

REVOLUTION AND THE LAST JUDGEMENT

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My research has centered on the question of the relationship between certain esoteric movements in the second half of the eighteenth century in France and the culture of Enlightenment and the Revolution. Focussing on the works of Antoine-Joseph Pernety and on material dealing with the Avignon Society of Illuminati, on the one hand, and on the political works of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin – an anti-Enlightenment theosophist but supporter of the Revolution – on the other, I have first and foremost aimed at examining the presumed « marginal influences » of Illuminist ideas on eighteenth century culture and politics, to show the interaction existing between them. I have also tried to look at the problem of the real meaning of the ideas of esoterism, of heterodox mysticism, concentrating in particular on learned millennialism and how it was affected from the theoretical point of view by the Enlightenment and, above all, by the French Revolution¹.

We know various groups of millennialist inspiration greeted the coming of the French Revolution as the Last Judgement of the Apocalypse, containing powerful social content and preceding the coming of celestial Jerusalem². The works of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin reveal apocalyptic ideas taking on new life, becoming, in contact with historic events, an intense elaboration of new theoretical and political ideas developed from the experience of the Revolution, though they still maintain their mystical utopian character. This phenomenon is particularly interesting in that it was felt on a European level, especially if it is considered in the perspective of later utopic socialism and of millenarism in the England of the Industrian Revolution³.

¹ A fuller discussion of these themes appears in E.J. Mannucci, *Gli altri lumi*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1988.

² In this regard, see, for example, C. Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England*, London and Baltimore, 1975 and. M. Vovelle, *La mentalità rivoluzionaria* (Italian translation, Laterza, Bari, 1987), where the question is touched upon several times – for example, on p. 134. Millenaristic interpretations of the French revolution exist in America as well; see, for example, the interesting anonymous pamphlet *Prophetic Conjectures on the French Revolution*, Philadelphia, 1794.

³ The classic text on the subject is E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1968.

If the classical myth of the golden age stems from a mentality and vision which are very different from those which give rise to Christian millenarism, in the course of time elements of one blended with elements from the other, on the one hand in the popular version of the tradition of Saturnalia, and on the other in cultured visions, which in eighteenth century France re-flourished in more or less archaic and secular forms. A turn of the century writer of this atmosphere is Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal, of particular interest because he brought his vision of life to bear on his revolutionary activity in various works among which stands out the *Correctif à la Révolution française*⁴, written at the beginning of 1793, and, at least to a certain extent, in his relationship with Babeuf's group, for whom he wrote the *Manifeste des égaux*.

Maréchal, who had hailed the Revolution as the « trumpet of judgement », in a very similar way to Saint-Martin, but with a metaphoric connotation, wrote the most successful theatrical work of the period of the Jacobin government when the Sansculottes' pressure was greatest. His work was written in fact for a sans-culotte audience, and its title *Jugement dernier des rois, prophétie en un acte* is in itself sufficient to excite the curiosity of those interested in this field. In the second part of my paper, I will examine some aspects of this work, which is often hastily passed over because its propagandistic and didactic nature, makes it seem self-explanatory⁵.

Let us begin with Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, the greatest Illuminist or esoteric thinker of the end of the eighteenth century. He was born at Amboise in 1743 in a family of the minor provincial nobility; studied law, but in his early twenties joined the army. An officer in the Foix battalion, stationed at Bordeaux, he entered esoteric circles when he met Martines de Pasqually, founder of the heterodox free mason order of the Elus Coens, who initiated him. The order of the Elus Coens was part, in its turn in a heterodox manner, of the movement of the red free masonry of the Hauts-Grades, which considered itself on a higher level of initiation, and even as the keepers of the true secrets of freemasonry, in comparison with the followers of the classic blue masonry of the English kind. Red freemasonry did have fatuous aspects to entertain aristocrats, but Illuminists found in its circles the chance to develop esoteric research⁶. In the last decades of the

⁴ S. Maréchal, *Correctif à la Révolution Française*, Paris, 1793 (available on microfiche at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris). Reference to this text will be made later in this paper in the section dedicated to Maréchal.

⁵ M. Carlson's, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, Ithaca, 1966 is wholly inadequate in that it discusses the *Jugement dernier* in the context of a book whose apparent scope seems to be to show the author's distaste for his chosen subject. Other general texts which touch upon this work are J. Truchet, *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle*, vol. II, Paris, 1974 and D. Hamiche, *Le Théâtre et la Révolution*, Paris, 1973 (a book whose tone shows the influence of the French cultural climate of 1968).

⁶ These aspects of masonry have been examined in various works by R. Le Forestier: *La Franco-Maçonnerie occultiste au XVIII^e siècle et l'ordre des Elus Coens*, Paris, 1928;

viewpoint by no means original within illuminism¹⁰, which Saint-Martin expressed in the mid 1770s, after the order was dissolved, in his most widely read book, *Des erreurs et de la vérité*, written for a general educated public and not just for initiates. Illuminism, the inner church, regeneration, if they became popular ideas, were a threat to the establishment, to the church as an organ of power and control, and as a support to hierarchy and institutions. The Inquisition condemned Saint-Martin's first work as « an attack on the divinity and tranquillity of governments », but did so twenty years later in 1798. Once the Revolution had come about it was possible to gauge the subversive potential of Illuminist writings, which had previously been overshadowed by the more direct threat of the *philosophes*. Illuminists need not await the permission of any constituted authority to make their revelation known. Saint-Martin, in his work had declared that « having no aim but the good of mankind in general, and above all having no desire to create discord among men, it did not directly attack any established dogma or Political Institution », but when he later fully supported the fall of those institutions, he was not surprised by this late condemnation.

Saint-Martin did not belong to any particular political movement, though it should be recalled that several of his works were published by the Cercle Social, founded by Bonneville and Fauchet, to which Maréchal was also linked. Saint-Martin can not be defined as an active revolutionary, but throughout the revolutionary decade he was associated with various initiatives: he was included in July 1791 among the possible tutors to the

¹⁰ Eighteenth century illuminism is the final expression of a tradition with roots in the renaissance and, in certain of its aspects, in a still earlier period (some facets and moments of this tradition have been examined, for example, by F. Yates, C. Webster and F. Jesi). Usually theosophes refer to a unifying basic myth, which includes a cosmogony, a cosmology, an eschatology (on theosophic mythology, see, for example, S. Hutin, *Théosophie, à la recherche de Dieu*, St-Jean-de-Braye, 1977 and A. Faivre *op. cit.*). The myth is a reinterpretation of the *Pentateuch* in its « secret » meaning: God, the fundamental Unity, is like the neoplatonic Demiurge, a god who organizes the primal chaos by emanation, who uses his own essence – which already includes all Possibles – to order the world. He emanates intermediate powers (in the tradition of the Judaic *Qabbalah*, for example, these are the ten *Sephiroth*, the ten creative attributes of divinity) who link him to the world since they are his visible manifestation. God also emanates angelic spirits, who have free will: it is this which determines their fall, caused by a boundless will to power, and through it, disaster in the sublunary sphere. According to theosophic myth, God punishes the rebel angels by imprisoning them in matter and sending man (in Martines' formulation the figure is androgynous, Adam-Eve), endowed with extraordinary powers, to act as their guardian and attempt their redemption. But man lets himself be seduced by the fallen angels and imitates them; and in his turn is punished with his present state of degradation. With him all of nature is borne down (the androgynous being splits into male and female). Thus man is originally superior to the angels, and that is why the theurgist can call them up. The occultist theosophist insists less upon the fall than upon the possibility of laboring towards regeneration; between mankind and God there is no incommensurable abyss: indeed, humanity, God and nature are woven together in a web of analogies veiled by a fall which can be recouped. The symbols with which nature abounds are not meant to confound knowledge and thus the way to the absolute, but to render it clear to those who know how to recognize them and this is as God has wished it to be. Mankind may realize regeneration if it reaches a total and unitary knowledge, rediscovering its place alongside Sophia, divine wisdom. The search is mystic and has no need for the mediation of a church, which, indeed, it usually despises.

Dauphin, with Condorcet and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre among others; he went on guard duty at the Temple; in the last months of the Jacobin government he was put in charge of the census of the ecclesiastic property at Amboise and then in the Year III he was called as auditor to the École Normale, where he polemicised with Garat. He was considered a patriot, as he wrote to the person at Amboise in charge of applying the law on suspects, saying that he had no need of certificates of civic spirit. More than once he made anonymous contributions to the revolutionary armies. Notwithstanding this, the few times scholars mention his political works of the revolutionary period, Saint-Martin's position is classified with that of De Maistre in his *Considerations sur la France*, because both have a mystical and providentialist vision. But there was a fundamental difference between them: Saint-Martin's God was not that of the established church, because he was a true theosophist¹¹. De Maistre's God instead was the god of the church and of hierarchic authority, and the referrals of this writer to esoterism and mysticism were hieratic trappings of reactionary ideology emptied of any strong specific sense.

This comparison with the counter-Revolutionary work of de Maistre ought to be kept in mind when examining the *Lettre à un ami sur la Révolution française*, written in the last months of the Terror, but published in 1795. As we have pointed out above, Saint-Martin's vision was part of the apocalyptic tradition. He stated that he had endless « confidence » in the work of the Revolution – « our surprising Revolution » – because he was convinced that it was the work of providence:

I believe that its equitable hand has had the object of destroying all the abuses which had infected the old government of France on all sides: among which abuses the ambition of priests and their sacrilegious peculation were to the fore. I believe that after having eradicated these greater abuses, Providence will give the French People, and hence other peoples, days of light and peace whose value we cannot perhaps yet perceive¹².

This profession of faith continues, and theosophy, which gives priority to spiritual action, blends with politics: « Lastly, I believe that its aim is to cleanse the spirit of man of all the stains which he daily sullies himself in his deep apathy ». So he comes to justify « our fury which is almost inseparable from revolutionary crises », although he was humanely very disturbed by the violent aspects of revolution, and reiterated this viewpoint in the Napoleonic period, in the *Ministère de l'homme-esprit*, declaring:

as the human priesthood has sullied this voice, and made it nothing, it must be

¹¹ In *Ministère de l'Homme-esprit, cit.*, Saint-Martin makes his most detailed attack upon the catholic church, clarifying his distinction between christianity and catholicism. He writes, for example: « Le christianisme ne marche que par des expériences certaines et continues: le catholicisme ne marche que par des autorités et des institutions. Le christianisme n'est que la loi de la foi; le catholicisme n'est que la foi de la loi ».

¹² *Lettre à un ami, cit.*, p. 1.

suspended in its turn, and be replaced by strong and violent action ... in this way, the French people could be considered as the people of the new law¹³.

For Saint-Martin, Revolution was a « divine-human action » (in the *Ministère ed l'homme-esprit* he explained that man's task was to continue God's work where God does not manifest himself). The providentialist position of the theosophist was however very different from that of De Maistre: if the two authors are formally alike in their vision of providence as an irresistible force, they apply providentialism to different things. For De Maistre it was against the people guilty of daring to overthrow established authority and kill the sovereign, that providence intervened, punishing them with the Terror; it used this instrument to preserve the boundaries of France intact and to regenerate the clergy, nobility and the monarchy, which would return to dominate France with renewed strength, by making their institutions divine, investing power with the majesty of mystery. De Maistre reduced the Revolution to an ephemeral episode of criminal profanation of authority, which was transformed into a punishment of the guilty nation, enabling the powerful to return again to rule over unchanged structures, which the Revolution had never been able to undermine.

On the contrary, for Saint-Martin the Revolution – the Last Judgement of positive redemption – had changed all the structures, and because it was in harmony with providence, would achieve its end, and bring justice to the whole of mankind: « Have we not seen, I say, as if by a supernatural power, all the oppressed receive those rights which injustice had usurped? »¹⁴. If De Maistre's providence is that of the divine right of kings and its work is only subordinate to this, Saint-Martin's is that of the millennium, but characterised both by the fact that the period of waiting and of prophecy was over and had given way to real history, and by the fact that its theoretician was a learned man with a complex metaphysical vision of his own and at the same time part of the contemporary political scene.

For Saint-Martin it was not the Terror which was the work of providence, but the whole Revolution, from its outbreak to the profound changes it brought about. Who was struck by the « vengeful hand » which guided the Revolution? Certainly not the nation, but the aristocracy, « this monstrous growth among individuals who are equal by nature », which had already been reduced to « vain names and imaginary titles » by the monarchy; and above all the clergy, the guiltiest party, « enjoying all their artificial rights and temporal usurpations » and « indirect cause of the crimes of kings », because they had arrogated the right to legitimise them¹⁵. The clergy, which had only sought to establish its own kingdom, though speaking of God, « whose existence they could often not even defend », and which had set up a kingdom which devastated consciences, making « everywhere of their

¹³ *Ministère de l'Homme-esprit, cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁴ *Lettre à un ami, cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

sacred books a tariff of extortion on the faith of souls accompanied by terror », deceiving the helpless and ignorant people.

By destroying the priests, the Revolution had set up the « new law ». The monarch had also been struck down, and he was only the first of a series, because

this class of men has a great wrong to expiate; those who sit on thrones, and the courtiers who are infected and intoxicated by their soporous atmosphere, so close their eyes to the great truths and the great principles, that they concentrate a whole nation in one man and in his supporters, whereas all the men of a State should forget themselves, to devote themselves to and recognise themselves exclusively in the Nation¹⁶.

This last notion clearly brings to mind echoes of the revolutionary political world, and was one which Saint-Martin was to take up again in the Year VI, in a work in which he was concerned with the aims of republican education. Blinded by this false vision, says Saint-Martin, « our enemies » could certainly not raise their eyes high enough to understand the propelling principle of the Revolution, « which could be called the revolution of mankind ». They did not see that it was human powers themselves which died, and that it was « a new, natural and living power » which had made them « all flee before us ». This was the second true war of religion, after that of the Jewish people « from Moses until Titus », because it did not limit itself to demolishing, « but it does not take a step without building », he said with mystical exaltation. It was the complete opposite, once again, of what De Maistre said, when he affirmed that republican institutions were rootless, while the previous ones were planted in French soil, and insisted – as did all the counter-revolutionary writers – on praising a tradition, of which in France, Saint-Martin wrote in a letter, a « clean house » was being made. Saint-Martin would break off relations with his friend Liebisdorf because the latter had published a counter-revolutionary work which played the game of the devil's « mannequins », who thought they could treat « a great Nation, free and watching over her own interests by herself, as they had done in other times with a ministerial cabinet »¹⁷. We note the appearance of the notion of « vigilance » and the awareness of the fact that the Revolution had profoundly changed politics, in a manner incomprehensible to those who were still prisoners of the mental schema of the old institutions.

For Saint-Martin, the Revolution was only the beginning of the road to the total moral political regeneration of French society and mankind in general, an idea we find in Robespierre¹⁸, as in Maréchal and Babeuf, in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ I am thinking, for example, of Robespierre's speech on the feast of the supreme Being, in Mary 1794: « Beyond the limits of the world a new world has appeared. In the physical realm everything has changed; everything must change in the moral and political realm. Half of the revolution is complete, the other half must be completed... ».

whose works, in fact, there are traces of apocalyptic vision; in fact, Babeuf speaks of a return to chaos, from which there will emerge a new, regenerated world, and Maréchal, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, talks of the « trumpet of Judgement » while, in the *Manifeste des égaux*, he states that « the French Revolution is only the fore-runner of a greater, more solemn revolution, which will be the last »¹⁹. Certainly these figures are fundamentally different from Saint-Martin, in that the future they look to is completely secular. But let us look more closely at the future envisioned by the theosophist. It was a future of an utopian kind, which was not elaborated as a plan based on the development of events and socio-economic and political conditions, but which nevertheless took into account the political vision of certain writers, first and foremost of Rousseau, for whom Saint-Martin had always held a great admiration; and it contains themes (such as criticism of private property) which have significant implications in the Jacobin period and the Directory.

Saint-Martin never abandoned his ideas on the re-establishment of the fundamental relationship between man and God, ideas which go back to the basic myth of theosophy where a « glorious man » is the guardian of the rebellious angels and is then dragged to his fall by their example. When man was still in possession of his original faculties, he necessarily founded his relationships to others in brotherhood, where he could freely develop « ses plus douces vertues », and his « facultés aimantes et expansives »²⁰, without needing to fall back on his faculties of deliberation and judgement and even less on those of coercion, because the « spirit-men » could live in a state of freedom without authority, based on bonds of affection.

This was a society based on common work, and not on property, with a moral purpose which was « susceptible de perfectionnement », not static and fixed forever, and this is a point I would like to emphasise, because it is a modern outlook compared to the traditional vision of the golden age, a modernisation which, in my opinion, stems from the revolutionary experience. In debased society, on the other hand, there is a social contract which

is rapidly transformed into a juridic butchery, where, out of two men who at the beginning would have been brothers, one becomes a lion and makes the other a lamb, whom he imperiously persuades, for the happiness of society and the honour of justice, to let himself be devoured with joyful trust and patriotic compliance²¹.

The more debased society is dragged downwards by its dominant members, the more strongly the other members will feel the revival of the need for justice, until they reach a society which is different from those known up till then, where the laws will be used as instruction, but will not

¹⁹ The *Manifeste* is included in F. Buonarroti, *La conspiration pour l'égalité, dite de Babeuf* (1828), Paris, 1957, 2 vols.

²⁰ *Eclair sur l'association humaine, op. cit.*, p. 21.

²¹ *Lettre à un ami, op. cit.*, p. 38.

be « lois de rigueur ». Saint-Martin was diffident towards the coercive aspect of laws, and seemed to think that it could be completely eliminated in a society without a real state apparatus, whose regenerated members could respond naturally to divine inspiration, by expressing their fundamentally good nature²². He thought that Rousseau had wanted to propose a simple return to the natural state. In comparison with the Ginevran philosopher, Saint-Martin put forward a more perfect state, achieved by regeneration after degradation. He called this society theocratic, but stated quite clearly that by this was not meant the government of historical ecclesiastic institutions, which he defined as « infernal theocracies ». For Saint-Martin, democratic government, popular sovereignty and general will only achieved a meaning with the re-establishment of the truly human faculties: the people were without doubt sovereign, but in the state of deprivation in which their sovereignty had existed, it had been reduced to a desperate search for apparent saviours (*Eclair sur l'association humaine*).

The people were truly sovereign when they dedicated themselves to the achievement of the laws of providence, and so, as we know, they become so with the revolution. If the laws violate the rights of man (and Saint-Martin, naturally, expresses these rights in a spiritualistic way) there is no longer « divine or political morality which prevents man from rejecting them ». When this came about, he saw in revolutionary government the tendency to make

the national institution turn towards customs, without which there can be no natural society; the law towards equality and universal justice, without which there can be no civil justice; reason towards a supreme Being of whom the heart of man is recognised to be the true temple, because, without the supreme Being, there would be no natural, civil or political association with a solid basis²³.

In more than one of his writings Saint-Martin falls back on the idea that everyone must work, that the rich must be educated to stop buying inaction and to forget their own interests in favour of the common good. In a just society everyone will have the necessary support and means to « valorize all their talents, because the more these talents are developed, the more society will gain by it »²⁴. Saint-Martin attacked « materialist » thinkers who based human association on physical needs, but here, in criticising Helvetius, he said something of interest: this philosopher makes the accumulation of wealth, and hence of property, derive from free labour. He sees property as a natural right and society as born to preserve wealth. But according to Saint-Martin, this can not be the principle of the transition from

²² In this vision of his there are points of contact with the altogether secular Maréchal of *Correctif à la Revolution*, see below the section on Maréchal.

²³ *Lettre à un ami*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²⁴ *Eclair sur l'association humaine*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

natural to political society, because, in that case, those who possess nothing could never become members of society.

I interpret this as a rejection of the bourgeois ideology underlying the property qualification. In Saint-Martin's opinion, private property was typical of those institutions of mankind which had lost sight of divine principles, and it was the Revolution which had enabled the oppressed to re-conquer their own rights: even a have-not was a fully entitled citizen. His was therefore the revolution of universal suffrage. Although he was of noble birth, and had a modest *rente*, Saint-Martin was especially against *rentier* income, holding that all income should derive from work and from personal capacities: as far as he was concerned, this was what revolution aimed at, bringing man closer to the natural and true human state. Common property was therefore natural property. Any other solution was ethical degradation. And it is in this sense that Saint-Martin read the II *Discours* of Rousseau.

For Saint-Martin it was the ethical relationship with the divine system which must be at the basis of the practical institutions established by the legislator. The political sphere had the most need of moral vigilance, especially against the danger of the legislator not knowing how to stop before violating the natural freedom and the development of the citizen's capacity to perfect himself²⁵. The legislator risked manipulating the people. But human society needed elected representatives until it re-acquired the consciousness of its fundamental link with God, which would make them superfluous, when the source of individual wills would become the general will which – and the circle would close – would correspond to the eternal divine wisdom. Of course the problem remained of how this eternal wisdom would manifest its choice of People's guide. Saint-Martin would later form the illusion that Napoleon would be this guide, or perhaps he imagined that the representatives of this wisdom might have had similar « careers ». Or perhaps he simply was not aware of the problem. In this way he was not able to sufficiently protect his utopian way of thinking from interpretations which had not understood or could not preserve its spirit. But his political themes are both part of the debate of the revolutionary left, and at the same time theosophist. And this statement leads to considerations which, in my opinion, are of some importance.

Illuminism as a living aspiration in dialectic with its time – that is, able to modify itself with its time – could not survive after this period, after the Industrial Revolution. Attempts to transfer eighteenth century strands of esoterism or occultism into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have had a completely different meaning. Yet it is in the political sphere that

²⁵ The problem of mechanisms of control vis à vis the legislators comes up often in the early years of the revolution – at the Constituent Assembly in terms more immediately political – and also, for example, in the milieu of the Cercle Sociale and its newspapers *Tribun du peuple* and *Bouche de fer*.

something of the dialectic of illuminism between ideas and events, which characterised the end of the eighteenth century in France, remains.

It would be outside the scope of this paper to attempt the full analysis of such a difficult figure to interpret as Maréchal²⁶. It should first of all be said that he was not part of the world of Illuminists as mystics. In fact, he was a resolute atheist, « l'homme sans Dieu ». He was born in Paris in 1750, the son of a tradesman. He did not wish to follow his father's profession and studied law, but at twenty began a literary career, writing works of arcadic inspiration. He was therefore welcomed in certain literary salons, where he also met the future Madame Roland. He found a post in the Mazarine Library, where he was able to broaden his culture and become familiar with the deists, the English materialists, utopians, physiocrats, Spinozists, the *philosophes* and encyclopaedists, and all the ideas which were circulating in his time. In the spirit of this intellectual atmosphere he also became an adept of a Masonic lodge. Of all the themes being discussed in that period, he was most attracted by that of the golden age, which was for him above all the « re-establishment » of a « natural » equality, which was non-statalistic; governed according to a rational central proposition, but anarchic and made up of family cells which were self-sufficient and guided by moral values of affection and virtue.

In the years preceding the Revolution, his irreligious and egalitarian writings lost him his post in the Mazarine Library and in the end led to his arrest and a brief imprisonment. At the end of 1788 he published an anonymous anti-monarchic booklet in Brussels, *Apologues modernes à l'usage du dauphin*, whose elements he was to take up again in 1793 in the theatrical work of which we shall speak.

Having embraced the cause of the Revolution, Maréchal wrote for newspapers (in particular *Révolutions de Paris*), wrote songs and pamphlets, which were always anti-clerical in tone, in favour of the reform of the calendar and the abolition of the external manifestations of religion and his old idea of the equal redistribution of the land among the fathers of families. He was friend of many foremost figures, in particular the Jacobin Chaumette, the leader of the Paris Commune, but also Bonneville, the founder of the Cercle Social – the group which published some of Saint-Martin's works – a circle which was to be connected with the Gironde. He was also a friend of Babeuf, at least from 1793 on, and played an important part, as we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in his Conspiracy of the equals. While Dommangeat presents a consistent picture of Maréchal as decidedly sympathising throughout his career with Jacobin politics and ideas, we have the impression that the problem is more complex and less clear cut and that there is much still to be understood about this figure. The only solid

²⁶ On the figure of Maréchal see, M. Dommangeat, *Sylvain Maréchal, l'égalitaire, l'homme sans dieu*, Paris 1950, and F. Aubert, *Sylvain Maréchal*, Pisa 1971.

reference point seems to be the recurrence in many of his writings of the themes we have mentioned. At the beginning of 1793 Maréchal wrote the *Correctif à la Révolution* where he argued that the Revolution was not yet over, and saw that moment as a transitional phase which would enable men to accumulate enough enlightenment « pour revenir par choix à l'état primitif »²⁷. Happiness was not possible as long as civil society, based intrinsically on inequality, violence and lack of liberty existed. Maréchal even attacked patriotism. The purpose of revolution for him was to go beyond civil and political society to a society of family relationships and friendship guided by natural reason²⁸. We note in passing that there are many similarities here with Saint-Martin's vision. Even in its atheism, Maréchal's vision contains a touch of lay mysticism in the faith in the pure self-evidence and goodness of natural reason which makes laws useless, and tempts us to think of a comparison with the divine wisdom of the theosophist.

In October 1793 his *Jugement dernier des rois* presents itself as a work of didactic propaganda, directed especially at a sans-culottes audience – whose political movement was at that moment at the height of its fervour – with a subject designed to receive unanimous enthusiastic applause, as in fact it did in its numerous performances in Paris and other cities²⁹. The play had the full approval of the government: the Committee of Public Safety, which had thousands of copies printed to send to the front, even provided the gunpowder – sorely needed at the front – to repeat the final eruption of the volcano every night at the Théâtre de la République.

The style of the *Jugement dernier* stands outside previous theatrical tradition, which had, including the famous *Charles IX* by Marie-Joseph Chenier, characterised the earlier phase of the Revolution, and has even been compared to modern revolutionary theatre, and in particular with Mayakovsky's *Misterija-Buff*³⁰. The elements of this accurate « popularising » expression of a new ideology have been pointed out by certain writers, and

²⁷ *Correctif à la révolution*, *op. cit.*, proposition LX.

²⁸ Dommanget tells us there were a number of communities in the period which gave expression to an archaic autarchy by refusing laws from the capitol and patriotism: Fleuriot (Vosges), Quitard-Pinon (Auvergne), Jault.

²⁹ In her essay on « Théâtre révolutionnaire et représentation due bien », *Poétique. Revue de théorie et d'analyse littéraire*, 22, 1975, J. Schlanger discusses the problem of how a civic education was offered through the revolutionary theater. She maintains that what was going on was « pedagogy through enthusiasm »: the good message was communicated by « contagion ». According to Schlanger, organizers did not expect the audience to take a critical point of view or to think about the political lesson contained in the text beyond that spelled out in the explicit matter enacted. And that is why revolutionary theater uses exaggerated images. What is required is not the exercise of judgment, but enthusiastic participation by « contagion » (so it follows that there must be no negative symbols). Revolutionary theater teaches nothing new, it simply provides abundant – redundant – confirmation. And so it necessarily resorts to « mediocre » words and clichés.

³⁰ Truchet, *op. cit.*, affirms that this theater is a precursor of protest theater; a comparison with Majakovskij is developed by Jacques Proust, « De Sylvain Maréchal à Maïakovski: contribution à l'étude du théâtre révolutionnaire », in *Studies in XVIIIth Century French Literature*, Exeter, 1975.

we shall examine them. What seems to me still lacking is some hypotheses as to how this « new » form is composed; that is, what traditional themes and images does a writer like Maréchal re-elaborate to build a text which breaks with tradition³¹. His choice of title – *Jugement dernier des rois, prophétie en un acte* – which explicitly draws from traditional images, already prepares us for the fact that the more closely we examine the text, the more complex the overlapping of old and new elements will appear.

Maréchal stated in introducing the text that the idea had been taken from his work *Apologues modernes à l'usage du dauphin*, which he however calls by its sub-title, *Leçons du fils aîné du roi*; and the following is the passage that Maréchal gives:

En ce temps-là: revenu de la cour, bien fatigué, un visionnaire se livra au sommeil, et rêva que *tous les peuples* de la terre, le jour des *Saturnales*, se *donnèrent le mot* pour se saisir de la personne de leurs rois, chacun de son côté. Ils convinrent *en même temps d'un rendez-vous général*, pour rassembler cette poignée d'individus couronnés, et les reléguer dans une petite île inhabitée, mais habitable: le sol fertile n'attendait que des bras et une légère culture. On établit un cordon de petites chaloupes armées pour inspecter l'île, et empêcher ces nouveaux colons d'en sortir. L'embaras des nouveaux débarqués ne fut pas mince. Ils commencèrent par *se dépouiller de tous leurs ornemens royaux* qui les embarrassaient; et il fallut que chacun, pour vivre, mit la main à la pâte. Plus de valets, plus de courtisans, plus de soldats. Il leur fallut tout faire par eux-mêmes. *Cette cinquantaine de personnages ne vécut pas longtemps en paix*; et le genre humain, spectateur tranquille, eut la satisfaction de se voir délivré de ses tyrans par leurs propres mains. (Italics mine).

The plot of the *Jugement dernier des rois* modifies this basic story to the extent that what it talks of is no longer an impossible dream, but a dream which by then, thanks to the Revolution, had taken on historical reality so that one could imagine fulfilling it. The *visionnaire* is thus transformed into an aged, involuntary Robinson Crusoe, forced by the French monarchic system to live on a volcanic desert island, because twenty years before he had dared to try to snatch his young daughter from the clutches of rapist aristocrats. The old man's solitude is made more bearable by his relationship with a group of savages who come to the island to worship the volcano. The savages have no experience of hierarchy or authority; they have no king; but are tempted to do homage to the old man. But, at the entrance to the cave where he lives, he has written the motto « It is better to have a volcano for a neighbour than a king. Liberty, equality »; he therefore dissuades them, and convinces them to keep their innocent equality and worship the sun as well as the volcano.

One day from the shore he sees a sloop of Europeans approaching and hides, fearing that they are bringing him news of an odious act of clemency

³¹ The analysis I propose differs from research into the literary sources, something which has already been undertaken, especially by Dommanget, *op. cit.*

by a new tyrant on the throne. But the Europeans are representatives of the sans-culottes from various European nations, who have risen up together on an agreed date and, following the example of France, have overthrown their tyrants – and this recalls the « revolution of mankind » of Saint-Martin – and loaded them all on a ship to exile them on a habitable desert island. Seeing the words carved by the old man, the sans culottes realise that the island is inhabited by a « martyr of the Old Regime ». He might have died without knowing that his country was free and with it the rest of Europe. « He is certainly one of us », they cry, seeing the « holy words » carved on the rock. He is worthy of the great Revolution, because « he had felt its coming at the ends of the earth » (scene II).

The old man and the sans culottes then meet and tell each other their stories. They go over the injustices of the old regime and the story of the liberation of the oppressed peoples brought about by the people themselves. The old man is enthusiastic. He had never dared to hope for such a revolution, but can conceive it, and says: « I had always believed that the people, who are as powerful as the God preached to them, had only to desire... » (Scene III). Answering his questions – in a way which is very much part of the revolutionary phase in which the work was written – with polemical references to all non-Jacobin movements, seen as equivalent to the oppressors of the Old Régime, the sans culottes tell him how they came to the decision to rise up simultaneously en masse all over Europe. They explain to him that the sans culottes are virtuous fathers and friends (and here Maréchal makes a synthesis of his own ideal and of the self image of the historical sans culottes). They go on to tell him how a « Convention européenne » had decided to deport all the kings to an island. They had not executed them to give Europe the spectacle of a seraglio where the tyrants would tear each other to pieces, venting their rage on each other instead of on their so-called subjects.

The old man assures the sans culottes that the island is suitable for their purpose, especially as the volcano seems on the point of erupting. During this speech he insists again on the goodness and rightmindedness of his savage friends, who are at that moment arriving on the island. In a scene of fraternisation – which the public received with signs of enthusiasm – the old man offers the sun the gifts of fruit brought by the savages, to whom he explains in gestures what is happening. He says to the sans culottes: « brave sans culottes, these savages are our older brothers in liberty, because they have never had a king. They were born free, and live and die as they were born » (Scene IV).

In the meantime the kings are set on shore with the Pope and Catherine II (impersonated in Paris by the comic actor Michot). The sans culottes from each country enumerate their crimes (with some historical accuracy), while the sovereigns attempt pitiful justifications or complain about the lack of comfort. Maréchal naturally gives special treatment to the pope, and the Roman sans culotte declares that the sans culottes recognise no divinities

but liberty, equality and fraternity. The sans culottes invite nature to complete their work with the volcano's fire, pretend to leave with the old man and the savages, but really hide so as to watch how the kings behave. They immediately begin to quarrel and accuse each other. A fight breaks out between the Pope and Catherine II (his made the audiences roar with laughter). The king of Spain has concealed a piece of bread and tries to eat it. Another fight breaks out. This whole scene is full of comic and grotesque elements, which were not present in the original basic story. The sans culottes return and throw the kings a case of biscuits, because « they feel pity as well as justice ». The grotesque riot which follows is brought to an end by the eruption of the volcano, always greeted enthusiastically by the audience; the kings, surrounded by fire, are dashed under ground.

I would now like to point out certain elements which stand out in this text. To begin with, however, a word of caution: the presence of these elements must not be seen as a logical chain, an orderly discourse which « stands up » on its own. Every symbol has several senses which do not necessarily « agree » and may not be always deliberate. Nor could it be otherwise: the new must arise from the disarrangement of many traditional symbols.

Let us take the example of the theme of the « Last Judgement ». The themes of the Christian last judgement are not limited to the title; they occur throughout the play, but turned upside-down, because the God of the sans culottes is their own liberty, equality and fraternity: their will, to which the old man referred³². The last judgement is turned upside-down because it is controlled by man and not by some extrahuman agency. The presence of this symbolism is in my opinion brought out by the insistence on the collective decision to all rise up together on an established date, a gesture which generally recalls the idea of ritual and the sacred, but is also an inverted reminder of the insistence of the Gospels, and in particular of Matthew 24, on the fact that it is not given to men to know the *exact moment* when the Apocalypse and the Last Judgement will come to *all the nations*. The kings are condemned because they are the persecutors of the poor and the weak, as in the Gospels and Revelation, but they are condemned by the poor and the weak themselves, and not by a « supreme » authority; they are taken by ship to an island which is a metaphor of great complexity.

The island is present throughout eighteenth century literature, as a utopian setting, as the destination of voyages of initiation or in search of the true state of nature. It has been pointed out by Dommangeat that the island in Maréchal's play has its precedent in *L'isle des esclaves* by Marivaux, where

³² Observing the limits of Maréchal's viewpoint, which he finds to be « idealistic and static » and which, « despite the fact that he is an unbeliever, verges upon an essentially religious naturalism », Proust sustains, in the cited essay, that for Maréchal the revolution is like an « illumination ». Touching briefly on Maiakovski's subtle derision of the Sermon on the Mount, he affirms that Maréchal is not capable of an equally free reinterpretation of the Christian myth. He does not, however, develop the point.

after the shipwreck the relationships between servants and masters are reversed. And clearly many fragments of a discourse on the state of nature crowd in Maréchal's work: the exiled Robinson, the good savages, their fraternisation with the *sans culottes*³³, and at the end, for the kings, the negative state of nature in the war of everyone against each other, the only image of nature legitimately connected to tyranny.

And the island can become the locus of negative reality, if the rest of the world is freed, and has become positive. But there are other older and more confused references in this island-symbol. The ship may bring to mind a classical allusion to Charon's boat to Hades. On the one hand, this ship bears the condemned kings – which according to the opening passage are stripped of sceptres and ornaments, « naked » before the Judgement – to a hell which they will make themselves, but where the eruption of *fire* which will hurl them into the bowels of the earth is already in preparation. On the other hand, the ship bears the *sans culottes* to visit the old man and save him. Dommanget has speculated on the literary sources of this figure of the old man and has suggested some nearly contemporary to the play. Certainly the figure of the old wise man has a long cultural history. There is however a possible interpretation of the figure in the setting of the theme of the « Last Judgement », which however bold it may seem, tends in my view to impose itself as completing the pattern proposed: if the *sans culotte* has acquired the right to come to terms with the past, to « visit the Hades » of his dead to interrogate his own history as learned literary predecessors had done before him, then the old man can be compared to the prophet, the « just man » who lived before the age of redemption and was saved in the Christian Last Judgement³⁴, or also to the « martyrs » – and this is, in fact, the first word the *sans culottes* use to describe him when they arrive on the island – who are avenged in the Judgement.

This play was, of course, not written by *sans culottes*, but *for* them. It is therefore the more likely that a writer who set out to involve them on an emotional level by teaching them some ideas in an immediate way would more or less consciously make use of the traditional elements of sacred performances, though distorted and changed in meaning.

The turning upside-down of themes is of foremost importance – in a different and coextensive perspective which does not cancel out the original one – even in the theme of the Saturnalia, which is also mentioned at the beginning. Saturnalia that are no longer the eruption of one day, the expres-

³³ Again, Proust writes: « ...the transferal of sovereignty from the hands of the people to those of the nation is not a conquest, it is a re-conquest. Republican order allows the people to rediscover the equivalent of *natural order*, and the *sans-culottes* can fraternize with the savages... ». Proust sees in this play a tendency to sacralize natural order, founded on a representation of reality constructed along the lines of that upholding the divine right monarchy, though referred to different principles.

³⁴ For an analysis of the Last Judgment in Christianity and other religions, see S.G.F. Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead*, London, 1967.

sion of the dream of a world turned upside-down, but in turn assume an upside-down meaning, because they are truly achieved. The reference to the Saturnalia might at first sight seem so generic as to be superfluous, as in the case of the last Judgement. The utopian future, the golden age of Saturn (which in time had blended, as was mentioned at the beginning, with other symbols of Christian origin) have arrived. This may be, but why should a completed revolution need this old tradition? And yet it was a deeply rooted tradition in popular culture, as was the religious one of the last Judgement. And its presence, which at times can be seen in the provincial revolutionary holidays, in the characters in the processions³⁵, could not but have a strong emotional effect on the audience. I think that the strong elements of comedy and the grotesque in the play should be seen in this perspective³⁶, together with the lack of direct violence against the kings, who are struck down and eliminated by a natural force, the volcano, which could be seen at the same time as a metaphor of the irresistibility of the general will of the people.

Maréchal had several plays in his library³⁷, including Renaissance texts of popular comedies. And if we, albeit with some caution, approach Bachtin's by now classic work on Rabelais and popular culture to seek some help in interpretation, to fill in the gaps of other explanations, we do find some useful ideas: the importance of the body and bodily functions in popular carnivals, for example. And in our case, eating, for here we have the kings fighting over food. The Pope, the priest, comes to blows with a woman, Catherine, who is, further, interpreted by a man; a woman against whom the only vulgar expression in the play – « Madame de l'enjambée » – is used. Their fight has a salacious touch to it which makes it all the more funny.

And that volcano, which recalls « "hell", a compulsory part of every carnival [which] was represented by a balloon throwing out flames » (Bachtin), enables us here to reply to Jacques Proust's objection³⁸ that the fact it was nature- volcano which makes the last decision is a political limit of the play, because it is a sign of the impotence of the sans-culottes. But perhaps this solution really followed the logic of popular grotesque comedy: « (...) behind the laughter there was never any hidden violence », writes Bachtin,

³⁵ Cfr. M. Vovelle, *op. cit.*, and M. Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1976.

³⁶ The comic aspects of *sans culottes* theater and the light-hearted atmosphere of the public are underlined by S. Bianchi, « Un théâtre sans-culotte? », « *Gavroche* », 7, 1982-83.

³⁷ F. Aubert, *op. cit.*, lists all of the titles in the library Maréchal left.

³⁸ He moves this objection in « Jugement dernier des rois », in *Approches des Lumières. Mélanges offerts à Jean Fabre*, Paris, 1974; in the essay « De Maréchal à Maïakovski », *cit.*, he continues this interpretation of the people reduced to the role of mere spectators, adding the hypothesis that the vulcano may, at the moment, remind the public of the *Montagne*. Thus the scheme would work out: First stage, the passive people; second stage, the exemplary militant *sans-culottes*; third stage, the vulcano- the leaders whose decisions carry all before them.

laughter raised no stake, hypocrisy and deception never laugh but have a serious mask, laughter has no dogmas and cannot be authoritarian, it is not a sign of fear but the consciousness of strength, it is connected to the sexual act, to birth, to renewal, to fecundity, to abundance, to eating and drinking, to the earthly immortality of the people, it is linked to the future, to the new and clears the way for the future.

The kings become comic bogeymen, in a « carnivalisation » of consciousness, to use another expression of Bachtin's, which went with the overturning of the old, with the construction of the new, with the regenerating, almost sensually liberating eruption. For Maréchal, although steeped in Enlightenment culture and abstract bourgeois reason, had after all come from a semi-popular background and grown up in the Halles district. So perhaps this irruption of popular comedy was a conscious intuition, perhaps Maréchal not only wanted to indoctrinate an audience which was different from him, but also wanted to give them something. It was not a theoretical instrument, because popular comedy never uses deliberate theory, but an instrument which could more intimately be part of that audience, and contribute to an autonomous elaboration of new ideas.