

## THESIS ABSTRACT

### **Counter-revolution in France. Thinkers, politicians and writers against progress (1789–1815)**

The object of the thesis is to follow the widely conceived, counter-revolutionary discourses, emerging from the French language literature in 1789–1815. By researching and examining some recurrent leitmotifs and narrative strategies, the author delineates a general, problematic background of the counter-revolutionary literature, perceived in its integrity.

The aim of such an approach, broad, although necessarily selective, is to represent the writings of the French revolution's opponents as a corps of testimonies, informing us about particular mentality transformations. Indeed, the experiences of the revolutionary period seem to be a key element to comprehend not only the evolutions of the minds at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also some essential changes within the French culture, where the narratives of the Enlightenment and classicism give way to a special kind of romanticism.

The counter-revolution is to be seen here not as a mere demand of a return to the *status quo* before May 1789, and therefore as a purely negative gesture understood as the opposition to any changes. It was indeed a reaction, yet not in the meaning the 19<sup>th</sup> century conferred to this word, but in its etymological sense. The counter-revolution became, in fact, an attempt to elaborate a rival project to the revolution. If the latter brought a new, liberal point of view, based on the civil liberties, the domination of the private property in public sphere, the counter-revolutionaries proposed a model founded on obedience, religion and hierarchy, identified with an immemorial order, sanctified by tradition and transcendence. A free competition of individuals was replaced here by a co-existence of social groups, whose respect of their traditional functions would guarantee a harmony in the state. Almost every theoretician and activist of different counter-revolutionary coteries was indeed aware of the necessity of some changes and adaptation of the monarchy to the new, post-Enlightenment society. Thus each and every project, even the most conservative one, was forced to consider a return to the *ancien régime* "without abuses". In this sense, the counter-revolution did not constitute an opposition to the revolution as such, but a different, more evolutionary way to reform the country.

This character of the counter-revolution is emphasized in the first chapter of the thesis, which recreates its general, ideological background, in order to establish the conceptual framework

in which we are to operate. The chapter features anti-revolutionary narratives of such thinkers as Joseph de Maistre, Louis de Bonald, Edmund Burke or Antoine Ferrand. Subsequently, the author presents some key political realities of the revolutionary era; it is, of course, not a place to cite all circumstances of the 1789–1815 period, changing at a vertiginous pace. Chapter II is a description of “life and work” of the count Emmanuel d’Antraigues; his biography leads us throughout the turbulent history of counter-revolution. D’Antraigues’ career is worth being considered both as an epiphenomenon of a counter-revolutionary involvement, and as a testimony of his individual existential experience as an eye-witness to the dramatic revolutionary events.

The consecutive sections of the thesis investigate some more literary questions. Chapter III explores J.-J. Rousseau’s influence on widely considered counter-revolutionary discourse. It is beyond doubt that Rousseau, worshipped by numerous foreground actors of the revolution, became a sort of the French Republic’s forefather. However, such a perception of the *philosophe de Genève* is, perhaps, a simplification. Although an important part of counter-revolutionary elites could never accept that fact, it seems that a large amount of anti-revolutionary writings are profoundly inspired by Rousseau’s ideas, if not by the political ones, then at least by his literary and ontological concepts. The author tends to attribute to Rousseau an essential part in the formation of the French romanticism, and in the construction of a new type of subjectivity, based on a nomadic identity and on a kind of “internal emigration”.

A work featuring the counter-revolutionary literature would be incomplete without an insight into the emigrational writings. In chapter IV, the author explores, in fact, how the *émigré*’s condition influences the perception of reality. The emigrant imaginary is a battleground where two idealistic constructions confront each other: the past and the future, for they are both equally idealized, unreal and enchanted in the *émigré*’s minds. This idealization, coupled with sentiments of exile and rejection, are also to be considered as causes of a new, romantic way of perceiving the reality.

Chapter V transports us anew to the revolutionary France itself, and, particularly, to one of its most crucial regions: the *Vendée*. Was it indeed a counter-revolutionary region which inhibited the march of the young Republic in the name of Catholicism and monarchy? Was it an indefinite territory occupied by some rebelled peasants whose revolt would be primarily economical? Or perhaps was it rather a *lieu de mémoire*, the space of a genocide, as some

historians would like to believe? Maybe, the *Vendée* is all those things at the same time. The author focuses on the process of shaping the collective memory about the *Vendée*, considered as the heart of the counter-revolution, as well as on the construction of martyrdom narratives by some anti-revolutionary memorialists.

The last thing to be considered is the impact of the Jacobin Terror on the French counter-revolutionary literature and culture. What changes of the counter-revolutionary perception of the world were brought by a liminal experience of the Terror? Was Robespierre's death on the scaffold a new chance for counter-revolutionary projects? In fact, the Bourbon's Restoration was still to be awaited for twenty years. And when it eventually came to pass, its triumph was a mere pretence, the falseness of which was finally exposed in 1830.

The counter-revolution, however, is not reducible to its political aspects. It triumphed, in fact, by the literary and the cultural revolution it helped to foster. The author considers that romanticism is to be seen, partly, as a work of counter-revolutionaries and *antimodernes*, term that Antoine Compagnon forges to define those purely modern authors whose conception of modernity was somewhat ambiguous. The post-modern fascination with those writers may be a proof that we still remain within a dialectical pendulum movement between modernity and tradition.