
H-France Review Vol. 20 (September 2020), No. 166

Matthew W. Maguire, *Carnal Spirit: The Revolutions of Charles Péguy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 296 pp. Notes and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812250954.

Review by Eric Brandom, Kansas State University.

Matthew W. Maguire's *Carnal Spirit: The Revolutions of Charles Péguy* is deeply sympathetic toward its subject. Péguy was an important figure, influential in his dissent during his own time and especially in the interwar period. New Anglophone scholarship on him is to be welcomed. If historians of the Third Republic know Péguy, it is probably through *Notre Jeunesse* (1910), his retrospective defense of Dreyfusism, or *l'Argent* (1913), perhaps his most sustained attack on republican intellectuals. His poetry is still read occasionally in classrooms and, of course, several of his formulations are famous: *mystique* turning into *politique*, for instance. *Carnal Spirit* invites the reader to appreciate Péguy as a philosopher and poet of time, history, modernity, the body, love, and human freedom. It is a learned, elegantly written, rich, and impassioned book. It is also, like Péguy himself, self-consciously at odds with prevailing intellectual orthodoxy, as Maguire understands it.

Péguy's fierce independence and many principled stands mean that he and his *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* occupy a unique and difficult place in the intellectual landscape. Péguy managed, indeed micromanaged, this journal, also often writing book-length essays and poems for it, from its first issue in January 1900 up to his mobilization for war in 1914. The *Cahiers* were the central, consuming project of his life and existed to, as he wrote pseudonymously in the first issue, "dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité, dire bêtement la vérité bête, ennuyeusement la vérité ennuyeuse, tristement la vérité triste." [1] Despite unending financial difficulties, Péguy always insisted that the *Cahiers* would appear on high quality paper, printed with plenty of room in the margins, and also of course that the work would be done in a union shop. There would be no compromises. Passionate socialist, he was at war with organized socialism; absolutely faithful Dreyfusard, he rejected attempts get a return on the political capital generated by that mystical energy; poet of Jeanne d'Arc and of mystical Catholic faith, he never took communion and remained outside the Church; an ardent nationalist, he was unmerciful to ethn nationalists and antisemites; he remained a republican despite the Republic as it actually existed. Arguably a major modernist poet, he nonetheless earned from Marcel Proust the withering judgment that "he writes down literally everything that passes through his head" (p. 176). Finally, he was so intensely devoted to his friends that these relationships often shattered into recrimination and bitterness—leaving a trail of "broken glass" throughout his life, as his biographers, the frères Tharaud, put it (p. 220).

Methodologically, *Carnal Spirit* is a classic single-author intellectual history, the result of long reading and consultation of remaining manuscripts in archives, with a fairly tight focus on Péguy's own thought. Context is present here, of course, but Maguire does not reconstruct the cut-and-thrust of the *Cahiers'* political engagements, although he is interested in recovering the nature of that engagement as such. We in the present are encouraged to listen to Péguy and take him seriously. Péguy's challenges to the academic historiography of his time are a major theme of the book, so perhaps it is only right that Maguire follows suit. However, many historians will disagree sharply with his account of the problems with academic history-writing today, and likely with his larger claims about what is wrong or broken in our shared present more generally. Maguire's surprising and unnecessary hostility to much recent scholarship interrupts rather than facilitates the dialogic encounter he wishes to stage with Péguy.

Carnal Spirit is divided into eleven chapters. The organization is mainly thematic, but the reader never loses sight of change over time—a difficult balance, well struck. In the first chapter, Maguire gives an account of the intellectual landscape of late nineteenth-century France as Péguy encountered it. Most of this material will be familiar to historians of the period. Maguire's acceptance of Péguy's own categories imposes some distortions. It may be that, according to Péguy, there was a commonality in the deep structure of Emile Durkheim's and Charles Maurras' ideas beyond their shared reference to Comte—for Péguy, modernists and reactionaries were mirror images of each other—but this says more about Péguy than about either of the other two figures (p. 45). Maguire is good at presenting complex ideas in a lucid way, and the summary introduction of Henri Bergson, so important for Péguy, is excellent (pp. 51–58). The weight this chapter assigns to Emile Boutroux is welcome, and there clearly remains room for significant work on the difficult position of liberal Catholic intellectuals in the Republic, as related to Péguy and more broadly.

The second chapter narrates Péguy's childhood in Orléans and his life up to the founding of the *Cahiers*, including, importantly, his time at and decision to leave the *École normale supérieure* (pp. 79–81). Chapters three and four deal with Péguy's concept of modernity and the kind of “critique” that would be adequate to it. In chapter five, Maguire turns to the body, especially aging and laboring bodies, in Péguy's thinking. Chapters six and seven center on the interrelated problems of war, honor, nationhood, and nationalism. Maguire's suggestion that Jean Jaurès is as much the source of Péguy's mystique as anyone is productive (p. 71), and chapter eight, referring to what may be Péguy's most famous formulation, asks the very reasonable question, “what does it actually mean to say everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics?” (p. 164). Maguire's answer, in the end, is that “for truth and justice to flourish, liberal societies need people who are willing to live within liberalism toward ends that transcend liberalism” (p. 174). Chapter nine examines and defends Péguy's peculiar style, both in prose and poetry, which is at once attractive and a significant barrier, especially for Anglophone readers today. Chapters ten and eleven close out Péguy's life, treating first the meaning of his conversion to Catholicism in 1907, the moment of literary success in 1910, and then the period of isolation, increasingly strident nationalism and, as Maguire says, despair, which found an end in the war. Péguy wrote in early 1913, “Je suis un vieux révolutionnaire. En temps de guerre il n'y a plus qu'une politique, et c'est la politique de la Convention Nationale...c'est Jaurès dans une charrette et un roulement de tambour pour couvrir cette grande voix.”[2] In July 1914, a nationalist student shot Jaurès dead in a café. A month later Péguy, too, was dead at the front. Of course, the end of a life need not be the meaning of a life. But what an end! Maguire resists taking Péguy's martyrdom to the war as the salient fact about his historical significance, and this is no doubt correct. Yet there is more

room for judgment about Péguy and the war that really did take place than, it seems to me, Maguire allows.

Carnal Spirit covers a good deal of ground, but also orbits around a few key issues. The remainder of this review will follow one particularly important thread of the argument, about historicity and embodiment. Famously, Péguy wrote in 1912 that “le monde a moins changé depuis Jésus-Christ qu’il n’a changé depuis trente ans,”^[3] yet Maguire argues that Péguy was not anti-modern, even in Antoine Compagnon’s sense of the term. Maguire highlights the importance of Pascal (on whom he has worked previously), and argues that Péguy drew on Pascal’s description of the different orders of human life—carnal, intellectual, charitable—and saw in modernity the confusion of these orders: “For Péguy, what is essentially modern is the ambition to achieve a loveless mastery and control over others and over experience through intellect, but without an organic, charitable relation to what is known and mastered, including one’s self” (p. 87). Modernism, for Péguy, had therefore always been available. Obeisance before “immanent becoming” is not a new phenomenon. Aristotle was a modern, though Bergson is not. Yet Péguy evidently did think his time was exceptional—1881 was a key year because of Jules Ferry’s school reforms. “The market economy” and the “reign of money” snuff out all other modes of relation to the world and other people; in the late nineteenth century, modernity became unavoidable. As Maguire summarizes, this would be a second creation, a “decreation” in which “the totality of human experience is no longer free or open to the new, but mastered and disciplined by abstraction” (p. 92). Here, although Maguire does not pursue it, we might see Péguy as exemplary of a certain analytic confusion on the part of some dissident French socialists about the relationship between state action and capitalist development.

Maguire argues that for Péguy, modernity is antithetical to freedom because modernity means disavowing one’s own metaphysical commitments and also politely pretending that no one else has any such beliefs. Real freedom consists in believing and knowing that one believes. This makes for awkward conversations, but they must be accepted as essential to a free life (p. 105). Practiced unbelief is especially dangerous because, as Péguy claims, the intellectual party has fully taken over the Republican state and is using the machinery of this state to impose its disavowed, future-and-pluralism-killing metaphysics. In place of and against this flattening, dishonest, unifying, modern metaphysics Péguy proposes a metaphysical “federalism”—a condition in which no one metaphysics would be able to dominate the others, resulting perhaps in a jumbled mess, but also the possibility of freedom (pp. 114-16). For all the discussion of “metaphysics,” it is never exactly clear what Péguy or Maguire mean by this term—something like profound, life-altering belief, or truths that transcend material interest. If so, Péguy was hardly alone in thinking about this, and it would be interesting to know what Maguire thinks about the appearance of Péguy in, for instance, Emile Perreau-Saussine’s *Catholicism and Democracy*, which examines Catholic attempts to come to terms with political modernity—ultimately popular sovereignty and liberal democracy—in the wake of the French Revolution.^[4] Does Péguy really fit into this Catholic problematic? If so, what does it mean to take seriously his claims to republicanism?

For Péguy, Maguire argues, love is a prerequisite for freedom. Two interrelated “revolutions” are especially urgent here: in our approach to carnality, that is to bodies, and in our relationship to time. The cycle of birth, reproduction, childrearing, ageing, and death is at the heart of Péguy’s worldview. As Maguire writes, “the middle-aged are animated by hope of a miracle for the children they love, and, this hope is itself miraculous” (p. 119), because so obviously unfounded.

We are not a spirit locked into the body as a bird in a cage; we are incarnated, carnal spirit. Bodies are finite in time and space, and also literally inconceivable without other bodies. “For Péguy, it is this embodied spirit that the ‘second creation’ of modern metaphysics wishes to deny: its passage in time toward death, and to deny the spiritual power of the body, the full earthy and spiritual dimensions of the ‘carnal’” (p. 120). Péguy valorizes and rhapsodizes the work that women do (care work, in this case), but also male peasant agricultural labor: “It is through the organic that the spiritual enters a world of finite time...one indispensable way we affirm love in particular through our temporal, carnal lives is through work” (p. 123). The modern world, Péguy wrote, had “a secret, shameful taste for the inorganic”—Maguire glosses this as “even repressed antipathy toward carnality with serious consequences” (p. 124).

Maguire explains that, for Péguy, special kinds of action and thought are required to reconnect bodies to plural historical experience. History, both as fact and academic discipline, is very much at issue here. Péguy preferred Michelet to Renan. The latter is understood to be the master of the new historians of the Sorbonne, people like Langlois, Lavissee, and Lanson. Maguire summarizes Péguy’s critique in a way that is clearly supposed to strike also at the academic historiography of our own time: “Through the methods of modern historical research, metaphysical differences became contextual differences, with the metaphysics of the present passing judgment on the contextual limitations that prevented preceding ages from recognizing the evident legitimacy of the currently dominant metaphysical configuration” (p. 97). For Péguy and Maguire, this “technocratic historicism” (p. 25) makes continuity, and therefore agency, unavailable. In his *Clio*, Péguy formulates the difference he is after: “history consists essentially in *passing alongside* the event. Memory consists essentially in being inside the event, in above all not leaving it, remaining there, and in ascending back from within” (p. 99). Academic history-writing therefore participates in the same “decreation”—replacing the real with an abstraction—as in Léon Walras’ new economics, Emile Durkheim’s sociology, and indeed the daily newspapers from which the *Cahiers* were to be so rigorously differentiated. This has to be resisted by a different kind of relationship to reality, and especially to the past: “Following his teacher Bergson, Péguy believed that it was the participatory, integrative, organically cumulative properties of memory that made freedom possible” (p. 114). The nation—or, Maguire insists, the *pays*—is thus the carnal reality that allows the participatory and collective, really mystical love that is the content of universal freedom. Without such love, Maguire suggests, nothing like Péguy’s militant defensive actions as a student during the Dreyfus Affair—a proto-antifa, we might say—would have been possible.

In his own life, and especially outside of France, it was Péguy’s poetry that commanded most attention. One virtue of *Carnal Spirit* is to pay serious attention to the creative work, especially the late dramatic sequence on Jeanne d’Arc—recently also the inspiration for a pair of films.[5] For Maguire, Péguy’s prose is “terrestrial,” “embodied and dialogical,” and so too is the poetry. It makes heavy use of repetition “to recount the infinity of God, and human beings’ search for God” in a way directly inspired by the Psalms (p. 179). This is usefully put into contrast with Paul Claudel’s significantly less earthy approach (p. 183). Jeanne is the central figure of Péguy’s poetic and, perhaps, historical vision. Maguire provides a sensitive and nuanced reading of the late works, trying to show how Péguy was dramatizing in them a particular relationship between eternity and present, present and past, love and action—one not always clear either to Jeanne or to any other characters. Paying careful attention to the poetic and dramatic works in this way is a real service in English-language scholarship. These are religious poems, and in the end they argue that mystical commitment is what we are lacking in our relation to the past: “For Péguy,

the Incarnation and the Resurrection are free acts of God that, like all acts of freedom, do not break from the past but daringly and creatively draw ever more deeply from their origin” (p. 207). Something about our present, Maguire asserts, makes such acts of love—of embodied and historically conscious freedom, “ressourcement”—virtually unthinkable.

Péguy indeed is worth returning to as a thinker and historical actor who took as a central problem the relationship between historicity and action, both individual and collective. Maguire’s discussion of how Péguy, who was intensely honor-driven but also never actually fought a physical duel (p. 142), sought to transpose or translate the honor culture of his time into the *Cahiers* is tantalizing. The *Cahiers* were to incarnate a certain vision of what sounds very like republicanism, as Péguy wrote in 1905: “they are respectively autonomous, free among themselves, mutually free, free the one from the others, each born, living, and moving in a free company of free *cahiers*” (p. 146). In the *Cahiers*, Péguy sought a rigorous and honorable confrontation with things as they really are, which would necessarily be public, egalitarian (at least along some dimensions), and materially self-sustaining without giving in to the profit imperative. Undeniably, it remains an appealing project.

Yet Maguire’s hostility to recent scholarship makes it more, rather than less, difficult to get back to Péguy. He claims that there is today a “standard model of late modern history” that is closely associated with “technocratic historicism” (p. 19, see pp. 11-14) and, ultimately, a linear and progressive idea of history. This model, Maguire says, is mainly interested in tracing “pathological response to an emerging late or postmodernity that brought Europe—or, at the least, left Europe vulnerable—to the hecatombs of 1914–1945” (p. 12). Selfhood is, for this model, always a failure and any too-strenuous effort in that direction is incipiently fascist. This scholarship refuses to believe, Maguire says, that individuals can transcend their contexts and is therefore hostile to careful study of individual authors. Reasonable suspicion of “heroic, promethean subjectivity” has “calcified into an ideological commitment to affirm its opposite” and thus scholars become “determined not to see that distinct and consequential events of thought and action indeed happen within complex and unique historical moments” (p. 19). This is not a plausible description of scholarship on “late modern history.” Maguire, in any case, does not engage explicitly with very much of it.[6] The introduction singles out three books for exemplary punishment for their mis-readings of Péguy, but none are primarily *about* Péguy. He is one minor example out of many in the first, and a precursor in the other two (pp. 8-18). It is true that too little scholarship on Péguy exists in English. Beyond Annette Aronowicz’s 1998 book on Péguy and Bernard Lazare, which Maguire cites frequently, there is Glenn Roe’s excellent 2014 monograph, also fundamentally concerned with Péguy’s critique of historicism and how it might still be active in the present. Roe shows up in two footnotes, but perhaps the book appeared too late to shape Maguire’s own project.[7]

Maguire writes that he will deal with Péguy’s many futures in a later work (p. 225). Yet the way people read Péguy is part of what Péguy historically means. According to Julian Jackson, Péguy became a “common point of reference for resisters, Vichy conservatives, and Paris-based fascists alike.”[8] How did that happen? The answer cannot be irrelevant to how we read Péguy’s texts. Take the question of antisemitism. That Péguy himself was vocally anti-antisemitic is not debatable, but neither does it exhaust the matter. Among the standard, unavoidable accounts of Péguy’s life and work is the 1926 *Notre Cher Péguy*. Written by the brothers Tharaud, a pair given their pen-names by Péguy himself, it is a two-volume memoir and treatment of the author, colorful and rich in precious anecdote—quoted from at the beginning of this review. The

Tharauds became establishment figures in the interwar, both eventually *immortalisé* in the Academie française. Their travel writings from the early 1920s were part of the wave of literature that established the myth that the Bolsheviks in, for instance, Hungary, were corrupt Jews grasping for power, and consequently that Hitler's antisemitism was a reasonable response to his experience.[9] If Péguy was such an effective anti-antisemite in his life, why were many of his friends and self-conscious inheritors antisemites? That he was a comrade of Bernard Lazare, and that many Jews read and appreciated him is true, but does not meet the question. To worry about these affinities is not to drown Péguy in the cold bathwater of technocratic historicism. Nor is it to engage in some shallow moralistic cancellation of Péguy; indeed, the polyvalence of his legacy is a point of interest. Historical meaning is not made all at once by a single context, and we as historians are not entirely free to choose which contexts we like. Futures and pasts cannot be definitively untangled.

Péguy indeed is worth our time, and *Carnal Spirit* is frustrating because so much of what mattered to Péguy could have been connected more directly, through a serious engagement with the work of other scholars, to our own time and to his. For instance, the authors of the 2018 *Theses on Theory and History* also castigate the naïve realism of the historical profession, and demand a more complex and thoughtful engagement with the multiple, overlapping temporalities that bind historians to their subjects.[10] No technocratic historicism, no linear and progressive temporality there, but also not the humanism that clearly underlies Maguire's project. François Hartog's attempt to articulate our specific version of presentism, which makes significant reference to Péguy, might have provided more depth to a critique of the current moment. Julian Wright's *Socialism and the Experience of Time*, largely about Péguy's socialist acquaintances and adversaries, would have suggested that Péguy's concerns about temporality were not so unusual. Ruth Harris' classic *Lourdes* might have helped Maguire contextualize Péguy's approach to bodies with popular Catholic devotionism from which Péguy—who himself went on a pilgrimage to Chartres late in his life (p. 219)—drew so much inspiration.[11] The above books are mentioned not, I hope, as a pedantic complaint about insufficient footnotes, but rather because the resources exist to bring Péguy's thought, so carefully and sympathetically reconstructed by Maguire, into fruitful dialogue with contemporary scholarship. Perhaps that is coming in the book on Péguy's futures. Here, Maguire's sympathy, style, erudition, and careful reading are unfortunately vitiated by the defensive crouch with which he approaches other scholarship.

NOTES

[1] "Lettre d'un provençal," *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* 1/1 (1900): 1-21. p 9. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6740509f/f65.item>

[2] "L'Argent suite," *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* 9/14 (1913): 15-238. p 127. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k67407257/f123.item>

[3] "L'Argent," *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* 6/14 (1913): 9-93. pp 12-13. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k67407220/f12.item>

[4] Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2012).

[5] Bruno Dumont, *Jeannette, l'enfance de Jeanne d'Arc* (2017); *Jeanne* (2019).

[6] Special targets for Maguire are Christopher Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004) and Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006).

[7] Annette Aronowicz, *Jews and Christians on Time and Eternity: Charles Péguy's Portrait of Bernard-Lazare* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998); Glenn Roe, *The Passion of Charles Péguy: Literature, Modernity, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014). Maguire also does not engage explicitly with recent French scholarship on Péguy, which is more extensive. For a sampling, see the 2002 special issue of *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, and also Camille Riquier, *Philosophie de Péguy, ou les mémoires d'un imbécile* (Paris: PUF, 2017).

[8] Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p 4.

[9] See Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 2018), pp 105ff.

[10] Theory Revolt, "Theses on Theory and History" <http://theoryrevolt.com/> Cited June 15, 2020.

[11] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015); Julian Wright *Socialism and the Experience of Time: Idealism and the Present in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999).

Eric Brandom
Kansas State University
ebrandom@ksu.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172