

Self-Portrait, with Parents and Footnotes

In and Out of a Postwar
Jewish Childhood



My parents and I, Otwock, outside Warsaw, c. 1954



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For Rózka

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Introduction

Charles Péguy and Romain Gary—A Quasi-Academic Exploration of Memory

Peter Esterhazy, the Hungarian novelist, ends his huge tome about his aristocratic family with a list of at least one hundred writers from whom he claims to have borrowed sentences.¹ To it he appends a slightly shorter list, documenting specific sentences and their progenitors. For example, Saul Bellow, book 1, sentence 36; Vladimir Nabokov, book 1, sentence 266; Witold Gombrowicz, book 1, sentence 304, book 2, sentence 15.² The length of the first list raises the possibility that none of his sentences is truly his own, a position he seems to endorse when he insists that even the word “yes” and the spaces between words are borrowings.³ This excessive—and humorous—precision also accompanies the second list, since counting to line 266 to find Nabokov’s influential sentence, even if it is the same edition as the one Esterhazy was using, is highly unlikely to occur to anyone. Playing with the genre of copyright acknowledgments, Esterhazy is surreptitiously telling us that it is impossible to be original. Every voice is a secret alchemical mixture of many other voices, some traceable, some not. And yet the quirkiness of Esterhazy’s own voice as he makes these observations lays bare a paradox. The deeper the impact of the influences, the greater the originality of the voice.

In late November 2018, I suddenly started to write about my childhood and adolescence or, more precisely, about my life with my parents. The direct impulse came from two writers, Charles Péguy, the French poet and philosopher whom I have been reading on and off for forty-five years, and Romain

1 Peter Esterhazy, *Celestial Harmonies*, trans. Judith Sollosy (New York: Echo Press, 2000), 844-845.

2 Ibid., 845-846.

3 Ibid., 843.

Gary, the Eastern European French Jewish novelist, whom, up to that point, I had never read. They were born at least forty years apart at opposite ends of the European continent, not to mention everything else that differentiates them. I can recognize their respective influence on a sentence here or there. But it is not a matter of sentences. At stake, is their way of remembering and of talking about memory.

Before entering into my own stories about my parents, I will stay a while with these two authors, thinking about them in the way I am accustomed, that is, as a text interpreter. Nothing shows more the interlacing of one's voice with another. But also, I must admit to having an altogether unhealthy love for ideas, unhealthy if one is a storyteller who must let the story do the work. I have been around good storytellers all my life, not least among which was my mother. I pride myself at not being too bad at it myself, but some dybbuk of an idea inhabits me from time to time that requires another form.

Péguy

Recently, I read an article about how many steps we need to walk a day to remain healthy, and the debate, based on various empirical studies, is between the canonical ten thousand and the challengers 4,500 and 2,700.⁴ I grew up in a world in which people walked and did not count their steps. Now that we do not walk, we have taken to counting them. Much lies buried in that difference.

To age is to pass. It is to pass from one generation to another, from one time to the next. . . . To age is not to *have switched ages*; it is to *become* of a different age or rather it is to have persevered too long in the *same* age.⁵

These admittedly convoluted words stopped me in my tracks, propelling me to jot down at top speed code words that referred to episodes in my childhood. As my initial jab about walking indicates, I have persevered too long in the same age.

4 Gretchen Reynolds, "Even One Extra Walk a Day May Make a Big Difference," *New York Times*, June 5, 2019.

5 Charles Péguy, "Clio: Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne," in *Oeuvres en prose complètes III*, ed. Robert Burac (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 1174. All translations of Péguy are mine.

Péguy describes persevering too long as gradually becoming of two ages at once, the one in which certain problems were so present that they were simply the air one breathed, and the one in which they disappear from view, replaced by others.

For years and years . . . you throw everything you've got at a certain problem and you can't solve it and you throw everything you've got at a particular evil and you cannot remedy it. And an entire people throws everything at it. And whole generations throw everything at it. And all of a sudden people turn their back on it. And the whole world changes. The questions asked are no longer the same (there will be enough other ones), the difficulties presenting themselves are no longer the same, the prevailing illnesses are no longer the same. Nothing happened. Everything is different. Nothing happened. Everything is new. Nothing happened. And everything prior no longer exists and everything prior has become foreign.⁶

The primary example Péguy gives of “Nothing happened. Everything is different” is his experience of the transformation of the Dreyfus affair, the event that formed his youth. He relates the visit to his bookstore/office of a young man eager to discuss the affair with him, ten or twelve years later. In the course of the conversation, Péguy realizes that what for him had filled his entire life, affecting his friendships, his choice of careers, his finances, his marriage, and eventually his religion, had become just an abstraction.⁷ For the young man to be for or against Dreyfus might still have been of interest, but with none of the costs involved, shorn of the ambient atmosphere. The conversation, even if it referred to Dreyfus, no longer pointed to an event that permeated daily life.

When I said earlier that much is buried in the difference between simply walking and walking as an achievement recorded in number of steps, I meant the whole texture of life. This seems like a very odd comparison to the passionate debates of the Dreyfus affair. Nobody debated walking. But beneath lay an entire understanding of what could and could not be measured, of health and old age, of data gathering, and on what the data was gathered. This is not unrelated to my life's work as a teacher of the humanities. I interpreted texts, a

⁶ Ibid., 1206.

⁷ One version of this encounter can be found in Péguy, “A nos amis, à nos abonnés,” in *Oeuvres en prose complètes II*, ed. Robert Burac (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988), 1308-1312.

most fluid enterprise, even if it required a great deal of training. Internalizing the meaning of those texts, made possible by that training, was a central part in the formation of a human being. I cringe when I pronounce that expression, “the formation of a human being.” By the criterion of counting steps, it lacks all precision. Is there even a specifically human being? Walking, or rather what lies beneath walking, has turned into an engagement when it was not one before, an engagement to defend the opacity and fluidity of the human against all algorithmic imperialisms. One wakes up one fine morning to find oneself an underground man.

To remember, then, is to capture the change one has witnessed in the texture of time. But it is not as if the past is an object ready-made for our taking. Neither we nor the past stand still.

For aging is precisely a process through which one sinks gradually, through which the same being sinks gradually into the same perspectival point in an increasingly distant consideration of the same time period.⁸

We are stuck at one point, our formative years. There is movement nonetheless. As that time recedes, we keep on selecting some events over others, seeing meanings we did not see before, ourselves changing as our perspective deepens. The past is not fixed. Yet, as much as our understandings might shift, we are fixed in a certain period. I would not have focused on the article that reported on measuring steps in the way I did if I were not from another time. But it is the present, with its obsession with measuring everything, that makes me identify a certain activity as my past. Memory is this fluid interplay between a past we shape as it shapes us. Precisely because this operation is so connected to an internal, particular history—unavailable as a standardized narrative—Péguy speaks of memory as what makes for all the depth of a human being.⁹ Memory, if it is truly memory, is always that of a particular experience of time. It may echo that of others, but it is never the same.

Péguy’s tone about memory and aging in the passages I cited above is profoundly melancholy, without a trace of polemic, although occasionally a faint comical note intrudes. “To age is to have persevered too long in the same age.” He seems to put the blame strictly on the aging person, who should not have

⁸ Ibid., 1175.

⁹ Ibid.

persevered in aging. His tone makes me rue my examples of walking and text interpretation, which make me sound like a particularly unlovable curmudgeon. Memory, it would seem, should be more elegiac, more at peace. Luckily for me, one does not have to go very far to find not only a much more polemical tone in Péguy's reflections about memory, but also a much more polemical understanding of the content of memory as such. Not every act of recall is the genuine article. He distinguishes real memory from what he feels is an altogether different enterprise, history.

As I have already mentioned, memory is always particular, personal. In addition, it focuses on details, without attempting to create an all-encompassing narrative. Some of these details can be corroborated in official documents. Some of them cannot. His example of a memorialist is an older friend of his, Maxime Vuillaume. Taking a walk with him through Paris is to discover what happened at this or that street corner during the time of the Commune—who sat in which cafe, who lived where. It is to see the size of the stones of the sidewalks, the construction sites, and the way they became part of the battle in progress.¹⁰ Engaging details in this way, the memorialist conveys the density of an atmosphere, the very thing missing from official documents. By contrast, what Péguy calls history smooths out the details into a linear narrative, operating like a train running on a track at some distance from the coastline. Unlike memory, it does not follow the contours of the coast, with its twists and turns, and bays openings unto the sea, the ebb and flow, the double life of men and fish.¹¹ History cleans up all that unruly mess.

To say that the memorialist captures an atmosphere is not quite adequate to what Péguy means, however, for it misses the moral dimension. "Memory is always of war." Memory is always embattled, like a general in a war, or, even more so, like a foot soldier who cannot escape to safety.

The principal inconvenience of foot soldiers, their principal weakness is that they cannot flee in battle, or rather from the battle, as easily as they would like. . . . The foot soldier alone was irrevocably engaged in the battle's destiny and in the destiny proper to the human being.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 1194-1195.

¹¹ Ibid., 1191.

¹² Ibid., 1183-1184.

A life is a series of engagements. We are all foot soldiers, with no way of escaping being engaged. These engagements put us at risk. Regardless of whether we uphold the original commitments or reject them for other ones, we have taken a stand, subjecting ourselves to judgment, to defeat, to loss. In this sense, memory is a kind of confession of faith, an affirmation of what one holds fast to. What Péguy calls history, on the other hand, examines the troops at rest, and reports that a suspender was missing from the uniform of a soldier. It refuses to resurrect the live moral options of the battle as it was fought. It is more comfortable with something that no longer presents any challenge for the present. It walks alongside the cemetery, reporting on what is dead and buried.¹³

Who is the historian, for Péguy? Most of us, surprisingly enough. That is, once we get older, fifty, say, with few exceptions, we tell the stories of our youth through the prism of the vague historical consensus that has built up around the events of that time.¹⁴ We do not go back to engagements or ways of thinking that may deviate from the acceptable story because we do not want to stand out. We want to be on the winning side, as that vague consensus has determined it.¹⁵ The human being will always prefer to measure himself than to see himself, says Péguy.¹⁶ Measurement relies on commonly accepted standards. Seeing oneself, by contrast, does not. The descent into oneself is what human beings fear the most. The word he uses is not “fear” but “terror.”¹⁷ Why, one might well ask? It might make us see how flimsy the external support for our life’s choices really are. Alternately, we might see those choices and their implications clearly for the first time.

One last part of Péguy’s treatment of aging and memory deserves mention, the regret he insists is inseparable from remembering.¹⁸ This is incontrovertible. Aging always involves loss—loss of vigor and the wide-open possibilities of youth, of course—but also a confrontation with what did not get fulfilled, the obstacles one did not surmount, a confrontation with the highly flawed person one turned out to be. But, he adds, “nothing is as great and as beautiful as regret.”¹⁹ That is more puzzling. What would make it beautiful and great? Perhaps regret affirms our resistance to being objects of measurement. In

13 Ibid., 1177.

14 Ibid., 1192.

15 Ibid., 1189.

16 Ibid., 1191.

17 Ibid., 1190.

18 Ibid., 1175.

19 Ibid.

regretting, we measure ourselves against the commitments buried in the soil of our personal history, manifesting themselves in a myriad of ways. Only the inner eye can catch them, and only the inner eye can detect the distance from the mark.

Péguy often spoke of writing his confessions when he would reach the proper age. He never did reach it, dying at the front at forty-one on the eve of the Battle of the Marne. On the other hand, strewn throughout his later writings are hints of his confessions to be. One example involves a cycle of poems, Victor Hugo's *Les Châtiments*, in which the exiled poet rages against Napoleon III's usurpation and abuses of power. Péguy's commentary, equal parts admiration for Hugo's craft and amusement at some of his artistic and personal quirks, has nothing of the confessional about it, reflecting instead an academic style of literary analysis that he both deploys and mocks. The smatterings of a confession occur later, interrupting the literary analysis.

From counting rhyme schemes, he turns to the atmosphere in which the *Châtiments* were read. Most people did not own their own copy, pooling their money to purchase a joint subscription. Péguy, still a child, read the booklets a teacher lent him, recalling their physical texture, the color of the covers, what illustrations were on which page. Copies passed eagerly from hand to hand, people half concealing them as they walked, since Hugo's work was illegal.²⁰ The details reflect the poems as more than just ideas, entering not only the mind but also the senses. The description conveys the communal energy, the defiance that a large group of ordinary citizens exhibited against an authoritarian regime. He concludes: "This is what will prevent you your whole life long from giving in to any temporal tyranny, be it liberal or, it goes without saying, clerical."²¹ From this early experience derived both his later defense of Dreyfus against the Catholic Church's abuse of power and his even later defense of the Church against the liberal abuse of power. As a man closing in on forty, at the point of rupture between one generation and the next, he sees that the atmosphere in which he grew up has passed completely while it continues to form him still, he who has persisted too long in the same age.

I have taken much from Péguy. I could cite, like Esterhazy, sentences 23 and 24 or 34 and 35 as inspired by his style. But like the organic flow that walking was in the old days, my debt to Péguy cannot be captured in discrete units. Although the passages cited here propelled me to articulate my perseverance

20 Ibid., 1097-1099.

21 Ibid., 1099.

too long in the same age, Péguy, three generations before me, was already living in my age, or, at the very least, foresaw some of the consequences of “measuring,” of the external “objective” gaze of his time. For some reason, my whole adult intellectual life has been an excited objection to mis-applied measurements. Like a knight of yore, I have ridden, lance in hand, against methods which flatten out what Péguy referred to as the depth of the human being. Since Péguy’s time, the turn of the twentieth century, the realm of measurement has expanded beyond measure. I might as well be tilting at windmills. I persist. Although remembering my Eastern European Jewish parents cannot be reduced to just this concern, given the centrality of Nazism and Communism in their history and, consequently, in mine, it should come as no surprise that the horse, its rider, and the lance make their periodic appearance.

I should add that I too remember the texture of the Pléiade edition in which I first read Péguy, and the circumstances in which I received that volume. It was a gift from Pien Pook van Baggen, my teacher’s wife, inaugurating a friendship which lasted until she died some forty years later. I was twenty-two that fateful summer of 1974, stuck between two loves and two continents. Unable to move in either direction, I chose graduate school instead. It was by far the best decision I ever made, despite the suspect nature of the timing. Volume three of Péguy’s collected prose works, later to be followed by its predecessors, accompanied me into adulthood. It now marks my looking back.

Romain Gary

Had Péguy lived to write his confessions, I doubt very much that he would have spoken about the painful aspects of his relationship with his mother and grandmother, the two women who raised him, and about his missing father, who died when he was an infant. He mentions all of them, here and there, throughout his work, not in order to relate his personal interactions with them but to evoke their way of life, situating them in a historical context. Within his moral framework, to expose the ugly strands of family relationships was equivalent to a violation of intimacy,²² and in some pockets remains so even today. Romain Gary, born in 1914, and not in 1873, the year of Péguy’s birth, already belongs to a Freudian age, to whose categories he refers at the same time as he resists

22 Charles Péguy, “De la situation faite au parti intellectuel dans le monde moderne,” in Péguy, *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, 540. “When a son speaks ill of his father and mother, I am wounded in my deepest feelings. I have the impression of an indecency, perhaps the most serious of all . . .” (my translation).

them.²³ *Promise at Dawn*, published in 1960, is very much about the painful part of his childhood with his mother. Yet I would submit that as he reveals it, he also camouflages it. His mother's excesses and derailments appear covered with a strange glory. A woman alone had to raise a child in a world that showed very little mercy. She emerges as the brave, resourceful woman whose love and absolute trust in his future sustained him. In writing her story, Gary proffers to her the mercy that the world has denied her. To do anything else—to foreground the crippling effects of that love—would be to side with the world, to add to the cruelty.

Gary's gesture touched me to the quick, as if I too had this negotiation to make. My mother's excesses and derailments bear a family resemblance to those of Gary. The world was even harsher to her than it had been to Gary's mother. *Promise at Dawn* sent me on my way, which, of course, does not coincide with its author's. For one, Gary wrote a fictionalized memoir, which allowed him to embellish and invent the better to capture the double nature of his life with his mother, the source of his melancholy and aloneness as well as of his verve and humor. Secondly, I am not Gary and my mother was not his mother. As in the case of Esterhazy and his lists of authors, *Promise at Dawn*'s influence is not a matter of individual sentences, although there are some. I cannot help but acknowledge, however, an occasional commonality in content and perhaps style, due, I would maintain, to a common human predicament—the fact of having had parents, and Eastern European Jewish mothers, to boot. Most of all, I recognized in the way Gary combined, transformed, exposed, and covered up the details of his past, the royal road to my own.

An incident he relates early in the book illustrates his approach to his mother's excesses, the simultaneous exposure and camouflage in which he engages. His mother, who had a very hard time making ends meet, would continually crisscross the city of Wilno (modern-day Vilnius), where they were living, peddling hats which she would store in their apartment. The neighbors did not like her, a Russian immigrant in a Polish enclave, and reported her to the police as a possible Russian spy or smuggler. The police come to the apartment, empty out all her boxes, crumple their contents, only to exonerate her

23 Romain Gary, *La Promesse de l'aube* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960), 76-80. The French edition I used differs in some details from the one upon which the English translation is based. I include my own translation, but refer to the equivalent passages in the English version--Romain Gary, *Promise at Dawn*, trans. John Markham Beach (New York: New Directions, 2017), 64-68.