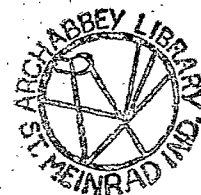


Woman as Co-Redemptress in the Theater of  
Paul Claudel as Exemplified by Violaine  
in L'Annonce Faite à Marie

A Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty  
Of Saint Meinrad College of Liberal Arts  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May, 1980  
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## INTRODUCTION

Paul Claudel is considered one of the major authors of France by all literary critics. If literature is a viable means for understanding a culture, and indeed it is, then the thought of Paul Claudel, as a major French author, is an important indication of modern French sentiment. A previous study interested us in Claudel's work, L'Annonce Faite à Marie, and in particular in a character within this drama, Violaine.

Because Violaine exemplifies what seems to be a major trend in the thought of Paul Claudel, we propose that a textual study of this drama will lead to an understanding of Paul Claudel's conception of the role of woman in the economy of salvation. From this study not only are Claudel's ideas revealed; one can also gain an understanding of one aspect of that mélange which is modern French civilization.

Assuming that most readers are well acquainted with the basic facts of Claudel's long career, chapter one presents a very brief biography containing elements pertinent to this study. There follows a short resume of the literary forces that influenced him, in particular the Symbolist Movement of the nineteenth century. Chapter one emphasizes Claudel's peasant heritage because of the major role this heritage plays as a setting both geographical and emotional for the play. Finally, in order to understand Claudel's unique approach to poetry, there is a short examination of his poetic theory.

Chapter two begins the actual textual study of L'Annonce Faite à Marie. Included within this chapter is a brief review of the drama, a character

analysis of the three principal characters, Mara, Violaine, and Jacques Hury, and a look at the indispensable roles of Pierre de Craon, Anne Vercors and Elizabeth. There follows an examination of the underlying themes of the play which support the main theme, namely, woman as co-redemptress. The chapter examines in some detail Claudel's use of symbols, such as the names chosen for the characters, the uses of the church year as an evocative setting, the use of symbols that appeal to the ear, and others.

The third chapter focuses on Violaine as a means of entrée into the thought of Paul Claudel. The chapter begins with an examination of the evolution of this character (Violaine) through the different versions of the drama. Finally, a textual study of the development of Violaine's role in the play is presented.

From this study and from the studies of notable critics, certain conclusions concerning the significance of the role of Violaine are justified.

## CHAPTER I

A brief review of some of the biographical data of Paul Claudel's early life will help to elucidate the evolution of his career as a poet and dramatist.

Paul Claudel was born on August 6, 1868, in a remote agricultural village, Villeneuve-sur-Fère, located about sixty miles northwest of Paris. He was the last of four children, he had two sisters and one brother who died soon after birth. Claudel's father, Louis-Prosper, was a tax collector and his mother, Louise, was the daughter of a physician and niece of the village priest. Although his family was middle class, Claudel considered himself a "peasant by environment." His village was so isolated that the nearest train station was four miles away. This "peasantry by environment" so impregnated Claudel's view of the people and the land that it later became the matrix from which he drew the setting for his most important and successful play, L'Annonce Faite à Marie. It was from this fecund source that he also discovered many of the themes developed in the play.

Claudel's description of Villeneuve in Contacts et Circonstances shows to what extent this environment moved him:<sup>1</sup>

Villeneuve est un rude et austère pays, un pays de gros labours et de forêts . . . Il y pleut beaucoup, et quand il y pleut, c'est durement, violemment, et j'allais presque dire passionnément. Il y fait un vent terrible et qui fait tourner sans arrêt le coq du clocher grincer la girouette de notre modestes logis . . . Tout cela s'incrimait dans ma mémoire en traits profonds. Et il y avait aussi les explorations personnelles que je dirigeais du côté de l'horizon, car Villeneuve, bâti sur une espèce de promontoire, jouit de quatre horizons; tous aussi peuplés pour moi, aussi riches de suggestions et de légendes que ceux de l'Edda.<sup>2</sup>

In 1882, Mme Claudel moved with the children to Paris so that the eldest daughter could study sculpture formally and Paul could pursue his studies in Parisian institutions. Prior to this move, in 1881, Claudel's grandfather, Athanase Cerveaux, died. Young Paul witnessed a slow and painful death that threw him into a desperate panic. His education did little to mitigate this desperation. The failure to pass his first baccalaureate examination and the "bleak and harsh" intellectual climate of Paris only encouraged his despair.<sup>3</sup>

Not until the end of spring in 1886 did Claudel's trend toward disillusionment begin to change. This resulted from a new influence in his life, that of Arthur Rimbaud. According to Claudel's own words, Rimbaud's Les Illuminations affected him like "a spiritual thunderbolt and shook him to the core."<sup>4</sup> For the first time, Claudel was able to crack open the materialistic prison into which he had fallen. It was at this time that Claudel started drifting from one church to another, not as a seeker of God, but perhaps out of some nostalgia for his past. In any case, he attended vespers on Christmas Eve of that year (1886) at Notre-Dame-de-Paris. Claudel relates how, standing by the second pillar on the right side of the sacristy, he was moved deeply by the psalms and particularly by the canticle, the Magnificat. He recalls vividly this experience in Ma Conversion:

Et c'est alors que se produisit l'événement qui domine toute ma vie. En un instant mon coeur fut touché et je crus. Je crus, d'une telle force d'adhésion, d'un tel soulèvement de tout mon être, d'une conviction si puissante, d'une telle certitude ne laissant place à aucune espèce de doute, que, depuis, tous les livres, tous les raisonnements, tous les hasards d'une vie agitée, n'ont pu ébranler ma foi, ni, à vrai dire, la toucher. J'avais su tout à coup le sentiment déchirant de l'innocence, l'éternelle enfance de Dieu, une révélation ineffable.<sup>5</sup>

From that night at Notre-Dame on, the Bible became Claudel's constant

companion. Four years elapsed, however--four years to the day (Christmas, 1890)--before he officially returned to the church of his childhood and again received the eucharist.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Jacques Maritain in his Notes on Modern Poetry best explained this event when he wrote that a poet, after seeking refuge in his own spirit which leads to "nothingness" must return to religion and God.<sup>7</sup>

As a student and young writer, Paul Claudel was deeply influenced by symbolism. In fact, the critics point out that two of his plays, Tête d'Or and La Ville are good examples of symbolist theater. Although he would later mature into one of the leaders of the "Renouveau Catholique," the influence of the Symbolists and the Symbolist Movement was always to dominate his work.

While from the Middle Ages to the present generation of writers symbolism in its broadest connotation has been an accepted literary device as well as a force in French literature, Symbolism as both a broad current of poetic idealism and a literary school or movement became a prominent influence in French literature in the second half of the 19th century. Both groups shared common aspirations about the poetic ideal and similar views about the technique of poetry. However, it is interesting to note that the greatest symbolist poets in the true sense of the term from Nerval to Mallarmé, lived and wrote before the official establishing of the Symbolist School. Like the Romantic Movement before it and "Le Renouveau Catholique" which to some degree flowed out of the broad current of symbolist thought, a quest for the absolute permeated efforts of these writers.<sup>8</sup>

The Symbolist Movement in literature could trace its roots back as far as Plato, but for our purposes a brief mention of the contributions of three immediate precursors suffices. Although most poets in the wake of Victor

Hugo, either consciously or unconsciously must have been influenced by his dictum: "La poésie, c'est tout ce qu'il y a d'intime dans tout," affirming the existence of an ideal world hidden beneath the real world,<sup>9</sup> certainly one of the most influential initiators of the nineteenth century symbolism is the poet, Charles Baudelaire (Les Fleurs du Mal, 1857), whose poetic and mystical theory of "correspondance" is a discernible influence on Paul Claudel's own interpretation of nature and matter.

Historically, Arthur Rimbaud's influence on subsequent poetic development is inestimable. He made major contributions toward the fundamental doctrines of the Symbolist Movement through his emphasis on the "surréel" aspect of symbolism, and by seeking to create a language "accessible à tous les sens."<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, his personal discovery of Rimbaud was a turning point in the life and thought of Paul Claudel, as he himself attested.

The third important influence on nineteenth-century Symbolism was Mallarmé. Although he shunned participation in any school and therefore was never officially a member of the Symbolist School, he is considered by the majority of literary historians the real leader of the Symbolist Movement. His exalted conception of the "idéal", his total devotion to the "sacerdoce poétique" along with his own exceptional poetic gifts make him the greatest and purest of the symbolists.<sup>11</sup>

After his return to Rome in 1874, Mallarmé resided on the Rue de Rome, and from 1880 on he began to receive at his famous "mardis" an increasing number of friends and disciples.<sup>12</sup> For a time, Paul Claudel frequently numbered among these Tuesday visitors and evidently imbibed much from the animated discussions, much that he was to filter through his own personality and perceptions of the universe, later to forge it into his own particular



poetic stance.

To place Claudel correctly vis-a-vis Symbolism, it is important to distinguish between the broad current of symbolism in which Claudel belongs, and the somewhat esoteric school itself existing between 1885 and 1900, which eventually frittered away into ephemeral and decadent groups.<sup>13</sup>

The Symbolist ideal was an attempt to express the sense of mystery that surrounds us, an effort to express the very soul of things, their essence or ultimate reality. To achieve this, they felt that poetry should not be descriptive but rather an attempt to reach beyond appearances by the use of symbols, and should be linked to a philosophy of the unknowable and to the subconscious. Poetry should suggest through fluid, musical verse (vers-libre), not limited by set forms. This ideal was in direct contrast to the Parnassian ideal of "art for art's sake" and to the philosophy of Positivism as well as to the literary movement of Realism.

Le symbolisme repose sur le sens du mystère: le mystère règne en nous et autour de nous, il est l'essence même de la réalité. Ainsi la poésie ne saurait être descriptive; pour atteindre l'âme des choses, au-delà des apparences, elle usera du symbole, elle se fera suggestive, fluide, musicale et incantatoire. Elle sera liée à une philosophie de l'inconnaissable et du subconscient: c'est le rêve de chaque poète qui s'exprimera dans son oeuvre. On est à l'opposé de la conception parnassienne, du positivisme et du réalisme.<sup>14</sup>

The Symbolists stressed the necessity of indirect communication in order to capture the hidden reality of things. Philippe Van Tieghem explains indirect communication in this way: "La poésie doit donc n'être ni descriptive ni narrative, mais suggestive. Parler en poète, c'est 'se contenter de faire une allusion' aux choses 'ou de distraire leur qualité qui incorporera quelque idée'."<sup>15</sup>

Of all the media available for Symbolist expression, drama seems to have been the most appropriate. In the theater the Symbolist movement had

its greatest success. The influence of the "Symbolist Theater" is still present today, for on the stage symbolism flowered. Symbols, on the stage, became three dimensional; the ambiguity of symbolism could replace lengthy attempts to answer the essential questions of life; in drama, "the defaults of the symbol, which were represented in the writing of poetry by the white sheet of paper, would appear so much more effectively in vocal silences and verbal interruptions."<sup>16</sup> Although Claudel's theater employs the basic techniques of the symbolists, his work is too vast to be restrained within a single narrow literary movement.

From the beginning of his writing career Claudel showed himself to be a poet on a grand scale. His writings show that his view of life and the world were without intellectual sophistication. As stated earlier, Arthur Rimbaud exerted a great deal of influence on Claudel. He gave Claudel his first glimmer of truth and was, in fact, the germ of his inspiration and technique. Both writers bring the reader to a medieval oneness, this oneness "accepts the indissoluble relationship between subject and object and places knowledge at the point where they become one in a language which then acquires an ontological force transcending time."<sup>17</sup> Claudel later wrote, a poet is not a person who invents but one who "consolidates" for others to understand.<sup>18</sup>

Claudel believed that the poet should try to capture all--in fact--the universe. Rules of diction or regular verse did not inhibit him. He believed in inspiration from God and his goal was to express the ideas he had come to understand. His expression of personal revelation could not stand the impediment of poetic law. Claudel, in accordance with symbolist thought, is not really concerned with careful description but rather with revelation and the process of revelation.<sup>19</sup>

How is the poet to transpose a world of material objects and beings into a poetic world? According to Louis Barjon, Claudel attempts to accomplish this using four devices; "les mots, le rythme, les images et les symbols," and "l'appel de l'univers."<sup>20</sup>

The "word" is the key to Claudel's attempt to make the universe known. Through his poetry and the verse of his dramatic characters he expresses his revelation. In a sense, Claudel feels akin to Adam in paradise, for he too is called upon by God to name the creatures that fill the earth and heavens. It is in the naming that these creatures gain identity. For Claudel, this is both the privilege and the duty of the poet, "C'est en nommant tout être par son nom qu'il incorpore tous les éléments de la nature dans cet univers merveilleux créé par lui à l'image du monde visible."<sup>21</sup>

One must remember, however, that the world is not a museum in which all stands still waiting to be named. The world, of course, is alive, pulsing with force and counter-force. It is precisely this "shivering" of life, the very movement of things, lives and events that the poet must capture and translate. This is the rhythm that is found in the cadence of claudelian language. "Le verset claudélien" is Claudel's method of conveying the movement that is inherent in nature itself. In reality, these "versets" of Claudel's are neither verse nor prose; he described them as "alinéas" or "proses suprêmes".<sup>22</sup> He uses the examples of the natural rhythm of the sea and the rhythm of respiration to help make this concept understandable. It is now clear that "le verset claudélien" is not confined to any traditional poetic line but seeks its own rhythm and language.<sup>23</sup>

One encounters in Claudel's writing, through his use of subtle and

complex symbols, a universal expression.<sup>24</sup> That is, Claudel draws an affinity between all things by his use of material symbols to represent beings, ideas, qualities or conditions.<sup>25</sup> Although this is the cause of Claudel's apparent obscurity it is also the source of his undeniable richness. Through his use of symbols and images Claudel conquers the world and unravels for us the infinite variety of creatures.<sup>26</sup>

Claudel's inspiration stemmed from what he believed was a call from the universe (*l'appel de l'univers*). He considered that as a poet the universe sought him out to recall a unity that has been lost (*nostalgie de l'unité perdue*). Claudel uses water to express this "*esprit à tout rejoindre*", for he viewed water as thousands of drops joined together. He believed that the universe could unite in this manner; this certainly influenced his writing.<sup>27</sup>

Claudel's early life was rooted in the soil. This peasant influence was a source of his later conversion and contributed to his poetic theories and inspirations.

## FOOTNOTES

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3. Louis Chaigne, Paul Claudel: The Man and the Mystic, pp. 35-44.
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7. Anna Balakain, The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal, p. 168.
8. André Lagarde, Laurent Michard, XIX Siecle, Les Grandes Auteurs Français du Programme, p. 539.
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18. Chiari, p. 149.
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21. Barjon, p. 38.
22. Barjon, p. 38.
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## CHAPTER II

To the casual reader, L'Annonce Faite à Marie may appear to be an unsophisticated piece of work. This is not only a deception but also a tribute to the writing skill of Paul Claudel. Through closer study, the reader notices the symmetry and unity of the Prologue and the four acts of the drama. Act I occurs during the same morning as the Prologue; Act II takes place only two weeks later.

There is a seven-year break between the action of Acts II and III, while Act IV is separated from the third by only a short time. These lapses of time between the acts of L'Annonce Faite à Marie are certainly necessary if the action of the drama is to be believed. The extent of physical damage to Violaine from her leprosy in the beginning of Act III is an example. The genius of Claudel is such that, although the duration of time is necessary for each act's credibility, it in no way disturbs the flow of the play. In fact, because of the naturalness of the time lapses, they are hardly noticed by the reader or viewer.

Further study reveals the beauty of the chronology and the orderliness of the events of each act. The Prologue establishes the basis for the plot. There, Violaine, the favored daughter of Anne Vercors, says goodbye to Pierre de Craon, an architect of cathedrals. Although Craon had earlier tried to abuse her, Violaine is filled with compassion upon learning that he has contracted leprosy. Secretly observed by the spying eye of her sister Mara, Violaine gives Craon a farewell kiss.

In Act I, which occurs only a few hours after the Prologue, Anne Vercors announces to his wife, Elizabeth, that Violaine is to marry Jacques Hury, a foreman on the estate. Anne Vercors considers Jacques Hury as a son. Vercors also announces that he is to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in order to pray for France and the Church. He leaves that very morning.

In the second act, Mara, who is also in love with Jacques Hury and jealous of his affections for her sister, Violaine, tells Jacques Hury of the kiss that Violaine had given to Pierre de Craon. Soon after, Violaine and Hury exchange vows of love and loyalty to each other before the fountain of Adoue. Violaine however then reveals to Hury that she is tainted with leprosy. He views this as proof of the insinuations of Mara, and violently reproaches Violaine. Later, upon her request, Hury takes Violaine to the lepers' colony at Géyn.<sup>1</sup>

It is at this point in the play that the seven year lapse takes place, precisely in the middle of the drama. It is interesting to note that, first, the underlying theme of victim and sacrifice is foreshadowed in the Prologue; and second, both Act I and Act II end with scenes of departure. In Act I, Anne Vercors leaves for his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and in Act II, Violaine leaves her home for the lepers' colony at Géyn. With each of these departures, there is a feeling that the separation will be permanent. Elizabeth certainly felt this despair in Act I when she told her husband, "Tu ne me reverras plus!"<sup>2</sup> In the second act, Violaine exclaims to Jacques Hury, "O Jacques, nous ne serons pas mari et femme en ce monde!"<sup>3</sup> And in parting with Mara, Violaine renounces all her belongings saying, "Je te donne mes robes, Mara, et toutes mes affaires!"<sup>4</sup>

In Act III, the peasant workers of Chevoche, who have just completed a road for the King, lead Mara to Violaine, the sound of whose leper's rattle



draws Mara to Violaine's cave. Paradoxically, these same workers who have been feeding Violaine are employed by Pierre de Craon, the cathedral builder who is unaware of Violaine's identity. Upon meeting Violaine, Mara demands that she resuscitate Aubaine, the baby daughter of Mara and Jacques Hury, whom she carries in her arms. As midnight strikes, Violaine and Mara hear the bells which announce the birth of Christ, as it is Christmas Eve. As they recite the prayers of Christmas, Violaine holds the body of Aubaine. As morning breaks, Aubaine stirs; she is alive, only now, she has the blue eyes of Violaine.

In the fourth and final act, Mara, unable to bear the generosity of Violaine, pushes her sister into a sand pit. Just before Jacques Hury, now Mara's husband, discovers the truth, Anne Vercors returns carrying Violaine in his arms. Conscious for a moment, Violaine speaks words of love and peace to each. The play ends as Violaine is reunited with her whole family, save Elizabeth who had died. She has been carried to Cambernon, her beloved home, in the arms of the returning pilgrim, Anne Vercors. He blesses the union of Jacques Hury and Mara at the time of Violaine's death.<sup>5</sup> In Acts III and IV, Claudel reinforces the unity and balance of the play's structure through these complementary scenes of reunion.

Of the six characters, Anne Vercors, Elizabeth, and Jacques Hury typify respectively the patriarchal father, the subservient wife and mother, and the earthbound, spiritually obtuse peasant of the Middle Ages. Although these three characters represent types, their roles are essential, both to carry forward the plot and reveal the symbolic meaning of the play as will be discussed later in some detail. In contrast to the three characters mentioned above, Pierre de Craon, Mara, and Violaine, whose symbolic roles are intricately interwoven, are individuals revealing real psychological density.

In addition to Violaine, whom we will discuss in detail in the third chapter, there are five characters. Pierre de Craon is the first with whom the audience becomes acquainted in the Prologue. There, he and Violaine initiate the plot. Pierre de Craon is a spiritual man, an architect who builds cathedrals as prayers to God. As a guest of Anne Vercors, he is the first to recognize the supernatural nature of Violaine's vocation. In the early morning hours of the Prologue he asks Violaine,

Qui êtes-vous, jeune fille, et quelle est donc cette part que Dieu en vous s'est réservée, Pour que la main qui vous touche avec désir et la chair même soit ainsi Flétrie, comme si elle avait approché le mystère de sa résidence?<sup>6</sup>

Revealing his leprosy, Craon is surprised and touched by the compassion Violaine has for him. As an act of charity Violaine gives him a farewell kiss. The kiss not only relieved Craon of his guilt but of his leprosy as well. It is interesting to note that the character of Pierre de Craon was not in the original Jeune Fille Violaine. The elimination of his return in the fourth act of the final stage version tends to reinforce his prophet-like role.<sup>7</sup>

Jacques Hury, the betrothed of Violaine, is a counterpoint to Pierre de Craon. If Craon is a man of the spiritual realm then Jacques Hury is a man of the temporal world. He is the calloused-handed foreman of Combernon, a man who loves his land and his life. The ring Hury gives to Violaine he found while plowing the earth.<sup>8</sup> He accepts Violaine from Anne Vercors even as he accepts the estate, saying,

Alors je vous prends de par Dieu, et je ne vous lâche plus! Je vous tiens pour de bon, votre main et le bras avec, et tout ce qui vient avec le bras. Parents, votre fille n'est plus à vous! c'est à moi seul!<sup>9</sup>

When Jacques Hury learns of Violaine's leprosy and the kiss given to Pierre de Craon he does not understand the connection. In fact, with his limited,

this-wordly, peasant mentality, he cannot understand and Violaine does not try to explain. In Act IV, as Violaine tries to speak of this world and another, Hury can only answer, "Le bonheur est fini pour moi."<sup>10</sup>

Anne Vercors, as Lord of Combernon, is the most conventional character in L'Annonce Faite à Marie. He is lord of the household and master of his estate. There are many possible sources for this character type in both the Old and New Testaments. The patriarch, Abraham, is just one example.

From the New Testament, the confidence of the centurion in his own authority when he tells Christ, "If I give one man the order, 'Dismissed,' off he goes. If I say to another, 'Come here,' he comes."<sup>11</sup> is echoed by Anne Vercors when he tells Elizabeth, "Je le veux. Jacques épousera Violaine . . . Je pars . . . Cela sera ainsi."<sup>12</sup> Soon after he puts his estate in order, Anne Vercors departs on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem a typical goal of medieval man. His absence, however, is acutely felt by Violaine, as later she moans, "Mon père m'a abandonnée."<sup>13</sup>

La Mère, Elizabeth, is an inconsequential character in the drama. Although her love and affection for her family is apparent, she exerts little influence on either her husband or daughters. This lack of influence seems to typify the status of many women in her situation at that time in history.

As Claudel continued to revise this drama, first titled La Juene Fille Violaine and later L'Annonce Faite à Marie, the importance of the role of Mara grew steadily. In fact, Claudel once said that Act IV is "l'acte de Mara,"<sup>14</sup> for if Pierre de Craon first recognized Violaine's saintly nature, it was Mara who revealed it. In Mara, Claudel saw the element of violence contained in the passage from the Gospel. "From John the Baptizer's time until now the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and the violent take it

by force" (Matthew 11:12).<sup>15</sup>

With the relationship between the two sisters, Claudel effectively polarizes two aspects of nature: good and evil, spiritual and carnal. From the day of her birth, Mara, whose name signifies bitterness, was a disappointment to her father, who desired a son.<sup>16</sup> Both parents have nothing but hard words for Mara, the black.<sup>17</sup> In Act I, Elizabeth warns Mara that she will not urge Violaine to act as Mara wishes but, "Au contraire! Je répéterai seulement ce que tu as dit. Bien sûr. Qu'elle ne sera pas assez sotte que de te céder, si elle me croit."<sup>18</sup> The final words Anne Vercors has for Mara before he leaves for his pilgrimage to Jerusalem are: "Sois bonne."<sup>19</sup>

Claudel asserts further, however, that the relationship of the two sisters is indissoluble and necessary. Certainly, Violaine recognized the import of their relationship when she said to her father at the end of the fourth act,

Et Mara, elle m'aime! Elle seul, c'est elle seule qui a foi en moi! Mara! Ah comme elle a bien obéi, ah comme elle a bien fait tout ce qu'elle avait a faire!<sup>20</sup>

With his assertion of the sisters' need, one for the other, Claudel illumines the need good has for bad and spiritual for material. The persistence of Mara forces Violaine to reveal her spiritual gift. The darkness of Mara tends to intensify the light of Violaine, perhaps as Judas intensified Christ's. Had Mara not forced the miracle on Christmas eve, Violaine, and her gifts, would have died, ungiven. Taken a step further, it can be said that Mara's "evil" is part of Violaine's "greater good" and as such she too is an implement of God's will.<sup>21</sup> And it is Mara's faith that is satisfied with the miracle, albeit mediated through the mystical power of Violaine.

It took Claudel fifty-six years and four consecutive versions to write

the play, L'Annonce Faite à Marie as it now exists. The length of time it took to write and the number of different versions is indicative of the difficulty Claudel had in presenting his thoughts, thoughts that changed through the years even as the play developed. Hence, L'Annonce is laden with themes aside from the relationship between Violaine and Mara already discussed.

As mentioned before, Claudel was born in the countryside at Villeneuve-sur-Fere. There, he assimilated and learned to appreciate the peasant heritage of France. This pride in his "stock" is evident throughout this drama. It is with affection that Anne Vercors speaks of Combernon, and with pride as he traces his family's possession of the estate back to the time Saint Rémy received the land from G  nevi  ve of Paris.<sup>22</sup> He is quick to point out that it was his family that "converted" Combernon from a "pagan" land, congested with poor trees and self-sown briars" to a "Christian land and exposed it bare and broken to the waters of baptism."<sup>23</sup> For Claudel, Anne Vercors typifies the peasant man, who although faulted, is sincere, simple and reverent toward God and the land.

It is through these words of Anne Vercors that Claudel demonstrates the peasant's recognition of his dependence on God for the harvest and therefore for life itself:

Les autres attendent leur bien des hommes mais nous le recevons  
tout droit du ciel m  me . . . La terre tient au ciel, le corps  
tient    l'esprit, toutes les choses qu'il a cr    es ensemble  
communiquent, toutes    la fois sont n  cessaires l'une    l'autre.<sup>24</sup>

Just as in this play the peasant's radical relationship with the land is a profound symbol of man's dependence on God, so too the peasant's integral connection with the natural rhythms of life, as expressed by the seasons of the year and even by the various hours of the day, are an ever-present theme. For Claudel, the peasant, like no other, experiences the cycle of winter-death and spring-life. With this experience, the peasant

understands the mysterious cycle of physical-spiritual death and rebirth. In this context, the miracle of Aubaine's rebirth takes on added significance. Aubaine (a name that means "Godsend" in French) becomes a paradigm of the peasant's life and not merely a "deus ex machina."

From the beginning of the drama Claudel infuses Combernon with a divine presence which sanctifies time. The author creates this holy atmosphere by situating the monastery of Monsanvierge on the very property of Anne Vercors, emphasizing the responsibility of the owners to sustain the life of these "doves of the Spirit." Claudel reinforces this sacred ambiance through his use of auditory symbols. The monastery bells announce the Incarnation of Christ three times a day by the ringing of the Angelus, the prayer intricately associated with Claudel's title, L'Annonce Faite à Marié. From the Prologue through the first act of the drama, the nuns of Monsanvierge, chanting the canonical hours and singing the seasonal Marian antiphons, permeate the humdrum life of their peasant benefactors with an aura of prayer. This theme provides one of the effective unifying elements in the drama. The dialogue of Pierre de Craon and Violaine in the Prologue is interrupted by the ringing of the Angelus. As the play closes, the last sounds are the final notes of the Angelus. The Angelus is a prayer of particular importance in this drama because it is a prayer that salutes the incarnation of Christ through Mary. We will discuss this aspect of the Angelus further in chapter three. It is with the daily prayers of the family at Combernon, the prayers of the first Christmas Mass, and the Angelus that Claudel gives rhythm to their spiritual life and ensures the presence of divine realities in their earthly existence.<sup>25</sup>

The hour and season in which the action of this drama takes place is always significant. The plot commences, in the Prologue during the early

hours of a spring morning. Later, in the shimmering heat of the July noon-day sun, Violaine reveals her leprosy to Jacques Hury. The most effective use of time and season, however, is the night Claudel chose for the miracle, Christmas eve. Could it be that, not only because it is the night of Christ's birth, but also because of the significance the night holds for Claudel, that he situates the climax of his favorite play at this time? As it is well known, his conversion, his own "rebirth" also occurred on a Christmas eve. The eve in the drama not only draws a correlary between the miracle of Christ's birth and Aubaine's rebirth, but is also reminiscent of Claudel's life. In this manner, Claudel draws from Christmas its most profound meaning; the incarnation of God's promise for rebirth.

The stage direction of the drama emphasizes the importance of the symbol of sound. Claudel sustains his atmosphere throughout the play by a wide variety of auditory symbols. His use of the chants of the nuns creates a holy ambiance and also signals the changing seasons of the year through the use of seasonal liturgical antiphons, the Regina Caeli<sup>26</sup> (Easter), the Salve Regina<sup>27</sup> (the time after Pentecost), and the repeated interpellation of the Angelus<sup>28</sup> for example. His use of bells, trumpets, and bird song vary the atmosphere of the play from lyrical to triumphant, to the final flight of Violaine's soul.

The final means Claudel uses to achieve authenticity in L'Annonce is his extremely adept use of language, both practical and rustic. A classic example is the patois of the worker of Chevoche at the beginning of Act III,<sup>29</sup> "I peut venir à c't'heure. Vous ons binfait not'part."<sup>30</sup>

Claudel has loosely structured L'Annonce Faite à Marie on the model of a Medieval Miracle play. He reinforces the use of symbol and allegory concretely by his choice of names, both for places, and for the characters.

He chooses names of local places to enhance his assertion of the sacredness of the land.

The name Anne, of biblican origin, was in common use for men in Medieval France. Here it ties the patriarchal figure of Anne Vercors to the Old Testament and establishes a link with the mother of Mary. Jacques is a solid peasant name symbolizing since before the revolution "a member of the peasantry." What more suitable name for the "builder of cathedrals" than Pierre (stone). Elizabeth's name harkens the reader back to the biblical story of the Annunciation.

All of these themes support and enhance the "message" of the play, the redemption of God and woman's role in bringing about salvation. This intermingling of natural and divine transforms this drama into a "liturgical play" in which Violaine accepts the sufferings of those around her and leads them to salvation. This role of Violaine is the subject to be examined in chapter three.



FOOTNOTES

1. Jean-Noël Segrestaa, "L'Annonce Faite A Marie: Claudel," Profil D'Une Oeuvre, p. 9.
2. Paul Claudel, "L'Annonce Faite A Marie," in Paul Claudel: Théâtre, Tome II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p. 43.
3. Claudel, p. 53.
4. Claudel, p. 63.
5. Segrestaa, p. 9.
6. Claudel, p. 13.
7. Wallace Fowlie, Two Dramas: Break of Noon: The Tidings Brought to Mary, p. 154.
8. Claudel, p. 19.
9. Claudel, p. 41.
10. Claudel, p. 127.
11. Matthew 8:9, The New American Bible.
12. Claudel, pp. 28, 29.
13. Claudel, p. 52.
14. Segrestaa, p. 59.
15. Fowlie, p. 151.
16. Claudel, p. 27.
17. Claudel, p. 27.
18. Claudel, p. 36.
19. Claudel, p. 43.
20. Claudel, p. 127.
21. Joseph Chiari, The Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel, p. 75.

22. Claudel, p. 38.
23. Fowlie, p. 202.
24. Claudel, p. 39.
25. Noële M. Denis-Boulet, The Christian Calendar, pp. 120-123.
26. Claudel, p. 15.
27. Claudel, p. 44.
28. Claudel, pp. 15, 128.
29. Segrestaa, p. 51.
30. Claudel, p. 64.

### CHAPTER III

The ultimate drama of L'Annonce Faite à Marie is man's quest for salvation, accomplished through the sacrifice of a woman. Claudel realizes that man is redeemable; as a Christian, however, he is acutely aware of man's need for divine help (grace) and even intervention. Claudel situates this play in the Medieval period because, quite simply, divine intervention, which he symbolized graphically by a miracle, was a far more plausible idea in that era. Violaine is the voice for Claudel's message of hope, a message that took fifty-six years and four consecutive versions to perfect. In fact, Claudel considered L'Annonce the "crowning stone" of his career as a dramatist.<sup>1</sup> A brief survey of the development of the role of Violaine in different versions of the drama will reveal a transformation not only in the play but also in the thought of Claudel.

In the first version of La Jeune Fille Violaine, Anne Vercors decides to marry Violaine to Jacquin (Jacques Hury). Violaine, however, realizes that her sister Bibiane (Mara) also loves Jacquin. Although she suffers insult, Violaine, apparently endowed with a taste for sacrifice, decides to refuse Jacquin so that he may marry her sister. Cursed and blinded by Bibiane, Violaine leaves the house.

Later, Bibiane meets Violaine, who has begun to live the life of a saint, and asks for a cure for her blind son Aubin; Violaine restores Aubin's sight. In the final act, Violaine, who has been savagely assaulted by Bibiane, is brought back to die in Jacquin's house.

The final analysis of this first La Jeune Fille Violaine is that it is

neither a drama nor a tragedy, but a "haphazard construction" combining elements of both. Although there is some pathos in the character of Violaine, the play is ultimately "unsatisfactory."<sup>2</sup>

Pierre de Craon is introduced under this name for the first time in the second version of La Jeune Fille Violaine. As the play begins, Craon meets Violaine for the last time. Both recognize within themselves a force that draws them to saintly life. Anne Vercors announces that he is going to America to help the family of his brother and Mara declares that she will kill herself if Violaine and Jacques Hury are wed. Violaine again accepts undeserved sorrows and steps aside in order to allow Mara to marry Jacques. Violaine is then banished from the house by an ungrateful Mara.

Later, Violaine helps Mara "to do good" and in doing so offers us one more proof of God's mysterious will. In the end however, Mara blinds and murders Violaine. The play closes as Violaine is carried home in the arms of Pierre de Craon.

This is a Christian tragedy, which critics considered a far better play than the first version. With the introduction of the more clearly defined character of Pierre de Craon we become aware from the beginning that there is a force beyond Violaine that shapes her destiny.<sup>3</sup> With the second version of the drama, there is a progression from a Violaine who is good to a Violaine more concerned with God's will, and perhaps, divinely inspired. In both cases, Violaine's goodness is offset by the aspect of violence depicted in Mara which seems to play an important role in Claudel's theory of salvation.

In the third attempt at this drama, the first to be titled L'Annonce Faite à Marie, the role of Violaine becomes even more prominent. Through Mary-like virtue, Violaine rises above goodness to a higher order of holi-

ness. In this version of the drama, Violaine truly becomes an instrument of God's will, capable even of bringing a dead baby back to life. In a sense, the Violaine of L'Annonce becomes an incarnation, or perhaps a means for an incarnation of God's promise of rebirth and salvation.

Although there is little change in the final stage play from the third version, only a rewriting of the fourth act, it is important to note that Claudel felt compelled to make this revision. In fact, it was not until 1948 that this final version was written. One could say that L'Annonce Faite à Marie was literally Claudel's life work. Over the long period of time devoted to revising, even rethinking this drama, the character of Violaine developed. In the first two versions the role was an abstract symbol. With each revision, however, Violaine gained more passion and compassion; in a word, Violaine became human. In its final version Claudel reveals his concept of redemption for man, in particular through the complex character of Violaine, the role of woman in bringing about that redemption. It seems that this concept of salvation, vaguely conceived with the first Violaine grew through the four versions of the drama, finally to flower in all its depth and complexity in the final Violaine, perhaps even as Claudel as Christian matured. This seems to be the compelling reason for the many versions of this play Claudel was to write.

The author's title, L'Annonce Faite à Marie, alerts the reader to be aware of the parallel he draws between Violaine and Mary, the mother of Jesus. With her acceptance of sorrow and rejection in the drama, Violaine is a Marian figure and as such, an example of the holy woman.<sup>4</sup>

In effect, a scene similar to that of the Marian Annunciation occurs in the Prologue. There, Pierre de Craon, as a Gabrielian figure, forecasts, through somewhat ritualized language, the salvific nature of Violaine's

future when he tells her,<sup>5</sup> "Ce n'est point à la pierre de choisir sa place mais au Maître de l'Oeuvre qui la choisie."<sup>6</sup> Here we realize, even as Pierre de Craon realizes, that Violaine is of a higher order, in fact, "l'oeuvre d'un autre."<sup>7</sup> The exceptional point is, however, that Violaine herself does not seek this status nor is she aware of it and its consequences. She, in fact, in obvious youthful jubilation, looks forward to an ordinary life, that of being the wife of a Tardenois peasant in her cherished Combernon.

Her realization slowly develops through Acts I and II, reaching a tragic climax in Act II, scene III. There, in an excruciating scene, Violaine enters a garden, where Jacques Hury awaits her. She is dressed in the sacerdotal habit of the nuns of Monsanvierge, a fitting costume to ritualize her passion. Repeatedly, with touching intensity, she asks Jacques Hury if he loves her. Violaine knows that she must reveal the silver flower (fleur d'argent<sup>8</sup>) which betrays her leprosy and fears intuitively that Jacques will leave her. She prefaces the revelation of her malady, saying to Jacques Hury, "Jacques, je veux vous parler, ah! que c'est difficile! Ne me manquez point, qui n'ai plus que vous seul!"<sup>9</sup> Jacques' love however, has been poisoned by the dark secrets Mara has whispered into his ear and he rejects her saying, "Infame, reprouvée, Reprouvée dans ton âme et dans ta chair . . . Eloigne-toi de moi."<sup>10</sup> Jacques accuses Violaine of wrongdoing with Pierre de Craon, of kissing him on the mouth. Violaine, realizing that their marriage is impossible denies nothing and asks only that Jacques take her to the lepers' colony at Geyn. Through accepting suffering and Jacques' misunderstanding, Violaine renounces her worldly love and worldly future. Her denial will eventually render her a saint, capable of dispensing grace.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Mara meets Violaine in the third act, she has been so ravaged by her leprosy that she is blind and must hide her face because of

its hideousness. As the drama unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that along with the Marian symbol, a Christ symbol is also strongly present. As Violaine speaks, it becomes clear that she is not bitter as one would expect, but rather is living the advice earlier given to Pierre de Craon:

Soyez digne de la flamme qui vous consume! Et s'il faut être dévoré que ce soit sur un candelabre d'or comme le Cierge Pascalien plein chœur pour la gloire de toute l'Eglise!<sup>12</sup>

In the third act, it is by her understanding of the redemptive power of suffering that Violaine is propelled to saintliness. Violaine explains to Mara that her suffering is in place of the church and that, "Puissante est la souffrance quand elle est aussi volontaire que le péché!"<sup>13</sup> Finally, it becomes clear that Violaine's suffering is united with Christ's redeeming sacrifice, and that she has become an instrument of his saving grace. Violaine echoes the sentiment of the gospel, saying to Mara, "Prions . . . Ne crains point. J'ai pris ta douleur avec moi. Regarde! . . . Ne pleure point."<sup>14</sup>

After discussing the nature and implications of Violaine's pain, the miracle of Aubaine's rebirth seems to diminish somewhat in importance. In fact, the actual miracle only occupies a very few lines at the end of the scene; a brief review of the event, however, is helpful. When the baby stirs, Mara's attention focuses on her, the child whom she thought she had lost. Violaine, rather, almost regards the baby as a distraction, she seems to recognize immediately a greater implication, a further dimension to the miracle, namely, the renewed presence of God on earth. It is interesting that as the scene closes the Angelus is heard again; its presence reinforces Violaine's relation to Marian virtue and the rebirth of Aubaine as a living symbol of the Incarnation of Christ at Christmas, confirming the power of faith.

In the definitive version of the drama, the character of Violaine matures almost at Mara's insistence. Mara is an essential element to this plot, her important role provides dramatic contrast, strengthening the plot and highlighting interest. The third act of the drama might have become only a long and preachy lesson. Claudel's dramatic instinct, by the violent contrast, intensifies the drama and reveals the redemptive message in a deeply moving theatrical scene. In fact, Mara is a doubting figure, perhaps like Thomas, for although she is present for the miracle, she misinterprets it. As the third act closes, the audience may believe that a conversion has taken place in the soul of Mara, a fatal mistake, however. As the fourth act opens it is evident that Mara remains frustrated, jealous, insecure, and bitter.<sup>15</sup> The drama shows that Mara's anxiety and bitterness stem from many causes, for example, the harsh words of her parents in Act I and the disappointment of Anne Vercors because Mara was not born a boy. She represents, in fact, the sour in contrast to Violaine's sweet, the dark putting in relief Violaine's light.

It is interesting that the only character to develop in this drama is that of Violaine, while the others, even Mara, remain somewhat static. Not static in the sense of being lifeless, but from the time they are introduced they remain essentially unchanged. On the contrary, Violaine moves from the beautiful, innocent, unsuspecting peasant girl who, referring to her apparently secure future, says in the Prologue, "Loué donc soit Dieu qui m'a donné la mienne toute de suite et je n'ai plus à la chercher. Et je ne lui en demande point d'autre,"<sup>16</sup> to the role of victim in the second act, to the saintly mystic leper, who tells Mara, "Dieu est avare et ne permet qu'aucune creature soit allumée, Sans qu'un peu d'impureté s'y consume, La sienne ou celle qui l'entoure, comme la braise de l'encensoir qui'on attise,"<sup>17</sup>



in the third act. And finally, in her last speech of the play, she echoes Christ's dying words: "All is consumated, mais que c'est bon."

In the last act, the trajectory of Violaine's path to God is completed. Dying, she is carried back to Combernon, in the arms of her father, Anne Vercors. Here, we discover that the meaning of Violaine's life, a path of suffering and of faith, is gradually comprehended. Anne Vercors realizes that he had never needed to go on a pilgrimage, that is, perform an act, in order to be faithful. It would have been sufficient to follow the example of his own daughter, Violaine. Jacques Hury interprets, for us, Violaine's life in this dialogue from Act IV.

Anne: Jacques, mon enfant! le même appel que le père a entendu, la fille aussi, elle lui a prêté l'oreille!

Jacques: Quel appel?

Anne: (comme s'il récitait) L'ANGE DE DIEU A ANNONCÉ A MARIE ET ELLE A CONÇU DE L'ESPRIT-SAINT.

Jacques: Qu'est-ce qu'elle a conçu?

Anne: Toute la grande douleur de ce monde autour d'elle, et l'Eglise coupée en deux, et la France pour qui Jeanne a été brûlée vive, elle l'a vue! Et c'est pourquoi elle a baisé ce lépreux, sur la bouche sachant ce qu'elle faisait.

Jacques: Une seconde! en une seconde elle a décidé cela?

Anne: VOICI LA SERVANTE DU SEIGNEUR.<sup>18</sup>

Later in this act, Claudel expresses the epitome of his fundamental theme, that is his deep-seated concept of the nature of salvation illustrated by Violaine's search for the path that leads to it. Again it is Violaine's father, Anne Vercors, the returning pilgrim who voices, for Claudel, the quintessential theme of L'Annonce Faite à Marie:

Mais ma petite fille Violaine a été plus sage! Est-ce que le but de la vie est de vivre? est-ce que les pieds des enfants de Dieu sont attachés a cette terre misérable? Il n'est pas de vivre, mais de mourir! et non point de charpenter la croix,

mais d'y monter et de donner ce que nous avons en riant!<sup>19</sup>

The drama ends as Anne Vercors carries Violaine away to die. One last time the triumphant bells of the Angelus are heard, again linking the role of Violaine to that of Mary and the incarnation which was God's promise of salvation:

Et le Verbe s'est fait chair et il a habité parmi nous.<sup>20</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Chiari, The Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel, p. 75.
2. Chiari, pp. 76, 77.
3. Chiari, pp. 77, 78.
4. H. Walters, "Possible Sources for Claudel's *Violaine*," Renaissance, Vol. 22, Winter (1970), pp. 99-107.
5. Jean-Noël Segrestaa, "L'Annonce Faite À Marie: Claudel," Profil D'Une Oeuvre, p. 73.
6. Paul Claudel, "L'Annonce Faite À Marie," in Paul Claudel: Théâtre, Tome II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p. 20.
7. Claudel, p. 12.
8. Claudel, p. 56.
9. Claudel, p. 52.
10. Claudel, p. 132.
11. Wallace Fowlie, Dionysus in Paris: A Guide to Contemporary French Theater, p. 132.
12. Claudel, p. 23.
13. Claudel, p. 75.
14. Claudel, p. 76.
15. Fowlie, p. 131.
16. Claudel, p. 20.
17. Claudel, p. 75.
18. Claudel, p. 121.
19. Claudel, p. 122.
20. Claudel, p. 124.

## CONCLUSION

In L'Annonce Faite à Marie, the character Violaine exemplifies the thought of Paul Claudel as it has bearing on the salvific role of women. We proposed a short research project to see if this idea could be verified. A study of the play in some depth demonstrates the truth of the above statement.

Throughout this drama Claudel develops the character of a woman, Violaine, into what could be called the "ideal" woman. For Claudel, this "ideal" woman entails a fine mixture of Christlike sacrifice and Marian compassion. By leaving Combernon after her rejection by Jacques Hury, Violaine sacrifices her life. That is to say, her love, her happiness, and her future. This is not done without anguish; the reader cannot help but feel empathy for the desolate Violaine who meets Hury in the garden. But even with the anguish, even after bearing undeserved guilt, Violaine does not hate, but in fact, still loves. To the mind of Paul Claudel, Violaine is a call to all women to live the heroic life; a call to unselfishness typified by the Virgin Mary and now portrayed by Violaine.

This study, by no means, claims to give a complete picture of Paul Claudel's concepts concerning salvation; a more extensive study would certainly reveal a more complete schema of Claudel's concepts. The symbolism of this drama, however, strongly supports our conclusions. The significance of his chosen title and the recurrence of the Angelus throughout the drama draws a mutual bond between Violaine and the Virgin Mary. This bond is unmistakable.

Paul Claudel must certainly be considered one of the great French writers of modern times. This study shows, in addition, that he should be considered one of the great Christian writers of our time. Beyond being entertaining or rewarding, L'Annonce Faite à Marie is an inspiration to the faith of Christians who desire to imitate the selfless love of Mary and, above all, of her son Jesus.

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