

# Charles Maurras, Shaper of an Age

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THERE ARE SERIOUS obstacles in our way when we try to acquaint America with the personality, the role, and the thought of Charles Maurras (1868-1952). One of these obstacles is that American scholars and their academic endeavors have been mostly shaped by the Germanic spirit, with here and there a representative of Latinitas, a Santayana, or a Maritain. The French university system is far from their accustomed mode of thought, and the French model of schooling is more distant still. The works of Maurras have therefore been little translated, hardly discussed (this would be today politically incorrect), let alone read on any academic level. The fact, too, that T.S. Eliot was a great admirer of Maurras does not help, and even diminishes the French thinker in the eyes of American critics.

There are other reasons, too, for the wide gap. Maurras is the quintessential anti-democratic thinker, and "pluralism" would mean for him the coexistence of several closed worlds, "republics" under the unifying monarchy. Or they would be "minorities" as we would call them: Protestants, Freemasons, Jews, and foreigners. These almost self-con-

tained "republics," these four riders of the Apocalypse, penetrated France as alien elements, and, with modernity coming, corroded the autochthonous substance. They would be "republics under the king," an ideal image in need of a great deal of political architecture. For Maurras the State (politics) cannot be separated from the classical (aesthetic) canons.<sup>1</sup>

At this point we are at the heart of Maurrassian doctrine, at the farthest pole from Anglo-Saxon premises: a Mediterranean worldview in which Greeks and Latins commune. The State is a work of art (Aristotle balancing Plato in neverending tension), an orderly and just arrangement, built for permanence, an ideal. It is far, unbridgeably far, from pragmatic politics, the duel of lobbies, voting procedures, responses to polls, authorized flag-burning. The classical spirit is everywhere present in Maurrassian literature, even in his full name: Charles-Marie-Photius, the last-mentioned from the sixth-century Greek merchant-discoverer of Marseille, metropolis of the Midi, not far from Maurras's birthplace. The Greek ideal accompanied him to the end as the sign of perfection, peak-achievement, reference, and a kind of inner clock. It has been held by "terrible simplifiers" that Maurras introduced fascism in France,

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and, of course, he was sentenced to life-imprisonment at age seventy-seven as a "collaborator of the German occupant." This fact further explains why Maurras and his oeuvre are practically unknown in the United States, where occasionally college students will sidle up to you showing some Maurrassian texts as if they were dirty pictures.

We shall attempt here to reestablish a modicum of truth. There were some youthful errors of judgment on Maurras's part, but they were then common to the generation of Anatole France, Ernest Renan, and others, all followers of Auguste Comte's positivism, a "scientific" philosophy and sociology (the latter term coined by Comte himself), a doctrine not unlike Herbert Spencer's in England. We must explain the Comtian success-story and generational influence by the fact that the nineteenth century turned France upside down, a trying era indeed. It began with the worldshaking rule of Napoleon, followed by three revolutions which, with 1789 in the background, changed society's structure; this was followed by the crisis of restoring or abolishing the monarchy, the colonization of North Africa and Indo-China, the outlawing of religious orders by the ideologically and aggressively lay republic (1905). Thus one half of the country's intelligentsia followed Comte's positivism and preparation for a scientific society, the other half, Catholic and royalist. We see the outline of Maurras's important position as a unifier of the two discourses. A unifying factor was the general detestation of Germany, victorious at Sudan (1870), a Germany nevertheless admired for her progress in all of the sciences and technologies. For Maurras, the Germans were the par excellence *aliens* (Protestants, romantics, sentimental and barbarous), and facing them, positivism that represented French (Greco-Latin) rationality, lucidity, and the politically best organizational prin-

ciple. The ideological climate for this vision was the clear Mediterranean air, the sun at high noon, the silence and equilibrium celebrated by Paul Valéry's great poem, *Le cimetière marin*—German darkness versus French light. The wisdom of pre-Socratic sages was close to this *Provençal* vision.

In 1896 Maurras was sent by his newspaper to report on the first modern Olympic Games held in Athens. There is some discussion whether he "discovered" the classical ideal on the Acropolis, or whether this episode meant only the final revelation of maturing ideas. That trip for him was the privileged moment, as other moments were decisive for Descartes and for Pascal, and before them for St. Augustine—all three Mediterranean. (Let us also bear in mind that throughout his life Maurras was stone-deaf; vision and intellect were his chief channels to the apprehended world.) His Greek-Latin *forma mentis* translated for him the image of classical columns to the political architecture of sharp contours and hierarchies within which the citizen occupies his place. Expressed otherwise, there are the multiplicities of civil society, but institutions and finally the hereditary king are at the top. This is not as rigid as Plato's Republic, but of a similar inspiration. This is not fascism, nor even Nazism, both being too turbulent for Maurras's classic preferences, both alien on account of their socialistic ingredient and enthusiastic but temporary unity, not fixed in institutional form. The Maurrassian edifice is also different from that of Carl Schmitt, the German critic of the modern State, who faulted the Weimar constitution for its failure to make room for a supreme arbiter in case of turmoil and danger. Precisely, the Maurrassian State needed no appointed arbiter, it possessed such a function in the monarch, surrounded by loyal civil servants of the common good. Thomas More would be a good illustration.

Is this a utopian construct? Is it Plato's ideal republic, without a philosopher-king, but a flesh-and-blood member of the nation and its history? I tend to believe, rather, that the Maurrassian realm is an attempted answer to modern politics *before* anarchy sets in and appeals must be made to the "exceptional individual." In its pure form, such a political body will never be found, but one must keep in mind that Maurras grew up in the first decades of the Third Republic, with its hypocrisy and scandals of corruption, its weak national defense, unable to stand up to Bismarck and the Kaiser, and its *fin-de-siècle* hedonism. Thirty years before, in Spain, Donoso Cortes, in despair over the lack of royal guidance, asked for a dictator to govern a slowly pulverized empire. Napoleon III was but a failed imitation of such a dictator.<sup>2</sup> In Wilhelminian Germany, Max Weber diagnosed the modern political weakness, although his solution differed from that of Donoso Cortes and of Maurras. Yet he tried to bring a remedy to the same ills: namely, the hope that patriotic and educated civil servants would protect the questionably valid democratic industrial order.

In a France still royalist at heart, Maurras had no great difficulty to find support for restoration. From the Dreyfus case to the defeat in 1940, half-a-century, Maurras was the undisputed icon of army officers, the clergy, fashionable ladies, the bourgeois class, and even of some leftist patriots who found "their" republic not militant enough. Contrary to later times, large sections of the intelligentsia were also avid reader of Maurras's journal, *Action française*, which embodied the aspirations and the literary taste of the Right. Even today, the remnant of the Right considers him as its *maître à penser*, and young men are not lacking who commit themselves to his cause, an unflinching patriotism. Many of my own friends pay tribute to his form of intelligence;

indeed, when Maurras was sent to prison and then died, France was again divided into two camps, and the cleavage almost led to civil war when Charles de Gaulle granted independence to Algeria and liquidated the empire. The followers of Maurras never forgave the General-President.<sup>3</sup>

There were, however, other tragedies which destabilized the pedestal on which Maurras used to stand. In 1926, Pope Pius XI ex-communicated the *Action française* (movement and various journals), dealing a near death-blow to his followers, a majority of them Catholics, henceforth divided in their loyalty. Many left Maurras, and few returned when, in 1939, Pius XII lifted the interdict. *Mutatis mutandis*, this was a sort of "Lefebvre affair." A second episode takes us to February 1934 when the French Right saw that the time had come to attack the government and the regime itself for its continued corruption and communist infiltration. An enormous crowd was ready to invade the building of the National Assembly in order to "throw out the scoundrels"; a message from Maurras, still and always only a publisher of journals, but having a unique prestige, would probably have sufficed to launch the attack. In this ripe moment he hesitated, then desisted, in spite of the pressure by his young disciples to act. They never forgave him for having remained, in those fatal hours, just a scribbler.<sup>4</sup> The following year a leftist coalition, the "Popular Front," took over the government—perhaps the decisive factor in the outbreak of World War II, four years later.

The unspent energies of the Right on February 6 (keep in mind that Hitler had just become chancellor!), were stored away until the 1940 defeat and Marshal Pétain's coming to power. In a great nation's history things often repeat themselves. In the mid-eighteenth century France had, so to speak, two heads: Louis

XV and Voltaire, uncrowned prince of the "republic of letters." There was a similar occurrence in 1940: Pétain and Maurras. The marshal, too, was in fact a Maurrassian, as was the majority of the civil servants of what was now called the "French State," a "republic" no more. The difference between the two situations, separated by two hundred years, was the fact of the German occupation. The legitimate question is, to what extent was Maurrassian thought responsible for the new laws promulgated by the Vichy regime, and to what extent the orders of the occupying power? Even today the issue is undecided since half of France long before these events had been "Maurrassian" (and was to remain so till this day). Condemn an entire nation? Half of it? Was the other half free of doctrinal and political errors? Obviously not, even if we only consider that it was the socialist/communist government, heavily manipulated by Stalin, which sabotaged the coming war. Which side, then, was guilty for opening France's strategic gates on the northeastern frontier? Was it not the pacifist Left which enjoyed popularity abroad among its intellectual allies, Stalin's fellow-travelers from Picasso to the "Red Dean" of Canterbury?<sup>5</sup>

End-of-century historiography has still not answered these questions, because some sturdy taboos oppose an objective debate in each of the countries involved, including the United States. Certainly, in this paper by a contemporary who was at the time a young man in Central Europe, Maurras and his political thought are not seen as isolated elucubrations, but as occupying a central and influential position in minds from Athens to Buenos Aires, from W. B. Yeats to Thomas Mann. Let us try to unravel this basically non-mysterious course of events.

1789 and its revolutionary sequels demonstrated, although perhaps with

non-Burkean underpinnings, that democracy is inevitable and that it will change the course of western history. Tocqueville himself was of two minds about this likely future, and that is why he traveled in America: to understand the phenomenon in depth, and, as it were, to prepare for its coming to France. At the end of his sojourn he was still undecided whether to welcome democracy or warn against it, but he understood that the problem transcended politics, which is largely cultural, affecting public discourse, the place of religion, the structure of the family. By and large, European intellectuals of the post-Tocquevillian century and a half remained similarly hesitant. At any rate, the two extra-European "experiments," the American and the Russian, reacted to the new ideology and prompted many nations to embrace some form of collectivism, such as communism, fascism, or mass democracy. This was, and still is, the "spirit of the time."

Maurras chose otherwise: nationalism, but not the war-like, aggressive kind, rather an organized patriotism, unmoved in its classical structure, severely traditionalist, built according to the rhythm of natural and local growth, yet not allowed to leave the institutional path. The doctrine was pragmatic enough (Maurras favored the "voluntary associations" which he thought he detected in the United States), but only by default. It could only apply to one country at a time when aggressive ideologies were imposed on multitudes of them. Disciples, from Brazil to Rumania, had to formulate their own "Maurrassism," adapting if they could his thinking to local circumstances. But this was impossible. Eventually without an accepted referent (*patriotism* was obviously preempted), people on the "other side" began to refer to Maurrassian teaching as "fascism." Clearly it was not exportable the way Soviet communism and Ameri-

can democratic capitalism have been.

For similar reasons, Maurras's anti-Semitism and (early) anti-Catholicism (inherited from Comte) have also been misunderstood, often on purpose, by unforgiving enemies. These issues interested him only insofar as they affected France. No ideology could be manufactured from these elements. The nation's unity was the primary consideration, and all those who could not assimilate to it were the "foreign element" that Maurras called *les mêtèques*, the Greek term for "outside the household,"—not slaves, not inferior strata, but unassimilated. Such views were held by Comte, Anatole France, Tocqueville's younger friend, Gobineau, Renan; the tragedy was that the Hitler years turned this essentially Greek view into racist instruments. If Maurras was responsible for it, so were prestigious thinkers from Voltaire on.

This leads to Maurras's much more complex views of the Church, and therefore to the relentless animosity towards him to this day in certain Catholic circles. What is forgotten is that Maurras's later poems express a humble conversion, to such an extent that a pope was to call him a great champion of the Church. On his death-bed he asked for and received the last sacrament. This is not to deny the earlier, "positivist" Maurras's erroneous interpretation of the Church's origin and trajectory, an interpretation close enough to that of a heretic movement, for example, of Marcion in the second century A.D. The Church has two aspects, Maurras argued: the four emoting Jewish evangelists with their sentimental missionary mentality, and the solid superstructure modelled on Roman political virtues and Roman sense of realism built on the knowledge of human nature. He admired the Roman side and faulted the Semitic, middle-eastern side as a source of danger for the body politic. Only the later Maurras was

to understand that there was no fracture between the two "sides"; the militant Maurras of earlier decades had combated Marc Sangnier's democrats (in *La démocratie religieuse*) as menacing both Church and State.

The Maurras phenomenon deserves to be studied seriously for an understanding of European history in the first half of the twentieth century—the struggle for and against democracy—and also because ignoring it leaves a vacuum for misjudgments in political theory and practice. Half a century after his death, the picture is rather clear even if it has to be unearthed from under layers of taboo and other layers of newspeak. Like all the important political writers—Plato, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Max Weber—Maurras reacted to what he perceived as a dangerous decline of sobriety in politics, but he refused to become "universally valid" in a century demanding global diagnoses and global remedies. His sole interest was France. In the eyes of his critics, he thus became a narrow nationalist, but not in the eyes of those aware of his enormous influence and of his attempt to integrate political thought with a Mediterranean overview, and thus with a classical vision. In a romantic and sentimental age, Maurras tried to rehabilitate rationality as a political interpretation of the real, although he was not too sanguine about the "future of intelligence," the title of one of his volumes (*L'avenir de l'intelligence*, 1905). Much more influential was the above mentioned *Démocratie religieuse* (1906-1913) in which he tears to shreds the utopian infiltration of Church doctrine and politics. In a way, Maritain's public writing career was an answer to the thesis of these volumes, and it is perhaps not incorrect to opine that the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) itself meant to be a final liquidation of the Maurrassian critique of a social and sentimental Ca-

tholicism. The controversy is not likely to end soon.<sup>6</sup>

French intellectual history has known many instances of thinkers and writers who first meet with rejection and then become regarded as upholders of orthodoxy: for example, impressionistic painters, and poets like Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. There have been several post-Maurrassian "cursed generations," too, those who rejected Maurras's inadequacy to lead concretely in critical times; and those who, by now *sine ira et studio*, have returned to him and to his memory as a permanent advocate of clear thinking and style. In fact Maurras's thought is very much alive today when France is melting herself down in a sentimental, pan-European *potpourri*. For these disciples, Germany remains the adversary, and even François Mitterrand, socialist president with a Maurrassian past, tried many diplomatic tricks (another taboo subject) to prevent German reunification in 1990 by attempting to dissuade Gorbachov from granting it. History, *pace* Fukuyama, is not ending, and Maurras, popular or cursed, is likely to accompany it as a relevant observer.

1. Maurras's Hellenic mindset and inspiration are important explanatory factors here. His *Provençal* background was built on the ancient Greek communities which extended from Asia Minor to the Spanish coast. These communities were intensely commercial, but otherwise closed to political participation by foreigners and other outsiders. 2. Similar, real, or failed semi-military *coups d'Etat* were not infrequent in the nascent democracies of the last century and of the early twentieth, from General Boulanger to Mussolini and Franco. 3. This seems a paradox since de Gaulle, scion of a Maurrassian family, instinctively and consciously assumed regal attitudes as president of the French republic (1960-70). In the 1960s I had opportunities to watch him at press conferences in the Elysée Palace where the monarchic, Louis XIV aspect was very much in evidence. 4. Among the fiery young men who saw

The Maurrassian generations are, if not dying out, losing their intellectual influence. The "hexagone" used to be politically self-sufficient, but it now loses its moorings in the "global" context. There are new rightist groups, a new nationalism directed not at Germany but at the United States, ready to fight on other than strictly political fronts. Three decisively important institutions, active until 1960, have abandoned the national cause as Maurras had conceived it and have accepted a weakened condition: the Army was internally defeated and eviscerated by de Gaulle when he granted independence to Algeria; the official Church at Vatican II opted for the liberal-democratic establishment and its culture; and the mental fortress, the system of education (tough lycées, a well-structured university training, elite schools like the Ecole Normale Supérieure), has been all but dismantled. The thinking and teaching of Maurras, determining factors for half a century, are now a rigid orthodoxy of *ipse dixit* for powerless subgroups and an object of nostalgia for past leaders and ideals. In a way, it is the agony of France.

this rupture between words and deeds as a scandal, several were to yield to the "fascist temptation." They became Hitlerist sympathizers and later cooperated with the occupation forces. One, the great poet Robert Brazillach, was sentenced to die by the *épuration* court and executed (February 1945). 5. To complicate matters, let us note that there were pacifists also on the Right who did not want to upset the European balance of power, for example, by challenging Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia (1935). 6. The thinking of Maurras is often summed up in the formula, "*politique d'abord*," that is to say, in worldly affairs and confrontations the political interest is the primary consideration. Maritain's answer was summed up in "integral humanism," divinely inspired human standards in all things. The first formula is too harsh, the second unrealistic.