

Portrait of a Chosen Man, Albert Camus

Portrait of a Chosen Man¹

Le Portrait de M. Pouget was published before the war, in installments, in a review of relatively limited influence. At the time, it enjoyed an undoubted but unobtrusive success. It has just appeared in book form,² and it still seems to have been relatively little discussed in the unoccupied zone. This is because, in spite of appearances, the world has not changed since the war. It is still very noisy. And if a measured voice undertakes to speak to us of an austere and pure example, the probability is that no one will listen.

What we mean when we say that a book has "found an audience" is that it has gone beyond the large or small circle of readers it could count upon even before publication. Naturally, I have no doubts that Le Portrait de M. Pouget was read enthusiastically in Catholic circles. But it would be a good thing if very different readers had the opportunity to meditate on this fine book, and what I would like to do here is describe its appeal to a mind alien to Catholicism.

It is an extremely difficult enterprise to put intelligence and modesty on stage, or to sketch the portrait and write the novel of a spiritual adventure. Le Portrait de M. Pouget belongs to a genre difficult to define, even more tricky to categorize. It is inspired not by friendship, as was Montaigne's essay on La Boétie, but rather by veneration, as Alain was inspired when he tried to revive Jules Lagneau.

There is always something moving in the homage one man pays to another. But who can boast that he has defined the intriguing feelings that link certain minds to others with ties of respect and admiration? Such ties are sometimes more solid than those of blood. The man who has not had this experience is indeed poor, while he who has been granted it and has given himself wholly to it is happy indeed. In any case, this is the kind of experience Monsieur Guitton has described for us.

Who was M. Pouget? An old Lazarist priest, three-quarters blind, who meditated on Tradition, and received a few students in the little cell where his life was drawing to its close. His life can be summed up in a few words: peasant, seminarian, teacher, invalid, with forty years of studious retreat in his order's Mother House.

So it is lacking in the kind of dramatic events that nourish brilliant biographies. The only earthly happenings are those contained in an endless reflection on Tradition and Biblical texts. Writing the biography of M. Pouget thus involved composing a small manual of exegesis and apologetics, tracing a spiritual portrait from his works, his method, and his ideas.

These ideas were not clear-cut. M. Pouget put them forward with considerable precaution. And M. Guitton has shown all the necessary moderation and respect in describing them. Consequently, to summarize would be to distort them. The reader can remedy this difficulty by making allowances for it. If Pouget had read the rest of this article, he and M. Guitton would have been justified in exclaiming: "It's much more complicated than that."

Father Pouget's whole effort seems to have been devoted to finding a middle way between blind faith and a faith that knows its reasons. He did not wish to maintain ideas that are indefensible, to justify ambitions that the Bible never had. Father Pouget made concessions. He considered everything in the Bible inspired, but did not see everything as necessarily sacred. A choice had to be made.

From the point of view of rigid orthodoxy, such an attitude was dangerous. As a matter of fact, this proved to be the case, for it appears that Father Pouget

suffered from official disapproval. He made his peace by striving after serenity and putting forward a postulate: "The Church is not infallible because of the proofs that she advances, but because of the divine authority with which she teaches." This said, his problem was to cut his losses, to establish an irreproachable minimum in the Biblical texts, and to show that this minimum was enough to prove the truths of faith.

Father Pouget pointed out, for example, that we require the Gospels to possess a degree of historical accuracy that no one would have thought of requiring from the historians of classical antiquity or the Middle Ages. Allowance must nevertheless be made for the mentality peculiar to each historical period, and for the rapid variations in moral climate from one century to another.

And we have to make a clear distinction in the Bible between what is attributable to divine inspiration and what results from the mentality peculiar to a historical period. Thus, for a long time, the Bible indiscriminately cast both sinners and the righteous into the same hell. Ecclesiastes, for example, clearly states that "the dead know not anything neither have they any more a reward" (Ecc. IX, 5). This is because the idea of moral rewards was foreign to primitive Jewish thought.

Consequently, it is impossible to defend these texts, or torture them by allegory until they show evidence of divine inspiration. To those who might evidence surprise at God's carelessness in thus allowing his ideas to be distorted, Father Pouget would have replied that it was more probably a case of a deliberate plan. God has proportioned his revelations to the ability of men to understand them. The light of God is too bright for human eyes and revelation must be progressive.

"God is a teacher," M. Pouget would say. We had to wait until the twentieth century to believe that it was possible to philosophize without knowing how to spell. Such an idea would have scandalized Father Pouget. Divine pedagogy, like all reasonable pedagogies, proceeds on the contrary by stages. It does not lay down the law, it teaches. It temporizes with the human mind and gives it time to breathe. Thus God has made himself a realist and a politician.

Father Pouget also liked to talk of another divine attribute, that of condescension (which we must, I suppose, take in its exact meaning of "coming down to the level of ..."). God's motto would thus be, according to our author: "Neither too soon, nor too late, nor too much at a time." The result is that God had made his teaching coincide with history. History is the series of manoeuvres organized by God to make the light of truth penetrate the blind hearts of men. We must consequently look upon revelation as something that develops in a stubborn effort to free itself from successive layers of worldly prejudice.

There must be no tampering with historical truth. And Monsieur Guitton had considerable justification for replying to critics that: "What is remarkable is not that Judeo-Christianity should be clothed in particular mental attitudes, but that it should transcend them." Let us finally note that the Church supports this effort in her own work of defining the faith, which as Father Pouget points out is almost always negative. The Church gives every liberty to her theologians. She rejects only those theories which threaten the existence of the faith in their time. Revelation teaches what is, the Church rejects what is not.

The task of the Church is thus to watch over the march of truth, preventing men from causing it either to hasten or to stray. Heretics, in short, are men who want to go faster than God. There is no salvation for impatience. These principles of the basic minimum, of respect for the mentality peculiar to a particular period, and of progressive revelation form the basis of M. Pouget's method. This method does not, it is true, go to the root of the problem.

That root is the problem of being, and Pouget seems to have been suspicious of metaphysics. In any case, the intellectual esteem inspired by his enterprise makes it the commentator's duty not to go beyond the author's chosen context.

Within this context, however, Pouget's method is exposed to one great objection. It runs the risk, in fact, of using this respect for the mentality peculiar to a historical period as an easy way out for problems raised by exegesis.

Everything that contradicts faith is attributed to the mentality of the time, and discussion is thus avoided. On this point M. Guitton offers a reply that is only half satisfying: "The method is as good as the mind using it." True. But that involves the risk of abolishing the very problem of methodology, for there would no longer be good and bad methods but good and bad minds. With a few nuances, I would not find this a completely impossible point of view. But for a person who accepts Tradition, on the other hand, it is rather surprising.

One feels much more comfortable in pointing out what seems invaluable in Pouget's meditations: they leave the problem of faith intact. Let me make myself clear. It is scarcely necessary to say that, for Father Pouget himself, the problem did not arise. But every exegesis assumes its disbelievers. Like Pascal's *Pensées*, Pouget's thought has an implicit aim: it is apologetic. But his method does not try to convince people immediately. That is the task of grace. Pouget's critique was negative and preparatory.

It aimed at showing that the inspired texts of the Bible contained nothing really offensive to common sense. Divine texts cannot be obstacles on the path to faith. They are just the opposite, sure and certain guides. "From all this" said Pouget, "we draw not faith, for this is impossible, but adequate motives for belief." Thus, from the point of view of intelligence, such a method, with all its modesty and generosity, leaves the question intact. Our freedom of choice remains absolute. It is restored to its true climate.

For a hundred years now, science and religion have been mixed together far too much.³ More supple examination, indeed, restores complete freedom both to Christians and to unbelievers. The former no longer try to "prove" revelation, while the latter no longer base their arguments on the Bible's doubtful genealogies. The problem of faith does not lie in quibbles of this kind. Pouget uses common sense to restore prestige to grace. On this issue he puts things back into their rightful places, the only way to make the mind progress.

These are the real merits of a method like his. And however discreet they may be, these merits are so invaluable as to make us forget the astonishing attitude that kept Copernicus and Galileo on the Index for three hundred years, or that accords divine status to the slightest comma in the Bible. Is all of Father Pouget contained in this method? We might perhaps expect to find that there is also, in addition, some whiff of existence, some more human resonance. The very method, however, ought to disclose, to those who are looking for it, the secret of a great soul.

When M. Guitton writes that the principle Father Pouget followed in his researches was "a courageous indifference to his desires," we seem indeed to stand face to face with the man and, for a second, to possess him completely. Again, we feel completely informed, as to his human side, when Father Pouget confides to us: "There are moments, now that I am drawing near my end, when I have questions which might lead toward disbelief." It would be puerile to exaggerate the meaning of these confessions.

They are the significant shadows of the portrait, the fold of the lip that Piero della Francesca gave the Duke d'Orbino, It would be nothing without the rest—the hard eyes, the imperious nose, and even the landscape in the background. But, without it, the face would lose its secret and its humanity.

Here, in conclusion, I can repeat the question I asked in the beginning: "But who was M. Pouget?" Today, when India is in fashion, one is certain of an audience if one talks about gurus. Indeed, it is one of those spiritual masters whom this priest calls to mind. Yet this cannot be said of his influence. His teaching is really not aimed at illumination or at the inner god; this strange guru has transformed historical criticism into an instrument of asceticism.

He appeals to common sense in order to support the revelation of what goes beyond our senses. I am not competent to judge if he was rewarded in what was dearest to his heart.⁴ One can, on the other hand, easily feel that a book like the one that has just been devoted to him is not only a homage but also a proof of the efficacy of such teaching.

For I have scarcely discussed the book itself, faithful in this, I suppose, to the intentions of its author. In another book by Guitton we read that "the elect are those who realize their own ideal type." In this respect, we can see that we have today a "portrait of a chosen man" that appears as an exceptional triumph in our literature.

To write it required not only talent, but also the powerful motives of admiration and affection. M. Guitton indeed brings clarity to the most delicate ideas, which is a feature of the highest style. He also breathes warmth into abstractions and passion into objectivity. This comes from the soul. A virile piety does the rest and gives this fine book its tone.

It would be ungracious to insist upon the reservations that the ethical a priori one feels in certain pages of the book (pp. 130 passim, 157) can inspire in a non-Catholic thinker. It is enough to note that such reservations exist. The essential thing is that this book of good faith should be accorded its rightful place: far above the vain remarks that, today, are heard like the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal mentioned by St. Paul.⁵

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1 Though apparently only of minor interest, this essay throws considerable light upon Camus's attitude toward religion. Like *Diplôme*, which he wrote in 1936 on *Métaphysique chrétienne et Néo-platonisme*, it shows that he had a serious interest in the intellectual history of Christianity, and in the problems which this religion presented. But, unlike *Diplôme*, which retains complete academic objectivity, this essay on Father Pouget shows more of Camus's own opinions. Thus, when he dismisses as "quibbles" (p. 225) the type of problem that drove Ernest Renan from the Church, his own essentially moral objections to Christianity stand out much more clearly by contrast —P.T.

2 Published by Gallimard, 1943.

3 In fact, contemporary disbelief is no longer based on science in the way that it was at the end of the last century. It denies both science and religion. It is no longer the skepticism of reason when confronted with miracles. It is a passionate disbelief.

4 It will nevertheless be noted that Guitton's fine thesis on Time and Eternity in Plotinus and Saint Augustine begins with a methodological distinction between mind and mentality.

5 *Le Portrait de M. Pouget* was written before the war. Since the armistice, M. Guitton has published books and articles of which I would be less inclined to approve.

The end