

CHARLES PEGUY

(7th January, 1873—5th September, 1914)

IT is well that he died when he did: it were too painful to picture him still living in these days of betrayal of the victory for which he gave his life so joyously. He deserved to die in battle for France and Christendom, for his death was thus of a piece with his life. As he died, so had he lived—in action; fighting, as he expresses it, on the frontiers of every province of human activity.

During life, the instrument of his action had been the pen. Yet, in a sense, he was a writer only accidentally. Essentially, he was the citizen, and later the patriot and the Christian, who recognizes a duty and claims the right to influence his contemporaries. The authority he wielded was moral rather than intellectual, less doctrinal than educational: heart predominates over head, but since it was a good heart, which had been set true from the beginning, it was able to pilot him, gropingly but safely, through those early years of his public life when his range of action was foreshortened by an overclouding of his intellectual horizon. The return from agnosticism to the Faith, and from utopian socialism to France and Christendom, is scarcely perceptible in his writings: at least, in the earlier Péguy, the later is always clearly discernible. His 'conversion' was rather a rediscovery of the supernatural, conditioned perhaps by the realization that true love of neighbour exists, and is possible, only as a function of love of God. Not that the latter, even in its official manifestations, infallibly issues in the former: that had been, perhaps, his biggest stumbling-block. Even after his recovery of the Faith, it remained a difficulty for him that the Church seemed to have ceased to be, socially, the Communion of the Faithful and to have become largely the close preserve of a class. The equation, apparent to him in practice, of *bien-pensant* and *bourgeois* explains his denunciation of the *politique cléricale* as contrasted with the *mystique du salut*. We must not quar-

BLACKFRIARS

rel with his application of these categories to religion, since the same distinction, applied to Republicanism, *Dreyfusisme* and Socialism, served to crystallize the disillusionment which brought him back to the Faith.

Other difficulties, too, survived his return to Catholicism. The influence of Bergson, dating from his *Ecole Normale* days, remained paramount; to it must be ascribed an incomprehension of St. Thomas and a kind of mild contempt for the Scholastic Revival. Of St. Thomas he writes:

What Bergson loses will not be gained by St. Thomas but will be re-gained by Spencer . . . And St. Thomas will remain as he was and what he was twenty-five or thirty years ago, before Bergson came upon the scene : a great saint, a great doctor, a great theologian of bygone days . . . with no bearing on the present . . . (esteemed, hallowed, numbered off and buried). Put to the test and, so to speak, worn out.

In condemning Bergson, the 'Roman bureaucracy' had rejected what seemed to Péguy to be the very system of philosophy which had first enabled the organic character of the Church and the dogma of Grace to be rendered accurately and fully.

A still graver difficulty, this time of the theological order, must have lain behind his continued abstention both from the Sacraments and from the Mass. The mere fact of the civil marriage which he had contracted could not in itself have debarred him from the full practice of his religion, had he willed to resume it. He has unfortunately left us without guidance as to his religious dispositions in this matter, but a recent study¹ puts forward a new and convincing theory which has the merit of picking up a thread in the 'psychology' of the earlier Péguy—the defiantly proclaimed 'solidarity with the damned' which seems to be the clue to his temporary abandonment of the Faith. Hell had seemed to him to be the theological counterpart of economic misery. Clearer thinking might have led him to see that economic misery itself demands the Hell of the

¹ Daniel-Rops, *Péguy*, Flammarion. (Collection : *Chefs de File*, 1933.)

CHARLES PÉGUY

theologians, but of the latter he can never have had any very accurate conception. It is suggested that his voluntary abstention from the central mysteries of his re-found religion was dictated by the thought that in seeking to ensure his own salvation by means not open to his wife and children he would be, as it were, leaving them in the lurch and with them the whole troop of the unfortunates condemned to hell-fire. Was this pride? asks M. Daniel-Rops. Was it not rather humility, and magnanimity, of the highest order? He was consciously risking his eternal life as an offering to God for the conversion of his dear ones and the redemption of all the damned. We may criticize the insufficiency of a charity founded on sentiment rather than on intellectual principles, but we may confidently leave to God's mercy the pilgrim of Our Lady of Chartres, the soldier who decorated the altar of his Patroness on the eve of the battle in which he fell.

Péguy's literary style is not so much a creation as the expression of his personality. To the reader it seems so artless, so spontaneous, so self-revealing an utterance, that the difficulty which Péguy claimed to experience in the art of writing cannot have resided in the mere manipulation of words. His style suggests nothing so much as a schoolmaster conscientiously construing a page of very terse Latin and proposing, interminably, still more faithful renderings, still more faithful equivalents of each word or phrase in turn, as if almost despairing of exhausting its content: each new attempt necessitates a dozen more refinements, sometimes by its very sound. Péguy's aim is, however, always to intensify, not to expand, his idea but his idea is a living psychological entity, never a dead mathematical formula. Its modes, though apprehended successively and discursively, are intended to be re-assembled, to be telescoped, so as to give a *total* effect, as if achieved instantaneously. Thus the ideas which he gave the world are the fruit of a strenuous labour of which the very pangs are uttered on paper. This is what he must have meant by the difficulty of the art of writing; it was indeed so laborious for him that

BLACKFRIARS

reading him is an almost equally fatiguing art for us. His *idées-maitresses* are few, but he develops them throughout his works as a composer develops his themes. He accumulates images as does a poet, and so his prose is closely linked up with his poetry, of which there is no space to speak here. When he has painted his picture—the artistic analogies are inevitable—its subject is meant to stand out as one thing, pictorially, as he himself first saw it in his mind's eye, before he attempted the difficult art of exteriorizing it in time and space. Let him speak for himself:

Quand on a une œuvre en tête, on croit que ce n'est rien . . . on la tient là sous la main. On aura sûrement fini ce soir. Et quand on la développe, quand on la déroule sur le papier, sur le plan du papier, dans ce développement, dans ce déroulement linéaire qui est la condition même, qui fait l'institution, qui est la constitution de l'art d'écrire, qui en fait la loi, on ne sait plus où l'on va (si on est loyal, si on est probe, si on veut suivre, si on suit fidèlement les modalités, les modulations, les ondulations de la réalité) (Les courbes géologiques.) (Les courbes, les plis du terrain.) Si on ne truque pas, fût-ce pour des raccourcis (artificiels).

With his brackets, he seems to be groping for a new form, a new technique, to meet the necessities of his thought. And, as a further example of his style, one cannot resist quoting one of the most beautiful passages in his prose works:

Heureux ceux, heureux deux amis qui s'aiment assez, qui veulent assez se plaire, qui se connaissent assez, *qui s'entendent assez*, qui sont assez parents, qui pensent et sentent assez de même, assez ensemble en dedans chacun séparément, assez les mêmes chacun côte à côte, qui éprouvent, qui goûtent le plaisir de se taire ensemble, de se taire côte à côte, de marcher longtemps, d'aller, de marcher silencieusement le long des silencieuses routes. Heureux deux amis qui s'aiment assez pour (savoir) se taire ensemble. Dans un pays qui sait se taire.

As the poet of the *Mystères*, Péguy is assured of immortality—a literary immortality, based on the survival of the printed word. That his memory and influence remain strong in the France of to-day is due, however, to the vividness with which he impressed his personality on his reading

CHARLES PEGUY

public, the subscribers to the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, to whom practically the whole of his work had been offered. Whilst they and their generation survive, it matters not that re-editions of Péguy's individual works are few, and that his (posthumous) *Œuvres Complètes* remain incomplete and difficult of access: his conversation among men remains a ripe and fruitful memory, intensified by the continuing actuality of so many of his judgments. 'The struggle,' he said, 'is between money and spiritual values as a whole.' The scale of values (already he had seen it) has been annihilated, because the instrument of measure, exchange and value has invaded the things it was supposed to measure, exchange and value, and has become the very matter and object of the world of men. Again, in the international situation of the present moment, we see re-enacted the state of tension, of armed peace, which is neither war nor peace, in which he saw Europe to be living up to the eve of the War. He had already said the last word on pacifism, when he defined the true pacifist as being, not the man who says: 'If my country invades yours, do not fight; and if yours invades mine, I will not fight,' but the man who says: 'If my country invades yours, I will not fight; and if yours invades mine, I ask you not to fight,' and an ever-increasing multitude of Frenchmen will re-echo the sentiment which moved him to exclaim: 'France is a great Mohammedan power, in Africa. How much greater she would be, throughout the world, if she were something of a Christian power at the same time.'

At the moment, then, he lives not so much by what he has left posterity, as by what he was and by what he did. To have lived and acted in and through an *organ*, is something more than to have survived as the mummy of an arm-chair philosopher. He was an event, not so much in the history of French thought as in the history of France. His written works will be referred to and quarried into just as long as his *action* remains vital; they will be the monument, not of a *pensée* but of a man. *Requiescat in pace!*

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