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On the Trail of a French Philosopher of Genius, Jules Lequyer

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ON THE

Trail

OF A
FRENCH
PHILOSOPHER
OF GENIUS:

JULES LEQUYER



Michelle Bakay

It seems unremarkable--the little town of Plérin along the north coast of Brittany, a cemetery beside St. Peter's church, a weathered marble statue of a bearded figure who is deep in thought. The inscription reads:

This monument was raised to the memory of an unhappy friend and a man of great genius in 1868 by Renouvier.

Jules Lequyer, born at Quintin in 1814, deceased at Plérin in 1862. Pray for him.

His works: *The Hornbeam Leaf; Abel and Abel; The Search for a First Truth; The Dialogue of the Predestinate and the Reprobate.*

The irony in this monument is that the Renouvier named in the inscription is Charles Renouvier (1815-1903), one of the most celebrated French philosophers of the nineteenth century, while Jules Lequyer may be the most overlooked French philosopher of that century. Yet, to the end of his life Renouvier referred to Lequyer as his "master in philosophy." William James (1842-1910), the great American philosopher-psychologist, called Lequyer "a French philosopher of genius."*

by Donald Wayne Viney,
Associate Professor of Philosophy

With the eagerness of a child on a treasure-hunt, I traveled last Summer (1994), with my wife Rebecca, to the beautiful countryside of Brittany on the trail of this neglected French thinker. A sabbatical leave from the University and the support of PSU President Donald W. Wilson made this memorable trip possible. We were the guests of Dr. Paul Houillon and his family. Dr. Houillon is chief of services at the psychiatric hospital in Plouguemével. He arranged meetings with the mayors of Quintin and Plérin, the places mentioned on Lequyer's monument. We were warmly received, not only by the mayors, but also by other local officials and by the French press. To our delight, Rebecca and I found our visits reported, complete with photographs, in four articles in *Ouest-France* and *Le Télégramme*, the former having the largest circulation in the country.

Lequyer's monument speaks in stark and simple terms of "an unhappy friend" signaling the fact that melancholy shadowed Lequyer throughout much of his life. It was not always so. As an only child, he was under the dotting care of his mother, Cécile Digaultray, and the devoted family servant, Marianne Feuillet, who was referred to by one of Lequyer's close friends as his "second mother." His father, Jean-Joseph Lequyer, was a physician of good reputation in the town of Saint-Brieuc, where a street is named for him.

Despite these happy beginnings, Lequyer's adult life seemed to be a Sisyphian labor. He was unsuccessful in

Lequyer's home
Plermont,
in Plérin,
France



gaining a post as a military officer; financial troubles, aggravated by his impracticality, plagued him; ambitions he had for political office never materialized; his writings were unpublished and unfinished at his death; he suffered a mental breakdown at the onset of which he seized an axe and tried to cut his arm; he never married, but his proposals to Anne-Françoise "Nanine" Deszille, who had been his childhood sweetheart, were twice refused; he lost an important job as an archivist because of a delay in mail service; finally, his sad life came to a tragic end when he drowned in the bay of Saint-Brieuc. His death was not ruled a suicide, but there is no question that he was deeply distraught that grey February evening when he went swimming.

"Unhappy friend" indeed. Yet, despite

his misery, late in his life he was given to acts of charity and devotion that often amazed his friends. He instructed underprivileged children and, one winter, opened his home to three waifs who were infested with ringworm. On another occasion he took pity on a former priest, whose alcoholism had caused a scandal. Acting as a kind of counselor, Lequyer put the man on the road to recovery and arranged for him to retire in a home for aged clergy. Actions like these, coupled with an almost childlike piety, ensured that his name was well-known in the region. His death came as a shock to his friends, of whom there were many.

Lequyer's monument also speaks of "a man of great genius." Obsessed by the philosophical questions of freedom, he wrote with unparalleled brilliance and

continued

Il était dans le dictionnaire de 1917
Un Américain sur les traces de philosophe Jules Lequyer

Non, ce ne sera pas les lettres du Dr. Houillon, mais tout simplement une page de l'Annuaire de la commune de Plérin qui est en train de s'écrire. Donald-Wayne Vinny, professeur à l'université de Pittsburg (Etats-Unis), fait actuellement un périple à Plérin. Il veut retrouver les traces de Jules Lequyer, celui qui fut son maître à penser.

On peut regretter cependant que l'accueil du professeur américain à la mairie de Plérin soit quasiment passé inaperçu. Seul Yves Le Faucheur et son épouse ont accueilli le professeur Vinny. Un vice que l'on peut comprendre en analysant les propos du maire Yves Le Faucheur. « Pourquoi un professeur de cette université d'Etat-Unis s'intéresse-t-il donc de la vie de Jules Lequyer ? » Très vite la réponse a été donnée par le professeur lui-même mais aussi par le docteur Paul Houillon, directeur de l'hôpital de Plouguemével et de la maison de repos de Quintin.

Même s'il a pu dire Jules Lequyer « est le philosophe le plus important du XIX^e siècle. Pourtant à côté de lui est plus un penseur », annonce Paul Houillon: « Il n'est pas assez connu car il n'a pas pu de son vivant passionnés d'histoire, elle a fait des recherches: il habite à St-Vincent-Canada, dans une maison qu'il avait appelée Pleu-Mont, »

Le professeur Vinny et son épouse, accompagnés du docteur Paul Houillon, ont été reçus à la mairie de Plérin par le maire Jean Le Faucheur.

Un philosophe

Lequyer est important car il est difficile à classer. Et de ce fait, Lequyer est une passion de ma vie. Je l'ai lu à y a dix ans et j'ai été très ému. C'est un des plus grands penseurs du XIX^e siècle. J'ai décidé d'écrire un livre dessus car il est méconnu des philosophes, anglais, américains et français. Tout ceci sera complété à son retour aux Etats-Unis et je pourrai vous dire que mes élèves savent bien Jules Lequyer.

Union des retraités

Complément de la tombola de la commune de Plérin des retraités du 10 juillet: 3024 3230 3071 3075 5184 3233 3247 3296 3361 3342 3380 3371 3372 3386 3388 3417 3423 3435 3446. Le numéro 2583 gagne le voyage de deux jours au Futuroscope de Poitiers (Mairie Le Faucheur, de Plérin).

"To our delight, Rebecca and I found our visits reported, complete with photographs, in four articles in Ouest-France and Le Télégramme, the former having the largest circulation in the country."

94 **Le Télégramme** **4,20 F**
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Tombstone of Jules Lequyer

Renouvier is mentioned on the tomb, but it is known that another of Lequyer's close friends, Madame Agathe Lando (born 1790), helped to erect the monument. The French Philosophical Society restored the tomb in 1922.

* Lequyer's name is often spelled "Lequier," although "Lequyer" is the official orthography. Lequyer himself preferred using the "y" as he believed it to be more distinguished.

imagination. With remorseless logic he followed the implications of the idea of freedom conceived as creativity.

For Lequyer, freedom is the first truth, from which the search for truth begins. One is not coerced by evidence to believe in freedom; rather, by an act of freedom, freedom affirms itself. Lequyer took the thought another step: "The formula of science: TO MAKE, not to become, but to make, and in making, to MAKE ONESELF." The power we have "to make" can change not only the world but also ourselves. Although we do not create our existence, we are responsible for who we become.

Lequyer's writing is suffused with his Catholic faith and enlivened by his sense of having heard the voice of God. His most daring reflections are reserved for the topic of religion. He reasoned that if God created us and we "make ourselves," then God has so made us. Thus, he spoke of "God, who created me creator of myself."

Lequyer realized that this idea is contrary to classical theology, according to which God's creations only reenact the divine will. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) claimed that, in the proper sense, God alone creates. By contrast, Lequyer argues that God, in creating a human, created a being "who can will what God does not want, and not will what God wants, that is to say, a new God who can offend the other."

Lequyer explores some of the far-reaching implications of these ideas in an imaginative dialogue between two clerics, one a man of irreproachable character, the other a man of superficial piety. By a miracle they are made privy to omniscience, each seeing what he will become in the future. The good man sees that he shall backslide and be one of the damned. The other sees that he will repent and is predestined for heaven. An impassioned discussion ensues on whether God's eternal foreknowledge precludes the possibility of free choice.

The greatest theologians of Christendom, from Augustine to Aquinas, held that God perfectly knows our future free decisions. Significantly, Lequyer puts the arguments of these authorities, of which he had an encyclopedic knowledge, in the mouth of the rogue, the one predestined for heaven. The reprobate deftly counters the arguments, suggesting Lequyer's unique solution to the problem.

According to Lequyer, God's existence is unaffected by the passage of time. However, rather than thinking of the future as something that obediently follows the contours of divine knowledge, Lequyer thought of the future as something that is in the making, due to human free decisions. Thus, God has perfect prevision of the extent to which the future is open or closed with respect to our choices. In Lequyer's words, "Terrible prodigy: man deliberates, God waits."

The dialogue between the predestinate and the reprobate is but one example of the way Lequyer's fertile mind approached perennial philosophical problems. The other works mentioned on his tomb are novel in their own right. Unfortunately, Lequyer's works are currently unavailable in translation, more than a century after his death. This may help to account for why he is still unknown to so many English-speaking philosophers. I have translated some of Lequyer's works and am in the process of translating the dialogue between the predestinate and the reprobate.

Through the years I have found it regrettable that others have been so slow to recognize the genius of Lequyer. Not so in the towns we visited. In Quintin a plaque marks his place of birth, and a street is named after him, as is a small psychiatric facility (thanks to Dr. Houillon). In Plérin one finds Lequyer's grave as well as a school bearing his name. Here he is a celebrity, even if he is unknown to the rest of the world, excluding a Francophile in Pittsburg, Kansas whose research and translations may help to save Lequyer from drowning a second time, in obscurity. ♦