating the principle of life operating by violent means [...]. Not one instant passes when some living thing is not being devoured by another [...]. Yet what being will exterminate the one that exterminates everything else? [...] It is man who has the task of exterminating man [...]. It is war that fulfills this decree [of extermination]. Do you not hear the earth itself crying out for blood? [...] Man, possessed by a divine fury, and not by mere hatred or rage, goes to the battlefield without knowing his intention or even what he is about to do [...]. [A]n innocent murderer, a passive tool in an almighty hand [...] [T]he universal law of violent destruction of the living is continually obeyed. The whole earth, steeped in blood, is only an huge altar on which every living thing must be immolated without restraint, without respite, until all the world is consumed, until all evil is extinguished, and until death itself dies (*OC*, 14 vols. [Lyon, 1884-1886], 5:22-5).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Keith M. Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago, 1975).

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (New York, 1968). The “emotionalizing” of moral and political principles had been undertaken before Maistre – if for different purposes – by Rousseau, by the pre-Revolutionary theater, and by much of the oratory of the Revolution; see David Denby, *Sentimental Narratives and the Social Order, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1994); and William M. Reddy, “Sentimentalism and Its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 109-152.

to the pliable qualities of Burke's conservatism than Bonald ever came.<sup>18</sup> If this makes Maistre's thought appear (at least in hindsight) ancestral to present-day rebuffs of the rationalist Enlightenment, then interpreting him as a prophet of poststructuralism or postmodernism may be justifiable, though surely he would have been shocked by such a linkage.

By contrast, several facets of Bonaldian conservatism tap sources and mimic paradigms quite different from those that nurtured the Maistrean sensibility. Certain of them, in fact, belong to the arsenal of rationalistic forms and assumptions that were mobilized by traditionalism's opponents throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bonald was clear about why he felt a literary repackaging of pre-Revolutionary attitudes and beliefs, no matter how dazzling, was inadequate in the aftermath of a corrosive "age of reason":

It is necessary to continue to bring about the instruction of enlightened men in advanced societies by way of reason; because to the extent that mankind and society mature [*avançant en âge*], reason becomes stronger and feelings [*affections*] less lively. [...] Proofs based on sentiment have been weakened among nearly everyone and, insofar as they fail, the disorders of individuals, those fruits of the passions, have tended to push aside belief in the [divine] author of general order [...] Therefore, the moment has arrived to rescue reason from doubt with principles without which it is impotent and seeks happiness in vain. This is the task that I have undertaken.<sup>19</sup>

Bonald was as aware of the ploys of the passions as were the *moralistes* La Rochefoucauld and Vauvenargues and the preachers Bourdaloue and Massillon.<sup>20</sup> Human reasoning, he knew, could be dominated or twisted by interests, desires and feelings. But unlike David Hume, Bonald believed that right reason, when in the employ of Christianity's truths, can remain free of the *amour-propre* of the individual and of the mistakes that emotions surreptitiously perpetrate. Maistre and Bonald alike tried to convince their contemporaries of the validity of theocratic tradition by disparaging unmonitored humanity in what amounts to a sort of "negative anthropology." But the formalistic proclivities of Bonald's words and ideas are much further removed from a latter-day "negative

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<sup>18</sup> See Franciszek Draus, "Burke et les français," in F. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* Vol. 3 (Paris, 1989), 79-99.

<sup>19</sup> *Legislation primitive, OC*, 1: 1191, n.1; 1108.

<sup>20</sup> "We judge physics with our reason but morals with our passions. We readily assent to opinions which only demand an effort of our faculty of intellection [...] [B]ut we obstinately push away those beliefs that exact some sacrifice from our faculty of enjoyment" (*Recherches philosophiques, OC*, 3: 301).

theology" than is the mystery-bound apologia cultivated by Maistre. It is the latter who invokes supernaturalism by referring to humanity's inveterate weaknesses, weaknesses that are redemptively channeled by a hidden God through society's inscrutable practices and history's most frightening events. Thus, Maistrian rhetoric qualifies as Romantic no less than as Augustinian. It obfuscates reality by savoring enigmas that humble humanity's rational pretensions. Notwithstanding the Church's guardedness toward the inherent mysticism of the whole of the Counter-Enlightenment, Bonald was exceptional among his colleagues on the Right insofar as he proffered a "traditionalist scientism." And it was this strange concoction, when adapted by thinkers outside the Church, which would imprint such secular enterprises as Auguste Comte's "religion of humanity" and Emile Durkheim's structural-functionalist sociology.<sup>21</sup>

Bonald was wary of philosophizing that inculcated atheism. He was confident, however, that another kind could be and had to be pursued if the Revolution's destructiveness was going to be healed: "[T]he modern schools [of philosophy], whether materialistic or eclectic, have produced the philosophy of the individual, of *moi*, which enjoys such prominence in their writings; I have tried to produce the philosophy of social man, the *philosophie du nous*, if I may so call it."<sup>22</sup> Bonald strives for a "socio-theology" within which the secular order and the sacred order, the natural and the supernatural, almost become relational/essential equivalents.

Because Maistre tries to confound Enlightenment assumptions by stressing reality's irrationality, it is his textual strategy rather than Bonald's that eschews a rationalist vision. While Maistre's underlying principles perhaps are no less reconcilable with Thomism than are those of Bonald's, their lexical shell, their evocation of the unfathomable tendencies endemic to the workings of society, is not a discourse indentured to reason, whether Aristotelian or Cartesian or Lockean. If we are willing (rather anachronistically) to connect these thinkers to twentieth-century trends of thought, then I would suggest that the type of metaphysical discourse preferred by Bonald verges on structuralism, whereas Maistre's image of the sacred and his literary proclivities veer toward poststructuralism. The former labors to overcome the Enlighten-

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Steven Luke, *Emile Durkheim – His Life and Works: A Historical and Critical Study* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 474; and Andrew Wernick, "Structuralism and the Dislocation of the French Rationalist Project," in John Fekete (ed.) *The Structural Allegory* (Minneapolis, 1984), 130-49, where the struggle to unite *fides* and *intellectum* is shown to continue to haunt the renaissance of Scholastic thought at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> *Demonstration philosophique, OC*, 1: 29.

ment by turning its own philosophical repertoire against it; the latter, radically and seductively, strives to discard the Enlightenment's forms no less than its content.

Given Bonald's belief that language is the basis of all reasoning, representations and communications – and that it always has been accepted, utilized and transmitted on faith by individuals and societies – the rational patina coating his traditionalist truths may appear to be no better than an inadequately-mitigated fideism.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this was the Church's justification for officially condemning it. It is also the case – a bit like Hans-Georg Gadamer in our era – that Bonald corrects the pretensions of intellectuals to cogitate without prejudice: "The philosophes, who rose up with so much fury against what they called prejudices, should have begun by trying to disengage themselves from the language in which they saw fit to write; because language is the first embodiment of our prejudices and secures all others."<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, Bonald saw his own theorizing as nothing less than a holy "science" – a superficially modernized supplement to Aquinas' or Suarez's Christian Aristotelianism. Bonald viewed his achievement as the substitution of seventeenth-century rationalism for twelfth-century rationalism and as a demonstration that heaven's jurisdiction is universal, immanent and immutable. The logic he assumed to be constitutive of the "essence" of every society was ineluctable as well as singular.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, Bonald, in line with Maistre, wanted to revivify the Christian (or premodern) perspective on human beings and their institutions, which the eighteenth-century's anarchic individualism had condemned. But this common ground did not preclude divergence. Where, for example, Maistre's God is often portrayed as acting in ways unfathomable for human rationality, the God of Bonald is presented as

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<sup>23</sup> There can be little doubt that this belief in language as a "primitive" gift undergirding all subsequent reasoning is the traditionalist keystone of Bonald's system: "It is time to emphasize that, even today, the individual receives his first knowledge only by means of revelation, that is to say, through the transmission that his teacher imparts to him along with the arts of language [...] Thus, the first means of all knowledge is the word received from faith without examination, and the first means of instruction is authority" (*Legislation primitive, OC*, 1: 1172). Cf. Jean Bastier, "Linguistique et politique dans la pensée de Louis de Bonald," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 58 (1974); 538-59.

<sup>24</sup> *Pensées, OC*, 3: 1387. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley, 1976).

<sup>25</sup> We should remember, too, that much of Aquinas' reconciliation of reason and faith were condemned in 1277 by Church authorities in Paris. This issue – the divide separating Tertullian from Boethius as far back as late Roman times – has always been a difficult one to arbitrate for Catholic theologians.

an abstract, almost Spinozistic, embodiment of the highest *ratio*. This "scientized" approach at least appears to demystify the Christian deity; nor does it hesitate in describing Him as the "supreme organizer."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the manner in which God is invoked by Bonald's treatises is reminiscent of the "watchmaker" metaphors of the deists of the mid-1700s.

Relevant to this assessment of Bonald's ideological disposition is Carl Becker's famous, no doubt exaggerated, claim that the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries – what divided them notwithstanding – were united by a "faith in reason."<sup>27</sup> The rationalistic and deistic inclinations of many Enlightenment thinkers encouraged Bonald to hold that religion and reason can be allies. It is no accident that Bonald admired and imitated the hyper-rational but religion-friendly philosophies of Nicholas Malebranche and Gottfried von Leibniz.<sup>28</sup> Their philosophical metaphysics, having shed the egoism of Descartes' search for truth,<sup>29</sup> inspired the discursive form of Bonald's "sociolatriy" – that veritable Christian structuralism for which he claimed an unlimited purview.<sup>30</sup> Although Maistre conceded the value of Occasionalist philosophy for indoctrinating theocentrism among philosophically-inclined minds, he showed little desire himself to draw upon it. He never chose to frame his reactionary

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *Essai analytique* in *OC*, 1: 959 where God is called the "Ordonnateur suprême."

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932).

<sup>28</sup> For Bonald's appreciation of these two rationalists, see *Legislation primitive*, *OC*, 1: 1059, n.2, 1066, 1089, and 1181, n.1. Maistre, however, seems to have had little direct acquaintance with the system of Leibniz; cf. Lebrun, "Maistrean Epistemology," in Lebrun (ed.), *Maistre Studies*, 218-19. While Maistre produced a thorough critique of Bacon's empiricism, Bonald's devoted dozens of pages of his books (especially of *Recherches philosophiques*) to evaluating the full sweep of the history of philosophy since the ancient Greeks. Overall, Bonald was more concerned with positioning his thought vis-à-vis the long tradition of philosophical ideas in Western civilization.

<sup>29</sup> "[T]he school of Descartes learned to think with precision and express itself with clarity and [...] taught us to affirm great truths which until then were only known unclearly. At the same time, it prudently doubted those things which are sometimes affirmed without being known" ("La philosophie et la révolution," *OC*, 3: 536).

<sup>30</sup> "What progress that profound meditator [i.e., Malebranche] could have made in the *recherche de la vérité* if he had only made [...] historical application of the truth of his principles to the tangible condition of various religions and political societies" (*Essai analytique*, *OC*, 3: 446).



message through Malebranche's philosophical vocabulary the way Bonald did.<sup>31</sup>

The Christian/Cartesian philosophy of Malebranche – a leading light of the late seventeenth-century Oratory – was encountered by Bonald during his student years with the Oratorian fathers at the *collège* of Juilly.<sup>32</sup> The pedagogy and curricula of the Oratory have not been thoroughly researched. Nonetheless, we know enough about their flirtations with modern thought (including Descartes and Rousseau) to hypothesize that Bonald's right-wing recruitment of reason, his peculiar Counter-Enlightenment stance, had roots in his studies at Juilly.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, this context shows that we can not assume that Bonald's Christianity was a sham because his notion of God (unlike Maistre's) was conveyed via images of a predictable deity constrained by, even while operating through, nature's fixed laws. In fact, philosophically-inclined believers of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries had arrived at this position long before Bonald's day.<sup>34</sup>

The pseudo-scientific, syllogism-laden prose through which Bonald rebuffs Enlightenment secularism and liberalism can be considered neo-Scholastic. But it also resulted from his attempt to adapt the discourse of early-Enlightenment deductivism and rationalist analysis to his own purposes. In its alignment with this analytical mode, Bonald's conservatism fits within what Michel Foucault labels the "Classical" *episteme*.<sup>35</sup> Bonald did not subvert the Enlightenment by dwelling on the reason-resistant intricacies of reality, by stressing (*à la* Maistre) the cruel absurdities of the human condition, or by limning the hidden compulsions of an inscrutable cosmos. Instead, his Counter-Enlightenment denigrates the Enlightenment's "content" (i.e., its empiricism, individualism, and meliorism) while concurrently employing representational

<sup>31</sup> But the Savoyard's reaction to Malebranche was less imitative; cf. Richard Lebrun, "Maistre and Malebranche," in Lebrun (ed.), *Maistre Studies*, 221-31.

<sup>32</sup> For the tensions in this philosopher's system, see Michael E. Hobart, *Science and Religion in the Thought of Nicolas Malebranche* (Chapel Hill, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> See Pierre Costabel, "L'Oratoire de France et ses collèges," in René Taton (ed.), *Enseignement et diffusion des sciences en France au XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris, 1964), 67-100.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. R. R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1939).

<sup>35</sup> See Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966).

modes and rationalist forms that had been the stock-and-trade of anti-traditionalists of the "century of light."<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, the Kantian motto "*Sapere aude*" was not Bonald's. Rather, he codified reason in a way similar to its confinement during the Middle Ages, that is, within a highly-structured philosophy which, connected to the eternal, eschews what is ephemerally "real." To achieve this he shackled reason to an otherworldly attribution of language (and the civilization *in tempore* that "gift" made possible) and placed it outside of mankind's dominion. There is no denying that for Bonald a deocentric conception of language's source and function is the Archimedean fulcrum for human rationality, the "primitive" point of intellectual leverage that mankind finds indispensable. Deference, age-old institutions, hoary practices and collective memories; these once reliable vehicles of tradition were no longer effective inculcators of the true and the good under modernity. This, despite the fact that Bonald argued that faith – some originary point for intellectual initiation – was as necessary to secular as to religious thinkers. Unless exempla were carefully chosen and the lessons they contained were underscored by rational exegesis, history itself was a poor defender of the Old Regime: "Historical proofs become depleted in the process of moving further and further from the epochs they recount [...] but rational proofs gain strength, because reason is better at clarification, even when it comes to clarifying errors."<sup>37</sup> In short, Bonald maintained that transient experience, whether historical or existential, could be a greater enemy of "tradition" than is the most austere analytical reason. The latter, in fact, could be made to serve to expose and "eternalize" a society's innate structures.

Bonaldian rationalism was "totalitarian" in scope, not progressive or libertarian in intention.<sup>38</sup> All phenomena in nature, culture, and history are evaluated not in accordance with whatever contingencies or conventions of this world that may have generated and then transformed them but against a vision that is at once rational, moral, and immutable. It is not the mundane accidents but the ideal structure of causal, syntactical,

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<sup>36</sup> Although Bonald (and Maistre too) sometimes twisted or truncated the opinions of the philosophes to support his own position; cf. Leigh Barclay, "Louis de Bonald, Prophet of the Past?" *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 55 (1967): 167-204.

<sup>37</sup> *Legislation primitive*, *OC*, 1: 1192, n. 1. Bonald was aware that even Descartes, in order to overcome skepticism, had had to posit God as the guarantor of "clear and distinct" truths.

<sup>38</sup> He noted that, at least as regards morality and society, "[t]he truth can be presented under new forms, but we cannot discover new truths." ("Des sciences, des lettres et des arts," *OC*, 3: 1159).

or constitutional relations that interests Bonald. Thus, his structuralist vision is often reduced to semiotic ciphering, to simplistic triads of functional /ideal terms (i.e., *pouvoir, ministre, sujet*) grounded in a Christian metaphysics that has been thoroughly “platonized.” The perfect syntax for a sentence, like the perfectly-arranged authority relations within families and governments, is defined by a trinitarian logic. This “logic” represents positions of superordination and subordination throughout the cosmos and is forever fixed. The relational “essences” of this structural discourse have the distinct ideological advantage of being beyond legitimate debate.<sup>39</sup>

Influenced by Leibniz’s<sup>40</sup> (but also by Condillac’s<sup>41</sup>) quest for a philosophical *clavis universalis* or *langue bien faite*, Bonald’s triadic semiotic was intended to reform the corrupted “language of Adam” whose last direct descendent was alleged to be the “classical” language of Louis XIV’s France.<sup>42</sup> The latter, however, had been distorted and degraded by the neologisms and misdefinitions introduced by the Enlightenment and the Revolution.<sup>43</sup> Bonald’s reductive reformulation of the official language of Old Regime theocracy and hierarchy was hardly to every counter-revolutionary taste, however. Despite its goal, this was just the sort of scientization of God’s mysteries and inexplicable tradition that Maistre condemned within Enlightenment thought and which his own apologetic style cast aside.<sup>44</sup> Paul de Man (the onetime

<sup>39</sup> Bonald declares that the perfect language for teaching theocracy “would be able to deduce, from algebraic formulae, general maxims with which we could resolve the problems presented by social events of the past and even of the future” (*Recherches philosophiques, OC, 3: 20.*).

<sup>40</sup> See Michael Losonsky, “Leibniz’s Adamic Language of Thought,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 523-44.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Legislation primitive, OC, 1: 1069*. Lia Formigari asserts that Bonald concocted an “Ultra[-royalist] Condillacianism” (“Theorie des Zeichens und metaphysische restauration,” *Zeitschrift für Phonetik, Sprachwissenschaft, und Kommunikationsforschung* 36 [1983]; 531). See my “From Enlightenment to Counter-Enlightenment Semiotics,” *Historical Reflections* 26 (2000): 59-91.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. L. M. Findlay, “The Genius of the French Language: Towards a Poetics of Political Reaction during the Revolutionary Period,” *Studies in Romanticism* 28 (1989): 556.

<sup>43</sup> The innovations of the later eighteenth century are surveyed in Max Frey, *Les Transformations du vocabulaire français à l’époque de la Révolution* (Paris, 1925).

<sup>44</sup> While Bonald repulsed the sensationalist epistemology of Condillac, he consciously borrowed from the latter’s semiotic scientism. Maistre, however, found neither facet of Condillacian thought acceptable. As Jack Lively has commented, Maistre “built a mystique of language...[and] he reserved special

godfather of today's postmodernism) wrote that, by desiring to regularize language and make its infinite ken homogeneous, the Enlightenment pursued a "substitution of sameness for difference."<sup>45</sup> Maistre might have believed something quite similar about the "algebraic" manner in which his Counter-Enlightenment colleague attempted to scientize the discourse of traditionalism. In truth, he may have been only marginally more appreciative than Bonald of political variety and cultural "difference" throughout this world. But he was adamant about exalting divine "difference" and insisting that God's ways are sublimely obscure to mankind's limited reason and moral understanding. Shrinking the "difference" between Creator and creature with pellucid discourse, no matter how dedicated to the theocratic cause, was contrary to the Maistrean objective of humbling our rational pretensions. Bonald, however, remained committed to producing a timeless structuralism capable of defeating the progressivist rationalism and empiricism of those philosophes and liberals who disdained immemorial hierarchies.

Like a Hegel without dialectical sensibilities, Bonald updated Platonism and providentialism so that the temporally real was either rendered insignificant or forced into the governing matrix of signs of the transcendently rational.<sup>46</sup> The flux of so much of history was tragic and violent because it derived from humanity's wrong-headed efforts to ignore the ultimate reason and natural law within the divine plan. Much of history for Bonald resulted from nothing better than sin-bred arrogance and error. Yet even the greatest of historical mistakes (e.g., the French Revolution), he advised, were only temporary; they were only ephemeral violations of a process directed by God and his earthly lieutenants toward redemptive perfection. Moreover, this divine jurisdiction will always, over time, correct mankind's sociopolitical foolishness through inevitable, fully explainable rebellions, wars, or

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scorn for Condillac, who had been concerned with the philosophic improvement of language" (Lively, "Introduction," to *The Works of Joseph de Maistre* [New York, 1965], 17). Bonald also wanted to preserve the mystique of traditional "ordinary language" where that had not been altered. But where its corruption had occurred he proposed (*à la* Condillac) to philosophically craft an artificial language or sign-system that would be structurally impervious to change away from the usage of *grand siècle* French.

<sup>45</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, 1978), 148.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 1:132. See Gérard Gengembre *La Contre-Révolution, ou l'histoire désespérante* (Paris, 1989), 212-51; and my "History, Authority, and the Ideological Representation of Tradition in Louis de Bonald's Science of Society," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 311 (1993): 142-77.

counter-revolutions. Bonald's version of "cosmic optimism" was an Augustinian atavism, one that gave him assurance that the blasphemies and atrocities of the Revolution would eventually be surmounted.

Maistre's thought, on the other hand, seldom resorts to an explicit natural-law basis. But Bonald repeatedly insists that only on such a foundation could the philosophes' challenge be met.<sup>47</sup> Bonald's prose was cold and demonstrative because that was the style appropriate to his ideological/discursive goal of fighting Enlightenment rationalists on their own turf. Inquisitive, aggressive secularism, not rationalism *per se*, was his target. He condemned mankind's willful *amour-propre* but not its capacity for reasoning systematically or, as in the work of geometers, for representing the everlasting verities. The main problem, according to Bonald, was that it was hard to keep that capacity free of self-interest where matters social and political were concerned.

The new legislation and institutions of post-1789 France – together with their pre-Revolutionary stimulants – were anathema to all the palladins of the Counter-Revolution. Maistre assaulted the Revolution's legacy by revealing how it stemmed from the ignorant pride which liberals displayed whenever they rationally dissected and yearned to refashion politics in line with weak reason's dictates. His preferred literary tack was to dramatize that reasoning about social things was ultimately fatuousness, that humans are incapable of comprehending and eliminating those sanguinary episodes in the functioning of society that only seem arbitrary, wasteful, and barbaric. Bonald, however, believed that methodical argumentation remained a desirable instrument for Christian conservatives so long as it was shown to rest upon an *Ur-reason/Ursprache* resident in God/Nature. The orderliness of traditional communality, its teleological structures, should be shown to be the microcosmic instantiation of the macrocosm. With this commitment – as several commentators have noted – Bonald (and the same cannot be said of Maistre) laid part of the foundation for the development of functionalist sociology by Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and others.<sup>48</sup> But this

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Richard Lebrun, "Maistre and Natural law," in Lebrun (ed.), *Maistre Studies*, especially p. 198.

<sup>48</sup> See (among his many relevant writings) Robert Nisbet, "Conservatism," in T. Bottomore and R. Nisbet, *A History of Sociological Analysis* (New York, 1978), 89-97; Robert Spaemann, *Der Ursprung des Soziologie aus dem Geist der Restauration* (Munich, 1959); and my "The Historical Imaginary of Social Science in Post-Revolutionary France: Bonald, Saint-Simon, Comte," *History of the Human Sciences* 7 (1994): 1-26. Quasi-sociological critics of bourgeois modernity such as Honoré de Balzac (the novelist) and Frédéric Le Play (the student of family structures) also admitted Bonald's influence.

same claim is harder to make for the anti-scientific conservatism of Maistre, even though he too was adamantly opposed to democratic individualism and its "de-socializing" effects.

To put this another way, Bonald imbibed the Enlightenment's desire to create social science, cast aside its empiricist and progressivist subversions, and then put such "science" in league with traditionalism by constructing a façade of systematic discourse.<sup>49</sup> What Bonald called his "science of society" derived from a socialized but ahistorical ontology that denies all types of individualism. Bonald represented his neo-medieval values through a structuralist rhetoric, one that reinforced changeless relations of super- and sub-ordination within every community.<sup>50</sup> Whether or not this tactical discourse was appropriate to his ideological moment and mission is, of course, another matter. The late-Enlightenment/pre-Romantic "irrationalism" (if that is the best word for it) fostered by Maistre was probably superior for shocking readers into accepting what Bonald also subscribed to: namely, that history had been misdirected by egoistic philosophes and rebels who dangerously maintained that mankind's reason and virtue are *sui generis*.

But Bonald's rationalist strategy for defeating Enlightenment reasoning possessed one advantage that Maistre's strategy lacked – it was systematically all-inclusive. Bonald's scientific conservatism, however self-contradictory or deceptive, centers on a semiotics of reaction (i.e., his triadic symbolic logic), a semiotics that challenged Enlightenment values wherever he saw them manifested.<sup>51</sup> This feature of his thought – together with his longevity – allowed him to assess a vast spectrum of changes throughout the politics, culture, and social and economic life of France after the fall of the Bastille. Taking a proto-sociological perspective, Bonald associated the Enlightenment and the Revolution with the bourgeoisie and its ignoble interests, even if (contra Marx) he tended to define those interests as more cultural and ethical than economic.<sup>52</sup>

When he returned from his emigration just before 1800, Bonald began a dual career as publicist and politician (most notably as a deputy

<sup>49</sup> Cf. David Carrithers "The Enlightenment Science of Society," in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-century Domains* (Berkeley, 1995), 232-70.

<sup>50</sup> An interesting view of the structuralism within his thinking is Pierre Machrey, "Bonald et la philosophie," *Revue de synthèse* 4e series, no. 1 (1987): 3-30.

<sup>51</sup> *Démonstration philosophique*, OC, 1: 41-2.

<sup>52</sup> Bonald's view of the bourgeoisie, its attitudes and politics, is displayed in his *Réflexions sur la révolution de juillet 1830* (ed.), J. Bastier (Toulouse, 1983).

and then a peer in the chambers of the Restoration). In those capacities he applied his structuralism to the criticism of a broad array of phenomena, both already altered by democratization and under debate in parliamentary sessions, though doing so sometimes compelled him to bend his principles and thus to appear as a partisan pragmatist or even a hypocrite. In any case, his criticism was targeted against the Revolution's verbal attacks on Old Regime forms of personal address and vocabulary as well as against the rise of such tangible trends as industrialism, urbanization, and laissez-fairist economics. At the same time, he wrote to revive "feudalism," patriarchalism, women's legal inferiority, and the indissolubility of marriage.<sup>53</sup> The antidote he proposed for these maladies were those immemorial social bonds which he saw implied by "religion," a word whose Latin root denoted the communal interconnectedness without which human beings neither fulfill God's commandments nor nurture their own humanity. While never an ardent admirer of centralized royal absolutism (like many nobles, he favored a decentralized monarchy and feared bureaucratic statism), Bonald apotheosized the structures of pre-Revolutionary authority wherever they continued to exist, formerly existed, or could be imagined to have existed.<sup>54</sup> In this endeavor, he appropriated the sweep of Montesquieu's study of the "spirit" of laws and institutions for his own critique of the structural *cum* cultural errors of multifaceted modernity.

In conclusion, what allows Bonald to resemble a precursor of structural functionalist sociology<sup>55</sup> is the same thing that makes him less provocative and seductive as a writer concerned with banishing the Enlightenment's sacrilege. In the view of nineteenth-century Romantics – but from the perspective of the ironic culture of our postmodernist times as well – Maistre has appeared to be the more alluring Jeremiah. As thinker, ideologist, and stylist, Bonald emphasized neither the

<sup>53</sup> Cf. David Klinck, *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist Louis de Bonald* (New York, 1996), *passim*; D. K. Cohen, "The Vicomte de Bonald's Critique of Industrialism," *Journal of Modern History* 41 (1969): 475-84; and my "The Traditionalist Critique of Individualism in Post-Revolutionary France," *History of Political Thought* 16 (1995): 49-75.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Pierre Machery, "Bonald et la philosophie," *Revue de synthèse* 4e ser., no. 1 (1987): 3-30.

<sup>55</sup> See E.A. Tiryakian, "Emile Durkheim," in Bottomore and Nisbet (eds.), *A History of Sociological Analysis*, 204-05. Louis Dumont notes that in general Bonald was "led to consider man as a social being, to stress all social factors [...] and [to] explain ultimately that society is not reducible to an artificial construct or the combination of individuals" (*Essay on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* [Chicago, 1986], 102).

“experimental” and historicist justifications nor the Romantic tropes that are the noteworthy, perhaps the defining, features of Maistre’s writings, particularly the later ones. Bonald was dedicated to coopting rather than rejecting the Cartesian, rationalistic, and deistic conceptions of the *siècle des lumières*, even if this alliance with the *esprit géométrique* was more spurious and formal than genuine and substantial. For him, countering the “age of reason” did not necessitate a retreat from the rational affirmation of the Logos. Rather, it involved rescuing reason from a modernity that was turning rationality against the wisdom of God/Nature and the institutional repositories that had once preserved that wisdom.



*The Social Bond  
according to the Catholic  
Counter-Revolution:  
Maistre and Bonald<sup>1</sup>*

One can only be struck by the following paradoxical situation: Maistre and Bonald, figureheads of French counter-revolutionary thought,<sup>2</sup> are certainly the thinkers who had experienced the most anguish and anger in the face of the destruction of the social bond that the French Revolution, according to them, represented, in which they had seen a veritable catastrophe to the symbolic bond, or, to use their own language, an unprecedented crisis in the religious authority of political power – an authority which, according to them, was the condition of the possibility of society itself. They had insisted with an extreme vigor on the theoretical and practical impotence of liberal and democratic principles, denounced as incapable of producing a theory of society; and they had never ceased to proclaim the necessity of breaking with practical and

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<sup>1</sup> “Le lien social selon la Contre-révolution catholique: Maistre et Bonald,” a paper given at a colloquium in Besançon in 1996, and to appear in *Le lien social dans la pensée française 1815-1914* (edited by Christiane Menasseyre, Robert Damien, and André Tosel),

<sup>2</sup> Properly speaking, Maistre and Bonald are theoreticians of the Catholic Counter-Revolution. It must not be understood by this that they express the positions of the Catholic Church: although it had been for a very long time hostile to the principles of the French Revolution, the Catholic Church never fully accepted their political philosophy. From the pontificate of Leo XIII, marked by the restoration of Thomism and by a policy of rallying to the French Republic, Maistre and Bonald appeared more and more clearly as heterodox Catholics and their influence in the bosom of the Church never ceased to diminish. Nevertheless, they represent the Catholic Counter-Revolution in the sense that, by affirming the identity of the structure of the monarchy and of Catholicism, they elaborated a specific type of authoritarianism that took the Catholic Church as a model of authority. This authoritarianism cannot be confused either with the pragmatic traditionalism of the liberal (Burke) or conservative (Rehberg, Gentz) counter-revolution, nor with the occasional traditionalism of the romanticism appropriated by the counter-revolution (Novalis, Adam Müller, and Friedrich Schlegel in his last years).

theoretical individualism to think and to organize society like a total, supra-individual fact – which earned them the admiration of August Comte.<sup>3</sup> And yet, paradoxically, they themselves had been impotent to realize the sociology that their thought promised, since in their works all theory of society, even before it was born, had been absorbed and annulled by the theological foundation that alone had made it possible. This paradox could be linked to the fact that the traditionalist critique of liberal and democratic individualism of these two thinkers rested on an immanent reversal of Rousseau's theory of social contract; so that this critique did not go beyond the limits of a kind of denied Rousseauism, reproducing in itself the predicaments of Rousseau's thought, and in particular its powerlessness to surmount the liberal individualism that it otherwise refused.

## I

The counter-revolutionary position of Bonald and Maistre can be described as an attempt to go beyond Burke's traditionalism, which remained profoundly liberal,<sup>4</sup> in the direction of an authentic traditionalism. The praise of tradition that Burke opposes to the abstract rationalism of the French revolutionaries is first of all praise for the *English* political tradition, in other words of a tradition of liberty, characterized by *habeas corpus*, the break with Rome, and parliamentary government. This praise remains pragmatic: it praises tradition as the deposit of the experience of past generations – on the model of jurisprudence, “the collected reason of ages.”<sup>5</sup> The principles of Burke's traditionalism are those of empiricism and Lockean natural law;<sup>6</sup> his critique of egalitarianism could have found arguments in Adam Smith – who said of Burke that he was the only person who, without

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<sup>3</sup> Let us recall that Maistre and Bonald were counted among the “saints” of the positivist calendar and that the 46<sup>th</sup> lesson of the *Cours de philosophie positive* accorded to Maistre an “eminent philosophical superiority.” The influence that Bonald's paradoxical “modernity” could have had on Comte has been analyzed by P. Machrey, “Bonald et la philosophie,” *Revue de synthèse*, Jan.-March 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Burke's place in the liberal tradition, already emphasized often by Carl Schmitt, is recognized by the majority of his interpreters, such as P. Manent, P. Raynaud, and M. Villey. R. Dahrendorf even judges Burke's liberalism as more open than Hayek's ultra-liberalism. See his *Réflexions sur la révolution en Europe*, trans. by B. Vierge (Paris: Seuil 1990), 37-49.

<sup>5</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989), 8:146.

<sup>6</sup> Burke maintained at the heart of his thought the representation of a “law of nature,” integral with “the *real* rights of man.” *Ibid.*, 109-11, and M. Ganzin, *La pensée politique d'Edmund Burke* (Paris: LGDJ 1972), 161 ff.

communicating with him, always thought “exactly” as he did in matters of political economy;<sup>7</sup> his refusal of democracy remained within the limits of an aristocratic liberalism in the style of Montesquieu.<sup>8</sup> Maistre and Bonald, both convinced that the French absolute monarchy constituted civilization’s point of perfection, could not be satisfied with Burke’s critique of the Revolution. Liberal traditionalism, in effect, left in the shadow a decisive question, that of knowing from where the tradition of English liberty held its authority. Is it the ideal of liberty that justifies praise of the tradition, or is it tradition that validates this ideal? With Burke, sometimes the tradition is justified in virtue of the mediation that it assures between the past and the present, as one of the conditions of liberty; sometimes it is invoked as the legacy of the ancestors, which filial piety obliges one to respect with fear and devotion. This ambiguity had given strength to Burke’s thought: one could see in it the formula for stability of English liberal institutions, institutions of which the social base, as Burke emphasized, had been the alliance very soon realized between “the noble ancient landed interest” and the new forces of finance and capital. But it was precisely this alliance that had not occurred in France, as Burke emphasized equally;<sup>9</sup> so that Burke’s critique of the Revolution could only find a small echo in France. What use was it, in a country where the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the nobility had precisely not been made, to praise the English model of an interweaving of liberalism into aristocratic structures and of a stabilization of capitalism by its alliance with the forces of the landed nobility?

If the ambiguity of Burke’s liberal traditionalism lent it strength in English lands, marked by institutional and social continuity, it marked its weakness in French lands, irreversibly marked by the revolutionary break. This weakness was the expression of a logical weakness: Burke had given the formula for the stability of English institutions, but this formula was itself unstable in principle, since it was founded on a deliberate refusal to decide from where the social order held its

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<sup>7</sup> See Ganzin, 30. Burke refuses the egalitarianism of the revolutionary idea of the rights of man as incompatible with the good order of a society founded on property: “the characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be *unequal*.” *Reflections*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> It is in the name of the liberal demand for the limitation of sovereign power that Burke denounces the sovereignty of the people proclaimed by the declaration of the rights of man: “The people are the natural control on authority; but to exercise and to control together is contradictory and impossible.” (*Appeal from the Old Whigs to the New Whigs, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Boston: Little Brown, 1901) 4:164.)

<sup>9</sup> *Reflections*, 158-60.

legitimacy. Moreover, this decision was required, as much from a logical point of view as from the point of view of specific conditions in France, where the effective rupture of the political tradition forbade being able to found the social bond on a traditional continuity that had disappeared. As Maistre wrote: "The red bonnet, in touching the royal brow, has caused the sacred oil to disappear; the charm is broken, prolonged profanations have destroyed the divine rule of national prejudices."<sup>10</sup> If the traditional social order had a right to restoration, this right could certainly not be founded on the sole fact of tradition: it was necessary that this right of tradition be founded in reason, outside the tradition, on a metaphysical principle. This metaphysical principle could only be that of the rights of man and of liberty, which authorized no restorationist perspective and must oblige liberalism, even conservative, to compromise with the world born of the revolution and the destruction of the society of orders. There was therefore only one possibility for counter-revolutionary thought, at least if it wanted to be consistent: to the idea of a society founded on the rights of man, it could oppose neither the "historic rights of the French" nor the "veritable rights of man" – it could only oppose the rights of God. Tradition has only a relative right if it is not founded in the absolute of the divine will; it is only on the condition of being of divine will that the old social order can enjoy a right of restoration. It is, according to Bonald "the most philosophic of truths that *the Revolution began by the Declaration of the rights of man and that it will only end with the declaration of the rights of God.*"<sup>11</sup> This truth merits being called "the most philosophic" of all since, in giving to the refusal of the Revolution the sole philosophical foundation that was adequate to it, it elevates the Counter-Revolution to the height of a philosophy – which Burke had not known how to do. Besides, it alone permits taking the historic measure of the revolutionary event, since it permits one to understand, as Bonald says, that "the project of republicanizing Europe" and that of "introducing atheism there" are one and the same project,<sup>12</sup> or again, as Maistre says, that the French Revolution is "satanic" in essence and constitutes the world event of "the fight to the death between Christianity and philosophism,"<sup>13</sup> that is to say as well the ontological combat of the will of God, declared by the traditional social order, and of the will of man in rebellion against Him.

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<sup>10</sup> *Considérations sur la France, Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte 1884-86), 1:145.

<sup>11</sup> *Législation primitive considérée dans les derniers temps par les seules lumières de la raison, Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine 1982), 2:250.

<sup>12</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux, OC*, 13:334.

<sup>13</sup> *Considérations sur la France, OC*, 1:61-2.

It is not by mistake that Maistre could write to Bonald that there was between their two minds “the most rigorous unity.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the sometimes important differences that separated their doctrines, Maistre and Bonald can be considered as two representatives of the same aspect of counter-revolutionary thought, which has as its principle character the identification of the divine right of sovereignty and the sovereign right of the divinity. There is here a particularly radical face of traditionalism since Maistre and Bonald, assuming the violence of the consequences of their praise of the divine right of power, do not hesitate to praise – which Burke had refused to do – the merits of slavery, of the Inquisition, and of political and religious persecution, or again to ask for “the annihilation of individual dogmas and the absolute and general reign of national dogmas, that is to say, of useful prejudices.”<sup>15</sup> The remarkable point, however, is that with these two thinkers the quasi-irrational demand for the destruction of individuality by the domination of tradition is founded on an authentic metaphysical rationalism, alone precisely capable of justifying violence as a means of submitting individuals to the established tradition. Contrary to an often maintained thesis,<sup>16</sup> neither Maistre nor Bonald claims to oppose “the evidence of authority” to “the authority of evidence.” On the contrary, they claim to unite them by showing that they imply one another and, moreover, that they come down to the same thing. Bonald expresses their common thought when he declares that “the sole authority that had power over the reasonable being is reason” and that men must be led “by the authority of reason.”<sup>17</sup> And if both emphasize that individual reason must submit itself to the double authority of Church and state, it is in the name of the double principle according to which authority “forms reason” and is itself founded on reason, as well on the divine reason that has instituted authority as on human reason that, in the course of its own progress, becomes capable of understanding

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of 10 July 1818, *OC*, 14:137.

<sup>15</sup> Maistre, *De la souveraineté du peuple*, *OC*, 1:376.

<sup>16</sup> This is L. Brunschvicg’s thesis (*Le progrès de la conscience* (Paris: Alcan 1927), 2:496,) taken up by A. Koyré (*Etudes d’histoire de la pensée philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard 1981), 145) and by P.A. Taguieff (*La force du préjugé* (Paris: Tel/Gallimard 1989), 548). These all refer to L. de Bonald, *Recherches philosophiques*, *OC*, 8:62ff. It suffices however to consult this text to note that Bonald does not oppose but on the contrary *associates* “the evidence of authority” and the “authority of evidence.”

<sup>17</sup> *Législation primitive*, *OC*, 3:143-4, and 6:291. Maistre writes from his side: “as soon as you separate faith from reason, revelation not being able to be proved, proves nothing; thus it is always necessary to return to St. Paul’s well known axiom: *That faith is justified by reason.*” *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, *OC*, 6:169-70.

the reasons of authority and of appropriating them for itself in its rational knowledge of the order of political and social nature. In fact, only the rational knowledge of this natural order permits hoping for and working for the reestablishment of the destroyed tradition. It is because "human kind is renewed in each generation," Bonald emphasizes, that "governments can, whatever be the progress of false doctrines, renew a people by education."<sup>18</sup> It is reason itself that commands the subordination of the individual to society, and this subordination must be willed and organized according to the rational knowledge of its necessity. The old regime has no other hope of restoration than that which derives from its immanent rationality, founded on divine reason, and therefore on the possibility of its reconstitution by a rational education.

One must therefore emphasize that Maistre and Bonald both articulate, although each according to a different fashion, their traditionalism from a rationalism inspired by Malebranche. Maistre, an admirer of Descartes, places his thought under the sign of an adhesion to the ideas of "this admirable Malebranche [...] who sometimes erred in the pursuit of truth but never abandoned it."<sup>19</sup> Bonald certainly reproaches Cartesian rationalism for "wanting to do everything with a single man" instead of considering man in his *social* existence, which alone makes him authentically man.<sup>20</sup> Against Cartesian innatism he objects that "the knowledge of moral truths, which are our ideas, is *innate*, not in man, but in society."<sup>21</sup> And he regrets that Malebranche, studying "the immutable laws of order," had not "embraced moral nature as he had physical nature, and extended his view, not over the particular order of religion, but over the general order of society." However even this regret aimed at introducing the program of an extension of Malebranche's rationalism:

Descartes proved God, explained man, and did not consider society. The necessity of general laws, the expression of the will of the creating and conserving being, was perceived; Descartes made an application of it to movement, Malebranche to thought: Newton generalized the laws of movement, by calculating the universal system of the physical world. It is time for us to dare to generalize as well the laws of the moral world, and in this ESSENTIAL REASON, which, according to Malebranche, makes itself understood to all intelligence that consults it, lets us consider the SUPREME POWER, which, to regulate all men, spoke to society.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 14:36.

<sup>19</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg, OC*, 5:170 and 4:36.

<sup>20</sup> *Recherches philosophiques, OC*, 8:51.

<sup>21</sup> *Législation primitive, OC*, 2:49-50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:207-9.

This is a program that Maistre for his part realized by perceiving the formula of one of the most important laws of the moral world in “a veritable oracle pronounced by the illustrious Malebranche: *Infallibility is included in the idea of any divine society*”<sup>23</sup> – an “oracle” of which the “generalization” is that sovereignty and infallibility are synonymous terms, so that political sovereignty must be held to be infallible in its sphere by the same title as the magisterium of the Church.<sup>24</sup> It is not the Church alone that constitutes a divine society; all ordered society is divine, since it holds its order and its existence from God; so that political authority must be held to be divine by the same title as spiritual authority.

## II

The horror experienced by Maistre and Bonald in the face of the French Revolution comes from what appears to them as a return to barbarism of the most civilized humanity. According to Bonald, “the French Revolution has led a nation to the barbarous and savage state of primitive societies.”<sup>25</sup> It had been, according to Maistre, the work of “*de-civilized savages*,” who aimed at “reducing” the French people “to the level of brutes” and rendering them “atheist and man-eating.”<sup>26</sup> In writing these lines, Maistre was surely thinking of scenes from the Terror, “drunken revels of an unbridled populace.”<sup>27</sup> However it is not these scenes that constitute the true gravity of the Revolution. Maistre indicates this clearly when he declares in 1818, in agreement on this with Bonald, that the Restoration constitutes a “Revolution [...] much more terrible than that of Robespierre’s time,” since it is the revolution confirmed and therefore made by the kings.<sup>28</sup> The true revolutionary catastrophe is symbolic: it is that “the sacred character of sovereignty is erased forever in the measure that the irreligious principle becomes widespread.”<sup>29</sup> So that revolutionary savagery is not identified with the violence of the Terror; it is present as well in the liberal society of the Restoration. The Revolution had opened a return to savagery, not because it had been the violent destruction of the aristocracy and the old monarchical order, but because it had instituted a society whose principles were in contradiction

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<sup>23</sup> *Soirées*, OC, 4:389.

<sup>24</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:2.

<sup>25</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:82.

<sup>26</sup> *Lettres d'un Royaliste savoisien*, OC, 7:105 and 135.

<sup>27</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:65.

<sup>28</sup> Maistre to the Chevalier d'Olry, 5 September 1818, OC, 14:148.

<sup>29</sup> “Lettre à M. le Marquis [...], sur l'Etat du Christianisme en Europe,” OC, 8:489.

with the natural laws of social order; a society which, thus deprived of the very possibility of order, is incapable of stability and peace. Maistre is notably frightened that the French Revolution is inaugurating a new age of warfare, an age of global civil wars. While the Christian monarchies had known how to civilize war by submitting their conflicts to rules and to the limits of the "law of nations" and the "European equilibrium," the idea of the rights of man, by giving to conflicts unlimited objectives like the emancipation of human kind, could only invent the *total war* realized under the Revolution by the *levée en masse* of nations.<sup>30</sup> As for Bonald, he adds that peace itself, in modern societies, is a form of war. Denouncing as fallacious the opposition traditionally made by the liberals between the spirit of war and the spirit of commerce, he designates commerce itself as a savage form of war:

commerce is only so strongly in favour in non-constituted societies or republics, because it places man with respect to his fellow man in the savage state. [...] What is the character of the savage state? It is the placing of men with regard to other men in a state of continual warfare and of the invasion of property: moreover commerce, such as it is practiced almost everywhere in Europe, is a real invasion of the property of the other; [...] I maintain that commerce, even the most honest, necessarily places men with regard to other men in a continual state of war and trickery, in which they are occupied only with mutually trying to steal the secret of the other's speculations, to increase their own profit, and to elevate their commerce on the ruin or diminution of that of others.<sup>31</sup>

Bonald in the course of his work will never cease to develop this theme and will do his best sometimes to show in the development of capitalism the development of a kind of civil war, leading to unsupportable inequalities and producing by the same token an army of miserable, unsocial, and potentially revolutionary proletarians.<sup>32</sup> "Modern governments want much commerce, manufactures, luxury, pleasures, and population especially, and they look to banish begging. They wish the cause and reject the effect. The countries of Europe where there are the

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<sup>30</sup> These themes recur constantly in Maistre's correspondence. See *OC*, 9:167; 10:201 and 325; 12:94, 213, 407, and 424; 13:275, 303, and 345-6. One finds these themes in Bonald as well, though less clearly. See *Théorie du pouvoir*, *OC*, 13:400ff; and *Législation primitive*, *OC*, 2:107ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, *OC*, 13:422-3.

<sup>32</sup> See *Ibid.*, 15:314, and *Législation primitive*, *OC*, 3:392, and *Réflexions sur la Révolution de Juillet 1830*, ed. J. Bastier (Paris: DUC/Albatros 1988), 85-6. Bonald emphasizes that the use of machines in factories has the effect of transforming men themselves into machines. *Législation primitive*, *OC*, 3:102.



most colossal fortunes are those where there are the most poor. [...] They do not think about the fact that European society is in a violent state."<sup>33</sup>

This situation of social violence is the necessary consequence of the democratic idea of the rights of man, which proclaims the equality of liberties and the sovereignty of the people. Maistre and Bonald emphasized at the same time and in the same terms that the formula of the democratic idea was literally contradictory: "the people is sovereign, they say, and over whom? Over itself apparently. The people is therefore subject. There is surely something equivocal here, if not an error, for the people that *commands* is not the people that *obeys*."<sup>34</sup> In imagining a *sovereignty over itself* of the people, the ideal of democratic autonomy refutes itself: if man must *govern himself*, it is because he has a *need to be governed*; if he has a need to be governed, it is because *he cannot govern himself by himself* because he is "at once social and unsocial."<sup>35</sup> This difficulty is characteristic of all non-monarchical regimes, whose institutions are such that the fact necessarily contradicts the law. The fact of non-monarchical regimes always contradicts their law, for sovereignty is always exercised *in fact* by a single person. "Even in a government of several, sovereignty always pyramids,"<sup>36</sup> declares Maistre: this is proved by the fact that the Revolution itself had to institute, at each moment in its course, the sovereignty of one person – Mirabeau, Robespierre, or Napoleon. To which Bonald echoes:

*even the physical unity of power always exists in every society, that is to say that there is always only one man at a time who states one will and who commands one action in a society.* Thus the fact proves the physical unity, as reason demonstrates the necessity of moral unity; for it says that if there are at once two wills and two actions, there will soon be two societies.<sup>37</sup>

Because the structure of society and the state can only be pyramidal, aristocracies and democracies are always, in reality, *monocracies*; but these are unstable monocracies, because the factual reality of power there is contradicted by its own juridical institution and the real sovereign there is neither designated nor recognized by law. In non-monarchical

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3:102-03.

<sup>34</sup> *Sur la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:311-2. See as well Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13-18-19.

<sup>35</sup> *De l'Etat de nature*, ed. by J.-L. Darcel, *Revue des études maistriennes*, 2/1976, 97. [From note b, in fact, where Darcel identifies the phrase cited as coming from an earlier version of Maistre's manuscript.]

<sup>36</sup> *Cinquième Lettre d'un Royaliste savoisien*, ed. by J.-L. Darcel, *Revue des études maistriennes*, 4/1978, 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Essai analytique sur les lois naturelles de l'ordre social*, OC, 1:77.

regimes, the real sovereign is never the legal sovereign, but is always a *usurper*. In the same way, the equality of rights proclaimed by law is only a lie: an equal right of all individuals to occupy every social position is necessarily fictitious, since all the members of a single society can not occupy the *same* social position. Every society is hierarchical, since it assigns individuals necessarily unequal tasks and roles, and it organizes, whether under “republican” or “democratic” forms, the domination of the small number over the large number. “Whatever form is given to governments, birth and wealth always obtain the first rank, and nowhere do they rule more harshly than where their dominion is not founded on law.”<sup>38</sup> Democratic societies are always at war, because the social and political inequality that inevitably reigns in them is always illegitimate and therefore fought against.

On the contrary, monarchy is a natural regime, a regime of stability and peace, because it is the only regime that is capable of giving legitimacy to the constitutive inequality of society. While, in a republic, social distinctions, being illegitimate, appear “hard” or “insulting” and are a factor in social resentment and civil discord, monarchy gives them, through the institution of the nobility, the legitimacy of law and it attenuates them by conferring on them the status of authentic *distinctions*, linked to services and to duties. Maistre and Bonald even maintain that the existence of an hereditary nobility provided with privileges does not exclude equality of rights: it suffices that the nobility be open to merit for the right of each to occupy any social position to be assured.<sup>39</sup> But especially, monarchy alone is capable of legitimizing sovereignty. Because it is the only regime whose institutions clearly designate the legitimate holder of sovereignty, monarchy is the only regime capable of making the sovereign of fact the sovereign of law. Monarchy assumes the necessity of sovereignty; it knows, first of all, as Maistre emphasizes, that society and sovereignty are two ideas that “it is impossible to separate” and that “society exists only through a sovereign,”<sup>40</sup> since sovereignty is precisely the power that *constitutes* the society by organizing it and by unifying it under laws. It knows, consequently, as Bonald emphasizes, that the unity of the sovereign will can only really be assured by the singleness of the sovereign, and that “in political society, the existence of a unique power, or of a monarch, is a political law, a *necessary* immediate consequence of the fundamental law, and the fundamental law itself; because *where all want to dominate, it is necessary that one*

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<sup>38</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:430.

<sup>39</sup> Maistre, *Ibid.*, 1:436-7; Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:33ff.

<sup>40</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:324.

*dominate, or all destroy themselves.*"<sup>41</sup> But precisely because it assumes the necessity of sovereignty, monarchy manages to organize it constitutionally and to submit it to law; the sovereign holds sovereignty by a fundamental law of the state, by the customary constitution of the realm, which alone designates the legitimate sovereign, and which the legitimate sovereign is in "happy powerlessness to violate."

Monarchy is the regime of legitimacy, since the sovereign there holds his power by a constitutional law against which he can do nothing and which surrounds his power by fixed boundaries. Maistre and Bonald never cease to repeat that the principal difference between monarchy and democracy is that the first subordinates the simply legal will of the sovereign to a principle of legitimacy (the fundamental law of the realm), while the second necessarily absorbs legitimacy in the arbitrariness of the people and never submits this arbitrariness to any law. Bonald and Maistre often cited Jurieu's saying that "the people is the sole authority that has no need to be right to validate its acts,"<sup>42</sup> as well as Rousseau's opinion according to which "there is not, nor can there be, any kind of fundamental law that is obligatory for the body of the people, not even the social contract," to the point that if the people "wishes to do itself harm," no one has the "right to prevent it from doing so."<sup>43</sup> These two propositions express for Maistre as for Bonald the incompatibility of democracy and legitimacy. Bonald does not hesitate to see here the expression of the properly despotic meaning of democracy, which submits society to the unlimited arbitrariness of the people and suppresses the constitutional guarantee of fundamental law.<sup>44</sup> To the idea of a law emanating from the will of the people, Maistre very logically opposes the proposition that "law is only law, and only possesses a veritable sanction when it supposed to emanate from the a superior will; so that its essential character is *not to be the will of all*."<sup>45</sup> Still more: that authentic law must emanate from a superior will means not only that laws cannot emanate from the people, but also that the first laws of the state, the constitutional or fundamental laws, cannot emanate from the king. Since a sovereign

<sup>41</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 14:41.

<sup>42</sup> Maistre, *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie, OC*, 8:348; Bonald, *Essai analytique, OC*, 1:56, and *Législation primitive, OC*, 2:73.

<sup>43</sup> Maistre, *Quatre chapitres, OC*, 8:217 and 348; *De la souveraineté du peuple, OC*, 1:415. Bonald, *Essai analytique, OC*, 1:186; and *Législation primitive, OC*, 2:72. See Rousseau, *Du Contrat social*, I, 7, and II, 12 (in *Oeuvres complètes III* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1964), 362 and 394 [Hereafter cited as *OCIII*]).

<sup>44</sup> *Législation primitive, OC*, 2:111.

<sup>45</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur, OC*, 1:237

does not hold his right to sovereignty from his will alone – otherwise force would be law – but from a law that recognizes this right as legitimate, it is impossible that the law that confers this right to the sovereign emanate itself from the will of the sovereign:

The essence of a fundamental law is that no one has the right to abolish it. For how could it stand above *all men*, if *some men* had made it? Popular agreement is not possible. And even if it were, an agreement is still not a *law* at all and obligates no one unless a higher power guarantees its enforcement.<sup>46</sup>

The denunciation of democracy as despotism, in the name of the ideal of the constitutional limitation of sovereign power, is a classic theme of liberalism. Through their concern for the stability of society and the constitutional regulation of the state, Maistre and Bonald simply seem to make Burke's anti-democratic liberalism their own. It will also be noted that Bonald, like Burke, is worried by the inherent contradiction of the Declaration of the Rights of Man whose last article, which proclaims property a sacred and inviolable right, is incompatible with the first article, which proclaims that men are born and remain free and equal in rights: "equality of right" Bonald emphasize "takes away equality of property."<sup>47</sup> One could then ask if Bonald's thesis, which assigns the state the function of "protecting all property owners,"<sup>48</sup> which considers that "the legitimate property owning family is the basic element of constituted political society,"<sup>49</sup> and which concludes that only property owners have the right to exercise political powers – if this thesis, therefore, is not a simple variant of limited franchise liberalism that one could just as easily find in Kant or Guizot. One will observe as well that Maistre opposes to democratic liberalism, which wants individual liberty to be accomplished in political sovereignty, a principle that comes straight out of Montesquieu: "for a man to be free, it suffices that he obeys only the law; it is not at all necessary for him to make it."<sup>50</sup>

However it would be erroneous to conclude to a "liberalism" of intention on the part of Bonald and Maistre. First of all it must be

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>47</sup> *Législation primitive*, OC, 2:183.

<sup>48</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:414.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14:324.

<sup>50</sup> *Cinquième Lettre*, 46. See Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, XI, 2 and 3, *Oeuvres complètes II* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1951), 304-5: "they have confused the power of the people with the liberty of people. [...] It is true that in democracies the people appears to do what it wants; but political liberty consists not at all in doing what one wants. [...] Liberty is the right to do all that the laws permit."

emphasized that, contrary to Burke's liberalism, the thought of Maistre and Bonald excludes any alliance of the forces of the Old Regime with the forces of the capitalist market. Bonald affirms that "a constituted society must recognize only one kind of property owners, landed proprietors."<sup>51</sup> He maintains that the Revolution occurred because the nobility abandoned its military role, and that an authentic restoration will have to forbid the nobility from all right of commerce.<sup>52</sup> Maistre sees in the nobility a "prolongation of sovereignty"<sup>53</sup> whose influence must counter the "two modern gangrenes, the philosophic spirit and the spirit of commerce."<sup>54</sup> The only authentically "liberal" characteristic that can be found in these two thinkers is essentially their adherence to the maxim of the freedom of the grain trade, a maxim inherited from the physiocrats, of whom Maistre and Bonald were both admiring readers and whose economic principles they always defended.<sup>55</sup> The liberalism of Maistre and Bonald is nothing other than physiocratic liberalism: however it must be emphasized that this liberalism, which devalued industry, had for its political formula the "legal despotism" of monarchical absolutism, which can easily be interpreted as an apology for the Old Regime and its society of orders. One can hear the echo of physiocratic doctrine in Bonald's affirmation that "agriculture must be the foundation of public prosperity in a constituted society"<sup>56</sup> and that "proprietary and agricultural society" is the "only political society that exists in nature, and that merits the name of society, as the man of landed property is properly the only one who is a member of political society."<sup>57</sup> Moreover Bonald and Maistre retained especially from physiocratic doctrine three theses that form the framework of their political thought: that it is necessary that "the sovereign authority be unique and superior to all the individuals of the society"; that the natural laws have been "instituted by the supreme Being"; and that these natural laws are only the "immutable and indisputable" laws of the natural physical and moral order, so that positive laws must be and can be only "laws of handling"

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<sup>51</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 13:414.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:225.

<sup>53</sup> *Du Pape, OC*, 2:439.

<sup>54</sup> *OC*, 9:467. [Letter to Baroness de Pont, 11 September 1805.]

<sup>55</sup> Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 15:148; Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur, OC*, 1:226-7.

<sup>56</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 15:343.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-6.

relative to this natural order that they have the function of “declaring.”<sup>58</sup> There would be no end to citing the numerous texts of Bonald and Maistre that are only repetitions of these three affirmations. One will notice besides that, in these theses, Bonald and Maistre could have seen a first political application of the principles of Malebranche’s thought. It is not irrelevant that it was under the authority of a Malebranche epigraph that Le Mercier de la Rivière had placed his *Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques*, where he explains that the rational evidence of the truth has for its politically necessary translation the “unity of will, force, and authority” realized by monarchy alone since, evidence being in virtue of its “irresistible force” a “despotic authority,” “the natural despotism of the evidence leads to social despotism.”<sup>59</sup>

Paradoxically, the reference to physiocratic doctrine must show us what forbids us from taking for liberal the “constitutionalism” common to Maistre and Bonald. Le Mercier de la Rivière had declared that “a right” was only “a prerogative established on a duty.”<sup>60</sup> Maistre recaptures this idea in his account by reproaching the authors of the “declaration of the RIGHTS of man” for having given “Rights for first Principles, while a Right is perhaps only a consequence; that is to say, the Corollary of an anterior Law.”<sup>61</sup> Bonald, again, radicalizes this idea by declaring that “in society, there are no rights, there are only duties”:<sup>62</sup> each social function – and in particular the nobility, the social profession par excellence – is defined exclusively by its duties. The consequence of these propositions is that no subordinate social position can actively claim its rights against superior social positions; a consequence that Maistre formulated by declaring that “the peoples have rights, but not that of asserting them”<sup>63</sup> – so that the sovereign power need only take account of his superior, who is God. Exactly like the physiocrats, Maistre and Bonald think that it is the essence of sovereignty not to be able to be judged nor controlled by independent bodies that could oppose it as a counter-power. If the sovereign could be judged or controlled, Maistre remarks, “the power that would have this right would be the sovereign,

<sup>58</sup> Quesnay, *Maximes générales du gouvernement économique d'un royaume agricole*, I, in *Physiocratie* (Paris: GF-Flammarion 1991), 237; *Le droit naturel*, V., *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>59</sup> P.P. Le Mercier de la Rivière, *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (London: Nourse, and Paris: Desaint 1767), t. 1, chaps. 17 and 22, pp. 217 and 280.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, t. 1, chap. 2, p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> *Cinquième Lettre*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 14:461, and 15:262.

<sup>63</sup> *OC*, 12:481. [Letter to the Count de Vallaise, 19 December 1814.]

and there would be two sovereigns, which implies contradiction.”<sup>64</sup> Since the submission of each to the law, which renders society possible, is itself only possible by the submission of all to a sovereign power,<sup>65</sup> sovereignty is “necessarily *absolute*.”<sup>66</sup> If this proposition does not contradict the affirmation according to which the character of monarchical sovereignty is legitimacy, it is that Maistre and Bonald do not understand the constitution in the liberal fashion as a *human* work that could be invoked as a source of law, but that they understand it in the traditionalist fashion as a properly *divine* work, sacred by virtue of its organic immanence in the society of which it is the constitution.

The constitution of a nation is not a text or a collection of recognized or enunciated laws, it is what *constitutes* the society and the sovereignty that belongs to each nation. A constitution is therefore nothing other than the specific form that is taken, in each nation, by the social fact and by the political power that organizes it. “A constitution in the philosophical sense,” Maistre declares, “is therefore only the mode of political existence attributed to each nation by a higher power; and, in an inferior sense, a constitution is only the assemblage of more or less numerous laws that declare this mode of existence.”<sup>67</sup> And Bonald for his part proposes a literally identical definition,<sup>68</sup> in the terms of which “nature must be the sole legislative *power* of societies, so that “the monarch is therefore, so to say, the secretary of nature, and he writes only under its dictation.”<sup>69</sup> Maistre and Bonald separate from each other here in that the first adopts an historicist perspective according to which legitimate or natural constitutions, being the work of Providence, are in themselves historical and changing realities,<sup>70</sup> while Bonald on the contrary maintains that, since “man is born everywhere the same, the same political and religious constitution must suit all societies.”<sup>71</sup> However, this important divergence, which is moreover strongly tempered by the fact that Maistre holds the monarchical tendency of sovereignty for a universal natural law, must not conceal their essential accord, for both think that sovereignty can be limited only by the natural constitution of the society; in other words by the action of God and not by the will of

<sup>64</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:418.

<sup>65</sup> Maistre: “society cannot subsist without sovereignty.” *Cinquième Lettre*, 26. Bonald: “power constitutes society.” *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:203.

<sup>66</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:422.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>68</sup> “The constitution of a people is the mode of its existence.” OC, 11:418.

<sup>69</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:455.

<sup>70</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:328-31.

<sup>71</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:12, and *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:37.

men. The only counter-power that can be known by the sovereign is the counter-power that opposes to him “the invincible nature”<sup>72</sup> of the society, which collapses or enters a crisis when its laws are violated; it is not the counter-power of a body or a representative assembly that can actively oppose itself to the sovereign will.

The distance of Bonald and Maistre from liberalism is marked by the fact that their “constitutionalism” leaves no place for a right of the individual and in particular to the idea of a right of the individual to independence. The only right that can be opposed to the sovereign power is the right of the natural order of society, and this “right,” which is only the name of a factual necessity, can only be “opposed” to power by the nature of society itself: what limits the power of the monarch is the force of things that result from the natural invincible order willed by God. The natural laws of the social order are really divine wills, in the sense that they have been willed by God, but they are laws in the sense that they are “the necessary relations derived from the nature of beings,” and the “laws of things” that it is catastrophic to transgress – and not divine commandments that deliver us from necessity and from the duty of obeying the sovereign power that causes society to be.<sup>73</sup> Therefore the individual can oppose no right to society. Bonald declares unambiguously that “it is not Man who constitutes society, but it is society that constitutes man” (15); and he denounces familial and domestic education as dangerous because they cannot form the social man (15). The ultimate theoretical alternative of political philosophy – “man *makes* himself and *makes* society, society *makes* itself and *makes* man” (14:488) – according to him translates itself into this practical consequence: “in society, it is necessary, if it is possible, to *socialize* everything” (15:7).

Burke, as a liberal, had reproached the French revolutionaries for having wanted to translate directly into social rights “the natural rights which may and do exist in total independence of” political right.<sup>74</sup> Maistre and Bonald reproached the French revolutionaries in an exactly inverse way: for having admitted the existence of rights of man distinct from the rights of the citizen. The thesis is no longer, as with Burke, that it would be vain to want to realize the rights of man without taking account of their necessary interweaving with the historic and particular rights that are those of the citizen; the thesis is that there are no “rights

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<sup>72</sup> This expression, borrowed from Rousseau, is ceaselessly repeated by Bonald, who chose this phrase, extracted from the *Contrat social* (II, 11), as an epigraph to the *Théorie du pouvoir* and to *Du divorce*; see Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, 1:112.

<sup>73</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 15:15.

<sup>74</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 110.



of man," but *only* the right of the citizen and that these rights reduce themselves in reality to the duties of which they are the simple subordinate and secondary correlatives. "At the head of their voluminous works," Maistre declares, "one reads a Declaration of the *Rights of MAN and the Citizen*. If they had said *The rights of the Citizen*, or of the *man-citizen*, I would still have understood them; but I confess that MAN, distinguished from the citizen, is a being that I don't know at all."<sup>75</sup> And Bonald for his part, poses the following question: For a social being such as man, what does it mean to be free? A part of the answer is given by the fact that the height of oppression for a social being is to be excluded from all society.<sup>76</sup> Freedom is assuredly the power to accomplish one's will; but the will really only merits the name of will and only merits being called free when it is rational, virtuous, and intelligent; to be free, is to will what God wills, it is to will to be within the order of necessary social relations (462). "Freedom, for the intelligent and physical man, consist in obeying the laws or necessary social relations derived from the nature of beings" (386). To be free is not to be independent (14:364), it is to will the reasonable, identical to the will of God; in politics, it is to will the general will, understood as the will that has the common good in view. Man, a social being for whom political freedom is the condition of natural freedom, can therefore only be free by having for his only will the general will of the social body. "Society, to be free, must be independent; man, to be free, must be dependent" (405). To conclude, man is only free in a monarchy and in Christianity, where the particular wills are destroyed to the profit of the single general will, incarnated and guaranteed by the monarch and by Christ.

Counter-revolutionary liberalism and radical traditionalism are in agreement on a diagnosis: the democratic liberalism of the French revolutionaries, who thought they could bring agreement between freedom and equality, the rights of man and the sovereignty of the people, is an inconsistent liberalism, because the sovereignty of the people excludes the constitutional limitation of the sovereign power, and because equality excludes freedom of property. However radical traditionalism adds that counter-revolutionary liberalism is no less inconsistent, because, in recognizing the rights of the individual distinct from the right of society and opposable to it, it resumes on its own account the very idea of democracy: the ideal of the sovereignty of the individual over himself, an ideal that is no less contradictory than the ideal of popular sovereignty that is its direct continuation. One could formulate the thesis of Maistre and Bonald by saying that, according to

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<sup>75</sup> *Cinquième Lettre*, 69.

<sup>76</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:462.

them, a society is only a society in the measure that it is not liberal (where the sovereign power is absolute) and that it is not democratic (where sovereignty rests on a transcendent foundation). Radical traditionalism will therefore not oppose the virtues of the English representative system, characterized by its capacity to harmonize interests pragmatically by means of discussion, to revolutionary ideas; on the contrary it will oppose the necessity of breaking at the same time with both liberalism and democracy, by refusing at one and same time the right of the individual to independence and the right of the people to dispose of itself. It will ask for a merciless censure, designed notably to combat the corrosive effects of philosophy and this other form of permanent civil war that is perpetual public debate. As Maistre declares, every state, and more generally, "everything great rests on a belief"; and only a "large and profound belief" can assure the national homogeneity that makes a unity of citizens. Moreover one cannot have a widely shared belief "where the individual reason predominates": "the clash of individual opinions left to itself produces only scepticism, which destroys everything."<sup>77</sup> Recapturing for his own account Rousseau's diatribes in *Emile* and the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* against philosophy, which "produces only divergent opinions," and which therefore constitutes "the mortal enemy of every association" (376), indeed the "universal solvent" of morals and society (408), Maistre claims that, in every society, the individual reason must be "crushed" by the social reason, "so that citizens are believers whose loyalty is exalted to faith, and obedience to enthusiasm and fanaticism" (361). Bonald justified this program for his part by this proposition that summarizes his analysis of freedom: "governments are instituted to force men to be free, that is to say good."<sup>78</sup>

### III

The preceding propositions sound "Rousseauist." Incontestably, they indicate Maistre's and Bonald's debt to Rousseau's thought – a debt that manifests itself in the fact that their first authentically mature counter-revolutionary works, the *Théorie du pouvoir* for Bonald and the manuscript *De la souveraineté du peuple* for Maistre, give a considerable place to the reading and critique of Rousseau. This is a debt that their other works do not cease to betray or to deny across numerous ambivalent judgements that cover Rousseau with both insults and praise; the blame thrown on the philosopher of democracy and on the writer of

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<sup>77</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:408.

<sup>78</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, 14:412.

shamelessness is most often accompanied by an expressed recognition for the author of the stature of Socrates and Jesus, and for the publicist who had known how to perceive some decisive truths.

Among the number of these decisive truths, it is certainly not necessary to count the idea of the social contract as the foundation of political and social legitimacy; an idea whose sole merit is to make quite clear the common absurdity of liberalism and democracy, which consists in believing that an individual can be asocial and man be a legislator of himself. Maistre insists vigorously on this point: "It is a capital mistake to represent the social state as a chosen state founded on the consent of men, on a deliberation, and on an original contract, which is impossible."<sup>79</sup> An historical absurdity, first of all, since such a contract never took place. Next, a juridical absurdity: the social contract, which could only be valid on the condition of being accepted by *all* the individuals who compose the society, would, strictly speaking, have to be renegotiated with the arrival of each new member of the social body; it would therefore have to be ceaselessly redone, while it is supposed to be the most stable of social realities. Moreover, to suppose that the social contract approved by the ancestors must not be renegotiated by the newcomers means that the dead must govern the living, which is the traditionalist thesis. Finally, a logical absurdity: society itself cannot be founded on a contract, for the good reason that there can only be a contract between men already living in society. "Speech alone," Maistre remarks, "would prove that man is a social being by essence,"<sup>80</sup> which emphasizes that "embarrassments of the origin of language" recognized by Rousseau in his *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* are the same as those of the idea of the social contract: in the same way that "speech seems to have been highly necessary in order to establish the use of speech,"<sup>81</sup> the social contract supposes a society that renders it possible.<sup>82</sup> It is the same for society as for language; both have, in a sense, *always already* existed – at least with respect to God; "properly speaking, for *man* there has never been a time prior to society, because before the formation of political societies, man was not quite man."<sup>83</sup> The social bond is therefore not the product of a convention, but the product of

<sup>79</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:318.

<sup>80</sup> *De l'Etat du nature*, OC, 7:553.

<sup>81</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, *Oeuvres III*, 149.

<sup>82</sup> Bonald gives this a considerable development, since he makes it the first truth of metaphysics: man can have speech only from a primitive Revelation by which God communicated to him language and by this thought itself. See *Recherches philosophique*, OC, 2:325ff.

<sup>83</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:317.

necessity. "Society neither is nor can be the result of a pact; it is the result of a law."<sup>84</sup>

It is therefore Rousseau's serious mistake to have founded his political thought on a representation as impossible as that of the social contract; but the interest of his thought is that he himself, in a way that was partly involuntarily and partly explicit, admitted the impossibility of this representation that founds it. First of all, according to Maistre, this is proven by the contradiction that comes when the *Contrat social* affirms at the same time that "every legitimate Government is republican"<sup>85</sup> and that democracy is suited only for "a people of gods."<sup>86</sup> It is absurd that "a government that is made only for gods" be "nevertheless proposed to men as the only legitimate government,"<sup>87</sup> as Maistre spells it out, and is moreover happy to be able to oppose to democrats Rousseau's affirmation "that a genuine democracy has never existed, and will never exist" because "it is contrary to the natural order that the majority govern and the minority be governed."<sup>88</sup> Maistre can certainly be reproached for not taking any account of the distinction made by Rousseau<sup>89</sup> between the sovereign (the legislative power) and the government (the executive power): it is not a contradiction to affirm as Rousseau did that the people is the only legitimate sovereign, that is to say that it must hold the legislative power, and that democracy in the strict sense is impossible, that is to say that the people, holding the legislative power, cannot at the same time hold the executive power. Maistre anticipated the objection by declaring it to be without value.<sup>90</sup> On the one hand, one must ask how the distinction of the sovereign and the government is compatible with the severe critique to which Rousseau elsewhere submits the idea of division of powers.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand and especially, one must observe that the consequence of the analysis of the *Contrat social* itself calls into question the distinction between sovereignty and government by showing that in virtue of an "inherent vice" in the social contract, it "must always happen sooner or later" that "the Government usurps sovereignty."<sup>92</sup> The impossibility of the people *governing itself* means that sooner or later it

<sup>84</sup> *De l'Etat du nature*, OC, 7:564.

<sup>85</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, II, 6, OCIII, 380.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 4, OCIII, 406.

<sup>87</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:482.

<sup>88</sup> *Contrat social*, III, 4, OCIII, 404.; Maistre, *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:464.

<sup>89</sup> *Contrat social*, III, 1.

<sup>90</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:482.

<sup>91</sup> *Contrat social*, II, 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 10, OCIII, 421-3.

wants to lose its *sovereignty over itself*: the impossibility of democracy as auto-government also means the impossibility of the social contract and the necessity that society be constituted by God. Bonald reaches this same conclusion on his account by remarking that Rousseau was right to define the government as the minister of the sovereign but that “in making the people or men the sovereign and also making man the power or the government,” he “visibly confuses the power and the sovereign, and thus destroys the legitimacy of the government that he wants to establish, instead regarding God as the sovereign, and a human being as the power, obviously putting between the sovereign and the power this distinction that constitutes, according to Rousseau and reason, the legitimacy of society.”<sup>93</sup>

A second contradiction of the *Contrat social* is no less revealing: this one affects the notion of the general will, of which Rousseau affirms that it is “always right” even though “the deliberations of the people” do not “always have the same rectitude.”<sup>94</sup> Maistre observes that it is strange that the soundness of the general will is not always right. Here again, an objection soon asserts itself: Maistre forgets that Rousseau distinguishes “the will of all and the general will” by remarking that “the latter considers only the common interest” while “the other considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills,”<sup>95</sup> “so that what generalizes the will is less the number of voices than the common interest that unites them.”<sup>96</sup> There is no contradiction because the general will is always right but the will of all can err. However, here again, one can fear that the distinction between the “general will” and the “will of all” carries in itself a principle of instability that forbids maintaining it. *Either* the general will in effect is such by the general interest that it has in view, because it wants the common good – one conceives in this case that it will always be right, but then it is necessary to recognize that it in no way supposes the sovereignty of the people, since nothing prevents the will of one, a king for example, being in this sense a general will; *or* one can put forward that the general will is the will of all, in so far as it legislates for the generality of citizens by proposing what is for the good of all – but in this case nothing authorizes us to suppose that it will always be right, since the will of all can be deceived on what is really the good of all. Bonald, who raises this difficulty, resolves it for his own account by supposing that the law must certainly be the expression of the general will, but that the general will can in no case be identified with the

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<sup>93</sup> *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:99.

<sup>94</sup> *Contrat social*, II, 3, OCIII., 371.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 3, OCIII, 371.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 4, OCIII, 374.

collective will, "the sum of particular wills" which is as such essentially passionate and "malfunctioning." According to Rousseau's own definition, the general will can not be a particular will: it therefore cannot be either the will of a single man, nor even the unanimous will of a people<sup>97</sup>; it can only be "the will of the most general being for the conservation of the generality of beings, a perfect will alone capable of ruling imperfect wills,"<sup>98</sup> the will of God that merges with the "nature of society" and thus constitutes the general will of the social body as such. God, Bonald says, is the "general will of civil society,"<sup>99</sup> a supra-individual will, residing in the whole of society, and that necessarily "manifests" itself in the "general power exercised through a king, the agent of the general will."<sup>100</sup>

We know that in the *Contrat social* the "solution" to the difficulty is furnished by the personage of the "legislator." It is precisely because while "the general will is always right" but "the judgement that guides it is not always enlightened" that, according to Rousseau, there is born "the necessity of a legislator," whose role is to bring to the social body the "public enlightenment" that will permit the general will to coincide fully with itself in wanting in all clarity the good that it wants confusedly.<sup>101</sup> However the question then posed is: why cannot the general will constitute itself? We know Rousseau's response: "the social spirit which should be the result of the institution would have to preside over the founding of the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of laws."<sup>102</sup> Because men cannot "be before the laws what they must become by the laws," the legislator, to enlighten the general will, cannot be content with simple reasoning but must have recourse to "the intervention of heaven": in effect, men who are not yet formed by the laws must be persuaded by "divine authority."<sup>103</sup> Commenting on this passage to which he devotes much attention, Maistre crows: the necessity of a legislator demonstrates the traditionalist truth that no people can *constitute* itself, that no people can *give a law to itself*, in other words that no people can be its own sovereign. To Rousseau who asks for a legislator of supreme intelligence, Maistre replies that "this intelligence has already been found. One would have to be very foolish to look for it on earth, or not to see it where it is.

<sup>97</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:39-42.

<sup>98</sup> *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:152.

<sup>99</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:127.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:38-50.

<sup>101</sup> *Contrat social*, II, 6, OCIII, 380.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 7, OCIII, 383.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Gods would be needed to give laws to men.’ (*Contrat social*, II, 7.) Not at all, it only takes one.”<sup>104</sup> The legislator hoped for by Rousseau can be no other than God himself: the *Contrat social* is the best possible introduction to the theocratic doctrine, because the paradoxes admitted by Rousseau oblige recognition that sovereignty and its laws can only be founded on God. Rousseau recognized this, without taking the measure of his own words, in affirming on the one hand that “a State has never been founded without religion serving at its base”<sup>105</sup> – and on the other hand that “it is not every man who can make the Gods speak, or be believed when he declares himself their interpreter.”<sup>106</sup> Rousseau wants the legislator *to present himself as if* invested in a divine mission; however since it is impossible, on Rousseau’s own admission, for men to *feign* such a mission,<sup>107</sup> it is necessary that this divine mission be real: the word mission pronounced by Rousseau must be understood *literally*.<sup>108</sup> In effect, if democracy is impossible – if men can neither institute themselves as sovereigns nor institute their sovereign – then *no* man can institute himself as sovereign or “legislator.” Monarchs themselves, being only men “dependent in their essence,” are themselves also in need of a sovereign who governs them and from whom they can hold their own sovereignty; their power is only possible by their submission to divine power. Maistre draws from Rousseau the same conclusion as Bonald: society is only possible if it is itself the “immediate” work of God, whose will is the constitutive will of the social body, a will really existing beyond the individual wills that belong to it.

It is on achieving this point, almost to the threshold of sociology, that counter-revolutionary thought turns short and renounces thinking the social bond. Society is only possible if God is; therefore God is, so that the existence of society proves the existence of God, which in its turns renders an account of the existence of society: this is almost the total content of Maistre’s sociology as well as that of Bonald.<sup>109</sup> With Maistre, the absence of social theory, which is obvious, is required by the providentialist historicism that organizes his thought: because he identifies the constitution of societies with the historical reality of

<sup>104</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:338.

<sup>105</sup> *Contrat social*, IV, 8, OCIII, 464.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 7, OCIII, 384.

<sup>107</sup> Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, OC, 1:81: “Man, by his own powers, is at most a Vaucanson; to be a Prometheus, he must climb to heaven, for the legislator cannot gain obedience either by force or by reasoning.” (Citing Rousseau, *Contrat social*, II, 7.)

<sup>108</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:345.

<sup>109</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:13, and 1:41 and 45.

opinion and with the socially dominant mentality, and because he defines this reality as a reality submissive to a permanent and largely unpredictable evolution, Maistre reduces possible sociological knowledge to the single thesis of the necessary existence of an irresistible sovereign power constituting the summit of the social pyramid. The economic and social conditions as well as the constitutional limits of this power must moreover remain undetermined. One cannot produce any general theory with respect to their types, since the types of possible and legitimate social relations depend on the historical relativity of the will of a Providence for which everything is possible and whose ways are impenetrable. The absence of all determined sociology thus correlates with the impossibility of any theory of counter-revolutionary action. Maistre never ceases to emphasize that, in a situation like that of the revolutionary chaos of which the Restoration is a continuation, it is impossible to know what is legitimate and what is not. This position assures to Maistre's thought a flexibility refused to Bonald's thought, since it authorizes abandoning the certain principles of monarchical legitimacy under some conditions; but it also presents, by the same fact, a disquieting face that Bonald's thought does not present, since the abandonment of the principles of legitimacy can lead, according to a movement already tried out by Maistre and taken to its conclusion by his heirs, Donoso Cortés and Carl Schmitt, in the direction of a decisionist adherence to the political form of dictatorship, the only possible form of sovereignty in a democratic age.

In contrast to Maistre, Bonald, guided by his thesis of the universality of the natural laws of the social order, elaborates a veritable system that provides a theoretical sociology. Bonald maintains that "bodies are the essence of a constituted society" and that every society "tends to make bodies of all men, of all families, and of all professions."<sup>110</sup> He does his best to describe in a detailed way the spheres of social existence, linking in a successive way a theory of the family, a theory of municipal commons, a theory of the nobility, a theory of administration, and a theory of the Church. This sociology, however, is in large measure a *trompe l'oeil*. Bonald himself gives the reason for this by declaring:

society in general, that is to say the general order of social beings and their relations, is expressed in this general proportion: Power is to the minister as the minister is to the subject; a *proportion* which is only [...] the translation, in the particular language of society, of that other general *proportion* expressed in the most abstract and the most analytic language: The cause is to the means as the

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<sup>110</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 15:27.



means is to the effect. *Power*, *minister*, and *subject* are called the *persons* of the society.<sup>111</sup>

This general proportion is particularized in the triads father-mother-child, chief-officer-subject, and God-priests-faithful. Thus, each social sphere is only the incarnation of the same structure, that of subordination of the subject to the minister and of the minister to power; and there is nothing more to know, in each circle of society, than the formula of subordination, the formula of the very circularity of the social circle, in which the points of the circumference are united by their subordination to the center constituted by power.<sup>112</sup> To conclude, Bonald's sociology is very poor; its fundamental truths, which boil down to the commandments of the Decalogue,<sup>113</sup> are contained in a brief enumeration: "the existence of an intelligent being, superior to man, who created man, and who preserves him," "the spirituality and immortality of the soul,"<sup>114</sup> the illegitimacy of divorce, the honour due to parents, the rights of the oldest, the heredity of power, the existence of social families whose wealth must be guaranteed by an agricultural economy, the unity and masculinity of political power, the right of primogeniture, and the inalienability of the domains of the state.<sup>115</sup> Bonald's sociology, of which one could say that it is the negation of sociology just as Maistre's historicism is the negation of history, has the same result as Maistre's historicism: it forbids all theory of counter-revolutionary action, since political power has no other function than to preserve constituted society and, in the case of crisis, to wait for "invincible nature" to recapture its empire and to reestablish by itself the necessary order of things. It is because Bonald proposes no real sociological theory of the revolutionary phenomenon that his ultimate explanation of the Revolution of 1830 must be the following: "Alas! If the kings have gone away, it is that God has retired from society."<sup>116</sup>

This situation is the sign that the dilemmas of Rousseau's thought, denounced and utilized by radical traditionalism as the proofs of its own truth, have not been surmounted, but have rather been reproduced by traditionalism within its own bosom. Maistre and Bonald have preserved and confirmed Rousseau's two theses: on the one hand, the consequence

<sup>111</sup> *Législation primitive*, OC, 2:424.

<sup>112</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:50.

<sup>113</sup> *Législation primitive*, OC, 3:6-8.

<sup>114</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:13.

<sup>115</sup> *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:159-60.

<sup>116</sup> *Réflexions sur la Révolution de Juillet 1830*, ed. by J. Bastier (Paris: DUC/Albatros 1988), 78.

of the critique of the division of powers proposed by the *Contrat social*,<sup>117</sup> a critique approved by Bonald<sup>118</sup> as by Maistre, the affirmation that “The supreme authority cannot be modified any more than it can be alienated; to limit it is to destroy it. It is absurd and contradictory for the sovereign to choose a superior”<sup>119</sup>; on the other hand, the directing maxim according to which “everything that breaks the social unity is worth nothing.”<sup>120</sup>

The political problem is therefore no different with Maistre and Bonald than it was with Rousseau: it is always a question of making the individual, abdicating his egoism, to become a simple “part” of the social unity, in a way that assures the domination of the general will over the particular will. The very formulation by which Maistre poses the problem is very close to the one given in the *Contrat social*: “Man’s first need,” Maistre writes, “is that his nascent reason lose itself in the national reason, so that it changes its individual existence into another common existence, just as a river that flows into the ocean always continues to exist in the mass of water, but without a name and without a distinct reality.”<sup>121</sup> Rousseau for his part had declared that the legislator’s task was one of “substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence with we have all received from nature” and of “transforming each individual who, by himself, is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being.”<sup>122</sup> As with Rousseau, with Maistre and with Bonald it is a question of assuring the formation of “patriotism,” that is to say according to Maistre of “the individual *abnegation*,”<sup>123</sup> that happens through “the union of politics and religion,”<sup>124</sup> alone capable of making sure that the faith of the citizen is indissolubly political and religious – which Bonald confirms by explaining that the capacity of the citizen to sacrifice himself and his property, a constitutive capacity of the society and unthinkable to liberalism, is only possible through the religious spirit.<sup>125</sup> And for the traditionalists, as for Rousseau, the real means for the formation of patriotism is public education. “Public

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<sup>117</sup> See particularly *Du contrat social*, II, 2, OCIII, 369-70.

<sup>118</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 13:435.

<sup>119</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:418, citing Rousseau, *Contrat social*, III, 16.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:8, OCIII, 464.

<sup>121</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:376.

<sup>122</sup> *Contrat social*, II, 7, OCIII, 381.

<sup>123</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, OC, 1:377.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:361.

<sup>125</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:205ff.

education” is the “basis of everything” declares Maistre, who asks that it be confided to the Jesuits,<sup>126</sup> while Bonald does his best to describe in minute detail the organization and plan of studies of the colleges that must assure the social education of the children of social families, that is to say families vowed to the service of the state.<sup>127</sup>

Maistre and Bonald can think they have surmounted Rousseau’s contradictions while safeguarding the essence of his thought: the anti-liberal thesis according to which, in a constituted society, the individual must be wholly socialized. Burke’s conservative liberalism, characterized by its association with Locke, Adam Smith, and Montesquieu, would therefore be outstripped by a traditionalism founded on an association with Malebranche, the physiocrats, and Rousseau. However we can see that the overtaking is largely illusory. For his part, Rousseau had not outstripped liberalism: the *Contrat social* was broken on the impossibility of reconciling the closed and totalitarian morality of the city conceived on the antique model, which requires a national and intolerant faith, with the open morality of Christianity, which claims all men as brothers and affirms the unshakable right of individuals in the name of the universal vocation of faith. The advent of Christianity, which was in Rousseau’s eyes the advent of truth, means the collapse of conditions susceptible to making a republican regime possible: the right of individuals, recognized by Christianity, does not permit the constitution of a sovereign people unified and provided with an absolute law.<sup>128</sup>

This predicament is not surmounted by the sole fact that one replaces it by the monarch or by nature; the difficulty is reproduced, under different forms, in Maistre’s thought as in that of Bonald. Maistre maintains that the interests of the monarchy and those of Catholicism are the same, in virtue of the correspondence in their structures: the juridical irresistibility of the monarch corresponds to the infallibility of the sovereign pontiff in matters of faith. However *Du Pape*, which develops this analogy, comes up against a difficulty that Maistre is never able to surmount: how to organize the co-existence of the two sovereign powers, a temporal power and a spiritual power, which have in common certain domains of competence? Who, in the last instance, must be sovereign, the king or the pope? It is precisely this question that Maistre never answers, contenting himself with proposing for the pope a hypothetical title to

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<sup>126</sup> *OC*, 10:183 [Letter to Chevalier Rossi, 3 January 1807] and 8:272 [“Mémoire sur la liberté de l’enseignement public”].

<sup>127</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, *OC*, 15:3ff; and *Législation primitive*, *OC*, 4:1ff.

<sup>128</sup> On this point, see the analyses of A. Philonenko, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la pensée du malheur* (Paris: Vrin 1984), 3: 23, 47, 64-5, and 77-82.

indirect power over sovereigns.<sup>129</sup> In effect, Maistre really refuses to assume this proposition, which follows from the central proposition of his thought, that every sovereign is irresistible, and which however contradicts this thesis: in proposing nothing more than showing that the thesis of indirect papal power is not absurd, the basic thrust of *Du Pape* is devoted to the elaboration of a largely mythical historical image according to which temporal sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty have always had the same interests; a mythical image that expresses Maistre's contradictory wish to see realized the union of monarchical absolutism, by definition Gallican however, and Catholic infallibility, which by definition however recognizes only its own absolutism, a mythic image that signals that liberalism has not been outstripped, since the obstacle to social unity that with Rousseau constituted the rights of the individual is reproduced with Maistre under the form of the rights of the pope, rights in themselves very little liberal since they are the rights of spiritual constraint, which however signal the irreducible break between the man and the citizen.

Bonald is Gallican.<sup>130</sup> He therefore avoids the difficulties into which Maistre falls, since he considers that infallibility belongs only to the Church and not to the pope, and he refuses the subordination of the temporal power to the spiritual power. However the correspondence of structure between the temporal monarchy and the Catholic monarchy, a correspondence whose existence Bonald like Maistre affirms, then has this consequence that infallibility must not be accorded to kings. Only nature is infallible; it alone takes "the initiative for necessary laws, as man takes the initiative for laws that are not."<sup>131</sup> Then the difficulty is that the function of the sovereign power becomes practically unintelligible, to the point that one can ask if Bonald really had a theory of state. Bonald defines society as a "gathering of similar beings, a gathering whose purpose is their production and their mutual preservation."<sup>132</sup> The family assures the function of production, while the political power assures the function of conservation. "In a formed and constituted state, it is only necessary that it be maintained," writes Bonald: power "asks only virtue, or respect for the constitution and the domestic, political, and religious laws."<sup>133</sup> The Rousseauistic theme of the necessity of a social

<sup>129</sup> *Du Pape*, OC, 2:181.

<sup>130</sup> See *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:192, 239, and 277. While he toned it down as he grew older, Bonald never disowned his Gallicanism; his *Démonstration philosophique* of 1830 did not say a word about the infallibility of the pope.

<sup>131</sup> *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:159.

<sup>132</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir*, OC, 14:40.

<sup>133</sup> *Essai analytique*, OC, 1:234.

education is then found doubled by a very different theme: that of the natural independence of the family, which follows from the principle that wants each social sphere to be the realization of the same fundamental structure. If the family realizes the structure of power by the same title as political society, then the family constitutes, by the same title as the state, a complete and achieved circle in itself. This is why Bonald defines the family as the “natural society”<sup>134</sup> and maintains that the rights of the family, as well as the rights of property, are sacred. Thus, while with Maistre the rights of individual reappear under the form of the rights of the pope, with Bonald they reappear under the form of the rights of the family, to the point that Bonald’s language defending the right of familial property is sometimes indistinguishable from liberal language. Bonald maintains that taxes must have the consent of proprietors, who alone are fit to decide their just measure.<sup>135</sup> And he distinguishes civil liberty, which consists in “employing at one’s liking and according to one’s tastes and talents one’s natural or acquired faculties always conforming to the laws of religion and morality,” and political liberty which consists in participation in public affairs. So then the refusal of democracy comes in the thesis according to which “political liberty can only be established at the expense of civil liberty, this first benefit of social life.”<sup>136</sup> Finally, it is difficult to understand how this thesis can be reconciled with Bonald’s other thesis, which he inherits from Rousseau in order to oppose Montesquieu: that social man owes everything to society<sup>137</sup> and that “society [...] must use man right to the end.”<sup>138</sup>

With Maistre as well as with Bonald, traditionalism fails to surpass liberalism; it leads on the other hand to explosive contradictions, which through descent by way of Balzac or Baudelaire from Maistre and Bonald, will create the sinister modernity of their thought and will constitute, particularly through Maurras, one of the preparations for the totalitarian adventures of the twentieth century. The paradox is that it is its debt with respect to Rousseau and its belonging to the space of Cartesian rationalism, in other words its belonging to the theoretical space of the sovereignty of the will and of possessive individualism, which the counter-revolutionary thought of Maistre and Bonald had drawn the political spring of its most sinister affects, those which have notably guided its most direct heir, Carl Schmitt, towards fascism. Perhaps liberalism is nothing more than a critique of politics, according

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<sup>134</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 15:29.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:476ff.

<sup>136</sup> *Réflexions sur la Révolution de Juillet 1830*, 56-9.

<sup>137</sup> *Théorie du pouvoir, OC*, 15:63-4, and 203.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:286.

to Carl Schmitt's famous quip<sup>139</sup>; however the counter-revolution in itself is nothing other than a critique of liberalism, which by drawing despotic conclusions from liberal arguments failed to go beyond the limits of liberalism.

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<sup>139</sup> "There is no liberal politics *sui generis*, there is only a liberal *critique* of politics." C. Schmitt, *La notion de politique*, 118.

## *Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt<sup>1</sup>*

Among those in the twentieth century who have taken Joseph de Maistre seriously are those who regard him as the quintessential political “realist,” someone whose clear-sighted perception of the harsh “realities” at the heart of political life was refreshingly unobscured by the wishful thinking and naïve assumptions of so much political thought since the Enlightenment. The best known of Maistre’s twentieth century “realist” admirers is Carl Schmitt (1888 -1985), interest in whom has exploded over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> Given this interest, and in light of the fact that Maistre occupied a privileged place in Schmitt’s pantheon of heroes, alongside other “realists” such as Thomas Hobbes, Louis de Bonald, and Donoso Cortés, it is worth considering what it was about Maistre’s thought that Schmitt found so compelling. Schmitt credits Maistre with a rare insight into the fundamental nature of “the political,” the nucleus of which is the ability to distinguish between friends and enemies, his criterion for the existence of political consciousness itself. In Schmitt’s Manichean universe, the “good Christian and patriot de Maistre”<sup>3</sup> was a “friend” rather than an “enemy.” His Maistre is a skeptical and worldly-wise diplomat and lawyer whom he esteemed for “the rational

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin, July 1999. I am very grateful to Ronald Beiner for his characteristically astute and helpful comments on an earlier drafter of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> On the interest in Schmitt in English, see George Schwab, “Progress of Schmitt Studies in the English-speaking World,” *Complexio Oppositorum: Uber Carl Schmitt*, ed. H. Quaritsch (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 1st ed. (1925), as quoted in Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1998), 60. As Cristi points out, the second edition omits reference to Maistre here.

clarity of his thought, his reasonable, matter-of-fact attitude, his capacity for legal argument, his sense of the limits of the efficacy of the state."<sup>4</sup>

The idea of Maistre and Schmitt as "kindred spirits" has been echoed by recent commentators as well, most notably Stephen Holmes. Both occupy positions of prominence in the tradition of antiliberalism that Holmes has identified, with Maistre one of its "truly brilliant originators" and Schmitt his "most original twentieth-century admirer."<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin's association of Maistre with fascism at least indirectly supports this view, given Schmitt's involvement with the Nazis. For Berlin, Maistre's views have "an affinity with the paranoiac world of modern Fascism" with which Schmitt was for a time closely connected.<sup>6</sup>

There is no doubt that Maistre and Schmitt were kindred spirits in many ways, and it is not my intention to dispute this. It is beyond question that they had a great deal in common, both personally and ideologically. The political views of both were formulated in response to revolution: the French Revolution forced Maistre into exile for twenty years, in the process effectively creating the Counter-Revolutionary thinker as we know him today; Schmitt lived through the German "revolution" of 1918-19, the civil conflict of the early Weimer years, and the ascendancy of the Nazis. Both believed in Catholicism as the one true faith, admired the Church as a model political institution, and denounced Protestantism for contributing to the fatal destabilization of the social, political, and religious order of modern Europe. Maistre and Schmitt were also both jurists: Maistre was trained and qualified as a lawyer, eventually becoming a magistrate and Senator before the Revolution forced him into an abrupt change of career; Schmitt's legal career took him to both the summit of his profession, as chair of public law at the University of Berlin and one of the most influential constitutional theorists in Weimar Germany, and the depths, becoming the director of the University Teachers Group of the Association of the National Socialist League of German Jurists and, for a time, the *Kronjurist* of the Third Reich.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press 1986), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press 1993), 7, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 113.

<sup>7</sup> In 1936, Schmitt organised a conference on "Judaism in Jurisprudence," in which, in his inaugural address, he quoted Hitler's claim that "In fending off the Jew, I fight for the work of the Lord" (Carl Schmitt, *Die deutsche*



However, if we are to get a complete and accurate picture of the relationship between the views of Schmitt and Maistre, then we must go beyond the similarities that both Schmitt and Holmes have stressed, which is the purpose of this paper.<sup>8</sup> I argue that Schmitt used Maistre for his own ends, selectively concentrating on points of convergence while overlooking or suppressing many areas in which they diverged, often quite strikingly. It is these areas that are the focus of the present paper. They actually occupied distinct intellectual worlds with very different outlooks, assumptions, and orientations. The core of Maistre's political philosophy was providentialism, whereas the center of Schmitt's was decisionism. These worlds did intersect, and Schmitt chose to focus entirely on this common region, thereby presenting a very partial and distorted account of Maistre. This is most apparent in their views on providence, democracy, ultramontanistism, and anti-Semitism. First, though, I will briefly summarize Schmitt's highly favourable – if very selective – presentation of Maistre's views.

## I

In his book *Political Romanticism* (1919), Schmitt opposes political realism to political romanticism, denouncing the latter and lauding the former. Among those he praises as political realists is the “immortal de Maistre.”<sup>9</sup> In this work he undertakes to correct the common error of associating counterrevolutionary theorists such as Burke, Bonald, and Maistre with German romantic conservatives such as Adam Müller and Novalis. According to Schmitt, romanticism is passive, indecisive, discursive, and aspires to transcend the immediate world of political reality (117). The image that he paints of the typical romantic is that of an ineffectual weakling, with both feet firmly planted in the clouds,

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*Rechtswissenschaft im Kampf gegen den jüdischen Geist*, quoted in Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, trans. M. Brainard [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1998], 154). This did not prevent Schmitt from being attacked that year in the Gestapo newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps*, as a consequence of which he was forced to abstain from writing on politics (with some exceptions). (See “Eine peinliche Ehrenrettung” and “Es wird immer noch peinlicher,” *Das Schwarze Korps*, Folge 49-50 [3 and 10 December 1936], 14, 2).

<sup>8</sup> This is not to imply that Stephen Holmes fails to acknowledge any differences between Maistre and Schmitt. For example, in “The Lion of Illiberalism” he stresses Maistre's providential determinism, which is not a feature of Schmitt's more voluntarist outlook (*The New Republic*, 30 October 1989, 32-7).

<sup>9</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 134

constitutionally incapable of clear perception or decisive action. Schmitt's Maistre is the opposite of all this, an "extremely unromantic," hard-nosed realist with practical political experience, "completely rooted in the classical character of the eighteenth century" (23). Another hallmark of romanticism, according to Schmitt, is its tendency towards everlasting conversation as a substitute for decisive action. By contrast, he claims, Catholic political writers such as Maistre, Bonald, and Donoso Cortés, "who are called romantics in Germany because they were conservative or reactionary and idealized the conditions of the Middle Ages, would have considered everlasting conversation a product of a gruesomely comic fantasy."<sup>10</sup>

Schmitt also credited Maistre with realizing that the moment of "decision" lies at the heart of "the political." He depicts Maistre and his Counter-Revolutionary brethren as practical men of the world, "filled with the sense that they were not elevated above the political struggle, but were instead obligated to decide in favour of what they regarded as right [...] ability to make a decision between right and wrong."<sup>11</sup> According to Schmitt, Maistre's experiences as a lawyer, politician, and diplomat gave him a keen awareness of the immediacy of the need to think clearly and act decisively. When the Revolution came, he boldly took his stand against it, unlike the romantics with their "inability to decide."<sup>12</sup> Maistre shared Schmitt's appreciation of the unavoidable "either-or" character of human affairs, without which decisions cannot be made.

De Maistre spoke with particular fondness of sovereignty, which essentially meant decision. To him the relevance of the state rested on the fact that it provided a decision, the relevance of the Church on its rendering of the last decision that could not be appealed. Infallibility was for him the essence of the decision that cannot be appealed, and the infallibility of the spiritual order was of the same nature as the sovereignty of the state order. The two words *infallibility* and *sovereignty* were "perfectly synonymous." To him, every sovereignty acted as if it were infallible, every government was absolute.<sup>13</sup>

Like Schmitt, who frequently maligned discursive democracy in favour of what he took to be more decisive and active political forms, Maistre denounced "Parliamentary despotism" and claimed that those who naively "believe that by multiplying deliberative voices doubt is

<sup>10</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. G. Schwab (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press 1988), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 55.

diminished, know little of human nature, and never sat in the midst of a deliberative body."<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Schmitt rated Maistre's conception of human nature very highly for its stark psychological "realism," which derived "from his lack of illusions about morals and from solitary psychological experiences"<sup>15</sup> he had in the wake of the French Revolution, which cost him his home, career, and possessions, and forced him into a twenty-year exile. He situates Maistre in a tradition that includes Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bossuet, Fichte, and Taine, all of whom presupposed human beings to be evil in some measure.<sup>16</sup> Referring to Maistre, Schmitt spoke of "the profound skeptical pessimism of the diplomat without illusions and his principle that would inevitably destroy romanticism as a whole—namely, the view that man is evil in his volition and his impulses, and that he is good by virtue of his intellect."<sup>17</sup>

## II

Among the most significant differences between Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt is the former's providentialism, which simply played no part in the latter's thought. For Maistre human affairs can only be properly understood in the larger context of a divine plan, complete knowledge of which is forever beyond human understanding. It is precisely this larger context that was missing from the prevalent interpretations of contemporary revolutionary events, according to Maistre. One of the fundamental objectives of his *Considerations on France* (1797) is to fill in this missing "big picture," thereby explaining the violent circumstances of the 1790s in terms of a "divine plan" in which the crimes of the modern age are punished by an "invisible hand" operating through French Revolutionaries, who are mere "instruments of God." Thus it was "providence," he claims, that "willed that the first blow be struck by the Septembrists."<sup>18</sup> This providentialism provides the moral framework within which Maistre situates the terrible events of revolutionary Europe. That is what he means when he says in the *Considerations* that he is looking at the Revolution "from a purely moral

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *The Pope*, trans. A. M. Dawson, reprint of 1850 ed., with an introduction by R. A. Lebrun (New York: Howard Fertig 1975), 171, 106-7.

<sup>15</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1976), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. R.A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), 6.

point of view.”<sup>19</sup> For Maistre, the will and intentions of human beings on actual political events count for nothing. “The more we examine the influence of human agency in the formation of political constitutions,” he writes, “the greater will be our conviction that it enters there only in a manner infinitely subordinate, or as a simple instrument.”<sup>20</sup> However, the relative powerlessness of human beings is not a cause for despair for Maistre because of his faith that justice is assured by the benevolent will of a higher power. “If the vilest instruments are employed,” he points out about the French Revolution, “punishment is for the sake of regeneration.”<sup>21</sup> Maistre interprets the violence and bloodshed of the French Revolution as a form of punishment meted out on humanity for the crimes of the eighteenth century. This is moral because, according to Maistre, “punishment can have no other end than the removal of evil.”<sup>22</sup> The moral logic of these apparently wicked events is to be found in the fact that “there is no chastisement that does not purify; there is no disorder that ETERNAL LOVE does not turn against the principle of evil. It is gratifying amid the general upheaval to have a presentiment of the plans of Divinity.”<sup>23</sup> This harsh view is described very well in his *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (1814):

Europe is guilty [...] and it is because she is guilty, that she suffers [...] the kind of expiation which these crimes demand, and the adorable prodigy which compels EVIL to purify, with its own hands, the place which the eternal Architect has already measured by the eye for His marvellous constructions. The men of this age have taken their side.<sup>24</sup>

Maistre pursued this theme again in his “masterpiece,” *The St. Petersburg Dialogues*, published in 1821, the year of his death, which he subtitled “Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence.” In it, he seeks to account for “the ensemble of ways of Providence in the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, reprint of 1847 ed. (Delmas, NY: NY Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints 1977), 41.

<sup>21</sup> Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, quoted in Richard Lebrun, “Joseph de Maistre’s ‘Philosophic’ View of War,” in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 7 (1979), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, 172-3.

governance of the moral world.”<sup>25</sup> One of these ways is war which, like revolution, Maistre defines as a “department [...] whose direction Providence has reserved to itself.”<sup>26</sup> The “moral” dimension of war, according to Maistre, is that it is an instrument of divine justice. It acts, like the practice of “bleeding” humans, to restore sick and decadent societies to health through the retempering of the human soul when it has lost its strength through “an excess of civilization,” and the pruning of the human tree for the sake of “the real *fruits* of human nature – the arts, sciences, great enterprises, lofty conceptions, manly virtues.”<sup>27</sup> Maistre did not glorify war because he had a sadistic nature (as far as we know). Although he was fascinated by it, it was less a morbid fascination than a religious fascination that comes from witnessing, as he genuinely thought he was, the hand of God working through human affairs.

The providential moralism at the heart of Maistre’s outlook does not appear to be a feature of Schmitt’s view at all. He does not situate his political theory within a broader moral context, as Maistre does. Indeed, this is one of its virtues, according to Schmitt, who criticizes liberalism for seeking “to tie the political to the ethical.”<sup>28</sup> On Schmitt’s Weberian view, politics, morality, and aesthetics have their own internal standards and logic.<sup>29</sup> The primal political antithesis between friend and enemy has its counterpart in the moral sphere in the opposition between good and evil and in the aesthetic realm in the distinction between beauty and

<sup>25</sup> Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, trans. R.A. Lebrun (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1993), 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>27</sup> Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 29. Richard Lebrun argues that Maistre’s providential position on war “does not differ from the traditional position expressed by the great court preachers of the late seventeenth century. We know that Maistre possessed and read the works of Bossuet, Bortaloue, Massilon, and Mascaron, and he occasionally cites their works in support of his position. Maistre’s originality lies not in the essentials of his views on war but in the literary form that he employs [...] Maistre’s primary concern remained that of the moralist and Catholic apologist” (“Joseph de Maistre’s ‘Philosophic’ View of War,” 46-9).

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> This view of Schmitt is rejected by Heinrich Meier, who claims that the opinion that “Schmitt sharply distinguished between politics and morality, that he was a theoretician of ‘pure politics’ [...] can only be met with astonishment.” He argues that, although Schmitt made such a distinction in the first edition of *The Concept of the Political*, he abandoned it in later editions, making the political ‘total,’ rather than just one domain of many (*The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, trans. M. Brainard [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1998], 22).

ugliness. Politics is essentially amoral, according to Schmitt. He seeks to liberate it from its “subjugation” to morality, so that “the decision” – the core of his concept of the political – “frees itself from all normative ties.”<sup>30</sup> That is why he claims that, “[l]ooked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness”(31-2), rather than originating, ultimately, from God, as Maistre believed. This is the “existential” nucleus of Schmittian politics, which diverges strikingly from the Maistrian view that all human affairs are comprehensible only within an overarching framework of providential justice. Yet in *Political Theology*, Schmitt attributes his own “existential” decisionism to Maistre: “In the cited remarks of de Maistre we can see a reduction of the state to the moment of the decision, to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision created out of nothingness”(66). This interpretation is not without some textual support, as the following passage from Maistre’s *On the Origins of Sovereignty* demonstrates:

The Roman jurisconsults have been greatly criticised for saying that the prince is *above the laws* (*princeps solutus est legibus*) [...] But even if they would have meant that the prince can violate moral laws with impunity, that is to say without being judged, they would only have advanced a truth that is sad, no doubt, but incontestable. While I might be forced to agree that one has the *right* to slaughter Nero, I would never agree that one has the right to judge him. For the law by virtue of which one would judge him would either have been made by him or by another, which would suppose either a law made by a sovereign against himself, or a sovereign above the sovereign, two equally inadmissible suppositions.<sup>31</sup>

However, there is more to Maistre’s position than this. His project is to situate the political within a Christian moral context. His work as a whole constitutes a theodicy – albeit a grimly dark one – in which “profane” earthly events, no matter how awful, cruel, or apparently malevolent, are depicted as an integral part of perfect, universal justice. Schmitt, by contrast, avoids making any explicit link between the earthly and the transcendent. In his 1928 *Verfassungslehre* (*Constitutional Theory*), he writes:

That which exists as a political form, considered juridically, has value because it exists. From this alone originates its “right to self-preservation,” the presupposition of any further consideration. It seeks ultimately to maintain its

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<sup>30</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *On the Origins of Sovereignty*, in *Against Rousseau*, trans. R.A. Lebrun (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1996), 117-18.

existence “*in suo esse preserverance*.” It protects “its existence, its integrity, its security, and its constitution” – all existential values.<sup>32</sup>

For Maistre, by contrast, particular political forms derive their value – like most things – primarily from their place within a larger order of meaning. If Maistre can be called a “decisionist,” it is God, not man, who decides. Thus, while Schmitt is correct that a merely human act of will would be amoral, that is precisely why Maistre would have condemned it. Maistre’s world is enchanted and darkly mysterious, where the sacred and the profane, the worldly and the transcendent everywhere overlap and interpenetrate in ways that necessarily confound human understanding. At the heart of an inscrutable universe lies an impenetrable secret that Maistre identified with the divine, which is the source of all meaning and value. There is nothing of this supernatural dimension in Schmitt’s disenchanted, Hobbesian world, where the brutal reality of things is all-too-obvious. There is no providential consolation in Schmitt’s writings, only a harsh, never-ending, amoral – even nihilistic – struggle between opposing forces and interests for survival and supremacy.

This difference can be seen in Schmitt’s explanation of war as “the existential negation of the enemy,”<sup>33</sup> which contains nothing of the providentialism found in Maistre’s account. For Schmitt, war is “the most extreme political means”(35) in the perpetual contest between friend and enemy that is essentially amoral. He credited early modern writers such as Vitoria, Grotius, and Gentilis with undermining the concept of the “just war” as both a misapplication of moral principles to politics and as incompatible with the exercise of absolute and undivided political sovereignty. Maistre, by contrast, valued war as a form of justice, a divine punishment for human sins. In *The Concept of the Political* (1927), Schmitt explains that the justification of war does not and cannot reside in morality:

War, the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy – all this has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only [...] There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no programme no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason [...] it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms [...] justice does not belong to the concept of war (35).

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Verfassungslehre* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot 1970), 73.

<sup>33</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 33.

Schmitt was well aware of Maistre's providentialism, which he rightly regarded as the essence of his counterrevolutionary outlook towards which he was, in general, deeply sympathetic. "De Maistre still sees the individual entirely from the perspective of the theological ideas of the classical age," he writes in *Political Romanticism*, a work in which Maistre is frequently praised for his "realism." "[I]n his insignificance in the presence of the transcendent providential power that governs us and in whose hands the active heroes of the Revolution appear to de Maistre as automatons [...] the activity of the individual, based on rationalistic maxims, can create nothing. It can only delay, destroy, and abrogate the natural course of things; but it cannot produce anything of permanence."<sup>34</sup> Yet, unlike many other aspects of Maistre's thought, Schmitt reserves comment here, perhaps because he was uncomfortable with the extremism of Maistre's position, according to which political actors are nothing more than passive instruments of a divine will. Schmitt stood somewhere between Maistre's uncompromising anti-humanism and the political voluntarism of another of his heroes, Thomas Hobbes. Their differences notwithstanding, all three rejected as both undesirable and untenable a conception of political agency in which ordinary individuals actively participated in government.

Joseph de Maistre's attitude towards democracy is entirely consistent with his belief in the nullity of individual political agency. He was an ardent proponent of monarchy – "the best, the most durable of governments, and the most natural to man"<sup>35</sup> – and actively hostile to all forms of democracy, which he denounced as "the harshest, most despotic, and most intolerable" type of government.<sup>36</sup> His position on this was conventionally conservative, utterly typical of the elitism common among right-wing critics of popular government. Among the reasons that he gives for his opposition to democracy is his belief that it is incompatible with sovereignty. In his essay *On the Origins of Sovereignty*, which Maistre worked on in 1794-95, he actually defines democracy as "*an association of men without sovereignty*" (142). The democratic belief that individuals can be authors of the laws to which they are also subject contradicts the essence of sovereignty, which is "a restraining power that acts on the subject, and that is placed outside the subject" (143). A voluntary association based on consent is not sovereign and can therefore only enact statutes or covenants, not laws, since, in the face of disagreement, "no one among them has coercive force to constrain them" (143-4).

<sup>34</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 109-10.

<sup>35</sup> Maistre, *The Pope*, 299.

<sup>36</sup> Maistre, *On the Origins of Sovereignty*, 163.



Like Hobbes, Maistre claims that society “cannot subsist without sovereignty” (46), which means that it cannot exist with democracy since the latter is incompatible with sovereignty. As a form of association incompatible with sovereignty, democracy is for Maistre a form of anarchy. He argues that a sovereign must be one and indivisible, whereas democratic republics “have never been anything but multi-headed sovereigns” (63). In his book *The Pope* (1819), Maistre associates democracy in the political sphere with Protestantism in the religious sphere, which are incompatible with the sovereignty of temporal rulers and the sovereignty of the Pope in their respective domains.<sup>37</sup>

Despite his deep admiration for Maistre’s views on politics and sovereignty (as he understood them), Carl Schmitt was far from rejecting democracy in all of its forms, as Maistre had done. He represents a strand of right-wing populist thought that is quite distinct from that of the elitist Maistre. Of the parliamentary form of democracy, Schmitt was famously contemptuous. Yet he came to favour a Caesaristic, identitarian type of *Führerdemokratie*.<sup>38</sup> Schmitt began to shift away from monarchism towards a more democratic position when he discerned the nationalistic, anti-liberal potential of democracy. As Renato Cristi writes, Schmitt “came to realise that democracy was a political form of government that could also serve as a vehicle of sovereignty [...] This meant a shift in his conception of sovereignty and a weakening of its personalist and hard decisionist aspects [...] Schmitt shifted from an intransigent adherence to the conservative revolutionary themes he shared with de Maistre and Donoso Cortés to a more flexible position.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Maistre, *The Pope*, 119.

<sup>38</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. E. Kennedy (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press 1985), 16. Renato Cristi argues that Schmitt became much more critical of democracy in the 1930s, as part of his critique of the total state of the twentieth century, which he compared unfavourably to the absolute state of early modernity in *Die Hüter der Verfassung* [*The Guardian of the Constitution*] (1931) and *Legalität und Legitimität* [*Legality and Legitimacy*] (1932). Under absolutism, he argues, there was a clear separation between state and civil society. However, this distinction breaks down in the totalistic mass democracies of the twentieth century, as the state comes to be identified with civil society, weakening the former. Schmitt therefore “drastically downsized the people’s agency and allowed it only a passive role. The people could not govern, deliberate or discuss political issues [...] Democracy was to be plebicitary not participatory” (*Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism*, 206).

<sup>39</sup> Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism*, 115.

In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), Schmitt defines democracy as ‘the identity of governed and governing.’<sup>40</sup> For him, identity is the heart of democracy, an identity of “sovereign and subject, the identity of the subject and object of state authority, the identity of the people with their representatives in parliament, the identity of the state and the current voting population, the identity of the state and the law, and finally an identity of the qualitative (the numerical majority or unanimity) with the qualitative (the justice of the laws)” (26). Not surprisingly, Schmitt specifies two requirements for democracy: “homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication of heterogeneity” (9). While Maistre maligned the popular democrat Rousseau, hero of the French Revolutionaries, as “one of the most dangerous sophists of our century,”<sup>41</sup> Schmitt credited him with perceiving the fundamental identitarian logic of democracy and its need for homogeneity. “[T]he ‘general will’ demonstrates that a true state, according to Rousseau, only exists where the people are so homogeneous that there is essentially unanimity. According to the *Contrat social* there can be no parties in the state, no special interests, no religious differences, nothing that can divide persons.”<sup>42</sup>

There is even less place in Schmitt’s *völkisch* form of democracy for discussion – which “is not democratic but originally liberal”<sup>43</sup> – than there is in Rousseau’s Spartan “republic of virtue.” For Schmitt, fascist Italy is more democratic than liberal, and as such preferable to parliamentary regimes such as Weimar Germany or the United States, which are democracies “without a *demos*, without a people.” Whereas Maistre viewed all forms of democracy as instances of what Rousseau called the “will of all,” a mere aggregation of the selfish interests of atomized individuals, Schmitt believed that, under favourable conditions, democracy could genuinely embody a national “general will,” expressed through a Caesarist *Reichspräsident* legitimated by plebiscite.

Joseph de Maistre began his political life as a moderate Gallican and ended it as a leading proponent of ultramontanism, which he defended in

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<sup>40</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Maistre, *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, 34. Maistre’s attitude towards Rousseau was actually much more ambivalent than this quotation suggests. Rousseau’s deep hostility to the Enlightenment was not lost on Maistre. This argument is developed in my “Rousseau, Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment,” *History of Political Thought*, 15/1 (1994), 97-120.

<sup>42</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 13. In his *Verfassungslehre*, Schmitt refers to “the unrefutability of Rousseau’s democratic teachings” (205).

<sup>43</sup> Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 15.

*The Pope* (1819), a work published two years before his death. Yet in the transition from the one to the other he never successfully managed to square the circle of papal infallibility and absolute temporal sovereignty. On the one hand, the counter-revolutionary Maistre was eager to uphold the absolute rights of sovereigns, particularly in an age of insurrection, and to give no succour to subjects against their rulers. It is in the nature of government, he writes in *The Pope*, “to be infallible – that is to say, absolute.”<sup>44</sup> This position is consistent with the views on the nature of political sovereignty he expressed in his writings of the 1790s, particularly in *On the Origins of Sovereignty*, and it is deeply congenial to Schmitt’s way of thinking. On the other hand, the ultramontane Maistre appears to have had second thoughts about throwing in his lot entirely with the modern state, as Hobbes had done during the English civil war. It is likely that the anti-clericalism and anti-Christianity of the French Revolutionary state played some role in this. In *The Pope*, Maistre upholds the right of the pope to judge temporal rulers and to interpose himself between sovereigns and their subjects in exceptional cases. “Popes,” he writes, “have in reality restrained sovereigns, protected the people, put an end by their wise intervention to temporal quarrels, admonished kings and nations of their duties, and struck with anathema those great crimes they had not been able to prevent” (180). Maistre is quick to stress that this may only legitimately occur in cases of “great abuse, great criminality” on the part of a secular ruler (185). When this happens, then the Pope may legitimately release subjects from their oath of allegiance to such a sovereign (122, 196). This is preferable, on Maistre’s view, to allowing any other body or, worse, individuals, to decide when a sovereign need not be obeyed. He emphasized that, when Popes have acted in this manner, they have done so reluctantly and as a last resort, in order to maintain peace and to preserve the principle of sovereignty in general by acting against particular sovereigns who, by behaving tyrannically, have brought all rulers into disrepute.

The Popes have struggled sometimes with sovereigns, never with sovereignty. The very act by which they loosed subjects from their oath of allegiance, declared sovereignty inviolable. The Popes instructed the people that no human power could touch the sovereign, whose authority was only suspended by a power wholly divine [...] the blows struck by the Holy See against a small number of sovereigns, almost all odious, and sometimes, even, intolerable by their crimes, might check or alarm them, without altering in the minds of the people the high and sublime idea of their rulers it was their duty to entertain (128).

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<sup>44</sup> Maistre, *The Pope*, 2.

Maistre appears to be trying to uphold two practically incompatible principles: the absolute sovereign power of temporal rulers and the right of the pope to intervene between rulers and their subjects. Not surprisingly he emphasizes that relations between sovereigns and popes have been harmonious and mutually supportive in all but a few cases. Only rarely does conflict occur, he assures us, particularly in a revolutionary age, when the interests of traditional authorities such as the Crown and the Papacy converge even more than usual. "There is so much analogy, so much fraternity, so much dependence between the pontifical power and that of kings," Maistre claims, "that the former was never shaken without the latter being injured, and that the innovators of our age have never ceased to point out to kings the Christian priesthood as the greatest enemy of royal authority" (131). This is unlikely to convince any but the most uncritical of his readers and, I suspect, Maistre himself was not entirely persuaded by it, although he felt a pressing strategic need to make it.

Unlike Maistre, Schmitt was not an ultramontanist. He did not even attempt to uphold anything comparable to the rights that Maistre latterly accorded to the pope in temporal political matters, let alone try to present infallible papal power as somehow compatible with the absolute power of sovereigns. Yet Schmitt was a Catholic (officially until 1926, when he was excommunicated) who admired the Church as an exemplary political form which the rulers of secular states would do well to emulate. He liked to stress the extent to which the Church had historically supported nationalism and particularism. He even interpreted Maistre's views on the papacy as an expression of this:

[W]hat he [Maistre] sees as the cardinal point of his argument and, at the same time, its incontestable premise: public morality and national character are what everything depends upon. Christianity becomes a European religion. That papacy legitimises itself by virtue of its indispensability for national character.<sup>45</sup>

This accords with Schmitt's own view that, despite its universalism, the Catholic Church has actually defended local particularities from various forms of universalization, and that it has been much more effective in doing so than Protestantism. "Catholics in particular (Tyrolers, Spaniards, Poles, Irish)," he writes, "have Catholicism to thank for a large part of their national strength of resistance."<sup>46</sup>

Although his position in this matter is a major step closer to that of Hobbes than Maistre's ultramontanism was, the last two parts of

<sup>45</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press 1996), 5-6.

Hobbes's uncompromisingly Erastian *Leviathan* (1651) must have made very uncomfortable reading for the Catholic Schmitt, since they present the Roman Catholic Church as the arch-enemy of temporal sovereigns, belonging to the same class in which Schmitt put Jews, Protestants, Freemasons, and other dangerous *potestas indirecta*. For Hobbes, the Catholic Church was a subversive force in the body politic that set up "an unlawfull Power over the lawfull Sovereigns of Christian People."<sup>47</sup> He presents the Church of Rome as part of an organized conspiracy against the temporal power, dividing the loyalties of subjects and confusing their minds with "Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions." In *Leviathan*, the state is presented as an alternative to the autonomous ecclesiastical authority of the Vatican. Hobbes argues that the sovereign is the "supreme pastor" of his people and "God's prophet" in this world with an absolute right to control the opinions of his subjects, including their religious opinions. Therefore decrees such as those issued by the fourth Lateran Council (1215) – which became canon law enforced by an ecclesiastical court – requiring temporal leaders to expel all heretics from their dominions and declaring heretical preaching without the license of the pope or the local bishop, are obvious attempts to usurp the legitimate power of political sovereigns, according to Hobbes.

The Doctrine of the fourth Councill of Lateran, held under Pope *Innocent* the third, (Chap. 3. *de Haereticis*.) *That if a King at the Popes admonition, does not purge his Kingdome of Haeresies, and being excommunicate for the same, doe not give satisfaction within a year, his Subjects are absolved of the bond of their obedience [...]* And by this means, as often as there is any repugnancy between the Politicall designs of the Pope, and other Christian Princes, as there is very often, there ariseth such a Mist amongst their Subjects, that they know not a stranger that thrusteth himself into the throne of their lawfull Prince, from him whom they had themselves placed there; and in this Darknesse of mind, are made to fight against one another (631).

For Hobbes, the command of a sovereign would even have to be obeyed were he to forbid the Christian religion and require the public denial of one's Christian faith (chap. 42), something that must have put Schmitt's Catholicism and his admiration for Hobbes under strain. Even so, on this matter Schmitt's position appears to be much closer to that of Hobbes than to Maistre's. Throughout the 1920s, Schmitt increasingly gravitated in a Hobbesian direction. As he became more and more absorbed in the constitutional and political debates of Weimar Germany, Schmitt gradually distanced himself from the Catholic church and his

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968), 708.

interest in theological counter-revolutionaries such as Maistre waned. As George Schwab notes, during this period Schmitt “shifted his loyalty from the church, the possessor of *veritas*, to the state, the possessor of *potestas*.”<sup>48</sup> In his later years, Maistre moved in exactly the opposite direction.

Joseph de Maistre was opposed to many things. It often seems as though he was opposed to most things. But he was not anti-Semitic, unlike Schmitt. At least, if he was, then I have been unable to unearth any evidence of it.<sup>49</sup> Quite the opposite, in fact. His attitude on this subject compares very favourably indeed with that of the “enlightened” Voltaire, whose writings are littered with anti-Semitic barbs.<sup>50</sup> In his posthumously published *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition* (1822), Maistre boasts that the capital of Catholicism was “the only part of Europe where the Jew feels himself neither maltreated nor humbled [...] distinguished by the glorious title of ‘*the Jewish paradise*.’”<sup>51</sup> Maistre professed his admiration for Moses – “a wonderful man”<sup>52</sup> – as one of the truly great legislators of antiquity who realized that “politics is divinized, and human reason, crushed by the religious ascendancy, cannot insinuate its isolating and corrosive poison into the mechanisms of government, so that citizens are believers whose loyalty is exalted to faith, and obedience to enthusiasm and fanaticism.”<sup>53</sup> Despite arguing that no constitution can be made or written *a priori*, Maistre granted just one “magnificent”

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<sup>48</sup> George Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt Between 1921 and 1936*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, Westport, London: Greenwood 1989), 135.

<sup>49</sup> To his discredit, Maistre does claim in his *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition* (1822) that in the fifteenth century “Judaism deeply shot its roots into the soil of Spain, and threatened to kill the national plant [...] They were, indeed, a nation contained within another [...] The Jews were nearly masters of Spain [...] An insurrection broke out in the year 1391, and a dreadful slaughter ensued [...] it was indispensably necessary to establish the Inquisition, as best calculated to cure the political cancer which was rapidly corroding the heart of the nation” (*Letters on the Spanish Inquisition*, trans. Thomas J. O’Flaherty [Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints 1970], 22-3). I have been unable to find any other published comment on this subject by Maistre that is even remotely as negative as this.

<sup>50</sup> See Peter Gay, “Voltaire’s Anti-Semitism,” in *The Party of Humanity: Studies in the French Enlightenment*, ed. P. Gay (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1964), 97-108.

<sup>51</sup> Maistre, *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Maistre, *On the Origins of Sovereignty*, 78.

exception, that of “the Divine mission of the great Hebrew Lawgiver.”<sup>54</sup> There is even some truth to the characteristically exaggerated claim of E. M. Cioran when he writes that Maistre’s “affinities with the spirit of the Old Testament were so deep that his Catholicism seems, so to speak, Judaic, imbued with that prophetic frenzy of which he found but a faint trace in the gentle mediocrity of the Gospels.”<sup>55</sup>

Carl Schmitt’s attitude towards Judaism was completely different, as one would expect of a person who was a member of the Nazi Party, organized a conference on “German Jurisprudence in the Struggle Against the Jewish Spirit” shortly before the war, and defended Hitler’s Nuremberg laws that excluded Jews from German public life.<sup>56</sup> The most thorough and revealing discussion of this topic occurs in Schmitt’s 1938 essay on *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. In it, he paints a diabolical picture of the Jews as the most dangerous and successful “enemy within” the nation-states of modern Europe. In this work, Hobbes is faulted for opening a “barely visible crack in the

<sup>54</sup> Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> E.M. Cioran, “Joseph de Maistre: An Essay on Reactionary Thought,” in *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Little, Brown and Co. 1986, 1987), 48. Cioran also writes that, “when Maistre realised that the Jews in Russia, faithless toward their own theocratic tradition, were echoing certain ideologies imported from France, he turned against them, calling them subversive spirits and – the depth of abomination in his eyes – comparing them to Protestants” (47-8). Unfortunately, he does not support this claim with any evidence, and I have not been able to find any myself.

<sup>56</sup> “Die deutsche Rechtswissenschaft im Kampf gegen den jüdischen Geist: Schlusswort auf der Tagung der Reichsgruppe Hochschullehrer des NSRB vom 3 und 4 Ocktober 1936,” in *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung*, J-2, Jg. 41, Hefl 20 (Oktober 15, 1936), 1193-99. Schmitt joined the Nazi Party in May 1933. Stephen Holmes claims that Schmitt was always anti-Semitic. Paul Gottfried takes the view that “Schmitt had never been an anti-Semite or Aryan racist before 1933,” although “for several years past revolutionary rightists had eagerly sought his friendship” (*Carl Schmitt* [London: Claridge 1990], 38, 35). Chantal Mouffe writes that it is “incorrect to assert, as some do, that Schmitt’s thinking was imbued with Nazism before his turnabout of 1933 and his espousal of Hitler’s movement. There is, however, no doubt that it was his deep hostility to liberalism which made possible, or which did not prevent, his joining the Nazis” (*The Return of the Political* [London: Verso 1993], 121). Others – including Schmitt himself – argue that he was not really anti-Semitic even after 1933. Rather, his “anti-Semitism” was an act of opportunism in the context of Nazi Germany (Joseph Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist of the Third Reich* [Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983], 281-2). John McCormick sensibly takes a middle path (*Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997], 266-70).

theoretical justification of the sovereign state” by insisting on a strong distinction between public and private.<sup>57</sup> The “liberal Jew” Spinoza ruthlessly exploited this opening, having recognized in it “the telling inroad of modern liberalism, which would allow Hobbes’ postulation of the relation between external and internal, public and private, to be inverted into its converse [...] and the leviathan’s vitality was sapped from within and life began to drain out of him (57). Ever since, Jewish intellectuals such as Moses Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, Börne, Heine, Meyerbeer, and Friedrich Julius Stahl-Jolson have pursued and advanced Spinoza’s subversive project. For Schmitt, Jews are the primal enemies of “the political,” with an “unerring instinct for the undermining of state power” to serve their own selfish interest (60). Schmitt did not mince his words in this study of Hobbes, boldly arguing that “the Jews stand by and watch how the people of the world kill one another. This mutual ‘ritual slaughter and massacre’ is for them lawful and ‘kosher,’ and they therefore eat the flesh of the slaughtered peoples and are sustained by it (9). Subsequent events appear to have done little to dent Schmitt’s attitude towards the Jews, as demonstrated by his unrepentant postwar diary (*Glossarium*), in which he writes that “Jews remain Jews, while Communists can improve themselves and change [...] The real enemy is the assimilated Jew.”<sup>58</sup>

## III

Carl Schmitt’s attempt to claim Joseph de Maistre as an intellectual ancestor was largely fraudulent, notwithstanding some important points of convergence. Schmitt exaggerated these points while overlooking what was most important to Maistre’s outlook. Although both were “anti-liberals,” they nonetheless inhabited different intellectual worlds, one revolving around providentialism and the other decisionism. Schmitt’s presentation of his relationship to Maistre was seriously distorted by its exclusive focus on this area of convergence. When the decisive differences between them are taken into account, Maistre appears much less like an ancestor of the “revolutionary conservatism” of inter-war Germany and more like a traditional Catholic reactionary.<sup>59</sup> His anti-

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<sup>57</sup> Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> See Schmitt’s *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951*, ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot 1991), 18.

<sup>59</sup> The only significant aspect of Maistre’s outlook that was less orthodox than Schmitt’s was his interest in Freemasonry. Maistre was a practising Freemason for much of his adult life, eventually rising to the senior rank of *Grand Profes* of his lodge in Chambéry, notwithstanding Pope Benedict XIV’s anti-Masonic bull of 1751 (Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual*



populism, ultramontanism, and providentialism in particular reveal him to be much less of a “realist,” as Schmitt understood the term, than he appears in the Procrustean bed of Schmitt’s writings.

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*Militant* [Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988], 57). Richard Lebrun claims that 1782 was “probably the high point of Maistre’s enthusiasm for Masonry” (*Joseph de Maistre*, 67). Although Maistre’s active involvement with Masonry diminished during the 1780s, he retained his interest in it and is thought to have occasionally frequented gatherings of Freemasons while he lived in St. Petersburg. Many Catholics and Counter-Revolutionaries believed that Freemasons were among the secret conspiratorial groups that had helped to bring about the Revolution. The most influential exponent of this conspiracy theory of the Revolution involving Freemasons was Abbé Barruel (1741 – 1820), whose *Mémoire pour servir à l’histoire des jacobinisme* (1797) was very influential in shaping the nineteenth century conception of the Enlightenment and its links with the Revolution. (See Amos Kaufman, ‘The Origins of the Theory of the Philosophe Conspiracy’, *French History*, 2 [1988], 152-72). Maistre’s pre-Revolutionary “Mémoire sur la Franc-Maçonnerie” was an explicit defence of Freemasonry, one of the goals of which was “the advancement of Christianity.” He argued that Freemasonry could act as “an intermediary institution between church and state, palliating the insufficiencies of the one and the other, aiding the one and the other without substituting itself for them” (Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 67). Carl Schmitt’s view of Freemasonry was much more conventional for a conservative Catholic than was Maistre’s. Like traditionalists such as the Abbé Barruel, he grouped it with those secret, sectarian “forces of society” such as Rosicrucians, mystics, pietists and, above all, Jews, which together constituted the many “silent ones in the land” who surreptitiously worked to advance their own partial interests at the expense of the state and the public interest that it represents. “[T]he masonic lodges, conventicles, synagogues, and literary circles,” he wrote, “all displayed by the eighteenth century their enmity toward the leviathan elevated to a symbol of state” (Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, p. 62). For Schmitt, the eighteenth century Masonic order that Maistre actively participated in and promoted as a source of support for Christianity was, in reality, Catholicism’s “last European adversary” (Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* [*Roman Catholicism and Political Form*], quoted in Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, 147).

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*Part Four: Reception and Influence*

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*Joseph de Maistre's  
Works in Russia:  
A Look at their Reception*<sup>1</sup>

The great subject of “Joseph de Maistre in Russia” can be treated in two different ways: on the one hand, one can concentrate on Joseph de Maistre’s relations with Russians during his stay in St. Petersburg as minister of the king of Sardinia, a stay that lasted fourteen years – from 1803 to 1817; on the other hand, one can speak of what one calls “the reception” – reactions (sometimes very unexpected) that Maistre’s works have provoked among Russian authors. The two subjects are equally interesting, however the first is – at least in broad terms – well enough known. Maistre’s biographers have several times recounted in detail the story of his diplomatic career, the part that he took in the conversions of Russians to Catholicism (the Russian Catholic Sofïia Svechina [known as Sophie Swetchine in France] was right to name him “the great sower”), his relations with the Jesuits in Russia and the co-relation between his departure from Russia and the expulsion of Jesuits from St. Petersburg. Therefore, I will mention only briefly the circumstances of Maistre’s stay in Russia. On the contrary, it seems to me very important to try to track down the echoes of Maistre’s writings in Russian literature over two centuries to prove the intense presence, although underground, of his work in that literature.

THE RECEPTION OF MAISTRE’S WORKS  
IN RUSSIA: MAISTRE’S DOUBLE IMAGE

Maistre’s destiny in Russia is unique, because one could only read his works in French (translations were almost non-existent, save for some letters published in translation in the second half of the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> “Oeuvres de Joseph de Maistre en Russie: Aperçu de la réception,” *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 13 (2001) 63-89.

century<sup>2</sup>), but they were known, and they were cited. Even in secular novels Maistrarian ideas were actively exploited (in the majority of cases, it is true, in a polemical way). There is more; we know that Russian civilization, developing later than European civilization, often followed its example, with the appearance of “Russian Voltaires,” “Racines of the North,” and other parallel phenomena. Moreover, the figure of a “Russian Joseph de Maistre” also existed, and there were even several pretenders to this role, pretenders who sometimes – and this is something very interesting – in no way shared the ideas of the author of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*; nevertheless, not sharing his ideas, they closely followed his mental strategy. Moreover, nineteenth-century people, French as well as Russian, were in general very sensible to a supposed ambiguity in Maistre’s works; we know Silvestre de Sacy’s *mot* who said: “Paradoxically, Joseph de Maistre is the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of religious and political reaction, and he is its Voltaire by his manner of writing.”<sup>3</sup> Silvestre de Sacy was joined by Henri Lutteroth, author of *La Russie et les Jésuites* (1845); Lutteroth says that in Maistre’s letters on public education in Russia:

one finds all the qualities and all the faults of their author: his love of paradox, his mordant irony, his passionate polemic, the cutting tone of his assertions, his inexact citations and his bad faith; and with that the love of the good, the just, and the true, which for almost always being deceived on the object of its pursuits, is none the less estimable.<sup>4</sup>

One can also recall the words of a Russian diplomat and French poet, the Polish Xavier Labinski who, in his refutation (in French) of the Marquis de Custine’s *La Russie en 1839*, in speaking of the crowd of Maistre’s imitators, said that Maistre “even when he is wrong, is always new and piquant, because the same ideas are paraphrased to satiation by all the boys in theology who live on the crumbs of this grave sophist.”<sup>5</sup>

So to utilize Maistre’s ideas and images it was evidently not necessary to share his opinions, and this is what permitted Maistre to play an important role in the genesis of masterpieces of Russian literature. Pushkin owed to him the description of the famous monument of Peter

<sup>2</sup> One letter to Prince Kozlovskii, several letters to King Victor-Emmanuel I, and one letter to the Marquis Paulucci.

<sup>3</sup> Silvestre de Sacy, *Variétés littéraires, morales et historiques* (1858), 2:80-1 (review of Maistre’s *Correspondances et opuscules inédites*, first published 26 December 1851).

<sup>4</sup> H. Lutteroth, *La Russie et les Jésuites* (Paris: 1845), 26.

<sup>5</sup> X. Labinski, *Un mot sur l’ouvrage de M. de Custine La Russie en 1839, par un Russe* (Paris 1843), 26.

the Great in St. Petersburg; it is the phrase from the first dialogue of the *Soirées*: "His terrible arm is still extended over their posterity [Peter the Great's subjects], who press around his noble effigy; looking at him, one does not know whether this bronze hand protects or threatens" – which brings up the famous description of Falconet's statue in Pushkin's poem *Bronze Cavalier*, and all the ambiguous meaning of this poem (what is the state of man: salvation or death?) is summed up in this Maistrarian alternative: "protects or threatens."<sup>6</sup> Tolstoy owes to Maistre the pages of *War and Peace* on philosophy of history, and Dostoevski the vision of war as a redemptive force. Nineteenth-century Russian literature is truly marked by Maistre's presence, but this presence is always hidden, subterranean, and implicit. We will speak in more detail of Tolstoy and Dostoevski, writers of the second half of the nineteenth century, but for the moment we must occupy ourselves with the first half of this century. Before passing to the reception of Maistre's written work, it is necessary to say a few words about his oral heritage, kept in the memories of his Russian contemporaries.

#### AN ESSAY IN "MAISTRIANA"

We know that Maistre was not only a brilliant writer, but as well an excellent orator whose words fascinated his salon listeners. One Russian man of letters, Stepan Zhikharev, noted in 1807 in his journal:

I would not want to spend a week alone with Count de Maistre, for he would surely transform me into a proselyte. He is full of wit, he has an unlimited erudition, he speaks like Cicero, and his words are so convincing that it is decidedly impossible not to share his opinions.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, when it is a question of a first-rate talker, there is always a temptation to make a collection of his "sayings," following the example of those anthologies very popular in the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which are called "ana." So here are some contributions to a "Maistriana" that could have been put together from Russian memories and private correspondence (often unpublished).

Prince Kozlovskii, a Russian diplomat, who was the Russian minister to the King of Sardinia at the time when Maistre was the Sardinian

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<sup>6</sup> The Maistrarian description of St. Petersburg, to be found at the opening of the *Soirées*, was so popular at the time that it was even cited in its entirety in the *Guide du voyageur à Saint-Pétersbourg*, published in French in 1840 (132-4); see L. Grossman, "Balzac vs. Rossi," in *Literatournoïe nasledstvo* (Moscow 1937), 31-32:220.

<sup>7</sup> S. Zhikharev, *Zapiski sovremennika* (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk 1955), 390.

minister at the Russian court, who visited Maistre in St. Petersburg in 1812 and in Turin in 1817 and who in 1817, at the time of Maistre's recall from St. Petersburg, took up his defense with the Russian minister of foreign affairs – this prince spoke in a private letter of 1815 of a lost evening that his guests had missed, and Maistre's daily philosophy came to his mind:

There are people – the old Maistre told me – full of wit, full of the future, always ready, but who have had the misfortune to get it into their head that good-naturedness is silly. They adore you. Then all of a sudden they close the door on you. You ask why? No explanation. You cry, no pity. You swear that if you have sinned, it is, my faith, despite yourself, and even without realizing it. But they tell you nothing. You guess and you tremble while waiting every day, every hour, to lose a society that is dear to you.<sup>8</sup>

Stepan Zhikharev, whom I have already cited, noted some Maistrian paradoxes in his journal. On 10 January 1807, he remarks:

In speaking of some of our common acquaintances, belonging to high society, he said that he loved them well and esteemed them, but however sees them rarely, for their characters, following the example of some chemical elements, are excellent in themselves, but incompatible with others.<sup>9</sup>

On 26 February of the same year, he notes other no less paradoxical words of Maistre: he affirms that: “almost always it is necessary to be more careful of one's friends than one's enemies, because the latter, at least, are not going to lead you into error by their counsels; he also said that one must reveal our insignificance only to God, while hiding it from mortals so as not to attract their scorn.”<sup>10</sup>

If these last words seem to Zhikharev too close to “Jesuitism,” he shares fully another of Maistre's reflections, where speaking of a statesman who all the world took for a genius, he said that he, Maistre,

thought little of his genius, because this magistrate always surrounds himself with nonentities, and moreover, if he does it better to hide his plans and his thoughts, he does so poorly, because in the majority of cases it is not the people to whom we ourselves confide our secrets who betray us, but those who guess them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Institut de la littérature russe (henceforth – IRLI), Département des manuscrits, Fonds 309, N 28091, letter to Vasiliï Zhukovskii of 26 December 1835. Text in French.

<sup>9</sup> S. Zhikharev, *Sapiski sovremennika*, 318.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

## MAISTRE'S MOST OFTEN CITED MAXIMS

One of the proofs of the popularity of the Maistrarian work in Russia is the presence in Russian literary works of different kinds of citations drawn from the author of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. It is therefore important to try to draw up a list of Maistrarian maxims that have entered into the Russian literary vocabulary and which, repeated in articles, in letters, and even in novels, have been preserved in people's memories to our day. Our list does not claim to be exhaustive, but it appears to us to be very characteristic.

On this list, it is the passage on the executioner, drawn from the first dialogue of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, that by right occupies the first place. I am going to cite some significant examples.

Aleksandr Pushkin said in the review of Samson's "Mémoires" (1830): "Let us admit it, we awaited the appearance of the "Mémoires du bourreau Sampson" with impatience, although with aversion. [...] So what will we say of this work, which inspired the Count de Maistre's poetical and terrible page?"<sup>12</sup> (The review was published in the *Gazette littéraire* in 1830; moreover, Pushkin had the 1831 edition of the *Soirées* – the second Lyon edition – in his private library, completely cut up,<sup>13</sup> which proves that his interest in Maistre's work was constant enough).

Aleksandr Bestuzhev, who wrote under the pseudonym of Marlinskii, includes in his little novel *Une soirée aux eaux de Caucase en 1824* (1830) the following reflection:

Not only at night but also in daylight, it is unpleasant to see the horrible scene of moral and physical destruction that the ultimate penalty presents to us. It is only the Count de Maistre who knew how to see in the person of the executioner a figure that is consoling for humanity, the representative of divine justice on earth. My brother, it is true, had not read a single line of this, but even if he had read it, he would remain loyal to the voice of nature and would not have believed the perfidious logic of Torquemada, mixing divine causes with humiliating instruments.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A. Pushkin, *Polnoé sobranie sotchinenii* (Leningrad: Naouka 1978): 7:74-5.

<sup>13</sup> B. Modzalevskii, *Biblioteka A.S. Pouchkina* (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaĭa Akademia Naouk 1910), 279, N 1123.

<sup>14</sup> A. Bestuzhev (Marlinskii), *Sotchinienia* (Moscow: Khoudojestvennaĭa literatoura 1981), 1:273.



The socialist Alexander Herzen called Maistre “the bloody terrorist, who, through fear of Napoleon, gave one hand to the pope and the other to the executioner.” (*De l'autre rive* (1850)).<sup>15</sup>

Aleksandr Turgenev, about whom I will say more later, in a letter to a Russian friend of 8/20 February 1841, recounts his impression of religious lectures by the Dominican Lacordaire who seemed to him too imbued with French nationalism: Lacordaire “sings the praises of the League, about which we can say many bad things, but whose greatness we will understand better each day; when one preserves a people and its faith, when one saves its nationality, all one’s faults are lost in glory.” Turgenev does not agree with this point of view, calls Lacordaire “the guardian of the Inquisition and its pyres,” and contests his ideas, using those of Joseph de Maistre:

If the executioner of civil society, the Count de Maistre’s *keystone*, is a sad necessity, the executioner of the Church, of the religion of love and charity, the instrument of the Inquisition is nothing other than the horrible anomaly of the moral, religious, and political world.<sup>16</sup>

Not only the passage on the executioner as the “keystone,” but also the idea of raising a statue to Voltaire by the hand of the executioner was known and often cited in Russia.

Prince Petr Viazemskii, poet and literary critic, a friend of Pushkin, a Voltairian in his youth and a rather lukewarm believer in his old age, wrote in his book *Fonvizine*, completed in 1832 and published in 1848, with respect to Fonvizine’s anti-French invectives in his letters written from France:

After that, Fréron and Nonnotte [a Jesuit adversary of Voltaire] must appear to be people of great composure, and it is only the Count de Maistre who could have surpassed Fonvizine, especially when he erected a monument to Voltaire by the executioner’s hand.<sup>17</sup>

This was a key citation for Viazemskii, who also mentioned it in a 1827 article, in speaking of the affinities of different thinkers by their ideas, but belonging to a single century: Voltaire and Rousseau, despite all their quarreling, have a closer kinship between them than with Count de

<sup>15</sup> A. Herzen, *Sobranie sotchinanii* (Moscow: Khoudojestvennaia literatoura 1956), 3:341.

<sup>16</sup> IRLI, Fonds 309, N 2550, fol. 43; the italicized words are in French in the text.

<sup>17</sup> P. Viazemskii, *Polnoie sobranie sotchinenni* (St. Petersburg 1880), 5:84.

Maistre who "with a dash of indulgent eloquence would have had a statue to Voltaire raised by the executioner's hand."<sup>18</sup>

Another popular phrase from Maistre is that which affirms that each people has the government that it deserves. There is nothing astonishing in the fact that educated people in the nineteenth century willingly cited it; for example, a Russian émigré, Vladimir Pecherin, about whom I will speak more later, wrote on 7 June 1864 to another Russian émigré, Prince Petr Dolgorukii:

I no longer know what to think of the character of our people. Count de Maistre says a terrible thing: "Each people has the government it deserves." Autocracy, it seems to me, is very dear to our people. How they love to seek the master's good graces, to spy, etc.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are many more astonishing examples; on 16 July 1996, the magazine *Itogui* (a Russian variant of *Newsweek*) published a letter from a Russian merchant seaman who writes:

The words of a Sardinian minister pronounced in 1811 remain current; in speaking about Alexander I's new laws he said: "each people has the government it deserves." There is something in the elections of the mayor of St. Petersburg that proves it.

Thus, in completely modern conditions one refers to a "rule" formulated by Maistre.

I have spoken of the utilization of Maistrian maxims by nineteenth-century Russian people, but the reception of Maistre's work was not limited, surely, to simple citations of aphorisms. Maistre always had attentive readers (readers in French, because translations, as I have said, did not exist). These readers did not necessarily share all the thinker's ideas, but they did not know these ideas by hearsay.

#### MAISTRE'S ASSIDUOUS READERS: SOME EXAMPLES

Among Maistre's readers one meets people with entirely different reactions. Mikhail Orlov (1788-1842), a general, who had studied in St. Petersburg at the Abbé Nicole's Jesuit school and who in 1814 had signed the act of capitulation of Paris, received in the same year from Maistre the first edition of the *Considérations sur la France*, and on 24 December 1814 he responds to the author with an admiring letter where he finds in

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<sup>18</sup> P. Viazemskii, *Estetika i literatournaia kritika* (Moscow: Iskousstvo 1984), 68 (article "Les sonets de Mickiewicz").

<sup>19</sup> *Contexte-1993* (Moscow: Naslédié), 51.

all the historical events that have taken place since the book's appearance a testimony to the truth of the ideas proclaimed there ("The *Moniteur* is the most voluminous development of your ideas").<sup>20</sup> There is something of great significance in the fact that Maistre's complete works, which appeared with Vitte in Lyon (to this day the most complete edition), justly opens with this admiring letter from a Russian who called the *Considérations sur la France* "a classic work that one could not study too much, a classic by the host of profound and great ideas that it contains," a work "worthy of Bossuet's pen," a prophetic work. However Orlov had rather liberal opinions and a little later participated in the Decembrist movement, which had the goal of modifying the Russian political regime – so he was not necessarily in agreement with all Maistre's ideas.

On the contrary, the great historian Nikolai Karamzin (1766-1826), a man of conservative opinions, a convinced monarchist, remained unmoved by the seductions of Maistrian style. On 14 July 1821, Karamzin wrote to his friend, the poet Ivan Dmitriev: "I am reading with a headache *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* of Count de Maistre, whose reflections have such a profound sense that they prove to be totally deprived of meaning."<sup>21</sup>

It is convenient to demonstrate the diversity of reactions provoked by Maistre's work with the example of the three Turgenev brothers (who are homonyms only of the great novelist Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev), sons of the famous Russian Mason of Catherine II's time – Ivan Petrovich Turgenev (1752-1807).

The one who did the most for the diffusion of Maistre's unpublished works was the eldest, Aleksandr Turgenev (1784-1845), who, however, most often kept his distance with respect to the ideas of the author of *Du Pape*. There is more: at the time of Maistre's stay in Russia, Turgenev occupied the post of director of the department of foreign cults in the Ministry of Public Instruction, and he participated actively in the expulsion of Jesuits from St. Petersburg (1815) and subsequently from Russia (1821) – a measure against which Maistre protested with all of his strength and which was one of the causes for his retirement from his diplomatic post. However Aleksandr Turgenev also quit his post and became a tireless mediator between French culture and Russia. He informed his Russian friends as much by his "monster" letters, eighty pages in length, real cultural chronicles of Parisian life, as by the sending

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<sup>20</sup> J. de Maistre, *Oeuvres complètes* (Lyon: Vitte 1924), 1:l.

<sup>21</sup> N. Karamzine, *Lettres à Dmitriev* (St. Petersburg 1866), 310-11.

of new French books.<sup>22</sup> I already said that Aleksandr Turgenev kept his distance with respect to Maistrian ideas (his sympathies went towards more moderate Catholicism or towards enlightened Protestantism); nevertheless he knew Maistre's works, read them himself, and diffused them among his friends. For example, it is from Turgenev that Henri Lutteroth, editor of the Protestant Parisian review *Semeur*, received the text of the *Cinq lettres sur l'instruction publique en Russie*. Unpublished at that time, these letters were cited at length by Lutteroth in his book *La Russie et les Jésuites* (1845). Turgenev knew Maistre's work better than some of the French journalists of the 1840s. On 14 February 1845 he informs his Russian friends about a mistake made by one of the editors of the *Journal des Débats*, who, in speaking of Joseph de Maistre, called him Xavier; it is Turgenev who remarks with indignation and cites the witty bon mot of a woman, who said of this: "It's as if one would say Jean-Jacques Voltaire!"<sup>23</sup>

It is Turgenev as well who in 1836 had imported into Russia Maistre's posthumously published book on Bacon, which appeared that same year. However Maistre's ideas as exposed in that book in no way pleased him. Maistre, he wrote in a private letter of 7 September 1836, treats Bacon "as a rascal, as ignorant (!), and as impious! I will pass on the piety – but to refuse science to Bacon is more brazen than refusing the keys of St. Peter to his successor!"<sup>24</sup> In 1839 he informs his old boss, the ex-minister of public instruction, Prince Aleksandr Golitzyn of the publication in the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* (1832, Vol. 5, No. 28) of Maistre's *Lettre à une dame protestante sur la maxime qu'un honnête homme ne change jamais de religion* and promised him to send him its text.<sup>25</sup>

Maistre's name is always found linked to Aleksandr Turgenev's religious and philosophical reflections. Thus, on 2 June 1830, he writes from Paris to his friend Prince Viazemskii with respect to Madame Récamier and the religion that she confesses:

She is open to the supreme, spiritual religion, that of the heart, religion created not for earthly people, but for incorporeal beings, created not here, but there, where they do not even have need of faith, let alone a church, where spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> See M. Thiery, "Alexandre Tourgueniev," in *Histoire de la littérature russe. XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'époque de Pouchkine et de Gogol* (Paris: Fayard 1996), 223-5; and V. Miltchyna, "Un cosmopolite russe entre la France et l'Allemagne: Alexandre Tourgueniev," in *Philogogues IV. Transferts culturels triangulaires France-Allemagne-Russie*, under the direction of K. Dmitrieva and M. Espagne (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme 1996), 167-86.

<sup>23</sup> A. Turgenev, *Khronika rousskogo* (Mosow-Leningrad: Naouka 1964), 251.

<sup>24</sup> *Literatournyi arkhiv* (Moscow-Leningrad 1938), 1:84. In French in the text.

<sup>25</sup> See IRLI, Fonds 309, N 1102a, fol. 2, verso, letter of 7/19 April 1839.

dualism will not confront man with nature, but man with the Creator of this nature. This thought, this opinion, does not exclude the need to bend the mind in this fragile abyss not only to obedience to the faith, according to the word of the apostle, but as well to obedience to the church, according to the Count de Maistre's statement about all beliefs, and on this point I am in agreement I do not remember with whom, but it seems to me with this same Maistre, who says that the dogma is a truth-law.<sup>26</sup>

On 30 September 1835 in the Swetchine salon, Turgenev takes part in a theological discussion where Maistre is evoked: "'The greatest crime against grace is to count on it too much.' Count de Maistre's profound saying, especially for those who, not acting on their own strengths, hope only in divine grace."<sup>27</sup> This dialogue on faith and individual liberty is, moreover often linked to Maistre's name by Russian authors. For example, the secretary of Russian ambassador in Paris, Viktor Balabin, speaking in his journal of the impotence of the French government, remarks: "Wasn't Count de Maistre right to say, somewhere, that things proceed independently and often in spite of government."<sup>28</sup>

The other brother, Sergei Turgenev, who died in 1827 at thirty-seven years of age, was much more skeptical about Maistre's theories. He left unpublished remarks about the book *Du Pape* that we will cite at length to show what the educated Russian public found to refute in the Maistrian reflections on the Holy See:

The preliminary discourse goes on and on. There is only one truth to be found there, which is that the French nobility caused, in great part, the revolution, and one easily sees that the reasons that the author gives to believe this are not true. M[aire] takes infallibility for the absolute, infallibility for sovereignty. Marvelous! But what therefore would hide the arbitrariness that the pope calls infallibility? Is therefore absolute monarchy tempered by aristocracy the best of governments? And yet what aristocracy? M. must make Protestantism [detested?]. But why always confuse the temporal and the political with religion? All this must be considered under other points of view [without that] you will no longer bring men back to your ideas. They would not even want to reason about your dogmas. It is in vain for you to be consistent in your deductions, your principle is no less false. Your explain poorly. [...] The Church is not what you say. It is universal for all Christians; its leader is no longer visible; but its laws remain, only it has nothing in common with your government. This work appears

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<sup>26</sup> *Ostafievskii arkhiv kniazai Viagemskikh* (St. Petersburg 1899), 3:206. The thought cited by Turgenev is a paraphrase of the beginning of the book *Du pape*: "theological truths are no other than general truths manifested and divinized within the sphere of religion, in such a manner that it is impossible to attack one without attacking a law of the world."

<sup>27</sup> Turgenev's diary – IRLI, Fonds 309, N 305, fol. 134; in French in the text.

<sup>28</sup> V. Balabine, *Journal* (Paris 1914), 1:209 (25 April 1845).

to me as harmful as it is useless. You establish that the council is the last instance and you will transport infallibility, the Supremacy, respect [?] of the judged matter to this council or to the Synod.

This work is still remarkable, fortunately is not worth the trouble of being refuted. However as curious as it is, I ask what is it good for today? Will someone tell me that the truth is always good for something? What is there that is truly good, true, has already been said before him, but it is [useless to absolute sovereigns]. Does he claim in effect to reunite all Christians today?

The embarrassment of the bishops proves that they feel the arbitrariness of the Pope, that they want to remedy it, but do not know how to do it. If some had the same need today, they would arrange it more easily.

The citations relative to the Greek and Russian churches are curious, to prove the supremacy of the pope. But that which was is no longer, and probably will not be.

[...] However today the popes have changed position; far from taking part in the independence of Italy, they prevent its reunion, without which it cannot obtain its independence. [...] Prejudices alongside of truths. In the centuries of barbarism, it was no doubt advantageous that a superior power had a certain influence on sovereigns. However today there are other surer means to influence them.

[...] Maistre says that modern Greeks, even in freeing themselves from the Turkish yoke, will never form a sovereignty. It has never had one. What therefore was the Later [Roman] Empire? Moreover this is not the same as it must be.

I find everything in Maistre except Christian charity.

How he clings to words, for example, that of Catholic, which habit alone has made common, since when one wants to speak more clearly, one never fails to add Roman.<sup>29</sup>

It must be pointed out that Sergei Turvenev was not an Orthodox theologian, he was rather a political thinker and a reader attentive to the logic of thought.

The third brother, Nickolai Turgenev (1789-1871), a Decembrist (condemned to death in absentia for his participation in the plot of 14 December 1825), a liberal, and a tireless partisan of the abolition of serfdom in Russia, was the most severe. In 1845 he read Lutteroth's *La Russie et les Jésuites*, published first in the *Semur*, finding there some fragments of the *Lettres sur l'éducation en Russie*, and on 25 May 1845 he writes to his brother Aleksandr that Maistre's letters are

curious by their infamy. I am full of tolerance in affairs of his kind, and yet I cannot read them without aversion. When it is a question of the interests of their

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<sup>29</sup> IRLI, Fonds 309, N 4512, fol. 1-2 verso, in French in the text.

material Catholicism, these gentlemen don't give a damn about anything, liberty, enlightenment, or civilization.<sup>30</sup>

This protestation was no longer dictated by the orthodoxy of the author (Nikolai Turgenev being in no way a fanatic of the Greek cult), but by his liberal views. Maistre's reflections on the science that "rendered man lazy, incapable of business and great enterprises" could not have pleased him.

Still another source of Maistre's influence on the minds of Russians was Saint-Simonianism, as is witnessed by the memoirs of Vladimir Pecherin (1807-1885). Here was a man with an extraordinary biography. In the 1830s, he was a young and brilliant professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Moscow. Nevertheless, in consequence of the passionate reading of Saint-Simon's works, Lamennais' *Paroles du croyant*, and George Sand's novels, he renounced the career that was opening before him in his native country; he profited from the occasion to leave for Europe and did not return at the expected time (which was strictly forbidden by the Russian laws of the time). In Europe (in Switzerland first, and then in France) he would adhere to the Saint-Simonians and to the socialists, leading a life without money, work, or domicile, then renouncing socialist ideas he converted himself to Catholicism and entered (by sincere conviction) the religious order of the Redemptorists. He remained with them for almost twenty years, preaching Catholicism in Ireland (and preaching in a brilliant way), then leaving the order by a new deception and ending his days in Ireland, but as a simple chaplain at a hospital in Dublin. We see that Pecherin's life is only a succession of enthusiasms and deceptions. In both, however, Maistre played a considerable role. Finding himself in France in the second half of the 1830s, Pecherin "devoured" the three volumes of *La Religion de Saint-Simon*, where *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* was highly praised; so he got this book for himself and ended up loving it. On the contrary, in the 1860s and 1870s, when he worked on his memoirs, Pecherin disapproved of the political idols of his youth, for the most part French, and especially French rhetoric, which appeared to him as false and artificial (guided by the spirit of polemic he even gave these memoirs the title *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, proposing a sort of antithesis of Chateaubriand's book). Then Maistre is transformed for Pecherin from a venerated prophet into a detestable old fool who wrote in a style that was "heavy, pompous, dazzling the reader by the flashiness of his

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<sup>30</sup> IRLI, Fonds 309, N 3979, fol. 3 verso.

erudition."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the attitude towards Maistre never remained neutral; one can follow him with admiration, one can deny him with indignation, but one cannot remain indifferent. Moreover, indignation did not prevent Pecherin from often enough citing Maistre's famous saying on government, as we have seen above.

"RUSSIAN JOSEPH DE MAISTRE" FIGURES  
THE FIRST "RUSSIAN JOSEPH DE  
MAISTRE": PETR CHAADAEV

I have already said that not only was Joseph de Maistre read in Russia, but that there were several thinkers and writers who, for some peculiarities of their works or their ideas, were baptized by their contemporaries as "Russian Joseph de Maistres." It is to this part of the story of Joseph de Maistre in Russia, the most astonishing part of all, that we now turn. This part will include several sections of which the first must surely be devoted to Petr Chaadaev (1794-1856). A brilliant officer in the second decade of the nineteenth century, a "beau," worthy of being called the Russian dandy, he abruptly left the service in 1820 (perhaps because he understood that military service could not favour his ambitious designs). He traveled in Europe, and then shut himself in his Moscow study for several years. During these years of seclusion he created in French the texts that bear the title of *Lettres philosophiques*; in them he touches on many crucial questions for Russia, notably its relations with European culture and civilization. The response that he gave was pessimistic enough. Russia "only exists to give some great lesson to the world," but the lesson is rather terrible, because Russians for the moment "make a gap in the intellectual order" of Europe, they are "of the number of those nations that do not seem to form an integral part of human kind"; who are excluded from the great Catholic civilization, that of educated and active Christianity (in opposition to Orthodox Christianity, uncultivated and passive).<sup>32</sup> Written in the 1820s and 1830s, Chaadaev's letters remained unpublished for some years, although his friends had certainly read them and even made efforts to publish them abroad or at least made them known there (thus Aleksandr Turgenev showed the text of them to Ballanche who appreciated them very much and sent his compliments to the author). However the publication of the first letter, that which is the

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<sup>31</sup> W. Pecherin, "Zamogilnyié zapiski (Apologia pro vita mea)," in *Rousskoé obschestvo 30-kh godov XIX veka. Liudi i idei. Memouary sovremennikov* (Moscow 1989), 233-4.

<sup>32</sup> See P. Tchaadaev, *Lettres philosophiques*, presented by F. Rouleau (Paris: Librairie des cinq continents 1970), 51-2 ff.



most reproving and which denies, so to say, modern Russian civilization, in a Muscovite review *Télescope* in October 1836, caused an enormous scandal. The censor was discharged, the editor of the review exiled, and for Chaadaev himself the Emperor in person invented an extraordinary punishment: they had him proclaimed a fool and for a year and half the doctor came to his home each day to examine him and to "take his pulse."

After this short look at Chaadaev's biography, let us return to our subject. Already from this brief review of his ideas we can perceive several affinities between his work and Maistre's ideas. For the two thinkers one of Russia's great misfortunes is to have been "removed from the general movement of civilization and the freeing that came from Rome" (Maistre, *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*); to be compared with Chaadaev:

The vivifying principle of unity then animated everything in Europe [in the Middle Ages]. [...] Foreign to this marvelous principle we had to become the prey of conquest. [...] Relegated in our schism, nothing of what was happening in Europe came to us. [...] The new destinies of human kind were not accomplished for us. Christians, the fruit of Christianity did not ripen for us. (*Première Lettre philosophique*)

The principle of unity, and the Papacy as the instrument of unity, are the ideas the most dear to the two thinkers. Maistre, who Chaadaev esteemed highly,<sup>33</sup> was not the only French author who influenced him. Bonald or Ballanche also played a large role in the formation of the Russian thinker. However for well informed contemporaries, the Chaadaev-Maistre parallel was, it seems to us, the most important.

This comparison is constantly found under the pen of Aleksandr Turgenev, who was Chaadaev's friend and correspondent. Thus, in an 1834 letter, Turgenev speaks of a project that a certain Khliustin (a cultivated young man, moreover a brother of Madam de Circourt, a Russian married to a French publicist, Adolphe de Circourt and sometimes nicknamed "the Russian Corinne"); this young man, he said, proposes to publish "the mystical Muscovite Count de Maistre" (it is Chaadaev that Turgenev has in mind).<sup>34</sup> A year later, having brought to Russia Maistre's newly published book on Bacon, Turgenev planned "to render Bacon-Maistre to Maistre-Chaadaev" (letter to Viazemskii of 7

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<sup>33</sup> In his "Aphorismes et remarques divers," the fragment devoted to Maistre is significant: "'Exaggeration' said Count de Maistre, 'is the truth of honest men,' that is to say people of conviction, for an honest man must not be devoid of it." (P. Tchaadaev, *Oeuvres inédites ou rares* (Meduon: Bibliothèque Slave, Centre des Etudes Russes 1990) 192.)

<sup>34</sup> *Ostafievskii arkhiv*, 3:162, letter of 24 October 1834 to P. Viazemskii.

September 1836; moreover Chaadaev begged him for it.<sup>35</sup><sup>36</sup> This tradition of identifying Chaadaev and Maistre even went beyond the frontiers of Russia. According to the Russian émigré publicist of the 1850s, Nikolai Sasonov, Lamennais called Chaadaev “the Russian Maistre.”<sup>37</sup> So one of the most important events in the history of Russian philosophy in the nineteenth century, the creation of Chaadaev’s *Lettres philosophiques*, was produced under the intellectual patronage of the Maistrian work.

Thus, in the person of Chaadaev we have the number one “Russian Joseph de Maistre.” However the list of Russian Maistres is far from being exhausted. However, before passing to the following “Russian Maistre” it is first necessary to say a few words about the Slavophile current.

#### JOSEPH DE MAISTRE AND THE SLAVOPHILES

The Slavophile movement is a nationalist current of Russian thought from the 1830s to 1870. Its representatives affirm that Russia occupies a unique and privileged position in Europe; according to them, if the West is corrupt, lost in individualism, self-interest, and egoism, it is in Russia that there are preserved the true values on which a happy society can be founded. Therefore, Russia has a special mission in the world – it is its collectivism and its Orthodox religion that can save it from the next catastrophe. The most curious point is that, all the while proclaiming the originality of the Russian way, the Slavophiles borrowed almost all the elements of their theory from Western thinkers; the kinship of their ideas with the philosophy of Schelling, Herder or Baader (this last believing that it is from Russia that a universal Christianity is going to surge) has been demonstrated several times. Even the invectives against “the rotten West,” so frequent with the Slavophiles, are taken from the French

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<sup>35</sup> *Litartournyi arkhiv* (Moscow-Leningrad 1938), 1:84.

<sup>36</sup> On the traces of the reading of the French traditionalists in the work of Chaadaev, see Ch. Quénet, *Tchaadaev et Les Lettres philosophiques* (Paris 1931), 133-90. Quénet’s book, very rich in facts and hypotheses, sometimes sins by strange faults relative to Maistre’s biography; thus Quénet writes, one does not know why, that *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* were not published until 1837.

<sup>37</sup> P. Chaadaev, *Polnoie sobranie sotchinenii i izbranniié pisma* (Mosow: Naouka 1991), 2:551.

journalist, Philarète Chasles.<sup>38</sup> There is nothing astonishing that in the list of the Slavophile movement's foreign sources, Joseph de Maistre's name occupies a place of honour.

To be sure Maistre has to appear to the Slavophiles, partisans of the Orthodox church, rather as an enemy propagating absolutely opposed ideas, than as an ally or authority. Effectively, several Slavophile publicists, such as Aleksei Khomiakov (1804-1860), who in the early 1850s refuted in his French articles the ideas of the Catholic publicist Pierre Sébastien Laurentie, cited Maistre as an adversary. Nevertheless several Slavophiles showed a constant interest in Maistre's actual works. Perhaps sensing their profound affinity with the French-speaking thinker, traditionalist like themselves, the Slavophiles read Maistre with attention and sometimes cited him with sympathy. For example, one of the eminent members of this current, Iurii Samarin (1819-1876), read Maistre's works with great attention. On 25 April 1843 he asked the friend of his youth Prince Ivan Gagarin, become Catholic and even a Jesuit, to send him from France to Russia "Maistre's works – save the *Soirées* which I already have." This was at a time when Samarin was working on his thesis devoted to Russian religious thinkers of the eighteenth century, Feofan Prokopovitch and Stepan Iavorskii. Moreover, in this thesis he cites Maistre twice, once in speaking of the Catholic theory of the reversibility of the Redemption, "exposed in an intelligent and brilliant way by Count Joseph de Maistre," and again in speaking of Maistre's idea of the inevitable fall of any supreme power that refuses to obey the pope.<sup>39</sup> These two times Samarin himself does not share Maistre's views and contests them, by opposing to the Catholic vision (and, as he says himself, typical for "Catholic rationalism") things from the Orthodox vision. However esteem and even a sort of admiration shows through in his Maistre references.

The citations drawn from Maistre are moreover only an index, a symptom. Much more important is the profound "strategic" resemblance between the Slavophiles and Maistre, a resemblance that was obvious to contemporaries. The Slavophiles' utopian concept was turned towards the past; it was there, in the peasant "community," that they looked for their social ideal, which permitted Prince Viazemskii to compare them in 1875 to Maistre, baptized the "prophet of the past."<sup>40</sup> Father François Rouleau

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<sup>38</sup> See G. Struve, "S.P. Chevyrev i zapadnyie vnouchenia i istotchniki teorii-aforizma o 'gnilom' ili 'gniuchem' zapade," in *Zapiski roussskogo nauchnogo instituta* (Belgrade 1941), 16:201-63.

<sup>39</sup> Y. Samarin, *Izbranniié proizvedenia* (Moscow: Rosspen 1996), 40 and 159.

<sup>40</sup> P. Viazemskii, *Estetika i literatournaia kritika*, 343.

describes in a very pertinent way this resemblance between the “prophecies of the past,” French and Russian:

Despite the differences, the kinship comes from the fact that it was a question in both of the same “prophecy of the past” that was shown by the same check on the plan of practical life; from the point of view of ideas, there is the same romantic sense of obscure origins that replaces the law by a claimed historical continuity that picks up the irrational; an irrationality that is accompanied by an idealization of authority of a patriarchal type which, in the end, constitutes the only foundation of the system.<sup>41</sup>

Viazemskii’s article, written in the 1870s (and being moreover nothing other than a portrait of Aleksandr Turgenev, Viazemskii’s friend and Joseph de Maistre’s propagandist in Russia), was one of the first texts where the kinship between the Slavophile movement and Maistrian ideas was emphasized. What was with Viazemskii only a short remark thrown out in passing was developed in an article published in 1889 in the nationalist review *Rousskii vestnik* (*Russian Messenger*) and entitled “Joseph de Maistre and his political doctrine”<sup>42</sup> (an important article for the story of the reception of Maistre’s works because abounding in long Maistre fragments translated into Russian). The author, Pavel Matviev, affirmed that the two eminent publicists of the Russian nationalist movement, Ivan Aksakov and Mikhail Katkov, “knew Maistre’s work very well and much esteemed the original profundity of his ideas.” The fact of the kinship was recognized as much by the partisans of nationalism as by their enemies. If the one side applauded this affinity of idea and ideals, the other side combated the imitators and their model – Maistre himself.

Among the latter it is necessary to name first the great Russian philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev. Solov’ev was the author of the one of first Russian biographical essays devoted to Maistre – the article “Maistre” in the great encyclopedia of Brokhaus-Ephron, where Maistre is called the philosopher who “had predicted in the future a grand synthesis of faith and knowledge, the fusion of religion, philosophy, and positive science in a single universal system.” However, if Solov’ev esteemed Maistre’s philosophy as such, its “incarnation” among the Russian nationalists seemed to him absolutely inadmissible. According to Solov’ev, “the conscious negation of justice and the cult of the executioner tied Maistre with the ultra representatives of nationalism, partisans of Ivan the Terrible.” Yet he remarked in an article “The

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<sup>41</sup> F. Rouleau, *Ivan Kiréievski et la naissance du slavophilisme* (Paris 1990), 97.

<sup>42</sup> See *Rousskii vestnik* (1889), N 5-6.

national question in Russia" (1889-1891), "Maistre's opinions were not composed only of inhuman tendencies; his reflections were sometimes false, but always fine and sometimes profound,"<sup>43</sup> while our obscurantists, not being able to understand them in depth, simplified them and at the same time exaggerated them. Solov'ev was not inclined to accuse Maistre of all the faults of his imitators. He says that the Maistrian theory of state as a force that absorbs the human self is not the strongest part of his system (on the contrary, Solov'ev's Catholic sympathies made him appreciate Maistre's theocratic ideas). Moreover, the Slavophiles and the Russian nationalists, according to Solov'ev, "steal a little branch of the enormous Western tree of science of good and evil and during a half-century proudly oppose to it the whole entire tree, taking this branch for the original plant."<sup>44</sup>

Maistre's Russian disciples, writes Solov'ev, instead of speaking on Maistre's behalf, speak on behalf of the Russian people, who, themselves, had never admitted its sympathies towards the doctrines of the Savoyard thinker. It is true, remarks Solov'ev, that the feeling of the individual and of society is so little developed with the Russians, that it is more difficult to find in Russia an honest person than a saint. However, if this is so, it is unthinking to believe that it must be so, although Maistre thought so.

Moreover, if with Maistre the idea of a "national reason strong enough to repress the aberrations of individual reason," of patriotism as "individual abnegation" (*De la souveraineté du peuple*) does not involve aggressive accents relative to other nations than that of the author, with the Russian nationalists the same ideas evolve towards the exaltation of the Russian nation at the expense of other peoples, and this is what is enormously displeasing to Solov'ev's ecumenical and cosmopolitan mind. So therefore in his polemic against the Russian nationalists, Solov'ev, the partisan of universality, was in some sense nearer to Maistre than to his alleged students.

One of the fundamental elements of the Slavophile movement was, as I have said, faith in Russia's special destiny – a salutary destiny for the whole world. This idea the Slavophiles could have drawn from several sources, but also from Maistre, for one of his preferred theses was the one that he exposed in *Considérations sur la France*: "Every nation, like every individual, has received a mission." Maistre thought primarily of France's mission; his successors applied this thesis to Russia.

Among the thinkers who developed this thesis by closely following the Maistrian method and reflections was the great Russian poet Fodor Tiutchev (1803-1873), baptized in the salons as the "Russian Joseph de

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<sup>43</sup> W. Solov'ev, *Sotchinienia* (Moscow: Pravda 1989), 1:490.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

Maistre" (another one, after Chaadaev). By his ideas, Tiutchev was close to the Slavophiles and even served as the spokesman for this movement. However he was such an original figure that he merits a special look in the context of our study.

THE SECOND "RUSSIAN JOSEPH  
DE MAISTRE": FEDOR TIUTCHEV

Tiutchev's case is paradoxical because this herald of Slavophilism was a pure European in his habits and personal preferences. Twice married to Germans, he preferred to write (if it was a question of prose and not verse) in French and his spiritual "sayings" that were retained in the memory of his salon companions are also for the most part French. Tiutchev was not only a great Russian poet, but also a diplomat; for several years (from 1822 to 1839) he served in Russian missions in Europe (in Munich and the last two years in Turin). On returning to Russia he became the most eminent publicist defending the Russian and Orthodox cause. It must however be emphasized that he defended this cause in French (the European language of communication par excellence) and published his texts in Europe in separate editions or in reviews, such as, for example, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* ("La papauté et la question romaine," 1850). Moreover, his dream was to transform this polemic in the European press with its critiques of Russia into a sort of official service, and he proposed this to the government, but the negotiation stalled and he continued this kind of activity at his own risk and peril. According to Tiutchev, the Western system of thought was prone to "fetishism for which all is form, formula, and political mechanism." This system is nothing other than that of "deification of the human self," which had given life to Gregory VII, Luther, and the modern revolution; yet "the human self left to itself is anti-Christian by essence." This system is therefore fatal for the modern world; it is only Russia that can save it, Orthodox Russia, "the very legitimate sister of the Christian West, Christian like it, not feudal, not hierarchical it is true, but by that even more intimately Christian [...] one in its principle, integral by its parts, living its own life, organic, and original." Tiutchev's ideal is the triumph in the entire world of the reunited Church (Catholic and Orthodox) under the aegis of the Russian emperor (who plays with Tiutchev the same role as the pope with Maistre). Tiutchev proclaims the same values as Maistre and uses similar argumentation, changing only the name of the force incarnating these values. The two thinkers share the energetic negation of "the human self wanting only to take care of itself" that caused the French Revolution and caused all the other revolutions. However, if for Maistre it is from Catholicism that one

must expect salvation, for Tiutchev it is from Orthodoxy. Still, despite this crucial difference, the similarities, especially in the details, are striking. It is not accidental that one of the shrewdest of Maistre's Russian readers, Lev Karsavin, about whom I will have occasion to speak again, remarked with respect to the Senator's monologue in the eleventh dialogue of the *Soirées* and notably of his statement "I do not know what great unity towards which we march with great steps," that it would only be necessary to add some words on "the Russian national idea" for Maistre to become completely parallel to Tiutchev or Dostoevski.

The resemblance between Maistre's work and Tiutchev's published articles was perceived by several of the latter's contemporaries.<sup>45</sup> The French critic Eugène Forcade remarked in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of 1 June 1849, in a review of Tiutchev's article "La Russie et la Révolution" (included in the brochure by Baron de Bourgoing *Mémoire présenté à l'empereur Nicolas depuis la révolution de février par un Russe, employé supérieur des affaires étrangères*):

Without adopting this judgement on all points, one will not perhaps find him devoid of depth, if only M. de Maistre had professed another opinion on Orthodoxy, he would not have spoken otherwise.

In 1850, the Catholic publicist Pierre Sébastien Laurentie, in his preface to the publication in the same review of another article by Tiutchev, "La Papauté et la question romaine," called him a disciple of the school that had once been directed by Joseph de Maistre, and which, bending to a certain national logic, now proclaimed that it is only in the person of the tsar that one can find the true pope.<sup>46</sup> This was also Jules Michelet's opinion in *Les martyrs de la Russie* (1851); speaking of the Russian emperor who believed that his "holy mission" was to persecute the Catholics in Poland and to triumph over Rome, Michelet says:

He [the Emperor] always has around him impatient young men, inspired by the violent school of M. de Maistre, who, despite the old diplomats, burn to speak and to shine. [...] A letter of 31 October 1849, dated St. Petersburg, and signed: *A Russian diplomat*, appears in a review [*Revue des Deux Mondes*]. The author is the Russian emperor's envoy in Bavaria. The title: "La papauté et la question romaine, au point de vue de Saint-Pétersbourg." Its mystic and devout form often recalls, at least by its haughty and half-ironic tone, the rude master whose inspiration the author has followed.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> On the articles published by Tiutchev seen by the European press, see more details in R. Leine's article in the *European Studies Review* (1971), Vol. 1, No. 3.

<sup>46</sup> See *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1850 (1 January), vol. 5, 117-18.

<sup>47</sup> J. Michelet, *Légendes démocratiques du Nord* (Paris, PUF, 1968), 204-5.

The contemporaries were right; they start not from actual mentions of Maistre's name in Tiutchev (the references are rare enough), but from the underlying kinship.

Tiutchev knew Maistre's work from his youth and, according to the testimony of the Bavarian publicist Charles von Pfeffel, "admired it." Become a Slavophile publicist, he did not expose such sympathies publicly, but his knowledge of Maistre shows itself from time to time in his work. For example, already quite old, in a letter to his daughter of 16 February 1868, Tiutchev cites with respect to the "misunderstanding between the Russian authorities and all the intelligent part of the country" the supposedly eighteenth-century saying with respect to the condemnation of Calas: "Someone, to excuse this error, cited the saying that the best horse sometimes stumbles – 'One horse perhaps,' the other replied to him, 'but a whole stable?'"<sup>48</sup> Now it is almost beyond doubt that it is in the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* that the Russian poet would have read this saying and his memory would have retained it.

There are poems, and famous poems of Tiutchev, where the attentive reader can perceive Maistrian reminiscences. I will cite only one example (but it is in no way unique). In 1854, in the midst of the Crimean War, the poet wrote the poem *Pour le nouvel an* (1855), where this new year is called "the executor of the decrees pronounced by God," carrying with himself two swords: one bloody sword of battle and one an executioner's axe. One already sees that images linked to the Maistrian mystique of redemptive war and of the executioner are present here, but most significant is the fact that Tiutchev himself, inscribing this poem in a friend's album, accompanies it with this small note: "This is not my thought on the new year, but that of another. So whose? That is difficult to explain." In my opinion we have the right to put forward the hypothesis that this mysterious other is no one other than Joseph de Maistre.<sup>49</sup>

The relation of Tiutchev's philosophical and historical reflection with that of Maistre is obvious as well in the Russian poet's correspondence. For example, on 24 November 1853, in a letter to his wife, Tiutchev describes the Russian situation in the following manner:

There is a magic circle where for two generations we have imprisoned Russia's national conscience and it is truly necessary that the good God in person deign

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<sup>48</sup> *Literatournoïé nasledstvo*, 1988, Vol. 97, part 1, 325. (In French in the text.)

<sup>49</sup> For more details, see V. Miltchyna, "Tiutchev i frantzouzskaiā literatoura," in *Izvestia AN SSSR, Seria literatoury i iazyka*, 1986, vol. LIXV, no. 4, 338-45.



to give us a violent kick to make us break this circle and get us back on our way.<sup>50</sup>

Faith in God as a force who directs the evolution of nations is here expressed in a way very close to that of Maistre who speaks not of a “kick” but of “a great and terrible instrument in the hands of Providence, who uses it to reverse this or that” (Maistre said this of Napoleon, and that he “comes from the heavens like lightning.”)<sup>51</sup> Also completely Maistrian is the vision of European revolutions at the end of the 1840s:

For sixteen years it [Europe] has nourished by its own hand the monster that is devouring it today. There is in this blindness something divine. [...] We are assisting at one of the great epochs of mankind. *A certain accumulation of vices rends a certain revolution necessary.* That is what all history preaches to us; we now have what we have well merited. Europe is paying for old debts and we march so clearly towards a certain end that to expose the thing, is to demonstrate it.<sup>52</sup>

The most curious thing is that the appearance of a publicist such as Tiutchev had been predicted by Maistre himself in *Du pape*, where he said:

But Russia becoming every day more European, and the universal language being completely naturalized in that great empire, it is impossible that some Russian pen, determined by one of those circumstances that cannot be foreseen, should not, through the medium of the French language, attack the Roman Church; and this is much to be desired, as no Russian can write against this Church without proving himself *Protestant*.<sup>53</sup>

However the attitude of Tiutchev himself towards the Protestants was as disapproving as that of Maistre; in 1836, in evaluating the efforts of the Russian government for the propagation in the country of the triad “Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality,” he wrote:

the intellectual movement, such as is now being accomplished in Russia, recalls in certain respects and taking account of the immense diversity of time and

<sup>50</sup> *Starina i novizna*, 1914, Vol. 18, 62. In French in the text.

<sup>51</sup> J. de Maistre, *Lettres et opuscule inédites* (Paris 1851), 1:155 (letter of 19 January 1809). [Also, *Oeuvres complètes*, 11:195-6.]

<sup>52</sup> *Starina i novizna*, 1914, 18:60; Tiutchev’s letter to his wife of 1/13 November 1853, in French in the text. It goes without saying that the words in italics are a direct paraphrase from *Considérations sur la France*

<sup>53</sup> J. de Maistre, *Du Pape* (Paris 1860), 337-8 (Book IV, Chapter V) [Also *OC*, 2:469.] Charles von Pfëffel drew the public’s attention to this Maistrian “prevision” immediately after the appearance of the article on “La Papauté et la question romaine.”

positions, the Catholic attempt tried by the Jesuits. [...] There is the same tendency, the same effort to appropriate modern culture less its principle, less liberty of the press, and it is most probable that the result will be the same. [...] This is so for the simple reason that in the absolute power, such as it is constituted with us, there enters an *ipso facto* Protestant element.<sup>54</sup>

THE THIRD "RUSSIAN JOSEPH  
DE MAISTRE": DOSTOEVSKI

However the list of "Russian Maistres" does not end with Tiutchev. Russian critics of the second half of the nineteenth century assigned this role to Dostoevski. The comparison with Maistre was first made by a contemporary journalist with respect to reflections on war by Dostoevski in the article "A lover of paradoxes," published in 1876 in the context of a series of articles entitled *Journal d'un écrivain*. Dostoevski exposes here, by the intermediary of a friend presented as a strange man and a dreamer, his vision of war (international, not civil, war) as a salutary phenomenon, re-awakening in souls feelings of generosity, of self-sacrifice, chivalry, etc. Thus, on 19 May 1876, in the journal *Golos (Voice)*, the critic Laroche (a Russian of French origin) exclaims: "Imagine that, we Russians, we now have our own Joseph de Maistre, and we can be proud of it: his talent in no way cedes to that of the French author, and even much surpasses it."

Three years later an atheistic journalist in the same journal, shocked by the fact that in the novel *The Brothers Karamozov* the only heroes are religious people or those sympathetic to the Orthodox religion, writes in an article of 30 May 1879:

Mr. Dostoevski is in the first place a Joseph de Maistre, outraged by the atheism of the modern world and demanding the most radical and absolute turn-about towards the past [...] to the farthest and most austere times of the Middle Ages. Writers of Maistre's kind only want to talk of the "religion of love." However anyone who does not share either the Maistrian anger, or the Maistrian wishes, will always think that this religion is rather that of vengeance and hate.

For the author of this article, Maistre and Dostoevski are both like seamen who "feeling the approaching storm, throw everything that they can jettison into the sea," who both believe "that it is only religion that can save humanity from the atheist and revolutionary gangrene, and that

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to Ivan Gagarin of 2 May 1836; in French in the text (cited by F. Cornillot, *Tioutchev, Poète-Philosophe* (Lille: Service de reproduction de thèses, Université de Lille-III 1974), 511. Commentators on this text affirm that the word Protestantism is employed here not in the strictly religious sense, but in the larger sense that Joseph de Maistre gave it.

to propagate this religion it is necessary to put all the world to fire and blood." Such a critique comes in most cases from the "progressive" and liberal camp, opposed by definition to Maistre, who for these publicists passes for an enemy of humankind, a heartless man, a defender of all the retrograde aspects of Russian life. We find an example of such an interpretation in one of the rare Russian articles of the nineteenth century devoted especially to Joseph de Maistre. Its author is Aleksandr Pypin; the article was published in the radical socialist review *Sovremennik* (1866, No. 2). It is entitled "The counsels of Count Joseph de Maistre" and represents a kind of review of the *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, published for the first time in 1859. The author characterizes Maistre as a "Jesuit" (an absolutely pejorative definition for him), creator of a "frightful" system, a hypocrite, and an exploiter of too credulous minds and brutal instincts. Such was the point of view of radical publicists of the nineteenth century on Count de Maistre, and this point of view is to be found, reinforced by this still more profound hate and by Marxist phraseology, in some books on the history of philosophy that appeared in the Soviet period.

In concluding on Dostoevski, I will permit myself to cite some passages from Joseph de Maistre to show how sometimes the problems posed by the French thinker are close to those that disquieted the Russian novelist, although contemporary critics said nothing about them. Thus, Maistre writes in the *Etude sur la souveraineté*, in speaking of the role that the philosophes played in the coming of the Revolution:

Philosophes! Having produced the cause, never will you be able to exonerate yourselves by expressing pity for the effect. *You detest the crimes*, you say. *You have not slaughtered anyone*. Well! *You have not slaughtered anyone*; that is the sole praise that you can be accorded. But you have caused the slaughter.

Anyone who has read *Brothers Karamazov* or who simply knows the plot, will recognize the principal clash in the novel: the brother Ivan did not kill his father with his own hands, but he had him killed by the hands of the servant Smerdiakov. One can also recognize an echo of Maistre in the famous monologue of the Grand Inquisitor in the same novel. The reasoning of this personage who affirms that man, if he remains free, immediately puts himself to looking for someone that he can obey, seems to be a polemical incarnation of Maistrian ideas on liberty and the individual self.

One other example: in the story "The dream of a ridiculous man" (*Journal de l'écrivain*, 1877), Dostoevski describes the corruption of an ideal people, chaste and ignorant of sin – corruption caused (in the dream moreover) by the arrival among these pure people of a man of flesh and

bones (the storyteller). Once corrupted, they set themselves to reasoning in the following way:

All right, we are liars, wicked and unjust [...] But we have science, and with that we will again find the Truth, only then we will receive it consciously: Knowledge is superior to feeling, the consciousness of life is superior to life. Science will give us wisdom, wisdom will reveal the laws to us, and the knowledge of the laws of happiness is superior to happiness. That is what we say, and on such words each loves himself more than others. [...] Each becomes so jealous of his individuality that he vows all his strength to belittle and diminish others, and he makes this the basis of his life. Slavery is born, even voluntary slavery; the weak submit in good grace to the stronger, provided only that these let them oppress those who are even weaker.<sup>55</sup>

One recognizes in the story Maistre's preferred ideas on the harmful consequences of the reckless development of the sciences and on "the sad nature of man," who, "reduced to himself, is too wicked to be free."<sup>56</sup> To be sure, it is not my intention in this case to affirm that Maistre served as a direct source for Dostoevski, but what, in my opinion, one has the right to affirm, is that the intellectual and philosophical foundations of the two authors are parallel, despite the differences of confession (Dostoevski, as we well know, was passionately Orthodox).

LEO TOLSTOY: TRACES OF READING  
MAISTRE IN *WAR AND PEACE*

Among the classical nineteenth-century Russian writers there is still one more who knew Maistre well and who borrowed phrases and ideas from him, without however it ever occurring to anyone to baptize him as a "Russian Joseph de Maistre." I am speaking of Leo Tolstoy and more precisely of his novel *War and Peace*. Tolstoy worked on this novel from 1863; he published it between 1865 and 1869. This is the period when, following the publication of Maistre's works and unpublished correspondence, his name became popular not only in France but also in Russia. For example, the liberal historian and journalist Mikhaïl Stasiulevitch devoted some pages to him in his *An Essay on the Principal Systems of the Philosophy of History* (1866), emphasizing that it was wrong to see in Maistre only a reactionary and that his work always lends itself to double interpretations. Tolstoy, moreover, knew Maistre's work "at first hand." He had read him and had retained several Maistrian "sayings" that he willingly cited in *War and Peace* as well as in his private

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<sup>55</sup> F. Dostoïevski, *Journal d'un écrivain* (Paris 1972), 998. (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade; trans. by G. Aucourturier.)

<sup>56</sup> J. de Maistre, *Du Pape*, 258 (Book III, Chapter II).

correspondence. For example, in his letters he several times uses Maistre's ingenious excuse that his letter was long because he had not had the time to make it shorter.

As for the novel *War and Peace*, there are two personalities for whom Maistre, as was demonstrated in 1931 by the Russian researcher Boris Eikhenbaum, served as a prototype.<sup>57</sup> The first is – at the very beginning of the novel – Viscount de Mortemart, the second – “a man of much merit” in Volume III. The latter, speaking of Kutuzov's nomination to the post of commander in chief of the Russian army, describes him in way that is completely parallel to what one finds in a Maistre letter of 2/14 September 1812. Maistre wrote:

Kutusov is a man at least seventy years old, large and heavy, witty moreover, and subtle to excess. [...] he sees poorly, has difficulty sitting a horse, and can barely stay up, etc. Despite this physical weakening, he is no less extremely attached to a Moldavian woman, which was much talked about during the war with Turkey.<sup>58</sup>

The anonymous Frenchman, put in the scene by Tolstoy, repeats word for word all the details cited by Maistre; he reports textually (in French) Alexander I's words to Kutuzov, cited by Maistre: “The Souverain and the Fatherland award you this honour,” with the Maistrian remark: “They say that he blushed like a maiden to whom one had read *Joconde*.”<sup>59</sup> The sentence spoken by “the man of much merit” that shocks his Russian listeners and ends the conversation in the novel is also taken by Tolstoy directly from Maistre: “Others assure me that Prince Kutuzov, in accepting the command, put as a condition that His Imperial Majesty not return to the army.”<sup>60</sup> In Tolstoy this sentence is in Russian, but translated literally.<sup>61</sup> The two Frenchmen having Maistre for prototype do not belong to the number of personalities Tolstoy is sympathetic to; Viscount de Mortemart takes part in a conversation that is futile and full of gossip; “the man of much merit” does not know how to understand and appreciate Kutuzov, one of Tolstoy's favorite historical figures.

On the contrary, in other cases it is the heroes dear to Tolstoy, his spokesmen, who speak just like Maistre spoke in his dispatches; in the letter already cited of 2/14 1812 Maistre wrote:

<sup>57</sup> See B. Eikhenbaum, *Lev Tolstoj* (Moscow-Leningrad 1931), 2:300-16.

<sup>58</sup> J. de Maistre, *OC*, 12:201.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 202. [*Joconde* was a licentious tale by La Fontaine.]

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>61</sup> See L. Tolstoy, *La guerre et la paix* (Paris 1952), 925-6.

Few battles are lost physically. You shoot, I shoot; what advantage is there between us. Moreover, who can know the number of dead? Battles are almost always lost morally; the true victor like the true vanquished, is the one who believes himself to be such.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, it is Prince Andrei Bolkonskii in Volume III (chapter 2) who, on the eve of the Battle of Borodino, says almost the same thing to Petr Pezukhov:

The one wins the battle who has firmly decided to win it. Why did we lose the Battle of Austerlitz? Our losses scarcely exceeded those of the French, but we were told too soon that we were vanquished and we were. [...] Tomorrow there will be produced millions and millions of eventualities that will in a moment make their [soldiers] or ours flee. [...] [But] you want me to say to you, no matter what happens, and despite the scheming of our leaders, it is we who will win the victory.<sup>63</sup>

Tolstoy also profited from Maistrian theories in creating the chapters devoted to the “philosophy” of war. Like Maistre, Tolstoy was sure that it was not individual wills that decided the outcome of battles and of humanity, but only the divine will, Providence. He would willingly have subscribed to Maistre’s words: “the French Revolution leads men more than men lead it.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, if one analyzes Tolstoy’s general views on war, one must name another French author who also submitted to Maistre’s influence and who served as an intermediary between Tolstoy and the author of *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. I am speaking about Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who published in 1861 his book on *La guerre et la paix* (the “rhyme” of titles is already significant) whose principal thesis is very Maistrian: “War is the divine fact.”

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:  
KARSAVIN AND SHEBUNIN

We now come to the last decades of the nineteenth century. The current at the end of the nineteenth century – and at the beginning of the twentieth century – that is habitually called “Russian religious philosophy” did not elaborate a common and unanimous opinion on Maistre’s work. For some, this figure did not have any importance in principle and they did not mention him. For others, like Gustav Spet, author on an important *Essay on Russian Philosophy*, Maistre was only a sower of “paradoxes” that were mistakenly taken for “wisdom of state” at the time

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<sup>62</sup> Maistre, *OC*, 12:220.

<sup>63</sup> Tolstoy, *La guerre et la paix*, 1009.

<sup>64</sup> J. de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, *OC*, 1:4.

of Alexander I, a time when true philosophy was not in fashion. However there were also Russian philosophers who were very much interested in Joseph de Maistre's philosophy. Among these, the most important place is occupied by Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), a philosopher who lived in Lithuania after the October Revolution and who in 1945 was put in a concentration camp by the Soviet authorities, where he died seven years later. He was a Russian Orthodox thinker who studied Catholicism attentively, the author of books on the culture of the Middle Ages and the life of Western monks. Karsavin believed the figure of Maistre so important (and close in some way to himself) that in 1918-1922, in Petrograd, in the midst of the Revolution, he wrote a biography of Maistre (based on books newly appearing in France; his principal source was Cogordan's book). Unfortunately, this text could not be published at the time (the consequences of the October Revolution were already being felt) and it did not see the light of day until 1989.<sup>65</sup>

Karsavin's study presents an original interpretation of the place occupied by Maistre's thought in the history of human thought. Maistre himself as a thinker and a writer, writes Karsavin, is much more interesting and important than his theories; the beauty of his logic possesses, if one might say, an intrinsic value. For Karsavin, Maistre is a loser following the example of "the whole century that was also a loser," who did not succeed in expressing himself in either the revolution or in the reaction. According to Karsavin, what is most important in Maistre is that he united in his person the two principal elements of his time: the traditional ideal, on the one hand, and the aspiration towards the beyond, close to the revolutionary fervour, on the other. Karsavin constantly emphasizes this double character of the Maistrian work. Maistre is the prophet of the future, sometimes a very wise prophet, and, at the same time, the apologist of the past. It is for this reason that he incarnates the soul of the century; according to Karsavin, this soul could not be preserved in the "innovative" and progressivist layers of society; one can only find it in the more traditionalist layers, with the provincial aristocracy, of which Maistre was a fine and learned representative.

If Karsavin gave a philosophical interpretation to Maistre's work, another Russian researcher, Andrei Shebunin, a little later – in the midst of the Soviet epoch – devoted a historical study to him. This researcher brought out in Leningrad in 1925 an excellent book *The European Counter-Revolution in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. In it the reader is presented with very impartial summaries of the theories created by thinkers such as Maistre and Bonald. Shebunin did not follow Soviet

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<sup>65</sup> See *Voprossy filosofii* (1989), No. 3, 93-118; text published by A. Ospovat with commentary by V. Miltchyna and A. Ospovat.

practice and did not damn an author whom he did not know or understand; on the contrary, he knew how to present the ideas of an author of which he spoke as a coherent system. Shubunin followed up his work on Maistre and he wrote in one of the three large volumes entitled *Russian Culture and France* (which appeared in 1937-1940) a large pioneering study devoted to Joseph de Maistre's Russian connections. He accompanied it by the publication (with commentaries) of several unpublished documents from the Archives of the Russian ministry of foreign affairs, including Maistre's letters to Russian statesmen and Emperor Alexander I, Maistre's letters to the future Russian minister of public instruction Sergei Uvarov with respect to his French book *Projet d'une Académie asiatique* (1810), and Maistre's *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, and the correspondence of the Vice-Chancellor Charles Nesselrode with Prince Kozlovskii on the subject of Maistre's recall to Turin.

Shebunin worked on this publication for several years, and the greatest difficulties that laid in wait for him were not of an intellectual order. One of the editors of the volume described to Shebunin in a letter of 21 September 1936 the struggle against the directors of the Communist party that he was obliged to wage to obtain the right to publish a text on Joseph de Maistre. In the beginning, he said, the leaders were decidedly against such a publication and had considered attention to this figure perfectly useless. A Soviet big wheel kept the text for more than five months, without deciding anything. Finally however "tiring negotiations" concluded with the editor's victory.<sup>66</sup> They succeeded in keeping the text, but they did not save the author. In 1937, this black year when the "great Terror" began in the USSR, Shebunin was arrested and sent to a camp. He was there when the volume with his article and his publication (in all more than 150 pages) appeared, and as it was absolutely impossible to publish the texts of so-called "enemies of the people," the text appeared under the pseudonym of M. Stepanov. It was only in 1975 that the author's real name was revealed.<sup>67</sup>

#### THE PRESENT SITUATION

Shebunin-Stepanov's work was an exceptional work not only in the quality of its execution, but by the very fact of the appearance of a large study full of esteem devoted to Maistre. In Russia in the Soviet period words like "conservative" and "reactionary" were an unappealable

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<sup>66</sup> See Russian National Library (St. Petersburg), Manuscript department, Fonds 849, No. 302, fol. 64-64 verso (Letter from S. Makashin to A. Shebunin of 21 September 1936).

<sup>67</sup> See the article by V. Sirotkin in *Historia i historiki* (Moscow 1975), 118.



judgement: there was no possibility of publishing translations of a thinker equipped with such a “passport.” To be sure, Maistre had the right to a short article in the *Philosophical Encyclopedia* – but nothing more. It is only towards the end of 1980 that the situation changed. Not only was it finally possible to publish the little biography of Maistre written by Lev Karsavin – but already at the beginning of 1990 the author of the present article succeeded in publishing in a daily (!) a translation of the first dialogue of *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.<sup>68</sup> Now we even possess in Russian three editions of part of Joseph de Maistre’s work: extracts from Maistre’s diplomatic dispatches, written from St. Petersburg (the book, which appeared in 1995, is entitled somewhat awkwardly as *St. Petersburg Letters*),<sup>69</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, a translation that appeared recently (in 1997) and was made following the edition prepared by Jean-Louis Darcel (and even published with fragments of Darcel’s article as a postscript),<sup>70</sup> and a 1998 translation of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.<sup>71</sup>

One cannot say that Maistre has become a very popular author; however he is sometimes cited where one least expects it. There is nothing astonishing in the fact that the famous historian and literary theorist Yuri Lotman, in one of his letters, reproaching his correspondent for not answering him, remarks: “Russians do not answer letters. This is a national trait: Joseph de Maistre speaks about it.” The citation is taken from the “small book,” *Religion et moeurs de Russes*,<sup>72</sup> that Lotman was studying at the time. Much more astonishing is the letter from the “merchant seaman” that I cited earlier. It could be said that Joseph de Maistre is beginning to occupy an official place in the Russian literary pantheon where, moreover, as I have tried to demonstrate, he was always present in one way or other.

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<sup>68</sup> *Nezavissimaia gazeta*, 8 August 1992.

<sup>69</sup> J. de Maistre, *Peterbourgskié* (St. Petersburg: Pisma 1995), trans. and annotated by D. Soloviev.

<sup>70</sup> J. de Maistre, *Rassoujdenia o Frantzii* (Moscow: Rosspen 1997), trans. by G. Abramov and T. Chmatchkova.

<sup>71</sup> Trans. by A. Vassiliev and ed. by A. Terekhov (St. Petersburg: Editions Aletea 1998).

<sup>72</sup> *Religion et moeurs de Russes. Anecdotes recueillies par le comte Joseph de Maistre et le P. Grivel. S.J.*. Put in order and annotated by P. Gagarine, S.J. (Paris: Ernest Leroux 1879), 78.

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RICHARD A. LEBRUN

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## *Joseph de Maistre in the Anglophone World*<sup>1</sup>

It is, of course, well known that Joseph de Maistre read English well, and that he was greatly interested in English institutions and things English generally. Perhaps what is less well known is the extent to which Maistre has been known and understood in the Anglophone world.<sup>2</sup> It is this second topic, Joseph de Maistre's "presence" in the Anglophone world, that I want to explore in this study.

I will begin by reviewing very briefly what is known of Joseph de Maistre's relationship to England and then turn to how and when English readers became aware of him. Since articles and books in English about Joseph de Maistre have now been appearing for almost 150 years (and I have identified over 100 such items), this will have to be a sampling that stresses patterns rather than an encyclopedic account. I will note the differences between Catholic and non-Catholic views, as well as the distinctive character of English as opposed to North American images of Joseph de Maistre. I would like as well to note the timing and extent of translation of Maistre's works into English, and to trace the development of serious original scholarship in English on Maistre.

The most comprehensive study of Joseph de Maistre's relationship to England was written in French, but by an Englishman. Frederick Holdsworth's *Joseph de Maistre et L'Angleterre*,<sup>3</sup> which was published over sixty years ago, has yet to be superseded. Exploring in detail Maistre's knowledge of the English language, English writers, and English institutions, Holdsworth demonstrated that the Savoyard had achieved, what was for his time, a remarkably good understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Joseph de Maistre dans le monde Anglophone," *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 13 (2001), 91-108.

<sup>2</sup> For an earlier review of English-language literature about Joseph de Maistre, see E.D. Watt, "The English Image of Joseph de Maistre: Some Unfinished Business," *European Studies Review* 4, No. 3 (1974), 239-59.

<sup>3</sup> Paris: Champion 1935.

island nation and its people. In particular, Holdsworth showed how Maistre was able to use certain English authors, such as the Neoplatonists, to critique other English writers, such as Francis Bacon and John Locke.

Holdsworth also attempted to assess early English acquaintance with Joseph de Maistre. He was particularly interested in determining their awareness and appreciation of Maistre's judgments about English institutions. He felt that Maistre's views offered a valuable corrective to Voltaire's one-sided portrayal of England, and that the English could have benefited from careful consideration of Maistre's opinions about their institutions. After reviewing English comment about Maistre in the second half of the nineteenth century, Holdsworth concluded that for various reasons (including antagonism towards French ideas, rejection of Maistre's traditional Catholicism, and English pride) the most important parts of Maistre's work (and in particular his judgments about English political institutions) were almost completely ignored in England. Unfortunately, Holdsworth failed to identify some of the earliest commentaries on Maistre as well as some writers who did take into account his views on the English constitution.

Many if not most educated Englishmen in the nineteenth century read French, so translation of Maistre's works into English was not essential for him to become known in England. However I should still say a word at this point about the earliest translations. Interestingly enough, it was a minor work, a work that has been of relatively little interest to recent Maistrian scholars, the *Lettres sur l'Inquisition espagnole*, which was translated first in 1838 (by John Fletcher). Even more curious is the fact that this same work was translated twice more in the next thirteen years, once in 1843 in Boston by T.J. O'Flaherty, and again in 1851 in London by Aeneas McD. Dawson, a Scottish priest who had published a translation of Maistre's *Du Pape* in London the previous year (and who later emigrated to Canada). To this day the *Lettres sur l'Inquisition espagnole* remains the only Maistre work to have been translated into English three times.<sup>4</sup> The only other Maistre work to appear in English during this early period was an anonymous translation of the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, which was published in Boston in 1847. After these mid-nineteenth century translations, it would be over 100 years before another translation would appear. I want to return to this interest in Joseph de Maistre in North America shortly, but first I want say something about his early reception in Great Britain.

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<sup>4</sup> Two of these early translations have been republished in facsimile versions in recent years.

Although this is not easy to trace, it appears that the first group of English intellectuals to become interested in Joseph de Maistre were some members of the so-called Oxford Movement. Wilfrid Ward, in his study of his father, *William George Ward and the Oxford Movement*, claimed Maistre was much read among Oxford dons in the 1840s, and that William George Ward in particular was much influenced by Maistre.<sup>5</sup> Ward's controversial book on the *Ideal of a Christian Church* of 1844 followed Maistre's interpretation of the French Revolution and its implications for the future of Christianity. However, Ward was almost the only person associated with the Oxford movement to cite Maistre openly. Accused by their opponents of being "Romanizers," most of the Tractarians would probably have been reluctant to acknowledge Maistre or his influence.

John Henry Newman was probably the best known leader of the Oxford Movement. In the Introduction to his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, published in 1845 on the eve of his conversion to Catholicism, Newman defended his theory of development by stating that he believed that such a view had "recently been illustrated by several distinguished writers of the continent, such as De Maistre and Möhler."<sup>6</sup> However, as Owen Chadwick has demonstrated, it appears unlikely that Newman had a first-hand knowledge of Maistre, at least at this time. What seems to have happened is that some of Newman's friends had told him that he would find precedents for his ideas about development in the theories of Maistre and Möhler, and Newman stuck in the reference without further research.<sup>7</sup>

If there is no evidence that Newman was much influenced by Maistre, the same is not the case for another famous convert churchman, Cardinal Henry Edward Manning. On the eve of his conversion to Catholicism in December 1850, Manning reported to a close friend that, "for reading," he had "done little but *De Maistre* on the Pope – a wonderful book."<sup>8</sup> A few weeks later, in another letter to the same friend, he cited Maistre's

<sup>5</sup> See as well, Wilfrid Ward's *William George Ward and the Catholic Revival* (London: Macmillan 1893), where it is stated that "De Maistre and Lamennais were favourite authors with the second school of Tractarians." (London: Longmans, Green 1912), 82.

<sup>6</sup> Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (New York: Doublday 1960), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1957), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Manning to Robert Wilberforce, 14 December 1850, cited in Edmund Sheridan Purcell, *The Life of Cardinal Manning* (London: Macmillan 1893), 1:588.

*Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* in favour of the Roman Catholic position on the Sacrifice of the Mass.<sup>9</sup> At the First Vatican Council, of course, Cardinal Manning was one of the most vigorous champions of a declaration of papal infallibility.

Perhaps the most famous English opponent of the Ultramontane position at the time of the First Vatican Council was John Acton. This extraordinarily well educated and well read English Catholic intellectual was, of course, aware of Joseph de Maistre. In 1855, in his journal, *The Rambler*, he characterized Maistre as “the only French Catholic of his time who felt and urged the necessity of an alliance between the Church and Modern learning.” Acton added, however, that Maistre had “too much of the levity and unscrupulousness of statement which distinguish his infidel adversaries.” For this reason, and because Acton thought Lamennais had distorted some of his ideas, Acton concluded that Maistre’s influence had “not been altogether beneficial.”<sup>10</sup> A few years later, in an article on “Ultramontanism” in the *Home and Foreign Review*, Acton expanded these judgments somewhat, this time according Maistre “perhaps the highest place next to Pascal among laymen who have defended religion without the advantage of a theological education.”<sup>11</sup> Acton still blamed Maistre for his example of discussing many questions of history “with the arts of advocacy,” suggesting that while many followed him in good faith, “there were other followers who were not in good faith”<sup>12</sup>

To turn now from Maistre’s possible early influence on a few isolated Englishmen to publicity about Maistre in English publications, the first significant piece that I have been able to find is an anonymous thirteen-page article in *Fraser’s Magazine* in April 1849. The author, in fact, was William Maccall, who in 1873 published a longer version of the same piece under his own name (with the date of composition given as May 1848).<sup>13</sup> In common with many other pieces on Maistre published in English over the years, it tells us as much about Maccall and his prejudices as it does about Joseph de Maistre. In this case, for example, while Maccall tells his readers that Maistre’s name “deserves to be better known than it is in England,” that he “possessed an extraordinary

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<sup>9</sup> Manning to Wilberforce, 3 March 1851, Op. cit., 1:607.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *Essays on Church and State*, ed. by Douglass Woodruff (London: Hollis & Carter 1952), 450.

<sup>11</sup> *Home and Foreign Review*, July 1863, 162 ff., cited in *Essays in Church and State*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-8.

<sup>13</sup> In a volume entitled *Foreign Biographies*, 1873; reprinted in 1972 (Freyat, NY: Books for Libraries Press).

erudition,” and that there are pages of Maistre’s writings that “are not equalled by any thing that has appeared since the death of Rousseau,”<sup>14</sup> he uses his article to expound his own views on such matters as the nature of the Restoration in France, the necessity of centralizing government in England, and English folly in allowing the survival of the Irish language in Ireland. In the longer version published in 1873, Maccall proceeds from his description of Maistre’s apology for Ultramontane Catholicism to argue his own view that both “Popery and Protestantism” will soon be “overwhelmed” by the ideas expounded by Emanuel Swedenborg.<sup>15</sup>

The publication in 1851 of the two-volume edition of *Lettres et Opuscules du Comte Joseph de Maistre*, with the biographical essay by his son Rodolphe, inspired lengthy reviews that provided English readers with a considerable amount of information about Joseph de Maistre and his ideas. In October 1852 the *Edinburgh Review* published a 39-page review article that began with what can be characterized as a classic description of the two contrasting views of Joseph de Maistre that had emerged by that date:

By one party he has been reviled as the apologist of the headsman, the advocate of the Inquisition, the adversary of free inquiry, the virulent detractor of Bacon, the friend of the Jesuits, and the unscrupulous perverter of truth for his own controversial purposes; by the other, he is extolled as an austere moralist reacting against the sentimentality and *philosophism* [...] of the age, a steadfast believer and an unshrinking upholder of all he believed, a loyal and devoted subject to a despoiled sovereign, an elegant scholar, a powerful logician, a disinterested statesman, and the unflinching advocate of a persecuted order, which reckoned among its members the friends and instructors of his youth.<sup>16</sup>

While the reviewer provides a reasonably accurate account of Maistre’s life and theories, his own views are soon apparent. He accuses Maistre of defending “the most absurd manifestation of the Romish Church, or the most obsolete customs of absolute monarchies with the same reverence and conviction as the fundamental dogmas of Christianity” (297). While admiring the power of Maistre’s pen and the vigour of his thought, he concludes by suggesting that “Every true lover of liberty and humanity must rise from the task [of reading Maistre] invigorated and refreshed – strengthened in an apposite faith, and proud of those conquests against which such attacks are impotent” (328).

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<sup>14</sup> *Fraser's Magazine*, April 1849, 384-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Foreign Biographies* (Reprint edition), 39.

<sup>16</sup> *Edinburgh Review* 96 (1852), 290.

A 49-page review of the same edition of Maistre's writings in the Catholic periodical, *The Dublin Review*, two months later, nicely illustrates the fundamental division between non-Catholic and Catholic commentators on Joseph de Maistre. The reviewer, J.B. Robertson, had no hesitation about placing Maistre "at the side of the greatest thinkers and writers that had ever adorned Christianity."<sup>17</sup> He ranked Maistre among "the deepest thinkers, and most eloquent writers of the age" (428), and described him as a "man of high character and eminent genius" (433). A good part of the review was devoted to citations (in French) from Maistre's letters, which Robertson felt showed Maistre to be "the fond husband and indulgent father, the constant friend, the devoted loyalist and patriot, the fervent Catholic, the philosophic statesman, and the scholar equally versed in sacred and profane literature" (432). In the entire review, there was not one word of criticism.

More critical, but still sympathetic, was the long article published by Rev. William Alexander (probably an Anglican clergyman) in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1859. Alexander thought it important for his coreligionists to be aware of Maistre's works, because "his speculations [...] have escaped from between the covers of his books, and percolate the whole mass of modern Catholic writings of the abler sort."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, Alexander disagreed with Maistre's general position; he accused Maistre of "always bailing the old boat of ultramontaniam with the silver cup of modern thought" (658). At the same time, he recognized Maistre's admiration for English institutions, found his examination of the English constitution "excellent" (668), and thought the "speculations on *executions* and on *war* [...] the most original and beautiful portions of de Maistre's writings" (676).

By the 1850s and 1860s, references to Maistre, at least as a symbol, were appearing in English publications on various topics. For example, an article on the Austrian Concordat of 1855 in the *Edinburgh Review* characterized the concordat as an "attempt to engraft ecclesiastical despotism on dogmatic infallibility," and suggested that the "prophetic writer," Count de Maistre, would have been delighted to find "that his conception of papal power has at last been realized in the Austrian Concordat."<sup>19</sup> In 1865, to take another example, Herman Merivale published a "dialogue of the dead" between the shades of Benjamin Franklin and Joseph de Maistre.<sup>20</sup> The conversation is about politics, with the fictional Franklin arguing his belief "that mankind need not be

<sup>17</sup> *The Dublin Review* 33 (1852), 421-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Dublin University Magazine* 54 (1859), 658.

<sup>19</sup> *Edinburgh Review* 103 (1856), 491.

<sup>20</sup> *Historical Studies* (London: Longmans, Green 1865), 204-26.

governed by classes, nor for classes; that men in the long run are capable of conducting their own affairs" (207), while the fictional Maistre defends his more aristocratic ideas. The two agree on their condemnation of slavery, and then Maistre challenges Franklin on what was then (in the era of the American Civil War) the great question in contemporary politics: "what right can one portion of your Union have at any time to retain another portion in unwilling connection" (220)? Franklin's reply, which might well be of interest to Canadians today, is that of self defence: "the majority are [...] justified in forcibly resisting it [the desire for separation], in one case only; namely, when the separation would diminish their own security, and thus interfere with their prosperity" (220). The dialogue concludes with the imaginary Franklin telling the equally fictional Maistre that "I must retort on your theocratic Utopia the sarcasm with which you visit my democratic one" (226).

It was also in 1865 that James Fitzjames Stephen published a series of essays on Maistre in the *Saturday Review*.<sup>21</sup> The essays were in the form of a series of reviews of Maistre's works, starting with the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. Stephen is obviously well-informed about Maistre's life and well-read in his works, but his main objective in these essays appears to be that of proving that Maistre's arguments are almost always vitiated by the fundamental fallacy of "begging the question" (253-4). Maistre's method, Stephens charges, "is to lay down general principles of enormous importance, as self-evident truths, and then to make these supposed first truths the foundation of all his subordinate speculations" (254). According to Stephen, this is the vice of the "high Ultramontane school," including Dr. Newman, whose speculations are "full of it" (254). For Stephen, Maistre is a writer whose "shrewdness and brilliancy were only equalled by his one-sidedness" (271). So, though Maistre was, in Stephen's view, "perhaps the ablest and most devoted Roman Catholic writer of the day" (310), his ideas and his sophistry had to be opposed.

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, then, fairly extensive treatments of Maistre's thought were available to readers in England. One of the most influential of these descriptions was by John Morley, who published an 80-page chapter on "the champion of social reaction," as he called Maistre, in his *Critical Miscellanies* in 1886, an essay that was reprinted as late as 1925.<sup>22</sup> Morley was hardly sympathetic to Maistre's position, yet he ranked Maistre as the greatest champion of revived Catholicism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, praised

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<sup>21</sup> Later reprinted in the third series of his *Horae Sabbaticae* (London: Macmillan 1892), 250-324, which is the edition I will cite here.

<sup>22</sup> In a volume titled *Biographical Studies* (London: Macmillan 1925), 165-239.



his wonderfully lucid style, his superior natural ability, and thought that all Maistre's writings were "penetrated with the air of reality and life, that come of actual participation in the affairs of the world with which social philosophers have to deal" (170). Drawing on Rodolphe de Maistre's biographical sketch of his father and Albert Blanc's edition of Maistre's diplomatic correspondence, Morley provided a sympathetic account of Maistre's life, and acknowledged his sterling personal qualities. When he came to discuss Maistre's ideas, which he outlined with some care, Morley suggested that Maistre's "mind was of the highest type of those who fill the air with the arbitrary assumptions of theology, and the abstractions of the metaphysical stage of thought" (328). Secure in his own dogmatic assumptions as a disciple of Auguste Comte, Morley concluded that "Those who can best appreciate De Maistre and his school" are people like himself "who know most clearly why their aspirations were hopeless, and what makes their system an anachronism" (239).

Let us turn now from Maistre's reception in England to his image in North America. When a translation of Maistre's *Essai sur le principe générateur* was published in Boston in 1847, it almost immediately received a long review from Orestes Brownson in his journal, *Brownson's Quarterly Review*.<sup>23</sup> Brownson was probably the best known American Catholic intellectual of his time, an eccentric convert of whom it was said that he never agreed with anyone for very long, even himself. His review of Maistre's essay suggests that he had read and appreciated Maistre's works in their original language before writing about this particular translation. Brownson began the review, not with a discussion of the political theory of the *Essai*, but with a well-informed and critical analysis of Maistre's use of analogies between Christianity and the religions of antiquity. Brownson examines the possibilities and pitfalls of using reason in religious apologetics. He thinks that Maistre was not always as careful as he should have been in his use of analogy, but is confident that he "was sound and orthodox" (548). After this preliminary discussion of Maistre's methods of religious argument, Brownson turns his attention to the *Essai*, which he declares to be, "of the several works of Count de Maistre," the one that can be with most advantage and best fitted to the actual wants of American politicians, "whether Catholics or Protestants" (468). He acknowledges that Maistre is no doubt a "staunch monarchist," but he believes that Maistre's "great general principle of political constitutions" is "as true and as applicable in the case of a republican constitution as in that of a monarchical constitution" (468). Brownson's application of Maistre's theory of the generative principle to

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<sup>23</sup> *Brownson's Quarterly Review* 4 (1847), 458-85.

the American situation shows that he had a good understanding of its implications. Brownson argues that in the United States “the existing legal order is republican.” It may or may not be “the best of all possible forms of government in the abstract,” but it “is the form which God in his providence has established here, and therefore it is the best for us; [...] therefore we must obey it, and cannot resist it without resisting God, from whom is all power, by whom kings reign and legislators decree just things” (469). After developing these principles at some length, and suggesting their relevance for contemporary Latin American states and Ireland as well as the American republic, Brownson concludes by recommending Maistre’s essay “as worthy of general study, and as almost the only sensible political pamphlet that has ever been published amongst us” (485).

Brownson may have regarded Maistre’s works as worthy of the serious attention of Americans, “whether Catholic or Protestant” (459), but America was a Protestant land. A review of Maistre’s works in the *North American Review* in 1854 typifies the anti-Catholic bigotry that long characterized intellectual life in the United States.<sup>24</sup> For this anonymous reviewer, Joseph de Maistre was a writer who placed the Catholic Church “upon its true basis,” revealing “clearly the innate, central, everlasting repugnancy that exists today between the tendencies, hopes, aspirations, and best omens of modern civilization, and those of the backward-looking Roman Catholic Church” (377). Maistre, he continues, “is universally acknowledged to be the very prince of the Ultramontanists, the leading exponent of the Neo-Catholic school,” but little known outside of France (377-8). In Maistre’s thought, the reviewer suggests, “the Roman Catholic Church of the present century finds itself summed up, expressed, and brought to a position of self-consciousness” (383). In effect, readers are told that to know Maistre is to know their enemy. It is from this perspective that Maistre’s writings in defence of such institutions as the papacy and the Spanish Inquisition are expounded as scandalous examples of “Romish” arrogance. Maistre, in short, is presented as an able apologist of a dying institution.

When, in 1882, the *American Catholic Quarterly Review* offered an unsigned 24-page article reviewing a number of Maistre’s works, the first topic that was mentioned was the deep-seated anti-Catholic prejudices that seemed to characterize “the Anglo-Saxon mind.”<sup>25</sup> The reviewer, who says he can “never sufficiently acknowledge” his own intellectual obligations to “the great Savoyard publicist” (18), speaks of Maistre as

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<sup>24</sup> *North American Review* 79 (1854), 371-406.

<sup>25</sup> “Count Joseph de Maistre,” *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 7 (1882), 17.

the "keenest, wittiest, and most brilliant" of the coterie of polemicists who defended the royalist and Catholic causes at the beginning of the century. He compares Maistre to Baron von Eckstein, the Vicomte de Bonald, and Mallet du Pan, and judges that Maistre "has left an influence upon the thought of his times far greater than any of this contemporaries" (17). The same kind of uncritical praise characterized a second article on Maistre in the same journal thirteen years later.<sup>26</sup> The second author, T.L.L. Teeling, appears to have been well-informed about the Maistre family, since he refers to the Château de Bissy as having been purchased by Colonel Nicolas de Maistre, who left it to Joseph's grandson, Rodolphe's son, "whose widow, an Irish lady, still resides there with her son, the present Count de Maistre" (838). In concluding his highly laudatory article, Teeling optimistically reports that Maistre's "life and works are coming more prominently before the public at the present time than ever before" (838). This kind of extravagant and uncritical treatment of Joseph de Maistre by American Catholic authors would, unfortunately, continue for at least another half-century.<sup>27</sup>

By the early twentieth century, secular treatments of Maistre were being published in the United States as well. In 1906, for example, a long essay on Maistre appeared in the series *Main Currents of XIXth Century Literature* by Georg Brandes, the Danish literary critic.<sup>28</sup> For the most part, the essay is a generally dispassionate exposition of the main facts about Maistre's life and his leading ideas. Brandes characterizes Maistre as "a great and fascinating personality," the "successful advocate of a lost cause," and "the most attractive figure which the reactionary camp of the century has to show" (111-12). Interestingly enough, Brandes follows Emile Faguet in charging that Maistre's Christianity was "an entirely external thing," "a Christianity without brotherly love," and suggests that at heart he was "as devoid of religious feeling as the century which he attacks in the name of revealed religion" (112). When the American political thinker Harold J. Laski published his *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* a decade later,<sup>29</sup> he in turn cited both Faguet and Brandes

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<sup>26</sup> "Joseph de Maistre," *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 20 (1895), 807-38.

<sup>27</sup> See, as examples, Giovanni Papini, *Laborers in the Vineyard* (New York: Longmans 1930), 128-36, and Thomas Patrick Neill, *They Lived the Faith* (1951), 190-221.

<sup>28</sup> Published most recently in a volume entitled *Revolution and Reaction in Nineteenth Century France* (1960), 87-112.

<sup>29</sup> Harold J. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1917).

when characterizing Maistre's religious sentiments.<sup>30</sup> For Laski, Maistre was an example of the blindness induced by "fanatic devotion to a cause" (232). He never questioned Maistre's sincerity, and thought that his position "would demand the highest reverence did it possess the single merit of truth" (232). In Laski's view, the brilliance of Maistre's apologetic did "not conceal the viciousness of its determined obscurantism" (234).

Unfortunately, Laski's extremely negative view of Joseph de Maistre has been followed by other American authors writing about French political thought. Roger Soltau, for example, in a book on *French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* cited Laski, as well as hostile French critics such as Edmund Schérer and Samuel Rocheblave, as authorities for his interpretation of Maistre.<sup>31</sup> Soltau characterized Maistre as "an incorrigible romanticist" (24) for imagining that the clock could be put back to the time prior to 1789, suggested that his admiration of the British constitution was "based on profound ignorance and misunderstanding" (18), and argued that Maistre should be seen as "the forerunner of that irreligious religion, of that atheistic Catholicism, of which Maurras was to be the most conscious and deliberate champion" (22).

On the other hand, a much more sympathetic and balanced treatment can be found in Charlotte T. Muret's *French Royalist Doctrines Since the Revolution*, which was published two years after Soltau's book.<sup>32</sup> Coupling Maistre with Bonald in a chapter on what she calls "The Theocrats," because the common characteristic of their thought was its religious basis, she characterizes them as representing "what had been best in the old regime" (12). After carefully delineating the differences between the two men and providing an admirably clear and objective exposition of their political ideas, she concludes that "they had a truer vision of man than most of the theorists of their day" (33). At the same, she was also critical, since she judged that Bonald and Maistre "underestimated the value of consent, of voluntary and active sacrifice, as opposed to forced obedience, and, in stressing the necessity for an absolute and unquestioning authority, they only avoided legitimating pure force by resorting to a supernatural sanction for power" (33).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, and 223-4. Laski also cited Morley, Saint-Beuve, and Georges Cogordan as sources.

<sup>31</sup> Roger Soltau, *French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1931), 15-24.

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte T. Muret, *French Royalist Doctrines since the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press 1933), 10-34.

Muret's example of treating Maistre and his thought in a balanced and sympathetic way has been followed by other American writers as well. There are three authors, in particular who deserve to be cited here. The first is John Courtney Murray, the American Jesuit who is credited with drafting the Second Vatican Council's statement on religious liberty.<sup>33</sup> Murray's 1949 article on "The Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre" is a well-informed and nicely nuanced assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of his theories. After describing Maistre's ideas on the role of religion in society and state, for example, Murray concluded that "Maistre's treatment of religion may have been good sociology and good statesmanship, but it was far from being good theology."<sup>34</sup> Murray also offered a sensible critique of those such as Laski who had distorted his thought as well as those like Charles Maurras, who had tried to exploit his thought for their own purposes, pointing out how, on many essential points, Maistre contradicts the doctrines of the *Action Française*: "Fundamental to his entire writings is the plea for order and quietism; yet a basic theme of the *Action* was violence and the 'coup de force'" (86). In conclusion, Murray noted the irony that in accord with the principle that Maistre himself often asserted, that "'the written word is silent, it cannot answer back,' Maistre was unable to repudiate the scoundrels who were one day to claim him as their master" (86).

The second author whose fair and balanced treatment of Maistre should be noted is that of the American historian, Paul Beik, who in his book *The French Revolution Seen from the Right: Social Theories in Motion*,<sup>35</sup> limited himself to discussing Maistre's writings during the period up through 1799. Beik gave a good account of Maistre's Savoyard background, spelled out his interpretation of the Revolution, especially as it is to be found in *Considérations sur la France*, and concluded by stressing the complexity of Maistre's writings and thought. Maistre was, Beik suggested, "a writer of extraordinary imagination who calls on the mysteries of religion and the positivism of social science, who is alternately a visionary and a shrewd and moderate observer of events."<sup>36</sup>

The third author to be noted for taking an impartial approach is the American political scientist Elisha Grier, who also translated Maistre's

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<sup>33</sup> See Francis Canavan, "Religious Freedom: John Courtney Murray and Vatican II," in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, Ed. By Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1992), 167-80.

<sup>34</sup> John Courtney Murray, "The Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre," *The Review of Politics* 11 (1949), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society 1956.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

*Essai sur le principe générateur*. In an article entitled “Joseph de Maistre and the Reaction Against the Eighteenth Century,” Grierer stressed the circumstances of the French Revolution, which are portrayed as turning Maistre from an enlightened Savoyard conservative “merely defending an order hardly threatened” into an emigré “defending what had become the *ancien régime*, and waiting its restoration.”<sup>37</sup> Maistre’s monarchism, for example, is carefully nuanced by pointing out that when he defends hereditary monarchy, “it should not be forgotten, as it usually is, that Maistre means limited monarchy, in which there is an independent judiciary, room for talent, advisory councils, and the liberty indigenous among the European peoples – the *ancien régime* as it had lately functioned in Savoy and was supposed to function in France” (594n34). In assessing Maistre, Greifer concludes, “we must see him as “a *philosophe* in spite of himself, an eighteenth century man” who, to restore the old regime, was led by circumstances to become “a systematic political philosopher of reaction” (598).

By the middle decades of the twentieth century, in addition to these judicious assessments of Joseph de Maistre by American theologians, historians, and political scientists, we also begin to find works of original scholarship. The first Ph.D. thesis in English on Maistre that I have found was completed at the Catholic University of America in 1937. By Elio Gianturco, it was entitled “Joseph de Maistre and Giambattista Vico: Italian Roots of De Maistre’s Political Culture.” In effect, Gianturco tried to show that Maistre was a disciple of Vico. As we know today, in all his writings Maistre rarely cites Vico, and even his notebooks contain almost nothing by the Neopolitan writer. Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that later Maistre scholars have not accepted this thesis. Nor have they been any more enthusiastic about the argument that Gianturco developed in article published the year before he completed his doctoral dissertation. In this article, entitled “Judicial Culture and Political-historical Judgment in Joseph de Maistre,”<sup>38</sup> Gianturco argued that Maistre was “primarily a jurist” whose juridical knowledge systematically influenced “his judgment of historical events and political institutions.”<sup>39</sup> Maistre scholars, of course, have always been aware that Maistre was trained in the law and served as a magistrate both before and after the revolution, but one thing that has always struck me, as I suspect it has many others as well, is how seldom, in either his writings, or his notebooks, Maistre ever cites the literature of jurisprudence.

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<sup>37</sup> Elisha Grierer, “Joseph de Maistre and the Reaction against the Eighteenth Century,” *The American Political Science Review* 55 (1961), 592-93.

<sup>38</sup> *The Romantic Review* 27 (1936), 254-62.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-5.

A much more significant contribution, in my judgment, was the Ph.D. thesis in philosophy that Aloysius Caponigri submitted to the University of Chicago in 1942. Taking Maistre seriously as a philosopher, Caponigri undertook a careful systematic exposition of Maistre's philosophical positions. In particular, Caponigri spelled out Maistre's epistemological theory of innate ideas and its implications for other aspects of his thought. It is only with Jean-Yves Pranchère's recent thesis on Maistre's philosophy that Caponigri's work has been superceded.<sup>40</sup>

Other doctoral theses in English have followed over the years. Some, like the thesis done by Bruce Mazlish at Columbia University in 1955, have been comparative studies. Mazlish studied Maistre in the context of Bonald and Burke. More recently, D.Phil. theses at Oxford have compared Maistre to Maine de Biran,<sup>41</sup> and to Bonald and Saint-Simon.<sup>42</sup> None of these studies have ever been published, so their findings are not widely known. However, my own 1963 University of Minnesota thesis on the relationship between Maistre's political thought and his religious thought<sup>43</sup> was subsequently published under the title *Throne and Altar*.<sup>44</sup>

The two most recent doctoral theses in English of which I am aware are a 1992 Cornell University Ph.D. thesis in history by Owen Bradley entitled "Logics of Violence: the Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre," and a 1995 Oxford D.Phil. thesis in political science by a Canadian, Graeme Garrard, entitled "Maistre, Judge of Jean-Jacques: An Examination of the Relationship between Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Joseph de Maistre, and the French Enlightenment." Bradley's thesis, now published as a monograph,<sup>45</sup> is a challenging reinterpretation of Maistre that attempts to transcend the customary divisions between his admirers and his critics. Bradley argues that Maistre "was a theorist and not an

<sup>40</sup> "L'Autorité contre les lumières: la philosophie de Joseph de Maistre," doctoral thesis, Université de Rouen, 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Larry Alan Siedentop, "The Limits of the Enlightenment: A Study in Conservative Political Thought in Early Nineteenth-Century France with Special Reference to Maine de Biran," Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1966.

<sup>42</sup> Cyprian P. Blamires, "Three Critiques of the French Revolution." Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Richard A. Lebrun, "Joseph de Maistre: The Relationship between his Political Thought and his Religious Thought," University of Minnesota Ph.D. thesis, 1963.

<sup>44</sup> Richard A. Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1965).

<sup>45</sup> Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1999).

advocate of violence.”<sup>46</sup> What we find in Maistre, Bradley contends, is “a project of comprehending irrational processes in the socio-political sphere commonly ignored (or only cited to be abhorred) by Enlightenment forms of rationality.”<sup>47</sup> While not denying that Maistre was a conservative, Bradley argues that Maistre’s innovative theorizing about the violent and irrational dimensions of social and political life makes him “open to modern readings in a way that his fellow Conservatives are not.”<sup>48</sup> For Bradley, Maistre was “not only a conservative ideologue but also a highly innovative theorist of order and ideologies,” and he concludes by suggesting that “Maistre ultimately belongs as much to the history of enlightenment as to that of obscurantism because the theory of social unreason itself belongs to the history of reason.”<sup>49</sup>

Graeme Garrard’s thesis on Maistre and Rousseau is still waiting publication. However Garrard has published two very stimulating articles on Maistre. The first, in the journal *History of Political Thought*, summarizes his Oxford thesis.<sup>50</sup> Garrard’s argument is that Rousseau was an important precursor of what Isaiah Berlin has called the Counter-Enlightenment. In his article, as in his thesis, Garrard examines the parallels between Rousseau’s partial critique of the Enlightenment and Maistre’s much more comprehensive and systematic indictment. Garrard finds that despite Maistre’s frequent denunciation of Rousseau’s ideas, he shares with Rousseau “a profound concern for what he takes to be disastrous social and political ramifications of eighteenth-century ideas” (97-8). In effect, Garrard argues that “Maistre’s works are the consummation of many of the ideas and arguments first directed against the Enlightenment by Rousseau” (100). Garrard’s second article, in the prestigious *Journal of the History of Ideas*, is entitled “Joseph de Maistre’s Civilization and its Discontents.”<sup>51</sup> The title, of course, evokes Sigmund Freud’s famous essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, and in fact what Garrard does is argue that there are remarkable parallels between Maistre’s views and Freud’s. Both conceived human beings as divided against themselves, “perpetually struggling to prevent the innate aggressiveness of the species from plunging society into a Hobbesian war of all against all” (430). Freud, in reaction to the Great War of 1914, like

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>47</sup> “Logics of Violence,” 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 678.

<sup>49</sup> *A Modern Maistre*, 237-8.

<sup>50</sup> Graeme Garrard, “Rousseau, Maistre, and the Counter-Enlightenment,” *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994), 97-120.

<sup>51</sup> Graeme Garrard, “Joseph de Maistre’s Civilization and its Discontents,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1996), 429-46.



Maistre in reaction to the French Revolution, was led "to reject the common Enlightenment view of human beings as naturally sociable and of social life as a reflection of a natural world governed by laws established by God and discoverable by reason" (430). Both feared that the Enlightenment project of "significantly loosening social, religious, and political bonds on individuals could precipitate the collapse of the fragile edifice of society." Garrard concludes by suggesting that it is Maistre's novel social theory, which views individuals as complex, dynamic, and contradictory beings, that gives his thought "a sinister modernistic edge" and "that gives his work, like Freud's, a disturbing relevance to the twentieth-century reader" (446).

This brief review of some recent scholarly writing in English on Joseph de Maistre should demonstrate that Anglophone scholars are now making significant contributions to our understanding and appreciation of Maistre's thought and its place in modern intellectual and cultural history. However, it must also be admitted that it is often neither the most careful nor the most innovative scholarship that receives the widest distribution. For example, when my biography of Joseph de Maistre was published in 1988,<sup>52</sup> the long review article that appeared in the widely circulated American review, *The New Republic*, was entitled "The Lion of Illiberalism."<sup>53</sup> The author, Stephen Holmes, a professor of political science and law at the University of Chicago, seems to have done his best to interpret my work as somehow reinforcing old stereotypes of Maistre. For Holmes, Maistre remains the "unwavering antiliberal" (33) who "dwelled obsessively on the incomprehensible" (36). His thought was characterized by "profound fatalism," a "crudely instrumental view of faith" (34), and, according to Holmes, "his account of the origins of gratuitous bloodshed, his whole theory of sacrifice, in fact, is obscure to the point of insanity" (36). George Steiner published a similar ill-spirited review in the *London Review of Books*.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes I think the mythical Maistre is too useful a bogeyman for liberals to give up.

More sophisticated, but in some ways just as seriously misleading, are the brilliantly crafted vignettes of Joseph de Maistre created by Sir Isaiah Berlin. These essays now date back some forty years, but recently Berlin's views have received wider circulation than ever before. When Berlin's most lengthy piece on Maistre, an essay entitled "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" was edited for inclusion in a volume

<sup>52</sup> Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Holmes, "The Lion of Illiberalism," *The New Republic* (October 30, 1989), 32-7.

<sup>54</sup> "Darkness Visible," Vol. 10, no. 21, 24 November 1988.

of essays entitled *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*,<sup>55</sup> it was published as well in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>56</sup> In fact, this essay offers a more nuanced portrait of Maistre than Berlin's first effort, which appeared forty years ago in a slight volume on Tolstoy's view of history entitled *The Hedgehog and the Fox*.<sup>57</sup> The title comes from the Greek poet Archilochus, a fragment which says "The fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing."<sup>58</sup> Berlin interprets the line to mean that there is a great chasm between those "who relate everything to a single central vision" and those "who pursue many ends, often unconnected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way" (7-8). Berlin demonstrates that Tolstoy knew Maistre's work and used it as a source for his famous novel *War and Peace*, and then playing with the contrast between the hedgehog and the fox, uses Maistre as a foil in an attempt to delineate Tolstoy's complicated and even contradictory vision of history. For this purpose Berlin emphasizes (and I would say exaggerates) Maistre's "grimly unconventional and misanthropic views about the nature of individuals and society" (76), and describes Maistre's writings as closer in content and tone to those of "Nietzsche, d'Annunzio, and the heralds of modern fascism than to the respectable royalists of his own time" (76). Berlin writes of "Maistre's general irrationalism" (91) and claims, for example, that "Maistre believed in authority because it was an irrational force" (91). In the end, he argues, with reference to the essay's title, that Maistre and Tolstoy were both, despite their obvious differences, "blood brothers" who were "by nature sharp-eyed foxes" and at the same time shared "an agonized belief in a single serene vision, in which all problems are resolved, all doubts stilled, peace and understanding finally achieved" (120-1).

Berlin's essay on "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" is entirely focussed on Maistre and in it his treatment of Maistre is in some ways much more enlightening although the title of the essay is misleading. Berlin is not so much blaming Maistre for the origins of fascism as arguing that Maistre was an extraordinary and original thinker whose "genius consists in the depth and accuracy of his insight into the darker,

<sup>55</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: John Murray 1990), 91-174.

<sup>56</sup> *The New York Review of Books*, 27 September, 10 October, and 25 October 1990.

<sup>57</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: The New American Library 1957). This piece is now also available in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus 1997), ed. by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, 436-98.

<sup>58</sup> Cited by Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 7.

less regarded, but decisive factors in social and political behaviour.”<sup>59</sup> It is because Maistre, in his speculations, “boldly, more than once, and often for the first time, revealed (and violently exaggerated) central truths, unpalatable to his contemporaries, indignantly denied by his successors, and recognized only in our own day,”<sup>60</sup> that he foreshadows in a remarkable way the terrifying realities of twentieth-century fascism. To make his case, Berlin, it seems to me, distorts Maistre’s overall position by overemphasizing what he characterizes as the “irrational” aspects of Maistre’s theorizing. It is not that Maistre’s writing does not contain passages that lend themselves to the portrait Berlin paints, but because he chooses his evidence almost exclusively from Maistre’s darker pages (and from his more pessimistic “Russian works”), the resulting image is more lurid than life-like – at least in my opinion.

Although I have had space here to provide no more than a sampling of what has been written about Joseph de Maistre in English – I have only been able to mention about a third of the more than 100 pieces my research has identified – I hope I have been able to offer some sense of the English images of this great Savoyard writer.

Perhaps I could close by saying something about modern translations of Maistre’s writings. The first twentieth-century translation was Elisha Greifer’s excellent version of the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, published under the title *On God and Society* in 1959. This was followed in 1965 by Jack Lively’s volume of selected excerpts from most of Maistre’s major works, published under the somewhat misleading title *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*.<sup>61</sup> Since then I myself have tried to provide accurate annotated translations of works that had never before been translated into English (or at least not in their entirety). With the financial assistance of grants deriving ultimately from the Canadian government, McGill-Queen’s University Press of Kingston and Montreal has published my versions of the *Considerations on France* (in 1974, since republished by Cambridge University Press in 1994), *The St. Petersburg Dialogues* (in 1993), *Against Rousseau: “On the State of Nature” and “on the Sovereignty of the People”* (in 1996), and *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon* (in 1998).

With most of Joseph de Maistre’s writings now available in English translation, it is my sincere hope that he will become more truly understood and better appreciated in the Anglophone world. From all the

<sup>59</sup> *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 166.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>61</sup> *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, translated and edited by Jack Lively (New York: Macmillan 1965)

evidence, his “presence” in that world is very real and promises to remain vivid for a long time to come.

## *The Persistence of Maistrian Thought*<sup>1</sup>

For a long time it has been a commonplace of Maistrian studies – and a well-founded commonplace – to emphasize the paradoxical character of Maistre’s work. Almost all interpreters have recognized that this work is placed under the sign of paradox from a triple point of view: paradox surges especially in the contrast between a cruel and ferocious opus and an author whose correspondence shows him to be charitable and tolerant; it appears as well as the mark of the Maistrian style, which made great rhetorical use of the *oxymoron*, of the association of contrary terms; and finally it characterizes the Maistrian vision of the world, which perceives the presence of evil – that is to say an *active nothingness* – in all reality, and yet defines the whole totality of reality as the work of God utilizing Evil in the service of the Good.

The paradoxical character of the reception of Maistre’s work corresponds to this series of internal paradoxes in his work. Maistre had never intended to propose anything but an apology for Catholicism, and yet the Catholic Church has never fully recognized this apology. Pope Pius VII refused the dedication of *Du Pape* because of the theological errors contained in the work; the advent of Thomism to the rank of the official philosophy of the Catholic Church at the end of the nineteenth century, implied that it was impossible to hold Maistre, whose thought is often in contradiction with Thomist theses, to be an authentic Catholic philosopher. And it is obvious that the Church that has issued from Vatican II is very distant from the Church such as it was conceived by Maistre, a Church forever allied to monarchy in the struggle against the individualism of the rights of man and modern democracy. Inversely, Maistre’s work has often found some of its most fervent admirers among authors who, at first glance, seem much more representative of the “modern spirit” opposed by Maistre than the pure Catholic tradition; thus

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<sup>1</sup> “La persistance de la pensée maistrienne,” *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 12 (1996), 205-39.

Auguste Comte and Baudelaire, who both recognized Maistre as one of their master thinkers.

The place held by Maistre in contemporary culture today also testifies to this paradoxical reception. This place is at once discrete and real; for although he is not ranked as a great classical author, Maistre is often cited or mentioned. We could say of him that he is unrecognized without being forgotten. He has a presence in anthologies;<sup>2</sup> syntheses of the history of political thought rarely neglect exhibiting and commenting on his doctrine;<sup>3</sup> and recently he has even had the right to a biography written by one of his descendants.<sup>4</sup> Bonald and the young Lamennais, who were assuredly the two counter-revolutionary thinkers the nearest to Maistre by their intention and their themes, are neither as well read or as much studied as he is. Not only is a review specifically devoted him, but a good part of his work is today easily accessible, with several of his texts being available at the same time in critical editions and in current editions.<sup>5</sup> In particular, he remains a reference author for a number of thinkers and writers who are far from situating themselves in direct descent from the Catholic counter-revolution. Here we could multiply the examples. When René Girard proposes to elucidate the “mystery of

<sup>2</sup> Thus in *Droits de l'homme et philosophie. Une anthologie (1789-1914)*, texts chosen and presented by Frédéric Worms (Paris: Agora/Presses Pocket 1993).

<sup>3</sup> It is true that these exhibits sometimes testify as well that the work and the life of Maistre remain on the whole little known. So it is that B. Binoche, in his work *Critiques des droits de l'homme* (Paris: PUF 1989), adds to a remarkable commentary on chapter VI of *Considérations sur la France* a biography of Maistre that is almost fantastic, according to which Maistre “ended his days in second-rate administrative functions in Chambéry” – while Maistre in fact died in Turin, capital of the realm of Piedmont-Sardinia, where he occupied nothing less than the position of *régent de la grand chancellerie*, that is to say he was minister of justice.

<sup>4</sup> Henri de Maistre, *Joseph de Maistre* (Paris: Perrin 1990).

<sup>5</sup> We point out especially the recent critical editions by Jean-Louis Darcel of *De la souveraineté du peuple* (Paris: PUF 1992) and the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (Geneva: Slatkine 1993), as well as the re-publication of the critical edition of the *Considérations sur la France*, published by Jean-Louis Darcel with Slatkine in 1980. The *Considérations sur la France* was the object of a pocket book edition by Complexe (Brussels) in 1988 and has just been published by the Imprimerie nationale (Paris 1994); the text established by J.-L. Darcel, accompanied by a choice of other texts, is available in the “Quadrige” collection: J. de Maistre, *Écrits sur la Révolution*, (Paris: PUF 1989). The *Eclaircissements sur les sacrifices* has recently been made available in pocket book (Paris: Agora/Presses Pocket 1994).

sacrifice," one of the first authors he evokes, although in a very brief and simply allusive way, is Joseph de Maistre.<sup>6</sup> When Julien Freund intends to analyse the essence of politics or the phenomenon of decadence, he cites Maistre as an obvious reference.<sup>7</sup> When Roman Jakobson presents the tendencies of contemporary linguistics, he does not hesitate to declare that "Joseph de Maistre posed an infallible principle" in writing in *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* that "there are no arbitrary signs."<sup>8</sup> Finally, when Michel Henry proposes to demonstrate that humanity today is entering into barbarism, he explicitly borrows his definition of barbarism ("a ruin and not a rudiment") from Joseph de Maistre.<sup>9</sup>

It is certainly not a question of attributing a secret influence to Maistre, or even less making of him a sort of occult master of contemporary thought. In the twentieth century, his most authentic heir is undoubtedly Carl Schmitt; this political thinker, who today arouses a certain interest in France where translations of his works multiply, expressly situated himself in descent from the Catholic counter-revolution and was loyal to Maistrian thought in sharing with it the same theory of sovereignty, the same attachment to Catholicism, and the same apocalyptic vision of the world issued from the French Revolution.<sup>10</sup> However – besides the fact that he is himself a thinker who has had few direct disciples, his violent engagement in favour of Nazism during the 1930s has made difficult an unreserved adhesion to his political thought – even Carl Schmitt can not be counted as Maistre's disciple. His political positions were not deduced from Maistrian thought, not least because the political context of Germany in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s largely exceeded the context that was thinkable for Joseph de Maistre in 1796 or in 1821. Properly speaking, Maistrian thought never *made a*

<sup>6</sup> R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset/Pluriel 1980, re-edition), 11-13.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Freund, *L'essence du politique* (Paris: Sirey 1978, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), and *La décadence* (Paris: Sirey 1984).

<sup>8</sup> R. Jakobson, *Main Trends in the Science of Language* (New York: Harper Row 1974), 24, cited by H. Meschonnic, "Langage, histoire, une même théorie," *N.R.F.*, no. 296 (1977), 89. See J. de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (2<sup>nd</sup> Entretien), Darcel ed., 153, or in *Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine reprints 1984), hereafter *OC*, 4:99.

<sup>9</sup> M. Henry, *La Barbarie* (1987, new edition Paris, Livre de Poche 1988), 9.

<sup>10</sup> With respect to these themes and express references to Maistre, the affinity of C. Schmitt with Maistrian thought is particularly clear in *Théologie politique I* (1922) and *II* (1969), translation by J.-L. Schlegel (Paris: Gallimard 1988).

*school*, not even in the course of the nineteenth century, when the diffusion of Maistre's works was considerable. It is permitted to think that Baudelaire "was perhaps his sole disciple;"<sup>11</sup> however it is probable that Maistre himself would have had difficulty recognizing himself in this disciple who was so particular, as he would have had difficulty in recognizing himself in the eulogies of certain contemporary French writers who have claimed his heritage by trying to make of him an avant-garde author.<sup>12</sup>

Is it necessary to go so far as to reduce these eulogies to simple "provocations," which really would have nothing in common with Maistre – except, precisely, the taste for provocation?<sup>13</sup> Nothing is less sure. If Maistre's only *real disciples* are his paradoxical disciples, in the image of Comte and Baudelaire, does it not follow that these paradoxical disciples are *really* his *disciples*? There is no trace of provocation, but a clear expression of fascination and of his reasons in this unexpected statement by George Steiner: "I sense myself very close to Joseph de Maistre; with infinitely more depth than Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and all the Enlightenment, he predicts, with an astounding exactitude, a black terrible clairvoyance, that the twentieth century will be bathed in blood and torture. For him, history was a punishment."<sup>14</sup> George Steiner indicates clearly here what gives Maistrian thought its force and its present attraction: the traditionalist critique of the modern world is far from having lost all its credibility. Democratic liberalism thinks that its own truth is confirmed by the principal catastrophes of this century, that is by the advent of world wars and totalitarian regimes; the horror of these events demonstrates to its eyes that the values represented by the "rights of man" are invincible and unsurpassable, and that liberal democracy can be abandoned only at the cost of a fall into violence and

<sup>11</sup> J.-L. Darcel, preface to Maistre's *Ecrits sur la Révolution*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Here we cite the unreserved enthusiasm of P. Sollers, *Femmes* (Paris: Gallimard 1983), 222, and P. Muray, *Le 19<sup>e</sup> siècle à travers les âges* (Paris: Denoël 1984), 294, as well as the more nuanced praises of B.-H. Lévy in *Les derniers jours de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Livre de poche 1992), 294, and G. Matzneff, preface to H. de Maistre, *Joseph de Maistre*, integrally reprinted in *Maîtres et complices* (Paris: Lattès 1994).

<sup>13</sup> See Cioran, who praises Maistre above all for his "genius for provocation." "Joseph de Maistre," in *Exercices d'admiration* (Paris: Gallimard 1986), 11.

<sup>14</sup> G. Steiner, in an interview with F. Ewald, *Magazine littéraire*, No. 285 (February 1991), 81. See as well G. Steiner, "Logocrats (A note on de Maistre, Heidegger and P. Boutang)," in *Langage et politique/Language and Politics*, ed. by M. Cranston and P. Mair, Publications de l'Institut universitaire européen (Firenze: Badia Fiesolana) (Brussels: Bruylant 1982).



barbarism. However traditionalism can respond that totalitarianism, precisely because it is a new and historically previously unrealized phenomenon, testifies against the society from whose breast it has only become possible. A contemporary of the Napoleonic wars that he described as a “civil war of human kind,”<sup>15</sup> Maistre was explicitly frightened that the French Revolution had inaugurated a new age of warfare. To his eyes the Revolution had put *total war* into the world by inventing the *levée en masse*, by giving itself unlimited objectives (like the emancipation of human kind), and by hurling *nations* (and no longer only courts and professional armies) one against the other on an enormously amplified field of battle. While the European monarchies had known how to civilize war by submitting their conflicts to rules and to the limits of “the law of gentlemen” and of “the European equilibrium,” the age of the rights of man and of democracy could only be the age of unlimited world wars.<sup>16</sup> The last dialogue of *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* even goes so far as to suggest that the French Revolution perhaps signifies the beginning of the end of the human adventure: the disappearance of religion, and the sudden “increased speed” of world history, are these not signs announcing that “the time has come”?<sup>17</sup> Today it is inevitable to note that neither the possibilities of destruction offered by nuclear arms, nor the menaces of ecological devastation that weighs on the planet, are able to refute the inquietude that the majority of traditionalist thinkers shared with Maistre.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *OC*, 12:424.

<sup>16</sup> These themes recur constantly in Maistre’s correspondence. See *OC*, 9:167, 10:201 and 325, 12:94, 213, and 407, 13:275, 303, and 345-6. When Carl Schmitt praises the “European public law” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and when he denounces the idea that war can be declared in the name of humanity as an idea open “to pushing war just to the extreme limits of the inhuman,” (*La notion de politique*, trans. by M.L. Steinhauser (Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1972), 98-9), he is only systematizing an analysis already presented, in a dispersed way, in Maistre.

<sup>17</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 548 (*OC*, 5:231).

<sup>18</sup> Thus one can pick up numerous Maistrian themes in René Guénon’s *La crise du monde moderne* (recently republished in the Folio collection), which has the imminence of the apocalypse for a central theme. Carl Schmitt himself expresses many times, in a discrete way, the fear that the modern world might be the triumph of the Antichrist. See *La notion de politique*, 151; and *Théologie politique II*, 179-82.

We know that Maistre denounced the French Revolution as “*satanic* in its essence”<sup>19</sup> and that he opposed to it the divine right of monarchy. Such an extreme version of the refusal of the French Revolution has almost no defenders today,<sup>20</sup> but the thesis which is at the heart of this refusal, which is that “every imaginable institutions is founded on a religious concept, or it is only a passing phenomenon,”<sup>21</sup> is less foreign to contemporary thought that one might think. Presented in its strictest formulation, under the form of the thesis of the divine origin of sovereignty, the central thesis of Maistre’s work seems incontestably obsolete. However it has a less foreign sound when it becomes the thesis according to which “nations are only civilized by religion,”<sup>22</sup> and it has an almost familiar sound when it is reduced to mean that a society without religion is impossible, because “human reason reduced to its own resources” is incapable of assuring by itself alone the consensus of opinions that founds the political and social order.<sup>23</sup> That the revolutionary project, that is to say the project of a foundation of society on reason alone and only the will of individuals, was intrinsically despotic, doomed to destroy the real liberties of individuals at same time as the traditions supporting those liberties – this thesis which was Maistre’s – today counts Claude Lévi-Strauss among its defenders.<sup>24</sup> It is also the thesis of François Furet when, writing that “the Goulag leads us to rethink the Terror in virtue of an identity in the project,”<sup>25</sup> assigns the French Revolution a totalitarian

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<sup>19</sup> *Du Pape*, preliminary discussion, Lovie and Chetail ed. (Geneva: Droz 1966), 23 (*OC*, 2:xxxii-xxxiii); *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 109 (*OC*, 1:55).

<sup>20</sup> The thesis of the identity of the Revolution and Satan was reaffirmed, in 1989, by certain groups of opponents to the commemoration of the bicentenary. See. S. L. Kaplan, *Adieu 89*, trans. by A. Charpentier and R. Lambrechts (Paris: Fayard 1993), 106 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 110 (*OC*, 1:56).

<sup>22</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, XXXIII, *OC*, 1:269.

<sup>23</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, Darcel ed., Bk I, chapters 10 and 12, 147 and 172.

<sup>24</sup> Lévi-Strauss suspects the French Revolution of being at the origin of the “catastrophes that have fallen on the West” because it has made us believe “that society is a matter of abstract thought while it is made up of habits, and of usages, and that by grinding these under the grindstones of reason, one pulverized ways of life founded on a long tradition, and reduced individuals to the state of interchangeable and anonymous atoms.” *De près et de loin* (Paris: Odile Jacob 1988), 165

<sup>25</sup> F. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (1978) (Paris: Folio/Galliamard 1985), 29. Furet’s judgement was more indulgent in his later texts.

meaning. So one could ask if Maistre had not known how to discern justly, with an extraordinary prescience, the totalitarian future of the ideals of the Revolution. Carl Schmitt<sup>26</sup> drew attention to a letter of 1811 in which Maistre almost seems to predict the Bolshevik Revolution by declaring that he fears above all a Russian revolution that would be led “in a European way” by a “university Pugachev.”<sup>27</sup> Thus it is that what seems at first to be an eccentric position – the thesis of the Satanism of the Revolution – might henceforth seem to be the spring of an astonishingly prophetic analysis: the violence of the twentieth century will appear as the proof of the Maistrian lesson, which says that a society necessarily courts catastrophe if it thinks it can found itself on the sole power of reason or of science and does not propose for itself any other end than the liberty of the individuals who compose it.

So we will not be astonished to be able to hear something like an echo of Maistrian thought in numerous currents of contemporary culture, finding it there in ones on which Maistre has exercised no influence. Even when, Carl Schmitt apart, Maistrian thought might seem deprived of direct posterity, his themes and his arguments remain present as a diffuse heritage in works otherwise very different one from the other. It is natural that the criticisms Maistre addressed to liberalism and to democracy can be found among thinkers who, attached to demonstrating the superiority of the antique or medieval mode of thought over the modern mode of thought, use against modern liberalism or the idea of the rights of man arguments already utilised by the traditionalist current.<sup>28</sup> However the Maistrian critique of the democratic ideas of the Revolution coincides equally with a part of contemporary neo-liberalism, either that which affirms with François Furet that the French Revolution is ended and that the ideal of revolutionary democracy can be no more than a despotic fantasy, or that which coincides more radically with Friedrich von Hayek to certify it “the abortion of the democratic ideal” and to proclaim the incompatibility of liberty and social equality.<sup>29</sup> Finally, in

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<sup>26</sup> C. Schmitt, *Théorie du partisan* (1962), in *La notion de politique*, 265-6.

<sup>27</sup> *OC*, 12:59-60.

<sup>28</sup> See Léo Strauss, *Droit naturel et histoire* (1953), trans. by M Nathan and E. de Dampierre (Paris: Plon 1954), *Le libéralisme antique et moderne* (1968), trans. by O. Berrichon Sedeyn (Paris, PUF 1990), and M. Villey, *Le Droit et les droits de l'homme* (Paris: PUF 1983).

<sup>29</sup> See F. von Hayek, *Droit, législation et liberté 3* (1979), trans. by R. Audouin (Paris: PUF 1983). The convergence of neo-liberal theses with counter-revolutionary thought has been analysed by S. Rials, “La droite ou l’horreur de la volonté” in *Révolution et Contre-révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: DUC/Albatros 1987), 53-6, and by G. Gengembre, *La Contre-révolution ou l’histoire*

a much more paradoxical way, certain arguments of the Maistrrian critique of the Enlightenment are involuntarily being discovered again by the thinkers (one could willingly call "progressivists") who identify themselves with the idea of "post-modernity," that is to say who propose renouncing the 'modern project' of the emancipation of human kind through the autonomy of reason and substituting for the universalism of the Enlightenment a tolerant relativism that has given up on universal ends as lost. We will note that Jean-François Lyotard, who has been one of the first to make "post-modernity" a philosophic theme,<sup>30</sup> is frightened that modern philosophy and politics have taken place under the sign of a "horrible crime" – the execution of Louis XVI, "a brave and completely lovable king who was the incarnation of legitimacy."<sup>31</sup> We will remark equally that Maistre anticipated some of the arguments opposed to the rationalist idea of science by Paul Feyerabend, one of the principal representatives of "postmodern relativism." Feyerabend has maintained that "scientific method" does not exist; he has argued this thesis by the example of the Copernican theory, which according to the rules of scientific verification would have had to have been abandoned since certain of its predictions were then experimentally refuted; he concluded from this that it was necessary to "put science in its place" and "to prevent scientists from taking education in hand."<sup>32</sup> Maistre for his part wrote that "there is not and there cannot be a *method of invention*"; he emphasized that Copernicus's theory, although true, had been refuted in his time by the objection, then unsolvable by it, drawn from the phases of Venus. The limits of the science inspired Maistre with this conclusion: "if science is not uniformly relegated to a subordinate rank, incalculable evils await us; we shall become stupefied by science, and that is the worst sort of stupidity."<sup>33</sup>

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*désespérante* (Paris: Imago 1989), 180 ff.

<sup>30</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit 1979).

<sup>31</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, "Discussion avec R. Rorty," *Critique*, no. 456 (May 1985), 583.

<sup>32</sup> P. Feyerabend, *Contre la méthode* (1975), trans. by B. Jurdant et A. Schlumberger (Paris: Seuil 1979), 20, 68 ff, and 241-2.

<sup>33</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, OC, 6:41; *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 242 (OC, 4:218); and *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, XXXIX, OC, 1:277. Let us add that we could even compare Maistre's affirmation that "the true system of the world was known perfectly in the most remote antiquity" (*Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed. (OC, 4:77) to Feyerabend's statement according to which "there existed a highly developed and internationally known astronomy in the old stone age." (*Contre la méthode*, 346.)

So it is not in virtue of simple arbitrariness or polemic facility that, in a recent work written in defence of the “Baconian ideal” of the progress of humanity founded on technique, Lucien Sève brings together the contemporary critics of science and technology and the theses of *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* and judges it necessary, all the while recognizing that Maistre is in this matter an “emblematic reference more than a direct inspiration,” to emphasize the permanence of the “Maistrian program” that, in the fashion of a “cultural constant,” “in fact at least underlies the whole anti-science philosophic-political movement.”<sup>34</sup> Other authors do their best to show that the “traditionalist paradigm” – a paradigm of which Maistrian thought assuredly offers one of purest types – was the work of two great philosophers who, in producing the most rigorous and most radical critique of universalist rationalism, posed the foundations of “postmodernist” thought: Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>35</sup> To tell the truth, such a proposition must seem inappropriate in the measure that the work of a Nietzsche and a Heidegger was aimed at sapping everything that Maistre’s thought had aimed to defend: affirmation of the solidity of onto-theological reason, confidence in the ultimate and universal foundation of thought, faith in a unique sense of the truth. When Nietzsche proclaims that God is dead, when Heidegger pronounces that “philosophy is fundamentally atheist,”<sup>36</sup> they are the antipodes to Maistre affirming that “Christ commands” and “that every metaphysical proposition that does not issue from a Christian dogma is and can be nothing but a culpable extravagance.”<sup>37</sup> However Nietzsche and Heidegger nevertheless share with Maistre the same critical vision of modernity: all three contest the value of democracy and of science; all three think of modern times, and even Western history in its entirety, as a process of decline or of decadence in the course of which nihilism has been deployed. Such a coincidence does not fill in the abyss that separates

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<sup>34</sup> L. Sève, *Pour une critique de la raison bioéthique* (Paris: O. Jacob 1994), 247-9.

<sup>35</sup> For a portrait of Nietzsche as traditionalist, see L. Ferry and A. Renaut, “Ce qui a besoin d’être démontré ne vaut pas grand chose,” and P. A. Taguieff, “Le paradigme traditionaliste. Nietzsche dans la rhétorique réactionnaire,” in *Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzchéens* (Paris: Grasset 1991). For a portrait of Heidegger as traditionalist, see L. Ferry and A. Renaut, *Heidegger et les modernes* (Paris: Grasset 1988), and L. Ferry, “Tradition ou argumentation,” *Pouvoirs*, no. 56 (1991).

<sup>36</sup> M. Heidegger, *Interprétations phénoménologiques d’Aristote* (1922), trans. by J. F. Courtine (Mauvezin: T.E.R. 1992), 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 117 (*OC*, 1:66), and *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 516 (*OC*, 5:189).

the atheism of the two German philosophers and Maistre's Catholic certitude. However, when Nietzsche is upset because "soon two millennia and not a single new God!"<sup>38</sup> or when Heidegger declares: "only a God can still save us,"<sup>39</sup> one can ask if they are not held in the same theoretical space that Maistre inhabited when he wrote that "all true philosophy must opt between these two hypotheses: either a new religion is going to be formed, or Christianity will be rejuvenated in some extraordinary way."<sup>40</sup>

Certainly, one must not proceed to hasty or polemical amalgams and come to "confound Nietzsche and Joseph de Maistre."<sup>41</sup> Let us repeat that Maistre exercised no real influence on contemporary thought, and that there would be something clearly absurd in wanting to make him the precursor of intellectual currents very different from him and very different one from the other. To want to display Maistre as an unexpected precursor of contemporary culture could lead to building a properly fantastic figure: that of a Maistre who would be a precursor as well of Maurras as Heidegger and of Nietzsche as of integral Catholicism, and of Hayek as of Lévi-Strauss – a figure who would be without consequence, announcing nothing by force of announcing everything.<sup>42</sup> The very notions of influence and of precursor, from the point of view of the history of ideas, have only a weak value; the notion of influence, too vague, is incapable of indicating the nature of the relation that supports the works that it claims to bring together; the notion of precursor always participates in the retrospective illusion that sees in the present the truth of the past. The care to avoid this illusion however must not prevent us from noting that traditionalist thinking, such as Maistre incarnates, haunts the debates of contemporary philosophy, which has for its theme the "crisis of the Enlightenment" and "the end of modernity." It *haunts* these debates precisely because no one now defends the traditionalist

<sup>38</sup> F. Nietzsche, *L'Antéchrist*, § 19, trans. by D. Tassel (Paris: U.G.E. 1967), 29.

<sup>39</sup> M. Heidegger, *Réponses et questions sur l'histoire et la politique* (1966), trans. by J. Launay (Paris: Mercure de France 1977), 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 114 (*OC*, 1:61).

<sup>41</sup> V. Descombes, "Le moment français de Nietzsche," *Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzschéens*, 126.

<sup>42</sup> One can think that the important thesis by R. Triomphe (*Joseph de Maistre, Etude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un matérialiste mystique* (Geneva: Droz 1968), did not know how to avoid this pitfall: in affirming that Maistre's doctrine is on an identical foundation with systems of thought as different one from the other as those of Luther, Kant, Herder, or Novalis, R. Triomphe ends by withdrawing all identity from Maistrian thought.

position per se; while the rationalist adversaries of “postmodern” thinkers accuse the latter of “neo-traditionalism,” these people denounce this accusation as an imaginary imputation. Traditionalism in any case appears as a spectre: it is the ghostly double of postmodern relativism – sometimes the menacing shadow that rationalists see behind this relativism, sometimes the illusory image of themselves that the defenders of this relativism are doing their best to dissipate. Spectral, the persistence of Maistrian thought must seem as multiform as elusive.

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“The definitive laicisation of our modernity convicts the Counter-Revolution of unreality.”<sup>43</sup> This diagnosis with which Gérard Gengembre opens his study of counter-revolutionary thought works for Maistrian thought – and works so much more in that the “laicisation of our modernity” is accompanied by a laicisation of Catholicism itself. It is true that it is difficult to know that the laicisation of society is definitive; that the “laicisation of our modernity” is either a non-guaranteed progress or that it is acquired forever; history has often been rich in the unexpected and in regressions. However the “unreality” of counter-revolutionary Catholicism seems to be quite completely definitive, since the Catholic Church itself no longer believes what Maistre believed: that the cause of the French monarchy and the cause of Catholicism are one and the same cause; that the Church must profess intolerance; that the rights of God exclude the rights of man. The restoration of *divine right* monarchy is no longer a Catholic project – save for certain integralist milieus, which is why Gérard Gengembre is right to say that the thought of a Maistre is “practically unreadable according to the characters of the contemporary extreme right” and that “perhaps only integral Catholicism could be compared to it, when it quits the strictly theological domain to venture into political discourse.” But integralism, precisely in so far as it defines itself as a Catholicism in rupture with the Catholic Church, makes a figure of eccentricity rather than a serious intellectual position; in any case it is forbidden to claim for itself the authority of the Church that it challenges. That integralism is today the only place where Maistrian thought survives in its entirety, can only mean one thing: that Maistrian thought has not survived. The fact that contemporary integralism repeats the theses of counter-revolutionary traditionalism must not have the effect of making us forget that, in his time, Maistre had not been “integralist.” Having severely criticized the “incredible pretension” of Jansenism “to be in the Catholic Church, despite the Catholic Church,”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> G. Gengembre, *La Contre-Révolution*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *De l’Eglise gallicane*, OC, 3:45.

he always declared himself ready to retract his opinions if the Church came to condemn them.<sup>45</sup> If integralism was purely and simply the truth of Maistrian thought, it would be necessary to suspect Maistre of having failed to recognize the meaning of Catholicism and to classify him, he who never claimed anything other than to serve the cause of the Church with obedience, among the false friends of the Church; it would be necessary to admit that the strength of the fascination that preserves his work owes nothing to the Catholicism that he thought to defend but that in fact he had betrayed. This last consequence is difficult to accept. The laicisation of the modern world does not signify the disappearance of religion, nor the disappearance of Catholicism; it is hardly believable that the diffuse persistence of Maistrian thought in contemporary culture has no relation, no common reason, with the real persistence in the breast of the modern world of Christianity and the Catholic Church.

One will object that the cause is already judged: two centuries ago, the Catholic tradition confirmed the partly negative judgement that, in the lifetime of Maistre himself, Rome laid on *Du Pape* in noting the theological errors of Maistrian argumentation. One can consider that Maistrian thought was definitively condemned as no longer representing the truth of Catholicism from the moment when Thomism, with the encyclical *Aeterni patris* (4 August 1879), became the official philosophy of the Catholic Church. All Thomist theologians are, in effect, in accord in observing that Maistre's philosophy, his political philosophy in particular, was strictly incompatible with Thomist positions.<sup>46</sup> It is logical therefore that, in the course of an exhaustive comparison of Maistrian political philosophy with that of St. Thomas Aquinas, a Catholic theologian came to the judgement that "Maistre is not a Catholic political philosopher," but is well and truly a "heretical" thinker.<sup>47</sup> This is a judgement that is confirmed in its own way, outside of theology, by the feelings of a believing and practising Catholic: here one can take as an example the reaction of François Mauriac to the reading of chosen

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<sup>45</sup> *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, OC, 5:295.

<sup>46</sup> See, among others, G. Breton, "Le droit divin de la souveraineté politique selon Joseph de Maistre," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique*, 28 (1927), 31 ff; H. Rommen, *Der Staat in der katholischen Gedankenwelt* (Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei 1935), 115-16, and 226-7; Ch. Journet, "Pourquoi Joseph de Maistre et Donoso Cortés ne sont pas nos maîtres," *Nova et vetera*, No. 24 (1949); F.E. de Tejada, "Joseph de Maistre en Espagne," *Revue des Etudes maistriennes*, No. 3 (1977); and M. Villey, *Philosophie du droit I* (Paris: Dalloz 1986), 156.

<sup>47</sup> M. Huber, *Die Staatsphilosophie von Joseph de Maistre im Lichte des Thomismus* (Basel/Stuttgart: Helbing & Lichtenbahn 1958), 10 and 60.



extracts of Maistre published by Cioran in 1957. Mauriac writes in his *Bloc-notes* that Maistre represents an “odious” Catholicism: “it is little enough to say that this atrocious doctrine is different from that of the Beatitudes that all the saints practised who believed in love and who, literally, died of love. It is not even a caricature of it [...]: it constitutes exactly the negation of it. And if, as we must believe, this great honest man Joseph de Maistre was none the less a true Christian, it is that in private, in the secret of his prayer, he would have manifested another part of himself than that which burst out in his writings and which is horrible.”<sup>48</sup> We see that Mauriac was not far from making a definitive condemnation of Maistre, saving an indulgence imposed *in extremis* by charity.

However it must be underlined that this type of judgment risks being lured into a caricatured and historically false vision of the content of Maistrian thought. Thus it is that a recent *Histoire de l'Enfer* does not hesitate to declare that “Joseph de Maistre was the apologist of a bloody hell over which reigned an executioner-god,” and that “his concepts [...] owe more to the Marquis de Sade than to Catholic theology.”<sup>49</sup> The parallel between Maistre and Sade is in no way absurd: it has been made by authors who have found in Sade’s thought elements of the Catholic and monarchist vision of the world,<sup>50</sup> as well as by authors who were disturbed by the elements of cruelty present in Maistre.<sup>51</sup> However Maistre is certainly not the “heir” of Sade, who he probably did not read; a great reader of Origen, St. Augustine, Pascal, Bossuet, Fénelon and of theologians less well known today such as Bergier or Berthier, he took the essential of his arguments from the Catholic tradition.<sup>52</sup> As for an “apology for a blood hell,” which can give God the appearance of an executioner, it figures first in a good number of authors of the Catholic tradition, from Tertullien and St. Augustine down to seventeenth-century Jansenist sermons and to eighteenth-century Jesuit sermons. However it is not precisely a specific characteristic of Maistrian thought – on the

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<sup>48</sup> F. Mauriac, *Bloc-notes* (Paris: Points/Seuil 1993), 1:418.

<sup>49</sup> G. Minois, *Histoire de l'Enfer* (Paris: PUF 1994), 123.

<sup>50</sup> Thus, P. Klossowski, who interpreted Sade’s thought in the light of Maistre’s. *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Seuil 1967), 72, 85, 98, 103, 115, and 140.

<sup>51</sup> See J. Paulhan’s “preface” to Sade’s *Infortunes de la vertu* (Paris: Folio/Gallimard 1977), 18, G. Durand, “Portrait philosophique de Joseph de Maistre,” *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1 (1956); and L. Derla, “Joseph de Maistre e l’irrazionalismo,” *Studi francesi*, 44 (1971).

<sup>52</sup> Maistre’s “*registres de lecture*” [notebooks] leave few doubts on this point. See J.-L. Darcel and R. Lebrun, “Joseph de Maistre et les livres,” *Revue des études maistriennes*, No. 9 (1985).

contrary, the theodicy of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, which only justifies the action of Providence *here-below*, does not raise the question of hell. That the dogma of the eternity of punishments was barbarous and cruel, this had been the principal objection addressed to Catholicism by the thinkers of the Enlightenment: it is significant that Maistre, after all anxious to oppose the irreligion of the Enlightenment on all fronts, had got around this objection without confronting it. Addressing itself to demonstrating that the earthly suffering of the innocent can assure the salvation of the guilty, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* did not look to justify the dogma of the eternity of punishments. It is not certain that Maistre would have been shocked by the thesis maintained today by certain of the most influential Catholic theologians, that it is to be hoped that hell is empty.<sup>53</sup>

Seen since Vatican II, Maistre's Catholicism seems incontestably distant and eccentric, foreign to the truth of Catholicism. It is advisable however not to exaggerate this foreignness; it scarcely appeared in 1819 or in 1821, at the time of publication of *Du Pape* and *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. A whole portion of the Catholic clergy recognized itself in Maistrian thought, just as later it recognized itself in Louis Veillot's actions or even in certain positions of the Action Française.<sup>54</sup> The "Renaissance of Thomism" not yet having taken place, no one in the Church noticed the heterodoxy of the Maistrian positions in relation to those of St. Thomas Aquinas. It is true that Maistre was soon the object of violent critiques on the part of certain members of the French clergy, who already reproached *De pape* of harming the Catholic cause by compromising it by bad arguments leading to dangerous consequences.<sup>55</sup> However these critiques were made in the name of Gallicanism: they judged the thesis of pontifical infallibility incompatible with the true Catholic tradition. We know that the First Vatican Council, under the pontificate of Pius IV, decided it otherwise: the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility, in 1870, was in this regard an authentic

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<sup>53</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *L'Enfer. Une question*, trans. by J.-L. Schlegel (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1992).

<sup>54</sup> In his autobiography, Father S. Breton reports that "the Thomism that they taught, in 1926, at the Angelicum in Rome was not so far from the Maurrasian spirit of the Action Française." *De Rome à Paris* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1992), 143.

<sup>55</sup> See the *Réclamations pour l'Eglise de France et pour la vérité, contre l'ouvrage de M. le Comte de Maistre intitulé Du Pape*, by the Abbé Baston (Paris 1821-1824), as well as the *Purgatoire de Feu M. le Comte Joseph de Maistre pour l'expiation de certaines fautes morales qu'il a commises dans ses derniers écrits*, by the Abbé Senli (Paris 1823).

posthumous victory for Maistre. No one would risk saying that Pope Pius IX was not Catholic: the political philosophy of the *Syllabus* is moreover very little distant from Maistre's political philosophy, to the point that one author could write that "the spirit of Joseph de Maistre came alive in Pius IX."<sup>56</sup> Moreover, did not the latter declare, in his encyclical of 8 December 1866, that "the Revolution was inspired by Satan himself."<sup>57</sup>

It is appropriate therefore to be precise about the exact nature of Maistre's "heterodoxy" – a heterodoxy which, from the point of view of contemporary Catholicism, is not to be distinguished from his "integralism." One can for this purpose, in a gross way, summarize Maistrian thought in three great theses, each one corresponding to one of the three works he published at the end of his life: the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, *Du pape*, and *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.<sup>58</sup> The *Essai* proposes a providentialist political philosophy, which made historical duration the criterion of the legitimacy of political regimes; the thesis is that, in political matters, legitimacy "is explained by God's prime minister in the province of this world – Time."<sup>59</sup> *Du pape* proposes a juridical-political justification of the infallibility of the sovereign pontiff in matters of faith, a justification according to which infallibility belongs necessarily to the pope in virtue of his simple quality as *sovereign* of the Church. Maistre's thesis is that, since every association supposes a location of ultimate decision that is recognized as having the power to define the law, the Pope must be infallible in the Church for the same reasons that, in every state, there must be a sovereign power that can decide law and right without appeal: "infallibility in the spiritual order, and *sovereignty* in the temporal order, are two perfectly synonymous words. Both express this high power that dominates all others, from which others are derived, which governs and is not governed, which judges and is not judged."<sup>60</sup> Finally, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* proposes a theodicy of which the object, as indicated by the sub-title, limits itself to justifying only the "temporal government of Providence." The thesis is that the sufferings of the innocent in this world are justified by "the reversibility by which the innocent suffer for the benefit of the guilty," a reversibility of which the

<sup>56</sup> C. Latreille, *Joseph de Maistre et la papauté* (Paris: Hachette 1906), 328.

<sup>57</sup> Cited by S.L. Kaplan, *Adieu* 89, 108.

<sup>58</sup> It is true that the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* was published posthumously, just after Maistre's death, but Maistre desired nothing more than this publication.

<sup>59</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, XXVII, OC, 1:265.

<sup>60</sup> *Du pape*, OC, 2:2.

model is offered by Christ's sacrifice: in the same way that Christ by his death expiated the faults of human kind and brought redemption, so the suffering of the innocent wins the salvation of "the culpable, who, of themselves, could not expiate their own debts."<sup>61</sup> So what is the orthodoxy of these three theses?

Maistrrian providentialism is certainly heterodox in the measure that it leads in political matters to a strict *historicism*, according to which "history [...] is the first master in politics, or more exactly the only master,"<sup>62</sup> so that historical fact is the norm of law. Justice is that which is willed by God; what is willed by God is declared by duration and is known to us by history. Therefore it is necessary to want *what is*, that is to say what exists and has been kept for a long time. Maistrrian historicism thus leads to a *traditionalism*, which holds inherited custom for the will of God: "Every government is good when it has been established, and has subsisted for a long time unquestioned,"<sup>63</sup> a *positivism* that affirms that what must be is what is already: "what is, is good,"<sup>64</sup> a *relativism* finally, which denies the existence of a universal norm for law and defines justice by historical circumstances: "Despotism, for a given nation, is as natural, as legitimate, as democracy for another."<sup>65</sup> Contrary to each of these affirmations, the Catholic tradition since St. Thomas Aquinas has been one of natural law; it affirms that the principle of legitimacy is the norm of justice; that this norm is given to us by the natural law, which is known by reason (and not by history), and that this natural law is a universal law that transcends the facts and obliges us to condemn certain political forms such as despotism.<sup>66</sup> Providential historicism is incontestably incompatible with the tradition of Catholic natural law. However, it must be noted that this historicism wanted to be nothing other than a commentary on St. Paul's famous maxim in the *Epistle to the Romans*, "*nulla potestas nisi a Deo*,"<sup>67</sup> and that it situates itself in the continuation of an orthodox idea, that of one Providence absolutely sovereign through the course of events. Historicism is not absolutely foreign to a religion that thinks that God is known to us by the historical event of the Incarnation and that "the history of the Church

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<sup>61</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 460 ff (*OC*, 5:117 ff.).

<sup>62</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, Darcel ed., 186.

<sup>63</sup> *Du pape*, *OC*, 2:253.

<sup>64</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, Darcel ed., 182.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>66</sup> This doctrine, ceaselessly repeated by the Thomist tradition, is found wholly complete in the latest *Catéchisme de l'Eglise catholique* (Paris: Mame/Plon 1992), 401-07.

<sup>67</sup> ["No power but of God." Romans 13:1.]

must properly be called the history of the truth.”<sup>68</sup> If it breaks with the Thomist tradition, Maistre’s providential historicism is not in conflict with the whole Catholic tradition.<sup>69</sup> One can see in it the simple rigorous development of certain thoughts of Pascal and Bossuet. Was Pascal not already historicist when he wrote that “events” are the “masters” that God gives us “from his hand,” and that “custom does equity to all, by the sole reason that it is received?”<sup>70</sup> Was Bossuet not already historicist when he wrote that “all law must come from public authority” and that “each people must follow as a divine oracle the government established in their country?”<sup>71</sup> That Catholic policy must be “traditionalist,” this was still Pope Pius X’s thesis in the conclusion of his letter condemning “The Sillon” (1910).

The theological-political argument of *Du pape* is undoubtedly theologically defective, because it reduces the Church to being only a *case* of monarchy, accrediting with the same blow a confusion between the legal *irresistibility* of decisions of the sovereign power – an irresistibility that in no way excludes, in the future, *coming back* to the same decisions to annul them – and the *infallibility* of the *ex cathedra* word which *definitively fixes* the dogma. The danger that must be watched for here in the Maistrian argumentation is that of a strictly *decisionist* definition of the Church’s magisterium. Anxious to demonstrate, in a polemical view against Protestantism, that the Christian cannot know what he believes if the content of his faith is not fixed by an always available *living word*, alone capable of defining the sense of the faith in the case of doubt, Maistre goes so far as to write: “Should there occur one of those questions of divine metaphysics which must necessarily be referred to the decision of the divine tribunal, it concerns not our interests that it be decided in such and such a way, but that a decision be pronounced without delay and without appeal.”<sup>72</sup> It is obvious that, in such a phrase, concern for the truth of dogma is purely and simply sacrificed to the need for the prescribing of the faith; papal infallibility is no longer the infallibility of the word of faith, but simply the infallibil-

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<sup>68</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Le Guern, no. 650, ed. Brunschvicg, No. 203, ed. Lafuma, No. 550.

<sup>69</sup> On this point, see R. Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press 1965), 70-73 and 108-15.

<sup>70</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, Leguern ed., No. 717, Brunschvicg ed., No. 294, Lafuma ed., No. 60.

<sup>71</sup> Bossuet, *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l’Ecriture sainte*, Bk. I, III, 5, and Bk. II, conclusion, J. Le Brun, ed. (Geneva: Droz 1967), 20 and 63.

<sup>72</sup> *Du pape*, OC, 2:155.

ity of an arbitrary word whose only function is to assure, *by its very arbitrariness*, the unity of the Church. If the unity of the Catholic faith can be assured only by the word of the pope, understood as an instance of ultimate jurisdiction for the definition of the content of the faith, it thus follows that the Gospel constitutes in itself a *danger* for the faith, because it thwarts the authority of the living word of the pope by the authority of a writing that is *dead* and by this fact ambiguous. "Read without notes and without explanation, Holy Scripture is a poison."<sup>73</sup> The consequences – properly ruinous for the Church herself – of the Maistrian argumentation then becomes obvious: papal infallibility such as Maistre presents it is not far from furnishing the formula for a *de-christianized Catholicism*, reposing only on the sovereignty of the pope. We also know Maurras engaged himself in this way and professed an astonishing Catholic atheism, associating a profound disregard to the "gospels of four obscure Jews" with great admiration for the "learned cortege of the Fathers, councils, and popes."<sup>74</sup> We also know how the Catholic Church condemned Maurrasien atheism, as admiring as it was of the "Church of Order."

However, here again, it is advisable not to be mistaken. If the argumentation of *Du pape* often cedes to the temptation of decisionism, it in no way intends to retire the Gospels and tradition from their authority; in contrast to Maurras, Maistre never took the step that leads to a "non-Christian Catholicism." *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* and the *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices* testify rather to a real "Christocentrism."<sup>75</sup> It is necessary to refuse the purely juridical argumentation of *Du pape* an authentic theological significance; but it must not be forgotten that this argumentation, in Maistre's own mind, had the particular value of an *analogy* designed to remove the scandalous appearance of the thesis of papal infallibility. It is thus that, as defective as it is, the Maistrian argumentation is at the service of an infallibility which is, itself, theologically impeccable: *Du pape* defined infallibility exactly as it would be defined by the Council of the Vatican in 1870 when it promulgated the dogma.<sup>76</sup> And we can observe that Maistre's theological decisionism, as illegitimate as it is, is founded on a critique of Protestantism often practised in the bosom of the Catholic tradition. Why

<sup>73</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, Darcel ed., 567 (OC, 5:256).

<sup>74</sup> Ch. Maurras, preface to *Chemin de Paradis*, cited by V. Nguyen, *Aux origines de l'Action française. Intelligence et politique à l'aube du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Fayard 1991), 643.

<sup>75</sup> M. Ravera, *Joseph de Maistre pensatore dell'origine* (Milan: Mursia 1986), 111.

<sup>76</sup> See *Du pape*, OC, 2:112.

is it necessary that the faith be fixed by the infallible word of the pope? Because it is absurd to suppose, as Protestantism wants it, that the faith can be founded on the authority of a "Writing" that lends itself to a multitude of different interpretations: "no system is as shocking to good sense, not even atheism: for [...] if religion is founded on a book, if we must be judged on this book and if all men are judges of this book, the God of Christians is a dream a thousand times more monstrous than the Jupiter of the pagans."<sup>77</sup> To allow particular judgement to decide the meaning of the Scripture comes down to destroying the possibility of dogma; a faith that no longer rests on the authority of the Church – an authority that concentrates the authority of the pope – will necessarily be an erring faith, so that "the abolition of Catholicism [leads] straight to that of Christianity."<sup>78</sup> "It is necessary to believe everything or nothing. [...] Any nation, like any man, who would want to choose the dogmas, will lose them all."<sup>79</sup> The argument is not new; it was already one of the principal springs of Bossuet's *Avertissements aux protestants*, as Maistre himself recalled: "Bossuet warned the Protestants a hundred times in his works that their system was leading them straight to Deism (or to *Nothingism*). The event has justified the prediction."<sup>80</sup>

Maistre's central argument in favour of papal infallibility is that a faith that reposes on no visible and unique authority is an absurdity; this is why there is "no logical middle-ground between Catholicism and deism,"<sup>81</sup> and even no middle-ground between Catholicism and atheism: "everything boils down to the great axiom: Catholic or nothing."<sup>82</sup> We see that not only did Maistre prolong Bossuet, he announced Newman, who maintained "that there is no middle-ground, in true philosophy,

<sup>77</sup> J. de Maistre, *Réflexions sur le protestantisme*, in *Ecrits sur la Révolution*, 227 (OC, 8:76-7).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 227 (OC, 8:77).

<sup>79</sup> *Lettres sur l'inquisition espagnole*, OC, 3:382.

<sup>80</sup> *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, OC, 8:316. – One might perhaps be surprised that Maistre could invoke Bossuet, who was Gallican and who had opposed papal infallibility. However Maistre thinks precisely that Bossuet proved to be incoherent in refusing papal infallibility all the while opposing the principle of the infallibility of Church to the Protestants: the infallibility of the Church involves that of its leader. (See *Du pape*, OC, 2:82 ff.) Vatican I here proved Maistre right against Bossuet.

<sup>81</sup> OC, 13:384.

<sup>82</sup> *Religion E*, 30, cited by E. Dermenghem, "Pensées inédites de Joseph de Maistre," *Le Correspondant*, 25 May 1922, Vol. 251, p. 633.

between atheism and Catholicism.<sup>83</sup> Can we say that Newman's formula is the very formula of fundamentalism?<sup>84</sup> It would be surprising if the formula of fundamentalism was given by the theologian of the "development of Christian doctrine," whose evolutionary concept of dogma has sometimes been evoked to justify Vatican II.<sup>85</sup> What follows in consequence is that the assimilation of Maistrian thought to the fundamentalist mode of thought must be admitted here to be particularly problematic; for it is precisely Newman who mentioned Maistre to justify his own concept of the development of dogma.<sup>86</sup> "I believe that Christianity has been, like all great things in the world, subject to the universal law of *development*," wrote Maistre to a correspondent; and he added this phrase which is enough to make any fundamentalist tremble: "we know that for three whole centuries there remained doubt in the Church on the eternity of punishments and also on the divinity of the Holy Spirit."<sup>87</sup> We can ask ourselves if this phrase – which Bossuet would certainly have refused – would even have been accepted by Newman, for whom the development of dogma consisted in the progress of the understanding of an already acquired revealed truth, not in a discovery coming to substitute itself for a doubt. In place of a Maistre who is heterodox by virtue of fundamentalism, here we could show a Maistre who is heterodox by virtue of an excess of evolutionism. The last dialogue of *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* announces "a third explosion of the all powerful goodness in favour of the human race,"<sup>88</sup> and Maistre's *registres de lecture*<sup>89</sup> confirm without any ambiguity that he understood by this, in the pure tradition of Joachim of Floris,<sup>90</sup> a "Third Revelation" – the Revelation of the Holy Spirit that must accompany the Revelation of the Father (the Old Testament) and that of the Son (the New Testament), which have already happened. Maistre's Joachimite inspiration certainly confirms his

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<sup>83</sup> See the commentary that Newman gives to this thesis in his *Grammaire de l'assentiment* (1870), trans. by M.-M. Olive (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1975), 586 ff.

<sup>84</sup> This is suggested by P.-A. Taguieff, "Le paradigme traditionaliste," 233.

<sup>85</sup> See J. Guittou, *Un siècle, une vie* (Paris: Laffont 1988), 379 and 383.

<sup>86</sup> See Newman, *Histoire du développement de la doctrine chrétienne*, trans. by J. Gondou (Paris: Sagnier et Bray 1848), 37.

<sup>87</sup> *Amica collatio* (1820), published by Dominique de Maistre in *Etudes*, October 1897, t. 73, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, Darcel ed., 556 (OC, 5:24).

<sup>89</sup> See the entries cited by E. Dermenghem, *Joseph de Maistre mystique* (1923), edited and corrected edition (Paris: Colombier 1946), 285.

<sup>90</sup> As emphasized by H. de Lubac, *La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Flore. Tome 1: de Joachim à Schelling* (Paris: Lethielleux 1979), 308.



heterodoxy, since millenarianism is condemned by the Church. However it also proves that the decisionism of *Du Pape* did not lead Maistre on the single path of a purely political Catholicism, justified only by a concern for order. The millenarian waiting was as well, literally, a waiting for a *revolution* made by God;<sup>91</sup> which means that it appears that at the heart of Maistrian thinking – and what has probably given his thought this strength of fascination that is not in Bonald's thought – there remains active the properly utopian and revolutionary ferment of Christianity.

We can thus think that the elements of heterodoxy in Maistrian thought does not prevent it from remaining fully Christian or his Christianity from remaining fully Catholic. This is what the theodicy of *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* lets us think. Maistre's affirmation that Christianity "rests entirely on an enlargement of this same dogma of innocence paying for crime,"<sup>92</sup> is in no way heterodox; it expresses one of the fundamental beliefs of Counter-Reformation Catholicism.<sup>93</sup> In particular, it constitutes perhaps the strongest argument that a Christian theodicy can produce. We must certainly recognize with Paul Ricoeur that theodicy is "the jewel of onto-theology" and that it belongs, therefore, to an epoch of Christianity that one can judge to be passé.<sup>94</sup> However one must observe that the Maistrian theodicy avoids the trap that the great theodicies have not known how to avoid, in particular Leibniz's theodicy and Hegel's philosophy of history: the hasty dissolution of the problem of evil in the affirmation of an order of wholeness or a general harmony of the world. We know that the Enlightenment, from Voltaire to Diderot, held against the Christian religion the scandal of the existence of evil: the scandal of the earthly injustices permitted by God, and also the scandal of the eternal confirmation of evil by the eternal existence of hell, a punishment necessarily disproportionate in relation

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<sup>91</sup> Maistre often announced, in his correspondence, that the French Revolution was only the "preface" of a future "religious revolution" (*OC*, 13:27), and that the "negative revolution" made by men would be succeeded by the "positive revolution" made by God. (*Correspondance diplomatique 1811-1817*), ed. by A. Blanc (Paris 1860), 1:321.)

<sup>92</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 94 (*OC*, 1:39; repeated in the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 95 (*OC*, 5:123).

<sup>93</sup> This is emphasized by L. Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1942) (Paris: Albin Michel 1988), 277. P. Klossowski, at the time when he was still Christian, accorded to Maistre that the reversibility of the sufferings of the innocent to the profit of the guilty was "the fundamental dogma of Christianity." *Sade mon prochain*, 98.

<sup>94</sup> P. Ricoeur, "Le mal: un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie," in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil 1994), 221.

to the fault that it punished,<sup>95</sup> in the face of which the Enlightenment, denouncing hell as an irrational belief and original sin as a pseudo-explanation of existing evil, proposed no longer considering evil as a theoretical problem but as an exclusively practical problem. Evil must not be *justified* by reason but *opposed* by the progress of technical mastery and social organization. Neither Leibniz nor Hegel really responded to the objections of the Enlightenment:<sup>96</sup> that evil be minimized as a detail in the midst of the maximum perfection of the best of all worlds or that it be justified as the necessary vector of the total realization of Reason, in all these cases the scandal of the suffering of the innocent is *concealed* without being suppressed or resolved. Such is not the case with Maistre: in *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* evil is not justified but recorded as a mystery, the mystery of the disorder of a world where “all is only violence” – a mystery that Maistre holds up to the Enlightenment as a scandal that no practical progress can ever make us forget nor accept, whereas the extreme scandal of the suffering of the innocent sees itself justified in that it unlocks the perspective of the salvation of the guilty – the sole possible response, from a Christian point of view, to the objection of the eternal pains of hell.

It can be objected to Maistre that his theodicy is very nearly a sanctification of violence, and that, if the sufferings of the innocent are willed by God for the salvation of the guilty – so that in an unjust world, injustice is a good – the difference between justice and injustice becomes strangely vacillating. The theses, defended by Maistre, of the special creation of the executioner by God and of the divinity of war<sup>97</sup> make us enter into such vacillation. It can also be objected to Maistre that the original evil, the diabolic revolt of the angels or the original sin of men, remains unintelligible, and that the compatibility of the existence of evil and of a good and all powerful God remains undemonstrated, or again – which is perhaps only another aspect of the same problem – that it is difficult to understand how Maistre “can conciliate his certitude of *Providence* with the poorly contained feeling of an inexorable form of *decadence*.”<sup>98</sup> However the majority of these objections do not apply in a specific way to Maistrian thought; certain of them can be addressed to

<sup>95</sup> See Diderot, *Addition aux pensées philosophiques* (in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. by P. Vernière (Paris: Garnier 1990), 57 ff, and in particular numbers VII, XII, XLVIII, LII, and LIV.

<sup>96</sup> On this point we can only return to P. Ricoeur’s analyses.

<sup>97</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 105 and 393 (*OC*, 4:32 and 5:26).

<sup>98</sup> S. Rials, “Lecture de Joseph de Maistre,” in *Révolution et Contre-révolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 39.

Christianity in general, which explains the world at once by the sin of revolt and by the love of God, which makes room at once for the Good News of the Gospels, the point of the ascendant history of redemption, and of the menace of the Apocalypse, the final term of the history of a humanity whose fall continually calls upon itself the anger of God. The violence of the Maistrian theodicy, which identifies the providential order of the world with a sacrificial order, is only a part of the violence of the religion itself, in so far as it has sacrifice at its heart. And it is precisely that violence that still confers today to Maistre's texts their force of fascination. If Maistre, as George Steiner has noted, can seem today more profound than the thinkers of the Enlightenment, it is because the violence of the twentieth century has accredited the idea that, conforming to the dogma of original sin, the problem of evil was invincible: the extreme horror has made the new appearance of evil, not only a simple practical question, but a staggering fact. Moreover, Maistre's work translates with force vertigo before evil; a vertigo to which the Maistrian theodicy cedes more than once, responding to the vertigo of evil with an another vertigo – the vertigo of the idea that every illness is a merited punishment, the vertigo of the hypothesis of a despot God,<sup>99</sup> the vertigo of the thesis that violence is divine in as much as it assures the necessary sacrifice of the innocent. Vertigo before evil leads Maistre beyond the limits of orthodoxy; but it at the same time communicates to his work the strength of the religious feeling from which it comes. It can be thought that the heterodoxy of Maistrian thought surges from the heart of Catholic orthodoxy itself. Even though Maistrian thought does not survive in contemporary Catholicism, its diffuse persistence could thus be a witness to the enduring strength of certain propensities within Catholicism.

One could here take as a witness François Mauriac, who as we have seen judged Maistre severely. In his *Bloc-notes*, contrary to Maistre, Mauriac has only contempt for the “degraded” Christianity of Louis XIV's time<sup>100</sup> and for the “abominations of political Christianity” (1:361); he condemns “the amalgam of altar and throne” (4:387), and more generally the ties between the Church and the powers that be (1:315-6). He refuses the death penalty (2:26), and he declares that he “has never known how to see the signs of divine intervention in the events of history” (1:79). However is Mauriac's faith so different than Maistre's faith? Mauriac does not deny that Providence is at work in

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<sup>99</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 109 and 451 (*OC*, 4:39 and 5:105).

<sup>100</sup> F. Mauriac, *Bloc-notes*, 3:543. Our references to this edition are hereafter indicated directly, in parentheses, following the citations.

history, since he writes that “the other world penetrates this world” (4:77) and that “absurdity is the reverse of the tapestry, whose eternal design will one day appear” (3:481). Maistre had concluded from his providentialism that “each nation, like each individual, had received a mission that it must fulfill.”<sup>101</sup> Mauriac thinks that “a nation exists before the Father’s face” (2:280), and that “a nation is really a unity, and that it has a vocation” (4:286). He believes that “power was given directly by God to Peter’s successor and to the apostolic college. On this point, no possible concession: for the Church to deny this would be to deny itself” (5:311). Maistre had described war as the culminating point of “the great law of the violent destruction of living being,” a law in virtue of which “man is charged with slaughtering men”; the violence of “this long series of massacres soils all the pages of history.”<sup>102</sup> Mauriac takes history for a “river of blood” (4:79); he is frightened by “this law of the animal world where everything is accomplished as if someone had said in the beginning: ‘Devour each other!’” (3:185) and where man “is only a link in the endless chain of the devouring and the devoured” (4:555). He is frightened also in that the creation, although repaired by Christ, does not cease to choose the part of nothingness (1:483), as is shown by the folly of the modern world which forgets God to the point of corresponding exactly to the descriptions of “the prophecy of the end of time of which every word applies to what we see before our eyes” (2:443). What Mauriac does not forget is that “Evil is Someone,” that “souls are lost every day and by the millions” (3:86); he has the feeling of “the presence of Evil in the world” (1:195). However this presence is also that of “the immolation of some pure hearts” (1:195): “our realm is that of the communion of saints, of reversibility” (5:270).

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Because his heterodoxy remains so to say intimate to Catholic orthodoxy, Maistre’s work reflects Catholicism at the same time that it is reflected in him. However this reflection is no less deceiving or deforming, and this because it is by this very deformation that Maistrian thought is innovative. It no longer appears as a reflection of a past Catholic tradition, but rather as the first mirroring of a future tradition, the tradition of the critics of modernity: a tradition of which certain great representatives are explicitly anti-Christian and anti-Catholic. Commenting on the texts of Maistre and Bonald, Alain Finkielkraut concludes: “their intensely immanent thought lets nothing subsist underneath the

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<sup>101</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 69 (OC, 1:8).

<sup>102</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 390-2 (OC, 5:23-5) and *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 88 (OC, 1:29).

tangible world of history. These strange devout men try very hard to denounce the illusion of other-worlds. Speaking in the name of the menaced religion, they anticipate, in fact, Nietzschean nihilism."<sup>103</sup> This diagnosis is not isolated; it had already been sketched by Julien Benda, who had seen in Maistre one of the ancestors of the "treason of the clerks," that is to say the abandonment by the intellectuals of the belief in the eternal idea of reason and of law, to the profit of a radical relativism and of a religion of history;<sup>104</sup> and Albert Camus, situating Maistre in the history of the nihilist revolt, had not hesitated to draw a parallel between Maistrian messianism and Marxist messianism.<sup>105</sup> As surprising as they appear at first glance, these perspectives on Maistre's thought are authorized by the providential historicism that belongs to his thought. It is incontestable that Maistre absolutizes the relative by affirming that the will of God is "perfectly declared by the facts,"<sup>106</sup> and known above all by history. Maistre bases the historical *relativity* of political institutions in the *absolute* of the divine will: anti-relativist by his notion of a providential God, Maistrian providentialism becomes relativist by his notion of a providence identical with the ensemble of historical facts. The foundation of the relative in the absolute proves to be indiscernible from an integral effacement of the absolute in the relative. Although founded on the idea of transcendence, Maistre's providentialism finishes well and truly by presenting itself, in a paradoxical way, as a thought of immanence, a thought that is properly speaking historicist in that it accepts the thesis of the historical relativity of norms of justice and of law. In testimony we have this astonishing declaration, which could serve as the motto of a critic of ethnocentrism: "each people fulfills its mission; we despise the Orientals, and they despise us: who is to judge between us?"<sup>107</sup>

We have already evoked the connections that it is possible to make between Maistre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. We perceive in these three thinkers a similar counter-revolutionary disposition, traditionalist at least in that it values the aristocratic tradition against democracy.<sup>108</sup> All three

<sup>103</sup> A. Finkelkraut, *La défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard 1987), 30.

<sup>104</sup> J. Benda, *La trahison des clercs* (1946), new edition (Paris: Grasset 1975), 46 and 51.

<sup>105</sup> A. Camus, *L'homme révolté* (1951) in *Essai* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard 1965), 696-8.

<sup>106</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, 96.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>108</sup> It suffices to return to *Qu'appelle-t-on penser?* (trans. by A. Becker and G. Granel, Paris: PUF 1992, 109) where Heidegger mixes his voice with that of Nietzsche in citing a passage from *Crépuscule des idoles*, entitled "critique of

understood modernity as the spreading of nihilism; the fact that Maistre had already used *the word and the concept* of nihilism, with the synonymous term of “*rienisme*” [“nothingism”],<sup>109</sup> is particularly striking here. With each of the three thinkers, nihilism is certainly made the object of a different interpretation: Nietzsche (who holds nihilism for the essence of Christianity) and Heidegger (who identifies it with the forgetfulness of being of which onto-theology is an aspect) are both very far from Maistre for whom “modern nothingness” is the ultimate consequence of “Protestant nothingness,”<sup>110</sup> being only the result of forgetting God and of the insurrection of pride against authority. However if the interpretations of nihilism are different in each case, the phenomenon targeted, at least in its social and intellectual symptoms, is in each case the same: the three thinkers share at least a *similar diagnosis* when they accept characterizing their epoch by the phenomenon of “nihilism.” Finally, the three thinkers resemble each other as well in that each of them proposes a variety of historical relativism. These diverse resemblances are such that one could, by multiplying citations, produce numerous effects of echoes from one work to another. When Nietzsche declares: “the *inequality* of rights, it is on this condition that there are rights,”<sup>111</sup> he repeats a commonplace of the Maistrian work; and the insults that he addresses to Rousseau (“plebian “marked by the “rancour of the sick”<sup>112</sup>) say nothing that Maistre had not already said when he described Rousseau as a “weak and surly” being, dominated by a “plebian anger that excites him against any kind of superiority.”<sup>113</sup> Maistre and Nietzsche again have in common admiration for the laws of Manou;<sup>114</sup> and it could be judged significant down to this detail, that both understood Newtonian science in the light of the commentary that Boskowich

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modernity,” in which Nietzsche defines democracy as decadence and opposes to it the “will of Tradition.”

<sup>109</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier (an author who Maistre used) gives the words *nihiliste* and *rieniste* as synonyms in his *Néologie or vocabulaire des mot nouveaux* (Paris: Moussard et Maradan 1801), 2:145: “*Nihiliste* or *rienniste*: Who believes in nothing, who interests himself in nothing. The fine result of bad philosophy, which struts about in the big *Dictionnaire encyclopédique!* What does it want us to be? Nihilists.”

<sup>110</sup> *OC*, 13:291 and 28.

<sup>111</sup> F. Nietzsche, *L'Antéchrist*, § 57, 97.

<sup>112</sup> F. Nietzsche, *La volonté de puissance*, ed. by E. Foerster-Nietzsche (1910), trans. by H Albert (Paris: Livre de poche 1991), § 29, 66.

<sup>113</sup> *De la souveraineté du peuple*, 210-11.

<sup>114</sup> See *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., 102-04 (*OC*, 4:28-31); F. Nietzsche, *L'Antéchrist*, § 57.

gave of it.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand it will be judged that certain of Heidegger's propositions offer a surprisingly "traditionalist" sound: thus the definition of modernity as "the insurrection of man giving in to the exclusive self-willing of his own will,"<sup>116</sup> or the affirmation that tradition is not "behind us" but "on the contrary comes towards us because we are exposed to it and that it is our destiny," an affirmation that concludes a denunciation of the Enlightenment according to which "the *Aufklärung* casts a shadow over the origins of thought itself."<sup>117</sup> Henri Meschonnic, who in the oxymoron sees the very figure of Heidegger's thinking, maintained that the abandonment to the being claimed by the German philosopher recovered the reactionary thesis: "what is, is what must be,"<sup>118</sup> and he shows that the Heideggerian thinking on language rests on the notion of the "genius of language" at the same time as on the reduction of language to naming.<sup>119</sup> However the "genius of language" and the "theory of names" are also the two pillars of Maistre's philosophy of language<sup>120</sup> – which corroborates George Steiner's thesis that Maistre's philosophy of language "contains *in nuce* the doctrine elaborated by Heidegger."<sup>121</sup> In fact, the philosophic exploitation of etymologies in *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* is already guided by the two principles that can be found as the basis of Heidegger's etymologism: to know that "each language, taken separately, mirrors the spiritual phenomena that took place at its birth," and that "each word is *true*, which is to say that it is not imagined arbitrarily."<sup>122</sup> Certainly we must not forget that the origin that speaks in language is for Heidegger the radical historicity of being, and not like with Maistre a resonance of the eternity of the divine verb. One can with Dominique Janicaud define Heidegger's historicism as a "destiny historicism" that "affirms that 'all is a sending' (*Alles ist Schickung*): "not only is there not, for Heidegger, a superior instance (theological or normative), but history itself is

<sup>115</sup> *OC*, 1:413, 5:223 and 237, 11:11; F. Nietzsche, *Par-delà Bien et Mal* (Paris: U.G.E. 1972), I, § 12, 35.

<sup>116</sup> M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. by P. Klossowski (Paris: Gallimard 1971), 2:303.

<sup>117</sup> M. Heidegger, *Qu'appelle-t-on penser?*, 117 and 195.

<sup>118</sup> H. Meschonnic, *Le langage Heidegger* (Paris: PUF 1990), 45 and 207.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 259 and 264.

<sup>120</sup> See *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, Darcel ed., 148ff (*OC*, 4:91 ff); *Essai sur le principe générateur*, L-LVI, *OC*, 1:289-90.

<sup>121</sup> G. Steiner, "Logocrats," 71.

<sup>122</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, Darcel ed., (*OC*, 4:97 and 101). See also this declaration in the *Bienfaits de la révolution française* (*OC*, 7:445): "languages contain a hidden and profound metaphysics."

sharing out."<sup>123</sup> This destiny historicism is absolutely incompatible with the belief in a God who would be the cause of the world and of history, and yet it happens that it strangely resembles providentialist historicism. In the margin of one of his lectures on Hölderlin, Heidegger writes: "the secret history of legend does not know chance. All is the effect of Providence."<sup>124</sup>

In any case it is not advisable to force the analogy. That one can hear the echo of traditionalism in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger does not authorize making of this echo the truth nor even the source of their thinking. The *historic perspective* that will make the persistence of a "traditionalist form" appear in Nietzsche and in Heidegger must not lead precisely to an *error of perspective* that "would crush" onto each other three perspectives whose differences are irreducible: if here and there the three philosophies can be superimposed almost exactly, they should nevertheless never be confused. Even the designation of "neo-traditionalism," despite the nuance that it introduces, does not apply without injustice to the Heideggerian promotion of the origin; it remains in any case inadequate to characterize thinking like that of Nietzsche, who affirming the nullity of origins, intended to put an end to the whole of the moral tradition, demanded the sovereignty of the individual, and did not hesitate to place himself under the patronage of Voltaire. A simple fact must moreover incite us to prudence: Nietzsche and Heidegger nowhere refer to Maistre – nor to Bonald or to Lamennais. This is why it will seem preferable, in flagging Maistre's "presences" in contemporary thought to turn towards a philosophical critique of modernity that explicitly makes a place for the Maistrrian model: the analysis of the "dialectic of Enlightenment" proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>125</sup> The resemblance between this analysis and the Heideggerian critique of modernity has often been emphasized; but the "dialectic of Enlightenment" according to Adorno and Horkheimer is interesting here in that it dialogues with Maistrrian thought in a relationship at once more direct and more distant

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<sup>123</sup> D. Janicaud, *L'ombre de cette pensée. Heidegger et la question politique* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon 1990), 102. G. Vattimo, for his part, defines Heidegger's thought as "a kind of historicist relativism" according to which "there is no longer any last truth." *La fin de la modernité*, trans. by C. Alunni (Paris: Seuil 1987), 180.

<sup>124</sup> Cited by H. Ott, *Martin Heidegger. Eléments pour une biographie*, trans. by J.-M. Beloeil (Paris: Payot 1990), 20.

<sup>125</sup> "Dialectic of Enlightenment" – *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947) – is the original title of the work by Adorno and Horkheimer translated into French under the title *Dialectique de la Raison*, trans. by E. Kaufholz, republished by Tel/Gallimard, Paris 1983.



than the one that one can establish, in a purely exterior way, between Heidegger and Maistre: more direct, because Horkheimer and Adorno do not hesitate to cite Maistre and to find him right on certain points; more distant because in contrast to Heidegger, formed in the bosom of Catholicism, Adorno and Horkheimer come from the horizon of Marxism. One could perceive a sort of continuity between the Catholic texts of the young student Heidegger, who opposed to the authority of the Church the “unlimited autonomy” of the “modern spirit,”<sup>126</sup> and the great books of the philosopher Heidegger describing the nihilism immanent in the modern promotion of subjectivity. On the other hand it is impossible to perceive any form of traditionalism in the critique of the Enlightenment conducted by Adorno and Horkheimer, a critique integrally conducted in the name of the Enlightenment itself and with the goal of safeguarding its project of rational emancipation.

The “Dialectic of Enlightenment” designates a paradoxical process, realised according to Adorno and Horkheimer in contemporary Western civilization, in virtue of which the Enlightenment, which had defined itself as the contrary of myth and superstition, “returns in myth”<sup>127</sup> and becomes in its turn superstition. This properly cultural process is accomplished in the sphere of ideas and in the social sphere at the same time. From the point of view of the history of ideas, it appears that positivism is the destiny of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment critiques myth and superstition by means of scientific reason; reason for the Enlightenment does not define itself, in the fashion of divine reason as a substantial or “objective” reason – it is nothing other than a method, simply a logical and formal faculty. However if reason, as simply a formal faculty, can do critical work, it proves itself, on the other hand, to be incapable of defining ends. Purely formal, the critical reason of the Enlightenment proves itself to be purely instrumental: it reduces itself to being “a criterion of calculation and utility” (24). However by this same fact it ceases to be a *critical* reason, since it must bow down before the rules of utility and coherence as before evidence that it is impossible to put in question. Reason must thus submit itself “to what is immediately given” (43). The Enlightenment *sacralizes* what exists, exactly like myth; the positivism in which they are overturned is nothing other than the “myth of what exists” (10), therefore “a taboo so to speak universal” that boils down to a “radicalization of mythic terror” (33). The work of the Enlightenment is the destruction of religion by science; but precisely because it identifies truth with science (95), the Enlightenment must end

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<sup>126</sup> Cited by H. Ott, *Martin Heidegger*, 66.

<sup>127</sup> M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, *La dialectique de la Raison*, 18. The parentheses in the body of our text refers to the French translation.

up reducing reason to being only a power of adaptation to the facts discovered by science. Because in destroying religion the Enlightenment destroys at the same time the idea of "objective reason" that is in fact "the energy source of their very efforts," the progress of Enlightenment tends of itself "to retrograde towards superstition."<sup>128</sup>

This process, according to which "progress becomes retrogression" (18), is accomplished in a parallel way in modern social evolution. The program of the Enlightenment, perfectly formulated for the first time by Bacon, was the emancipation of humanity through the scientific and technical mastery of the world. Modern times *are realizing* this program. A liberal social organization substitutes itself for the old order of mythic terror; to the sacrifices offered to the gods in appeasement, by individuals crushed by natural forces, succeeds the industrial organization of the rational domination of nature. It turns out however that the rationality of this domination is the rationality of "social constraint" (30): men must submit themselves to the imperatives of the social organization of the technical domination of the world. By the rational domination of the self, each man must adapt himself to the rational domination of the world. Man must therefore become a simple function of the social machine in the bosom of which he must specialize himself, and inevitably, atrophy himself. The independence accrued with regard to nature has for a correlation the growth of social dependence and the impoverishment of the possibilities of individual experiences. It turns out that "the domination of nature implies the domination of man," or to put it another way that it does not liberate humanity. Industrial society from this fact takes on a "nihilist aspect": since reason, become a simple formal instrument, is no longer the measure for defining ends, "the renouncement of the individual himself, in industrial society, is made without any end that transcends the society itself," and the civilization must define itself as a "rationalized irrationality."<sup>129</sup> The rational mastery of the world is in effect itself an irrational end, an end for which no objective reason can be found; so that reason is no more than a instrument of adaptation to this irrational end that is itself – and that boils down eventually to the sole conservation of self of the social system of scientific and industrial mastery. The "rational sacrifice" of self that the technical domination of the world requires of the individual participates in fact in the same irrationality as religious sacrifice: "the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice" (68).

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<sup>128</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse de la Raison*, trans. by J. Debouzy (Paris: Payot 1974), 27-39.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-03.

Such a conclusion carries an unexpected conclusion of Maistre's analysis, which had seen in the executioner the basis of society and in sacrifice the heart of religion and the social tie. Baudelaire, demonstrating by the fact that he was certainly Maistre's perfect disciple that he wanted to be, had commented by these words on the use of the guillotine in the French Revolution: "the Revolution, by sacrifice, confirmed superstition."<sup>130</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer extend this conclusion to the extreme: it is the *whole* process of civilization led by the Enlightenment that, according to them, verifies and reconstitutes superstition.

The idea that terror and civilization are inseparable – a conclusion that the conservatives reached – has solid foundations. [...] The evolution of civilization is accomplished under the tutelage of the executioner; from this point of view Genesis, which tells the story of Adam and Eve chased from Paradise, and the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* agree. Work and pleasure are placed under the tutelage of the executioner. To want to deny this fact defies all science and all logic (228-9).

The historical experience of the dialectic of Enlightenment thus obliges us to note that traditionalist thought, of which Maistre is the typical representative, contains an authentic moment of truth: "the critique of the Catholic counter-revolution will prove that it was right against the *Aufklärung*, just like the *Aufklärung* was right against Catholicism" (100). Although they denounce the authoritarian intention of Maistrian thought, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize in it the merit of having known how to propose a pertinent critique of the Baconian project of a scientific and technical emancipation of humanity. Not only was Maistre not deceived by perceiving, as he did in *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* as well as in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, that the Enlightenment was entirely prefigured in the Baconian program of a purely immanent knowledge assuring the mastery of the world, but moreover he had known how to unmask in this program a new form of idolatry, the idolatry of science (25).<sup>131</sup> Maistrian thought thus achieves a double victory over the thought of the Enlightenment: that of having proved a superior lucidity, for in knowing, on the one hand, the necessity of terror and sacrifice for the civilization of past humanity, and, on the other

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<sup>130</sup> Ch. Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu*, VI, in *Oeuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1975), 680. See the commentary on this phrase by V. Descombes, *Philosophie par gros temps* (Paris: Minuit 1989), 67.

<sup>131</sup> In *Eclipse de la Raison*, Horkheimer emphasizes the pertinence of the Maistrian critique of empiricism; he recaptures as well one of Maistre's favourite theses, which is that the Catholic Church had contributed in an important way to the progress of modern science. (87 and 97.)

hand, in knowing how to analyse, on the occasion of the event of the French Revolution, the irrationality of the new society issuing from the rationality of the Enlightenment. Of the one side, “the psycho-social experience that is announced not only by the horrible doctrines of Maistre and Bonald, but also by Goethe and Nietzsche, is better founded than the myth of the strength of the people and the unshakable faith in the healthy instincts of the masses”; and on the other side, “one can find in the literature of the Catholic counter-revolution in France, with Bonald and Maistre, [...] an analysis of bourgeois society much more penetrating than that of the critiques of religion in Germany in the same period.”<sup>132</sup>

The analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer thus makes Maistre appear as an excellent *witness* of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Certainly, to the eyes of Adorno and Horkheimer, Maistre remains a *prisoner* of the dialectic of Enlightenment: far from “going beyond” this dialectic, the reactionary desire to restore tradition and the old hierarchies only confirms this. Maistrian thought by the same title as the Enlightenment leads to a positivism that sanctifies what exists. Worse still, it aggravates the failure of the Enlightenment since it claims a total abdication of the critical demand in the name of a will for re-mythologization, a will so much more violent in that it becomes purely decisionist. Although the Catholic religion had always condemned superstition that it had refused to confuse with religion, Maistre is led to eulogize superstition as such.<sup>133</sup> In proposing a defence of tradition that thus ends up contrary to tradition, traditionalism pronounces its own failure; a check inscribed in its own project, since “the very fact that [...] one invokes the tradition shows that it has lost its hold on people,”<sup>134</sup> or to put it another way there is no longer a *tradition*. Not being able to conceive of a restoration other than an *authoritarian* restoration (that is to say a restoration that is precisely *no longer* supported by the authority of tradition), traditionalism finally reconstitutes in itself the worse dimension of the French Revolution, that is the *terrorism* that requires the crushing of the individual by national or collective reason. Citing one of Maistre’s texts that asks for the dissolution of individual opinion and judgement in the

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<sup>132</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Théorie critique*, essays presented by L. Ferry and A. Renaut, trans. by the group of translators of the College of Philosophy (Paris: Payot 1978), 302 and 211.

<sup>133</sup> *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Darcel ed., (OC, 5:197).

<sup>134</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse de la Raison*, 42.

bosom of patriotic enthusiasm, Horkheimer notes that, on this point, "Maistre himself is in agreement with the French Revolution."<sup>135</sup>

However if it is true that by reason of its strictly *regressive* character Maistrian thought appears as a simple *moment* of the dialectic of Enlightenment, it none the less preserves the merit of having elaborated the first *theoretical model* of this dialectic. Maistre knew first of all how to seize the *unity* of modern times by affirming that the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Revolution being only steps of one and same process and that the same dynamic, which Maistre was probably the first to designate by the name of "individualism,"<sup>136</sup> was at work in the Protestant principle of "private interpretation" as well as in the autonomous thought of the Enlightenment or in the revolutionary attempt to found the state on the sovereignty of the people. From "Protestant nothingism" to "modern nothingism" in passing by Baconian science, one and the same project constitutes modernity to Maistre's eyes: the refusal of the transcendence of authority, a refusal that founds a project of individual and collective autonomy.<sup>137</sup> Maistre consequently knew how to describe the history of the realization of this project as a history producing its own negation, in virtue of the "divine and invariable law" that wants "error [...] always to cut its own throat."<sup>138</sup> It is in a truly "dialectic" way that the *Considérations sur la France* interprets the course of the French Revolution, which it describes as a necessary overturning of the rational autonomy in its opposite. The Revolution was born of the ideal of founding a State on the rational will of individuals, in other words from the desire of men to become masters of their own history. What happened? "Those who established the Republic did it without wanting to and without knowing what they were doing": the project of liberty was realized in the Terror under the form of the "most frightful despotism in history"; in place of a state rationally founded on

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 204-05. Horkheimer returns to this Maistre text with its characteristically Rousseauistic accents: "Man's first need is that his nascent reason [...] lose itself in the national reason, so that it changes its individual existence into another common existence, just as a river that flows into the ocean always continues to exist in the mass of water, but without a name and without a distinct reality." (*De la souveraineté du peuple*, 149.)

<sup>136</sup> OC, 14:286.

<sup>137</sup> This thesis, developed especially in the *Réflexions sur le protestantisme*, runs through all Maistre's work. See, for example, *De la souveraineté du peuple*, 170 and 261, and *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, OC, 8:347 ff.

<sup>138</sup> OC, 13:189.

the will had surged a Revolution which “acts all alone” and “which leads men more than men lead it.”<sup>139</sup>

The *power* of such a model it is true to say is such that one can ask if Adorno and Horkheimer themselves, despite their unambiguous condemnation of traditionalist authoritarianism, have really succeeded in detaching themselves from it. In the measure that it presents itself as a linear process commanded by the binary opposition of reason and myth, the dialectic of Enlightenment takes on the allure of fate: nothing seems to be able to resist such a process; it becomes notably impossible to determine what new progress of the Enlightenment could let us escape the “curse of irresistible progress,” which is to be as well an “irresistible regression” (51). Since no third term is given beyond or above Enlightenment and superstition, the overturning of the first in the second must necessarily appear as being *without issue*. It is known that Horkheimer, at the end of his life, thought that the dialectic of Enlightenment assigned for a necessary and inescapable term to human history the definitive dissolution of individuality in the bosom of the “administered world.” However we can ask ourselves what still distinguishes the pessimism of the idea of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, since it points out the inescapability of the auto-destruction of reason, from traditionalist pessimism, which interprets the progress of the Enlightenment as the advent of barbarism. It is certainly impossible to accuse Horkheimer’s last texts of being “reactionary,” since it is in the name of the “autonomy of the individual” that Horkheimer frightens himself that the “administered world” was “the immanent tendency of the development of humanity.”<sup>140</sup> However it is remarkable that Horkheimer found nothing to oppose to this “immanent tendency” other than “nostalgic” attachment to “religious categories.” Horkheimer certainly refused to have these categories understood as “dogmas” having the status of absolute truths; he only wanted to have these notions of religion and theology to stir up in us “the nostalgia that what happens in the world, the horror and the injustice, be not the last word, but that there exists an Other.” It remains that the analysis of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” led in the end to a eulogy of religion that understood itself, exactly in Maistre’s way, as meditation on “the greatest intuition of all times, the doctrine of original sin.”<sup>141</sup>

However one must not hasten to interpret Horkheimer’s conclusion as a victorious return of Maistrian thought – Horkheimer refers himself, on this occasion, to Schopenhauer and not to Maistre. Here again, Maistrian

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<sup>139</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, Darcel ed., 66-8 (OC, 1:4-7).

<sup>140</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Théorie critique*, 359.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 360-1.

thought appears only so to say in the fashion of a “phantom thought” (in the sense that one speaks of a “phantom image”) that Horkheimer’s thought *evokes*, but that does not deliver much of its meaning. The temptation is certainly great, in the face of such an effect of echoes or reflections of appearances, to denounce the continuity of the different critiques of modernity with traditionalism; a temptation that sometimes, in the heart of contemporary philosophy, yields certain polemical analyses that, in making the binary opposition between “reason” and “tradition” correspond to the historic conflict between a “tradition of reason” and a “tradition of tradition,” could lead one to believe that the Catholic counter-revolution, German romantic thought, Nietzschean and Heideggerian historicism, and finally the thematic of the dialectic of Enlightenment are successive aspects of the one and same refusal of modernity. Such a vision however risks offering the most paradoxical example of the persistence of Maistrian thought; for it is precisely this typical trait of Maistrian thought ( and of traditionalist thought in general) that the reduction of the history of thought to the reciprocal hostility of a camp of reason (understood as “anti-tradition”) and a camp of the tradition (which can eventually claim for itself, as is the case with Maistre, the authority of “true reason”). Maistre, who holds the French Revolution – to his eyes the historical incarnation of radical evil – to be necessary result of the Enlightenment, interpreted the whole of modern thought in applying himself to research, in order to denounce them, thinkers who were *guilty* of the catastrophe. He thus produced a unified image of the history of modern ideas in which, faced by an innocent Catholic tradition (to which according to him were attached Descartes and his disciples), the totality of the thought of the Enlightenment, from Voltaire to Kant including Rousseau, and the totality of the empiricist tradition, from Bacon to Condillac, including Locke, are represented as the *accused*.<sup>142</sup> Today “radical evil” is no longer represented by the French Revolution, but by the totalitarian regimes of this century; so it is therefore the intellectual origins of this last catastrophe that are today the object of philosophical inquests. Certain of these inquests continue the accusation against the Enlightenment; others, with good arguments, turn the accusation against the anti-modern tradition. However in the measure that it leads to confusion in a single picture of currents as different as Catholic traditionalism, the romantic movement, and Heideggerian historicism, the accusation carried against traditionalism

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<sup>142</sup> In an extreme way, the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (chapter 13, OC, 6:276) does not hesitate to detect the “venom” of atheism in Kant as well as Bacon.

carries the risk of borrowing from the latter its worst faults: the transformation of the history of ideas into a prosecution by amalgamation.

The paradoxical evolution of the idea of dialectic of Enlightenment with Adorno and Horkheimer can serve as a warning here. The traditionalist appearance sometimes taken by the idea of the dialectic of Enlightenment holds at first to what this idea, as formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, picks up from a philosophy of historical necessity. That history had a *unique direction* – this thesis is undoubtedly not specifically traditionalist; however one can think that it is traditionalism that has given it its most coherent form – in particular because it is perhaps the only one able to give a full sense of the unity of modern times. One ordinarily defines modernity as the social logic deployed since the beginning of modern times; however, as even the date of this beginning is difficult to fix, so the logic by which it acts is difficult to name. Is it capitalism? Secularism? Individualism? Democracy? Techno-science? Liberalism? These different dynamics can only be confused from a single point of view: from the point of view of traditionalism, which comes to see in each of them the *same* direction because it sees in each of them a *negative* direction, the destruction of traditional authority. It is only to this point of view again that “modernity” and “modern times” are fully identified: because they both defined themselves by the will to break with tradition. The only way not to be traditionalist – to escape from any kind of persistence of Maistrian thought – would then be to renounce the idea of a unity of modern times; to distinguish on the one hand modernity, a term that only designates the present of the speaking subject,<sup>143</sup> and on the other hand modern times, a historical reality made by distinct dynamics (secularism, capitalism, liberalism, democracy, and individualism). Therefore to admit the idea of a unique history of the Enlightenment and of modern reason it is perhaps advisable to substitute “a contingent history of the rational,” made up of an “abundant forking” of “different establishments, different creations, different modifications by which rationalities engender one another, oppose themselves one to the other, and hunt one another.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> H. Meschonnic, in *Modernité modernité* (Paris: Verdier 1988), shows that “modern” is a word that does not have a referent but “designates the undefined presence of the apparition.” Modernity is not the character of modern times; it is not defined by novelty or by opposition to tradition; it is the “historical mode of subjectivity.” The “modern” properly speaking, is a non-datable present, which because it is authentically a present, remains a present; it is the transhistoric present of an historical subject.

<sup>144</sup> M. Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Gallimard 1994) 4:440-1.



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