

“THE LITTLE GIRL HOPE”

Péguy’s epic treatment of Hope takes the form of a strange monologue called *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, or *Portal of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, in which St. Joan of Arc is receiving a long catechism lesson, framed as a dramatic monologue, from a Franciscan nun called Mad-

ame Gervaise. The idea of the medieval porch of a French cathedral makes one think of the medieval mystery plays that were presented under them, but also of those busy carved scenes, so full of saints and allegories, very much giving a tangible aspect to the truths of faith, and often characterised by those arresting but serene smiles of the saints and of our Lady. The tangible, the real, was, as we have seen, something very central for Péguy, very much influenced by the early works of Bergson, who sought to create “a metaphysic which ... aimed to reveal the *réel* (the real) and thus was endowed with an ‘organic force’ permitting it to be related to life in all sorts of new and fruitful ways which are impossible in the case of a logically self-contained system, which contents itself with being merely ‘*vrai*’ (true), that is, put together in such a way as to satisfy the intellect.”³⁹ For Péguy, the discipleship of the *réel* is also, and preeminently, incarnational, so that he has been hailed as the poet who *enshrined the incarnate word*.

In the *Portal*, Madame Gervaise presents to the young St. Joan the idea that Hope has perhaps been too overshadowed by Faith and Charity. There is even the idea that Hope is almost more accessible and more ‘friendly’ for the agnostic or the seeker, and that it can, by God’s grace, lead us to the fullness of Faith. If one were to speak of a ‘temporal procession’ of the theological virtues, Hope can be seen as coming first, even if without at least implicit Faith it would be impossible. The perspectives of the convert and the sinner are naturally turned to the last things, as much through fear as through hope: and this perspective needs to be restored to the Christian life, to cure us all of sentimentalism, ritualism, or activism, all of which are extremes into which a Christian can fall when he forgets the object of our hope, to be forever one with Christ in the beatific vision.

Madame Gervaise, with her lessons of catechism, her reminiscences of things that a friendly, almost avuncular God the Father has said to her—in fact the main voice that speaks throughout the poem is God’s, through her—her visions, her tales of the saints, is addressing the young girl who will one day awaken France from its slumber and call it back to faith and action. It is clear that Péguy is also thereby addressing the Frenchmen of the early twentieth century who seem to have lost hope in the vocation of their country, to have lost hope in God’s promises, to have lost energy and direction. Here is how Péguy describes the three theological virtues:

For my three virtues, said God.
The three virtues my creatures.
My daughters, my children.

³⁹ Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence: A Reassessment*, 83.

Are themselves like my other creatures.
Of the race of men.
Faith is a loyal Wife.
Charity is a Mother.
A loving mother, all heart. Or an elder sister who is like a mother.
Hope is a little slip of a girl.