

## BLACKFRIARS

### CLAUDEL, DRAMATIST<sup>1</sup>

#### I. "Golden Head"

JACQUES RIVIERE, one of Claudel's converts, writes:

It is no good thinking that one can bring to Claudel a frigid admiration! It is not our taste he thinks to please, he demands our soul so that he can offer it to God. He wants to force our innermost consent, to drag us in our own despite from doubt and dilettantism. His presentment of the world is so dense, his explanation so forceful, so practically convincing, that to reject it is to be self-condemned to seek comfort in the void.

The French have the dramatic instinct better developed than the rest of us, to judge by their power of staging things. Lourdes from day to day is a good instance of the ease which only instinct can give in the setting out of thought or prayer in action. The French also work harder at the things of the mind, and their literature is central, that is, they can get all the thrills they want at home, and when they desire to add to their store, they assimilate the great things from abroad, and leave the trivial. Their *Ecoles moyennes* study Milton better than ours. They as a nation know much more about Dante than the English, whose national comprehension has been increased, for good or ill, by Doré's illustrations.

Claudel is such a giant among Frenchmen that few of his fellow-countrymen, by comparison, can rise to the full height of him. Not even the Académie Française. Nearly all confess to being out of their depth in his work. Jacques Madaule, a life-long friend and student, is a very competent and entertaining guide in this vast realm of French Literature. Vast, because Claudel in fifty years has done so many different things that his Bibliography alone in *Vie Intellectuelle* runs well into a fifth century, and many small works and essays have appeared since that number of the periodical. He has dramatized from Confession to the Martyrdom of Tarcisus, and Dutch Landscape is glorified by his vision,

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Drame de Paul Claudel*, by Jacques Madaule (Desclée de Brouwer; 18 frs.).

whether it be on canvas or waterlogged or breezy, or in a town, or even in a show-case of Delft ware, glass, or carving. And all the time he has read Scripture, the Fathers, the *Divine Comedy*, Coventry Patmore, Francis Thompson, *que sais-je?* Beautiful versions of Patmore, elegant and accurate, and a translation of Francis Thomson's *Corymbus for Autumn*. Nothing too hot nor too heavy for such a dedicated mind.

But more than anything he is a dramatist, who writes even for a stage and an audience that is yet to come when education educates and the wealthy cease to be illiterate. The reactions of Eternity and Eternal interests on Time, of Spirit upon Matter, of Sense upon Conscience, of the Guardian Angel upon the human soul, of Prayer upon a tangled skein, these are his matter.

He works centrifugally, from a kernel to a wide circumference, some quite important pieces being written twice or thrice over, some written oftener than they have been produced. Invent descriptions for his dramatic work—Advanced Spiritual Reading, Mysteries, Moralities with a difference, Amusement for the Incurably Serious—the same will apply to nearly all he has written, and each book or article or essay could bear the Benedictine device, I.O.G.D.

All that can be done inside one article is a *catalogue raisonné* of his dramas.

*Tête d'Or* or Golden Head, first published anonymously, was written in French in 1889, and re-written in 1894-5 at New York and Boston. In some lights the central figure is God Himself, disguised. In another light, Golden Head connotes Feet of Clay. The immortal must die. What does he think about it? In the first part Simon Agnel intert the beloved wife, and Simon, enormously vital, rebels against the common lot. His helplessness to save a life he loved more than his own leaves him prostrate. Then he meets Cébès, a man some years his junior.

Cébès, too, suffers from the thought of death, but not as fighting the thought, rather as defeated by it. What is the use of living? We know we were not made to die. Simon scorns the thought of death and binds himself to Cébès by a great

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oath. His blood drips on to the head of the younger man and the strong man allies himself to the weak.

The second part shows a great Empire menaced by a sea of savages. Death is in the palace, the Emperor rends his garments, Beauty, the Princess Imperial, cannot stifle their wailing. But Simon shakes out his golden hair and takes command of their armies. Three days' march away from the Imperial City he gives battle. A messenger proclaims Victory, and to the sound of trumpets and of guns Simon returns in glory to find Cébès dying. But Cébès has caught from Simon the scorn of death, and under the black cloud the setting sun pierces with the dazzling certainty of the essential Existence the ocean of being to which the failing Cébès is gathered in.

O Golden Head! All pain is over! Broken the net  
and I am free! The grass is torn from ground!

The joy is in the final hour and that same joy  
am I, the secret hid for evermore.

O Golden Head, lo! I am thine, into thy hands  
I give me, so hold me while thou hast me!

But Golden Head breaks up again, his heart is stone, for wife and friend alike have slipped from him, he will stand up alone and go on with the mighty enterprise. Drunken with despair he demands the crown and becomes King of Men. What does he promise his subjects? Not peace nor ease, but escape from bonds of dullness. Like one man they rally to do feats unheard before. All mankind now shall rise to the call, throw off the ancient curse and conquer all the earth, recovering Eden. Like the old story of Prometheus. (Claudel was just then reading Aeschylus.)

All Europe is conquered and the victorious host has crossed the Caucasus, and now a supreme battle waits it, all Asia like the sands of the sea is embattled at the foot of the mountains. Again the victory is to Golden Head, but he is stricken to death. Before he could free his people, his mate had to die in his arms; before he could be King, his bosom friend had to die; and now, for his victory over the rest of mankind, he must die himself.

The agony of Golden Head takes up more than half of the

Third Part, yet does not seem long-drawn, since for him death is the end of all. He first declares the vanity of all things: he has wrestled with nothingness, and now nothingness is engulfing him. His outcry, his shattering rages, his blood streaming down the slope, all attest his impotence, as of those proud ones in the Bible overthrown without ado because they leant not on the Holy Strong One of Israel. But the whole bitter meaning for Simon Agnel is that, knowing what to expect, he dared it. He had to obey the imperious behest that ordered him to live and to do. Man cannot shirk this dilemma: either go down to the level of the brute and perform certain feats without looking to their aim, their place in the scheme of things, or keep man's dignity and do what nature lays down to be done, but only to end in the nothingness whence we came. Unto dust thou shalt return, O dying conqueror!

But the poet will not have his hero perish in despair. After the retreating army has left him alone, he hears a faint moan behind him. The Princess, the Emperor's daughter, who erstwhile was Beauty personified, is nailed by the hands to a great tree. Golden Head sets her free, and with her mangled hands she lays him on his death-bed. They gaze in each other's eyes, and love is what they see. The two halves of human nature are become one on the brink of the tomb: Beauty of Woman abused, scorned, trampled; Strength of Man all broken and at the last gasp. Two splendid wrecks to show up our double impotence. The heiress of the ancient State and the founder of the new, whelmed in common ruin. So it is not true, as Golden Head believes, that all is cancelled with the melting of this muddy vesture of decay. Love lives, it gave strength to a man half-dead to rescue another from peril, it gives the woman strength to bear in bleeding hands his all but lifeless frame. So in her arms he dies, remembering his consort loved of old, and Cébès' arms, and those of his invincible legions. Despair is dumb, and in the silence wakes the same sweet sound that Cébès gave out dying at the dawn. Golden Head breathes his last as the sun sets in blood-red grandeur. He willed the Princess to reign in his stead, but she will sink under the imperial robes, and the

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conquering army will bear back to its own land a light little corpse for all its fruit of victory.

Without translating at large it is impossible to convey the *atmosphere* in which these tragic endings are brought home to the audience. Only those who know their Claudel can guess how he surpasses all in power of conveying tension, pause, and *systole* in stage-craft.

JOHN O'CONNOR.

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## WORSHIP

“WE went on up the narrow strait, thus anxiously. On this side lay Scylla . . . on that Charybdis.”<sup>1</sup> In the *Odyssey* of every Christian there are times and places when the words of Homer strike home. Worship and personal prayer are essential to him as motive forces directing his journey “up the narrow strait”; and in his living experience both are beset by the two monsters that lie within bow-shot of his anxious passage, routine and pietism. The one springs from misapprehending the rôle of corporate worship, the other from over-absorption in individual devotion. As there is little steerage way there must always be sufficient impetus to keep the frail craft moving straight ahead, responsive to every touch of the helmsman. Individual temperament will give an inclination to one side or the other: the scrupulous towards self-absorption and the easy-going to mechanical routine.

The same difficulty holds good in some degree for group worship with its tendency to divagate towards high-and-dry formalism or towards an unstable revivalism. Each extreme marks the over-emphasis of one of the two essential coordinates of worship, a disciplined cultus and personal responsiveness. In the history of the Church the scales have moved successively up and down without irrevocably destroying the careful balance, though the individualist side has tended to be outweighed, since corporate devotion has a

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<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey*, Book XII, T. E. Lawrence's translation.