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**PAUL CLAUDEL «L'ANNONCE
FAITE A MARIE»: A STUDY OF
GENRE**

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The paper looks at the singular genre of Paul Claudel's 1911 drama, which the author himself defined as a mystery play. This work is studied as a sort of genre experiment, which became possible in the early 20th century, owing to the blurring of borders typical for Symbolist theatre. One can define two specific levels in the subject matter of the piece: the dramatic one, the actual story and the one reminding us of a mystery play, which shows the events in a universal light, symbolically reflecting the principal episodes of sacred history. A detailed analysis of the interaction between these two planes covers the list of personages and their character, the symbolic meaning of different images and developments of the story, spatial and temporal relations, as well as the influence of liturgy. The author comes to the conclusion that Claudel in «L'Annonce faite à Marie» achieves a unique synthesis of genres, reanimating certain features of a Medieval mystery, and in this way continues with his Symbolist drama the centuries-old tradition of Catholic theatre.

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Introduction

This paper studies Paul Claudel's play «L'Annonce faite à Marie» (1911) – one of the most significant works of this author, its genre reflecting both the general tendencies of the development of new drama in the early 20th century and the energetic search for novel forms that the writer pursued, trying to create modern Catholic theatre.

Claudel's first plays appeared in the late 19th century and his last dramas were written after World War II. He worked at a time when writers and artists were passionately seeking new aesthetic approaches, new forms both in literature and theater. It was an era of incessant disputes and radical changes of various schools and trends on the literary arena.

In his youth, as he was beginning his literary career, Claudel was passionately in love with Symbolism, greatly admired Rimbaud and visited the famous “mardis” of Mallarmé. In those years he wrote two plays “Tête d'Or” (1889, 1894) and “La Ville” (1890, 1897)³, marked by innovative form and permeated with the rebellious spirit of Rimbaud's poetry. At the same time the decades of the 1980s-90s were for Claudel a period of intense spiritual work, involving the appearance and strengthening of a deep religious feeling. As D. Millet-Gérard noted, a poet and a theologian existed in harmony in Claudel's soul (Millet-Gérard, 318), and as he was becoming a very devout catholic his aesthetic was also changing: the Symbolist idea of grasping the Absolute by deciphering visual reality is interpreted as a desire to perceive the Creator through an overall understanding of his creation (on Paul Claudel's Symbolism in his dramas, see: Ubersfeld).

³ The majority of Claudel's plays have at least two versions. These dates indicate the completion of the principal “variants”.

Reading the plays Claudel wrote in the last decade of the 19th century - “La Jeune fille Violaine” (1893, 1900), “L’Echange” (1894), “Le repos du septième jour” (1894) – we may note a rising interest towards Christian themes and an intense search for individual artistic approaches, as well as a desire to form a personal aesthetic system. Later Claudel will start to boldly experiment with different genres, looking for the most adequate form in theatre that would fit his aesthetic principles. This search for the most appropriate genre form sometimes encouraged the writer to return to his past subjects and to create new versions of his earlier works.

Thus, the idea to make a new variant of “La Jeune fille Violaine”, which Claudel himself called “the most poetic and the most imperfect” of his plays (Claudel, Théâtre, V.2, p.1381), appeared after Armand Bour and Marie Kalff asked for his permission to stage the drama in the “Théâtre d’Art”. Claudel refused (see: Paul Claudel et Jacques Rivière, p. 181-182; Paul Claudel et André Gide, p. 97), but afterwards kept thinking about a new version of the play. Finally in 1911 there appears «L’Annonce faite à Marie» - “a mystery play of four acts and a prologue”.

Mystery Play Genre and Early-Twentieth - Century Theatre

Before attempting to analyze in what way the «L’Annonce faite à Marie» may be looked at as a mystery play, we should make a few remarks regarding the question: is the latter possible on contemporary stage? We inevitably associate this genre with a different epoch, a different kind of theatre, different ideological, aesthetic and social context. Taking this into consideration, a mystery play, as a certain phenomenon of Medieval culture, ceased to exist together with Medieval theatre as a whole, when the single world of those taking part in the event became divided by the footlights between the actors and the audience.

Contemporary theatre and the theatre of the Middle Ages are two very dissimilar spectacles, playing different social roles. Today a play or a show are

regarded as a work of art, created by a single person – the dramatist, or by a group of people – the director and his company. Both are aimed at producing an aesthetic effect either on the reader, or on the spectator. What happens on stage is relatively imaginary, is more or less truthful. It is a sort of “second” reality, which somewhat corresponds with the “first” reality. The very character of their correlation is based on artistic methods of the playwright and the director. But it is clear for anyone inside the theatre, be it actor or visitor, that the show is not something real as life. It is a reflection, existing in another dimension.

Whatever one may think about Medieval drama, about its genesis within the realm of liturgy, ritual or carnival, we may state that for someone seeing it in those remote years it was never a work of art in the modern sense of the word. Medieval man strongly believed that what he saw was taking place in reality.

Only this absolute trust could harmonize in Medieval theatre the inconceivably abstract with downright naturalism, a serious subject with jovial, sometimes coarse laughter. Since the times of Romanticism these specific features, strange to modern mentality, have been explained by a lack of taste, by the ignorance of Medieval man. But what we are witnessing is not some absence of esthetic feeling, but a markedly different approach towards the theatre and the world. After Christian religion ceased to be the cornerstone in the spiritual life of European society, this theatre was doomed to disappear. The appearance of illusion on stage became a sign of the beginning of absolutely new art.

But it would be wrong to study mystery plays as a genre form, basing our judgment solely on features, that were inevitably connected with specific Medieval mentality, and just as inevitably became a fact of the past, as the theatrical tradition was dying. Regarding or disregarding whatever men and women saw in mystery plays at the time they were created, we now study this phenomenon as a work of art and single out its true artistic achievements. The latter are based solely on our own point of view, without any allowances for the “naïve” perception of Medieval men. The unique Christian character of this genre makes it impossible to fully

reconstruct it in the 20th century, when neither Christianity, nor any other ideology can claim to be something universally accepted. But, nevertheless, certain features of a mystery play may bring some inspiration into modern theatre, which is so preoccupied with erasing borders, merging, combining genres, and even – with the author’s ideological backup – become dominant in the process of this synthesis.

Speaking today about the mystery genre in connection with «L’Annonce faite à Marie», we take into consideration our contemporary knowledge of Medieval theatre in general, and of “miracle” plays in particular. At the same time, entering the new millennium, we have an opportunity to study and summarize the evolution of drama in the passing century. Claudel’s “mystery” genre has already been a point of discussion in Russia in the 1910s and 1920s. We may point out B. Eichenbaums’s article “On Paul Claudel’s Mystery Plays” and A. Tairov’s notes regarding the staging of «L’Annonce faite à Marie» at the Moscow Chamber Theatre.

B. Eichenbaum looks at mystery plays “not in the Medieval, but in a broader sense”. He holds the opinion that the “medieval mystery play was just a splinter of a religious rite, a folk liturgy. It *represented* (author’s italics - A.S.) something that served as a sacrament in church. The new mystery play, towards which, apparently, contemporary theatre is heading, must be a further development of tragedy. But it should differ from a tragedy in a sense that the line of the human soul does not only bend, but locks itself in a ring. The tragic curve tightens into a circle” (Eichenbaum, 121). Eichenbaum believes that Maeterlinck was the one closest to approach a mystery play. Claudel, in his turn, “embodied” the mystery play. Beginning with his “heroic tragedy” «Tête d’Or» Claudel gradually rises to the level of a mystery play. “Each play not only ends in simple ruin, but in some kind of new synthesis; over every one of them, after all the storms and tempests, there is a great rainbow of spiritual peace, in which the Sun of life burns refracted in human tears” (ibid, 123). Studying in detail “La jeune fille Violaine”

Eichenbaum calls it a mystery play of love. He believes that «L'Annonce faite à Marie» is inferior to the initial version of the play.

This concept allows us to look at Claudel's oeuvre in a new and interesting way, highlighting the innovative character of his works and their internal evolution. The term "mystery play" truly acquires, within the context of the article, a very wide, somewhat generalized meaning. We may also see here a biased approach to Medieval mystery plays, typical for the early 20th century, and the lack of a time distance that would be useful to correctly analyze Claudel's work. At the same time Eichenbaum studies a very important problem that involves relations between tragedy and mystery play. Comparing them appears to us to be not only justified, but also fruitful, if we seek to define each one of the two genres.

Both mystery play and tragedy focus on the main problems of human existence. Specific, arbitrary and unessential issues are being set aside. Man is alone as he faces the world; he must do something and assume responsibility for his actions. The forces that work against this person are in both cases much stronger than those at his disposal. Both mystery play and tragedy should include some transcendental intervention in the course of events. Finally, the fundamental mythological character of the problems that the protagonist faces allows the author to avoid many references regarding concrete time and space in the case of both genres.

However, if in the center of tragedy there is a figure of a human being, whose individual will is in conflict with the world order, a mystery play tells us about a man who is himself a part of this very world order. His individual will is important only as far as it supports the logic that lies behind the created world. Eichenbaum believes that a mystery play should contain some solution of the tragic conflict and a return to original harmony. But the world outlook that forms the foundation of a mystery play is essentially not tragic and the very notion of "conflict" is hardly applicable in this case.

In trying to establish the genre of Claudel's "Annunciation" as a mystery play, we may view the latter as a Catholic genre par excellence, and in this sense it is closely connected with the Middle Ages. As something based on the Christian view of the world, a mystery play may be regarded as a genre that rather exists in opposition with tragedy and does not fit within the framework of its evolution. The trials and tribulations, which the personage of a mystery play voluntarily accepts, however brutal or unjustified, are not tragic for the simple reason that the hero of the story clearly realizes why and for what cause he is making those sacrifices, and acquires in suffering spiritual peace and even a sense of true happiness. The protagonist of a tragedy in certain ways "argues" with divine forces, while the hero of a mystery play fully accepts the world order that was created by God and strives to imitate Christ. If the will of a tragic personage clashes with divine will and thus impinges on world harmony, a character of a mystery play sacrifices himself in order to preserve this harmony.

Essentially what we encounter in a mystery play is not some individual person with his unsolvable problems, but mankind as a whole, taken, moreover, in "historical" perspective. A tragedy rarely includes a significant movement in time, while a mystery play tends to attempt to portray the history of humanity as a whole, seen by Christians – from the creation of the world to the Last Judgment. The tragic conflict usually unfolds beyond time, a mystery play traditionally includes at least two temporal dimensions: first, it is the present, in which those participating in the show and the personages exist, perceived as a period between the First and the Second Coming of Christ; and second, the mystical aspect – a constant repetition of sacred history in every moment of this present time.

Thus we may view a mystery play as not just a genre that has little in common with the evolution of tragedy, but as something which is essentially "not tragic", based on a totally different world outlook.

A. Tairov, as he was planning to work on "L'Annonce faite à Marie", saw his task not in "staging Claudel, but in, by using his drama, creating a basis for a

theatrical mystery play” (Tairov, *Zapiski...*, 282). The latter term the director defined as “such a theatrical representation, when the essential dynamic motive is *faith* (italics by the author – A.S.) impregnated within the human soul, when a sincere belief in it can move mountains, a faith, that creates a performance with the most full and intense feelings (emotions). (Tairov, *K postanovke...*, 8). At the same time Tairov was not speaking about any kind of religious faith. Just like Eichenbaum, he calls “L’Annonce faite à Marie” a mystery play of love. The show did not include the fourth act and was finished with the scene of the raising of the child. There were many cuts in the text, and, as Alisa Koonen points out, Tairov tried to omit the author’s “mystical ideas” (Koonen, 90). Tairov’s theatrical mystery play basically turned out to be a development of the tragic genre, as Eichenbaum perceived it. The religious essence of Claudel’s play vanished from the show, and the difference between a mystery play and a tragedy practically disappeared.

“L’Annonce faite à Marie” as a Mystery Play of the Modern Age

As we study Claudel’s play, we may notice that the author’s passionate, orthodox, almost Medieval Catholicism is embodied in forms that remind us of early-20th-century esthetic. The ancient, “prehistoric”, in the context of modernity, genre is being revived by the means of modern theatre. One can see here the traces of the last four centuries, which marked the development of European theatre and particularly of its recent form – Symbolist drama. Claudel began his artistic career as a Symbolist, and even after distancing himself from this movement, he retained its “birthmarks” for the rest of his life. It is to Symbolism that “L’Annonce faite à Marie” owes its two-part structure, which allowed the mystery genre to penetrate 20th-century drama.

What has been an integral part of a Medieval representation, in Claudel’s case becomes a “background” story, which we can define as the subject of a

mystery play. As to the “foreground” plot, we, following the expression of the German scholar S. Stiel, will call it “dramatic” (Stiel, 24). In this case we use the word “drama” as an instrument to define, for practical sake, any modern play, different from the pieces of Medieval theatre.

Thus in the foreground we see an unfolding drama, and simultaneously a mystery is taking place in the background. Both of them have their own subjects, their own logic in terms of the course of events and their own important motives. The drama relates the story of the Vercors family. The personages here can be characterized by different features and are connected between each other in various ways. Their actions form the plot, which reaches its culmination in the third act, and is tragically resolved in the fourth. It is a drama which looks at eternal ethic and philosophical problems: faith, love, good and evil and human responsibility.

A mystery play speaks to us not only about man, but about the world and mankind as a whole. What we have defined as the subject of the drama becomes an example, an illustration and an image belonging to the subject of the mystery play. The logic of the latter somewhat subdues the principal theme, and at the same time explains a lot within its structure. If the first version of “La Jeune fille Violaine” was somewhat generalized and, in the style of Symbolist art, could be interpreted in many different ways, the steps, taken by the personages had practically no motivation within the logic of developing events. If in the second version we can more or less explain them by psychological factors, in the “Annunciation” we feel that the objective course of events inevitably leads to this particular result. What happens is explained by the effect of other forces, existing beyond the realm of the dramatic.

The Symbolist reading of the “Annunciation” reveals the universal sense of the piece, making its subject matter similar to a Medieval mystery play. An indication of the original theme can be already seen in the name of the play.

The mystery play opens with a prologue, where the Symbolist traits of the subject matter are already defined. One of their initial moments was already noted

by S. Stiel – this is basically an “announce”, the deliverance of divine will in a dialogue.

Violaine gives to Pierre her wedding ring as a donation for the construction of the Sainte Justice Church and simple-heartedly thinks that neither for himself, nor for his church she can do anything else. But Pierre clearly expects something more from her:

« Ce n'est point à la Pierre de choisir sa place, mais au Maître de l'oeuvre qui l'a choisie ». (II, 20)

Pierre, an architect and a builder of churches, can accurately understand the function of various materials and choose a particular stone, which is necessary for constructing the church. He sees that a higher role is awaiting Violaine and invokes her to hear and obey an order that comes from above:

«La sainteté n'est pas d'aller se faire lapider chez les Turcs ou de baiser un lépreux sur la bouche,

Mais de faire le commendement de Dieu aussitôt,

Qu'il soit

De rester à notre place ou de monter plus haut » (II, 21)

So we can see that Violainne is selected for a different role, she is destined «to move upwards». She learns this from Pierre and accepts her fate. The very fact of presenting the ring acquires a symbolic meaning: Violainne renounces all earthly things, including her earthly fiancé, in favor of the “heavenly bridegroom”. In the first act the same meaning would be embodied in Violainne’s wedding dress (being, at the same time, according to local tradition, a funerary one, another Symbolist nuance). After kissing a leper, Violainne inevitably deprives herself of the opportunity to return to anything that she had experienced up to the present, and has to accept the destiny that Providence had marked for her. The leprosy that she contracts after her kiss becomes a symbol of being chosen, a divine sign, that marks her among other people.

The episode of the deliverance of the good word in the dialogue establishes a symbolic parallel between Violaine and Virgin Mary. Being only hinted at in the prologue, this connection is clearly emphasized in the third act, when Violaine appears as the mother of the resurrected child. Both the drama and the mystery play reach their climax in the third scene of the third act, as the “exterior” subject matter closes in on the “interior” one, dissolving in it.

Violaine does not consider herself to be a saint, so she looks at Mara’s request to revive the child as a great temptation. She cannot do it, does not want to, and thinks she has no right to make the attempt. But suddenly we hear bells ringing in the distance, marking the beginning of the Christmas service. At this moment the drama is being overtaken by the mystery play, something like a mass unfolds on stage, in which even Mara participates, whose role, until then, was solely a part of the dramatic plot. The essence of the story is no longer a dialogue between the two sisters, and takes place not here and now, but everywhere and always. The choir of the angels, which only Violaine can hear, praises the birth of the baby, the birth of God. Mara reads aloud the book, given to her by Violaine. It is hard for her to pronounce lines from the Holy Scripture, fragments from sermons, as she realizes how sinful she is.

But she continues to read because neither Violaine, nor herself any longer belong to themselves. And the miracle that takes place on stage is only an image of the one that is praised by the choir. There is a line in the plot connecting the symbolic annunciation with the symbolic birth. As the day breaks Violaine feels some movement under her cloak, where she held the dead child.

«Violaine. – Paix, Mara, voici le jour de Noël où toute joie est née !

Mara. – Quelle joie y a-t-il pour moi sinon que mon enfant vive ?

Violaine. – Et nous aussi un petit enfant nous est né!» (II, 83)

The text itself does not allow us to divide one event from the other. Just like in Medieval liturgical drama the episode taking place on stage is a sort of divine service. The resurrected child is Violaine’s immaculately born baby, blue-eyed just

like herself. She will later tell Jacque that she is aware of the effort that a woman makes in giving life.

We took a closer look at one of the symbolic lines in the “L’Annonce faite à Marie”, where the heroine is associated, and at the moment of climax is even identified, with Virgin Mary, according to the laws of a mystery play. A second line, which also begins in the prologue and develops simultaneously with the first one, is the theme of Christ.

By kissing the leprous Pierre de Craon, Violaine contracts his illness, at the same time curing him. Together with leprosy she not only accepts Pierre’s suffering, but also his disgrace. In this case we face a paradox, typical for the Medieval attitude towards this disease, particularly widespread during the epoch. On the one hand, as we already noted, the Bible itself allowed the faithful to view leprosy as a sign of being the chosen one, of some kind of special spirituality and proximity to God. But simultaneously with the above-mentioned notion and in contrast to it, Medieval mentality viewed a leper as one of the most despicable members of society, who had earned this terrible punishment with his mortal sins. Leprosy was seen as an exterior manifestation of man’s wickedness. “It is a sickness that is primarily symbolical and ideological, leprosy, first of all, means the leprosy of the soul”. That is what we read in Jacques Le Goff’s book «L’imaginaire medieval» (124).

Leprosy entered Pierre’s life when he wanted to sin. With sin – his own and the general notion of it – it is associated in the words he utters:

« O jeune arbre de la science du Bien et du Mal, voici que je commence à me séparer parce que j’ai porté la main sur vous » (II, 16)

By voluntarily accepting leprosy Violaine takes responsibility for Pierre’s sins and by her disgrace, suffering and death atones for them. Cured and purified, he can now complete his life principal’s project – the construction of the Sainte Justice Church.

Violaine's death brings peace to the souls of those who knew her. Jacque experiences spiritual enlightenment. Even Mara confesses that she has changed. As people stand next to Violaine's deathbed, everyone is reconciled, and a rainbow appears in the sky – a Biblical symbol of a covenant between God and human beings, a sign of men's absolution and his reconciliation with God (Gen 9: 13-17).

Anne Vercors' theme is particularly symbolic, as he remains one of the most enigmatic personages of the whole play. The majority of scholars, who wrote about the piece, associate him with God the Father. It is true that he sacrifices his daughter Violaine, even though he has the power to change the course of events. A. Blanc believes that his absence, which became an essential factor of Violaine's sacrifice, symbolically reflects the silence of God the Father in Christ's Passion (Blanc, 84). In this light the apparently logical interpretation of Vercors' theme becomes a continuation of the symbolic sequence when Violaine is associated with the Savior.

But the text of the play allows us to come up with another interpretation of Vercors' role. In the first act, giving instructions to his servants before leaving the stage, Anne Vercors says:

“Maintenant que je m'en vais, faites comme si j'étais là.

Car je reviendrai. Je reviendrai au moment que vous ne m'attendrez pas »
(II, 43)

These words almost literally repeat the New Testament call to stay awake (Mat 24: 42-44). The subject is continued in the fourth act – we see a constant repetition of the motive of ripe fruit and harvest, which, according to the Bible, are associated with the coming of the Last Judgment (Rev 14: 14-20).

As, in this light, we look at Vercors' “theme”, we may note in the “L'Annonce faite à Marie” some prophetic elements, and the symbolical subject of the piece acquires the universal character of a Medieval mystery play, encompassing the past, present and the future of mankind.

At the heyday of a Medieval mystery play its principal content was the story of man as it was interpreted in the Bible. The principle motives of this history are symbolically present in Claudel's "L'Annonce faite à Marie". Here we witness the Fall of Adam and Eve, Annunciation, Immaculate Conception, Nativity, redemptive sacrifice, Resurrection and the expectation of the Advent. These themes, which in a concrete and direct way were staged in the Middle Ages, become, in 20th-century theatre a "background" theme, an "interior" subject, which evolves simultaneously with the "exterior" dramatic plot. The mystery play sometimes recedes, sometimes once again intersects with drama, and on other occasions pushes it aside, fully absorbing it, completely dissolving it in itself. The shifts from one level to another are usually marked by a direct reference to liturgical practice.

Many scholars, who wrote about Claudel (S. Stiel, M. Lioure, A. Vachon, A. Blanc and others), noted how this liturgical element transforms his plays, transcending the limits of time and space and adding a universal dimension to what takes place on stage. "Annunciation" was regarded as a classical example of this approach.

Violaine's dialogue with Pierre de Craon, the way it begins, is a typical dramatic conversation. After hearing the bells, they stop their intercourse and start praying. At this moment they seem to be participating in a mass that is presently taking place. The tone of their conversation changes, as well as the very melody of speech, its vocabulary and syntax. The essence of the dialogue is also transformed. A mystery play begins. As the scene ends Mara appears, and both dimensions once more intersect. The logic of the mystery play forces Violaine to kiss Pierre once more. As Mara sees the kiss it becomes a new dramatic element.

The drama subject matter energetically evolves in the first two acts. The mystery play can be seen through the symbolic character of separate phrases, gestures and episodes.

In the third act the mystery takes over the drama – once more owing to the interference of the liturgy. As we have already noted, the miracle happens, and the dramatic element is totally immersed in the mystery play. The spectacular emotional effect at the end of the scene is achieved by a very subtle, musical move of transforming one plane into another. The dramatic dialogue of the two sisters is being interrupted by the chiming of bells, which is at first barely audible, but then becomes clear and distinct. We can also hear the sounds of trumpets and calls “Vive le Roi!” It is Charles VII going to Rheims for his coronation.

The dialogue gradually comes to an end. What is left is only Mara’s reading and the choir of angels. The tension keeps rising, and as the climax comes a miracle takes place.

The fourth act of the piece is also permeated by elements of a mystery play. The drama subject matter basically ends with Mara’s crime and Violaine’s death. Both of them are essential, so that the mystery play may take place. Pierre, being purified both spiritually and physically, is building a church. Peace and calm descends on Vercors’ house. From the deserted, and, as it seems, forever silent monastery, there sounds again the tolling of the bells. All the characters are united by a feeling of an accomplished miracle:

« Pierre de Craon. - ...Dieu est né!

Anne Vercors. – Dieu s’est fait homme !

Jacques Hury. – Il est mort !

Pierre de Craon. – Il est ressuscité ! » (II, 114)

Totally corresponding with the two themes of the development of the piece is the trajectory of artistic time. The subject of the mystery play unfolds beyond and above time, it is absolutely universal and impossible to grasp within the boundaries of traditional temporal categories. Meanwhile the drama has its specific timing. On the one hand it is morning, evening, spring, autumn, with Claudel’s characteristic symbolic meanings of the hours and the seasons of the year. On the

other: historical time: “the end of the period of the Middle Ages, in the form that that Medieval poets may have imagined antiquity”.

A Medieval mystery play, based on the corpus of sacred texts, may well include historical episodes. They were not marked out as something special by the men living in that epoch. They believed that the Bible was as true as those events that took place in the past. And in general, are we justified in speaking about historical facts in those scenes of half-history, half-legend, which were essentially represented by Medieval performances relating to remote epochs? The esthetic of mystery play did not imply any historical accuracy.

Claudé in his “Annunciation” creates a generalized image of the Middle Ages, which really reflects the “antique” character of Medieval mystery plays. He includes into his piece what can be regarded as the most legendary episode of the time: the coronation of Jeanne D’Arc by the king of France. This event takes place in the play at Christmas night, even though it was universally believed to happen in July. Jeanne’s fate echoes that of the heroine of the drama and is symbolically connected with the subject matter of the mystery play. We seem to witness the best traditions of the latter.

But, contrary to the “classical” mystery play, in Claudé’s case history does not fit in any way with the subject of the latter, which in reality primarily evolves within a symbolist scheme. The historical background, however arbitrary it may be, exists as the real time when the drama evolves. Afterwards, when in the third scene of the third act the mystery play reaches its culmination and “absorbs” the drama, the historical time seems to fit in and disappear within the universal time of a mystery play. At the moment when Catholic priests are conducting a Christmas mass, when Violaine revives Mara’s child, Jeanne D’Arc crowns the French king. God, the child and the king are born at the same time. In this way harmony and happiness enter the world, the family and the state.

This presupposes a merging of various temporary planes, the desire of time to “grow” to the level of eternity and to be dissolved in it, as the events culminate.

This was what A. Vachon believed to be one of Claudel's key principles prior to writing on «Le soulier de satin» (Vachon, 382). In order to make this happen, as the scholar writes, the author creates a situation in which the personages end up in a very specific state, balancing, it seems, on the border of two worlds, which basically unites rather than divides them. In the “Annunciation” this merging of our and the “other” world is achieved by introducing a liturgical context, into which the climax scene is fully included. At this moment the historical time of the drama is completely immersed in the eternity of a mystery play.

Conclusion

The drama and the mystery play of Claudel's “Annunciation” represent the two levels of reading the piece. The drama completely determines the form of this work, its composition and, to a large extent, its subject matter. Dramatic roles are played to the full by Mara and Jacques, and partly by some other characters. The mystery play appears to be the essence of the “Annunciation”, rising the piece to a universal philosophical level, transforming and deepening its message, when all the symbols are being connected together and a “background” subject unfolds. The universal concept interacts with a dramatic plot. The parallel existence and the inseparable connection between these two planes form the dramatic synthesis, which makes it possible to stage this mystery today.

“L'Annonce faite à Marie” is not Claudel's only play in connection with which we can speak about the deep influence of mystery plays on the writer's work. Certain traits of this Medieval genre may be seen in «Le soulier de satin» (1924) (even though here they appeared in an indirect way, inspired by the Spanish Auto Sacramental), in «Le Livre de Christophe Colomb» (1934), in «Jeanne D'Arc au bûcher» (1934), in «L'Histoire de Tobie et de Sara» (1938) and in certain others, less important works. Features of mystery plays in these pieces are not as evident as in “L'Annonce faite à Marie”, but the fact that they appear, and appear in several plays is very suggestive. Claudel wanted a mystery play

because he was reviving Catholic theatre, and the latter is rooted in the Middle Ages. The genre experiment, which essentially offers us “L’Annonce faite à Marie”, had discovered the mystery play for contemporary theatre. And in the future the author could easily use the elements of this “dead” genre as any other, “live” one. The revival of the mystery play was enormously important for Claudel, because the genre brought to life the memory of its past, and the writer’s oeuvre began to be perceived in the context of a strong cultural tradition that sprang from the Middle Ages.

Notes

- Ubersfeld, A. *Paul Claudel poète du XXème siècle*. Paris, 2005.
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