“ALL EVIL IS THE CANCELLATION OF UNITY”:
JOSEPH DE MAISTRE AND LATE GERMAN ROMANTICISM

Adrian Daub

Introduction

In 1798, the German Romantic poet Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801)) wrote a collection of aphorisms entitled *Glauben und Liebe oder der König und die Königin* (1798). Novalis’ aphorisms juxtaposed the cold mechanism of written constitutions with the warmth of a sociality founded on principles that were at once familial and monarchical, a position that appears to strikingly anticipate Maistre’s *Essai sur le principe génératos des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines* (1814), Louis de Bonald’s *Du divorce* (1801), and Karl Ludwig von Haller’s *Restauration der Staatswissenschaft* (1816–34). This link, privileged by Robert Triomphe in what remains the most detailed study of Maistre’s relationship to Germany,1 entails a misunderstanding of Novalis’ project, and that of the early Romantics and Idealists with him. Instead, the way Maistre absorbed German sources and in turn influenced a number of prominent German thinkers highlights the development of German Romantic thought from a Kantian anti-Rousseauism to a position much closer to the thought of the French reaction.

This article proposes to chart this development through the prism of the family. The Novalis of 1798 does not posit the same relationship between family and monarchy as Maistre; the Friedrich Schlegel of 1818 very much does. When Robert Triomphe argued for a “twin brotherhood” between Maistrian Catholicism and what he terms “German crypto-Catholicism,”2 his desire to stabilize what we might call their family resemblance led him to ignore or underplay this development. Carl Schmitt’s portrait of “Political Romanticism” makes a similar set of assumptions. Maistre’s reception and resonances in Germany

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2 Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre*, 528.
varied greatly with time. Rather than a stable kinship, the German Romantics’ relationship to Maistre was something they had to grow into—the slowness of their rapprochement (for it was their thought rather than his that seems to have budged) may seem surprising given how much consonance we can find even in the earliest writings of Schlegel, Schelling, Novalis, the young Hegel and the Counter-revolution. And yet: between *De la souveraineté du peuple* of 1794 and *Les soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* of 1821, Maistre’s written output spanned much of the period of what is today considered to comprise German Romanticism. The differences between the Romantics’ starting point and Maistre’s thinking, their gradual alignment, and the debt the more conservative Romantic writings of the 1810s owed to the Savoyard together map out a brief history of German Romanticism.

Telling their story of transition in its entirety would require a book in its own right. In this article, I propose to retrace what Triomphe called a “twin brotherhood” by using the very question of filiality, fraternity, and paternity as a guide. In the changing ways in which the Romantics think the relationship of family to state, we find a reflection of their evolving relationship to Maistre and his thought. In the aftermath of the revolution the family was fraught territory: the family as model had been central for the ideologues of absolutism, and the family as a possibly egalitarian social structure had been important to Rousseau and other exponents of the Enlightenment (in particular in Germany).

Accordingly, the German reaction to both Enlightenment and Counter-revolution unfolded very much structured by familial metaphors. From Starck’s indictment of “philosophism” as the work of “women” and “the new androgynes” and his consequent advocacy of the patrimonial state (*Patrimonialstaat*), to the older Friedrich Schlegel’s and Franz von Baader’s conservative political erotics, which essentially combine Maistre with François Hemsterhuis, questions of familial structure, paternal authority, and filial piety come to decisively structure the German Romantics’ evolving relationship to Maistre and Bonald. At the same time, resistance to Maistrian ideas, in particular from Hegel and his school, traces the story of the gradual diremption of Romantic and Idealist traditions in German thought.

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3 Johann August Starck, *Der Triumph der Philosophie im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Germantown: Rosenblatt, 1804), 1:213.