

THE ETHICS OF MEMORY AND MEMOIR WRITING. CHARLES PÉGUY AND ROMAIN GARY

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I will draw on two twentieth-century French writers and extract from their works their ideas about memory and memoir writing. The first, the poet and philosopher Charles Péguy wrote a great deal about memory, bringing the philosophy of Henri Bergson into realms of daily life that the philosopher himself did not. Not all of Péguy's meditations on memory are related to memoir writings, and yet they provide a possible frame for anyone who would want to engage in such a task. I will focus on some of his points about time and aging, give some examples from his projected confessions, and relate them to the writing of memoirs as he saw it. The second author, Romain Gary was a prolific novelist, whose works were among the greatest best sellers in post-War France. I will focus on his literary memoir, *Promise at Dawn*. Gary does not write directly about memoir writing. His ideas on it are embedded in his autobiographical narration, however, and it is these ideas that I shall extract and illustrate. Much separates these two authors' views on memory and memoirs. Despite their differences, I would like to argue that both authors focus on the ethics of memory and memory writing. That ethics revolves not so much on telling the literal truth, the getting this or that detail correctly, but in capturing and conveying the commitments that have marked one's life, and capturing them in such a way that they do not coincide with the current pieties about the past. Memoir writing for both authors is a way of responding to the times, a kind of critique of contemporary society.

KEY WORDS: Charles Péguy, Romain Gary, memory, memoirs, ethics

Introduction

To place Charles Péguy (1873-1914) and Romain Gary (1911-1980) side by side is a bit of a wager.¹ Péguy was a French philosopher, essayist, and poet who wrote exten-

1 I have already done so in the introduction to Aronowicz A (2021), *Self-Portrait with Parents and Footnotes: In and Out of a Postwar Jewish Childhood* (vii-xxv), Academic Studies Press, of which the current essay is an adaptation and a rethinking

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sively on time and memory. Although he occasionally alluded to writing a memoir someday, he never did, dying early in the days of the First World War at the age of 41. Gary, on the other hand, was a prolific novelist, who never reflected philosophically on either time or memory. He did write a famous fictionalized memoir, *Promise at Dawn*, which became one of the all-time bestsellers of France after the Second World War, eventually made into not one but two movies. (The first movie, directed by Jules Dassin, came out in 1970, ten years after the publication of the book. The second movie, directed by Eric Barbier, came out in 2017, almost fifty years after the first. Both have kept the book's title, *Promise at Dawn*.) Beyond the differences in the genres in which each author chose to express himself, lie many more. Péguy and Gary belong together in one significant respect, however. For both writers, the act of remembering involves an ethic. It is to this ethic of remembering its different starting points and – also its meeting points – that I will turn our attention to today. That ethics revolves not so much on telling the literal truth, the getting this or that detail correctly, but in capturing and conveying the commitments that have marked one's life, and capturing them in such a way that they do not coincide with the current pieties about the past. Memoir writing for both authors involves addressing the present and challenging it.

Péguy's Memories

In the case of Péguy, ethics come slowly on to the scene, at least as concerns the long essay on time, history, and memory from which I will draw, *Clio or Dialogue of History with the Pagan Soul*. His first concern in the passages that follow is to convey the phenomenon of aging:

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. (Péguy 1992: 1174)

In this convoluted passage we hear echoes of the French philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of *durée*. Here is one example of the way change and continuity simultaneously characterize *durée*: "There is no essential difference between passing from one state to another and persisting in the same state. If the state 'which remains the same' is more varied than we think, on the other hand the passing from one state to another resembles, more than we imagine, a single state being prolonged. But, just because we close our eyes to the unceasing variation of every psychical state, we are obliged, when the change has become so considerable as to force itself on our attention, to speak as if a new state were placed alongside the previous one" (Bergson 2016: 10).

Durée is time itself, and time is not a series of discrete units succeeding each other, as our watches might suggest. It is one continuous flow, change and continuity at once. As a result, aging – the passing of time, par excellence – is also continual, imperceptible change. And yet, even though change is constant, allowing for no breaks, at some point we notice that time has ruptured. We *become* of another generation. Despite the continual change we have undergone, we have in some way stood still, persisting in our point of origin. We are all born at a certain historical moment, and bear the mark of that moment *no matter how much we have changed*. To age is to suddenly become aware of this rupture, which, paradoxically, is the consequence of our indelible continuity with our point of origin.

Péguy gives a specific example of what this awareness amounts to,

For years and years—you doggedly attack a certain problem and you can't solve it and you throw everything you've got at a certain evil and you cannot get rid of it. And an entire people throws everything it's got at a certain problem. And all of a sudden people turn their back on it. And the whole world changes. The questions asked are no longer the same. The prevailing illnesses are no longer the same. Nothing happened. Everything is different. Nothing happened. Everything is new. (Péguy 1992: 1206)

Once again, he emphasizes the shock of becoming of another generation, the suddenness of the realization. In this passage, however, another dimension comes to light. Arriving at a moment of rupture with the present is inevitable. We can't stop it, no matter how active we are, no matter how much we adapt to new technology or to new styles. At some point, the very texture of life changes.

Péguy's prime example of this rupture between his generation and the one that follows is the Dreyfus Affair. That event marked his life as well as that of his cohort in myriad ways, affecting their marriages, their education, their career, their friendships. For the young man who comes to his office years later to discuss the Affair, it has become something to analyze, to be informed about. He cannot experience it as the life-shaping event that it was in the past because, even if people still mention it, it has become something abstract, unlived, a political opinion exclusively, perhaps (Péguy 1988: 1308-1312). (I think, in my own case of the Second World War. In my postwar childhood, the war was everywhere and left a moral legacy it would be difficult to put into words. It affected the relations between parents and children, education, religion or lack of it, one's loves and fears. People have not stopped speaking about the Second World War today, on the contrary, but the reality I grew up with has disappeared. The war's immediacy is gone, as well as the style in which one talks about it, including the very vocabulary one uses, and the politics attached to it.) To

age is to become surprised at a profound and decisive break whose form one could not have anticipated.

Péguy's meditation on aging frames his observations on what it means to remember. For him, it is to place oneself at the point of rupture and to try to express the difference between the before and after. The problem is that most of us are incapable or unwilling to do this. We prefer to tell the story of our past within the frame of a vague historical consensus that has built up around it (Péguy 1992: 1189-1190). Even though we might sound like people who remember our specific past, we actually reproduce a kind of history textbook, eliminating the living and often messy particularity of our own experience. Remembering for Péguy is fraught with an inbuilt problem of dishonesty we don't even notice we are engaging in. Real remembering, not the textbook variety, is very rare.

Péguy gives us some examples of real remembering, as he sees it. In one, he refers to his older friend, Maxime Vuillaume, who as a young man had witnessed the events of the Commune of Paris in 1871. This revolutionary movement took over the government of Paris for a brief two months, before national troupes crushed it. By the time Péguy was writing, in the second decade of the twentieth century, and thus over forty years later, it had become textbook history. But Vuillaume spoke of it otherwise. To walk with him in Paris, Péguy describes,

is to have every stone and every street corner tell a story. Here such a Communard (a supporter of the Revolutionary government) would drink his coffee, and he would sit like this; on this street, there were loose stones, one of which a Communard used as a shield as he shot at the soldiers who were coming to defeat the Commune. The stone fell on top of him and crushed him. In this building lived so and so, near an electricity producing plant, and he would joke about it in this way. And so on. (Péguy 1992: 1194-1195)

One wonders upon reading these disparate, and seemingly insignificant details why Péguy praised Vuillaume as an exemplar of genuine memory. After all, Vuillaume leaves out the ideological fervor, so essential to the Commune, not to mention the chronology of events. What you do get instead are *personal* details that convey the flavor, the atmosphere of living in that time—the mess of it, the style of it. The Commune was not just a political event, to be defined by its ideologies. It was the way ordinary people lived at that time. Recovering that atmosphere, that concreteness is what remembering is all about, and it always depends on a detail, not necessarily the key one from the point of view of the textbook.

Along with the atmosphere something else is at stake in real remembering, made clear in Péguy's second example. When he was still a child, he saw all around him people carrying half-hidden in their sleeves a copy of Victor Hugo's cycle of poems, *Les Chatiments*, condemning the coup d'État that brought Napoleon III to power on December 2, 1851. Given Hugo's opposition to the coup, his poems became illegal, thus their furtive transmission from hand to hand. Péguy's teacher at the time lent him his copy, and Péguy reports at length on the texture of the book, its binding, and its illustrations, all seemingly secondary to the main event (Péguy 1992: 1099-1100). His recounting of this event sounds much like Vuillaume's description of the Commune – disparate, insignificant details – but Péguy also draws a larger point from this contact with Hugo's poetry, and with books, in general. He attributes his lifelong repugnance to the usurpation of power to this collection of poems, and to the way it was read (Péguy 1992: 1099). His commitment to what he calls the Republican mystique began in this refusal of an authority imposed by force, which he saw all around him. It was an atmosphere of defiance which ordinary people exhibited toward tyranny, expressed among other ways in the way they related to censored books, and in which he bathed as a child.

Péguy's two examples – that of Vuillaume about the Commune and his own about Hugo's poetry against Napoleon III – make clear that real remembering has an inevitably social dimension. An entire world, not just one's own private reality, but the reality one shared with others, comes to light through inextricably personal details. Moreover, Péguy's kind of remembering is inseparable from a social critique. It makes present a possibility that has been lost as an option. The point is not to return to an idealized past but to probe the present for what it lacks. For those familiar with Péguy's commitments, the lost point in both the anecdote about the Commune and about Victor Hugo is the disappearing of the Republican mystique, now replaced by something that he called a *politique*, a desire for power rather than a desire to resist tyranny. "Everything begins in mystique and ends in *politique*," is one of his famous phrases (Péguy 1992: 20). This problem of a politics that has lost its initial generous vision only to be replaced by a play for power sounds far removed from the recovery of personal memory. For Péguy, however, it is precisely personal memory, if indeed it is truly personal, which keeps alive the possibility of something beyond the stranglehold of the present, and thus, beyond the power games that everyone now assumes politics exclusively is.

Gary's Memoir

On the surface, much separates Péguy from Romain Gary. The latter does not seem to be as directly interested in the larger political and social context which his personal story reveals. That, of course, is only very partially true, as we will soon show. But

first, I would like to draw attention to a glaring difference between the two, which nonetheless also hides a similarity. The two authors do not seem to mean the same thing by “the personal.” As personal as Péguy’s remembering was, it did not involve talking about one’s relationship to one’s parents, or at least not in a way that revealed the emotional tenor of that relationship, the inevitable traumas that come with it. He still belonged to a time when to expose those bonds was a desecration. Gary’s memoir, on the other hand, is completely and utterly focused on the emotional bonds between him and his mother.

It is curious, however, that Gary, so focused on the texture of his relationship with his mother, nonetheless retains a reticence reminiscent of Péguy’s. He avoids criticism of her. That is, he hides the pain his mother caused him, or to put it more accurately, he presents his mother in such a way that he does not blame or accuse her, even when the pain shows. One extended example will suffice to show that an older version of talking about one’s parents – a reluctance to expose them to an external, critical eye – still prevails. Perhaps this is not merely a social convention but reveals an ethical commitment, not identical to Péguy’s own, but which resonates with his in more than one way.

When Gary was a child of eight, living in Wilno (Vilnius) with his mother, a neighbor reported her to the police, suspecting her of illegal peddling or maybe simply out of ill will toward a stranger. She was Russian in an enclave of Poles, and Jewish to boot. The police come and destroy her merchandise. At first, she breaks down, completely defeated by the loss of her livelihood and by the betrayal. But, suddenly, she shakes herself free of her despair. Dragging the eight-year old Gary with her, she summons all the neighbors into the common courtyard area, and holding him tight against her, declaims:

Filthy, petty bourgeois bedbugs! You don’t know with whom you have the honor of speaking! My son will become Ambassador to France, a Knight of the Legion of Honor, a great dramatic author, an Ibsen, a Gabriele d’Annunzio!... He will have his clothes tailored in London! (Gary 1960: 50)²

The neighbors laugh and jeer. The little boy, suffocating from humiliation, decides to commit suicide. He sneaks into a shed, filled with wooden logs, and is determined to cause an avalanche that will bury him beneath them. At the crucial moment, a stray cat climbs up to his perch and begins to lick his face. This gesture of dubious affection

2 This is my own translation, based on a version of the French original which differs in some places from the one used in the published English translation. I will include the page reference to the published English translation alongside the French pagination, see Gary, *Promise at Dawn* (trans. Markham Beach), 2017: 9.

(he still had cake crumbs on his cheeks) nonetheless saves him. He decides to live (Gary 1960: 53; 2017: 42).

It is perfectly clear from the way Gary tells this story that the child he was had become an instrument in his mother's hands, her weapon against the world, subordinating his well-being to her demands—a theme Gary repeats throughout the book. This is not the way he *explicitly* comments on it, however. Instead, he draws several larger points from this incident, each of which presents his mother in a favorable light or at least takes the blame from her. In the torrent of derisive laughter that followed her little speech about his shining future, Gary emphasizes her courage and tenacity in the face of great adversity: “My mother stood straight up in the storm, head held high, holding me tight against her. There was not a trace of embarrassment or humiliation in her. She *knew*” (Gary 1960: 51; 2017: 40). Secondly, that last, very short line in the passage – She *knew* – underscores her utter trust in him, a trust, it turns out, that did spur him to accomplish great things. In real life, he did become Consul General of France, a writer who won the most prestigious literary prize in France, the Goncourt, not once but twice, and a decorated soldier, who became an officer in the Legion of Honor. (A famous story attends the second time he won the prize. The Goncourt can only be given to an author once. Gary, who throughout his life resorted to various pseudonyms, started to write under that of Emil Ajar, and it is for a book written under that name, *La vie devant soi/The Life Before Us* that he won the Goncourt a second time. The members of the jury were not aware that Gary and Ajar were the same person and Gary had not written it with the intention of winning the prize. It caused quite a bit of controversy and speculation.) The point is not so much what he achieved but his debt to her. She somehow transmitted to him some of her daring and through her trust in him, giving him the impetus to become the accomplished person he became. The only blame he dispenses directly when describing the scene in the courtyard is toward the people who mocked a poor woman and her young son, incapable of seeing their plight.

The scene of his humiliation as an eight-year-old boy reveals not only Gary's reluctance to present his mother critically but also the larger ethics upon which his memoir is built: compassion. Compassion does not mean here that he becomes blind to her misuse of him. It means that in telling her story he is committed to seeing her other sides, her courage, her love for him, despite some of its negative manifestations. Nothing in life, he tells us, is completely pure. Even love is inextricably mixed with self-interest. In describing the cat who licked his face, spotted with cakecrumbs, he says: “I had no illusion as to the motives of this sudden affection.” But he decides to enjoy the caresses anyway. A bit later, when the cat purrs against his nose, and bites

his ear, he concludes, "In short life was worth living" (Gary 1960: 53; 2017: 42). Purring and biting are part of the same phenomenon.

Compassion is not a mere affect, a merely reactive emotion. It is, as we have called it, a commitment, a conscious decision to see people in a certain light. The commitment to compassion arises, in Gary's case, from its utter absence from the scene of humiliation in the courtyard. The hateful faces of the crowd marked him at the most profound level. He claims that no event in his life played a more important role. "I owe to it what I am. For the best and for the worst that laughter became who I am" (Gary 1960: 51; 2017: 40). He does not speak of compassion in these sentences, it is true, but later on we find a description of it as essential to who he is. "My egocentrism is such that I recognize myself instantly in all who suffer and I hurt through all their wounds" (Gary 1960: 214; 2017: 197-198). Compassion is intimately tied to who he is, and in ways he does not care to spell out, it is also tied to the personal experience of his mother's ordeal, as well as his own suffering. He does not want, in telling her story, to reproduce the jeers he himself experienced.

No matter how different the emphasis in Péguy and Gary's in the nature of the events they select, it is clear that for both, remembering involves bringing to light their respective ethical commitments – whether to the Republican mystique or to compassion – through the retelling of very particular details. But even more importantly, they each point out how a real ethical commitment arises. Both Péguy's and Gary's commitments arose when they were children. It was not a decision they made. A certain atmosphere lodged in them without their conscious consent. For Péguy, those booklets of Hugo passed from hand to hand expressed the overall atmosphere of resistance to oppression. For Gary, the depth of the humiliation he and his mother suffered revealed a social world in which an of an ingrained hatred of the stranger, of the other, was rampant. It honed his discernment for such attitudes, in whatever camp he found them, and made him aspire to its opposite. Later in their lives, both authors became conscious of their commitments and verbalized them as choices. But a real commitment in both cases is, in a way, not a choice. It is imposed. Remembering is to recall this strange passivity, the way a certain time and place forms one's moral self without one's consent, so to speak.

To return to our earlier claim, we can now see that *Promise at Dawn* is, despite its focus on private emotional bonds, a social critique, as much so as Péguy's. It is certainly a critique of the kind of world in which political, ethnic or racial divisions are so fundamental, that the humanity of the outsider disappears. This is the world that made his mother's life so difficult, and by extension, also his own. To make this critique more pointed, more directed toward the specific offenses not of the early twentieth century but of his own adulthood, will require telling another of Gary's

stories, this time about his father. He had known that his father, with whom he had been long estranged, had died in Auschwitz. (Gary's father left his mother when Gary was still a small child. He remarried and had another family, all of whom perished in Auschwitz). But one day he receives a new piece of information. His father, he is told, had died not in the gas chambers, but on the way to them, from sheer terror. Gary's reaction is very strongly worded: "The man who died this way had been a stranger to me but that day, he became my father, forever" (Gary 1960: 105; 2017: 90). This requires some unpacking.

It would seem at first that Gary, in telling this story is perpetuating the oft-repeated accusation against Jews made after the war, echoing an anti-Semitic stereotype: The millions of Jews who were murdered in the death camps had been too cowardly to take up arms in self-defense; they had gone, as the phrase went, like sheep to the slaughter. His father, on this account, would not even have been courageous enough to make it to the gas chambers. That would be the point of the anecdote, if it were not for the last line. By declaring that his father became his father forever at the point of his greatest humiliation, Gary turns the denigrating attitude toward the slaughtered Jews on its head. One does not heap reproaches on the tortured and abandoned. Rather, one stands with them, affirms an unbreakable bond with them, recognizes the common human vulnerability in them. *Promise at Dawn* was published in 1960 when the accusation that the slaughtered Jews had been cowards was very much in the air, not least in Israel. Gary is pushing back against the vague consensus in the early postwar years that only military virtue was worth honoring in the face of adversity.

In line with this refusal to elevate the courage of the soldier to the status of the highest virtue is the way he recounts his exploits during the Second World War as a pilot for the Free French Air force. He certainly describes his fellow soldiers with great admiration. They showed grace under enormous pressure, going into battle with an astonishing sense of humor and poise (this is the theme of much of the second half of Gary's memoir). Most of them were killed in combat. And yet as much as he sincerely admires their courage in war, he puts it in its place. He attributes his own courage – he was wounded several times during his flight missions – to his fear of his mother. Again and again he describes his fear of facing her, if he did not come home a decorated soldier. What would she say? (In one incident in his childhood, his mother commands him to come back bloodied on a stretcher rather than to sully his honor or hers, see Gary 1960: 147; 2017: 145. Toward the end of the book, he yearns to show his mother all the medals he has been awarded for bravery, only to find out that she had died of an illness in his absence, and could not witness his military prowess, Gary 1960: 357-370; 2017: 332.) This marries virility to weakness, to being a Momma's boy,

who could not achieve independence from his mother's judgment. This introduces, a note of humor in all the solemnity.

The humor does not take away from the virtue of courage. Undoubtedly, according to Gary, the courage of his fellow aviators is to be admired and emulated. But from the rest of the book, we know that compassion is yet a greater virtue, or at least a competing one, as we saw in his anecdote about his father. Not to mention that standing with the despised might, in fact, require a great deal of courage, but of a different sort, as was revealed many times by Jews who could escape death but chose to stay with the people they loved or whom they were responsible for, and by those who chose to save them, at the risk of their own lives, without engaging in combat. Gary's critique of the contempt shown the slaughtered Jews in the postwar period is not an aside in the book, but a larger response to the times – the insistence of his contemporaries on focusing on military courage alone – based on commitments that arose in childhood.

Conclusions

I end with a reflection on the preponderance of memoirs in our own time. One does not want to impose either Péguy or Gary's standards for what remembering entails on those who write their life stories. And yet I wonder whether the best memoirs are not those that transmit to us that atmosphere, that communal context in which life-long commitments grew, commitments not to this or that ideology or political party but to a much more many-sided good, captured not in abstractions but in the telling personal detail. We live in a world of so many abstractions—statistics and algorithms, focus groups and surveys, and political slogans. To read a memoir in which the ethical is embedded in a communal world thick with human relations is as if to awaken from a dream. In doing so, we may find resources to resist the commonly accepted ideologies of the present.

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