Charles Péguy

by Roger Kimball

On the poet & polemicist, occasioned by the publication of Temporal and Eternal, translated by Alexander Dru.

A great philosophy is not that which passes final judgments, which takes a seat in final truth. It is that which introduces uneasiness, which opens the door to commotion.
—Charles Péguy, “Note on M. Bergson”

Truth’s pedagogue, braving an entrenched class of fools and scoundrels, children of the world, his eyes caged and hostile behind glass—still Péguy said that Hope is a little child.
—Geoffrey Hill, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy

In the introduction to his Essays on European Literature (1950), E. R. Curtius remarked on his good fortune in having been a contemporary and an interpreter of “men like Gide, Claudel, Péguy, Proust, Valéry, Hofmannsthal, Ortega, Joyce, Eliot.” Greatness calls forth greatness, so it is easy to understand Curtius’s gratitude. But what about his list? Joyce and Eliot are self-explanatory. Likewise Proust and Valéry, Ortega and Hofmannsthal. Gide and Claudel are at least plausible, even if their reputations have declined in the years since Curtius wrote. But Péguy? How did that unfamiliar name find its way onto the distinguished critic’s “A-list”?

In the English-speaking world, the French poet and intermittently Catholic polemicist Charles Péguy is barely even a name today. Until recently, I knew him only as the author of the penetrating observation (found in a 1905 essay called “Notre Patrie”) that “It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive.” Having gained in pertinence for nearly a century, that remark by itself is worth a modest sort of literary immortality.

From about 1910 until around the time Curtius composed his tabulary homage, Péguy was regularly invoked as a modern master—a peculiar master, to be sure, but a master nonetheless. Writing in The New Statesman in 1916, two years after Péguy’s death in action at the beginning of World War I, T. S. Eliot commended him as “one of the most illustrious of the dead who have fallen in this war,” “a national, a symbolic figure, the incarnation of the rejuvenated French spirit.”
The philosopher Henri Bergson, whom Péguy knew and whose work he wrote about, said that “he knew my most secret thought, such as I have never expressed it, such as I would have wished to express it.” Similar encomia abound.

In our own day, enthusiasts for Péguy’s work are much rarer. One of them is the French philosopher Pierre Manent. In *Charles Péguy: Between Political Faith and Faith* (1984), Manent extolled Péguy as “one of the most penetrating critics of the historical and sociological points of view which dominate modern consciousness.” High praise. Manent acknowledges the “violently personal” character of Péguy’s work, his habit of lacing considered arguments with *ad hominem* attacks, of ending lyrical expostulations with “an insult.” But Manent discerned a “luminous mind, eager to understand and to think,” behind the self-obsession and often bitter polemics. Péguy, Manent argues, continues to be “of capital importance,” above all because of his insights into the distinctive hubris of modernity: the curious modern tendency to substitute faith in technique for the cultivation of wisdom, the belief that a perfect administration of life could somehow relieve the burden, the unpredictable adventure, of living.

Another of Péguy’s recent admirers is the British poet Geoffrey Hill. Hill not only devoted a long poem to Péguy in 1984—*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* evokes the title of Péguy’s most famous poem *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc* (1909)—but also wrote an enthusiastic appreciation of Péguy, whom he clearly regards as a kindred spirit. Péguy was, Hill admitted, a man of violent emotions (“violent” and “passionate” are words that inevitably turn up whenever Péguy is on the menu), but also “a man of the most exact and exacting probity,” “one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century.” Reflecting on Péguy’s return to an unorthodox Catholicism after a period of loudly declared atheism, Hill speaks of Péguy’s having “rediscovered the solitary ardors of faith but not the consolations of religious practice. He remained self-excommunicate but adoring.” Students of Hill’s poetry will recognize the terrain.

I would not myself place Péguy in the exalted company of Proust, Eliot, and Co. His genius was too idiosyncratic, his achievement too diffuse. Even Péguy’s admirers—most of them, anyway—acknowledge this. Eliot, for one, stressed Péguy’s genuineness and lack of “affectation”; he also noted that “one would hardly call him a ‘thinker.’” Péguy’s style, Eliot said, “is not a style to think in; it is too emphatic, too insistent.” In 1928, writing about Péguy’s friend Julien Benda, Eliot noted in passing that Péguy was “a remarkable example of a writer who managed to influence many people, largely because he had so confused a mind that there was room for everything in it somehow.” One misunderstands Eliot, I believe, if one misses the element of admiration in that deflationary remark. Order is admirable—Eliot wouldn’t want us to do without that—but capaciousness, too, he suggests, is an intellectual strength.

In any event, if Péguy has occasionally been rated rather too highly, he is unduly neglected today. One reason for this is the character of Péguy’s work. His combination of spiritual earnestness and rhetorical ferocity is currently out of fashion. There is also the pedestrian fact that so little of Péguy’s work is readily available in English. Translations of a good deal of his poetry were made in the 1940s. And in 1943 a miscellany of prose snippets and poems was published under the title *Basic Verities*
That volume went through several printings but has long been out of print.

It is welcome news, then, that Liberty Fund has undertaken republication of *Temporal and Eternal*, [1] an “adaptation” of two long essays by Péguy that were first published in English in 1958. The book, with a new foreword by Pierre Manent, contains abbreviated and edited versions of *Notre Jeunesse*, Péguy’s 1910 meditation on the Dreyfus Affair, and “Clio I,” a posthumously published reflection on history, the clergy, and the modern world. *Notre Jeunesse* (translated as “Memories of Youth”) is generally regarded as one of Péguy’s most important essays. “Clio I,” although it develops some themes introduced in *Notre Jeunesse*, is also (as Péguy’s translator comments) “among the most turgid of his works.”

In some respects, Péguy was very much a period piece. Immersed in the controversies, prejudices, and emotional weather of his day, he took on their coloring. This boosted his contemporary relevance. It also assured that he would soon seem dated. In intellectual matters as in hemlines, nothing seems more out-of-fashion than yesterday’s rage. But Péguy was not only a creature of his time. As Manent’s comments suggest—and as passages in *Temporal and Eternal* demonstrate—he was also a writer whose insights continue to resonate today. Péguy was above all an apostle of the firsthand, the present reality, the rootedness in lived experience. Hence his repudiation of all efforts to deal with things by proxy. “The modern idea,” he wrote in a passage on historiography that Manent quotes,

> the modern method comes down essentially to this: given a work or given a text, how do we proceed to know it? Let us start by ignoring the text; above all let us be careful not to pick up the text or even to look at it, that would come at the end, if it were ever to happen. Let us begin at the beginning or rather because we must be complete, let us begin by the beginning of the beginning; the beginning of the beginning is to find in the vast, moving, universal, total reality, the exact vantage point which, though bearing some relation to the text, is the farthest removed from the text.

Anyone who has followed the divagations of contemporary literary criticism or museological practice will know what Péguy means.

That much of what he had to say about the modern world is unwelcome and falls on deaf ears is naturally another element in Péguy’s neglect. The criticisms he formulated are unflattering to modern vanities, especially our apparently unassailable sense of self-importance and self-sufficiency. But of course that is precisely why Péguy’s work is valuable and worth recalling. “If Péguy is susceptible to looking bizarre in our contemporary eyes,” Manent notes, “it is only because he was much more concrete and real than we ordinarily care to be.”
I would argue only with Manent’s “only.” Let us grant Péguy’s vividness and “reality,” qualities that when overdone do seem bizarre. There is also the matter of Péguy’s style. Eliot regretted its being “too emphatic, too insistent.” But that’s only part of the problem. One of Péguy’s critics tartly remarked that Péguy “lacked the one talent that would have made him a great pamphleteer: brevity.”

His poem *Eve*, written in 1914, begins with what have become among Péguy’s most famous lines:

> Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour la terre
> charnelle
> Mais pourvu que ce fût une juste guerre.

(“Happy are those who die for the carnal earth/ but only if it be for a just war.”) Péguy embroiders his theme for 1911 quatrains—that is 7643 alexandrine lines and a concluding hemistich, making *Eve* one of the longest poems in French.

In both his poetry and his prose, Péguy favored repetition. A word, a line, an image would be taken up over and over again, slightly varied, often repeated outright. His style was at once accretive, like a pearl, and relentless, like a tidal wave. It doesn’t work for everyone. When François Mauriac was told that someone was translating *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc* into English, he said “What a pity someone does not translate him into French.” Not entirely fair, but having sampled a bit of Péguy in French I know what he means.

Musing in 1910 on Péguy’s style, André Gide produced a baroque correlative:

> Péguy’s style is like that of very ancient litanies. It is like Arab chants, like the monotonous chants of heath and moor; it is comparable to the desert; a desert of esparto, a desert of sand, a desert of stone. … Péguy’s style is like the pebbles of the desert which follow and resemble each other so closely, one so much like the other, but yet a tiny bit different; and with a difference which corrects itself, recovers possession of itself, repeats itself, seems to repeat itself, stresses itself, and always more clearly.

And so on. Gide meant to be flattering. But what might be admirable in a verbal construct is not necessarily readable.

Thanks to the chaperoning of translators, readers of Péguy in English encounter this aspect of his work in much diluted form. (Alexander Dru, noting the “plodding gait” of Péguy’s prose, claimed that he attempted “to prune the style in order to reveal the fruit.”) One result is that Péguy is mostly known—to the extent that he is known at all—as the author of one-liners. I have already mentioned his marvelous observation about acts of cowardice motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive. He has many others nearly as good:
Tyranny is always better organized than freedom.

Surrender is essentially an operation by means of which we set about explaining instead of acting.

Homer is new and fresh this morning, and nothing, perhaps, is as old and tired as today’s newspaper.

A word is not the same with one writer as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.

He who does not bellow the truth when he knows the truth makes himself the accomplice of liars and forgers.

The last two, especially, are characteristic of Péguy’s—what to call it?—his style, his outlook, his personality.

But Péguy was more than a coiner of epigrams. No one would accuse him of being a systematic thinker, but he was an unusually candid one. He was born in modest circumstances in 1873 in Orléans, Joan of Arc’s birthplace. His father, a carpenter, died several months later, and Péguy was raised by his mother and grandmother. They eked out a living recaning chairs, a craft that Péguy also practiced occasionally in his youth to help maintain the family coffers. Péguy later paraded his “peasant” background—rather overstating (or perhaps I mean “understating”) his origins, but he regarded an earthy provenance as a patent of authenticity. (It was an attitude that underlay his ardent nationalism.) Péguy early on displayed academic promise, won a scholarship to the Ecole normale supérieure, but failed part of his examination and left without taking a degree. Overall, his academic performance was indifferent. By the time he was twenty, Péguy had ceased practicing his native Roman Catholicism, declared himself a socialist, and worked running a socialist bookshop in the Latin Quarter. When his closest friend died in 1896, Péguy determined that duty required him to marry his friend’s sister, which he did the following year. They had four children, the youngest of whom was born in 1915, after Péguy’s death. In 1898, Péguy used his wife’s inheritance to open his own bookshop, located near the Sorbonne, which he studiously mismanaged and brought to the brink of bankruptcy within a year.

In 1900, he started the Cahiers de la Quinzaine (“Fortnightly Notebooks”), the journal that he ran until his death and in which most of his work first appeared. As F. C. St. Aubyn writes in his book on Péguy,

his editorial policy was idealistic. No advertising was to be accepted for fear of inhibiting the freedom of expression. Those interested in the review would support it financially according to a sliding scale of ability to pay. All points of view were welcome. No manuscript would be
censored although the author might later find himself the object of a strongly worded rebuttal if his ideas differed from those of Péguy.

Péguy’s journal was a distinguished but not quite indispensable publication—though to call it a publication tells only half the story. Contributors included Maurice Barrès, Julien Benda, Anatole France, Daniel Halévy, Romain Rolland, André Suarès, and Jean Juarès—a respectable roster of semi-luminaries that, one notes, does not include such incandescent names as Gide, Proust, and Apollinaire. At any one time there were only a few hundred subscribers, but the Cahiers seem to have formed the center of their intellectual universe. Thursdays Péguy was “at home” to a dozen or so friends who dropped by to discuss the events of the day. Controversy and contention were always in order. “A review only continues to have life if each issue annoys at least one-fifth of its readers,” Péguy wrote. “Justice lies in seeing that it is not always the same fifth.”

In 1908, Péguy startled his friends by announcing his return to the Catholic faith (but not quite to the Catholic church: he remained hostile to the institution). Péguy continued to regard himself as a socialist, but here, too, his allergy to “parties” and institutions made him an unreliable ally. One admirer said that Péguy’s socialism was “far more akin to the socialism of Saint Francis than to that of Karl Marx.”

Perhaps. He liked to remind his readers that he was pursuing “none other than The Eternal Salvation of France,” etc. Alexander Dru is probably right to argue that attempting to label Péguy politically is “a waste of time.” He was too idiosyncratic, not to say erratic. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he was too stalwart in following his own conscience to make a good member of any party. Until the last four or five years of his life, the vast majority of Péguy’s writing was polemical. There was always a lyric strain in his sensibility. But until 1910, when he fell in love with Blanche Raphaël, a longtime friend, that lyricism showed itself sporadically. Péguy remained faithful to his wife, but his new emotional attachment probably helps explain the huge outpouring of poetry in his last years. Péguy was a lieutenant in the reserves; it is said that when war was declared in August 1914, he left off writing in mid-sentence to join the mobilization. On the first day of the first battle of the Marne, about twenty-five kilometers from Paris, Péguy was felled by a bullet through the head. “For God’s sake, push ahead!” are said to have been his last words. He was forty-one.

At the center of Notre Jeunesse, as at the center of Péguy’s life, was the Dreyfus affair. It is difficult for us to comprehend the riveting importance of this episode for French life at the turn of the century. In its divisiveness, it was like the Vietnam War in American society, only more so. The fate of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army captain on the French general staff who was falsely accused of spying, was a lightning rod, a catalyst, a test of will and political good faith. Everyone took sides. And, as Proust noted midway through A la recherche, “The waves of the two currents of Dreyfusism and anti-Dreyfusism divided France from top to bottom.” The affair officially lasted from 1894, when Dreyfus was first courtmartialed and sent to prison on Devil’s Island, until 1906, when he was finally reinstated. In fact, its repercussions lasted decades. The army, the old-guard
of society, the Catholic church hierarchy were adamantly against Dreyfus; enlightened opinion was tirelessly on his side. It was not simply a matter of anti-semitism, a virulent species of which erupted throughout France. The Dreyfus Affair was one of those world-defining, world-changing occurrences whose ramifications are all the more surprising because unexpected. “There is nothing,” Péguy noted, “so unforeseen as an event.”

Péguy was from the beginning of the affair a passionate Dreyfusard. By 1910, when he wrote *Notre Jeunesse*, he had invested the event with nearly cosmic significance. For him the Dreyfus Affair did not merely dramatize an instance of justice violated and set right. It was the stage upon which the soul of modern man struggled for significance. The Dreyfus Affair was bound up with the future of the French Republic and the future of France as a Christian society. He saw in the Dreyfus Affair and its aftermath an emblematic movement of history in which the fate of society was at stake. “Everything,” Péguy wrote in one of his most quoted aphorisms, “begins in mysticism [la mystique] and ends in politics [la politique].”

Péguy wrote *Notre Jeunesse* as a response to—and an attack upon—a long essay by his friend Daniel Halévy about the Dreyfus Affair in the *Cahiers*. Halévy, too, was a staunch Dreyfusard. But he did not, as Péguy saw it, understand that the terms of the debate had been transformed utterly in the years following Dreyfus’s reinstatement. Over the years, supporters of Dreyfus had hardened into the party of Dreyfus. They had lost the spontaneity and faith that had originally fueled their cause. The division was no longer between Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, but between those who had succumbed to the inert, tabulating spirit of modernity and those who understood that culture was something deeper and more vital. “Dreyfusism triumphant” had capitulated to the sterility of party domination just as thoroughly as had the anti-Dreyfusards years before.

For Péguy, it was not enough to be on the right side of the debate, because the debate was fundamentally about more than choosing the right side. It was about the direction of the modern world. He was “horrified,” he wrote, to discover that what was “to us an instinct has for the young become a matter of propositions… a matter of logic.” Péguy hoped to show “what culture is, and how utterly different from (infinitely more precious than) science, archaeology, a doctrine, erudition, and, of course, a system. You will see what culture was like before the professors crushed it.”

In Péguy’s mind, the Dreyfus Affair had originally called forth a kind of heroism that had been sadly depleted by the institutionalization of its own success. He lamented

> the world we call… the modern world. The world that tries to be clever. The world of the intelligent, of the advanced, of those who know…. who have nothing more to learn. The world of those who are not had on by fools. Like us. *That is to say:* the world of those who believe in nothing, not even in atheism, who devote themselves, who sacrifice themselves to nothing. *More precisely* the world of those without a *mystique*. And who boast of it.
As far as I know, Péguy never attempted *la mystique*. Doubtless he would have regarded the exercise as an example of precisely the sort of degradation he was warning against: the movement of “organic” (a favorite word) plenitude to lifeless rationalism. In part, I suppose, Péguy was issuing the same sort of admonition that Walter Bagehot, writing about the English monarchy, made about the fragile but indispensable charisma of the throne: “We must not,” Bagehot wrote, “let in daylight upon magic.” Warning about the extent to which politics was “devouring” *la mystique*, Péguy was calling attention to the non-rational currents of life that nourish healthy institutions and preserve reason from rationalism.

Clearly, Péguy was a kind of romantic. Much that he had to say about the differences among nations, the French “race,” etc., seems curiously dated, even odious, to our twenty-first-century ears. As Manent noted, “Péguy did not go so far as to say that a German saint was an impossibility, a contradiction in terms, but it must be said that he came close to it.” Perhaps Péguy’s notion of *la mystique* is similar to what Kant meant by an “aesthetical idea”: a “representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e., any concept being capable of being adequate to it.” But I think there was more to it than that. It is easy to dismiss a figure like Péguy. His enthusiasms are embarrassingly frank, his rhetoric volatile, his categories clumsy. But he saw something essential about the spiritual aridity of modern rationalism, the attempt to reduce life to a calculus of competing interests. We live in a world increasingly determined by the administrative imperative Péguy recoiled from. In such a world, Péguy’s ambition to “introduce uneasiness” and open the door to “commotion” is a necessary corrective.

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