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Saint-Brieuc bay
collection Goulven Le Brech

Two great adventurers of the mind

ON 11 FEBRUARY 1862, a cold winter day, the French philosopher Jules Lequier drowned in Saint-Brieuc bay, at some distance from the little seaside resort of Plérin in North Brittany. In June 1963 John Cowper Powys's ashes were scattered on the pebble beach of Chesil Bank, not far from Weymouth in Dorset. The Channel, that long stretch of sea between France and Britain, such is the shroud in which are entombed these two great adventurers of the mind that are Jules Lequier and John Cowper Powys.

There are obvious differences of course between these two great men who follow each other from one century to the next. Jules Lequier died at the age of 48 without having published anything and only left fragments of partly incomplete manuscripts. Powys, author of an impressive body of work, died in his ninety-first year, his genius only partly recognised. Lequier never won the love of his beloved Anne Dezsille, whom he called "Nanine", nor did he thus receive the inspiration necessary to develop his work, whereas Powys, in his mature age, found in the person of Phyllis Playter a woman who inspired him. Lequier, son of a doctor, was a Catholic and studied at the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique, whereas Powys, son of a clergyman, was an animist and a pagan, hostile to science.

But there are also many similarities. Like Powys, Lequier is a raconteur, and both men were first known for their ability to communicate their thoughts verbally. John Cowper's gift for throwing light in his conferences on the works and thoughts of great writers has been praised by many, including Henry Miller.

Jules Lequier was also a great orator, according to all who knew him. The Breton writer, Ernest Hello[1], who often saw Lequier, bears witness:

> ...In private, when his words reached the heights of his thought, he attained almost unrivaled eloquence, difficult to describe for lack of comparable oratory. It was iron and fire. It was forceful, powerful; it was splendid and stirring.[2]

They are both admirers of the great English poet John Milton (1606-1674). Milton belongs to the Powysian Pantheon. Powys devotes a whole chapter to him in *Visions and Revisions* (1915) and he also discusses him in *The Pleasures of Literature.* Milton is regularly mentioned in his letters and Milton's complete works are recommended in *One Hundred Best Books* (1916)[3]:

> No epicurean lover of the subtler delicacies in poetric rhythm or of the more exalted and translunar harmonies in the imaginative suggestiveness of words, can afford to leave Milton untouched. In sheer felicity of beauty—the beauty of suggestive words, each one carrying "a perfume in the mention" and together, by their arrangement in relation to one another, conveying a thrill of absolute and final satisfaction—no poem in our language surpasses Lycidas, and only the fine great odes of John Keats approach or equal it.

Lequier also was influenced by John Milton and mentions him in his notebooks, in particular Notebook B in the Jules Lequier archive[4]. In his research on the subject of the beautiful and the possible, Lequier mentions Milton who appears to him to represent the idea of the possible related to the image of the poet, as opposed to the idea of necessity, linked to the image of the scientist (Galileo).[5]

Jules Lequier has been compared to Novalis for his fragmentary writings and for his style—Heather Dohollau[6] said of Lequier that he "was the last of the German Romanticists". Many references to the British Romantic Age are to be found in Lequier's archive concerning the domains of both science and poetry, at the time closely related in the Romantic Science movement. In the B notebook, Lequier briefly evokes the poet and entomologist, George Crabbe (1754-1832), and started a translation of *Consolations in Travel* (1830), the autobiography of Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829), the famous chemist and inventor, a translation never completed. Lequier proves to be a poet, a philosopher and a scholar, well aware of cultural events on the English side of the Channel.

Turning to their works, we become aware of the importance for Lequier as for Powys of the natural environment. This link with nature is an underlying aspect in Lequier, never a theme in itself, but one encountered in several of his texts, particularly in his Breton tale *La fourche et la quenouille* (The pitchfork and the distaff). The plot of this philosophical tale, written during his youth, is situated in the department of Côtes d'Armor, not far from the little town of

[1] Ernest Hello (1828–1885) was a French Roman Catholic writer from Brittany.

[2] *Cahiers Jules Lequier*, n°3/2012, Association Les amis de Jules Lequier, p. 6.

[3] J.C. Powys, *One Hundred Best Books*, Little Blue Books n°435, Haldeman–Julius, 1916.

[4] Rennes 1 University Library.

[5] See Goulven Le Brech, 'Jules Lequier, le spectre du beau' and Jules Lequier, 'Fragments sur le beau" in *Le Philosophoire*, 'La Beauté', n°38, Autumn 2012.

[6] Heather Dohollau (1925-2013), poet and painter of Welsh origin. She came to live in Brittany after her marriage.and wrote mainly in French.

Quintin, Lequier's birthplace. In the tale the area is described minutely, together with its enchanting atmosphere… Similarly, in *Wolf Solent* and his other Wessex novels, John Cowper Powys gives lengthly descriptions of the rural scene in which his characters roam. In both cases the same landscapes—low green hills with small streams meandering below, hollow ways, ponds, coastal paths above the sea—form an adjunct to metaphysical thought.

The theme of the choice and freedom given to man to accept his lot or to choose his destiny is brilliantly expressed in a short poetical and philosophical text by Jules Lequier entitled *The Hornbeam Leaf*[7]. It is the only text that Lequier considered satisfactory and which he gave to read to his close relatives during his lifetime. It is a hymn to childhood and to awakening nature, in which Lequier evokes his rural childhood spent at the family home, not far from the Channel.

During a fine day in spring, the young boy suddenly experiences a feeling new to him, which compels him to stop playing. As he is about to pluck a leaf from a hedge, he suddenly becomes aware of his astonishing sovereign power to pluck or not to pluck the leaf.

> One day, in my father's garden, at the moment of taking a hornbeam leaf, I suddenly marveled at feeling myself to be the absolute master of this action, insignificant though it was. To do, or not to do! both so equally within my power! A single cause, me, capable at a single instant, as though I were double, of two completely opposite effects! and, by one, or by the other, author of something eternal, for whatever my choice, it would henceforth be eternally true that something would have taken place at this point of time that it had pleased me to decide. I was not equal to my astonishment; I drew back, I recovered, my heart beating precipitously.[8]

Demiurge in his garden, the child decides to pluck the leaf. A bird frightened by his movement immediately takes to flight in alarm. Once in the air, the bird is clutched in the talons of a sparrowhawk. Seeing the bird flee from the hedge, the child's vision swings away from the possibly naïve concept of sovereign freedom to the harrowing idea of relentless necessity.

> I am the one who had handed it over, I said to myself with sadness. The caprice which made me touch this branch and not another had caused its death. Afterwards, in the language of my years (the guileless language that my memory cannot recover), I continued: such then is the way things are connected. The action that everyone calls unimportant is the one whose repercussion is perceived by no one, and it is only by reason of ignorance that one succeeds in being unconcerned.[9]

This awesome idea of a universal necessity directing everything, interfering with everything, from the smallest particle of nature up to whole areas of the child's thought, has disastrous consequences on his most profound beliefs. The human mind being unable to conceive of all the causes and consequences of his acts makes the child doubt the possibility for man to have true knowledge. Any attempt at serious thought can then only lead to illusions, and man becomes the accomplice to these soothing illusions. With respect to ethics, since he therefore no longer needs to consider the necessary consequences of his decisions, man finds himself divested of any responsibility for his acts.

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[7] *The Hornbeam Leaf*, bilingual edition, tr. D.W. Viney, Logo-Sophia Press, 2010.

[8] Ibid., p.7.

[9] Ibid., p.7.

However, in a sudden philosophical twist in events, the child rebels. He must abandon this idea of universal necessity, for such a situation is unbearable. *The Hornbeam Leaf* ends with a philosophical bet against the harrowing idea of universal determinism, bet in which nature acts as a medium in the subject's accession to a free-will which becom aware of itself. A sober bet should be placed on the effectiveness of liberty.

> Suddenly I raised it [my head] again. Recovering my faith in my freedom by my freedom itself, without reasoning, without hesitation, without any other gauge of the excellence of my nature than this inner testimony that makes my soul created in the image of God and capable of resisting him, since it should obey him, I said to myself, in the security of a superb solitude: This is not so, I am free.[10]

The problem of free-will is also central in *Wolf Solent*, in which the general theme is the question of a mode of living, and the struggle which takes place in each human being between his real life and his imaginary life. Having reached middle age, comfortably settled in Blacksod, Wolf Solent is torn between his life with Gerda (who represents real life) and his love for Christie Malakite (embodying imaginary life). In chapter thirteen, we find a description of the feeling of human liberty, at the end of a philosophical and existential questioning, of the same nature as that described by Lequier in *The Hornbeam Leaf.*

> The queer thing was that his brain moved at this moment with incredible rapidity. His brain debated, for example, as it had never done before, the insoluble problem of free-will, the problem of the very existence of the mystery called 'will'.[11]

Exactly like Lequier seizing back his freedom through an act of faith in his freedom, Wolf finds an issue out of his doubt and his worries by affirming his will. From this act a stream of liberating peace emerges, of the same nature as the "superb certainty" felt by Lequier when he celebrates the excellency of human liberty.

> And then, all in a moment, with a crouching wild-animal movement of his consciousness, he flung a savage defiance to all these doubts. He laid hold of his will as if it had been a lightning-conductor, and, shaking it clear of his body, thrust it forth into space, into a space that was below and yet above, within and yet beyond Poll's Camp and Babylon Hill. And then, in a second, in less than a second, so it seemed, as he recalled it afterwards, there came flowing in upon him, out of those secret depths of which he was always more or less conscious, a greater flood of liberating peace than he had ever known before! [12]

According to Jean Grenier[13], Jules Lequier in the history of philosophy, "a precursor without being a promoter", disappeared without leaving any traces, but his main brilliant idea is honoured. For, upholding human liberty as a philosophical precept, Lequier anticipated several major trends during the 20th century: bergsonism, and existentialism in France, pluralism and process philosophy in the United States.

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[10] *The Hornbeam Leaf*, p.15.

[11] John Cowper Powys, *Wolf Solent*, ch.13 'Home for Bastards', Macdonald, 1961, p.276.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Jean Grenier (1896-1971), French writer and philosopher, friend of Albert Camus. His 1936 thesis *La philosophie de Jules Lequier* was devoted to Jules Lequier,.

If it had not been for the friendship and gratitude of the philosopher Charles Renouvier[14], an intimate friend of Lequier, the latter's name and philosophical research would have been completely forgotten. Renouvier saved Lequier from oblivion by acquiring the fragments of Lequier's work after his death. In 1865 he personally had printed 120 copies of ***La recherche d'une première vérité***, fragments of the first and the eighth books of Lequier's work. In order to make Lequier's ideas better known, he distributed these copies in France and in other countries to those he considered able to understand their importance. The philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910), who exerted a major influence on John Cowper Powys, requested a copy.

William James recognised his debt to Renouvier, writing "[Renouvier] was one of the greatest philosophic characters, and, but for the decisive impression made on me in the seventies by his masterly advocacy of pluralism, I might never have got free from the monistic superstition under which I had grown up"[15]. In a letter dated 2 November 1872, William James asked Renouvier to send him a copy of ***La recherche d'une première vérité***. In the same letter he thanks Renouvier (whose books he had read) in the following terms: "It is thanks to you that I now have, for the first time, an understandable and reasonable concept of what is Liberty"[16]. Renouvier owes such a concept of liberty to Jules Lequier. Thirteen years earlier, in 1859, Renouvier had written in one of his books: "I owe it to justice to declare that I made many and considerable borrowings from M. Lequier, on this important question of liberty, which until now was considered only as simply important, whereas its importance is preeminent in philosophy."[17]

The innovation Renouvier found in Lequier is the reflexive aspect of his conception of liberty: the fact that an act of liberty postulates liberty. Lequier goes further than Descartes for he puts liberty before the Cartesian ***cogito.*** He puts 'doing' before 'being' and thus anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre's formula "Freedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence". He thus brings about a true revolution in the world of ideas. In the midst of the 19th century, at a time when the determinist vision of science and ethics was preeminent, Lequier dares to assert the role of human freedom in the "System-of-Things" as Powys would say. In opposition to contemporary philosophers and scientists, he asserts that beyond the influence exerted by his environment, it is possible for an individual to exert his freedom on the world and thus to 'make' himself. One of his personal formulas sums up his thoughts to perfection: "ACT, not ***become***, but act, and, in acting, MAKE ONESELF".

On the metaphysical plane, the consequence of this vision of man as a being endowed with creative liberty, is to no longer conceive the world as a great homogeneous whole (monism), but as the sum of heterogeneous units (monadism). There no longer exists a single organising principle governing all men, but a plurality of experiences shaping ever-changing humankind. Such a

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[14] Charles Renouvier (1815-1903), French philosopher. He was the first to formulate a complete idealistic system, adopting a modified version of the Kantian categories.

[15] W. James, ***Some Problems of Philosophy***, New York: Longmans, 1912, pp.164-5.

[16] Correspondence between Ch. Renouvier and William James, ***Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale***, n°1, Jan.-March 1929.

[17] Ch. Renouvier, ***Essais de critique générale***, ***Deuxième Essai***, Traité de psychologie rationnelle d'après les principes du Criticisme, tome 2, Paris, 1859, Bureau de la ***Critique philosophique.***

world made up of a plurality of universes is precisely what Powys calls "multiverse" in his essay *In Defence of Sensuality*.

On several occasions, William James paid tribute to Renouvier for having delivered him from his monist creed and for having brought him his pluralist conception of the world, issuing from his concept of human freedom. Powys had read the essay in which James expounds this concept (*A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909). In many of his writings, he testifies to the influence of the pluralism of James on his own philosophy of life, particularly in *The Complex Vision*. In *Autobiography* he explains the interest he felt for James's thought:

> But William James was a startling delight to me, too, for all his roguish jibes at Hegel. I responded with a lively cymric reciprocity to his Pluralistic ideas, which, in my fluid and incorrigibly sceptical mind, seemed quite as *conceivable* a vision of things as any self-evolving, self-dividing, self-reconciling absolute. I can recall one occasion, when I was heading for Trenton where I was to give a lecture, being so absorbed in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* that I permitted my train to stop at the station and to leave the station in complete oblivion of my purpose.[18]

It seems that John Cowper Powys appreciated the pluralist idea, beyond what it represents on a strictly speculative plane, which influences the structure of his fiction. What particularly pleased him in such an idea is the opening it offers to different modes of being: conscient animate or inanimate beings. But it is in *Weymouth Sands* that his personal version of pluralism endows various places in this little seaside resort with a specific soul, just as it does for the human characters. Over the years, his novels take place at more and more remote locations in space and time, with less and less realistic characters.

The link with nature, so significant in the legendary and mythological past, is also to be found in the works of both Powys and Lequier. In both cases the influence of the Celtic spirit emanating from certain places is clear, but all superficial folklore is of course avoided. The position of the Breton philosopher is aptly described by André Clair writing "... in a complete reversal of reflexive philosophy, it is nature itself, enhanced conscience, which becomes spirit [....] The act of meditation, of dialogue and then of narration, has its roots in nature."[19] In another text Clair describes his philosophy as: "formed on the sands of Armor, and amongst the heather and the gorse."[20]

According to Lequier, man has the incredible ability to take refuge "in his freedom as in an impregnable fort", and from there to explore everything outside himself: his sensations, his ideas, his instincts, his powers of love and intelligence... The same central idea is brillantly developed in *The Complex Vision*. Beneath this idea lies the same wish to elevate man up to his dignity as a thinking, feeling and above all creative being. Through philosophy, poetry or the novel, Lequier and Powys had in mind to declare that in spite of all that society demands of man, an invicible freedom remains. In these early years of the 21st century, rife with scientism and endless varieties of obscurantism, these two

[18] J.C. Powys, *Autobiography*, Macdonald & co, 1967, p.479.

[19] André Clair, *Métaphysique et Existence*, Vrin, 2000, p.42. A. Clair is professor emeritus of ethics and of the history of philosophy at University of Rennes 1.

[20] André Clair, 'Introduction' in *La recherche d'une première vérité et autres textes,* Paris, PUF, 1993, p.46.

great spiritual adventurers offer us the message that it behoves each and every one of us, not to become, but in spite of everything, to “act ... and, in acting, make oneself”.

Goulven Le Brech

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Hornbeam leaves (Carpinus betulus)
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