

THE HOLY INNOCENTS  
AND OTHER POEMS



THE MYSTERY OF  
THE HOLY INNOCENTS  
AND OTHER POEMS

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

CHARLES PEGUY is the only poet of consequence during the last fifty years in France whose work has failed to arouse the smallest critical interest in this country. Compared with Claudel or Valéry, to mention two of his contemporaries, he has simply fallen flat. It almost seems as though the term 'poetry' were out of place, or as though, and this is perhaps nearer the truth, the conception of poetry his work implied placed it outside the pale of contemporary criticism. There seems to be nothing for criticism to get its teeth into. Everything is plain sailing. There is no shell to crack, no secret to explore, no difficulty of language, no impenetrable thought, no interplay of images to be unravelled. In whatever direction the critic looks, whether at the technique, the ideas, the images or the psychological sphere, there is nothing to be done, or at any rate nothing worth doing.

But in addition to this negative quality, which disqualifies Péguy at the start, there are some very palpable positive elements in his work which seem to settle the matter for good and all. He is not merely eccentric, in the sense of being outside the French literary tradition; he is all too easy to label. There can be no doubt where he belongs, with his Mysteries, his Tapestries, his saints and his pilgrimages. The atmosphere is all too familiar: the deliberately archaic world of a stylised, mediaeval Catholicism, the refuge of the convert in reaction against the modern world, returning in his poetry to the true fold of the past.

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*The Mystery of the Holy Innocents* and the selections from his other poetic works collected in this volume are, like all his work, perfectly straightforward and do not call for comment. But it may not be out of place to try and forestall some of the misunderstandings which cluster round his work, and to suggest where the critical problem lies, not for the sake of raising a question, but in order to clear the way for a fuller understanding of the poetry itself. For whether Péguy's poetry is ultimately judged to have failed or succeeded, whether he is recognised as an important writer or not, there is no doubt whatever that it remains of the greatest interest and implies a conception of poetry and of the function of the imagination which, as I shall suggest, illustrates the truth of Coleridge's notion of poetry, more distinctly in certain respects, than Wordsworth himself. This does not of course imply any comparison between the merits of Péguy and Wordsworth, and in general I have no intention in what follows of awarding marks to Péguy, but of explaining quite briefly what Péguy thought he was doing. Nor shall I deal specifically with the poems in this volume, which can only be done at greater length and in detail.

Péguy's poetry grew straight out of his prose and it is even possible to point to the pages in *St. Joan* where his prose smoulders, catches fire and bursts into flame. With the exception of some lines of doggerel in the first version of *St. Joan* \* Péguy wrote no poetry, and did not think of writing poetry, until he was thirty-five, six years before his death in 1914. His poetry, he said, was prepared by twenty years of prose, or more accurately by about twenty volumes of prose. Then, in 1908 he informed Joseph Lotte that he had 're-become' a Catholic, and shortly afterwards he told

\* *Jeanne d'Arc*, 1898.



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Daniel Halévy, that he had begun writing poetry. Of the two men, Halévy was the more surprised and, one might safely add, the more incredulous.

The metamorphosis which took place in Péguy at this period was a double event: his return to Catholicism and the release of his imagination, the birth of his poetry, are two facets of the same spiritual renewal, and the character of his poetry cannot be understood apart from its source; so that before turning to his poetry it is necessary to say two words about his return to Catholicism. In the first place, it is important to observe that Péguy would never allow that he was a 'convert'. Morally, spiritually, intellectually, he had nothing to disavow except his sins. He was not converted *from* anything. He continued to hold the same views, and his criticism of Catholicism was sharpened. The more fully he came to see the Church, the more fully his vision justified his having left the Church which he had been shown and had seen in his youth. He would not even allow that he had 'evolved'.\* He describes the process which led him to see once again that he was a Catholic, and in fact that he had never really left the Church, as a process of *approfondissement*, a deepening of mind and heart: not a revolution asserting the contrary of what had gone before, but a renaissance renewing all that was permanent. The culmination of that process is only described once in Péguy's work, with perfect clarity, not, significantly enough, with reference to Christianity, but with reference to his poetry,

\* It would be impossible to give the reasons with which Péguy substantiates his claims in this brief introduction. Those who wish to consider his attitude will find it examined in greater detail in *Péguy* (Harvill Press), where I have developed the suggestions put forward here. Péguy's original intention, on his return to the Church, had been to put all his poetry into the same form as the *Jeanne d'Arc* (1898) in order to emphasise the continuity of his thought.

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in his *Commentary on 'Eve'*, his last poem. The intellectual aspect of his return to Catholicism is in fact clear, but its inmost secret could only be told indirectly, as reflected in the release of his imagination. That is, moreover, the method of the *Biographia Literaria*, where the story of Coleridge's conversion from Unitarianism to faith in the Trinity proceeds intellectually, so to speak, and directly, up to the point at which his rejection of the theory of the association of ideas led him to formulate his conception of the Imagination as a mirror in which to express the culmination of the *approfondissement* in which he came to believe in the Trinity.

'The poet, described in ideal perfection,' Coleridge writes, 'brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and a spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I should exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination.'

The culmination of Péguy's process is described in different terms and without reference to the imagination, perhaps because Péguy regarded his conception of poetry as classical, equally opposed to the sterilities of order (classicism) and a disorderly fertility (romanticism). But the fact described is the same: the *fusion* of all the faculties, which brings the whole soul into *activity*, to which Péguy would have added that this represented the essential form of liberty. Writing in the third person Péguy speaks of descending to the depths of reality.

'Just as in the matter of faith Péguy descended to the depths at which liturgy and theology, that is to say the spiritual life and the spiritual proposition, are not yet distin-

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guished, so, as a writer, he descended to the depths where the image and the idea are still joined in a liaison which is itself carnal and not as yet resolved.'

Indeed the whole of the *Commentary* is a gloss on Coleridge's ideas.

To Péguy the poetic act is the imaginative vision, itself the product of the 'whole soul of man' with all its faculties *fused*, so that as Coleridge says, he *diffuses* that spirit of unity upon his work, and that unity is its form. *Tout le jaillissement est dans le germe, tout l'ordre dans l'épi*. All the activity, all the freedom is in the spiritual seed, all the order in the fruit. Order is the fruit of freedom, that is Péguy's description of his poetry and of his faith, his Catholicism.

The special character of Péguy's poetry—its simplicity—is the immediate reflection of his faith: simplicity here being the unity created by the fusion of understanding of which Coleridge speaks and not the sham simplicity of naïveté. This reveals a second consideration, where Péguy is again at one with Coleridge.

Péguy's faith was not in any sense a private affair: his faith is the faith of the Church, the personal appropriation through faith of the mysteries revealed. He has neither private views nor private interpretations to offer. There is nothing esoteric or 'mystical' about his *mystique*. It is personal: which means to say that it turns him away from his private world, releases him from his private world, and turns him towards others. Faith to Péguy is communion; poetry to Péguy is communication. His poetry is the direct communication of the vision given in faith. This directness of vision attains such clarity for Péguy that he does not hesitate to put the greater part of his poetry, the main part of his poetry, into the Mouth of God—as though to illustrate

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Coleridge's definition of imagination as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the infinite act of creation in the infinite I AM'. For faith, in Péguy's poetry, is not 'belief'—which at once suggests propositions—but the capacity to see, a light. The choice of faith as a subject was, as Coleridge desired, the choice of a subject 'remote from private interests' while at the same time the centre of his personal life.

The well known distinction which Coleridge draws between imagination and fancy, in the *Biographia*, and which he applies to Wordsworth, applies even more forcibly, I think, to Péguy (not, to repeat, in praise of Péguy or in disparagement of Wordsworth but simply as indicating the character of Péguy's work).

'Last and pre-eminently,' Coleridge writes, 'I challenge for this poet the gift of Imagination in the highest and strictest sense of the word. In the play of *fancy* Wordsworth, to my feelings, is not always graceful and sometimes recondite.' Péguy is not recondite in his allusions, but he is frequently ungraceful and he is in constant danger of falling, like Wordsworth, into sentimentality; then the imaginative structure is obscured, the unity diffused over the poem hidden. In fact, it would be possible to point to the recurrence of certain images in both Wordsworth and Péguy, in particular, children and childhood, which leads them on to very thin ice. Moreover, Péguy was quite unable and certainly unwilling to correct, cut and improve his work. Unlike Wordsworth who could improve the *Prelude* long after he was incapable of conceiving it, Péguy was lacking in technical mastery and adopted a *quod scripsi scripsi* attitude to his work which is responsible for half the trouble. But where imagination is concerned, in the strict Coleridgean

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sense, Péguy ventured further than Wordsworth (not necessarily more successfully) and gave full expression to the whole range of his imaginative vision in a single, unbroken epic, *Eve*, which, in conception though by no means in execution, sustains the comparison which he did not hesitate to make with the Divine Comedy.

It is probably the exclusion of the poet's private world, the choice of a subject 'remote from private interests' which makes Péguy's work strange. On the other hand the subject being Christianity, it is natural and easy to identify his poetry with the familiar attempt to return to past forms, and even deliberate archaism. There are, no doubt, certain elements in his poetry which make this view plausible—the use of older forms of words, and to a certain extent the *mise-en-scène*—but in general Péguy's style is wholly his own and his *vers libre*, as well as his four-square quatrain, is his own. With the exception of Victor Hugo there is no obvious derivation, and neither Baudelaire nor Rimbaud, the real rejuvenators of French poetry, touched him at all.

Looked upon as a whole Péguy's poetry sprang out of his prose in the same way that his Catholicism grew out of his deepest thoughts and feeling. He found himself a poet just as he found himself a Catholic, and for the same reasons. There was no break with the past and no 'conversion'. His poetry is not a naïve statement of his faith, a simplification, but an infinitely richer and more complete expression of his mature faith or more precisely of the faith which he rediscovered when he left his despair behind him and discovered the meaning of hope. For it was then that he discovered in hope the parallel to freedom.

There is also a special sense in which Péguy's poetry is the fulfilment of his prose works. It is the proper expression

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of his *mystique*. And yet in the ordinary sense Péguy is not a mystical poet because his conception of mysticism is perhaps the distinctive mark of his work as a whole.

Mysticism to Péguy is the contemplation of the mysteries of the faith as the spring of action. Anything which smacks of quietism, of passive oriental mysticism, and really of mysticism as it is usually conceived, was anathema to him.

He does not recollect in tranquillity: The Catholics, he wrote, are unbearable 'dans leur sécurité mystique'. The essence of mysticism was an *angoisse* pushing him to action. This action was the communication of his *mystique* as the source or, as he says, the nourishment of life, so that he could write that *la mystique* is the source of *la politique* and that a *politique*, once it becomes detached from its *mystique*, hardens into an ideology and is no longer free to grow and live. Once a *mystique* turns back upon itself to become attentive to its own phases and moods, it becomes a refined form of individualism. The importance of St. Joan in Péguy's work is that she exemplifies the correct relation between *la mystique* and *la politique*, the relation at the basis of the idea of Christendom, not as a fixed form but as a developing communal life. At first Péguy had hoped that Socialism was to replace the stagnant Catholicism of his day. When the optimism of the Socialist idea proved in the Dreyfus Affair to have been an illusion, and it appeared to him as a *politique* divorced from its original *mystique*, he thought in terms, not of a return or conversion to Catholicism, but of a Catholic renaissance. His poetry is the result.

Péguy's *mystique* is not esoteric but popular and his poetry conforms to his *mystique*. He is not concerned with his religious experience, and except in some of the *Quatrains* and the *Sonnets* there is relatively little reference to his

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belief, his private life or himself. *Credidi, propter quod locutus sum ; ego autem humiliatus sum nimis*. He believed and therefore he had to speak, however humiliating his own position, technically outside the Church and deprived of the sacraments owing to his civil marriage. But in order to speak, in order to express the whole gamut of his thought and feeling, he had to find a new voice and a new language: the language of the imagination.

A Catholic renaissance, if it was to mean anything, must involve the whole man, and this was where Péguy reached a conception of the imagination which is parallel to that of Coleridge and Newman. Moreover, the de-christianisation of France which bulks so large in his work, was not, in his view, the result of an intellectual defeat, or of a lack of arguments, but of the intellectualisation which reduced the faith to a series of propositions. It was not arguments which were wanting but charity, life. The individual in that world was isolated and *déraciné* by an excessive intellectualism, by which he meant what Pascal calls *l'esprit de géométrie*, the geometrical and mathematical thought of his day. This tendency had in fact infected both Catholicism and Socialism so that both were reduced to abstractions, and faith, in Newman's terms, tended to be restricted to a notional belief in propositions arbitrarily divorced from life and freedom and in practice from hope. That is why hope is the great theme of the *Three Mysteries* the source and sign of life and freedom to create. But what Péguy desired was a faith in which the spiritual proposition and the spiritual life (while remaining distinct) should never be separated at the root, and to communicate his thought he had to find a language in which the image and the idea would, in the same way, remain vitally linked together: the language in fact of the

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imagination. Systematic thought is usually the systematic exclusion of the image, which becomes at the most an illustration, and it was Bergson's attempt to bring movement into thought, and to think in terms of movement and life, that won Péguy's lasting admiration.

The central image in Péguy's poetry is the fact that it is God who speaks, and his imaginative power must be measured by the fact that it can communicate and hand down the word of God as something new. The reunion of tradition and freedom is one of Péguy's great themes. For in a propositional Christianity everything which is new tends to be regarded as false to tradition, whereas in poetry the old and stale is dead. In the communication of Christianity tradition and freedom must be united, and the old must be new in a real and vital sense in order that a notional faith should be backed by a real assent. Otherwise the notion, though held intellectually, ceases to have meaning and becomes the end term of a logical series. That was the criticism which Péguy made of the intellectualist Catholicism of his day.

But poetry is no more to be found in a sterile order (classicism) than in a disorderly fertility (romanticism). Péguy's order is the fruit of freedom, and it is worth observing that his poetry is both freer than his prose (from idiosyncrasies) and more orderly, and he regarded himself as in the classical tradition (of Corneille, not Racine). Indeed, Péguy points to the poverty of his poetry (the adjective, the evocative phrase is almost absent) as the mark of its classicism and of its Christian note. But while the arbitrary distinction between classical and romantic which Péguy adhered to serves little purpose, it remains true that his conception of order as the fruit of freedom is the essential romantic contribution to criticism. And from that point of



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view Péguy could be said to have rediscovered the romantic movement, though not its specific form, romanticism.

There is another respect in which Péguy can be best understood as carrying forward the central ideas of the romantic movement—a movement, be it noted, which in its truest forms made possible the renewal of the link between Christianity and the culture of that time. The ideal perfection of the poet, Coleridge writes, is to diffuse the tone and spirit of unity upon his work ‘by that synthetic and magical power’ to which alone he reserves the name of imagination. The term of Péguy’s poetic work is the poetic synthesis which takes form in the epic. Whatever the weaknesses of *Eve*, and there are many, it is ultimately in his epic that the characteristic quality of his work appears to the full. This note is present from the first, and the three *Mysteries* (*The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, *The Porch of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, and *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*) are a single poem having for their theme the mysteries of faith, hope and charity. The *Quatrains* offer a parallel with their treatment of the Supernatural and Cardinal Virtues. But in neither poem does Péguy allow himself the scope and the canvas to give his imagination time to focus the whole Christian scheme into a single whole. This was only attempted in his last work, *Eve*, which in a sense represents a fusion of the two forms previously used, the broad imaginative conception of the *Mysteries* being set in formal rhyming quatrains. *Eve*, Péguy claimed, was the only Christian epic which owed nothing to the past, and if criticism ever takes his work seriously it will have to turn to *Eve*.

The epic quality in Péguy’s work is not revealed in the size and scope of his work only, but in a radical simplicity