

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Péguy
- poems -

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Charles Péguy(7 January 1873 – 5 September 1914)

Charles Péguy was a noted French poet, essayist, and editor. His two main philosophies were socialism and nationalism, but by 1908 at the latest, after years of uneasy agnosticism, he had become a devout but non-practicing Roman Catholic. From that time, Catholicism strongly influenced his works.

Biography

Péguy was born to poverty. His mother, widowed when he was an infant, mended chairs for a living. In 1894, benefitting from republican school reform, he was received in the École Normale Supérieure, and attended notably the lectures of Henri Bergson and Romain Rolland, whom he befriended. He formally left the École Normale, without graduating, in 1897, even though he continued attending some lectures in 1898. Influenced by Lucien Herr (librarian of the École Normale), he became an ardent Dreyfusard.

From his earliest years, he was influenced by socialism. From 1900 to his death in 1914, he was the main contributor and the editor of the literary magazine *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which first supported the Socialist Party director Jean Jaurès. Péguy ultimately ended his support after he began viewing Jaurès as a traitor to the nation and to socialism. In the *Cahiers*, Péguy published not only his own essays and poetry, but also works by important contemporary authors such as Romain Rolland.

His free verse poem, "Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue", has gone through more than 60 editions in France. It was a favorite book of Charles de Gaulle.

He died in battle, shot in the forehead, in Villeroy, Seine-et-Marne during World War I, on the day before the beginning of the Battle of the Marne.

Influence

Benito Mussolini referred to Péguy as a "source" for Fascism. But, according to Zaretsky in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Péguy would have likely been horrified by this appropriation.

At the end of Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock* (1938), the unnamed Frenchman the old priest tells Rose about, who never took the sacraments but who some think was a saint, is obviously Péguy.

In 1983, Geoffrey Hill published a long poem with the title *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*.

Freedom

GOD SPEAKS:

When you love someone, you love him as he is.

I alone am perfect.

It is probably for that reason

That I know what perfection is

And that I demand less perfection of those poor people.

I know how difficult it is.

And how often, when they are struggling in their trials,

How often do I wish and am I tempted to put my hand under their stomachs

In order to hold them up with my big hand

Just like a father teaching his son how to swim

In the current of the river

And who is divided between two ways of thinking.

For on the one hand, if he holds him up all the time and if he holds him too much,

The child will depend on this and will never learn how to swim.

But if he doesn't hold him up just at the right moment

That child is bound to swallow more water than is healthy for him.

In the same way, when I teach them how to swim amid their trials

I too am divided by two ways of thinking.

Because if I am always holding them up, if I hold them up too often,

They will never learn how to swim by themselves.

But if I don't hold them up just at the right moment,

Perhaps those poor children will swallow more water than is healthy for them.

Such is the difficulty, and it is a great one.

And such is the doubleness itself, the two faces of the problem.

On the one hand, they must work out their salvation for themselves. That is the rule.

It allows of no exception. Otherwise it would not be interesting. They would not be men.

Now I want them to be manly, to be men, and to win by themselves

Their spurs of knighthood.

On the other hand, they must not swallow more water than is healthy for them,

Having made a dive into the ingratitude of sin.

Such is the mystery of man's freedom, says God,

And the mystery of my government towards him and towards his freedom.

If I hold him up too much, he is no longer free

And if I don't hold him up sufficiently, I am endangering his salvation.

Two goods in a sense almost equally precious.

For salvation is of infinite price.

But what kind of salvation would a salvation be that was not free?

What would you call it?

We want that salvation to be acquired by himself,

Himself, man. To be procured by himself.

To come, in a sense, from himself. Such is the secret,

Such is the mystery of man's freedom.

Such is the price we set on man's freedom.

Because I myself am free, says God, and I have created man in my own image and likeness.

Such is the mystery, such the secret, such the price

Of all freedom.

That freedom of that creature is the most beautiful reflection in this world

Of the Creator's freedom. That is why we are so attached to it,

And set a proper price on it.

A salvation that was not free, that was not, that did not come from a free man could in no wise be attractive to us. What would it amount to?

What would it mean?

What interest would such a salvation have to offer?

A beatitude of slaves, a salvation of slaves, a slavish beatitude, how do you expect me to be interested in that kind of thing? Does one care to be loved by slaves?

If it were only a matter of proving my might, my might has no need of those slaves, my might is well enough known, it is sufficiently known that I am the Almighty.

My might is manifest enough in all matter and in all events.

My might is manifest enough in the sands of the sea and in the stars of heaven.

It is not questioned, it is known, it is manifest enough in inanimate creation.

It is manifest enough in the government,

In the very event that is man.

But in my creation which is endued with life, says God, I wanted something more.

Infinitely better. Infinitely more. For I wanted that freedom.

I created that very freedom. There are several degrees to my throne.

When you once have known what it is to be loved freely, submission no longer has any taste.

All the prostrations in the world

Are not worth the beautiful upright attitude of a free man as he kneels. All the submission, all the dejection in the world

Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,

The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation

From a love that is free.

Charles Péguy

The Passion Of Our Lady

For the past three days she had been wandering, and following.
She followed the people.
She followed the events.
She seemed to be following a funeral.
But it was a living man's funeral.—
She followed like a follower.
Like a servant.
Like a weeper at a Roman funeral.—
As if it had been her only occupation.
To weep.—
That is what he had done to his mother.
Since the day when he had begun his mission.—
You saw her everywhere.
With the people and a little apart from the people.
Under the porticoes, under the arcades, in drafty places.
In the temples, in the palaces.
In the streets.
In the yards and in the back-yards.
And she had also gone up to Calvary.
She too had climbed up Calvary.
A very steep hill.
And she did not even feel that she was walking.
She did not even feel that her feet were carrying her.—
She too had gone up her Calvary.
She too had gone up and up
In the general confusion, lagging a little behind ...
She wept and wept under a big linen veil.
A big blue veil...
A little faded.—

She wept as it will never be granted to a woman to weep.
As it will never be asked
Of a woman to weep on this earth.
Never at any time.—
What was very strange was that everyone respected her.
People greatly respect the parents of the condemned.
They even said: Poor woman.
And at the same time they struck at her son.

Because man is like that.—
The world is like that.
Men are what they are and you never can change them.
She did not know that, on the contrary, he had come to change man.
That he had come to change the world.
She followed and wept.
Everybody respected her.
Everybody pitied her.
They said: Poor woman.
Because they weren't perhaps really bad.
They weren't bad at heart.
They fulfilled the Scriptures.—
They honored, respected and admired her grief.
They didn't make her go away, they pushed her back only a little with special attentions
Because she was the mother of the condemned.
They thought: It's the family of the condemned.
They even said so in a low voice.
They said it among themselves
With a secret admiration.—
She followed and wept, and didn't understand very well.
But she understood quite well that the government was against her boy.
And that is a very bad business.—
She understood that all the governments were together against her boy.
The government of the Jews and the government of the Romans.
The government of judges and the government of priests.
The government of soldiers and the government of parsons.
He could never get out of it.
Certainly not.—
What was strange was that all derision was heaped on him.
Not on her at all.—
There was only respect for her.
For her grief.—
They didn't insult her.
On the contrary.
People even refrained from looking at her too much.
All the more to respect her.
So she too had gone up.
Gone up with everybody else.
Up to the very top of the hill.
Without even being aware of it.
Her legs had carried her and she did not even know it.

She too had made the Way of the Cross.
The fourteen stations of the Way of the Cross.
Were there fourteen stations?
Were there really fourteen stations?—
She didn't know for sure.
She couldn't remember.
Yet she had not missed one.
She was sure of that.
But you can always make a mistake.
In moments like that your head swims.
Everybody was against him.
Everybody wanted him to die.
It is strange.
People who are not usually together.
The government and the people.
That was awful luck.
When you have someone for you and someone against you, sometimes you can
get out of it.
You can scramble out of it.
But he wouldn't.
Certainly he wouldn't.
When you have everyone against you.
But what had he done to everyone?

I'll tell you.
He had saved the world.

Charles Péguy