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The Historical Thought of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821)

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Abstract

As a founder of conservatism, Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) made crucial contributions to historical thinking. Conceptualising history both as a conduit of human self-improvement and as a criterion of philosophical judgment, his conservatism was irretrievably historical. His theories of constitutions and of European government depended on a model of institutional development across time. His epistemology, historicised knowledge, and his sociology of violence posited that history arises out of the self. This paper reconstructs Maistre's historical thought by gathering together the five strands of it that he developed throughout his career, from his early essays on Rousseau to his posthumous mystical works. The aim is to describe the origins of a Francophone tradition of historical thought that crossed political boundaries easily and that has remained unexplored until now.

I. Introduction

The historical rupture represented by the French Revolution compelled contemporaries to reflect on the nature and meaning of history. For the generation educated in the downfall of a whole world, history was no longer dead and distant, as it had often been for the detached writers of the Enlightenment. It was alive in blood and fire.¹ Some who remained religious during those years felt history with particular intensity, awakening suddenly to the fear that God might have abandoned humankind altogether, and that his ways in history must be discovered if faith was to be kept and defended. To many who experienced the Revolution, history properly understood revealed Providence's designs. This paper focuses on the historical thought of a man to whom the Revolution brought profound spiritual anxiety.

Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) may be considered as a founder, if not as *the* founder, of French historical thought. It was he who provided the major theoretical link between the historical philosophies of the French Enlightenment and the liberal historiographies of the French nineteenth century. Although great, his contribution to the theory of history has

remained long obscured, due principally to the fact that the majority of French theorists and practitioners of history in the nineteenth century (Guizot, Michelet, Mignet, Quinet, Thierry, Thiers) were associated with the left, so that their historical philosophical ancestry has generally been assumed to lie exclusively in Enlightenment historiography and historical philosophy.² But a crucial intermediate – the one that turned history into the measure, rather than the mere object, of philosophical reflection – lay between Enlightenment and early liberal historiography. The Revolutionary hiatus forced the birth of a historical speculation that presented itself as neither Enlightened nor liberal, but that had intellectual origins in the Enlightenment and a posterity among its descendants. This was the historical vision of early conservatism.

From the point of view of the association between ideas, it makes sense that conservatism and historicism should form an alliance at birth. As Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) observed, conservative thinking is historical thinking. There is a certain inclination toward the concrete, combined with a taste for what is rather than what ought to be, that renders conservatism particularly prone to expressing itself in historical terms.³ The revolutionary variety of conservatism represented by Maistre – a variety uninvested in the past – was well suited to lay down the unseen historical bridge between the Enlightenment and French left-wing thought. Deeply steeped in the Enlightenment, Maistre's theory of history crossed political boundaries with remarkable ease, to the point that it became best known, and most belaboured, among the heirs of Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825).

A decrier of philosophical systems, Maistre never attempted to craft a comprehensive theory of history. Describing his historical thought is therefore often an exercise in the recovery of the implicit. But his historical reflections continually inform, and may be retrieved from, five different strands of his thought: his constitutionalism, his epistemology, his Europeanism, his theory of sacrifice, and his mystical thought. It is the historicising tendencies implicit in these various aspects of his philosophy that I attempt to sketch in what follows. The exercise is frequently one in the recovery of the implicit. Once complete, however, it reveals a historical thought heretofore unknown, that founded Francophone attitudes to history and grew in complete independence from better known developments in contemporary Germany.

II. Conscience, Providence, and the History of Nations

The political aspects of Maistre's historical thought are contained *in potentia* in the theory of constitutions that he developed in 1794-6, when he responded to the Terror by writing *De l'état de nature* and *De la souveraineté du peuple*, two refutations of Rousseau. Together, these essays certify that Maistre's politics was born simultaneously with, and is inseparable from, his philosophy of history. The essays were only published posthumously, when his *Oeuvres complètes* began appearing in 1884, but they informed thoroughly the

political philosophy popularized in the *Considérations sur la France* (1797), the pamphlet where he exposed, in brief and vivid style, the conclusions of his study of Rousseau.

De l'état de nature, a critique of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* (1754), lays the groundwork for historicising Rousseau's social philosophy. It does so in two theoretical moves. The first of these psychologises justice by appealing to the idea of conscience that Rousseau restored to the forefront of philosophy:

The laws of justice and of the moral good are engraved in our souls in indelible characters, and the most abominable criminal invokes them every day. See these two robbers who wait for a traveller in the forest; they massacre him, they strip him: the one takes his watch, the other his box, but the box is adorned with diamonds: 'IT IS NOT JUST!' cries out the first, we must share equally.' O divine conscience, your sacred voice does not cease to make itself heard: always it will make us blush for what we are, always it will warn us of what we can be.⁴

Every man knows justice and the good viscerally, intuitively, without need of reason, even while he chooses to deceive himself. It is an intimate sense with historical consequences. In Maistre's thought, history oscillates between tranquil periods when humans obey their conscience, and periods of regenerative punishment when they break God's laws.⁵ The French Revolution has brought divine retribution in terrorizing intensity because it is a time when conscience has been forsaken. Even the victims are guilty. "How few Frenchmen there are," writes Maistre, "among those who are called the innocent victims of the Revolution, to whom their conscience has been able to say: Now, seeing the sad fruits of your errors/Recognize the blows you have directed."⁶

The suffocation of conscience, in turn, results in subjugation by desire. "It is not men who lead the Revolution," Maistre announces famously in the *Considérations*, "it is the Revolution that uses men."⁷ Having spent all its passions, "France no longer desires anything with a passion, except repose."⁸ Herein lies the psychological source of historical fluctuation. As passion flares and exhausts itself, ages of turbulence are followed by ages of tranquility, revealing that history is produced by two antithetical principles: conscience, and the stifling of conscience.

These two principles have a historically active counterpart in divine Providence, Maistre's second key to historicising Rousseau's philosophy. A historical agent, Providence differs from conscience and passion in that, rather than determine human subjectivity, it administers circumstances. Again contesting Rousseau, Maistre writes in *De l'état de nature*:

[Rousseau] sees two isolated savages who, walking each on their way, happen to meet and take a fancy to living together: he says they

meet by chance. He sees a seed detached from a bush and falling on a soil disposed to fertilize it; he sees another savage who, observing the seed's fall and the germination that follows it, receives in this way the first lesson in agriculture: he says that the grain has fallen by chance, that the savage has seen it by chance; and, as it is not necessary for this man to meet another, or for this seed to fall, he calls these events accidental cases that might not have happened. [...] Without examining whether one can say and to what extent one can say that what happens might not have happened, it is at least certain that the Creator's general plans are invariable: consequently, if man is made for society, this savage may well not meet another; but in general savages will have to meet [...]. If agriculture is proper to man, it is quite possible for this seed not to fall on this ground; but it is impossible for agriculture not to be discovered in one way or another.⁹

We have here one of the earliest theoretical statements of the “taming of chance” that Ian Hacking has observed developing at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ In 1797, the tenets of *De l'état de nature* were popularized with the publication of the *Considérations sur la France*. In 1798, just one year later, the Directory began to practice moral statistics on a mass scale for the first time in history.¹¹ The temporal proximity is suggestive. For our purposes, however, what matters is that in re-theorizing nature – or, more precisely, Providence-as-nature – as an administrator of expedience, *De l'état de nature* provided the aetiology of a new historical theory.

De la souveraineté du peuple explained how the natural and providential causes discussed in *De l'état de nature* are realized in the history of national constitutions. *De la souveraineté* presents nations' history – in a manner similar to the history of savages – as its struggle through the centuries to arrive, by responding to the circumstances dealt to it by God, at its optimal constitutional combination:

Let us consult history: we will see that each nation agitates itself and fumbles around until a certain reunion of circumstances places it more precisely in the situation convenient to it: then she displays all of a sudden all her faculties at once, she shines with all kinds of brilliance, she is all that she can be, and no one has ever seen a nation come back to this state, after having fallen away from it.

A nation interacts blindly with happenstance and circumstance according to its character, until it finds the situation most expedient to it. It then deploys its particular constitutional combination to its full potential. This happens only once, for the simple reason that each nation has only one character; that the dice, cast by God, keep rolling; and that the

intellectual force that once moved the nation upward tends to spend itself after a certain point; so that, geometrically, a nation's historical progress may be charted by a parabola:

The highest point for a nation is that where its intellectual force reaches its maximum at the same time as its physical force: and this point, determined by the state of the language, has never happened more than once for each nation. It is true that the point I speak of is not an indivisible point, and that it is susceptible of more and less. In this way, in order not to get lost in subtleties, if one represents the grandeur and decadence of the Roman people by a parabola, Augustus is at the peak, and his reign occupies a certain portion of the upper side of the curve; one descends on one side to Terentius and Plautus, on the other to Tacitus; there genius finishes; there barbarity begins; the strength continues along the two branches, but always diminishing; it is born with Romulus.¹²

Once a nation has reached the high point of its intellectual faculties, regeneration is not possible. Rather

nations, going through their period of degradation, may have, from time to time, certain impetuses of force and grandeur that are themselves in decreasing progression, as during ordinary times. In this way, the Roman empire, in its decline, was great under Trajan, yet less so than under Augustus; it shone under Theodosius, but less than under Constantine; in the end, it had great moments even under the pedant Julian and under Heraclius, but the declining progression went its pace and did not change its law.¹³

Nations also ascend in fits and starts – like France, whose suffering under the unhappy reigns that preceded Louis XIV's "must be categorized with those painful jolts that perfect them during their progressive periods, and push them toward the highest point of their grandeur."¹⁴ In the end, like everything human, the moral force, the vigor that propels nations along – the collective equivalent of conscience – spends itself and loses the game against chance. Then younger, stronger nations come to assist the death of the old, usually by conquest. And the cycle is renewed.

Rousseau is the reference point even here. For Maistre's theory of constitutions historicises Rousseau's claim, in Chapter 11 of Book III of *Du contrat social*, that all nations perish, no matter how they are designed.

III. The Progress of Knowledge

The *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, written during 1809-16 and posthumously published in 1836, provides the psychological foundations of Maistre's theory of history through a model of the acquisition of knowledge across time. Maistre's main purpose in writing the *Examen* was to prove that, in developing a scientific method in his *Novum Organum* (1620), Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had been wrong to craft a "new instrument" of knowledge retrieval. Mind and world, held Maistre, were perfectly suited to each other and providentially designed to connect, so intermediaries between them were unnecessary and impossible.

Furthermore – and again contrary to Bacon – conjecture was not only permissible but also indispensable in epistemology. "[T]he art of conjecture is the most distinctive character of the man of genius in all genres,"¹⁵ Maistre avers with Bernoulli, and the foundation of all science. Instead of certifying truth by comparing experiences, or by applying corrective methods, as Bacon suggested, one should approach truth through conjecture and inference. It is these mental operations, and not the corrective comparison of experiences, that achieves certainty *in time*. In fact, scientific progress is the product of the continual inferences of various minds:

There is in things a natural movement that the least observation renders visible [...] Sciences [...] are born one of the other, by the sole force of things. It is impossible, for example, to cultivate arithmetic for a long time without having some kind of algebra, and it is impossible to have an algebra without coming to some kind of infinitesimal calculus [...] Can one even reflect upon the generation of curves without being driven to infer sizes smaller than all finite size? [...] I know absolutely nothing of differential calculus, but it must be something that has to do with these ideas and, since they have come to me so often, how could they elude professional mathematicians? It is then without any knowledge of the human mind that one attributes to this or that collection of precepts a progress that results from the very nature of things and from the movement impressed upon minds.¹⁶

Far from producing uncertain knowledge, conjecture approximates certainty by accumulating knowledge uniformly. The conjecturing mind, remembering the viable and inviable results of its inferences, develops instinctually and becomes ever more skilled at probability calculation. Overtime, conjecture's successful ventures are stored in a collective repository of scientific knowledge accessed by succeeding generations. No critical, methodical induction or extraneous epistemological instrument of any kind is necessary to

sieve the wheat from the chaff because conjecture is self-corrective. Science proceeds from the nature of knowledge: by nature truth is durable, and by nature error fails the test of time.

Just like national development, however, knowledge acquisition is not a linear process, because human beings do not fully control it. Although the love of knowledge and the ability to conjecture both help humans to grow wise, Providence the manager of chance also intervenes through “revelation,” the word that Maistre uses to identify not only Scripture, but also unexpected and infrequent discoveries:

[i]nventions of all kinds are rare; they succeed each other slowly and with an apparent strangeness that deceives our weak gazes. The most important inventions, and those best suited to *console* humankind, are due to what is called *chance*, and moreover they have distinguished centuries and peoples quite backward and individuals without culture: one can cite on this point the compass, gunpowder, printing and the magnifying glass. Is it *legitimate induction* and *the method of exclusion* that have given us quinine, ipecacuanha, mercury, vaccines, etc.? It is superfluous to observe, regarding these gifts of chance, that they could not be subjected to any rule; there is surely no method for finding what one is not looking for.¹⁷

In other words, “[c]ertain things are *sold* to man, and others are *given* to him” by Providence to console him for his ignorance.¹⁸ The knowledge “*sold*” to man is identical with empirical knowledge of particulars, that is, with that knowledge which man must conjecture in order to acquire. The knowledge “*given*” to man by divine grace, by contrast, is the knowledge of universals with which man is born, but which is also obscure to him – in consonance with his fallen status – until he starts looking for it.

The relationship between God and humanity is mirrored in the history of knowledge. Ages of creation are spiritual times like the *grand siècle*, prolific in discoveries, in literature and philosophy, when individual minds, loving God, discover; and when religious institutions, socially respected, dispense truth efficiently.¹⁹ Ages of dissertation, fundamentally critical in character, are most notably represented by the eighteenth century. Having lost intimacy with God, such times are unable to “exalt and direct” talents and merely discourse on what the past has revealed. They manufacture discord and distribute falsehood.²⁰ They are the evil times of the science that Maistre deplores, necessary misadventures on the historical return to God. In this respect, and insofar as Maistre thought of history as the story of human suffering,²¹ ages of dissertation are the most historical of times. That Maistre mourned them, then, suggests – as we shall see – that he theorized history for the purpose of leaving it.

IV. The History of Europe

Labored on between 1809 and 1819, *Du pape* can be read as a treatise on European government. Its subject was appropriate for its times: the early 1800s were a high point of Christian Europeanism. The de-Christianisation campaigns of the French Revolution once finished, they were followed by attempts, on the part of Christians and secular thinkers alike, to re-valorize Christianity's contribution to European civilization and culture. Inaugurating Romantic medievalism, Protestants like Madame de Staël²² and Novalis²³ celebrated the "spiritual kingdom" that Europe had been during the Middle Ages, while Catholic conservatives – Bonald,²⁴ Chateaubriand²⁵ – idealized medieval Europe from a social, political and aesthetic point of view. Nor did secular thinkers remain indifferent to the *Zeitgeist*: Saint-Simon and Thierry²⁶ celebrated medieval Europe as a social model to be replicated and surpassed. In addition, Maistre's Europeanism was inspired by the fervent mystical Europeanism of Pietistic origin that was ablaze in the St Petersburg where *Du pape* was composed, and that would culminate in the signing of the Holy Alliance of 1814. Critical of both Pietism and the Orthodox Church, which he saw as Catholicism's competitors in Russia, Maistre set out in *Du pape* to prove the superiority of Catholicism by presenting European culture as a product of the papal political strategies.

Du pape's theory of European political history hinges on two libertarian claims: the first, that in founding European monarchy the popes created a government rendered free by the struggle between spiritual and temporal powers; and that the Christian clergy made major and historically unprecedented contributions to the culture of civil liberty. Given Maistre's reputation as an absolutist and authoritarian, it may seem surprising that he postulates Europe as the land of liberty. The surprise dispels, however, upon reflecting that, paradoxically, European Christian liberty in *Du pape* is made possible by the infallibility of Christ's vicar, that is, by his double absoluteness as a spiritual and temporal sovereign. The Catholic Church he governs possesses a machine-like rationality – the very one attributed to monarchies by Montesquieu²⁷ – that has emerged across the centuries and enabled ecclesial sovereignty to grow continuously. But the beginnings of this reason were difficult. In the early church, Maistre notes, councils met frequently. Ordered mostly by Greek emperors, they were intermittent powers that took away from sovereignty that constancy of life, action and vigilance without which it is no longer, since "for [it] there is no difference between sleep and death."²⁸ But councils became rarer with time and retained legality only when the pope presided them and approved of their decisions. Ecclesiastical sovereignty augmented with their infrequency. And uniquely, it did so in a linear and continuous fashion. Whereas all human groups and powers follow the parabolic trajectory of birth, growth, apotheosis, decline, and death that characterises the Maistrian history of nations, the church betrays its divine origins in being the only institution that has always grown imperturbably across the centuries and shown no signs of decay.

Once this consummately rational sovereignty was no longer disturbed by the passions of councils, it was in a position to create another sovereignty, less rational than itself but more law-bound than any previous temporal power. Leo III's crowning of Charlemagne in 800 announced the birth of a new race of kings bound by divine law, and the creation of an unprecedented political convention. A new kind of sovereign had arisen who was subservient to the law. As Maistre emphasised in *De la souveraineté*, antiquity and Asia never "disputed to kings the right to condemn to death,"²⁹ but no European would hesitate to accuse of crime a king who executes arbitrarily. Providence balances everything. The despot may sever his subjects' heads at leisure, but his own head is often required in exchange for his excesses. By contrast, the European monarch is sacrosanct, yet obliged by law to respect his subjects' lives, and incorporate their advice and protestations into the process of government.³⁰ The king's power is limited by a moral and religious opinion that he is always expected to uphold. The catch, of course, is that he may choose to ignore this opinion impudently, and on this point the early Maistre is in accord with Bodinian absolutism.

The political thought of *Du pape*, however, is no longer compatible with absolutism, and expounds a rather weak variety of authoritarianism. The book's politics are premised on the assumption that sovereign oppression sometimes becomes so great as to be unbearable for a people – as happened in 1809, the year that Maistre began composing *Du pape*, and that Gustav IV was deposed as king of Sweden. Gustav's deposition could not be helped: he was mad. But even in cases like his, the people should not undertake to depose the sovereign, since government, Maistre reasoned – in accordance with his thesis that popular sovereignty is impossible³¹ – would cease to exist by that very act, making bloodshed a probability. Instead, a foreign and neutral power should be able to mediate between the people and their sovereign, to ensure that, if a deposition had to happen, it would do so legally and peacefully. The popes of the present, then, may be able to depose kings just as the popes of the past created them. In this spirit, *Du pape* provides a mock-petition addressed to the pontiff by the Swedish people, asking him to mediate between them and their unfortunate monarch, who reigns only for their perdition.³² *Du pape*'s church, in short, has become a revolutionary machine, and its popes the Robespierres of the future. In parallel, *Du pape*'s European king is no longer the absolutist who can ignore his subjects' ill opinions: he is a creature of Revolution whose abuses can land him in front of a tribunal. These are all signs that *Du pape* has abandoned the apocalyptic eschatology – or the belief that one should wait for divine action – that characterized the early conservatism of the *Considérations*, for a new, revolutionary variety of conservatism that calls on men to play God's roles. Otherwise put, it has abandoned Counter-revolution for Anti-revolution.³³

The papal dispensation of sovereignty is thus not a pious exercise, a sign of reactionary nostalgia for medieval times. It is a revolutionary move, made by following revolutionary logic. It is an attempt to enhance the historical role of reason and minimize that of passion; to render spiritual ages long and critical ages short; to make the parabolas that define the history of nations look more and more like the ascending line that models the history of the

church; to save kings from themselves, and God's freedom from Caesar's tyranny; to ease, finally, the arrival of the Christian unity that will mark history's end.

V. The Self, Sacrifice, and History

The histories of nations, knowledge, and the church express what Maistre deems to be the deep cause of history, the ultimate source of its emanation – humanity's divided self. The geography of the self and its relationship with time are major subjects of the *Éclaircissement sur les sacrifices* (finished 1809, and published 1821). This little text reflects on Greek myth, borrows from Augustine, and elaborates ancient Platonic and illuminist anthropologies to develop a theory of human beings as split into body, soul, and spirit. According to Maistre, the spirit, rising up to the universal and moving toward unity, brings humankind to perform its duty without hesitation. Homer says that Zeus, having determined to make a hero victorious, has weighed his decision “*in his spirit*; he is *one*: there can be no combat within him.” But the soul, descending toward the particular, moves to sever man; so that if “long agitated between his duty and his passion [a] man has been on the point of committing an inexcusable violence, he has deliberated *in his soul and in his spirit*.”³⁴ The body alone is passive, the object for whose control spirit and soul contest. The “primitive and universal degradation” that the men of all centuries have ceaselessly confessed derives from the fact that being two, at once wanting and not wanting, loving and hating evil, attracted and repelled by the same object, humanity cannot possibly be true to itself or about itself: it must necessarily be duplicitous, lying to God, to others and to itself. Hence the cry of Augustine, confessing the command that old ghosts still wielded over his soul:

Then, Lord! Am I ME? No, without doubt (replies Maistre), he was not HE, and no one knew it better than HE, who tells us in the same place: *there is such a difference between MYSELF and MYSELF*.³⁵

Pascal had recently picked up this Augustinian (and originally Platonic) idea of the human contradiction, commenting that the “*so visible*” “*duplicity of man*” had led some to believe that we have “*two souls*.” Maistre criticizes this point, observing that the difficulty is not to explain the “*sudden varieties*” of a “simple subject” as Pascal claimed, but his “simultaneous oppositions.”³⁶ The point may seem pedantic, but can make a big difference to historical explanation. A mercurial character like Pascal's is developmentally unconstrained. But a subject consistently incongruous carries within her the paradox necessary for the generation of history: she is a vessel, so to speak, of concentrated time.

When collectively experienced, these states of unity and division give rise to overlapping sets of ages. We have already encountered them: the ages of dissertation and discovery described in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, the phases of shackled suffering and liberated tranquillity that in the *Considérations sur la France* succeed each

other through time and are governed, respectively, by passion and the desire for repose. The *Éclaircissement sur les sacrifices* finally identifies the mechanism of these alternations and the motor of history, in the economy of violence that guides all human endeavours. Freedom, discovery, and social order follow from the mastery of the passions are mastered, that is, during times when humanity's inherent violence is controlled through sacrifice. Dissertations, slavery, and destruction derive from the unleashing of the passions, or from the contrary of sacrifice. Historically, tranquil ages are paradigmatically represented by the *grand siècle*, which Maistre admires with the Enlightenment,³⁷ and regards as the apotheosis of the *ancien régime*; whereas the French Revolution is the most destructive of ages and as such represents the consummate anti-sacrifice.

The economy of violence, however, does not just generate historical alternations. Overtime, it also directs history toward the good, and it does so for reasons rooted in sacrifice's social, moral, and spiritual effects. As Maistre defines it, sacrifice necessarily involves the offering of sentient beings, of spiritually active victims whose utility, docility, capacity for self-mastery and predisposition to self-annihilation ensure the efficacy of their offering. Significantly, Maistre points out, the ancients never immolated wild beasts, beasts of prey, serpents, fish, stupid animals, or animals alien to humankind. Rather, "among animals, the most precious for their utility were always chosen, the sweetest [*les plus doux*], the most innocent, the ones closest to man by their instincts and habits [...] the most *human* victims, if one may express oneself in this way."³⁸ The *douceur* of these victims, who tended not to resist, or at least to resist less than others, the violence done to them, had the effect of maximizing the communal unity that sacrifice attained.

The history of sacrifice reached a major turning-point with Christ's arrival, because Christ was the ultimate *doux* victim. He differed from all previous victims in that he not only did not resist death, but willed it. Unmatched before or since, in either its nature or its results, his self-immolation was supremely efficacious because it was voluntarily dolorous. The Crucifixion instituted a new law of sacrifice. It marked the birth of a new kind of victim who strives to actually *become* the Christ in the act of martyrdom, whether literal or moral. Unlike the enemies and prisoners who were often immolated in ancient sacrifices, the Christian sufferer is a willing one, and in desiring not only death itself but the many deaths of suffering, he is not only *doux*, but capable of overcoming evil:

Under the empire of [the] divine law, the just man (who never believes that he is [just]) [...] tries to approach his model the painful way. He examines himself, he purifies himself, he makes on himself efforts that seem to surpass humanity, to obtain finally the grace of being able to *return what he has not stolen*.³⁹

Herein lies the great difference between pre-Christian and Christian sacrifice: the latter is bloodless and purely inward, performed by anyone at any time. Its new pervasiveness and

efficaciousness lend it great historic powers as a means of diminishing the oscillations – and the suffering – associated with history. Even more, as instituted in the Mass, Christian sacrifice is the eschatological machine that returns the universe to God:

Like the word, which is nothing in the material realm but a series of circular undulations excited in the air, and similar on all imaginable planes to those which we perceive on the surface of the water struck at a point; as that word [...] arrives still in all its mysterious integrity, to every ear touched at every point of the agitated fluid, in the same way the corporeal essence of him who is called *word*, radiating from the centre of the all-power, which is everywhere, enters whole into each mouth, and multiplies to infinity without dividing. Quicker than lightning, more active than thunder, the *theandric* blood penetrates the *guilty entrails* to devour their blemishes. It reaches to the unknown confines of those two powers irreconcilably united where *the impulses of the heart* collide with intelligence and trouble it. By a true divine affinity, it seizes man's elements and transforms them without destroying them.⁴⁰

This is why the Catholic Church will phase out the historical law of alternativity and extend God's word to the whole world.

VI. Envisioning the Future

Maistre was particularly preoccupied with the end days because he spent most of his creative years in St Petersburg in the early 1800s, when Slavic and Pietist eschatologies were in full swing. At the court of Alexander I, there was talk that partitioned Poland, the nation-grain that God had called to be resurrected, would give birth to the Slavic nation and renew world Christianity. There was also talk of the arrival of a redeemer who would usher in a new spiritual age. The Senator, one of the three friends whose conversations make up *Les soirées*, speaks of a “third explosion of all-powerful goodness in favour of humanity”⁴¹ when “the natural affinity of religion and science will unite [...] in the head of a single man of genius,” perhaps already born, who will put an end to “the eighteenth century that still endures.”⁴² Then “all of science will change its appearance: the spirit, long dethroned and forgotten, will return to its place,” and the dawning empire of intuition will be marked by the recognition of ancient truths.⁴³ The late Maistre, then, was a proponent of sapiential eschatology, of the belief that the world of cultural consciousness as we now know it will be brought to an end through its response to an enlightened teacher.⁴⁴ The belief illustrates his change of views. It was a new belief for him. When he was debuting as a pamphleteer in the *Considérations*, he had been an apocalyptic eschatologist. He had looked with awe upon the workings of Providence, and waited patiently for God to act and speak. This was the attitude

proper to Counter-revolution, which he depicted as the angelic and antithesis of the “Satanic” Revolution⁴⁵ as the movement that would replace “perpetual and despairing oscillations” with “a certain stability, an indefinable repose, a universal well-being.”⁴⁶

Les soirées, then, places far greater emphasis than the *Considérations* on humanity’s ability to save itself. But it remains a pious text that is shy of drawing the future’s contours precisely. For *Les soirées*’ three friends, the character of prophecy is fundamentally vague. The prophet sees past and future events fusing together, and seeming to take place all at once. His is the state of “great confusion” that the Saviour himself entered when, “delivered voluntarily to the prophetic spirit, the analogous ideas of the great disasters, separated from time, led him to mix up the destruction of Jerusalem with that of the world.”⁴⁷ Among humans, prophecy is the privilege – and the disease – of the exceptionally endowed. But it is an ordinary gift among spirits, who, according to Plato’s *Laws*, are “full of wisdom, intelligence and memory, [know] all our thoughts,” act as “causes of interpretation,” and communicate with us either through “dreams, voices [and] oracles or [by] presenting themselves to us when we leave this life.”⁴⁸ It was a belief that Maistre picked up from Machiavelli, who thought that spirits take pity on us humans and warn us of our future by portending coming misfortunes. By adding their contributions to our natural prophecy, they ensure that all the great events that happen in the world are predicted in one way or another.⁴⁹

We are informed, therefore, of future events; but we are unable to synthesise them into a coherent narrative. This is due to the weakness of human reason, to its irremediable inability to predict completely how Providence will arrange the course of time. And it is the reason why Maistre, like his traditionalist heirs in the nineteenth century – Ballanche, Barbey, Bonnetty, Eckstein, the early Lamennais – sketches only snapshots of the future, meteoric insights into better times, without ever writing them up as a story.

VII. Conclusion

It is symbolically appropriate that Maistre’s theory of history is fragmentary. Keeping his historical intuitions ever implicit, he never weaves them into a grand narrative, remaining especially guarded about the future. He provides flashes of insight into the epochs of history and describes some parts of them in deep detail. But he refuses ferociously to be systematic: for possessing the complete knowledge that belongs to God alone destroys humanity. History itself proves this. According to the Count of *Les soirées*, pre-diluvian humanity, still quasi-angelic yet already sinful, could not stand the immense knowledge and wisdom which God had bestowed upon it, and so fell through crimes beyond our capacity to imagine.⁵⁰ As it sinned, it became more ignorant, and kept losing the divine knowledge it had once possessed. The Flood ensued. In its wake, a new humanity – contemporary civilized humanity – arose. It continues to prevaricate and is ever punished (as it was early on, at Babel). But it is at least aware of its own degradation and, impelled by conscience, yearns for a higher spiritual state. Its task is to reconstruct the primitive revelation through

conscientious study, spiritual self-perfection, and *doux* self-sacrifice, to exhort Providence to speak again, and bestow once more its gifts of knowledge. Humanity, of course, cannot complete the task alone. To succeed, it requires not only the will to know itself and recapture God's knowledge, but also the unpredictable gifts of divine grace, born of God's determination to save humanity. The spurts and starts of discovery made possible by divine endowments – and which defy Bacon's uniform progress – might continue until humans are sufficiently perfected to cease being humans, and fashion themselves into angels.

This irregular Christian narrative of the fall and rehabilitation, so marked by the aleatory, is generated by the law of sacrifice that propels Maistre's history, and that organising it into an oscillation between antithetical ages. Ages of discovery, of order, freedom and tranquillity, more or less overlap. Ages of dissertation, disorder, slavery and revolution, seem likewise more or less equivalent to each other. The former set of ages is governed by sacrifice; the latter, by anti-sacrifice, and the reign of the passions. Because the return to God is an imperative, however, submission and destruction cannot endure equally. Or, more accurately, they may have endured equally in the past, but they cannot do so in the future. The French Revolution has ensured that. As the pinnacle of crisis, as the divine punishment without precedent and without successor, it has turned history into a vehicle of regeneration and reoriented humanity toward God. The characters of *Les soirées* are waiting for a "third explosion of all-powerful goodness," which they expect to be succeeded by a "succession of eternities" that will last until "beyond eternity" when "everything will be consumed."⁵¹ Their vision of ages sliding into eternities – those benign antitheses of suffering history – intimates that, overtime, historical alternation will decrease or be slowed down as ordered and enlightened times become longer, and critical and contentious ones more brief. Political violence will also decrease as a rational church, politicized and instrumentalized in the manner of Revolution, exports to the whole world Europe's free sovereignties bound by divine law. The rest is inscrutable: all that can be known is that a third revelation and a spiritual age of peace will precede the end of history. History is inherently obscure.⁵² This suggests that, if the task of the historian is to adapt her methods to her subjects, it is particularly appropriate to apply to Maistre's historical thought the very reconstructive approach that his fragmentary philosophy encouraged. That is what this paper has attempted to do.

In all, Maistre's theory of history combines a pessimistic, Augustinian vision of humanity as irremediably split and sinful with an astoundingly Pelagian account of its determination and ability to save itself. Unlike most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment – who, in designing utopias, marginalized or ignored the problem of suffering – Maistre confronts suffering directly while hoping that, through history, it will end once and for all. The resulting mixture of profound realism and unbounded hope is one reason for the enduring relevance of his historical thought. And it is an integral, if little explored, aspect of the ultimately revolutionary conservatism he represented.⁵³

Notes

- ¹ Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration* (L'Histoire Series, 2nd edition, Paris, 1963), 337-38.
- ² This assumption underlies Ceri Crossley's *French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simonians, Quinet, Michelet* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- ³ Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Nico Stehr, ed. and trans. David Kettler and Volker Meja (2nd ed., London: Routledge, 1997), 100.
- ⁴ Maistre, *Examen d'un écrit de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, in *Œuvres complètes* [henceforth *OC*] (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), VIII, 565.
- ⁵ Maistre, *OC*, III, 455-60.
- ⁶ Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), 203.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 254. I am grateful to Yohei Kawakami for having brought to my attention the theme of repose in the *Considérations*.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 552-53.
- ¹⁰ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Ideas in Context Series, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- ¹¹ Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, *Déchiffrer la France: La statistique départementale à l'époque napoléonienne* (Paris: Archives contemporaines, 1989), 313.
- ¹² *De la souveraineté du peuple: Un anti-contrat social*, edited by Jean-Louis Darcel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 278n.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27. On conjecture, Bernoulli observed: "In this alone consists all the wisdom of the Philosopher and the prudence of the Statesman." Quoted in Keith Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 158.
- ¹⁶ *OC*, VI, 67.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 471.
- ²⁰ *OC*, III, 455-60.
- ²¹ Maistre, *De la souveraineté*, 232.
- ²² In *De l'Allemagne* (1810).
- ²³ In *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1799).
- ²⁴ In the *Réflexions sur l'intérêt général de l'Europe* (1815).
- ²⁵ In the *Génie du Christianisme* (1802).
- ²⁶ In *De la réorganisation de la société européenne* (1814).
- ²⁷ In Chapter 5 of Book III of *De l'esprit des lois*.
- ²⁸ Maistre, *Du pape*, ed. Jacques Lovie and Joannès Chetail (Geneva: Droz, 1966), 34.
- ²⁹ Maistre, *De la souveraineté du peuple*, 199.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 201-02.
- ³¹ This is the central argument of *De la souveraineté du peuple*.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 195-97.
- ³³ On the distinction between Counter-revolution and Anti-revolution in Maistre's thought, see Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

³⁴ Maistre, *Éclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Œuvres*, 807.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 809-10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 808.

³⁷ On Voltaire's admiration for the *grand siècle* as a high point in French culture, see Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 105.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 813.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 834.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Maistre, *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, 767.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 765.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 766.

⁴⁴ For the distinction between sapiential and apocalyptic eschatology, see John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1998), 8.

⁴⁵ "There is in the French Revolution a *Satanic* character that distinguishes it from everything we have seen, and perhaps from everything that we shall see." See Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, 226.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 763.

⁴⁸ *Extraits G*, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, CD-ROM du Fonds de Maistre, Archives départementales de la Savoie, 1996, 2J16, 29.

⁴⁹ *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, 778-79n.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 485.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 764.

⁵² On the Maistrian concept of the obscurity of history, see Jean-Yves Pranchère, "The Negative of the Enlightenment, the Positive of Order, and the Impossible Positivity of History," in *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*, ed. Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun, *SVEC* 2011:1, 45-64.

⁵³ I'm very grateful to Ken Tsutsumibayashi, Kei Numao, and the audience at the conference "Designing Governance for Civil Society" held at Keio University on 20-21 November 2011, for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.