

Application for the Suard Pension

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

1837

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PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON, CANDIDATE FOR THE SUARD PENSION

TO THE GENTLEMEN OF THE ACADEMIE DE BESANCON.

Gentlemen, I am a compositor and proofreader, son of a poor craftsman who, as the father of three boys, could never bear the cost of three apprenticeships. I knew misfortune and trouble early; my youth, to use a very popular expression, was passed through a fine sieve. Just so Suard, Marmontel, and a host of writers and scholars struggled with fortune. May you, gentlemen, upon reading this memoir, have the thought that between so many men famous for the gifts of intelligence, and the one who now seeks your votes, the community of misfortune is perhaps not the only point of resemblance.

First destined to a mechanical profession, I was, on the advice of a friend of my father, placed as a free day student at the Collège de Besançon. But what was the payment of 120 francs for a family where food and clothing was always a problem? I usually lacked the most necessary books; I did all my Latin studies without a dictionary; after having translated into Latin everything that my memory supplied, I left blank the words that I didn't know, and, at the door of the school, I filled the empty spaces. I was punished a hundred times for having forgotten my books, but the fact was that I did not have them. All my days off were filled with labor, either in the fields or in the house, in order to save a day's work; on holidays, I went to the woods myself to seek the stock of hoops that would supply the shop of my father, a cooper by profession. What studies could I make with such a method? What meager success I was able to obtain!

At the end of my ninth year [quatrième], my prize was Fenelon's *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu*. That book seemed to suddenly open my mind and illuminate my thought. I had heard talk of materialists and atheists: I was anxious to learn how they went about denying God.

I will admit, however, that Descartes' philosophy, embellished with Fénelon's eloquence, did not entirely satisfy me. I sensed God, and my soul was permeated with him; captured from childhood by that great idea, it boiled over in me and dominated all my faculties. And in a book written to prove the existence of the Supreme Being, I only encountered a rickety metaphysics, the deductions of which had the appearance of a more practical hypothesis, but did not resemble a

certain, scientific theory. Allow me, Gentlemen, to offer you an example. The soul cannot perish, say the Cartesians, because it is immaterial and simple. But why can something which has begun to be not cease to exist? What then? Is the soul, in its duration, infinite and eternal on one side but limited on the other? This is inconceivable. — Matter, say the same philosophers, is not the necessary Being, because it is obviously contingent, dependent and passive. So it has been created. But how are we to conceive of the creation of matter by mind, rather than the production of mind by matter? One is as inconceivable as the other. So I remained what I was, a believer in God and the immortality of the soul, but, begging philosophy's pardon, this was less because of the evidence of its syllogisms than the weakness of the opposing arguments. It seemed to me from then on that another path was necessary to establish philosophy as science, and I never returned to that opinion of my youth.

I pursued my classics through my family's miseries and all the degradations with which a sensitive young man with the most *irritable* self-esteem can be deluged. Apart from illness and the bad state of his business, my father pursued a lawsuit that completed his ruin. The very day when the judgment was to be pronounced, I was to be awarded with *excellence*. I arrived with a very sad heart at that formal occasion where everyone seemed to laugh at me; fathers and mothers embraced their laureate sons and applauded their triumphs, while my family was in court, awaiting the decision.

I will always remember it. — The rector asked me if I wanted to be presented to some relative or friend, in order to be crowned by their hand.

“I have no one here, Rector,” I responded.

“Well!” he added, “I will crown and embrace you.”

Never, Gentlemen, have I felt such a shock. I found my family in distress, my mother in tears: our suit was lost. That night, we all supped on bread and water.

I dragged myself along as far as rhetoric: it was my last year of secondary school. I had to provide for my own food and upkeep. — “Presently,” my father said to me, “you must know your trade; at eighteen, I earned my bread, and I did not have such a long apprenticeship.” — I found that he was right, and I joined a printing shop.

I hoped for some time that the trade of proofreader would allow me to resume my abandoned studies at the very moment when they demanded greater efforts and new activity. The works of Bossuet, the Bergiers, etc., would pass before my eyes; I learned the laws of reasoning and style with these great masters. Soon I believed that I was called to be an apologist for Christianity, and I read the books of its enemies and defenders. Must I tell you, Gentlemen? In the raging furnace of controversy, often being fascinated by imaginations and only hearing my inner feelings, I gradually saw my dear and precious beliefs disappear; I would successively profess all the heresies condemned by the Church and related by the dictionary of Abbot Pluquet; I detached from one only to sink into the opposite, until finally, from weariness, I stopped at the last and perhaps most unreasonable of all: I was Socinian. I fell into a deep despondency.

However, the political commotions and my private misery tore me from my solitary meditations, and I threw myself more and more into the whirlwind of active life. To live, I had to leave my city and homeland, take up the costume and staff of the *compagnon* of the *tour de France*, and seek, from print shop to print shop, some lines to compose, some proofs to read. One day, I sold my school prize, the only library I had ever possessed. My mother cried; for me, there remained the notes taken from my reading. These extracts, which could not be sold, followed and consoled me everywhere. I wandered part of France in this way, sometimes exposed to lack of

work and bread for having dared speak the truth to a boss who, in response, brutally dismissed me. That same year, employed at Paris as a proofreader, I was almost once again the victim of my provincial pride; and without the support of my co-workers, who defended me against the unjust accusations of a foreman, I would perhaps have seen myself, urged by hunger, obliged to hire myself out to some journalist. Despite all the privations and miseries that I had endured, that extremity appeared to me the most horrible of all.

The life of man is never so suffering and abandoned that it is not strewn with some consolations. I had encountered a friend in a young man that fortune tormented, as much as myself, by the moral conflicts and the sting of poverty. He was named Gustave Fallot.¹ In the depths of a workshop, I received a letter one day, inviting me to leave everything and go join my friend... — “You are unfortunate,” he said to me, “and the life you lead does not suit you. Proudhon, we are brothers: as long as I have bread and I room, I will share it all with you. Come here, and we will succeed or perish together.” Then, Gentlemen, he himself submitted a memoir to you and presented himself to your votes as a candidate for the Suard pension. Without saying anything about it to me, he proposed, if he obtained the preference over his friends, to give me the enjoyment of that pension, reserving for himself the glory of the title and the use of the precious advantages that are attached to it. — “If I am appointed in the month of August,” he said to me, without explaining more, “our career shall begin in the month of August.” I flew to his call, and arrived to find him, stricken by cholera, spending his last resources for me, and arriving at death’s door without it being possible for me to continue caring for him. The lack of money no longer permitted us to remain together; we had to separate, and I embraced him for the last time. Last January 25, I spent an hour meditating at his tomb.

With fifty francs in my pocket, a sack on my back, and my philosophy notebooks for provisions, I set out for the south of France... But, Gentlemen, it would be an abuse of your patience to detail for you here, in minute detail and in chronological order, all that I have suffered in my body and heart. What does it matter to you, after all, that I have been more or less shaken by fortune? It is not enough, to earn your choice, to have only poverty to offer, and your votes do not seek an adventurer. However, if I do not tell you of my calamitous existence, who will recommend me to your attention? Who will speak for me? Such has been to this day, and such is still my life: living in workshops, witness to the vices and virtues of the people, eating my bread earned each day by the sweat of my brow, obliged, with my modest wages, to assist my family and contribute to the education of my brothers; in the midst of all that, pondering, philosophizing, gathering the least of unexpected observations.

Fatigued by the precarious and miserable condition of being a worker, I wished to attempt, together with one of my fellows, to organize a small printing business. The two of us pooled our meager savings and wagered all the resources of our families in that lottery. The treacherous game of business deceived our hope: discipline, hard work, frugality, nothing served; one of the two partners went into the woods to die of exhaustion and despair, while the other had no more to repent than having cut into the last slice of his father's bread.

Pardon me once more, Gentlemen, if, instead of exhibiting some real titles to your benevolence, I only show you my misfortune. Unknown to the majority of you, I must, it seems to me, tell you what I have been, what I am. It is not, moreover, without some repugnance that I have consented to recount to you some of the circumstances of my life, and to disclose to you the habitual state

¹ M. Gustave Fallot was the first Suard resident.

of my mind and character. Such confidences only appear to me well put between equals and friends. — “Well!” a man that I love and revere tells me, “Do you want to please the Gentlemen of the Academy? Speak to them as friend.” — Would he be deceived, and would my confidence lead me to a bad end?

In 1836-1837, a long sickness having forced me to interrupt my labor in the workshop, I returned to study. Some fortunate enough attempts at criticism and sacred philosophy had given a new impetus to my literary and determined my penchant for philosophical speculations. In the insomnia of fever and the leisure of a laborious convalescence, I gave myself up to some researches on grammar that appeared important enough to merit your examination. Two copies of my work were addressed to you; but the immense labors of your learned company alone have, until now, I at least dare to presume, delayed your judgment.

If, however, the weak composition that was submitted to you could answer for the one that I am preparing; if the presentation of my first glimpses sufficiently guarantee the accuracy of the ideas that I elaborate; if you would desire, Gentlemen, to see brought to the end new and fertile studies, would it be allowed to the one who already, since a year ago, has placed himself at your bench for trial, to count a bit more on your indulgent benevolence than on the doubtful hopes of his talent and the regard due to the extreme modesty of his fortune?

To see new regions in psychology, new ways in philosophy; to study the nature and mechanism of the human mind in the most obvious and most perceptible of his faculties, speech; to determine, according to the origin and processes of language, the source and line of descent of human beliefs; to apply, in short, grammar to metaphysics and morals, and to realize a thought that torments profound geniuses, that preoccupied Fallot, that our Pauthier pursued: such is, Gentlemen, the task that I would impose on myself if you would grant me the books and time; the books above all! The time will never be lacking to me.

After all the vicissitudes of my ideas and the long parturition of my soul, I had to finish, I have finished by creating for myself a complete, linked system of religious and philosophical beliefs, a system that I can reduce to this simple formula:

There exists, of superhuman origin, a primitive philosophy or religion, corrupted since before any of the historical eras, of which the cults of the different nations have preserved some authentic and homologous vestiges. The majority of the Christian dogmas themselves are only the summary expression of so many demonstrable propositions; and we can, by the comparative study of religious systems, by the attentive examination of the formation of languages, and independent of every other revelation, observe the reality of the truths that the Catholic faith imposes, truths inexplicable in themselves, but accessible to the understanding. From that principle can be deduced, by a series of strict consequences, a traditional philosophy the ensemble of which will constitute an exact science.

Such is today, Gentlemen, the compendium of my profession of faith.

Born and raised in the heart of the working classes, still belonging to it in my heart and affections, and especially through the sufferings and wishes, my greatest joy, if I garner your votes, would be, do not doubt it, Gentlemen, to be able to work from now on without rest, by science and philosophy, with all the energy of my will and all the powers of my mind, at the moral and intellectual improvement of those whom I am happy to call my brothers and companions; to be able to spread among them the seeds of a doctrine that I regard as the law of the moral world; and, while awaiting the success of my efforts, directed by your prudence, to already find myself, in some way, as their representative to you.

But, whatever your choice, Gentlemen, I submit to it in advance and applaud it; following the example of an ancient, I would rejoice if you find one more worthy than me: Proudhon, accustomed from childhood to sharpen his courage against adversity, would never had the pride to believe himself a disdained and unsung genius...

P.-J. Proudhon.

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