

## *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*

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Review of Jack Lively (ed.), *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, first published in *New Society*, 7 (10 February 1966), 28–9.

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The best of some writers is to be found in their incidental remarks and in the germinal ideas they let fall. This is not the case with Joseph de Maistre who, although he was an unsystematic and repetitive writer, was a systematic thinker and needs to be read in the gross. The fourteen volumes of his collected works are, however, a formidable undertaking; and it was a happy thought of Jack Lively to make and to translate this selection in which the six more important pieces of de Maistre's writings are reproduced.

There is, of course, abridgement, and something has been lost—the poetry (the opening scene of the *Soirées*, for example) and the often fascinating footnotes of this informed but fanciful scholar. But the main lines of the arguments are preserved in all their ingenious detail. It is an admirable piece of work and earns our gratitude.

Lively prefaces it with a substantial introduction. The biographical information it contains is adequate; perhaps some fuller bibliographical information would not have been out of place; but for the most part it is concerned to interpret the writings. He is, I think, a trifle over-generous to some of his predecessors in this enterprise: their categories, 'authoritarian,' 'fascist,' and so on, are notably unenlightening. His sketch of the organizing ideas of de Maistre's view of the condition and destiny of mankind is sufficient. But what he has to say about de Maistre's relation to the writers of the Enlightenment is what will properly capture the reader's attention, for it is here that the debate to which de Maistre was contributing is identified and that his ideas receive their definition in terms of their alternatives.

De Maistre believed himself to be combatting what he recognised as the intellectual and moral corruption of the Enlightenment.

But Lively contends that, although de Maistre is, in this sense, 'strictly a reactionary' writer, his enemies were, to a significant extent, the creatures of his own overheated imagination, and that the real difference between himself and his chosen opponents was often not very great.

This is an interesting view, and Jack Lively argues it with determination and lucidity. But I doubt whether it can be sustained without a good deal of qualification. It is true that de Maistre conjured up a vast and (to him) impious conspiracy against 'authority'; but (not without some confusion) the main point of his argument was directed, not against a revolt from 'authority', but against a by no means imaginary understanding of the nature of 'authority' which he thought to be erroneous and (with less cogency) to be also morally reprehensible. De Maistre's own understanding of 'authority' and the often bizarre arguments with which he supported it, may leave something to be desired, but when he identified his opponents as writers who believed that 'authority' derives from the quality of its acts, he had chosen neither imaginary enemies nor disguised friends.

De Maistre's theme is the government of mankind. The occasion in response to which he wrote was the French Revolution and the writings he believed to have brought it on. But he explored his theme at a number of levels and contributed to many somewhat different debates.

At one level, his writings were a recognition of that contingency in politics which his opponents denied. Circumstance is everything; even 'authority' rests upon contingent current opinion. Political discourse can never be demonstrative; the event never corresponds to the design.

At another level, that of secular history, events are recognised as the products of human choices and actions, and civilisations as human endeavours. There is wisdom and folly in this world; responsibility may properly be attributed and praise and blame allotted. Wars are preventable evils, not without their

compensations; to spill blood is a crime; revolution is the villainy of the few for which the many suffer.

But, in the end, what interests de Maistre is not the instruments of government, nor the relation of the ruled to their rulers, nor even events as the product of human choices, but the world as it lies in the hand of God: *dieu d'Abraham, dieu d'Isaac, dieu de Jacob, et non des philosophes et des savants* (as Pascal had said). He is concerned with events from the standpoint of Providence, and human affairs in relation to divine love and justice. Here his writing becomes a theological meditation; his theme is innocence, wickedness, and suffering in the world; and his master is Origen. The French revolution becomes a cosmic event, at once satanic and divinely decreed (or allowed). War is divine punishment; the blood of the innocent is the coin in which the cosmic debt of mankind is requited, and what is thus paid in this world is allowed for in what has to be paid hereafter.

It is a somber, even savage, reading of the human condition; but it is not pessimistic; and at least it is a change from the fond pelagian hopes of the Enlightenment. And, in de Maistre's view, this theological perspective is relevant to the government of mankind because the politics of time are intelligible only in the context of the politics of eternity.