A man might easily be reconciled to the idea of growing old, of passing away, of disappearing, for that is his nature and his destiny, together with the consolation that generations pass away, but humanity remains.

Unfortunately we no long possess even this consolation; we even possess the contrary certainty that humanity is not remaining.... Under our very eyes the humanity of the ancient Greeks is dying. What the invasions and penetrations of barbarians could not achieve, what the persecutions of Christians could not achieve, what time, that indefatigable demolisher, could not achieve, a few demagogues are accomplishing under our very eyes.

For centuries great and powerful philosophies have battled for and against that Greek culture, for and against one of the essential cultures of humanity. An immense effort has been made to oppress, to bury, to annihilate ancient culture. A notable effort of preservation and continuation has been made by a certain number of Christians. An admirable effort of restoration has been made by men...who have seen very clearly how important it was for the preservation of public spirit that the humanities first of all be maintained.

Here is a frequent phenomenon in the history of humanity. For centuries great philosophies fight for and against some great cause. And then, it is all over. And then, one day, a small band of scoundrels...come along. And the next day it is discovered that the great cause has been strangled in the night.

This is what has happened to us in the modern world.... Beneath our eyes, the memory of the most beautiful humanity vanishes...; beneath our eyes, by our own doing, the whole effort of the humanities perishes....

Between a culture, a history, a life spent in the history of humanity there lies an abyss;...between a whole body of artists, of philosophers, of poets, of writers, of men of action, of all cultured men, of critics and historians, of all men of taste, of all sensible men, of all righteous and fruitful men—between all those men who form a cultivated people within the people, there lies an abyss. The two forms of existence—the modern world and those who produce a living existence for an entire people—are not of the same order....
We live in such barbarous times that...we have only our lives to lose. We have been near to losing them, and we may be called upon to risk them again.

We live in such barbarous times that luxury is confused with cleanliness.

Let no one deceive himself as to what lies ahead of us.... In this state of barbarism, in this growing decay of culture, in this disorder of minds and morals, in this disaster of culture...we are defeated. The world is against us. All that we have upheld, all that we have defended, morals and laws, seriousness and severity, principles and ideas, realities and comely language, cleanliness, probity of speech, probity of thought, justice and harmony, accuracy, a certain dignity of demeanor, intelligence and truth, right, simple faith, good work, fine work, all that we have upheld, all that we have defended, falls back day by day before an increasing barbarism and decay of culture, before the invasion of political and social corruption.

No need to conceal this from ourselves: we are defeated.... In the decline, in the decay of public and private morality, we are beleaguered. We are in a state of siege and more than blockaded, and all the level ground is in the hands of the enemy.

Today no one, no living man denies, no one contests, no one even dreams of concealing from himself that there is a disorder: a growing and extremely disquieting disorder;...a real disorder of impotence and sterility. No one denies this disorder any longer, this confusion of minds and hearts, this coming distress, this menacing disaster.

It is perhaps this condition of confusion and distress that, more imperiously than ever, makes it our duty not to surrender. One must never surrender. All the less since the position is so important and so isolated and so menaced and that precisely the country is in the hands of the enemy.

We are defeated. We are defeated to such an extent, so completely, that I doubt whether history will ever have to record an instance of defeat such as the one we experience. I do not know whether history will have ever known men as defeated as we are, as beaten as we are, not shamed, but shamefully beaten. Not by a defeat which brings glory, to which supreme honors go, but by the most stunted defeat that can be imagined, the most vulgar that anyone has ever been able to achieve.

To be defeated—that is nothing. But we have been soundly beaten. We have been given a drubbing. In a few years, this modern society has fallen into a state of decomposition, into a dissolution such as history has never seen. Selfishness and the preoccupations of self-interest have never fallen to such a
degree of baseness. The ruin of the Roman Empire, the ruin of the ancient world, was nothing by comparison with the dissolution and degradation of this society, of the present modern society. Doubtless there were far more crimes and still more vice at that time. But there were also infinitely more resources. The rot was full of seeds. At that time, people did not have the sort of sterility that we have today....

**All is not lost:** far from it, in the case of revolutionary atheism. Mistaken charities, flames of charity can burn deflected there; some day they will be led back to the right place. But there is nothing to be done with a reactionary atheism, a bourgeois atheism. Nothing is to be expected, nothing must be hoped for, from a reactionary atheism. It is an atheism without a spark, which will never be kindled, which will never blaze. It is atheism without charity and without even an imitation or counterfeit of charity. It is therefore hopeless atheism. Hope can move freely only with a certain minimal amount of charity. Hope, the gleam of hope, can be lighted only with a certain fire. From reactionary atheism, from bourgeois atheism, one can expect nothing but ashes and dust because there, all is death and ashes.

**The modern world debases.** Other worlds had other occupations. Other worlds had other ulterior motives, other ulterior intentions. Other worlds had other temporal pastimes. The modern world debases. Other worlds idealized or materialized, built or demolished, meted out justice or exercised force; other worlds created cities, communities, men, or gods. But the modern world debases. This is its specialty. I would almost say that this is its calling....

The modern world debases. It debases the state; it debases man. It debases love; it debases woman. It debases the race; it debases the child. It debases the nation; it debases the family. It even debases what is perhaps most difficult in the world to debase because this is something that has in itself, as in its texture, a particular kind of dignity, like a singular incapacity for degradation: It debases death.

“Hope”

I am, says God, Master of the Three Virtues.

Faith is a faithful wife.
Charity is an ardent mother.
But hope is a little girl.

I am, says God, the Master of the Virtues.

Faith is she who remains steadfast during centuries and centuries.
Charity is she who gives herself during centuries and centuries.
But my little hope is she
Who rises every morning.
I am, says God, the Lord of the Virtues.
Faith is a soldier, a captain holding a fort....
Charity is a physician...who nurses the sick and the wounded...
But my little hope is she
  Who says “Bonjour” to the poor and the orphan.

I am, says God, Lord of the Virtues.

Faith is she who watches during centuries and centuries.
Charity is she who watches during centuries and centuries.
But my little hope is she
  Who goes to bed every night
  And gets up every morning
  And sleeps really well.

... I am, says God, Lord of that virtue.

My little hope is she
  Who goes to sleep every night,
    In that child’s crib of hers,
      After having said her prayers properly.
        And who every morning wakes up and rises
        And says her prayers with a new look in her eyes....

I am, says God, Lord of the Three Virtues.

Faith is a great tree...
And under the wings of that tree, Charity, my daughter Charity,
  Shelters all the woes of the world.
And my little hope is nothing but that promise of a bud
  That shows itself at the beginning of April....

It is the bud that looks as if it were getting nourishment from the tree....
  As if it could not exist without the tree...
And yet it is from that bud that everything comes.
  Without a bud that once appeared, the tree would not exist.
  Without those thousands of buds that come out at the beginning of April
    And sometimes in the last days of March,
      Nothing would last,
        The tree would not last and would not keep its place as a tree....
(Every place must be kept.)
All life comes from that tender, delicate April bud....
The toughest warrior was once upon a time a tender child,
And the most rugged martyr, the toughest martyr with the most rugged bark.
  With the roughest skin, the hardest martyr clawed by talons and nails,
    Was once upon a time a tender child.
Without that bud, which does not look like anything,
Which seems as nothing,
All would be dead wood.
And dead wood will be cast into the fire.

And my whole creation would be nothing but a huge cemetery....

My Son, on the Cross, had skin as dry as dry bark;
A withered skin, a wrinkled skin, a darkened skin;
A skin that was split by the nails;
My son had been a tender child.
A childhood, a budding, a promise, a pledge;
An attempt, an origin; the beginning of a Redeemer;
A hope of salvation, a hope of redemption....

I am, says God, Lord of the Virtues.
Faith is the sanctuary lamp
That burns forever.
Charity is that big log fire
That you light in your hearth
So that my children, the poor, may come and warm themselves
Before it on winter evenings.
And all around Faith, I see all my faithful
Kneeling together in the same attitude, and with one voice
Uttering the same prayer.
And all around Charity, I see all my poor
Sitting in a circle around that fire
And holding out their palms to the heat of the hearth.
But my hope is the bloom, and the fruit, and the leaf, and the limb,
The twig, and the shoot, and the seed, and the bud,
Hope is the shoot, and the bud of the bloom
Of eternity itself.

II

“What Counts Is the Wonder”


In this work, Péguy “is suggesting the way for modern man to become Christian: not by looking for traces of Christian memory which is by now a past of no concern to him, but by happening there by chance, encountering something by chance that strikes wonder in him.” For “the very nature of de-Christianization, its root, lies in ‘taking away the mystery and the workings of grace.’...
This error is having denied ‘Christianity’s very own mechanism.’ Or, the fact that the Eternal cannot reach the heart of man except in time; that only the wonder in the presence of the workings of grace in time, in the flesh, can set the heart of man in relation to Christianity. By denying the temporal, by failing to acknowledge the workings of grace in time, in time that passes and which is such a little thing,...there has been a failure to acknowledge the very dynamics of the Christian fact.... Such a mystical sin is the only explanation for modern de-Christianization which is of a totally different nature from the Christian incoherence there has always been.”

These were the Christian miseries. There was Christian greatness too,...But that is no longer by any means the scheme of things, no longer the average, no longer the norm, but which is now disaster proper; de-Christianization is that our very miseries are no longer Christian. Our very misery is no long a Christian misery.... What is meant is none other than the renunciation by all of all of Christianity.... The interesting thing, the new thing, is that there is absolutely no more Christianity.... The thing Catholics do not want to recognize, the new thing, is that...this world, this society, this modernity has been constituted entirely externally, entirely outside Christianity.... We have seen it constituted before our very eyes, if not founded, we have seen it instituted, living, settling, establishing itself, functioning--a world, a society (I do not say a city) perfectly livable and entirely un-Christian..., an entire un-Christian society, post-Christian.

...Clerics walk in the gardens of grace with terrifying brutality.... It is as if their one proposition were to sabotage the eternal gardens; that they have only one concern in time, which is to prevent any flowering as soon as they see it, the flowering of holiness, the birth of the fruits of holiness.... Thus the clerics strive to demolish the little that remains. They are very good at it.... They behave like diggers in a garden; more than that, they install a demolition company in the garden. And especially when God, through the ministry of grace, is at work in souls, they...think only of their temporal advantage; sometimes also—often, also—of their own temporal domination. Having dismantled the device, dislocated the joint, dislodged the axis, disconnected, everything falls. Which is everything that lies at the center.

The involvement of the temporal in the eternal and of the eternal in the temporal—having disengaged that involvement, there is nothing left. There is no more world to save. There are no more souls to save. There is no more Christianity of any kind.... There is no more Christianity; this marvelous story is no more, that unique, extraordinary, beyond belief—eternal temporal eternal, divine human divine—intersection, that marvelous encounter, unique, of the temporal in the eternal,
and reciprocally of the eternal in the temporal, of the divine in the hu-
man and mutually of the human in the divine.... There, my friend, is
Christianity. That is Christianity. That is the true Christianity.

“This has been the tragedy of the last several decades in the Church: the di-
minishing of Christianity to religious symbols.... Today, as then, the only pos-
sibility is that salvation happen in the desert. It might be that the heart of
man, touched by grace, will still wonder. That is all it would take, and Chris-
tanity would be re-born. Only from that point can everything start again. And
this is a mysterious working, Péguy explains, which ‘takes hold of men one by
one, singulos homines,’ which does not claim to change the face of civilization,
of social co-existence, of public life, mechanically and with a sudden stroke.”

Commentary: I believe Péguy has foreseen our situation today, the situation of
the apostolate, and also what we are to do about it. So many of his books seem
prophetic of our times. If he is right, we cannot expect to do much with the old
structures, the existing structures, which are largely without life. We are back
in “the desert” which the first Christians experienced in the pre-Christian pa-
gan world. The interesting question this work of Peguy’s (not published until
1955) raises for us is: How to get men to wonder again, to dream, and what
this might mean in the context of personal apostolate (“one by one”).

—John Gueguen