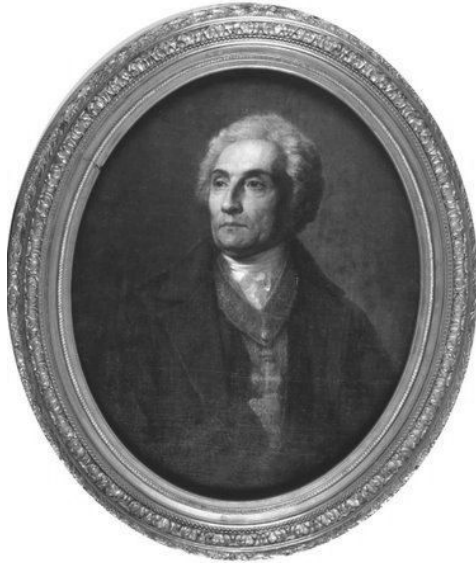


**The New *enfant du siècle*:  
Joseph de Maistre  
as a Writer**



Edited by  
Carolina Armenteros  
and  
Richard A. Lebrun



*St Andrews Studies in French  
History and Culture*





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The Editors  
*November 2009*



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## Editors' Note

*OC* is the abbreviation used throughout this volume for *Œuvres complètes de Joseph de Maistre* (14 vols., Lyon, 1884-1887).

The *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille* cited in this volume correspond to the files of the CD-ROM collection of the Fonds de Maistre, Archives départementales de la Savoie, 1996.

In footnotes some dates are given in both Old Style and New Style, reflecting Maistre's presence in Russia.



# 1 Introduction: assessing Maistre's style and rhetoric

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*Richard A. Lebrun*

## I

That the works of Joseph de Maistre have continued to hold sway over both scholars and the general public can be attributed in large part to his abilities as a writer. Certainly, the contents of his thought – mention can be made to his critique of the Enlightenment, his counter-revolutionary attitudes, his defense of monarchy and Catholicism, his ultramontanist, and his sociology – possess enduring interest for historians given their innovativeness in their own time, and their continuing relevance in ours. However Maistre's ability to mould the French language into a new, lively, memorable, and distinctive literary style has also contributed significantly to the influence of his thought. Varied and surprising critics and stylists, from Sainte-Beuve to Walter Benjamin, have been attracted to Maistre precisely because of his aesthetic and literary skills. Although he was a determined opponent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as is the case with Rousseau, Maistre's influence owes much to the magic of his literary style. The essays in this collection explore the nature and significance of Maistre's rhetoric.

In assessing Maistre's place as a 'French' writer there are first of all some biographical details to keep in mind. Though he was French in language and culture, in fact he was never willingly a French subject or citizen.<sup>1</sup> A native of Chambéry in the duchy of Savoie, at the time of his birth in 1753 a component territory of the northern Italian Kingdom of Sardinia,<sup>2</sup> he remained all his life a subject of the House of Savoy.<sup>3</sup> Nor

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<sup>1</sup> To honour Maistre for his *Considérations sur la France*, Napoleon in 1802 made him French against his will. See Maistre, *OC*, x, 409-410.

<sup>2</sup> The composite state ruled by the House of Savoy by the late eighteenth century consisted of several territories in the southern Alps and northern Italy, most notably the duchy of Savoie, the principality of Piedmont and the county of Nice,

was Maistre ever a professional writer. Rather for most of his career he was a magistrate and diplomat. Educated first by the Jesuits and then the local royal *collège*, he earned law degrees from the University of Turin, and then, like his father, served as a magistrate in the Senate of Savoie (the high court of the duchy and the equivalent of a French *parlement*). By the time of the French Revolution he had married and risen to the rank of Senator. With the invasion of Savoie by a French revolutionary army in September 1792, Maistre fled Chambéry. He subsequently served as the Sardinian consul in Lausanne (1793-1797), where he began a new subsidiary career as a counter-revolutionary propagandist, as Regent (head of the court system) in Sardinia (1800-1803), and then represented Piedmont-Sardinia as that kingdom's ambassador at the Russian court in St Petersburg (1803-1817). On his return to Turin in 1817 he served as the kingdom's vice-chancellor and head of the magistrature until his death in 1821. For Maistre, the French Revolution had meant the abandonment of an established and secure legal career, the loss of his property in Chambéry (including what had been one of the best private libraries in the duchy), and long years of exile and separation from his family.

Yet if it had not been for the French Revolution, it is highly unlikely that Joseph de Maistre would ever have achieved the literary renown by which he is remembered today. Though an extraordinarily intelligent, well educated, well read, and engaged observer of developments beyond the boundaries of his native province, until the Revolution exploded into Savoy his time had been almost completely occupied by his legal work. We know from his manuscripts, notebooks, and correspondence that prior to 1792 he had produced speeches for ceremonial law court occasions, a memoir on Freemasonry that was completely unknown at the time, a couple of memoirs on more general topics, and even tried his hand at composing an interesting little (unpublished) 'dialogue' in favour of freedom of the press. But it was only in reaction to the Revolution, and in particular after he settled in Lausanne, that he began to address a wider audience with his prose, beginning with anonymously written counter-revolutionary pamphlets.

The early pamphlets were scarcely known even locally, but Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* (1797), which offered a

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plus the kingdom of Sardinia, whence came the status of the rulers and the official name of the state since 1720. The capital was Turin in Piedmont.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical information, see Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).



providential interpretation of the French Revolution, quickly established his European reputation as a formidable defendant of throne and altar. Yet a decade would pass before he began writing what became his major works, which exhibit a gradual shift of 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, philosophical, and theological principles on which he had based the *Considérations. Du pape* (1819) argued for infallible papal authority as a prerequisite for political stability in Europe. *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (published shortly after Maistre's death in 1821) explored a host of philosophical and theological issues in witty dialogue form, while an appendix, entitled *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, developed his ideas about suffering and violence. Finally, his *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (not published until 1836) blamed the English writer for much of the scientism and atheism of the Enlightenment. In all of these works, from the early pamphlets through the relatively minor occasional pieces written to influence Tsar Alexander and his advisors and finally the major works just mentioned, Maistre displayed a quite extraordinary and distinctive literary style.

Joseph de Maistre himself was quite aware of the distinctive character of his prose style. In November 1797, at a time when his literary reputation was growing and he was becoming known as the author (though anonymous) of his first important work, *Considérations sur la France*, and he was asked by a representative of the future King Louis XVIII to write something about the situation in France following the *coup d'état* of Fructidor, he declined, explaining that 'my style is so well known in this country that if the piece appeared they would recognize my pen, and I would be buried alive.'<sup>4</sup> And again in 1804, by which time he was posted to St Petersburg as the Sardinian ambassador to the court of the tsar, when he was asked a second time to lend his pen to the French royalist cause, Maistre cautioned against the proposal on the grounds of his style: '[...] there is a kind of danger that I will never allow myself to confront: it is that of my style which is too well known. Certainly, I do not mean to brag, for there is nothing in common between *better* and *different*.

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<sup>4</sup> Maistre to comte d'Avaray, 13 November 1797, in *Joseph de Maistre et Blacas: leur correspondance inédite et l'histoire de leur amitié, 1804-1820*, introduction, notes, and commentary by Ernest Daudet (Paris, 1908), pp. 23-24. 'They' and 'this country' in this letter refer to people in the government of Piedmont-Sardinia.

But the fact is that it is different without it ever being possible to understand myself what is this kind of stamp that always betrays me.<sup>5</sup>

## II

There have been many attempts to characterize Maistre's literary style. Two of the first, and perhaps the most memorable, were by writers who were themselves distinguished authors, and who had either met Maistre or had access to people who had known him. We have taken the title of this volume from a description by the first, Alphonse de Lamartine, who penned the following assessment relatively late in his own life:

That brief, nervous, lucid style, stripped of phrases, robust of limb, did not at all recall the softness of the eighteenth century, nor the declamations of the latest French books: it was born and steeped in the breath of the Alps; it was virgin, it was young, it was harsh and savage; it had no human respect, it felt its solitude; it improvised depth and form all at once... That man was *new* among the *enfants du siècle*.<sup>6</sup>

This was not Lamartine's first judgment of Maistre. In fact, Lamartine's relations with the Maistre family and with Joseph de Maistre himself constitute a long, interesting, and complicated story.<sup>7</sup> Lamartine had been a classmate of Joseph de Maistre's nephew, Louis de Vignet, and had first been invited to visit the Maistre family at Bissy (near Chambéry) in July 1815. The young royalist poet had been charmed by the Catholic and royalist atmosphere of the Maistre family (at that point Joseph was still absent in Russia). Then, in August 1817, when Joseph de Maistre, his wife, and his daughters stopped for a family reunion at Bissy on his return journey from St Petersburg, Lamartine was invited to join the celebration; this would have been the only time he met the now famous author, and then for only a day or so, and in the midst of a large family gathering. The ties between Lamartine and the Maistre family were strengthened in February 1819 with the marriage of his sister Césarine to Xavier de

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<sup>5</sup> Maistre to d'Avaray, 15 July 1804, in *Mémoires politiques et correspondance diplomatique de J. de Maistre*, ed. by Albert Blanc (Paris, 1858), p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature*, 24 vols. (Paris, 1859), vii, 426-427.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean Rebotton, 'Lamartine et la famille de Maistre,' *Revue des études maistriennes*, 4 (1978), 91-139.

Vignet, another of Joseph's nephews. For a short time, in letters between Joseph de Maistre and Lamartine, they addressed each other as 'nephew' and 'uncle.' Then there was a contretemps that led to estrangement. Apparently what happened, was that for personal reasons relating to his courtship of an English heiress whom he later married, Lamartine, with the assistance of Louis de Vignet, obtained the two letters that we now know as 'A une dame protestante, sur la maxime qu'*un honnête homme ne change jamais de religion*,' and 'A une dame russe, sur la nature et les effets du schisme, et sur l'unité catholique,'<sup>8</sup> and published them in April 1820 in *Le défenseur*, a French royalist journal with which Lamartine was involved. The problem was that the letters were published without Maistre's consent and over his name. Joseph de Maistre was extremely upset over the publication of these 'very confidential' letters, and terminated his correspondence with the French author, not even acknowledging the gift of the poet's *Méditations poétiques*, Lamartine's first published work, which appeared to great acclaim in 1820. When Joseph de Maistre died in February 1821, Lamartine did not even write a note of condolence to anyone in the Maistre family.<sup>9</sup>

Lamartine's first public characterization of Joseph de Maistre, the man, the author, and his literary style, appeared in *Les confidences*, which he published in 1849, by which time Lamartine had evolved from the young royalist poet at least sympathetic to the pious Catholicism of the Maistre family to the secular republican who played an important political role in the Second Republic following the Revolution of 1848. During the years after 1820, Maistre's children, Rodolphe and Constance in particular, who had remained fervently Catholic and royalist, shunned Lamartine. The description of Maistre that Lamartine penned for *Les confidences* revealed a deep ambivalence towards its subject. While still expressing admiration for the greatness of the man, he proceeded to belittle the writer and the thinker:

Coming out of his mountains as a young man, he had first lived in Turin, then shocks had thrown him successively to Sardinia, then Russia, without ever having passed by France, nor England, nor Germany. He had been morally disoriented from his youth. He knew nothing except from books, and he read few of them. From this came the marvelous eccentricity of his thought and his style.

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<sup>8</sup> Maistre, *OC*, viii, 129-157.

<sup>9</sup> Rebotton, 'Lamartine et la famille de Maistre,' 106-110.

This was a crude soul, but a great soul; an uncivilized intelligence, but a vast intelligence; a rude style, but a strong style. Thus delivered to himself, all his philosophy was only the theory of his religious instincts. [...] the writer in him was quite superior to the thinker, but the man was very superior to the thinker and to the writer. His faith, to which he too often gave the clothing of sophism and the attitude of paradox that defied reason, was sincere, sublime, and fertile in his life. [...] Under the forms of the man, one still senses the rock. Thus this genius was only rough-hewn, but it had great proportions. This is why Maistre is popular. More harmonious and more perfect, he would be less pleasing to the crowd, which never looks closely. This was an alpine Bossuet.<sup>10</sup>

This characterization, so faulty in its description of the person, experience, learning, and literary achievements of Joseph de Maistre, which first appeared as a supplement to the popular newspaper, *La presse*, in February 1849, was deeply offensive to Rodolphe de Maistre,<sup>11</sup> and apparently stimulated him to edit and publish some of Maistre's previously unpublished writings along with a selection of his letters in a volume that also included his own brief biography of his father.<sup>12</sup> This was Rodolphe's way of refuting Lamartine.<sup>13</sup>

Not content to let the matter rest, however, Lamartine returned to the fray with a long section about the Maistre family and Joseph de Maistre in his *Cours familier de littérature*, which he published between 1856 and 1869. In volumes VII and VIII of this series, which appeared in 1859, there was a long sixty-five page *entretien* on Joseph de Maistre. After less than subtle jabs at Rodolphe's biography of his father, Lamartine invents tales of long walks and conversations in the company of Joseph de Maistre at Bissy in 1817. Also invented is a scene at the signing of Lamartine's marriage contract in Chambéry, which supposedly revealed Maistre's vanity. In fact, the evidence suggests that Joseph de Maistre was not in attendance on this occasion.<sup>14</sup> Much of the piece, in fact, is no more than long excerpts from Maistre's works and correspondence, presented in a rather patronizing way to illustrate his own unsympathetic judgments

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<sup>10</sup> Lamartine, *Les confidences* (Paris, 1879), pp. 332-333.

<sup>11</sup> Rebotton cites a letter from Rodolphe to his sister Constance. See 'Lamartine et la famille de Maistre,' 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Lettres et opuscules inédits du comte Joseph de Maistre* (Paris, 1851).

<sup>13</sup> See Rebotton, 'Lamartine et la famille de Maistre,' 127-128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

about the man, his ideas, and his literary achievements. Lamartine concluded by averring that ‘This was the first great man that I had ever approached so closely in my life; I was proud to listen to him, and I meditated respectfully in order to remember him; I did not foresee that I would one day judge him as a philosopher and deliver testimony about his little weaknesses and his high virtue.’<sup>15</sup> While it is clear that, for various personal and political reasons, Lamartine’s characterization of Joseph de Maistre’s person and his political and religious position is scarcely to be trusted, it remains significant that the French poet and writer still felt compelled to pay homage to Maistre’s literary style. In addition to the tribute from which we have borrowed the title of this volume, Lamartine concludes his assessment in the *Cours familier* this way:

But his true triumph is in style. Here he is, not without equal, but without comparison. Solidity, brilliance, propriety, images, suppleness, boldness, originality, uncton, abruptness even, it had all the qualities of the word that knows how to make itself heard [...] His thoughts will pass or have passed, but his style will remain for the lasting admiration of those who read for the pleasure of reading.<sup>16</sup>

The assessments by the famous literary critic, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, are more trustworthy and have been much more influential. In fact, apart from Maistre’s own works and letters, Maistre’s image in nineteenth-century France probably owes more to Sainte-Beuve than anyone else.<sup>17</sup> A self-proclaimed sceptic in religion, he was repelled by Maistre’s doctrines, disliked his aristocratic attitudes, and was angered by his cavalier treatment of Pascal and the Jansenists of Port-Royal, yet he was enchanted, seduced even by Maistre’s literary talents.<sup>18</sup> He was

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<sup>15</sup> Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature*, viii, 75-76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, viii, 73-74.

<sup>17</sup> See my *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant*, pp. 265-267.

<sup>18</sup> Sainte-Beuve wrote about Maistre on a number of occasions. Except for his critique of Maistre’s *De l’église gallicane* in his own study of Port-Royal, Sainte-Beuve’s comments about Maistre appeared first in periodicals before being published in his multi-volume series *Causeries du lundi* (xv, 67-83) and *Portraits littéraires* (ii, 287-466). These pieces have been brought together and annotated by Maurice Allem in Sainte-Beuve, *Les grands écrivains français: XIXe siècle, philosophes et essayistes* (Paris, 1930), i, 1-163. For the sake of convenience, this edition is cited here.

fascinated by Maistre; he read him, researched his life and personality by seeking out those who had known him, wrote about his life, and often paid tribute to his style. Sainte-Beuve acknowledged that he suffered ‘involuntarily to see a man who speaks such a beautiful French express sentiments that are so little ours,’<sup>19</sup> but admitted that what ‘Maistre has is his marvelous language; with all its rigidity and bitter tones, it is incomparable, and we inevitably surrender to it each time that we hear or read it.’<sup>20</sup> In a piece dating from 1843, Sainte-Beuve, commenting on Maistre’s *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, paid its author this extraordinary compliment: ‘The chapters on “final causes” and “the union of science and religion” include passages on order and proportion in the universe, on art, on Christian painting, and on the beautiful, that are, certainly, some of the most beautiful pages that have ever been written in human language.’<sup>21</sup>

Sainte-Beuve’s assessment was impressionistic rather than precise. For example, at one point he writes:

One of his favourite expressions, and one which he often used was *point-blank*. This was the secret of his tactics, this was his gesture; this was the way he acted; he advanced alone against a whole enemy army, mouthing his challenge, and shooting the leader *point-blank*. He attacks in glory, to triumph, and earns an excess of reprisals. In Rome’s spiritual distress, this was the Christian Scaevola, and the three hundred others did not follow.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, if one does a computerized search of all Maistre’s works, one discovers that Maistre only used the adverb *point-blank* (*à brûle-pourpoint*) once.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, even though not literally true, Sainte-

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<sup>19</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Les grands écrivains français*, i, 121.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 131.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 53. Gaius Mucius Scaevola was a hero of the Roman Republic, who went into an enemy camp alone and assassinated the enemy king’s secretary, thinking he was attacking the king.

<sup>23</sup> *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, online database in the InteLex Past Masters series. ‘*A brûle-pourpoint*’ occurs in the third dialogue of *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. See Pierre Glaudes’ critical edition in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres* (Paris, 2007), p. 541; or in English, *St Petersburg Dialogues*, tr. by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston, 1993), p. 94. A Google search reveals that many other critics have picked up the same quotation, either directly, or from Emil Cioran, who liked it and cited it in his own characterization of Maistre’s

Beuve's characterization still leaves us with an evocative and memorable image of Maistre's literary sallies.

As Pierre Glaudes points out in his essay about Maistre and his letters in this volume, when Maistre's correspondence began to be published in the years after 1850, Sainte-Beuve immediately appreciated the importance of these documents, not only for revealing the private man behind the published writings, but for displaying as well quite another dimension of Maistre's literary skills. Reviewing the edition of Maistre's *Lettres et opuscules inédits*, which appeared in 1851, Sainte-Beuve wrote:

But it is the correspondence especially which is going to seem totally new and which is of the greatest value. The superior man, and, moreover, the excellent, sincerely, friendly man, the father of the family, shows himself there on every page in all his natural vivacity, in all piquancy of humour, and, if one may say it, in all the gaiety and cordiality of genius.<sup>24</sup>

Another contemporary of Sainte-Beuve who greatly appreciated both the content and literary style of Maistre's works was Barbey d'Aurevilly. His characterization of Maistre in his *Les prophètes du passé* (1851), however, was wholly laudatory and quite uncritical. His review of Maistre's previously unpublished *Quatre chapitres inédits sur la Russie* when it appeared in 1859 included the following typical tribute: 'To my mind, very humble, but very convinced, philosophically or rather theologically, what Maistre expressed in all his works is absolutely true, and, literarily, is absolutely beautiful – and of a beauty that is his, which no one can imitate and no one can call back.'<sup>25</sup>

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provocative style. See Cioran, *Exercices d'admiration* (Paris, 1977), p. 67; or, in English, *Anathemas and Admirations* (New York, 1991), p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Les grands écrivains français*, i, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'J. de Maistre,' in 'Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,' in *Œuvre critique*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes and Catherine Mayaux, 3 vols. (Paris, 2004-2007), iii, 74.

### III

There are many studies that trace in detail Maistre's influence on both the style and substance of a surprisingly diverse variety of writers in France and elsewhere. While it is often difficult to disentangle enchantment with Maistre's style from attraction to his ideas, a list of French writers most often mentioned as influenced by his style would include Charles Baudelaire, Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, Louis Veuillot, Léon Bloy, Pierre Boutang, and Emil Cioran. What is perhaps surprising is that, despite the many tributes paid to Maistre's literary skills, until relatively recently there have not been many studies that have explored the precise nature and significance of those skills.

The first and still the most comprehensive attempt at analysis of Maistre's literary technique is the doctoral dissertation by Margrit Finger defended at the Philipps-Universität Marburg in 1972.<sup>26</sup> Finger cited at length all Maistre's own comments about literary style, rhetoric, and techniques of argument and persuasion, and then went on to assess Maistre's own performance according to his own criteria. Her approach was critical, in some ways perhaps hypercritical, and is nicely summed up in the subtitle of a paper that she presented in French at the first international conference on Joseph de Maistre held in Turin in 1974.<sup>27</sup> The subtitle, which was also the title of a major chapter in the dissertation, reads: 'The art of shutting the mouths of innovators.' In this paper, describing the state of the question quite well, Finger writes:

The Maistre question does not, however, consist only in his ideas, but also in the way in which he expresses them and demonstrates them. Much has been written about his ideas, but almost nothing has been written about his way of presenting them. Now, since I tried to fill this lacuna by writing a thesis devoted to the literary techniques in Joseph de Maistre's works, in this paper I will only occupy myself with an aspect of his work, or, more precisely, the

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<sup>26</sup> *Studien zur literarischen Technik Joseph de Maistres* (Unpublished inaugural dissertation, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1972).

<sup>27</sup> Margrit Zopel-Finger, 'Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ob omnibus ou l'art de fermer la bouche aux novateurs,' in *Joseph de Maistre tra illuminismo e Restaurazione*, ed. by Luigi Marino (Turin, 1975), pp. 70-79.



polemical means by which our author tried to “kill the spirit of the eighteenth century.”<sup>28</sup>

The article displays the strengths of the thesis: a detailed examination of all the techniques of polemic employed by Maistre in his writings: irony, satire, insult, citations from a wide range of authorities and carefully chosen historical and geographical examples, reasoned arguments based on perhaps questionable premises, and appeals to the emotions (especially of fear). She correctly points out that Maistre was adept in the ‘dialectic of the schools’ and well trained and experienced in the rhetorical skills of a lawyer. All this is quite valuable, but somehow fails to focus on the ‘magic of style’ that makes Maistre’s writings so seductive and influential.

Since 1975, a major venue for the publication of serious scholarship on the life and writings of Joseph de Maistre has been the *Revue des études maistriennes*. Given the importance of this question of Maistre’s style, so clearly identified by Margrit Finger, we might have expected to find a good number of articles on this issue in the fourteen issues of the *Revue* appearing since that date. In fact, however, among the sixty-three studies that have appeared up through the most recent issue in 2004, there are only two that focus more or less exclusively on this problem, and two more that argue for an intimate relationship between Maistre’s rhetoric and the substance of his thought.

The first, an article by Jacques Vier, which appeared in issue number 3 (1977) of the *Revue*, is entitled ‘Le style de Joseph de Maistre.’ Though short, only nine pages in length, it does deal directly with its topic. Quite in contrast to Finger’s assessment, however, Vier argues that the major influence on Maistre’s style and its ever-present model was the Bible. According to Vier, Maistre’s literary power ‘comes from daily commerce with the *Scriptures* and with some of their most famous commentators, Origen, St Augustine, and St Thomas.’<sup>29</sup> Vier adds that Maistre’s style may owe something to his juridical formation (and especially to writers coming out of that tradition such as Montesquieu and Charles de Brosses, an eighteenth-century Burgundian magistrate) and acknowledges as well his debt to the writers of classical antiquity (Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Cicero, and Tacitus).<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately the remainder of his article offers little more than uncritical praise of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Vier, ‘Le style de Joseph de Maistre,’ *Revue des études maistriennes*, Actes du colloque de Chambéry, 20 novembre 1976, 3 (1977), 56.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

power of Maistre's prose in demolishing the eighteenth-century *philosophes* (Voltaire particularly) and the pretensions of the French Revolutionaries, and defending Catholic religious truth and papal authority. It is perhaps significant that the discussion following Vier's presentation at the colloquium, recorded in the 'Actes,'<sup>31</sup> became side-tracked into a debate about Maistre's lack of appreciation for Protestant theology and scarcely touched the issue of Maistre's literary style.

The article on Maistre's rhetoric in *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* by Agnès Guiland in issue number 12 (1996) of the *Revue* is much more substantial and important.<sup>32</sup> Significantly perhaps, in her 'review of the literature' on her topic she cites only Margrit Finger's 1972 dissertation and completely ignores the 1977 *Revue* article by Jacques Vier.<sup>33</sup> Guiland justifies restricting her study of Maistre's rhetoric to *Les soirées* on the grounds that this is the sole work by Maistre, apart from his correspondence, that is not a 'treatise.' While one might query her characterization of the bulk of Maistre's writings as 'treatises,'<sup>34</sup> and regret her omission of Maistre's other works (notable for their 'rhetoric' as well as their literary style), it must be acknowledged that Guiland's attention extends beyond Maistre's use of the techniques of rhetoric narrowly understood to encompass his literary genius. In her introduction, she describes her study of *Les soirées* as an attempt '[...] to evaluate the true literary qualities of a writer better known as a philosopher by studying in detail the text of the *Entretiens* in order to discover the genius of this man of the pen.'<sup>35</sup>

What Guiland offers is a veritable *tour de force* of literary analysis almost as skillfully constructed as the masterpiece she has chosen to study.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-67.

<sup>32</sup> 'La rhétorique dans *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* de Joseph de Maistre: réfuter et convaincre,' *Revue des études maistriennes*, 12 (1996), 77-203.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. It must be noted, however, that Philippe Barthelet included the Vier article in his massive volume, *Joseph de Maistre* (Les dossiers H, Geneva, 2005), pp. 184-190.

<sup>34</sup> See my chapter in this volume arguing that most of his writings are better characterized as 'pamphlets'. Pierre Glaudes contrasts Maistre's skillful and imaginative use of the essay form with the more didactic 'treatise' format that had characterized much Catholic apologetic literature in the eighteenth century. See his 'Introduction' to *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes (Paris, 2007), pp. 349-357.

<sup>35</sup> Guiland, 'La rhétorique dans *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* de Joseph de Maistre,' 83.

She divides her work into two long chapters, the first of which describes and deconstructs the polemical techniques that Maistre wielded to discredit the credibility of his chosen opponents and their arguments. The second chapter focuses on Maistre's art of persuasion, reviewing all the literary devices that Maistre used to convince and seduce his readers into accepting his own views. Drawing on a wide range of technical literature on rhetoric, Guiland identifies a total of ninety different devices, figures, and tactics that Maistre deployed in *Les soirées* (all helpfully defined in a 'glossary'<sup>36</sup>), and by ample and well chosen citations demonstrates how Maistre used them to achieve his goals.

The first chapter focuses on the specific rhetorical techniques that Maistre used to demean his opponents (such as skilful use of vividly descriptive adjectives, accusations of folly and intellectual deficiencies, logical incoherence, the use of provocation, paradox, irony, word play, and the argument from silence with its implication that the opponent's argument is not worth answering). The second chapter explores Maistre's literary techniques, showing us in detail how he sought to win over his readers by his use of the dialogue format that renders his argument more vivid by creating the illusion that the reader is sitting in on the conversation of three very 'real' interlocutors, how he used typographical resources (italics, capitals, and placement of text) to mimic the ways the voice expresses emphases, and how he used an extensive repertoire of forms of argument, allegories, illustrations, and personal anecdotes. By careful analysis of Maistre's use of the techniques of dramatic narrative, prose rhythms, repetitive devices, and subtle appeals to emotion, Guiland takes us behind the curtain, as it were, to reveal many of the secrets by which the author achieved his stylistic magic.

In the end, however, Guiland has to admit that Maistre's prose reflects more than mastery of technique. She concludes that 'Maistre's ideology is reflected very exactly in his writing,' and that his writings 'are marked by the subjectivity and the very strong personality of the writer.'<sup>37</sup> While she cautions that her study of *Les soirées* should not lead to hasty conclusions about Maistre's style and calls for similar examinations of his other works, she still permits herself the conclusion that her work 'consecrates Maistre as one of the greatest stylists of his century.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 199-203.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 193.

Number 14 (2004) of the *Revue des études maistriennes* includes two articles that explore the linkage between Maistre's politics and his rhetoric. The first by Pierre Glaudes, 'Maistre et le sublime de la Révolution. Enjeux d'une conversion esthétique,'<sup>39</sup> argues that Maistre borrowed the category of the 'sublime,' developed by Edmund Burke in his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and incorporates it into a 'political theology' that focused on the supernatural or Providential dimension of the French Revolution. Glaudes demonstrates how Maistre's characterization of the Revolution was enriched by attributes then habitually attached to divine objects.<sup>40</sup> Displayed first in his *Considérations sur la France* of 1797, Maistre's Providential interpretation of the Revolution highlighted its 'obscurity' (or unknowableness), its power ('beyond human means'), and its apparently 'miraculous,' 'satanic,' and 'divine' characteristics. As Glaudes explains, 'To perceive the sublime of the Revolution [...] is to surmount one's stupor before the incomprehensible collapse of ancient traditions, in order to seek there the transcendent signification of the event. [...] History, by which we could have been tempted towards a reduction to hopeless nonsense, becomes the source of an aesthetic enjoyment, founded on the accord, rich in meaning, of theology and politics.'<sup>41</sup> A good portion of the article is devoted to showing how much of Maistre's prose in the *Considérations* exemplifies the ancient rhetorical device of *deinôsis* or vehemence, which strongly exaggerates the responsibility for the actions of a person or group of people. For Glaudes, Maistre's appropriation of Burke's notion of the sublime provides the Savoyard with both an interpretive key for understanding the Revolution and a new rhetoric for elucidating and imposing its transcendent meaning. In this way then, politics and aesthetics are portrayed as intimately bound together in Maistre's political writing.

The inseparability of politics and literary style is similarly a central theme of Michael Kohlhauer's article, 'Politiques, poétiques du moi. Joseph de Maistre et la question du sujet,' which also appears in number 14 (2004) of the *Revue des études maistriennes*. Maistre the writer, argues Kohlhauer, hid Maistre the philosopher and Maistre the politician but was

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<sup>39</sup> *Revue des études maistriennes*, 14 (2004), 183-200. Curiously, the volume's 'Table des matières' gives the title as 'Ecriture politique et sublime chez Joseph de Maistre: une nouvelle rhétorique.' Both titles are equally appropriate.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

at the same time deeply implicated with both. Maistre's Christian faith and opposition to eighteenth-century philosophy made direct self-disclosure, or indeed any kind of dwelling on oneself, repugnant to him – a theme that Pierre Glaudes also takes up in this volume, though with reference to Maistre's gentlemanly ethic. Refusing the 'I' was necessary in order to live virtuously and to deny the individualism of modernity. Yet Maistre's unique, subjective style, recognized instantly throughout Europe, handed over to his readers that same self that he sought to obscure and evade. In this way, and also through the melancholia that pervaded his rhetorical self-betrayal, Maistre the writer contributed to the evolution of a Romanticism 'of the right' that tended to transform all philosophical and political discourse into highly subjective 'literature.' This was the case even though Maistre the philosopher and the politician rejected the individualist premises on which Romanticism depends.

It was precisely the quality of exaggeration identified by Pierre Glaudes that Emil Cioran seized upon as the most striking characteristic of Maistre's thought and literary style.<sup>42</sup> Although he almost despairs of diagnosing the rhetoric of conservatives ('Trying to dissect their prose is tantamount to analyzing a thunderstorm'<sup>43</sup>), Cioran does offer this description of Maistre's prose:

... he [Maistre] fulminated as a *littérateur*, even as a grammarian, and his frenzies not only failed to diminish his passion for the correct and elegant formulation but augmented it even more. An epileptic temperament infatuated with the trifles of the Word: trances and boutades, convulsions and bagatelles, grace and a foaming mouth – everything combined to compose a pamphleteering universe at whose heart he harried 'error' with blows of invective, those ultimatums of impotence.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically perhaps, the distinguished literary critic, essayist, and philosopher George Steiner, referring to the essay from which this quotation has been taken, writes: 'The current spokesman for total pessimism, Cioran, has not only written an incisive essay on de Maistre,

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<sup>42</sup> E. M. Cioran, 'Joseph de Maistre: An Essay on Reactionary Thought' in *Anathemas and Admirations*, tr. by Richard Howard (New York, 1991), pp. 22-78.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

his own aphoristic, tenebrous texts are, time and again, direct echoes of *Les soirées*.<sup>45</sup>

In reviewing studies devoted to Maistre's rhetoric, mention should also be made here of a very interesting master's thesis done for the Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV) in 2002 by an Englishman, John Prideaux. Entitled 'La politique de l'ironie chez Joseph de Maistre,' the study is narrowly focused on Maistre's use of irony in the political writings that he composed in the 1790s. It examines the techniques used by classical rhetoricians to provoke laughter, of which Maistre was fully conscious, as well as the use of irony by eighteenth-century authors such as Rousseau. It demonstrates how Maistre used irony as a rhetorical strategy, how he manipulated laughter for his own polemical goals, and the limits of his use of irony. As Prideaux shows, Maistre was fully aware of his talent for irony. He wrote in a letter dating from 1820: 'You speak to me of my talent *for causing laughter in reasoning*. In effect, I feel myself called to bring the most arduous questions to the level of every mind, and then I can say like Boileau: *It is by this that I merit, if I merit something*.'<sup>46</sup> One of the advantages of irony, which Maistre appreciated, 'is that it permits the writer to put the most arduous questions to the level of all minds.'<sup>47</sup> Prideaux concludes his study with a useful examination of the role of the violence of the French Revolution in putting an end to the eighteenth-century style of irony known as *persiflage*. According to Elizabeth Bourguinat, on whose characterization Prideaux draws, eighteenth-century *persiflage* had been characterized by a light mocking irony that owed its success to an historic misunderstanding between society (*les mondains*) and the *philosophes*. *Les mondains* had been fascinated by the new philosophy that appeared to explain the crisis of identity that they were experiencing. '*Persiflage* will disappear the moment the misunderstanding was cleared up, that is to say during the first years of the Revolution.'<sup>48</sup> Prideaux sums up Maistre's contribution to rhetoric this way: 'Irony thus became with Maistre a way of getting out of the dead-end, a way of avoiding the pure hate that signifies the check of

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<sup>45</sup> George Steiner, 'Darkness Visible,' a review of Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant*, in *London Review of Books*, 24 November 1988.

<sup>46</sup> Maistre to Abbé Rey, 26 January 1820, in *Oeuvres complètes*, xiv, 199, cited by Prideaux, 'La politique de l'ironie,' p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Prideaux, 'La politique de l'ironie,' p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Bourguinat, *Le siècle du persiflage, 1734-1789* (Paris, 1998), p. 16, cited by Prideaux, 'La politique de l'ironie,' p. 82.

rhetoric, and therefore contained a hope of regeneration at once linguistic and political.<sup>49</sup> In his own way then, Prideaux also links Maistre's rhetoric to his politics.<sup>50</sup>

## IV

Without being exhaustive, this brief review of previous attempts to characterize and analyse Joseph de Maistre's literary style suggests the importance of the topic for our understanding of his thought as well as the difficulty of separating any assessment of his style from judgments about the content of his thought. With Maistre, it would seem to be the case that rhetoric was not a mere technique or a strategy but rather an outward expression of an inner pattern of values. His style, it might be said, was not simply an ornament of his writing, an outer garment adorning his thought, but rather the vivid expression of a formidable and passionate personality as well as of an intellectual position. Consequently, although focused on Maistre's literary style, the studies in this volume inevitably deal as well with Maistre's identity and experience as a learned magistrate, an exile, and a diplomat.

Our essays in this volume attempt to expand our understanding of Maistre's literary style as an expression of his meaning by addressing 'Maistre as a writer' from three quite different directions. The first, my own piece on 'Maistre as pamphleteer,' seeks to situate Maistre's writings in the context of the literary genres of his time, and argues that, from this perspective, Maistre can be very usefully characterized as a skilled pamphleteer. By demonstrating how many of his writings exhibit the typical features of eighteenth-century pamphlets, the essay suggests that viewing Maistre as an engaged public intellectual writing for the media of his time enhances our appreciation and understanding of almost all his works. This consideration also helps us keep in mind that he was never an academic, professional philosopher, theologian, or political scientist.

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<sup>49</sup> Prideaux, 'La politique de l'ironie,' p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Gérard Gengembre, referring particularly to Rivarol, had already characterized the counter-revolutionary opponents of Revolution as irresistibly funny ironists: 'When it is funny, the right is irresistible. The counter-revolutionary journalists are the sons of Voltaire.' See *La contre-révolution ou l'histoire désespérante* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Paris, 1999), p. 23.

In the second essay in our volume, Pierre Glaudes celebrates how much can be learned from a careful reading of Maistre's correspondence. Both his official correspondence and his private letters reveal a very different person than the seemingly doctrinaire author of the published works. Maistre's diplomatic correspondence discloses his anguish and uncertainty in the face of the overwhelming events of the French Revolution, and the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, as well as his perceptive observations on contemporary events and his shrewd assessments of political developments. His personal letters to family and friends, on the other hand, reveal a different *persona* and a different rhetoric than the *persona* and the rhetoric Maistre presented in his official correspondence and to the readers of his pamphlets and books. These private letters, Glaudes concludes, 'render justice to his rectitude, his elegance, and his humanity.'

Our final essay, by Benjamin Thurston, looks at the 'paradox of the writer,' the apparent contradiction between Maistre's vehement critique of written words as both sterile and destructive and his authorship of a large number of counter-revolutionary pamphlets, political reflections, philosophical commentaries, and polemical works. As Thurston shows, this aversion for written discourse underlies Maistre's critique of Protestantism, materialist philosophy, the writings of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, constitutionalism, and revolutionary propaganda. Considering the implications of this outlook both for Maistre's self-perception as a writer and for the status of his own work, Thurston accounts for the paradox by tracing the discontinuity between Maistre's thinking about the word and its public uses before and after the Revolution. He shows how Maistre came to believe that the circumstances of the time left no alternative but the exploitation of rhetoric for polemical purposes.

Together, these three essays not only explore the issue of Maistrian rhetoric, but also provide material for reflecting on the ways in which the French Revolution altered political rhetoric. They should contribute to a better understanding of Maistre's thought, to a more accurate assessment of the character and extent of its influence, and to the resolution of many questions relating to its interpretation.



## 2 Joseph de Maistre as pamphleteer

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*Richard A. Lebrun*

### I

Joseph de Maistre has not often been identified or thought of as a pamphleteer. Specialists, of course, know that he wrote a number of political pamphlets, but for most general readers today Maistre is known primarily as the author of such serious and enduring works as *Du pape* and *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. Nevertheless, I will argue here that he might also be characterized as a skilled practitioner of the art of the pamphlet. It should be understood, of course, that in characterizing Maistre as a ‘pamphleteer’ I have no intention of denigrating his stature and reputation as an important and influential thinker. My purpose rather is to situate his writings in the context of the literary genres of his time.

In our time, the pamphlet as a literary genre has almost disappeared, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in both France and England, pamphlets were produced in great numbers, played an important role in public debate, and engaged the attention of first-rate authors. Some examples, such as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) and the Abbé Sièyes’ *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* (1788), had a deep and lasting impact. Newspapers of the time were usually of no more than four or six pages, much smaller and fewer in number than their current counterparts. In a world without our mass media, pamphlets were an important way of addressing the literate public.

F.P. Lock, Edmund Burke’s most recent biographer, has characterized the ‘pamphlet’ as ‘a short piece of argumentative prose, dealing with a more or less topical issue, addressed to a fairly general audience, and persuasive in intent.’<sup>1</sup> A proliferation of pamphlet literature, as Lock

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Politics, Pamphlets, and Ideas in Eighteenth-Century England,’ unpublished paper presented at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, at an event entitled ‘Studies in the History of Ideas: Lectures in Honour of J.A.W. Gunn, 18 October 2002.’ Cited with the permission of the author. Although this is an unpublished

points out, ‘presupposes a public sphere characterized by freedom of debate and of the press, and by a healthy printing and publishing industry.’ In England, there was an explosion of pamphlets during the political troubles of the years between 1640 and 1660, but it was only with the expiry of the Licensing Act in 1695 that pamphleteering became a characteristic and enduring feature of political life, to decline in importance only in the 1820s when newspapers expanded their size and their functions. Censorship, of course, endured much longer in France, but during periods of political upheaval and less effective governance, such as during the regency following the assassination of Henri IV, during the Frondes, during the various crises associated with Jansenism, the Damiens affair, the Maupeou crisis, and in the period from July 1788 on when the crown invited advice from the public about procedures for the election of the coming Estates-General, the production of pamphlets could also reach explosive numbers.<sup>2</sup>

The typical eighteenth-century pamphlet, according to Lock, was between twenty-four and ninety pages in length, though some, such as Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was perceived by contemporaries as a pamphlet, could be much longer. They were usually, but not always, published as booklets, without hard covers. Although we can speak of the typical eighteenth-century pamphlet, it does not seem that the genre was identified at the time by either length or binding, but more by topic, intended audience, and style of rhetoric. The distinction was probably never absolute, and pamphlets were regarded as something like books. It is significant that while eighteenth-century newspapers were but imperfectly and unevenly preserved, pamphlets were often bound together, and thus survive in reasonably large numbers. They were an excellent

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source, it is the most useful general treatment of pamphlets as a genre that I have been able to find. Hereafter cited in the text as ‘Lock.’

<sup>2</sup> See, especially, Jeffrey K. Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1990); William Doyle, *Jansenism* (London, 1999); Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France 1757-1765* (New Haven & London, 1975); Idem., *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750-1770* (Princeton, 1984); Jean Egret, *The French Prerevolution, 1787-1788* (Chicago & London, 1977); Raymond Birn, ‘The Pamphlet Press and the Estates-General of 1789,’ in *The Press in the French Revolution*, ed. by Harvey Chisick, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 287 (1991), 59-69.

vehicle for the treatment of questions of public interest, since they offered writers more time and space than contemporary newspapers, and they could be rapidly printed and distributed. The typical pamphlet was published anonymously, with the author assuming or constructing a persona or authorial voice that would presumably make his arguments persuasive.

F. P. Lock, whose description of eighteenth-century pamphlets I have cited, was concerned primarily with English examples, but his enumeration of the characteristic features of pamphlets as a literary genre apply as well to most French pamphlets of the time, including those written by Joseph de Maistre. It should be noted, however, that in France many publications of this type were known as *libelles*, and were in fact libelous defamations of individuals, groups, or institutions, and often blatantly pornographic.<sup>3</sup> Maistre's writings had nothing in common with that sub-genre. In France there was also another sub-genre of pamphlets known as *mémoires justificatifs*, written and published by barristers, originally to defend or criticize judicial decisions, but, increasingly in the latter part of the eighteenth century, to argue questions of general political interest.<sup>4</sup> Except that Maistre was a magistrate and not a barrister, some of Maistre's pamphlet-like writings appear somewhat akin to this sub-genre of pamphlet literature. Restricting the terms of reference and comparison to the more responsible pamphlet literature appearing in eighteenth-century France, it is worth noting that many of the *philosophes*, including Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau, were, among other things, skilled pamphleteers.<sup>5</sup>

Written 'to persuade,' pamphlets were 'inescapably rhetorical,' and used various rational, emotional, and ethical appeals (Lock), all of which are to be found in Maistre's pamphlets. In addition, eighteenth-century pamphlets were distinctive with respect to certain common devices that authors used to buttress their arguments (Lock). One very common device was the use of 'parallel history,' and especially the use of

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> See David A. Bell, *Lawyer and Citizen: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (New York, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Raymond Trousson, 'Rousseau et les stratégies du pamphlétaire,' in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: Essays in Memory of R.A. Leigh*, ed. by Marion Hobson, J.T.A. Leigh and Robert Wokler (Oxford, 1992), pp. 197-207.

parallels from Roman history. The effectiveness of this device rested on the ‘classical education’ that was common to almost all educated men in this period. In this ‘universe of discourse’ the importance of the Roman experience was taken for granted. There was also a common belief in a single standard of excellence embodied in the classical norm. A second common device was the appeal to legal precedent; as Lock puts it, eighteenth-century pamphlets exhibited a ‘discourse of precedents.’ Precedents were indeed often ‘inconclusive and contradictory,’ but nevertheless offered ‘a common ground to which all could appeal’ (Lock). A third device, the use of numerical and statistical arguments, came to be more commonly used as the century wore on. In 1700, statistics were not commonly available, but by 1800, statistics were becoming abundant, and were frequently used to add precision to political argument (Lock).

## II

Joseph de Maistre would be almost forty-four years of age when he published *Considérations sur la France* in 1797, a work that Sainte-Beuve, the great literary critic, once characterized as a ‘sublime pamphlet.’<sup>6</sup> While it was this ‘pamphlet’ that brought Maistre to Europe’s attention as a great publicist, there is a sense in which he had been preparing for this success ever since he had returned to Chambéry from his university studies in Turin in 1772.<sup>7</sup>

As we know from the notebooks in which he entered extracts from his reading and his comments thereon, Maistre became well informed about the intellectual and political debates that characterized the Europe of the high Enlightenment. His facility with languages gave him access to a vast range of literature. In addition to his native French, and the knowledge of Latin and Greek that he had acquired as part of a good classical education, Maistre had also learned Italian from his time in Turin. In 1776 he taught himself how to read English. Maistre’s curiosity about a wide range of topics is apparent in his lifelong infatuation with

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<sup>6</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire sous l’Empire*, cited in *Les grands écrivains français par Sainte-Beuve. XIXe siècle. Philosophes et essayistes*, ed. and annotated by Maurice Allem (Paris, 1930), i, 286, n. 78.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2, ‘Adventures of the Mind,’ in my *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal & Kingston, 1988), pp. 36-69.

periodical literature. His notebooks contain hundreds of references to a very wide range of newspapers, reviews, and learned journals. In an early notebook entry (probably dating from the 1770s) we find him writing:

I love journals; I go there looking for the little truths that can be encountered in them. [...] If I had a collection of twenty thousand real journals, printed in London or Amsterdam, I would prefer it infinitely to *L'Esprit des lois*, or any book of politics that one can imagine.<sup>8</sup>

The references to London and Amsterdam are significant, for these were centres where publishing was relatively free of censorship. Maistre was certainly well aware of contemporary arguments for greater freedom of the press. In an unpublished and unsigned 'dialogue' probably written between 1786 and 1789, Maistre has a 'Mr Dennis,' an Englishman, defending freedom of the press against 'The President' (of a French court, presumably).<sup>9</sup> In defending freedom of the press, Maistre's Mr Dennis develops two lines of argument. The first is an argument from natural law to the effect that mere human laws cannot prohibit the denunciation of unjust legal decisions or unjust laws. The second is the utilitarian argument that freedom of the press promotes knowledge, safeguards mankind against injustice, and promotes reforms.

This unpublished 'dialogue' can probably be characterized as a kind of pamphlet, even though never published.<sup>10</sup> From internal evidence it is clear that it was written in response to a specific dispute that had arisen in France. In 1786, one Charles Dupaty, a member of the Parlement of Bordeaux, published a *mémoire* protesting the innocence of three men condemned to be broken on the wheel. The Parlement of Paris eventually got involved in the affair and had Dupaty's memoir burned by the public executioner. The Parlement's condemnation, written by the *avocat général*, Antoine-Louis Séguier, a well-known opponent of the *philosophes*, was subsequently published.<sup>11</sup> Maistre's little dialogue opens with Mr Dennis angrily berating Séguier's arrogance in 'thundering against freedom of the press.' Whatever the irony of the later champion of

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<sup>8</sup> 'Extraits G,' in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J16, 213-214.

<sup>9</sup> Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 89-93.

<sup>10</sup> Now available in a data base of English translations of Maistre's works in the InteLex 'Past Masters' series, which may be accessed online through libraries subscribing to the series.

<sup>11</sup> For details on Dupaty and Séguier, see the *Nouvelle biographie générale* (Paris, 1853-1866), xiii, 256-263 and xli, 465.

reaction defending freedom of the press on the eve of the Revolution, it seems to me that Maistre's piece fits easily into Lock's definition of a pamphlet as 'a short piece of argumentative prose, dealing with a more or less topical issue [...] and persuasive in intent.'

Two other minor unpublished pieces that Maistre penned in the spring of 1788 might also be characterized as 'pamphlets' though he himself labeled them as 'memoirs.' These memoirs dealt directly with contemporary French issues at the time when the Assembly of Notables called by Calonne had repudiated his proposed reforms and his successor, Loménie de Brienne, was trying to force the Parlement of Paris to register similar reforms. In the one memoir, Maistre developed a defense of the French system of venality of office. In the second shorter memoir on the nature of the *parlements* in France, Maistre developed the thesis that 'the *parlements* of France were once what the Parliament of England is at present.'<sup>12</sup>

The revolutionary events of 1789 in France were obviously of great interest to Joseph de Maistre in Chambéry. We know from his correspondence that from an early date he was tempted to take up his own pen. Some time after the famous night session of 4 August in which the National Assembly abolished 'feudalism' in France, we find him writing to his friend, Henry Costa, describing how he was 'heated up beyond all expression by politics,' and had already before him 'ten or twelve or fifteen written pages that would call forth more,' and then goes on: 'Who knows if, before the beginning of October, you will not see me arriving at your place with Montesquieu, Bacon, and Mably wrapped up in four folders – and some scraps of paper that I will read to you to know what you think?'<sup>13</sup> Maistre scholars have long recognized that Burke's 'great pamphlet' was very important for the Savoyard's thinking. Maistre, in another letter to Costa, commented on Burke's work: 'For myself, I am delighted, and I do not 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.'<sup>14</sup> Maistre's comments in this letter

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<sup>12</sup> These memoirs may be found in Clément de Paillette, *La politique de Joseph de Maistre d'après ses premiers écrits* (Paris, 1895).

<sup>13</sup> Undated letter to Henry Costa. Cited in François Descostes, *Joseph de Maistre avant la Révolution: souvenirs de la société d'autrefois, 1753-1793*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1893), ii, 332-334.

<sup>14</sup> Maistre, letter to Costa, 21 January 1791, *OC*, ix, 11. For a detailed commentary on this letter, see Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 101-103.

also signal his great interest in the impact of print on the evolution of public opinion. His characterization of Burke's depiction of developments in France – 'public spirit annihilated, opinion vitiated to a frightening degree' – suggests that Maistre was coming to understand the influence of a determined and active minority and to appreciate that an appropriate counter-revolutionary strategy might require an equally vigorous campaign to rectify public opinion.<sup>15</sup>

In still another letter to Henry Costa a month later, Maistre complains about the mistakes being made by the Sardinian government in dealing with unrest being stirred up in Savoie by French revolutionary propaganda. In particular, he describes how the government had reacted to the circulation of a pamphlet entitled *Le premier cri de la Savoie vers la liberté* (from the evidence of the quality of the type and the paper used obviously produced in Paris). Instead of refuting the pamphlet, which Maistre thought would have been easy enough, the government had commanded the local printer to disavow it. Maistre commented: *Quos Jupiter vult perdere prius dementat*.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of the next few months, he proffered unsolicited advice to Turin on how to counter French designs on Savoie, advice that was generally ignored and that in fact led to his being viewed with suspicion by the government.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Maistre remained loyal to the Sardinian monarchy, and when the French invaded Savoie in September 1792, he fled to Turin. Facing the threat of having his property confiscated by the new French-sponsored regime in Chambéry, Maistre returned in January 1793, but soon found living under the new regime more than he could stomach. So after a few weeks, he departed again, but not before penning his first counter-revolutionary pamphlet. Having, in effect, abandoned his career as a magistrate by his initial flight, Maistre was evidently casting about for a new career. As published, this pamphlet carried the date 1 February 1793 and the title 'Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens à la Convention Nationale des Français.'<sup>18</sup> It takes the form of an appeal to the Convention against the injustice of confiscating the property of Savoyard

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<sup>15</sup> Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> Maistre, letter to Costa, 17 February 1791, *OC*, ix, 15-16. The citation is from Euripides, *Fragments*: 'Those whom he wants to destroy, Jupiter first makes mad.' The Latin version of the Greek original has been attributed to James Duport, a seventeenth-century English classicist.

<sup>17</sup> Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>18</sup> *OC*, vii, 46-81.

nobles and military personnel who continued to serve the king of Sardinia after the French occupation of their native province. But as he acknowledged in a letter to Mallet du Pan, the well-known Swiss publicist, requesting his assistance in its publication, the ‘address to the Convention’ was ‘only a framework and no more,’ with his real purpose being ‘to exhibit nobly and *dexterously* our way of thinking.’<sup>19</sup> In the pamphlet Maistre offered a reasoned defense of the pre-revolutionary regime in Savoie and urged continuing loyalty to the Sardinian monarchy. By the date of this letter to Mallet du Pan, 28 February 1793, he had already left Chambéry a second time, and, perhaps still looking for an opportunity to continue to serve the Sardinian monarchy, he may have hoped the pamphlet would provide a good example of what he could accomplish with his pen. His little work would both demonstrate his royalism and show that he was worth the hire.

By early April, the pamphlet had been published, and despite Maistre’s attempts to remain anonymous, his authorship was suspected, and the French representative in Geneva having demanded its seizure and the French deputy on mission in Savoie having requested the author’s arrest, the latter found refuge in French-speaking Lausanne.<sup>20</sup> Within two days of his arrival in the city, Maistre had arranged a meeting with Mallet du Pan. We may presume that the Swiss author encouraged Maistre’s publicist ambitions, since a couple of days later he noted in his diary that he had begun writing his *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien à ses compatriotes*.<sup>21</sup>

A few months later, with the support of an old friend, Baron Vignet des Etoles, the newly named Sardinian ambassador to Bern, Maistre was named the Sardinian ‘Correspondent’ in Lausanne, a position akin to that of a consul. The post provided a modest salary, but if Maistre had hoped for financial support for his activity as a pamphleteer, he was disappointed. However, even without support from either Vignet des Etoles or Turin, Maistre persisted in his efforts as a counter-revolutionary publicist. Between April and mid-August 1793, he wrote and published

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<sup>19</sup> Maistre, letter to Mallet du Pan, 28 February 1793. Cited in the edition of the latter’s works entitled *Mémoires et correspondance pour servir à l’histoire de la Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1851), i, 339.

<sup>20</sup> See François Descostes, *Joseph de Maistre pendant la Révolution* (Tours, 1895), pp. 282-283.

<sup>21</sup> *Les Carnets du comte Joseph de Maistre, publiés par le comte Xavier de Maistre. Livre journal. 1790-1817* (Lyons, 1923), p. 30.



four *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, anonymous pamphlets that clearly fit F.P. Lock's criteria for this literary genre. Each letter was a short piece of 'argumentative prose,' dealt with a 'topical issue,' was addressed to a 'fairly general audience,' and was 'persuasive in intent.' The letters were consciously crafted as counter-revolutionary propaganda, designed as Maistre himself put it in a preface that he added to a later combined edition of the *Lettres* and the earlier 'Adresse ... à la Convention Nationale,' 'to work on opinion,' and 'to undeceive peoples from the metaphysical theories' that had done them so much harm.<sup>22</sup>

The immediate purpose of the *Lettres* was to revive royalist sentiments in French-occupied Savoie and to help prepare the way for its reconquest by the monarchy and its Austrian ally. A second purpose, only slightly less obvious, was to persuade influential people in Turin of the necessity of remedying abuses and implementing reforms. In effect, Maistre was offering an analysis of the Revolution and a counter-revolutionary strategy based on that analysis.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, Maistre's rhetoric was an appeal to reason. He argued for the wisdom and moderation of the Sardinian monarchy's rule in Savoie in the decades before the Revolution. The peace, order, and happiness of life under the old regime were contrasted with the violence, disorder, and suffering brought by the French invasion and the imposition of revolutionary changes. Appeals to emotions and ethics, however, were not entirely neglected, since Maistre also included evocations of honour and sworn oaths to the old sovereign. With the authorial voice of a Savoyard royalist, 'the fraternal voice of a compatriot and a friend,' Maistre tells his countrymen that he is 'going to sound their hearts, and to look there in their deepest parts for the least atoms of pride,' and appeal to 'the enthusiasm of ancient fidelity.'<sup>24</sup> In these particular pamphlets the device of parallel history is used only sparingly, though there is a reference to Greek and Roman jurisprudence.<sup>25</sup> In the fourth letter in particular, which is devoted to a detailed defense of the laws and government of the King of Sardinia, Maistre tries to show that 'no state in the world presented more order, more wisdom, [and] more uniformity.'<sup>26</sup> Here Maistre stresses the

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<sup>22</sup> *OC*, vii, 39.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed examination of Maistre's goals and strategies in the *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, see Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 122-127.

<sup>24</sup> *OC*, vii, 128-9 & 156.

<sup>25</sup> *OC*, vii, 153.

<sup>26</sup> *OC*, vii, 160.

good credit and economy of the old government, and the mildness and fairness of its system of tax assessment and collection, using statistics to demonstrate its superiority to the systems in place under other European governments. If Maistre here neglects the device of arguing from legal precedent, so often used in eighteenth-century pamphlets, it is for the very good reason that part of his case for the excellence of the old Piedmontese monarchy was that ‘the first of modern sovereigns’ to do this, King Victor-Amédée II (1675-1730), had ‘collected all the laws of his predecessors, compared them, chose among them, put them in order, [...] and made an immortal effort to give his people a civil code under the name *Royal Constitutions*.’<sup>27</sup>

The *Lettres* failed to achieve either of Maistre’s desired goals. He lacked the means to ensure distribution of many copies in Savoie, and the attempted reconquest failed miserably. As for the second goal of promoting reform in the Sardinian government, even before the fourth letter had appeared, Maistre learned that the sale of the *Lettres* had been forbidden in Turin, ‘apparently as anti-royalist.’<sup>28</sup> As he ruefully remarked to his friend, Vignet des Etoles, ‘I have not enhanced my fortune by fabricating these Letters.’<sup>29</sup> Despite this contretemps, Vignet des Etoles wrote to the minister of foreign affairs in Turin recommending Maistre’s ‘capable pen.’<sup>30</sup> The response was a categorical refusal.<sup>31</sup> Though Maistre would continue to serve the monarchy in diplomatic and judicial posts for the rest of his life, his government would never see fit to engage or reward his talents as a publicist.

With the defeat of the Austro-Sardinian campaign, Maistre was at first too discouraged and disillusioned to try his hand again, but he was soon writing to Vignet des Etoles that ‘he had three fine and fruitful subjects in mind: sovereignty of the people, hereditary aristocracy, and

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<sup>27</sup> *OC*, vii, 207. Maistre’s father, François-Xavier Maistre, had in fact played an illustrious role in editing a revised 1770 version of the *Royal Constitutions*, first proclaimed in 1723. See Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Maistre, letter to Vignet des Etoles, 9 July 1793, cited in Jean-Louis Darcel, ‘Les années d’apprentissage d’un contre-révolutionnaire: Joseph de Maistre à Lausanne, 1793-1797,’ *Revue des études maistriennes*, 10 (1986-1987), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Maistre, letter to Vignet des Etoles, 16 July 1793, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J37.

<sup>30</sup> Vignet des Etoles, letter to Hauteville, 31 January 1794. Cited in Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva, 1968), p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre*, p. 73.

religion.’<sup>32</sup> A March 1794 diary entry reveals that he had sent a draft ‘5<sup>th</sup> Savoyard letter’ to the exiled French bishop of Sisteron, François de Bovet, then residing in Fribourg, for comment. As a consequence of Bovet’s criticisms Maistre abandoned the idea of a ‘5<sup>th</sup> letter.’ But the bishop’s passing comment ‘that it will appear extraordinary that in treating *ex professo* the question of sovereignty of the people, the author has said nothing of J.J. Rousseau,’<sup>33</sup> provoked Maistre to undertake a systematic study of Rousseau’s famous works, the *Discours sur ... l’inégalité parmi les hommes* and the *Contrat social*, with a view to refuting the Genevan’s ideas on the state of nature, the social contract, and popular sovereignty. The results of these studies were two manuscripts, probably written between mid-summer 1794 and late 1796, which would remain unpublished until long after Maistre’s death. We now know these two pieces as *De l’état de nature* and *De la souveraineté du peuple*.<sup>34</sup> Maistre himself referred to the pieces as ‘essays,’ and they read more like small treatises in political theory than pamphlets. Nevertheless, they display Maistre’s characteristic irony (usually at Rousseau’s expense) and include arguments drawn from the ‘parallel histories’ of Greek and Roman republics and the Ottoman Empire and supported by numerous citations from a host of classical authors.

Joseph de Maistre’s next published piece was a *Discours à Madame la Marquise de Costa* that appeared in both Turin and Lausanne in August 1794.<sup>35</sup> Written as a tribute to console his friends, Henry Costa and his wife, on the death of their young son Eugène as a result of wounds received fighting the French, the work probably should not be classified as a political pamphlet. Yet Costa himself commented that ‘Politics is too

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<sup>32</sup> Maistre, letter to Vignet des Etoles, 12 December 1793, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J37.

<sup>33</sup> Bovet, letter to Maistre, 13 April 1794. Cited in Jean-Louis Darcel ‘Maistre à Lausanne,’ 92.

<sup>34</sup> The two pieces were first published by Charles de Maistre in 1870 under different titles, the first as *Examen d’un écrit de J.-J. Rousseau sur l’inégalité des conditions parmi les hommes*, the second as *Etude sur la souveraineté*, in *Oeuvres inédites du Comte J. De Maistre* (Paris, 1870). It was Jean-Louis Darcel who established the correct titles (from Maistre’s manuscript) and published critical editions of the two pieces, the first in the *Revue des études maistriennes*, 2 (1976), the second in a separate volume (Paris, 1992). For English translations, see *Against Rousseau: ‘On the State of Nature’ and ‘On the Sovereignty of the People,’* ed. and tr. by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> *OC*, vii, 234-278.

much the base of his work.<sup>36</sup> And it was in this discourse that Maistre first worked out and enunciated what would be his distinctive ‘providential’ interpretation of the French Revolution,<sup>37</sup> an interpretation that would be central to his *Considérations sur la France*, which would appear in early 1797.

In the meantime, in the summer of 1795, Maistre produced a little piece that was very definitely a political pamphlet. According to his own manuscript note, the *Adresse du maire de Montagnole à ses concitoyens* was written at the request of Savoyard priests who were returning to Savoie and who asked him ‘for a pamphlet that could be distributed in profusion to satisfy and direct public spirit.’<sup>38</sup> Here Maistre indulged his considerable talent for irony and humour. Montagnole, as he explains in this same note, was a mountain village near Chambéry: ‘its wild site, the simplicity of its inhabitants, and its detestable wines’ had made its name ‘a kind of joke.’ The authorial persona is the mayor, Jean-Claude Têtu. According to Maistre, Têtu ‘caused much laughter’ with the ‘reasonable banter’ of the address that was credited to him. The pamphlet was designed to persuade voters, who were to be convoked in primary assemblies for the election of new representatives, not to support anyone who favoured the permanent incorporation of Savoie into the French Republic. According to Maistre (in the same manuscript note), the pamphlet had ‘an extraordinary vogue in Savoie and Switzerland,’ but nevertheless, with respect to its political purpose, ‘proved useless.’<sup>39</sup>

In characterizing Maistre’s *Considérations sur la France* as a ‘sublime pamphlet’ Sainte-Beuve was judging both its literary quality and its literary genre. The work’s literary qualities have often been analyzed and praised, but less attention has been paid to its status as a pamphlet.<sup>40</sup> In fact, however, it fits very nicely into F.P. Lock’s delineation of eighteenth-century pamphlets and employs their characteristic devices.

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<sup>36</sup> Undated letter, cited in Charles-Albert Costa de Beauregard, *Un homme d’autrefois* (Paris, 1910), p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> In fact stated most clearly in manuscript passages that Maistre chose not to include in the published version. See Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 133-137.

<sup>38</sup> *OC*, vii, 350.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel, in his Introduction to his critical edition of the *Considérations*, does characterize the work as a ‘counter-revolutionary pamphlet’ (Geneva, 1980), p. 17.

Published anonymously, Maistre's *Considérations* was, at almost 250 pages in length in its first edition, on the long side for a pamphlet, but still much shorter than Burke's *Reflections*. Without entering here into a comparison of the ideological positions of the two writers,<sup>41</sup> it is nevertheless worthwhile to note how these two works resembled each other as pamphlets. Like Burke's much longer work, Maistre's pamphlet dealt with the topical issue of France's Revolution, was addressed to a general audience (in Maistre's case to a French audience), was persuasive in intent, and was both a shrewd tract for the times and a work of enduring significance. As was often the case in the 'pamphlet wars' of the period, both works were at least in part responses to earlier pamphlets. As is well known, the immediate stimulus for Burke was a sermon of 4 November 1789 by Dr Richard Price, later published with the title *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*.<sup>42</sup> For Maistre, it was a pamphlet by Benjamin Constant entitled *De la force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s'y rallier*.<sup>43</sup>

As literary stylists who excelled in the use of irony, Burke and Maistre were equally ready to pour scorn on their opponents. While both authors could craft finely wrought rational appeals, in these two works they used emotional and ethical appeals primarily. In the *Considérations*, Maistre's emotional appeal was for the most part cast in the rhetoric of religion.<sup>44</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel rightly suggests that the most seductive aspect of the little work was its tone, that of 'a religious and mystical meditation on an event' – the French Revolution. Darcel continues: 'The sparkle of the visionary, a prophetic tone, and in its best pages, an apocalyptic lyricism linking up with the scriptural origins of Judeo-

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed comparison, see Richard Lebrun, 'Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke: A Comparison,' in *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought, and Influence* (Montreal & Kingston, 2001), pp. 153-172.

<sup>42</sup> According to J.C.D. Clark, this was a sensational document that provoked some twenty-one critical replies before Burke's. See Clark's Introduction to his critical edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Stanford, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> May 1796. The fourth chapter of Maistre's *Considérations* was a direct response to Constant, who had called on moderate monarchists to rally to the Republic on the grounds that it was the sole regime capable of assuring liberty in France. For details, see Darcel's Introduction to the *Considérations*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>44</sup> Maistre's intention had been to title the work 'Religious considerations on France,' but he bowed to Mallet du Pan's judgment that if the original title were allowed to stand 'no one would read you.' See Jean-Louis Darcel's Introduction to the *Considérations*, p. 19.

Christian civilization, this is what seemed new, what struck the first readers.<sup>45</sup> Maistre gave cosmic significance to the Revolution by proclaiming that never had the role of Providence in human affairs been more palpable, than in the otherwise inexplicable course of recent events. While he was not the first to advance a providential interpretation of the Revolution, Maistre presented his essentially religious view with distinctive sophistication, force, and clarity. Construing what was happening as both a divine punishment and as a providentially ordained means for the regeneration of France, Maistre was able to condemn the Revolution and the ideas it embodied, and, at the same time, treat it as a necessary prelude to the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. His reading of the European political situation offered a religious vision of redemption.

Maistre's *Considérations* also put a strong emphasis on an ethical appeal. In Maistre's reading, the French Revolution was 'radically bad.' It was, he asserts, 'the highest degree of corruption ever known, [...] pure impurity.'<sup>46</sup> The Revolution was 'an assault against sovereignty [...] one of the great crimes that can be committed.'<sup>47</sup> To bring it about, 'it was necessary to overthrow religion, outrage morality, violate every propriety, and commit every crime.'<sup>48</sup> It seems clear that Maistre had been genuinely scandalized by the violence and bloodshed of the Revolution, as well as by the loosening of sexual morality that appeared to be one of its consequences. By the time Maistre wrote and published his *Considérations*, many in France were growing disenchanted with the immediate past. By highlighting the goriest incidents of the Revolution and publicizing the most glaring weaknesses of the Directory, Maistre sought to exploit the regime's lagging support and influence public opinion towards the possibility and desirability of a Bourbon restoration.

Legal precedent also had a place in Maistre's *Considérations*, with a long chapter on 'the old French Constitution.' In 1795 the Bourbon claimant, the future Louis XVIII, had issued a document that became known as the 'Declaration of Verona.' Since this statement had appeared hopelessly reactionary to contemporary French republicans and even to

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<sup>45</sup> Darcel, Introduction, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Considérations sur la France*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes (Paris, 2007), p. 224. In English, *Considerations on France* (Cambridge, 1994), ed. and tr. by Richard A. Lebrun, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

most moderate royalists, Maistre had to try and put the ‘constitution’ of the old régime in the most favourable possible light. To document his version of the old monarchy, he cited at some length a work entitled *Développement des principes fondamentaux de la monarchie française*, produced in Koblenz in 1795 by a group of *émigré* magistrates of the old *parlements*. Maistre had been under the impression that the work had the pretender’s approval, but even when advised to the contrary, in a Postscript to later editions of his own work, he explained that he had had recourse to the magistrates’ book because he had been separated from his own books and had needed ‘a collection of this kind to collect my ideas.’<sup>49</sup> However he declined to retreat from his portrait of the old régime as a moderate ‘constitutional’ monarchy, saying that if the magistrates’ work contained errors that he had overlooked he disavowed them – but without admitting that this had been the case. Maistre, in effect, took his stand with the French magistrates as an apologist for limited monarchy and an opponent of royal absolutism.

Maistre’s *Considérations* also reflects the developing practice in later eighteenth-century pamphlets of using numerical and statistical arguments. In the third chapter, ‘On the Violent Destruction of the Human Species,’ he cites the statistical record since the decline of the Roman Republic on the number of deaths in both external and civil wars. In the fourth chapter, which asks ‘Can the French Republic Last?’, he uses the analogy of a ‘die thrown a billion times’ without ever turning up a 6 on one of its faces, to argue that if you run through history, where ‘you will see so-called *Fortune* tirelessly throwing the die for over four thousand years’ and find that ‘LARGE REPUBLIC’ has never been rolled, you must conclude that ‘that *number* is not on the die.’ And the seventh chapter, on ‘Evidence of the Incapacity of the Present French Government,’ cites the ‘prodigious number of laws’ passed by the three assemblies of the revolutionary period (some 15,479, as reported by a ‘foreign gazette’ in 1796) as evidence of the incapacity of those assemblies.<sup>50</sup>

Lastly, Maistre’s little work included a clever bit of ‘parallel history’ in the form of a pastiche of passages from David Hume’s *History of England*, sections that traced the conflict in seventeenth-century

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 213-215, 219, & 236. On the contribution of Maistre’s *Considérations* to the birth of moral statistics, see Carolina Armenteros, ‘From Human Nature to Normal Humanity: Joseph de Maistre, Rousseau, and the Origins of Moral Statistics,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 107-130.

England between the Parliament and the king, the king's trial and execution, the conflicts among various factions of republicans, the royalist plots, the maneuvers of Monck, and finally, the restoration of the monarchy. Maistre entitled this chapter: 'From a History of the French Revolution by David Hume.' The moral was clear: as in England, the republic would flounder and the monarchy be restored.

Since the Directory forbade its sale in France (where Maistre hoped it would influence the elections scheduled for March 1797), the immediate impact of his *Considérations* was largely limited to *émigré* circles. Here it won immediate popularity, and in addition to a second edition corrected by the author, there were also four pirated editions in the eight months following initial publication. Although published anonymously, as Maistre himself acknowledged, his distinctive literary style was almost impossible to mistake. His authorship was suspected, and then confirmed in October 1797 when a congratulatory letter to Maistre from the comte d'Avaray, his contact in the entourage of Louis XVIII, was intercepted by General Bonaparte's staff and published by the Directory. This disclosure cost Maistre an appointment to a post as a Councillor of State in Turin, because at this juncture King Charles-Emmanuel was an ally of the French Republic, and could not afford to offend his ally by favouring the author of a royalist pamphlet.

That Maistre would publish no more pamphlets, or anything else for that matter, until 1814, was largely due to circumstances. It was not that his pen was idle, for we now have a number of works, pamphlets among them, which accumulated in his portfolio over the years, some to be published only long after his death. Most of these can be dated with reasonable accuracy, but there is one piece, with the title 'Bienfaits de la Révolution française,'<sup>51</sup> about which we can say: only the 1790s. This catalogue of the 'benefits of the Revolution,' in fact an ironic catalogue of its crimes, stupidities, and failures, is largely a collection of excerpts from French newspapers published between 1791 and 1798. The little work was never completed, but it might well have been an effective counter-revolutionary pamphlet.

With his failure to obtain a post in Turin in October 1797, Maistre was unemployed for almost two years. When the French took over open control of Piedmont in December 1798, Maistre departed with his family for Venice, where he remained until August 1799. We have two

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<sup>51</sup> *OC*, vii, 385-500.



pieces that he wrote during these months in the Adriatic city, one of which was obviously intended as a political pamphlet. Entitled ‘Discours du Citoyen Cherchemot, Commissaire du pouvoir exécutif près l’Administration central du M..., le jour de la fête de la souveraineté du peuple,’ it was a burlesque on revolutionary cant. Having, as he explained in a note at the head of his manuscript, ‘made a great collection of revolutionary phrases,’ he put them together in ‘an imaginary speech pronounced by some *civic* celebrity.’<sup>52</sup> The result, he continued, ‘would have caused a lot of laughter if it had been printed very carefully, which would have been essential because of the numerous and faithful citations.’<sup>53</sup> The orator, Citizen Cherchemot, whose very name, of course, was a joke, and whose citations from various French politicians and newspapers Maistre carefully documented, naively displays the uncritical beliefs and absurdities of the whole revolutionary project. Perhaps it is as well that the pamphlet was never published; royalists may have laughed, but republicans would not have been amused, nor likely persuaded.

The second piece Maistre wrote in Venice is an interesting and unpublished manuscript he titled ‘Essai sur les planètes.’<sup>54</sup> The piece is not particularly well organized or developed, but it nevertheless reveals Maistre’s fascination with certain intellectual issues that would continue to intrigue him for the rest of his life. Though entitled an ‘essay on the planets,’ the focus was not astronomical, but philosophical and religious. Whether or not the author intended this piece for publication (perhaps as some sort of pamphlet), or for what purpose and what audience, this little manuscript essay certainly displays the imagination and speculative verve that would characterize his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.

### III

With Maistre’s appointment and service from 1800 to 1803 as Regent in Sardinia, a post that made him responsible for all judicial services on the island, and then his subsequent posting to St Petersburg in 1803 as the

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<sup>52</sup> *OC*, vii, 368.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> The manuscript may be found in one of Maistre’s notebooks, *Philosophie D*, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et sa famille*, 2J20, 653-72. An English translation may be found in the IntelLex database cited in note 10 above.

Sardinian ambassador to the court of the tsar, for many years Maistre had little time or opportunity to write except on official business. It was not until 1809 that his interest in internal political developments in Russia led him to write his *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines*. The stimulus this time was the ‘constitutional’ schemes of Michael Speransky, one of Tsar Alexander’s advisors on domestic matters. Speransky had conceived and promoted a number of projects designed to modernize the Russian government, projects that aimed to transform the existing autocratic oligarchical regime into something like the new Napoleonic structure in France. From Maistre’s perspective, these schemes appeared as foolish and revolutionary as the constitution-making of the French Revolution.

Completed in May 1809, the *Essai* was an eloquent amplification of the constitutional theses of the *Considérations sur la France*. Maistre himself nicely summarized the work in a letter to his king: ‘This past year I amused myself by writing a dissertation to establish that man cannot create what they call constitutional or fundamental laws, and that by the very fact that such laws are written they are worthless. I gathered together a host of philosophical, religious, and experimental or historical reasons.’<sup>55</sup> Maistre would not attempt to publish this little work until 1814, but he circulated it in manuscript to his circle of Russian friends, and was able to report to the king that it had ‘singularly impressed the small number of good minds that I have had judge it.’<sup>56</sup>

If *Considérations sur la France* may fairly be characterized as a political pamphlet, clearly the *Essai* can be as well. Less than half the length of the *Considérations*, the *Essai* is tightly focused on the topical issue of constitutions – in the first instance, in reaction to the unnamed Speransky’s ‘constitutional’ schemes, and in the second instance, when the work was published in 1814 in both St Petersburg (anonymously) and Paris (under his name), it was certainly read, to Maistre’s subsequent dismay, as a comment on the restored Louis XVIII’s acceptance of a constitution (the famous *Charte*).<sup>57</sup> In contrast to the *Considérations*,

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<sup>55</sup> Maistre, letter to Victor-Emmanuel I, [18 (6) January 1810], *OC*, xi, 386-387. In *OC*, this letter is dated December 1809, but the original in the archives in Turin gives the 1810 date.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> The 1814 Paris edition was arranged by Louis de Bonald, who may have misinterpreted Maistre’s intentions, and published it with his name and titles, to Maistre’s chagrin. See Maistre’s letter to the comte de Blacas of 23 August 1818,

where the rhetoric had been largely emotional and ethical, in the *Essai* the appeal was addressed primarily to reason. Maistre's case against man-made written constitutional or fundamental laws was argued on the grounds of history, which he called 'experimental politics.' His secondary thesis about the indispensable role of religion in the establishment of durable institutions is buttressed by arguments from what we would call the sociology of religion.<sup>58</sup> In support of these two theories, as well as a subsidiary theory about the origins and nature of language and names, Maistre cites a host of historical examples drawn from the Bible, Greek and Roman history, the Ottoman Empire, England, and the new American republic. The emotional appeal, this time to guilt, is not absent. It appears most clearly in the last paragraph, where Maistre concludes: 'Europe is guilty for having shut her eyes to these great truths, and she suffers on account of her guilt.'<sup>59</sup>

While the *Essai* of 1809 was written in reaction to proposed changes in Russia's 'constitution,' it represents only a tangential involvement in Russian politics. However, the next two years saw Maistre pen a number of writings that dealt specifically with Russian political questions and that were intended for Russian eyes. While it is true that some of Joseph de Maistre's major works, including *Du pape*, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, and his *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, were composed during his sojourn in St Petersburg (and published later), the 'Russian works' in question here differ from the others in that they were works written for the specific purpose of influencing Russian ministers of state and Tsar Alexander I himself. These works would only be published long after Maistre's death, and lack one of the characteristics of F.P. Lock's definition of a 'pamphlet' in that they were not 'addressed to a fairly general audience,' but it seems to me that they otherwise fit into that definition, being short pieces of argumentative prose, dealing with topical

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in Ernest Daudet, *Joseph de Maistre et Blacas, leur correspondance inédite et l'histoire de leur amitié (1804-1820)* (Paris, 1908), p. 350.

<sup>58</sup> When Maistre had first advanced this idea, in the *Considérations*, he had stated explicitly that his 'reflections were addressed to everyone, to the believer as well as to the sceptic. [...] Whether one laughs at religious ideas or venerates them does not matter; true or false, they nevertheless form the unique basis of all durable institutions.' See p. 227.

<sup>59</sup> *Essai sur le principe générateur*, paragraph LXVII, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 401.

issues, and being clearly persuasive in intent. They were, if one likes, pamphlets addressed to a very limited readership.<sup>60</sup>

The limited readership is directly related to the political situation in Russia at this juncture. In an autocracy without parties, ‘politics’ tended to be limited to little more than efforts to persuade the tsar to adopt or reject a particular policy. Maistre participated in this scene as an articulate personality and a persuasive writer able to offer a coherent theory of conservatism that made sense to highly placed persons who were opposed to change.<sup>61</sup> On his arrival in St Petersburg in 1803, Maistre was merely the representative of one of the least important European states, but by 1810-1811, when these ‘Russian works’ were written, he had become well known to both the tsar and some of his ministers. Using his social skills, his literary reputation (as the author of the *Considérations*), and his pen, Maistre worked hard to influence Russian foreign and domestic policies in ways that would favour Sardinia and the cause of counter-revolution generally.

In Russia from the time of Peter the Great there had been movements to modernize and Europeanize the country. With the accession of Alexander (who had been introduced to Enlightenment ideas by his Swiss tutor, Frédéric de la Harpe), the reform party had high hopes for fundamental changes in Russian political and social structures. Two areas of particular concern were the educational system and governmental structures (‘constitutional’ questions).

Although Maistre did not become involved in the issue until 1810, one of the first reforms of Alexander’s reign was a complete restructuring of Russia’s system of education, from the primary grades through to universities. The new system was to be modern and utilitarian, and was intended to train prospective state employees and provide a more

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<sup>60</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel has argued that in these works, as in many of his other works, Joseph de Maistre was writing as ‘mentor of the prince.’ His paper, ‘Joseph de Maistre, nouveau mentor du prince: le dévoilement des mystères de la science politique,’ given at a colloquium in Montpellier in December 1998, is available in English as ‘Joseph de Maistre: New Mentor of the Prince: Unveiling the Mysteries of Political Science,’ in *Joseph de Maistre’s Life, Thought, and Influence: Selected Studies*, ed. and tr. by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston, 2001), pp. 120-130.

<sup>61</sup> For more details on the story of Maistre’s involvement in Russian politics and the circumstances surrounding the composition of his ‘Russian works,’ see Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 197-210.

competent bureaucracy. Access would be based on merit, not birth. This feature evoked the hostility of many nobles who feared losing their practical monopoly on state service.

These reforms were making their way through the governmental machinery during Maistre's first years in Russia, but he did not pay much attention until the reforms began to impinge on ecclesiastical education in the years following 1809. The Russian Church and the Jesuits, who feared having their schools included in the new 'Enlightened' system, now joined the nobility in opposition. As a friend of the Jesuits and of many of the more conservative noble families in St Petersburg, and a known opponent of the Enlightenment, Maistre was a natural ally to the opponents of these educational reforms.<sup>62</sup>

Joseph de Maistre's first opportunity to intervene directly on the opposition side came in 1810 when the new minister of education, Count Alexis K. Razumovsky, solicited his advice on the curriculum proposed for the Tsarskoe Selo Lycée that Alexander was establishing for the education of his younger brothers. Maistre responded with the piece we know as *Cinq lettres sur l'éducation publique en Russie*.<sup>63</sup> The letters warned of the political and moral dangers of the wholesale introduction of science into the curriculum; offered a description of traditional 'classical education' and its emphasis on acquisition of Latin, which was contrasted with the proposed curriculum's emphasis on modern languages, the natural sciences, and modern philosophy; warned of the moral dangers of boarding schools not entrusted to celibate religious orders; and praised the Jesuits as educators, contrasting them with the perils of employing Protestant imports from western Europe. Razumovsky took Maistre's advice seriously and submitted a report to the tsar questioning the proposed curriculum. As a consequence the new curriculum that was approved for the Lycée was somewhat less ambitious. In effect, Maistre's first involvement in Russian educational matters was a qualified success. A few months later the same official asked Maistre's opinion on another educational prospectus. This one was not an official proposal, but the work of Ignatius Aurelius Fessler, an ambitious adventurer promoting his own candidacy for a chair at the Alexander Nevsky Seminary in St

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<sup>62</sup> See David W. Edwards, 'Count Joseph de Maistre and Russian Educational Policy, 1803-1828,' *Slavic Review*, 36 (1977), 54-75.

<sup>63</sup> *OC*, viii, 163-232.

Petersburg. Maistre's 'Observations' on this prospectus,<sup>64</sup> which reiterated and refocused some of the same arguments that he had raised in his earlier 'letters,' probably did not play any significant role in blocking Fessler's appointment, but on the other hand they seem not to have offended the minister.

When Maistre had recommended the Jesuits to Razumovsky in his letters on public education in July 1810, he had done so in rather general terms. In the fall of 1811, however, he had the opportunity to become more directly involved in their cause.

The presence of Jesuit educational institutions in Russia goes back to the First Partition of Poland in 1772, when a sizable Roman Catholic population and several Jesuits schools were incorporated into the Russian empire. When the papacy suppressed the Jesuits in 1773, Catherine II refused to allow publication of the papal brief in her dominions, and these Jesuit institutions, including their college at Polotsk, in what the new Russian administration called White Russia or Belorussia, survived. During the reign of Paul I, the Jesuits were allowed to extend their operations from this base to St Petersburg, where they were given a church and allowed to open a college. Despite some fears that Alexander's accession would threaten the favours they had enjoyed under his father, the Jesuits continued to flourish and even expanded their work, establishing missions in the German colonies on the Volga, in the Crimea, and in the Caucasus. They worried about the government's program of educational reform, but by astute maneuvering at court, and with the sympathy of conservative officials who approved their work, the Jesuits managed to keep their schools out of the reach of the new University of Vilna, which was supposed to supervise their work.

By the fall of 1811, changing circumstances led the Jesuits to try to secure more formal recognition of the autonomy of their educational establishments. Their new general sent letters to Count Razumovsky, the minister of education, and to Prince Alexander N. Golitsyn, the over-procurator of the Holy Synod, requesting that the school at Polotsk be raised to the status of an autonomous university and that it become the administrative centre of all Jesuit schools. It was in support of this campaign that Maistre wrote his *Mémoire sur la liberté de l'enseignement*

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<sup>64</sup> *Observations sur le Prospectus Disciplinarum ou Plan d'étude proposé pour le Séminaire de Newsky*, OC, viii, 233-265.

public,<sup>65</sup> which he presented to Golitsyn on 19 October. Golitsyn in turn, in his report to the Council of Ministers in November, recommended approval of the Jesuit request, using arguments from the Jesuit general's letter and Maistre's *mémoire*. The recommendation was approved by the Council and Razumovsky delegated to inform Tsar Alexander of the decision. Surprisingly, because Alexander had rejected similar requests in the past, he granted the Jesuit petition in January 1812, and the college at Polotsk was made an Academy, and awarded the privileges given to universities.

We know that Golitsyn had read Maistre's *mémoire* to Alexander a couple of days after the above-mentioned Council meeting; the tsar would seem to have been impressed by Maistre's arguments about the dangers of revolutionary ideas and his recommendation of the Jesuits as the defenders of traditional values. In his *mémoire*, Maistre had hinted that he had more to say on Russia's domestic situation, and Alexander asked Golitsyn to tell Maistre that he would be pleased to see what Maistre had to say. Maistre's response was the *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, which he completed on 28 December 1811.<sup>66</sup> In his chapter 'On Freedom' Maistre warned that in Russia, given the weakness of religion and the Orthodox clergy, an unprepared and sudden abolition of serfdom would lead to chaos. In the second chapter, 'On Science,' using the arguments he had developed in his 'letters' on public education, Maistre warned against any rush towards science as a threat to religion and to the health of Russia as a military state. The third chapter, which was 'On Religion,' summarized the theses of his earlier (unpublished) 'Réflexions sur le Protestantisme dans ses rapports avec la souveraineté,' warned about particular dangers that Protestantism posed for Russia, and pleaded for freedom for Catholics living under Russian rule (primarily in areas acquired by the partitions of Poland) on the grounds that the dogmas of Catholicism are politically conservative and thus restrain the people. The fourth chapter, 'On Illuminism,' was a short-course on varieties of illuminism, from simple Freemasonry, which Maistre pronounced 'in no way bad in itself,' to the deadly dangerous sect that had been exposed in Bavaria. Maistre warned particularly against the kind of illuminism that was an 'amalgamation of Calvinism and philosophism' by which Russia is 'most assailable and most attacked.' An appendix repeats what Maistre

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<sup>65</sup> *OC*, viii, 267-275. Note Maistre's characterization of this piece as a *mémoire*, one of the types of eighteenth-century pamphlets.

<sup>66</sup> *OC*, viii, 279-323.

judges the most damning citations that prove the ‘general spirit’ of ‘philosophico-Protestant doctrine’ and contains a reiteration of ten ‘conservative maxims’ for Russia.

The modern reader of these pamphlet-like ‘Russian works’ should keep Maistre’s immediate didactic purpose in mind. In all these pieces our author seems to have been simplifying and exaggerating his arguments to lend them maximum persuasive power. We know from Maistre’s other works and from his correspondence that his considered views on many of the issues touched on in these ‘pamphlets’ for the Russian court were really much more sophisticated than might appear at first glance from these documents.

## IV

In addition to these ‘Russian works’ there is a further category of Maistre’s writings that may be characterized as ‘pamphlets.’ These are pieces that I would categorize as ‘works of religious controversy.’ Although religious controversy is hardly foreign to any of Maistre’s writings, there are four rather disparate pieces that are distinctive in that the primary focus of all of them is the defense of Roman Catholicism against the perceived dangers of Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>67</sup> The dates of composition of these minor works span a considerable period, with the manuscript of the first dated 1798 and the last 1 May 1819,<sup>68</sup> and the dates of publication spanning an even longer period, from 1822 to 1870, all after Maistre’s death. Interestingly, except for one, these pieces are in the form of ‘letters,’ which was a format often used by

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<sup>67</sup> There are two other short pieces that might also be classified as works of ‘religious controversy,’ letters ‘à une dame protestante sur la maxime qu’un honnête homme ne change jamais de religion’ and ‘à une dame russe sur la nature et les effets du schisme et sur l’unité catholique’ (*OC*, viii, 129-57), but they should probably not be counted as pamphlets, except perhaps as pamphlets designed for a very limited readership. When they were first published, without his authorization in 1820, Maistre complained bitterly that they were ‘absolutely secret pieces touching on what are called *matters of conscience*.’ (Maistre, letter to his son comte Rodolphe de Maistre, undated, but 1820, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*).

<sup>68</sup> For details on the contexts in which these writings were composed, see Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, pp. 160, 217, 246 & 248.



contemporary pamphleteers. Examples by Edmund Burke come readily to mind: *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777), *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), and *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796).

Considering these works by date of composition, for Maistre's 'Réflexions sur le protestantisme dans ses rapports avec la souveraineté,'<sup>69</sup> the only one of these pieces not in a letter format, both the manuscript and printed versions carry the indication 'Turin 1798,' but in Maistre's manuscript, in a section omitted from the printed edition, there is a reference to 'this very year' as 1796. This little work, which remained unpublished until 1870, is an impassioned attack on Protestantism, characterized as the *sans-culottism* of religion, for having undermined the spiritual and political unity of Europe. The argument develops Maistre's contention that Christianity is the religion of Europe and that Protestantism was not only a religious heresy, 'but a civil heresy, because in freeing the people from the yoke of obedience and according them religious sovereignty, it unchained general pride against authority and put discussion in place of obedience.'<sup>70</sup> Authors and sources cited in the course of developing the argument include Edmund Burke, Montesquieu, Montaigne, Madame de Sévigné, Condorcet, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church, and various English newspapers. We do not know why Maistre decided not to publish the piece, but we can note that some of the arguments and citations deployed therein would find their way into some of his later works.

The second piece, the only one of these pamphlet-like works of religious controversy to be written during the author's sojourn in St Petersburg, is his *Lettres à un gentilhomme russe sur l'Inquisition espagnole*, which he wrote in 1815.<sup>71</sup> It is not known whether there really was a Russian gentleman to whom the letters were originally addressed or whether the epistolary form was adopted for stylistic reasons.<sup>72</sup> In 1816, Maistre tried to make arrangements through a French bookseller in St Petersburg to have the piece published anonymously in Paris, but when

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<sup>69</sup> With the title *Sur le protestantisme* in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, pp. 311-330.

<sup>70</sup> *OC*, viii, 66.

<sup>71</sup> *OC*, iii, 287-401.

<sup>72</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this work, its circumstances, and its argument, see Richard A. Lebrun, 'Joseph de Maistre et l'apologie de l'Inquisition espagnole,' in *Joseph de Maistre*, ed. by Philippe Barthelet (Lausanne, 2005), pp. 409-417.

delays ensued, he became fearful that it might be published under his name or in a drastically edited form, and requested an old acquaintance who happened to be in Paris to recover the manuscript and return it to him.<sup>73</sup> In the end, the piece was not published until 1822, the year after Maistre's death. The little work is characteristically Maistrian, offering a vigorous defense of an institution that had been soundly condemned in the eighteenth century by both Protestants and *philosophes*. Taking the position that the Spanish Inquisition had been grossly caricatured by these writers, Maistre sought to set the record straight. He argued that it had been a beneficent institution that had maintained national unity and preserved Spain from the horrors of religious upheavals, civil wars, and disasters such as the French Revolution. Maistre's appreciation of Spanish civilization appears to have been derived in part from the Spanish ambassador to St Petersburg, General Benito Pardo de Figueras, whom he admired as a Hellenist and art critic.<sup>74</sup>

As for the historical accuracy of Maistre's piece, judging by the best recent scholarship,<sup>75</sup> Maistre's portrait was closer to historical fact than the 'myth of the Spanish Inquisition' that was current in his lifetime, and to which he was responding. By the measure of recent studies, his interpretation requires revision, but it can still be characterized as an astute and well-written corrective to the anti-Spanish prejudices common north of the Pyrenees.

The last two of Maistre's pamphlet-like works of religious controversy were written after his return from St Petersburg to Turin. A 'Lettre à M. le Marquis sur la fête séculaire des protestants,' dated 14 January 1818, was written in support of a group called the Société des bons livres and published in one of their publications.<sup>76</sup> The piece is Maistre's commentary on a planned 'secular celebration' of Luther in the

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<sup>73</sup> Maistre to Carlo Emanuele Alfieri de Sostegno, letters of 11 November and 11 December 1816 and 4 February 1817. See Nada Narciso, 'Tra Russia e Piemonte (Lettere inedite de Guiseppe de Maistre a Carlo Emanuele Alfieri de Sostegno, 1816-1818),' in *Miscellanea Walter Maturi* (Turin, 1966), pp. 309-313.

<sup>74</sup> See Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva, 1968), pp. 281-282.

<sup>75</sup> See Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven & London, 1997).

<sup>76</sup> See *OC*, viii, 471-481. According to a note in this Vitte edition, this piece was first published in a collection called *Nouvelles anecdotes chrétiennes* (date and place of publication unknown). It was published again in *Lettres et opuscules inédits* (Paris) in 1851 before appearing in the Vitte edition.

context of a proposed union of ‘reformed’ (Calvinist) and ‘evangelical’ (Lutheran) churches in Germany. Rather than welcoming the planned union as a noteworthy ecumenical development, Maistre reads it as a desperate Protestant response to the ‘miraculous re-establishment’ of Pope Pius VII to the throne of St Peter with the collapse of the Napoleonic empire. That such a reconciliation between the two churches could be contemplated without negotiation over theological and liturgical differences between them Maistre took as proof that the Protestant churches no longer stood for any positive Christian dogma. Protestantism, he concluded, had become a ‘simple negation’ and had descended to ‘absolute indifferentism.’ His piece of anti-Protestant propaganda concluded that many Protestants were ready to throw themselves into the arms of Catholicism. The only thing lacking was the most ‘decisive of all arguments! – *The conformity of our conduct with our maxims.*’

The last of these four works of ‘religious controversy,’ dated 1 May 1819, we know as the ‘Lettre à M. le Marquis ... sur l’état du Christianisme en Europe.’<sup>77</sup> Despite the title, it is clear from the contents that it was written for Tsar Alexander’s benefit, and it appears likely that Maistre hoped to have it brought to the tsar’s attention through some intermediary.<sup>78</sup> In the piece Maistre tried to demonstrate how the tsar (perhaps inadvertently) had struck serious blows against Christianity by the protection he had accorded to Calvinism, by the support he had given to the Bible Society in Russia, by his actions against Catholicism and against the Jesuits, and by his willingness to support the dream of ‘universal Christianity’ (the kind of religiosity that appears to have inspired Alexander’s Holy Alliance of 1815). Maistre had, in fact, long entertained the hope that the tsar could be won to a more favourable policy towards Catholicism. This ‘pamphlet for one’ was his last attempt to persuade Alexander of the wisdom of this course.

This leaves for consideration the major works that Maistre composed in Russia: *Du pape* (published in 1819), *De l’église gallicane*

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<sup>77</sup> *OC*, viii, 485-519. Like the ‘Lettre à M. Le marquis sur la fête séculaire des protestants,’ this piece was first published in *Lettres et opuscules inédits* (Paris, 1851).

<sup>78</sup> See Camille Latreille, *Joseph de Maistre et la papauté* (Paris, 1906), pp. 289-290. Latreille discovered a copy of Maistre’s letter in the papers of the Abbé Vaurin with extracts and a note indicating that the whole had been transmitted to Alexander in 1820. Latreille thought it probable that Vaurin used as his intermediary a Russian-born Polish countess who sometimes resided in Geneva.

(published in 1821), *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (published a few months after Maistre's death in 1821), and *L'examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (not published until 1836). These works could not properly be classified as pamphlets. But leaving aside *Les soirées*, Maistre's almost unclassifiable literary masterpiece, the other three works, it may be argued, certainly display pamphlet-like qualities. All are long for pamphlets, but all are pieces of 'argumentative prose,' dealing with topical issues (*Du pape* with the character of the papacy, *De l'église gallicane* with church-state relations in France, and *L'examen de ... Bacon* with the role of science in Western civilization), and were clearly persuasive in intent. In all three, Maistre's rhetoric embodies emotional as well as rational arguments, and, in the first two in particular, Maistre makes ample use of the devices of 'parallel history' and legal precedent.

## V

It was the collapse of the Old Regime in France and the subsequent Revolution that led Joseph de Maistre, a hard-working magistrate in Savoie, a French-speaking duchy of the Kingdom of Sardinia, to abandon his native Chambéry and undertake a new role as a counter-revolutionary propagandist. From the first months of a long exile that took him to Lausanne, Turin, Venice, Cagliari, and, finally, St Petersburg, he wrote to express his deep-felt opposition to the French Revolution and eighteenth-century *philosophie*. From a hesitant beginning with pamphlets written to influence opinion in French-occupied Savoie and in Turin, by 1797 Maistre had developed a distinct authorial 'voice' that found a European audience with *Considérations sur la France*, one of the most famous and enduring pamphlets of the time. Although he published nothing more of consequence between 1797 and 1814, Maistre continued to write pamphlets and pamphlet-like pieces for the rest of his life. Even the major works composed in Russia, and eventually published between 1814 and 1836, betray Maistre's literary apprenticeship and long career in the 'pamphlet wars' of the period. I am arguing that our understanding and appreciation of these major works, as well as almost all his other writings, is enhanced by viewing them as the productions of an accomplished pamphleteer. This perspective also reminds readers that this author was never an academic, nor a professional philosopher, theologian, or political scientist, but rather someone who should be read and judged as an engaged public intellectual writing for the media of his time.

### 3 Joseph de Maistre, letter writer

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#### *Pierre Glaudes*

If the publication of Maistre's works, in France as in the Anglo-Saxon world, has experienced a notable resurgence over the last fifty years,<sup>1</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Discours à Mme la marquise Costa de Beauregard*, in *Joseph de Maistre*, ed. by Philippe Barthelet (Les dossiers H, Geneva, 2005), pp. 27-41; *Considérations sur la France*, critical edition established, introduced, and annotated by Jean-Louis Darcel, preface by Jean Boissel (Geneva, 1980); *Considerations on France*, tr. and ed. by Richard A. Lebrun, introduction by Isaiah Berlin (Cambridge, 1994); *Des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines [Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques]*, critical edition, introduction and notes by Robert Triomphe (Paris, 1959); *On God and Society. Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions and Other Human Institutions*, tr. by Elisha Greifer and Laurence M. Porter (Chicago, 1959); *Sur les délais de la Justice Divine* [with *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*], 2 vols. (Paris, 1980); *Du pape*, critical edition, introduction by Jacques Lovie and Joannès Chetail (Geneva, 1966); *The Pope Considered in His Relations with the Church, Temporal Sovereignties, Separated Churches, and the Cause of Civilization* (New York, 1975), facsimile reprint of the first edition, tr. by Aeneas McDonnell Dawson (London, 1850), introduction by Richard A. Lebrun; *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, ed. by Jean-Louis Darcel, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1993); *St Petersburg Dialogues*, translation and introduction by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston, 1993) [includes also a translation of the *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*]; *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition* (Delmar, NY, 1977), facsimile reprint of the first edition (London, 1830), translation, introduction and notes by Thomas J. O'Flaherty, with an introduction by Charles M. Lombard; *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon*, translation and introduction by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal, 1998); *Ecrits sur la Révolution*, texts chosen and introduced by Jean-Louis Darcel (Paris, 1989), [includes: *Quatrième lettre d'un royaliste savoisien à ses compatriotes*; *Trois fragments sur la France*; *Considérations sur la France*; *Réflexions sur le protestantisme dans ses rapports avec la souveraineté*]; *Reflections on Protestantism in its Relations to Sovereignty*, translation and introduction by Christopher Olaf Blum, preface by Philippe Bénétou in *Critics of the Enlightenment. Readings in the French Counter-revolutionary Tradition*, ed.

same cannot be said of his correspondence. To date, the Vitte & Perrussel edition of the *Œuvres complètes*<sup>2</sup> remains the standard edition in this field. However, not only is this edition incomplete, but it is also quite unreliable. The letters are frequently truncated and some are sometimes combined with others into a single letter, as was quite common in the nineteenth century. Perusing the manuscripts allows us to gauge to what extent these editorial lapses are damaging to our understanding of Maistre: the image that we have of him – whether as a diplomat, an advisor to princes or an individual – is thus distorted. The creation of a modern edition of this correspondence is currently one of the major projects in Maistrian studies, and one which all specialists are very much hoping for.

Already in the middle of the nineteenth century, the publication of the two volumes of *Lettres et opuscules inédits* by Vatou in 1851, then the *Mémoires politiques et correspondance diplomatique* by Albert Blanc at the Librairie nouvelle in 1858, had profoundly renewed understanding of the Savoyard philosopher. We can judge this by Sainte-Beuve's reaction in the articles he devoted to each of these editions.<sup>3</sup> He displayed a heightened interest in this correspondence, which to him seemed 'of the highest value.'<sup>4</sup> The one whom general opinion often considered to be the

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by Christopher Olaf Blum (Wilmington, DE, 2004), pp. 133-155; *Écrits maçonniques*, ed. by Jean Rebotton (Geneva, 1983); *De l'état de nature*, text established by the manuscript, introduced and annotated by Jean-Louis Darcel, in *Revue des études maistriennes*, 2 (1976), 1-170; *Contre Rousseau* [*De l'état de nature*], notes and afterword by Yannis Constantinidès (Paris, 2008); *Against Rousseau: 'On the State of Nature' and 'On the Sovereignty of the People,'* translation and introduction by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal and Kingston, 1996); *Cinquième lettre d'un royaliste savoisien à ses compatriotes*, in *Revue des études maistriennes*, 4 (1978), 64-89, text established from the manuscript with an introduction and annotations by Jean-Louis Darcel; *De la souveraineté du peuple* [*Essai sur la souveraineté*], text established, introduced and annotated by Jean-Louis Darcel (Paris, 1992); *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, text established, introduced and annotated by Pierre Glaudes (Paris, 2007), [includes: *Six paradoxes à Mme la marquise de Nav...*, *Considérations sur la France*, *Sur le protestantisme*, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*].

<sup>2</sup> [Facsimile reprint: Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1979]. Maistre's correspondence is found in volumes ix to xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Le constitutionnel*, 2 June 1851, reprinted in *Causeries du lundi* (Paris, n.d.), iv; *Le moniteur*, 3 December 1860, reprinted in *Causeries du lundi*, xv.

<sup>4</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 193.

cruel ‘executioner’s apologist,’<sup>5</sup> in effect appeared in a new light: ‘The superior man and, moreover, the excellent, sincere, friendly man [and] father figure, presents himself on each page in all his natural liveliness, in all his witty humor and, we might say, in all the joyfulness and warmth of his genius.’<sup>6</sup> For Sainte-Beuve, reading Maistre’s letters was a fortuitous discovery that delighted him, he states, because they showed the writer ‘in his lively and colloquial plenitude, in his daily spurts and flashes, outbursts and outpourings.’<sup>7</sup>

The impression is similar and the enthusiasm even more pronounced in the reviews that Barbey d’Aureville devoted to the same editions. The morsels of refinement and sensitivity contained in Maistre’s private correspondence, the critic insisted, revealed the ‘gentle heart’ of this man who until then had been considered an ‘idea killer.’<sup>8</sup> For most readers, they transformed the Savoyard thinker’s appearance – this lion, who when he loves, has ‘majesty as much as power.’<sup>9</sup> Regarding his diplomatic correspondence, Barbey stated, we see not only the intellectual superiority of the Sardinian ambassador to St Petersburg bursting forth, but we also find his ‘complete individuality,’ delivered ‘from head to toe,’ ‘going from genius to the most profound soul’ and ‘from the most profound soul to the most seductive wit.’<sup>10</sup>

To these testimonials, we might add the statements that Maistre himself made, which show us his taste for the epistolary genre. In his *Observations critiques sur une édition des Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*,<sup>11</sup> does he not assert that ‘few books are as worthy of a commentary as [these letters], and few commentaries are as useful to youth and as sure to please all kinds of readers?’<sup>12</sup> For him, nothing

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., iv, 192.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., iv, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xv, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Le pays*, 28 June 1859. Reprinted in ‘Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,’ Second series, Chapter III (‘J. de Maistre’), in *Œuvre critique*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes and Catherine Mayaux, 3 vols. (Paris, 2004-2007), iii, 76 & 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Le constitutionnel*, 4 July 1870. Reprinted in ‘J. de Maistre,’ in ‘Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,’ *Œuvre critique*, iii, 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Le pays*, 15 December 1860. Reprinted in *A côté de la grande histoire* (Paris, 1906), p. 223.

<sup>11</sup> *Lettres à sa fille et à ses amis*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1806), ed. by Philippe Antoine Grouvelle.

<sup>12</sup> Maistre, *Observations critiques sur une édition des Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*, OC, viii, 57.

compares to the charm of this correspondence that presents not only an intimate portrait of a famous woman, but also reveals the spirit of the age of Louis XIV. Even more so than Voltaire, Madame de Sévigné allows us to experience all the great events of this ‘memorable age:’ she brings the court of the Sun King and ‘the high society of the time’ alive for her readers; she presents a multitude of great men ‘in action;’<sup>13</sup> and she restores the splendor of the traditions of this age so rich in noble characters.

If letters (as Maistre asserts elsewhere) are ‘pure conversations’ – a kind of ‘tête-à-tête with a friend’<sup>14</sup> – they often benefit the reader by revealing what is hidden behind the public façade, since the author, in trust, gives his impressions without holding back. Also, they are indispensable for those who ‘find pleasure in hearing things called by their name.’<sup>15</sup> This tidbit, which we find in a note to the comte de Front, leads us to believe that Maistre himself was fully engaged in the art of letter writing. Thus, he recoiled at the thought that his letters might be ‘thrown into the street or lost in a cabaret.’<sup>16</sup> For readers like us, however, there are scarcely any documents more valuable than this correspondence. We find here, in a style less rigid than in his works, the entire philosophy of authority that made his reputation as a counter-revolutionary thinker. We encounter especially a person, enamored with history, whose sensitivity (little studied today) is still influenced by eighteenth-century social customs, and which already fits in with the new movement that brings together the generation of Senancour, Chateaubriand, and Madame de Staël.

## I

Maistre’s letters present us first and foremost with a man aware he was living in ‘one of the greatest eras of humankind.’<sup>17</sup> What a contrast there is between the young husband of 1786 who confides his happiness to his friend de Beauregard – ‘My occupation at all times will be to think of all

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to comte de Front, 18 (3) December, 1805, *OC*, ix, 513.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ix, 514.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 203.



the possible ways in which I can make myself pleasing and useful to my companion in order to always have before my eyes a being made happy by me. If there is anything that might resemble Heaven, this is it<sup>18</sup> – and the honourable Savoyard senator fleeing the French invasion in September 1792, his life upended from that day forward.

A gulf separates these two periods, demonstrating the extent of the revolutionary upheaval. In 1786, this man, lighthearted and used to the ways of high society, was still enjoying himself at the Savoyard nobility's balls and parties, like this 'English Day' that he describes to a friend:

First, tea, coffee, chocolate, butter, etc., parlour games and a concert. At 5 o'clock, dinner: 65 people at the table, 30 around, and at the table the first chapter of Genesis. All that crawls, all that swims, all that flies, all that sings, all that moos, all that bleats was there. I am sending you the menu for your amusement. A hundred people served on silver-plated dishes (even the plates), and the silver-gilt dessert plates, knives, forks and spoons (honestly). Then, the ball, all the sweets imaginable and *fruit cocktails*.<sup>19</sup>

It was still the same man who, in September 1793, steeled himself against crushing worries and, downplaying his troubles to Madame Costa de Beauregard, confided to her that he still had enough to live on for fifteen days, without it being too bothersome. The animals that his letter evokes were no longer the pleasant species that populate the Garden of Eden: they were the beasts thrown into the Roman arena, the world now resembling an amphitheater in which 'the martyrs sentenced to death *by animals*'<sup>20</sup> were the nobility.

Shaken by the revolutionary upheaval, Maistre nevertheless did not waver under the effects of the powerful energy released by this terrible explosion. As soon as the stupor waned, this 'deeply religious intelligence'<sup>21</sup> attempted to maintain the confidence of a Christian who cheers himself up in order to evade the temptation of discouragement, even when confronted with such events and his own setbacks. In his personal correspondence, a healthy distance allowed him to mix the informal and formal with the tactfulness of a gentleman who guards against the use of vulgar expressions. Thus, during the first winter of his

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<sup>18</sup> Letter to comte Henri Costa de Beauregard, 8 September 1786, *OC*, ix, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Monsieur \*\*\*, 20 February 1786, *OC*, ix, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to comtesse Henri Costa de Beauregard, 8 September 1793, *OC*, ix, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 196.

exile in Lausanne, he noted that the cold had ‘piled six more feet onto the *little barriers* that [separated] [him] from [his] friends.’<sup>22</sup> ‘Here the opening of the ball is postponed,’ he joked, ‘but the violins are ready and all the bows in the air: we are waiting for Pitt to strike the first beat of the overture.’<sup>23</sup> Most likely he had already sensed that the exiles’ wait would be longer than he had predicted. However, silencing his concerns, he preferred to adopt this maxim: ‘*Whatever is, is right.*’<sup>24</sup>

A kind of historical fatalism, which Maistre identified with wisdom, helped him to ‘do that which is good, just and noble, without worrying about the future.’<sup>25</sup> This attitude full of dignity surely displayed ‘the confidence that the man of honour must have in his conscience and Providence.’<sup>26</sup> However, such a moral imperative of acquiescence to divine will often clashed with the mystery that surrounded God’s plans ‘in the era of Revolutions.’<sup>27</sup> Christian hope thus struggled to harmonize with somber thoughts. In spite of the surprises and disappointments, Maistre scrutinized history day after day in an attempt to decipher its Providential meaning: ‘When God wants to show that a work is entirely from his own hand,’ he recalled by quoting Bossuet,<sup>28</sup> ‘he reduces everything to impotence and hopelessness, then he acts.’<sup>29</sup> Thinking about world affairs, this idea persuaded him that when everything seems hopeless, one must submit to God without despairing.

‘Nothing happens by accident, my dear friend,’ he wrote to Vignet des Étoles: ‘Everything has its rule, and everything is determined by a power that rarely reveals its secret to us.’<sup>30</sup> This historicism that sought God in the chaos of events, of which Leopold von Ranke would

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to comtesse Henri Costa de Beauregard, 29 April 1793, *OC*, ix, 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* The quote in italics, in English in the original, is from Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to comte d’Avaray, 30 July 1807, *OC*, x, 448.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Yves Pranchère, ‘Fatalisme,’ in *Dictionnaire Joseph de Maistre*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 1176.

<sup>27</sup> Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, Chapter 1, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, p. 200.

<sup>28</sup> Bossuet, *Panegyrique de saint André apôtre*, premier point.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to comte d’Avaray, 12 (24) July 1807, *OC*, x, 439.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Étoles, 28 October 1794, *OC*, ix, 78.

provide another illustration in the 1820s,<sup>31</sup> was founded for Maistre upon the certainty that the meaning of any event can be reversed, an attitude that allowed him to make the best of the most disastrous developments, even when they began to pile up. He believed in divine intervention, as Sainte-Beuve remarks, even ‘within and *through* the disasters that [divine intervention] itself unleashes.’<sup>32</sup> This was particularly the case over the course of the summer of 1794:

The wonderful successes of the French, the overall trend in Europe toward mixed government, the mistakes of the monarchy at a time when it should have employed all of its means, the incompetence or the corruption of leaders, even on our side, are circumstances organized in such an extraordinary way that I see it as a judgment of Providence.<sup>33</sup>

Maistre’s faith, which often led him to speculate about the future, did not necessarily make him a dreamer ‘outside the movement of History,’ who had wandered off into the ‘darkness of abstraction.’<sup>34</sup> The Savoyard thinker, as his correspondence demonstrates, was above all a ‘man of fact and experience,’<sup>35</sup> who kept his feet firmly planted even when he raised politics to ‘its broadest generality.’<sup>36</sup> From the same ‘intellectual family’ as Machiavelli, according to Barbey, ‘he [was] a Machiavelli without atheism, without a republic and without the Borgia.’<sup>37</sup> Thus, Maistre, wary of Austrian power, disagreed with Vignet des Étoles by stating, contrary to the latter’s opinion, that ‘the greatest misfortune that could befall Europe’ was if France ‘were to lose its influence’<sup>38</sup> or be brought to its demise. Even if it meant shocking the Sardinian king’s ambassador to Bern even more, he [Maistre] also confided to him his doubts concerning the future of Savoie within the Sardinian kingdom:

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<sup>31</sup> For Ranke, there exists a direct relation between God and the history of humanity, which according to him can only be a chaotic consequence of events without links between them.

<sup>32</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 197.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Etoles, 22 August 1794, *OC*, ix, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Barbey d’Aureville, ‘J. de Maistre,’ in ‘Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,’ *Œuvre critique*, iii, 81.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 80.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Etoles, 28 October 1794, *OC*, ix, 79.

I cannot help but believe that Piedmont will be revolutionized, and that we will reconstitute ourselves together, or that Savoie will no longer return to its former domination. This idea is not the result of any political calculation, and yet I cannot rid myself of it. It seems to me that a revolutionized Savoie, united to a non-revolutionized Piedmont, would create a discordance.<sup>39</sup>

We see that Maistre, not satisfied with having grasped very early the immense reach of this revolutionary event, understood that it was futile to believe in the ‘total restoration of old ideas,’ having keenly observed that ‘every great revolution always acts more or less upon those who fight it.’<sup>40</sup> Did he not already dare to state in 1794, perspicaciously, that ‘absolute monarchy’ is over and done with, and that the monarchs who were worried about preserving their power would do well to ‘limit through legal means the violations [of this power]’<sup>41</sup> from now on? ‘To my mind,’ he explained to Vignet des Etoles, ‘the plan to put Lake Geneva in a bottle is not as crazy as the one to restore things to exactly as they were before the Revolution.’<sup>42</sup>

His correspondence demonstrates quite well how he strove, day after day, to adapt his thinking to new realities, ceaselessly enriching it according to events. The dazzling rise and impudent successes of Napoleon, this ‘new Attila,’<sup>43</sup> fascinated him. The horror that the emperor’s usurpation aroused in him did not entirely preclude a kind of admiration for this personage of such lofty stature. Hostile to all ‘batonocracy,’<sup>44</sup> he was most certainly horrified by the militarization of civilian life under the Empire and by the excessiveness of the Napoleonic wars, with the change in the scale of violence that endangered the very existence of peoples and their dignity.

After Austerlitz, the ‘*bloodiest [battle] ever recorded in modern history*,’<sup>45</sup> he summarized in ‘two words’ his feelings concerning the ‘rivers of blood’ and the ‘piles of bodies:’ ‘Horror and indignation.’<sup>46</sup> The carnage at Eylau horrified him just as much: ‘Now that the thaw is here,

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<sup>39</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Etoles, 15 August 1794, *OC*, ix, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 18 (30) April 1804, *OC*, ix, 164.

<sup>41</sup> Lettre to baron Vignet des Etoles, 22 August 1794, *OC*, ix, 74.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Etoles, 9 October 1793, *OC*, ix, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to comte de Front, 28 December 1805 (10 January 1806), *OC*, x, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Etoles, 9 October 1793, *OC*, ix, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Letter to King Victor-Emmanuel I, 19 (31) January 1806, *OC*, x, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to comte de Front, 24 December 1805, *OC*, ix, 503.

the bodies rot and come out of the ground. Imagine [...] having to dig them out in this condition in order to bury them again. What a task! We fear the plague. Here are the *rights of man*, laid out so well by the Paris solicitors in 1790 [...].<sup>47</sup> Eventually recalling the ‘slaughterhouse’ of Moskowa/Borodino, where ‘the same battery was seized over and over again up to five times,’<sup>48</sup> he was content to repeat these words from a petty officer: ‘*Those who saw this battle have an idea of Hell.*’<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, Napoleon’s military victories amazed him so much that he began to suspect in their insolent repetition a work of Heaven, beyond our understanding: ‘The divine hand is so deeply imprinted on these events that [...] I hardly dare to rationalize it,’<sup>50</sup> he wrote after Austerlitz. The very same day, he shared his astonishment with the chevalier de Rossi: ‘It is a phenomenon, Monsieur le Chevalier, it is magic, it is a miracle. It is something with no name, and the more we think about it the less we understand it.’<sup>51</sup> Sublime – such was Napoleon’s role in history according to Maistre.

Whence the astonishment that again took hold of him, in October 1812, with respect to the tremendous threats during the Russian campaign: ‘Over the course of twenty years,’ he stated, ‘I have attended the funerals of several rulers; nothing has shocked me as much as what I am seeing at this moment, for I have never seen anything so great tremble.’<sup>52</sup> Napoleon was enigmatic: which is precisely why this ‘miraculous man’<sup>53</sup> who appeared to control thunderbolts could only be a fierce instrument in the hands of God. In April 1810, Maistre made this startling confession to the chevalier de Rossi:

Things have come to the point where it would be dangerous to stop this man; as for me, Monsieur le Chevalier, if I were able to kill him through a single act of my will, I would certainly refrain from doing so. I would be afraid of mingling my human ignorance with plans that are too great to allow the son of a man and a woman to involve himself.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 9 (21) March 1807, *OC*, x, 325.

<sup>48</sup> Letter to comte de Front, 2 (14) September 1812, *OC*, xii, 217-218.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, xii, 219.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to King Victor-Emmanuel I, 19 (31) January 1806, *OC*, x, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 19 (31) January 1806, *OC*, x, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 1 (13) October 1812, *OC*, xii, 240.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 10 April (2 May) 1810, *OC*, xi, 447.

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

This incomprehensibility of history, which stretches the perception of time, weighs it down to the point of sometimes making the length of time unbearable for the spectator condemned to wait, powerless. ‘As the days pass, my worries and fears increase,’<sup>55</sup> Maistre confessed in March 1810. It thus happens that his letters let brief outbursts of exasperation escape in the face of the slowness of events. ‘The minutes of Empires are the years of man. When I think that posterity will perhaps say: *This hurricane will last only thirty years*, I cannot help but shudder,’<sup>56</sup> he wrote to the chevalier de Rossi in April 1806. Maistre, as Sainte-Beuve so rightly pointed out, ‘is full of happy images to describe this horrible slowness which, without foiling his profound hope, manages to postpone the end until a time that he will not see.’<sup>57</sup> Such was the case when he compared his impatience about ‘the final event that depends on Providence’<sup>58</sup> to the suffering of a woman in labour for whom birth is indefinitely deferred: ‘The state in which I live here, waiting for news, could be called *labour*, like the pains of a woman. What will we see appear?’<sup>59</sup>

Maistre, at the same time, could not help but think ahead toward this highly anticipated event and project himself into the future. If his correspondence allows us to follow, in their most subtle variations, ‘his everyday impressions of the terrible game being played before his eyes,’<sup>60</sup> his letters also reveal the Christian convinced of the real presence of God in history, who has the genius of ‘a distant glance.’<sup>61</sup> This faculty allowed him to predict ‘decisive moments,’<sup>62</sup> not without some success, which for a long time would assure his reputation. However, when history finally seemed to prove him right at the time of the fall of Napoleon, it was his insightfulness that dampened his enthusiasm. Thus, he wasted no time in realizing that the restored monarchy was bound to fail due to the disastrous conditions involved in its establishment. Maistre saw in it the indelible stamp that the Revolution left on the minds of those who came to power after having fought it:

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<sup>55</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 13 (25) March 1810, *OC*, xi, 423.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 14 (26) April 1806, *OC*, x, 106.

<sup>57</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 203.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 21 October 1809, *OC*, xi, 325.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, xv, 72.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, 211.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

[...] nations die like individuals – he wrote to the marquis de Clermont Mont-Saint-Jean – and [...] there is no evidence that ours is not dead; but [...] if *palingenesis* is possible (which I still believe and hope for) [...] where are the components of this Counter-revolution? Bonaparte is on Saint Helena; it is a pity that his doctrine remains in all the councils. In any case, do not think for a minute [...] that the traditional order could have breathed for fifteen years in such a poisonous atmosphere without having been in the slightest bit inconvenienced.<sup>63</sup>

Severe toward Louis XVIII, despite his deference to royal majesty, Maistre attacked ‘this tattered old Charter’<sup>64</sup> and hardly hid his skepticism concerning its chances for success. Vehement and sarcastic, a May 1819 letter addressed to Bonald confirmed his doubts with respect to the durability of this written constitution whose legitimacy he rejected: ‘You have never told me, Monsieur le Vicomte, if you believe in the Charter; as for me, I do not believe in it anymore than I do in a hippogrif or a remora fish. Not only will it not last, but it will never exist because it is not true that it exists. In the first place, God has nothing to do with it; that is its great curse.’<sup>65</sup>

His opinion about the Holy Alliance was hardly more favorable. In October 1815, he pointed out to the comte de Vallaise that the Convention that united the Austrian, Russian and Prussian monarchs who represented the ‘three great Christian families,’<sup>66</sup> contained no practical provision that ‘comes to the aid of religion.’<sup>67</sup> He mocked the purely ‘declamatory’<sup>68</sup> nature of this text, with its ‘expressions borrowed from the Creeds, the Liturgy, and even the Mystics and crammed into a diplomacy [that] will not fail to make all of *religious* Europe burst into laughter.’<sup>69</sup> We are a long way away, according to him, from the ‘great religious revolution’<sup>70</sup> he was hoping for: ‘When I think of what we did

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<sup>63</sup> Letter to marquis de Clermont Mont-Saint-Jean, September 1815, *OC*, xiii, 156.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to comte de Vallaise, 20 September (2 October) 1816, *OC*, xiii, 434.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to vicomte de Bonald, 29 May 1819, *OC*, xiv, 168.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to comte de Vallaise, October 1815, *OC*, xiii, 162.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 163

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

and what we could have done,' he confides to Vallaise, 'I feel like crying like a woman.'<sup>71</sup>

Having once envisaged a possible banishment of the Bourbons by Providence, Maistre spent his final years disappointed, bruised, and 'discouraged by the Monarchy.'<sup>72</sup> 'I have been asked for a preface for a second edition of *Considérations sur la France*,' he wrote to Marcellus on 9 August, 1819, 'but until now I had not found the time: I am overburdened, sick of life [...] and my mindset suffers for it: from small-scale, it has become nothing, *hic jacet*; but I am dying with Europe, and I am in good company.'<sup>73</sup> To the end, however, Maistre will keep 'his profound faith in a higher unity'<sup>74</sup> called forth to revive itself from the 'revelation of truth in the minds of the masses.'<sup>75</sup>

Thus, his correspondence reveals a witness to history less firmly anchored to certainties than we might have thought. Aware of the irreversibility of history and, at the same time, unable to mourn the past, Maistre is, despite himself, a modern by the problematic relationship that he establishes with time: in the final years of his life, he is torn between an eschatological foreboding, which leads him to consider the present in terms of a future utopia,<sup>76</sup> and an ironic withdrawal, from which a bitter disillusionment breaks through.<sup>77</sup> It is in this way that he struck a singular

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<sup>71</sup> Letter to comte de Vallaise, 14 (26) September, *OC*, xiii, 159.

<sup>72</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Les historiens politiques et littéraires,' Chapter XXI ('Le docteur Revelière'), *Œuvre critique*, iii, 533.

<sup>73</sup> Letter to Marcellus, 9 August 1819, *OC*, xiv, 183.

<sup>74</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'J. de Maistre,' in 'Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,' *Œuvre critique*, iii, 70.

<sup>75</sup> 'Extrait d'une conversation entre J. de Maistre et M. Ch. de Lavau,' *OC*, xiv, 286.

<sup>76</sup> According to François Hartog, modern times are characterized by a conception of time as an overture to the future and as a period of waiting for a progress called to overturn the present. See *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expérience du temps* (Paris, 2003).

<sup>77</sup> For Hans Robert Jauss, the modern conscience is characterized by 'this attitude that consists in seeking in the distant past the truth of an abolished nature and in the proximity of nature the absence of the All': essentially in mourning, this conscience does not define itself in 'opposition to ancient times,' but by its 'disagreement with the present time.' See 'La "modernité" dans la tradition littéraire et la conscience d'aujourd'hui,' [1974], in *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, French translation by Claude Maillard (Paris, 1978), pp. 193-194.



note in the movement for the renovation of the philosophy of history that was being accomplished at this time, especially in Hegel's Germany.

## II

A subject of the king of Sardinia, Maistre never stopped serving the interests of the House of Savoy. When the revolutionary armies entered his country on 22 September 1792, out of loyalty to Victor-Amédée III he was the only senator to leave Chambéry with his wife and children. However, during a period in which the Turin government, as a rule, eyed the duchy's intellectual elites with suspicion, he was no less suspected of being sympathetic to the Revolution. Lovera di Maria, the new president of the Savoie Senate, who hunted down legislators susceptible to new ideas, criticized Maistre for his philosophical readings and Masonic acquaintances. In spite of his devotion to the Sardinian regime, such suspicions never ceased to harm his career.

From the beginning of his exile in Lausanne, he worked as a consular agent and conscientiously performed his duty of intelligence missions. His relationship with Vignet des Etoles was nevertheless stormy. The latter was incapable of agreeing with the audacious political conjectures of his compatriot, whose 'love for France'<sup>78</sup> and the idea that he formed about the fate of this country's mission *sub specie aeternitatis* made him even more suspect. The Sardinian king's ambassador criticized his subordinate for being too French in terms of his tastes, his opinions, and especially his dazzling blinding wit. 'How should one respond to the general accusation of *being witty*,' Maistre protests. 'There is neither in Carolina nor in the laws of the Pays de Vaud any penalty whatsoever for such an infraction.'<sup>79</sup>

Nothing could be done about it: the one whom his transalpine enemies nicknamed *Il francese* was constantly under suspicion. It was always the same refrain: such and such a man does not love Piedmont enough. Maistre, it is true, did not mince words with respect to Turin when he became exasperated by criticisms that he judged to be unfounded. Such was the case with the accusations that touched upon his Masonic activities. Writing to Vignet des Etoles, Maistre protested:

The one thing that makes me angry is to see you talking seriously

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<sup>78</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Étoles, 26 August 1794, *OC*, ix, 76.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Étoles, 23 October 1794, *OC*, ix, 85.

about this nonsense of Freemasonry. [...] I am not surprised that in a country whose capital vice is to attach extreme importance to nothings, they have talked and talked too much about this trifle; but I am astonished that you have not sensed straight away that this was only a pretext for making sport of my hopes for a position.<sup>80</sup>

The tone of superiority that Maistre adopted was exactly what got him detested in the Piedmont capital, where envious courtiers turned against him. The loftiness that ended up getting him noticed by Louis XVIII or Alexander rendered him odious to the king of Sardinia's entourage. Sent to Cagliari in October 1799 to reorganize the judicial system, he had to put up with his work being 'noticeably hindered'<sup>81</sup> by the Viceroy Charles-Félix, with whom he made the mistake of disagreeing while carrying out his duty. His equanimity of temperament, which he compared amusingly to 'these subterranean caves that always maintain the same temperature,' helped him to 'smooth over the rough patches'<sup>82</sup> of this embarrassing situation. However, in private, he complained about the thanklessness of his mission: 'I will not even bother to tell you about Sardinia,' he wrote to Count Napione. 'It would be an epic. Suffice it to say that if we are not dead, we are certainly at least in the death throes.'<sup>83</sup>

After three years spent in this mess, he would maintain a loathsome opinion of the Sardinians. In May 1805, he again described them in quite harsh terms to the chevalier de Rossi, foreshadowing his portrait of the savage in the second dialogue of *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Letter to baron Vignet des Étoles, 9 October 1793, *OC*, ix, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Letter to Count Napione Coconato, 20 January 1802, *OC*, ix, 104. Charles-Félix was a younger brother of the kings Charles-Emmanuel IV and Victor-Emmanuel I.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 103-104.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 103.

<sup>84</sup> '[...] it must be noted that there is the same difference between a *crippled* man and a *sick* man as there is between a *vicious* man and a *guilty* man. Acute illness is not transmissible, but that which vitiates the humours becomes an *original illness* capable of tainting a whole race. It is the same with moral illnesses. Some belong to the ordinary state of human imperfection, but there are certain transgressions or certain consequences of transgressions that can degrade man absolutely. These are *original sins* of the second order, but which evoke the first for us, however imperfectly. From this origin come savages, about whom so many extravagant things have been said, and who served as the eternal text for J.-J. Rousseau, one of the most dangerous sophists of our century [...] He constantly mistook the savage for the primitive man, although the savage is and can only be the descendant of a man detached from the great tree of civilization by some transgression, but of a

Written with an unrelenting hand, this vengeful letter carries the mark of ‘this golden nail,’ as Barbey so wonderfully states, ‘when it is not made of diamond,’ that Maistre ‘drives so well with his spiritual hand, in between the smooth and square blocks of his solid Roman style.’<sup>85</sup>

No human race is more foreign to all the sentiments, all the tastes, and all the talents that honour humanity. They are cowards without obedience, and rebels without courage. They have studies without knowledge, a jurisprudence without justice, and worship without religion. *Our arts and our laws of beauty offend them.*<sup>86</sup> The Sardinian is more savage than the savage, for the savage does not know the light, and the Sardinian hates it. He is deprived of man’s most beautiful attribute, perfectibility. With them, each profession does today what it did yesterday, as the swallow builds its nest, and the beaver its den. The Sardinian looks stupidly at a suction pump (I have seen it) and goes to empty a basin by force of arms and handle-fitted pails. [...] The scythe, the harrow, and the rake are as unknown to him as Herschel’s telescope. He is as ignorant of hay (which he should nevertheless eat) as he is ignorant of Newton’s discoveries.<sup>87</sup>

Such pages confirm Barbey’s remark that Maistre, strictly speaking, never became irate in his letters, being ‘too patrician to give this advantage to his adversaries’:<sup>88</sup> he employs a kind of disdain which is ‘the gentleman’s only anger,’ but then gives it ‘focused and somber forms’ far more terrible ‘in their concentration and sobriety,’<sup>89</sup> than the noisy violence of anger.

In October 1802, after his setbacks in Sardinia, Maistre was named ambassador to St Petersburg. After having taken up his position, he became in a few months, and despite the lack of material support provided by his ruler, acquainted with the St Petersburg aristocracy, which welcomed him into their palaces with open arms. In June 1803, he was

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genre that can no longer be repeated, as far as we can judge, for I doubt new savages will be formed.’ *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Second dialogue, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 485.

<sup>85</sup> Barbey d’Aureville, ‘Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux’, First series, Chapter III (‘Donoso Cortès’), *Œuvre critique*, i, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Voltaire, *L’orphelin de la Chine*, Act I, Scene 3.

<sup>87</sup> Lettre to chevalier de Rossi, 29 May (10 June), *OC*, ix, 410-411.

<sup>88</sup> Barbey d’Aureville, ‘J. de Maistre,’ in ‘Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,’ *Œuvre critique*, iii, 71.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

introduced to Alexander I. He learned that the emperor had been reading his diplomatic correspondence with the Sardinian government. He immediately used this valuable information to manipulate the Russian ruler, even as his own government continued to criticize him for the unnecessary length of his despatches. He did not seem to care in the least: the loyal subject was not a servile courtier. He knew that his pen and his conversation would allow him to attain a distinguished position within the heated political game being carried out in St Petersburg by the European powers.

Events proved him right, counter to the pettiness and stupidity of the Cagliari court: his influence was soon out of proportion with the actual stature of the government he represented.<sup>90</sup> However, no one in Cagliari was grateful for this. In June 1807, the treaty of Tilsit, which ended the war of the fourth coalition, placed him in a difficult position since it sanctioned a reversal of alliances by allying Napoleon with Alexander. In St Petersburg, the situation of the Sardinian ambassador was becoming more and more awkward. A daring diplomatic enterprise – the unsuccessful attempt, by his own initiative, to plead his king’s case to Napoleon – got him reprimanded by his government, which deprived him of intelligence: ‘Why are you not keeping me informed about what is going on?’<sup>91</sup> he complained to the chevalier de Rossi; leaving Maistre, without concern for his dignity, struggling with petty administrative issues.

We find in Maistre’s correspondence at this time signs of impatience. Infuriated about not receiving any ‘outward sign of trust’<sup>92</sup> from the Sardinian government, he made it no secret that an inconsistent policy had placed him in a ridiculous situation: ‘The system of suspicion, fear, humiliation, and even proscription directed toward me is not consistent with a position as illustrious as the one in which I have been placed.’<sup>93</sup> Even though he continued to be held in disfavor in Cagliari, he counted off, like so many war wounds, the numerous sacrifices that his poorly rewarded loyalty had imposed upon him:

A man without bread and without hope, a father without a country  
and without property, a spouse without a wife, a representative

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<sup>90</sup> The court had moved to Cagliari in Sardinia in 1798 because of the French occupation of Piedmont and did not return to Turin until 1814.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 10 January 1808, *OC*, xi, 8.

<sup>92</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 28 May (3 June) 1808, *OC*, xi, 126.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

without means, a minister without duties, a gentleman without a title, an employee without a rank, etc. [...] I am no more than a postbox and I no longer feel anything.<sup>94</sup>

Viewed with suspicion by his supervising minister, as well as being stationed in a country now allied with the enemy, where he represented a ruler more or less without a state, Maistre thought at one point about resigning: '[...] I am still ready to resign without a fuss, at the first sign you send me, all the more since I have never been able to shake off the charge of being odious,'<sup>95</sup> he wrote to the chevalier de Rossi in May 1808. Having given up on this idea, he then had no other option than exercising the 'necessary prudence' that is needed when one does not want to 'shock anybody.'<sup>96</sup> Since he could be considered a French national ever since the annexation of Savoie, never having been able to obtain his naturalization from the Sardinian government, this put him at risk at any moment of the rigour of the laws of his new country:

[...] I turned towards the side of His Majesty, and I asked him, since only Sardinia remained to him, to be made a Sardinian gentleman. This request did not succeed. [...] I am therefore French and by the king allied on this point with the French law; and what prevents Napoleon from calling me to France [...] and even demanding that the Emperor [Alexander] no longer recognize me [as ambassador]? He is certainly the master! All this is undoubtedly without remedy; but you see [...] how I have been protected and adopted by my Sovereign!<sup>97</sup>

Maistre's deference toward his sovereign did not always go as far as sacrificing irony. In the letters to his superiors in which we often sense some quite obvious strains, 'a thinly guised respect'<sup>98</sup> lets a justifiable resentment filter through. It even happens that his freedom of expression stings like a reproach. In July 1807, he complained about the disdain with which Victor-Emmanuel seemed to receive the dispatches he sent him. No longer content with never being listened to, despite the 'striking political realities' that he had to interpret, he had to put up with the 'depths of

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<sup>94</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 10 January 1808, *OC*, xi, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, May 1808, *OC*, xi, 112-113.

<sup>96</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 1 (13) April 1809, *OC*, xi, 232.

<sup>97</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 28 May (9 June) 1808, *OC*, xi, 127.

<sup>98</sup> Georges Laffly, 'Un génie honnête homme,' in *Joseph de Maistre*, ed. by Philippe Barthelet (Les dossiers H, Geneva, 2005), p. 196.

misfortune' and be devoured by 'financial difficulties'<sup>99</sup> from which no one thought of rescuing him. 'H.M.'s unwavering decision having destroyed my future,' he concludes in this letter, 'only my motto remains to me: *Fors l'honneur nul souci*.'<sup>100</sup> Maistre's indignation was more or less the same in January 1815 when, having had enough of being without a secretary – which forced him to go 'everywhere in person' and 'to write everything with his own hand' – he made fun of his 'quite extraordinary' status as ambassador, before blasting Vallaise in an accusatory tone: '*Why employ someone you despise, or why despise the person you employ?*'<sup>101</sup>

Even if Maistre happened to bridle when his noble pride was pricked, he never strayed from his duties out of a rebellious nature. In 1812, after the fall of Speransky and at the height of his favor with Alexander, he refused to leave the King of Sardinia's service for that of the Emperor of Russia. Such an advantageous proposition, however, would have guaranteed his fortune. But his dynastic loyalty carried the day, without this gracious decision garnering him the least bit of gratitude on the part of the Sardinian king, nor any improvement in his material conditions. In 1814, after finally recovering his family, he felt completely ashamed to welcome them with the meager means at his disposal. However, as he wrote to Blacas, he still preferred '*the happiness of being miserable*'<sup>102</sup> with his family to solitude.

Thus, neither accusations, nor criticisms, nor humiliations deterred Maistre's loyalty; he continued to serve his king in spite of his own interests and to the detriment of his children's future. Might we see in this stubborn loyalty a strict application of principles espoused by the staunch defender of authority? Obviously, these are not just vague generalities that Maistre states in October 1815 when writing to Vallaise: '*Against our rightful sovereign, even if he were a Nero, we have no other right than to let our head get cut off while respectfully telling the truth.*'<sup>103</sup>

One could cast doubt on the integrity of this straightforward confession by looking for the deceit and ulterior motives of an

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<sup>99</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 20 July (1 August) 1807, *OC*, x, 430 & 431.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* Maistre's motto may be translated as: '*Nothing to worry about except honour.*'

<sup>101</sup> Letter to comte de Vallaise, 7 (19) January 1815, *OC*, xiii, 164.

<sup>102</sup> Letter to comte de Blacas, 27 December 1814 (8 January 1815), *OC*, xiii, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Letter to comte de Vallaise, October 1815, *OC*, xiii, 164.

opportunistic courtier or an ambitious person.<sup>104</sup> Reading Maistre's correspondence suggests, on the contrary, that 'the ideas, the conscience, and the morals' – which, according to Barbey d'Aureville, [are] 'the most important and must come first'<sup>105</sup> in a man – form an integral whole in the eyes of the Savoyard thinker. Sainte-Beuve might take the characteristic a bit too far when he turns Maistre into a man 'all from one whole,' 'like one of those mountain peaks from his austere country, one of those jagged rocks cut from steel.'<sup>106</sup> He hits the nail on the head, however, when he points out in the behavior of the King of Sardinia's subject this 'wit' and this 'touch of aristocracy,'<sup>107</sup> so unfamiliar to the masses nowadays. A sense of honour, at the heart of the aristocratic code, is not without meaning for Maistre, who always remained faithful to the lofty idea that he set for himself concerning the duties of his office.

The Sardinian diplomat barely diverged from the goal of the Savoyard magistrate, such as he himself defined his ethics in 1784: there must reign in the conduct of both something 'lofty,' 'pure,' and 'visibly beyond reproach,' because in all circumstances, '[their] external character certifies the quality of [their] soul.'<sup>108</sup> *Noblesse oblige*: rooted in an ancient, centuries-old tradition, this idea touched the heart of Maistre's being and defined his fundamental values. From this followed an '*art of probity*'<sup>109</sup> in the name of which, when one was a man of quality, one consented to every sacrifice and which made one oppose a strong resistance to the political and social upheaval that represented, on the morrow of the Revolution, the glorification of individualism.

### III

It is commonplace to say that Maistre's destiny was profoundly changed by the historical drama that he happened to experience. The Revolution placed him in so many painful situations, and it so very often put him on a

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<sup>104</sup> See Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre. Etude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un matérialiste mystique* (Geneva, 1968).

<sup>105</sup> Barbey d'Aureville, 'Les critiques ou les juges jugés', Chapter XII ('Rivarol'), *Œuvre critique*, ii, 547.

<sup>106</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, xv, 81.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, xv, 82.

<sup>108</sup> Maistre, *Le caractère extérieur du magistrat*, OC, vii, 17.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, OC, vii, 12.

course toward an apparently hopeless future, that it ended up getting under his skin. Relegating him to a precarious and shifting life, it amplified his losses, renunciations, and grief, at the same time that a new world was emerging from the ruins of the old. It is scarcely surprising, in this respect, that his correspondence, like that of a number of *émigrés* in this same period,<sup>110</sup> is a ‘depository of touching images’ and confessions, which always surface ‘in scattered bursts’ without ever creating an authentic ‘self-narrative:’ the self remained detestable for Maistre, who rejected the ‘mindset of the serious autobiographer’ adopted by Rousseau in the *Confessions*, and who never spoke of himself, always pulling back ‘just before divulging.’<sup>111</sup> No indiscretion or obscene displays of emotion for this man of character who, with an ‘ethereal lightness,’<sup>112</sup> kept his emotions in check and managed to make himself understood without spelling out everything.

Deprived of his country by the intrusion of revolutionary troops into Savoie, uprooted from his Vaudois friends by his sovereign’s order, forced into a new exile by the invasion of Piedmont, Maistre, after being named ambassador to St Petersburg, had to accept the various constraints that made up his new life as a diplomat. As a cost-saving measure at a time when the Italian wars had reduced considerably his government’s resources, he was not authorized to have his family accompany him for this mission. This separation, which exacerbated the pangs of exile, would for many years be a thorn in his side.

In February 1805, a melancholic day when he was feeling homesick and bemoaning the revolutionary age, he confessed to his brother: ‘Six hundred leagues away, ideas about family, and childhood memories overwhelm me with sadness. I see my mother, with her saintly face, moving about my bedroom and, as I write this to you, I am crying like a child.’<sup>113</sup> Such bouts of melancholy, even if they do not reach René’s displeasure with living, are a leitmotif in Maistre’s correspondence

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<sup>110</sup> See Karine Rance, ‘L’émigration nobiliaire française en Allemagne: une “migration de maintien” (1789-1815),’ in *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*, 30 (1998), 5-29. See, as well, Daniel Schönplflug and Jürgen Vos, eds., *Révolutionnaires et émigrés. Transfer und Migration zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland, 1789-1806* (Stuttgart, 2002).

<sup>111</sup> These expressions were used by Florence Lotterie about Xavier de Maistre in her introduction to the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (Paris, 2003), pp. 21 & 29.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>113</sup> Letter to chevalier de Maistre, 14 February 1805, *OC*, ix, 335.



during his stay in Russia. The feeling of the ever-changing nature of things, but also awareness of things being irreparable, frequently turned his mood gloomy: 'Man *never* likes *never*,' he told Madame Huber-Alléon in May 1806, 'but it is even worse when it touches *country*, *friends* and *spring*! Memories in certain situations are horrible; I see nothing beyond regrets.'<sup>114</sup>

The fabulous atmosphere of the St Petersburg salons, where his conversation was appreciated, and the arrival of his son Rodolphe in the Russian city in August 1805, cheered him up and revitalized him. Despite gloomy thoughts which sometimes haunted his sleep, he started to enjoy life again by spending all his time studying and reading – his true passions. For the comtesse de Goltz, he painted a quite pleasant picture of his daily life:

[...] I try, before ending the day, to recover that *native* gaiety that has preserved me up to now: I blow on this fire like an old woman blows, to relight her lamp on the brand of the old. I try to make a truce with the dreams of severed arms and broken heads that unceasingly trouble me; then I eat like a young man, then I sleep like a child, and then I awake like a man, I want to say good morning, and I begin again, always turning in this circle, and constantly putting my feet in the same place, like a donkey turning a millstone.<sup>115</sup>

The impulsive whim and humoristic touch of this statement were pleasant auxiliary treatments for this discrete and Stoic gentleman, who refused to let himself be downtrodden by bad memories and despondence. Forced after Tilsit to limit his official sorties, Maistre retreated into his office even more, finding in his work a remedy for his troubles. These new pastimes, while assuaging his sorrows, helped him persevere better through the sustained separation from his loved ones, whose absence continued to sully his daily life:

I read, I write, I work to distract myself, to tire myself out if it were possible. In finishing my monotonous days, I throw myself on my bed, where sleep, when I invoke it, is not always obliging. I turn, I am troubled, while saying like Hezekiah: *De mane usque ad vesperam fines me*.<sup>116</sup> Then poignant ideas of family pierce me. *I think I hear crying in Turin*; I make a thousand efforts to represent

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<sup>114</sup> Letter to Madame Huber-Alléon, 15 May 1806, *OC*, x, 117.

<sup>115</sup> Letter to comtesse de Goltz, 2 (14) May 1805, *OC*, ix, 385.

<sup>116</sup> Is 38:13. '[F]rom day to night you bring me to an end.'

to myself the figure of this twelve-year old girl, whom I do not know. I see this orphan daughter of a living father. I ask myself if one day I am destined to know her. A thousand black phantoms bustle around my Indian curtains.<sup>117</sup>

Such revelations, where a sorrowful sensibility emerges, are not so rare in his correspondence, but they are generally handled with humour in a minor mode. The rejection of grandiloquence limits the excesses of pathos, with Maistre preferring jolly jesting (in which sensitivity hides behind a mask of bittersweet disinterest) to a solemn or tragic *gravitas*:

As for me, Admiral – he wrote in March 1810 to Tchitchagof – I have always had this equality of humour that you know and that is not sold in a shop. It is not that I do not see everything that my brother or others see; but I have a maxim that when one is condemned to be shot, what is best to do is to go to the game with good grace, otherwise the spectators mock you and you are no less shot. – *All is over with me.*<sup>118</sup> I am no longer destined to see my children; so there is nothing more to live for; it is all over except to be buried. I see no more than my memories, by the letters that I receive and by those that I write, and by studies that continue, as if I were in college.<sup>119</sup>

Among Maistre's most beautiful letters, we will draw attention especially to the ones that give 'his person a more likeable and more human character.'<sup>120</sup> We find in them first and foremost the intimate emotions of a person for whom there exists 'two things about which memories are difficult or almost impossible to erase: the sun and friends.'<sup>121</sup> It is this person of delicate constitution, who lets his sorrow flow forth upon learning of the death of Madame Huber-Alléon in June 1807. Devastated by this sad news, he composes an elegiac letter in which, without excessive emotion, his deep sentimentality is expressed:

You will not believe to what point this woman is present to me – he writes to Count Golovkin – I always see her with her great upright figure, her light Genevan manner, her calm reason, her natural

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<sup>117</sup> Letter to chevalier de Rossi, 14 (26) April, *OC*, x, 106.

<sup>118</sup> Original in English.

<sup>119</sup> Letter to Admiral Tchitchagof, 22 March (3 April) 1810, *OC*, xi, 441-442.

<sup>120</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 210.

<sup>121</sup> Letter to contessa Trissino de Salvi, 8 (20) November, *OC*, ix, 508.

finesse, and her grave banter. She was an ardent friend, although cold to all the rest. I will not pass better evenings, feet toward the fireplace, elbows on the table, thinking furiously, exciting her thought and quickly skimming a thousand subjects, in the midst of a family worthy of her. She is gone, and I will never replace her. When one has passed middle age (and I have long passed it, probably), these losses are irreparable. Separated without return from all that I hold dear, I learn of the death of old friends; one day, the young will learn of mine. In truth, I died in 1798,<sup>122</sup> only the funeral has been delayed.<sup>123</sup>

The sensitive man who lets the very core of his sincerity pour forth here, appears as well in Maistre's correspondence with family members. Love and parental concern constantly shine through 'in an amusing tone.'<sup>124</sup> In spite of the distance, this admirable father of 'patriarchal values,'<sup>125</sup> was constantly involved in his children's upbringing. Always with a touch of gentleness, the advice he tried to give them, to guide them in an apprenticeship in life, joined Christian virtues with solid common sense and the benefit of experience. Thus, when his daughter Adèle became involved in a quarrel at school, Maistre jokingly gave her a lesson in affability. 'Too intense about things in life to have the excessive prudishness of those who pay no attention to them'<sup>126</sup> – the phrase is Barbey's – he surprised the prim and proper minds who wanted at all costs to turn him into a sanctimonious hypocrite:

To overcome oneself, to submit to circumstances, is a duty for everyone, but especially for women. [...] A man, my dear child, is an animal. Unfortunately for your sex, extremely proud; but happily for this same sex, extremely foolish. It is necessary to use his foolishness against his pride. In ceding skilfully and with grace, it is necessary to make him believe that he will always be king. Then he is content to allow himself to be led. *As soon as a woman cedes the sceptre, it is given back to her immediately.* That is all there is to the catechism of this world. Never forget it. You know by heart the beatitudes of the Gospel; but it is not forbidden to

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<sup>122</sup> The year Piedmont was invaded by France.

<sup>123</sup> Letter to Count Théodore Golovkin, 18 (30) June 1807, *OC*, x, 415-416.

<sup>124</sup> Georges Laffly, 'Un génie honnête homme,' p. 195.

<sup>125</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 209.

<sup>126</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Les historiens politiques et littéraires,' Chapter II ('M. Capefigue'), *Œuvre critique*, i, 376.

know others, as, for example, *Happy are mild women, for they will possess men*. Submit therefore my dear Adèle; submit, caress, insinuate yourself; you will soon find some imbecile full of wit who will say in his heart: ‘Here is the one I need.’ If after you have wed he comes to discover that you are a bit impertinent, the evil is not great.<sup>127</sup>

When Constance, from whom he had been separated at an early age, tells him a few years later, in a similar refrain, that she would prefer not to have a husband if it meant being separated from him [her father] again, the tenderness of Maistre’s answer does not prevent him from moderating, playfully, such intentions:

[...] my dear child, the fig tree is made to bear figs; however I accept with great pleasure all the lovable things that you tell me about our *inseparability*! I am transported by the idea of seeing you, knowing you, and enjoying your attentions as long as I will promenade on this small *ball*. However, I am not an egoist, and if some honest man, fallen for you as I imagine him, comes to ask you of me by speaking very politely, I am ready to cede you, on condition that you would from time to time come to cultivate your new acquaintance: which, I think, will suffer no difficulty.<sup>128</sup>

Maistre’s letters to Rodolphe are also full of advice and tempered affection. This loving father, who corrected his son’s spelling and grammar, endeavoured to foster in him all the qualities of an honest man. He particularly encouraged him in his career as an officer. ‘Take advantage of this in order to develop a *geographic eye*: that is what the military is all about,’ he wrote to him during the 1808 campaign for which the young man had enlisted: ‘I am not talking about valour,’ he continued, ‘anyone who does not have any should get lost. But you would never believe how infatuated I am with this *geographic*, and even *topographic*, perspective. Either I am terribly mistaken, or it is this which makes generals.’<sup>129</sup> Some years later, subduing his worry on the eve of the battle of Moskowa/Borodino, Maistre, as one might expect, suggested to his son that he perform his duty as a soldier:

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<sup>127</sup> Letter to Adèle de Maistre, 14 December 1802, cited from the manuscript, the letter cited in *OC*, ix, 109, having been shortened for publication.

<sup>128</sup> Letter to Constance de Maistre, 20 April 1814, *OC*, xii, 419.

<sup>129</sup> Letter to Rodolphe de Maistre, 29 May (10 June) 1808, *OC*, xi, 129-130

God preserve me – he writes to him – from giving you the counsel of cowards! [...] you are fighting a just and almost holy war. You are fighting for all that is most sacred among men, one can even say for civil society. Go then, my dear friend, and *return or take me with you*.<sup>130</sup>

The severity of tone does not preclude feelings of worry which, in closing, inconspicuously colour this letter. Between 1807 and 1812, Maistre had several occasions to feel such fatherly anxiety. Over and over, he feared for the young man's life on the battlefield next to the Russians: 'No one can know war unless his son is in it,'<sup>131</sup> he told Count Deodati. Annoyed by the 'horrendous delay'<sup>132</sup> of the mail that left him without news for several weeks, he sometimes lost patience with his son, who seemed to have forgotten him: 'I am truly despondent,' he wrote to him on 22 May 1807. 'Since 13 April, not a word from you. God forbid I do you the disservice of believing that you have not written to me; so the letters surely have been intercepted.'<sup>133</sup> After finally receiving the letter he was expecting, Maistre, despite having calmed down, could not manage to hide the intensity of the anxiety that affected him: 'I was extremely angry with you, but in this anger there was a good portion of sadness,'<sup>134</sup> he wrote to him on 15 June 1807.

Thus, by skimming through this correspondence, we gauge the moral resources of this kind-hearted man who was day after day being tested constantly in his intimate affections. Writing letters, in contrast to Rousseauist autobiography which fades into solitude, was for him a way of sharing with gentle souls the emotions that envelop him without, however, falling into sentimentality. Sharing thus understood humanizes the world, betters men, and makes life more livable. Far from being a maudlin emotionality, Maistre's sentimentalism – so similar in this way to Yorick's<sup>135</sup> – was indeed an entire Christian belief in the *virtus* of sympathy and benevolence, in the saving power of feelings.

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<sup>130</sup> Letter to Rodolphe de Maistre, 5 (17) July 1812, *OC*, xii, 156.

<sup>131</sup> Letter to Count Deodati, 11 February 1807, *OC*, x, 309.

<sup>132</sup> Letter to Rodolphe de Maistre, 15 (27) July 1807, unpublished.

<sup>133</sup> Letter to Rodolphe de Maistre, 22 May (3 June) 1807, unpublished.

<sup>134</sup> Letter to Rodolphe de Maistre, 15 (27) June 1807, unpublished.

<sup>135</sup> We know Xavier de Maistre's debt to the author of the *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. We can think that Joseph shared his younger brother's admiration for Sterne, and that he preferred, like him, 'the delicacy of heart' and

Should we therefore be surprised that this man, in the face of so many trials and tribulations, believed he would forever be deprived of ‘what we crudely call *happiness?*’<sup>136</sup> Saved from despair by the ‘salutary reflection’ of a Christian, he sometimes had the opportunity to wonder, deep down inside: ‘*What do I have left?*’<sup>137</sup> But he never delayed picking himself up, being ashamed of his weakness. Indignation, impudence, and a grandiose spirit suited his temperament better than complaints, but also this lightheartedness and bonhomie which allowed him to be self-critical: ‘[...] if I had the pleasure of living for a time with you under the same roof,’ he wrote to Count de Rossi in 1815, ‘you would hardly be surprised to see that I am the king of the slothful, the enemy of all business, the friend of the study, of the lounge chair, and even easygoing to the point of feebleness! Because I never compliment myself: *Nuper me in littore vidi.*’<sup>138</sup>

His forced departure from Russia was a final crisis in Maistre’s life. He saw it as an added grief, which brought back his sadness. At sixty-four years of age, he had arrived at the day of reckoning. With the ironic distance suitable to his personality, he thus turned back on himself without the slightest leniency:

I don’t know what the life of a rascal is like since I have never been one, but that of an honest man is abominable. How few men are there whose passage on this stupid planet has been marked by really good and useful acts! I prostrate myself before the one of which one can say: *pertransivit bene faciendo*,<sup>139</sup> the one who had been able to instruct, console, and relieve his fellows; the one who made great sacrifices for charity; *these heroes of silent charity* who hide themselves and expect nothing in this world. But what is the ordinary man? And how many are there in a thousand who can ask themselves without terror: what have I done in this world? *In what*

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‘the beautiful sentiments’ that are the traditional prerogative of France to the frivolity of eighteenth-century French society. See *Sentimental Journey*.

<sup>136</sup> *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, First dialogue, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 458.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Letter to Count de Rossi, 25 August (6 September) 1815. *OC*, xiii, 143. Maistre cites the Second eclogue of Virgil’s *Bucolics*, v, 25: ‘Nec sum adeo informis; nuper me in litore vidi/Quum placidum ventis staret mare,’ ‘Nor am I so ill to look on: lately on the beach I saw myself, when winds had stilled the sea.’

<sup>139</sup> Acts 10:38: ‘He went about doing good things.’ The text is about Jesus.

way have I advanced the common good and what will remain of me of good or evil?<sup>140</sup>

Fairer and more forgiving, readers of these letters, better than the author himself, have been able to give him credit for his honesty, his honour, and his humanity. Barbey d'Aurevilly and Sainte-Beuve, who hardly saw eye to eye, found themselves equally in agreement on this matter. The *Causeries du lundi* introduce the correspondence as 'the best commentary and the most useful rectification that the comte de Maistre's other distinguished, but quite haughty, writings could have received.'<sup>141</sup> As for the author of the *Les prophètes du passé*, he finds in them 'the most focused mind of the most upstanding conscience that has probably ever existed,'<sup>142</sup> a fine, affectionate, gentle, and sweet man who brings together 'purity of life' and a 'total soundness of understanding.'<sup>143</sup>

Barbey d'Aurevilly and Sainte-Beuve are right: it is when Maistre steps out of his formal style of diplomat or counter-revolutionary thinker to engage himself informally in moral questions, political insights, or simply natural feelings, that he touches and amazes us the most.

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<sup>140</sup> Letter to chevalier de Saint-Réal, 21 December 1816 (2 January 1817), *OC*, xiv, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, iv, 193.

<sup>142</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'J. de Maistre,' in 'Les philosophes et les écrivains religieux,' *Œuvre critique*, iii, 75.

<sup>143</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Rivarol,' in 'Les critiques ou les juges jugés,' *Œuvre critique*, ii, 556.





## 4 Joseph de Maistre: the paradox of the writer

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### *Benjamin Thurston*

‘Every day we write things which we later condemn.’<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to overestimate the power and reach of the written word in eighteenth-century Western culture. Activities as diverse as industry, warfare, sculpture, and music were analysed and discussed at great length in journals, technical manuals, and encyclopædia. The fluency of the *philosophes* and the sheer volume of their work testified to an enormous confidence in the resilience, the versatility, and the clarity of the French language. The belief that meaningful statements could be made about laws of nature, that essential truths of human psychology and social behaviour could be expressed in language and thus made accessible to all educated men, was the foundation of much literary and philosophical activity in this period. It was a commonly held assumption that the expansion of literate culture in eighteenth-century Europe was synonymous with progress and civilisation. There were many in the republic of letters who were convinced that literary salons, public libraries, and scientific academies were instrumental in weakening the social dominance of what they regarded as barbaric prejudices and extravagant superstition. The prominence and ubiquity of the written word was seen by men like Voltaire and Condorcet as the sign of an enlightened and progressive society, ready to rid itself of untenable dogma and obsolete practices.

Such optimism did not go unchallenged, however. Rousseau’s *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750) was only the most celebrated critique of the idea that goodness and happiness for both the individual and the community were dependent upon an increase in literacy and science. The intellectual origins of the belief articulated by Rousseau – that the written word is essentially baneful, disruptive, and unreliable – can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greek philosophy and early

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<sup>1</sup> Maistre, *De l’église gallicane*, OC, iii, 171.

Christian theology, but it survived in a variety of religious and secular contexts for centuries thereafter. In the eighteenth century, it informed both traditional and empirical accounts of the origin and formation of language, where a chronological and ontological primacy was often attributed to speech or gesture. The depreciation of the written word was also commonplace in the doctrines of illuminism, and was especially prominent in the works of Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730-1824) and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803), both of whom exercised an important influence on Joseph de Maistre. In *Des erreurs et de la vérité*, for instance, Saint-Martin described speech as the natural medium of spiritual truth because it was uncontaminated by the gross materiality of written signs: ‘in all languages, the sense of sight is inferior to that of hearing, because it is by hearing that man naturally receives, by means of speech, the living explanation or the intellectual aspect of a language, whereas the written word can only refer to it, offering to the eyes no more than a lifeless expression and material objects.’<sup>2</sup> We find a similar hostility to inscription expressed in a letter sent by Willermoz to Maistre in 1780 on the subject of Reformed Scottish Rite Masonry. Pressed by his apprentice to answer certain doctrinal and historical questions relative to the Order, Willermoz responded by underlining the incapacity of the written word to convey fluently truths that would be obvious in conversation. Once again, the metaphysical prerogatives of the human voice were contrasted with the sterility and inertia of mere inscriptions:

the spoken word, being the sensible expression of the whole being who uses it, has its own particular rights and virtues which can never be substituted and the effects of which must always be more or less important according to the subjective inclinations of whoever uses it and the personal inclinations of whoever hears it, and it is only by virtue of the sublimity of its effects (which are often wrongly exploited) that man is the only being in the sensible world to enjoy its use.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, Maistre appears to stand four-square within the tradition of Western phonocentrism: he accepts without question the belief that the written word is a corrupt and inferior substitute for speech, that *la parole* (speech) has ontological priority over *l’écriture* (writing). In the

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<sup>2</sup> Saint-Martin, *Des erreurs et de la vérité* (Edinburgh, 1782), p. 471.

<sup>3</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J11, 62.

*Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, he borrows a number of arguments from Thamus's denunciation of the written word in Plato's *Phaedrus* and weaves them into his own critique of political and religious inscription.

[...] the man who owes all his education to the written word *will only ever appear to be wise*. The spoken word [...] is to the written word as a man is to his portrait. The works of painters appear to be alive to us; but if we question them, they maintain a dignified silence. The same is true of the written word, *which does not know what should be said to one man, nor what should be hidden from another*. If it is unfairly attacked or insulted, it cannot defend itself, *since its father is never there to lend it support*. For this reason, whoever thinks it possible to establish a clear and lasting doctrine by the written word alone, IS A GREAT FOOL. If he really possessed the genuine seeds of truth, he would not imagine that *with a little black fluid and a pen* he would be able to cultivate them in the outside world, protect them from the inclemency of the seasons, and give them the vigour necessary to endure.<sup>4</sup>

Even sacred texts are no exception to this rule. Maistre claims that the Gospels marked an involuntary rupture with the oral tradition of the Early Church, which had been threatened 'by the nascent heresies and the corrupt practices of certain believers.'<sup>5</sup> Spiritual transparency and unity are the preconditions of speech; wherever obscurity and division prevail, the spoken word is invariably replaced by written signs.

The writings of the Early Church had a naïve character because they addressed readers for whom any codified statement of belief was either superfluous or absurd. The true creed of the Christian martyrs was written in their hearts. For the same reason, Maistre believed it was vain to read the Old Testament as a *summum* of Hebrew theology. The very first verse of Genesis, for example, predicated a prior belief in God. Holy Writ was a series of partial and involuntary confessions rather than a systematic compendium of religious dogma: 'never was there a more shallow idea than that of looking for the entirety of Christian dogma in the Scriptures: there is not a single line in these writings which declares, or which even hints at, the aim of making them into a code or a dogmatic declaration of

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<sup>4</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Pierre Glaudes (Paris, 2007), p. 377.

<sup>5</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J1, 40 and 2J15, 98 (F 211).

all the articles of the faith.<sup>6</sup> Saint-Martin arrived at the same conclusion in his discussion of Christian esotericism: ‘in early Christian ritual, in the letter of Innocent I to bishop Decentius, and in the writings of Basil of Caesarea, we see that the Christian religion includes *matters of great weight and import, which are not, and which could never be, written down.*’<sup>7</sup>

Maistre maintained that it was wrong to confuse genuine faith with ‘the external signs and written confessions.’<sup>8</sup> It was doubt, a state of separation and anxiety, that vented itself in words.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Church bore witness to Christ without entangling itself in the knots of disputation and polemic. Indeed, it bypassed language as far as possible, and when obliged to pronounce, would only do so with fear and trembling.<sup>10</sup> It was the awareness that inscription vitiated faith that made the Church reluctant to engage in written controversy: ‘Had our sophistic adversaries not compelled us to write things down, our faith would be a thousand times purer.’<sup>11</sup> It was always an intrusion, an external pressure that forced written disclosure: ‘If the belief is not attacked, it would be useless to declare it.’<sup>12</sup> Yet such moments of disclosure were not evidence that Catholic doctrine was in a state of perpetual flux. Exactly the opposite was true: ‘if Christianity had never been attacked, it would never have established dogma in writing; by the same token, dogma has only been established in writing because it already existed in its natural state, which is *speech.*’<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Church recognised that inscription was always likely to promote disunity:

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<sup>6</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, *Tableau naturel des rapports qui existent entre Dieu, l’homme et l’univers*, 2 parts (Edinburgh, 1782), ii, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, ed. by Jacques Lovie and Joannès Chetail (Geneva, 1966), p. 307.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Maistre, ‘Discours pour le retour du roi de Sardaigne dans ses états de terre ferme,’ *OC*, viii, 460.

<sup>11</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 376.

<sup>12</sup> Maistre, ‘On the Sovereignty of the People,’ in *Against Rousseau: ‘On the State of Nature’ and ‘On the Sovereignty of the People’*, tr. & ed. by Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal & Kingston, 1996), p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 375.

But should a dogma be brought into question, the Church forsakes its natural state, far from any notion of controversy; it looks for the foundation of the disputed dogma; it questions its traditions; above all, it creates words, which were superfluous for its simple faith, but which have become necessary to articulate dogma, and to place a new obstacle between the reformers and ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

To answer the arguments of heretics in writing was to risk greater disunity, because words often entrenched the divisions between people: ‘War raised these lofty ramparts around the truth; they might very well keep it safe, but at the same time they hide it from view; they shelter it from attack, but they thereby make it less approachable.’<sup>15</sup>

For Maistre, then, the written word is at best a necessary evil, which simultaneously protects and conceals the truth. This idea in turn raises questions about how texts are (or should be) read and understood. In his discussion of aesthetics in the fourth of the *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, Maistre illustrated the explosive potential of unregulated exegesis with reference to a single line of verse: ‘He sees but night, he hears but silence.’<sup>16</sup> Was it possible for critics to reach a consensus about the meaning of these words?

Someone will say: *Of course we can say that*. Someone else will say: *No, I’m sorry, we cannot say that*. I then say: *Can we say that which makes us say, can we say that?* Here are three different opinions on a single line of poetry: by a simple process of extrapolation, you will see that there is enough material in a whole poem to start a civil war.<sup>17</sup>

The Church could not afford to ignore this lesson. Maistre argued that to expose a sacred text to the ravages of public criticism was to lose control of dogma and thus to destroy religious unity. The free circulation of Scripture invariably led to exegetical chaos: ‘*anything* can be found in *any* book that *anyone* is free to interpret as he pleases.’<sup>18</sup> Maistre warned that to make Holy Writ into the ultimate rule of faith was effectively to

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<sup>14</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, p. 376.

<sup>16</sup> Maistre, *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon, OC*, vi, 287.

abolish doctrinal truth altogether: ‘nothing is decided, since everyone sees what he wants to see in Scripture.’<sup>19</sup>

If the Bible was not the sure and clear collection of texts imagined by Luther, then where was doctrinal authority to be located? To refer to the works of the Church Fathers was simply to substitute one text for another, to shift the location of the argument rather than to resolve it:

In one of those rare moments when he talked sense, Jean-Jacques Rousseau rightly observed that: *God himself could not create a book about which men could reach agreement.* But if men cannot agree about the meaning of Scripture, how should they do so concerning the Church Fathers?<sup>20</sup>

An interpretative authority had to be external to Scripture, had to be beyond the reach of quibbles and cavils, in order to resist the attacks of Hydra-headed reason. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church had protected the faithful from the confusion of demotic exegesis, but then the Reformation had rashly opened the pages of Holy Writ to the inspection of all and sundry:

[...] the fundamental principle of this religion, the original maxim on which it rested everywhere before the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century came along, was the infallibility of its teaching, which resulted in blind respect for authority, the renunciation of individual reasoning, and consequently the universality of belief.

The reformers undermined this whole edifice: they put individual judgment in place of catholic judgment; they foolishly put the exclusive authority of a book in place of that of the teaching ministry, a ministry which preceded the book and which had been set the task of explaining it.<sup>21</sup>

Despite its peculiar stridency, Maistre’s critique of Protestantism is hardly original; it belongs to a long tradition of Catholic apologetics and has obvious affinities with Charron’s *Les Trois Vérités* and Bossuet’s *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*. For Maistre, the Reformation had encouraged only a perpetual logomachy among Christians: ‘individual judgment, inexhaustible verbosity, and permanent

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<sup>19</sup> *Lettre sur l’état du christianisme en Europe*, OC, viii, 514.

<sup>20</sup> *Viri christiani*, OC, viii, 372.

<sup>21</sup> Maistre, *Sur le protestantisme*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 312.

and boundless chaos.<sup>22</sup> He warned that the Church could not survive as a debating chamber. If left to their own devices, men would quarrel endlessly about the interpretation of sacred texts. The Christian religion therefore had need of an exclusive sovereign authority in order to guarantee doctrinal unity.

The Word of God is clearly the rule of our faith, but which word is this? Is it the lifeless, written word: no, it is the spoken and living Word; it is the word we hear and not the word we read; for *faith cometh by hearing* (Romans 10.17). The Protestant system is like that of a man who pretends that no magistrates are necessary in civil society; that all differences of opinion can be resolved by reference to the Law, that everyone can read this law and administer justice for himself etc.<sup>23</sup>

Here was the cardinal error of Protestantism: ‘to put the written word alone in place of authority.’<sup>24</sup> According to Maistre, the Reformation had propagated the idea that Scripture was common property and should be distributed without mediation to all and sundry. But if authority was effectively dispersed in this manner, what became of doctrinal truth? It was Maistre’s belief that Protestantism encouraged not the mild, accommodating climate of English tolerance portrayed by Voltaire, but a deadened sensibility to religious experience, a sophisticated scepticism that, caught between so many irreconcilable claims to truth, eventually dissolved the credibility of all dogma. By a logical process, then, Protestantism worked its own destruction, for ‘admitting no authority besides a book, which is itself, according to their admirable doctrine, subject to no interpretative authority, all dogmas would disappear in quick succession.’<sup>25</sup>

In *Du pape* (one of the works he composed in St Petersburg and which was eventually published in 1819), Maistre drew attention to a famous seventeenth-century schism in the Russian Church to illustrate the danger of autonomous exegesis. In 1652-1653, a quarrel broke out in the Church between the reformist Patriarch Nikon and dissidents bent on maintaining traditional rituals and beliefs. Nikon wanted Russian practices to conform at every point to the standard of the ancient Patriarchates of

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<sup>22</sup> Maistre, *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J17, 351 (A 560).

<sup>24</sup> *Lettres à un gentilhomme russe sur l’Inquisition espagnole*, OC, iii, 367.

<sup>25</sup> *Lettre sur l’état du christianisme en Europe*, OC, viii, 486.

Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. This involved considerable changes, not only in the language of the service books, which had been corrupted by poor translations and careless copying, but also in the ritualism of the liturgy, to which, among a predominantly illiterate laity, great significance was attached. Those who rejected the Nikonian service books and reforms in the ritual were known as *Raskolniki*, or *Old Believers*. Ever since the great council of 1666-1667, at which Nikon's reforms were ratified, the *Raskolniki* had been schismatics, recognised outsiders to the religion of Imperial Russia. Despite his habitual veneration of ancient rites and practices, Maistre was unequivocal in his condemnation of these dissidents from the Established Church. He believed that their defiance of ecclesiastical and civil authority was founded upon a misguided claim to ownership of Slavonic liturgy and dogma. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Maistre looked out upon the religious landscape of Russia, he was able to dismiss the *Old Believers* as the heretical cousins of European Protestants.

The word *rascolnic* in Russian literally means *schismatic*. The schism denoted by this generic term has its origin in an old translation of the Bible, which the *rascolnics* venerate, and which includes texts modified – or so they say – in the version favoured by the established church. This is the reason why they call themselves (and who could stop them?) *men of the Old Faith* or *Old Believers* (*staroversi*). Wherever the common people, having the misfortune to possess the Holy Scriptures in the vernacular, see fit to read and interpret the text, no aberration of the individual mind should surprise us. It would take too long to list the manifold superstitions which have accumulated around the original grievances of this misguided crowd. In no time at all, the initial sect split up into ever smaller groups, as always happens, to the point at which there are today perhaps forty *rascolnic* sects in Russia.<sup>26</sup>

Without an external, sovereign interpretive authority, the Bible was a dangerously unstable text. For Maistre, the absurd misunderstanding of Holy Writ that underlay Protestantism, the belief in the primacy and transparency of Scripture, had mired its votaries in endless verbal disputation and ruinous doctrinal confusion.

Maistre observed that the Protestant belief in the individual's right to read Scripture without apostolic supervision had been pushed to its

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<sup>26</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 309n.



logical conclusion in his own day. The mass translation, production, and distribution of the Bible that took place in the early years of the nineteenth century was undertaken in the conviction that Holy Writ should be accessible to everyone, for by its lights everyone might come to know God. Maistre identified Bible societies as the modern apotheosis of the spirit of religious democracy that had blighted Christianity since the Reformation. He watched the growth of these societies from his vantage point in St Petersburg with horror and fascination. The British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in London in 1804, was enormously popular, and within a decade around two hundred auxiliary groups had been established in the British Isles. On mainland Europe and in North America, similar societies flourished and rapidly won public approval for their work. Their declared mission was to facilitate individual access to Scripture through the distribution of Bibles in common tongues at reasonable prices. To avoid the accusation of doctrinal bias, the Bibles were printed without notes or commentaries. Maistre concluded that the Protestants were playing with fire. He remarked that the methods of the Bible Society were anathema to the Catholic Church, which was ‘systematically opposed to the distribution of Scripture in the vernacular.’<sup>27</sup> The Bible Society was founded upon the crude equation of increased distribution with increased faith: ‘Every year they let us know how many copies of the Bible they have sent abroad; but they invariably omit to tell us how many people they have converted to Christianity.’<sup>28</sup> Who else but a nation of shopkeepers could confuse the data of trading accounts with the reality of spiritual conversion? The Catholic Church was right to be intolerant of this arbitrary distribution of the Bible. ‘Read without notes or any form of explanation,’ wrote Maistre, ‘Holy Writ is poison.’<sup>29</sup>

The right of the individual to read the Bible was the central tenet of the Bible Society’s muddle-headed philosophy, and it was this that inevitably whittled away at the vital fibre of men’s beliefs and led to interminable arguments over words and meanings. Throughout the centuries, all manner of heretics and charlatans had plundered Scripture for their own purposes in the insane belief that the letter was the transparent medium of spiritual truth: ‘From Arius to Calvin, appeals to *Scripture* have been used to attack and deny every article of Christian

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<sup>27</sup> *Lettre sur l’état du christianisme en Europe*, OC, viii, 497.

<sup>28</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 221.

<sup>29</sup> Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes, p. 774.

dogma.<sup>30</sup> Saint-Martin likened the Old Testament to a battlefield, the site of futile logomachic and ideological struggles: ‘given their depth and the richness of the language in which they were written, the Hebrew Scriptures can be read in so many different ways that they are like a battlefield, where all parties, all sects, find what they need to attack one another and to defend themselves.’<sup>31</sup> Maistre saw countless examples of this in his own age, including the apocalyptic ruminations of English divines. In the book of Revelation they fondly imagined they had discovered the fall of Popish despotism predicted to the precise hour and minute: ‘this book is disastrous for all learned Protestants, and (even the great Isaac Newton is no exception to this rule) as soon as they begin to discuss it, it turns their heads.’<sup>32</sup> Yet these inaccuracies were as nothing compared to the abuses of the philosophers. Maistre criticised Bacon’s fraudulent invocation of Scripture in *The Advancement of Learning* and his promotion of a materialistic conception of the soul. ‘The reader is left perplexed, even irritated,’ he wrote, ‘by the shameless way in which this consummate fraudster exploits Scripture and twists it to make it say whatever he wants.’<sup>33</sup> In Locke’s *Essay* too, the germs of the most vile and contemptible sensationalism were to be found ‘supported where necessary by passages from Holy Scripture.’<sup>34</sup>

Although he regarded the Bible as highly subversive when placed in the wrong hands, Maistre was in fact supremely intolerant of any literature that threatened the *status quo*. He unhesitatingly commended the royal prohibition of irreligious works in his *Eloge de Victor-Amédée III* and warmly applauded the vigilant censorship of the Spanish Inquisition in the *Lettres à un gentilhomme russe*.<sup>35</sup> In correspondence written between the outbreak of the Revolution in France and the annexation of Savoie in 1792, he deplored the contamination of his native Chambéry by the republican propaganda of Paris and Grenoble, the ubiquity of ‘French

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<sup>30</sup> *Lettre sur l'état du christianisme en Europe*, OC, viii, 514.

<sup>31</sup> Saint-Martin, *Tableau naturel des rapports qui existent entre Dieu, l'homme et l'univers*, ii, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 358.

<sup>33</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, OC, vi, 278.

<sup>34</sup> *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, OC, iv, 366-367.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal & Kingston, 1988), p. 50; Maistre, *Lettres à un gentilhomme russe sur l'Inquisition espagnole*, OC, iii, 348.

pamphlets extolling the rights of man and the utility of public hangings.<sup>36</sup> Maistre believed that, if left unchecked, the spread of ideas via books and pamphlets would be disastrous for civil peace and religious unity.<sup>37</sup> Subsequent events gave him no cause to retract this diagnosis of the ills of modern civilisation. In a memorandum intended for Alexander I, Maistre warned that a misplaced tolerance of books would bring about the downfall of Russia: ‘Shortly before the disaster that has overtaken us all, Voltaire said, in France: *Books have done all this!* Let us repeat his words here in Russia, which has not yet been brought to its knees: Books have done all this, so let us beware of books!’<sup>38</sup>

Maistre’s antipathy to the written word can appear violently intolerant and indiscriminately destructive. In the *Six paradoxes à Madame la Marquise de Nav...*, for example, he sets out to undermine the reputation enjoyed by Shakespeare, Locke, Richardson, and Voltaire by pointing out the arbitrary and extrinsic factors involved in the construction of a literary canon. In the manuscript version of the eighth dialogue of *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, he even suggests that humankind has no need for any books other than Euclid’s *Elements* and a Hebrew version of the Gospel.<sup>39</sup> There is, he thinks, something unhealthy, something abnormal, in the unprecedented quantity of writing produced in his day. In the fourth of the *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien à ses compatriotes*, Maistre blames the law’s delay in the kingdom of Sardinia on ‘this

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<sup>36</sup> Maistre, letter to Henri Costa de Beauregard, 26 June 1791, *OC*, ix, 17.

<sup>37</sup> However, a fragment of dialogue written sometime between 1786 and 1789 does contain arguments against censorship. One passage from this dialogue reads: ‘too much attention has been paid to irreligious works: by banning them with the full support of the government, we lend them an incalculable importance in the eyes of the public: we have exalted the free-thinkers by persecuting them, and instead of answering them with disdain or reasoned argument, we have been so clumsy as to offer them the glory of martyrdom. This was directly counter to our aims, and if you require empirical evidence, I refer you to the example of the English, who, as you know, do not hesitate to speak their minds, and who are, as a general rule, infinitely more religious than our French neighbours. It would likewise be simple for me to prove to you that the government has nothing to fear from writers and that the only effective way of dealing with scurrilous pamphlets is to allow them to increase in number; but I know that such details would be superfluous for you.’ *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J14, 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Quatre chapitres sur la Russie*, *OC*, viii, 344.

<sup>39</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J2, 74 (531).

overproduction of writing, which is a truly *endemic* illness amongst us.<sup>40</sup> We find the same association of writing with disease in the preface he wrote for an edition of his brother Xavier's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* in 1812. Here, Maistre describes 'the compulsion to write' [*la Scribomanie*'] as 'a peculiar illness of our age,' which has, moreover, resulted in prolific waste, since the majority of what has been written will surely be forgotten or even burnt by future generations.<sup>41</sup> Maistre's imagination is haunted by the flammability of paper and the evanescence of ink. In its most provocative and extreme form, this culminates in a vision of book burning on an epic scale: in a critique of Herder's philosophy, Maistre recalls the legendary destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria by a Muslim army and claims that he likewise would not hesitate to reduce the whole of eighteenth-century German literature to ashes, convinced that the gains of such a conflagration would far outweigh the losses.<sup>42</sup> Maistre also gives short shrift to the constitutionalism of Thomas Paine, which, he says, is founded upon the naïve assumption 'that laws are made of paper and that nations can be created with ink.'<sup>43</sup> The consequences of such a profound misunderstanding of the written word are immense, warns Maistre; in reality, writing is always and everywhere a sign of 'weakness, ignorance, or danger.'<sup>44</sup> The true measure of human language is the *λόγος* (Logos), the Word of God. This benchmark of impossible linguistic perfection and concision inevitably devalues all human communication, but writing is especially disfavoured. On this account, the sheer volume of revolutionary legislation (Maistre counts 15,479 laws passed in less than six years) is sufficient testimony of its nullity and impermanence.<sup>45</sup>

At a number of levels, Maistre's emphatic condemnation of the written word unavoidably brings the status of his own work into question.

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<sup>40</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien à ses compatriotes*, OC, vii, 193.

<sup>41</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J8 301 (610).

<sup>42</sup> Robert Triomphe, 'Joseph de Maistre et Herder,' *Revue de littérature comparée*, 28 (1954), 323.

<sup>43</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, p. 378; for a more detailed analysis of this theme, see Yves Madouas, 'La critique de l'écriture chez Joseph de Maistre,' *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 3 (1971), 344-361; Benjamin Thurston, 'Joseph de Maistre: critique de l'écriture comme signe de décadence et de corruption,' *Revue des études maistriennes*, 14 (2004), 233-242.

<sup>44</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, p. 378.

<sup>45</sup> Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, p. 236.

To begin with, his assiduous and lifelong accumulation of books and journals is spectacularly at odds with the frequent declarations of unashamed bibliophobia in his own work. The catalogue of Maistre's library in Chambéry (covering the period 1769-1792) lists 937 titles, made up of 2,621 volumes, including a significant collection of periodical literature. According to Jean-Louis Darcel, the composition of this library revealed 'the choices [...] of a man for whom books are at the same time a research tool, a means of erudite recreation, and – through his acquisition of rare or valuable editions – a source of pleasure.'<sup>46</sup> Then there are the minor biographical details that contrast so starkly with the rabid fantasies of destruction and censorship mentioned above: in 1789, for example, Maistre had the forty-five volumes of his copy of the *Encyclopédie* bound in Lyons at considerable expense; in 1792, when he fled Chambéry for the first time and made the arduous journey across the Alps to Aosta and Turin, he was carrying around fifty books in his luggage, including a five-volume edition of the *Iliad*, an illuminated *Liber hymnorum* from the thirteenth century, and a copy of Charron's *De la sagesse*. Maistre's library in Chambéry was looted in 1793 during the social unrest that followed the abortive Austro-Sardinian campaign to retake Savoie. This, he confessed to Vignet des Etoles, was his life's work gone in an instant.<sup>47</sup> As he moved around Europe over the next twenty-eight years, however, Maistre's bibliomania, his urge to collect and catalogue books, remained undiminished. When he died in 1821, his second library contained at least 307 titles made up of 659 volumes. Of course, this biographical evidence does not stand in any necessary relationship with the ideas expressed in Maistre's *œuvre*, but it would be rash to claim that the 'death of the author' makes the disparity entirely irrelevant. Besides, the same paradox runs through the texts themselves: how do we reconcile Maistre's vigorous censure of the written word with his authorship of a large number of political essays, philosophical commentaries, polemical tracts, and counter-revolutionary pamphlets? The Vitte & Perrussel edition of the *Œuvres complètes* runs to fourteen volumes but does not include many of the miscellaneous opuscles from Maistre's manuscripts and notebooks. Given the importance Maistre accorded to verbal economy (in the preface to the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794) he remarks with approval that the complete works of certain seventeenth-century authors will fit neatly

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<sup>46</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel, 'Les bibliothèques de Joseph de Maistre 1768-1821,' *Revue des études maistriennes*, 9 (1985), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 30.

‘in a waistcoat pocket’), he himself left behind an extraordinary volume of work in a medium he repeatedly condemned as ignominious, baneful, and insecure.<sup>48</sup> There are indications that Maistre was himself aware of this contradiction. In a letter to the Marquis de Barol in 1785, well before he had written the works which would make him famous, he pointedly described himself as a victim of ‘the compulsion to write’ [‘*scribomanie*’].<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the sheer magnitude of his *œuvre*, the allusive density of Maistre’s prose also appears to conflict with his stated antipathy to literary culture. Examples range from the full-scale critiques of major philosophical works based on close (if selective) readings (i.e., Bacon’s *Novum organum*, Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*, Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, etc.) to occasional pieces of literary commentary or socio-political polemic (i.e., *Observations critiques sur une édition des Lettres de Madame de Sévigné*, *Observations sur le prospectus disciplinarum*, *Viri christiani Russiae* ...). On almost every page of *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* there is likewise a substantial and continuous interaction with other texts in the form of quotations, allusions, paraphrases, and footnotes. The recycling of excerpts from revolutionary journals in *Bienfaits de la Révolution française* and of passages from Hume’s *History of England* in the last chapter of *Considérations sur la France* are only the most egregious examples of this literary parasitism. There is too an enjoyable irony in the fact that Maistre’s most sustained argument against the written word (the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*) is so obviously dependent on the authority of other texts (including works by Plato, Plutarch, Cicero, Tacitus, Machiavelli, Hume, Pascal, Bergier, Muratori, etc.).

Maistre’s deliberately provocative bibliophobia cannot conceal a scholarly reverence for the written word and a humane celebration of the literary resources of modernity, which include ‘our printing, our large and numerous libraries, our dictionaries, our tables of contents, etc.’<sup>50</sup> Despite his depreciation of the instruments of writing (‘*a little black fluid and a pen*’), Maistre recognises their utility for man’s fallen state in recording

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<sup>48</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J8, 301 (610).

<sup>49</sup> See Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal & Kingston, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>50</sup> *Sur les délais de la justice divine*, *OC*, v, 454.

‘those sudden moments of clarity which fade without issue if they are not recorded in writing.’<sup>51</sup> By the same token, his relentless denigration of ‘wretched paper’ (the perishable material of constitutions, charters, and articles) does not exclude an effusive admiration for ‘our excellent paper, that remarkable gift of Providence, which brings together in an extraordinary union the qualities of permanence and fragility, which absorbs the thoughts of men, which forbids us to alter them without detection, and which only gives them up when it is destroyed.’<sup>52</sup> This persistent ambivalence points to an unresolved conflict between the philosopher and the writer in Maistre, between his antipathy towards, and his fascination for, the written word. This conflict leads to recurring patterns of deviation and transgression in his work, and a turning away from the ideal of the Logos, which at the mundane level of human discourse implies extreme compression and austerity of language. From this perspective, the polyphonic complexity and rhetorical violence of Maistre’s *œuvre* are totally at odds with the precepts of the speech he read before the Senate of Savoie in 1784, entitled *Le caractère extérieur du magistrat ou les moyens d’obtenir la confiance publique*. Maistre here argued for the brevity and formality of public discourse and he described the obligations of the magistrate thus: ‘Insolence, immoderation, and paradoxes never defile his speeches; and whenever he speaks reason unto other men, be his words forthright or discreet, he always enlightens and never causes alarm.’<sup>53</sup> We have only to contrast this policy of restraint and discretion with his later claims that ‘audacities’ (*‘impertinence’*) were permissible in the service of the Church, or his confident apology of *ad hominem* philippics in *Du pape* (‘I assure you that *nothing will have been done to change people’s opinions so long as we refrain from attacking individuals*’<sup>54</sup>) to measure the discontinuity in his thinking.<sup>55</sup> In an article

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<sup>51</sup> Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, p. 706.

<sup>52</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 111.

<sup>53</sup> *Discours sur le caractère extérieur du magistrat*, OC, vii, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Maistre, ‘Un écrit inédit de Joseph de Maistre: *Amica Collatio* ou échange d’observations sur le livre françois intitulé: *Du pape*,’ *Études*, 73 (1897), 26; Maistre, letter to Deplace, 28 September 1818, OC, xiv, 150.

<sup>55</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Maistre’s rhetoric, see Margrit Finger, ‘Studien zur literarischen Technik Joseph de Maistres’ (Unpublished inaugural dissertation, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1972); Agnès Guillard, ‘La rhétorique dans *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*: réfuter et convaincre,’ *Revue des études maistriennes*, 12 (1996), 77-203.

entitled ‘Politiques, poétiques du moi: Joseph de Maistre et la question du sujet,’ Michael Kohlhauser drew attention to a similar and perhaps related source of tension between what he identified as the impersonal and the subjective voices in *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*:

The careful reader will indeed discern a contest between two types of rhetoric in *Les soirées*, each of which is associated with a different attitude of the writer. The inward gaze of recollection or of enthusiasm often causes the bellicose voice to fall silent, and the introduction of this subjective note underlines the human dimension of the subject. This allocation (partition would probably be a better word) of the roles between the social or official first person and his alter ego puts one in mind of the disjunction by which the human being separates himself from the thinker and theoretician (a process already glimpsed by Cioran). The resulting tension opens up possibilities of invention and surprise, at the same time as it gives rise to the aesthetic interest of *Les soirées*.<sup>56</sup>

On this account, Maistre’s work – behind its supposedly monolithic façade of dogma and orthodoxy – is riven by fascinating internal contradictions. The idea of a divided self in Maistre’s work, of a subtle but ineluctable discord between the subjective-aesthetic and objective-philosophical voices identified by Kohlhauser, helps to bring areas of otherwise untidy incoherence or puzzling ambiguity into sharper focus. For example, we find that metaphors of reading and writing are liable to disrupt the tidy scheme of binary oppositions (the internal and the external, the spiritual and the sensible, the immutable and the inconstant, etc.) in Maistre’s thought. The association of *l’écriture* with artificiality, impotence, and ephemerality, for example, is totally inverted in the Count’s description of God as a ‘supreme writer’ in *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.<sup>57</sup> Other examples are not hard to find. Where Bacon claims to discern no order in the heavens, Maistre retorts: ‘How could we read a script whose every letter is a planet? And, even if the size of the characters did not stand in the way, are we in a position from which to read?’<sup>58</sup> The symmetries and patterns of the created universe are taken as proofs of God’s existence. So too are the moral instructions written in the soul.

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Kohlhauser, ‘Politiques, poétiques du moi: Joseph de Maistre et la question du sujet,’ *Revue des études maistriennes*, 14 (2004), 215.

<sup>57</sup> *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, p. 695.

<sup>58</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, *OC*, vi, 496.



Unlike their counterfeit copies in ink and paper, these commandments are eternal, unchanging. The worst excesses of depravity in the ancient world had not effaced from men's minds the laws written 'in divine letters.'<sup>59</sup> The aim of the Bible was to lead 'the human mind to read within itself what had been written there by the hand of God.'<sup>60</sup> Revelation had only lifted the veil 'which prevented man from reading within himself.'<sup>61</sup>

Not only were there moral laws written in men's hearts, but there was also a divine narrative or Providential code (for those who had eyes to see) in human history. The Reformation and the Revolution had turned men from the observance of these immutable truths towards a literature of complaint and subversion, and a desperate obsession with the surfaces of things. The mountains of paper blackened by the ink of republican journalism were only insubstantial scribblings, spiders' webs of the imagination.<sup>62</sup> The language that 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 that compassed them round about. In reality, a text or language of far greater significance was being composed in tandem with the meretricious untruths of revolutionary discourse: 'Whenever blind agents of sedition announce the indivisibility of the republic, behold only Providence which announces the indivisibility of the kingdom.'<sup>63</sup> To see beyond the surfaces of things, to pierce the shadows of political jargon, to bypass the poverty of human language and to behold the divine script of human history – this was what Maistre urged. There were truths written in letters of blood on all the pages of history,<sup>64</sup> which only the short-sighted could fail to see.<sup>65</sup> People were so in thrall to the bright lights and shifting scenery of the present age that they lacked the concentration necessary to read in 'the great book of history.'<sup>66</sup> Maistre referred repeatedly to the Revolution as a sort of divine script, a metatext, a language which the impious, like Belshazzar, could not comprehend. It was 'the preface [...] to the dreadful book we have

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<sup>59</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 251.

<sup>60</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, OC, vi, 268-269.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, vi, 270.

<sup>62</sup> *Bienfaits de la Révolution française*, OC, vii, 471.

<sup>63</sup> Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, p. 209.

<sup>64</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 274.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>66</sup> *Lettres d'un royaliste savoisien*, OC, vii, 96.

been forced to read.<sup>67</sup> The suppression of institutional Christianity throughout Europe was interpreted in the same terms: 'If Providence erases, it is presumably in order to write.'<sup>68</sup> Only this form of writing was permanent, meaningful. Man lived 'within a world of invisible things made visible.'<sup>69</sup> Although Maistre claimed to borrow this idea from Pauline theology ('Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.' Heb 11:3), it was also central to eighteenth-century illuminism, whose votaries were encouraged to read and decipher the code of the material universe. Whatever its genealogy, this use of language manifestly undoes the ontological stability of *l'écriture* in Maistre's work, leaving it suspended between antithetical significations. Writing is alternately dismissed as the contemptible occupation of 'a starveling author turning the pages of Livy in a garret in Paris' and glorified as an act of divine intelligence and creativity.<sup>70</sup> In *La pharmacie de Platon*, Jacques Derrida drew attention to a similar process of linguistic disruption in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato seeks to distinguish between two types of discourse.

According to a schema which would dominate all of Western philosophy, a good form of writing (natural, alive, learned, spiritual, internal, eloquent) is opposed to a bad form of writing (artificial, moribund, ignorant, physical, external, mute). And the good can only be referred to in the metaphor of the bad. Metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic. The bad form of writing is, in relation to the good, like a model of linguistic reference and a simulacrum of essence. And if the network of predicative oppositions which link one form of writing to the other holds within its mesh all the conceptual oppositions of 'Platonism' – conceived here as the dominant structure of the history of metaphysics – we could argue that philosophy has been played out between two forms of writing. Even though the intention was to distinguish only between speaking and writing.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, p. 381.

<sup>68</sup> Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, p. 210.

<sup>69</sup> Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, p. 736.

<sup>70</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J7, 406 (44).

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon,' in *La dissémination* (Paris, 1972), pp. 186-187.

The rigid binary opposition of *la parole* and *l'écriture* in Maistre's work is repeatedly disrupted by metaphors of reading and writing that contaminate the logic of the objective-philosophical discourse. In addition to this linguistic and conceptual ambiguity, there is another factor in Maistre's theory of language which appears to undermine the fundamental coherence of his work. According to the hermeneutics which underpins his critique of the Reformation, no stable or uniform interpretation of a text is possible on the basis of private and unregulated readings, since 'anything can be found in any book that anyone is free to interpret as he pleases.'<sup>72</sup> The obvious objection to this belief is that, by denying the practical possibility of an authoritative interpretation of any text, it simultaneously undermines the apologetic and polemical coherence of Maistre's own work. The meaning of a book, on this account, is contingent on entirely unpredictable acts of individual interpretation (resulting in what Maistre called 'this infinite multiplicity of judgments which conflict with, and negate, each other')<sup>73</sup> or, according to the reception theory outlined in the *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, on (equally unpredictable) psychological and cultural factors. Maistre objects to the unregulated act of reading because it destroys the ability of communities and institutions to find common meanings (and hence belief systems) in texts; at the same time, he argues that communities and institutions (or 'public opinion') can and do impose common meanings upon texts that remain unread or only partly understood (i.e., the English reception of Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Locke's *Essay*). Whereas Maistre's stringent prohibition of sacred literature among the laity and his concomitant defence of the unique, mediatory role of the Church fit into this reception theory well enough, the apologetic and polemical aims of his own work appear deeply compromised, for (according to this same theory) both the anarchy of individual readings and the arbitrary fiat of public opinion make a mockery of any belief in authorial intention as constitutive of a text's meaning.<sup>74</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel's suggestion that the works written by

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<sup>72</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, p. 287.

<sup>73</sup> Maistre, *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, p. 165.

<sup>74</sup> This reception theory is, however, contradicted by the Count in *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, who claims: 'And should I have the chance to write down and publish all that I am telling you, I would not hesitate for a moment; nor would I be put off by the threat of storms, so confident am I that the true intentions of a writer

Maistre after his arrival in Russia were not originally intended for publication, but were private manifestos for the instruction of Alexander I, seems to offer a resolution of this dilemma by removing the texts from the public domain. The idea of Maistre as a privy counselor who wrote in a Masonic code for the inner circle of an imperial court, is, however, curiously at odds with his energetic pamphleteering during the 1790s, his authorship of several important works (e.g. the philosophical critiques of Bacon, Locke, Malebranche, and Condillac) unrelated to Russian politics, and his decision to publish *Du pape*, *De l'église gallicane*, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, and various polemical epistles after his departure from St Petersburg.<sup>75</sup>

How, then, was it possible for Maistre to condemn the arbitrary distribution of Holy Writ on the grounds that ‘*anything* can be found in *any* book that *anyone* is free to interpret as he pleases,’ and at the same time to assume a direct relation between apologetic literature and the propagation of faith?<sup>76</sup> In fact, Maistre never made such a strong assumption as this; in the preface to *Du pape*, for example, he recognised that ‘A good book is not one which meets with everyone’s approval, otherwise there would not be any good books; it is one which entirely meets with the approval of a certain class of readers for whom the work is especially intended.’<sup>77</sup> In a letter of 1817 to Graf Friedrich Leopold zu Stolberg, in which he endorsed the distribution of tracts and hagiographies by a Catholic foundation in Turin, Maistre similarly argued that, to be effective, apologetic literature had to cater for different reading communities:

In the last few years a society has been established in Turin under the inconspicuous name of *Catholic Friends*, whose primary objective is to encourage access to edifying books, by offering them at modest prices, and even by giving them away, so far as this is financially possible, so that the true teaching of the Church can circulate through all the veins of the state. You will observe, *Monsieur le Comte*, that our aim is exactly the same as that of the baneful propaganda of the previous century, and that we are

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are always acknowledged and given their due.’ Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, p. 589.

<sup>75</sup> Jean-Louis Darcel, ‘Joseph de Maistre, mentor de la Russie,’ *Revue des études maistriennes*, 14 (2004), 149-164.

<sup>76</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, OC, vi, 287.

<sup>77</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, p. 25.

confident that we shall achieve our aims, by doing for a good cause precisely what this propaganda did for a bad cause with such lamentable success. We choose especially those books which are short and accessible to a wide readership; but we try, as far as possible, to make allowance for different ages, temperaments, and intellectual abilities. We are at various times preoccupied by polemical, historical, or ascetic literature, and we select our weapons according to our circumstances.<sup>78</sup>

Maistre did not abandon his belief in the importance of ‘states of mind’ as the decisive factors in the reception of a text, but he subscribed to a situational apologetics (‘we select our weapons according to our circumstances’) that took account of this plurality.<sup>79</sup> He worked out the consequences of these ideas in his notebooks, his correspondence, and his published works. In the *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, for example, he argued that ‘man has need of prejudices, practical rules, ideas that are empirical, material, tangible. He cannot be led by syllogisms.’<sup>80</sup> He elsewhere described the syllogism as the corollary of man’s theomorphic nature, but he recognised that it was, on its own, an inadequate means of persuasion: ‘sometimes, it is inadvisable to make use of *fleshless* syllogisms. A wise author will work miracles if he hides this *skeleton* beneath the *rosy flesh* of *Rhetoric*.’<sup>81</sup> Maistre returned to this idea again and again. In *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, the Chevalier declares: ‘Reason can make little headway on its own and struggles to be heard; often it has to be – so to speak – *armed* by the fearsome epigram. French wit pricks like a needle, so that the thread goes through the hole.’<sup>82</sup> In 1820, in reply to a Roman theologian’s criticism of *Du pape*, he affirmed that, in order to cure men of their errors, it was henceforth necessary to sugar the pill of reason: ‘These robust and willful youths will only swallow their bitter drink if the rim of the cup has first been touched with sweet syrup.’<sup>83</sup> In the same work, he defended his use of hyperbole as a secular medium of sacred truth:

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<sup>78</sup> Maistre to Stolberg, December 1817, *OC*, xiv, 116-117.

<sup>79</sup> *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>80</sup> *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, *OC*, vii, 166.

<sup>81</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J20, 197 (D 517).

<sup>82</sup> Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, p. 606.

<sup>83</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J6, 266 (11). The original text is in Italian; Maistre is quoting from Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, i, 3.

I would be the first to admit that all I have said about the Councils is somewhat exaggerated; I have again made amendments to this section and I believe that there is now little or nothing further to add. As far as the exaggerations in my work are concerned, the eminent critic should know that where a tree inclines to the ground, it is not enough to restore it to an upright position; it must rather be pulled in the opposite direction. A priest or a theologian ought perhaps to have said things differently, but I trust that our Holy Mother will allow us, as laymen, to speak as we please; we shall serve her well enough with our audacities.<sup>84</sup>

Although Maistre never retracted his theoretical criticisms of linguistic abuse, in practice he totally repudiated the maxims of the speech he delivered before the Senate of Savoie in 1784. Following the French invasion of the duchy in 1792, he rapidly came to the conclusion that the Revolution had destroyed the tenability of the old creeds, that desperate conditions called for desperate measures. In the preface to his first counter-revolutionary pamphlet, the *Adresse de quelques parents des militaires savoisiens à la Convention nationale*, he emphasised the need for authority to parry and riposte: ‘even the most generally valid maxims suffer exceptions under extraordinary circumstances, and although slanders are usually best met with silence, we should not allow ourselves to be bound unconditionally by this rule; it is particularly true that in the fight for men’s minds, silence does not lead to glory, still less to safety!’<sup>85</sup> Maistre warned that the House of Savoy could not afford to ignore the slanders of French revolutionary propaganda. Since it was too late to prevent the circulation of subversive literature, the only remedy left was to enter the lists against the foe, to join the logomachy on equal terms. In the *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, Maistre reproached the nobility of Chambéry for their failure to counter the critics of monarchism: ‘In order to fight them on superior, or at least equal, terms, it is obvious that we needed to use the same weapons, and everywhere we did the opposite.’<sup>86</sup> Maistre did not doubt that polemical and apologetic literature would fall stillborn from the press unless it was faithful to the idiom of the age. His defence of situational rhetoric helps us to understand how he was able

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<sup>84</sup> *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J6, 262 (3). The original text is in Italian.

<sup>85</sup> *Lettres d’un royaliste savoisien*, OC, vii, 37-38.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, vii, 131.

simultaneously to condemn and exploit the written word. Although he was resolutely hostile to the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, Maistre's rhetorical violence, his ruthless deflation of received ideas, and his peerless mastery of paradox and irony place him in the company of writers and orators such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Sade, and Saint-Just. In his *Cours familier de littérature*, Alphonse de Lamartine described Maistre as a combination of an impassioned eloquent Diderot and an earnest Christian philosopher.<sup>87</sup> Maistre's language has more in common with that of the philosophers and revolutionaries whose ideas he professed to despise than with that of the saints and theologians with whom he claimed spiritual kinship.

Although he emphasised the importance of the Word of God as the measure of human discourse in his critique of the Reformation and the Revolution, Maistre also admitted the reality of more earthly linguistic imperatives. While he purposefully and brilliantly exploited the resources of postlapsarian rhetoric, his work was haunted by the idea of a pure and infallible language. 'All his natural impulses being directed towards the truth,' wrote Maistre, 'he [man] is forever seeking the *true names of things*; he has the vague memory of a language before *Babel*, even before *Eden*.'<sup>88</sup> The paradox of the writer is rooted in the simultaneous orientation of Maistre's work towards the perfection of the divine and the degradation of the human. Maistre was perhaps not unaware of this tension. In *Viri christiani Russiae amantissimi animadversiones in librum Methodii*, he quotes from I Corinthians 13. In comparison with the Word of God, what did all the art and artifice of human language amount to? 'What are words, and our writings, and our attempts at persuasion, and our futile efforts at syllogisms? A sounding brass... a tinkling cymbal.'<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Alphonse de Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature*, 28 vols. (Paris, 1856-1869), viii (1859), 44. Similarly, Emil Cioran, who read Maistre with great perspicacity, detected a combination of Bellarmine and Voltaire in his work; cf. Cioran, *Exercices d'admiration* (Paris, 1986), p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, p. 106.

<sup>89</sup> 'Viri christiani,' *OC*, viii, 398. The original text is in Latin.





## 5 Epilogue: the forced inhabitant of history

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### *Carolina Armenteros*

One common theme unites the papers collected in this volume. They all suggest, in different ways, that Maistre owes his longevity as a writer to his forced habitation in history. The French Revolution was historically unprecedented in that it dragged every individual, willing or not, from the private world of domesticity onto a public realm governed by the tyranny of journalism.<sup>1</sup> Weaving together the common threads of the papers presented in this volume, I would like to suggest in what follows that Maistre's compelled entry into history formed him as a writer – by obliging him to develop divergent writing personas, by subjecting him to the Revolution's polemical paradigms, and by simply driving him to write.

### I

Benjamin Thurston seeks to resolve Maistre's paradox of the writer – the contradiction between the man who condemned written discourse as sterile and destructive, and the prolific author who marked French literature indelibly. Thurston finds the key to the paradox in Maistre's resignation to history. When the Revolution came, Maistre quickly realized that Voltaire had been right – that he was living in a time when political reality was made with books, and that books could be fought only with other books. The proud silence with which the aristocracy had traditionally preserved its status and its dignity was now one of the strongest weapons in the camp of the enemy. And so to defend a truth that he believed should be lived and felt rather than asserted, or at most spoken rather than written down, Maistre lowered himself to write polemically. In

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, 'Darkness Visible,' a review of Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant*, in *London Review of Books*, 24 November 1988.

the ethic of a man like him, this was a double, and tragic, debasement – a painful testimony to the humiliation of his class, and to his condition as a fallen creature. Significantly, the period during which Maistre became active as a pamphleteer was also the period during which he awoke to a new spiritual anxiety – to the despairing possibility that God had abandoned humanity altogether, and that the burden of his punishment was too heavy to bear.

Thurston comments that Maistre's fall into writing was accompanied by his forsaking of the restraint that he once recommended in his youthful *Discours sur le caractère extérieur du magistrat* (1784). A manual on how to inspire public confidence through ceremony, an austere life and parsimonious speech, the *Discours* can be read as a manifesto of Stoicism and a handbook of aristocratic representation – a thorough defence of Plato's maxim that 'every serious man in dealing with really serious subjects carefully avoids writing.'<sup>2</sup> When he joined the revolutionary pamphlet wars in the 1790s, Maistre necessarily abandoned its prescriptions. Revolutionary writing was anything but austere and parsimonious, and what ceremony it fostered was a travesty and a subversion of the old rituals Maistre wished so urgently to conserve. His compositions of the revolutionary era are hence Epicurean in their nearly unbounded self-expression. They are tributes to the cult of interiority that Rousseau prepared, the Revolution initiated, and the Jacobins raised to untold heights. Maistre realized that the days had come when the prize of public attention went not to the virtuous preservers of secrecy, those magistrates of old whose external character he had once polished in prose; but to the man whose self-unveiling marked the popular imagination most deeply. He went about the task, like all the others, in the name of truth and justice, clamouring to support innocence against the unrighteous.<sup>3</sup> But if his words have remained where those of others have passed away, this was not, at least initially, because he aspired to personal glory.

When the *Considérations sur la France* first appeared in April of 1797, they did not bear Maistre's name. During his early days as a propagandist, Maistre did not wish to live in history, but to exit it. As he

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<sup>2</sup> *Seventh Letter*, line 344c, tr. by R.G. Bury, in *The Perseus Project*, Digital Library at Tufts University.

<sup>3</sup> In this he resembled Rousseau. See Raymond Trousson, 'Rousseau et les stratégies du pamphlétaire,' in *Rousseau and the Eighteenth Century: Essays in Memory of R.A. Leigh*, ed. by Marian Hobson, J.T.A. Leigh and Robert Wokler (Oxford, 1992), pp. 199-201.

saw it, the Revolution was ‘Satanic’ because it was the consummation of history, of the sins and miseries of which Bayle insisted the human narrative was composed. Ensuring the triumph of the contrary, angelic principle of counter-revolution therefore necessitated a return to atemporality. Even years later in St Petersburg, long after he had become a hardened polemicist, Maistre continued to believe that true virtue and happiness reside in the ability to leave behind history and the dissensions it requires, and to be content with a beneficent and unremembered life. Living in history, for this man of the world marked by Augustine, meant experiencing events memorable for the sin and suffering that caused them. Exiting history, conversely, meant entering a private utopia of peace, virtue and harmony. It also meant ceasing to write, starting to live, and cultivating the spiritual forms of communication – prayer and prophecy – that the spoken word enables. That, at least, is the lesson of *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (1821), whose inspired portrait of the truth and beauty attained through conversation on the transcendent is anything but an ode to the polemics of the printed word. In this respect, Maistre remained ever faithful to the maxims of the *Discours*.

But what a difference in his manner of defending them! The *Discours*, like Maistre’s other pre-revolutionary writings, betrays a man who has a keen mind and a way with words. But it is otherwise unremarkable, unstamped by eternity. The pages of his later texts, by contrast, tremble still with the political violence and the spiritual fears that engendered them. The Revolution consecrated Maistre as a writer. Emil Cioran observed with malice that conservatives ‘fling themselves [...] upon the Word’ and ‘for the most part write more carefully than the adepts of the future’ because, knowing the future to be against them, they find in words ‘vengeance and consolation.’<sup>4</sup> Less gloomily, Revolution drives dying elites to rhetorical excellence because, in accelerating time and the collapse of the whole world they once governed, it leaves them only the word as a means of pleasing, remembrance, and self-distinction.

Maistre attached the highest importance to the ‘*philosophy of style*,’ and averred that he who knew not how to write was incapable of metaphysics. The violence that pervades his thought and rhetoric is a response to the primal experience of the ‘*terrible truth of evil*,’ while his style incarnates his sense of the mystery of history. By conveying his

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<sup>4</sup> Cioran, ‘Joseph de Maistre: An Essay on Reactionary Thought,’ in *Anathemas and Admirations* (London, 1992), p. 75.

thought in what Baudelaire called ‘rockets,’ Maistre provoked his readers into a state of fascination and shock.<sup>5</sup>

Maistre also infused classical rhetorical aesthetics with a Biblical breath. The *Considérations sur la France* (1797) uses the ancient technique of *deinôsis*, a Greek term signifying the religious horror that mortals experience in the presence of a terrifying divinity. The imprecations, vociferations and vituperations of his style are so many codes of his anti-modernity, of his repulsion for what Baudelaire called ‘that famous *flowing style*, dear to the bourgeois’<sup>6</sup> – and to the *philosophes* that Maistre decried. The bracing rage that erupts throughout his writings is a marker of class and political persuasion. More importantly, though, rage lends to pamphleteering a Scriptural dimension. Maistre himself saw his own writing as an ‘act of justice,’ a manifestation of holy wrath that emulated the Logos and set the mind on fire; while his pamphlets were the mouthpieces of an irate God who scandalized ignorance with prophecy in the tradition of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup>

Thurston’s paradox of the writer suggests another, related set of links between Maistre’s thought and writing. Commentators have often noted that Maistre is the man of paradoxes, a favourite trope of Christian writers from Tertullian to Kierkegaard, who found in it a means to unsettle incredulous reason and suggest the incomprehensible dimensions of the divine. Maistre’s paradox delates a world where everything is obscure and upset, where God’s will is hidden and human thought skims the surface of reality. His paradox thus simultaneously possesses ontological value and articulates an aesthetics of terror and the sublime.

But it does not convey a pessimistic theology. Quite the contrary: its ultimate purpose is the very hopeful one of demonstrating how, despite the desolation of the world, good and evil yet – mysteriously – conspire with one another for higher and benign ends.<sup>8</sup> These revelatory properties of the paradox in turn are intimately in league with its intrinsically disputative abilities. For the paradox excels at seizing opinions in order to

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Yves Pranchère, ‘Ordre de la raison, déraison de l’histoire: l’historicisme de Maistre et ses sources classiques,’ in *Joseph de Maistre*, ed. by Philippe Barthelet (Les dossiers H, Geneva, 2005), p. 367.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes* (Paris, 2004), p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> See Pierre Glaudes, Introduction to *Considérations sur la France*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. by Glaudes (Paris, 2007), pp. 193-194.

<sup>8</sup> See Glaudes, ‘Paradoxe,’ *Dictionnaire Joseph de Maistre*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, pp. 1244-1245.

unveil their inner contradictions and stir disorder in the camp of the enemy<sup>9</sup> – often with the devastating irony and uproarious humour that certified the Voltairian origins of the counter-revolution.<sup>10</sup> Maistrian paradox, in short, is where piety, laughter, revelation and dissension meet.

But Maistre was not simply treading in the steps of his Christian predecessors. In adopting the paradox for polemical purposes and under revolutionary conditions, he actually reinvented it as a genre. No one, to my knowledge, preceded him in this endeavour. Classical rhetoric – especially Cicero’s speeches – had offered paradoxes as rhetorical devices. But these devices were always embedded in prose, the mere supports of polemical writing. They were never lifted out of prose to form a genre in their own right, a lyrical exercise in the consequences of sustained contradiction. Yet that is precisely what Maistre did in 1795, when, honing his polemical skills, he composed the *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, a work addressed to a probably fictional recipient and destined initially not for publication, but for circulation among friends.

The *Six paradoxes* is one of Maistre’s most amusing productions, a text bent on toppling dominant opinions on such then-controversial topics as the government of women. The first paradox, ‘The duel is not a crime,’ depicts an assembly of ‘natural men’ in a forest who come together out of boredom and curiosity and end up instituting the ‘principle’ of society (prudently leaving the ‘form’ of society for another meeting). But one of them warns the assembly, saying:

Messieurs, there is a future in what I am going to say to you. The social state, good in certain respects, will not degrade you less in others, by obliging you almost habitually to think. Yet, thought is only a perpetual analysis, and there is no analysis without a method for operating it. But, where is this method without which you will not be able to think? I demand that before anything else we invent the word.

On this point, there was only one voice.

*Let it be invented! Let it be invented!* people shouted from all sides. *Let it be invented!* Beginning though with simple ideas and onomatopoeia.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 1243.

<sup>10</sup> See Gengembre, *La contre-révolution ou l’histoire désespérante* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Paris, 1999), p. 23.

You would not believe, Madame, how much this preliminary decision facilitated matters.<sup>11</sup>

Brutally simplifying and satirizing the ideas of Rousseau, Helvétius and Condillac, this passage parodies the National Assembly's unreflective borrowings from philosophy.

It is not unique in its mockery. Continually emitting such stinging darts, the *Six paradoxes* is an enduring testament to the exceptional ability of the paradox-as-genre to deal a blow to moral complaisance and the vanities of *a priori* reason. Of course, this ability also renders the paradox intrinsically precarious, since its destructive powers can also reverse direction to hound fiercely the beliefs that form it.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the paradox can destabilize the very writing that expresses it. In unveiling the multifaceted approaches that one can have to a moral or philosophical question, it places the utility of written arguments itself on an insecure foundation. This is one reason that Maistre delighted in throwing out the paradox provocatively onto the page, while playfully refusing to profess his adherence to its conclusions. The resulting uncertainty is one source of the lasting enthrallment of his prose. As Cioran put it: '[t]o sustain the ambiguity, to confound us with convictions as clear-cut as his: this was certainly a *tour de force*.'<sup>13</sup> Not that the paradox offers doubt only: for in demolishing it also upholds another reason, ever mindful of its own capacity for error, that approaches the truth obliquely and draws strength from weakness.

The mind prone to contradiction stirs surprise by continuously conjuring the consequences of extreme situations – one reason that Maistre has become paradigmatic of the perversity thesis that supposedly characterizes conservative political rhetoric and its associated alarmism.<sup>14</sup> Yet the paradox is perhaps less significant for its tendency to produce dread, than for its ability to sway, to unsettle complacent level-headedness. After more than two thousand years of philosophy, Schopenhauer was the first to point this out in his posthumous opuscule

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<sup>11</sup> Maistre, *Six paradoxes à Madame la marquise de Nav...*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, p. 143 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Glaudes, 'Paradoxe,' p. 1244.

<sup>13</sup> Cioran, 'Joseph de Maistre,' p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1991), pp. 18-19.

*The Art of Controversy*,<sup>15</sup> where he argued that persuasion is unrelated to the rational pursuit of truth, and that the opposite proposition everywhere widespread is nothing more than Plato's deceit. *Pace* the Athenian, rhetoric's true masters were not the truth-loving philosophers, but the mercenary sophists they blamed and derided. These latter alone recognized that eristics is foreign to virtue and truth, that its true object is not to attain wisdom, but to triumph with words by whatever means. Schopenhauer hence set out to re-found the art of rhetoric so long obscured by categorizing disputative techniques, most of them founded on bad faith, and all of them designed to overwhelm one's adversaries in conversation. The resulting list alerts us that Maistre's style, so bent on disturbing reason, is formed, above all, by the urgent need to persuade.

The paradox, of the writer and as a genre, likewise intertwines with the problem of human duplicity at the core of Maistrian thought. Like Rousseau, Maistre is extremely aware of the irretrievable hypocrisy of the human condition. An heir of the Augustinian account of the self as divided between passional and spiritual halves warring to possess the soul, Maistre understands historical epochs as emanating alternately from the unified and divided states of the individual. Periods of tranquility, practically free of history – like the Middle Ages – preside over the relative peace and unity of individual souls; whereas periods of subversion – like the eighteenth century – testify to the ascendance of the passions and the severing of the self. These are epochs of torn beings who at once want and do not want, whose actions and words are perpetually at odds with each other, and who are generally fated to live out their humanity as a lie. The apotheosis of such periods, of course, is revolutionary convulsion, which Maistre says is not an event but an actual epoch. As an individual who felt 'crushed' by the whirlwind, Maistre resorted to writing in a manner that at once symbolized and completed the state of deepened hypocrisy that was the lot of those who survived what Auguste Comte called 'the great crisis.' In this sense, Maistre's paradox of the writer, and his writing of paradoxes, point to the gap within a Stoic moralist and one-time advocate of silence confronted by history as a personal imperative.

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<sup>15</sup> A work also known under the titles *Eristic Dialectics* and *The Art of Always Being Right*. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, tr. by E.F.J. Payne, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1988–1990), iii, 725–760.

## II

Yet even in writing Maistre did his best to diminish the paradox, or rather to resolve it to his advantage. If the Revolution marked the passage from verbal culture to the culture of print, from eloquence to self-creation through writing<sup>16</sup> – or, in Maistre’s vocabulary, from the living to the lifeless word – then in embracing the new he also tried to retain the old. Specifically, what Maistre called his ‘scribbling’ brought to life the spoken word and echoed the strongly oral culture in which he was reared. Richard Lebrun’s essay on Maistre the pamphleteer suggests one way in which this happened. During and after the Revolution, the writings that Maistre destined for public consumption were often either pamphlets, or incorporated pamphlet-like elements and conventions. The pamphlet, of course, was the revolutionary genre *par excellence*. Reaching record production and sales at the end of the reign of Louis XVI, it addressed a mass audience on the topical issues of the day, materializing the revolutionary belief that political truth can be discerned and created in wars of words where public opinion reigns supreme. An especially explosive and violent genre, the chosen medium of invective and satire, provocation and desperation, the pamphlet was authored by those who looked on the world indignantly, posing as truth’s evident owners and criticizing power without self-control. The rhetorical violence with which Maistre would brand generations was ideally formed on its pages, and the fact that Maistre’s writing retained this violence – occasionally with a whiff of vulgarity – long after the Revolution was formally over only lends support to Lebrun’s thesis.

Mortality, however, was the corollary of the pamphlet’s brief combats. It aged quickly and – with some notable exceptions – was quickly forgotten. In this respect, it shared the fate of revolutionary France’s successive constitutions, which Maistre prophesied were doomed to sterility and political inconsequence simply for having been written down. In its often quotidian concerns and ambitions of mass consumption, the pamphlet also epitomized the journalistic tyranny that accompanied its rise – a tyranny to which Maistre willingly succumbed, avidly reading newspapers and journals throughout his life.

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<sup>16</sup> See Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, 2001).



The pamphlet's impermanence appropriately symbolized its written simulation of conversation and oral polemics. Revolutionary pamphleteering and conversation have in common that, though they may aim to form minds and souls, their words vanish speedily and are rarely remembered. Maistre's achievement was to save his own words from this fate by using and evoking the very genre that almost fatally led them to it. It is an achievement that certifies both his talent as a writer, and his commitment to a spoken word, stenciled on God's, which he believed was alone eternal. Suggestively, Maistre developed the conversational style that was the unmistakable trademark of his prose during the years that formed him as a pamphleteer.

Those of Maistre's interpreters, sympathetic or hostile, who admired his rhetoric may be almost invariably identified by their use of italics and capitals to imitate the cadences of speech. This was perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Maistre's authorship, the one that immediately advertised a text as his even when he did not sign it. It is also the habit that makes it possible to follow his posterity across the centuries in the most unlikely places. One experiences a feeling of strange familiarity, for instance, on finding that an intensified version of Maistre's rhetorical rhythms suffuses the prose – and especially the doctrinal prose – of the 'Supreme Father' of Saint-Simonianism, Barthélémy-Prospér Enfantin (1796-1864), of all people, whose zeal to subvert traditional morality was matched only by that with which he devoured Maistre's *oeuvre*. What is even more bizarre is that, true to the intimate reciprocity between Maistre's thought and rhetoric, Enfantin borrowed Maistre's themes along with his style, but only to put them at the service of a vision that aimed to eclipse Maistre's own forever. Thus, Enfantin echoes – in disconcerting tones – *Du pape's* defense of the clergy: 'the PRIEST TIES the spiritual and the temporal, the spirit and the flesh, that is to say that he UNITES *science* and *industry* in the same desire for the PROGRESS of humanity.'<sup>17</sup>

In becoming a pamphleteer, then, Maistre was able both to adhere to, and to cheat, revolutionary logomachy – to insert the limpid, spoken word into an impurely fixed and dulled medium. To succeed, the effort required that one not only speak, but also scream into writing – another

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<sup>17</sup> Enfantin, *Economie politique et politique: articles extraits du Globe* (Paris, 1831), p. 171.

source of Maistre's stylistic violence, and of the permanence of his pamphleteering persona.

If readers throughout Europe recognized Maistre's prose even when it was anonymous, it was because his various writing personas – the pamphleteer, the letter-writer – incarnated the Revolution's writing hero, the man who succeeded in fashioning a public identity for himself by expressing a radical subjectivity in print. The difference was that in his case this success was at first inadvertent. As a Christian with gentlemanly ethics who sought to efface himself, to evade the odious and conceited 'moi' that he discerned governing his age, Maistre the writer could reveal himself only indirectly, unwittingly, as an act of self-betrayal.<sup>18</sup> The transparent self that conveyed itself without guilt and without shame in Rousseau's texts repelled him. It seemed narcissistic and haughty, self-obsessive and above all deceptive. Its self-proclaimed authenticity was a lie, a deformed shadow of the *philosophes*' chimerically translucent 'Man.' Augustine, with his insistence on the essential opacity and hypocrisy of the human condition, was instead the thinker to be believed, because truth requires not self-publication, but rather self-transcendence and the adoption of a universal point of view. That, at least, is the opinion of the Count in the fourth dialogue of *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (begun 1809). The great irony, of course, was that this ethic of self-erasure, so unsure of itself, was articulated in a sparkling prose that lent a diaphanous poetic identity to its composer, along with a rhetorical profile that has remained unique through the centuries.

Even as he overcame and surrendered to revolutionary polemics, Maistre lyricised his verbal writing in *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. A series of dialogues between three men intent on the truth, *Les soirées* subverted the conversational conventions of the age of Enlightenment. Rebelling against the dilettantism that reigned in eighteenth-century salons, Maistre describes how three close friends – two older men and a younger man – practice daily a conversation about truth. Preferring this activity to the 'elegant blabbering' of the salons, the interlocutors strive to glimpse truth together by plunging into the studious exchanges that became fashionable in the salons of the post-Revolution, those imitations of Coppey,<sup>19</sup> where Maistre himself had engaged Staël in amusing verbal

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Kohlhauser, 'Politiques, poétiques du moi. Joseph de Maistre et la question du sujet,' *Revue des études maistriennes*, 14 (2004), 201-229.

<sup>19</sup> Glaudes, Introduction to *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, p. 425.

battles long and fondly remembered.<sup>20</sup> Maistre's interlocutors also share an educative goal, with the younger man eager to learn from his elders, and the older men happy to teach him. The full truth the three seek, of course, being divine, cannot be grasped completely. But the very form of the dialogues, each of which offers a collection of fragmentary insights into a whole, expresses the organicism that Maistre opposed to the mechanistic rationalism of the Enlightenment – and that explains also why he wrote essays rather than treatises.<sup>21</sup> In combining a pedagogical objective with a meandering courtship of truth, essays, like conversation and its manifold digressions, eschew the treatise's attempt to subsume a diverse reality under a rational mechanics. They offer, instead, a pre-romantic and imaginative ideal of the search for truth that springs from respect for variation and particularity. It is an ideal rooted in awe: the three friends' exchanges are doomed never to end because, as all three know, it is impossible to exhaust the secrets of Providence.<sup>22</sup>

Maistre's methods for enlivening the written word exceeded even his conversational antics. His rhetoric is well known also for its terseness – for what Lamartine called his 'brief' and Steiner his 'lapidary' style – which, along with the Maistrian mimicry of conversation, was likewise copied by admirers, notably Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet (1815-1880) and Pierre Boutang (1916-1998). Pithiness, of course, has the advantage of avoiding the ignominies of verbosity – the surest sign of the philosophical falsehood, moral corruption and creative impotence that Maistre detected in eighteenth-century discourse. Even more, pithiness can become elegant conciseness, the quality that Maistre most admired in the prose of the *grand siècle*, truer and closer to the divine in what it managed to leave unsaid – or rather, in what it managed to intimate by not saying – than in what it actually said. This is one reason that the Count and the Senator of *Les soirées* energetically refuse to weary and oppress their listeners with the interminable speeches that could so easily show off their abundant erudition.<sup>23</sup> It is a last, yet crucial, vestige of the old salon ambition to be agreeable to others that remains in the midst of Maistre's spiritual and scholarly sobriety.

Epigrammatic grace too was what Maistre marveled at in Latin, which he was horrified to see everywhere replaced with the vernacular. *Du*

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<sup>20</sup> Maistre, Letter to the Marquise de Priero, August 1805, *OC*, ix, 444.

<sup>21</sup> Glaudes, Introduction to *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, p. 430.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

*pape* mourned the vanishing of Latin inscriptions from public places: '[i]nstead of that noble laconism, you will read tales in vernacular language. The marble condemned to babble weeps the language that gave it that beautiful style that had a name among all other styles, and that, from the stone upon which it had established itself, threw itself into the memories of all men.'<sup>24</sup> Maistre's emphasis on memorability suggests another reason why he forged his posterity with a written orality. The folly of revolutionary leaders was to believe that writing was *real*, rather than the pathetically dissonant and enfeebled echo of that higher Word that is alone operative; and that passing laws was all that was needed to make them be respected. Maistre's terse scripting was hence a bid to prove – with the paradox that nearly always enveloped his thoughts – that the spoken human language that was a degraded version of God's own could engrave itself in hearts everlastingly like the true natural law. For when they carried truth, the spoken word and its succinct written analogue were endowed with an eternity absent from Enlightenment dissertations, philosophic gibberish, revolutionary debates, and the tiring blathering of salons that were havens of flattery.

In short, if hard marble could no longer shelter brevity, Maistre's pamphlets and lyrical dialogues could. As genres that elevated conversation over dissertation, they had something of the constantly unfinished and occasional about them that made them natural containers of the unspeakable.

### III

Maistre the pamphleteer was only one of many writing personas that he adopted during the twenty-eight years that he inhabited history.<sup>25</sup> Self-deployment, naturally, is the lot of any writer, whose task, postmodernists assure us, is invariably to perform. Yet Maistre's scriptural theatrics were exceptionally varied and intense. As Richard Lebrun and Pierre Glaudes remind us in this volume, the publication of Maistre's correspondence in the 1850s surprised the public, revealing an affectionate, sensitive and

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<sup>24</sup> Maistre, *Du pape*, ed. by Jacques Lovie and Joannès Chetail (Geneva, 1966), p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> I am counting from the invasion of Savoie by the French Revolutionary army in September 1792 to Maistre's death in February 1821.

humane individual never disclosed by the fulminating *doctrinaire* that he always played in his essays, pamphlets and dialogues. Cara Camcastle likewise discovers very different Maistres – who are nonetheless aspects of the same Maistre – when she compares his philosophical writings with the memoirs, letters and reports of Maistre the advisor, administrator and diplomat.<sup>26</sup>

The reasons for the wide divergence between these personas are various. Foremost among them is Maistre's relationship to language. Steiner has called him a 'logocrat' – a rare, esoteric believer not only in the transcendental nature and divine origin of language, but also in language's autonomous *moulding* of humankind.<sup>27</sup> A new paradox arises here. For Maistre's prose impresses precisely by his mastery of it, by the way he casts and forges and pours it along the channels he has devised for it. Indeed in his dominance of French, in his deep knowledge of it and in his ability to make it uniquely his own, he is – like many other great writers – a translator's nightmare.

And yet Maistre believed that human beings can neither invent nor dominate language, but only serve it. His masterful adoption of radically different personas in his writings is ironically explicable by his certainty that humanity is made to serve the word. Divinely instituted, language is not a human creation. Like history itself, it is fashioned by Providence. Maistre therefore sees himself as the mere employer of the various linguistic instruments – dead or alive, written or spoken – that he finds at his disposal. After the fall into writing, being a pamphleteer versus a letter writer is not a question of dissembling versus authenticity for him, but rather of becoming the humble tool of whatever Providence has arranged.

The dogmatic persona Maistre cultivated in his published writings also enabled him to keep faith with the ethic of the *Discours sur le caractère extérieur du magistrat*. Revolution or no, Maistre never wavered in his conviction that if the first duty of magistrates is to be just, the second is to appear so. In a political theory of unity and order that denounced the dissensions of discussion, certainty had to be at least simulated in public in order to keep the collective faith alive. Maistre's authoritarian persona hence served exactly the same purpose as his conversational and lapidary style: it was a means of conveying the infallible – ever paradoxically – through unstable writing, of announcing

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<sup>26</sup> Camcastle, *The More Moderate Side of Joseph de Maistre: Views on Political Liberty and Political Economy* (Montreal & Kingston, 2005), p. xvi.

<sup>27</sup> See Steiner, *Les logocrates* (Paris, 2008).

the certainty that Descartes insisted always distinguishes the true by concealing it in a performance.

Not that Maistre's writing was solely a show. A comparison of his works and letters, published writings and manuscripts suggests – postmodern qualms regardless – that authenticity, at least as he conceived it, ran through his personas. And probably no one will be surprised if I propose that the most authentic of these personas are those that emerge in his personal letters. As Glaudes reminds us in this volume, Maistre rejoiced in thinking of correspondence as 'pure conversations' between friends. The description is thought-provoking. The reference to purity conjures the flawless language that Thurston insists forever haunted Maistre's imagination. As for conversation, it not only approximates the spoken *logos* that in Maistre's thought conveyed the Word most pristinely, but evokes also the Platonic dialogue, that road to divine truth that he believed to be the straightest yet traced by humans, and which he emulated in *Les soirées*.

In real life Maistre's conversation was probably less collaborative. Contemporaries who heard him speak were enraptured, and even those who wished to remain indifferent wrote of him admiringly as a friendly dazzler, a moral captor, an intellectual seducer. 'I would not like to spend one week speaking tête-à-tête with him,' wrote S. Zikhariev (1788-1860), 'because he would make of me a disciple straightaway. He has intelligence to spare, treasures of erudition, speaks like Cicero, with so much persuasion that it is impossible not to let oneself be carried away by the demonstration.' His conversation is 'varied, lively and engaging.'<sup>28</sup> Aleksandr Stourdza (1791-1854) was similarly impressed:

M. de Maistre was without question the most memorable character of the place and time in which we were living, I mean the court of Emperor Alexander and the period between 1807 and 1820 [...]

We were all ears when, sitting on a sofa, with his head high, [...] the count abandoned himself to the limpid flow of his eloquence, laughed with a good heart, argued gracefully, and animated the conversation by governing it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre: Etude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un matérialiste mystique* (Travaux d'histoire éthico-politique, no. 14, Geneva, 1968), p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 305. On Stourdza's view of Maistre, see also Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, p. 183 and n. 31.

Thus did Maistre live out his belief that man in dialogue is called to imitate the Logos. He did it perhaps too well. When he was expelled from St Petersburg in 1817, it was for converting Russian nobles to Catholicism, presumably during sessions like those described by Zikhariev and Stourdza.

If speech enlivened Maistre's texts, writing also infused his conversations. Maistre intended his works as instruments for building intimate political communities. It was an attitude that dovetailed well with his royalism. Suspicious of the floods of public writing that the Revolution had started, monarchists of the Napoleonic age were fond of circulating manuscripts within families and among circles of friends. Thus Madame de Genlis (1746-1830), Madame Legroing de La Maisonneuve (1764-1837), and the characters of their novels, all critical of what Maistre called the 'rage for distinction,' wrote moral tales and plays intended only for their friends, their families, and the children they taught,<sup>30</sup> and if Maistre allowed manuscripts to accumulate in his portfolio year after year, it was because he wrote them for people he knew. Indeed his deep sense that texts are ever private, no matter how theoretical their content, helps to explain why he was beside himself when Lamartine published his letters on religion without permission; and why the news that Bonald had done the same with his *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* (1814) distressed him greatly.<sup>31</sup> The revolutionary age was a time when the boundaries between public and private textuality were dangerously fluid, when the public threatened to invade all writing and become the final and sole standard of its worth. It is ironically symbolic of this development that every year of the Russian campaign against Napoleon, when Rodolphe was at the front, he and Maistre numbered their letters to each other to keep track of them, and referred to them as one would to a journal's issues.

In the end, Maistre the writer saw himself employing a language much closer to God's in his letters – the continued publication of which, to this day, would perhaps have grieved him – than in any other kind of writing. His correspondence – and especially his personal correspondence – was the form of written communication that allowed him to be most truly himself, freeing him, however slightly, from the state of hypocrisy that he believed to be the lot of humankind, and especially of the portion

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<sup>30</sup> See François Cattois, *Notice historique sur Mme Legroing de La Maisonneuve. Extrait de la biographie universelle, tome 71* (1842).

<sup>31</sup> See his account of the incident in Maistre to Lamennais, 1 May 1820, *OC*, xiv, 227.

of it that lived and wrote through the Revolution. Letter-writing, from this perspective, resembled redemption.

## IV

The papers collected in this volume show us Maistre in a new light as a thinker whose remarkable writing and reflective skills were sharpened by his entrance into history. His epistolary personas, his lifelong pamphleteering, the contradiction between his spite of the written word and his abundant authorship – all these themes reveal a man whom history broke into unforgettable, ironic and sometimes violent writing. Rousseau famously declared that it is not possible to be at once a man and a citizen, because natural man must be shattered by the education that will teach him to become a fragment of the social whole. Maistre ridiculed Rousseau's notion of natural man unsparingly, conceiving of humanity as naturally sociable and therefore rifted by default. Nor did he have any use for Rousseauist utopias in the Augustinian world he saw around him, dwelt in by beings he deemed too evil to be free. Yet his own entrance into history was accompanied by the sort of wrecking of the individual that Rousseau described.

This process prompted Maistre to reflect on human dividedness, and left traces in what Roland Barthes would have called the flavour of his writing. The relatively peaceful homogeneity of Maistre's pre-revolutionary compositions reveal a man who had 'prevaricated' less – to use his own Martinist vocabulary – than the middle-aged enemy of the Revolution. Even the personal correspondence of his later years is marked by extreme anxieties absent from the carefree, fun-loving, youthful letters Glaudes describes. Indeed much of the rhetorical violence and sublimity for which Maistre has been alternately admired and condemned may be traced to what he himself understood as the Providential process of severing selves that the Revolution propelled. The spirit of the Terror lives on in his pages.

In closing, this is the first volume to examine systematically Maistre's writing personas, his style and the intimate links between his thought and his rhetorical self-presentation. This epilogue has leant on the papers assembled here to attempt a reflection on the relationship between Maistrian rhetoric and the French Revolution – a subject that deserves further investigation. Hopefully, future research will ponder also that



broader phenomenon that so arrested Cioran – the connection between early conservatism and the ability to write immortally.



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