L'ANNONCE FAITE A MARIE

PAUL CLAUDEL

L'ANNONCE FAITE A MARIE

MYSTÈRE
EN QUATRE ACTES ET UN PROLOGUE

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EDITORS' NOTE

Though *L'Annonce faite à Marie* is well known to lovers of French literature, it has not hitherto been familiar as a prescribed text in our Universities. Recently, like so many French works, it has ceased to be obtainable. The editors of the present edition—the first to appear in this country—feel the more indebted to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press whose generous policy now makes this masterpiece once more available, not only to students but to a wider public. They believe that the play has only to be read to win new admirers and enthusiasts.

A. L. S.
C. M. G.

INTRODUCTION

The figure of Paul Claudel to-day stands alone in French, and perhaps in European, literature; for while such men as Péguy, Barrès and Mauriac have all in various ways defended the Christian tradition, Claudel alone, resisting the strong current of modern materialism, has devoted his literary life to engaging French literature once more in a definitely Christian channel.

Paul Claudel was born on 6 August 1868, at Villeneuve-sur-Fère in the Tardenois, on the same high ridge as that farm of Combernon which is the scene of his great drama. The house stood behind the church; and by climbing into an old apple-tree the boy could see far over the plain to the north, where the towers of Laon Cathedral were just visible, and below him, not far away, the wilderness of *Le Géyn* where poor Violaine was to take refuge as a leper. His parents were losing touch with the religion of their peasant ancestors, and his own first communion was, as he tells us, at once the crowning-point and the termination of his religious practices. By the time of his family's removal to Paris they seem to have been effectively detached from the Christian faith. This, if we may judge from *Ma Conversion**—a document of unique value and interest—was in 1881 or 1882. Everything now encouraged the boy to bury the beliefs of his childhood. Naturalism was the fashion in literature, with Decadentism as a refuge for the fastidious. At the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, where he received his schooling, it seemed as though modern unbelief had acquired an organized form. Taine's Monism, among the prevalent influences, had at least the advantage of presenting the universe as a unity, and the young Claudel accepted without question the

* *Revue de la Jeunesse*, 10 octobre 1913.

theory that the world contained 'a rigid sequence of cause and effect which Science would contrive perfectly to disentangle in the near future'. But Kant's Ethics were more than he could stomach, and there were sharp passages of argument between himself and the master, M. Burdeau—the Burdeau who a few years earlier at Nancy had provoked the rebellion of the young Barrès, and who was now trying to impose his own, as well as Kant's, Categorical Imperative on the schoolboys of Paris. Renan, however, was the reigning deity. In 1883 he distributed the prizes at Louis-le-Grand, including one for Claudel. The latter, without reading the Gospels, was taking his ideas on religion directly from Renan, and the *Vie de Jésus* had furnished him with new reasons for unbelief. One can understand the resentment which followed, when the spell was off. 'Ne me perdez point avec les Voltaire, et les Renan, et les Michelet, et les Hugo, et tous les autres infâmes!' he cried later, remembering the days of his bondage. Days of bondage, indeed. From the materialistic concentration-camp there was no apparent means of escape, and 'little by little', he says, he 'fell into a state of despair'. A gleam of hope came in the summer and autumn of 1886 when he read Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer*. 'Pour la première fois', he tells us, 'ces livres ouvraient une fissure dans mon bagne matérialiste et me donnaient l'impression vivante et presque physique du surnaturel.'* They could hardly do more. But before the end of the year a decisive event came to direct the future course of his life. On Christmas Day he attended High Mass in Notre-Dame de Paris. He was beginning to write, and thought that the ceremonies of the Church, as seen through the eyes of an aesthete

* *Ma Conversion*. In a letter to Jacques Rivière (Tientsin, 12 March 1908), Claudel explained what may seem strange in this experience, the immense spiritual debt he had incurred towards Rimbaud, while making it clear that his *literary* masters were Æschylus, Dante, Shakespeare and Dostoevski.

and dilettante, might well inspire interesting essays in decadent literature. Later in the day he returned to Vespers. The choir-boys were singing what he afterwards learned to be the *Magnificat*. Suddenly, he tells us, as he stood by the second pillar at the entry to the choir, he 'believed'—believed with a conviction so entire that no subsequent experiences have been able to shake it. Hitherto, it had been only through Renan that he had any knowledge of Jesus; he did not even know that He had ever called Himself the Son of God.* But that very night he took up a Protestant Bible which had belonged to his sister, and there, 'for the first time', heard the accents of a divine voice. Every word of the Gospel 'belied the impudent assertions of the apostate and opened my eyes'. For three or four years one part of his nature resisted. The philosophic system he had built up remained strangely intact, and he possessed no intellectual armament to support the new spiritual impulse. Yet this was gradually to prove the stronger. He was encouraged, too, by the thought that the art and poetry he loved were divine things, and that he might still cultivate them. And so at length his confession was heard by a sympathetic young abbé, and on Christmas Day, 1890, in the same Cathedral Church of Notre-Dame, he took his second communion.

If we have dwelt on this episode, it is not so much because the consistency and perhaps the quality of this conversion in two stages have been questioned; but because a young man rarely has the vision (it is not courage he lacks) thus early to shape his career in opposition to public opinion; above all, because these four critical years count for more in Claudel's life than the long and distinguished period of service which he has rendered the Republic in three continents. As regards the first point one can only say that in matters of faith one is obliged to take a man's word for the genuine character of his religious

* He says elsewhere in *Ma Conversion*: 'J'étais [à l'égard de la religion] dans une ignorance de sauvage.'

experience; and that once a return to religion has been determined, this return is nearly always in the direction of the communion, whether Protestant or Catholic, which occupies the principal place in the memories and affections of the laity.

Claudel's spiritual experience had been completed when he was yet on the threshold of his public career. After studying at the École de Droit and the École des Sciences Politiques, he became Acting French Consul in New York (1893), Consul in Boston; then successively Vice-Consul and Consul in Shanghai (1895), Foochow, Pekin and Tientsin. He had begun to write poetical dramas before his final reconciliation with the Church. The first versions of *Tête d'Or* and *La Ville* date from 1889 and 1890 respectively. In 1892 he composed the first version of *La Jeune Fille Violaine*. *L'Échange* (1893) sets forth the antithesis between the Christian and the companionate ideas of marriage. *Le Repos du Septième Jour*, a typical Claudelian 'Mystery' written in China (1895–6), is the story of a Chinese Emperor who descends to the abode of the dead to seek a cure for the ills of his people. From 1899 to 1900 Claudel composed the second version of *La Jeune Fille Violaine*; with the introduction of Pierre de Craon the main lines of the future masterpiece were laid down. *Partage de Midi* is a study of two couples, against the background of the Indian Ocean and Shanghai. To the early years of the present century belong also a prose-work, *Connaissance de l'Est*, and the poems entitled *Corona Benignitatis Anni Dei*. In *Memento pour le Samedi Soir* we see the poet wandering over the Chinese countryside, but it is the *Psalms*, and especially those of the Exile, which furnish inspiration for this

Poëme de Paul Claudel qu'il composait en Asie,
Loin de la vue de tous les hommes, au temps de la grande apostasie.
Flûte basse sous le bruit profane insolente comme une trompette,
Articulation dans le chaos de la phrase forte et nette.

Vers aride et trait ardent de son cœur vers la patrie
Comme il marchait le long des murs de Cambaluc, écoutant
le coucou de Tartarie.
Ou sous un saule vermineux, près d'une grande tache de sel,
Sur une terre à moitié détruite, mangée d'eau sale et de ciel.

Ah, que ma langue se dessèche, expire en moi le souffle
même,
Si mon cœur jamais s'oublie de toi, Jérusalem!

After his return from the East, Claudel occupied various consular posts in Central Europe. He continued to publish poems and plays at intervals. The *Cinq Grandes Odes* appeared in 1910. *L'Otage* (1911), *Le Pain dur* (1918) and *Le Père humilié* (1920), form a trilogy of plays depicting the lives of three generations of post-Revolutionary Society. In *L'Otage* (set in the countryside of Claudel's childhood) Sygne de Coûfontaine, last survivor of a noble house, is led by the need of saving the family estates into marriage with the diabolical parvenu Turelure; the play closes with Turelure's gloating over his wife's death-bed. If Turelure is one of the most odious figures in modern literature, his son and his mistress, shown in *Le Pain dur* as in league against the impotent old sinner, come near to rivalling him. Finally their daughter, the beautiful but blind Pensée de Coûfontaine, a symbolic character, is the focus of interest in the last play, of which the scene is Rome.*

Meanwhile, in his old home at Villeneuve, Claudel had rewritten for the second time *La Jeune Fille Violaine*. As *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, the play was produced on Christmas Eve, 1912, by the 'Œuvre',

* When M. Maurice Hollande visited Villeneuve-sur-Fère some five years ago, he found that 'Monsieur Paul' was well known to the country folk, not as the author of *L'Annonce*, but as the village boy who had 'made good', who had become an ambassador. One villager admitted he had 'put his nose' into *L'Otage*; but added that he had quickly withdrawn it. 'One has to be better educated than we are to appreciate such things', he perhaps too modestly explained. (See 'Au berceau de Claudel', in *Mercure de France*, Vol. 278, 15 septembre 1937, pp. 553–4.)

which, since its foundation in 1893, had been the Symbolists' Theatre; and it may be remarked here that *L'Otage* and *L'Annonce*, with Maeterlinck's four great dramas, are the only Symbolist plays which have had any stage success in France. Claudel's interest about this time seems to have been mainly directed to Attic Drama. As long before as 1896 he had published a translation of the *Agamemnon*, and versions of the *Choephoroe* and the *Eumenides* were to follow in 1920. Dreaming now over Æschylus's lost satyr-play of *Proteus*, he wrote on this subject a farce (*Protée*, 1914), of which the characters are the god Proteus, half-man, half-seal, Menelaus, Helen and the nymph Brindosier, supported by choruses of seals and satyrs. It is a very diverting piece of fun, which a good judge prefers to all Claudel's other plays.* During the war of 1914–1918 Claudel spent some time at the Front, and went on two missions to Italy. In 1921 he was appointed Ambassador in Tokyo. His last considerable work, *Le Soulier de Satin*, a drama of the age of the *Conquistadores*, is perhaps the most ambitious and one of the most poetical of his plays. He has published, in *Positions et Propositions*, two volumes of critical essays, letters and lectures on literary and religious topics; but he is primarily an artist: by far the greater part of his effort has been devoted to poetry and poetic drama, and he is, we believe, one of the few considerable writers now living of whom this can be said.

It is one of the marks of modern French literature (which does not, however, stand alone in this respect) that in spite of its great contributions to moral observation it has been gradually acquiring a non-religious character, and that since the early eighteenth century

* B. W. Downs, 'Paul Claudel', in *The North American Review*, Vol. 220, September 1924, p. 89. The best brief survey we know of Claudel's work, and one of the few attempts at a critical and not simply eulogistic estimate of his talent. The fine *Cantate à Trois Voix* (written in 1911) and *Protée* form the *Deux Poëmes d'Été*.

some of its leading figures have been definitely opposed to the orthodox forms of Christianity. 'Who would suspect', asks Claudel, 'when reading Rabelais, Montaigne, Racine, Molière and Victor Hugo, that a God has died for us on the Cross?' It was natural he should take as his guides, in the work of evangelizing modern literature, those master spirits whose vision and experience seem to border on the supernatural. Of Virgil, 'inspiré d'un souffle vraiment divin, le prophète de Rome', he has the highest idea; but Æschylus has influenced him more deeply. The moral reality of Hell, the drama of the conscience—grimmest of all dramas—the inescapable justice of Heaven: to these themes, which are Æschylean, may be added the Biblical perception that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children (blindness of Aubin and Pensée) and the Christian ideas of Charity and that the wicked may be saved by the intercession of the just (salvation of Mara). *Partage de Midi* offers the kind of story which Dante relates with such poignancy and reticence. The Chinese Emperor's descent to the nether world, in *Repos du Septième Jour*, is more Dantesque than Virgilian. And Claudel has paid tribute to Dante both in his *Ode jubilaire* and in the introduction, in which he counts him as one of the five poets who deserve the title of 'imperial' because they unite the qualities, carried to a supreme degree, of inspiration, intelligence and universality.

If we turn to the pattern of Claudel's dramas, it is Æschylus again, and Shakespeare, who provide models approximating to the kind of lyrical tragedy which, in *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, he has achieved in perfection. The mingling of familiar and 'popular' elements (the song 'Compère Loriot', the roadmakers in the forest) with rustic and lyrical episodes ('la fiancée à travers les branches en fleurs') and scenes of overwhelming pathos—a tragedy built on these lines is foreign to the French tradition, but it is very near to the Greek and also, in a different way, to the Shakespearean. The

great scenes can only be called Claudelian. These plays make up a body of Christian drama which is, we believe, unique in modern literature.

In Paris in the early nineties, Claudel came within the powerful orbit of Stéphane Mallarmé. The latter's idea of the relations between poetry and music had been partly derived from Wagner and Schopenhauer, who had been exercising a marked influence on Symbolist theory towards 1885. It was through this channel, and also perhaps through Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, that Claudel became familiar with Schopenhauer's conception of the world as Will; hence, in all probability, the principle that literary art should address something deeper and more intuitive in our nature than discursive reason.*

His views on Prosody are set forth in a long article in *Positions et Propositions*. The very free verse he uses may owe something to the example of Whitman, but it owes most to the 'verset' of Hebrew poetry. It seems to have arisen spontaneously at the moment when he began to write dramas. 'J'inventai ce vers qui n'avait ni rime ni mètre', he says in *La Ville*; and again, in *La Muse qui est la Grâce*:

> Les mots que j'emploie
> Ce sont les mots de tous les jours, et ce ne sont point les mêmes!
> Vous ne trouverez point de rimes dans mes vers ni aucun sortilège. Ce sont vos phrases mêmes. Pas aucune de vos phrases que je ne sache reprendre!
> Ces fleurs sont vos fleurs et vous dites que vous ne les reconnaissez pas.

His 'versets' at their best (as in *L'Annonce faite à Marie*) seem well designed to sustain the tone of a modern poetic drama; but they have the limitations inseparable from all free verse: they are too free to be always aesthetically satisfying. Claudel, however, also uses the free rhyming verse which appears with such

* See Henri Dérieux, 'Quelques propositions sur Claudel', in *Mercure de France*, Vol. 247, 15 octobre 1933, pp. 257–94.

éclat in the great poems of *Corona Benignitatis Anni Dei* and in the *Trois Poëmes de Guerre*. One cannot separate this supple, sparkling, mobile instrument from the personality whose voice it conveys; the poet has indeed created the vehicle best fitted for his purpose.

It is, however, in his spiritual insight that he appears greatest. It will be to his credit that, before the close of the last century, he divined the breakdown of that social philosophy which represented man as capable of organizing for himself upon earth, if not a paradise, at least a tolerable dwelling-place; that he saw it is only by recognizing the existence of a principle which transcends it on every hand, that mankind has hitherto achieved any measure of happiness or work of enduring value. Of this view of anti-Christian materialism in the social and political domains it is not our business to speak; but we may appropriately ask whether the present evolution of the European literatures, with their declining tempo, is not symptomatic of some larger process. If that should be so, Claudel's quest for 'quelqu'un qui soit en moi plus moi-même que moi' may be one of the signs of a spiritual and literary renaissance.

The qualities of *L'Annonce faite à Marie* will be admired by most readers. They seem to be enhanced, if that is possible, when the play is compared with the versions of 1892 and 1900; for one could not otherwise guess with what taste and insight the poet had been guided from version to version: it is as though the Muse, who generally departs after the first vision, had returned not merely to counsel,* but again and again to inspire. The reader may be surprised to learn that in the second version of *La Jeune Fille Violaine* the time of the play was recent or contemporary; and also that Pierre de Craon made his first appearance in this version. His presence was needed and, as it were, solicited, for he instantly became one of the chief

* In his *Art Poétique* he says: 'Mais vous ne m'abandonnerez point, ô Muses modératrices.'

protagonists; though it must be added that in a sense practically all the characters are chief protagonists, so closely are their actions interlocked. Pierre is already, in this second version, a man of spiritual vision, and his words—

> Il est des gens, ô Violaine . . .
> À qui nulle abondance ne suffit, s'ils ne boivent
> À la vive source eux-mêmes, y appliquant la bouche —

foreshadow the heroine's destiny and his own. It is he, too, who brings to Anne Vercors news of his brother's recent death in America, where he has left a widow and two children; this decides Anne to undertake a journey which he announces with such strange abruptness when he speaks of catching 'the midday train'.

In *L'Annonce*, by the placing of the action towards the close of the Middle Ages, the atmosphere of mysticism is heightened. Pierre is no longer a civil engineer, but a builder of great churches; Anne Vercors leaves his family to visit not America, but the Holy Land; and Violaine seems to gain in poetry and saintliness from the proximity of Jeanne d'Arc. The dialogue between Pierre and Violaine in the Prologue is of an almost Hellenic splendour; few poets have achieved at once such colour and such tone; it makes one think of great moments on the Attic stage. Moreover, the rest of the play maintains, with appropriate variations, the high level on which it has begun. Violaine is not blinded by a handful of ashes which Mara throws in her eyes, but, following a movement of charity and compassion, becomes a leper. The child of Jacques and Mara is not a little boy, Aubin, who is born blind; but a little girl, Aubaine, who dies. And the miracle which takes place in the dark hours between Christmas Eve and Christmas Morn is a figure of that divine birth which Angels once announced.

The fourth act, in the second version, had not been without jarring notes and tedious passages. Anne had taken the news of Violaine's death with unnatural

detachment, and the aspersions he had cast on American society had been out of keeping with the tone of the play. In *L'Annonce* these weaknesses have disappeared. Anne's feelings are more human and not less Christian. He recalls memories of Violaine's childhood, deeply poignant, and yet accepts the decree of Heaven with resignation. And the play concludes in an atmosphere of poetry and benediction, with the sound of the Angelus in our ears.* The intensity of the original vision, the serenity with which it has been grasped, the beauty of the formal design—neither too free nor too much stylized—these are marks of a work of the highest art.

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* For the significance of the Angelus and its connexion with the title of the play, see the notes to the present edition.

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