



Evil Raised to Its Highest Power.
The Philosophy of the Counter-Enlightenment,
a Project of Intellectual Management of the
Revolutionary Violence

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Abstract: *The Counter-Enlightenment and its corollary, the Counter-Revolution, must not be systematically reduced to some sterile philosophical denial and combat, hoping to return to the former established society, political power and thought, which would be nothing more than a mere reactionary endeavor. Counter-revolutionary authors such as Maistre and Bonald, who, at first, did favour the Enlightenment, intend to explain what seems inexplicable, notably the Terror, and, by giving a sense to it, to go beyond the dread created by the outburst of revolutionary violence. Indeed, their purpose is to understand the course of the Revolution, its causes and effects, and its infernal logic. To proceed, they develop new intellectual strategies, induced by the radical novelty of the revolutionary process itself. In order to reassign to this event such a place in History as defined by a divine purpose, they start by proving that the Revolution is evil, then, further explaining this evil from a theological point of view. Favouring internal criticism, this paper purports to analyze and compare Maistre's and Bonald's methodical examination of the Revolution in some of their more relevant works.*

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Introduction: From Light to Dread

As soon as the issue of counter-Revolutionary thought was addressed, the substantiation of its original paradox has often been expounded; namely, that its two most prominent representatives on both sides of the Alps, Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre, initially communed in a similar enthusiasm towards this Revolution that was shortly after to become their *bête noire*. Their position has nothing to do with some spontaneous and superficial support for the fervour seizing people's minds. No, the mayor of Millau and the Savoyard senator are children of the Enlightenment, prototypes of that enlightened aristocracy which, without betraying its attachment to Catholic faith, had both read and re-read Montesquieu and Rousseau.¹ In 1796 and 1797, however, they respectively published the *Théorie du Pouvoir*

¹ Our position differs from David Klinck, who saw in Bonald's support a feudal tradition. See David Klinck, *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist Louis de Bonald* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996.). From the same author, see also "The strange Relationship of Rousseau to the French Counter-revolution as seen in the early Works of Louis de Bonald." in *Proceedings of the Consortium on revolutionary Europe 1750-1850* (Athens, GA : The Consortium, 1980), 14-22. On the idea of counter-revolutionary thought mirrored

politique et religieux and the *Considérations sur la France*, two works appearing as theoretical weapons, and a program, designed to cancel the process and both announcing the restoration of the French monarchy.

We will not examine here the reasons for this turnaround — is it one in fact? — nor will we try to seek its origin in biographical elements.² Whether Bonald broke with the Revolution when the priests were required to take an oath or during the emigration is of no more consequence than knowing whether Maistre had had an “epiphany” as early as September 1792 or during the summer of 1794.³ Instead of an axiological reversal, it is our conjecture that it was a feeling of dread that got hold of both of them in the wake of the Terror which they had not witnessed first-hand. It is no coincidence that the two texts mentioned above were published under the Directory, when ashes were certainly still burning, but as if to secure a distance, no matter how tenuous, with respect to Robespierre’s reign. The Terror had assigned itself an ethical purpose, the triumphal coming of Virtue, and a practical one, the instant disarming of any opposition to the creation of the Nation. And now, *a posteriori*, after Thermidor, a new light, probably not anticipated in its plans, can be shed on this Terror, working, as an intellectual “scare,” a notional anguish for those trying to reflect on what could only be apprehended until that moment in the shadow of the last scaffold.

In this aspect, Bonald’s and Maistre’s work is not a reaction merely in the political meaning of the term, an end decreed against a revolution that nonetheless continued to follow its course, in order to prescribe the necessity of an opposite outcome. It appears also as a dialectical backlash, born from an extraordinary outburst of violence, generating a desperate — but seen as salutary — attempt at a conceptualization of the unintelligible. In this respect, their work can be seen as the result of an epistemological attempt, as it were, aiming at the impossible, namely to describe a phenomenon of seismic proportions and its reintegration into the fabric that it had pretended to tear. Diverging or converging, how do these two theoretical systems proceed, entailing the catastrophic failure of men, and rending the veil of time? For, far from merely imposing any philosophical or theological authority, they resort to a method. This is what we intend to examine, from the perspective of an internal criticism, by comparing Maistre’s and Bonald’s more pertinent works.

The following argument progresses through three stages: first, we intend to show that explaining the inexplicable and understanding the incomprehensible involves a first hierarchy of priorities (I); secondly, we shall argue that this hierarchy is liable to make an ethology ensue from an etiology (II); thirdly, we shall propose that, if such a seemingly speleological exploration sheds light into the abyss, then, at the same time, hopefully, it could point to some heavens (III).

from the Revolution instead of designed against it, see Robert Spaemann, *Der Ursprung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Restauration. Studien über L.G.A. de Bonald* (München: Kosel, 1969). In *Rivoluzione e potere in Louis de Bonald* (Firenze: Olschki, 1990), Paolo Pastori’s interpretation is of a Christian re-appropriation of the Enlightenment. On Maistre’s heritage of the Enlightenment, see Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun (eds.), *Joseph de Maistre and the legacy of Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011).

² To this day, the best biographies are Henri Moulinié, *De Bonald, la vie, la carrière politique, la doctrine* (New York : Arno Press, 1978 [1916]) ; Henri de Maistre, *Joseph de Maistre* (Paris : Perrin, 2001 [1990]). Worth mentioning is the more recent work by Giorgio Barberis, *Louis de Bonald, ordre et pouvoir entre subversion et providence* (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2016).

³ Joseph de Maistre, *Les Carnets du comte Joseph de Maistre, Livre journal 1790-1812* (Lyon : Vitte, 1923), 217. Quoted by Pierre Glaudes in his introduction to the *Considérations sur la France*. See Joseph de Maistre, *Œuvres*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Paris : Laffont, 2007), 185. If not stated otherwise, all the references to Maistre refer to this volume. If not stated otherwise, translations of de Maistre and Bonald are from the author of this paper.

I. The Hermeneutics of Disorder

To begin with our two authors temporarily isolate a cluster of causes revealing the very core of the phenomenon in order to delineate the field of investigation — which is also a battlefield. This initial outline leads to a first understanding and a first identification of those responsible.

A. Men's Fault

Since an instance of human madness soon turned inhuman, people alone could have been at fault. From the very start of his *Théorie du Pouvoir*, Bonald stipulates that the drama of History is summed up in the Promethean and cyclical ambition of a humanity regularly exhausting itself in wanting “to set itself up as lawmaker of the political society, and to give a constitution to the one and to the other,”⁴ namely to pretend to be *constituting* that which has already been constituted, or rather that which naturally *constitutes itself* through a slow internal movement that it disrupts and delays. The Revolution only departs from the rule by its scale and by the minority status of those improvised wonder-workers who, sure of the purity of their intentions, have dragged along the bulk of their compatriots: “follies committed by clever people; eccentricities uttered by sensible people; crimes perpetrated by honest people... these are the revolutions”⁵; or: “only some need to be guilty for all to be unhappy. A revolution is just the fault of some and the misfortune of all.”⁶

Similar tones can be observed in Maistre, castigating the abuses of the rabble only to declare that “[t]he role played by some nobles in the French Revolution is a thousand times more *terrible* (I do not say more horrible) than anything else we have seen in the Revolution.”⁷ Naming the insane voluntarism, the suicidal treason of the *élites* gets rid of all conspiracy-oriented argumentations in the vein of Barruel,⁸ in order to confine the roots of evil to such social categories particularly corrupted by harmful doctrines. The doubt introduced by the Reformation, and translated into a religious schism, was coupled with a potential political schism, explicitly articulated in the 18th century as the possibility of a revolt against the spiritual and temporal authority and as the exhortation to put it into practice. Thus undermined, the supreme principle, be it called *Power* by Bonald or be it designated as *Sovereignty* by Maistre, was from then on primarily exposed. Hence the special importance given by the Savoyard to the execution of Louis XVI, an “assault against *sovereignty*” committed “in the name of the nation” and thereby becoming, independently of the fact that it had been conceived only by “any number of rebels,” a national crime.⁹

Bonald treats the execution of Louis XVI on the 21st of January 1793 less harshly. He discreetly stresses the monarch's weaknesses.¹⁰ More importantly, he sees the event less as

⁴ Louis de Bonald, *Théorie du Pouvoir politique et religieux: dans la société civile démontrée par le raisonnement et par l'histoire* (1796), in *Œuvres de M. de Bonald*, 7. Volumes (Paris : Leclère, 1847-1854), vol.1 : 99. If not stated otherwise, all the references to Bonald refer to this edition.

⁵ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées sur divers sujets*, in *ibid.*, 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), 101.

⁸ Augustin de Barruel (1741-1820) interpreted the Revolution as the result of a masonic and philosophical conspiracy. See Augustin de Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (Hamburg: P. Fauche., 1797-1803). On Barruel, see Sylva Schaeper-Wimmer, *Augustin Barruel S.J. (1741-1820): Studien zu Biographie und Werk* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Lang, 1985).

⁹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 12 ; Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, 204.

¹⁰ See Gérard Gengembre, “La Contre-Révolution et le roi funeste: Bonald juge de Louis XVI,” in *Pour la Révolution française, En hommage à Claude Mazauric* (Rouen: Publications de l'Université de Rouen, 1998).

the inconceivable paroxysm of the Revolution, than as a synecdoche of the larger movement of historical tension, therefore being only its critical stage. To Maistre, the unspeakable gesture of immolating a victim, both intangible in theory and innocent in actual fact, must rebound in vengeful torrents of blood on the regicidal people, on the whole continent even, which did not prevent it. To the Aveyronnais,¹¹ this embodiment of the death of monarchy cannot be isolated from a deeper issue: the intrinsic conditions of the regime having allowed its extinction.

In both cases, this event is linked to an apparently aporetic train of thought. According to Bonald, the traditional monarchy, Catholic and absolute, represented perfection itself due to its universal character. According to Maistre, it is due to its particular compatibility with the French case. It crowned an accomplished state of society, as ratified by a long tradition – here again, two diverging conceptions of the principle of legitimacy eventually agree to qualify the Old France as legitimate. Therefore, nothing ought to have been able to overturn that order of things, intended to be perpetuated *ad infinitum*. But, at the same time, something unlikely occurred, resoundingly, exposing the vices of the institution. Not those of the *Cahiers de doléances* — registers of grievances — which were but a simple list of clumsily collected discontents; not those denounced by Rousseau, whose idea of a republic was designed for Geneva only, while acknowledging at the end of the *Social Contract* the impossibility of putting his views into practice; not those listed by Sieyès, or by any speaker belatedly declaiming the hypothetical rights of a Third Estate whose political existence was decreed at the same time.¹² This notion breaks through an innermost dysfunction, a half-open breach in the armour through which rush in succession Lutheranism — *philosophy* — Revolution, i. e. the religious schism, then the philosophical one, both responsible for the Revolution in the long run. Besides, the two thinkers regularly use a viral and infectious metaphor in order to qualify republican or *liberal* ideas; maybe the monarchy succumbed to a defective immunity or to a progressive loss of immune defenses. One could define decadence this way.¹³

B. The Monarchy's Fault

In this respect, the diagnosis is final; even if Louis XVI had wanted to act like Louis XIV, he could not have done so, independently of his personal qualities or of the “spirit of the time.” Something in the monarchy had been hindering the *self-establishing* process already mentioned with Bonald. According to him, some sort of devitalization had long been wearing down the harmonious mechanisms enabling any society to *preserve* and to *perpetuate* itself, to use Bonald's terms. The state gets its impetus from the natural movement allowing any family to go from the *private* or *domestic state* up to the *public state* — i.e. to nobility — thus guaranteeing the entire nation the progressive accession to the *social existence*. This collective emulation is cautiously limited by ancient normative frameworks which stimulate its vital momentum. Furthermore, the nobility, emanating as it were from the Power, constitutes the *Ministry*, the *nexus* of the *Power/Minister/Subject* triad. This triad is nothing but the political expression of a general metaphysical structure: *Will/Love/Force* for the creative gesture, *Cause/Means/Effect* for logic, *God/Christ/Humanity* for the religious society, *Father/Mother/Child* for the domestic

¹¹ Bonald, a ‘Rouergat,’ was born in the province of ‘Rouergue,’ turned into the ‘*département de l’Aveyron*’ by the Revolution.

¹² In his *Essai analytique sur les lois naturelles ou du Pouvoir, du Ministre et du Sujet* (Paris : Leclère, 1800) Bonald refutes Sieyès's *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?*

¹³ See the unpublished manuscript *Où allons-nous?* (Archives du Monna : 1818) where Bonald develops this metaphor.

society¹⁴... It looks as if this principle of regeneration had jammed, freezing society, as it were, exactly where it had to be mobile. Above all, sclerosis of the ranks, disputes concerning ancestry, and limitation of ennoblement would have been both the cause and the symptom of a necrosis, which, eventually, would be fatal.

Moreover, Bonald insists on the people's growing hostility towards the nobility, due to its narrowness, turned into a manner of enclosure. A nobility massed at the Court of Versailles, seen as having degenerated into a swarm of parasites, cut off from their domain, as well as from the duties defining their condition (*noblesse oblige, noblesse égale service [nobility means service]*). The nobility that had remained untainted, provincial, and well-rooted had to bear the brunt of the haughtiness of that factitious Versailles oligarchy. Bonald constantly emphasizes the fact that this situation, turned endemic, made the public opinion liken the one to the other, and that the revolutionary violence, in its fiercest expression, was, first and foremost, an anger turned against nobility.¹⁵ Proclaiming the *admission of all to any position*, a lie, an illusion just as inapplicable as the *sovereignty of the people*, the Revolution obscured the ancient principle of the *admissibility of all families*, or, to be more precise, it took advantage of the fact that it had been obscured.

It was inevitable that the Power at the top would be contaminated by the effects of this decadence. After having sustained over the centuries the effort to overcome feudal disintegration and to muster its strength to build its most solid structure in the 17th century — the *Grand Siècle*, and its literary pinnacle as the expression of its institutional pinnacle¹⁶—, the monarchy was at the same time weakened by war.¹⁷ In 1789, Power's loss of sacred status was simply the consequence of that previous loss of technical effectiveness, and its loss, in a nutshell, was that of an older involution: "a government never perishes except through its own fault, and almost always through old faults that make it commit new ones."¹⁸ Therefore, the Revolution is the product of a disharmony, a loosening of the chords of several instruments in the glorious concert little by little interspersed with louder and louder wrong notes.

Incidentally, Maistre literally uses this musical metaphor when he describes the universal moan induced by the lowering of the "keynote of the system of our creation."¹⁹ The pertinent chapter of the *Considérations*, with its suggestive title ("On the Violent Destruction of the Human Species"²⁰), inserts the event into an entirely different symphony. Heralding the famous passages of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* on this subject, one can already read there that "war is, in a certain sense, the habitual state of mankind, which is to say that human blood must flow without interruption somewhere or other on the globe, and that, for every nation, peace is only a respite."²¹ Therefore, the Revolution is just the most terrifying *hic et nunc* of this uninterrupted carnage, through which History unfolds as a long collective sacrifice originating from an ontology of the necessary violence, justified through the dogma of

¹⁴ The most complete phrasing of this triadic structure can be found starting with Bonald's *Essai analytique sur les lois naturelles ou du Pouvoir, du Ministre et du Sujet*.

¹⁵ See especially Bonald's booklet *Quelques considérations sur la noblesse* (Paris : Le Normand, 1815) published as a supplement to the *Réflexions sur l'intérêt général de l'Europe*.

¹⁶ On Bonald's aesthetics and his literary theory, in addition to Gérard Gengembre's works, see John Conley, *L'Esthétique sociale de Bonald*, doctoral thesis (Louvain : Université de Louvain, 1988) ; Rainer-Michael Lüddecke, *Literatur als Ausdruck der Gesellschaft : die Literaturtheorie des Vicomte de Bonald* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

¹⁷ Louis de Bonald, *Théorie du Pouvoir*, 312 ff.

¹⁸ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 300.

¹⁹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

reversibility.²² Besides, it appears as a conclusion of the various successive incursions made by the author in order to undo time and again the bloody weft: regardless of whether its *terminus ab quo* is set in modern French history, in the history of Europe, or whether it goes back to the Ancient World, the *terminus ad quem* is the same, characterizing a “brilliant hour.”²³ Another way of saying that irrespective of one’s chosen itinerary, the paths of History implacably leads towards this same ahistorical moment.

C. The Revolution: Running Amok or Following an Understandable Course?

By escaping the human course of time, the Revolution escapes men at the same time: “It has been correctly pointed out,” says Maistre, “that the French Revolution leads men more than men lead it. This observation is completely justified, and although it can be applied to all great revolutions more or less, it has never been more striking than it is in the present period.” He goes on: “The very rascals who appear to lead the Revolution are involved only as simple instruments, and as soon as they aspire to dominate it they fall ignobly.” Robespierre, Collot or Barrère would have established the Terror almost unwillingly, “extremely mediocre” men having only “driven what they call the revolutionary chariot, [...] without looking back.” To this, he adds:

The revolutionary torrent took successively different directions, and it was only by following the course of the moment that the most conspicuous men in the Revolution acquired the kind of power and celebrity they were able to achieve. As soon as they wanted to oppose it, or even to stand aside by isolating themselves or by working too much for themselves, they disappeared from the scene.

And he concludes that “the more one examines the apparently most active personages in the Revolution, the more one finds in them something passive and mechanical. [...] They are right when they say *it goes all alone*.”²⁴

The image of the chariot is strikingly reused and developed by Bonald, when he extends the perspective to the subsequent decades, including the Restoration:

I imagine the Revolution as a chariot in which travelers who left their homeland so as to see new places were riding without knowing too well where they were headed. As they kept reaching on their way places that seemed nice to them, they would have wanted to get down; but, since the chariot was still in motion, they jumped down in order to stop it, and fell under the wheels. The constitutional monarchy attempted the first, they were the most tired by the journey; they wanted to descend. They had cause to regret: the chariot was still moving, and it went without stopping until it reached the ‘93 Republic. The spot was horribly beautiful, and some of them liked it; but the chariot doubled its speed, and those who wanted to get out met with a wretched death. The speed decreased as they approached the Directory, they hoped for some rest; but, despite the efforts of all those who would have settled for that stay, they had to move along and push until they reached the Consulate. No one wanted to stay there, and from a distance they thought they saw a better

²² For a recent and nuanced reinterpretation of Maistre’s theory of sacrifice, see Carolina Armenteros, *L’Idée française de l’histoire. Joseph de Maistre et sa postérité* (Paris : Garnier, 2018). See especially the chapter “Histoire et violence sociale,” 193-223.

²³ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

lodge. Indeed, they reached the Empire: there, the road seemed to them smoother, the region less rocky; but the chariot went on more rapidly than ever, and, despite the exhausted travelers' sincere desire, after such a long journey, they were unable either to stop the chariot or to get down. In the end, the road became more uneven, the horses bolted, the chariot was thrown into abysses; and, after the hardest jolts and the most dangerous accidents, it found itself returned to the constitutional monarchy.²⁵

Tellingly, both excerpts attempt to give some legibility to the general maelstrom that seems to cloud any signification, be it by exposing the stages of the cataclysm. By doing so, the Revolution is already partly tamed, reinstated within the framework of a chronology, no matter how uneven. A narrative of the exit from History becomes possible. Showing, organizing, naming a subject is already intellectually sizing it; classifying chaos does put some order into it. Even better, the unsympathetic look upon it leaves some critical distance, permitting as well to outline a process whose dynamics eludes its very actors. The abominable mechanics of the Revolution, this new Moloch, this infernal machine devouring its parents as well as its children, become all the more visible. An empirical observation morphs into a hermeneutic one: "a revolution has its laws," Bonald thus deduces, "just as a comet has its orbit; and the first of all is that those who think that they lead it are only instruments; some destined for starting it, others for carrying on with it or ending it. Bonaparte was subject to this law just like the others, and more than the others."²⁶ Maistre articulates his reflection in a similar way: "here again we may admire order in disorder, for it is evident, if we reflect a bit, that the guiltiest revolutionaries could be felled only by the blows of their accomplices."²⁷ The "permanence and the generality of disorder," Bonald confirms, is "also an order, but a *negative* one [...]."²⁸

At this stage, the idea of an *order in disorder* can, however, prove to be equally worrying or reassuring. Realizing that anarchy possesses its own rules, those of an endless consumption, might lead to the consuming contemplation of an advancing horror, of which one can only predict the speed. If this order is an *order in itself*, having in common with the known order the only presence of guidelines, that could mean the final eclipse of the natural order and the emergence of a teratological order, escaping the fate of the world. In other words, there is indeed some logic *in* the illogical, but one that would be intrinsic to it and that would obliterate any reconciliation with an ontological obviousness that it has eroded. Therefore, this order, perceived thanks to the analysis of the revolutionary disorder, could be construed as a monstrosity replacing the natural and the socio-political orders that had been slowly built over time. Would Maistre's and Bonald's counterrevolutionary theory result in a hopeless statement? Would the revolutionary disorder triumph, since to understand it is by no means to stave it off?

Both thinkers' concepts, though, will lead them further, and enable them to grasp the Revolution from another angle.²⁹ Here, Maistre's historicism and Bonald's organicism can agree in an experimental approach, since France "is an *experimental society*, [...] abandoned for a while to any theory, to any test, to any system of government."³⁰ An approach that has just

²⁵ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 380.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 13.

²⁸ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 401.

²⁹ See Gérard Gengembre, "Bonald et la Révolution. De la négation à la gestion," in *La Révolution vue de 1800*, 37-50 (Elseneur : Centre de Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1991).

³⁰ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 441.

removed people, initially designated as the great culprits, from this maelstrom that carries them along; can now consider other protagonists.

II. The Good, the Evil, the Blood. Sketch of a Theodicy

In order to do that, one must not describe anymore the Revolution, but define its specificity; “what distinguishes the French Revolution and makes it an *event* unique in history,” Maistre puts forward, “is that it is radically *bad*. No element of good disturbs the eye of the observer; it is the highest degree of corruption ever known; it is pure impurity.”³¹ Bonald’s verdict is quite similar: “the French Revolution, or, rather, the European one, was a call to all the passions through all the errors; it is, to make use of the energy of a geometric *phrase*, evil raised to its highest power.”³² First of all, its fundamental evil nature must be quantified. Next, its essence must be defined.

A. The Very Nature of Revolutionary Evil

The first trait striking the two authors lies in the methodical character of the crime, in a rationalization of the abomination, all the more astonishing since one has seen that its servants had only acted on a passive, quasi-robotic impulse³³; compared to the English precedent, “in France there was more art in the persecution, more malice in the hatred, more method in the destruction,”³⁴ Bonald notes. Between malice and evil spell, it is easy to surmise the presence of the Evil One. Maistre does go along, reformulating the paradigm of the revolutionary specificity in its “*satanic* quality to the French Revolution that distinguishes it from everything we have ever seen or anything we are ever likely to see in the future.”³⁵ The shift towards the theological field that the Savoyard holds dear is from then on predictable, heralding the hypothesis of an untimely intrusion of the Devil, who would have somehow taken the cosmos from God. This would mean the inconceivable divine defeat, leaving Creation to Satan; unless this abandonment were not the outcome of a lost fight, but that of a simple withdrawal of the Creator, having thus given free rein to his archenemy. This second supposition points at a third one, that of a conscious and premeditated gesture pertaining to the punctual stepping aside, and not to the withdrawal. God’s moving away is strategic, it only signifies a distancing in order to gain ground in terms of latitude in his action, even to free himself from it and let it work, in a strange dissociation between his plans and that which comes to carry them out, or, at least, to express them.³⁶

Providence would then take on the unprecedented dimension of a divine will independent of its Author’s orders, but commissioned by him to relay them down here. This metaphysical distortion would allow rereading that *order in disorder* already mentioned, and to which Maistre returns over and over, through a more complex grid: the former is not consubstantial with the latter, as one might have feared for an instant. It is not an improbable presence of God as a Supreme Commander of anarchy anymore; it pertains more to a *mediated divine principle*,

³¹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 38.

³² Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 328.

³³ On Maistre’s and Bonald’s concept of a revolutionary savagery, see Vincenza Petyx, *I selvaggi in Europa. La Francia rivoluzionaria di Maistre e Bonald* (Naples : Bibliopolis, 1987).

³⁴ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 375.

³⁵ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 41.

³⁶ We draw on some statements by Pierre Glaudes, “L’hypothèse de Maistre est que la Révolution est un déchaînement du mal utilisé par Dieu au service du bien,” *Philitt* (June 23rd 2015). <https://philitt.fr/2015/06/23/pierre-glaudes-lhypothese-de-maistre-est-que-la-revolution-est-un-dechaînement-du-mal-utilise-par-dieu-au-service-du-bien-2/> (Accessed November 16, 2019).

through which He never lets go entirely, but puts at the heart of events an element able to allow Him to regain control of the rudder at any time: “the first condition of an ordained revolution is that whatever could have prevented it does not exist and that nothing succeeds for those who wish to prevent it. But never is order more visible, never is Providence more palpable, than when superior action is substituted for that of man and it acts all alone. This is what we are seeing at the present moment.”³⁷

B. The Bloody Punishment

This flood of blood of which humanity is simultaneously the instigator and the victim can no longer be related to the simple necessity of war, the “*all is evil*” that expresses and justifies the omnipresence of violence on Earth.³⁸ Certainly, the aforementioned violence preserves more than ever its sacrificial nature. But the fumes of the pyre are not honouring a vengeful god, a Christianized version of the pagan gods whose face was unveiled at the opening of the games. Maistre’s God is Old Testament-like, one who does punish, but cannot be accused of a grim delight. Humanity sinned for the first time in Paradise, the result was the Fall; ousted from Eden, it nonetheless persisted in sinning, with Abel’s gesture. The Incarnation and the Passion provided a redemption in the suffering of the Son — everything would lead us to think that that was not enough to give man a clear conscience of his destination. The Revolution would appear as a Second Fall and as a Second Revelation, a *negative* one. That explains why the word *miracle* appears so often in Maistre’s text, this “effect produced by a divine or superhuman cause that suspends or contradicts an ordinary cause,”³⁹ a title that the Committee of Public Safety strangely finds itself awarded. “Robespierre’s infernal genius” is saluted without irony, in that he was the only one able to perform that “miracle” consisting of “harden[ing] the soul of France by tempering it in blood.”⁴⁰ He even takes on a messianic character through his unique coming and through his own martyrdom, once his mission has been accomplished.⁴¹

Damnation and possible salvation, punishment and beneficial intention are, indeed, inseparable and in proportion. Thus, the Incorruptible embodied “both a horrible chastisement for the French and the sole means of saving France”⁴² and, if “the chastisement of the French [...] departs from all the ordinary rules,” it is because “[so does] the protection accorded to France; [b]ut these two miracles together multiply each other and present one of the most astonishing spectacles that humanity has ever seen.”⁴³ The Convention turns from miraculous to providential, since its destructions prelude the elaboration of a new meaning: “If Providence *erases*, it is no doubt in order to *write*,” so that “one would be tempted to believe that the political revolution is only a secondary object in the great plan unrolling before us in such terrible majesty.”⁴⁴ One may then regain courage and sense that the hand of God was truly accomplishing the Father’s salvific designs: “there is no chastisement that does not purify; there is no disorder that ETERNAL LOVE does not turn against the principle of evil. It is gratifying amid the general upheaval to have a presentiment of the plans of Divinity.”⁴⁵ God does not punish His Creature for having committed the revolutionary blasphemy.

³⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹ “[...] this monstrous power, drunk with blood and success, [...] the like of which will never be seen again [...]” *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

Nonetheless this remains a prevalent axiom among the *topoi* of the Catholic Counter-Revolution.⁴⁶ Nor has He driven the Revolution to be subjected to an ordeal of purification through fire, for such Machiavellianism is unlike Him. Rather, He has *taken advantage* of the Revolution, the hatching of whose germs he patiently studied before recording the unavoidable falling into barbarism, to let Evil skyrocket and turn it against itself. In Maistre's cosmology such as one finds it in the *Soirées*⁴⁷ and the *Éclaircissement*, Evil does not pertain to God; it is the preeminent instrument that he appropriates in order to make Good prevail.

C. From Evil to Good

Some of Maistre's and Bonald's phrases might lead us to think that Good has been willingly removed to that end, so that its sinister contender burns itself out and clears up the place for a triumphal reappearance. Thus, crime translates into sanction when the assassination of the king and the destruction of the Church become a punitive deprivation of a dynasty and of a religion having left the ungodly territory together.⁴⁸ In no way, however, could this distancing, similar to that of God, signify the disappearance of the principles which they embody, which become operating *forces*, proportionally — in this case, exponentially. Bonald states: "in society, the good always tends to the better, and the bad to the worst; as they both advance at an equal pace, the best can meet the worst; and this is what one saw during our revolution, which produced at the same time heroic virtues and atrocious crimes."⁴⁹ For the time being, we just have to keep in mind the emphasis on the synchronous nature of the two militias' increasing ranks and their equivalence. Indeed, we witness a most amazing *agôn*. Let us quote Bonald again:

There are two worlds within the moral universe: the world of error, of vice, of disorder, and of darkness; it is this world, the only one that existed back then, that Jesus Christ is talking about, when he says that his kingdom is not of this world. There is the world of truth, of order, of light, that Christianity came to create on Earth, and whose various parties, brought together by the same general beliefs and in the same political laws, have taken the name of *Christendom*: there are the negative world and the positive world, of which one ends up in corruption and destruction; the other has as its object perfection and preservation. These two worlds are pitted one against the other in a necessary opposition, and society, which is the world of order and of truth, is the war of good against evil. This is why the supreme power of society is called *the Lord of Armies*.⁵⁰

And he goes on by describing a "war always of cunning, and sometimes of violence and of open power," where the good "advance as a regular army corps," whereas the evil "[wage it] as partisans."⁵¹ This dualism takes on an air of Manicheism, an entirely assumed one, by

⁴⁶ As in the works of Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet and Juan Donoso Cortés, often viewed as Maistre's and Bonald's heirs.

⁴⁷ On this famous work, see Michael S. Kochin, "How Joseph de Maistre Read Plato's Laws," *Polis* 19 (2002): 29-43.

⁴⁸ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 367.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵⁰ On Maistre's interpretation of this phrase of the Gospel, see Jean-Yves Pranchère, *L'Autorité contre les Lumières. La philosophie de Joseph de Maistre* (Genève : Droz, 2004), 426-427.

⁵¹ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 324.

the way.⁵² Maistre says the same thing, in a shorter presentation: “The Present GENERATION is witnessing one of the greatest spectacles ever beheld by human eyes; it is the fight to the death between Christianity and philosophy. The lists are open, the two enemies have come to grips, and the world looks on.”⁵³ One notes the capital letters, implying that what befalls the concerned generation (in the passing, generational sense), partakes of an eventual *generation*, in the genetic sense.

To such an overlap of moral and spiritual concepts is surreptitiously added a doctrinal stratum. *Intellectual* would be more exact, clearly intending to roll back the Enlightenment, the last channel through which Evil permeated mankind. It has been turned it into a system, causing the seismic cataclysm of the Revolution. Maistre’s providentialist interpretation does explain the “downstream” phenomenon; it does not however clearly discern the “upstream” responsibility of men, God or the devil. If the episode has an expiatory value – its reintegration in a superior order – its causes are still in question. The merely historical causes mentioned above seem now incomplete in order to describe that which pertains precisely to ‘the leap’ out of History. In other words, reducing a metaphysical event to purely empirical circumstances leaves a gap, a disproportion, a mismatch of nature rendering their joining unlikely. It is then necessary to find a transverse axis able to rearticulate these various planes.

D. Reinstating the Truth

The return to the notion of *negativity*, which illuminated the paradoxical order of chaos, could solve this apparent contradiction. Bonald’s paragraph opposing a *positive world* to a *negative world* already presented them as the respective domains of truth and error. Such is the dyad which, since the *Théorie du Pouvoir*, is the backbone of its author’s philosophical project. Truth, one, universal, revealed, can be stated in a few simple maxims, all coming down to the same principle of cosmic Unity. Error, on the other hand, encompasses the huge field of all that leaps out of this narrow circle, closed on itself. It is *human*, one could say to paraphrase the proverb, in that it originates from the misguidance of people, whereas the Truth only originates from God. Bonald insists: no middle ground between the two, no middle term coming within the being and the nothingness⁵⁴; only a sublime ascending path in one direction and winding paths in the other. Truth engulfs the world, merging with the universe, expressing it totally. Error is not an anti-truth; it is the absence of truth, an approximate truth, or a distorted truth. A regression of the mind, it cannot nourish thought: “a thought is always true; but it is often incomplete, and the error is only a *lack* of thought”⁵⁵. Bonald does not herald, for all that, Bachelard’s aphorism; truth cannot be born out of a rectification of the error, it precedes the denaturation process that created the latter; which in no way forbids the possibility of a correction in the case of a fall out of meaning, which is a fall out of the world. A *fall* to be understood once again in its *theological* and its *teleological* meaning. The obvious facts holding Creation together have been obscured but they act even better as the silt and leaven of the forthcoming semantic regeneration: “*if I have not proved these truths,*” one can read on the first pages of the 1796 work, “*others will prove them, because time and events have matured these truths; because the preservation of civil society nowadays depends on their manifestation, and the internal unrest that one can all too easily perceive in the general society is nothing else but the efforts that it makes so as to give*

⁵² “[...] the ancient schools that have admitted two principles, the one good and the other bad, are less absurd than those that do not acknowledge any.” *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵³ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 45. Capital letters added in accordance with the original French text. See Joseph de Maistre, *Œuvres*, 229.

⁵⁴ Louis de Bonald, *Théorie*, 112.

⁵⁵ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 410.

birth to truths that are essential to its existence."⁵⁶ Giving birth designates less a birth than a rebirth, an outburst of the "prodigious accumulation of errors"⁵⁷ that had delayed the resurrection. Besides, this accumulation of obstructive material can be rationally explained: discoveries are easy to make in the physical world, since one has to only make use of one's reason and to persuade one's senses in order to admit its laws. It is different for those governing the moral world, who face a more persistent obstacle, pride and passions. Man is therefore easily inclined to disobey the *authority of the obviousness* and the *evidence of the authority* and to prefer denying the existence of the sun by pretending to avoid being blinded.

Here starts and here ends the role of the revolutionary *sophists*, of their predecessors, and of their epigones. Through some rhetorical tricks, these philosophers, pamphleteers, libelers and orators, from Voltaire to Mirabeau, from Rousseau⁵⁸ to Robespierre, from the "philosophical sect" to the Jacobins, have all tried to subvert the political order, by exempting the individual from his duties, or, rather, by making him believe for a moment that he could have been exempt from them. Nevertheless, the disaster resulting from the credence that they could have been granted does have this merit: the stratagem is now permanently uncovered. So prophesizes Bonald: "One advantage that will result from the French Revolution will be that of putting the error in its place, and of restoring the rights of truth."⁵⁹ Since error has literally no place at all, as it lacks any consistency, the first part of the sentence quite simply points out its liquidation for the benefit of a notional *restoration* having prevailed over all the usurpations. As for the second, it foresees a vaster restoration.

As we have established, with their own concepts, Bonald and Maistre define the Revolution as born from Evil, as an insurrection against Truth, its order and its authority. They are then able to point to a much wider recovery.

III. Solving the Schism. From Epiphany to Parousia

The analyses of the situation offer a valid set of explanations, since they qualify in various ways the aspects of the crisis. Nonetheless, they are insufficient to dispel the anguish it generates, that of the end of times: "in all the great commotions of society, the belief in the end of the world spread among the people. This time it was, in Europe, maybe less of an error than an equivocation: doubtlessly, the Revolution did not threaten us with the end of the physical world, but with that of the moral world; and, when religion withdraws, society dies; it has given up the ghost."⁶⁰ Now, to Bonald, the end of the latter could not appear as an alternative to the end of the former, which would signify a total natural disaster; fit for Noah to repopulate the planet. It encapsulates it, signifying a general destruction, an extinction of the universe. The withdrawal of religion is its agony, the last death rattle after which the cosmos would be void. Since Bonald's doctrine does not admit any autonomy between the Created and the Creator, who grants their reciprocal survival through the cult, and makes the Creator dependent on the uninterrupted continuation of its Creation, we are facing the definitive risk of the death of God.

⁵⁶ Louis de Bonald, *Théorie*, 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁸ On Maistre and Rousseau, see Graeme Garrard, "Rousseau, Maistre, and the Counter-Enlightenment," *History of Political Thought*, Jan 1, 1994.

⁵⁹ Louis de Bonald, *Théorie*, 108.

⁶⁰ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 435-436.

A. *The Obvious Rebirth*

Such radical pessimism is, however, nothing but a moment, certainly a crucial one, of a desperate plea for the cause of survival. Bonald distanced himself from de Maistre by threatening a joint obliteration of man and God, induced by their heteronomy. Nevertheless, he agrees with him again when he states that the spring has been not so much broken as loosened, which destines it to be re-tightened even more strongly: “never is society closer to seeing the strictest institutions being born or reborn than at the time of the greatest weakening of all the rules; it is especially there that the extremes meet, and that nature has placed the remedy next to the ailment.”⁶¹ — Maistre would rather say *into the ailment*. The Savoyard restates, unexpectedly so, the dogma of the inevitability of violence in order to invoke a truce, this time besought by the people exhausted by the trial, weary “of convulsions and horrors.” Because humanity, from now on, aspires to peace, it can only impose it on itself and consider “any attack on this tranquillity” barely regained as “a crime of *lèse-nation* that the courts would perhaps not have time to punish.”⁶² The blasphemous cry ceasing by loss of voice, the French brought back to reason by exhaustion or, more likely, by fear: Maistre does not dwell on this issue, with no guaranteed permanence, maybe recorded by History only, this “experimental politics.” By contrast, it is obvious to him that the situation cannot avert its impending collapse. Disorder, even when unfolded according to its own logic, cannot settle down in a stasis, if only because it is a collection of gruesome artifices, with no conceivable viability at term; “Everything is artificial and violent, and it all announces that such an order of things cannot last.”⁶³

An obvious fact shared by Bonald, for whom “every time one waits for the return of order, one makes a safe bet, and one can only be mistaken about the date.”⁶⁴ Even better, “when a revolution starts or when it must end, the obstacles opposed to its progress or to the return to order become as many means that speed them up.”⁶⁵ The disheartening failure of Good in front of Evil has a counterpart to its dazzling and climatic rise, its tumbling down the slope. This motion is somewhat mechanical, and, once more, it is fundamentally independent of the people’s will, which it even strives to counteract. This is because, to Bonald, it results from these laws of the political world that are the moral equivalent of the laws of physics. In this case, History moves like a huge pendulum, and the similarity between the offset from the axle and the counterweight bringing it back to it is only a balance of forces. The Revolution was neither predictable nor unpredictable, but the scale of the swing, reaching an extreme limit, makes the return *to normalcy* inevitable. The weight-related metaphor can alternate under Bonald’s pen with a clinical metaphor, the recovery of health after a bout of fever.⁶⁶ No need to invoke Providence, it is enough to study *the invincible nature that resumes its sway* — the adage is a secondhand one, borrowed from the *Social Contract* and repeated over and over since the *Théorie du Pouvoir*, which has the sentence as its motto.⁶⁷ Furthermore, it is significant that Maistre, less inclined to such interpretations, also appropriates it in his

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 437.

⁶² Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁴ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 417.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶⁶ A metaphor that can also be found in Maistre, comparing the restoration to come to a “return from sickness to health.” See Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 83.

⁶⁷ “if the legislator, mistaken in his object, takes a principle different from that which springs from the nature of things; [...] the State will be ceaselessly agitated until it is destroyed or changed, and invincible Nature has resumed her sway. Cont. Soc. L. 2. C. II” Title page of the first edition of Louis de Bonald’s *Théorie du Pouvoir*.

Considérations.⁶⁸ To Bonald, the perfect adequacy between the natural order and the divine order is enough, without useless reminders of what links them together, namely of a hand of God that would appear from time to time from among the clouds in order to show itself to people. Such a show of hand is perfunctory, God being everywhere, and revealing himself to them all the time, just as much as they show themselves to him. Being an unnatural event, the Revolution ought to have been *naturally*, that is, to stay within the vocabulary of Bonald's metaphysics, *necessarily*, resorbed. *Necessity* leads and explains the world, necessity synonymous with *divinity*, rationalizing the notion of divine right, reducing it to a simple logical consequence of the nature of Power.⁶⁹ More broadly, the *Théorie du Pouvoir* states that the "science of man and of the universe" that the book defends is nothing but an infallible arithmetic, which proves the *necessary relationships* distributing the roles of the one and of the other.⁷⁰

B. The Return of History According to Divine Law

For Bonald, unlike Maistre, history has no *experimental value*; it is only *nature in action*, and, far from providing answers to questions left open, it only delivers evidence.⁷¹ On the other hand, the two men are in agreement when the particularity of the French case attracts their attention. The universality of the language of the eldest daughter of the Church is only the vehicle of the exemplary universalism of the "heart of Europe," the pulse of the continent obediently following its own.⁷² "First-born of the European civilization," it will therefore be "the first to be reborn to order or to die."⁷³ No other choice left, then, but the monarchic restoration.

Maistre thus takes up the transnational vocation of the country in order to justify *a contrario* the latter one: "All the monsters born of the Revolution," he notes, "have, apparently, laboured only for the monarchy. Thanks to them, the lustre of victories has won the admiration of the world and surrounded the French name with a glory that the crimes of the Revolution can never entirely eclipse; thanks to them, the king will reascend his throne with all his pomp and power, perhaps even with an increase of power."⁷⁴ Unwillingly, the revolutionary demon has transfused its infernal forces, become a unique virtuous force, to the one promised to a "new birth."⁷⁵ God, through an "*affectation* of Providence" tending to thwart the will of the peoples, performs a reversal that purely and simply cancels the revolutionary statements: "If one wants to know the probable result of the French Revolution, it suffices to examine that which united all parties. They have all wanted the debasement, even the destruction, of the universal Church and the monarchy, *from which it*

⁶⁸ "Nevertheless, everything announces that the present situation in France cannot last and that invincible nature must restore the monarchy." Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations on France*, 76.

⁶⁹ See Louis de Bonald, *Observations sur l'ouvrage ayant pour titre: Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française, par Mme la baronne de Staël* (Paris : Leclère, 1818) See especially Chapter V, "Du pouvoir absolu ; du pouvoir arbitraire ; du pouvoir divin ; de l'obéissance passive."

⁷⁰ See the entire foreword to Bonald's *Théorie*.

⁷¹ Thus, "the constitution of a people is its history put into action." Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 303.

⁷² "France lies at the heart of Europe, and it is its heart; if it beats too strongly or too fast, fever and disorder can take over the entire body." *Ibid.*, 327-28.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁷⁴ Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations on France*, 16.

⁷⁵ An idea used by Maistre to designate the accession to the throne, a sort of transubstantiation through which the one who is king is no longer the man who was simply destined to it. See Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations on France*, 69. If the vocation of the passage was that of making people forget the past conduct of the count of Provence – brother of Louis XVI and the future Louis XVIII – in the context of his writing, it is interesting to note that the restoration is thus described as a squared resurrection.

follows that all their efforts will culminate in the glorification of Christianity and the monarchy.⁷⁶ And, a little further:

Do you believe that *these arms will be shortened*, which once used so feeble an instrument [Joan of Arc], that the Supreme Commander of Empires will take the advice of the French to give them a king? No, He will again choose, as He has always done, the *weakest to confound the strongest*. He has no need of foreign armies, He has no need of the *coalition*, and just as He has preserved the integrity of France despite the counsels and power of so many princes, *who are before His eyes as if they were not*, when the time comes, He will restore the French monarchy despite its enemies. He will chase out these noisy insects *pulveris exigui jactu*: the king will come, he will see, he will conquer.⁷⁷

The conclusion of the Revolution mixes a contradiction of human and divine wills, a quasi-alchemical overturn and a glorious apotheosis upon which the Caesarian resonance confers a thousand-year-old depth; a dispelling of darkness, it again pertains to the *miracle*, almost to the marvelous. The Revolution is doubly *monstrous*; *tératos*, it stands out through its ultimate disfigurement, through the repulsion that it inspires, while also being a *monstrum*, a prodigy that, showing itself in its strange radiance, *demonstrates something* or points out *that great things shall reveal themselves*. Bonald himself, despite his naturalistic axiomatic architecture, does not shy away from pictures of the same kind:

In the dramas of revolutions, just as in those of the theatre, there are various *twists*, but there is always only one dénouement. When the show lingers, the spectators, in a hurry to leave, often mistake the intermissions for the end of the play; and the actors themselves, who change from an act to the other, at least their clothes and their part, more hurried than the spectators, are almost always mistaken. During the last *catastrophe* appears the *deus in machinâ* [*sic*]: this conforms with the rules of the art, and the greatness of the theme requires its intervention: *Nec deus intersit nisi dignus vindice nodus*.⁷⁸

One could have thought that this heavenly intervention would surround itself with flashes of lightning and take on the airs of a Judgment whose harshness would be proportional to the crime, of an apocalyptic display, of an invention of new calamities. The fact that the sin had contained its own punishment, that the Revolution had punished itself all along its progress, that it had, *in fine*, constituted a punishment simultaneous to the fault, renders all righteous ferocity superfluous. Maistre dedicates a whole chapter of his *Considérations*⁷⁹ to the allaying of such fears, proving that, if the Revolution has been committed with the assistance of vice, that is, of the crowd of those who have agreed to cooperate with the Devil, the Counter-Revolution will necessarily convene the assistance of the others, namely of “all the virtues.”⁸⁰ The action will be *naturally* performed — in both senses of the word — with gentleness and ease, certainly, but precisely due (and here one comes closer to Bonald again) to the fact that *nature*, defined by Maistre as “the ensemble of secondary forces that are the agents of the Divinity,”⁸¹ is supported here. The Counter-Revolution is a collaboration with

⁷⁶ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 80.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁸ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 443.

⁷⁹ See Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, especially Chapter X, “On the Supposed Dangers of a Counter-Revolution”, 83 ff.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 84

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

God, a huge operation, in the most surgical sense, through which evil is painlessly extirpated; it also *angelic*, as the lesions that it comes to heal are the result of a demonic attack.⁸²

Let us quote the long passage of which one so often retains only the closing sentence:

The return to order will not be painful, because it will be natural and because it will be favoured by a secret force whose action is wholly creative. We will see precisely the opposite of what we have seen. Instead of these violent commotions, painful divisions, and perpetual and desperate oscillations, a certain stability, and indefinable peace, a universal well-being will announce the presence of sovereignty. There will be no shocks, no violence, no punishment even, except those which the true nation will approve. Even crime and usurpation will be treated with a measured severity, with a calm justice that belongs to legitimate power only. The king will bind up the wounds of the state with a gentle and paternal hand. In conclusion, this is the great truth with which the French cannot be too greatly impressed: the restoration of the monarchy, what they call the counter-revolution, will be not a *contrary revolution*, but the *contrary of revolution*.⁸³

It is significant moreover that this true recapture uses the very syntax of the new *In hoc signo vinces* that must be written on the standard: “CHRIST COMMANDS, HE REIGNS, HE IS THE VICTOR”⁸⁴; the device *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* subordinated his authority to his sovereignty, and his sovereignty to his victory. The permutation of the terms suggests a quasi-military course of reappropriation — Christianity, and, together with it, its “very Christian”⁸⁵ son, triumphs because it asserted its rights, then rendered their nature inalienable. The revolutionary violence was not an epiphany, at most it was an image of hell or an echo of purgatory, precluding a liberation.

C. Time and Legitimacy Regained

The illusory freedom promised by the revolutionaries, in fact the massacre and the “slaughtered innocence,”⁸⁶ is replaced by the real, wise, and granted freedom, the “*liberty through the monarchy*”⁸⁷ — the notion of semantic subversion reappears, to be remedied by a counter-subversion.⁸⁸ The king, as soon as he is restored, sees, indeed, the instantaneous re-creation of what Maistre calls the *circles of legitimacy*: “Only the king, the legitimate king, wielding the sceptre of Charlemagne from the majesty of his throne, can dampen or disarm all these hatreds and outwit all these sinister plots. Only he by his command can make order of all these ambitions, calm excited minds, and suddenly surround authority with that magic wall which is its true guardian.”⁸⁹ This ordering faculty is also expressed in Bonald’s doctrine. Assuming all the aspects of a cosmogony, the *Power* reveals itself to the people at the same time that it reveals them to themselves. It is compared to the Sun, which by rising, highlights

⁸² The expression “Angelic Counter-Revolution” appears in a letter dating from the 5th of September 1818 to the chevalier d’Olry, quoted by P. Glaudes. See Joseph de Maistre, *Oeuvres*, 189.

⁸³ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 105

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸⁶ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 84.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸⁸ Concerning these notions, see my forthcoming paper: “Contre-Révolution ou contre-subversion ? Le sens rétabli selon Louis de Bonald (1754-1840), une métaphysique sémantique de la régénération sociale,” *Actes du colloque: “Les Mots du politique – 1815-1848”*.

⁸⁹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 92.

the principles that dynamize the universe through the previously mentioned triadic division. This division tends to attract towards the first term the other two. In both cases, one witnesses a *regeneration* rather than a *reversion*: if monarchy is revived, more just and stronger, — in other words, finally enjoying its faculties in full force and in full right —, it is because the painful birth has purged the Old Regime of its dross and because, for the first time, a fully accomplished social and political order can come.

Both authors are able to describe a predicative vision that could equally be qualified as utopian. Thus, Maistre, in a chapter of the *Considerations*⁹⁰, imagines up to the most tangible scenes the announcement of the return, the popular jubilation, the overcome misgivings, the regained unanimity at the cry of “Long live the king!”, the apotheosis of the coronation. As for Bonald, it is the entire *Théorie du Pouvoir*, and more especially the third part (the “Theory of Social Education and of Public Administration”) that takes on the allure of a vast programmatic plan.⁹¹ Even though his socio political doctrine is not set in its definitive form and must still be fine-tuned and reformulated in the 1800, 1801, and 1802 essays, even though the Restoration, above all, is only a very uncertain hypothesis, he details the mechanisms of the monarchy to come, a virtuous realization of the latent possibilities of the past monarchy. Education, administration, economy, taxation are dissected in advance, just as the legal, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects of the access to nobility, of the meeting of the Estates General, of the coronation are precisely prescribed. We are at the height of the assertive reinvention of tradition, of the uchronic use of a tradition reinterpreted with the purpose of inventing a new one.⁹²

In that sense, the conclusion of the work is particularly symptomatic⁹³, inscribing the finally accomplished reconciliation of History with itself in the monumental majesty of a Temple of Providence located at the heart of the kingdom, a place of education for the *Dauphin* and of pilgrimage for the subjects, a kind of a religious and political basilica. Situated both outside of time and in time, this architectural heart seals the junction of the spiritual and the temporal, the absorption of historical contradictions and their magnificent and eternal settlement. The Revolution, a spasm of History reinscribed in its course, has not only purified the former institutions through its cathartic, and *a posteriori* redeeming, moment. By proving the impossibility of a split between the fate of the people and the designs of God, it has redrawn the unique line that makes the two converge by guiding them towards the same goal, this Parousia where the two Jerusalems are destined to become one, marking the millenarian culmination of the process of *constitution* in the ultimate stage of the *Civilization*.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ See Chapter IX, “How Will the Counter-Revolution Happen if it Comes?”, *ibid.*, 77 ff.

⁹¹ See Gérard Gengembre, “Bonald, 1796-1801: Contre-Révolution et politique du possible,” in *The Transformation of political culture*, 309-321, ed. François Furet, Mona Ozouf (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1998).

⁹² See Pierre Macherey, “Bonald et la Philosophie.” *Revue de Synthèse* 1 (1988): 3-30. On dismissing the idea that a maistriean or a bonaldian restoration would simply be a return to the past, see Paolo Pastori, *Rivoluzione e potere in Louis de Bonald*; See Cristina Cassina, *Idee, stampa e reazione nella Francia del primo Ottocento*, (Manduria/Bari/Roma: Lacaita, 1996) on Bonald and his friends of *Le Conservateur*. See also my paper, “Une *Contre-utopie* face à l’Histoire: l’Ancien Régime selon Bonald, une uchronie politique à l’âge romantique,” in *Le Lys recomposé*, actes du colloque organisé à l’université de Rouen en mars 2018, Laurent Agard, Guillaume Cousin et Blandine Poirier ed, *Publications numériques du CÉRÉdI*, “Actes du colloques et journées d’étude” 22 (2019), <http://ceredi.labos.univ-rouen.fr/public/?une-contre-utopie-face-a-l.html> (Accessed November 15, 2019).

⁹³ On this concluding chapter, see Gérard Gengembre, “Bonald et le temple de l’avenir,” *Les Cahiers de Saint-Martin* 5 (1984).

⁹⁴ On Maistre and the idea of civilization, see Graeme Garrard, “Joseph De Maistre’s Civilization and Its Discontents,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57/3 (1996): 429-446.

To Maistre, the idea of a dialectic and mystical synthesis is expressed in a striking way in the tenth and eleventh conversations of the *Soirées*, heralding “the greatest of revolutions,” of which the French one would only have been the “instrument,”⁹⁵ and whose final act will be the definitive fusion of humanity in God, the abolition of all the opposites, then the abolition of time itself, this “*contrived thing, that only wants to end.*”⁹⁶ “Third revolution” or “Revolution of God,” the final triumph will be the divine triumph — announcing so the prophecies of *Du Pape*; and being quite close to Bonald’s phrase, which he describes as a “philosophical truth and the most philosophical of truths: *that the revolution started with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and that it will only end in the Declaration of the Rights of God.*”⁹⁷ We are placed in front of an amazing reversal, in a most geometrical sense, stating that *things have come full circle*. Reverting to the circular meaning of the word, the Revolution is a revolution, a huge one, that has in fact never eluded the Author of all things; better, it has completed an ellipse, which, while being denied in its historic stage (evil being “*the schism of being,*” and, in that, “[*not being*] true,”⁹⁸ had it only really taken place on the human plane?), redefines the *ends* [*finalité*] of the world after having raised the specter of its *end* [*fin*]⁹⁹, and reinstates History, which, far from having been used up, renews its unrelenting *march*.

In the end, History regains its natural order and course, whereas men had imagined they were recreating it, even presenting it with a new origin. Using their own theoretical weapons, Maistre and Bonald manage not only to understand but also to prophesize, with an absolute certainty. They reassign a direction to History, the direction of Truth. Versus the *Philosophie des Lumières*, they devise a *Philosophie de l’Histoire*.¹⁰⁰ They reappropriate the idea of *Progrès*, which the criminal heirs of the Enlightenment had usurped¹⁰¹, and, paradoxically, they are in a way true to their initial adhesion.

Conclusion: From the Tragic to the Sublime

However, ending this brief reflection on a theological note would be simplistic, confining once again the two authors to this straightjacket in which they have been for too long unfairly imprisoned. Condemned at times, exonerated at times, men have, in fact, never left the stage, and the “postdiluvian” period will have to exert some gigantic propaedeutics to make them relearn the world. “Now that France tries to go back on the narrow path of wisdom,” Bonald writes in the front matter of his *Législation primitive*, “and that, after having dictated laws to Europe, it wants to give some to itself, the time has come to provide its unsteady reason with these principles that once constituted its strength, and outside which it would look for happiness in vain. This is the task that I have undertaken. A former inhabitant of this

⁹⁵ Joseph de Maistre, *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, 762.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 764.

⁹⁷ Louis de Bonald, *Législation primitive*, 93.

⁹⁸ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 38.

⁹⁹ We borrow the words to the title of Gérard Gengembre’s article, “Bonald : fin ou finalité de l’Histoire ?,” in *Espace des Révolutions. Paris-Londres, 1688-1848*, ed. Jacques Sys (Villeneuve-d’Ascq : Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur les pays anglophones, 1991), 77-88.

¹⁰⁰ On Bonald as a philosopher of History set against the Enlightenment, and feeding upon it at the same time, see Mary Hall Quinlan, *The historical Thought of the Vicomte de Bonald* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1953).

¹⁰¹ On the diversity and depth of the Counter-Enlightenment see Didier Masseau, *Les Ennemis des philosophes: l’antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000) ; Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment : The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) ; Graeme Garrard, “An Answer to the Question: what is Counter-Enlightenment?,” *Early Modern Philosophy* (2000); Graeme Garrard, “The Enlightenment and Its Enemies,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 49/5 (2006) : 664-680.

devastated country, I point out to those who were born after the days of desolation the old boundaries of our common heritage.”¹⁰² Knowing whether these *days of anger* have cried out the wrath of God or that of people is of no importance; it is up to them to return to the steep roads of politics. For our thinkers are haunted by another dread, especially starting from 1814.¹⁰³ If we often quote Bonald from the 1817 *Pensées*, it is not only because they constitute the most concise form of his doctrine at the time of maturity. Louis XVIII is on the throne, and never does the *Vicomte* evoke more often the Revolution, in a present perfect that quite often morphs into the simple present; thus, when he declares that, Bonaparte out of the way, “Europe, whatever one may say, is on its way to restoration,” it is only to add that “for this great purpose, one would say that it is waiting for someone or for something.”¹⁰⁴ Could it be that the tragedy, that one had thought had ended, would only be performed again and again? The anxiety of a Revolution that does not end and of a Restoration that is not one are at the time part of the counter-revolutionaries’ phobic constants — Bonald’s and Maistre’s first of all, as illustrated in their correspondence, since they have become friends in the meantime.

Most certainly, the failure of any English-type monarchy, quite different from the one they had known, did fuel their disappointment, but it is beside the point. One as the other had condemned 1791, but not at all to promote a turning back to some sort of 1788, having sufficiently proclaimed that it had carried the germs. Maybe the complexity of the Revolution should be read elsewhere, for instance in these other lines of the *Législation primitive*.

The French Revolution has exceeded, and by far, all fears and all hopes. An unprecedented collection of weakness and of strength, of disgrace and of greatness, of delirium and of reason, of crimes and even of virtues, its head in heaven and its feet in hell, it reached the two extremes of the line that man was meant to cover, and it offered Europe, in all genres, scandals or models that will never be surpassed.¹⁰⁵

Had one not seen, in that troubled landscape, ‘93¹⁰⁶ suddenly appear as a *horribly beautiful spot*? The Revolution, seen as an *écartement* (growing interval) and an *écartèlement* (drawing-and-quarterming) between two poles that had never shown themselves as clearly as in their estrangement, is not just the opening of an abyss between two cliffs, each overlooked by a terrifying fortress standing out against a burning sky. The depth of the pit makes its contemplation trying; but the strange union that makes the tragic and the sublime¹⁰⁷ converge within the apocalyptic fray seems to produce a more confused feeling of beauty and of dread: it is known that the vertigo is the product of an unstoppable and unconscious fascination with the abyss.

Translated by Florina Haret

¹⁰² Louis de Bonald, *Législation primitive*, 65.

¹⁰³ Year of the first Restoration after Napoleon’s abdication on April 6th.

¹⁰⁴ Louis de Bonald, *Pensées*, 334.

¹⁰⁵ Louis de Bonald, *Législation primitive*, 64-65.

¹⁰⁶ Year which saw the beginning of the Terror.

¹⁰⁷ We deliberately resort to a Kantian terminology. G. Barberis reminds us that, in *Politische Theologie* (1922), Carl Schmitt considers Bonald, Maistre and Donoso Cortés to be the first to have theorized the “tragic dimension” of politics. See Giorgio Barberis, *Louis de Bonald, ordre et pouvoir entre subversion et providence*, 33. We hope to have suggested in this paper that, with Maistre and Bonald, such a perspective does not entail a terminal anthropological pessimism.

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