

to render the substance of a Henry James novel in a relatively brief poem. Be that as it may, “Parks” is *something like* a Willa Cather novel in miniature, a remarkable and moving achievement.

In his critical writing, Prunty has made much of the distinction between “poems that speak” and “poems that sing.” For the most part, his poetry is content to speak in a carefully modulated voice that is unique and unmistakable, a voice that is engaging, companionable, reflective, and ostensibly modest (more than one reader has drawn comparisons with Frost). Yet Prunty can sing when he wants to, as in this passage from “Two Views,” which records the “choric” antiphony of migratory songbirds:

This side liquid whistles followed by
a trill,
While there, a series of clear
carolings,
Then the rapid whinnies of
descending will
While somewhere overhead a finch
attempts
All notes at once, as though to
summarize
The way limbs ladder up, step green
to blue
So shadows rise.

Prunty’s project is to “Turn what we lose always to a new finding” (“Albumen Silver Print from Glass Negative”) by venturing into a liminal territory where life as lived “carries more than reason / Gathers in its mirrors” (“Fields”). His poems, like the birds in “Two Views,” are “convergences of now.”

THE FORTUNES OF BOOKS

Christopher O. Blum

*The French Idea of History: Joseph de
Maistre and His Heirs, 1794–1854*

by Carolina Armenteros (Ithaca:
Cornell University Press, 2011)

“It shall scarce boot me to say ‘not guilty,’” declares Hermione, accused of a particularly horrid adultery in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, for “mine integrity, being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it, be so received.” Were he alive today, Joseph de Maistre might say much the same about the accusation, famously levied by Sir Isaiah Berlin, that he stands at the origins of fascism. Although the accusation never had much weight beyond that lent to it by its author’s fame, and although it met with a convincing refutation in the course of Owen Bradley’s *A Modern Maistre* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), it continues to be trotted out—and no longer as an accusation but as an incontrovertible verdict—as, most recently, by Jonathan Israel in *A Revolution of the Mind* (Princeton, 2010).

Joining Bradley in Maistre’s defense is Carolina Armenteros. She is a distinguished figure among students of Maistre’s thought, about which she has edited several volumes and has now written a most surprising book. Taking aim directly at the question of Maistre’s influence, she has attempted to reinterpret Maistre’s *oeuvre* and to show that it contained arguments, insights, and claims

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that were not only far removed from fascism but also at variance with the conservative or traditionalist thought he is normally assumed to have shaped. The key to unlocking the mind of Maistre, she suggests, is history. His “brilliant and tortuous writing career centered on the idea of history,” she says; moreover, history was, to him, “the tool for discovering what humanity actually is.” To realize that historicism was the common thread that both wove together Maistre’s treatises and shaped the thought of those whom he influenced in the nineteenth century is to discover that “his image . . . as an absolutist and as a precursor of fascism needs to be radically changed.” Far from having been a nostalgic reactionary, he was a progressive whose belief that the church was a cause of progress and of liberty made his conception of Providence an “incarnation of the Enlightenment belief that human beings, no longer helplessly embroiled in the tools of original sin, can be reformed and improved by knowledge.” No progenitor of fascism, he was, rather, the grandfather of the religion of humanity of Comte and Saint-Simon and of the Catholic liberalism of Philippe Buchez and Louis Bautain.

In support of this most original argument, Armenteros has written a book with two very different parts: the first consists of five chapters in which she offers contextualized readings of Maistre’s works; the second contains three chapters on Maistre’s posthumous influence. The latter part is the more immediately convincing reply to Berlin’s thesis, for in it she brings forth sheaves of evidence in support of her contention that Maistre enjoyed—if that is the word—a wide and deep influence in the half-century after his death. Whether it was Auguste Comte listening to Maistre’s sociological treatment of the church while ignoring his sacramental vision, or Pierre-Simon Ballanche taking

Maistre’s suggestion about the importance of sacrifice and priestly intercession in the direction of a universal theosophy, or Buchez and Bautain borrowing his arguments about the church and political liberty while dispensing with his equally strong arguments about the importance of order and tradition: many were the readers of Maistre who could only with the greatest difficulty be cast as forerunners of fascism.

In the first part of her study, Armenteros devotes chapters to each of Maistre’s celebrated books—*Considérations sur la France* (1797), *Du Pape* (1819), and *Les Soirées de St.-Pétersbourg* (1821)—as well as chapters on his posthumously published critique of Rousseau and on his *Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices*, a brief discussion of the place of sacrifice in religious worship, written in 1809 and published shortly after his death in 1821. In the course of these chapters, she writes some splendid pages that place Maistre’s works in the context of such precursors and contemporaries as Madame de Staël, Nicolas-Sylvestre Bertier, and Jacques-Joseph Duguet. Equally impressive are her various discussions of the Russian context to Maistre’s writing projects both great and small, especially those that show his serious engagement with questions of pedagogy—a subject that takes one straight to the heart of the difference between Enlightened and traditional modes of thought.

Throughout this first part of *The French Idea of History*, Armenteros returns to her central thesis: that Joseph de Maistre is much more a child of the Enlightenment than its critic. She expresses her thesis in a terminology that is, at times, difficult to assess. The discovery that Maistre valued monarchy as a form of government in part because of its role in guaranteeing aristocratic liberty leads her to speak of “Maistre’s libertarian essence.” His interest in the notion of “common

sense” leads her to speak of the “empiricist character of his epistemology.” And the *Soirées* she describes as “a rationalist, morally progressivist, and potentially historicizing cosmology animated by a nearly unbounded faith in the power of human beings to craft their own destiny.”

Even when carefully honed, the terms *libertarian*, *empiricist*, and *rationalist* are not very sharp tools. And to apply them to Maistre is not to use them with precision. If one were to grant her contention that Maistre was more of a Pelagian than an Augustinian, it would still be difficult to see how someone arguing at great length for the validity and importance of prayer should be considered a rationalist. Nor does it seem useful to qualify as an empiricist someone who read with understanding and defended Aristotle’s doctrine of the agent intellect as articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. How, finally, is a political theorist who so evidently held that law and political authority have as their purpose the punishing of vice and the encouraging of virtue to be meaningfully understood as a libertarian? It is certainly well and good to correct misinterpretations of Maistre by showing the nuances of his thought, but it would also seem well to express those nuances in language proportionate to the task.

It is tempting to see in the first part of *The French Idea of History* the working out of one large *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. If Comte and Saint-Simon were able to find something to admire in the writings of the austere critic of Rousseau, Locke, and Voltaire, then perhaps it is the case that those aspects of his writings that they admired actually enjoyed theoretical priority in Maistre’s own mind. Armenteros suggests such a perspective when, in her introduction, she adumbrates her overall thesis: “Under Maistre’s pen, everything—reason, science,

knowledge—was historicized and temporalized in order to be known.” The problem with a claim expressed in such universal terms, of course, is that a single fact at variance with it suffices for a contradiction. And the facts to the contrary are not wanting.

Take, for instance, Maistre’s epistemology as it emerges in the course of the *Soirées*. There is indeed cause to suspect that he may be guilty of historicizing his consideration of human knowing: his initial defense of St. Thomas Aquinas is indeed a sort of weighing of his reputation that amounts to little more than an account of his authority. Yet once he has laid out the Angelic Doctor’s understanding of the intellect (in the course of which Maistre makes a regrettable, but understandable, error of transposing the word *potential* for *actual*), he enters into a sparkling dialectical defense of it against the claims of someone who really was an empiricist, Condillac. The passage is worth considering at length:

Here is what Condillac has to say: I will concern myself with the human mind, not to know its nature, which would be foolhardy, but only to examine its operations. Let us not be the dupe of this modest hypocrite; every time you see a philosopher of this past century bowing respectfully before some problem and telling us that the question exceeds the powers of the human mind; that he will not try to resolve it, etc., you can be sure that on the contrary he fears the problem as too clear, and that he is hurrying to pass it by in order to reserve the right to muddy the waters. . . . You see an example of it here. Why lie? Why say that one does not want to pronounce on the nature of the soul while one is pronouncing very expressly on the essential point by supporting the thesis

that ideas come to us through the senses, which obviously excludes thought from the category of essences. I do not see, moreover, that the question of essence of thought is any more difficult than that of its origin, which they tackle so courageously. Can one think of thought as an accident of a substance that does not think? Or can one think of accident-thought knowing itself, as thinking and meditating on its essence as a non-thinking subject? Here is the problem posed under two different forms, and for my part I admit to you that I have never seen any so hopeless.¹

The question that Maistre poses here in two different ways is by no means historicizing. Is the human person by nature a knowing animal, or is thought, “being a secretion of the brain,” as Darwin memorably put it, something accidental to our nature? This is the very question that human beings, wishing to give a coherent account of what they are, asked in the days of Anaxagoras and Democritus, and still ask today in the most searching of ways. Neither Maistre’s question nor the broader discussion in which it is posed is, in my estimation, significantly different from the impeccably analytical and unhistoricist consideration of the matter in Peter Geach’s marvelous recent essay “What Is Man?”² If Maistre thought—as he plainly did—that it was by asking and answering questions such as that one that human beings come to know, then it is difficult to see how Armenteros’s thesis that he “historicized everything” can be sustained.

Nor is her account of the development of Maistre’s thought without its shortcomings. It is no secret that Maistre and his fellow European conservatives, among whom notably Louis de Bonald, were dissatisfied with the Bourbon Restoration, the Holy Alliance,

and the behavior of many of their fellow aristocrats. Armenteros, however, allows herself considerable interpretive latitude on the subject: “Jaded by kingly folly and the pettiness of his own court, the late Maistre detached himself progressively from temporal monarchies and took his distance—probably unconsciously—from traditionalism.” It must have been an unconscious development—that is, if Maistre may be supposed to have been awake when corresponding—for his letters suggest that he shared the *esprit de corps* of the French defenders of tradition. “If I were in Paris, tied together, bound together with all the brigands at *le Conservateur*, I too would have a common action.” That aspiration was expressed in a letter to Bonald in the autumn of 1819; a year later he wrote again, speaking of Lamennais as “one of the first accomplices of our band.” These are not exactly words of leave-taking or despair.

As a treatment of certain aspects of Maistre’s thought and of one strain of his influence, *The French Idea of History* has much to offer. And as another response to the calumnious charge of Sir Isaiah Berlin, it is certainly welcome. Maistre’s writings were, indeed, works of genius, and as such they were read by many and given diverging interpretations. Maistre himself would surely not have been overly surprised by the vagaries of his influence, for as he himself memorably observed, “the fortunes of books would be the subject of a good book.”³

1 Joseph de Maistre, *The Saint Petersburg Dialogues*, trans. Richard Lebrun (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 64–65.

2 The essay may be found in Peter Geach, *Truth and Hope* (Notre Dame Press, 2001).

3 Maistre, *Soirées de St.-Petersbourg*, édition de Lyon, vol. 1 (reprinted Paris, 1980), 366.