

PAUL CLAUDEL

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There is a marker set in the floor of Notre Dame, near one of the great pillars in the choir, which commemorates the return to the faith of Paul Claudel. *Ici se convertit Paul Claudel.* His conversion, as he called it, took place on Christmas Eve. He was eighteen at the time and his drift from the faith had not been due to the temptations flesh is heir to, particularly in the teens. Rather, it was the free-thinking atmosphere of the intellectual milieu in which he was educated that led him astray. A school prize he won was awarded by Ernest Renan, the self-important apostate whose life of Jesus was an early entry in the "demythologization" of Christianity and was a marked influence on the times.

Claudel did not return immediately to the practice of his faith. But on that Christmas Eve in Notre Dame, the liturgy spoke to him with a power he would never forget and his disbelief drained from him.

Claudel was a triple threat -- a poet of oceanic force; a playwright whose works transformed a secularized theater with the drama of salvation; an art critic.

Paul Claudel entered the French diplomatic service as a very young man and through a long career was stationed in increasingly important

posts around the world. Born in 1868, his conversion took place on December 25, 1886; in 1893 he was posted to the United States for a year in the French consulates in New York and Boston. Next were posts in China but, in 1900, returned to France, he spent some time in a Benedictine monastery testing a vocation he decided was not his. So it was back to China and an event whose full dimensions have become known only in recent years.

Claudiel had an affair with a married woman whose husband's business interest it was his task as consul to further. The liaison became a local scandal and Paris was informed. The woman, Rose Vetch, returned to Europe alone and, as it transpired, pregnant with Claudel's child. In Belgium she entered into another liaison, and disappeared from Claudel's life. He sought her desperately and for a six month period turned away from the faith, even contemplating suicide. It was not until thirteen years later, on the occasion of their daughter's first communion, that he heard from Rose. By that time, Claudel had married and was the father of four children.

Le Partage du Midi (Break of Noon) is the play in which Claudel made use of this tragic and passionate encounter. As it had with St. Augustine, Claudel's sin and its attendant humiliation was the making of him spiritually.

His diplomatic career included assignments as French Ambassador

to Japan, to the United States, to Belgium. When he retired in 1935, at the age of 67, he had twenty more years to live. But it was not until he was 78 that this ferocious Catholic was elected to the French Academy.

The Tidings Brought to Mary; the play devoted to Christopher Columbus; the great Trilogy consisting of *The Hostage*, *Stale Bread* and *The Humiliated Father* in which Claudel looks at the modern world through the eyes of faith -- these assure his fame.

His letters make clear that he was ever on the *qui vive* for those who might be interested in the faith -- his long correspondence with André Gide record a failed effort. Anne Delbée's *Une Femme*, the life of Paul's sister Camille, a sculptress who was the mistress of Rodin, has been made into a movie (*Camille*) in which Paul is portrayed as a prissy and pietistic figure. This is historically false. When Camille became the mistress of Rodin, Paul was caught up in his own adulterous affair. Camille spent the last 30 years of her life in an asylum, driven mad by Rodin, smashing her own statues about which Paul had written so eloquently. By the time Camille was confined, in 1913, Paul's life was back on track. Small wonder that he should have sought to extricate his sister from a demeaning, destructive and sinful situation.

Claudel's *Five Great Odes* show the influence of Scripture on his poetry. It turns out that the Bible was his lifelong passion. The Vulgate was always on his desk and his Journal is almost a florilegium of Latin verses. *I*

Love the Bible -- as *J'aime la Bible* would be called if it were translated -- is a good introduction to Claudel on Scripture.

He was a vocal foe of the new trends in biblical scholarship, deploring the work of Father Lagrange and the *école biblique* he opened in Jerusalem. While it is difficult to agree with Claudel on this, it is impossible not to sympathize with him. In some respects, his is an argument from the literary genres employed in the sacred texts. Who can understand the poetry of the Old Testament except a man who understands poetry, preeminently the poet himself. To subject the text to a disengaged dissection is not to get to the heart of it but to eviscerate it.

Nearly a third, ten volumes, of Claudel's *Oeuvres Complètes* are devoted to his reading of Scripture. These volumes are the fruit of a lifetime spent reading the text, as a form of prayer, as the act of a believer. None of this work has been translated. I am not sure how much of it is even read. I once asked a biblicist what the estimation of Claudel's scriptural writings was. I drew a total blank. But an establishment that keeps Claude Tresmontant at arms length is hardly ready for Paul Claudel.

It was my great good fortune years ago to be given by my wife Claudel's *Journal* in the two volumes of the Bibliothèque de la Pleiade. What a privilege to listen in as this man of enormous faith comments on Scripture, broods over his faults, offers up the boredom of the diplomatic life, engages in polemics and poetic flights, edifies.

Claudé died in 1955, a patriarchal figure, one of the official immortals of French literature, to the end a daily communicant.

"...Je vois l'église ouverte. Il faut entrer.

Mère de Jésus-Christ, je ne viens pas prier.

Je n'ai rien à offrir et rien à demander.

Je viens seulement, Mère, pour vous regarder."

(Finding the church open, I must go in./ Mother of Jesus, I am not come to pray./ I have nothing to offer, nothing to ask./ Mother, I have come only to see you.)

Lines from *La Vierge à Midi*. Paul Claudé was buried from Notre Dame, the cathedral in which all those years before he had turned again to God.

In 1993 Gilles Cornec published *L'affaire Claudé*, a book that considers the reasons why Claudé continues to be hated by so many of his countrymen. That a man might be at once poet, diplomat and Catholic is an affront to those for whom art is necessarily a rejection of the common demands of human life, an end in itself, a substitute for religion. The poet's grave was desecrated in 1980. Perhaps one should see in this a proof of how seriously the French take their artists. Claudé took his art seriously by seeing it as his vocation, or perhaps it would be better to say that he saw it in terms of the one vocation that embraced his poetic production, his diplomatic profession and his family. There are writers, already loved and

hated by many, whose greatness seems still largely unplumbed. Claudel is one of them.