

Confronting the Darkness of Enlightenment

T. JOHN JAMIESON

Against Rousseau: "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People," by Joseph de Maistre; translated and edited by Richard A. Lebrun, *Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.* xxxix + 204 pp.

An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon: Wherein Different Questions of Rational Philosophy Are Treated, by Joseph de Maistre; translated and edited by Richard A. Lebrun, *Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.* lxii + 331 pp.

IN THESE PAGES, I once challenged professors of political theory to place Count Joseph de Maistre's book on the French Revolution, *Considerations on France* (1797), alongside the more common texts of Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Locke, and Burke in their syllabi. I can gladly report that I recently came across one instructor in a nearby public university who has done exactly that. Of course, even when this "reactionary" witness to the Jacobin cataclysm is included among the gods of political philosophy (both true and false), he is still only one of the voices; and what is the effect of one course offered by a typical political science department that takes no interest whatever in political theory, and conducts itself as if theory

had no importance?

Even so, one tries to open doors, and minds. When I taught Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* to bright seniors in a public high school, I had them also read relevant passages from Carlyle (from whom Dickens cribbed his history and prophecy), Burke (who to them was already the authority on the concept of "the sublime"), and Joseph de Maistre, who asked, and attempted to answer, *why* the French Revolution had happened. Once the unit was over, although they belonged to a highly select group of American high school students who had heard of Maistre, I doubt that they remembered him; yet I think they would now be highly skeptical of the liberal mythology of history that interprets the Revolution as a glorious first instalment of political progress. In the era of Diana the new Royal Martyr, these students know monarchy to be an enduring institution, and one with political power through pure symbolism. Perhaps they see the critical difference between demagogical myths contrived for the purpose of turning humans into lemmings, and reverential myths inherited and perpetuated because they conserve the state and society.

The great dead political philosophers cannot speak for themselves on televised Sunday roundtables, but one rejoices when they can at least be read and studied in one's own language. The scholar who has done the most to bring Maistre into currency in the Anglophone world is Richard A. Lebrun of the University of Manitoba, who has written a fascinating biography of the Count¹ and translated the entirety of his *St. Petersburg Dialogues* (1821) and *Considerations*, and who continues with these further texts on Bacon and Rousseau.

Great political philosophers are made when their personal lives are disrupted by historical crises, and especially when they are sidelined from high political

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life—and so their biographies are significant. Maistre was no mere self-promoting pundit or overexposed leader of some literary coterie. In his practical life he had been a jurist and governor in the European backwaters of Savoy and Sardinia, and a diplomat in Switzerland and Russia. He was by birth a gentleman with a family and an estate, and he would have lived and worked regularly if not altogether quietly if the Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath had not destroyed his private peace at every turn. In his intellectual life he was a controversialist who battled fashionable opinions of his day more by candlelight in his study than in the glare of print; most of his works were unpublished at his death. They are almost all polemics and highly biased apologetics, but based on deep and comprehensive reading of the classics and the Church Fathers and every major writer of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in both French and English.

Taken together, Maistre's works represent not only a one-man counteroffensive on every front of the crisis of modernity, but manifest his comprehensive awareness of the depth and complexity of that crisis. And yet, clever, learned, and polished as the count was, he never supposed himself a new Plato or St. Thomas; prophetic as his perspective of modern history was, he did not set out to become a systematic Universal Mind. *Against Rousseau* (1794-1795) and *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon* (1814-1816) illustrate the growth of his comprehensive critical awareness, inasmuch as political sentimentalism on the one hand, and the worship of science on the other, constitute the twin supports of progressivist and utopian political faith. In Maistre we have a witness from the crucial period, who testifies to the pervasiveness of the "Rousseauist" elevation of man as an innocent primitive and its consequent project of construct-

ing a primitivist society for him; and likewise to the pervasiveness of the "Baconian" cult of experimental research, materialism, and progressivism. He witnesses to this pervasiveness, that is, by his insistence on defeating these twin idols of his age in debate.

Naturally, Maistre's *Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon* and his *Against Rousseau* should be of special interest to readers of Irving Babbitt, who was not simply stigmatizing Rousseau and Bacon as twin founders of the West's civilizational derailment and the dehumanization of man, but using them as shorthand symbols in his "great books" approach to the history of ideas. As a student of French literary criticism, Babbitt found his views in part within his field, a field of controversy in which Maistre had been a participant and enjoyed the status of a French equivalent to Burke. (Babbitt occasionally gives backhanded praise to Maistre as a conservative.) It was truly Joseph de Maistre, as polemicist, who demonized Bacon and Rousseau because they had already been canonized as gods of the French enlightenment. As much as Babbitt was aware, so was Maistre, that "ideas" had created the nascent age of ideology, that these ideas had been received uncritically, and that the authors of the ideas had been, whatever their true genius, vulgarized as patrons of progressivist attitudes. Neither Babbitt nor Maistre misperceived the modern crisis as a chain of conspiratorial causes that need never have happened if Bacon or Rousseau had not been born. It was simply a first step towards spiritual and social recovery for Maistre to shake the pedestals of these false gods. As for the ultimate cause behind the Western crisis, to Maistre this could only be the mysterious will of God which punishes even as it permits, not the will of a venal English politician or a French author of salacious confessions.

After Maistre wrote and published his

first anti-revolutionary pamphlet, *Letters of a Savoyard Royalist to His Compatriots* in 1793, a French émigré bishop chided him for attempting to discuss social contract theory without even mentioning Rousseau's name. Lebrun portrays this as Maistre's turning point, when he plunged seriously into the study of Rousseau and produced the two *Against Rousseau* essays, which expound so well on Maistre's favorite themes. But he did not publish them, and they served only as preparation for his famous works. Here is a remarkable passage which owes a little to the inspiration of Burke, beginning a chapter entitled, "Of the National Soul:"

Human reason reduced to its own resources is perfectly worthless, not only for creating but also for preserving any political or religious association, because it only produces disputes, and, to conduct himself well, man needs not problems but beliefs. His cradle should be surrounded by dogmas, and when his reason is awakened, it should find all his opinions ready-made, at least all those relating to his conduct. Nothing is so important to him as *prejudices*. Let us not take this word in a bad sense. It does not necessarily mean false ideas, but only, in the strict sense of the word, opinions adopted before any examination. Now these sorts of opinions are man's greatest need, the true elements of his happiness, and the Palladium of empires. Without them, there can be neither worship, nor morality, nor government.... (87)

These *good* prejudices, or mental habits, constitute the "national mind." Now the phrase "national mind" or "soul" appears first in French in Montesquieu, not Maistre; and yet it has had a curious life as a slogan and ideological fetish for extreme rightists, independent of Maistre's concept. Fascist politicians from José Antonio Primo de Rivera to Augusto Pinochet have used it as a pretext for pruning the body politic through persecution rather than for reforming

the minds of political elites through dialectic. By writing his critique of Rousseau, Maistre attempted only the latter, and in the end his approach elevates rational discourse, if the natural function of prejudice in human life can be justified by reason. When the philosophes set out to abolish human prejudice—that is, every nonreflective attitude or custom or habit that constitutes the daily life of individuals and nations—they were attempting to abolish human nature.

An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon was written in 1814-16, towards the end of his diplomatic mission at Tsar Alexander I's court. Since the *Examination* was not published till 1836, it too made no contribution to Maistre's celebrity at the Restoration as a "prophet of the past." One could read it as the negative statement of his beliefs, inasmuch as it mostly attacks the enlightenment, while his *St. Petersburg Dialogues* remain the great positive statement of Maistrean traditionalism; or one could read it, as one reads *Against Rousseau*, as the philosophical homework upon which the masterpiece rests.

The *Examination* is not an "anti-rationalist" attack on science itself but upon the enlightenment's idolatry of science and the falsification of its nature. In an excellent preface that summarizes the evolving scholarly criticism of Maistre, Lebrun shows that the count anticipated twentieth-century views of the nature and history of science. Maistre was right to reject Bacon's purely inductive approach: theory is not only the product of observation; the imaginative scientific hypothesis precedes its experimental verification. But Bacon and the philosophes always insisted upon the primacy of the material over the intellectual, a view that reached its full fruition in the properly so-called "ideology" or materialist epistemology of Condillac. Because of his interest in esoteric and hermetic "sciences" as underground albeit

unreliable vehicles of a remnant and quasi-revealed wisdom tradition, Maistre could give credit to “metaphysical” astrology and alchemy as indispensable precursors of the modern sciences, while Bacon and the philosophes wanted to obliterate such embarrassing origins.

Most of the *Examination* deals with the contradictions in Bacon’s logic and his absurd truncation of metaphysics; yet the work is highly readable because of Maistre’s usual conversational style and use of quotation and anecdote from the entire gamut of his ancient and modern reading. His chapter entitled “The Union of Religion and Science” is more thematically characteristic of the author of the *St. Petersburg Dialogues*.

While Bacon divorces theology and classical metaphysics from the natural sciences, Maistre reasserts the traditional Christian view that man’s greatest motive for conquering the physical world’s mysteries is to gain a glimpse into the sublime mysteries of divine providence and causation: the *ratio* of nature is the *logos* of God. In general the Church had been the patron of the sciences, particularly of Copernicus, while its condemnation of Galileo was an exceptional event. Maistre asserts that Europe excels the rest of the world in science and technology because of the honor that Christian theology pays to reason and knowledge in general.

Maistre compares the floridly baroque seventeenth century and the dryly neo-classical eighteenth century as periods in French letters and theorizes upon the cause of the former’s superiority: it was not that the writers of his own century lacked the faculties of wit and intelligence, but rather that they lacked the *true* enlightenment of religious faith:

Give Buffon the faith of Linnaeus; imagine Jean-Jacques Rousseau thundering in a Christian pulpit under the surplice of Bourdaloue, Montesquieu writing with the pen that traced *Télémaque* and the

Politique sacrée, Madame du Deffand going to Mass every day, loving only God and her daughter, exciting herself over Providence, grace, and St. Augustine, and painting a society that resembled her, etc., etc., who knows if, in these so different genres, the great century would not find itself advantageously balanced? (275)

(Montesquieu, nonetheless, was a writer for whom Maistre had considerable respect: Rousseau’s *Social Contract* corrupted the servants, but only had the political cause been lost when *The Spirit of the Laws* converted their masters.)

Maistre’s reputation has long suffered at the hands of scholars working from second-hand views of him: guilt by association with the anti-Dreyfusard twentieth-century French rightism of Charles Maurras has obscured him. The paranoid Abbé Barruel, *not* Joseph de Maistre, founded modern conspiracy theory when he explained the Revolution purely as the work of freemasons and illuminati; Maistre, who was a theosophic mason and an illuminatus of the right, invoked conspiracy only in the sense of the literary coterie, of mediocrities using publicity to forge a climate of opinion and to protect themselves against excellence. In this sense, the encyclopedists were “the greatest and most formidable conspiracy that has ever been formed against religion and thrones,” he says, and it was only such a cabal that could have made Bacon the pseudo-authority that he became in eighteenth-century France.

Conservative intellectuals, aliens to the usual contemporary academic culture and thus rebels against their teachers, have often begun by secretly apprenticing themselves, as collegians, to one long-dead wise man who strangely spoke to them of their own times like a prophet. Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Irving Babbitt, and Paul Elmer More have been among these personal sages. An entire shelf of Lebrun translations of Joseph de Maistre will in time

enable the count to serve the same function, as curious and independent minds seek an alternative to our age's spiritual disorder and deformity. To his happy discoverers he will be a coach or trainer and a guide to greater thinkers than himself—and also a model: one who shows that it is possible to reject the platitudinous and mediocre assumptions of modernity, and to attain rationally founded opinions which are equivalent to the inherited, life-giving prejudices of persons bred in a pre-modern Christian culture.

1. *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).

Toward a Conservative Postmodernism

ROBERT P. KRAYNAK

Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought, by Peter Augustine Lawler, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. 208 pp.

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH recent trends in academic and literary circles knows that the term "postmodernism" is generally claimed by intellectuals of the Left. Why it is popular on the Left is a bit of a puzzle because "postmodern" simply means "after modernity," an idea so vague and open-ended that it is hard to place on the ideological spectrum. Yet liberals and radicals obviously find it useful for advancing their favorite political activity—

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subverting established authorities and traditional literary canons in order to liberate the voices of the silenced and oppressed. In their view, the oppressors include nearly all the great figures of the Western tradition whom they accuse of using objective truth and reason to suppress dissenting opinions and to establish their intellectual hegemony. While the list of enemies begins with the Greek philosophers and medieval Christians, the primary opponent today is the Enlightenment and its notion of rationality and science. By subverting the Enlightenment, postmodernists hope to arrive at a new stage of history where all pretenses of truth and rationality are discarded and people assert their subjective wills in a world of multicultural identities. Such is the vision of the postmodern



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