

**THE
EAST I KNOW**

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The East I Know by Paul Claudel & Teresa Frances & William Rose Benét

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PAUL CLAUDEL & TERESA FRANCES & WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE EAST I KNOW

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BY
PAUL CLAUDEL

LIBRARY OF
CALIFORNIA

"Look East, where whole new thousands are!"

BROWNING

TRANSLATED BY
TERESA FRANCES
AND
WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT



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PAUL CLAUDEL

BY PIERRE CHAVANNES

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courtesy of the Editor*

CLAUDEL worked for more than twenty years in silence in an almost complete obscurity. Nobody ever mentioned him save a few very independent artists — Mirbeau, Barrès, Schwob, Gide, Jammes, Mauclair — who talked about him amongst themselves and sometimes even dared to speak about him in public, without awakening an echo.

Moreover, Claudel was usually far from France, Consul in various towns of the Far East; he published his earlier works anonymously, lest their Catholic character should damage his career, and for a long time his work was only to be seen in the small literary reviews and in special editions, of which a very small number of copies were printed; and he never attempted to advertise himself. But in time he was saddened by this great solitude. "One grows tired," he wrote, "of speaking, as it were, in impenetrable cotton-wool."

These latter days Claudel's glory, which had so long been obscured, has suddenly blazed forth, if not to the great public, at least to the public which reads and is interested in literature. The *Théâtre de l'Œuvre* has played one of his dramas — *L'Annonce faite à Marie*; the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* is about to play another — *L'Échange*. The ordinary newspaper critics have begun talking about Claudel; gen-

PAUL CLAUDEL

erally speaking, they refer to him with admiration, often with astonishment and that kind of reserve which marks men who are not sure that they understand, and, fearing that they are deceiving themselves, do not wish completely to commit themselves. But in many young reviews admiration is carried to a pitch of enthusiasm and almost of worship; and to-day writers who are by no means young rank Claudel with the small company of the very great: Æschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe.

Reading Claudel, one can understand this long silence, this admiration, and also this reserve. Claudel is not an easy poet: when one penetrates his work one is transported as though into a foreign country. He has a speech peculiar to himself; he has invented a form which is neither prose, nor regular verse, nor ordinary vers libre; his work, created by a solitary man, is not bound up with our troubles and our daily life; to love Claudel one must be initiated.

He is a poet, in itself a thing rare in our time; but he is also, and some would say primarily, a thinker. He has brought his dramatic work together under the general title of *L'Arbre*, just as Balzac assembled his immense work under the title of *La Comédie Humaine*. By this title Claudel wants to indicate that his work has the sort of natural profound living unity of the tree, which thrusts its roots deep into the nourishing earth, and draws from it the sap which rises in the branches to feed the remotest sunlit boughs. Each of his dramas also is a drama of thought; they raise the greatest problems and often suggest solutions. *Tête d'Or* is the chief, the commander of men, the conqueror, who is driven to great deeds by an immense desire — as it were, a

PAUL CLAUDEL,

predestination. The weak, whom Cébès symbolizes, the people, give themselves to him; he carries them in his train until the day when, undertaking an enterprise beyond mortal strength, he loses his power and dies a new Prometheus on a high mountain. *La Ville* presents contemporary society and the struggles that rend it, and the great attitudes of the spirit confronting life: *Isidore de Besme*, the engineer, the savant, is the realist, who has a knowledge of natural forces and uses them to satisfy the needs of men. He dominates the town, but he is unaware of the mystic quality of things; he wrongly estimates the soul, and his science leads only to death. *Lambert* is the man who seeks the end of life in the play of ideas and the love of woman. *Cœuvre*, finally, is the poet who enters the inmost shrine of truth by intuition and love, but is condemned to solitude by that knowledge. *Le Repos du Septième Jour* is an ideologic drama: a Chinese Emperor goes down into hell, and the roots of the moral world are laid bare in a Dantesque vision, a kind of summary of good and evil. *L'Échange* and *La Jeune Fille Violaine* are dramas of sentiment. In *L'Échange* four characters are set against the brutal, realistic, material background of America. There is *Louis Laine*, an adventurous, but feeble, person who had stifled in the too rigid enclosure of the old European society; there is his wife, the gentle *Marthe*, the wife faithful through everything, who keeps close in her heart the traditional virtues of the old Christian world; there is *Lechy*, the violent woman who is the incarnation of disorder, and spreads it around her and death with it; and there is *Sir Pollock*, the man of affairs, who only lives for gold, convinced that anything can be bought