



St Petersburg Dialogues: Or Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence

Joseph de Maistre

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Written and set on the banks of the Neva, St Petersburg Dialogues is a startlingly relevant analysis of the human prospect at the end of the twentieth century. As the literary critic George Steiner has remarked, "the age of the Gulag and of Auschwitz, of famine and ubiquitous torture, ... nuclear threat, the ecological laying waste of our planet, the leap of endemic, possibly pandemic, illness out of the very matrix of libertarian progress" is exactly what Maistre foretold. In the Dialogues Maistre addressed a number of topics which are discussed briefly or not at all in his other works already available in English. These include an apologetic for traditional Christian beliefs about providence, reflections on the social role of the public executioner and the "divinity" of war, a critique of John Locke's sensationalist psychology, meditations on prayer and sacrifice, and a mini-course on "illuminism." The literary form is that of the "philosophical conversation" -- one that allowed Maistre to be deliberately provocative and to indulge his taste for paradox, a "methodical extravagance" that he judged particularly appropriate for the eighteenth-century salon. Translator and editor Richard Lebrun provides a full scholarly edition of this classic work, complete with an introduction, chronology, critical bibliography, and generous explanatory notes. The Dialogues will be of interest to scholars of literary history as well as the history of ideas.

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