

 THE FRENCH IDEA OF HISTORY

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JOSEPH DE MAISTRE
AND HIS HEIRS,
1794–1854

CAROLINA ARMENTEROS

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*In memory of Danute Vasiliauskas
with all my gratitude*

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NOTE ON EDITIONS, TRANSLATIONS, AND REFERENCES

In an effort to transmit concepts as Joseph de Maistre and his interpreters read, wrote, and understood them, I have consulted all except ancient Greek primary sources in the original language. Where a printed edition was not available, I have used Internet editions.

In the interests of argumentation, I have translated primary sources myself. In translating Maistre's texts, however, I have benefited extensively from Richard Lebrun's English editions of Joseph de Maistre's works, especially *Against Rousseau: "On the State of Nature" and "On the Sovereignty of the People"* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), *Considerations on France* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), and *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998). Like Lebrun, I have left titles like "Monsieur" untranslated, to remind the reader that the original texts are in French. All translations are my own unless otherwise referenced.

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

When used to cite Maistrian writings, *OC* is the abbreviation of *Oeuvres complètes de Joseph de Maistre*, 14 vols. (Lyon: Vitte and Perrussel, 1884–87; facsimile edition, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1979). All references to Maistre's *Les soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* are to the edition printed in *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, edited by Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007).

Wherever possible, I have used "human being," "humanity," "human-kind," and "men and women" rather than "man." But where a nineteenth-century writer clearly meant "man," I have adopted this usage in order to preserve the original meaning as accurately as possible.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>OC</i>	<i>Oeuvres complètes</i>
<i>RBS</i>	Russian Bible Society
<i>REM</i>	<i>Revue des études maistriennes</i>
<i>RER</i>	<i>Rite écossais rectifié</i>
<i>SVEC</i>	<i>Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century</i>

Introduction

Conservatism and History

This is a book about the beginnings of historical thinking as a philosophical enterprise. The historical rupture represented by the French Revolution compelled contemporaries to reflect on the nature and meaning of history. For the generation educated in the downfall of a whole world, history was no longer dead and distant, as it had often been for the detached writers of the Enlightenment. It was alive in blood and fire.¹ Some who remained religious during those years felt history with particular intensity, awakening suddenly to the fear that God might have abandoned humankind altogether, and that his ways through time must be discovered if faith was to be kept and defended. To many who experienced the Revolution, history properly understood revealed Providence's designs. This book focuses on the historical thought of a man to whom the Revolution brought profound spiritual anxiety. And it tells the story of the quiet upheaval that his reflections, dispersed across political and philosophical boundaries, effected in nineteenth-century French thought and politics.

1. Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, 2nd ed., L'Histoire Series (Paris: Flammarion, 1963), 337–38.

I

For nearly forty years Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) led a calm, uneventful life in the city of Chambéry, serving first as a magistrate and then as a senator of Savoie² until history, in the form of the French revolutionary army, erupted into his life in September of 1792. This event signaled the beginning of his permanent exile from home, and the start of a brilliant and tortuous writing career centered on the idea of history. Defending the fledgling conservative position that Maistre adopted soon after leaving Chambéry implied reflecting on history. As Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) observed, conservative thinking is historical thinking. There is a certain inclination toward the concrete, combined with a taste for what is rather than what ought to be, that renders conservatism particularly prone to expressing itself in historical terms.³ Even more, for Maistre history was a moral force, the vehicle of Providence, the site for the accumulation of experience, and the tool for discovering what humanity actually is. It was a nearly total means of explanation, guided by a God who was a source of illumination. Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* (1797) conjured a terrifying Providence, an agent of regenerative punishment that has remained deeply imprinted in the public perception as characteristic of his notion of divinity. One purpose of this book is to show that, more than a punitive agent, Maistrian Providence is a provider of knowledge that bestows radical freedom by revealing its ways to humanity (see chapter 3). In this guise, it is the instrument of divine education,⁴ the incarnation of the Enlightenment belief that human beings, no longer hopelessly embroiled in the toils of original sin, can be reformed and improved by knowledge.⁵

Maistre also entertained a set of assumptions about the social and psychological effects of historical evidence that resulted in a distinctive means of deploying historical facts for the purposes of philosophical and political contention. Importantly, Maistre never wrote history—one reason that his historical thought has been scantily attended to.⁶ But his writings contained

2. Maistre was named a Senator on May 2, 1788; he abandoned the position when he fled from Chambéry on September 22, 1792.

3. Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed., ed. Nico Stehr, ed. and trans. David Kettler and Volker Meja (London: Routledge, 1997), 100.

4. On God as a teacher in Maistrian thought, see Élício Verçosa Filho, “The Pedagogical Nature of Maistre’s Thought,” in *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*, ed. Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011), 191–219.

5. John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: The Religion of the People and the Politics of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 288.

6. See, however, Jean-Yves Pranchère, “Ordre de la raison, déraison de l’histoire: L’historicisme de Maistre et ses sources classiques,” in *Joseph de Maistre*, ed. Philippe Barthelet, 366–90, Les dossiers H (Geneva: L’Âge d’Homme, 2005); and Michael Kohlhauser, “L’histoire-mal: Approches pour

both an overwhelming wealth of historical erudition and deeply historicizing themes. They expounded that history is the standard of social, political, and moral truth; that this truth can be expressed in a myriad particular and historically contingent ways; and that history itself develops toward the good through set stages and according to set causes.

Describing Maistre's historical thought is often an exercise in the recovery of the implicit. A decrier of philosophical systems, Maistre never attempted to craft a comprehensive theory of history. Nor did he value history particularly as an educational subject. While in Russia, he even recommended that history be removed from school curricula, on grounds that it was a "free teaching" that anyone could learn by reading, or by being read to, every day. Simultaneously, however—and in keeping with his intent to use history to uncover God's designs—Maistre praised philosophical history, observing that in the past, "special chairs of history" were "confided to superior men, who *reason about history* more than teaching history."⁷ He also insisted, in nearly every book he wrote, that history is "experimental politics," the ultimate source of knowledge, God's medium for conveying to humanity philosophical truth and falsehood, political right and wrong.⁸ The result of this theological interest in history was that, rather than serve as the object of philosophical judgment, history became the criterion for it. Under Maistre's pen, everything—reason, science, knowledge—was historicized and temporalized in order to be known. Political philosophy itself transmuted into a historical problem.

When he turned history into the measure of politics, Maistre was unwittingly sharpening a polemical knife that would one day be pointed by his enemies at his allies. The liberals of the Restoration (1814–30) used historiography as a political language to evade state censorship. If during the Revolution "émigrés like Chateaubriand, Maistre, Barruel, had both the incentive and the time to draw up their indictments" of the Revolution through historical chronicling, "in the Restoration, the tables are turned; it is the men of the Revolution, cut off from politics, who turn to history to state their case."⁹

un (non-) lieu littéraire," in *Imaginaires du mal*, ed. Myriam Watthee-Delmotte and Paul-Augustin Deproost, 189–208 (Paris and Louvain-la-neuve: Cerf/ Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2000).

7. Joseph de Maistre, *OC* (Lyon: Vitte and Perrussel, 1884–87; facsimile edition Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 8:182–83.

8. E.g., *OC*, 7:539.

9. Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 6.

This book contends that the historical reflections of French-speaking counterrevolutionaries during the Revolution and the Empire were far more than historical chronicling. One may be tempted to believe that the Counter-Revolution found in history only a refuge of safety, a sanctuary to which to retreat from contemporary turmoil and find solace in an immobilized past. The liberal and socialist historians of the nineteenth century can consequently emerge, *ex nihilo*, as the unprecedented creators of the great historical synthesis of their century.¹⁰ Two of my guiding arguments in this volume are that, rather than spend its years of exile in a state of unreflective repetition, the Counter-Revolution was the innovative and indispensable link between the Enlightenment and the postrevolutionary Left in matters historical—the decisive, if neglected, intermediary between the philosophers of history of the French eighteenth century, and the historians and historical philosophers of the nineteenth. Maistre himself was the foremost and most creative representative of this mode of historical thought, which grew in complete independence from far better-known developments in contemporary Germany. His historically inclined works not only fueled the Restoration's political disputes but were also a major source of the future-oriented statistics of the Directory and the Empire, and of the traditionalist, socialist, and positivist philosophies of history that arose from 1820 to 1854. They were, in fact, crucial to the rise of an autochthonous Francophone tradition of historical thinking that historicized Enlightenment social and political philosophy, transporting ancient arguments to modern contexts.

Understanding Maistre's mediation between the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century requires clarifying the relationship between conservative theories of history and prior eighteenth-century models. The *philosophes* had been keenly interested in history: it was Voltaire (1694–1778) who first composed, under the pseudonym of the abbé Bazin, an essay entitled *La philosophie de l'histoire* (1763). Yet the *philosophes* looked on history from afar and on high. *Candide* (1759), Voltaire's literary masterpiece, took the distant, anodyne narration of misery and catastrophe that Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1695–97) identified as the invariable content of human history to heights of irony and absurdity. The *philosophes* also equated history with the rational progress of human collectives—as Voltaire again did in the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1753)—or recounted the vicissi-

10. Ceri Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simoniens, Quinet, Michelet* (London: Routledge, 1993).

tudes of universal “Man” and the linear development of abstract reason—like Condorcet in the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795). Early conservatives, by contrast, reflected on the history of specific, historically existing institutions, governments, traditions, sciences, and languages. For them, human beings did not exist as intangible individuals, but as national, biological, religious, and political beings whose moral activity transformed the world. The *philosophes'* linear time no longer applied. Time was irregularly broken by the successes and failures of historical experiments, and measured by the organic growth of institutions, the moral fortunes of social groups, and the intimacy of the human-divine relationship. The model grew partly out of the historical apologetics of the late eighteenth century. To combat unbelievers without faith in authority, French theologians proved religious truth through historical fact.¹¹ Maistre's innovation was to deduce from their narratives a theory of historical meaning, and of the causes and stages of historical development.

Of the Francophone conservative trio he formed with Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) and François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), Maistre was the more erudite scholar and the deeper thinker; so that if his works lacked the massive and immediate appeal of Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* (1802), their impact has endured tenaciously. Until now, this chapter in the history of history has remained unread, due in part to the nature of the material. If Maistre was a genial writer and a serious scholar, he was also an incidental thinker who read and wrote out of personal interest when his ministerial duties permitted him. He never formed a school. So although his works all share a highly distinctive style and theoretical perspective, they were often read as occasionally as they were written, by exceedingly diverse readers who endowed them with an essentially fragmentary posterity.

The existence and significance of Maistre's philosophy of history has been further secreted by the assumption that early conservatism, as a stream of thought hostile to the Enlightenment, never endeavored to explain history in the light of reason. The notion of Counter-Enlightenment that Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) introduced has encouraged this point of view. Grouping together thinkers as diverse and even inimical as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Maistre, Berlin's scholarship and some of that influenced by it conceptualize “reactionary” thought in terms of its political tastes and

11. William R. Everdell, *Christian Apologetics in France, 1730–1790: The Roots of Romantic Religion* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 109–43; and Robert R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939).

rhetorical strategies, rather than its historical intellectual filiation.¹² One conclusion readily drawn is that conservatism is not only changeless, but also intellectually severed from the Enlightenment in all its possible definitions. Viewed as the simplistic recrudescence of Old Regime ideology, aged themes made progressively explicit, early conservatism is deemed to owe a largely reflexive life to the Revolution, to be a pure reaction to Enlightened modernity unrelated to the debates of its own time except by antithesis and negation. The movement's own self-representation as a set of intuitive insights drawn from tradition rather than modernity has done much to advance this view. But a very different account is now arising.¹³ Scholars are beginning to wonder whether the right-wing dissenters that Maistre so well represented, "misplaced and untimely, as Nietzsche said, are not the true founders of modernity and its most eminent representatives."¹⁴ The question is important; for reconceiving the early conservatives as the ultimate moderns also broaches the possibility that they incorporated sophisticated theories of sociopolitical change and progress—those sine qua nons of speculative historical philosophy—into their thought.

Maistrian studies, meanwhile, is experiencing a renaissance. Intellectual biographies of Maistre now exist in both French and English, and the first volume-length study of his intellectual relationship to the Enlightenment has just appeared.¹⁵ Scholars contributing to the *Revue des études maistriennes* (*REM*) (founded in 1974) have produced works on multiple aspects of his thought—including his epistemology, linguistics, economic theory, and philosophy of natural law.¹⁶ Richard Lebrun and Jean-Louis Darcel have cataloged Maistre's libraries and classified the contents of his reading notebooks, where the works of major and minor Enlightenment thinkers figure promi-

12. Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Hogarth, 1979); and Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).

13. Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2006).

14. Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 19.

15. *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*.

16. On epistemology, see Richard Lebrun, "Maistrian Epistemology," in *Maistre Studies*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Lebrun, 207–21 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988). On linguistics, Benjamin Thurston, "Joseph de Maistre: Logos and Logomachy" (D. Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2001). On economic theory, Jean Denizet, "Joseph de Maistre Economist," in *Joseph de Maistre's Life, Thought and Influence: Selected Studies*, ed. Richard A. Lebrun, 84–104 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); and Cara Camcastle, *The More Moderate Side of Joseph de Maistre: Views on Political Liberty and Political Economy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005). On philosophy of natural law, Richard A. Lebrun, "Maistre and Natural Law," in *Maistre Studies*, 193–206.

nently.¹⁷ Pierre Glaudes has published a new, critical edition of Maistre's works (2007), accompanied by a *Dictionnaire Joseph de Maistre* covering his major intellectual precursors and legatees. Philippe Barthelet's massive *Joseph de Maistre* (2005), which collects texts on Maistre by some 150 interpreters, is also generating new research on Maistre's colossally varied legacy, such as Armenteros and Lebrun's *Joseph de Maistre and His European Readers* (2011).

II

Conservatism and the historical mentality were both so intimately linked in their early days that any study of Maistre's historical thought must be prefaced by a discussion of his politics, and of the reasons why he has been labeled a reactionary. The matter is complicated from the beginning by the problem of rhetoric. By the time he published *Du pape* in 1819, Maistre was well-known as a master of the French language. His rhetorical reputation had been born with his writing career.¹⁸ After the *Considérations sur la France* (1797) made his style widely known, it became impossible for him to commit a manuscript anonymously to the press. The clarity, beauty, and liveliness of his prose were admired on an international scale. Two monarchs, Louis XVIII (1755–1824) and Alexander I (1777–1825), tried to enlist his literary talents in their service: the first to edit the royal declaration of 1804, and the second to compose all edicts issued by the Russian court.¹⁹ Nor were the politically like-minded the only ones to heap praise on his writing skills. Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869) could put political opinions aside and vanquish his personal dislike of the Savoyard to enthuse on the lively splendor of his prose:

That brief, nervous, lucid style, stripped of phrases, robust of limb, did not at all recall the softness of the eighteenth century, nor the declamations of the latest French books: it was born and steeped in the breath of the Alps; it was virgin, it was young, it was harsh and savage; it had no human respect, it felt its solitude; it improvised depth and form all at once. . . . That man was *new* among the *enfants du siècle*.²⁰

17. Jean-Louis Darcel, "Maistre's Libraries," in *Maistre Studies*, 3–41; and Richard A. Lebrun, "Maistre's Reading," in *Maistre Studies*, 42–64.

18. On the intersection between Maistre's political thought and his writing practices and personas, see Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun, eds., *The New enfant du siècle: Joseph de Maistre as a Writer*, St. Andrews Studies in French History and Culture (St Andrews: Centre for French History and Culture of the University of St Andrews, 2010).

19. Richard Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 205–7.

20. Alphonse de Lamartine, *Souvenirs et portraits* 3rd ed., (Paris: Hachette, Furne, Jouvet, Pagnerre, 1874), 1:188–89.

Lamartine credited Maistre with stylistic novelty, but otherwise judged Maistre as did other French liberal *littérateurs*, notably Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–69), who in 1843 sketched Maistre’s most lasting portrait in the *Causeries du lundi* and the *Portraits littéraires*.²¹ Sainte-Beuve admired Maistre’s French greatly but was repulsed by the doctrines of submission it conveyed; and so in his bright, light, flowing style, he praised Maistre as a writer into oblivion as a political theorist. For almost a century afterward, Maistre’s defense of throne and altar was inextricably allied in France with the spirited language in which he undertook it—and displaced from any preceding intellectual traditions. The assumption was that as a great stylist he could be no innovator, and that his thought could derive from no sources other than the ancient and medieval ones he cited with such approval, and that seemed to suit his opinions so well.

In implicitly denouncing political theory as a contributor to Revolution, Maistre’s monarchism supported this interpretation admirably, as did his allegiances in the past. The *Considérations sur la France* (1797) and the counter-revolutionary pamphlets that antedated it in the 1790s established him clearly as a monarchist. In the next decade, the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* (1809), a treatise attacking the viability of written constitutions—published without his knowledge and against his will—placed him ostensibly in the camp of the Ultras, those royalists who, “more royalist than the king,” sought to reestablish the Old Regime in its pristine form. Finally, the publication of *Du pape* another decade later put the finishing touches on Maistre’s reactionary portrait. It had become clear early on that the book was destined to occupy a place all its own in conservative literature. Chateaubriand had declined the editorship, feeling unequal to the punctilious editorial task required to keep *Du pape*’s radical anti-Gallicanism uncensored.²² In the end it was Maistre’s clerical connections who provided the required editor, and it was journals like *Le défenseur*, *Les archives*, *Le drapeau blanc*, and *L’ami de la religion et du roi*, closely associated with the clergy and the Ultra Party, that welcomed *Du pape* enthusiastically when it first appeared.²³ As we shall see, the Ultras ultimately remained disengaged from Maistre’s thought, and one aim of this book is to explain why. But their initial fervor did much to encourage the increasing association of Maistre with abstract, “reactionary,”

21. On Lamartine’s and Sainte-Beuve’s appraisals of Maistre as a writer, see Richard A. Lebrun, “Introduction: Assessing Maistre’s Style and Rhetoric,” in *New enfant du siècle*, 1–18.

22. Robert Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre: Étude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d’un matérialiste mystique* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), 336.

23. *Ibid.*, 338.

and “priestly” modes of thought, exclusively moralistic and unconcerned with the world, like the ones that Stendhal reproached Maistre for on opening *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (1821).²⁴

Maistre’s status as a “reactionary,” however, is exceedingly relative, and this book emphasizes his political moderation.²⁵ If by “reaction” is meant the desire to reinstitute prerevolutionary society, then Maistre was not a reactionary. Sympathetic to civic humanism, he was not, like Chateaubriand, intellectually yoked to the patriarchal and agrarian society of the Old Regime. His attitude on this point remained always consistent. Throughout his life he adhered to a youthful definition of equality, whereby the king should “protect equally all the orders of the state, [and] distribute his favors indifferently, and . . . make certain not to elevate one alone to the prejudice of others.”²⁶ Scion of a family of humble origins that had risen to the nobility through public service, Maistre looked approvingly on inclusive societies that protected liberty and equality (see chapter 1) and in which access to political office was open to all who aspired to acquire it through merit. He was undedicated to the reproduction of political pasts. And because he thought that Catholicism could sustain good government at all times and in all nations, he felt no need to defend any historically specific social or political system—least of all the Old Regime Gallicanism that drove him to rage. Imperial conquest was likewise something he had no desire to perpetuate, well aware, as a subject of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, where he and his fellow Savoyards felt bullied by the Turinese, that “the worst misfortune for a nation, is to obey another.”²⁷ Even his attitude toward the Ultras was, for all his desperation at the publication of the Charter of 1814—the royal constitution whose mere existence paid tribute to revolutionary ideals—and for all the passion he spent defending the restitution of émigré property,²⁸ in the end a distant one.²⁹ His historical thought enabled this. For, despite his authoritarian reputation, Maistre was never an inflexible ideologist. Sensitive to the fluctuations of time, his points of view changed according to needs and circumstances that he saw as ordained by God. Maistre’s historicism, in fact, shows that his image in the French- and English-speaking worlds, where

24. *Ibid.*, 364n.

25. With Camcastle’s *More Moderate Side of Joseph de Maistre*.

26. Maistre, *Éloge de Victor-Amédée III, duc de Savoie, roi de Sardaigne, de Chipre et de Jérusalem, prince de Piémont, etc.* (Chambéry, 1775), 33.

27. *OC*, 14:257.

28. *OC*, 13:100–103.

29. See Maistre, *Correspondance diplomatique de Joseph de Maistre, 1811–1817*, ed. Albert Blanc (Paris: Michel-Lévy frères, 1860), 1:268.

he has been known respectively as an absolutist and as a precursor of fascism, needs to be radically changed. For Maistre not only crafted a new, distinctively French way of thinking about history that placed enormous faith in the power of human beings to craft their own destiny. He did so by emphasizing the themes of liberty and the individual in a manner inconsistent with both fascism and absolutism.

Maistre's conservatism, then, did not assist a desire to congeal the past, and this makes his long-ignored moral progressivism comprehensible. Nor is studying his historical thought an antiquarian venture. It enables, first, a wholesale reassessment of his overall philosophy. It illuminates, second, the statistical practices of the administrators of the Directory and the Empire, and the assumptions about the course of history that underlay those practices. And it prompts, third, a reconsideration of the intellectual background, socio-moral goals, and antipolitical sensibilities of the socialists, traditionalists, and positivists who took it up during the 1820s and 1830s. To be sure, liberals like François Guizot (1787–1874) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) also read Maistre. But unlike the main characters of this book, they never regarded history either as a way out of politics or as a comprehensive means of philosophical explanation.

III

This book draws an intellectual profile of Maistre that differs variously from that often sketched by current scholarship. I maintain that Maistre was a rationalist, and not the die-hard enemy of reason that is often portrayed; that his epistemology comprised an original empiricism continually in tension with the innatism that is invariably assumed of him; that, like the monarchists of the Restoration, he prized freedom highly;³⁰ that he was very far from being the pure and crude authoritarian and absolutist so long and so often accused; that in the end his monarchism and general commitment to temporal sovereignty were shaky and ambiguous at best; and that his political attitudes were not reducible to a negation of Revolution, but derived from his inheritance and engagement with various strands of the Enlightenment.

Maistre never had sufficient spite for the a priori, system-building, and mathematizing reason that the *Encyclopédie* elevated to infallible heights. It has therefore been frequently presumed that he was an irrationalist—a claim

30. On monarchist liberalism during the Restoration, see Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society? Ideas in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

seemingly supported by the fact that he proposed intuition and common sense as epistemological alternatives to reason.³¹ I argue, however, that intuition and common sense—themselves notions with deep roots in theological rationalism—collapsed in his thought onto a new, collectivist, a posteriori kind of reason, ideally suited to historical thinking (see chapter 2), that had deep Cartesian roots—and that Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782–1854) ultimately radicalized with his notion of common sense (see chapter 6).

Intuition and common sense, in turn, were the faculties of an *empirical* mind attentive to particulars. That this has not been discerned previously is partly attributable to the fact that Maistre advertised his innatism loudly, defending Descartes' inborn ideas and the natural law of Pierre Charron (1541–1603) engraved in the heart by God, against Enlightenment materialism. Nor has Maistre's ferocious attack on Bacon's empiricism in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (published 1832) done much to rectify the widespread impression that he was an unmovable enemy of experience. I maintain, however, that Maistre attacked certain strands of the Enlightenment by developing the form of direct empiricism (see chapter 2) that is necessarily implied by using historical evidence, as he did, to make political points. Empiricism, in addition, certified Maistre as Burke's intellectual partner. Indeed, the two thinkers' joint defense of religion with experience persuaded scholars for some time (quite wrongly) that Burke had been Maistre's intellectual mentor.³²

Only lonely efforts have so far striven to prove that liberty was integral to Maistre's political thought.³³ This book seeks to assist in the plowing of this so far narrow furrow by contending that Maistre had strong ideas of personal and political freedom that were integral to his historical and political thought. Again, he himself did little to raise the profile of his theory of liberty. The *Considérations sur la France*, with its anguished portrayal of the revolutionaries as God's playthings, entrenched Maistre firmly in the public imagination as a historical determinist who equated Providence with fatality. Yet, although the *Considérations* famously states that “we are all attached to the throne of the Supreme Being”³⁴ by a chain, it says also that the chain is “supple,” and that it is variably so; and that the extent of suppleness corresponds to the degree of freedom with which Providence endows humanity

31. Pierre Glaudes, introduction to *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), 354.

32. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 101–2.

33. Camcastle, *More Moderate Side of Joseph de Maistre*, and Paolo Pastori, “Joseph de Maistre e la libertà,” *Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto* 55, 4 (1978): 336–58.

34. *Considérations sur la France*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, 199.

during different historical periods. Revolution, of course, is the age when the chain tightens extremely, nearly immobilizing humanity. But this age is also the exception of history, and the shroud of the freedom that otherwise suffuses Maistrian history.

With time, Maistre's interest in freedom increased, and he abandoned the absolutist tradition of political thought with which French scholarship consistently associates him. *Du pape*, his ultramontanist manifesto, signaled the final antiabsolutist—and, in some respects, unmonarchical—orientation of his thought. The point may seem counterintuitive, since *Du pape's* portrayal of a Europe ruled by monarchs hardly seems, at first glance, intended to diminish kingly power. Yet Maistre's conception of the papacy as a power of constitutional revision does precisely that. A rift hence separates the rather Bodinian texts he composed during 1794–96, from *Du pape* (1819).³⁵

This is no idle point. On it depends, first, the moral progress that Maistre insists is history's constant. Although humans often use their freedom badly, over time this freedom conspires with Providence to produce positive moral outcomes—thanks to human perfectibility, a doctrine that Maistre joins Rousseau in temporalizing. The suggestion that Maistre was a progressivist may unsettle readers who still see him mainly as a Christian pessimist for whom only Providence redeems. One purpose of this book is to ease such discomfort by reading closely Maistrian texts that reveal his Pelagianism—the very same that inspired his impassioned defense of the Jesuits, and that impelled him to hound Jansenists, Protestants, and other descendants of Augustine, while borrowing extensively from their thought.

Of all eighteenth-century philosophies, it was Rousseau's that Maistre scattered most liberally throughout his writings. Scholars have long underlined the continuity between Rousseau and Maistre,³⁶ and the formative influence that Rousseau exercised on Maistre.³⁷ In the shadow of Revolution, Maistre and his fellow conservatives reread the Genevan with new eyes, and to theoretical profit. But in the process of learning, Maistre denounced his teacher, as he unearthed in his works the critical armaments that had served to destroy an entire way of life. Indeed Maistre felt for Rousseau a unique combination of intense interest and passionate repugnance that makes sense

35. I am grateful to Jean-Yves Pranchère for helping me clarify this point.

36. Graeme Garrard, "Rousseau, Maistre and the Counter-Enlightenment," *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): 97–120.

37. On the Rousseau–Maistre relationship, see also Jean-Yves Pranchère, *L'autorité contre les lumières: La philosophie de Joseph de Maistre* (Geneva: Droz, 2004), 199–226; and Richard Lebrun, "Joseph de Maistre and Rousseau," *SVEC* 88 (1972): 881–98.

when considering the two thinkers' respective positions vis-à-vis religion and the Enlightenment.

By the time Rousseau began to publish, the theological and radical Enlightenment, once collaborative, had polarized and become inimical³⁸ so that, as Jean-Jacques Lefranc de Pompignan (1709–84) realized, the thought of the author of *Du contrat social* could play a mediating role, and fill the vacuum left by moderate forms of Christianity and philosophy.³⁹ In this respect, the Counter-Enlightenment Rousseau founded was a form of antiradical Enlightenment. Maistre thought well of it because it proved Christianity's worldly uses. Such proof was indispensable after 1750, when utility became the ultimate moral principle, and disbelief a “totalizing system” demanding answers to questions not of faith but of good living.⁴⁰ What Maistre found unendurable was Rousseau's belief that portions of Christianity would have to be discarded in the process of confronting *philosophie*.⁴¹

Maistre's approach to the absolutist and antidespotic Enlightenment represented by Montesquieu and Gibbon was far more muted.⁴² He reproached Montesquieu for his faithless determination to adopt God's point of view,⁴³ yet Montesquieu's relativism supported his own bid to know “the eternal laws of the world” and his transformation of historical study into spiritual solace. A similarly uneasy combination of blame and borrowing characterized his relationship to Hume, whom he deemed philosophically dangerous, but to whom he was also indebted, especially in the fields of history and epistemology (see chapter 2).

In contrast, Maistre rejected as the essence of *philosophie*, the Lockean empiricism whose unprecedentedly impious potential Peter Gay described in *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966). The *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*

38. See Jeffrey Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), especially the introduction.

39. See Hisayasu Nakagawa, “J.-J. Rousseau et J.-G. Pompignan: La ‘Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard’ et ‘De la religion civile’ critiqués par l’*Instruction pastorale*,” in *Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002): 67–76; and Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment*, 306.

40. Bernard Plongeron, “Combats spirituels et réponses pastorales à l’incrédulité du siècle,” in *Les défis de la modernité (1740–1840)*, ed. Bernard Plongeron, *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Desclée, 1997), 247.

41. On the Counter-Enlightenment's adoption of Helvétius's principle of utility, see Burson, *Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment*, 306–7.

42. For a more extensive account of Maistre's relationship to the various strands of Enlightenment, see Carolina Armenteros and Richard Lebrun, introduction to Armenteros and Lebrun, eds., *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*, 1–16.

43. Jean-Yves Pranchère, s.v. “Montesquieu,” in Jean-Louis Darcel, Pierre Glaudes, and Jean-Yves Pranchère, *Dictionnaire Joseph de Maistre*, in *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, 1230.

(begun in 1809), a study of the epistemology of Locke's precursor, is a work of detestation. Yet Maistre objected not so much to Locke as to the *philosophes'* image of Locke. After all, in the first decades of the eighteenth century the theological Enlightenment represented by the Jesuits and the *Journal de Trévoux* had synthesized Locke and Malebranche both piously and successfully. It was only during the 1730s, when Voltaire turned Locke into a materialist, and when, following his lead, the Jansenists started accusing the Jesuits of mobilizing the philosophy of a sensualist, that Locke lost his legitimacy in Catholic circles.⁴⁴ Ironically, then, the Locke that Maistre cast off was his enemies' imaginary construct.⁴⁵

But Maistre's admiration for Descartes was unbounded. Descartes was his hero of reason. He was the bulwark against justification by faith alone, that mantra of the Augustinians from Calvin to Pascal, those producers of disorder who had manufactured all modern horrors. Descartes had the further merit of having begotten Malebranche, who had remained pure throughout his marriage to Locke by the Jesuits, and whom Maistre adored for having shown that reason is the site where the divine presence manifests itself in humanity.⁴⁶

Maistre's religious conservatism derives from a form of Enlightenment that, wishing to keep a seat for religion in politics and society, debated on the political liberties deriving from the relationship between church and state. Famously represented by Burke and often dependent on Hume's subjection of reason to the passions, this initially British Enlightenment proved, when transported to Germany with Hume, quite useful to Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), Salomon Maimon (1753–1800), and other critics of Kant in their subversion of criticisms of Christianity.⁴⁷ This book demonstrates that Maistrian conservatism and epistemology arose out of Hume's similar and little-known fate in France.

IV

Maistre's posterity in the French nineteenth century can appear surprising. The monarchists of the Restoration whose causes he pleaded rarely turned to his writings for reflection, or even for propaganda. The conservative press that

44. Burson, *Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment*, 44–53.

45. The *philosophes'* image of Locke was so solid and well-known that it was demolished only in 1969, when John Dunn published *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises on Government."*

46. Pranchère, "Ordre de la raison, déraison de l'histoire," 382.

47. Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1–13, 24, 91, 137, and 288.

took up his ideas simply reproduced them, or the lively style in which he expressed them, without reflecting much on the philosophy that underlay them. *Le conservateur* features articles by Lamennais⁴⁸ and Bonald⁴⁹ largely content to express a few opinions, either similar to Maistre's or simply his, when addressing contemporary issues and events. Anticipating Sainte-Beuve's depiction of Maistre as a stylist rather than as a thinker, an article by Arthur O'Mahoni on the Louvre's paintings makes rhetorical use of italics and irony in a manner quite reminiscent of Maistre,⁵⁰ but ignores his thought and politics. The one departure from these patterns is an anonymous article, "Sur le principe politique," in the far more theoretical—and, perhaps for that reason, soon-to-be-suppressed—last volume of *Le conservateur*,⁵¹ that adopts concepts integral to Maistrian historical thought—the comparability of moral and physical laws,⁵² the idea that history proceeds by the "force of things,"⁵³ that the political principle is expressed in the history of each people⁵⁴—and applies them to analyze recent French political history. But this was an exception in a political movement that followed Maistre in valuing—unfortunately for the conservative posterity of his thought—practice over theory, and whose presence in print was already too precarious to borrow theories that had first been developed by the precursors of Revolution. Unlike many of Maistre's contemporary admirers, the Ultras and legitimists had a political status to preserve; and leaving Maistre's thought untapped was one price they paid to achieve this. The praise of Maistre's style was hence their major means of celebrating him. Even Jacques-Maximilien Benjamin Bins de Saint-Victor (1772–1858), one of their most brilliant and renowned journalists, limited his comments to the subject when writing a piece as germane to Maistrian theory as the preface to the first edition of *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, only one directly polemical use seems to have been made of Maistre by an Ultra—O'Mahoni's comparison of Maistre to an Old Testament prophet who defeated, together with Bonald and Lamennais, the "false wisdom" of the Gallicans.⁵⁶

48. On Bible societies (*Le conservateur* 3:49–54) and on France's relations with the Holy See (*Le conservateur* 3:593–600).

49. On military costs (3:481–94).

50. 4:561–66.

51. *Ibid.*, 4:3–15.

52. *Ibid.*, 4:4.

53. *Ibid.*, 4:4, 13.

54. *Ibid.*, 4:6.

55. Saint-Victor, preface to *Joseph de Maistre: Oeuvres*, 447–54.

56. Quoted in E. N., "Préface de l'éditeur," in A. Baston, *Réclamations pour l'église de France et pour la vérité, contre l'ouvrage de M. le Cte de Maistre intitulé "Du pape," et contre sa suite, ayant pour titre, "De l'église gallicane dans son rapport avec le souverain pontife"* (Paris, 1821), 1:vi.

What made the Ultras generally wary of Maistre was precisely what inspired the zeal of one who would leave their ranks years later—Lamennais. The young Breton was fascinated by the new, worldly means that the Savoyard provided for defending old, sacred truths. Such means, he wrote to Maistre, were imperatively needed: some people were losing their faith because truth was articulated in medieval formats incomprehensible to modern minds.⁵⁷ In keeping with this observation, Lamennais replicated Maistre's historical perspectives on truth, and historical means of expressing the truth, throughout his tempestuous career. He is therefore a major character in part 2 of this book.

One curiosity of Maistre's intellectual descent in the nineteenth century is that his nontraditionalist interpreters were overwhelmingly disciples of Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Although one might expect the herald of tradition and the father of industrial socialism to differ on nearly everything, their historical theories reflect and anticipate each other with startling exactitude. Both saw history as alternating between “synthetic” and “analytical” or “organic” and “critical” periods, as Saint-Simon variously called them. Both thought that Christian history was distinguished by the separation and epic struggle between spiritual and temporal powers. Both interpreted the Middle Ages as a period of social integration, and modernity as an age of disorder that began with Protestantism and culminated in the French Revolution. Both saw religion as indispensable to social stability, and believed that Christianity was the most perfect of religions. Last, and perhaps most important, both looked forward to the rejuvenation of religion—Saint-Simon's New Christianity and the “third revelation” of *Les soirées*. That Maistre prospered among Saint-Simon's descendants therefore has its logic. The way in which he depoliticized, and by the same stroke moralized, historical theory appealed to those who, politically disempowered and unworried by political strategy, presumed no necessary correspondences between philosophy and politics—at least not in the manner of the “schools” of political ideology that emerged during the Restoration.⁵⁸

Maistre seems to have been unaware of Saint-Simon. He did not own his works and mentions him nowhere in his notebooks and published writings. The obverse is less probable. Saint-Simon was keenly interested in early conservatism. The *Considérations sur la France* (1797), which contained all of Maistre's historical thought *in potentia* and was published before Saint-

57. Pranchère, *L'autorité contre les lumières*, 108.

58. On these schools, see Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, 342.

Simon's own works, may have been an influence. The similarities between Maistre's *Du pape* (1819) and Saint-Simon's *Le nouveau christianisme* (1825) also seem too great to be accidental. They spring, however, from a mixture of borrowing and coincidence. Saint-Simon's *Lettres d'un habitant de Genève à ses contemporains* (1803) and his *De la réorganisation de la société européenne* (1814) both prefigure themes of *Du pape*.

By the 1830s, Maistrian and Saint-Simonian ideas about history had fused so thoroughly among traditionalists, socialists, and positivists that their precise origins cannot always be identified. What is certain is that Maistre thrived among all these disparate schools of thought because he turned history into the site of moral renewal and evoked an earthly heaven of solidarity and peace. After 1848, however, the fortunes of his historical thought waned along with those of its socialist propagators. Nevertheless, this book continues until 1854 because it was in that year that Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802–61) delivered his *Discours sur la loi de l'histoire*, perhaps the last Christian philosophy of history of Maistrian descent to have been elaborated in nineteenth-century France; and that Auguste Comte (1798–1857) published the last volume of his *Système de politique positive*, a book that enshrined Maistrian themes in a historical philosophy. Comte was out of step with his time: when his rivals the Saint-Simonians were ablaze with religious prophecies in the 1830s, he shunned them as intellectually inferior madmen; but once 1848 was over, he turned religious himself.⁵⁹ The delay, however, resulted in the development of an exceptionally fertile and systematic historical theory.⁶⁰

V

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 describes Maistre's historical thought in intellectual context and identifies the highly differentiated strands—social, moral, political, epistemological, religious, mystical, constitutional, Europeanist—that together form it as a whole. Part 2 then recounts the legacy of Maistrian historical thought in the three major forms in which it influenced the nineteenth century—as a collection of propositions on the nature of historical knowledge; as an etiology of the historical process, especially in regard to knowledge and violence; and as a speculative philosophy of history, that is, a model of the social, political, and religious systems that

59. Mary Pickering, "Auguste Comte and the Saint-Simonians," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 236.

60. For the contrary case, see Pierre Macherey, "Le positivisme entre la révolution et la contre-révolution: Maistre et Comte," *Revue de synthèse* 112 (1991): 41–47.

have succeeded each other through time and will determine the character of the end of time. To make the evidence manageable, I have not dwelled on historiography partly indebted to Maistre—like Chateaubriand's *Études historiques*⁶¹—or on fictional and aesthetic materials that took up Maistrian historical themes but without reworking them for historical theoretical purposes—like the manifold reflections on suffering of Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aureville (1808–89) and Charles Baudelaire (1821–67).

The connection between Maistre and his historical philosophical heirs is sometimes indirect and not always clear, both because nineteenth-century authors did not always indicate their sources with scruple, and because the traditionalism he professed lent itself easily to intellectual borrowing without acknowledgment. As Christ's humble warriors, traditionalists were not supposed to wish to gain fame, which sometimes makes it difficult or impossible to identify which ideas Maistre's successors drew from him and which they took from the vast trove of traditionalism that he helped found. Regardless of the precise mode of transmission, however, my main argument that Maistre was at the origin of a distinctively Francophone way of thinking about history remains unaltered. In part 2, I have underlined his direct and indirect influence on nineteenth-century writers wherever I have been able to verify it, which is in almost all cases. Otherwise, I have assumed convergence.

Chapter 1 describes the genesis of Maistrian historical thought in *De l'état de nature* and *De la souveraineté du peuple* (composed 1794–96), two essays that refute Rousseau, and that contain most of Maistre's historical thought *in potentia*. The essays include a sophisticated model of historical causation that constitutes an early example of moral statistical theory.

Chapter 2 analyzes the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon* (begun 1809), Maistre's major epistemological work, along with his pedagogical writings. It argues that Maistre's philosophy of knowledge was inherently historicizing and maintains, against current literature, that he was a direct empiricist, a theorist of freedom, and a sociologist of knowledge. The chapter also shows the consonance between Maistre's epistemology and the educational pieces that he composed for the Russian government.

Chapter 3 reads *Du pape* (1819) as a Europeanist text and an early exercise in the sociology of religion. It situates Maistre's magnum opus for the first

61. Chateaubriand distinguished his approach to the history of Christianity from Maistre's and Lamennais', possibly unaware that his belief that "liberty is Christian," and his expectation of a third revelation and of a man of "superior genius" were themes that Maistre had been the first to introduce and popularize in French historical consciousness. See *Oeuvres de Chateaubriand* (20 vols. Paris: Dufour, Moulat and Boulanger, 1860–63), 9:47–48; and Bernard Plongeron, "Le christianisme comme messianisme social," in *Les défis de la modernité*, 843–45.

time in the context of early nineteenth-century Russian religious controversies and reads it as the container of his speculative philosophy of history. The crucial event in this narrative is the advent of Christianity, the religion that instituted the sociopolitical order that made Europe free.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the *Éclaircissement sur les sacrifices* (composed 1809). It depicts the little text as a theory of progress through suffering that lent a historical dimension to the mysticism of Origen (ca. 185–254), to modern Augustinianism, and to eighteenth-century illuminism, especially that of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803).

Chapter 5 discusses the Platonic, Pelagian, and utopian historical vision of *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (1821) in intellectual context. Maistre's account of the will and of the individual's role in history is clearest here, with prayer and prophecy arising as constitutive and determinative of the historical fate of social groups. *Les soirées* also contains a radical theory of liberty that this chapter breaks new ground by defining, and a vision of the end of time that would become highly influential.

Each of the chapters of part 2 is a continuation of a chapter or set of chapters of part 1. I have designed chapter 6 as the epilogue to chapters 1, 2, and 3. It recounts how the *Considérations sur la France*, the pamphlet that popularized the tenets of the essays on Rousseau, became a major source of the moral statistics that became the glory of Napoleon's government, informing French prefects' plans to steer France toward a better future. Maistre's epistemological theory of historical causation also helped inaugurate the intellectual history of the social fact, as well as sociological approaches to the organization of knowledge, erudite Catholic philosophies of history, and traditionalist theories of liberty.

Chapter 7, the prolongation of chapter 4, discusses the astounding success of Maistre's theory of sacrifice among traditionalists, socialists, and positivists, and its contribution to expiatory historical philosophy until 1848.

Chapter 8, devoted to the speculative philosophy of history, picks up various themes of chapter 5. New characters are introduced, and the protagonists of chapter 7 return, but with an interest in the religious future and in the succession of historical ages. I argue that Maistre's vision of the coming harmony helped more than any other theme to guarantee his historical theoretical posterity, shaping the pre-1848 drive to guide history toward the abandonment of politics.

Finally, the conclusion describes the paradoxes at the core of Maistrian thought, with the aim of gathering together the various strands of his historical philosophy and tracing its prosperity and wane in the nineteenth century.

A Brief Intellectual Biography

One of Maistre's greatest contradictions was that, for the prolific writer that he was, he condemned writing as the corrupt communicator of a feeble and deadened truth, deeming the *spoken* word to be most alive and closest to God's infallible pronouncements.¹ Maistre was hence a conversationalist before he was an author; and in fact several of his texts were initially intended only as primers for conversation among friends. Conversely, if he transmitted his idea of history orally, the idea reached him also in unwritten ways. These ways were those of history itself, as well as his upbringing and education, social contexts and exchanges, personal and political events. Not all of this book, therefore, reflects on written texts. This brief biography attempts to retrieve Maistre's *non verba* by drawing as much as possible on the private sources of his thought: his diaries, notebooks, and correspondence.

Born in Chambéry in 1753, Joseph de Maistre was educated like most upper-class, French-speaking Catholic boys of his time—by the clergy (likely the Jesuits), receiving a thorough grounding in the Greek and Latin classics. As a boy he probably attended the *collège royal* in Chambéry, a traditional

1. Benjamin Thurston, "Joseph de Maistre: The Paradox of the Writer," in *New enfant du siècle*, 75–98.

institution where lessons emphasized literary exercises—apologues (didactic moral tales), discourses, and disputations.² At home Maistre was, as he himself put it, “brought up in all the ancient severity, broken since the cradle in serious studies.”³ His grandfather Demotz, an *érudit* whose library was one of the finest in Savoie, took great interest in Joseph’s education: he had the young man’s tutor bring him twice a day to his study to check on his progress, and bequeathed his library to him when he died.⁴ From the age of seven Joseph was also a member of the Congregation of Notre-Dame de l’Assomption, a Jesuit-run society rather Jansenist in its insistence on human iniquity and its pedagogical reliance on the instillment of terror.⁵ On the whole, a stern consciousness of duty and religion pervaded the child Joseph’s upbringing: one anecdote recounts how, one day when he was nine, his mother asked him to stop playing on announcing to him the expulsion of the Jesuits from France.⁶ Yet not all was dourness and austerity: Joseph was also early imbued with the gentle, love-based mysticism of Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622), so popular in Savoie at the time. He would return to it periodically throughout his life, both for spiritual consolation and for intellectual stimulation in his work.

At sixteen, Joseph enrolled in the law course at the University of Turin, where the works of Enlightenment philosophy were required reading; but his familiarity with them dated from earlier days. By fifteen he had already read Voltaire, and was harboring encyclopedic ambitions. He began work on a personal dictionary of the arts and sciences that evinced both his classical education and his enthusiasm for his times. Highly erudite and scrupulously researched, the entries show sympathy for sensationalist philosophy. Young Maistre read Pagnac’s account of a statue that came to life very much like Condillac’s with an open mind,⁷ and judged Mirabeau’s *L’ami des hommes* (1756–58) a “temple built to virtue,” “one of those rare books that render homage to the human mind.”⁸ These early penchants help explain the empiricism that I claim he upheld. Simultaneously, Joseph sought persistently to reconcile these interests with his faith and education. Thus if he defined happiness with the Epicureans as “the presence of pleasure, and the absence

2. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 112.

3. OC, 14:208.

4. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 7.

5. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

6. Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre*, 71.

7. Maistre, *Extraits F*; Chambéry, in *Archives de Joseph de Maistre et de sa famille*, 2J15, 458.

8. *Ibid.*, 137.

of pain,” he concluded from this that the “belief in immortality is the only sanction for morality;” jotting down his first reflections on the happiness of criminals and virtuous men⁹—the very debate that would open *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (1821) thirty-nine years later. Indeed, during his adolescence Maistre always framed his knowledge of sensualist psychology within a traditionalist yet unusual moral framework. He did so most memorably in the passage of his *Registres de lecture* where he argued for the embalment of the corpses of good men on grounds that men remember nothing except what they receive through the senses, and that the remains of the virtuous, suitably preserved, could provide undying inspiration for future generations.¹⁰

But most remarkable about Maistre’s teenage reading notes is the continuity of interest and opinion they disclose with his mature works. At sixteen the future Jesuitist was already hinting at *Du pape’s* sociology of religion, arguing that the ecclesiastical state is good because it preserves society and prevents people from dying of hunger.¹¹ And at fifteen he had already judged that *Des délais de la justice divine*, the Plutarchian text that he would translate into French and publish in 1816, was “without question one [of the treatises] that does the greatest honor to Plutarch.”¹² Even as an adolescent Maistre was already an intuitionist, contending, as he would in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, that the idea of abstraction has been engraved in our minds by God’s hand, and that no definition can compare with the evidence of inner sentiment.¹³ He had made his first steps in fideism, confessing to God that he adored him without understanding him.¹⁴ He had judged Pascal harshly;¹⁵ and he had speculated on the nature of time and the idea of successive eternities within eternity¹⁶—voiced years later by the senator of *Les soirées*.

On return from university, a budding career in Savoie’s legal establishment left Maistre little time for reading and writing on subjects unrelated to his work as a magistrate. Still, over the next twenty years he managed to enlarge his grandfather’s library into the best library in Savoie, encompassing virtually

9. *Ibid.*, 45.

10. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 10, 17–20; and Maistre, *Extraits F*, 111, 297.

11. Maistre, *Extraits F*, 18.

12. *Ibid.*, 81.

13. *Ibid.*, 141.

14. *Ibid.*, 289.

15. *Ibid.*, 285. See also Jean Rebotton, “Maistre’s Religious Education,” in Lebrun, *Maistre Studies*, 79.

16. Maistre, *Extraits F*, 285.

every subject—arts and sciences (including the esoteric and the occult), history, philosophy, law, and theology. History attracted him particularly during these years.¹⁷ He read on ancient, medieval, modern, and ecclesiastical history, deriving from these readings, with the help of then-current syncretism, an argumentative method that would serve him throughout his life—the proof of a religious or philosophical belief by its prevalence across time and nations. He also became quite a fan of periodicals, those engines of revolution, keeping himself informed of contemporary issues by reading journals and gazettes from all over Europe.¹⁸ In this way, he built the political consciousness and linguistic skills (six modern European languages in addition to Latin and Greek) that would inform his later Europeanism.

The major new intellectual influence Maistre came across during his prerevolutionary adulthood was illuminism. Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803), whom he met, to his delight, in 1787, was a favorite author.¹⁹ Freemasonry also became the focus of his social life and a main source of his historical and philosophical reflection. At first initiated into the Loge des Trois Mortiers at Chambéry in 1773, Maistre quickly became interested in the Rite Ecossais Rectifié (RER²⁰) that Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730–1824) had brought to Lyon. Formally affiliated with the Dresden-based, Scottish-rite order of the Stricte Observance Templière, the RER combined traditional Scottish Freemasonry with Martinist mysticism and taught the eschatological cosmogony of Willermoz's spiritual teacher, Martinès de Pasqually (1727–74). According to this cosmogony, God gave freedom to the spirits that emanated from him. But first Lucifer and then Adam fell into matter and were imprisoned in it. Man's spiritual task is henceforth to save himself and matter through Christ's help, spiritual exercise, and theurgical communication with angelic spirits. Intrigued by these teachings, Maistre joined the RER's Loge de la Sincérité at Chambéry in 1778 under the name "Josephus a Floribus"—the Latin name of Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202), the Middle Ages' major historical theorist and a possible inspiration of the senator's vision of the "third revelation" in *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.²¹

Illuminism offered Maistre a variety of intellectual attractions. The study of the occult sciences—astrology, alchemy, magic—seems to have been

17. See Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre*, 39.

18. *Ibid.*, 37.

19. *OC*, 13:331–32.

20. Jean Rebotton, introduction to Maistre, *Écrits maçonniques de Joseph de Maistre et de quelques-uns de ses amis francs-maçons*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Jean Rebotton (Geneva: Slatkine, 1938), 2:24.

21. Jean-Yves Pranchère, s.v. "Joachim de Flore," *Dictionnaire Joseph de Maistre*, 1204–5.

among them, and indeed his self-teaching of Greek and interest in ancient Platonism and Hermetism date from this period. Maistre probably also felt an immediate theological affinity with the Masonic fideistic mysticism of inner illumination or divine intuition. But most important among his intellectual acquisitions from Freemasonry was the tendency to interpret nature through “signs.” Insofar as Freemasonry was a philosophy, it could be broadly defined as a science of sacred symbols whereby every detail of every being in the world can, if interpreted right, yield information about the divine. Though by no means uncritical of Freemasonic theosophy—whose historical claims he questioned in letters to Willermoz, and ultimately dismissed in the *Mémoire au duc de Brunswick* (1782)—Maistre did incorporate its method of induction by “signs” or symbols into his mystical and political thought.

Probably because of his many juridical and Masonic activities, Maistre interrupted the *Registres de lecture* for about a decade during his twenties and thirties, to take them up again only in exile. His personal letters indicate that the Revolution found him a hardworking paterfamilias and member of the Senate of Savoie sympathetic to revolutionary developments. In July of 1790 he even wrote to his sister Thérèse judging that their king’s ambassador had “shown rather little taste for not wishing to celebrate the feast of the fourteenth [of July].”²² Yet by January 1791, he was admitting to his friend Joseph Henri Costa de Beauregard (1752–1824) that his “aversion for everything done in France [was becoming] horror,” that philosophical “systems were . . . turning into passions,” and that all the “massacres, pillagings, fires” ordered by the National Assembly were nothing compared with the destruction of the public spirit and the vitiation of opinion that accompanied them.²³ His letters to Costa de Beauregard through 1791 and up to April 1792 reveal a darkening mood: talk of revolutionary conspiracies in Chambéry, increasing aristocratic mistrust of the bourgeoisie and the populace, antireligious disturbances—all these contributed to Maistre’s wholesale rejection of French revolutionary ideals, and an attitude toward revolutions far more negative than that which he had voiced in 1785 when, praising the *Administration des finances de France* (1784) of Jacques Necker (1732–1804), he had advocated the careful uprooting of old institutions when necessary.²⁴ In the course of 1792 Maistre’s revulsion for the revolutionary regime finally grew beyond compromise. When the French army invaded the country in September, he

22. OC, 9:10.

23. Ibid., 9:11–14.

24. Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre*, 120–21.