

CLAUDEL, DRAMATIST

II. "The Town"

AFTER *Golden Head* in 1889, *The Town* in 1890 written in France, and a second version written in China 1897. The *Golden Head* is the drama of a man alone with his own nothingness; *The Town* is that of the Commonwealth of Men. Not the entire population is brought on to the stage as a really sophisticated modern would attempt or would pretend, but four men and one woman come forward, and behind them is the murmur of the masses.

Lambert de Besme is a political Boss. To him you turn when things come to a head, for he knows the magic formulae which quieten the crowd, and can give pleasant names to the behaviour of the herd. Yet he is not happy: after wasting his life in futile fuss he feels his soul awaking: stricken in years, he has not known the love of woman; this way, his world will fall to dust, he will seek shelter with the dead, will hug the dust before he is one with it; nay, the champion of the settled order will voice the vengeance of the oppressed.

He is just the average man uplifted by the chances of the game to a commanding position, but he has to go on thinking and acting like all or any of the nameless crowd. So in the play he stands authentically for the mob.

Isidore de Besme is the outstanding man. Whereas his brother has the appearance and the illusion of power, Isidore is the Town's master. Not by inheritance or by conquest, but by superior knowledge. Scientist and engineer, he holds in his hands those countless organisms on which a great city depends from day to day. Water, Lighting, Transport. All depends on him, he depends on no one. The fruit of his tree of knowledge—would you say Wealth, Power?—no: 'tis loneliness. And he is alone with wretchedness, for the thought of death has bitten him, and his life has become

A coquetry
Of death, which wearies me
Too sure
Of the amour.

Golden Head, we know, was gnawed by the same corrosion, but his escape was by the counter-irritant of ambition. But he is worse off than Golden Head was when the world was at his feet, for he knows all things that they are vain. The thought of death dries up the wells of life, he never loved nor was loved, and the rapture of two lovers before his eyes will only draw the bitter word: 'tis naught. He is the spiritual image of the Town. For there the gods are dead, and even wealth is but the foil to bestial despair. Besides, why distinguish rich and poor, fate will make them all alike. And all alike are scheming or sweating, living or labouring just to choke the maw of Death. Isidore de Besme, in numb despondency, gives up the game and goes, but one man stays wide-awake, his name is *Miser*.

Here note well that Claudel's mind will be haunted, so long as it works at all, by the problems arising from those huge and growing abscesses of clotted humanity which are a feature of our times more than ever before. *Miser* is out of place in the Town, and knows that he is, and being a forceful man, hurls himself at the social organism like a battering-ram. He hates the walls, and the compartments hinder his breathing, it is no thirst for justice or for a better order of things that drives him; he is quite human, and still a heavy instrument of God's designs, and his fierce denunciations of the Town are in the key of the prophecies against Tyre, Nineveh, or Babylon. God has not made man for this joyless, loveless existence: it is flouting their Creator to crowd out charity from amongst His creatures; to foist on them the Servile State, the play of economic laws instead of the liberty of glory of the sons of God. Though *Miser* never mentions God, probably has no faith in Him, he chances to be none the less the Avenger of His slighted claims, so deep-seated is the harmony between the natural and the supernatural orders of Creation. *Miser* as a human personality is up against the scorn of his rights and will establish them by main force did it bring the social framework down in ruin; but the rights in question are the Master's own as much as the man's. *Miser*, all through, feels that he is carrying out a sacred duty. Besides, he is all action and cannot spare time to enquire into his own motives.

Miser, the curse of the Town, is balanced by Cœuvre, on whom the chainless Spirit breathes. He contemplates his surroundings not with a view to their usefulness, nor even as Besme, so as to know and analyze. God forbid that he should destroy anything that is! "Whatever is, is right," and he voices the dumb essence and fosters the lower being in his heart into the higher existence of which he himself is in the likeness. With him, matter is ever passing into spirit, apparent confusion cries on the hidden order. He is the poet of mankind, his breath vocalizes the universe as the organ-builder's diapason. So his verse is a natural thing without rhyme or metre, but moded by the rhythm of breathing and the aspiration of the flame.

How then is he, too, discontented? Because men do not understand his harmonies and are estranged rather than reconciled. However, if he cannot sing *to* them he will sing *for* them. But why sing at all, or for whom sing? Deep silence engulfs the song, no response but an echo of the "odd unmated line":

Doubt all around is, echo terrifies.
 No word but love implies,
 And yet though love this heart o'erbrim
 Who loves me, or can say that I love him?

Cœuvre, like the rest is ignorant of God, though saint-like he obeys Whom he sees not. This word returning on itself, shall it find a listener ever?

All at once an answer comes and an urgent question, not from God—from Woman. Lâla, beloved of Lambert de Besme, at Cœuvre's feet entreats to be his wife. So his odd unmated song finds rhyme and antistrophe. Here, as in *Golden Head*, woman appears as lightning in the dark, dazzling, revealing, but disappointing. She can offer him the whole sum of sensual delight, but her soul cannot be shared; that makes all things one, 'tis true, but that is not the Being in Whom all good is common property. The soul evades as God does, only in God attained at last can soul be conjoint with soul. So the solemn wedding which ends the First Act is heavy with boding. Paradise is not on earth any more.

Therefore Lâla, soon after bearing him a son, goes her

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way. The squall of riot, raised by Miser, puffs upon the Town and Lâla is rapt away to speak promise and fallacy in copious measure to the mob at the crossroads. But she plans the City of the Future, whereas Miser thinks but of blotting out the Bad old Town.

Her plan is beautiful: Justice based on Love, a veritable New Jerusalem. Woman lost us Eden, she is for ever raising the mirage of Paradise Regained. Trust her not, for the flaming sword still guards the forbidden gate, but do not overmuch mistrust, for the longing she inspires is not all vain, since the Kingdom of God is within us. At the end of the play, Lâla is to utter in dim oracle the gist of all that Claudel has to say of woman throughout his drama, what is, here below, the business of her allurements:

I am the promise not to be fulfilled,
To this is all my graciousness distilled.

Meanwhile, Miser's men destroy the Town: Lambert sinks among the tombs, Isidore is killed by the rioters; Cœuvre vanishes into a mysterious refuge, taking with him a sapphire, the gift of *de Besme* before he died. The rest set up the well-tempered commonwealth preached by Lâla. Fifteen years of tearing and rending ensue. Peace of exhaustion amid ruins, and once more Spring is here. The conquerors gather round Miser to offer him the kingdom since they have seen for themselves that one man and one alone can make or keep an Ordered State. He refuses and departs, for all he prizes is liberty, and this he claims as guerdon for shattering the taskmaster's yoke about their necks. But before he goes he appoints to succeed him Ivor, son of Cœuvre and Lâla. Ivor ponders how to use the sovereign power: The Prince cannot think to compass the happiness of the community, for that is not man's portion here; neither can he govern for his own self, since the Prince is not an end but a means—what then is the aim of social man? *Golden Head* had failed to answer, but from the outset of this play it is the main question. To Ivor, perplexed and pondering, enters Cœuvre his father, in pontifical array with a train of clerics. During his long retirement he had been meditating on the last words of *de Besme*, his will and testament:

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I say that all things doth nothingness underlie
Baffling the mind's whole grasp, and that is why
Well-school'd to elemental forces' play
Contact I plann'd to take the place of knowing
And so to find how Being sets things going,
Aye, how to trap it even so.

Here is the dilemma: Since the basis of reality eludes our mind's grasp, what shall we call it? The void in which our thought is lost to sight, nothingness (as Besme says) and the sum of all things Maya, phantasmagoria, born of us and nothingness like us; or the sole essential Being, self-subsistent, the basis of our existence and that of the universal scheme? If we adopt the second alternative, we are saved from Death, no external riot shall mask the underlying order, and the universe, ourselves included, shall seem a complete mode of not being That which Is, and in this Single Being which upholds it, it finds that unity and concord to which the poet erstwhile could not refuse either his ear or his voice. For we are not free and independent voters between Being and Not-Being; the deepest need of our nature, the soul-cry that cannot be stifled, the question incessantly arising, by main force drives us on to the worship of God. Doubtless we do not see Him, but we cannot help feeling Him, or tasting, as it were. It made Cœuvre a Christian, then a Bishop—to the sapphire of Isidore he joins the amethyst. As there could not be a world at all if there were no God keeping things together and drawing them to consummation, neither can there be a veritable City without a central shrine for prayer and worship. So in a blaze of intellectual light Cœuvre intones the Credo of the Councils. Claudel's conversion began in 1883; *Golden Head* was written in 1889 a year before his public profession, and *The Town* in 1890 forms the solemn proclamation of his conversion. It carries on the first drama and completes it on a higher plane. This is worth noting, as in all Claudel's great plays there is a spiritual sequence of the Higher Logic.

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