

# THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE FLESH: BODILY MEDIATION IN THE WORK OF CHARLES PÉGUY

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“Christian mediation invites human beings into a performance of fragility that is a resounding ‘yes’ not only to the dynamic, fertile exigencies of creaturely being, but also to the loving vulnerabilities and intentional exposures of divine being.”



God waited.

She was free  
to accept or to refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.

—Denise Levertov, “Annunciation”

## 1. A CERTAIN CORPUS, AN ETERNAL PRECARIOUSNESS

It is nearly a truism that Charles Péguy (1873–1914) is a poet and a philosopher of the flesh. In Péguy’s poetry and prose there is nothing—from his deeply rooted French patriotism and political activism to his Christology, ecclesiology, Mariology,

and theological anthropology—that is not radically mediated through some sort of “body.” According to Péguy, “a temporal form of flesh is needed as a material carrier, as the matter for an idea. We know of no historical movement of the spirit, be it political, social or even religious, that could become manifest without a certain *corpus*, a fleshly form of actualization.”<sup>1</sup> In a recent interview, French philosopher and theologian Emmanuel Falque has suggested that Péguy’s most central and profound message is that, for Christianity, “*everything* is a matter of ‘corporeality’”; the “carcass,” and the “flesh and bone” of human existence is precisely the site “where God speaks to us and meets us.”<sup>2</sup> For Catholicism in general and for Péguy in particular, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the paradigmatic instance of mediation is the condition of the possibility for the mediation of divine grace and its presence to human beings through natural,

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1. Charles Péguy, *Œuvres en prose, 1909–1914* [1957], 42, as quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Péguy,” in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3: *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, John Saward, Martin Simon, and Rowan Williams, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 465 (hereafter cited as *GL3*). Balthasar underscores this point in his theological aesthetics, the foremost example and representative of which is Charles Péguy: “The spiritual must put on flesh, the invisible must give proof of itself in form” (*GL3*, 401–02).

2. Emmanuel Falque, interview with Artur Rosman (December 2017), published in English as “Christ Doesn’t Save Us by Words First of All, but by His Body,” *Church Life Journal* (June 7, 2018) (emphasis added). In the same interview, Falque says that “a veritable ‘enfleshment (*encharnement*)’ of man to God is produced by the Incarnation, and that the ‘elevation (*élevation*)’ of the carnal into the spiritual also enforces the ‘elevation (*élevation*)’ of the spiritual into the carnal.” “*Encharnement*” and “*élevation*,” which are French neologisms created by Charles Péguy and probably untranslatable to another language, show nicely the urgency of the author of *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* to find an adequate expression for these great moments of our carnal existence, such as “birth,” “suffering,” “death,” “eros,” and the “resurrection of the body.” Falque elaborates beautifully upon the significance of the flesh of the material body in *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus*, trans. William Christian Hackett (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014); and *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), among other works. Cf. Emmanuel Falque, “Incarnation philosophique et incarnation théologique: Une histoire arrive à la chair et à la terre. Lecture du *Dialogue de l’histoire de de l’âme charnelle*,” *L’Amitié Charles Péguy*, no. 102 (April–June 2003): 164–78.

bodily media.<sup>3</sup> The Incarnation is the real “inscription” of an extraordinary narrative into the language of flesh wherein the eternal is written into a “world of fecundity, of carnal perpetuity,” the infinite introduced decisively into the temporal and the fleshly;<sup>4</sup> it is both a “welcome” and a “welcoming,” the crowning of flesh with the advent of “l’Éternel dans la chair.”<sup>5</sup> In Péguy’s economy, this “inscription” of the words of Christ (and the Word that is Christ) into legible, pronounceable forms (syllables, sentences, Scripture) is not merely verbal, to be understood or heard in an intellectual mode. Rather, the words of Christ must be translated, “trans-carnated,” perhaps, into tangible, fleshly forms extended in time and space. We must not simply read the scroll; we have to eat it (Ez 3:3; Jer 15:16; Rev 10:10).

With the resounding fact of *et homo factus est* at the feast of Christmas, *histoire* (history, story) has come to earth as flesh in the infant God. Here at this axis eternity is made temporal; the spiritual is made carnal. For Péguy, these realities are not antagonistic such that mediations between them would be externally related, but they are, rather, mutually conditioning, internally interleaved and interpenetrated one with the other.<sup>6</sup> In

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3. Albert Béguin has noted that “*Et Verbum caro factum est* is the centre around which everything [in Péguy’s work] is organized and becomes intelligible” (*L’Ève de Péguy* [Paris: Labergerie, 1948], 25, as quoted in John Saward, “The Pedagogy of Péguy,” *The Chesterton Review* 19, no. 3 [August 1993]: 357–79).

4. “Tout ce monde charnel, temporel et charnel, tout ce monde de la fécondité, de la perpétuité charnelle, de la race charnelle, et même, par là, même l’entrée, l’inscription, l’insertion de l’éternel dans le temporel, de l’éternel dans le charnel, de la vie éternelle dans la vie charnelle” (All this carnal, temporal and carnal world, all this world of fecundity, of carnal perpetuity, of the carnal race, and even, by this, even the entrance, the inscription, the insertion of the eternal in the temporal, of the eternal in the carnal, of the eternal life in the carnal life) (Charles Péguy, *Victor-Marie, Comte Hugo* [Paris: Gallimard, 1934], 100, my translation).

5. “Un accueil, comme un accueillement, comme un recueillement de l’Éternel dans la chair, comme un achèvement d’une série charnelle, comme un couron” (A reception, as a welcoming, as a gathering of the Eternal in the flesh, as a completion of a carnal series, as a crowning) (*ibid.*, 103, my translation).

6. “*Et homo factus est*. L’éternité été faite, est devenue temps. L’éternel a été fait, est devenu temporel. Le spirituel a été fait, est devenu charnel. C’est

his lengthy essay on Péguy in the third volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a catalogue of Péguy's use of this "axis" language, underscoring not only the internal relations of realities that might otherwise appear to be antagonistic, but also noting that, although the axial point resists conceptual or theoretical synthesis, such synthesis is able to be *lived* ethically, as "the decisive involvement of a whole life."<sup>7</sup> In keeping both with his refusal to relate the temporal and eternal antagonistically and his commitment to the goodness of finitude in light of Christ's full assumption of human nature, bodies are thus represented across Péguy's corpus not as an impediment or obstacle to spiritual knowledge, but rather as the means by which human beings can uniquely imitate Jesus, especially vis-à-vis the angels who have form but not matter. His presentation of the incorporeal angels as experiencing a lack rather than an advantage reverses any residual Platonisms that would disproportionately privilege the spiritual over and apart from the corporeal:

The angels are certainly pure, but they aren't the least bit  
 carnal.  
 They have no idea what it is to have a body, *to be* a body.  
 They have no idea what it is to be a poor creature.  
 A carnal creature.  
 A body kneaded from the clay of the earth.  
 The carnal earth.  
 They don't understand this mysterious bond, this created  
 bond,  
 Infinitely mysterious,

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(surtout) une histoire qu'est arrivée à l'éternité, à l'éternel, au spirituel, a Jésus, à Dieu. Pour avoir la contre partie, la vue de l'autre côté, la contrevue pour ainsi dire, cette histoire comme une histoire *arrivée à la terra, d'avoir enfanté Dieu*" (*Et homo factus est*. Eternity was made, became time. The eternal has been made, has become temporal. The spiritual was made, became carnal. It is [above all] a history that has come to eternity, to the eternal, to the spiritual, to Jesus, to God. To have the counterpart, the view from the other side, the counterview, so to speak, this history like a story that has *come to earth, having given birth to God*) (ibid., 102, emphasis original, my translation). Cf. Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 254n12. According to Péguy, even sin and grace are "two operations of the same kingdom . . . two operations of salvation, hermetically articulated one upon the other" (Charles Péguy, *Notes on Bergson and Descartes: Philosophy, Christianity, and Modernity in Contestation*, trans. Bruce K. Ward [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019], 32).

7. Balthasar, *GL3*, 427.

Between the soul and the body.  
 Because God not only created the soul and the body.  
 The immortal soul and the body that is mortal but will be  
     resurrected.  
 But he also created, as a third creation he created  
 This mysterious tie, this created tie,  
 This attachment, this bond between the body and the soul,  
 Between spirit and matter,  
 Between that which is immortal and that which is mortal  
     but will be resurrected  
 And the soul is tied to mud and to ash.<sup>8</sup>

And further on,

To have this bond with the earth, with this earth, to be  
     this earth, clay and dust, ash and the mud of the earth,  
*The very body of Jesus.*<sup>9</sup>

Allusions to the humble images of clay, dust, ash, mud, and earth to describe the human body—literally images from the *humus*, the soil or ground—are evocative not only of the second creation account in which the Lord physically fashions human beings from the dust of the earth, but perhaps also of one of the seven signs in John’s gospel when Jesus mixes his own saliva with dirt and applies the mud to the eyes of the man born blind (Jn 9:1–7). Both biblical narratives witness to the competence of even the lowliest forms of matter to mediate divine action and presence. Elsewhere in *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, Péguy offers modest, rustic agricultural metaphors to describe the relationship of body to soul: the soul is a “good work horse” pulling behind it the body-plow, and it is the Lord himself, like a French peasant farmer, who has “hitched the body to the soul.”<sup>10</sup> For Péguy, the body and the soul are interleaved and of a piece, coming always together to salvation or to judgment, like two hands bound together either in prayer or in sin.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. D.C. Schindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 49–50 (emphasis original).

9. *Ibid.*, 52 (emphasis original).

10. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

11. *Ibid.*, 47–48. The poet Paul Claudel offers a similar idea: “It is not by the spirit alone that the spirit speaks: it is *body that speaks* to body. Our body has

Wheat, wine, water, oil, hands, blood, feet, wombs, breastmilk, food, nourishment, time, names, birth, history, nature, night, children, flames, good tools, words—all of these are for Péguy the premier finite sites of and vehicles for the mediation of divine presence. Given his fundamental devotion to the mediating capacity of body and flesh across Péguy's poetry and prose, it will be difficult to do justice to the full range of precisely how all manner of fleshly bodies—Mary's maternal body, the infant Christ born into the world at Christmas, the bodies of the holy innocents martyred at Herod's command, the cheerfully aging peasant body extended in time, bodies wounded or sick,<sup>12</sup> the suffering body of Christ at the Passion, collective bodies like churches and nations, fingers dipped into the holy water font *in saecula saeculorum*, bodies reposed in the parish graveyards all awaiting the resurrection, even the flesh-body of poetic language and the words of Scripture, which attest to the Word made flesh—play a primary role in mediating truth, love, grace, and divine presence.

While this article will explore (and otherwise simply presuppose) that for this French Catholic poet it is the fact of the Incarnation that secures the metaphysical and theological status of finitude and the mediatory capacities of flesh, Péguy's particular articulation of corporeal mediation is exceptional in my view insofar as it foregrounds with peculiar insistence the phenomenon of precarity, that "state of undress" which is "*the only situation and position that is Christian, . . . the point of Christianity, the point of view, the point of life and the point of being of Christianity.*"<sup>13</sup> Reading Péguy, it is quite clear that ordinary embodied life, not in spite of but because of this precariousness, is the dramatic theater of a marvelous pathos and a slow ripening toward sanctity: with

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ceased to become an obstacle, it becomes a means and a vehicle; it has ceased to be a veil, and it becomes an apprehension [a power of understanding]" (*Présence et prophétie* [Paris: Gallimard, 1958], 55, as quoted in Falque, *Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 149).

12. Of particular interest are Péguy's essays on having the flu: "De la grippe," "Encore de la grippe," and "Toujours de la grippe," in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 1: *Oeuvres de prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1916), 87ff.

13. Péguy, "Conjoined Note on Descartes and the Cartesian Philosophy," in *Notes on Bergson and Descartes*, 204 (emphasis added).

prodigious tenderness and understanding Jesus speaks to Eve, the eternal housekeeper and the bearer of fallen time;<sup>14</sup> a woodcutter fells trees in the dark of winter, thinking, with tears and icicles frozen in his beard, of his children and of his own death and the happy eventuality of his name being forgotten; the melancholy man of forty trades in back alleys the hermetic secret that no one is happy or has ever been happy, and yet he still looks upon his son and thinks that this time it will be different; stubborn little Jeannette who would die too soon as Joan of Arc burns with righteous fury at the thought that Frenchmen, good country people from Lorraine, would never have forsaken Christ, if only they had been there; the sleeping Christ's little knees curl up underneath the soft animal flesh of his belly; and Mary, his mother, Queen of the Seven Sorrows, the haunted *Stabat Mater* at the base of the Cross, ages an eternity in one day and never ceases again from weeping ("No boy," says Madame Gervaise, "had ever cost his mother so many tears").<sup>15</sup>

Péguy's (gloriously inefficient) economy of Christian mediation is grounded in free acts of kenotic love that allow God to be perceived, seen, read, tasted, handed over in tradition in time and space—but also beaten, crucified, misread, ignored, received unworthily. In Péguy's oeuvre, the infinite God becomes "*un tendre enfant laiteux*,"<sup>16</sup> a tender milky babe subject to the exigencies of flesh, to the ravages of time, and finally to the Cross and the spear. The infant body of Jesus is held in the hands of Simeon: "As one takes, as one holds up an ordinary child, a little child of a family of ordinary men; with his old tanned hands, with his old wrinkled hands, with his poor withered and puckered-up old hands, with his two shriveled up hands. With

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14. "Et je vous aime tant, mère de notre mère" (And I love you so much, mother of our mother) (Charles Péguy, *Les Tapisseries: Ève* [Paris: Gallimard, 1946], 32, my translation).

15. Charles Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, trans. Julian Green (New York: Pantheon, 1950), 116. "Jamais un garçon n'avait coûté autant de larmes à sa mère" (Charles Péguy, *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 5: *Oeuvres de poésie* [Paris: Gallimard, 1918], 135).

16. Charles Péguy, *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 6: *Oeuvres de poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1919), 20 (emphasis original).

his two parchment-like hands.”<sup>17</sup> He has given his body “to the discretion of the least of the soldiers . . . , to the discretion of the least of the sinners”;<sup>18</sup> it is distributed daily by “our sinful hands” in the Eucharist.<sup>19</sup> When the Word takes on flesh (syllables, sentences, pronounceability, a physical body, a eucharistic body, a mystical body, an ecclesial body), the infinite Word voluntarily places himself into the limitations of a particular time and place, into a role of profound dependence upon mediatory processes, and is thenceforth made vulnerable, like all human beings are, exposed both to harm and to misunderstanding. In becoming “a man like others among others,”<sup>20</sup> God thereby accepts not only the limitations of a human body, but also the limitations of human language and forms of linguistic and historical transmission:

He wished to be the material and the object of the exegete and historian, the material, the object, the victim of historical critique. . . . In order that the incarnation be complete and entire, in order that it be honest, in order that it be neither limited nor fraudulent, his history had to be a human history, subject to the historian, and his memory had to be a human memory, humanly, defectively conserved. In a word, his very history and memory had to be made incarnate.<sup>21</sup>

It is to perishable human beings, “we simple travelers, poor travelers, fragile travelers, / precarious travelers, / eternal vagabonds, / who enter this life and who immediately exit,” who are “we feeble, we fragile, we precarious, we shameful, we weak creatures, / we flimsy, we transient creatures, we vagrants, we shepherds” that the responsibility of preserving this living word is given, that it may be nourished in and by human blood, flesh, and hearts, “all of us children from all the parishes” in “carnal perpetuity.”<sup>22</sup> In a radical transfiguration of power into

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17. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, 58.

18. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 83.

19. *Ibid.*, 73.

20. Péguy, *Notes on Bergson and Descartes*, 164.

21. *Ibid.*, 166.

22. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 60–63.



the abdication of control, rather than its seizure, and a radical transfiguration of smallness as coincident with the greatest, God becomes dependent upon a system of mediation—through Scripture, the appointment of apostles, and a sacramental economy—that relies upon the temporal and physical mediation of human beings to be maintained and carried on.

The peculiarly precarious character of bodily mediations in Péguy's work is not simply due to the innate fragilities of the flesh but also to its necessary extension in time. Mediations of the flesh are subject to slow temporal processes, which require a certain patience: the patience of the farmer who plants the seed and waits, and does not know for certain whether there will be a drought or a flood. Péguy distills this idea of the Incarnation's temporal extension neatly in the following passage from *Victor-Marie, Comte Hugo*, referring to "a bodily culmination, a bodily maturation, a fulfillment and a completion, the bodily bringing to fulness of a bodily sequence." He goes on,

The Incarnation is simply the supreme instance, the superabundant instance, a peak, a limiting case, the ultimate drawing together into a single point of this everlasting infusion of the eternal into the temporal, the spiritual into the carnal, which is the hinge, the cardinal point, the joint, the elbow and knee, the entire creation of the world and man and which indeed brings it into being. . . . Any kind of sanctification that is abstract, withdrawn in a crude manner from the world of the flesh, is a process without meaning or consequence. . . . The Incarnation would have to present itself as the full flower and the temporal fruit of the earth, as an extraordinary triumph of fertility, as a superabundant but yet not unnatural growth; in order that we might consider God as he is on the side of his creation, emerging out of his creation, from a succession of creatures, from the lineage of David, which issues in God as it might in an ordinary bodily issue.<sup>23</sup>

On this view, the Incarnation is not the advent of the mediation of flesh as such, but the mediation of a *temporal* form of flesh, stretched out in time from annunciation, conception, gestation, birth, infancy, circumcision, toddlerhood, youth, teaching in

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23. Péguy, *Œuvres en prose, 1909–1914*, 729–32, as quoted in Balthasar, *GL3*, 429–30.

the Temple, young adulthood, all the routine days of working as a carpenter, and, before his untimely execution, only three years of preaching and teaching. That Péguy describes the Incarnation here in terms of fertility, reproduction, and gradual growth and situates it explicitly in the genealogical, biological line of other human births will be crucial for my account of his view of mediation. There is, moreover, a fundamental relation between the smallness and secrecy of Mary's maternal womb in which the body of Christ was gradually knit together month by month and the precarious character of Christianity as a whole.

2. *ET BENEDICTUS FRUCTUS VENTRIS TUI:*  
THE MATERNAL WOMB, INFANTHOOD, LACTATION

When considering the mediatory significance of the flesh of Christ, reflection upon the figure of Mary, the God-bearer, who truly mediates human nature to Christ according to the flesh, cannot be left behind. It is because Jesus took physical flesh from Mary that it is possible for human beings to share in Christ's flesh, for flesh and all finitude to be sanctified and made capable of mediating divine presence. In Péguy's poetry on the whole and culminating (at least in Balthasar's judgment, who calls them "Péguy's supreme artistic achievement"<sup>24</sup>) in the Chartres poems of *La tapisserie de Notre Dame*,<sup>25</sup> the Virgin Mary is a symbol of the perfect human expression of the coterminousness of spirit and sanctified flesh. In *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, where Marian devotion is likewise a central theme, Mary's purity and her bodiliness are complementary rather than competitive realities. That is, it is not *in spite of* her carnality that she is pure but *because* of it: "Because being carnal she is pure. / But, being pure, she is also carnal. / And it's for this that she is not only unique among women. / But she's unique among all creatures."<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, in *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, Péguy draws the comparison between Mary and Eve precisely on this point:

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24. Balthasar, *GL3*, 487, cf. 413.

25. Charles Péguy, *La Tapisserie de sainte Geneviève et de Jeanne d'Arc, La Tapisserie de Notre-Dame*, ed. Paul Hartmann (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).

26. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 47 (emphasis added).

only these two women were both perfectly pure and perfectly carnal, Eve “until sin,” and Mary eternally.<sup>27</sup> The doubling of Eve and Mary reappears in his long narrative poem *Ève*.<sup>28</sup> More apropos, Péguy tends to rhyme *charnel* (carnal) with *maternel* (maternal) in *Ève*.<sup>29</sup> Such poetic juxtapositions are significant here because they not only reinforce that it is because the infant Christ was conceived in and born of a human mother that all flesh participates in him, but they also prioritize the temporal theme, where eternal time enfleshed in Jesus speaks to “fallen time” instantiated in the figure of Eve.<sup>30</sup> The genuinely carnal and vulnerable nature of Christ’s humanity and its debts to Mary’s sanctified flesh and even to her maternal care are strengthened in the following examples of such pairings. For example, Péguy describes the infant Jesus in *Ève* as a small nursling, caressed by his mother’s hand, “bathed in a carnal wave,” and laughing into the eyes of Our Lady.

Parce qu’il fut nourri du lait d’une autre femme,  
 Et bercé d’une main mêmement *maternelle*,  
 Parce qu’il fut baigné dans une onde *charnelle*,  
 Et parce qu’il riait aux yeux de Notre Dame.<sup>31</sup>

Later in the poem, Péguy again pairs the maternal and the fleshly. He marvels here that Jesus truly is the fruit of a maternal womb,

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27. “Et deux femmes seulement ont été pures étant charnelles. / Et ont été charnelles étant pures. / Et c’est Ève et Marie. / Ève jusqu’au péché. / Marie éternellement” (And only two women were pure being carnal. / And they were carnal being pure. / And they are Eve and Mary. / Eve until sin. / Mary eternally) (Péguy, *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, 107, my translation).

28. “The poem to Eve does not fail to recognize the role of Mary. The long sequence on the ‘only two bodies’ that, without being dissolved into cosmic nature, travel back along the road to Paradise, the bodies of Jesus and Mary—all this clearly emphasizes the dogmatic position of Mary over against Eve. If Jesus is the God-Man and thus the source of all things made present in the temporal order, then Mary is the unfallen creature and thus Paradise made present in a fallen temporal order” (Balthasar, *GL3*, 487).

29. See Béguin, *L’Ève de Péguy*, 112; Saward, “The Pedagogy of Péguy,” 361.

30. Balthasar, *GL3*, 487.

31. Péguy, *Les Tapisseries: Ève*, 65–66 (emphasis added). “Because he was nourished by the milk of another woman, / And cradled by a mother’s hand, / Because he was bathed in a carnal wave, / And because he laughed in Our Lady’s eyes” (my translation).

deliberately emphasizing with the image of the sleeping Christ tucked into the straw the smallness, exposure, and precarity that conditions all animal life.

Et Jésus est le fruit d'un ventre *maternel*,  
*Fructus ventris tui*, le jeune nourrisson  
 S'endormit dans la paille et la balle et le son,  
 Ses deux genoux pliés sous son ventre *charnel*.<sup>32</sup>

Péguy's poetry likewise evokes a great sense of pathos in his juxtaposed representations of the tremendous fragility and precarity of infancy with those of intense violence. Often he will overlay images from the first Christmas onto images from Christ's Passion, entangling swaddling clothes with the burial shroud, birth with death, those two inevitable parentheses into which the wholeness of every human life gets drawn. In *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, for instance, Christ's birth and death become intertwined between the two cities that bookend his life: "Life begun at Bethlehem and finished at Jerusalem. / Life included between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. / Life inscribed between Bethlehem and Jerusalem."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in Madame Gervaise's utterly transforming vision of the Passion in the same text, it is at the moment of his anguished death cry that Jesus thinks only of the manger, likening crèche to tomb, that "last cradle of every man," superimposing images of swaddling clothes upon the burial shrouds:

The linen of his burial;  
 As white as the handkerchief of that famous Veronica;  
 The linen as white as swaddling clothes.  
 And which one winds around exactly like swaddling  
 clothes.  
 But bigger, much bigger.  
 He had become a man.  
 He was a child who had grown much.<sup>34</sup>

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32. *Ibid.*, 152 (emphasis added). "And Jesus is the fruit of a mother's womb, / *Fructus ventris tui*, the young infant / Fell asleep in straw and chaff and sound, / His two knees bent under his carnal belly" (my translation).

33. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, 99.

34. *Ibid.*, 104–05.

With these lines, the reader thus cannot forget Jesus' status as a child, as *someone's* child, who had, through the normal processes of human growth, become the condemned man now hanging on the Cross. Similarly, but in a slightly different register, we recall that the end of *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* reasserts Christ's sonship relative not so much to Mary as to the grieving Father God who, "alone, father at that moment like so many fathers, . . . was unable to bury [his] son."<sup>35</sup> Maternal and Marian images are present, however, all throughout: in the woodcutter father's audacious "stunt" of giving his sick children to the care of Mary, whose arms envelop "all the children of men, through centuries of centuries, all the little siblings of Jesus";<sup>36</sup> in Péguy's marvelous personification of night as the figure of a "dark-eyed mother, universal mother," a figure "who gently rock[s] the whole of Creation / Into a restoring Sleep. / As one lays a child in his little bed, / As his mother lays him down and as his mother tucks him in / And kisses him."<sup>37</sup> The maternal figure of night comes to bury the entire scene of the crucifixion: "The Centurion and his Romans, / The Virgin and the holy women, / And that mountain, and that valley, upon which the evening was descending, / And my people of Israel and sinners and, with them, he who was dying, he who had died for them."<sup>38</sup>

The suffering of innocent infancy is, of course, the major theme of *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*. Here the experiences of the martyrs and holy innocents are associated with the Passion of Christ in large part by Péguy's employment of extended metaphors of milk, lactation, and breastfeeding. Thus he is not only securing the vulnerability of these bodies who are being treated with such violence but also laying the groundwork for how images of nourishment function variously across his corpus. For example,

The most hardened warrior has been a tender infant nourished with milk; and the toughest martyr, the strongest

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35. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 137.

36. *Ibid.*, 30.

37. *Ibid.*, 131.

38. *Ibid.*, 137. See similar imagery in Charles Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, trans. Pansy Pakenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 74.

martyr tortured on the iron horse, the martyr with the roughest bark, the most wrinkled skin, the strongest martyr on the rack and in the thumbscrew has been a tender, milky child.<sup>39</sup>

This imagery is soon repeated but related instead to the Passion of Christ: “My Son who on the Cross had a skin as dry as bark; / a faded skin, a wrinkled skin, a tanned skin; / a skin which cracked under the nails; / my Son had been a tender milky child.”<sup>40</sup> The image of milk reappears to describe the massacred Innocents under Herod to great effect: “By an iniquitous King / Milky they were murdered: / (milky, full of milk, milky, in the age of milk, being still on a milk diet, milk-fed, *ipsum sequunter Agnum sine macula* / they follow the Lamb himself without stain.”<sup>41</sup> The text goes on to suggest explicitly that the sacrificed Lamb without stain and the martyred children without stain who follow him are and will be always bound together.

In French, of course, there is a close etymological link between “infant” (*nourrisson*) and “to feed,” “to nourish,” “to nurture,” or to “nurse” (*nourrir*). Péguy makes ample use of nourishment metaphors throughout both his poetry and prose. That Péguy describes Jesus as a “milky babe” nursed on the maternal lap of Mary not only communicates that he ate and required—as all animal beings do—daily sustenance and care for his growth and development, but also prefigures the ways

39. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, 72. “L’homme de guerre le plus dur a été un tendre enfant nourri de lait; et le plus rude martyr, le martyr le plus dur sur le chevalet, le martyr à la plus rude écorce, à la plus rugueuse peau, le martyr le plus dur à la serre et à l’onglet a été un tendre enfant laiteux” (Péguy, *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 6, 18).

40. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, 73. “Mon fils qui sur la croix avait une peau sèche comme une sèche écorce; / une peau flétrie, une peau ridée, une peau tannée; / une peau qui se fendait sous les clous; / mon fils avait été un tendre enfant laiteux” (Péguy, *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 6, 20).

41. “*Ab iniquo rege / Lactentes interfecti sunt: / Par un inique Roi / Laiteux ils furent assassinés: / (lactentes, pleins de lait, laiteux, à l’âge du lait, étant / encore au régime du lait, / nourris de lait) / ipsum sequunter Agnum sine macula / ils suivent l’Agneau lui-même sans tache*” (Péguy, *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 6, 230, emphasis original, my translation).

in which his own word and flesh will repetitively become consumed. For instance, in *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, Jeannette—in a long litany of beatitudes of those who had had the good fortune of being physically, sensorially, and temporally present to Christ—says, “Blessed were those who drank the milk of your words.”<sup>42</sup> The words of the same Christ who was nourished with milk in his infancy now, in a profound reversal where Christ is the maternal figure rather than the “milky babe,” nourish those faithful who hear and are nurtured by them. Jeannette reflects not only on the consumption and nourishment of Christ’s words by human beings but also on his flesh and blood in the Eucharist. She speaks directly and with wonder to first communicants who participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist: “You eat directly the good God; you feed directly from God. And there’s nothing closer than touching. There is nothing closer than food. Than that incorporation, than the incarnation of food.”<sup>43</sup>

The relation of dependence across Péguy’s work between the divine and the human, however, is—startlingly, scandalously—not unilateral but radically mutual and reciprocal. Again availing himself of images of milk and lactation, in this instance in *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, Péguy implies that it is human beings who must take up a maternal role relative to divine revelation:

As a carnal mother nourishes, and warms at her heart her  
last-born,  
Her carnal infant, at her breast,  
Securely held in the fold of her arm,  
Thus, taking advantage of the fact that we are carnal,  
We must nourish, we have to nourish in our heart,  
With our flesh and with our blood

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42. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, 62. “Heureux ceux qui buvaient le lait de vos paroles” (Péguy, *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 5, 76).

43. Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, 35. “Vous mangez directement le bon Dieu, vous vous nourrissez directement de Dieu. Et il n’y a pas plus près que de toucher. Il n’y a pas plus près que la nourriture. Que l’incorporation, que l’incarnation de la nourriture” (Péguy, *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873–1914*, vol. 5, 49).

With our heart  
 The carnal Words,  
 The eternal Words, pronounced carnally in time.<sup>44</sup>

For Péguy, this “maternal” mediation of human flesh is indeed the *only* means by which the living words of Jesus can continue to live in time and in history; they are not “canned words / To keep” but must be borne in flesh, “nourished, carried, warmed, warm in a living heart,” if they are not to “collapse fleshless.”<sup>45</sup>

### 3. ANNUNCIATIONS: THE “GLORIOUS INSECURITY” OF THE PRESENT MOMENT AND AN ETHICAL SUMMONS

Péguy’s central insight of the precarious character of genuinely Christian mediation—that it is neither transactional, nor secured, nor determined, nor a *fait accompli* that can be put away, preserved, saved, or hoarded—is connected closely to his (Bergsonian) theology of time and his privileging of the present moment. In my view, the temporal dynamic provides an especially subtle and informative entry point to understand more deeply Péguy’s views on the particularly precarious character of fleshly mediation. Indeed, the global fact that he often pairs the categories of temporal/eternal with carnal/spiritual suggests that for him there is no clear difference and that both are theologically significant. In his posthumous text *Note Conjointe sur M. Descartes et la Philosophie Cartésienne* (1924), recently translated with the conjoined *Note sur M. Bergson et la Philosophie Bergsonienne* (1914) (both of which are, despite their titles, Catholic apologia for an interpretation of Henri Bergson), Péguy centralizes the narrow, fragile, humble point of a particular present moment through which everything whatsoever must pass: the Annunciation of the birth of Christ by the angel Gabriel to Mary, a moment teetering between prophecy and Gospel, between the lush, inexhaustibly bountiful present and the “eternal prison of the past.”<sup>46</sup>

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44. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 59.

45. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

46. Péguy, *Notes on Bergson and Descartes*, 174 (hereafter this work will be cited in-text).



On the one hand, it might be considered odd that a philosophical essay ostensibly on Descartes and actually about Bergson would prioritize so deeply the figure of Mary; on the other hand, however, the Marian element is entirely in keeping with Péguy's theological and devotional interests. In fact, his appeal to Mary is especially apropos insofar as Péguy links "the glorious insecurity of the present" with images of growth, seeds, reproduction, fertility, and fecundity as signs of contradiction against the "barrenness" and "sterility" of the deterministic, mechanistic, materialistic, and capitalistic impulses of the modern world (*ibid.*, 183). For Péguy, the haunting specter of modernity represents the erasure of both the body and the present moment: in short, the erasure of the possibility of genuine mediation and the erecting of the false idols of regimes of money, progress, efficiency, and crass transactionalism in its place. "The modern intellectual world," he writes "would do anything (and has done everything) in order to evade fecundity, freedom, life, in order to escape that present that is fecund, free, living. It has done everything to escape flux and the presence of the present" (184).<sup>47</sup> Modernity, on Péguy's telling, cannot abide that which cannot be predicted, calculated, finally secured, or guaranteed; it can abide neither "poor uncertainty" nor "uncertain poverty" (197).

One of the main targets in this text is the modern capitulation to the rule of money and the deformative effects of its acquisition. Péguy objects not merely to the misuse or abuse of money but more fundamentally to its ersatz metaphysical status. For him, money is a false, counterfeit mediation. It is not an object itself in space or time but only the means of acquiring the desired object; it is a strange and empty "counter-object," amassed not as goods are amassed but as "that for which he has sold his goods" (187); it is the sacrifice and "mummification" of the flux and freedom of the present for the security of a determined future (*ibid.*); it is the erasure of hope as a theological category. Péguy's denunciations of money are swift and strong, associating it with the Antichrist (202) and against all forms of spirituality (219). Commerce and the worship of money presume to rigidify, ossify, or freeze everything into buyable allocations,

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47. Cf. 196: "The modern world effects an immense, a total, pouring out of the present."

even elements that should rather be “supple, free, living, fecund, non-interchangeable, non-homogenous, non-exchangeable, non-buyable and sellable, non-countable and calculable” (191). According to Péguy, modernity’s attempt to economize (and so to homogenize and sterilize, effectively to make barren) is resonant with forms of modern history that can only “conserve through cold” (199), not through the gentle, progressive cultivation of life through the mediations of time, flesh, and history, but rather through processes that arrest growth for the sake of more convenient, efficient preservation. This character of modernity effectively sidelines everything that cannot assure the same sorts of securities that the god of money promises, namely “faith, theology, philosophy, metaphysics, morality, civics, economics, poetics, the fine and musical arts; reality in fact” (199). The anti-Christian temptation of modernity is to mistake that which belongs to the realms of “nourishment and life for what belongs to recording and history,” which is tantamount to a preference for the past over the present and a grave and systemic forgetting of one’s own precarity, which is “for the Christian the most profound condition of human beings” (208–09). Precarity is both the misery and the glory of embodied human life in which the theological virtue of hope—“that one must always begin again” (ibid.)—gets concretely performed and reperformed, inscribed and reinscribed, visited and revisited.

We have already seen from “Clio I” that for Péguy it would be a betrayal of the nature of Christianity to secure the knowledge and memory of Jesus Christ through some kind of immediate, permanent miracle that would make the mediatory transmission of the Gospel superfluous. In the “Conjoined Note on Descartes and the Cartesian Philosophy,” Péguy elaborates the same point of the necessity of Christ’s memory being preserved not miraculously but rather by a living and dynamic process of mediation. This means not only that the Gospel must eventually be recorded by witnesses (Jesus’ “notaries,” in Péguy’s somewhat amusing appeal to bureaucratic language), but also that Jesus must *live* the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, accomplishing them over the long, slow course of a genuinely human life, not fulfilling them deterministically, as a machine, but rather “freely and as a human being” (168). As Péguy goes on, the movement from prophecy to Gospel is “in the order of the human and of

the event, not in the order of the logical, mathematical, physical, supposedly scientific deduction, not in the order of modern determinism. In a word, *the gospels are not the prophecies put into the past tense*, transferred just as they are, transferred in whole, transferred in bulk from the future into the past through the ministration of the present” (ibid.). The gospels are thus the fecundity or ripening of the prophecies, their “bringing into fullness,” “an accomplishment, a making full, a putting into plenitude of the prophecies. And not merely an effectuation” (169). On Péguy’s account, it is the Annunciation as narrated in Luke 1:26–38, when the birth of Jesus into flesh is foretold by the angel Gabriel, the announcement of a fecundity and a ripening of a different sort, that is the precise point of mediation between prophecy and Gospel. It is a dense point in time after which everything is different. It is, in Péguy’s manifestly poetic description, an utter singularity:

It is the complete end of a world and the beginning of another. . . . And in one of those long beautiful days of June where there is no more night, no more gloomy darkness, where the day goes hand in hand with the day, it is the final instant of the evening and at the same time the first instant of the dawn. It is the final instant of the promise and at the same time the first instant of the keeping of the promise. It is the final instant of yesterday and at the same time the first instant of tomorrow. It is the final instant of the past and at the same time, in the same present, the first instant of a tremendous future. (170)

In this private exchange, this diminutive sliver of time, is found the thinnest apex and culmination of promises pronounced to cosmos, world, nation, and people. “That prophecy,” Péguy says, “which had been enthroned with David and Solomon, which had been public for a whole people, published for everyone, proclaimed for a whole race, it found its end in a secret summit, in a flower, in a crowning of silence and shadow. It found its end in a confidential salutation addressed to a single, humble girl, and through the agency of a single angel” (171). This supple, momentous “point” of the Annunciation is the “arising of the future from the past through the ministry of the present” (173). It mediates prophecy to Gospel, eternity to temporality, flesh to divinity, and divinity to flesh. This is a point of “salutation, a

secret and confidential communication,” a “point of germination” (171), “a certain point of fecundity, through a certain point of generation in the present” (172). While itself a point in time, it tapers even more narrowly upon a humble point of flesh, into the silences and mysteries and inward operations of the maternal womb, upon something not marked by the predictability of mechanized automation but rather upon something living, *someone* living, someone who might just as well have declined instead of having said “let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

The Marian *fiat* is the open space where freedom comes out, without determinism or compulsion, to meet the offer of grace. Elsewhere in the “Conjoined Note,” using an extended metaphor drawn from his military experience, Péguy reflects upon the Catholic doctrine of the mediation of grace in the context of his explication of Cartesian epistemology. Just as observations and experience must, like a “sortie” from a besieged city, come out to “meet” the relief army of Descartes’s deductive reason, so too must human freedom go out from blockades of sin to meet the rescue army forces of grace (39–40). On Péguy’s account, bodily mediations of grace in Catholic theology do not bear the deterministic character of a machine, which would or could secure the outcome beforehand. Catholic mediation does not force a result but rather elicits a free response, accounting for the cooperative action of an acting agent. (Almost as if to commit this image to eternal memory, Péguy’s life comes to a premature end after being shot in the forehead as he advanced on the battlefield at Marne in the ranks of a literal rescue army.)

This high value placed upon human freedom means for Péguy that God waits—must wait—for a human response, the creaturely “yes.” “He has to, it’s insane, he has to hope that *we* save *ourselves*. / He can’t do anything without us.”<sup>48</sup> In “Clio I,” Péguy has his titular character speculate on this strange, counter-intuitive character of Christianity. Not only does it contest the category of modern progress in its narrative of an all-powerful God who willingly prostrates himself upon and into the *humus*—“*procidit in faciem suam*, a God fallen upon his face, on the earth,

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48. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 82 (emphasis original).

humble, humbled, in the humbleness of man"<sup>49</sup>—it also accords such freedom to human beings that the religion's entire apparatus teeters on the precarious foundation of unmitigated risk, a risk that is not a design flaw but rather its most defining feature.<sup>50</sup> In the Incarnation, the Scriptures, apostolic succession, the sacraments, and all bodily mediations that affirm without compunction the goodness of nature, God has cast himself into uncertain poverties, spent himself utterly without taking pains to guarantee that there will be a profitable return on investment. "It's this very situation, my child," says Madame Gervaise to Joan, "that God made for himself, in loving us. / God has deigned to hope in us, because he wanted to hope for us, wait for us. / Miserable situation, (in) return for what love . . . / He put himself in this strange, reversed situation, in this miserable situation where it's he who waits for us, for the most miserable sinner."<sup>51</sup> Thus, precisely to the degree that Christian mediation is inefficient, subject to failure, foolish, fragile, exposed, and precarious is precisely the degree to which it is Catholic and precisely the degree to which it is divine. Christian mediation invites human beings into a performance of fragility that is a resounding "yes" not only to the dynamic, fertile exigencies of creaturely being, but also to the loving vulnerabilities and intentional exposures of divine being.

Finally, there is for Péguy not only a necessary and irreducible connection between fleshly, temporal mediation, precarity, fecundity, and the fundamental character of divine love, but also it is exactly mediation's precarious character that provides the grounds for an ethical summons. In "L'Argent suite," Péguy concludes a meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of the carnal and the temporal, the insertion of the spiritual in the carnal and the insertion of the eternal in the temporal,<sup>52</sup>

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49. Charles Péguy, "Clio I," in *Temporal and Eternal*, trans. Alexander Dru (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), 155.

50. *Ibid.*, 157.

51. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 81.

52. "Le mystère même du charnel et du temporel . . . et de l'insertion du spirituel dans le charnel et de l'insertion de l'éternel dans le temporel" (The very mystery of the carnal and the temporal . . . and of the insertion of the spiritual into the carnal and of the insertion of the eternal into the temporal)

with what he calls a “lesson in modesty”: “Everything still needs to be done. Piece by piece. Day by day.”<sup>53</sup> It is therefore the human task and responsibility to continue the work of the Incarnation in the holy repetitions of the sacraments: in holy water from the font shared from hand to hand, in prayers and creeds repeated in common, in the ongoing work on behalf of the poor—who will always be with us—in marriages and births, in vocations, in weekly proclamations of the Gospel, continually starting over in hope, beginning again, walking slow and winding itineraries toward sanctification and participation in the life of God. □

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(Charles Péguy, “L’Argent suite,” in *Cahier de la Quinzaine*, vol. 9, Series 14 [Paris: L’Artisan du Livre, 1913], 177, my translation).

53. “Et qu’il faut encore tout faire. Pièce à pièce. Jour par jour” (ibid., my translation).