

CHARLES PEGUY

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In 1912, a spare man with a spade beard set off on foot from Paris, his destination the cathedral of Chartres. His name was Charles Peguy, he was just shy of forty years of age, he was a poet, pamphleteer, patriot and, above all, a Catholic who cherished his faith the more because of the years he had spent away from it. Two years later he would be one of the first to fall for France in World War I. Eighty years later he is mentioned often, written of some, read little. Who was Charles Peguy?

Many first encountered him in Raissa Maritain's memoirs. He enters the Maritains' life as owner of a bookstore, *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which can still be seen on the Rue de la Sorbonne, a vestigial rebuke to the institution across the street. Raissa presents us with the portrait of a slightly older man, married, with children he had not had baptized, a socialist, a man of enormous integrity who had broken with his former political allies, living a precarious life.

In her second book of memoirs, *Adventures in Grace*, Raissa discusses Peguy's religious difficulties. Her account begins with a quotation from Peguy, "I have found the Faith again, I am a Catholic." Thus he came before the American Catholic reader as a writer who, having wandered in

the byways of socialism and uneasy agnosticism, returned to the faith and found in Joan of Arc the overwhelming symbol of France.

The fact is that he wrote *Jeanne d'Arc* almost a decade before his return to the Church in 1907 and it is tempting to think that she attracted him because of her failure, her martyrdom, her victory in defeat. Peguy's own life did not describe a rising line. It was not exactly a spiral downward either, but a looping progression from hope through half-accomplishment to reversal. When he sat off on foot for Chartres he was a man who probably thought of himself as an all around failure.

With writers, it is customary to trade off a dissatisfying life for the stories or poems that come out of it, counting the sacrifice of the poet small price to pay for his poetry. This romantic conception of the artist dies hard. In any case, Peguy would have repudiated it with disdain. He wanted recognition and acclaim. He felt he deserved it. He did not receive it. Is there success in failure?

The Christian signs upon himself the cross which symbolizes the cruel execution of his publicly discredited Lord. *In hoc signo vinces?* But victory under this sign almost always looks like worldly defeat. One of the fascinations of Peguy is that he sought worldly acclaim by writing on themes which call into question worldly acclaim.

Only you know our loveliest sentiments

Last no more than the space of a day

And the strongest and most lasting love

Lasts no more than moments.

Those lines are from, *Eve*, said to be the longest poem in French, one thousand, nine hundred quatrains, or seven thousand six hundred forty-four lines. That is the size of a good sized novel. A pretty hefty bid for attention.

His prose writings are studded with *mots*. "There are lots of honest men. You can tell them by the way they do bad things badly." "Experts on youth are almost as sad as experts on love." "Kantianism has pure hands, but it has no hands." "One is no longer a poet after twelve years of age." "One word is always better than many." And, fair warning perhaps, "One should never believe what a poet says."

The Maritains, in their fervor as converts, confided in Peguy what had happened to them. "But I too have come to that," he cried. What did the poet mean? Jacques was not edified to learn that Peguy missed Mass on Sunday as well as Ascension Day. What kind of faith was this that did not express itself in the practices the faith required? But Peguy's marriage was not blessed and his children were unbaptized and his wife was opposed to rectifying either. They had married in a civil ceremony, she came of revolutionary stock, and Peguy appears to have felt bound by the nature of the compact they had entered into, considering it a matter of justice. To go to Mass would be to endure the suffering of separating himself from his family, and to be unable to receive communion. This was Peguy's agonizing

situation. He may serve as a kind of patron for those caught in similar seemingly insoluble circumstances.

Jacques Maritain made a disastrous visit to Peguy's wife to convince her that, since baptism was a meaningless gesture in her eyes, she should accede to Peguy's desires. The visit descended into theological wrangling. Raissa tries to put the best face on it, but it is difficult not to see the visit as enormously imprudent. It caused a rift between the Maritains and Peguy.

Peguy had been a champion of Dreyfus, and fell out with his former allies. He was a difficult friend and a ferocious foe. He returned to the faith but not to communion and it was only on the battlefield that he reentered the sacramental life. Peguy is a puzzle, no doubt about it. His poetry, which translates with difficulty, has come into English, but his prose has not. The fifteen years of his *Cahiers*, chock full of his great polemics and crusades, are exciting to read. His blast against Durkheim and sociology makes telling points. His feeling that the Church, by treating the apostate Ernest Renan with such gentleness, seemed to have adopted the liberalism that had led Renan out of the priesthood and out of the Church, is a shrewd analysis.

There are French writers who have written out of a Catholic sensibility but whose lives have been far from edifying. One thinks of Chateaubriand and Barbey d'Aureville, to keep examples discreetly in the

past. Peguy does not fall into this category. Far from it. With the return of faith came a settled Catholic outlook, that pervaded his life and everything he wrote. "It is probable that he did not have that 'illumination' which suddenly seized Claudel one Christmas afternoon at Notre Dame during the singing of the Magnificat, but that an interior change took place by slow increments. When he made his remark to Lotte [that he had regained the faith], he was sure of himself, and when he declared himself subject to the absolute 'order' of Our Lady of Chartres he had accepted the faith as a gift." (Louis Perche)

In 1910 appeared *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*. The adoption of an openly Catholic outlook alienated many subscribers to the Cahiers, who had come aboard when Peguy was a socialist. He gained new readers, of course, some of them as equivocal as those he had lost. He was embraced as an unquestioning patriot, a hero of the right. But Peguy's politics seem as non-ideological as those of Bernanos.

Peguy deserves a revival of interest on the part of Catholics. Anyone can love the poetry, but the prose, should it find its way into English, would claim, I think, a wide readership. Passionate, provoking, in the world but not of it, living his life in a kind of limbo, Peguy ended as a hero, both moral and military. Joan of Arc must have welcomed him home.