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CHAPTER I

Introduction: The Decline of the Enlightenment

IN THE BEGINNING was the Enlightenment." Any study of contemporary social thought might well begin with these words. Yet nothing is quite so dead today as the spirit of optimism that the very word Enlightenment evokes. Indeed, we are faced not with the mere end of the Enlightenment but with the prevalence of theories that arose in opposition to it. If the Enlightenment still figures in the realm of ideas it is as a foil for attack, not as an inspiration to new ideas. Romanticism, the earliest and most successful antagonist of the Enlightenment, has numerous successors today, especially in existentialism and in the various philosophies of the absurd. The revival of social thought that was almost forced upon Christians by the French Revolution is still active today. But the gradual decay of the radical aspirations of liberalism and the evaporation of socialist thought have left the Enlightenment without intellectual heirs. The Enlightenment is the historical and intellectual starting point of contemporary social theory, but only because a great part of our thinking today is based on ideas, romantic and Christian, that were from the first consciously directed against it.

In retrospect the Enlightenment stands out as the high point of social optimism from which we have gradually, but steadily, descended, at least philosophically. The less reflective public, certainly until 1914, remained cheerfully indifferent to the intellectual currents of despair that had been swelling throughout the 19th century. Moreover, the En-

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lightenment is not just an historical point of departure. Consciously, or often only half-consciously, the Enlightenment is still the intellectual focus for many who no longer share its beliefs, and who develop their own viewpoint in refuting the attitudes of a past era. For the romantic the rationalism associated with the Enlightenment is still an object of scorn. The orthodox Christian still finds its unreligious, if not actively anti-religious, radicalism abhorrent. It is therefore still worthwhile to ask oneself what is meant by the term Enlightenment. What matters here is not what it really was in all its internal complexity, but only those of its aspects which stand out in retrospect, and which, from the very first, entered into controversy.

The three cardinal traits of the Enlightenment were radical optimism, anarchism, and intellectualism. The optimism rested in the belief that the moral and social condition of mankind was constantly improving. Progress was not only a hope for the future but a law that marked the entire course of history. Though the philosophers of the Enlightenment were extremely critical of the institutions and mores of their own age, they had no sense of alienation from European history as a whole. The darkest ages of the past were but steps to a brighter time. Though the present might seem deplorable, it was infinitely better than the past, for history, like individual man, was rational, and reason was bound to manifest itself to an ever greater extent. This faith in reason made the Enlightenment thinker feel secure in his society and in history as a whole.

“The 18th century is imbued with a belief in the unity and immutability of reason. Reason is the same for all thinking subjects, all nations, all epochs, and all cultures. From the changeability of religious creeds, of moral maxims and convictions, of theoretical opinions and judgments, a firm, lasting element can be extracted which is permanent in itself, and

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which in this identity and permanence expresses the real essence of reason.”¹

If progress was inevitable it was not, however, a matter of supra-personal forces. It was not as a “law” of economic development or of biological evolution but as the commonsense notion that men learn through experience that the Enlightenment believed in progress. Its hopes were truly radical, which is not true of the pseudo-scientific theories of progress, for the essence of radicalism is the idea that man can do with himself and with his society whatever he wishes. If he is reasonable he will build a rational society; if ignorant he will live in a state of barbarism. To the Enlightenment the political and economic future were open. And since everywhere its proponents saw the growth of useful knowledge, they assumed that knowledge had merely to increase and spread until it was put to social use. Though the philosophers were not prophets of violence they were a great deal more radical in their philosophy than later social revolutionaries, for they did not regard men as the agents of historical destiny, but as the free creators of society.

The intellectualism of the Enlightenment was an integral part of this optimism. Even those who believed that utility, rather than reason, governed human action agreed that a purely intellectual appeal was sufficient to perfect conduct. Condorcet argued that since all political and moral errors were based on philosophical fallacies, science, by dispelling false metaphysical notions and mere prejudices, must lead men to social truth and virtue as well.² There was, however, another side to this intellectual optimism. If reason was the supreme guide to progress, the intellectuals, as the most reasonable of

¹ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, tr. by F. C. A. Koelln and J. P. Pettegrove (Princeton, 1951), p. 6.

² *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain*, ed. by D. H. Prior (Paris, 1933), pp. 191-192.

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men, were entitled to a position of leadership in society. Indeed, many intellectuals felt that they were achieving this goal. Marmontel declared quite frankly that the philosophers had already succeeded a negligent clergy in its “noblest function,” that “of preaching from the roof-tops the truths that are too rarely told to sovereigns.”³ And Duclos could not conceal his pride when he considered the importance of philosophers: “Of all the empires that of the intellectuals, though invisible, is the widest spread. Those in power command, but the intellectuals govern, because in the end they form public opinion, which sooner or later subdues or upsets all despotisms.”⁴ This “empire of the intellectuals” was, moreover, inhabited by only one group of the species. The poets, the artists, like the clergy, were excluded. It was only “reasoners,”—scientists and philosophers, the professional moralists—who were truly enlightened and reasonable, “lumières,” as they called themselves in France.

The notion of the secular moralist as the ideal intellectual was not an accident. It sprang directly from the Enlightenment’s attitude to both religion and art. After all, “enlightenment” meant the illumination of minds hitherto beclouded by religion. Opposition to the Roman Catholic Church was the strongest bond uniting the philosophers. Here rationalists and utilitarians, deists and atheists, were at one. Reason meant “non-religion,” and the rational, harmonious universe was free from the arbitrary interference of its Creator. Thus, the sane society would be without an established church, at the very least; at the extreme, it would be delivered from all priests. In aesthetics the Enlightenment philosophers accepted, in the main, the canons of neo-classicism inherited from the 17th century, with all the restrictions on the poetic imagination that

³ Quoted in M. Roustan, *The Pioneers of the French Revolution*, tr. by F. Whyte (Boston, 1926), p. 262.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 265. M. Roustan adds wisely, “La Bruyère would not have written that.”

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this implied. Indeed, at the beginning of the century Fontenelle had declared prose supreme, and had relegated poetry to a very inferior literary position. Even if the Enlightenment as represented by Voltaire and Marmontel, for example, did not go so far, it continued to subordinate art to the demands of philosophy. In a sense they made art superfluous by demanding that it be totally realistic—that is, follow the pattern set by a supposedly harmonious natural universe. The stage was to show nothing but the probable, the typical, the general—in short, only themes of universal significance. Moreover, the purpose of art was to instruct, to moralize. Shakespeare was condemned alike by Voltaire and by the conservative Dr. Johnson for a lack of decorum. Homer was disliked and Vergil praised on the same grounds. Taste, not strength, was the final criterion. Even Diderot and Lessing, who modified Aristotelian theory by the demand that drama should stir the audience emotionally, did not abandon the prerequisites of ethics. The spectators were to be moved only to virtuous feelings, especially to pity. The addition of sentimentality to literature was only an educational device, not a concession to the spirit of poetry.⁵ The vocation of the intellectual was, in the eyes of the Enlightenment, to reform and to teach society until all mankind was free from irrational urges, whether of an artistic or a religious sort.

This feeling that they were destined to redeem mankind naturally inspired the philosophers of the Enlightenment to work energetically at drawing up projects for the imminent betterment of society. Philanthropy is the term that best describes this zeal for practical reform. It was a passion that seized a rather simple man like the Abbé de Saint-Pierre no more severely than sensible or profound people like Bentham or Kant. Indeed, it was the good Abbé who gave currency, in

⁵ The above remarks are largely based on Professor René Welleck's *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, vol. 1, "The Later Eighteenth Century" (New Haven, 1955), pp. 12-104.

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the earlier years of the century, to the word, “bienfaisance” which was to become so dear to the writers who followed him.⁶ Though in France and Germany, especially, there was no scope for political activity on the part of intellectuals, the dream of citizenship, and especially of political leadership, was intensely felt. It was a profoundly political age.

The politics of the intellectuals were, however, of a peculiar nature. They were the politics to end all politics. Force was not only unnecessary in a society composed of reasonable persons; it was the prime instrument of unreason. Anarchism was the logical attitude for those who felt so great a confidence in intelligence in general and in the professional intellectual in particular. All existing political and religious institutions were irrational, obsolete, and so “unnatural,” designed to prevent an inherently self-regulating society from achieving universal felicity. Coercive institutions, especially the traditional state, were not only unnecessary; they actually prevented an orderly social life. The function of the state was to be educational and its repressive activities were to be limited to protecting society against unenlightened nations and against those few aberrant persons whose anti-social urges led them to a life of crime. The radical aspiration of the Enlightenment was to substitute the educative leadership of the intellectuals for the state that was based on power and habit. Education and legislation were identical to Helvetius.⁷ Once the art or science of educative legislation was mastered, social perfection would be at hand.

The “invisible hand,” so easily laughed at now, was not

⁶ M. Leroy, *Histoire des Idées Sociales en France* (de Montesquieu à Robespierre) (Paris, 1946), p. 10. C. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century of Philosophers* (New Haven, Conn., 1952), p. 70.

⁷ Helvetius, *A Treatise on Man*, tr. by W. Hooper (London, 1810), vol. II, pp. 438-443. To these attitudes there were, of course, exceptions, especially during the earlier Enlightenment. Voltaire, for instance, was far from being an anarchist.

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really a mysterious mechanism. It merely implied that social harmony was inevitable in a society of perfectly free and reasonable persons. To be sure, there was some inconsistency in believing that educational restraint was necessary in political but not in economic life.⁸ But even in the latter realm, monopoly was regarded as so reprehensible that society had a right to prevent it and punish those who practiced it. Freedom, however, was regarded as the necessary condition of human development in all areas, just because it allowed the best, the most reasonable, impulses to assert themselves in every sphere of action. Moreover, the Marxist contention that the Enlightenment was nothing but the bourgeoisie coming into its own finds little support in the writings of that period, and is forced to rely almost exclusively on Voltaire's frequently expressed contempt for the "canaille."⁹ Most of the writers of the 18th century, by no means Rousseau alone, felt that great differences in wealth were scandalous, and that one of the chief blessings of the abolition of the existing state was to be a reduction of these discrepancies. Almost all agreed with Helvetius that bad legislation alone created excessive economic inequalities, and that these could be mitigated by law.¹⁰ Among the many charges that Tom Paine brought against all the prevailing forms of government was that "in countries that are called civilized we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows" as well as "a mass of wretchedness that has scarcely any other chance, than to expire in poverty or infamy."¹¹ It was not that the Enlightenment was indifferent to poverty, but that it blamed it exclusively on obsolete and

⁸ E. Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, tr. by M. Morris (London, 1934), p. 127.

⁹ E.g., H. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism* (London, 1947), pp. 161-264.

¹⁰ *Treatise on Man*, vol. II, p. 205. The article on "Indigent" in the *Encyclopédie* states unequivocally that poverty is the result solely of maladministration. M. Roustau, *op.cit.*, p. 269.

¹¹ *The Rights of Man* (Everyman's Library, London, 1915), p. 221.

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immoral legislation. With the exception of monopolists, Adam Smith spoke of no one with greater contempt than of politicians.¹² Beneath his accusation lies the common anarchism of the Enlightenment, which essentially amounts to a belief that society is inherently good, but that governments, and they alone, prevent it from flourishing.¹³

While nothing was more sacred to the philosophers of the Enlightenment than individual liberty, they were not individualists. The word does not appear in their writings. For, though they saw a clear conflict between society and the state, between conscience and power, they did not envisage a similar tension between the individual and society. The inevitability of such a struggle, and the entire doctrine of the inviolability of individuality, were unknown to the Enlightenment. That the individual's conscience, his moral will, or at least his sense of utility were the ultimate arbiters of all public as well as of private action was taken for granted. There was, however, no suspicion of a necessary conflict between private and public interests, between individual freedom and social needs. For the utilitarians there was only a conflict between immediate and long-term interests, not between altruistic and self-regarding motives, and this conflict was to be resolved easily by education and by a few laws. The utilitarians regarded freedom as a necessity because it was in the interest of society no less than of the individual. Those who believed in an absolute moral law, on the other hand, saw freedom as the imperative first condition of all ethically valid action. In the last resort both schools thought freedom essential because man was a rational and social being.

Though it has become a cliché, there is nothing wrong with

¹² *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. by E. Cannan (Modern Library, New York, 1937), pp. 435 and 460-461.

¹³ Thus Tom Paine, "Society performs for itself everything which is ascribed to Government," *The Rights of Man*, p. 157.

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the phrase “the Age of Reason” as a description of the Enlightenment. It was reason that bound men to the past and to the future. It was reason that brought men together. It was reason that provided every standard for action and for judgment. Reason was to rule art as it guided science. As its ultimate aim the Enlightenment visualized the perfectly rational society of men as equal as they were alike in their common rationality. Such a summing up, though just in many respects, leaves out what so many antagonists forget about the Enlightenment—its humanitarianism, its very profound sense of justice. Thus Condorcet specially defined humanitarianism as tender compassion for all those who suffer the evils that afflict mankind, as horror for all that in public institutions and in private life adds new sorrow to those which nature has already inflicted on mankind.¹⁴ Of d’Alembert it was said by his eulogist, Marmontel, that he was “highly gifted with sensibility” and that he “blazed with indignation when he saw the innocent and weak crushed by the injustice of the strong.”¹⁵ Ultimately everything—the optimism, the intellectual excesses, the anarchism—were animated by this spirit. Justice is the center of Stoic thought, old and new. To ridicule this preoccupation is easy enough; whether anything superior has ever been considered is, however, quite another matter.

It would be a mistake to assume that the 18th century and the Enlightenment coincide exactly. Such symmetry is not to be expected in history. Even before the French Revolution, the Enlightenment was vehemently rejected by at least one group of intellectuals, the romantics. Moreover, even in the midst of the Enlightenment there were deviations. Sentimentalism in literature, a considerable concern about “genius,” began to be felt. Romanticism did not fall fully developed from the skies. The aesthetic revolt against neo-classicism did

¹⁴ *Esquisse*, pp. 164-165.

¹⁵ Rouston, *op.cit.*, p. 251.

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not find full expression until Herder, who was the first outstanding man of letters to throw overboard the entire system of aesthetics that had flourished during the Enlightenment. He was the first to discard those rationally imposed rules upon art, and to champion the supremacy of primeval poetic feeling. For in its origins romanticism was the revolt of aesthetic sensibility against the philosophic spirit. Eventually, moreover, this aesthetic difference implied a break with the Enlightenment as a whole, and the birth of a new attitude toward nature and society as well.

Romanticism, therefore, needs to be defined clearly. There are two extreme approaches to this question. One school of thought regards the classicist and the romantic as two eternal human types. The former seeks harmony in the contradictory elements of all existence; the latter glories in the individual and in the differences in all that he sees and feels.¹⁶ These opposed characters are expressed in religion, in art, and in philosophy throughout history. Christianity can thus be regarded as a romantic religion; the Gothic style, all music, and Platonic philosophy in their turn are somehow romantic. At the other pole are those who would call only one generation, that of the brothers Schlegel, romantic. For them, at best the romantic movement is over by that momentous year 1848. Indeed, among those who favor a narrow definition there is one scholar who advises us to speak only of "romanticisms," in the plural.¹⁷ Individual and national variations seem to him so great that no single definition can cover all the authors who have been called romantic. This idea has its merits, for the most significant differences were bound to arise among

¹⁶ E.g., F. Strich, *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik* (Bern, 1949).

¹⁷ A. O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1948), pp. 228-253. In reply to this, there is an impressive argument showing the unity of romanticism, in R. Welleck, "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History," *Comparative Literature*, 1949, vol. 1, pp. 1-23 and 147-172.

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writers who stressed individuality as their highest aim. Moreover, not all romantics remained romantic. Herder himself returned partially to the Enlightenment. Others became Christians. Also, there were endless quarrels among authors who at a distance seem to have so much in common. Thus Goethe was in turn the idol and the chief antagonist of the younger German romantics. Lastly, the task of defining romanticism has not been made easier by the polemical and colloquial use of the term. To some French authors, particularly, romanticism is just mysticism, irrationalism, and emotionalism of a German sort. It is a hideous, un-French infection, which undermines the true Latin, Catholic, and classical heritage of France.¹⁸ In popular usage, of course, a romantic is simply an impractical person.

The political and abusive exploitation of the word romanticism need not concern us here, but what of the two scholarly attitudes? A compromise between the two may well prove helpful. For, if romanticism is an eternal human urge, it becomes very difficult to understand what was so peculiarly new in the aesthetic opposition to the Enlightenment. If, however, romanticism is to be applied to only a handful of poets who chose that name, the great affinity that so many later writers have to that original group becomes inexplicable. It seems expedient, therefore, to look for both the unique and the enduring aspects of the romantic movement. For if it began as a specific theory of art, opposed to the standards of neoclassicism, it was also the expression of a general temper, of a state of mind, and this condition is still prevalent today, even though the aesthetic form it originally took has long since been discarded.

¹⁸ The best known of these politically inspired studies of romanticism are probably the innumerable works of Baron Ernest Seillière. A brief, but complete, statement of this viewpoint can be found in his *Romanticism*, tr. by C. Sprietsma (New York, 1929).

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In art the romantics, beginning with Herder, declared a total war against the neo-classicism of the Enlightenment. Instead of reason and form, the intuitive imagination of the poet was hailed as the sole creative force. Not the universal, the typical, and the probable, but the unique, the original and the fantastic were to be the aim of literature. Literature was to stir the reader, not to instruct him. To follow nature now meant not to seek harmony, but to imitate nature's dramatic intensity. Not civilization, but primeval energy was the greatest virtue. The odes of Horace were rejected in favor of Homer, and Shakespeare was idolized for just those qualities which Voltaire and Dr. Johnson had disliked as barbarisms. Not philosophical fables, but the novel of private experience became popular. Above all, the place that the Enlightenment had reserved for the philosophers was now claimed for the poets. They were now regarded as the founders of religions and of nations, and as the guardians of the highest truth. In fact, after neo-classicism the romantics went on to reject the entire Enlightenment, and the entire attitude that it represented. Instead of cold analysis they wanted the experience of life itself. Not man, the rational animal, but Prometheus, the defiant creator, was the new ideal. Historical optimism was rejected in the consciousness of the tragic in both life and art. Beauty cannot improve, and Hellas has passed. To all complacency the "genius" sneered: "Philistine." The present was no better than the past, and "things as they are," every convention, all set institutions, were only chains on the creative faculties of the artist. Individuality, not social reason, was to become the highest moral aim. All politics were suspect as unartistic. From the "quantitative individualism" of the Enlightenment, the romantics moved to "qualitative individualism"; from rational autonomy, to limitless self-expression and self-differentiation. To concentrate merely on reason was to remain a "rational oyster." An artistic personality must have

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a limitless number of qualities; it must be Protean, colorful, and, above all, different.¹⁹ This is by no means like the humanistic ideal of the full man. For the whole man is made up of a limited number of qualities in a preconceived state of balance. The humanistic ideal is based on a universal pattern, not on the romantic aspiration of each person to be completely different from every other. No wonder that all were permanently at odds with their environment!

The aesthetic revolt of romanticism was, then, only part of a more general dissatisfaction with the entire age. If we look deeper, beyond even the conscious expressions of romantic thought, we discover a specific consciousness. What appeared in the republic of letters at that time was very early, and with unrivalled subtlety, described by Hegel as the "unhappy consciousness." This is the "alienated soul" that has lost all faith in the beliefs of the past, having been disillusioned by skepticism, but is unable to find a new home for its spiritual longings in the present or future. Hopelessly tossed back and forth between memory and yearning, it can neither accept the present nor face the new world.²⁰ This is essentially a religious phenomenon, what Miguel de Unamuno was later to call the "tragic sense of life," a longing for immortality which is constantly harrowed by doubts of its possibility.²¹ However, this consciousness did not express itself in religious terms in the early years of romanticism. It was not only that "God is dead," but that culture had perished. The "unending yearn-

¹⁹ *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, tr. and ed. by K. H. Wolf (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), pp. 58-84.

²⁰ *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, tr. by J. B. Baillie (London, 1931), pp. 250-267 and 752-756. This, like most translations of Hegel's works, is inadequate, but since there are few direct quotations, the usual English versions will be referred to. Their general meaning has been checked in the German original.

²¹ *The Tragic Sense of Life*, tr. by J. E. C. Fitch (New York, 1954), pp. 1-57.

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ing” was felt primarily as culture longing.²² It was a yearning for Greece, first, then for the world of Ossian and for the colorful Middle Ages, and later for the Renaissance as well—in-
deed for any time more blessed than the present.

This sense of lostness in the “real” world that marks the unhappy consciousness, and that lies at the root of the romantic revival, is also what gives the movement its continuity. It is this which allows us to speak of romanticism as prevalent throughout the last century and today, in spite of the inner dissensions, the changes in modes of expression and in literary subject matter. The refusal to accept a world of nature in which all must die, or a social universe in which “the whole” counts more than each person, marks the entire course of romantic thought. The Enlightenment was able to rationalize and live at peace with these conditions; the romantic rebelled against them. The senselessness of death and the crushing force of society are the constant themes of all the poets who have been conventionally called the romantic school; so is the rejection of all existing cultural life. This attitude appears in Kierkegaard’s hatred of optimistic philosophy and in his call to “the one,” and again in Nietzsche’s dream of the super-artist who would subdue nature and society. Burckhardt’s longing for the artistic periods of the past is essentially the same as Herder’s dream of primitive societies dominated by poets. Many romantics, of course, eventually made their peace with God, with the established social order, with history, with politics, even with reason, but they ceased to be romantics when they did so.

As an aesthetic theory romanticism still has its votaries.

²² It is my firm conviction that the longing for Hellas was not only the first manifestation of romanticism but also the essence of its cultural attitude. Mediaevalism was nowhere as important, or as universal. See, e.g., E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge, 1935); G. Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York, 1949), pp. 355-465.

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The supremacy of art and of the artist is still a vital concern to André Malraux, to Albert Camus, and to Stephen Spender, for instance. In literary criticism, Sartre and his followers still belabor authors who adhere to the classical tradition and deal in stereotypes, thus denying man's freedom to behave unpredictably. American literature, especially the "tough" kind, is, one suspects, admired for what, to Europeans, seems to be its exotic character. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger still seeks the highest wisdom in poetry. And among existentialist thinkers, Karl Jaspers joins Goethe in the battle against Newton and the age of prose that he represents. However, when we speak of romanticism here, we mean primarily the manifestations of the unhappy consciousness, for today it is no longer the implicit basis of a new literature, it is a conscious attitude. Existentialism and the less systematic philosophies of the absurd regard themselves openly as the awareness that "God is dead." While the early romantics showed considerable combative vigor, and really believed that the spirit of poetry might yet conquer the world of prose, the contemporary romantic cherishes no such hope—indeed, no hope of any sort. Instead of dramatic energy there is now only a feeling of futility. Romanticism now expresses itself in a denial of the very possibility of our knowing—much less controlling—history, nature, or society. It asserts our freedom from God and social determination, but this implies only an absence of permanent attachments. Man has become a foreigner wandering aimlessly around unknown territory; the world, both historical and natural, has become meaningless. The relevance of all social thought and action becomes doubtful in the face of a human situation in which nothing is certain but the individual's reactions to the external world and his need to give expression to his inner condition. As seen with the inner eye, the world appears as a strange and hostile prison which one cannot either understand or alter; at best it can be evaded. The great

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tragedy of the present age is that history, society, and politics, for all their insignificance to our real self, press upon us unavoidably. The outer world is crushing the unique individual. Society is depriving us of our selfhood. The entire social universe today is totalitarian, not just some political movements and some states. Technology and the masses are the conditions of life everywhere today, and these, forming the very essence of totalitarianism, are the epitome of all the forces in society that have always threatened the individual personality. This is the romanticism of defeat, the ultimate stage of alienation. It is also the very farthest point from the spirit of the Enlightenment. Romanticism began by denying the facile optimism of the men of reason, but under the stress of the social enormities of the present age it has come to reject the entire modern world, and implicitly, the very possibility of social knowledge and amelioration.

Romanticism was not the sole hostile reaction to the Enlightenment. Christian believers could hardly be expected to rejoice in its doctrines, and the 18th century was by no means wholly irreligious. Pietist and Evangelical movements flourished. In Saint-Martin the century even had its mystic. But all this religiosity did not amount to a theological refutation of the Enlightenment, least of all in the realm of social theory. Not until the French Revolution shook the very foundations of ecclesiastical institutions was such a reply forthcoming. With the politically inspired literature of the Theocrats, chief among them Joseph de Maistre, a point by point attack on the Enlightenment from a Catholic position appeared. It is worth noting that even Maistre had in his youth flirted with Enlightened ideas, spoken favorably of liberty, and referred to God as the "Supreme Being."²³ The Catholic reaction to the Enlightenment, emerging as it did in the course of the Revolu-

²³ C.-A. Saint-Beuve, *Portraits Litteraires* (Paris, n.d.), vol. II, pp. 394-399.

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tion, was from the first primarily political in character, and its contemporary descendants, in their rejection of the whole post-Revolutionary world, retain this orientation. In this respect, therefore, the religious opposition to the Enlightenment has been rather less intricate, in a sense less profound, than that of romanticism. It is, however, superficial to regard the opposition as merely a matter of extreme political conservatism. In the case of a thinker of Maistre's caliber political "reaction" was only a part of a wider realization that Europe had ceased to be Christian and that the whole modern age was in every respect a failure. It is this awareness, not his authoritarian bias in matters of government, that has given Maistre's answer to the Enlightenment such a lasting influence.

That the faith in progress is repellent to most Christian thought is obvious, for it rests on the denial of original sin. Maistre, however, went even further than to deny its validity. Indeed, hardly anyone since Luther was more impressed by human corruption than Maistre. Though he professed to admire St. Thomas, he did not seem to accept his doctrine that the faculties of natural reason had remained largely unimpaired. Actually his pessimism was not merely social; it was cosmic in scope. His contribution to the controversy about the significance of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was a return to the belief that Providence was just but mankind so wicked that these disasters occurred because men deserved them. That the apparently good should perish together with the guilty was no injustice, since none of us is really innocent.²⁴ The picture of violence on earth that he painted was far grimmer than Hobbes'. Hobbes' natural man at least kills for understandable purposes, but Maistre saw violence as a law of all life, even that of vegetables. Men cannot help killing each other. They kill

²⁴ *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1922), vol. 1, pp. 170-177 and 201-211.

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for justifiable reasons, and they kill merely to amuse themselves. In either case they are merely fulfilling their destiny. The world is an endless scene of carnage.²⁵ It is violence that forms the essence of all human activity, of even its positive forms. Society ultimately depends for its survival on the public executioner.²⁶

Like the Enlightenment, Maistre placed great emphasis on the power of thought, but he regarded it as an almost wholly evil force. Religion and the “national dogma,” a mixture of religious and traditional moral and political precepts, were to be propagated by the clergy and the nobility, and to dominate the world of ideas.²⁷ As for the savants, they were not to speak on moral matters. They could have the natural sciences to amuse them, but nothing else, and he was even suspicious of these. The natural sciences were the creatures of pride and brutalized men. Also, by emphasizing the laws of nature, they made prayer seem superfluous.²⁸ Human reason and will were the enemies of faith and, as such, suspect. Men of learning were to give up all political ambitions. History, according to Maistre, shows that men of learning have no talent for practical affairs, while priests, on the other hand, have always made excellent statesmen.²⁹ This conclusion follows logically from his belief that in politics reason and practice stand unalterably opposed to each other. The rationality of political theories only demonstrates that they are useless or pernicious,³⁰ for they always forgot the profound irrationality of mankind in general, and of social units especially.

For the world about him Maistre felt a deep dislike. The Revolution he sometimes regarded as the direct work of Satan or as the punishment justly visited upon an irreligious genera-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 21-25 and p. 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 29-33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 192-197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 108-109.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 102-104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 174-176.

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tion. Only occasionally did he hope that it was a salutary purging of a corrupt nation.³¹ As to its historical origins there could be no doubt—it was the offspring of Protestantism, the child of heresy. Conversely only through a revival of religion, indeed only under the domination of the Catholic Church, could Europe hope to survive. It is this interpretation of history which gives Maistre a contemporary significance. Many Christian thinkers, both Catholic and Protestant, today subscribe to the idea that civilizations live and die with their traditional religious faiths, and that ultimately all social events are the expression of some religious attitude. As for the Enlightenment, the English Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, who is perhaps the most perfect representative of the school of Christian fatalists today, can still speak of it as “the last of the great European heresies.”³² Moreover, it is the historical fatalism implicit in a theory that makes cultural life dependent upon one factor—religious faith—that unites so many Christian social theorists today. War, totalitarianism, in short, the decline of European civilization—all are inevitable results of the absence of a religious faith in the modern age. Since a real renewal of Christianity is unlikely, the end of Western culture is more than likely. In this, Protestant theologians like the Swiss Emil Brunner and the English Nicholas Micklem, Anglo-Catholics like V. A. Demant and T. S. Eliot, and such Roman Catholic thinkers as Hilaire Belloc, Christopher Dawson, Romano Guardini, and Erich Voegelin quite agree. Here the democratic Jacques Maritain is at one with the authoritarian monarchist Henri Massis.

The relation of this type of religious thought to romanticism is not obvious. To be sure, both dislike much in common. But even if they shared a common distaste for the Enlightenment,

³¹ *Considérations sur la France* (Paris, 1936), pp. 17-32.

³² *Progress and Religion* (London and New York, 1933), pp. 192-193.

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it was for different reasons. It is one thing to reject neo-stoicism as a rationalist disregard for revelation; it is quite another thing to despise it as lifeless and unpoetic. Again today the Christian in revolt against the present age is no less in a state of cultural alienation than the romantic. The external aspects that arouse his indignation—rootless city life, technology, the prevalence of modes of thought that derive from the natural sciences, the popularity of totalitarian parties and ideologies—also offend the romantic. However, for the romantic, cultural alienation involves an absolute estrangement, whereas the believer can still rest securely in his faith. To long for such a haven without being able to find it is the essential condition of the unhappy consciousness. For the Christian thinker it is only the lack of faith among those about him that is terrifying, not the emptiness within himself. This distinction, though crucial, is not without difficulties. Particularly among the early romantics, “infinite yearning” ended in an acceptance of Catholicism. Friedrich Schlegel in fact became a great admirer of Maistre’s works.³³ Again, the emotional, internalized religion of feeling which flourished at the same time as early romanticism resembles the latter in many respects. Hegel, indeed, regarded it as a manifestation of the unhappy consciousness.³⁴ However, the insistence upon individuality as the sole guide to God which is characteristic of both the optimistic religion of Schleiermacher and the tragic faith of Kierkegaard bears but little resemblance to any of the established forms of Christianity. This too is evident

³³ *The Philosophy of History*, tr. by J. B. Robertson (London, 1846), pp. 464-470.

³⁴ Jean Wahl in his study of this subject feels that Hegel regarded all Christianity as “unhappy consciousness,” but I think that this is false, since Hegel discusses the unhappy consciousness as a specifically pre- and post-Christian phenomenon, and describes it as a response to a climate of skepticism. See J. A. Wahl, *Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel* (Paris, 1929).

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in the ideas of the contemporary Christian existentialist and playwright Gabriel Marcel. Similarly, the aestheticized reverence of a Chateaubriand is foreign to the ancient faith. Moreover, the worship of the creative imagination and the excessive disdain for reason as well as the insistence on individuality in all matters are distasteful to the orthodox forms of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. To Thomists in particular they are anything but appealing. There is thus no real affinity between romanticism and Christianity. The romantic and the Christian fatalist are alike only in a negative sense: in their common alienation from the age of the Enlightenment first; then from the entire world of science, industry, commerce; and now from a culture apparently doomed to war and totalitarianism.

Romantic and Christian despair in the realm of social thought are different, then, and would be more so if the end of European culture did not for the Christian have an even deeper religious meaning. However, the end of the West may very well mean the disappearance of Christianity in the world, and this possibility has aroused many Christians to a new and dramatic awareness of the old prophecy of the end of the world. The eschatological consciousness, already present in Maistre and in Lammenais, before his apostasy, is today the Christian equivalent of the unhappy consciousness. For the sense of doom is extended from the merely cultural level to the supernatural, and all mankind is faced with its final hour—a finality that for the romantic is already accomplished in the end of civilization. Thus recently Josef Pieper, a German Catholic thinker, in a brief but complete statement of the doctrine of the last things, foresees the apocalypse in the events of recent years.⁸⁵ In specific political events, especially in totalitarianism, he discerns a foretaste of the rule of Anti-

⁸⁵ J. Pieper, *The End of Time*, tr. by M. Bullock (London, 1954).

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Christ. Totalitarian ideologies represent the devil's counter-religions. The martyrdom of Christians in totalitarian states is a prelude to that heightening of tensions between the forces of Christ and Anti-Christ that precedes the end of time. Implicitly or explicitly the apocalypse has haunted all those Christian thinkers who since the French Revolution could see nothing but decadence and decline in the life of the modern age. It is difficult to imagine anything farther removed from the spirit of the Enlightenment than this.

These apprehensions are far from ridiculous. After all, the society that the romantic and Christian alike revile has rejected them. Both are excluded from the general current of popular thought. Political developments are hardly such as to encourage either. However, the Enlightenment has not triumphed—far from it. Even those who once opposed romantic and Christian despondency, the obvious successors of the Enlightenment, the liberals and socialists, have ceased to offer genuine intellectual alternatives to the doctrines of despair. Since the last century liberalism has itself become increasingly conservative and fearful of democracy. Today a conservative liberalism flourishes that also sees Europe doomed as a result of economic planning, egalitarianism and “false” rationalism. Socialism, on the other hand, has suffered as a theory because of its too intimate connection with the “movement.” Today, rejected by the left and assimilated by the right, socialism appears incapable of providing a philosophy that is anything but a defence of its immediate parliamentary position, and even here it falters. Such radicalism as still survives is usually only a belief in the infinite extension of individual liberty for its own sake, without any of the Enlightenment's faith in the harmony and progress of society as a whole that would accompany freedom. As for the two major forms of totalitarian ideology, Nazism and communism, they are not philosophical interpretations of the modern world so much as

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a verbal form of warfare. As such they are rather the subject of theoretical analysis, not replies to it. In any case, though both regard themselves as the "wave of the future," they too take a catastrophic view of modern history. Only after the violent overthrow of existing social institutions do they foresee a more perfect era, the nature of which remains vague. Certainly Nazism was in its racial monomania a fatalistic denial of all that the Enlightenment stood for, while the élitism and violence lying at the very root of communism make its use of the word "progressive" a crime against its Enlightenment meaning.

The end of the Enlightenment has, in fact, meant not only a decline of social optimism and radicalism but also the passing of political philosophy. This has not been the work of recent years only. The ascendancy of ideas opposed to the entire Enlightenment has been a rather slow and very intricate development. It is to the analysis of this process that the following pages are devoted.

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