CHARLES PÉGUY AND THE SPIRIT OF FRANCE

PÉGUY'S life practically covers the stretch of years between the Franco-Prussian war and the war of 1914. He was killed at the Marne in September, 1914. They are years when the attitude of Frenchmen to the problems of nationalism underwent fundamental changes, which are reflected in Péguy's *Cahiers de la Quinzaine.*

For two generations after the Franco-Prussian war, defeat and determinism worked their separate corrosions and Frenchmen knew such depression of spirit that perhaps in all history no country has fallen so low in faith in its power to carry on. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century German ideas had become increasingly popular, and it seemed to some people that all that was vital in recent thought came from Germany. Tracing the reactions of two generations of young Frenchmen to the music of Wagner is a very good way of tracing a change of attitude for which Barrès was largely responsible. He felt the fatal attraction of the Tristan music: 'It is in vain that I am bound to the mast, like the wise Odysseus. I tear my bonds asunder, and ardent even to despair I plunge beneath the waves to seek the sirens.' Elsewhere, he speaks of Wagner's creations as exerting harmful influences, demoralising and brutalising men's minds.

If the Affaire Dreyfus shook the very foundations of national institutions and showed up much that was rotten in the State, it served at least to bring about the re-birth of national passions in France, and the Kaiser's taunt at Agadir in 1911 found France on the up-grade. New prophets were about. The young men who had learnt from Professor Bergson to free their minds from determinism were bracing themselves for a regeneration of courage and moral welfare. The new feeling was, let there be men worthy to be Frenchmen—not dreyfusards and anti-dreyfusards, not republicans and royalists and socialists, not men of one party or another. Barrès, speaking on the death of Moréas, said: 'To become classical is to become more honest.' 'To become more honest' may be taken as the watch-word of the day.

There was great restlessness among the younger generation of these pre-war years, and a thirst for action. Renan's grandson, Psichari, found the intellectual atmosphere of Paris stifling, and departed to the African desert on active service; he dedicated his book,

L'Appel aux Armes, 'A celui dont l'esprit m'accompagne dans les solitudes de l'Afrique, à cet autre solitaire en qui revit aujourd'hui l'âme de la France, et dont l'oeuvre a courbé d'amour notre jeunesse, à notre maître Charles Péguy . . . .' Péguy in these days is writing of 'men who believe in something,' and this is what he discovers on their behalf: the values they were ready to live and die for were not new values, though they might appear to be new to the modern world which had forgotten them. 'Nous assistons à une profonde et violente révolution et réintégration de la race . . . Tout ce qui nous est arrivé, au moins que cela serve à cette génération qui monte.' In 1913 he publishes the *Cahier* which gives complete expression to his mature thought and attacks the chief enemy: money as a power. Characteristically, the Cahier called *De L'Argent* is mainly about his own childhood, where money was anything but a power. It is people, not theories, not facts, but a story, he offers to oppose the power of money: the people of the French peasantry, and the story of his own childhood.

In his desire to understand and interpret modern France, Péguy searches all down her history for evidence of times when her spirit was in a healthy and active state. Back he goes, through France modern, revolutionary, classical, mediaeval, through the dark ages, the early years of Christianity, Rome and the law of order, Greece and 'la pureté antique,' Israel and the race of David:

> 'Une race y montait comme une longue chaîne;
> un roi chantait en bas, en haut mourait un Dieu' (Hugo).

In fact, in defiance of Renan and Taine and 'la recherce scientifique' Péguy's history of France begins with Adam and Eve. For the purposes of my history, says Péguy, the story of Eve is more valid than any facts you may bring to light in your decipherings and excavations: from Eve at the beginning, to the end with the rising of the dead, when all the babies are born and the bells have stopped ringing, it is valid, for in this faith France has lived. This is worked out in a *Cahier* that took the form of a long epic poem, *Eve*. As he describes Eve mourning for her lost Paradise, the picture becomes more and more familiar, more and more like other descriptions of Péguy's, and we are soon forced to recognise that his Earthly Paradise is extraordinarily like his own native France, the plaine de la Beauce, stretching between Chartres and Orléans.

Péguy's descriptions of the Nativity scenes and the dawn of Christianity can only be compared to the work of the early stone-masons of French Cathedrals, or to the work of the tapestry-weavers who pass from incident to incident within the same frame. It is not

pseudo-mediaeval, it is quite spontaneously done in the same spirit. We know those Kings and Queens of Judah, and all the saints and virgins and angels of Chartres, who are so unmistakably French, for instance that thirteenth-century *Vierge du Songe de S. Joseph*, who is just a French peasant girl sewing. Péguy says that is what he is too: a French peasant. And from Péguy's point of view, here we are home again. For it is no accident, but a profound necessity, that all life be rooted at some point in space as well as time: the Nativity at Bethlehem, Jeanne d'Arc at Domrémy, and at Orléans; and Péguy's own beat is the country between Paris and Orléans, where his peasant forebears lived: 'Ma grand'mère qui gardait les vaches, à qui je dois, de qui je tiens, tout ce que je suis.' This is how he describes the manner of living of these people: 'Tout était un rythme et un rite et une cérémonie depuis le petit lever. Tout était un événement, sacré. Tout était une tradition, un enseignement, tout était légué, tout était la plus sainte habitude. Tout était une élévation intérieure, et une prière, toute la journée, le sommeil et la veille, le travail et le peu de repos, le lit et la table, la soupe et le boeuf, la maison et le jardin, la porte et la rue, la cour et le pas de porte, et les assiettes sur la table.' All old, consecrated old, back in the roots of time. 'A farm on the Beauce plain was infinitely nearer a gallo-roman farm, in manner of living, uprightness, earnestness, gravity, and in very structure and institution, in dignity, than to-day it is near itself.'

He talks of the ethics of old France, meaning the belief until now, he says, unquestioned, and sound religiously, morally and economically: that a man who works with his heart in his work is entitled to a living and has earned his right to live: it is the ideal of the good workman. 'We saw this piety of good workmanship carried unfailingly through to its furthest implications. All through my childhood I used to watch my mother mend chairs for Orléans Cathedral in exactly the same spirit, with exactly the same heart and hand with which this people used to carve its cathedrals.' 'A tradition surging up from the deep roots of the race, a whole history, an unquestioning acceptance, a sense of honour demanded that this chair should be well made. Every part of the chair that would not be seen was exactly as well done as the parts that were visible. It is the very principle of the Cathedrals.' People whose work is so knitted into their lives have a savour and a character that the world is losing: 'If a countrywoman made a remark, it was her race itself, her true being, what was in her of the people, that spoke and showed up. And when a workman stood lighting his cigarette, what he was going to say was not what all the morning papers had

said.' 'Would you believe it, I can remember people who enjoyed their work.' There is no degradation in poverty while the virtue of the race still flourishes. But when it withers, then arises the problem of destitution—a very different matter.

Péguy came to speak of his acceptance of tradition and traditional Christianity as of the old French peasant blood in him asserting itself: 'Vraiment je serais un grand sot de ne pas me laisser redevenir ce paysan.'

'Un pays, c'est un pays qui a un clocher,' says Péguy. A man's own countryside is one with a church tower. For bells rise on the air, so old, so familiar, you hardly know you hear them; so new, so insistent, you cannot help listening. You hardly know you hear, because it might be remembering. Your mind is still intent on the job in hand, you have not stopped or moved your head. The bells say the same thing over again, or nearly the same, and no one wonders how long ago they began, or when they will stop. Presently their tune has changed throughout, but no one could say when the change came, for it has always been the same, or nearly the same. We hardly know whether it is now we are hearing, or last time, or the time before, or all the times before. And if not our ears, then our fathers' and our fathers' fathers heard them : it is all the same, or nearly the same.

Jeanne d'Arc was Péguy's favourite saint. He never lost his wonder at her being 'une fille de chez nous.' 'Pensez, mon cher Halévy, n'est-il pas effrayant de penser que son père et sa mère, son oncle Durand Lassois, ses trois frères, sa grande soeur, ses amies, étaient des gens comme nous en avons tous connus, étant petits, comme nous eussions été nous-mêmes.' 'Et que toute cette grande histoire est sortie de là.'

And in his *Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc* someone says : 'Les bergers prosternés présentaient de la laine. De la laine de leurs moutons, mon enfant; de la laine des moutons de ce temps-là. De la laine comme celle que nous filons.'

The great difference between Péguy and others who were working for a traditionalist revival in France is that Péguy felt convinced that the true spirit of France is unquenchable and too resilient to be permanently hurt, whatever damage might be done to it. It is apparent from the Affaire Dreyfus onwards, when Péguy was on one side fighting for probity and first principles, and Barrès, for instance, on the other, defending national institutions. Péguy had no patience with those who would deny all validity to the last hundred years of French history, and said they were as bad as the people he lumped together under the disparaging label 'the intellectuals of the modern

world,' for whom France appeared only to exist since the Revolution. Accepting the monarchy in the past should not imply condemning the republic, as such, in the present. Nothing made Péguy more indignant than the way the leaders of Action Française talked of 'l'ancien régime' as though it were their private property.. But, he says, 'in the ancient world, under the old systems, there was life everywhere. What is dangerous is this great dead carcase of the modern world. Spirit could always slip in somewhere, carry on somehow, make itself felt; improvise, invent, spring like toad-flax in a crack in the wall—and starting from there, prosper and flourish. . . . . All the ancient forms of power were penetrated as by a marrow of spirit—all but one, the only one that has survived the advent of the modern world: the power of money.'

From thinking that the modern disorder and the decline of Christianity were two manifestations of the same principle of decay, Péguy came to hold that the modern disorder in thought and life is directly traceable to the decline of Christianity. Mercifully, he says, there are all the little people, all the quiet, inarticulate crowds of workers, who, day in day out, go on working often, still, for the work's sake, and living lives that are plain but by no means petty, and certainly not safe in the modern sense. So long as these go on, in all the remote corners of all the provinces, there is hope for France.

RUTH BETHELL.

THE HEATHEN ARE WRONG[1]

'I WAS there when France fell; and I have written this book to mourn her.' Many English-speaking people were there when France fell, and many have written books, to mourn the collapse of her army, or the dissolution of her political machine, or the capture of Paris, or the surrender of her navy. But the France mourned here, with this pall of many colours and many patterns, is not the agony of events that announced her painful death, but the reality of France, dying beneath the suffering of the last fatal illness: France as men of the French way of thinking loved and understood her. This reality is not widely, or at any rate not fully, understood in England and America; it is not understood what has died, nor what is the loss

[1] 'The Heathen are Wrong.' An Impersonal Autobiography. By Eugene Bagger. (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 12/6).