

# LETTER FROM THE PROVINCIAL

From the Province,

Thursday December 21, 1899,

**My dear Péguy,**

As long as the Dreyfus affair lasted, I tried, at my own risk, and especially at my own expense, to stay in Paris. We felt that this crisis was terrible, we knew that it was terrible in a decisive sense, and, as much as we could, we were present. We bought seven or eight newspapers in the morning, even big newspapers, even expensive newspapers, like the well-informed *le Figaro*. Then we bought newspapers at noon, when there were any. Then we bought newspapers at four o'clock, *les Droits de l'Homme* ou *le Petit Bleu*. Then we bought newspapers in the evening. We devoured the news. We spent hours and days reading documents, the pieces from the trial. The passion for truth, the passion for justice, indignation, impatience with falsehood, intolerance of lies and injustice occupied our hours, obtained all our strength. Sometimes we went down to the Sorbonne; it was necessary to repel the nationalist and anti-Semitic invasion far from the troubled courtyards, far from the Salle des Pas-Perdus. We finally gave each other, in the tracks and crossroads, strokes of the cane which were not tragic, but which were serious. Those who

I:287 had trades then did their best to practice them all the same. I admit that more than one job was badly practiced, that more than one job was somewhat neglected. Those who did not yet have a profession were in no hurry to choose one. More than one tradesman was horribly overworked. It couldn't last. It did not last. These times have passed.

Today I am a secondary school teacher in a good provincial town. Nothing is so hard in the world, nothing is as bad as these good bourgeois cities. Friends of ours left for these more distant international provinces still located in the countries that the bourgeois call foreign countries, in Hungary, in Romania. We receive the Paris newspapers one, two, or four days late. I have 20 hours of service per week, about two hundred pages of homework to correct per week, seven compositions per term, not counting the quarterly grades dear to the parents of the students. I have a few hours away from afar to find out what is going on in the inhabited world. However, I am a man, as this elder said. I have a few hours left to find out what is going on in republican and socialist France. However, I am a comrade and a citizen. The bourgeois state, in return for the work that I provide it, gives me the ordinary salary of the aggregates, less the ordinary restraint that it misuses to prepare for my retirement. Life is a little cheaper than in Paris, I manage to feed my family lately. But I barely succeed. I have a few cents left to buy the news of what's going on. Merchants only sell *le Petit Journal*. I subscribed to *la Petite République* because it is a friendly newspaper and because it represents official revolutionary socialism fairly well for me; I subscribed to *l'Aurore* because it is a friendly newspaper and because it represents for me stubborn and revolutionary Dreyfusism. I subscribed to *l'Aurore*, because it is not malicious and gives interesting news pretty well. Above all, I subscribed to *la Mouvement Socialiste* for all the good reasons that you know. That's already 5 francs

a year. That's almost all I can do. If I were a raging supporter of the glorious Struggle Class, there would be a way: I would say that, except for a few miserable fellows, all these children sitting on their benches at their tables in front of me are bourgeois, sons and grandsons of the bourgeois, that I must therefore stupefy them and not teach them, to precipitate ruin and to advance the internal corruption of this infamous bourgeois society, which, as we were assured by the speakers of public meetings, works with its own hands for its own destruction. It would be sabotage of a new kind. I would not prepare my lessons. I would not correct or badly correct my homework. I would have a lot of time left. I could, when my pupils had thus become too weak to follow my class, give them, as they pleasantly say, private lessons. I would have some leftover money. But I have the cruelty to sometimes abandon the field of class struggle. It seems to me that these children will one day be men and citizens. I try to do everything I can to make them later human beings and good citizens. Besides the respect that we owe and that we owe to his profession, I am not immoral. Even I hope that some of these children can become comrades. Weren't we ourselves at the Lycée? Have we not found in the teaching that we received at the Lycée at least some deep reasons for why we became socialists? Oh! I'm not saying that our masters and teachers did it on purpose. They were not socialists at the time. But they were good people and honest men, they were telling the truth they could. Without knowing it, these tradesmen did a lot to introduce us to socialism. And how many we do not know, have we not known good socialists raised in the Lycée or in the schools, sons of bourgeois father and mother. When a bourgeois son becomes a socialist, with or without his own, or despite his own, I say and believe that it is a piece of the Social Revolution that is being milked, without the impersonal dictatorship of the proletariat

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intervening. We are the revolutionaries. - For all these reasons, I reserve very little leisure. And on these hobbies I spend some time preparing and giving public lectures in primary schools. I will speak this evening on the *Prince of Bismarck*. I used Charles Andler's book to prepare my lecture. To the children of the school, to the adult former pupils, to the parents, I will tell how the Iron Chancellor got nicked on German social democracy. My hobbies will be reduced by the same amount. I believe that a very large number of men have  
I:289 as little leisure as I do. I believe that in Paris itself there are many men at least as busy as me. I believe that the teachers, the laborers, the masons, the bakers, the farriers, the wheelwrights and the blacksmiths of Paris and the province have much less leisure than me.

However, we are not negligible. We are the masons of the next city, the stonemasons and the mortar mixers. Attached to the soil as well as to the past, attached to work, to the workshop, to the class, we will not be more socialist delegates to socialist parliaments than we have been socialist deputies to bourgeois parliaments. We prepare the material of which fame and public glories are made. We love what we do, we are happy with what we do, but we want to know what we do with it after we are done.

But we don't know, we don't have time to know. Without being as busy as this guesdist who had no time to read anything at all, because he founded groups, it is certain that we do not have time to read all the newspapers and all the magazines which would interest us ; it is certain that we do not even have time to look for what would be to read in the newspapers and in the magazines which we do not receive regularly and personally.

Finally, in the newspapers we read regularly, we do not receive the truth itself. It becomes obvious. You know with what respect, what friendship, what esteem I have for the

robustness and righteousness of Jaurès; you know with what cordial and deep assent I gave to the luminous demonstrations which he produced to us during the affair. It is therefore not without astonishment and sadness that I read, under his signature in *la Petite République* of Thursday 16 November, sentences like these: "Zévaès was right to recall the essential principles of our Party. He was right to oppose the whole capitalist class, which is divided by secondary rivalries, but which is united by the same essential interest, the demand of the proletariat. »...« And on the other hand neither Zévaès, nor his friends, are ready to play the game of nationalists and reaction. »...« And Zévaès, however high his point of view, ... »I do not want to be ridiculous to pursue Mr. Zévaès; but after all we have known him, and when we are told of his high point of view, so high, we feel the truth of the state coming. We have spent twenty months and more distinguishing and distinguishing state truth from truth. - You celebrated in Paris *le Triomphe de la République*. In *la Petite République* of the next day I find a really "grandiose headline: *A Historic Day. - Paris to the people. - Triumphant demonstration. - 500,000 workers cheer for socialism*. And in *l'Aurore* I find a more modest headline: *The Triumph of the Republic. - A Great Day. - Parade of 250,000 citizens*. It has a bad effect on the ordinary. Can we not, victorious, at least imitate the veracity of the defeated English generals? Are we going to have an official truth, a state truth, a party truth. I fear it when I re-read a resolution from the recent Congress:

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*"Congress declares that none of the socialist newspapers are, as things stand, the official organ of the Party.*

*But all the newspapers which claim to be socialists have definite obligations which grow with the importance*

*of the newspaper and the support which the militants have given it throughout the country.*

*Freedom of discussion is complete for all questions of doctrine and method; but, for action, the newspapers will have to strictly comply with the decisions of Congress, interpreted by the General Committee.*

*In addition, the newspapers will refrain from any controversy and any communication likely to hurt one of the organizations. "*

I accept the first of these four paragraphs. When I say that I admit it, I do not mean that I am assuming a right of control, an authority over the decisions of Congress: I mean, roughly speaking, that it seems to me to conform to reason and to the truth.

The second paragraph presents some difficulty. The defined bonds we are talking about here, which increase or decrease, seem to me to be obligations of interest. Before these obligations or these recognition of interests, I place a perpetual obligation of law which does not undergo any exception, which cannot increase or decrease, because it is always total, which is imposed on small magazines as on major newspapers, which can not vary with the circulation, nor with the competitions or utilities: the obligation to tell the truth.

I:291 Tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, tell the stupid truth stupidly, boringly the boring truth, sadly the sad truth: this is what we have been proposing ourselves for more than twenty months, and not only for the questions of doctrine and method, but also, but above all for action. We have pretty much succeeded. Do we have to give it up? Who will distinguish doctrine and method from action? What is doctrine if not intelligence of action? What is the method, if not the pragmatics of action? How can the doctrine and how

can the method remain free, if the action must strictly comply with the decisions of Congress, interpreted by a General Committee. Who works for a serf is not free. And even, on closer inspection, it is not the doctrine and the method which are free: it is the discussion which is entirely free for all questions of doctrine and method. What is a freedom of discussion which does not carry with it a freedom of decision?

And the fourth paragraph presents us with a copy of these decisions of Congress before which, before any interpretation by the General Committee, I am forced to resolutely refuse to bow down my reason. It is indeed a question whether the Congress thus constituted had the right to decide between interests. But it is certain that the Congress had no quality to put the satisfaction to be given to these interests before the right of the truth.

The function of newspapers is to give their readers the news of the day, as they say. Newspapers have to get the real news, all the real news they can, just real news. The delimitation of what newspapers must give to their readers and what they must not give them, what they must even refuse, must coincide exactly with the actual delimitation of what is true from what is false, in no way with the artificial delimitation of what is or is not likely to hurt a nationally or regionally incorporated organization. This injury is not a criterion. Some men, like Zola, are hurt by the lie; but some men, like General Mercier, are hurt by the truth. Not to mention these extreme cases, if the truth hurts an organization, will one keep the truth quiet? If the lie favors an organization, will one say the lie? Really for the wounding truth will one do the honor of not treating it worse than the hurtful lie? But, to be silent about the truth, is it not already lying? How many times have we produced this simple proposition in the recent campaign. To the good bourgeois, and also to the comrades who wanted to take refuge

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comfortably in the silence, did we not often cut the retreat by telling them brutally, - because at that time we all ended up having brutal language: "Whoever does not mouth the truth, when he knows the truth, becomes the accomplice of liars and forgers! This is what we proclaimed then. This is what we proclaimed at the beginning of this winter; Is this proposal annual, or biennial? Does it melt with jelly? And this is what we still declare today against anti-Semites. Is this proposal also local? No. It is universal and eternal, let us say without false shame. We ask simply that one tells the truth.

It can go a long way, these injuries made or supposedly made to organizations. It is obvious that this resolution was proposed to Congress by its committee more particularly to protect certain organizations from criticism. These organizations are precisely those that have ambitious leaders and young people: will they be injured when someone is hurt by their leaders? Then the sanction will be terrible, vague, and almost religious:

*"If the General Committee considers that such a newspaper violates the decisions of the Party and causes prejudice to the proletariat, it calls before it the responsible editors. These being heard, the General Committee indicates to them, if necessary, by a public warning, that it will demand against them or a reprimand or the exclusion of the Party or the interdiction of the newspaper itself. "*

*Shall we blow on the flames of candles on the threshold of interdictions?*

The perfect serenity with which this Congress, for the internal service of the Socialist Party, suppressed press freedom, left me stupid. I know that the Congress was sovereign. But no sovereign, even if he were the Human International, the

human race, has this right, has the right to speak out against the truth. One does not put oneself against the truth. Have we said enough that a man, an individual has no right to speak out against the truth. This proposition was once an axiom. Unless parties have superhuman rights, are we going to march against axioms? This brings bad luck to reason. I:293

What a vague accusation: a prejudice because of the proletariat, and what a temptation presented to the advocates general of demagoguery! But more than the religious wave of the charge, the prosecutions and the trial, the economic precision of the sanction terrifies me. It is the journalist thrown into misery, it is the newspaper forced into bankruptcy for having injured one of the organizations. Journalists, however, are also workers. Will the Party they serve be a ruthless boss for them?

So Congress has trampled on one of our dearest hopes. How many times have we deplored that our socialist and revolutionary newspapers have, for the most part, bourgeois morals. But the newspaper has to live. The same paper must carry to the people an article which frees them and an advertisement which, in a sense, enslaves them. I have never, since the beginning of the affair, felt an impression of defeat as heavy as the day when Vaughan announced to us in *l'Aurore* that the newspaper would publish, like everyone else, a financial bulletin, a financial chronicle. The newspaper thus flies away, carrying the word of emancipation and the announcement of enslavement, the genius or the revolutionary talent with the reactionary absinthe, the pipes of the races, the filthy theaters. The newspaper takes away evil and good. Chance will balance, good or bad. What anguish for the writer, for the man of action, for the brilliant speaker, to know and see that his prose is sleeping with these indicator leaflets! Does not this anguish have a deep resonance at the very heart of his work, does he not introduce

impediments, impotence? How the talent of some and how the genius of the great speaker would unfold joyfully, clearly, purely in the health of a newspaper finally free! Now, admitting that genius and talent are morally negligible in themselves, they are considerable when they are used to prepare for the Social Revolution. So we passionately hoped that Congress would at least try to free on the fourth page. Here, on the contrary, he started the enslavement of the first.

I:294 Congress understood, it seems in the second paragraph, to govern all the newspapers that claim to be socialist. I hope that the language has pitched him. In the paragraph on sanctions, it seems that Congress has intended to govern only the newspapers which claim to belong to the Socialist Party thus constituted. Because we must now distinguish between socialism and the Socialist Party as we distinguish between the Churches and Christianity or Christianity, as we distinguish between the Republic and the different republican parties. It is not a question of always opposing them, but it is necessary to distinguish between them, and it is a worrying symptom that Congress did not introduce this distinction.

We made the penultimate and last year a formidable transfer and which can only be justified by the consequence. We used the truth. It doesn't seem like much. We have used the truth. We used it. We have diverted the truth, which is knowledge, for the purposes of action. The question now is whether we have committed embezzlement. For the truth that we used was not the easy truth of parties and controversies; it was scientific, historical truth, the very truth, the truth. We have said enough. And it was true. We have claimed - and it was true - that we oppose anti-Semitic villains and imbeciles exactly the authentic and scientific history of the present and of a recent past. We glorified ourselves, at least those who were accessible to glory, to lead us, in this affair which embraced us alive, like perfect historians. This glory was

founded in truth. We were seekers and servants of the truth. Such was in us the force of the truth that we would have proclaimed it against and against us. Such was the force of truth outside of us that it gave us victory.

For it was the revolutionary force of truth that gave us victory. We were not a single party. I don't know if we had tacticians with us. It may be, because it is a race that prevails everywhere. But Zola, who was not a tactician, spoke the truth.

Now that the truth has saved us, if we let it go on like an embarrassing baggage, we denigrate our recent conduct, we deny our recent words, we demoralize our recent action. We prevaricate back. We abuse trust.

It would be wrong to imagine that these paragraphs are insignificant and not very dangerous. One would be wrong to imagine that one can distinguish between truths, to respect at times of crisis the great truths, the explosive, glorious truths, and in ordinary life neglect the small familiar and frequent truths. It is precisely because we neglect for ten years the slow infiltration of familiar lies and politeness that suddenly a revolutionary must burst the abscess. Can we always find a revolutionary like Zola? There is a good chance that a General Committee will commit less deliberately than a man one of those terrible imprudences which are called salutary revolutions when they have succeeded. - We must not have a preference, an unhealthy taste for surgical truth, we must on the contrary try to escape it modestly by the regular practice of the hygienic truth.

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You know how much we have given, abandoned to the cause of truth. I am no longer talking about time or our strengths, work or feelings. We have given to the truth what cannot be replaced, childhood friendships, friendships of fifteen and eighteen years of age, which became complacently older, which would have become friendships of fifty years.

Many Dreyfusards have lost a few social connections or a few political friendships. It's nothing. But I treated like pirates, like bandits, like thugs, honest young people, lost in their province, who had allowed themselves to be led astray by the pettier infamies of Alphonse Humbert or by the bestial ugly infamies of Drumont. This amputation was necessary then. This violence was just, because these honest young men helped to maintain the greatest infamy of the century. It was our strength that this painful ease with entrenchment, with solitude, with internal exile. Having suffered this for the truth, we will not accept that we are forced to let it go to spare the susceptibilities, the self-esteem, the epidermis of some individuals. — Because basically that's all it is.

You live near Paris; you can attend certain ceremonies, stages and solemnities; you will give me the faithful account.

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You will tell me what you think of men and events. Not that I promise to think like you, or to think with you. But you will tell me what you think. You will go to the doctors you know, and ask them for consultations on difficult cases for me.

You will point out to me the articles of newspapers and magazines and even the books that I can read usefully in the time that I have. You know that I am interested, directly or indirectly, in everything related to the Social Revolution. I

will re-subscribe to my three newspapers. I will especially re-subscribe to the *Mouvement Socialiste*. *La Revue Socialiste* is a great review: it has its marked place in all groups and circles of study and propaganda. The *Mouvement*, shorter, more portable, nurtured, friendly, very largely international, hardly leaves the pocket of my jacket. To have the other newspapers and magazines and the books, we founded a circle of studies and reading. But it is not enough to have it all. We still have to find our way there. You'll help me find my way there.

You will transcribe to me all the documents or all the information that is to be kept. We cannot keep the clippings of the newspapers we have or don't have indefinitely. A notebook is more convenient. When a document is given to the public, everyone talks about it, it is found everywhere. Three months later, we don't know where to go to get it. I am sure that you will impartially give me the pros and cons. It was our honor, at the time of this case on which I am not afraid to ramble, to go and seek in the testimonies, in the enemy newspapers, the best of our proofs, the most invincible of our arguments. Shall we give up these good habits? Was not the most effective Dreyfusard work a History of the Variations of the General Staff provided by itself?

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I beg you to give me all the documents and all the information you can, even long, even boring. We owe to the same affair the exact, historical publication of minutes, shorthand reports, documents, papers, documents. We had the Zola Trial, the Revision of the Dreyfus Affair, Investigation and Debates of the Court of Cassation, the *Figaro* publications. *L'Eclair* provides a shorthand account of the debates that continue so boringly before the High Court. Here we recognize the homage that vice pays to virtue. I read with pleasure on the fourth page of the cover of the *Mouvement* that the *la Société nouvelle de librairie et d'édition* was going to give us the "Official stenographic report of the General Congress

of French Socialist Organizations held in Paris in December 1899." This is good official style. That's a good publication. Here we will have the unnecessary words spoken in the large gymnasium while the commission was working. We will have the low demagoguery of Ebers as well as the austere historical demonstration of Lagardelle. What does it matter? Better to publish it as such. It is even interesting that the Congress, on its second day, resolved that this publication should be carried out. He thus set a good example. We are going to publish, following the formal invitation of the Congress, under the control of a special commission, speeches offensive to this or that organization. It was very free. Why did Congress not continue?— There will be in your notebooks much more published than unpublished. But there is so much new that everyone knows in advance, there is so much published that everyone ignores.

If finally someone puts a copy in your hands, attach it to the notebooks. I will have this copy in communication, I will read it or not read it according to the time that I will have. It may happen that a good copy is not received in any review by any publisher. You will send me a good copy. You will even send me worms if you receive them. The worms is not necessarily dishonorable.

It will be an optional part of the notebooks, optional for you, optional especially for us.

I do not ask you to send me a history of the world per fortnight, or a geography of the world per fortnight, or a chronology of the world per fortnight. I beg you to send me notebooks of information, without party spirit, on what interests me.

The Provincial

# REPLY

Paris, Monday December 25, 1899,

**My dear friend,**

For a year, and on a trial basis, I will do everything I can to send you these information notebooks.

The first book will leave on January 5. I will send you on the 20th of each month the notebook of the first half and on the 5th the notebook of the second half of the previous month.

I want to reassure you now on this Triumph of the Republic. As much as we can count such a grand demonstration, at least two hundred and fifty thousand citizens marched. We can evaluate at least an equal number of citizens who cheered the parade, who cheered socialism. So *la Petite République* and *l'Aurore* were also right. We always have to get along.

I had prepared an account of this celebration, not for you, but for a friendly magazine. As an exception, I will send you this report in my first notebook. I will add the main documents from the Liebknecht case, and some notes on the last events of December 1899.