

Counter-Enlightenments

From the eighteenth century to the present

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2 First shots

The enlightenment of our century (*Die Aufklärung unsers Jahrhunderts*) is therefore a mere northern light, from which can be prophesied no cosmopolitical chiasm except in a nightcap & by the stove. All prattle and reasoning of the emancipated ones . . . all this is a cold, unfruitful moonlight without enlightenment for the lazy understanding (*ohne Aufklärung für den faulen Verstand*) and without warmth for the cowardly will – and the entire response to the question which has been posed is blind illumination (*eine blinde Illumination*) for every immature one who walks at noon.¹

(J. G. Hamann)

Introduction

The Enlightenment's first two truly serious, formidable opponents were among its first defectors: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788). Like many of the Enlightenment's early critics, both had once been sympathetic to it. After his arrival in Paris in 1743, Rousseau became an *homme de salon*, friend of the *philosophes* and regular contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. As a student in Prussia, Hamann had been 'a typical young German of the *Aufklärung*' and a 'disciple of the French *lumières*'.² However, the trajectory of their views changed dramatically following transformative personal experiences each had which ultimately led them to turn against the French and German Enlightenments respectively. According to his *Confessions*, this experience occurred for Rousseau in 1749 while he was on his way to see his imprisoned friend Diderot, editor of the *Encyclopédie*. It was then that he had his famous 'illumination' on the road to Vincennes while reading about an essay contest sponsored by the Academy of Dijon. 'From the moment I read these words,' he later recorded, 'I saw another universe and I became another man.'³ The intellectual product of this epiphany was Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750), the principal contention of which is that 'our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our Sciences and Arts to perfection'.⁴ He continued to denounce the 'fatal enlightenment of Civil man' (*des lumières funestes de l'homme civil*) for the rest

of his life, and fought a long and increasingly bitter war with the leading *philosophes*.⁵

Just under a decade later Hamann had a similar life-altering experience of a more directly religious kind while living in London in 1758.⁶ Isolated and deeply depressed in a foreign country, his mission on behalf of his friend and employer a failure, he immersed himself in the Bible. As he read he was 'seized with the awareness that he was not simply reading the history of Israel, but the record of his own life'.⁷ He emerged from this experience transformed, to the great chagrin and bewilderment of his enlightened friends back home. From this point Hamann took up arms against the *Aufklärung*, just as Rousseau had done against the *philosophes* almost a decade earlier.⁸ Between them, they set the terms within which the great clash between the Enlightenment and its enemies took place for generations to come.

Isaiah Berlin has written that Hamann was both 'the first out-and-out opponent of the French Enlightenment of his time' and its 'most passionate, consistent, extreme and implacable enemy',⁹ whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau was only an occasional critic of 'this or that error or crime of the new culture' of the Enlightenment, who 'shares more presuppositions with the Encyclopaedists than he denies'.¹⁰ It is possible that Hamann was a more passionate and consistent enemy of the Enlightenment than was Rousseau (I do not intend to argue the point either way), but the latter's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* was the first major shot fired in the war between the Enlightenment and its enemies. Hamann did not turn decisively against the Enlightenment until after the spiritual crisis he experienced in England in 1758, whereas Rousseau's earlier discourse (1750) directly challenged many of the basic assumptions and objectives of the Enlightenment. In addition, Rousseau was far more than an occasional critic of the Enlightenment, as the *philosophes* knew only too well. He was a pivotal figure in the emergence of the movement that gradually developed against the Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century, eventually giving rise to a rejection of its central ideas and assumptions by many writers in the early nineteenth century, particularly, although by no means exclusively, those associated with Romanticism.¹¹ Rousseau's writings represent the first serious intellectual challenge to the Enlightenment in France, and Hamann's work occupies a comparable position in the context of the German Enlightenment, where they gave 'a mighty stimulus to the currents of irrationalism that were present in the *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism'.¹²

The Counter-Enlightenment republic of virtue

Throughout much of the 1740s Rousseau was a close friend and supporter of the leading *philosophes* of the day. The editor of the *Encyclopédie*, who was one of his closest friends at the time, assisted him in publishing his first *Discourse*; he owed the circulation of many of his works in France to

Malesherbes, the Director of Publications, who was sympathetic to the *philosophes* and their ideas; he corresponded with Voltaire, he contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, and he was a *habitué* of the salons of Paris. Charles Palissot's popular satirical comedy of the period, *Les Philosophes* (1760), parodied Rousseau along with other leading *lumières* without distinguishing between them.

However, Rousseau's upbringing in the Calvinist city-state of Geneva prevented his complete absorption into the sophisticated culture of eighteenth-century Paris. He continued to think of himself as a 'citoyen de Genève' for most of his life. His eventual alienation from the world of enlightened Paris was partly rooted in the simple provincial values which he carried with him when he left Geneva as a young man. Rousseau retained an image of his native city as the ideal community, a small, virtuous, self-contained fraternity of independent people of simple faith and strong morals, which he contrasted favourably with the fragmentation and immorality of modern, sophisticated urban civilisation, epitomised by Paris, the 'capital city' of the Enlightenment, where 'the whole order of natural sentiments is reversed'.¹³ He rallied to the defence of his beloved homeland when he thought that it was threatened by the insidious spread of Parisian values through the modern theatre that Voltaire had recently introduced. Rousseau's idealised Geneva was as much a small, cohesive city-state of robust, 'masculine' virtue as Paris was a sprawling 'abyss' full of decadent, 'scheming, idle people without religion or principle'.¹⁴ To his mind, these two cities symbolised the best and the worst of collective life under modern conditions, one a monument to sophistication and enlightenment, the other a model of simplicity and virtue.

In reaction to the sophisticated milieu of enlightened Paris from which he grew progressively alienated, Rousseau eventually undertook an 'intellectual and moral reformation', forsaking the lifestyle and values with which he had associated since his arrival in Paris a decade earlier, having then been '[s]educed for a long time by the prejudices of my century'.¹⁵ He eventually abandoned Paris and fell out with those *philosophes* with whom he was still on speaking terms.

That serious trouble lay ahead was already apparent in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, which praises ignorance and argues that the strength and purity of morals are inversely related to the presence of the universal arts and sciences. Many *philosophes*, such as Voltaire, were amazed and repelled by this argument, and in his *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopédie* (1751), d'Alembert treated it as a kind of 'Preliminary Discourse to an anti-*Encyclopédie*'. This became the first significant skirmish in what would eventually develop into a full-scale war between Rousseau and the *philosophes*.

However, open warfare did not come until Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert* (1758), which attacked the performance of modern theatre on Genevese territory when Voltaire was staging plays at his estate near Geneva and persuading its citizens to take part in them. Rousseau blamed 'that buffoon'

Voltaire for ruining his homeland by corrupting its morals. In response, Voltaire denounced Rousseau as an 'arch-fool'¹⁶ and the 'Judas of his *confrères*'.¹⁷ He wrote to a friend asking: 'What about Jean-Jacques's book against the theatre? Has he become a priest of the church?'¹⁸ The fact that the orthodox Jesuit priest Guillaume-François Berthier (1704–1784) admired Rousseau's letter was simply grist for Voltaire's mill. Many of Rousseau's associates among the *philosophes* were further amazed and infuriated by what they took to be the apostasy of his subsequent writings as well, seeing in them further evidence that, as Voltaire wrote to Mme d'Épinay, 'Jean-Jacques has gone off his head'.¹⁹ Even d'Alembert, who often tried to temper Voltaire's attacks on 'that lunatic Jean-Jacques',²⁰ was led to conclude that 'Jean-Jacques was mad'.²¹ After Rousseau's *débâcle* with the good-natured David Hume in 1766, the latter denounced him as 'absolutely lunatic'.²² Eventually, as Peter Gay notes, Rousseau 'was treated as a madman by other philosophes long before his clinical symptoms became obtrusive',²³ no doubt due to his seemingly inexplicable 'betrayal' of the Enlightenment.

The core of the critique of the Enlightenment developed by Rousseau lies in his decisive modification of its rejection of social contract theory. Their many differences notwithstanding, virtually all of the *philosophes* criticised social contract theory, affirming instead their belief in both the indispensability of society to the formation of a fully human identity, and the existence of natural human sociability, understood as the innate disposition of human beings towards society. While Rousseau agreed with the former, he rejected the latter. Unlike the *philosophes*, he argues in his *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) that man in the state of nature is an isolated creature whose exclusive, instinctual concern is with its own physical preservation and well-being, remarking on 'the little care taken by Nature to bring Men together through mutual needs and to facilitate their use of speech, one at least sees how little it prepared their Sociability, and how little it contributed to everything men have done to establish Social bonds'.²⁴

Rousseau not only claimed that humans are naturally asocial. In his *Discourse on Inequality* he argues that the otherwise benign natural self-regard of human beings in the state of nature (*amour de soi*) is transformed into a powerful and aggressive form of selfishness in society (*amour-propre*), which eventually leads to a state of social warfare. When natural accidents such as floods and earthquakes forced human beings into collective action in the state of nature, their closer proximity increased their awareness of each other. Eventually, individuals began to compare themselves, as a result of which the natural differences between them became increasingly apparent. This eventually developed into an obsessive and ceaseless comparison with others, leading to divisive social competition and even warfare while increasing our dependence on others as we compete for their esteem and recognition.

Like Hobbes, therefore, Rousseau denied that the providentially directed

harmony in nature applies to society, as the *philosophes* assumed, and dismissed what he saw as the unfounded optimism lying behind the new morality of commercial society, according to which an 'invisible hand' turns 'private vice' into 'public virtue'. This discontinuity between natural order and social disorder is conveyed very clearly in Rousseau's *Emile* (1762):

But when next I seek to know my individual place in my species, and I consider its various ranks and the men who fill them, what happens to men? What a spectacle! Where is the order [of nature] I had observed? The picture of nature had presented me with only harmony and proportion; that of mankind presents me with only confusion and disorder! Concert reigns among the elements, and men are in chaos! The animals are happy; their king alone is miserable!²⁵

By retaining an important aspect of the Hobbesian view, albeit in a modified form, Rousseau insinuated a discordant note of social pessimism into the Enlightenment critique of contractualism, and thereby played an important role in placing the problem of order at the centre of social theory. He reintroduced the radical pessimism of Hobbes and, more importantly, linked it to the principle of enlightenment by claiming that the latter exacerbates this social war of all against all. Rousseau argued that the naivety and simplicity of the *philosophes* blinded them to the deep tensions and complexities of collective life and the powerful disintegrative forces that pose a constant threat to social order. He maintained that, by disseminating philosophy, science and letters, attacking the common moral life, practices and 'good opinion' of society and subjecting religion and religious institutions to systematic criticism and doubt, the French Enlightenment has undermined the very conditions of peaceful social life itself, inflaming *amour-propre*, releasing the powerful self-will of the individual and thereby plunging society into a Hobbesian state of war.

While the *philosophes* took human sociability for granted, Rousseau was primarily concerned to explore ways of manufacturing social cohesion and counteracting the powerful atomising force of *amour-propre*. Negatively, this required preventing, or at least minimising, the development and popularisation of philosophy, science and letters, and devaluing reason and the intellect in favour of direct, non-rational sources of moral perception such as conscience and instinct. For Rousseau, ignorance (of the 'right' kind) was not only a desirable condition for most people, but was actually necessary for the preservation of moral, political and social order, all of which rest on foundations that are not primarily rational. Indeed, he believed that the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of reason only exacerbate the socially disintegrative power of *amour-propre*. Rousseau therefore set himself foursquare against the French Enlightenment project of disseminating and popularising knowledge, particularly of the arts and sciences.

Positively, Rousseau turned to religion and patriotism as the best means of artificially promoting the sociability naturally lacking in human beings. Contrary to virtually all the *philosophes*, he did not believe that human nature and reason are sufficient to sustain the precarious bonds of society in the face of the powerful disintegrative forces constantly pulling against them. Instead, he claimed that particular religious and political institutions and beliefs are needed to promote the strengthening of 'sentiments of sociability', in the absence of which society will become a Hobbesian battleground. With the assumption of natural human sociability, the *philosophes* could confidently rely on the self-regulating powers of civil society to maintain social order (more or less). Given his rejection of this crucial Enlightenment assumption, Rousseau was forced to rely on religion and the state to manufacture sociability. The disorder that he identifies with society can only be controlled by means of the artificial promotion of social order through institutions and habits that reshape the identity and beliefs of individuals, causing them to identify with the common interests of all rather than their own narrowly defined, particular interests, thereby transforming the war of all against all in the spirit of community. Principal among these, Rousseau argues, are a strong and exclusive sense of national identity, the intervention of a quasi-divine legislator, and the integration of religion, society, morality and the state, in emulation of the city-states of antiquity. All play an indispensable part in the process of artificially adapting individuals to society and together constitute his republican Counter-Enlightenment answer to the enlightened 'republic of letters' of the *philosophes*.

For the *philosophes*, the acquisition and dissemination of 'all useful knowledge of Benefit to Mankind in General' was at the core of their goal of dispelling ignorance and spreading enlightenment. This was thought particularly true of scientific knowledge, the application of which held the greatest promise of promoting human well-being by extending man's control over the natural world. Such popularisation of knowledge, according to Condorcet, is what distinguishes the eighteenth century from earlier centuries. 'Up to this stage,' he wrote in 1794, 'the sciences have been the birthright of very few; they were now becoming common property and the time was at hand when their elements, their principles, and their simpler methods would become truly popular.'²⁶ This Enlightenment mission of disseminating useful knowledge is epitomised by the *Encyclopédie*, to which virtually every *philosophe* contributed and all supported, to a greater or lesser extent. This ambitious project represents the Enlightenment 'body and soul'.²⁷ It sought to provide a comprehensive compendium of modern learning in the natural and human sciences in a collection of articles written by virtually all the leading *philosophes* of the day in France, including d'Alembert, Diderot, Duclos, Naigeon, Grimm, Jaucourt, Raynal, Turgot, Holbach, Saint-Lambert, Marmontel, Morellet and Voltaire.²⁸ The Attorney-General of France acknowledged the importance of the *Encyclopédie* as a *machine de guerre* of the Enlightenment, the weapon of 'a society organised to

propagate materialism, to destroy Religion, to inspire a spirit of independence, and to nourish the corruption of morals',²⁹ when he attacked it before the Parlement of Paris in January 1759, just before it was banned.

Despite contributing to the *Encyclopédie* himself (almost exclusively articles on music), Rousseau held that popularising philosophy and practical science is both a cause and an effect of the corruption of civilised societies. Their popularity is symptomatic of moral debasement, since 'the Sciences and Arts owe their birth to our vices'.³⁰ At the same time, their popularisation is destructive of whatever residues of morality and religion still remain in such decadent contexts. The taste for philosophy, letters and science so characteristic of 'enlightened societies' only inflames *amour-propre*, further 'loosen[ing] in us all the bonds of esteem and benevolence that attach men to society'.³¹ That is why Rousseau openly rejected the fundamental goal of the Enlightenment in France as a recipe for certain disaster and called for ignorance and simplicity where the *philosophes* called for knowledge and sophistication. His preference was for the 'happy ignorance' of Sparta over Athens, that 'fatherland of the Sciences and Arts' so much admired by the *philosophes*.³²

Rousseau linked philosophy to *amour-propre* in his first major political essay. 'Philosophy,' he wrote pessimistically in *The Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, 'will always defy reason, truth, and even time, because it has its source in human pride, stronger than all those things'.³³ He repeated this connection again towards the end of his life, when he wrote in his 'Dialogues' (written between 1772 and 1776) that '[t]he proud despotism of modern philosophy has carried the egoism of amour-propre to its furthest extent'.³⁴ Given that Rousseau associated 'proud philosophy' with *amour-propre* and blamed the latter for giving rise to a Hobbesian state of war in society, philosophy is, by implication, fundamentally socially destructive. Hence his description in *Emile* of the enervating effects of 'the reasoning and philosophic spirit' on society, which causes 'attachment to life, makes souls effeminate and degraded, concentrates all the passions in the baseness of private interest, in the abjectness of the human *I*, and thus quietly saps the true foundations of every society'.³⁵ For Rousseau, ignorance 'never did any harm . . . error alone is fatal'.³⁶ In his reply to the King of Poland's criticisms of the first *Discourse*, Rousseau offered an unapologetic defence of such 'happy ignorance':

There is another, reasonable kind of ignorance, which consists in confining one's curiosity to the extent of the faculties which one has received; a modest ignorance, which is born from a lively love of virtue and inspires only indifference towards all things that are not worthy of filling a man's heart and do not contribute to his betterment; a sweet and precious ignorance, the treasure of a soul that is pure and content with itself, that finds all its felicity in retreating into itself, in confirming itself in its innocence, which places all its happiness in

turning inward, bearing witness to its innocence, and has no need to seek a false and vain happiness in the opinion others may have of its enlightenment.³⁷

It follows that the happiest societies are those that are the most ignorant of the arts and sciences. '[T]he beautiful time, the time of virtue for each People was that of its ignorance', Rousseau wrote, summarising the principal thesis of his essay to a critic. 'And to the extent to which it has become learned, Artistic, and Philosophical, it has lost its morals and its probity.'³⁸ The opposite of this golden age is Rousseau's own society, peopled by 'happy slaves' who are entirely oblivious to the fact that 'the Sciences, Letters, and Arts . . . spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened'.³⁹ The effect of the popular dissemination of the arts and sciences in virtuous societies is to undermine the 'good opinion' of ordinary citizens. Enlightenment, understood as the popularisation of knowledge, is therefore antithetical to virtue and social harmony.

But when peoples began to be enlightened and to believe themselves to be philosophers also, they imperceptibly accustomed themselves to the most peculiar propositions, and there was no paradox so monstrous that the desire to distinguish oneself did not cause to be maintained. Even virtue and divinity were put into question, and since one must always think differently from the people, philosophers were not needed to cast ridicule on the things they venerated.⁴⁰

That is why philosophers are, for Rousseau, 'the enemies of public opinion' who go everywhere 'armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith, and annihilating virtue. They smile disdainfully at the old-fashioned words of Fatherland and Religion, and devote their talents and Philosophy to destroying and debasing all that is sacred among men.'⁴¹

Although Rousseau's estimate of the cognitive capacities of ordinary men and women was not high, it mattered little to him, since he did not value this capacity very highly anyway. For Rousseau, a strong moral sense is much more important than knowledge or cognitive ability. It is the strength and purity of virtue, a good heart rather than the possession of knowledge, that is decisive. The innate faculty of conscience, which naturally inclines us towards the good, is of infinitely greater value than the faculty of reason, which usually leads most people astray. Often, knowledge obscures our intuitive disposition towards the good, and the intellect more often than not diverts us from our immediate impulse to do what is right. Philosophers, relying on reason rather than the 'inner light' of conscience, have allowed their empiricism to wipe away the greatest human faculty. Throughout his works Rousseau repeatedly stresses the importance and power of intuitive feeling and sentiment over reason, which he regards as too weak and unreliable to act as a basis for morality or politics, unlike the infallible '*voix intérieure*' of

conscience, which is the individual's pre-cognitive link with the divine. Rousseau thought of reason as a very weak and unreliable human faculty anyway, more often than not eclipsed by more powerful passions. In a political fragment, he explicitly stated that '[t]he mistake of most moralists has always been to consider man as an essentially reasonable being. Man is a sensitive being, who consults solely his passions in order to act, for whom reason serves only to palliate the follies his passions lead him to commit.'⁴² In a letter to Jacob Vernes in 1758 Rousseau announced that 'I have abandoned reason and consulted nature, that is, the inner feeling which directs my belief independently of reason'.⁴³ In other words, Rousseau took a decisive step, both for himself and for the history of thought generally, away from the Enlightenment's reliance on reason towards a stress on the inner life and feelings of the individual, which he linked directly to the inner world of the spirit, something he thought the *philosophes* denigrated or totally disregarded.

Rousseau also implicates reason in the destructive strengthening of *amour-propre*. In his *Discourse on Inequality*, for example, he writes that reason 'engenders amour-propre and reflection fortifies it; reason turns man back upon himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflicts him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: perish if you will, I am safe.'⁴⁴ For Rousseau, the more men reason, the more wicked they become, because of the links between reason and *amour-propre*. Given his hostility to popular enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that Rousseau expressed such a strong preference for Sparta, which 'chased the Arts and Artists, the Sciences and Scientists away from [its] walls',⁴⁵ over Athens, 'the abode of civility and good taste, the country of Orators and Philosophers' which is 'the pure source from which we received the Enlightenment of which our century boasts'.⁴⁶

Although Rousseau believed that *amour-propre* is as inescapable as society itself, he thought that, under very rare circumstances, it may be used to strengthen social bonds. He was deeply pessimistic about the likelihood that such circumstances would emerge even under the best of conditions, and he considered the civilisation of modern Europe to be the *least* favourable to their promotion. However, he did see *some* faint hope for preserving a semblance of Sparta in those obscure corners of modern Europe that the *philosophes* regarded as among the most backwards: Poland, Geneva and Corsica.⁴⁷ By the end of his life, he appears to have abandoned even this faint hope in favour of individual salvation by isolating himself completely from the corrupting influences of his age and retreating from the human to the natural world.

Given his overwhelmingly pessimistic social assumptions, Rousseau argues that sentiments must be fostered artificially by means of institutions and beliefs that systematically reshape the individual's antisocial passions in a way that promotes the formation and strengthening of social bonds. There is a vital connection, in other words, between sociability and the institutions and ethos of society. Since social sentiments are not naturally found in

human beings they must be instilled and maintained from outside. 'Good institutions,' Rousseau writes in *Emile*, 'are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the *I* into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.'⁴⁸ By denying that society is naturally self-sustaining, in other words, Rousseau introduced a link between sociability and politics, one function of which became to manufacture sentiments of sociability where none naturally exist. This provided a basis for the state's involvement in social life.

Rousseau insisted that any solution (or partial solution) to the social predicament must be based on an acceptance of the fact that individuals in society are necessarily dominated by *amour-propre*, the aggressive social form of *amour de soi*. However, he believed that it is possible to mitigate the social divisiveness of *amour-propre* by refocusing it, away from individuals and towards national communities. The 'well-ordered society' is one that maintains institutions, practices and beliefs that 'lead us out of ourselves', diffusing our individual selfishness throughout society and minimising the distance between our particular interests and the common interests of all. By uniting individual wills and interests with the social will and the common interest in this way, *amour-propre* becomes an extended form of social, rather than individual, selfishness. Love of *oneself* thus becomes love of *ourselves*. 'Let us extend *amour-propre* to other beings', Rousseau writes in *Emile*. 'We shall transform it into a virtue.'⁴⁹

However, Rousseau warned that a global diffusion of *amour-propre* would be unable to generate a sufficiently strong bond of attachment between individuals to preserve social unity. '[T]he feeling of humanity evaporates and weakens as it is extended over the whole world', he writes in his *Encyclopédie* article 'Economie Politique' (1755). 'Interest and commiseration must in some way be confined and compressed to be activated.'⁵⁰ According to this essay, the optimal extension of *amour-propre*, one that mitigates the powerful effects of individual selfishness without completely dissipating it through over-extension, focuses on national communities. The republican Rousseau maintained that a strong sense of national identity is crucial to counteract the strength of particular wills by redirecting them, rather than actually repressing them, towards a common end. '[T]he greatest miracles of virtue have been produced by love of fatherland', Rousseau wrote. 'By combining the force of *amour-propre* with all the beauty of virtue, this sweet and ardent sentiment gains an energy which, without disfiguring it, makes it the most heroic of all the passions. It produced the many immortal actions whose splendour dazzles our weak eyes.'⁵¹

Since individuals do not naturally identify themselves with particular communities, Rousseau argues that something external to the individual self is necessary to engineer this extension of *amour-propre*. The figure of the legislator, who occupies a central position in both *The Social Contract* (1762)

and *The Government of Poland* (written between 1771 and 1772; published 1782) is introduced by Rousseau to overcome this problem. Citing the examples of Mohammed, Lycurgus, Moses, Numa and Calvin, he contends that such semi-divine individuals are vital to the establishment of a well-ordered society. In the *Government of Poland* he writes admiringly of Lycurgus, Numa and Moses in particular for creating 'ties that would bind citizens to the fatherland and to one another. . . . All three found what they were looking for in distinctive usages, in religious ceremonies that invariably were in essence exclusive and national.'⁵² The 'genius' of these ancient lawgivers lay in their ability to engineer *moeurs*, customary habits and foundational laws and beliefs that shaped lasting communities of public-spirited citizens from a fractious body of essentially self-regarding individuals. Their task, in other words, is that of 'changing human nature' so that *amour-propre* is focused on the national community rather than on the individual.

The manufacture of sociability is central to Rousseau's essay on *The Government of Poland*. The key to the political health of Poland, he argued, is the existence of a powerful sense of national solidarity. One of the principal duties of the state, as we have seen, is the artificial cultivation of 'sentiments of sociability' which, in the case of Poland, is best achieved through the promotion of 'that patriotic fervour which raises men – as nothing else can raise them – above themselves'.⁵³ 'Sublime' Sparta is the model to which Rousseau urged Poles to turn for inspiration. He rejected the view put forth by the *philosophes* that the universal arts and sciences are an adequate basis for political community, advising the Poles strictly to curtail their development, the debilitating effects of which would be fatal to their vigorous *moeurs* and exclusive national spirit. '[I]t is education,' he writes in *The Government of Poland*, 'that you must count on to shape the souls of the citizens in a national pattern and so to direct their opinions, their likes, and dislikes that they shall be patriotic by inclination, passionately, of necessity. The newly-born infant, upon first opening his eyes, must gaze upon the fatherland, and until his dying day should behold nothing else.'⁵⁴

Rousseau contrasted what he took to be the social fragmentation and moral depredation of the 'enlightened' cosmopolitan civilisation of eighteenth-century Europe (epitomised by Paris) with an idealised image of the cohesive, homogeneous communities of past ages when virtue reigned supreme and all aspects of life were tightly integrated. This may be seen in the admiration he often expressed for pre-modern societies and non-Western (i.e. non-Enlightenment) cultures, such as Sparta, Persia, Scythia, Germany and republican Rome, and in his praise for the great legislators of antiquity, who embody the union of religion, politics and morality he proposed. Most *philosophes* also thought in terms of a contrast between modern European civilisation and the cultures of other times and places. However, the latter were typically described in terms such as 'barbaric' and 'primitive' when compared to the modern (European) age. This contrast was central to the philosophical history of the French Enlightenment, according to which

mankind has gradually (in some cases *very* gradually indeed) ascended from a state of ignorance and barbarism to a condition of enlightened civilisation, the apogee of which was eighteenth-century Europe. This progression was interpreted as a development from national and subnational particularism and narrowness to universalism and openness. Rousseau inverted this Enlightenment account in his first major political work, the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, and it remained a central theme of his writings thereafter. He openly and repeatedly attacked eighteenth-century civilisation for its artificiality, immorality, inauthenticity and absence of a strong binding sense of patriotic community, and he poured scorn on its sustaining myths.

Religion, like patriotism, was for Rousseau an indispensable ingredient of social and political life because of its power to shape men's souls so that *amour-propre* is extended beyond the individual. Most of the *philosophes* were prepared to grant that religion is necessary to the maintenance of morality, at least among the unenlightened masses. Even the militantly anti-clerical Voltaire conceded that, 'if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him'.⁵⁵ This, in fact, was the moderate position of the French Enlightenment, as found, for example, in the *Encyclopédie* article 'Société'. In *The Spirit of the Laws* the moderate *philosophe* Montesquieu notes that 'religion, even a false one, is the best warrant men can have of the integrity of men'.⁵⁶ For such *philosophes*, a benign – if remote – God is a necessary condition for moral order, a view that aligned them with the critics of the radical Enlightenment, and distinguished them from the minority of atheists such as Diderot, La Mettrie, Baron d'Holbach, Helvétius and Naigeon.

What so offended the *philosophes*, and alienated Rousseau from atheists and deists alike, was his rejection of the Enlightenment idea of a secular, rational state. Rousseau wished to tear down the wall between church and state that the *philosophes* had sought to erect, defending a civil religion and arguing against religious diversity modelled on ancient Sparta and Calvinist Geneva. Hence his praise for Hobbes, who called for the union of the 'two heads of the eagle': religion and the state. This is one of the principal reasons for Rousseau's deep admiration of the civic cults of antiquity, in which religion and politics were united. The 'religion of the citizen,' as he called it, 'combines the divine cult and love of the laws, and by making the fatherland the object of the Citizens' adoration, it teaches them that to serve the State is to serve its tutelary God. It is a kind of Theocracy.'⁵⁷

Rousseau's own version of this 'catechism of the citizen' in *The Social Contract* elicited a predictably hostile response from most of the *philosophes*, precisely because of its call for the union of religion and politics. Voltaire wrote in the margin of his copy that '[a]ll dogma is ridiculous, deadly. All coercion on dogma is abominable. To compel belief is absurd. Confine yourself to compelling good living.'⁵⁸ Shortly after *Emile* had been officially condemned in France, Diderot wrote to his mistress that Rousseau 'has the devout party on his side. He owes their interest in him to the bad things he says about the *philosophes*. . . . They keep hoping that he will be converted;

they're sure that a deserter from our camp must sooner or later pass over into theirs.'⁵⁹ The same thought occurred to Voltaire, who asked: 'Has he [Rousseau] become a priest of the church?'⁶⁰

Rousseau's eagerness to eradicate the wall that the *philosophes* were anxious to build between church and state can be better understood when it is borne in mind that he was a proud citizen of Geneva, which had no tradition of such a separation. For the general will to be generated and then to be sovereign, it is necessary that the structure of society be so closely unified that there is no room left for any kind of independent association within the body politic which might constitute a rival will with an interest of its own. Such dissensus is fatal to political unity and inimical to the formation and sovereignty of the general will. Rousseau therefore strongly disapproved of religious nonconformity, which creates conflict rather than unity. It was in deference to this principle that he justified his return to Protestantism during his visit to Geneva in 1754.

Far from shaking my faith, frequentation of the Encyclopedists had strengthened it as a result of my natural aversion for disputations and for factions . . . I also judged that everything that is form and discipline in each country fell within the competence of the laws. From this principle – which is so sensible, so social, so pacific, and which has drawn such cruel persecutions on me – it followed that, wanting to be a Citizen, I ought to be a Protestant and return into the worship established in my country.⁶¹

Given the divisive presence of *amour-propre* and the absence of natural social bonds, Rousseau believes that social and political life would be impossible without a civil religion, one practical function of which is to stimulate artificially the individual's identification with his national community and its laws and institutions. This identification will diminish the strength of his particular will, which is inversely related to the strength of the general will. Thus, in the first version of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau begins the chapter on civil religion with the statement that, '[a]s soon as men live in society, they must have a Religion that keeps them there. A people has never subsisted nor ever will subsist without Religion, and if it were not given one, it would make one itself or would soon be destroyed.'⁶² In fact, Rousseau had said as much himself five years earlier in his *Discourse on Inequality*, in which he linked religion with the weakness of reason.

[T]he frightful dissensions, the infinite disorders that this dangerous power would necessarily entail demonstrate more than anything else how much *human Governments needed a basis more solid than reason alone*, and how necessary it was for public repose that divine will intervened to give Sovereign authority a sacred and inviolable character which took from the subjects the fatal Right of disposing of it.⁶³

Prophet of the secret heart

As a young man, Johann Georg Hamann struggled to reconcile the Enlightenment ideas whose influence he felt while growing up in Königsberg under Frederick II (1712–1786) and as a university student in the early 1750s with the values and beliefs of his Pietist upbringing, just as the Genevan Protestant Rousseau tweaked the conscience of Rousseau the Paris *salonnière*.

The *Aufklärung* was institutionalised in eighteenth-century Prussia to a greater degree than the Enlightenment was in pre-Revolutionary France. Whereas most *philosophes* stood outside and opposed to the church and state establishment in France, in eighteenth-century Prussia the *Aufklärer* were closely allied to both, largely because of the Francophile Frederick II, ally of the *philosophes* and practitioner *par excellence* of 'enlightened despotism'. By the second half of the eighteenth century most educated Prussians like Hamann had been moulded by the enlightened policies of Frederick to some degree.⁶⁴ But eighteenth-century Germany was also the centre of the Pietist reform movement within the Lutheran Church led by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), which set itself firmly against the rational theology propounded by *Aufklärer* like Christian Wolff (1679–1754). It preached a life of simple piety modelled on the early church, the inner experience of faith, the sovereignty of individual conscience, and the centrality of feeling and intuition over reason. In this it followed the anti-rationalism of Martin Luther (1483–1546) himself, for whom reason was a 'whore' not to be trusted. It is not hard to see why Isaiah Berlin regarded Pietism as 'the root of romanticism' in Germany, given its enormous influence on the generations of eighteenth-century German writers who would eventually rebel against the *Aufklärung*.⁶⁵

The contest for supremacy within Hamann came to a head in the spiritual crisis he experienced in London in 1758, when pietism won a final victory over the *Aufklärung* in the struggle between his heart and his head. Writing later about this pivotal moment in *Gedanken über meinen Lebenslauf* (*Thoughts on the Course of My Life*, 1759), he recounted that 'The Spirit of God continued to reveal to me more and more the mystery of divine love and the blessing of faith in our gracious and only Saviour in spite of my great weakness, in spite of the long resistance which I had until then offered to his testimony and his compassion . . . I feel now, thank God, my heart calmer than ever before in my life.'⁶⁶ As a consequence of this experience, Jesus became the 'one single truth' to which Hamann henceforth devoted his intellectual life. According to Frederick Beiser, this was decisive not only for Hamann personally, but for German thought in general, since it marked 'one of the starting points of the *Sturm und Drang* and the reaction against the Enlightenment' in Germany.⁶⁷

The cold, heartless centre of everything that Hamann had come to oppose in the German-speaking world of his time after his London experience was Berlin, to which he professed a deep, personal antipathy. It was the Prussian

counterpart to Rousseau's Paris, the capital city of the French Enlightenment that Rousseau abominated. Hamann even identified his hatred for Babel – his preferred name for Berlin – as 'the true key to my writings'.⁶⁸ The Berliners, he told his friend and ally against the *Aufklärung* Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), are 'my adversaries and philistines, on whom I avenge myself'.⁶⁹ The evil brain of Frederick's 'enlightened' Prussian State was the Berlin Academy, or the 'Academy of Satan', as Hamann dubbed it in characteristically religious terms,⁷⁰ which Frederick had revived and which became an important source of policies and ideas.

If Berlin was the capital city of 'the enemy' for Hamann, their leader was 'le philosophe de Sans Soucy', Frederick II himself, supported by his 'grand vizier' Voltaire and a court that included some of the leading French *philosophes*, such as the atheist Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709–1751) and Maupertuis (1698–1759), President of the Berlin Academy. Hamann called the period in which he lived the 'age of Voltaire'⁷¹ and regarded Frederick's enlightened, paternalistic court as an alien presence in his native land, arrogantly imposing foreign ideas and institutions on its supposedly 'immature' people. '[T]rue enlightenment' (*daß wabe Aufklärung*), he asserted, 'consists in a departure of the immature man out of a *supremely self-incurred* guardianship' of the kind epitomised by the Frederician state and rationalised by *Aufklärer* like Kant.⁷² Writing about Frederick's court in *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762), Hamann remarked that 'The prince of this aeon makes favourites of the greatest villains against themselves; his court-jesters are the worst enemies of beautiful nature'.⁷³ Frederick's Francophile court was composed of mere 'hunting dogs and laps dogs, whippets and bear-biters' who arrogantly seemed to expect gratitude from the ordinary Prussian people for its despotism.⁷⁴ Hamann's 1772 essay *Au Salomon de Prusse (To the Solomon of Prussia)* took its ironic title from Voltaire's ode to the young Frederick upon ascending the throne – 'Solomon of the North brings light'. In it, he appeals to the king to rid his realm of the French *philosophes* who dominated the Berlin Academy and the court, and to recognise and promote the talents of his own subjects instead. He accuses Frederick and his philosophical followers of completely ignoring the spiritual dimension of life and he traces the king's apparent tolerance back to his materialism and even his homosexuality. The fact that Hamann was often subject to demanding and sometimes oppressive French and French-speaking officials in his work as a tax collector may have prejudiced him even more against this Gallican influence on his homeland.

Hamann referred to the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* of his time as 'modern Athenians', which he intended as an insult, since he regarded ancient Athens as a decadent culture fatally infected with abstract philosophy and dead to matters of the heart and spirit. He complained that these latter-day Athenians value the 'code of bon sens' while ignoring 'la politique du St. Evangile'.⁷⁵ Like so many of the religious enemies of the Enlightenment, Hamann repeatedly depicted these 'children of unbelief'⁷⁶ as dogmatists of a

new secular religion, whose 'bible', the *Encyclopédie*, is a barren substitute for the Holy Bible, the 'Encyclopaedia of the Genius-Creator', to whose fundamental truths they were deaf.⁷⁷ They are mere 'dogma makers' whom Hamann condemned as 'the biggest stainers of the wonderful works of God'.⁷⁸ He complained bitterly about the 'pharisaical sanctimoniousness' of the pedantic 'lettered men of our enlightened century' (*unfers erleuchteten Jahrhunderts*)⁷⁹ – a 'tragi-comic century'⁸⁰ – and declared that his sole purpose was to turn his readers away from the worship of the 'idol in the temple of learning, which bears beneath its image the inscription "The History of Philosophy"', and towards God.⁸¹ To Hamann, the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* were anti-Christian zealots against God. This is his version of what I shall call the 'iron law of religiosity' advanced by many of the Enlightenment's religious opponents, who hold that the zealous affirmation of religious disbelief among the *philosophes* was itself a form of religious zealotry. In short, there is no escape from religion, since to deny it is to affirm it in another form. Therefore atheism is impossible.

According to Hamann, the *Aufklärer's* intellectualism and taste for otherworldly abstractions led them away from the real roots of existence in the material world of nature and history. 'The truth must be dug out of the earth,' he instructed Jacobi, 'and not drawn from the air, from artificial words, but must be brought to light from earthly and subterranean objects by means of metaphors and parables, which cannot be direct but only reflected rays.'⁸² In an obvious allusion to the story of Adam and Eve, he asked Jacobi in 1784: '[O]ught not the tree of life to be a little more dear to us than the tree of knowledge?'⁸³ For Hamann, we are sensuous beings with 'fleshly intellect'⁸⁴ whose reason is materially grounded in 'flesh and blood'.⁸⁵ Since rationality flows from materiality, one must always keep one's feet firmly planted in the ground in order to stay close to the truth. This explains why Hamann described himself as an opponent of Kantian 'Platonism', and placed himself in the 'common sense' empirical tradition of Locke and Hume. He accused modern philosophers like Kant of carving up the natural unity of things to fit their procrustean theories, and he denounced philosophical analysis as a violent dissection of nature and 'a hindrance to truth'.⁸⁶ Hamann wanted to 'lower' the species, bringing us back down to the roots of existence and the sources of meaning in things that are common and familiar rather than airy and remote.

Hamann distinguished modern philosophy, which he dismissed as 'mere bombast'⁸⁷ belonging to 'the high tastes of this enlightened century [*das erleuchteten Jahrhunderts*]', where the denial of the Christian name is a condition without which one ought to dare to lay claim to be a philosopher',⁸⁸ from genuine philosophy, which is not hostile to faith. In his highly influential *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (*Socratic Memorabilia*, 1759), he depicts Socrates as an example of the latter, a forerunner of Jesus who was 'before faith' rather than against it. Socrates' significance for Hamann lay less in the philosophical views attributed to him than in the fact that he had 'lured his

fellow citizens out of the labyrinths of their learned Sophists to a truth in the inward being, to a wisdom in the secret heart'.⁸⁹ Like Rousseau's Socrates, his genius lay in his inner *daimon* and attentiveness to 'the voice in his heart', which set him apart from lesser thinkers.⁹⁰ Hamann also shared Rousseau's admiration for Socrates' humble profession of ignorance, which he interpreted as evidence of a fundamentally Christian sensibility. '[T]he last fruit of worldly wisdom,' he wrote to his friend Johann Lindner, 'is the recognition of human ignorance and human weakness.'⁹¹ Ignorance and genius, not abstract philosophy and reason, were the keys to Socratic greatness as Hamann understood it.⁹²

Central to Hamann's critique of the *Aufklärung* is his objection to its conception of reason. He had this in mind when he wrote in exasperation to his friend J. G. Herder that '[a]ll chatter about reason is pure wind'.⁹³ Yet this outburst is misleading when taken in isolation; he was actually ambivalent about reason in general. 'Are not reason and freedom the noble gifts to mankind and both at the same time the sources of all moral evil?', he asked.⁹⁴ He wrote to Jacobi that reason is 'the source of all truth and of all errors. It is the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, both parties are right and wrong which deify it and which vilify it. Faith, likewise, is the source of unbelief and of superstition. "Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing."⁹⁵ For Hamann, reason has its place within its proper, limited sphere, but the *Aufklärer* grossly exaggerated and thereby distorted its power and importance to the exclusion of other sources of insight. For them it had become a new religion, 'Holy Reason', which 'orders us to genuflect in worship before "rational consciousness"'.⁹⁶ Hamann scoffed that '[a]ll the propositions of your so-called universal, sound and scientific reason are lies'⁹⁷ and answered his own question 'what is this highly praised reason with its universality, infallibility, boundlessness, certainty, and evidence?' with the claim that it is 'an idol, to which a shrieking superstition of unreason ascribes divine attributes'.⁹⁸ He was much impressed by David Hume's (1711–1776) deflation of the pretensions of reason in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740). Hamann enthusiastically agreed with Hume that reason is 'the slave of the passions',⁹⁹ arguing that there is more feeling than reason in what we think and do and that this is nothing to lament. 'The *heart* beats before the *head* thinks – a good *will* is of more use than an ever so *pure reason*.'¹⁰⁰

Hamann's most systematic treatment of reason appears in his posthumously published 'Metacritique of the Purism of Reason' (written in 1784), a review of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In it he attacks Kant's belief in the autonomy, universality and above all the purity of reason. Anticipating Nietzsche, he claimed that reason is not a disinterested faculty of cognition but an instrument of the will with an essentially material, psychological foundation, necessarily embedded in language and experience and shaped by culture, nature and history. This is an aspect of Hamann's deep aversion to the obsession with purity which was, he believed, one of the

defining characteristics of his age. The Enlightenment distate for messy, concrete reality was most apparent in Kant's neat dualisms of pure and impure, thought and experience, noumena and phenomena. Such crisp dichotomies were essential for Kant because he wished to separate reason completely from its connection to nature, experience, tradition, language, sensuality and other sources of heteronomy. Hamann argued that this 'purification' of reason unfolded in three stages. First, empiricism sought to free reason from its dependence on external influences such as custom and tradition in order to ensure its autonomy.¹⁰¹ Kant then went beyond empiricism by divorcing reason, which he situated in the elevated noumenal realm, from experience, which he consigned to the sphere of mere phenomena. According to Hamann, the final stage of this 'purification' set itself the impossible task of purging reason of its dependence on language itself.

Hamann's opposition to this inflation and purification of reason is also apparent in his assaults on rational theology of the kind that was dominant in enlightened circles in both Germany and France in the eighteenth century. The basis of religion, he thought, lies 'outside the sphere of our cognitive powers'.¹⁰² Hamann appears to have had no qualms about enlisting the sceptical Hume in support of his own fideistic belief that '[f]aith is not the work of reason, and therefore cannot succumb to its attack; for faith happens for reasons just as little as tasting and sensing do'.¹⁰³ He translated Hume's anti-deistic *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) into German and wrote to Herder that their author 'is always my man, because he has at least ennobled the principle of faith and included it in his system'.¹⁰⁴ In *Golgotha und Scheblimini!* (1784), Hamann attacked the *Aufklärer* Moses Mendelssohn's essay on *Jerusalem, or Religious Power and Judaism* (*Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, 1783) for its deistic version of Judaism, which he believed was a fundamental betrayal of its author's own ancient religious heritage. He describes Mendelssohn's rationalistic and anaemic Judaism as empty, artificial and devoid of passion; his faith is simply an 'empty puppet-play', the 'vain, botched work of human artifice'.¹⁰⁵ Hamann also disputed the deist's distinction between the natural and the supernatural; the central lesson of Christianity, he thought, is that heaven and earth are not completely separate because God expresses himself through the material world. He ended up accusing Mendelssohn of atheism, a charge he later regretted when the Jewish *Auklärer* died in unfortunate circumstances.¹⁰⁶

Hamann's hostility to the eighteenth-century purification of reason is also evident in his attacks on language reform of the kind promoted by the Old Testament scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), whom Hamann took to task in *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762) for criticising the language of the Bible for being too figurative, sensual and concrete, and Christian Tobias Damm (1699–1778), an *Aufklärer* and disciple of Christian Wolff. In his *Reflections on Religion* (1773), Damm inveighed against the silent 'h' in

German as a useless anachronism that should be purged from the language. Hamann fought back in his *Neue Apologie Buchstaben b* (*New Apology for the Letter b*, 1773), valiantly defending the beleaguered letter for speaking 'with a human voice'.¹⁰⁷ He points out that pronunciation is not the sole guide to spelling because language addresses itself to the whole person, to feeling as well as to reason.¹⁰⁸ Purging it of such allegedly useless 'irrationalities' is an assault on the colour, beauty, texture, character, virility, history, and even spirituality of language. 'The purity of a language diminishes its riches; a too strict correctness diminishes its strength and manhood.'¹⁰⁹

According to Hamann, a universal, rational language of the kind he believed the *Aufklärung* favoured would be a 'baking-oven of ice'.¹¹⁰ In addition, given Hamann's belief in the essential divinity of language, Damm's reforms are nothing less than blasphemous, a 'stiff-necked stupidity in the guise of philosophy and a wrenching brutality in sheep's clothing against the one true God and the image of His invisible being in human nature!'¹¹¹ That is why it is mere hubris on the part of humans to tamper with language: God is an author whose 'writings' in the form of language and nature should be studied and revered rather than judged, corrected and purified.

Like Rousseau, Hamann believed that poetry preceded prose among the forms of human expression.¹¹² Poetry is 'the mother-tongue of the human race' and the principal means by which God communicates with man.¹¹³ Because 'God is a poet, not a geometer',¹¹⁴ the language of nature is poetical rather than mathematical. God expresses himself 'through nature and the Scriptures, through creatures and seers, through poets and prophets'.¹¹⁵ According to Hamann, at the opposite extreme from poetry is French, the preferred language of Frederick and the *Aufklärer*, which is why Hamann composed those of his essays which focus on Frederick and his philosophical supporters in that language rather than in his native German. Like Rousseau, he disapproved of French for being a cold, rigid, abstract, rationalistic language. Hamann shared Rousseau's admiration for the rich languages of earlier, more 'primitive' peoples, who enjoyed an immediate relationship to nature, which brought them closer to God. He seemed to believe that, through a Rousseau-like return to the kind of natural language that characterised the poetic tongues of primitive peoples, a partial return to this original state of linguistic innocence and enchantment might be possible.

Although Hamann's own 'tumultuous, obscure and perverse' style of writing appears to have possessed a certain magic which even Goethe confessed to find bewitching, it was completely devoid of primitive simplicity and directness.¹¹⁶ His style stands as a major obstacle to understanding his meaning, which was his intention. He did not *want* to be easily understood, and successfully employed an array of techniques to ensure this. He often wrote in deliberately compressed, paratactic sentences, composed of aphorisms and epigrams intended to squeeze 'the most thoughts in the fewest words'.¹¹⁷ His writings are also densely saturated with classical and biblical

references and allusions, many of which are thickly layered with meanings. In addition to the liberal use of paradox, irony, imagery and analogy, Hamann relied heavily on literary devices such as *autonomasia*, *periphrasis* and what he called ‘metaschematism’ that would enable him to communicate his insights obliquely.¹¹⁸ ‘Truths, principles, systems I am not up to,’ he confided to Johann Lindner. ‘Rather scraps, fragments, crotchets, thoughts.’¹¹⁹ Even Hegel, with his own well-deserved reputation for opacity, criticised Hamann’s work for its ‘unintelligibility’, describing it as ‘an enigma, indeed an exhausting one’.¹²⁰ If ‘it so happens that I cease to be clear to myself as soon as I have cooled off.’ Hamann wrote to Jacobi, ‘how little should I be surprised that I am not sufficiently clear to others?’¹²¹ Small wonder that, looking back on his own work, he admitted that ‘in some cases I can no longer understand it myself’.¹²²

One reason Hamann chose to write in this fashion was to affirm stylistically his opposition to the superficial clarity of contemporary philosophical writing. He thought that his dense and epigrammatic style corresponded better to the inherent mystery and complexity of things than did the superficially polished and elegant style prevalent in his day. Witty and sophisticated ‘*beaux esprits*’ such as the *philosophes* and their German admirers may have mastered the art of the clever *bon mot*, but they were oblivious to the deeper mysteries and wonder of language and its divine author. Hamann’s essays are a deliberate challenge to ‘the despotism of Apollo’ – the God of the philosophers – which ‘feters truth and freedom in demonstrative proofs, principles and conclusions’.¹²³ He compared his own method of composition to that of Heraclitus, whose sentences often *seem* unconnected, but are actually joined beneath the surface ‘like a group of small islands for whose community the bridges and ferries of system were lacking’. Hamann does not make his thought-connections explicit because he expected his readers to be able to ‘swim’.¹²⁴

3 Counter-Enlightenment and Counter-Revolution

Enlighten nations; that is to say, efface from the minds of the people what we call religious and political prejudices; make yourself master of the public opinion; and this empire once established, all the constitutions which govern the world will disappear.¹

(Augustin Barruel)

Introduction

When the leaders of the French Revolution canonised Voltaire and Rousseau (by putting them in the Panthéon in Paris, in 1791 and 1794 respectively), counted the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) among their enthusiastic supporters (at least until they sentenced him to be guillotined), and made basic Enlightenment themes such as reason, progress, anti-clericalism and emancipation central to their own revolutionary vocabulary, it was inevitable that a backlash against the Revolution would fuel opposition to the Enlightenment as well.² By the mid-1790s in Germany the term ‘Jacobiner’ was practically synonymous with ‘Aufklärer’.³ In France, the idea that the Revolution was ‘la faute à Rousseau, la faute à Voltaire’ had become deeply entrenched and widespread among both its advocates and its opponents by the early 1790s, despite the fact that Rousseau admitted to having ‘the greatest aversion to revolutions’ and Voltaire preferred government for the people rather than by the people.⁴ With the establishment of this link in the minds of so many, the violent excesses of the Revolution tainted the Enlightenment and spawned a new generation of enemies. The advent of what I shall call the ‘continuity thesis’ between the Enlightenment and the Revolution – the belief that they were connected in some intrinsic way, as cause and effect, for example, or crime and punishment – proved seriously damaging to the former as the latter became increasingly steeped in blood.

Edmund Burke (1729–1797) was among the first of the Revolution’s enemies to blame the ideas propounded by the *philosophes* for the disastrous collapse of political authority and social order in France in the 1790s. His enormously influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – the first sustained counter-revolutionary text of its kind in Europe – did much to

popularise the idea of the Enlightenment as a principal cause of the Revolution.⁵ His hostility to the Enlightenment came as a surprise to many of Burke's contemporaries, since he was a Whig politician who had hitherto fitted quite comfortably within the Enlightenment of moderate *philosophes* such as Montesquieu, a 'genius' whom he admired even after 1789.⁶ As Conor Cruise O'Brien notes in his study of Burke, he was, like Rousseau, 'a child of the early Enlightenment, that of Locke and Montesquieu'.⁷ Like so many of his generation (and social position), the Revolution had a huge impact on Burke's attitude to what preceded it. He raged not only against the Revolutionaries, but also against the *philosophes* for providing the leaders of the Revolution with the theories on which they based their disastrous political schemes. He regarded the revolutionaries as nothing more than politicised *philosophes* whose self-appointed mission was to unbend the naturally 'crooked timber of humanity' (to borrow Kant's phrase) to conform to an abstract ideal, an undertaking that had had fatal consequences in France and that Burke feared might spread to England.

Abbé Augustin Barruel (1741–1820) was a conservative writer and former Jesuit who fled from revolutionary France to England in 1792, not returning until Napoleon made his peace with the Church a decade later. Unlike Burke, his hostility to the *philosophes* was well known and well developed long before 1789. In the decades before the Revolution he had been on the editorial staff of the popular anti-*philosophe* literary journal *Année littéraire*, founded in 1754 by Elie-Catherine Fréron. The author of many books, including the satirical *Les Helviennes, ou lettres provinciales philosophiques* (1781–1788), an anti-*philosophe* novel in five volumes, Barruel is best known for his enormously successful *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 1798), which became one of the most widely read books of its day.⁸ In it he blames the French Revolution on a conspiracy of *philosophes*, Freemasons and the secret Order of the Illuminati who together plotted the overthrow of throne and altar in Europe.

Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) fled into exile from his native Savoy before the advancing armies of revolutionary France in the same year as Barruel (1792). However, unlike the abbé, he saw the Revolution as God's violent answer to the Enlightenment, more a work of divine retribution for the sins of the *philosophes* than of misguided men trying to implement the ideals of the Enlightenment, or the consequence of a vast conspiracy. Maistre depicted the revolutionary storm as an overwhelming force of nature unleashed on Europe by God that mocked human pretensions. For Burke and Barruel, by contrast, the destruction wrought by the revolutionaries was largely wilful, perpetrated by men who knew only too well what they were doing, even if they were largely blind to the unintended effects of their actions. There is almost no space for such human agency in Maistre's providential view of these events.

A philosophic revolution

Burke's immediate reaction to the French Revolution was ambivalent. In his earliest known comment on it, in a letter to Lord Charlemont dated 9 August 1789, he professed his astonishment at 'the wonderful Spectacle' of the French 'struggle for Liberty', the spirit of which he found 'impossible not to admire'. Yet he also sensed something 'paradoxical and Mysterious' about it and warned that they would need a 'Strong hand like that of their former masters to coerce them'.⁹ Burke's attitude to the Revolution quickly soured. By 17 September he admitted to his friend William Windham that he had 'great doubts whether any form of Government which they [the French] can establish will procure obedience'.¹⁰ When news reached him on 10 October that a mob had forced its way into the Royal Palace at Versailles to escort the king and his family to the Tuileries Palace in the centre of Paris, he wrote ominously to his son about 'the portentous State of France – where the Elements which compose Human Society seem all to be dissolved, and a world of Monsters to be produced in the place of it'.¹¹ By the end of the year, Burke had basically made up his mind about the essentially negative character of the Revolution and, towards the end of January 1790, he decided to sound the alarm against it in order to save England from a similar fate.¹² He feared that the great and delicate fabric of English social and political life that had been carefully spun over centuries would be completely torn apart by domestic Jacobins inspired by the example of their French brethren. In the process these 'illuminators of the world'¹³ would, he predicted, dispel the 'sober shade of the old obscurity'¹⁴ with their garish light, bringing ruin in their wake.

Although Burke generally favoured reform over revolution, he did concede that recourse to the latter is sometimes justified under extraordinary circumstances. Hence his sympathy for both the 'Glorious' Revolution of 1688 to 1690 and the American Revolution that began in 1776. However, he distinguished very clearly between these limited, pragmatic revolutions, as he saw them, and those based on grand philosophical or metaphysical principles, which are always undesirable and invariably do more harm than good. The quintessential 'philosophic revolution',¹⁵ he believed, was the French Revolution.

For Burke, it was the role of philosophy in the French Revolution that was its most distinctive and destructive feature. France after 1789 had become a 'Republic of Philosophy'¹⁶ governed by 'philosophic lords',¹⁷ 'political Men of Letters'¹⁸ and 'politicians of metaphysics'¹⁹ who had had 'their minds seasoned with theories',²⁰ 'dangerous and delusive first principles',²¹ 'metaphysic propositions'²² and 'rash speculation'.²³ The French Revolution was fundamentally unlike the Revolution of 1688 to 1690 and the American Revolution, which were essentially defensive and moderate, undertaken to preserve a traditional balance of settled customs, time-honoured rights and well-established institutions that had passed the test of

time, rather than to implement new modes and practices derived from first principles.

The present Revolution in France seems to me to be quite of another character and description [than the 'Glorious' Revolution], and to bear little resemblance or analogy to any of those which have been brought about in Europe, upon principles merely political. *It is a Revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma.* It has a much greater resemblance to those changes which have been made upon religious grounds, in which a spirit of proselytism makes an essential part. The last revolution of doctrine and theory which has happened in Europe is the Reformation.²⁴

The French Revolution was not only fundamentally 'philosophic' in its nature, according to Burke, but had been *caused* by the spread of philosophical speculation and abstract theoretical reflection in France in the second half of the eighteenth century. As a result, he argued, a 'false philosophy passed from academies into courts; and the great themselves were infected with the theories which conduced to their ruin'.²⁵ As the abstract theories of the *philosophes* gradually seeped into the minds of those who held – or would hold – actual political power in France, 'literary men [were] converted into a gang of robbers and assassins; never before did a den of bravoes and banditti assume the garb and tone of an academy of philosophers' as during the French Revolution.²⁶

By 'philosophy', Burke has in mind the ideas of 'grave, demure, insidious, spring-nailed, velvet-pawed, green-eyed philosophers'²⁷ such as Condorcet, Rousseau, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot and Helvétius (all named) that he held most culpable for bringing about the Revolution. Of these, Burke singled out Rousseau and Condorcet in particular, since the former was both an *encyclopédiste* and 'the insane Socrates of the National Assembly' of Revolutionary France,²⁸ and the latter was simultaneously the 'last of the *philosophes*' and 'the most furious of the heads of the Jacobin Club'.²⁹ Burke refers to the revolutionary leaders as Rousseau's 'scholars'³⁰ whose 'blood they transfuse into their minds and into their manners' and who looked upon his writings as 'holy writ'.³¹ This is spelled out most fully in his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), which contains a diatribe against the pernicious influence of this 'great professor and founder of the *philosophy of vanity*'.³² Ironically, Burke's view of Rousseau was essentially Voltairian, even though he detested Voltaire and regarded these two mortal enemies as kindred spirits. Like the *philosophes* he despised, Burke focused more on Rousseau's character and alleged influence than on his theories per se. In the circumstances, what the *philosophes* actually wrote was less important to Burke than the uses that had been made of them by the revolutionaries in France and the ideas that had been attributed to them.

[T]hey [the Revolutionary leaders] erect statues to a wild, ferocious, low-minded, hard-hearted father, of fine general feelings, – a lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred . . . Through Rousseau, your masters are resolved to destroy these aristocratic prejudices . . . they infuse into their youth an unfashioned, indelicate, sour, gloomy, ferocious medley of pedantry and lewdness, – of metaphysical speculations blended with the coarsest sensuality . . . the writings of Rousseau lead directly to this kind of shameful evil.³³

Burke also singled out ‘the impious sophistry of Condorcet’³⁴ as an example of the link between the Enlightenment and Revolution in France. As with Rousseau, Burke’s hostility towards Condorcet and the ‘geometric spirit’ he embodied focuses predominantly on his role in, and influence upon, the Revolution, rather than on his theories per se, even though it would be difficult to imagine anything more alien to Burke’s outlook than the ‘social mathematics’ of Condorcet. ‘That wretched man,’ he complained of him to a French correspondent in 1791, ‘stands as a great example, to shew that when the heart is vitiated nothing can be sound . . . the Condorcets and the whole of that sect of Philosophic Robbers and Assassins . . . delight in the destruction of mankind.’³⁵

Burke’s main objection to this ‘philosophic’ form of revolution is that it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the essential nature of social and political life and is therefore destined to end in practical disaster. The most durable and humane political systems, he thought, are basically pragmatic, emerging ‘naturally’ by trial and error over a very long period of time and adapting prudentially to particular circumstances as required. In this process of gradual evolution, habits and prejudices emerge that regulate the system’s operation, maintaining its equilibrium and balancing its intricately interconnected parts. According to Burke, the paradigmatic example of such a system – as perfectly balanced and finely tuned as any human regime could be – is to be found in England. Such a system can only be the product of time, common sense and patient, piecemeal development, and it was Burke’s self-appointed mission to protect it from the dangers posed by the virulent spread of France’s ‘philosophic’ brand of revolution.

The antithesis of the slow, ‘natural’, evolutionary English approach to politics, Burke argues, is Jacobinism, which seeks to apply ‘wild, visionary theories’³⁶ that are devoid of a sense of history and completely ignore local circumstances and practicalities. Its practitioners imagine themselves as political architects, erecting elaborate systems based only on ‘[p]ure metaphysical abstraction’,³⁷ in the process ‘destroying all docility in the minds’³⁸ of both leaders and led, inevitably culminating in ‘[m]assacre, torture, hanging’.³⁹ Words such as design, speculation, theory, system, metaphysics, philosophy and abstraction recur throughout Burke’s post-revolutionary writings as terms of opprobrium used to describe the Jacobin approach to politics, just as prudence, prescription, habit, prejudice, custom and conve-

nience are used approvingly in his account of its antithesis: the English political system.

What is Jacobinism? It is an attempt (hitherto but too successful) to eradicate prejudice out of the minds of men, for the purpose of putting all power and authority into the hands of the persons capable of occasionally enlightening the minds of the people. For this purpose the Jacobins have resolved to destroy the whole frame and fabrick of the old Societies of the world, and to regenerate them after their fashion. . . . This I take to be a fair description of the principles and leading maxims of the enlightened of our day, who are commonly called Jacobins.⁴⁰

According to Burke, the test of a political system should be broadly utilitarian, not theoretical. The question that should be asked is not whether a political system conforms to some abstract ideals, but whether it 'works' pragmatically, by which he meant whether it fosters peace, order and good government over the long term, given the particular context in which it is situated. The only reliable test for this is the test of time, which alone can establish the viability and durability of a political system. For Burke, political problems should be approached in terms of their likelihood of promoting good or evil, and not their conformity to truth or falsehood, which is a ruinously inappropriate standard in practical human affairs. Unfortunately for France, the Jacobins, in failing to realise this, built their politics 'not on convenience, but on truth'.⁴¹ They are just politicised *philosophes*, 'political Men of Letters' seeking a wholesale reordering of political life to make it conform to a standard of abstract truth and universal justice.

Men of Letters, fond of distinguishing themselves, are rarely averse to innovation. Since the decline of the life and greatness of Lewis the XIVth, they were not so much cultivated either by him, or by the regent, or the successors to the crown; nor were they engaged to the court by favours and emoluments so systematically as during the splendid period of that ostentatious and not impolitic reign. What they lost in the old court protection, they endeavoured to make up by joining in a sort of incorporation of their own; to which the two academies of France, and afterwards the vast undertaking of the Encyclopaedia, carried on by a society of these gentlemen, did not a little contribute. . . . They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means. . . . These Atheistical fathers have a bigotry of their own . . . this system of literary monopoly. . . . A spirit of cabal, intrigue, and proselytism, pervaded their thoughts, words, and actions. . . . Writers . . . have great influence on the publick mind.⁴²

The French revolutionaries also shared with the *philosophes* a profound contempt for religion in general, according to Burke. He regarded both as either atheists in fact or in effect, the difference between the two being practically irrelevant. ‘The philosophers,’ he claimed, ‘had one predominant object, which they pursued with a fanatical fury – that is, the utter extirpation of religion’⁴³ which the French revolutionaries put into practice. Hence the ‘great Object of the Jacobins,’ Burke wrote, ‘is the seduction of that part of mankind from the principles of religion, morality, subordination, and social order.’⁴⁴

While Burke thought of the principled ‘atheism’ of the *philosophes* as a sacrilege against the ‘city of God’, disastrous to the souls of men and women in the life to come, he saw the practical ‘atheism by establishment’ of the revolutionaries in his day as socially and politically disastrous to the ‘city of Man’, since religion is what ‘held the materials of the fabric’ of society together.⁴⁵ Although a true-believing Christian, like many *philosophes* Burke also believed in the utility of religion as an indispensable foundation of political legitimacy and form of social cement, in the absence of which he thought that institutions would crumble and society atomise. His depiction of the *philosophes* as atheists who fatally weakened the moral and social order of Europe is a major theme of much early Counter-Enlightenment writing, as we have already seen in the case of both Rousseau and Hamann, and is strongly echoed by Barruel and Maistre as well.

The triple conspiracy against throne, altar and society

Burke admired Augustin Barruel’s *Mémoires* and told him so. ‘I cannot easily express to you how much I am instructed and delighted by the first volume of your History of Jacobinism’, he wrote to the delighted abbé in May 1797, just over two months before Burke’s death. ‘The whole of the wonderful Narrative is supported by documents and Proofs with the most juridical regularity and exactness. Your Reflexions and reasonings are interspersed with infinite Judgement and in their most proper places, for leading the sentiments of the Reader and preventing the force of plausible objections.’ Burke even personally corroborated Barruel’s conspiracy thesis by revealing to him that ‘I have known myself, personally, five of your principal Conspirators; and I can undertake to say from my own certain knowledge, that so far back as the year 1773 they were busy in the Plot you have so well described and in the manner and on the Principle you have so truly presented. To this I can speak as a Witness.’⁴⁶ Barruel was deeply flattered by these words from ‘the immortal Burke’, whom he appears to have held in the highest esteem.

Burke was a late-comer to the theory of a *philosophe* conspiracy to overthrow throne and altar, compared to Barruel, who wrote for the popular conservative journal *Année littéraire* where the theory was first formulated in the mid-1770s.⁴⁷ This was after Barruel had returned from his first exile, following the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in the 1760s. For years

after his return he warned his compatriots that the *philosophes* were conspiring to topple the traditional institutions of France, and must be stopped. In addition to his anti-*philosophe* novel *Les Helviennes*, he wrote several books attacking the Revolution, including *Le Patriote véridique, ou Discours sur les vraies causes de la Révolution actuelle* (1789) and *Questions nationales sur l'autorité et sur les droits du peuple et du gouvernement* (1791). Barruel then went into exile a second time, in 1792, living in London where he devoured Burke's *Reflections* and penned a *Histoire du clergé pendant la Révolution française* (1793), as well as his *chef d'oeuvre* on the Revolution – the best-selling *Mémoires*.

At the same time, John Robison, Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, was writing his *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*, which was published in London in 1798 and quickly translated into French and German. Barruel wrote in the Preface to the third volume of his *Mémoires* that Robison's *Proofs* had been published just as his own third volume was going to press. 'Its author had not then met with my two first volumes', he notes, with a faint hint of disappointment. '[B]ut in a second edition he is pleased to mention them in his appendix. Without knowing it, we have fought for the same cause, with the same arms and pursued the same course.'⁴⁸ Despite the many similarities in their arguments and conclusions, Barruel was quite critical of Robison for his sloppiness, correctly pointing out that his own book devoted much more attention to detail and to the key philosophical texts than the good professor's had done.⁴⁹

The four thick volumes of Barruel's *Mémoires* present a mass of evidence (what was to *his eyes* evidence) in support of his central charge that the French Revolution was the consequence of a 'triple conspiracy' of *philosophes*, Freemasons and the Order of the Illuminati who together formed 'one continuous chain of cunning, art and seduction'⁵⁰ intended to bring about 'the overthrow of the altar, the ruin of the throne, and the dissolution of all civil society' throughout Europe.⁵¹ The first volume focuses on the anti-Christian conspiracy launched in 1728 by Voltaire when he 'consecrated his life to the annihilation of Christianity' upon his return to France from England.⁵² This conspiracy took Voltaire's famous war-cry against Christianity – *écrasez l'infame!* – as its slogan. Barruel's second volume concentrates on the anti-monarchical conspiracy, whose leading intellectual lights were Rousseau and Montesquieu, who campaigned under the watchwords 'Independence and Liberty' to destroy all governments.⁵³ The anti-Christian principles of the first conspiracy were grounded in the passions (above all a passionate, blind hatred of Christianity), whereas reason was the basis for the principles of the second.⁵⁴ Barruel's third and fourth volumes address the antisocial conspiracy that was the objective of the Freemasons and the Order of the Illuminati inaugurated and led by the Bavarian radical Adam Weishaupt (1748–1811). Together, these three groups constituted a single 'sect' numbering 300,000 'adepts', supported by two million sympathisers in France alone, 'all zealous

for the Revolution, and all ready to rise at the first signal and to impart the shock to all other classes of the people'.⁵⁵

Although the *philosophes* styled theirs the 'century of philosophy par excellence', as d'Alembert famously put it in his *Eléments de philosophie* (1759), it was really an 'age of pretended Philosophy',⁵⁶ or 'philosophism', according to Barruel. Philosophism is a term of abuse that would be used by Joseph de Maistre, William Wordsworth and Michael Oakeshott as well, to refer to the outlook of the *philosophes*, which all were at pains to distinguish from *true* philosophy as they understood it. Barruel defines 'philosophism' as 'the error of every man who, judging of all things by the standard of his own reason, rejects in religious matters every authority that is not derived from the light of nature. It is the error of every man who denies the possibility of any mystery beyond the limits of reason, of everyone who, discarding revelation in defence of the pretended rights of reason, Equality and Liberty, seeks to subvert the whole fabric of the Christian religion.'⁵⁷ Their differences notwithstanding, the *philosophes*, the Freemasons and the Illuminati were united in their zealous commitment to liberty and equality, 'these principles of pride and revolt' at the heart of philosophism.⁵⁸

Among the leaders of the anti-Christian conspiracy who fought to destroy the Church in France were Voltaire, its 'chief', d'Alembert, its 'most subtle agent', Frederick II, their 'protector and adviser', and Diderot, its 'forlorn hope'.⁵⁹ While Voltaire directed his attention and efforts to the highest strata of European society – its kings, emperors, princes and ministers – his more wily lieutenant d'Alembert deftly worked on the secondary 'adepts' of the conspiracy, on whom he employed his natural cunning and skill for intrigue in the *cafés* of Paris no less than in its learned academies, which he successfully infiltrated. Barruel makes much of the private correspondence between Voltaire and d'Alembert – these two great 'sophisters of impiety' – which (he claims) reveals the extent of the 'subterranean warfare of illusion, error and darkness waged by the Sect' to destroy Christianity.⁶⁰

The close association between Frederick II, Voltaire and d'Alembert also underscored for Barruel the degree to which the Prussian leader collaborated in this anti-Christian crusade.⁶¹ He points out that these leaders of the plot even employed secret names for each other in their private correspondence – Voltaire was 'Raton', d'Alembert 'Protagoras', Frederick 'Luc' and Diderot 'Plato'. Collectively they were known as the 'Cacouac' and the phrase 'the vine of Truth is well cultivated' was code for the fact that the *philosophes* were making steady progress in their plans to ruin Christianity.

In league with these four 'chiefs' of the conspiracy, Barruel reveals, was a phalanx of fanatical 'adepts', the most important of whom was 'the monster Condorcet'.⁶² He was not only 'the most resolute atheist' who acted in close concert with Voltaire and d'Alembert,⁶³ but he was also a Freemason who had been elected to the Legislative Assembly, and was a leading member of the Society of 1789, thereby embodying the links between the various elements of the conspiracy that Barruel claims to expose in his *Mémoires*. He

also lists the Baron d'Holbach, Buffon, La Mettrie, Raynal, Abbé Yvon, Abbé de Prades, Abbé Morrelet, La Harpe, Marmontel, Bergier and Duclos among the devout members of the 'synagogue of impiety'.⁶⁴ Barruel appears to have read the work of many of these *philosophes*, and had a very good knowledge of the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, d'Alembert and Diderot in particular. Unlike Burke, he quotes them directly and extensively, and frequently cites their private correspondence to support his contentions. This is unusual among the enemies of the Enlightenment, who rarely distracted themselves by actually reading the works of the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* they were attacking, although this is not surprising in a former editor of the leading literary journal of the period in France.

According to Barruel, the conspiracy extended far beyond this society of men of letters; Joseph II of Austria and Catherine II of Russia were also adepts of Voltaire, and the court of Louis XV was a veritable 'Voltairean ministry'⁶⁵ of powerful men such as the Marquis d'Argenson, who 'formed the plan for the destruction of all religious orders in France',⁶⁶ the Duc de Choiseul, 'the most impious and most despotic of ministers',⁶⁷ Archbishop Briennes, 'friend and confidant of d'Alembert',⁶⁸ and Malesherbes, 'protector of the conspiracy' and surreptitious ally of the *philosophes*.⁶⁹ Even the king's mistress, Mme de Pompadour, was a confidante and supporter of Voltaire.

Although the conspirators focused most of their attention on the highest orders of society, a strategy that proved enormously successful (in Barruel's eyes), they also tried to disseminate their radical ideas more broadly in order to 'imbue the minds of the people with the spirit of insurrection and revolt'.⁷⁰ That is the main reason behind the *Encyclopédie*, 'a vast emporium of all the sophisms, errors, or calumnies which had ever been invented against religion'.⁷¹ According to Barruel, the *philosophes* even shamelessly went from house to house asking for subscriptions for the reprinting of 'the most profligate and impious productions of Voltaire, Diderot, Boulanger, La Mettrie, and of other Deists or Atheists of the age, and this under the specious pretence of enlightening ignorance'.⁷² Some of them, such as the wealthy Baron d'Holbach, disseminated their 'poisons' in books and pamphlets printed and distributed at their own expense, scheming and conspiring tirelessly and effectively to advance their revolutionary cause.

But this popular strategy for 'philosophising mankind'⁷³ proved much less successful than the conspirators had hoped, because the bulk of the nation remained stubbornly attached to its faith throughout the eighteenth century. For Barruel, the Revolution was not a spontaneous popular uprising expressing a long-suppressed general will but the consequence of a 'united faction against the majority of the nation' who used force, subterfuge and terror to impose their will on an innocent and unsuspecting population.⁷⁴ He claims that a rising generation of 'literary sophisters' such as Voltaire, Rousseau and d'Alembert not only supplied most of the *philosophes* and scientists who led the conspiracy against Christianity, but it was from this class 'that the revolutionary ministers Necker and Turgot started up; from this

class arose those grand revolutionary agents, the Mirabeaux, Sieyès, Laclos, Condorcets; these revolutionary trumps, the Brissots, Champforts [*sic*], Garats, Cheniers; those revolutionary butchers, the Carras, Frérons, Marats'.⁷⁵ Lawyers, clerks and other members of the bourgeois professions, epitomised by Robespierre, were 'universally carried away by the torrent of the French Revolution' after studying the writings of the *philosophes*.⁷⁶

The second major target of the conspirators was the monarchy, according to Barruel. In the second volume of his *Mémoires*, devoted to the 'anti-monarchical' conspiracy, he starts out by analysing and criticising Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), since the application of their ideas had 'given birth to that disquieted spirit which fought to investigate the rights of sovereignty, the extent of their authority, the pretended rights of the free man, and without which every subject is branded for a slave—and every king a despot'.⁷⁷ Barruel was well aware of the mutual antipathy between Voltaire and Rousseau, something that Burke chose to overlook, but regarded it as secondary to their common project to destroy Christianity and the monarchy in France. In this he agreed with the revolutionaries, who had had the remains of Voltaire and Rousseau transferred to the Pantheon as joint 'fathers' of the French Revolution. Like Burke and Maistre, this act of homage did not escape Barruel's notice. All three agreed that it revealed a fundamental truth about the nature of the relationship between the *philosophes* and the Revolution in particular, and between philosophy and politics in general, and all commented on it:

Follow the Jacobin to the Pantheon; see to whom he has decreed honours, to whom he does homage; ask him how Voltaire and Jean-Jacques can have deserved such tribute, such honours. He will tell you that those men are no more, but that their spirit has survived them in their writings, and more powerfully combat for the cause of Jacobinism than all their armed legions. Here they prepared the minds and hearts of the people for our principles; there they win over the public opinion to our course.⁷⁸

Although Rousseau did eventually secede from the ranks of the *philosophes*, he did not secede from their ideals, which he continued to promote in his own, idiosyncratic way, according to Barruel. Rousseau still subscribed to the values of liberty and equality that were shared by all of the conspirators, and so continued to carry on their war separately.⁷⁹

Like many conservatives at the time, Barruel equated rejection of monarchy with rejection of government in general, just as many orthodox Christians equated attacks on their faith with attacks on religion in general. The principles of liberty and equality underlying the eighteenth-century attacks on monarchy, he believed, apply 'not only against kings, but against every government, against all civil society'.⁸⁰ The stark choice that Barruel presents to his readers is between monarchy and the 'reign of anarchy and

absolute independence'.⁸¹ According to this syllogism, Rousseau and Montesquieu were anarchists because they were anti-monarchists. This is somewhat surprising, given that Burke, whom Barruel so much admired, thought very highly of Montesquieu.

According to Barruel's thesis, the eighteenth-century philosophers who had conspired against Christianity and the monarchy paved the way for the 'antisocial' conspiracy that was led by the Freemasons and the Illuminati. Since the Freemasons were 'the children of the *Encyclopédie*'⁸² and 'all the French philosophists became Masons',⁸³ they worked together in perfect concert as part of a single conspiracy that sought 'the total dissolution of all society'.⁸⁴ The French Revolution was the deliberate consequence of the tripartite coalition of 'the sophisticated writers of Holbach's Club, the sophisters of the Masonic and the Illumined Lodges'.⁸⁵

The Order of the Illuminati was founded in 1776 by the Freemason Adam Weishaupt, Professor of Canon Law at Ingolstadt University in Bavaria. He was a Catholic who had been educated by the Jesuits, as Maistre, Barruel and Voltaire had been. However, he was closer to the latter than to the former in his heterodox religious beliefs, and was eventually forced to abandon his academic post and flee from Bavaria after a series of laws were passed in the 1780s proscribing the secretive order that he had founded. Weishaupt had originally tried to take control of the Freemasons from within. When this strategy failed, he created his own secret society modelled partly on the Jesuits, whom he admired for their secrecy, self-discipline and organisational efficiency. Wrapped in a 'mantle of darkness', the secretive Weishaupt and his shadowy band of conspirators then 'coalesced with the Encyclopedists and Masons' to overthrow the established political, religious and social order of Europe through violent revolution.

In these obscure and sinister machinations Weishaupt was supported intellectually by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Despite the calm surface of his dense scholarly writing, Barruel alleges that the actual doctrines propounded and defended by the Königsberg philosopher had a revolutionary effect on his audiences:

[They] thirst after that great day when the children of Equality and Liberty are to reign. His colleagues in the universities do not teach his principles with his coolness; the disciples become violent; the Jacobins smile; and as the system spreads, the offspring of both these teachers unite and form alliances in their tenebrous abodes. Under pretence of this perpetual peace that is to be enjoyed by future generations, they have begun by declaring a war of cannibals against the whole universe; nor is there to be found scarcely one of their offspring that is not ready to betray his country, his laws, and his fellow citizens, to erect that Cosmopolitan Empire announced by the Professor Kant, or to enthrone the Man-King of the modern Spartacus.⁸⁶

From the ideas of Weishaupt and Kant there emerged a 'new species of Jacobin' that made 'amazing progress' in Germany.⁸⁷

For Barruel, the 'grand object' of the coalition of the *philosophes*, the Freemasons and the Illuminati was 'consummated by the proscriptions and horrid massacres of the Jacobins'.⁸⁸ Indeed, the Jacobin Clubs were actually formed by the 'adepts of impiety', the 'adepts of rebellion' and the 'adepts of anarchy' acting in concert to implement their radical agenda. Not only were these groups united in their basic beliefs and goals, but they agreed on the means that should be employed to advance them, foremost among which were 'violent and sanguinary edicts, decrees of deportation and of death'.⁸⁹ The only difference between the Jacobins and their precursors is that the latter *wanted* to do these things, whereas the former actually *did* them in their violent struggle to establish the 'reign of reason and the empire of Philosophy'.⁹⁰

Crime and punishment

Joseph de Maistre shared none of Burke's high regard for Barruel's conspiracy theory of the Revolution, which he dismissed as 'foolish'.⁹¹ He made several pages of notes on the *Mémoires* and found much fault with it, particularly in its account of Freemasonry. This is hardly surprising given that Maistre was a Freemason himself.⁹² Indeed, he was an active and senior Freemason for nearly twenty years (1773 to 1792), and retained his interest in the order even after he was no longer involved with it directly.⁹³ His 'Mémoire sur la Franc-Maçonnerie' and 'Mémoire au Duc de Brunswick' (written in 1782) defend Freemasonry against the charge that it was politically subversive and religiously heterodox, at least in his native Savoy. More importantly, Maistre eventually interpreted the revolutionary events of his time as evidence of a divine purpose rather than any human design, and so showed scant interest in Barruel's (to him) crude conspiracy theory. The second half of the eighteenth century revealed something much deeper and more profound to Maistre than the naïve machinations of mere individuals. He thought that Barruel was looking in the wrong place for an explanation of the revolutionary events of the age; he mistook the effects for the cause.

Maistre's reaction to Burke's *Reflections* was very different.⁹⁴ He admired its author as a 'great writer who discerned the French Revolution', although he was not greatly influenced by his work.⁹⁵ Although the Revolution also had an enormous impact on Burke's thought, it did not affect him as directly as it did Maistre, who spent over two decades in exile after the armies of revolutionary France annexed his homeland in 1792. In addition, Burke was a generation older than Maistre, whose first major work appeared around the time of the former's death. Unlike Burke, Maistre was not given to waxing nostalgic about the natural harmony of human beings living in the quiet repose of their 'little platoons'. It is difficult to imagine him, for whom the 'entire earth, continually steeped in blood, is only an immense

altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end',⁹⁶ writing *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756). As Isaiah Berlin writes in his study of Maistre, his 'violent preoccupation with blood and death belongs to another world from the rich and tranquil England of Burke's imagination'.⁹⁷ Maistre had too much in common with Thomas Hobbes to find Burke's outlook entirely congenial to his way of seeing things.

Like Burke, and unlike Barruel, Maistre's opposition to the Enlightenment did not develop fully until the 1790s, by which time he was in his forties. Indeed, like Hamann, he had been '[n]ourished in the thought of the Enlightenment',⁹⁸ elements of which he retained throughout his life: he was familiar with the important ideas of his age, had a natural curiosity about modern science, owned a large and diverse library, was an enthusiastic reader of contemporary periodical literature, and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation he received in the salons of Lausanne and St Petersburg, at which he was a frequent and popular guest while living in exile. As his books, notes and correspondence abundantly demonstrate, he was always a man of unusually broad and eclectic tastes and interests, if reactionary politics.

It was in the crucible of the French Revolution that Maistre's moderate 'enlightened conservatism' was transformed into a reactionary Counter-Enlightenment conservatism. The works for which he is now best known were all written after 1789 and bear the direct imprint of the Revolution.⁹⁹ Although he had initially supported the French *Parlementaires* and endorsed their campaign to force the calling of an *Etats-Généraux*, he soon became disillusioned with the course that events took after 1790, just as Burke had.¹⁰⁰ Like Barruel, he was eventually forced to flee from his native Savoy as the advancing army of revolutionary France annexed his homeland and confiscated his property. In addition, by the middle of the decade, Louis XVI had been executed and the Terror had begun. Maistre's mature outlook was formed in response to these events, which accentuated the dark, misanthropic dimension of his outlook and stirred his deep horror of disorder and fear of anarchy.

Although Maistre is now best known for his opposition to the French Revolution, he first interpreted it as a necessary consequence of the Enlightenment and, accordingly, held the *philosophes* to be much more culpable for the excesses of the 1790s than the revolutionaries themselves, who were little more than pawns of the overwhelming forces unleashed in the salons of Paris by men such as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau. In the first half of the 1790s he was much closer to the outlook of Burke and Barruel than he was after 1795. He depicted the *philosophes* as sorcerer's apprentices who released a monstrous genie that devoured Europe. He too regarded Rousseau in particular as a symbol of the close relationship between the Enlightenment and the Revolution.¹⁰¹ Around the time of the Terror he wrote that it was Rousseau who 'posed the disastrous principles of which the horrors we have seen are only the immediate consequences'.¹⁰² Like so many others, he

lumped Rousseau in with the *philosophes* and blamed them collectively for the horrors of the Revolution:

Philosophes! Having produced the cause, never will you be able to exonerate yourselves by expressing pity for the effect. *You detest the crimes*, you say. *You have not slaughtered anyone*. Well! *You have not slaughtered anyone*; that is the sole praise that you can be accorded. But you have caused the slaughter . . . ‘*I carried out terrible laws*’, he [Ghislain-François-Joseph Lebon, Revolutionary Mayor of Arras] said, ‘*laws that have frightened you. I was wrong . . . I can be treated as I treated others. When I met men of principle, I let myself be led by them.* IT IS ABOVE ALL THE PRINCIPLES OF J.-J. ROUSSEAU THAT HAVE KILLED ME’. He was right. The tiger that kills is following its nature; the real criminal is the one who unmuzzles him and launches him on society. Do not believe that you are absolved by your affected *threnodies* on Marat and Robespierre. Listen to a truth: wherever you are and wherever anyone has the misfortune to believe you, there will be similar monsters, for every society contains scoundrels who are only waiting to tear it apart and to be unleashed from the restraint of the laws. But without you, Marat and Robespierre would have caused no harm, because they would have been contained by the restraint that you have broken.¹⁰³

In *Considerations on France* (1797), Maistre’s first major published work and his counterpart to Burke’s *Reflections*, and the *St. Petersburg Dialogues* (1821), the last major work published during his lifetime, he adopts a new, providential account of the Revolution that is much closer to his German contemporary Hegel (1770–1831) than it is to Barruel’s or Burke’s explanations. Like Hegel, Maistre now read the epochal events in France as a theodicy, a perspective that led them both to affirm *everything*, even violent revolution, to the degree that it is a consequence of some divine plan. Hence his view of the Revolution as a work of God’s will rather than human design, an approach quite unlike that of Burke, for whom it had more to do with human folly than with divine justice, which may explain why Maistre had so little to say about Burke’s revolutionary writings and felt the need to offer his own interpretation. In this sense Burke and Barruel were much more counter-revolutionary than Maistre, for whom violence and bloodshed are in some sense sanctified by their incorporation within a scheme of Christian providence. This explains how he could often write about the Revolution with an apparent calm, unlike Burke’s rage, noting (in the mid-1790s) that ‘it is gratifying amid the general upheaval to have a presentiment of the plans of Divinity’.¹⁰⁴ For Maistre, human affairs can only be properly understood in the context of a divine plan, complete knowledge of which is forever beyond human understanding. It is precisely this larger framework, he thought, that was missing from the prevalent interpretations of contemporary revolutionary events, including Burke’s, which makes no

attempt to situate them in such a providential scheme. One of the fundamental objectives of his *Considerations on France* is to fill in this missing 'big picture', thereby explaining the violent events of the 1790s in terms of a divine logic in which the crimes of the French revolutionaries are punished by the 'invisible hand' of God operating through them. (Invisible to non-believers.) The chaotic events of the Revolution are explicable only in terms of such a framework. Maistre had an even more radically circumscribed conception of human agency than Burke, a view no doubt greatly influenced by the revolutionary juggernaut he experienced crashing through Europe and the titanic forces unleashed by it, which seemed to overwhelm the wills and intentions of human beings. 'The more we examine the influence of human agency in the formation of political constitutions,' he writes in his *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions* (written in 1807, published in 1814), 'the greater will be our conviction that it enters there only in a manner infinitely subordinate, or as a simple instrument.'¹⁰⁵ That is why the revolutionaries were merely passive 'instruments of God' rather than effective agents responsible for their actions, since the Revolution was the work of God rather than men. 'We cannot repeat too often,' he wrote in his *Considerations*, 'that men do not lead the Revolution; it is the Revolution that uses men.'¹⁰⁶ However, Maistre did not regard this powerlessness of human beings as a cause for despair, because he interpreted the violence and bloodshed of the French Revolution as a form of divine punishment meted out on humanity for the 'crimes' of the eighteenth century. As such, it was salutary and therefore welcome, however shocking and terrible to mortal eyes.

Most of Maistre's major works were written during his tenure as King Victor-Emmanuel I's representative at the Court of Tsar Alexander I in St Petersburg (1803–1817). He considered Russia's position in the opening years of the nineteenth century to be broadly analogous to that of France before the Revolution, and feared that it was about to repeat the same mistakes by embarking on an ill-considered process of liberalisation and 'enlightenment' that would lead it down the same path to violent revolution. Russia was then a country not only untouched by revolution but still quite remote from the Enlightenment. However, Alexander was experimenting with a programme of liberalisation and reform during this period; as a result, 'the ideas of the Enlightenment were ascendant in Russian domestic politics' while Maistre was there.¹⁰⁷ If, as he argues in his *Considerations on France* and in the works that followed it, the Revolution was a punishment imposed by God on Europe for the sins of the eighteenth century, then it must have been both necessary and good, in the same way that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was necessary to redeem humanity for its sins. Russia, Maistre thought, was still relatively innocent; it had not yet sinned in the way that eighteenth-century Europe had, although he feared that it was about to do so. He therefore allied himself closely with the leaders of the conservative 'old Russian, anti-French' faction opposed to the Tsar's liberalising policies, in the hope of influencing the Russians not to follow the path

of sin, and thereby revolution.¹⁰⁸ If revolution is the work of God, enlightenment (as understood by the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century) is the work of man.

Of particular concern to Maistre was the programme of educational reform being considered in Russia, a central aspect of which was to give greater prominence to science in the curriculum at the expense of religion, evidence, to his mind, of the ominous parallels between Russia during this period and pre-revolutionary France. By arresting enlightenment, he hoped to 'arrest the revolutionary spirit [in Russia], which enters at all doors, but above all through public education'.¹⁰⁹ Maistre believed that it was the eighteenth-century popularisers of modern science and philosophy, epitomised by the *encyclopédistes*, rather than the true philosophical and scientific innovators of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries themselves or the revolutionaries of the 1790s, who destroyed 'the salutary wall with which the divine wisdom has surrounded us'.¹¹⁰ God, he argued, 'has placed certain objects beyond the limits of our vision' which it would be 'dangerous for us to perceive'.¹¹¹ That is why he thought that the popular dissemination of useful knowledge, which was at the heart of the Enlightenment project in France, had had such a catastrophic effect in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Maistre's aversion to popular enlightenment derives from his belief that reason is, at best, a weak and unreliable human faculty, the power and importance of which was disastrously overestimated in the eighteenth century. He did not actually denigrate reason per se. Almost none of the Enlightenment's enemies did. He affirmed the Thomistic synthesis of reason and revelation, which had endured, more or less, until the eighteenth century, when reason was elevated to the role of an all-powerful tyrant by the *philosophes*, he believed. Maistre stressed the limitations of reason against this inflation, and interpreted the Revolution as the inevitable outcome of the attempt to construct social and political institutions and practices on the weak and precarious foundation of human rationality. In his unfinished essay 'On the Sovereignty of the People' (written 1794–1795), for example, he writes that 'I only wanted to demonstrate that human reason, or what is called philosophy, is as useless for the happiness of states as for that of individuals, that all great institutions have their origins and their conservation elsewhere, and that when human reason is mingled with such institutions, it only perverts or destroys them'.¹¹² Later in the same essay Maistre stresses that his *real* objection is not to reason as such, but only to 'human reason reduced to its own resources' without the guidance of tradition, authority, prejudice or faith:

The more human reason trusts itself, the more it seeks all its resources from within itself, the more absurd it is and the more it reveals its impotence. This is why, in every century, the world's greatest scourge has always been what is called *Philosophy*, for Philosophy is nothing but

human reason acting alone, and human reason reduced to its own resources is nothing but a brute, all of whose power is restricted to destruction.¹¹³

Maistre regarded religion, not reason, as the proper foundation for durable social and political institutions. He argued that '[t]he more one studies history, the more one will be convinced of this indispensable alliance between politics and religion'.¹¹⁴ This was a central theme in his critique of the Enlightenment, which he complained had sought to keep the two apart. 'The present generation', he wrote in terms that Hegel would echo a decade later in his own dark portrait of the Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), 'is witnessing one of the greatest spectacles ever beheld by human eyes; it is the fight to death between Christianity and philosophism. . . . Philosophy having corroded the cement that united men, there are no longer any moral bonds.'¹¹⁵ Newton and Condorcet are then condemned, not Robespierre or the Committee of Public Safety. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a recurring theme of Maistre's writings from the mid-1790s is what he regards as the predictably disastrous social and political effects that this 'extraordinary persecution stirred up against the national religion and its ministers' had throughout Europe in the 1790s.

During the Terror, Maistre wrote of 'individual reason' as the greatest threat to social and political peace. He dismissed it as pathetically weak with an infallible disposition towards error, unlike 'national reason' which, like Burke, he took to be the expression of the collective wisdom of a people, gradually built up over many generations. By submerging its individual members in the collective body, curbing 'individual reason' and proscribing philosophical enquiry, he believed that nations could check the wayward tendencies of their citizens, whose fallen natures are forever trying to break free of the bonds of society.

[R]eligious and political dogmas must be merged and mingled together to form a complete *common* or *national reason* strong enough to repress the aberrations of individual reason, which of its nature is the mortal enemy of any association whatever because it produces only divergent opinions. All known nations have been happy and powerful to the extent that they have very faithfully obeyed this national reason, which is nothing other than the annihilation of individual dogmas and the absolute and general reign of national dogmas, that is to say, of useful prejudices. Let each man call upon his individual reason in the matter of religion, and immediately you will see the birth of an anarchy of belief or the annihilation of religious sovereignty. . . . Man's first need is that his nascent reason be curbed under a double yoke, that it be abased and lose itself in the national reason, so that it changes its individual existence into another common existence, just as a river that flows into the ocean always continues to exist in the mass of water, but without a name and

without a distinct reality. What is *patriotism*? It is this national reason of which I am speaking, it is individual *abnegation*.¹¹⁶

Maistre believed that our destructive passions are as powerful as our reason is weak. He conceived of humans as incorrigibly violent beings, and he dismissed the common Enlightenment belief in the 'natural goodness' of the species with impatient contempt. '[M]an's strongest inclinations,' he writes, 'are vicious to the point of obviously tending towards the destruction of society.'¹¹⁷ His first major work contains a chapter on 'the Violent Destruction of the Human Species', noting that Buffon (1707–1788) 'has proven quite clearly that a large percentage of animals are destined to die a violent death'. Maistre then adds that Buffon 'could apparently have extended the demonstration to man', which is precisely what he proceeds to do, beginning with a long catalogue of the wars of recorded history. 'There is nothing but violence in the universe', he concludes from his knowledge of history and nature. '[B]ut we are spoiled by the modern philosophy that tells us that *all is good*, whereas evil has tainted everything, and in a very real sense, *all is evil*, since nothing is in its place.'¹¹⁸ Perhaps his most uncompromisingly pessimistic account of the violence of the natural and social worlds occurs in the *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, published in the year of his death (1821). In it, he writes:

from the maggot up to man, the universal law of violent destruction of living things is unceasingly fulfilled. The entire earth, continually steeped in blood, is only an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite until the consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death.¹¹⁹