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## Masters Of The Right: JOSEPH DE MAISTRE



*It his 'Audodifesa', Evola wrote:*

*The position that I have defended and continue to defend, as an independent man (...) should not be called 'Fascist', but traditional and counterrevolutionary. In the same spirit as a Metternich, a Bismarck, or the great Catholic philosophers of the principles of authority, de Maistre and Donoso Cortés, I reject all that which derives, directly or indirectly, from the French Revolution and which, in my opinion, has as its extreme consequence bolshevism ; to which I counterpose the 'world of Tradition'. (...) My principles are only those that, before the French Revolution, every well-born person considered sane and normal.*

*In this all too brief review of the republication in Italian of de Maistre's 'Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg', Evola reveals his indebtedness to and interest in de Maistre. It also shows how to read an author - Evola is able to separate those aspects of de Maistre that are based on the Traditional point of view from those aspects that are merely of contingent interest or based on doctrine and dogma.*

*It was first published in 'Il Conciliatore' in November 1972, then as 'Joseph de Maistre' in 'Ricognizioni, uomini e problemi', an anthology whose texts were chosen and edited by J. Evola himself a few months before he died.*

## Masters of the Right: Joseph de Maistre.

The publisher Rusconi, who is performing a service of merit by printing a series of works which provide essential nutrients to the culture of the Right, has just issued a new edition of Joseph de Maistre's 'The Saint Petersburg Dialogues', edited by Alfredo Cattabiani. This is de Maistre's best-known work. However, direct references to the political domain, in which de Maistre shows his worth as a 'reactionary', are scarcer than in his other writings. In fact, he discusses mainly moral and religious problems: the very subtitle of the book, 'Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence', indicates this line of thought, which does not have much interest for us. Expressly presupposing the existence of a Providence conceived in moral terms, de Maistre confronts the problem of reconciling this with the spectacle displayed by the world and history as they actually are: wicked acts unpunished, virtues unrewarded, and so on.

The solutions to these problems that de Maistre offers cannot be said to be at all convincing, and in fact they seem to us to return to the idea of a divine justice that merely delays just recompense (in his own support, de Maistre includes as an appendix a tract by Plutarch entitled 'De sera numinis vindicta'). However, de Maistre himself reaches a freer and more satisfying view when he compares the ills and accidents that rain upon all types of human being to the bullets that hit an army without making a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. We are led to the conclusion that any conscious being taking on the human state of existence (willing it either ignorantly or rashly, as is said in a Hermetic tract), cannot but be exposed to the contingencies proper to such a state. To look for transcendent moral links, in either case, is natural enough, but to do so displays a continuation of the same ignorance or rashness, as the case may be.

Leaving questions of this sort on one side, let us mention some of de Maistre's ideas which are interesting from the traditional point of view. First of all, we can point to his belief in a Primordial Tradition. It may be that de Maistre was indebted to Claude de Saint-Martin, whom he knew, and who was an exponent of esoteric doctrines in the field of freemasonry, which was sufficiently different then from what it is now, that de Maistre himself took part in it. Then there is his view that the original natural state of humanity was not barbarism. On the contrary, he considers it to have been a thing of light and consciousness, while the savage, the 'primitive' of today, he sees merely as

*"the descendent of a man detached from the great tree of civilisation, following an abuse of power that cannot be repeated."*

In other regards, as well, man finds himself affected by a primeval abuse of power and a consequent degradation: this is the cause of his vulnerability, not only spiritual and intellectual, but also physical. The idea is evidently similar to that of 'original sin' in Christian mythology - the context being, however, vaster and more acceptable. As for his aforementioned thesis on the true nature of the 'primitives', its adoption would probably carry ethnological research to a higher level and avert many blunders.

De Maistre accused the savants, scientists, and such, who, like some cabal, collude together to deny that anyone might acquire greater knowledge than their own, and by different methods.

*"They dismiss as irrational a time in which men saw cause and effect clearly, but they*

*display the mentality of our current age, in which men can only with difficulty penetrate from effects to causes, and tend to say that it is worthless to concern oneself with causes, or hardly to know anymore what a cause is." He adds: "They propound innumerable clichés concerning the ignorance of the ancients, who saw spirits everywhere : it appears to me that they are much more foolish than these ancients were, because they fail to see any spiritual factors whatever. We always hear talk of physical causes. But what, in the final analysis, is a physical cause?"*

For him the axiom, "No physical event in the life of man can have a higher cause," is inauspicious and likely to promote a fundamental superficiality. He rejects the idea of progress.

The idea of involution appears rather more plausible to him. De Maistre notes that numerous traditions attest that

*"Men began already in possession of science, but a science different from ours, and superior to it, because it started from a higher point, which also made it more dangerous. And this explains to us how science, at its beginning, was always mysterious, and was restricted to the temples, where ultimately it burned itself out, when its flame could no longer serve except to burn."*

De Maistre attached great importance to prayer and its power. He even wrote: "No one can demonstrate that a nation that prays has not been answered," but, properly, it is the opposite that must be demonstrated, which is not easy. He finds himself confronting the contradiction between prayer and the power which is attributed to it, on the one hand, and the immutability of the laws of nature, on the other - an antithesis that de Maistre tries to reconcile, although not very convincingly. He thinks that if some prayers are not granted, that is due only to a higher divine wisdom.

De Maistre's defence of the executioner as an instrument of God is often cited with horror, and, even more so, his conception of the divine character of war. Unfortunately, these critics of de Maistre's view do not consider that war can really and truly express the highest spiritual values, of heroism and supra-individualistic action ; they see it in dismal terms, as an expiation performed both by and upon a humanity fundamentally guilty and debased. The difference between the just and unjust war, between the war of defence and that of conquest, between the war of the victor and that of the vanquished, is not considered. These views are little in accord with a positive 'reactionary' orientation.

In another of his works, 'Considerations on France', de Maistre, after declaring himself in favour of the restoration of the monarchy, states an important concept, namely, that the counter-revolution must not be a "revolution in the opposite direction", but rather the "opposite of a revolution". We owe to him a new type of theology of revolution ; he highlights something 'demonic' that generally hides itself beneath the revolutionary phenomena. This aspect is responsible for the fact that the revolution drags its makers along behind it, rather than being led by them. Only in the modern epoch did it take on the character of a more or less institutionalised 'permanent revolution', with its technicians and slick manipulators.

The reader will be able to find many other interesting ideas in the 'Saint Petersburg Dialogues', if he takes care to avoid such disquisitions as, for example, the prolix discussion of

Locke. We cannot resist the temptation finally to quote what de Maistre said about women:

*"A woman can be superior only as a woman, but as soon as she tries to imitate a man, she is nothing but a monkey."*

Pure truth, whether contemporary 'feminist movements' like it or not.