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TWO ENEMIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

3 The Second Onslaught

Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism

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TWO ENEMIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

3 The Second Onslaught Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism

This is a lightly edited transcript of a recording in Isaiah Berlin's papers. This was the third of the four Woodbridge Lectures, 'Two Enemies of the Enlightenment' (Hamann and Maistre), delivered on 25–8 October 1965 at the Harkness Theater, Columbia University. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

IF HAMANN WAS an angry man, Maistre was an even angrier one. He started from very different origins. Hamann was born in 1730, Maistre in 1753 in Chambéry in the Savoy. Maistre was the son of a man who had been raised to the rank of count because he was President of the court of the kingdom of Sardinia, particularly in the city of Chambéry. The general notion of Maistre is that he is a man of ancient lineage, an aristocrat, an enemy to the Revolution, a great defender of the Church and the State against the abominable Jacobin crimes. This is perfectly valid, except that he was not a man of ancient lineage. The biographies of the twentieth century, though not those of the nineteenth, have finally revealed the fact that, although his father was raised to the dignity of being a count, his great-grandfather and his grandfather were drapers. This is a fact which never emerged in any of the biographies of Maistre in the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century; and although it may be an irrelevant fact, comparatively speaking, it does perhaps throw some light upon the passion with which he defends the order to which his family was but lately raised. This sometimes occurs in the case of *novi homines* like Cicero and Burke, whom he resembles in other respects also. Maistre had a very uneventful life as a young man: that is to say he pursued the normal course of a young Savoyard aristocrat. He studied the law, he studied theology (in which he took little interest), he studied Latin and Greek. He joined a Masonic Lodge, which in those days was not incompatible with belonging to the Roman Church, and throughout his life defended Freemasonry, even though it had been excommunicated. It had been denounced by Papal Bulls as early as the 1730s on the grounds that, although what the Freemasons and the illuminists taught was

not Christian orthodoxy, or indeed in certain respects Christianity at all, yet their was a movement which was extremely useful against hard-shelled atheism. Because it emphasised the spiritual nature of man and dwelt on the immortality of the soul and life after death, it softened up the soul for the approaches of true religion, and therefore should not be condemned in the round and completely intolerant way in which the Roman Church condemned it. It was a useful instrument to help men towards the truth, and not, as was supposed by the Roman priesthood, a rival religion.

However this may be, Maistre belonged to a group of young aristocrats one of whose duties it was to give last comforts to the condemned in Chambéry, and this probably meant that he was present at a good many executions. He dwells on blood and execution a good deal in his works, and some of his biographers suppose that this may be due to early memories of such scenes. At any rate he had a perfectly conventional life until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, which he welcomed in a moderate sort of way. By 1791 he was no longer in a welcoming mood. The Revolution spread to the comparatively liberal and progressive kingdom of Savoy, which had already abolished feudalism in the 1770s and was a cautious, liberal, not very extreme kingdom, rather like Switzerland in the nineteenth century, which was a good deal in advance of the more reactionary institutions of its time, though a good deal behind the more liberal ones; and when the Revolution began to spread into Savoy, which it ultimately inundated, Maistre emigrated, went to Lausanne, then to Venice, then to Cagliari in Sardinia, where the court was of which he was an official. He began producing monarchist pamphlets almost immediately, which although they were very counter-revolutionary and extremely violent in their defence of the monarchy, nevertheless said things which the émigrés didn't wish to hear, such as that the Revolution was irrevocable, that the attempt to try to go back to a pre-revolutionary status was like trying to exhaust the Lake of Geneva by collecting its water in bottles, and other things of this type, which were regarded as rather unwelcome to the not very progressive, not very bright, not very advanced courtiers and aristocrats collected round King Victor Emmanuel I of Savoy in Cagliari. At any rate, it was thought that he was a rather uncomfortable customer. He was brilliant, he was an ally, but he was also paradoxical, sharp, over-critical and liable to make remarks which caused offence at court.

So it was decided to send him as far away as possible, and he was sent as Sardinian Minister to St Petersburg, where he spent a large part of his life, and where he accumulated a good deal of interesting observation of the life of the Russians, the court, the army, the Church, the customs of the Russians. He published a good deal of this in his diplomatic memoirs and also in notes which he used to send privately to various friends in the Russian aristocracy, all of which were subsequently used by persons interested in this period in Russian history, notably Tolstoy.

The importance of Maistre lies in the fact that he was the most brilliant and the most polemical of the critics of the philosophy that underlay the French Revolution. As may be imagined, the French Revolution produced a great crop of analysis of its causes and effects. It promised liberty and equality, and although it did undoubtedly promote these in the case of certain sections of the population, it was difficult to maintain by, say, 1807 or 1808 that human happiness, at any rate on the part of most of those who desired it, had conspicuously increased as a result of the Revolution. Institutions had changed: some had become richer, others poorer, some freer, others more enslaved. A new, Napoleonic regime was in charge. But there was a great deal of painful reappraisal, first of all of the causes of the Revolution, and secondly of the reasons for its failure, both on the part of those who regretted this failure and on the part of those who exulted in it. The liberals attributed the failure to the unchaining of human passions, to the Terror. People like Saint-Simon maintained that it was due to the fact that while the Revolution was proceeding quite peacefully until 1791, then the mob took control, and proceeded to exterminate those enlightened intellectuals in whose hands alone the Revolution would have been safe and its fruits would have been preserved. Socialists and communists maintained that there was tremendous blindness on the part of the makers of the French Revolution to the social and economic structure of society, and to social and economic causality in general, and that because Robespierre had not pressed on with his egalitarian laws, and because the laws of property had not been sufficiently touched, the Revolution turned out to be a failure. There were various other interpretations and explanations, as may be imagined. Hegelians maintained that the failure was due to an inadequate understanding of the general march of history and of the relationship of facts to ideas. The Catholic Church maintained, and

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Maistre with it, that the true cause of the failure of the French Revolution was the rupture with the past, the departure from the word of God, heresy, the fact that there was a particular kind of life which had been enshrined in tradition and in the teachings of the Catholic Church, and by breaking this, by mutinying and rebelling against it, man had put himself beyond the pale, had become an outlaw, and had been duly punished by God with such scourges as Robespierre and Napoleon.

If this had been all that Maistre said, he would not have been a very notable or interesting thinker. But he goes much further than this. He is determined to take to pieces the main theses of the Enlightenment, in particular as preached by the French Encyclopaedists, and to show their shallowness and insubstantiality. He begins by considering the propositions that man is rational, and that man seeks happiness. First of all the proposition that man is rational. He says: Whence do they derive this proposition? They derive it from a study of nature. Therefore we must apply ourselves first to the study of nature, and then to the study of the alleged rationality of man. Well, how do they study nature? These men study nature by making analogies between nature and mathematics, between nature and their own a priori philosophies. For Rousseau and for other thinkers nature is fundamentally a seamless harmony which man departs from; all human misery is due to the fact that human beings do not understand the harmonious nature of the reality in which they are situated. Animals and objects obey natural laws because they cannot avoid it: they are not conscious, and so they are unable to rebel. Man, on the other hand, because he has been given the boon of free will, is able, by misusing it, to alienate himself, is able to tear himself from nature, and the task then is to restore the broken equilibrium, and to restore man to the understanding of his own nature, his proper purposes and how these naturally blend into the harmony of nature, which science and other means of cognition are able to penetrate. These people, Maistre says, look at mathematics and they look within their own minds. Perhaps it would be more useful if they actually looked at history itself, or perhaps at some of the sciences closer to man, such as zoology. If you look at zoology, this picture of a peaceful nature harmonious with itself, this picture of someone sitting by the rill of a stream, which Rousseau paints, away from the corrupt sophistication of the cities, listening to the whistling of the wind in

the reeds and to the peaceful grazing of cows, and therefore able to get himself into a state of moral tranquillity, is not entirely valid. Nature is a world in which every animal rips every other animal to pieces. Nature is a world in which there is nothing but bloodshed; fearful struggle goes on between various races of animals, even between those of plants. In fact nature is one enormous slaughterhouse.

Let me quote a typical passage by Maistre on this subject, to convey the general quality of his imagination. If, he says, you consider what nature is impartially, and without the prejudices and sets of spectacles which these shallow men had inherited from persons principally interested in such non-human subjects as logic and algebra, what you will see is this:

In the vast domain of living nature there reigns an open violence, a kind of prescriptive fury which arms all the creatures to their common doom. As soon as you leave the inanimate kingdom, you find the decree of violent death inscribed on the very frontiers of life. You feel it already in the vegetable kingdom: from the great catalpa to the humblest herb, how many plants *die*, and how many are *killed*. But from the moment you enter the animal kingdom, this law is suddenly in the most dreadful evidence. A power of violence at once hidden and palpable [...] has in each species appointed a certain number of animals to devour the others. Thus there are insects of prey, reptiles of prey, birds of prey, fishes of prey, quadrupeds of prey. There is no instant of time when one creature is not being devoured by another. Over all these numerous races of animals man is placed, and his destructive hand spares nothing that lives. He kills to obtain food and he kills to clothe himself. He kills to adorn himself, he kills in order to attack, and he kills in order to defend himself. He kills to instruct himself and he kills to amuse himself. He kills to kill. Proud and terrible king, he wants everything and nothing resists him.

In French this becomes a kind of litany: ‘il tue pour se nourrir, il tue pour se vêtir, il tue pour se parer, il tue pour attaquer, il tue pour se défendre, il tue pour s’instruire, il tue pour s’amuser, il tue pour tuer: roi superbe et terrible, il a besoin de tout, et rien ne lui résiste’. He goes on:

[...] From the lamb he tears its guts and makes his harp resound [...] from the wolf his most deadly tooth to polish his pretty works of art, from the elephant his tusks to make a toy for his child: his table is covered with corpses [...] And who [in this general carnage] will exterminate him who

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exterminates all the others? Himself. It is man who is charged with the slaughter of man [...] Thus is accomplished the great law of the violent destruction of living creatures. The whole earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but a vast altar, upon which all that is living must be sacrificed without end, without measure, without pause, until the consummation of things, until evil is extinct, until the death of death.¹

This is Maistre's famous and terrible vision of life, and his violent preoccupation with blood and death belongs to a very different world from that to which he is usually attributed, the world of Burke, whom he admired, the world of the English conservatives, whom he is supposed to have read; a very different world from the world of the slow, mature wisdom of *Burke's Landed Gentry* or the deep peace of the country houses, great and small, or the eternal society of the quick and the dead, secure from the turbulence and the miseries of those less fortunately situated. It is equally far from the world of the mystics and the illuminists amongst whom he spent his youth.

If this is his view of nature, then it is not very surprising that he should say that man is fundamentally not made for peace, that if you look at the wars of extermination, at the fearful carnage with which human history is filled, it is difficult to say that man is by nature peaceful, that man is by nature benevolent. But it is also said that man is by nature rational. Let us consider this proposition too, says Maistre. Consider the institutions by which man is governed. Consider the institution of marriage. Nothing is more irrational than marriage, says Maistre. Why should a man choose a woman with whom to live for the rest of his life, when his attention might easily be distracted by other persons more attractive to him in later life? Nevertheless marriage is the one fundamental institution upon which human society is founded, and all attempts at creating societies founded upon free love have toppled. Consider the institution of monarchy. What is more irrational or absurd than that the son of a king, even a good king, should succeed him because he is his son? A wise king may have a stupid son, a good king may have an abominable son, and there is no reason for supposing that the

¹ v 22–5 (French at 23). Maistre annotates the last phrase '*And the enemy death shall be destroyed last* (St Paul to the Corinthians I, 15:26)' [so translated by the Douay–Rheims Bible; Vulgate, 'novissima autem inimica destruetur mors'; King James, 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'].

children of good men or of strong men or of useful men will have the same qualities themselves. Consequently it is a far more rational arrangement to have such a system as you have in Poland, where you have the *liberum veto*, where you do not have hereditary succession, where the nobles must agree upon who is to be king. But what has actually happened? France was governed by sixty-six kings, some good, some bad, but mostly efficient, mostly capable, and is the fairest kingdom upon the face of the earth, whereas Poland with its rational system is plunged into constant turbulence and has collapsed before the very eyes of the civilised world in a welter of blood and chaos.

So much then for the stability and reliability of rational institutions. This is typical of the language Maistre uses; these are the paradoxes which he urges. I give this sample just to indicate the kind of thing which made him rather unpopular at the court of Cagliari. Although the moral of all this was pro-monarchist, in favour of irrationality, the Church, tradition, faith, against reason, analysis, light, perfectibilism, nevertheless the examples which he gave and the tone in which he gave them did undoubtedly rattle these rather conventional men.

He goes on: If stability is what is wanted – and stability is indeed wanted, for without stability society cannot exist – then the worst possible foundation upon which society could conceivably rest is what our eighteenth-century philosophers urge upon us, namely reason. Reason means argument, reason means a construction on the part of rational beings of a kind that other rational beings are able to criticise using exactly the same weapons: what man makes, man can mar. If you want a stable foundation for society then the most shaky foundation upon which you can place is that of unaided human reason, because even though you may prove that one kind of institution is good or even the best, another man cleverer than you will disprove it tomorrow. Anything which argument puts up, argument will pull down, and therefore nothing is less stable than things which rely upon such so precarious a foundation as reason, because one reason is constantly toppled by another. The only foundation which is ultimately stable is something which cannot be reached by destructive forces. Reasoning, analysis, pulverises. This is an old Burkean argument, and something which Hamann would have agreed to. Reason analyses, it takes to pieces; anything which is taken to pieces ceases to be mysterious, becomes clear, and as a

result of becoming clear sometimes falls into familiarity and thus contempt. Therefore the only way in which you can secure a solid basis for government, which nobody would ever be able to shake, is by making it impervious to reason. How is this done? By founding societies upon foundations so dark, so mysterious and so terrifying that anyone who dares approach them will find himself immediately subject to the most hideous and enormous penalties. The only societies which have lasted are societies created by priests, in which the people have been taught a series of frightening myths whereby any questioning of the foundation of society was itself regarded as sinful and liable to bring about punishment. The only laws which have lasted amongst mankind are laws whose roots and sources are not remembered. Laws whose roots and sources are remembered are usually bad laws or at least laws which somebody wants to change. Custom is the foundation of our life – custom and the dark irrational sphere which nothing must be allowed to approach. Therefore authority must be blind. Once you allow people to argue about the basis of authority, once you allow people like Locke to discuss things like contract, or things like the justification of this or that form of government, you are done for. The only governments which have persisted, and been solid, are governments which do not permit discussion. Those are the governments which are on the whole the most stable.

He goes on to argue that this is what man fundamentally craves. We are told, he says, that man is born to freedom; at least M. Rousseau says that man is born to freedom – and then wonders why it is that man is nevertheless everywhere in chains. That is as if you were to ask why it is that sheep, who are born carnivorous, nevertheless everywhere nibble grass. When you say that man is born to freedom, what does this mean? When you study fishes, when you study animals, you simply study what these animals do, what these animals are. You do not ask yourself what these animals would like to be, because you do not know. In the case of man you do not study the actual history of man. If you study the actual history of man you will discover that what men desire is security, stability, authority, obedience. The last thing they desire is freedom: as soon as they are given freedom, everything crumbles and topples. Take monarchy versus democracy. Well, monarchy, as we have seen, is already irrational enough. Yes, there have been glorious democracies. Athenian democracy was undoubtedly a magnificent

phenomenon in human history, and how long did it last, and how much had we to pay for it afterwards? That is Maistre's complaint, that democracy, particularly Periclean democracy, is the kind of thing which human beings cannot bear upon their shoulders, the weight is too great. He says: If you wish to study human nature, consider actual human behaviour instead of ideal human behaviour, as the eighteenth century appears to have done. Consider this, for example: supposing a visitor were to come to you from the moon, and supposing you were to present two individuals to him, and you were to say about one of these individuals that he did occasionally kill other human beings, but he did it very seldom, he did it without any pleasure to himself, he did it as a pure duty, and the human beings whom he killed were usually murderers or parricides or matricides or perjurers or other abandoned criminals who were a menace to society. That is one of the individuals. The other individual whom you presented was a man who killed with a great deal of enthusiasm, killed persons who were perfectly innocent, and killed them in enormous quantities instead of merely killing them perhaps once in five or once in ten years. You will find that the first of these individuals is the executioner, and the second a soldier; and the reputation of soldiers is very different from that of executioners.

So much for human rationality. So much for the proposition that human beings accept the principles of the Enlightenment. Here is the executioner, who is a useful public servant, who does what he does with the utmost reluctance, and here is a soldier who kills with lust and with enthusiasm people every bit as innocent as himself, and it is the soldier who is most deeply respected in our society. Why should this be? Consider, he says, what people like and what they dislike, historically speaking. Never mind about what human beings should be or could be, or what you would like to see them as. Peter the Great, one of the great reformers of history, when he sent thousands and hundreds of thousands of Russians into battles and constant defeats, never had the slightest difficulty in doing so. They marched to battle and they died like sheep, perfectly obediently and without raising any protest. There was not the slightest sign of mutiny – there are very few mutinies amongst marching armies – and yet these men had no idea why they were marching, why they were killing those whom they were going to kill. They had no personal hostility towards the enemy, who was as innocent, as noble and as honourable as they were. On the other hand, when Peter tried

to shave the beards of the boyars there was a riot. When in the eighteenth century there was an attempt to reform the calendar there was practically a French mutiny. That is the kind of thing which people mind about: beards, calendars, yes; death, not in the least. And these are the people whom you wish to represent as rational, peace-loving, enlightened, illuminated, capable of governing themselves, potential democrats, potential liberals, to whom M. Voltaire and M. Rousseau wish to entrust the government. That is Maistre's sermon.

He continues. He says that what men really want – if you ask yourself what they want, instead of what they ought to want – is not what all the benevolent philosophers of the eighteenth century said they wanted, namely to live together in society for the purpose of living a happier life through co-operation and mutual self-help. The general conventional view, after all, of the eighteenth century was that the purpose of society was to ensure reciprocal mutual benefits for human beings which they would not be able to obtain for themselves. This is what Aristotle said, this is what St Thomas, in whom Maistre officially believed, said, and this is what a number of other thinkers, with a high degree of plausibility, have said, are saying, and I hope will go on saying. Maistre said: This is not true; what people really like, or at least among the things which people really like, is collective self-immolation. If you give people an altar upon which to sacrifice themselves they rush towards it headlong, and without thinking much of what it is they are sacrificing themselves to: that is what makes wars possible.

There is a passage in Maistre about war which illustrates the view I have been describing: 'What inconceivable magic is it which makes a man always ready at the first beat of the drum [...] to go without resisting, often even with a kind of eagerness, [...] in order to blow to pieces on the field of battle his brother, who has done him no wrong, and who on his side advances to subject him to the same fate if he can?'² Men, who shed tears if they have to kill a chicken, kill on the battlefield without a qualm. They do so purely for the common good, repressing their human feelings as a painful, altruistic duty. Executioners kill a very few guilty men, parricides, forgers and the like. Soldiers kill thousands of guiltless men, indiscriminately, blindly, with wild enthusiasm. Yet man is born to

² v 3–4.

love. He is compassionate, just and good. He sheds tears for others and such tears give him pleasure. He invents stories to make him weep. Whence then this furious desire for war and slaughter? Why does man plunge into the abyss, embracing with passion that which inspires him, officially at any rate, with such loathing? Why do men who revolt over such trivial issues as attempts to change the calendar and so on allow themselves to be slaughtered? There is only one valid answer: men's desire to immolate themselves is as fundamental as their desire for self-preservation and happiness. War is the terrible and eternal law of the world. Indefensible on the rational plane, it is mysteriously and irresistibly attractive. At the level of reasoned utilitarianism, war is everything which it is thought to be, and worse. Nevertheless it has governed human history, and this merely shows the inadequacy of rationalist explanations.

What then must be done? Man must be governed by some kind of discipline which gives vent to these irrational impulses, which nothing can cure. What Maistre believes, and this is something which is genuinely not a very eighteenth-century, nor even a very seventeenth-century view, is that the elements, the earth, call for blood. He is given to a kind of sadistic fantasy in this respect; he feels that the whole of the world is filled with slaughter and the sounds of slaughter, that dark and irrational forces move men, and that to treat them as if they were creatures of light, to treat them as if they were rational or benevolent, is simply an empirical error. Anyone who does so is likely to lead men to their doom. Therefore men must be governed in a manner which prevents them from ripping each other to pieces. He sees man with a more than Hobbesian pessimism as a kind of ape-like, tiger-like creature, ready for no evident reason to rip other men to pieces – out of greed, out of ambition, out of some general irrational impulse, and just for its own sake, simply out of aggressive instinct. The only way in which this can be prevented is by placing over him a degree of harsh authority on the part of men who understand other human beings, an authority which will imprison him and chain him. It will put some kind of armour, a sort of straitjacket, upon this potential lunatic, which will prevent him from venting these terrible and self-destructive desires.

That is Maistre's picture of man, and he thinks that the French Revolution let loose these things. His attitude towards the French Revolution is unorthodox and quite interesting in that regard. Of

course he disapproves of it, of course he thinks that the French Revolution is a great punishment sent by God upon men who have departed from the traditional discipline, the hierarchy, of the Roman Church, which kept people in a relative degree of order and prevented the worst kind of barbarism from occurring. Nevertheless he says that power must always be respected, because power is the only thing which stops people from disintegrating. He says there is always something which stops human beings. It may be conscience, it may be custom, it may be the assassin's dagger, it may be the papal tiara, but it is always something, never himself, he says, and therefore the idea of self-control, which is preached by the rationalists, the idea of self-coercion, is for him a contradiction in terms. Coercion must come from outside. Man is what he calls a theomorph and a theomach. Man is a monstrous centaur who both fights God and is made in his image. He is made in his image and to that extent he is rational and good, but he fights him because there are black instincts within him which nothing will ever finally quell, original sin, which nothing can ultimately exterminate. Man 'does not know what he wants; he wants what he does not want; he does not want what he wants; he *wants to want*³ and cannot achieve it. He feels, says Maistre, within himself a force more powerful than himself. If he is wise, he cries out and says: Who will rescue me from this? If he is stupid he gives in, and calls his weakness happiness. That is the kind of epigram in which Maistre sought to summarise mankind.

If this is what men are like, then of course they need strong government, that is perfectly clear. What kind of strong government must they have? They must have a government given to them in some irrational fashion, something, again, which reason cannot reach to, which reason cannot disintegrate, something which is sufficiently terrifying to keep people in a condition of permanent obedience. Our philosophers, he says, wish us to look at human nature as it truly is, and whom do they invite us to inspect? Why, of course, the savage, the noble savage, this primitive man, not corrupted by wicked civilised institutions. Savages are among the refuse of mankind, he suddenly observes. To say that we ought to imitate savages, to say that there is something about savages or about primitives which is superior is again to run against the most

³ iv 67.

obvious facts of psychology and history. If you look at savages you will see they are simply failures of the divine creation, they are simply debris of the divine process. Savages are drunken and they are barbarous. All they do is to scalp one another, eviscerate one another, and commit the most appalling crimes; they are subject to the most detestable vices and there are no qualities amongst them which any civilised person could possibly envy. He then borrows an example from Montesquieu: Savages? Savages are people who, when the good missionaries give them a cart and an ox, burn the cart in order to roast the ox. "The savage cuts down the tree in order to eat its fruit; [...] all he wants of us is powder to kill others and fire-water to kill himself."⁴ That is what savages want, and these are the persons whom we are invited to emulate. If you look at their language you will not find the great primitive roots of language about which so many eighteenth-century thinkers have been enthusiastic, and seventeenth-century ones also. They are simply the corrupt remains of the total collapse of human civilisation; these are the sad cases which the good fathers, the good priests, the good missionaries have not told us the truth about. These witnesses are kind, they are good, they are Christian, they do not want to reveal the hideous truth about the natives whom they find, and we have no business to be deceived by the fact that these charitable fathers do not wish to reveal that the savages whom they come across are amongst the lowest and most detestable human creatures living on earth.

So much for primitive man. What else are we expected to emulate? If we are expected to emulate democracies we need only look at history, at their fate. When Maistre was in Russia he began giving advice on the government of Russia because he had very little to do as the representative of the Sardinian king, who was after all a pensioner of England and Russia. The Sardinian king was also an enemy to Napoleon, who did not actually invade Sardinia, though he took away Savoy and the Piedmont; therefore since Napoleon had an ambassador at the Russian court also, the ambassador of his enemy the King of Sardinia had a rather complicated relationship to him. He was rather like, in the Second World war, a Gaullist ambassador in the presence of the official ambassador of Vichy France, and that is why Maistre did not have much diplomatic

⁴ iv 84; cf. Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, 5. 13.

business to prosecute. On the other hand he was obviously a man of considerable charm, erudition and intelligence, and all the Russian memoirs of the time say what an agreeable and delightful person he was. He was also a great converter to the Church of Rome. He must have converted more noble ladies of the Russian court than anyone can have done before or after him. Indeed, he did it on so formidable a scale that in the end, in 1817, Alexander I requested his withdrawal, because it was thought that this was interfering with the business of government too much. At any rate he used to send private notes to various Russian noblemen, and indeed to Alexander himself, about Russian affairs, and so far as the government was concerned the typical piece of advice he offers is something of this kind. He says: Man is corrupt, man is sinful, man is a cruel and vicious creature who can only just be stopped from destroying the others by the wise discipline imposed upon him by a few people wise enough and powerful enough to do so. This has been his whole history. The two institutions which have kept Europe comparatively peaceful, comparatively stable, have been the institution of serfhood and the Church itself. The Church enunciated dogmatic propositions which human beings broke at their peril. In about 1810 Maistre wrote a little tract defending the Inquisition, which was quite a brave thing to do, on the ground that the Inquisition was at least better than fratricidal wars; the Inquisition did at least prevent what he supposed to be religious wars, say in Spain; and he paints the Inquisition in somewhat rosy colours. He says the Inquisition takes a man away and by reasoning with him, sometimes applying a little violence, returns him to the bosom of his family as a reformed Christian. If this had not been done he would have gone to the extremes to which his unbridled reason would have pushed him, he would have formed a party, he would have led a movement and hundreds of thousands of people would have died in some fearful slaughter as a result. Consequently the Inquisition is a force for peace. Religion, then, and serfhood are the two anchors upon which stable human society rests. In Russia you still of course have serfhood, but the Church is too little respected. The Roman Church, he says, when it acquired the degree of authority which made it truly the arbiter of European fortunes, when the Pope became the leader of Christendom and a great deal of reverence and awe was owed to the Roman Church, and a solid discipline was established, was able, because it was Christian and

because it was good, to abolish serfdom, because one anchor proved enough. But in your country the priests are drunken and ignorant, the bishops have no learning and no authority, and therefore your clerical establishment is despised by the people, and has no moral or political authority. You cannot lean on that. Therefore the only anchor you Russians have for preventing your ship from going out to the high seas and being broken is the serf system. I know, he says, that people are constantly recommending you on economic and on humanitarian grounds to abolish serfhood, but this would be fatal. If you abolish serfhood, chaos would result. You would pass directly from the condition of your present barbarism to a condition of anarchy. It would not take long, he says, for a few Pugachevs,⁵ as he calls them – that is to say, a few mutineers – from the universities, supported by indolence and stupidity at home and criminal conspiracies on the part of the terrible ‘sect’⁶ abroad, the sect that never sleeps⁷ – I shall shortly explain who they are – to topple your entire kingdom, once the authority of the serf system has gone. And the Russians, he says, are extraordinary people. Nobody desires as ardently and as passionately as the Russians. If you lock up a Russian desire in a fortress, the fortress will blow up. Your people desire science; nothing is more fatal. Scientists are persons who put everything in doubt, who analyse, who disintegrate. We go back once again to Hamann, and to the disintegration of the living flesh of life under the terrible corrosive rays of analytical science. Scientists are persons who of all people, and as everyone has always known, know least about human nature. To put scientists in charge of any human institution is to guarantee its doom. The great governing people of the earth – the Jews, the Spartans and the Romans – despise science. When the Romans wanted science, they bought Greeks to be their scientists on their behalf, and the Romans knew that if they tried to be scientists themselves they would merely make themselves ridiculous. The same is true of the Spartans, and the same is true of the Jews. These are the great races who have established memorable human institutions on earth – nobody has ever been as grand as that – these are the people you must emulate.

⁵ [Emel’yan Ivanovich Pugachev was the leader of a peasant and Cossack rebellion crushed in the reign of Catherine the Great.]

⁶ e.g. i 407, viii 91, 222, 223, 268, 283, 311–12, 336, 345, 512–13.

⁷ viii 292.

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And whom do you have here? You have German Protestants and German scientists, who seek employment in your court and in your schools and in your universities. Why do these people come? They come because they are a shiftless element. They come because they are not happy at home. Persons of good character who possess property, believe in law and order, and are virtuous citizens do not emigrate. Persons who emigrate have something wrong with them, and by allowing in all these immigrants, by allowing in all these persons who are evidently not happy at home, who are fidgety and unable to establish themselves, you are simply importing a disintegrating element which in the end will prove the undoing of your great empire. I have spoken to a Prince of Germany who regretted the fact that various mutinous freethinkers were leaving his dominions, not so much because they were leaving his dominion as because of the terrible damage which they would do to the dominions of his cousin the Emperor of Russia.

This was the kind of advice which Maistre gave. He goes further: I know, he says, that there is a desire for science and enlightenment everywhere, but if you want stability, if you want peace, if you want order, if you want authority, if you want something which every State needs a minimum of, then my advice to you is, try to freeze it up, do not let it go too far forward. I know it cannot be stopped indefinitely, but at least you might slow it down. This piece of advice was adopted literally by certain Russian statesmen towards the end of the nineteenth century; the phrase 'freeze it up'⁸ was not irrelevantly used. They all argued that the unrest and disintegration of the European States, the general materialism and political instability of the bourgeois republics of the West, were largely due to the awful rise of uncensored free thought. Therefore in Russia they did their best, as we know, to try to slow down the process which they themselves rather pessimistically supposed could not be held up indefinitely.

That, at any rate, is Maistre's typical advice. He is quite interesting on a number of other topics as well, for example language, which brings him into line with Hamann and similar thinkers. He says: If you want to know where the repository of tradition lies, if you want to know where wisdom truly is, it is in language. Language encapsulates, language enshrines the whole tradition, all the

⁸ 'Geler', viii 330.

accumulated wisdom of an irrational kind of our society and our race. Not any kind of language, of course. The people whom he most detested were the Encyclopaedists. He says: M. Condorcet wants an international language so that scientists of one country might the better be able to understand the science of another. But an international language would shed precisely those peculiarities, precisely that accumulation of local, provincial, historical accretions which gives each language its unique quality and produces those words which shape our minds, which shape us educationally along those traditional lines along which the natural development of human beings and societies must lie if they are to be traditional, if they are to be peaceful, if they are to have regard to their own past, if they are not to be left without ideals and without principles. That is why we must learn Latin, not because it is a clear language, but, on the contrary, because it contains a huge accumulation of superstition and prejudice – particularly medieval Latin – which therefore acts as a shield against too much disintegrating influence by reason as it tries to make its way in from without.

This is precisely the kind of defence which Burke put up for prejudice and for superstitions – mainly for prejudice – namely, here are things which have lasted in time, here are things which held up against the corrosive influence of criticism: these are the things to cling on to. This is the skin which we have historically formed. This is the bark of the tree: if you strip off the bark, no matter how unsightly it may appear, the tree will perish. This is the great defence of tradition, superstition, prejudice, irrationality and, again, the crooked alleyways of life to which Hamann was so attached, and which Maistre in his own rather different way also defends.

If we listen, says Maistre, to what the philosophers say about language, some very peculiar things emerge. You ask M. Condillac, for example, what are the origins of language. Well, M. Condillac says, like everything else it is a product of the division of labour. Language is simply a utilitarian device invented by people for the purpose of expressing themselves. What are we to think? – Maistre asks. That the first generation of men said BA, and the second BE? That the Assyrians invented the nominative, and the Medes invented the genitive? This is a very typical Maistrean epigram. If that is not so, if this is not the way in which human society proceeds, if this is not done by conscious rationalism, by conscious division of labour, by people already illuminated from the beginning simply

seeking to build a life in terms of utility or a search for common happiness, which Maistre profoundly believes not to be rooted in the psychology of men – if that is not so, then what *are* we to think of human society?

Again he comes back to two eternal propositions: one, that the source of authority must be dark, impenetrable and uncriticisable, that if questions are allowed, if you say, ‘Why this institution?’ and an answer is given, and then you say, ‘What about this answer?’ and another answer is given, and you ask about the why of the why of the why of the why, this is an indefinite process, an infinite process; and in the course of this infinite process everything topples and falls. Therefore darkness must protect the institutions of mankind. That is proposition number one. Proposition number two – which follows from the first – is that we must never allow corrosive persons to penetrate into our midst. This is the ‘sect’ – the ‘secte détestable qui ne dort jamais’⁹ – which made the French Revolution. Who are these people? Jacobins, socialists, liberals, scientists, Protestants, Jansenists, perfectibilians, Jews, Freemasons, atheists, freethinkers, those who made the French Revolution, those who made the American Revolution. These are the people who must be put down; if they are not put down, we are lost, because all society rests upon authority and these people call authority into question. All society rests upon the curbing of reason, because if we do not curb reason, reason will destroy us.

There follows a famous passage about the executioner, I suppose the most famous passage in the whole of Maistre’s works, in the book called *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (*The Petersburg Evenings*), in which in some symbolic sense he tries to convey what it is that society rests on. It is an extremely exaggerated passage, but, as I say, thinkers only make an impact by wild exaggeration, and Maistre goes further than most. The passage conveys, again, the kind of flavour, the kind of feeling, which Maistre had, and the sort of thing with which he tended to shock the rather conventional court of Cagliari. I have mentioned that it seems to him mysterious that we respect soldiers – not just because they take risks or because they risk their lives or because they have nice characters – and do not respect the executioner, who performs the most useful of all social functions. He goes on:

⁹ viii 292.

Who is this inexplicable being, who, when there are so many agreeable, lucrative, honest and even honourable professions to choose among, in which a man can exercise his skill or his powers, has chosen that of torturing or killing his own kind? This head, this heart, are they made like our own? Is there not something in them that is peculiar, and alien to our nature? Myself, I have no doubt about this. He is made like us externally. He is born like all of us. But he is an extraordinary being, and it needs a special decree to bring him into existence as a member of the human family – a *fiat* of the creative power [...] Hardly is he assigned to his proper dwelling place, hardly has he been put in possession of it, when others remove their homes elsewhere whence they can no longer see him. In the midst of this desolation, in this sort of vacuum formed round him, he lives alone with his mate and his young, who acquaint him with the sound of the human voice: without them he would hear nothing but groans [...] The gloomy signal is given; an abject servitor of justice knocks on his door to tell him he is wanted; he goes; he arrives in a public square covered by a dense, trembling mob. A poisoner, a parricide, a man who has committed sacrilege is tossed to him: he seizes him, stretches him, ties him to a horizontal cross, lifts his arms; there is a horrible silence; there is no sound but that of bones cracking under the bars, and the shrieks of the victim. He unties him. He puts him on the wheel; the shattered limbs are entangled in the spokes; the head hangs down; the hair stands up, and the mouth gaping open like a furnace from time to time emits only a few bloodstained words to beg for death. The executioner has finished. His heart is beating, but it is with joy: he congratulates himself, he says in his heart ‘Nobody breaks men on the wheel as well as I.’ He steps down. He holds out his bloodstained hand, the justice throws him from a distance a few pieces of gold, which he catches through a double row of human beings standing back in horror. He sits down to table, and he eats. He goes to bed and he sleeps. And on the next day, when he wakes, he thinks of something totally different from what he did the day before. Is he a man? Yes. God receives him in his temples, and allows him to pray. He is not a criminal. Nevertheless no tongue dare declare that he is virtuous, that he is an honest man, that he is estimable. No moral praise is appropriate to him, for everyone else is assumed to have relations with human beings: he has none. And yet all greatness, all power, all subordination rest on the executioner. He is the terror and he is the bond of human association. Remove this mysterious agent from the world, and in an instant order yields to chaos: thrones fall, society disappears. God, who has created sovereignty, has also made punishment; he has fixed the earth upon these

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two poles: *For the poles of the earth are the Lord's, and upon them he hath set the world.*¹⁰

This is a typical Maistrean passage, and all he means – because I doubt whether he ever did see an executioner do any of these things,¹¹ if the biographers are to be trusted – is something of this sort. No man can exist without society; no society exists without some degree of sovereignty. All sovereignty implies infallibility, and infallibility rests with God. Therefore the Pope must be the master of mankind. This is the root and centre of Maistre's ultramontanism, and the whole passage about the executioner is simply a highly dramatised way of saying that, unless there are sanctions, unless there is punishment, man will sin, man will rip other men to pieces. His imagination swings between two extremes – on one side extreme punishment and terror, on the other side chaos. That is the feeling that the French Revolution induced in him. And yet he does not believe, for example, in military government. He wants government to be traditional, he wants government to be ancient, he wants government to be established, and he wants it to be established in the poetry, the mythology, the imagination, the tradition, the irrational, creative faculties of man: in his mythological and his poetical self, not by fiat, not by some kind of artificial Hobbesian sovereign. He is, for example, against what he calls *la Bâtonocratie*,¹² the rule of the stick. 'I have always hated military government,' he says; 'I hate it now, and so long as I live I shall always hate it.'¹³

His attitude towards Napoleon was ambiguous. On the one hand Napoleon was the Corsican monster, he was a usurper, he performed an act of utmost blasphemy by the hideous coronation by which he forced the Pope to crown him. He drove out the legitimate rulers of France. On the other hand, all power is from God, and Napoleon has power, and power is important. And Maistre lays down a proposition which did not make him particularly popular in Cagliari. He says: No doubt the Jacobins were

¹⁰ iv 32–4. [The closing quotation is from the Vulgate, *Domini enim sunt cardines terræ, et posuit super eos orbem* (Song of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2:8), Englished as above by the Douay–Rheims Bible.]

¹¹ [But cf. p. 2 above!]

¹² ix 59.

¹³ ix 58.

terrible people, but they saved France; no doubt the Jacobins were the scourge of God sent upon us, but in the chaos of France induced by the *philosophes* and Voltaire (it is quite right, he says, books have done it all; it is these pamphlets of the *philosophes* which are responsible for the dreadful disintegration of this great country), at least the Jacobins cut off heads. Anyone who cuts off heads asserts authority, anyone who asserts authority establishes order, and therefore the Jacobins are greater heroes in French history than Louis XVI, who was feeble and played with liberals. Louis XIV crushed liberals, issued the edict of Nantes, expelled a great many Protestants, and died glorious in his bed. Louis XVI was liberal, played with the liberals, encouraged democracy, and we all know how he ended. Robespierre is a monster, he says, drunk with power and blood; nevertheless he was the instrument chosen by history to rescue France and defend her frontiers against external invasion. Any power is always better than no power. Maistre is among the earliest European thinkers quite firmly to establish the proposition that all power is to be worshipped, all power is admirable. Every form of human coercion has for its end the preservation of that degree of minimum human order without which men become sinful, chaotic and self-destructive. The fact that he should have said this about the Jacobins did not, as I say, endear him to his royalist colleagues.

He wanted to meet Napoleon. He wrote to the court at Cagliari saying he wished to meet him because Napoleon had expressed a desire for a meeting. Napoleon was fascinated by his works, thought he had the root of the matter in him, and wished to meet this intelligent and interesting counter-revolutionary. Maistre wrote to the court; the court was extremely shocked. The King wrote back and said that on no account could he conceive that a loyal subject of his could possibly meet the bloodstained usurper. Maistre wrote back saying: I shall always be loyal to your majesty, I shall never contravene any orders you give me, and if you forbid me to meet Napoleon, I shall never meet him. But you confess yourself surprised by my attitude: not to surprise you I cannot promise. This is the kind of dispatch which made the court of Cagliari regard him as a somewhat uncomfortable ally.

Towards the end of his life Maistre wrote *The Conversations of St Petersburg*, which were published after his death. They became a kind of bible to non-Christian Catholics in France. The proportion of

Christianity in Maistre's writings cannot be regarded as high. He pretends that he derives his propositions from St Thomas, from all kinds of scholastic logic, or from the doctrines of the Roman Church, but in fact, as one can see from my quotations, which are not at all uncharacteristic, he is not what he is usually represented in the histories of political thought to be. He is not a proud, indomitable aristocrat standing on the frontiers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries looking back towards an imaginary past, a tragic figure resisting inevitable change, dignified, blind, reactionary, a classical profile of the last patrician, about to be knocked down by the furious bourgeois mob. That is a normal view of him even on the part of those who favour him: the last of the Romans, as it were. Émile Faguet says he is like a Roman of the fifth century before the final invasion overthrew them. The general notion is that he is out of date, that he is the last defender of a completely outworn order, a man tragically concentrated upon a partly imaginary but no longer restorable past.

This I believe to be a false account. Maistre is far more a harbinger, alas, of the future than a reconstructor of the past. The hysteria of his writings, the dwelling on blood, the view of man as possessed by irrational instincts, the darkness, the proposition that it is fundamentally the irrational and the uncontrollable which are in charge of men; the view that the analysis of the Encyclopaedists is shallow because they do not take account for self-immolation, of the human desire for destruction, of the whole bundle of irrational impulses of which man is to a large extent composed, and the proposition that only by exploiting these, by taking notice of them but also by directing them, by canalising them, by disciplining them, by making use of them, but above all by looking them in the face, can human society survive; the extreme contempt for liberals and democrats, the view that human beings are totally unfit to govern themselves, and must always be governed by small oligarchical élites, which must be groups of self-sacrificing men trying to tie up this terrible tiger with the most utmost effort, which gives them no pleasure at all, any more than the executioner takes pleasure in his executions; the notion that human society can only persist if a few self-sacrificing men are just able to rein in this monstrous beast, and must do so by appealing not to his rational self, which is weak, but to his irrational self, which is dominant, and must direct it towards ends not intelligible to him but intelligible to those who direct him –

this view, which is the view of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, does not appear to me to be an eighteenth-century view at all – neither progressive nor reactionary, nor liberal, nor conservative, very remote from Burke, by whom he was supposed to have been inspired, and totally unrelated to Thomism or the official Catholic political philosophy of that or of any other time. In this respect, I think, he is a proto-Fascist. It seems to me reasonable to say that his stress upon the seamy side, upon the black side, of human nature does qualify him to be so described. That, in effect, is his vision.

Let me try to sum him up. His merits are that he is genuinely capable of seeing through hollow abstractions, of understanding the role which myths and the irrational play in human life; that he understands that among the motives which move men is the desire for self-immolation, for aggression, for self-destruction, which is as much part of human history as the nobler and more rational impulses to which the Encyclopaedists appealed. He understands, in other words, all the things which the Fascist psychologists were able to exploit to so successful a degree. In short, if we only read the Encyclopaedists, we ought to be unable to explain the phenomenon of Fascism. If we read Maistre we can at least explain it, whatever our attitude towards it might be.

Maistre contradicts himself a thousand times. He says, for example, that all constitutions must be lived, they cannot be written, because whatever is written perishes, and therefore the English constitution is the best, because it has not been written down. Everything which is written down in laws and enactments must perish because this codification is done by human intelligence, by clerks, by people who use the feeble categories of the human intellect instead of thinking with the blood – a very strong theme in Maistre. On the other hand he also tells us that the Turks have survived so long because they have all believed in the Koran, that the Chinese have survived so long because they repeat the apophthegms of Confucius, which presumably are written down, that Christianity has survived for so long because it has dedicated itself to the eternal truths of the Bible. These two kinds of proposition are not compatible with one another. He says that only countries which own the true faith, only Catholic countries, can survive, because only in Catholic countries is authority understood. Elsewhere, mutinies break out: Calvin, Luther – these are the real

authors of the French Revolution, the people who trusted in individual judgement. On the other hand, he agrees that the England of his day appears fairly stable, and he says it is a miracle. The definition of a miracle is something which contradicts something which on other grounds one knows to be universally true, which again is not the most powerful of arguments. To regard something as miraculous merely because you have taken something to be a law which the exception in fact refutes is not the most powerful of logical instruments.

There are many other contradictions of a similar type, which I need not go into, and which are relatively unimportant. The general pattern of Maistre's views is fairly clear. What *can* be said about him is that he violently and vastly exaggerated, which is precisely what I have tried to say about Hamann too; that if it were true that men were as he describes them as being, that if all we had in the world were crime and punishment, that if men always oscillated between the most ghastly and bloodstained terror on the one hand, the only instrument which prevented them from total self-demolition and chaos on the other, then human history is even more unintelligible than he thinks Voltaire makes it out to be. Therefore his psychology and his sociology are just as lop-sided as that of the most superficial, the most rosy-spectacled, the most idealistic and starry-eyed of the idealists of the eighteenth century, whom he regards with such contempt and hatred. But it can be said for Maistre that he did attract people's attention to the black aspects of individual and social life, that if rational behaviour is to occur at all, then reality must be looked at as it is, and not as we would like it to be, and that if self-understanding is of any importance, then Maistre undoubtedly did bring out in a manner which was extremely bold and unusual in his day those huge, socially irrational factors which afterwards people like Marx and Freud wrote about, those aspects of human life which were not suspected or dreamt of in most of the writings of the eighteenth century. In this respect he did render a service to mankind. That is to say, after Maistre it was no longer possible to write about social life as it was written about in the eighteenth century.

It was only the French Revolution which made this change possible. We find a great deal of writing on the part of people such as Comte or Fourier, Macaulay or even John Stuart Mill, which takes no notice of these things, or very little notice. In this respect, when

you read one of Maistre's tragic, violent, hysterical and sometimes fantastic descriptions of human folly, of human degradation, of human misery, of human irrationality, on which he lays such stress, you feel that you are reading a far more contemporary author than Macaulay or Mill or Fourier, or any other authors either contemporary with or shortly after Maistre. In this sense he is a modern thinker, because he did rip open certain aspects of social reality which were only hinted at obscurely before, and were never presented with the harshness and the vivacious and dramatic force with which Maistre was able to impart them. That, ultimately, is his service.

He is regarded by most French writers about him as a marvellous and logical mind, capable of deducing all kinds of extremely paradoxical and disagreeable propositions by ironclad logic from very lucid premisses. This seems to me totally false. There is not much logic in Maistre, there is not much argument; all there is is a vivacious imagination and an extreme desire to show up and expose the enemy. The enemy is Voltaire, the enemy is Rousseau, the enemy is Holbach, the enemy is Helvétius, Condillac and Condorcet. Whenever he comes across their writings, he writes with a special dramatic violence and passion, a special hatred – a quality I also attributed to Hamann – which throws a gloomy light upon a scene not adequately illuminated by more rational and more benevolent thinkers.

The importance both of Hamann and of Maistre resides in two things. First of all they revealed irrational, chaotic, disagreeable aspects of both individual and social existence not taken care of in the symmetrical, elegant, rationalistic, I will not say rational, constructions typical of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Secondly they had a considerable influence upon behaviour (and deserve study as such), Hamann in the note of irrationality which he injected into German romanticism and by indirection various movements which were to grow out of it – various forms of nationalism and so forth – and Maistre by painting a picture of man which thereupon became the vade-mecum of every reactionary and indeed every Fascist movement in the world.

In 1830 the Saint-Simonian movement rather mysteriously observed (in its official *Exposition*) that what is needed is a combination of Voltaire and Maistre. This, on the face of it, seems somewhat paradoxical: Voltaire the friend of life, the friend of

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liberty, the friend of man; Maistre, the executioner, blood, darkness, irrationality, horror. What they meant was not altogether absurd. They wanted to say that Voltaire was a very dry and ironical thinker who thought poorly of mankind, and was not sentimental: he stripped away a good many illusions. Man as he painted him was not entirely attractive; no doubt his persecutors were even less so, but man as painted by Voltaire was a dry etching, and Voltaire removed from him all kinds of handsome attributes with which more optimistic or more charitable thinkers had clothed him before. This man needed advice about how to proceed; and Maistre provided the machinery by which alone the poor creature drawn by Voltaire could be governed. What none of these thinkers had foreseen was the possibility of the combination of irrationalism and science. For Maistre, science is the opposite of irrationalism, and therefore anyone who is scientific is bound to disintegrate the country in which he lives by resisting, or not allowing to grow, those healthy irrational forces round which society must grow, as a tree; the proposition that irrational movements – nationalism, chauvinism, totalitarianism of the right or the left – can come armed with science is one nightmare which even Maistre never dreamt of. Nevertheless, he did provide the material out of which it could ultimately be constructed.

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