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WITH PEGUY TO CHARTRES

THE reader taking up this book[1] for the first time may receive a confused impression. To begin with he will find some stanzas of French verse which suggest in their metre the pilgrimage which they describe in detail. It was André Gide who said that the poetry of Charles Péguy was like the repetition of some ancient litany, always similar but never quite the same. He might have said, with equal truth, that it was like the plodding of feet on a hard road, rhythmical and unrelenting; or like the washing of the sea over a shingle beach where no wave is identical but all strike variations of the same theme. Péguy's verse has a tremendous purpose, and he was never more serious about anything than about this pilgrimage which he made to Chartres. All that he was and knew and felt—his piety and his patriotism and his subtle, involuntary presumption—went into it, and was afterwards translated into the poem he dedicated to our Lady. So much the reader of this book will quickly seize. But then he will examine the photographs, and fresh images will mingle in his mind with the image of Péguy's pilgrimage. The foot of a pillar in Chartres Cathedral and a rucksack casting its shadow on the pavement; a boy with a rucksack on his back mounting the crest of a hill and the twin uneven spires of the cathedral meeting

1 *La Route de Chartres.* Extraits du poème de Charles Péguy, images at presentation de Pierre Jahan (Cerf Blackfriars; 8s. 6d.).

him on the near-horizon; the long shadows thrown by three women as they tramp along an empty road—what, he may ask, is the meaning of these images which mix so easily with the pictures of the Beauce, with the pictures of Notre Dame de Paris and Notre Dame de Chartres and with the plain that lies between them? The purpose of this article is to give the answer to these questions; to describe the two pilgrimages which have been made in recent years along the road to Chartres—the pilgrimage of Charles Péguy which was made once and forever and the pilgrimage of his posterity which is annually renewed.

I have no space to devote more than a few lines to the story of Péguy's life. He was born, of peasant origin, at Orléans in 1880. His mother was a widow and earned a humble living by mending chairs; Péguy was her only child. He was brought up a Catholic, although his mother rarely found time to go to Mass. The boy had exceptional intelligence and was able to go later to Paris and study at the Sorbonne. Proclaiming himself a Socialist and an unbeliever, he left the university and founded the *Cahiers de Quinzaine* in which he and his few devoted collaborators hammered out the first principles of their *Cité Harmonieuse*. Péguy at once developed an idiosyncratic style, loquitive, emphatic, and tirelessly repetitive, and it was soon clear that his Socialism was too personal, and too traditional, for any existing party of reform. Meanwhile he had married Mlle Badouin, the sister of his closest friend, who held views similar to his own. In 1906 he suddenly found himself a believing Catholic. The exact process of his conversion is unknown to us, and it may well have been obscure to him. He did not join his fellow-Catholics in any of their secular campaigns, for he was just as opposed to the militarist monarchism of Maurras as he was to the pacifist Socialism of Blum. His witness to the Faith was solitary and, in one respect, equivocal. For the circumstances of his marriage forbade him to approach the sacraments. At the time of his wedding he and his wife were both convinced free-thinkers and the ceremony had therefore been a civil one. None of his three children had been baptised. If he were to frequent the sacraments, it was essential that his marriage should be blessed in church, and that the children should receive baptism. Madame Péguy, who was bitterly chagrined by her husband's conversion, would agree to neither of these conditions. Péguy was unwilling to resort to subterfuge and, taking refuge in a certain Stoic pride, made no further effort to resolve a painful situation. He never, so far as we know, assisted at Mass until the feast of the Assumption, 1914, three weeks before he was killed at the Marne. It is uncertain if he ever received Communion. Yet it was

the faith, held in its plenitude and without a suspicion of reserve, which inspired him to write some of the finest verse in the French language. It was the faith which kindled his genius to such a degree of incandescence that he became a prophet among his own people, reconciling their divisions within the unity, paradoxical and yet profound, of his own nature.

The life of Péguy has an epic grandeur upon which I must not here dilate. I am only concerned to show the place occupied by Chartres, and consequently by our Lady, in his passionate and pathetic history. Péguy was not a great traveller. He never went abroad and he never saw the sea. His life is bounded by the two plains—the Beauce and the Brie, and by the two cathedrals—our Lady of Paris and our Lady of Chartres. Yet it was not until 1912 that he went to Chartres for the first time. In the February of that year his youngest son, Pierre, fell gravely ill. They suspected meningitis. But for Péguy there was a further supernatural anguish. He was afraid lest his children should die unbaptized, and it was in the agony of this fear that he said to Madame Maritain (the mother of Jacques Maritain): 'I shall soon go on foot to Chartres and confide them to the care of our Lady'. As soon as he had made this decision the child recovered. Péguy did not set out immediately, but on the 10th June he told his friend Alan Fournier that he would go to Chartres between Thursday the 13th and Thursday the 20th of the same month. He did in fact leave on Friday the 14th and returned on Monday the 17th. On the 18th he was seen at his office in the Rue de la Sorbonne, apparently exhausted with fatigue. The same day he wrote to the mother of one of his friends, thanking her for the 'maternal hospitality' she had shown him at Dourdan, a village between Paris and Chartres. But it was not until the 27th September that he gave to his friend Lotte the full story of his pilgrimage. This is what he said: 'My dear fellow, I have changed a great deal in these last two years, I am a new man. You can't imagine how much I have suffered and prayed. If you lived near to me, you would understand everything; but when one only sees a chap twice a year, I can't explain to you. I live without the sacraments. But I have a treasury of graces, an inconceivable superabundance of graces. When a sign is given me I obey it—one musn't resist. My little Pierre was ill. . . . I had to make a vow. I made a pilgrimage to Chartres. I am a man of the Beauce and Chartres is my cathedral. I did not go a yard in any vehicle and I did the 144 kilometres in three days. Ah, my dear boy, the Crusades—that was easy! It's quite clear that we others would have been the first to leave for Jerusalem and that we should have died on the way. To die in a

ditch is nothing—what we have done is more difficult than that. You see the spires of Chartres from 17 kilometres across the plain; from time to time they disappear behind a rise in the ground or the line of a wood. From the moment I saw them I was in ecstasy. I felt no more fatigue in my body or my legs. All my impurities fell from me at a single stroke. I was another man. The Saturday evening I prayed for an hour in the Cathedral. The Sunday morning I prayed for an hour before the High Mass. I did not assist at the High Mass—I was afraid of the crowds. My dear fellow, I prayed as I have never prayed before. I was even able to pray for my enemies —and that is something quite new for me. . . . My kid is saved, and I have given them all three to our Lady. But I can't take charge of everything. My life is not an ordinary one—my life is a wager. No one is a prophet in his own country. My children are not baptized . . . well, the blessed Virgin must look after that. I have a job to do, I have immense responsibilities. At bottom, there's a Catholic renaissance which is coming about through me; one has got to see clearly the thing which is really good'.

The whole of Péguy, or very nearly the whole of him, is in this conversation; his humility, his pride, his evasions, and his faith in his own destiny. The recovery of his child was slow, and he went again to Chartres soon after the talk with Lotte. He returned for the third and last time in July 1913. On this occasion his son Marcel accompanied him as far as Limours. Later, he described the march to Lotte: 'I nearly died a month ago . . . when I was making my pilgrimage to Chartres. From now onwards I've decided to go every year. The heat was appalling. I had knocked off forty kilometres. It would be fine to die by the wayside and go straight to heaven. But I'm all right. Our Lady has saved me from despair, which is the greatest danger'.

The presence of Chartres was with Péguy to the end. On the 26th May 1914 he confided to Lotte: 'One day I shall give you a rendezvous at Chartres. It's there that I've left my heart and I think it's there that I shall be buried'. The morning of the day he left to join his regiment, Péguy asked his wife to make the same pilgrimage every year, if he should not return. He was killed on September 5th, early in the morning, during the first manoeuvrings of the Marne; he had spent the night in vigil, decorating an altar of our Lady. Subsequently his wife and three children were, in their own time, reconciled with the Catholic Church.

There is another circumstance which adds poignancy to Péguy's pilgrimage. The months of Pierre's illness were a time of acute domestic unhappiness, for his conversion and the change it had

brought about in his political and social outlook had by now seriously estranged him from his wife. Furthermore, he had formed a close attachment elsewhere. Péguy was able to boast, 'I have never had a mistress', and Madame Péguy, when told of this friendship, replied simply, 'My son is married'. Nevertheless, it was to gain strength for his heroic renunciation that Péguy made the journey to Chartres, for this was the most intimate secret that he confided to our Lady's care. It was

> . . . Non point par vertu car nous n'en avons guére,
> Et non point par devoir car nous ne l'aimons pas,
> Mais comme un charpentier s'arme de son compas,
> Par besoin de nous mettre au centre de la misére.

Péguy was in or about his fortieth year, and his pilgrimage as he tells it to us in verse of a singlarly pure directness, retains all the stress of a *crise de quarantaine*. Nothing essential is hidden and we know that nothing essential was betrayed.

Chartres has always been a city of pilgrimage. The miraculous statue of our Lady—Notre Dame de Sous-Terre—enshrined in the crypt was destroyed during the Revolution, but was afterwards replaced by another made in its likeness. The new image is carved of the wood of the pear tree and seems, like its original, to be blackened by dust and time. Another venerated relic is the veil of the Virgin, known as the *Sainte Chemise* or the *Sainte Tunique*, a piece of very old silk wrapped in oriental tissue. When Rollo was besieging the town at the head of his Normans in 911 the courage of its defenders was sustained by the sight of this relic. Rollo, perceiving this, broke off his attack and gave one of his castles as a gift to the cathedral. The gesture was renewed by other medieval captains, who recognised in Chartres a special consecration to our Lady. Furthermore the city was an important intellectual centre. The sacred and profane sciences were taught here. Suger, the creator of the Gothic arch; Geoffrey de Lives, the friend of Abélard; Pierre le Vénérable; Saint Yves, the patron of the Law; Saint Bernard of the Spiritual Canticle, and the counsellor of Louis XI; John of Salisbury, the friend of Thomas Becket and author of the *Policraticus*, himself Bishop of Chartres —all these men illustrated the city with their fame.

And so it happened that Chartres became a national rather than a provincial shrine, and as the Frenchmen of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries returned to the profession and practice of the faith, they were drawn to Chartres, partly by the beauty of its glass and sculpture, and by the just proportions of the building, but more profoundly by the eternal truths of which these things, however perfect, are only the perishable symbols. For Huysmans it was

la cathédrale mystique, the *resumé* of heaven and earth; for Louis Gillet it represented the most perfect flowering of the popular genius of the French; for René Schwob it was a 'balmy island floating on the waters of pity and of sin'; and we have already seen something of what it meant for Péguy. It stamped with its own mysterious and irresistible truth the mind of the Protestant, Henry Adams. So complete and balanced an expression of the faith carries its own persuasion, so that for certain souls it becomes analogous to the miracles of Lourdes or the revelations of La Salette or the vocation of Ste Thérèse of Lisieux. But it is no part of my immediate purpose to write a history or an appreciation of Chartres. I am only concerned to point out why it has once more become a place of pilgrimage. It is the road rather than the destination which is the subject of these pages.

There are several roads which lead from Paris to Chartres and they all traverse the granary of the Beauce. It was along these bridle-paths and highways that the people and the kings of France have made their pilgrimage; Philippe-Auguste and Isabella of Hainault, Blanche of Castile and St Louis, Philippe de Valois, John the Good, Charles V, Charles VI, Charles VII, Charles VIII and Anne of Brittany, Francis I, Henry III and Louise de Vaudémont, Catherine de Medici, Henry IV (who was crowned in the cathedral), Anne of Austria, Louis XIV . . . and so the august procession goes on, until we come to a group of fifteen students from the University of Paris who followed in its wake on Whit Sunday 1935. By 1947 the fifteen had increased to 4,500, and the students' pilgrimage had become known throughout all the Catholic communities of Europe. It is this pilgrimage that I must now attempt to describe.

We may doubt if many—or any—of the glittering names I have mentioned above were in the minds of these young men and women. They had a purpose beyond pageantry. But it is quite certain that the example of Charles Péguy was vividly present to them. He, like themselves, was a man of our own time and sensitive to its degradation. The task he had set himself—to baptise the Revolution—was their's also. They knew that the schisms of history cannot be abolished, but that it is still possible to perceive and to accept whatever is creative in a revolt. It is thus that a nation's wounds are healed, and it was the paradox of Péguy that while for the present he was a partisan, for the past he was a peacemaker. The prospects of peace were much in people's minds in 1935, and we cannot doubt that as these fifteen students set out on foot, through Orsay, Saint Arnould, Gallardon and Gasville, an almost desperate hope for peace was in their hearts. We know that they chanted the Rosary as they

walked, and read aloud passages from Péguy. Their pilgrimage began with Benediction in Notre Dame de Paris and ended with Mass in the crypt of Chartres. This pattern has been followed, with variations and developments, in each succeeding year.

In 1936, Pentecost falling in the middle of their examinations, the pilgrimage was made at the beginning of July, and there were only thirty taking part in it. In 1937 more than a hundred were grouped under three *aumoniers*, and in 1938, the tercentenary of the Vow of Louis XIII, a hundred and thirty students gathered at Chartres on Whit-Monday in the presence of Cardinal Verdier. Fifty of them had set out from St Rémy-les-Chevreuses on the Saturday morning, and others had joined them on the way. On the Monday afternoon they performed a mystery play in the gardens of the bishop's palace. In 1939 the numbers had risen to 175 and for the first time a theme was proposed for meditation—'Christ in the life of the student'. If the outbreak of the war seemed a rebuff to their prayers for peace, it was only after the disasters of 1940 and the dolours of the German occupation that the pilgrimage began to assume its present dimensions. In 1942 there were already 650 who left from Maintenon on Whit-Sunday and reached Chartres on the Monday morning. They meditated on *les traditions mariales de la France chrétienne*, and a performance of *Le Triomphe de Notre Dame de Chartres* by Henri Ghéon was given on the southern *parvis* of the cathedral. In 1943 the numbers had almost doubled—there were 1250 at Chartres on the Monday—and the subject for study was the Holy Spirit. In 1944, the year of hope, the bombardment of Chartres made it necessary to cancel the pilgrimage at the last moment, and the students went instead to Notre Dame de Bonne-Garde. They met for their general chapter on the Sunday evening with the dog-fights above their heads, and their discussion was punctuated by the crackling of machine-gun fire and the boom of distant artillery. On returning to Paris they found the railway line had been cut, and they were forced, at the height of their fatigue, to take once more to the road. This pilgrimage of hope was also a pilgrimage of penitence.

I have now reached a point where I can tell my story at first hand. In May 1945 I went down to Chartres on the morning of Whit-Monday. Two thousand five hundred students had just arrived for their Communion Mass and were encamped on the *parvis*, eating a well-earned breakfast or moving curiously round the cathedral. It was not the cathedral one had known. The glass had gone and most of the sculptures were still obscured by sand-bags; a group of German prisoners were hastily dismantling these from the southern

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porch, where the mystery was to be performed that afternoon. At ten o'clock Cardinal Suhard celebrated Pontifical High Mass, which was sung by the whole congregation of pilgrims, and in the afternoon they chanted Vespers before entraining for Paris. During the day I had the chance to speak to them. They told me something of their inspiration and of how their pilgrimage was organised; how they were divided into *chapitres* of sixty, each with its *aumonier*: how the *chapitres* were divided into groups, or *équipes*, of ten, each with its leader who had studied for months past the subject of their meditation; how every step of the pilgrimage was made beforehand by those responsible for conducting it; how they had slept for two nights in the barns of the Beauce and walked four miles fasting, to reach Chartres on the Monday morning. As I listened to them I became infected with their *mystique* and I decided to make the whole pilgrimage with them at the first opportunity. In 1946 when they were studying the doctrine of the Mystical Body, I was unable to leave London, but Pentecost 1947 found me happily free. From now onwards I draw directly upon the diary I kept at the time.

Not having been able to assist at Benediction on the Friday evening in Notre Dame, I joined the pilgrimage at the Gare Montparnasse towards one o'clock on the Saturday afternoon. It was a warm unclouded morning and the forecasts prophesied a sunny week-end. Students carrying heavy rucksacks with provisions for three days were streaming up the boulevard or standing on the platforms of the buses. The *aumoniers*—many Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits among them—were standing as a point of rally for their *chapitres*. Yet only half the pilgrims were leaving from the Gare Montparnasse; the others were taking the southern route through Dourdan and were assembling at the Gare Austerlitz. Père Faidherbe, O.P., who has been the chief animator of the pilgrimage from its earliest days, invited me to come with him so that I could be free to get a better view of it as a whole. I did not, therefore, belong to any single *chapitre*, although I attached myself, successively, to two or three as we went along. The *chapitre*, however, is the essential unit of the pilgrimage and develops rather quickly its own spirit of community. If I were making the pilgrimage again, I should try to remain with the one group throughout. In the train Père Faidherbe introduced me to the *aumoniers* and the principal officials of the pilgrimage. They made me very welcome. And I began to appreciate what an intricate task of preparation had been performed.

We left the train at Rambouillet and lined up in a semi-circle in the square outside the station. Here I saw for the first time the

contingent of the paralysed and the infirm. There were about fifty of these in their invalid chairs, ready to be pushed along the road by an *équipe de secours*. When the second train from Paris had come in we chanted the *Salve Regina* and moved off, dividing into two *routes* called Blue and Red. These were never more than a mile or two apart, and the officials of the pilgrimage moved at will from one to the other. Remaining with the Blues I walked up and down the column, listening. The meditation on 'the structure of the Faith' had already begun and the *aumoniers* went from one *équipe* to the other within their own *chapitres*, assisting the discussion. I already knew that these 1500 students were not exclusively Catholic. There were some Protestants among them, two Mohammedans, and a number of Marxists. It was interesting to guess, as one overheard the crackle of dialectic, whether this argument or that objection came from a Catholic or an unbeliever. Once, I remember, the discussion had strayed on to politics and had to be pulled back on to its proper plane. In another *chapitre* I met a lively young unbeliever who nevertheless reached Chartres before anyone else by walking there on the Sunday evening. He wanted to see the cathedral by night. In the same group there was a young Jew, newly baptized; his grave and ardent faith made a piquant contrast with the high spirits of his companion which no metaphysical anxiety had yet disturbed.

Our first halt was in the Bois de Batonceau. Here we fell out, by *chapitres*, under the trees, and the leaders of each *équipe* summed up the trend of their discussions. Was faith an act of the intellect or of the will or of the heart? The argument usually ran upon these lines. When they had finished, the student *chef de chapitre* opened a discussion which was corrected, and then closed, by the *aumonier*. All this lasted about three quarters of an hour. We then resumed our march. We were now leaving behind us the fringes of the Forest of Rambouillet and were coming out on to the open plateau of the Beauce. The road had been steadily rising. We camped for dinner in a thinnish copse not far from a spring, whence the men carried supplies of water. Everyone had brought plenty to eat and shared generously with their neighbours. After dinner the Blue and Red routes joined in the singing of Compline and then the men and girls moved off to their respective *cantonnements* in the granaries of the adjacent farms. Some of the men made their confessions, walking up and down the road with the *aumoniers*. There was no ceremony; only the bare words of absolution and the sign of the cross sketched in the cool evening air.

I spent the night on a comfortable bed of straw with the *équipe de direction* serving both branches of the pilgrimage. Before we

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turned in the officers met in committee to discuss and criticise and plan ahead. The final details for the entry into Chartres on Monday were made clear. There was plenty of argument and an unflagging good humour. The following morning we were woken by the dog who insisted that it was time to get up. We washed and shaved from a tap in the farmyard, and then I took the road to Gallardon where both routes of the northern branch were to meet for Mass. As I was leaving I saw the last *chapitres* of Route Red disappear over the brow of the hill. It was a good four-mile walk and I was alone and fasting. The day was perfect. As I swung down the hill into Ecronnes, I overtook and entered into conversation with an old shepherd. A *personnage de Péguy*. He told me that many of these farms belonged to absent proprietors who were making a packet of money out of agriculture without paying any corresponding increase of wages. It was an old story and he told it me without bitterness. He must have been about sixty and he had fought beside the English in the First German War. I left him behind to catch up with a group of three students who were ahead of me on the same road.

The Mass of Pentecost was celebrated in a field just outside Gallardon. The little town with its sumptuous Gothic basilica and its old tower, battered by the English in some past and petty siege, made an impressive background. A high altar had been erected in the middle of the field before a screen of greenery. Some students were putting a finishing touch to it as we arrived. In front of it was a semi-circle of thirty-eight smaller altars, made out of piled rucksacks or wooden trestles; some of them were decorated with branches of white lilac which the girls had cut from a neighbouring wood. Before each of these altars an *aumonier* stood vested, with his *chapitre* grouped in rows behind him. The deep blood-red of Pentecost made a brilliant contrast with the young green of the meadows and the trees. Directly facing me, at the extreme right of the semi-circle, the invalids were lined up in their chairs. The liturgy was sung by the whole two thousand present, and as the celebrant intoned the *Credo*, the priests advanced to their altars and began simultaneously to say their Masses. In this way they were brought to the Elevation at the same time as the celebrant at the High Altar. It was an unforgettable moment—the Hosts raised in a single unanimous gesture to the serene unclouded skies.

Each *aumonier* gave Communion to his *chapitre*. It appears that in the diocese of Gallardon we had a dispensation to take liquid food before Communion, but very few seemed to know of this and fewer still to take advantage of it. After breakfast I slipped up into the town to see the church. The choir is pure perfection of Ile de France

Gothic; it recalls Beauvais. And there is a remarkable painted roof to the nave. We lunched an hour or two later in the midday heat and walked on through the afternoon. There was now very little shade. The Beauce has a kind of geometric beauty, and the monotony of the immense horizons is striped by the fields of clover and the brilliant magenta trefoil. The character of this landscape was noted by Fortunatus:

Belsia, triste solum, cui desunt bis tria solum:
Fontes, prata, nemus, lapides, arbusta, racemus.

The villages are few and scattered, grouped around the rare wells. There are no isolated houses; only the large solitary farms with their windowless fronts and their tight walls speak of a practical and unimaginative toil. What a sharp contrast with the country nearer to Paris—with the Hurepoix and its domesticated woods, its hint of the *banlieue*! Here and there a Roman or Merovingian villa reminds us that centuries of skilful cultivation have made of the Beauce one of the historic granaries of Europe; it has even been compared to an Hungarian landscape in the middle of France. And yet the absence of detail and anecdote is a precious aid to contemplation. The mind is attuned to infinity, and I found myself thinking of the plateaux of Castile and the aid these must have given to the Spanish mystics. The heat was becoming intense. We paused to drink wherever there was a *point d'eau*. Some of the girls were obviously tired, and the men relieved them of their rucksacks. The discussion flagged, and there was a moment when the secular strains of *Auprès de ma Blonde* mingled with the authorised canticles of the *route*. This seemed to me wholly fitting, for it is the genius of the Chartres pilgrimage to raise a supernatural structure on a natural foundation. Silence fell and the tired footsteps plodded on. And it was just then, at the moment of our most extreme fatigue, that the spires of Chartres first appeared on the sky line. They were seen with difficulty, framed between two telegraph poles. But soon the whole building became clearly visible, like a beautiful galleon riding the ocean of the wheat. Spontaneously, one after another, the *chapitres* took up the *Salve Regina*. Now near, now distant, the voices hung in the hot air, and the faces broke into smiles of intimate recognition. There is a logical link between the *Salve Regina* and *Auprès de ma Blonde*, and I felt that we had forged it.

We halted about 6.30 and for the third and last time the *chapitres* took careful stock of their discussions. After supper the Blue and Red *routes* rejoined for an evening session in a large clearing of the wood. Arranged in a half-circle, they listened while a number of selected speakers read through the microphone from the testimony of famous

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converts. These extracts were linked by an explanatory narration. First there was St Paul, telling the story of the road to Damascus:

> Vers le milieu du jour—je vis sur le chemin une lumière venant du ciel. . . .

I reflected that every year there is some student from Paris for whom the road to Chartres is also the road to Damascus. Then came St Augustine, speaking for the carnal sinner, and read by an African student:

> L'âme malade—je me torturais
> M'accusant moi-même—avec plus de sévérité que jamais
> Me retournant et me débattant dans ma chair . . .
> Et vous me pressiez, Seigneur, au plus secret de mon âme.

Then Newman, for whom I was privileged to speak, since I too, in my degree, had been an Oxford convert.

> La conviction très nette de l'identité du christianisme et du catholicisme romain s'est emparé de moi

and afterwards, in a rather moving translation, some stanzas from 'Lead kindly Light'

> Bienfaisante lumière, au milieu de ces ombres,
> Guide moi en avant.

And so to the first of the modern pilgrims of Chartres, J. K. Huysmans, attempting to explain the secret operation of grace:

> La soudaine et la silencieuse explosion de lumière qui s'est faite en moi;
>
> La soudaine et la silencieuse explosion de lumière qui s'est faite

of Notre Dame on Christmas Eve, while the boys were chanting the Magnificat:

> Et c'est alors—que se produisit l'évènement—qui domine toute ma vie. En un instant mon cœur fut touché—et je CRUS. Je crus d'une telle force d'adhésion—d'un tel soulèvement de tout mon être, d'une conviction si puissante—d'une telle certitude ne laissant place à aucune espèce de doute, que depuis—tous les livres—tous les raisonnements—tous les hasards d'une vie agitée n'ont pu ébranler ma foi, ni à vrai dire la toucher.

To Lou Tseng Tsiang, once Prime Minister of China and now titular Abbot of St Peter in Ghent and a monk of Saint-André. His testimony was read by a Chinese student. And lastly to Charles Péguy himself.

> La main de Dieu est lourde—le travail de Dieu,
> L'opération secréte est un feu qui consume.
> Comment nos pauvres carcasses y résisteraient-elles?

One could not listen to this company of converts and remain unmoved. What a miraculous providence had rekindled the faith in this sceptical and disintegrated France of the twentieth century! One

after another the high intelligences and the leaping imaginations had been caught upon the wing. I thought of Maritain climbing the slopes of Montmartre on his first pilgrimage to Léon Bloy; I thought of Bergson's baptism of desire; I thought of Psichari in the desert. I was proud, even though I was not astonished, that Newman had been included in the brilliant list, and I thought, had this been an English occasion, how proudly we should have put Chesterton and Hopkins beside him.

When the readings were over, a priest from Coltainville arrived with the Blessed Sacrament which was placed on an altar set up in the clearing. Compline was sung and Benediction given. Then we divided and moved off to our *cantonnements*.

I walked by myself down to Gasville, where I was to sleep in the presbytery. It was a magical evening. Sombre but always clear, the cathedral stood against the sky. Overtaking three girl students, I chanted the Litany of Loreto with them and passed on. Their high voices, lifted in the '*Je vous salue, Marie*' lingered in the air behind me. When I reached the presbytery I found some girl guides camping in the garden; they were walking to Chartres on their own. Seeing they had made a fire, I asked them to boil some water and we shared some of the 'Nescafé' I had brought from Switzerland. Then I pushed open the door of this very humble presbytery and found my way upstairs. I unbarred the shutters and let the perfume of the syringa bushes in the garden invade the room. Darkness was just falling. I flung a mattress on the floor, and was presently fast asleep.

When I awoke at 5.30 I found, to my surprise, that no one else had occupied the room. The beds had not been slept in. Something, however, had swung the shutters to, and when I opened them I saw that it had rained a little during the night. But the morning was fine and clear, and the last contingent of girls was swinging silently along the road to Chartres on the further side of the cemetery. The Cathedral looked quite different in the dawn-light; even from this distance of four miles or so it seemed lit up from within as well as from without. I dressed hurriedly and overtook the northern column about two miles from the city just as the second branch, coming up by another road, joined it from the south. This moment of meeting had been carefully timed. When the southern column arrived at the cross-roads, the last *chapitres* of our own branch were swerving into the main highway, and as soon as they had passed, the *chef de route* of the second column followed in behind them. From now onwards we marched as a single body. Looking back, a mile ahead, I could still see the pilgrims coming up over the brow of the hill; I suppose we must have stretched for a couple of miles. Yet I must guard against

giving an impression of military precision and routine. This Pilgrimage never remotely resembled a crusade; it was bent, first of all, upon the conquest of itself. Spiritually speaking, it marched upon its knees, and I never caught a single note of that collective presumption which so often mars the humility of Catholic demonstrations. Except for an occasional 'Je vous salue, Marie', or the lovely lilting refrain of 'Notre-Dame Angévine', we marched in silence. Only the careless tramp of 4,500 feet accompanied our meditations. It seemed to me then that a truly Cistercian peace had descended on us, for each of us was alone and yet in rhythm with an immense company. I was delighted to find a Dominican friend of mine who was making the Pilgrimage on his own, and had joined the southern branch on the Sunday night. The year before he had walked with three friends from Lyons to Chartres in fulfilment of a vow made during the war that if one of these friends returned safe from Germany they would make this Pilgrimage in thanksgiving. It had taken them 13 days, hard walking all the way. In the end, he told me, they had 'precipitated themselves upon our Lady'. As we reached the outskirts of Chartres he snatched my copy of Péguy's 'Présentation de la Beauce' and recited it aloud. The words went out to greet the cathedral on the hill; they sublimated and synchronised the tramp of all those marching feet.

> Quand nous aurons quitté ce sac et cette corde,
> Quand nous aurons tremblé nos derniers tremblements,
> Quand nous aurons râlé nos derniers râclements
> Veuillez vous rappeler votre miséricorde.

We descended a straight and sloping road between an avenue of clipped limes and left our rucksacks in a field immediately below the Cathedral. It was surrounded on three sides by an ancient stone wall, admirably and sturdily built. Père X remarked to me that in all beautiful and ancient things there is an image, or *bild* as Rilke put it, which is the picture of those things as they were first designed, or as they first appeared, in the imagination of the men who made them. In most modern buildings there is no surviving image; there is no nerve in them which makes them eternally apt and new. Perhaps, I thought, looking upwards, it is the presence of this image in Chartres rather than any disposition of buttress or pillar which gives to the building its unalterable youth.

The women separated from the men and took a shorter way to the Cathedral in order to be sure of getting seats, for most of them were fasting. They entered by the west door. We, in our turn, approached by the southern *parvis*. There was no time to linger over the loved details of the place, but I caught my breath to see once again the

Angel of the Annuciation, sometimes called 'the handsomest man in France', breathing its benediction over the plain which had once been Péguy's and now was ours. And as we moved inside, the morning sun, streaming through the restored windows, stained the stone with sapphire.

There was not an instant of confusion as the 4,500 pilgrims, now joined by a small contingent from Tours, were ushered to their places. My friend and I were placed at the extreme end of the choir, next to the people's altar below the chancel steps. High Mass was sung at 8.30 by the whole congregation, most of whom made their Communions. Soon after the Offertory Père X moved off to an altar in the apse to say his Mass which I served for him. The *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei* came echoing back to us from the hidden crowd of worshippers, filling, as it seemed, every crevice and vault of the Cathedral. The sound, reaching us from these invisible lips, took on a timeless quality, which is in itself the property of Gregorian chant. The immense anxieties and profound questionings of our own day were assuaged by this alliance with the centuries. The burden was shared with all the people and with all the kings of France. Just as the twin columns of our pilgrimage had lost their separate identities in the moment of junction on the highway, so we now joined a procession without end, whose sorrows and expectations had been our's. In the *grex Christi* there is only one distinction that matters: the distinction between the sheep and the Shepherd.

There is not very much more to tell. After breakfast we returned to the 'champ des pélérins' for the General Chapter, at which four students (one of them a Dutchman, representing the foreign delegations) resumed the conclusions of the Pilgrimage. In the early afternoon we filed, chapter by chapter, before the statue of Notre-Dame-sous-terre, and at 3 o'clock Claudel's 'Tobie et Sarah' was given on the steps of the southern *parvis*. This was perhaps a little difficult for the open air and the large, tired audience. When it was over we sang Compline in the Cathedral and the Bishop of Chartres gave Benediction. A message from Cardinal Suhard, who was prevented at the last moment from appearing in person, was also read. I had found a place in the north aisle where I could see the Madonna of the Belle Verrière, which has always seemed to me the most beautiful stained-glass window in the world, and it was with eyes fixed upon this that I joined in the chanting of the Magnificat. Half an hour later we had entrained for Paris and the Pilgrimage was over.

No description, however animated, can give an account of a supernatural experience. The incidents and ceremonies, the spontaneous spirituality, which have been the subject of these pages, were only

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

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