

the symbols of a prolonged conversation with God. The details and tenor of that conversation are not to be revealed, but they are the core of the students' Pilgrimage to Chartres, without which the outward manifestations would be a hollow and unnecessary noise. One can say how well the Pilgrimage was organised; one can say how well the pilgrims behaved. Certainly, the note of penitence was not sounded excessively, and there was no rain to mar the pleasures, or add to the discomfort, of the march. But it was not for nothing that many had walked those forty-odd kilometres who were not used to walking and that nobody had lit a cigarette for three days. Yet one may say all this and much more, and yet feel that one has said nothing. What one would like to speak of would be the image and germination of the Pilgrimage in those many souls; for in each one of them, Christian or unbeliever, Marxist, Moslem or Protestant, it will have marked a milestone, or possibly a crisis, in a drama which the judgment of God must one day bring to an end. It was evident what the Pilgrimage has come to mean for France, but it is not of the French that I now think, as I bring this essay to a close. I think of a young Swiss artist I met in Geneva shortly before I came up to Paris, and of a young Dutch student I met in Nijmegen just after I had returned from Chartres. Both of these had made the Pilgrimage in 1946. The light that came into their faces when I told the one of my project and the other of my experience showed me that the Pilgrimage had become both a symbol and an exercise of European unity; that where the Mother of God so signally performed her ministry of healing, there were neither French nor English, Dutch nor Swiss, Italian nor Spanish, but that all were one in Christ Jesus.

ROBERT SPEAIGHT

PEGUY THE PARADOX

FRANCE is reawakening. Not the France of Voltaire, but of Ste Jeanne d'Arc, not the France of Rousseau's 'Social Contract', but of Péguy's Christian social contract, the contract of universal brotherhood and charity. Charles Péguy was the day-star of that reawakening. None better than he understood the past and present of France, and none was better equipped to reconcile them. With reason he urged his fellowcountrymen to recall the soul of their race: 'Nous sommes une veille race de moines, d'apôtres, de soldats, de maîtres d'oeuvres'. His socialism was not the socialism of Fourier and Saint Simon but of St Francis of Assisi and Ste Jeanne d'Arc, a socialism which is the very antithesis of that propounded by the German Jew, Marx, a socialism to which France, if we read the

signs of the times aright, is returning. The socialism that best accords with the mind and soul of France is the charity of her saints, such as St Vincent de Paul. It would seem to be providential that Péguy was sent to lead the spirit of France, essentially Catholic and chivalrous, to new dimensions of Christian social justice.

Charles Péguy, was born on 7th January, 1878, at Orléans, where his beloved Ste Jeanne had once rallied the wavering forces of France. His widowed mother earned bread for herself and little Charles by mending cane chairs at which the future socialist often helped. Péguy gloried in his peasant origin. He often referred to the peasants of France in his writings, and it was from them, he insisted, that the moral energy necessary for the rejuvenation of France should come. Speaking of himself and his former companions of Orléans he said: *Nous avons touché l'ancienne France et nous l'avons connue intacte.*

It was his love of the peasants, as contrasted with the frivolous unproductive lives of city-dwellers, that made him a socialist, howbeit a socialist with a difference. Among the peasants he found the ancient soul of France pure and intact, uncorroded by 'the acids of modernity'. Among them one found contentment, decency, culture and delicacy, virtues not to be found in the modern world of the *bourgeoisie*. *Et aujourd'hui tout le monde est bourgeois.* His childhood years of poverty and toil gave Péguy excellent training for his future mission. The trouble with most social theorists, he said, was that they never knew what it was to be poor, but when he spoke of poverty it was with the knowledge of an expert. The young Charles attended the grammar school of Orléans and, having secured a scholarship, passed on to the Lycée there. From Orléans he went to the Lycée Sainte-Barbe in Paris, there to prepare for the Ecole Normale. It was during his stay at Sainte-Barbe, which had once sheltered men of such diverse minds as Calvin and St Ignatius Loyola, that Péguy became a revolutionary socialist and abandoned the faith. He was an impetuous youth, and life as he saw it was full of inconsistencies.

The life of Charles Péguy was full of startling paradoxes. Though he outwardly abandoned the faith he allowed himself to be elected president of the local St Vincent de Paul Society and would arrive late at meetings in order to avoid having to participate in the prayers. When his friend Baudoin died he married his sister out of a sense of loyalty to his comrade. The marriage was a civil one and he refused to have it validated by the Church, yet the first person he acquainted with the fact was his pastor of the old Sainte-Barbe days. In due course he entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure to train for a post as university professor. However, it soon became

obvious to him that the drab undramatic life of a teacher would not suit his dynamic impetuous nature. He had seen and experienced too much of the world's injustice to rest content and indifferent. He wanted to lash it with whip-like eloquence. He was wrathful with the righteous indignation of a prophet against all who were at ease in Sion, against *la lâcheté des foules*; and against the conspiracy of silence that lay heavy as frost on the distresses of the poor. The famous Dreyfus case, which occurred at this time, intensified his hatred of legalised injustice, and the fact that he was engaged all during his student days in writing a play on his heroine, Ste Jeanne, determined him in his resolve to become a liberator with the pen for sword. The play turned out to be a failure and lay unnoticed on his bookshelves. But the writing of it gradually brought him back to the faith of la Pucelle, the faith of his forefathers and of France.

On Labour Day, 1st May 1898, Péguy, with some financial assistance from his wife, opened a socialist book-shop in the Latin Quarter of Paris. It became a centre of heated political discussions, but spiritual ardour, alas, will not boil pots. Péguy wrote and spoke of making France the City of the Future, the Harmonious City, to a world which heeded him not. Business became so bad that he had to retire to a humbler shop on the Rue de la Sorbonne. Then in 1900 he and his socialist friends started the afterwards famous *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, to which, as editor, he devoted most of his energies for the rest of his tragically short life. The best of Péguy is to be found, mixed with much dross, in the files of the *Cahiers*. As the subscribers paid for their fortnightly periodicals when they pleased and according to their means, the editor had often to go in dire want.

Words poured from Péguy with urgency and terrible sincerity. Some men, he said, draw words out of their top-coats, some from their very entrails. His own came from him with much travail. His style, which has been a stumbling-block to many, was truly the man himself. André Gide likened it to that of the ancient litanies, and the analogy goes deep. It was like his own life, *La tumulte d'une âme inquiète et héroïque*. In poetry and plays, in classic prose and journalism, he tried to rouse his countrymen to a sense of their high vocation, reminding them that they stood on the threshold of a new era. For the cynical and inactive, the poseur and the lukewarm, the know-alls and the insincere, he had nothing but Dantesque scorn. Indeed he felt a kinship with the haughty Florentine in many ways. The modern world enraged him—*Le monde de ceux qui ne croient plus à rien, le monde de ceux qui ne se dévouent, qui ne sacrifient à rien, exactement le monde de ceux qui n'ont pas de mystique*.

He favoured the device of repetition, and with an almost monotonous insistency he reiterated his thesis that politics and sociology

should be based on mysticism, and referred constantly to the examples of St Francis and his St Jeanne as models of social reformers. How different from the Marxian socialism founded on dialectic materialism, which the Communists are trying to force on France! When the social revolution will come to pass, he said, it will be moral or not at all. His socialism was enlightened by his ideals of christian charity, and this was his attitude to that charity: 'I will have none of a christian charity which would be a constant capitulation before princes and rich men, before the powers of money. I will have none of a christian charity which would be a constant abandon of the poor and oppressed. I recognise one christian charity only and it is that which comes directly from Jesus: it is the spiritual, temporal and constant communion with the poor, the weak and the oppressed'. He anticipated the call of the modern Popes to a vigorous Catholic Action. Indeed one might compile a manual of Catholic Action from the *Cahiers*, containing such bugle-blasts as: '*Miles Christi*, today every Christian is a soldier; the soldier of Christ. There are no more quiescent Christians. . . . All of us stand on the breach today. We are all stationed at the frontier. The frontier is everywhere'.

The difficulties of keeping the *Cahiers* going (and he had often to write an entire issue himself) were aggravated by other trials. The most intense of these was the spiritual crisis which culminated in September, 1908, when he confided to his friend Lotte after much mental anguish, 'I have found faith again. I am a Catholic'. It complicated his life. He had married into a family of militant atheists, and his children, two boys and a girl, were unbaptized. Besides, he and Madame Péguy were not married in the eyes of the Church, so he could not consistently frequent the Sacraments or go to Mass.

The last four years of his life, though full of vicissitudes and interior trials, were poetically very productive. He published *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, a poetic play, in 1910, followed by the second and third mysteries in the two following years. In these the piece entitled *La Passion de Notre Dame*, and translated by Julian Green as 'The Passion of Mary', is truly in the Dante tradition and reveals Péguy, even more than Huysmans, as a man strayed from out the Middle Ages into our own time. His last ambitious poem, *Eve*, was published in 1913, and he announced that it would be an 'Iliad' even greater than the *Divina Commedia*.

If the last days of Péguy's life were rich in poetry, they were equally crowded with paradox. One year before his death one of his sons became gravely ill, and Péguy explained matters to our Lady. He told her of his many cares and placed them in her hands. He

promised her to make a pilgrimage to Chartres if his boy should recover. The child was saved, and so Péguy set off on his pilgrimage to Chartres on foot, a distance of seventy-two kilometres. He wrote an account of his pilgrimage in a poem which brought him more recognition in a matter of days than all his polemics of a lifetime on socialism.

The last paradox of all his life was that he, a man who had laboured so long and ardently in the cause of universal peace and brotherhood, should be killed in battle. He was over forty when the first World War broke out and could have taken a place honourably in the reserves. But he was as zealous to defend his nation as he was to serve it and so he left for the front with the rank of lieutenant. His regiment was engaged in following up the German retreat on the Somme in September 1914. On the third of the month they were quartered in a deserted convent, where Péguy spent the time decorating our Lady's altar with wild flowers. On the fourth they began to close up behind the retreating Germans. On the fifth Péguy fell in action, and died, as he had lived, upholding and fighting for all that is dear to christian civilization and the honour of the eldest daughter of the Church. A year before he had written in the course of a poem:

Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans les grandes batailles,
Couchés dessus le sol à face de Dieu . . .
Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans une juste guerre.
Heureux les épis mûrs et les blés moissonnés.

Blessed are those who died in great battles,
Stretched out on the ground in face of God. . . .
Blessed are those who died in a just war.
Blessed is the wheat that is ripe and the wheat that is garnered
in sheaves.

The wheat of Péguy's words has ripened in our time, nourished by the blood of thousands of Frenchmen who have died in two wars to preserve the christian way of life. But France must garner it, for there are millions starving in Europe for more than mortal bread.

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