ISAIAH BERLIN ONLINE

Two Enemies of the Enlightenment

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published items and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

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Two Enemies of the Enlightenment

IB delivered four Woodbridge Lectures on 'Two Enemies of the Enlightenment' (Hamann and Maistre) on 25–8 October 1965 in the Harkness Academic Theater, Nicholas Murray Butler Library, on Columbia University's Morningside Heights campus. The first and last lectures are apparently lost, but brief notices of them both were published in the student newspaper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, and appear below in their proper positions. The press release for the series, dated 19 October 1965, explains the name of the lectures:

> The Woodbridge Lectures memorialize the late Frederick James Eugene Woodbridge, distinguished dean and professor of Philosophy at Columbia. Professor Woodbridge, who died in 1940, left a bequest to Columbia for the purpose of bringing eminent philosophers to the campus and to support publication of their lectures by the Columbia University Press. Substantial contributions by friends made it possible for the University to establish the Woodbridge Memorial Fund for the endowment of a special lectureship in philosophy.

Frederick Woodbridge

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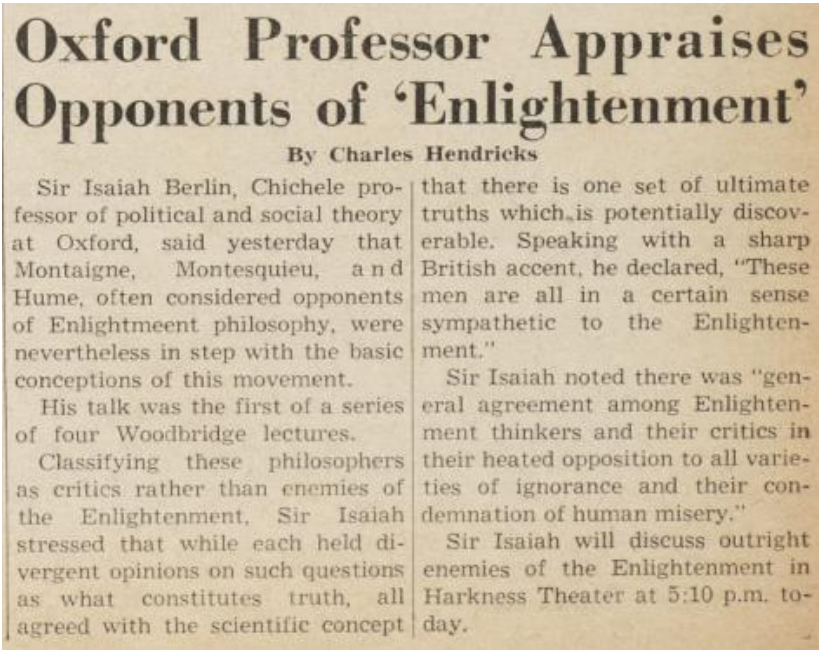
Listen to **recordings** of the surviving lectures

1 The Scientific Ideal of the French Enlightenment
Early Heretics and Doubters



Oxford Professor Appraises Opponents of 'Enlightenment'

By Charles Hendricks

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His talk was the first of a series of four Woodbridge lectures.

Classifying these philosophers as critics rather than enemies of the Enlightenment, Sir Isaiah stressed that while each held divergent opinions on such questions as what constitutes truth, all agreed with the scientific concept that there is one set of ultimate truths which is potentially discoverable. Speaking with a sharp British accent, he declared, "These men are all in a certain sense sympathetic to the Enlightenment."

Sir Isaiah noted there was "general agreement among Enlightenment thinkers and their critics in their heated opposition to all varieties of ignorance and their condemnation of human misery."

Sir Isaiah will discuss outright enemies of the Enlightenment in Harkness Theater at 5:10 p.m. today.

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Columbia Daily Spectator, 26 October 1965, 1

2 The First Onslaught
J. G. Hamann and his Disciples

Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88)

Before I begin properly I ought to say that I undertook to answer questions at the end of today's lecture. I hope that I shall stop at about [*inaudible*], and if I do that, then perhaps we might have an interval of two or three minutes, in the course of which those who neither wish to ask questions nor wish to hear others do so can perhaps conveniently leave without attracting undue attention to themselves.

*

I SPOKE LAST TIME about Hamann's anti-rationalism. Let me continue with the exposition of his views, so as to give you a more complete picture than I was able to do last time.

The word 'reason' itself profoundly irritated and annoyed him: whenever he sees it he strikes. Bayle made the famous statement, which is the battle-cry of the entire Enlightenment, 'Reason is the supreme tribunal, and one which judges in the last resort, and without appeal, everything that is placed before it.'[1] That comes from the famous essay on the comet. Hamann quotes this and says, 'What is this *reason*, with its universality, infallibility, exuberant certainty and obviousness? An *ens rationis*, a stuffed dummy which the *howling* superstition of unreason endows with *divine attributes*.'[2] This is a very typical way of speaking – for him, that is to say. What he wishes to say is that any form of reification, any form of the erection of any category as a general criterion for any purpose always distorts and caricatures. As I tried to say last time, he is the first of the thinkers, at least I think he is the first – it's always rather dangerous to say this, but he is at least amongst the first of thinkers – who start the entire tradition of saying: Any smoothing out, any generalisation is a caricature of the living tissue of life; death cannot copy life; rest cannot copy movement; words cannot copy reality; and so forth. Whenever the word 'reason' comes up in the writings of anyone else he sees before him a dead framework, an icy construction which appears to him to imprison and to kill the flowing chaos of life which he sees before him. To resist emotion with logical distinctions is to try to stop the ocean wave with a barrier of sand. Mathematics have never yet curbed passion or done anything to resist or restrain human prejudice. And he quotes Hume again.[3] The points I wish to make – there are three points – in order to condense this man's extremely chaotic and often wildly irrelevant thought into what appear to me to be the central propositions – at least of historical importance – let me say this.

[1] *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jesus-Chri[s]t: Contrain-les d'entrer* ['Philosophical Commentary on These Words of Jesus Christ: Compel Them to Come In'] ('Cantorbury', 1686), part 1, chapter 1, 7.

[2] 'Κογξομπαξ' ('Konxompax') (1779), W iii 225.3–6.

[3] Presumably a reference to a quotation by Hamann from Hume mentioned in the lost first lecture.

The first proposition which I wish to impute to him is that he genuinely was a nominalist and an empiricist. That is to say, whenever he saw rationalism before him in any shape or form he attacked immediately. The second proposition is about the unity of the spirit and the flesh. The third proposition is about the nature of language. He pictures the history of philosophy as a dead museum of forgotten antiquities in which it is necessary to infuse the breath of life in order to make them live; and when you come to the history of philosophy, what you mainly find there, according to him, are various forms of repression, various forms of frameworks, networks of categories, constructions of the reason, with which human beings try to shield and protect themselves against perception of reality. The true image, he says, of the average man, the sane, sensible or rational man, is that of a sleepwalker, 'a man who with infinite sagacity, reflection, coherence, talks, acts, executes perilous enterprises, and does this with greater assurance of touch than he would – or could – do it if his eyes were even a little open'.[4]

This is a paradox which almost every other Romantic author afterwards echoes. The notion is that sensible men and even sensible philosophers manage to lull themselves into some rigid view of life, construct some highly artificial schema by which they imprison themselves, go to sleep on a comfortable bed of an accepted and unquestioned dogma, and thenceforward, having dedicated themselves to some single *idée maîtresse*,[5] to some single framework or some single so-called coherent view of life, proceed then to ignore everything which is exceptional, everything that is real, everything that is palpitating, everything which contradicts, all the wrinkles, all the chaos, all the irregularities of life, which to Hamann are in fact reality. And he says: 'Four things I have never understood: the man who seeks the philosophers' stone; the man who wishes to square the circle; the man who wishes to measure

[4] Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel* [*Correspondence*], ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, 1955–79) (hereafter B) i 369.31–4.

[5] 'Master idea'.

the sea; and the man who believes that a man of genius ought to possess common sense.'[6] And as he was convinced that he himself was a man of genius, and compared himself to Socrates in this respect, not altogether modestly, his life was to a large degree devoted to constantly, wherever he saw it, refuting this constant tendency towards the imprisonment of reality in some categorial scheme. He says: There are two types of idolatry to which human beings are addicted. One he calls rational mysticism, the other he calls scientific mysticism. Rational mysticism, which is a curious name for it, is for example the Eleusinian mysteries. The Eleusinian mysteries are an attempt to create the illusion on people's part that there is another world to which they can be admitted by incantations, by religious exercises, by mysterious operations by which they escape from the chaos and the unsatisfactoriness of this world into some coherent, luminous divine world in which virtue is rewarded, crime is punished and otherwise order occurs, which compensates them for the dissatisfactions and the irregularities of this world.

This is a form of ancient idolatry. Modern idolatry, he says, is a much paler and much more – even foolish, a far less vivid version of this same thing, and that is created by the scientists of Paris. There is the religion of science and the religion of Eleusis: both these are forms of idolatry, both these are an attempt to erect a dualism by which the world here below is ignored in favour of some imaginary world thereabove or therebehind or therebelow. Any form of dualism of this sort appears to him to be an offence against the sense of reality. Anything which is ordered, anything which is finite, he seeks to reject. I think it was Spinoza who said: The purpose of nature is uniformity. There is nothing that Hamann believed less. He liked only diversity, he liked only infinity; anything which appeared to him to be finite or tend toward the finite, any ambition to try to lock anything up within a coherent

[6] More literally: 'Three things […] I cannot comprehend, possibly four: a *man of sound judgement* who looks for the philosopher's stone; the squaring of a circle; the extent of the sea; and a *man of genius* who *affects the religion of sound human reason*.' 'Glose Philippique' ['Philippic Gloss'], W ii 294.6–11.

schema, appeared to him a form of shallowness and foolishness. That is why – he tells the story himself, how, sitting in the garden of the English merchant Green, who was a great friend of Immanuel Kant – sitting in this garden, Kant said, 'I think' – not perhaps one of the wisest remarks which Kant made, as you will see – 'I think that astronomy has finally come to an end, I think everything is known, I don't think new knowledge can now occur.' If Kant did say that, as I say, it was not perhaps the most gifted remark of his.

Hamann said, 'When he said this, I could strangle him.'[7] His reason was – Hamann's interest in astronomy was not superabundant; he was not interested in natural sciences, as we know; on the contrary, he regarded the whole notion of the natural sciences as *Lebensfeindlich* – inimical to life. Nevertheless the very idea that something is finished, that God couldn't create new stars, new planets, that enormous exceptions couldn't arise, that some enormous outburst of chaotic creative imagination on the part of an unpredictable creator could not occur, that Kant or any other scientist was able with what appeared to him to be smug satisfaction to say, that's that, we've done the job, astronomy is at an end, now we get on to the next task, whatever it is, the next set of problems in the natural sciences, appeared to him to be the most profound misunderstanding and the most limitless arrogance of which contemptible human beings were capable. This is the temper in which he speaks. Similarly, whenever he finds any generalisations, whenever he finds Kant talking about categories – about, for example, causality, we already know what he thinks – but when he

[7] Hamann to J. G. Herder, 23 May 1768, B ii 416.30–35. IB's account of this episode is apparently based on Jean Blum's in *La Vie et l'oeuvre de J.-G. Hamann, le 'Mage du Nord', 1730–1788* [*The Life and Work of J. G. Hamann, the 'Magus of the North', 1730–88*] (Paris, 1912), 283–4: Blum reports that Hamann wanted to strangle (Blum's word, not Hamann's) the new hypotheses of astronomy (not Kant himself); moreover, Hamann's letter refers to Green's house, not his garden, and says that he heard Kant speak of the state of astronomy in a daydream (not in person), and found himself so hostile to these hypotheses that he was after their lives.

finds Kant talking about Time and Space with capital letters as forms of the intuition, he says: Time is to me pulse beats, time is to me heartbeats, the rhythms of nature, concretely, here; there is no such thing as Time, he says, with a capital T, there is only this particular piece of duration, there is this particular experience which is ungeneralisable because sufficiently dissimilar to other similar experiences for any general proposition about time not to be of great significance. Similarly space is what I feel when I gesture; space is what I feel when I make a piece of sculpture; space occurs when I try to mimic the walk of an animal, a form of gait for example. As for you the three-dimensional space of which Newton speaks, the box of which Newton and Kant speak, that is a typical fiction of reason which again imprisons and limits the imagination of man.

The philosophical value of this is not very clear, but at any rate it is a symptom of the way in which Hamann's thought and imagination worked. Anything which represses was inimical to him; even Rousseau, for whom he has some respect – he looks on Rousseau, and he says he looks on Rousseau, very much as Socrates looked on Protagoras, as the best of the sophists, but still a sophist. And he is the best of the sophists, just as Protagoras was for Socrates, because Protagoras understood something about the moral nature of man, though he didn't understand it, perhaps, in the way in which Socrates wished it understood. Rousseau is an excellent weapon against the shallow generalisations of Helvétius or Holbach; he understands the human emotions, he understands the darker side of human nature, which is completely opaque to the, for Hamann at least, dry unimaginative schematising dryasdusts who work in Paris, or for that matter in England too.

But Rousseau is mistaken because for one yoke he simply substitutes another: for the yoke of sociology, psychology, some kind of science of man – of human science or social science which is constructed on the analogy of mathematics or of natural science, which kills everything, smooths and irons everything out, he substitutes the simple man, the open heart, innocence, which nevertheless is also able to perceive some kind of general laws,

some kind of huge timeless propositions, which all good men at any period, at any time and in any place, could see if only they weren't corrupted by their own *amour propre* or by the devastating or crippling effect upon them of institutions which perhaps they weren't able to help being born into. And this seems to Hamann to be ultimately a deep fallacy. And that is why he attacks the *Nouvelle Héloïse*: he likes the *Nouvelle Héloïse* as a novel because it appears to him to some degree to show some perception of the Romantic, that is to say the emotional, nature of man, the miseries – it is in some ways a description of a specific psychological tragedy, of the pains and agonies of a particular human being in a particular concrete situation – and not to generalise too much. Nevertheless he says: There is absolutely no reason in the world why the heroine, why Julie, should in the end not go off with Saint-Preux. Why should she remain with her dreary boring husband Wollmar just because he is virtuous, and just because he understands nature, and understands the nature of the world? He understands nothing of the kind, he says. The morality of Rousseau, which is ultimately the conventional morality of Protestantism, for Hamann, is simply the imposition once again of fearful thongs, a fearful conventional framework, upon the wild beatings of the human heart; and therefore his criticism of this novel is that in the end Rousseau surrendered; in the end there is the gloomy trio of Wollmar, Julie and Saint-Preux; Saint-Preux is unable to marry Julie because she is already married to Wollmar; marriage is sacred.

Why should marriage be sacred? says Hamann. This needs some reasoning; and he himself never did marry the lady with whom he lived. This caused a certain amount of shock in pietist circles; nevertheless his general piety was so great, and the general holiness of his life was regarded as so exceptional, that he was not very much attacked on that score. But the general attitude of Hamann in this respect is that it is we human beings who impose barriers between the various aspects of human nature, between the reason and the imagination, between the imagination and sense, between sense and understanding – all these categories with which he thinks

Kant plays so idly, into which he hacks and cuts the living flesh of reality. All this does incredible damage in life itself. And one of the most powerful sermons to be obtained in Hamann is about the identification of the spirit and the flesh, that they are one, and that the ascetic cutting off of the spirit from the flesh, whether it is done by people who believe in the Eleusinian mysteries, or whether it is done by ascetics who follow either Jansenists or German pietists, whoever it might be, is a crime against the complete nature of man.

Let me read you some characteristic quotations to illustrate this point. The greatest crime, death in life, is to divorce the intellect from 'the deep abyss of the most tangible sensuousness'.[8] 'Let there be light!'[9] This is an act of creation, sensuous drawing and creation. God himself is made flesh. If God had not been made flesh he could not discourse to us, who are also flesh; but we, blasphemously, have divided the spirit from the flesh. Gather the fragments together: that is the work, in literature, of a scholar; in thought, of a philosopher; but to imitate them, to shape them and to live them, that is the work of a poet;[10] and the poet is the highest manifestation, for Hamann, of man. Reason is a poisonous snake,[11] the arch-heretic, the great enemy of God and his truth, the snake in Paradise. To divide the flesh from the spirit is blasphemy against God, who made us one. We must take Christ's words literally and seek to restore within ourselves a child's view of life, and a child's view of life mainly includes a natural, unashamed sense of the flesh. To tame the passions is to weaken spontaneity and genius.

This was a fairly commonplace sentiment for the eighteenth century, and Diderot would have subscribed to it, the Swiss aestheticians would have subscribed to it, but Hamann meant it in

[8] 'Metakritik über den Purism der Vernunft' ['Metacritique of the Purism of Reason'] (1784), W iii 287.31.

[9] 'Aesthetica in nuce' ['Aesthetics in a Nutshell'] (1762), W ii 197.26.

[10] ibid. 199.2–3.

[11] In this view he followed the pietist Johann Konrad Dippel (1673–1734), author as 'Christianus Democritus' of *Christen-Statt auff Erden ohne gewöhnlichen Lehr- Wehr- und Nehr-Stand* [*The Christian City on Earth without the Usual Educational, Military and Pastoral Professions*] (n.p., 1700), e.g. pp. 18, 78–9, 111.

a much more passionate and much more direct sense. Our philosophers hide with shame, like Adam, their unavoidable and agreeable sin;[12] as man was made in God's image, so is the body a picture of the soul. Modern writers, he says, have turned the savage violence of the Beasts of the Apocalypse into Lessing's harmless moral imagery; they have turned Aesop's ferocious vision into the smooth elegance of Horace. To understand truly one must descend to the depths of the orgies of Bacchus and Ceres.[13] Newton's, Buffon's and Nieuwentyt's discoveries cannot inspire poetry as mythology has only too obviously done.[14] The reason for this is that nature has been killed by the rationalists because they do not understand senses, passions, man. 'Passion alone gives abstractions and hypotheses hands, feet, wings; images it endows with spirit, life, language. […] Where [in science] do we find the rolling thunder of eloquence, or […] the monosyllabic brevity of lightning?'[15]

For this we must go to artists, for this we cannot go to the modern philosopher; we can go to the Bible, we can go to Luther, but not to the Greeks; to Milton, not to modern French versifiers. Why are the glorious organs of generation objects of shame? Do not speak of general human sentiment on this subject; this isn't true: '*children* are not full of shame, nor are *savages* filled with shame, nor are the Cynic philosophers'.[16] *Pudeur* is an inherited piece of morality – a habit, due to consensus. By 'consensus' he means middle-class sentiment, against the Bible, against God, against thunder. 'If the feelings are mere *pudenda*, do they therefore cease to be the tools of virility?' he says.[17] 'The *pudenda* of our organism are so closely wedded to the secret depths of our *heart* and *brain*

[12] 'Zweifel und Einfälle über eine vermischte Nachricht' ['Doubts and Ideas about a Mixed Message'] (1776), W iii 190.23–6.

[13] 'Aesthetica in nuce' (note 9), W ii 201.4–15.

[14] ibid. 205.21–3.

[15] ibid. 208.20–4; 'monosyllabic' because the German for lightning is 'Blitz'.

[16] 'Versuch einer Sybille über die Ehe' ['A Sibyl's Essay on Marriage'] (1775), W iii 199.28.

[17] 'Aesthetica in nuce' (note 9), W ii 208.11–12.

that a total rupture of this natural union is impossible.'[18] Reason is identified by him with repression, not altogether unlike Blake. 'I have always sought to identify and pick out the *inferna* of a torso, rather than the *superna* of a bust,' he wrote to Herder in 1768. 'And my coarse imagination has never been able to picture a creative spirit without *genitalia*.'[19]

Let me quote to you remarks which Blake made on this subject, which parallel this. When Blake says, for example, that men 'form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them / The eternal laws of God',[20] this is a very, very Hamannian sentiment indeed.

> Children of the future Age,
> Reading this indignant page;
> Know that in a former time,
> Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.[21]

This could almost be paralleled in a good many of Hamann's writings.

> That they may call a shame & sin
> Loves Temple that God dwelleth in
> […]
> And render that a Lawless thing
> On which the Soul Expands its wing.[22]

This is almost parallel. It's true, you could say that both in the case of Blake and in the case of Hamann, there is a common mystical tradition, in the case of Blake Swedenborg, in the case of Hamann very similar thinkers in Germany, who, as often in the writings of mystics, use sensuous and sexual imagery for all kinds of mystical

[18] Hamann to Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 24 July 1784, B v 167.16–18.

[19] Hamann to Herder, 23 May 1768, B ii 415.19–24.

[20] *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), plate 28, lines 6–7: *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford, 1978) (hereafter Bentley), i 282.

[21] *Songs of Experience*, plate 51 ('A Little GIRL Lost'), lines 1-4, Bentley i 196.

[22] 'The Everlasting Gospel', p. 50, Bentley ii 1060.

religious emotions. Hamann certainly belonged to this company, but he translated it into secular language, and he was one of the greatest defenders of spontaneous or natural behaviour, certainly in his day, whereby he did duly shock respectable persons. For example, on the frontispiece of the *Socratic Memorabilia*, of his first important intellectual essay, he represents himself as the goat-footed god Pan. And this caused a certain amount of surprise and even shock in the more staid circles in Königsberg. The *beaux esprits* for whom the French are writing would never see the dawn of the rising day, for they do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh. How can fastidious modern connoisseurs do anything, since they are ashamed of nature, cover her up, concern themselves only with the pretty clothes with which they hide her?

And then he says: 'Rules are the vestal virgins who populated Rome, thanks to the exceptions which they perpetrated.'[23] This is a very typical Hamannian joke. Fig trees, he says, which provide us very usefully with leaves to cover our shame, nevertheless feed us only by allowing their fruit to drop. Using these kinds of images, particularly about the vestal virgins, conveys a very typical Hamann sentiment because the proposition is: Rules are important, but it is also important to break them; the rules exist for the purpose of being broken in exceptional cases. Anything which pretends to have any degree of universal validity is a human fiction invented to constrict the spirit; and there is perpetual propaganda in Hamann against repression in all its forms, anything which imprisons the living spirit, whether in the form of philosophical construction or in the form of political organisation or in the form of language.

Let me come to his linguistic theory, which is simply another illustration of this selfsame thesis. The origins of language were a very lively subject in the middle of the eighteenth century. All kinds of theories developed about the origins of language: all kinds of rival views were expressed about whether language was in fact an invention – a gadget, like the wheel, for example, or the screw,

[23] 'Leser und Kunstrichter' ['Reader and Art Critic'], W ii 345.11–12. Romulus and Remus were the children by Mars of Rhea Silvia, a Vestal Virgin.

which human beings invented for certain purposes – or whether, on the contrary, it was a gift bestowed upon man by God. If you read, for example, Condillac, or if you read Lord Monboddo, you would find that they believed that language came into being as a result of certain biological or physiological needs. In Condillac it is a genuine physiological need, in Monboddo it's a little more conscious: human beings seeking to communicate, seeking to express themselves, and finding that incoherent noises and gestures didn't perform this task sufficiently well, proceed in some almost conscious sense – almost, not quite – to invent language exactly as one invents a chair, a table, the screw, as one uses fire: that is to say, it is a specific invention generated by human beings in a utilitarian spirit at a certain point of human evolution.

This was denied very hotly by theologians, led by a German theologian called Süssmilch, who pointed out, quite correctly, that there was something illogical about this hypothesis: that in order to invent, human beings must think, that one thinks in symbols – after all that is what thought is – and therefore one cannot invent symbols because, since one uses them for the purpose of invention one cannot invent the act of inventing, and therefore the cart is put, there, before the horse. In 1772 the Berlin Academy offered a prize for the best essay on the origins of language, and Herder wrote one and obtained the prize. Herder was a very faithful disciple of Hamann, and Herder put forward an intermediate theory of language, neither the first nor the second, neither a priori nor wholly empirical. He said that Süssmilch was perfectly right to suppose that human beings couldn't suddenly have invented language like that; they couldn't have invented language because presumably words, symbols, the whole systematic use of certain marks on paper, or certain sounds, for certain purposes couldn't have been adopted by human beings until and unless their consciousness, their reason, their faculties had developed to a certain degree; and when their faculties, their consciousness and their reason had developed to this degree, then the very development of the consciousness and the faculties to this degree was in fact the use of symbolism. The use of symbolism was itself

a natural organic development of human faculties in a certain direction. Therefore it was impossible to suppose that this was something which human beings had suddenly thought of: having not had language on a Tuesday, suddenly someone came, produced a brilliant invention, and on Wednesday, suddenly, this wonderful liberating instrument came into being, called language, after which we have never looked back.

That Herder correctly denied. On the other hand, he didn't see why Süssmilch should be right, who maintained that language was a gift of grace, that human beings were completely inarticulate before, suddenly God dropped language into their lap as a free gift of grace, and with surprise and gratification they suddenly observed themselves, they didn't themselves know how, in possession of this miraculous faculty. That appeared to him equally irrational, equally illogical, equally improbable, historically speaking, and therefore he produced a very sensible naturalistic theory by which reason and speech, being interwoven, develop as one, and therefore there isn't a specific problem about the invention of speech, just as there isn't a specific problem about the invention of reason, or the invention of the imagination, or the invention of sight, or the invention of hearing, or the invention of articulation. These things occur as they do.

Hamann was quite pleased with the essay, so far as it went, against Lord Monboddo or against Condillac or against Harris or against various other theories in the eighteenth century, but it was a little over-naturalistic for him, and he wrote to Herder, and he said: This will do, but you have left out the divine, you have left out God, you have left out the fact that God speaks to us, and we understand God because he has made us capable of understanding him. He has made everything. You implant in a sensible nature that which belongs to God. Herder was moved by this – he admired Hamann more than any other living man. He described himself as 'a camel-driver who collects the golden apples which fall from the

lap of the holy man sitting on the camel as he reads the Koran';[24] and, being in this mood, on the whole retracted, partly because he wished to please Hamann, and partly, I daresay, because he was a Protestant clergyman and it ill behoves a Protestant clergyman to deny the powers of God, and to deny, indeed, the doctrine of natural kinds which in this essay he did tend to deny. Nevertheless Hamann was stimulated by Herder's errors, as it seemed to him, to his own theory of language, which is somewhat analogous, but not entirely.

What powerfully moved Hamann's indignation to the highest possible pitch of intensity was the remark of the abbé Dubos, who was an eminent French aesthetician of this period, who said: 'What one has felt and thought in one language one can express with equal elegance in any other.'[25] This appeared to Hamann to be one of the least veracious remarks ever made by a human being. He said that our cast of mind is entirely based on sensuous impressions; that sensuous impressions and associated feelings, as he calls them, occur differently in different organisms, in different climates and in different circumstances. If you wish to understand the Bible, he says, you must comprehend 'the Oriental character of the eloquence of the flesh that takes us to the cradle of our race and religion'.[26] Images come before words and images are created by passions, and passions are not analogous in men under different circumstances. He then says: Every man is unique, every man possesses his own character, and words, symbols, are the natural expression of these unique human beings. There may be certain similarities, but what is important, of course, as always for him, is the unique quintessence which every human being incorporates and which he expresses in a particular use of symbols which he employs.

[24] More literally: 'a Turkish camel-driver gathering up holy apples before his holy ambler, which carries the Koran'. Herder to Hamann, February 1765, B ii 315.35–6.

[25] Untraced.

[26] 'Kleeblatt Hellenistischer Briefe' ['A Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters'] (1762), First Letter, W ii 170.37–9.

The central proposition of Hamann is that there is no difference between words and thoughts, and this for his time was a moderately bold thing to say. It is not the case that there is something called ideas, such that you look for words like gloves to fit these ideas. It is not the case that you think in thoughts and then look for something called words, noises, marks on paper, symbols, pictures, whatever it may be, in which to incorporate these thoughts for the purpose of communicating them to others. If you cannot use symbols, you are not thinking at all. Thinking *is* symbol-using, thinking *is* using either images or words; these two acts are literally identical for him. Language and thought are one, like God and His Shekhina, like God and his Tabernacle, he says.[27] 'Every court, every school, every profession, every closed corporation, every sect – each has' – and must have – 'its own vocabulary.' How do we penetrate them? We can penetrate them only with the passion of 'a friend, an intimate, a lover'[28] – by faith, by belief, not by rules.

Why is this so? Because the uniqueness of each human being is expressed by his gestures, is expressed by his facial expression, is expressed by the spasmodic movements which he makes, is expressed by his gait, by the way in which he gets up and by the way in which he sits down, by a thousand small and unconsidered movements of his body and his soul, which for him, of course, are one. That being so, language, symbolism is one of the means of expression of this uniqueness; and therefore the attempt to say that one can draw up rules for language, and that these rules are in some cases artificial rules, and that language submits to artificial rules exactly as, say, mathematics, which really *is* a human invention, submits to artificial rules, and that language is a tool, a gadget, an invention, and therefore is capable of being analysed into something which human beings have either discovered or invented for it, must be false.

[27] 'Zwey Scherflein zur neusten Deutschen Literatur' ['Two Mites for the Latest German Literature'] (1780), W iii 237.10–11.

[28] 'Kleeblatt Hellenistischer Briefe' (note 26), First Letter, W ii 172, line 21; 171, line 15.

You can no more invent language than you can invent feeling, than you can invent thought, than you can invent any other natural human activity. And for him there is a mystical analogue to this. The mystical analogue is that when Adam was in Paradise, then God spoke to him in such a manner that Adam understood everything, because the language in which God spoke was the language the understanding of which he implanted in Adam, and he understood without having to learn the language painfully as sometimes *we* have to; and the world, the very notion of what the world is, the whole notion of articulated experience, the whole notion of, say, the distinction between the external and the internal world, the distinctions of colours and shapes, the distinction of any kind of categories and concepts in terms of which you try to describe and contrast objects in the world – all this is the function of language. Not only can you not do it without language, but to do it *is* to use language; that is what language *is*. It is the function of discriminating, of comparing, of saying, of thinking, of feeling. Even in feeling, says Hamann, some occult symbolism occurs; that is to say, as soon as we become self-conscious; once we become self-conscious, symbolism is intermixed with it. Now if that is so, then there is a certain sense in which your world *is* your symbols: there isn't a world stretched in front of you, a *rerum natura*,[29] a given, coherent, articulated entity, and then you have to invent something or other with which to cover it, with which to articulate, with which to translate it, and that is why it is obviously absurd to say that a thing which can be stated in one language can be stated with equal elegance in every other. What can be said in French cannot be fully said in German; what can be said in German cannot be fully said in English; because these languages are the unique expressions of unique individuals living in unique circumstances and express differences as deeply as they express similarities, and what you can skim off, which is what the scientists do, that is to say, what you can skim off if you do produce a generalised language of a highly conceptual kind which is extremely formal in its structure, simply

[29] 'Nature of things'.

invented for the purpose of catching similarities and omitting what are regarded as irrelevant differences, in other words when you invent a perfect translating machine, then what you catch with it is for Hamann not worth catching.

I don't say that he would necessarily deny that this was possible, but his point is: We use language for the purpose of conveying experience; when we meet people, which is to him the most important of all phenomena, when we speak to other human beings, or to God, we wish to be understood and wish to understand them; this cannot be done by any application of mechanical rules. These things are at most some kind of aid, but they are not the key to understanding. Understanding is a unique act of mutual recognition which is not susceptible to rules inasmuch as it is of necessity unique and of necessity sufficiently dissimilar to other such acts to be of supreme value in itself. As you may perceive, he exaggerates; and indeed one could say about him, as one could say about other thinkers, that the thought of very few thinkers has survived who did not exaggerate. But Hamann perhaps exaggerated a little too much. At any rate, he supposes that philosophy is entirely concerned with words. This is a very modern-sounding statement. He certainly supposes that metaphysics and philosophy, whether true or false, is not concerned with things; it is concerned with concepts, with categories, and these concepts and categories are words. 'All idle talk about reason is mere wind', he says; '*language* is its organon and criterion!'[30] Language is like currency: men of genius can use it, but officials turn it, as they do everything, to sterile dogmatism, which they proceed to offer for their own worship by the people. And among these sterile officials he includes metaphysicians and philosophers of his own time.

Creation is speech.[31] 'Through *it* [language] are *all things* made.'[32] This mysterious statement means that God created the universe by

[30] Hamann to Herder, 8 December 1783, B v 108.6–7.

[31] Hamann to Gottlob Immanuel Lindner, 9 August 1759, B i 393.28–9.

[32] Hamann to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, 22–30 October 1785, 28 October, B vi 101.24–5.

some articulated act which is at any rate analogous to some conscious act, which is analogous to thinking. Just as God therefore must have implanted and created the world or articulated it by using, as Hamann supposes, those sacred symbols of which we sometimes catch glimpses, if only we attend to the words of the Bible sufficiently closely, so we, when we ask ourselves what the world is like, can operate only by means of our symbols and our words, which are not detachable from the world to which they apply. Indeed they don't apply to anything, they are part of it. The whole of the Hamann doctrine is that the notion of dividing the words and what the words are about – objects and symbols – is one more instance of this appalling act of diremption, of cutting, of abstraction, of division which has bedevilled the entire history of rational thought. That is why the cardinal sin, for Hamann, is 'to mistake *words* for *concepts* and *concepts* for *real things*',[33] which metaphysicians have done from the beginning of time. 'Reason is language, *logos*. On this marrowbone I gnaw, and shall gnaw myself to death on it',[34] he said to Herder three years before he died.

Let me give you a typical mystical passage by Hamann, so as not to make him out too modern a philosopher, too much of a modern linguistic philosopher, although you will perceive certain affinities, because the very notion that philosophy is about language, that paralogisms of the understanding, which Kant talks about, for example in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, according to Hamann are simply paralogisms of words, language. If we get into paradoxes, as Kant tries to prove, if we get into contradictions of a certain kind, these contradictions are not due to the mistaken function of certain faculties on our part. Faculties can't make mistakes, says Hamann; faculties just operate, so to speak; besides which there are no faculties, there is only one act of cognition: all these divisions into intuition, understanding, imagination, fancy, reason, *Vernunft*, *Verstand*, all these words, all this is idle chatter for him; there is only cognition or action – and cognition and action are

[33] Hamann to Jacobi, 14 November 1784, B v 264.36–7.

[34] Hamann to Herder, 6–10 August 1784, 8 August, B v 177.18–19.

one, of course, for him. To recognise the world is already to take up an attitude towards it; to take up an attitude towards it is to act in a certain fashion; and therefore thought and action are one, and he may for this reason also be regarded as one of the fathers of the famous theory of the unity of theory and practice. Well:

> Every phenomenon of nature was a word – a sign, symbol or pledge of a new, inexpressible but all the more intimate union, communication and community of divine energy and ideas. Everything that man heard in the beginning, and saw with his eyes, contemplated, all that his hands touched, was a living word; for God was the Word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as near and as easy as child's play.[35]

That's how it was with Adam in Paradise. After that there was the Fall, human arrogance, the Tower of Babel, and the terrible cold destruction made by philosophical reason. Rational religion is a contradiction in terms, like rational language. There is nothing which Hamann would have rejected with more fervour and indignation than the notion of a logically perfect language, or a logically correct language. The notion that there is a *rerum natura*, there is a structure of reality to which you can adjust language as a grid or as a machine, would have appeared to him to be the denial of the most self-evident of all facts.

One of the little tracts in which he makes it clear what his attitude is towards language is a very peculiar and very typical little pamphlet which he produced, which is called 'The New Apologia [or Defence] of the Letter *h*', which he published in 1773. It arose as follows.

There was a perfectly respectable Lutheran theologian called Damm in Berlin, who, in the course of offering various suggestions

[35] 'Des Ritters von Rosenkreuz letzte Willensmeynung über den göttlichen und menschlichen Ursprung der Sprache' ['The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross on the Divine and Human Origin of Language'] (1772), W iii 32.21–8.

about the possible etymological reform of German, suggested that the letter *h*, when it came after consonants in German, or where it came at the ends of words, played no part, had no use – it didn't add to the actual sound – and therefore for reasons of utility might as well be dropped. This aroused Hamann's rage in no uncertain manner. He said that the letter *h*, of course, was exactly as it had been described as being: certainly it was of no use. The notion of getting rid of things because they were of no use seemed to him the worst of all possible reasons for any form of action at all. Damm wishes to get rid of this poor letter *h*, he says, in order to create a spick and span world, a swept and garnished world in which everything shall be useful, everything shall be clear, everything shall be elegant, and everything shall be symmetrical. One can already foresee what the nature of the criticism is going to be. This leaves out from the world everything which is irregular, everything which is irrational; all it leaves is Leibniz's 'sufficient reason'.[36] If things don't have sufficient reason, out with them. Sufficient reason, says Hamann, is 'a lamentable, poor, blind, naked' little thing.[37] 'Your life', says the letter *h* suddenly, addressing itself to Baron Grimm in Paris, who supported Damm in this matter:[38] 'Your life is what I am myself, a breath' – '*ein Hauch*', *h*.[39] God has created poor little useless *h*, but he will not be allowed to perish from the earth, says Hamann suddenly. And then there is a tremendous hymn to God, which immediately follows. Those who wish to prove God by design have no faith in such as me, says the letter *h*; such a God exists only by the logic of vain, puffed-up logicians, and the logician is obviously prior to the God

[36] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology* (1714), paras 31–2.

[37] 'Neue Apologie des Buchstaben h' (1773), W iii 100.21.

[38] Damm and his ilk are apostrophised by Hamann as 'You little prophets of Böhmisch-Breda!' (ibid., 105.1, 106.9, 107.15), an allusion to *Le Petit Prophète de Boehmischbroda* [*The Little Prophet of Boehmischbroda*] (n.p., 1753), a pamphlet ostensibly reporting the vaticinations of a prophet born in a Bohemian village, actually by Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm, the celebrated Paris critic, a correspondent of Catherine the Great, a friend of Diderot, Holbach and many other figures of the Enlightenment. I.B.

[39] ibid., 105.4.

whom he creates. In such a universe I – little *h* – could not survive, but thanks to the true God I do and shall.

It was no great distance from this – and from then Hamann goes on to defend every kind of ancient institution. The door is then opened to a tremendous Romantic defence of everything which is useless but old, useless but has meaning for people, useless but expresses in some unique way the impalpable, the immeasurable, the unanalysable essence of something which reason condemns. He says that ancient institutions and usages must be defended, because if they are suppressed, then there is a danger that the soul will be killed altogether, as the French reformer obviously seemed to be doing. In a world, he says, built by Helvétius there will be no colour, no novelty, no genius, no thunder, no lightning, no agony, no transfiguration. That is what, of course, Goethe meant in that famous passage when he talks about his life in Strasbourg when he was young, in the 1770s, and he met Herder, who was suffering with a disease of the eyes, and Herder preached to him what in effect he had learned from Hamann. Referring to Holbach's famous *Système de la nature*, which is a famous atheistical and naturalistic work, Goethe says:

> We could not conceive how such a book could be dangerous. It appears to us so dark, so cold, so Cimmerian, so corpse-like that we found it difficult to endure its presence and shuddered at it as at a ghost. The author imagines that he gives the book a special recommendation when he says in its preface that as a decrepit old man, just sinking into the grave, he wishes to declare the truth to his contemporaries and to posterity before he dies.
>
> We laughed at him: […] 'Old churches', we said, 'have dark windows; to know how cherries and berries taste, we must ask children and sparrows!' These are our gibes, these are our maxims. […] How hollow and how empty we felt in this

> melancholy, atheistical half-night, in which the earth vanished with all its images, heaven with all its stars.[40]

That is direct Hamannian doctrine. Without Hamann, Herder would not have believed these things, and without Herder, Goethe is scarcely likely to have spoken them. That was the way in which these doctrines were transformed into Goethe's prose, and in this way achieved a world stage, and world fame.

This is Hamann's doctrine of language, and from this it's no great distance to his political views, which I might say something about here too. He believes, because of the letter *h*, that everything old, everything decrepit, everything which is ancient must be preserved. He obviously thinks that the crooked alleyways of the past mustn't be straightened out, for fear of losing something impalpable. This is rather like his friend Möser, who practised conservatism of a very analogous order. Our ancestors knew what they were doing. By altering things too much, by straightening things out, by sweeping the universe too clean we are removing that in it which is dear to us, which gives us a sense of our own identity and past – general conservative doctrine. Hamann went further than this. In the course of an attack on a book called *Master and Servant* by a well-known enlightened German bureaucrat called Friedrich Karl von Moser, which was a paean to enlightened despotism, in fact, Hamann says: So that is what we are to believe. The enlightened despot on the top, and everyone else below. This is the rational universe.

And he proceeds to identify, in a very typical fashion, political absolutism, scientific rationalism and generalising propositions in the sphere of aesthetics. Despotism in aesthetics on the part of the abbé Batteux and the abbé Dubos precisely corresponds to enlightened despotism on the part of von Moser's despot, and precisely corresponds to the general propositions which Helvétius

[40] *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* [*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*] (1811–33), *Goethes Werke* [*Goethe's Works*] (Hamburg, 1948–64), part 3 (1814), book 11, 490–1.

and Holbach would like us to substitute for the intuitive, rather more crooked, less elegant, less symmetrical views which men naturally live by. A constitution, says Hamann, can be written, a constitution can be published, a constitution cannot be believed in, a constitution cannot be lived, and we need something in terms of which life can be lived. Therefore all these attempts to create a schema whereby rational organisation takes the place of that chaotic growth which God has stimulated by his imaginative gifts as the artist of the universe, the attempt to alter that which God has created in the direction of rules or formulae which God cannot have stimulated, or has stimulated merely to our doom – cannot have stimulated at least in his capacity as a benevolent creator – as you will discover by reading the Bible, which is chaotic and rightly so. There is always this harking back, always this contrast between the smooth generalisations of the French and the thunder and the lightning and the chaos and the dark woods of the Bible, of Luther and so forth. Since this is so, this is what spells our doom.

He came back to the attack against Mendelssohn and against Kant. The position about Mendelssohn was quite an interesting one. In a sense they were friends. Mendelssohn was his first publisher; he thought Hamann, as I told you in my first lecture, was an interesting man with touches of brilliance; he published some of his writings in his Berlin publication, he and Nicolai, and then, towards the end of his life, published a celebrated work called *Jerusalem*, which is a plea for toleration for minorities in general and the Jews in particular. And in it he develops a perfectly conventional view, which a great many persons at that period held, and of which Mendelssohn gives a perfectly eloquent, though not perhaps a very first-hand, exposition, about the relations of the Church and the state, and about the foundations of political life in general; and he says – echoing Spinoza, echoing to some extent Locke, echoing a good many rationalists in the eighteenth century – that after all the state is founded upon two great foundations – natural law and the contract. Natural law is that which any reasonable being perceives to be true; that is what the Stoics have told us, that is what Cicero has told us, that is what St Thomas has told us. As for

promises, this is a social contract which must be kept because the keeping of contracts – *pacta sunt servanda*[41] – is itself a part of natural law.

If this is so, then, since the state is founded upon this rational foundation, since the whole moral foundation of the state rests upon the existence in it of rational men who have with rational freedom undertaken to live a certain kind of life, to obey a certain kind of government, not to perform certain acts, because they are anti-social in character, and to obey the laws, provided they are passed in a form of which they approve, and which is rational in character – since this is so, any state which suppresses rationality suppresses its own foundations. It can repress conduct, which it may not like because this conduct is dangerous to the foundations of the state as such. It can repress opinion where this opinion is dangerous. But to impose violent censorship, to impose unanimity, for example of religion, to impose unanimity of moral opinions against the freedom of rational beings is to cut off the metaphysical or moral branch on which the state itself may be said to be sitting. This was not, as I say, a very unconventional point of view, this was quite normal, and Mendelssohn published this in the interests of the Jews, who, he said, possessed a religion which was indeed different to that of Christians, but their actions in no way departed from the normal conventions of the times – they were good citizens. All that men could be expected to do in a state was to obey its laws. If they obeyed its laws, and did not preach any doctrine which was subversive of the state, then their religion was a private affair, because they had a right as rational beings to make a choice of that which they believed, provided this was not in itself subversive of life together. And this was therefore a plea for the state to keep its hands off religion, to keep its hands off moral and theological beliefs.

Hamann is exceedingly indignant. He says: So the state is founded on contract. In other words, if it were possible by reason to refute the proposition, say, that the contract had been entered

[41] 'Agreements must be kept.'

into by me or by my ancestors, or if it were possible by reason to refute the proposition that natural law is such as Isidore of Seville says it is, or such as St Thomas says it is, or somebody else says – if it were possible to disprove this, then the state would dissolve at once, it would disintegrate immediately, it would fall to pieces. Nobody but a fool can believe this. The state is an ancient product of human symbiosis. It is created by the intercommunication of human beings with emotions, intuitions, flesh as well as spirit – you can't go back to all the regular Hamannian theses at this point – all these faculties on the part of men, or if they are not to be called faculties, all these means of interlacing on the part of human beings, which is what men are, for men are organically and essentially intercommunicating beings, for they cannot be conceived in any other terms – all this is not the product of reason. This is the product of life together, this is the product of love, of hatred, of jealousy, of ambition, of the worship of God, of all kinds of complex and unanalysable human relations: he speaks the language which is somewhat similar to that of Burke, but a great deal more extravagant, and a great deal more violent. And Mendelssohn tells us that, if these propositions were refuted or even contradicted, then this whole structure would fall to pieces, as if it was a house of cards held together by nothing more than mere irrational agreement. Even the justification of it cannot be regarded as that, because there is no such thing as justifying what there is; we don't justify trees, we don't justify animals, we don't justify the imagination, we don't justify thought, we don't justify man; why on earth, then, should we justify something which is equally natural, equally indestructible, equally eternal, namely society? And as for the state, it is simply a particular form which this society has taken in the course of natural, irregular, crooked, essentially asymmetrical growth, which is naturally hostile to the artificial reasons of the Paris reasoners.

He then goes on to say: And what is more, Mendelssohn wants us to believe that religion should take its proper place in the state. This means that God must know where he belongs, he mustn't go out of the proper bounds which are set for him by the civic

authorities. Religion mustn't interfere with the normal civilised habits of men. You can imagine the kind of reaction which Hamann produces against this. And there follows a very violent and very passionate sermon to the effect that the very notion that the most sacred things there are, that our faith in God, that that by which we live our lives, and the most sacred principles of all, our communication with our maker, which is the whole of the end and goal of our existence – to relegate this to be simply another province of life, like paying taxes, like serving in the army, like any other normal function of human beings, that is the form of the profoundest possible blasphemy against nature, against man and against God. In short, he is pleading for what ultimately comes to some kind of loose anarchistic theocracy. He says that the notion of saying: Religion is all very well in its place, but it won't do if it interferes with the serious concerns of life – which is a parody or caricature which he produces of Mendelssohn – that this is an absolute denial of all that is most important and most profound in individual and in social existence.

He then transfers his attack to Kant, whom he was rather fond of baiting. He liked Kant personally, Kant lent him money, Kant was kind to him. Kant thought he was rather mad, but was amiable to him. 'One can only laugh' at these 'men of genius, or perhaps apes of genius', he said, '[…] and patiently continue on one's own path with assiduity, order, clarity, paying no attention to those charlatans'[42] – and did so. Kant, he says, as a loyal Prussian, in a little pamphlet called *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, which was an attack upon paternalist government, which should have pleased Hamann to that extent – Kant said that if the prince or the sovereign orders me to do something that I deem to be wrong, I must as a private person – still more as an official – carry

[42] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* [*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*] (1798), part 1, book 1, § 58: *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* [*Kant's Collected Works*] (1900–) vii 226, lines 10–11, 20–2. The passage is corrupt in the recording, and has been replaced by a version of IB's use of the same quotation at TCE2 244. There is, however, no direct evidence that Kant was thinking of Hamann when he wrote this.

it out; I have no right to disobey; but as a rational being, being a member of a rational society, I have a duty to criticise such an order. I am a combination, on the one hand of a private person, and on the other of a publicist or a philosopher, a theologian or a professor, whose duty it is, of course, always to speak out. Hamann says: So, a professor is at once a master and a slave, a guardian and a minor, an adult and a child. 'So the public use of reason and liberty is but a dessert, whereas the private use of these excellent things is the daily bread that we must give up, the better to taste the dessert.'[43] In public I wear the trappings of freedom as professor, while at home I have nothing but the rags of a slave, as the obedient servant of Frederick the Great. What on earth is the use of this?, he says. Faith alone gives us strength to resist guardians and tutors, who not only kill our bodies, but empty our pockets, and we cannot do this by mere means of Kant's abstract 'good will'.

And there follows a tremendous attack on intellectuals of this type, who subvert natural human morality. And he goes on to say: Obedience to reason is simply a call to open rebellion. Nicolai, who was Mendelssohn's co-editor in Berlin, and a very reasonable, amiable, high-minded and tolerant man, and did a very great deal for German enlightenment and education, once wrote of Hamann: 'There is room in the world for both of us';[44] after all, we don't understand each other. Hamann said: Certainly not. There is not room for both truth and falsehood: one or other must perish in the fight. Rationalists, philosophers, scientists, Jews,[45] foreigners must

[43] Hamann to Christian Jacob Kraus, 18 December 1784, PS, B v 292.5–7.

[44] '[E]s ist Raum für Dich und uns in der Welt' ['There is room for you and us in the world']: from a review of 'Zweifel und Einfälle über eine vermischte Nachricht' (note 12), *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* [*Universal German Library*], supplement to vols 25–36 (1780), part 4, 2479. See also Blum (note 7) 370. The review is unsigned, but the attribution to the periodical's co-editor Nicolai is plausible.

[45] Hamann's attitude to the Jews has been the subject of some dispute. See, for example, the essay by Ze'ev Levy on Hamann's controversy with Mendelssohn in Bernhard Gajek and Albert Meier (eds), *Johann Georg Hamann und die Krise der Aufklärung* [*Johann Georg Hamann and the Crisis of the Enlightenment*]

be kept in their place. This strikes a sinister note because it embodies in one attitude a kind of anti-rationalism, anti-intellectualism, demotic patriotism which was there in Hamann, the roots of faith in the deep, irrational instincts of the common people against the murderous and dehydrating effect of highbrow intellectuals, which afterwards entered as an ingredient into all kinds of chauvinistic exhibitions in Germany, and ultimately entered as an element into Fascism itself. Hamann himself, be it said to his honour, never took part in the persecution of rationalism which did occur after the death of Frederick the Great. He was too eccentric, too isolated, too queer, too much on his own to do any of these things. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this kind of propaganda undoubtedly did enter into the general brew of anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism, illiberalism and the kind of collective emotionalism which afterwards developed into all kinds of irrationalist movements in the nineteenth century.

I fear that I must end. Finally let me say this. If you say: Why should Hamann be paid any attention at all? – well, of course he exaggerated, as I say, as all philosophers who ever made a mark, I think, or nearly all, exaggerated. Erasmus didn't exaggerate, and we don't read him. Thomas Reid didn't exaggerate, and we don't read him much. If you ask yourself about the great thinkers of the world, I think you will find that they generally exaggerated. Hamann lived at a time when there is no doubt that there was a considerable simplification of the sociology and psychology and

(Frankfurt am Main etc., 1990), 327–44. However, there is undoubtedly a scattering of anti-Jewish remarks in Hamann's writings – see, for example, 'Hierophantische Briefe' ['Hierophantic Letters] (1775), *Third Letter*, W iii 146.34; *Fourth Letter,* 151.31; 'Fliegender Briefe II' ['Flying Letter, Second Version'] (1786), 395.11, 397.18–19; Hamann to Jacobi, 27 April to 3 May 1787, 3 May, B vii 181.5–7, Hamann to Jacobi, 10 May 1788, ibid. 467.26–7; as well as several passages in *Golgotha und Scheblimini!* [*Calvary and Sit Thou at My Right Hand!*, the two terms standing for abasement and exaltation] (1784), W iii 291–320 – and although he was certainly concerned to defend what he saw as true Judaism against perversions of it, and well disposed to Mendelssohn as an individual, it is not plausible to maintain that he was free of what later came to be called anti-Semitism. In this he was, of course, entirely typical of his age.

general attitudes towards what men were and society was, and this outraged him and he naturally went too far in the opposite direction in trying to restore what he regarded as the proper balance in this respect. He constantly tries to break through the crust of complacency, of smugness, of the general acceptance of scientific formulae as the key to life. He saw a world in which it appeared to him that human beings had broken up, in which we had over-specialised. If you wish to put it in sociological terms, it's possible to suppose that Hamann was really a seventeenth-century man who survived into the eighteenth century, rather as Dr Johnson was in England. He lived in the enlightened state of Frederick the Great, who was undoubtedly trying to make Prussia the most powerful and the most important state in Germany, and he was going there by forced marches. He produced agricultural crisis by his mercantilist policy, he introduced education and then was unable to provide sufficient employment for the children of poor but educated men. He drove his subjects, both military and civilian, in a very ruthless manner, and stamped upon all kinds of ancient institutions, altered them, rationalised them, centralised them and altogether vigorously tried to make an extremely modern state out of Prussia, which to some degree he succeeded in doing, somewhat in the manner, though perhaps not quite so violently, as Peter the Great in Russia.

Hamann's voice was the voice of a 'toad beneath the harrow'.[46] His universe was being shot to pieces, his whole emotional and cultural tendencies were towards something older, something far less rationalistic, and he saw in Frederick the Great, whom he calls contemptuously 'the Solomon of Prussia', simply an Ahab who takes away Naboth's vineyard – he, Hamann, being Naboth – simply a wicked king who puts up a lot of wooden idols before his people in the form of reason, science, symmetry, order, all these totally inhuman values into which human flesh is being ground,

[46] From the epigraph to Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Pagett, M.P.', in *Departmental Ditties and Other Verses* (Calcutta, 1886), 43: 'The toad beneath the harrow knows / Exactly where each tooth-point goes. / The butterfly upon the road / Preaches contentment to that toad.'

and by which appalling uniformity is being introduced in what was before that, at least for him, a world of living and therefore asymmetrical beings. And that is, I suppose, the reason for and the essence of this *cri de coeur*. A great many of the things which Hamann said were plainly not true. His attacks on Kant missed the point. He failed to perceive that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was a profound philosophical work. His proposition that general propositions should never be used, or that concepts and categories are of no use, is quite obviously meaningless. A great many of the charges which he levels at French science and French historical writing are beside the point.

Let me say one more thing. I don't think Hamann cared in the least about science and history. If he was told that scientists were simply curious about the way things were and wished to predict and control them, he wouldn't have minded. If he was told that what historians wanted to do was simply to discover how things happened, and use the most rational methods for the purpose of reconstructing the past, he would perhaps have agreed; but these things were of no interest to him. He was not curious about the past, and he was not interested in ordinary human lives; he was not interested in social facts as such; he was, as many such persons are, completely blind to human misery round him; he was not interested in social problems. He was completely absorbed in an act of mystical illumination of his own within himself, and as often happens to such people, he saw most clearly because he looked fanatically out of one window; but out of that window he did see what others did not see, and without Hamann neither Herder nor the German Romantic movement, nor all its consequences, both deleterious and beneficent, are altogether thinkable.

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Tomorrow I propose to talk about the very different figure of Maistre. I shall now stop for about two or three minutes.

The Second Onslaught
3 Joseph de Maistre and Open Obscurantism

Joseph de Maistre by Carl Christian Vogel von Vogelstein, 1810

IF HAMANN WAS an angry man, I think you will find that Maistre was an even angrier one. He started from very different origins than those of Hamann. Hamann was born in 1730, Maistre in 1753 in Chambéry in the Savoie. He was the son of a man who had been raised to the rank of a 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 I think perhaps throw some light upon the particular passion with which he defends the order to which his family was but lately raised. This sometimes occurs in the case of *novi homines*[47] like Cicero and Burke, whom in other respects he resembles.

He 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 it was a movement which was extremely useful against hard-shelled atheism, which, because it emphasised the spiritual nature of man and dwelt on the immortality of the soul and life after death, as might be said, 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 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

[47] 'New men'.

condemned in Chambéry, and this probably did mean that he was present at a good many executions.[48] 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 abolished feudalism already in the 1770s and was one of those cautious, liberal, not very extreme kingdoms 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 went to Venice, then went to Cagliari in Sardinia, where the court was of which he was an official. And then finally, I think partly because of the intransigence of his views, 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 means of 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 of Savoy in Cagliari.

At any rate, it was thought he was a rather uncomfortable customer. He was brilliant, he was an ally, but 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, in which he

[48] But see p. 89 below.

spent a large part of his life, in which he accumulated a good deal of interesting observation about 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 you may imagine, the French Revolution produced a great crop of analysis of its causes and effects. It promised liberty and equality, and although it undoubtedly did promote these in the case of certain sections of the population, it was difficult to maintain by, let us 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 of, first of all, the causes of the Revolution, and secondly 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 sufficiently been touched, the Revolution turned out to be a failure.

There were various other interpretations and explanations, as you may imagine. Hegelians maintained that this was due to an inadequate understanding of the general march of history and of the relationship of facts and ideas. The Catholic Church maintained, and Maistre maintained 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 enshrined in the teachings of the Catholic Church, and by breaking this, and mutinying and rebelling against it, man had put himself beyond the pale, had become an outlaw, and was 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 Encyclopedists, and to show their shallowness and insubstantiality. And 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 this proposition 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, and 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 don't understand the harmonious nature of the reality in which they are situated. Animals and objects obey natural laws because they cannot avoid it, because they are not conscious, and therefore 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 his other means of cognition are able to penetrate. Maistre says: These people look in mathematics and these people look within their own minds. Perhaps it would be more useful if they actually looked at history itself, or perhaps 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 read you a typical passage by Maistre on the subject, so as to give you 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 force, 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 to attack, and he kills 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 demands its entrails to make his harp resound, […] from the wolf its most deadly tooth to polish his trifling 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 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.[49]

[49] SPD (note 20), Dialogue 7, OC v 22–5 (passage quoted in French at 23). Maistre annotates the last phrase 'Car le dernier ennemi qui doit être détruit, c'est la mort" ['The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'] (1 Corinthians 15:26).

This is Maistre's famous and terrible vision of life, and his violent preoccupation with blood and death really does belong to a world very different from the world 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 world very different 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's 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's 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, and that man is by nature benevolent. But it is said that man is by nature rational. Let us consider this proposition too, says Maistre. Consider the institutions by which man is governed. Consider, for example, 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 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*,[50] where you don't have hereditary succession, where the nobles must

[50] 'Free veto'.

agree upon who is to be king. The result of which is that 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 the typical kind of language Maistre uses; these are the paradoxes which he urges. I tried to give you a sample of these 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, and he says: 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 really 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 this is something which Hamann would certainly 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 really secure a solid basis for government, which nobody will ever be able to shake, is by making it impervious to reason.

How is this done? This is done by founding societies upon foundations so dark, so mysterious and so terrifying that anyone who dares approach them will find himself subject almost immediately 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 kind of questioning of the foundations of society was itself regarded as sinful and about 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 from there 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 M. Rousseau wonders why it is that man who is born to freedom nevertheless is everywhere in chains. 'What does he mean?' says Maistre. '[…] The opposite of this insane pronouncement, *Man is born free*, is the truth.'[51] When you study fishes, when you study animals, you simply study what these

[51] *Du Pape* [*On the Pope*] (1819), book 3, chapter 2, 'Liberté civile des hommes' ['The Civil Liberty of Men'], OC ii 338.

animals do, what these animals are. You do not ask yourself what these animals would like to be, because you don't know. 'If someone aims to prove that the nature of the viper is to have wings and a melodious voice, and that of the beaver is to live in isolation on top of the highest mountains, it is for him to prove it.'[52] Maistre's jokes are of very high quality, I may say. I shall produce another one in due course, and you will see that he was a man gifted with a considerable ironical intelligence. In the case of man you don't study the actual history of man. If you study the actual history of man, you will discover that what men desire is security, what men desire is stability, what men desire is authority, what men desire is 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 see, 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 plaint, 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 really 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

[52] *Étude sur la souveraineté* ['Study on Sovereignty'] (1794), chapter 2, 'Origine de la societé', 318. Compare Émile Faguet's brilliant epigram in 'Joseph de Maistre', *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle* [*Political and Moral Thinkers of the Nineteenth Century*], 1st series (Paris, 1891), 41: 'Dire: les moutons sont nés carnivores, et partout ils mangent de l'herbe, serait aussi juste' ('To say that sheep are born carnivorous, but everywhere eat grass, would be just as reasonable').

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 of these individuals is 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 certainly every bit as innocent as himself, and it is the soldier who is most deeply respected in our society. Why should this be? Consider, for example, 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, who was 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. Certainly 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, persons capable of governing themselves, potential democrats, potential liberals,

persons 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 together, for example 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 wouldn't 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.

Let me read you a passage on war, and you will see the kind of thing that he meant: 'What inconceivable magic is it which makes a man always ready at the first beat of the drum […] to go without resisting, often with even 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?'[53] 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 love. He is compassionate, just and good. He sheds tears for others and such tears give him pleasure. He invents stories to make him

[53] SPD, Dialogue 7, OC v 3–4.

weep. Whence then this furious desire for war and slaughter? Why does man plunge into the abyss, embracing with a 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 of course 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? What must be done is that man must be governed by some kind of discipline which gives vent to these irrational impulses, which nothing can cure. What Maistre really does believe, 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 really 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; and anyone who does so is likely to lead men to their doom. Therefore what must be done is to govern men 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, for no evident reason ready to rip other men to pieces – out of greed, out of ambition, out of general irrational impulse, and just for its own sake, simply out of aggressive instinct. And 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, 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 it's 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 a contradiction in terms for him. 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 'doesn't know what he wants; he wants what he doesn't want; he doesn't want what he wants; he *wants to want*' and cannot achieve it. 'He feels 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*.'[54] That is the kind of epigram in which Maistre sought to summarise mankind.

If this is so, if this is what men are like, then of course they need strong government, that is perfectly clear. And what kind of strong government must they have? The kind of strong government which men must have is a government given to them in some

[54] SPD, Dialogue 1, OC iv 67–8.

irrational fashion: as I say, something which reason cannot reach, 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 obvious facts of psychology and history. If you look at savages you will see that 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 detestable crimes, and are subject to the most detestable vices, and there are no qualities amongst them which any civilised person could possibly envy.

He then begins to quote Montesquieu. Savages are people who, when the good missionaries give them a cart and an ox, burn the cart in order to roast the ox. 'They cut down the tree in order to eat its fruit' – that is what savages do. 'All they want of us', says Maistre, 'is powder to kill us and fire-water to kill themselves.'[55] That is what savages want, and these are the persons whom we are invited to emulate. If you look at their language, you will find there is none of 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 failures of the divine process, and the sad cases which the good fathers, the good priests, the good missionaries have not told us the truth about. These men are kind, these men are good, these men are Christian, they don't want to reveal the hideous truth about the natives whom they find, and we have no business to be

[55] SPD, Dialogue 2, OC iv 84; cf. Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois* [*On the Spirit of the Laws*], part 1, book 5, capter 13.

deceived by the fact that these charitable fathers don't 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. The Sardinian king was after all a pensioner of England and Russia. He was an enemy to Napoleon, who didn't actually invade Sardinia, though he took away Savoy and the Piedmont; and therefore, as 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 business to prosecute. On the other hand he was a man of considerable charm, erudition and intelligence, obviously, and all the Russian memoirs of the time say what an agreeable and delightful person he was. And he was 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 which 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 others by the wise discipline imposed upon him by the few people wise enough and powerful enough to do so, namely priests or kings. 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. Maistre wrote a little tract defending the Inquisition, which was quite a brave thing to do, in about 1810, 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 have, of course, serfhood, but the Church is too little respected. He says the Roman Church when it acquired the degree of authority which made it truly the arbiter of European fortunes, when the Pope really became the leader of Christendom, and a great deal of reverence and awe was owed to the Roman Church, and they established a solid discipline, 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 and no political authority. You can't lean on that. Therefore the only anchor you have for preventing your ship from going out to the high seas and being broken is of course 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,[56] 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'[57] abroad, the sect that never sleeps[58] – I shall tell you in a moment who they are – it would take very little time for these people 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.[59] Your people desire science; nothing is more fatal. Scientists are persons who put everything in doubt, scientists are persons who analyse, scientists are persons 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, who were their scientists for them, and the Romans knew that if they tried to be scientists themselves they would merely make themselves ridiculous. And 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.

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

[57] e.g. *Étude sur la souveraineté* (note Error! Bookmark not defined.), chapter 12, OC i 407; *Reflexions' sur le Protestantisme, dans sews rapports avec la Souveraineté* [*Reflections on Protestantism, in Its Relations with Sovereignty*] (1798) OC viii 91; *Cinq lettres sur l'éducation publique en Russie* [*Five letters on Public Education in Russia*] (1810), OC viii 222–3; 'Mémoire sur la liberte de l'enseignement public' ['Memorandum on the Freedom of Public Education'] (1811), OC viii 268; *Quatres chapitres sur la Russie* [*Four Chapters on Russia*] (1811), OC viii 283, 311–12, 336, 345, 512–13.

[58] *Quatres chapitres sur la Russie* (previous note), OC viii 292.

[59] ibid., 288.

These are the people you must emulate. 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? These people 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 all these emigrants, by allowing all these persons who are evidently not happy at home, who are fidgety and are unable to establish themselves at home, 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. And he goes further than that, and he says: I know 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, don't let it go too far forward. I know it cannot be stopped indefinitely, but at least you might slow it down. And this piece of advice was literally adopted by certain Russian statesmen towards the end of the nineteenth century; the phrase 'freeze it up'[60] was not irrelevantly used. They all argued that the unrest and disintegration in the European states, the general materialism and political instability of the bourgeois republics of the West, were largely due to this awful uncensored free thought which proceeded among them. And 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.

[60] Untraced.

But 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 of course in language. Language encapsulates, language enshrines the whole tradition, all the 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 Encyclopedists. 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 accretion which gives each language its unique quality and produces those words which shape our minds, which educationally shape us along those traditional lines along which 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. And that is why they must learn Latin, not because it's a clear language, but, on the contrary, because it has a huge accumulation of superstition and prejudice – particularly medieval Latin – in it, which therefore acts as a shield against too much disintegrating influence by reason trying 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 have 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. And this is the great defence of tradition, superstition, prejudice, irrationality and, again, these crooked alleyways of life to which Hamann was so attached, and which Maistre in his own rather different way also defends. And he says: If we listen 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, of course M. Condillac says: Like everything else it is a product of the division of labour. This is simply a utilitarian device invented by people for the purpose of expressing themselves. What are we to think?, says Maistre. That the first generation of men said BA, and the second generation of men said BE? That the Assyrians invented the nominative, and the Medes invented the genitive?[61] This is a very typical Maistrean epigram on that subject. 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 some kind of life in terms of some kind of utility or in terms of some kind of 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?

And he again comes back to two eternal propositions: one, that the source of authority must be dark, impenetrable and uncriticisable, that if questions are allowed to be asked, 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'[62] – the 'secte détestable qui ne dort jamais'[63] – which made the French Revolution. Who are these people? Jacobins, socialists, liberals, scientists, Protestants, Jansenists, perfectibilians, Jews, Freemasons, atheists, freethinkers, those who

[61] SPD, 2nd Dialogue, OC iv 88.
[62] See note **57**.
[63] 'The hateful sect which never sleeps': loc. cit. (note **58**).

made the French Revolution, those who made the American Revolution. These are the people who in some way 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 don't curb reason, reason will destroy us.

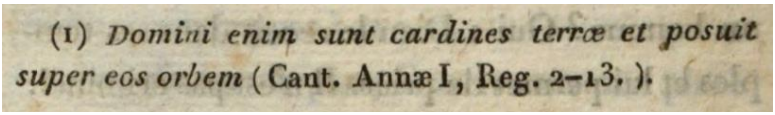
And then there follows the famous passage about the executioner, which is I suppose the most famous passage in the whole of Maistre's works, in the book which is called the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* – the *Petersburg Evenings* – in which in some symbolic sense he tries to convey to you what it is that society rests on. It's an extremely exaggerated passage, but then, as I told you, thinkers make an impact only by wild exaggeration, and Maistre goes further than most. Let me read you this passage, in order to convey to you once 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 already told you about the fact 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 don't respect the executioner, who performs the most useful of all social functions. He goes on:

> 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 alone acquaint him with the sound of the human voice: without which 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 better than I.* He steps down. He holds out his bloodstained hand, and there are justly thrown to 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 two poles: *For*

Jehovah is master of the twin poles: and upon them he maketh turn the world. Kings 1. 2. 8.[64]


(1) *Domini enim sunt cardines terræ et posuit super eos orbem* (Cant. Annæ I, Reg. 2–13.).

This is a typical Maistrean passage, and all he means – because I don't think he ever did see an executioner do any of these things,[65] if the biographers are to be trusted – all that Maistre really means 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, on one side terror, on the other side chaos. And that is what the French Revolution certainly did induce in him. And yet he doesn't 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 some kind of fiat, not by some kind of artificial Hobbesian sovereign. He is, for example, against what he calls 'la *Batonocratie*',[66] or rule of the stick. 'I have

[64] SPD, 1st Dialogue, OC iv 32–4. The closing quotation is from the Vulgate (in which the books of Samuel are called 1 and 2 Kings): *Domini enim sunt cardines terræ, et posuit super eos orbem* (1 Samuel 2:8). Maistre gives the Vulgate text and reference, using a variant verse-numbering in the first edition ('Cant. Annæ I, Reg. 2–13' ['Song of Hannah, 1 Kings 2:13']), in a footnote.

[65] But cf. p. **67** above.

[66] To Louis Amé Vignet, Baron des Étoles, 9 December 1793, OC ix 59.

always hated military government,' he says; 'I hate it now, and so long as I live I shall hate it.'[67]

His attitude towards Napoleon, for example, was ambiguous. On the one hand he was of course 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 didn't make him particularly popular in Cagliari. He says: No doubt the Jacobins were 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 (he says it's quite right, 'Books have done it all';[68] it's these pamphlets of the *philosophes* which are really 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 who 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. All power is always better than no power. And therefore 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

[67] ibid. 58.

[68] Voltaire had written 'Les livres ont tout fait' ['Books have done it all'] in 'Epître au roi de Danemark, Christian VII, sur la liberté de la presse accordée dans tous ses états' ['Epistle to the King of Denmark, Christian VII, on the Freedom of the Press Granted in All His Dominions'] (1771): *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* [*Complete Works of Voltaire*], [ed. Louis Moland] (Paris, 1877–85), x 427.

the preservation of that degree of minimum human order without which men become sinful, become chaotic and become self-destructive. And the fact that he should have said this about the Jacobins, as I say, did not endear him to his royalist colleagues.

He wanted to meet Napoleon, and he wrote to the court at Cagliari saying he wished to meet him, because Napoleon had expressed a desire to meet *him*. 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. And 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 Petersburg Soirées*, which were published after his death. And 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, he pretends that he derives his propositions from all forms of scholastic logic, or the doctrines of the Roman Church, but in fact, of course, as one can see from the quotations which I have given, 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 some kind of imaginary past, a tragic figure resisting change which is inevitable, 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 somehow 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 he seems to me to be in any sense a reconstructer 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 Encyclopedists is shallow because they don't take account of the human desire 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 in some way exploiting these, certainly by taking notice of them but also in some way by directing them, by canalising them, by disciplining them, by making use of them, but above all by looking them in the face – that only in this way can human society survive; the extreme contempt for liberals and democrats, the view that human beings are totally unfit to govern themselves, the view that human beings must always be governed by small oligarchical elites, which must be groups of self-sacrificing men trying to tie up this terrible tiger with the 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 persist only 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 in some way direct it towards ends not intelligible to him but intelligible to those who direct him – this view, which is of course the view of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, doesn't appear to me to be an eighteenth-century view at all – neither progressive nor reactionary, neither liberal nor conservative, certainly 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, officially, of

any other time. And in this respect I think he is a proto-Fascist. I think it's reasonable to say that the particular stress upon the seamy side, upon the black side, of human nature does qualify him to be so described. That, I think, is his vision.

Let me try to sum him up, finally. His merits are that he is genuinely capable of seeing through hollow abstractions, that he is genuinely capable of understanding the role which myths and the irrational play in human life; that he understands that among the motives which move men is this desire for self-immolation, is the desire for aggression, is the desire for self-destruction, which is as much part of human history as the nobler and more rational impulses to which the Encyclopedists appealed. He understands, in other words, all the things which the Fascist psychologists were able in fact to exploit to so successful a degree. In short, if we only read the Encyclopedists, 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.

He 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's not been written down. Everything which is written down in laws and enactments must perish because this is done by human intelligence, by clerks, by people who use the feeble categories of the human intellect instead of thinking with the blood – which is there very strongly in Maistre. Well, he says that. On the other hand he also tells you 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 propositions are not compatible with one another. He says that the 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 England appears fairly stable in his day, and he says: It's 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.

And there are many other contradictions of a similar type, which I needn't go into, which are relatively unimportant. The general pattern of his views is fairly clear. What *can* be said about Maistre 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 was crime and punishment, that if men always oscillated between the most ghastly and bloodstained terror on the one hand, which was 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; and therefore that his psychology and his sociology are just as lopsided 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 I think this 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 it is desired 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 certainly were not suspected or dreamt of in most of the writings of the eighteenth century; and 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.

And it wasn't was only the French Revolution which did that, because we find a great deal of writing on the part of people like Comte, on the part of people like Fourier, for example, certainly on the part of people like Macaulay, even on the part of people like John Stuart Mill, which takes no notice of these things, or takes very little notice of them. And in this respect, when you read Maistre, when you read one of these tragic and violent and hysterical and sometimes fantastic descriptions of human folly, of human degradation, of human misery, of human irrationality, which he stresses, you feel that you are reading a far more contemporary author than if you are reading Macaulay or if you are reading Mill or if you are reading Fourier, or any of the other authors either contemporary with or shortly after Maistre. And in this sense he is a kind of modern thinker: he is a modern thinker because he really did rip open certain aspects of social reality which certainly were only hinted at obscurely before, and were certainly never presented with the harshness and the vivacious and dramatic force which Maistre was able to impart to them. That, I think, is ultimately his service.

He is regarded by most French writers on 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 kind of dramatic violence and a kind of passion, which really does arm his sight with a kind of special hatred – which is also a quality which I attributed to Hamann – which really does throw a kind of gloomy light upon a scene not perhaps adequately illuminated by the more rational and the more benevolent thinkers.

As a final word, to be said both in the case of Hamann and in the case of Maistre: Their importance resides in two things. First of all, in revealing irrational, chaotic, disagreeable aspects of both

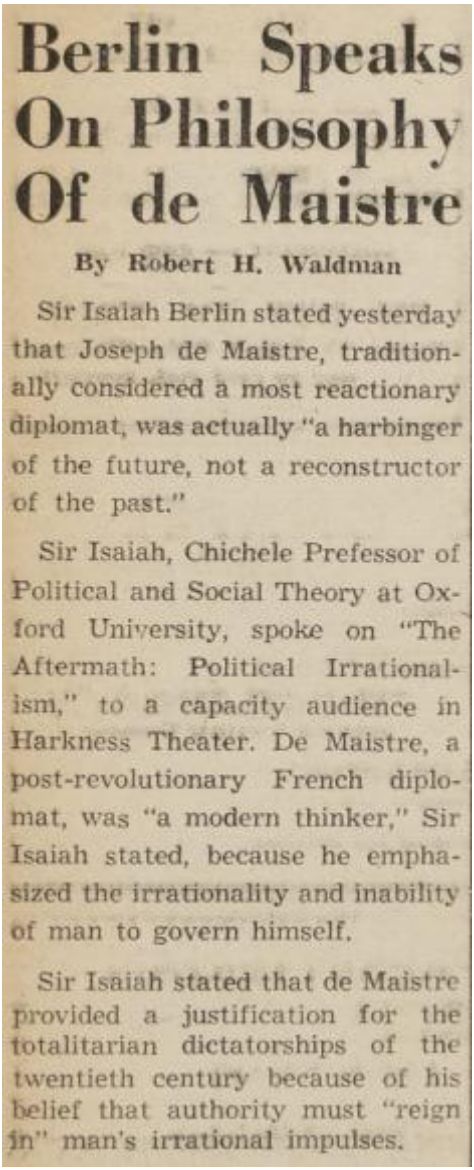
individual and social existence not taken care of in the symmetrical and rationalistic, I won't say rational, but at any rate the elegant constructions of the typical eighteenth-century Enlightenment. That is one. And secondly, both these men had a considerable influence upon behaviour, and deserve study as such: Hamann in the particular note of irrationality which he injected into German Romanticism and, by indirection, various movements which grew out of it – various forms of nationalism and so forth which grew out of it – 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.

One final remark I wish to make. The Saint-Simonian movement in 1830 rather mysteriously observed – the Saint-Simonian *Exposition* said – what is really desired is a combination of Voltaire and Maistre.[69] This, on the face of it, seems somewhat paradoxical: Voltaire, the friend of life, the friend of 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 on the whole 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 he removed from him all kinds of handsome attributes with which more optimistic or more charitable thinkers had clothed him before. This man needed some kind of advice about how to proceed; Maistre provided the kind of machinery with which this poor creature as drawn by Voltaire could alone be governed. What I think none of these thinkers had foreseen was the possibility of the combination of irrationalism and science. For Maistre, of course, science is the opposite of irrationalism, and therefore

[69] *Doctrine de Saint-Simon, Première Année, Exposition, 1829* [*The Doctrine of Saint-Simon, First Year, Exposition, 1829*] (Paris, 1830), 268: 'tâchez de rester juges impartiaux entre de Maistre; et Voltaire' ['try to remain impartial judges between Maistre and Voltaire'].

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 a particular nightmare which even Maistre never dreamt of. Nevertheless, he did provide the material out of which ultimately it could be constructed.

4 The Aftermath: Political Irrationalism



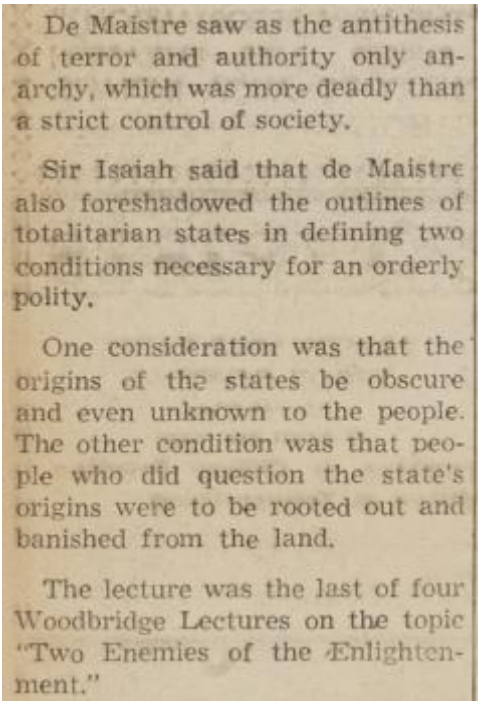
Berlin Speaks On Philosophy Of de Maistre

By Robert H. Waldman

Sir Isaiah Berlin stated yesterday that Joseph de Maistre, traditionally considered a most reactionary diplomat, was actually "a harbinger of the future, not a reconstructor of the past."

Sir Isaiah, Chichele Prefessor of Political and Social Theory at Oxford University, spoke on "The Aftermath: Political Irrationalism," to a capacity audience in Harkness Theater. De Maistre, a post-revolutionary French diplomat, was "a modern thinker," Sir Isaiah stated, because he emphasized the irrationality and inability of man to govern himself.

Sir Isaiah stated that de Maistre provided a justification for the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century because of his belief that authority must "reign in" man's irrational impulses.



De Maistre saw as the antithesis of terror and authority only anarchy, which was more deadly than a strict control of society.

Sir Isaiah said that de Maistre also foreshadowed the outlines of totalitarian states in defining two conditions necessary for an orderly polity.

One consideration was that the origins of the states be obscure and even unknown to the people. The other condition was that people who did question the state's origins were to be rooted out and banished from the land.

The lecture was the last of four Woodbridge Lectures on the topic "Two Enemies of the Enlightenment."

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