Break of Noon
Paul Claudel

Break of Noon

Partage de midi

Edited by Anthony Rudolf

with essays by David Furlong,
John Naughton and Susannah York

Translated by Jonathan Griffin, David Furlong,
John Naughton and Susannah York

Produced by Exchange Theatre
for the Finborough Theatre

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Preface

I will not seek to say more about the three essays included here other than to remark that collectively they shed light on the history of the making of this remarkable and complex play and on the history of the efforts to translate it. In a sense, they mirror Paul Claudel’s various versions. The three authors, David Furlong, director and translator, Susannah York, actress and translator, John Naughton, professor of French literature who has worked on Claudel for many years, create between themselves a three-way conversation (four-way if we include Jonathan Griffin) about this strange and compelling work.

I have edited this book as part of my ongoing role as Jonathan Griffin’s literary executor. It is thirty years since he died and nearly fifty years since Pierre Rouve’s Ipswich production of Jonathan’s translation, starring Ben Kingsley and Annie Firbank. I believe that Jonathan’s famous generosity of spirit would have enabled him to smile at Susannah York’s characteristically chirpy and mischievous account of their regular working sessions as co-translators. Her essay, published here as an Afterword, is reprinted in slightly edited form from the version that appears in *Sage Eye* (Menard Press, 1992), a volume of tributes to Griffin I put together after he died. I write shortly after the tenth anniversary of Susannah’s death, which was on January 15, 2011.

Observing David Furlong and Fanny Dulin of Exchange Theatre and their equally young team of actors at work during performances of several plays has been an eye-opener for me. John Naughton has been a comrade from the Yves Bonnefoy circle for decades. Furlong, Naughton and York are robust and challenging, as Claudel would have expected. As a fellow translator of Yves Bonnefoy, it is particularly interesting for me to read Naughton’s remarks about an earlier French writer than Bonnefoy, who had mixed feelings about Claudel, disapproving of his “idéalisme négatif” but approving of his celebration of terrestrial reality and his recognition of the sacred as incarnated in art.

Yves Bonnefoy would have been intrigued by this book, as I hope its eventual readers – whether in French studies or English theatre or both – will be.

Anthony Rudolf,
London, 3 March, 2021
P.S. My postscript to Susannah’s Afterword contains an account of the production of the play she starred in at the French Institute, London and at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre in 1991.
The Exchange Theatre and Claudel

DAVID FURLONG

In 2006 I directed my first play in London, in English. It was Paul Claudel’s *L’échange* (*The Exchange*), and it gave its name to the company I founded with Fanny Dulin, Exchange Theatre.

Paul Claudel was almost completely unknown in the UK, but I thought he could be presented to the London theatre world as “the French T.S. Eliot”. The three nights of this first show attracted about 120 people … Fanny had put her savings into the show, and on top of hiring Jermyn Street Theatre in the heart of the West End, we created a surprisingly bulky set, with costumes by French designer Agnès B. We were absolute beginners. The Claudel play contained the seeds of my future directorial practice, as well as mistakes of logic and beginner’s luck… We found the American version by a retired professor, Louise Witherell, from the University of Wisconsin. She was very open and delighted that there was interest in her old 1960s translation.

Claudel’s symbolism (and probably mine via the way I directed it) was very well-received by the only reviewer, Michael Donley, who attended on behalf of the Paul Claudel Society: *To tell the truth, we didn’t get the impression that it was a “translation”, as the dialogues were so fluid, easy, idiomatic. (…) Thomas Pollock Nageoire was the big surprise. A black man, he used musical and rhythmic speech (…) An ingenious transposition of Claudelian musicality (…) We laughed a lot, but the complexity survived. The original direction of David Furlong offered to the British public an approachable Claudel, without betraying the poet. (…) While reading the play again after this production, I saw it in a new light. A good sign, it seems to me. Let’s hope there will be a ‘reprise’, a longer run, later on.”

There was no longer run. But as we had managed to fill an auditorium for three nights with an almost unknown foreign playwright, I was approached by Neil McPherson from The Finborough Theatre, who was genuinely drawn by the idea of producing a Claudel play. The following month I had my first meeting with Neil, but apart from *The Exchange*, we did not have another Claudel on the horizon. My cast at the time and some anachronistic directorial choices did not fit Finborough’s production criteria. So Neil suggested that *The Exchange* was not the show for them, but immediately asked me if another Claudel play might
be suitable. I suggested intuitively *Partage de midi*, based on a few things I had read, and a vague memory... but mostly it was a gut feeling.

I immediately re-read the play and it confirmed my instinct that it could be a ‘colonial period piece’ and I made a wish that one day I would do it. Unconsciously, it allowed me to deepen what I had started doing with *The Exchange*: by changing one of Claudel’s main characters from a dominant white male to an empowered black lead actor, I had changed the gaze of the audience while still being absolutely true to Claudel’s universalist ideal of the “reunification of the world”. This was Michael Donley’s “big surprise”. I was decolonising my thinking about theatre, and *Partage de midi* immediately contributed to this, as the play deals with some of the actual events of Chinese colonisation.

Exchange Theatre went on to produce 22 shows in 11 years. In 2017, I was nominated for Best Director at the Off West-End awards, and the Finborough attended our acclaimed Molière production. The conversation with Neil was re-ignited. We wanted to collaborate after so many years, and he mentioned that it was the 150th anniversary of Claudel’s birth. It was the right time to bring our project to life.

* * *

In 1900, Paul Claudel, then a young 32-year-old diplomat, had an affair with a married woman, named Rosalie Vetch, while he was French consul in China. This love affair had a huge impact on him, and he wrote *Partage de midi*, a semi-autobiographical play, as a catharsis. Because he was both a devout Catholic, and a diplomat representing France abroad, he was warned by his confessor at the time not to publish his play, nor reveal any part of the true story. So, from the moment he finished writing *Partage de midi* in 1905, Claudel immediately banned it from being published or staged. (He did publish a private, limited edition of the work in 1906 for distribution only to close friends and to people he trusted.) He’d already had several of his plays published but this one was to remain generally secret for 42 years – until his friend Jean-Louis Barrault made him change his mind in 1948. By this time, Claudel had become a member of the Académie Française, and he was such an important figure as a diplomat that he’d even been on the cover of *Time* magazine when French ambassador in the USA. After his retirement, his plays were successfully produced year after year in France. Barrault had done some of the productions, especially the epic *Soulier de Satin*. They had talked...
about *Partage de midi*, and Barrault convinced Claudel to allow him to produce the play. Claudel agreed but revisited the play and completely rewrote the end. From then on, there were two versions of the play.

Fast-forward 70 years. We learned of a translation by Wallace Fowlie and ordered it. We discovered that it was based on the 1948 version. I hoped that I could find a translation of the 1906 version. We then discovered that Jonathan Griffin had made one for the Ipswich Arts Centre in 1972. But how could we get hold of the text? In the British Library archive catalogue, we found a programme – we learned that the cast included the young Ben Kingsley – but no translation.

A week later, I discovered that Griffin was also a respected translator of Portuguese poetry. I found the name of his publisher: Anthony Rudolf of Menard Press, who responded with great enthusiasm. He told us that he had a copy of Jonathan’s translation and that as Griffin’s literary executor and rights holder he was eager for us to revive it and that he would send it straightaway!

However, once again, it was the 1948 version! To study these translations, we needed the original version. So we ordered the new edition of Claudel’s plays, published by La Pléiade in 2011. It turned out that the two versions were not that different, apart from the ending. This was the main change: the 1906 version involved a young man still mourning his love – the one I wanted to direct – whilst the 1948 version was more ironic and less idealistic.

One day at the office, as I was printing out a scanned copy for my assistant director, Anne-Christelle Zanzen, we were discussing Chinese colonialism, the insurrections, and the world of the play. I gave her the script, and when she looked it over, she said “Are there only 35 pages?” In disbelief, I at first thought that she had miscounted... And then I checked Anthony’s envelope. I only had Act 1. I called him and he told me that he had sent me everything he had. “This is a catastrophe”, he said. Meanwhile, the Finborough, understandably, was showing concerns about the script situation.

It was then that Anthony mentioned to us that in the 1980s, his friend, the actress Susannah York, had fallen in love with the 1906 version and had gone through pretty much the same ordeal to find a translation. She even convinced Jonathan Griffin at the time to let her write a ‘1906 version’ of his translation, which she proceeded to do. It was read at the French Institute in 1991. We needed to find that version. Fortunately, Anthony thought of someone I hadn’t called yet: Richard Jackson, who was
a close friend of Susannah’s, the producer of several plays she directed, and
the man who had facilitated the 1991 event. Richard was very welcoming
and said he had an audio recording of the 1991 French Institute reading
and invited me to collect it. We had the most amazing conversation about
his legacy: how he had arranged tours of the Renault-Barrault company
in London in the sixties and seventies, how he had produced some
Marguerite Duras for the stage, and how he had an ongoing partnership
with the French Institute. I mentioned that we used to be resident there,
and how strange it was that this place, because they have a team that
changes every three years, seems to have permanent amnesia about what
great initiatives took place within their walls. The people in posts today
don’t know about our two years of residency five years ago, so how could
anyone remember Richard’s work from fifty years ago! After two hours I
had to leave and promised to continue the conversation when I returned
the tape after transcribing the second and third acts.

By the end of her translation, Susannah York had taken huge liberties
in comparison to the French. I ended up having to re-translate, whilst
already in rehearsal. I had already done some revision on The Exchange
and had also adapted Sartre and Molière, so I figured I could do the end
of Act 3 myself.

* * *

“Why this woman? Why this woman suddenly on this boat?” (Mesa –
Partage de midi / Break of Noon).

Claudel said of her, “She was the only woman I passionately loved, the
one who played in my life the entire role a woman could play”. But the
fact is that Rosalie left Claudel in 1904 and made no sign of life until
1917. It was through the resumption of their relationship, eventually on
a purely spiritual level, that she revealed to Claudel the reason for her
escape: she felt that her rival was none other than God Himself and that
she could not replace Him.

I decided to edit down the end of the play to the essence of its symbol-
ism and purity: I wanted to underline most of all the central theme of the
divine and eternal dimension of Love and Consent. This is the version
we presented at the Finborough Theatre in May 2018. I was finishing
assembling the script whilst the actors were already in rehearsals on Act 2.
It was quite an accomplishment, at the last minute. I owe a tremendous
debt of gratitude to Anthony Rudolf for offering and undertaking to find a publisher for this work, which has now been updated and expanded, and to John Naughton for bringing us his expertise and for translating the two alternate endings.

* * *

When casting and directing the play a few ideas governed my approach in line with the concept of decolonising theatre: I wanted to change the origin of Mesa, the protagonist representing Claudel. As a young diplomat, he had been so immersed in Asian culture that I felt strongly that the part should be played by an actor of Asian descent. I also wanted the ethnicity of Francis Vetch, Rosalie’s husband, to be respected in our casting of De Ciz. Finally, I wanted to tell the truth of the woman, Ysé, on whom Rosalie is based. Despite the three male characters around her, the play was never about the male gaze but about her undying power.

BREAK OF NOON was originally presented by Exchange Theatre in association with Neil McPherson at the Finborough Theatre in June 2018.

CAST

Ysé      Elizabeth Boag
Mesa     Matt Lim
De Ciz     David Durham
Amalric     Connor Williams

CREATIVE TEAM

Director     David Furlong
Producer     Fanny Dulin
Costume designer    Sarah Habib
Set Designer    Ninon Fandre
Lighting and Sound Designer   Alastair Borland
Fight director     Lula Suassuna
Assistant Director  Anne-Christelle Zanzen
EXCHANGE THEATRE

Led by David Furlong, artistic director, and Fanny Dulin, producer, Exchange Theatre is an international company established in 2006 in London in order to translate and produce unknown or rare international plays in English. The company has translated Georges Feydeau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Molière, Xavier Durringer for British premieres and developed ambitious productions with a strong visual imagery, original music and multimedia creations. Exchange Theatre was resident company at the Institut Français du Royaume Uni and invested bilingual interactive performances for families and young audience. The company has also investigated bilingual devised works with bicultural casts and creatives exploring under-represented identities. They received Off West-End nominations for best director, best productions and best video design on Molière’s *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and *Misanthrope*.

FINBOROUGH THEATRE

The Finborough Theatre is a fifty-seat theatre in the West Brompton area of London under artistic directorship of Neil McPherson. The theatre presents new British writing, as well as UK and world premieres of new plays primarily from the English-speaking world including North America, Canada, Ireland, and Scotland alongside rarely seen rediscovered 19th and 20th century plays. The venue also presents new and rediscovered music theatre.
Partage de midi is the most openly and painfully personal and autobiographical of Paul Claudel’s many plays. Published privately in 1906 in a limited edition of 150 copies destined for close friends and associates, the play would not see an edition for the general public, nor would it be performed on stage until 1948. For this public exposure to occur, Claudel will have had to confront the resistance of the woman who played such a decisive role in his life and in the play that dramatizes that role, and he will have had to receive the authorization of his Catholic confessors. It is undeniable that the play registers what in 1908 Claudel himself called “an exact accounting of the horrible adventure where I almost left my soul and my life after ten years of an absolutely chaste and Christian life.”1 The play deals with a painfully conflicted adulterous love affair and is set in China where Claudel occupied a consular post. Although the play is primarily focused on a personal and passionate drama, it also presents a critical perspective on the European colonialists bent on making their fortunes at the expense of the indigenous Chinese population. And as we shall see, for however autobiographical the play may be, the real-life protagonists will undergo transformations that allow them to be integrated into a mythic vision of sin and redemption.

In an essay called ‘Romantic Religion’, the Jewish theologian Leo Baeck seeks to establish a distinction between Judaism and Christianity by seeing the former as a “classic” religion, the latter as a “romantic” religion.2 In using the term “romantic,” Baeck is borrowing from Schlegel who defined romantic texts as ones that treat sentimental material in a fantastic way. The fundamental content of a romantic orientation are feelings and emotions pushed to an extreme. Its goal is a world where

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the extraordinary, the miraculous have the last word. For the romantic, suffering and sorrow are good and valuable as long as the soul can be immersed in them. With the romantic, everything is expressed in superlatives, and all of human and earthly reality is lived on the level of ecstasy. The romantic will often consider his emotional experiences, which by their very suddenness seem the proof of irrecusable authenticity, as the most important things in his existence and as situated therefore in the heart of a transcendent plan. To the extent, however, that the romantic will need to dismiss any reality that might call into question the initial rapture, he will live constantly between exaltation and bitterness. We can certainly observe some of this psychology in play in Partage de midi. Ysé recognizes Mesa as “extreme, extreme! headstrong, excessive, always goes too far.” The play vacillates between the banal realities and ambitions of the colonialists and a deeper drama that expresses itself on the level of ecstatic revelation. One has only to think of the sudden recognition between the lovers in Act One: “Mesa, it is Ysé, it is I” as though they had drunk the magic love philtre of that other great romance, the one of Tristan and Iseult. Many critics have noticed the resemblances between the medieval romance and the modern work. Wouldn’t Claudel have thought of Iseult when he gave Ysé her name? But perhaps the more significant comparison to consider is the one that can be made between Wagner’s operatic treatment of the story and Claudel’s play. Wagner’s opera and Claudel’s play have an obvious structural similarity: Act One involves the fatal recognition on board a ship; Act Two takes place in the opera in a garden, which Claudel transforms into a cemetery; Act Three registers the wound and death of the hero. But there are significant differences. As a young man Claudel, like so many of his contemporaries, was drawn to Wagner’s music. It was a moment in French cultural history when orchestral pieces were played at popular concerts, “discharging torrents of dream, of nostalgia and of unfounded sentimentality on imaginations open to them,” and it is at this moment that “the Wagnerian opium had begun its poisonous role.” Now these remarks were made by Claudel in 1939 and reflect a detachment from first encounters during which he found in Wagner and Beethoven his “only rays of hope and consolation” at a moment when materialism and naturalism were dominant forces, and when Darwin, Spencer, Renan, and Taine were masters. For the young Claudel, Wagner evoked the memory of God, of

a lost paradise, and of the true life. But with the passing years, a plainly visible detoxification will take place. By 1938, Claudel will say of the forces in play in Wagner's Tristan: “I once admired this, today I find it idiotic.” And it is in particular the resolution of the opera that Claudel found detestable. More than once, he will rail against the “braying of that great ass, Tristan” in the third act. Claudel cannot accept the welcoming of nothingness and unconsciousness exalted at the end of the opera. Of Wagner’s many operas, it is Tannhäuser Claudel admires most, since the opera is marked by such clear dualisms, especially between terrestres and célestes, between carnal love and transcendent love. For Claudel, drama means tension, the conflict of forces in opposition, and it is certainly tension and conflict that we feel in Partage de midi. The lovers themselves seem locked in a kind of battle for ascendancy. Mesa gets the final word in the first version of the play when he sees himself in the very last words of the work as “the great male in the glory of God/Man in the splendour of August/Victorious spirit in the transfiguration of Noon”. But this “victory” will not be accomplished without formidable struggle and division. I would like first, however, to establish the biographical facts that underlie the literary composition.

II

As a young diplomat assigned to a consular post in China, Claudel will become intimately involved with a beautiful woman of Polish/Scottish origins, named Rosalie Agnès Theresa Ścibor-Rylska, who was born in 1871 in Krakow. The affair is adulterous, since Rosalie is a married woman. Her husband is an unethical schemer, named Francis Vetch, a man bent on making a fortune in China by any means. Rosalie has had six children by Francis Vetch, two of whom have died at birth. Claudel will have met Francis Vetch as early as 1899. It is less clear whether or not he met Rosalie as well at that date. What is certain is that Claudel will reconnect with Francis Vetch, together with his wife and their children, in 1900 on board the steam ship Ernest-Simons on a return trip to China after a critical moment spent in France. During this period in France,

Claudel will seriously consider a vocation to the monastic life, and as an oblate at the Abbey Saint Martin in Ligugé, he will spend time in deep reflection on the possibility of pursuing this life until hearing while at prayer what he believes to be a categorical refusal. Years later, Claudel will remember this rejection as “rien de positif, simplement: non. Pas autre chose.” He will live this sense of refusal with bitterness and disorientation. “I had in me the strength of a great hope,” Mesa will say in the first act of Partage de midi, “and it’s gone.”

I have got to return to the same place. Nothing accomplished.
And here I am, sent back naked, with the old life,
Dried out, with no other instruction
But the old life to be started again, o God!
Life cut off from life,
My God, waiting for nothing but
You alone who want none of me,
With a heart wounded, with a strength crippled!

It is in this state of mind that Claudel will return to his post as vice-consul in Fuzhou, China. And in the endless days on board the Ernest-Simons he will be side by side with a beautiful and very alluring woman, in the constant proximity of her “face and her warmth”. The Vetch couple will wind up with Claudel in Fuzhou, and Francis Vetch will depend on Claudel for assistance as he tries to find ways of advancing his fortunes. Claudel will in fact lodge the couple, together with their children, in his official residence, and the affair with Rosalie will be facilitated by the numerous absences of her husband. The situation is sufficiently scandalous as to cause alarm in the diplomatic hierarchy. The affair will last for the better part of four years, but Rosalie will leave Fuzhou, pregnant with Paul Claudel’s child, on August 1st, 1904, never to return. She will take two of her children with her and leave two behind. What is most astonishing is that somewhere on her travels back to Europe, she will meet a Dutch merchant, named John W. Lintner, and agree to live with and be protected by him. Within no time, there is no response from her, and most of Claudel’s own letters will be returned unopened.

It is in a state of complete anguish and despair that Claudel will learn of “the horrible betrayal” from one of Rosalie’s aunts. He will pursue Rosalie in the company of her husband! to find that she has settled with Lintner in Brussels. Lintner will write to the Quai d’Orsay in Paris to denounce Claudel’s behaviour with regard to the Vetch family, offering to submit, if necessary, Claudel’s private correspondence with Rosalie and the “injurious” letters he has been writing to her. He asks formally for protection for Rosalie and her children, adding to his petition the unwanted and inappropriate advances of the husband from whom Rosalie is seeking a divorce. Claudel will return to France in acute misery and distress, soon seeking the support of close friends and religious advisers. He will also begin the therapeutic exercise of writing first drafts of the play that will become *Partage de midi*.

The first complete version, distributed privately, certainly registers the excesses of emotion that Leo Baeck identifies as a function of a religious temperament of the romantic sort. In the second act, Mesa professes his love for Ysé in the following way:

And here I am at the end of my strength like a starving man unable to
Hold back his tears at the sight of food.
Oh column! Oh power of my beloved! It’s ungodly. It’s unjust. I
should meet you!
What should I call you? A mother, because that’s a fine thing to have.
And a sister? I’m holding you, this round feminine arm between my
hands.
And a prey, the smoke of your life comes up through my nostrils, and
I’m trembling feeling you weaker like a yielding quarry I have by the neck!

And Claudel will have Ysé say:

I am Ysé, your soul!
And what are others to us? You are unique and I am unique.
And I hear your voice in my entrails like a cry that cannot be endured.
And I raise myself toward you like an enormous, desiring,
Dumbfounded creature.
And what we desire isn’t to create but to destroy and ha!
It’s not happiness I bring but your death and mine with it.
And what care I if I cause you to die
And me, and everything, and so what, so long as at that price,
Which is you, me, given, thrown, ripped, lacerated, consumed, I feel your soul, in a moment that is all eternity, touch my soul.

Claudel’s first readers were immensely moved by this exalted rhetoric. André Gide wrote enthusiastically and seemingly without irony: “On certain pages of your play, I feel that trembling of Moses before the burning bush…” And André Suarès was equally enthralled: “What a dazzling confession!...You appear in total nakedness. It’s not a play and it’s more than a play. I feel I’m at some magnificent requiem mass. Mesa’s Canticle is worthy of Dante, of the Bible.” Suarès perceptively notes the presence of a fifth character, who, though invisible, is omnipresent. “At the hour of noon that seems shadowless, the shadow of God is everywhere: He is the hero of the tragedy.” Readers over many generations have shared these feelings and have an unshaken preference for this first version of the play.

III

The real-life drama does not end here, however, since after thirteen years of silence, Rosalie will write to Claudel while he is serving as the French Minister in Brazil, and their relationship will enter a new phase. Though Claudel is now a married man with children, he will reconnect with Rosalie in 1920, and their physical intimacy will resume briefly, before stopping altogether in 1921 when Claudel is made French Ambassador to Japan. It is from this moment forward that Claudel envisions a relationship on a purely spiritual level where his hope is for a peaceful union in heaven. “The joy we were not able to have in this world,” he writes to her as early as 1920, “we’ve put on reserve for eternity.” And in 1921, he will add “how beautiful it would be to be able to sleep together…, buried spiritually in each other’s arms, in a deep peacefulness, everything between us atoned for and forgiven.” This period of reconnection and mutual examination of the turbulent events of 1900–1904 will lead to

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11 Op cit, p. 257.
a time of emotional appeasement in Claudel, a better understanding of Rosalie’s actions in 1904, and to a sense of gratitude toward her for leaving him, something he acknowledges he would have been incapable of doing himself. Claudel now views her decision to leave him as heroic, and as inspired by God. Increasingly, he will come to see the passion he felt for her as an experience of love that allowed the rigid and egotistical man he had become to understand the reality of someone other than himself. In his great canticle in the last act of the play, Mesa will exclaim,

And because I was an egotist, this is how you punish me  
By the dreadful love of another!

Rosalie will continue to inspire a great deal of Claudel’s writing, in particular his renowned epic drama, *The Satin Slipper*, published in 1929 and staged in 1943, where her redemptive role is underscored.

The truth, however, is that with the years that pass, the person called Rosalie Vetch, who exists in real time and space, will become an increasing disappointment and burden for Paul Claudel. To his credit, he will provide support for her and their daughter Louise until Rosalie’s death in 1951, and he will ensure continuing care for Louise until her death in 1996. He will in fact use his influence to help the careers of Rosalie’s children by Francis Vetch, and his generosity will extend even to assistance for Rosalie’s child by John W. Lintner, his rival. Reading the many years of Claudel’s correspondence with Rosalie, one is painfully aware of the gradual ebbing of rapturous devotion, surely brought on in part by the endless requests for financial support. Already in a letter of 1921, Claudel seems aware that he has very little in common with the woman he otherwise associates with the physical incarnation of his own soul. “You say we are alike, and it’s true, but how different we are as well, especially in religious matters.” And he continues in a disturbingly misogynist vein, “At bottom, I think that the majority of women don’t have much religious feeling…. Their lovers, their children, and for most women, the clothes they wear, are the primary and sole interests of existence.”


13 *Op cit*, p. 146. Claudel’s remark reminds one of a similar observation made by Baudelaire in one of his “intimate notebooks”: “I’ve always been amazed that women are allowed to go into churches. What conversation could they
angel, the star of my life whom I will love forever” in 1921 will be addressed more distantly in much later letters and without the passionate salutations and valedictions of an earlier time. What a painful evolution for Claudel to have outlived his ecstatic dream and to have finished in an attitude of bitterness and indifference toward the one who was once his great love and source of poetic inspiration! This imposition of real life upon exalted artistic recreation explains in part the efforts Claudel made in his revisions of the play for the production of 1948 to diminish some of the high-flying rhetoric and to cast Mesa more clearly as narrow-minded, self-centred, and small and Ysé as the woman chosen by God, but “drawn by lots,” to correct and chasten that egotism.

IV

The title of Claudel’s play, *Partage de midi*, is meant to underscore a crucial turning point. The four main characters are in the middle of their lives, at its decisive juncture. The catholic Mesa, in particular, realizes that, like Dante, he is “nel mezzo del cammin”. They all can feel that they have arrived at “Noon: at the centre of [their] lives”. They are together at this moment “cut off from the earth” with nothing but water behind and before them. Ysé, it should be noted, is an orphan. “I didn’t have parents to raise me,” she says in the first act, “I’m a foreigner, I don’t use every word as I should.” Like the others, she is constantly on the move “without having been able to settle anywhere.” Claudel has commented on the meaning of the names he has assigned to his characters. They each, he feels, represent some idea of middle or break. Ysé in Greek means equal. Mesa means half. The syllables in Amalric’s name divide into three separate syllables. De Ciz evokes cutting, as the French word for scissors is *ciseaux*.

In the earliest manuscript version of the play, Claudel had originally imagined three main characters: Mesa, the husband called Legrand, and Ysé who are dramatized in only the first two acts. Amalric is present in the second manuscript version, and he is an all-important addition because he allows Claudel to create a third act. The character Amalric may be based in part on a fellow companion on the *Ernest-Simons*, a loquacious


14 *Lettres à Ysé*, p.204.
and jovial personage, named Marie-Auguste Castanier, but by the second manuscript version of the play, Claudel is aware of the presence of John W. Lintner in Rosalie Vetch’s life and may even have caught a glimpse of him in Brussels. Amalric becomes the rival in *Partage de midi*, and he will do battle with Mesa for control of Ysé.

If the first two acts of the play are based quite closely on real life events, the same cannot be said of the third act. In the 1906 version of the play, Claudel creates an imaginary reconnection between Mesa and Ysé and the consecration of a marriage between them that will persist beyond death. Claudel composes this resolution having lost all contact with the real life Ysé, Rosalie Vetch. The ending is therefore a purely phantasmic conjecture. By 1948, Claudel will have long reestablished a relationship with Rosalie and have pursued it in an increasingly diminished form until shortly before her death. For the version of 1948, Claudel benefits not only from perspectives and explanations given by Rosalie, especially during the 1920s, but also from the vantage point provided by more than forty years of distance from the events that gave rise to the first version of the play. In the 1948 version of the play, the lovers see each other as instruments provided by God to inspire them toward heaven. They will have understood that their love for one another, if absolutized, will lead only to frustration, but because of this recognition, they will learn to redirect their love to its true object which is God.

What is especially striking about the third act, in all of its versions, is the way in which the act is placed in the background of an insurrection in China. The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) was a recent memory that the consul Paul Claudel would have been painfully aware of. It marked the resistance of some Chinese in the North to the foreign, imperialist presence in China, especially in the form of Christian missionaries. (During the period in 1900 when he is considering monastic life, Claudel’s spiritual counsellors at Ligugé advised him to remember his duties in China at such a grave and critical moment.) Throughout the play, Claudel will underscore and expose the racist, exploitative nature of the colonialists. In Act Three, Ysé is with Amalric as the two prepare for death. Rather than succumbing to the approaching insurrectionists, they have decided to blow themselves up in their house to avoid capture. Ysé lives in terror of “all those yellow bodies all together like a cake swarming with maggots… you’d say they don’t have real blood.” Despite the fact that *Partage de midi* concerns itself with a private and passionate love affair, its cultural setting is never far from sight. Mesa feels disdain for
the colonialists he associates with: “And us, the whites,” he says, “gossips, cynics, in petticoats and trousers, drinkers without thirst, pig eaters!” They are presented as uniformly and basely acquisitive. “We must all get rich! Or if not, it’s our own fault. I mean to make a pile and a half!” says Amalric, who adds “we’re like tigers among weaker animals.”

Obviously instead of this wretched commerce,
It would be better to enter sword in hand, terribly,
Into the old cities melting with human flesh,
Resolved to return with – for one’s own share – four barrels
brim full of jewels, and here and there
a few infidels’ ears and fingers chopped from matrons
and young maidens,
Or perish with honour in the midst of one’s companions!

Future productions of this play will have ample opportunity to bring out this background and to explore the degree to which the impossible and disastrous love affair is a function of its historical and cultural setting.

V

The present translation, the work of many hands and brought together by David Furlong, is based in part on the revisions Claudel made for the staging of the play in 1948 as well as on the first version of 1906, itself the product of many reworkings by Claudel. The first version, the one François Mauriac said was for “les connaisseurs de Dieu,” has an intensity missing in the later revisions, and this is because, as I have said, Claudel was understanding the experience that gave rise to the play in a new way, and from the perspective of being so many years removed from it. But it should also be noted that the first version has often proved difficult to perform in English translation, critics finding the language somewhat stilted and laboriously “metaphysical”. “More poem than play,” Susannah York has remarked, “a glorious metaphysical piece rich in characterization and vie intérieure but untheatrical….”

Through the various versions of this play, we can measure the degree to which Claudel is obsessed with the events of 1900-1904 and perceive his ongoing effort to better understand the moments that would structure so much of his future life. The relationship between Ysé and Mesa could easily be viewed as a banal bourgeois drama elevated to the level of mystical passion by an overexcited and deeply romantic religious imagination, but the revisions to the play also allow us to see the poet in dialogue with that imagination.

With this in mind, we thought it would be useful for the reader to compare the way in which the play ends in the 1906 version to the way it ends in the much later revised text. We used the text Claudel published in 1949, which contains revisions to the version created for the production of the play in 1948. We have placed this 1949 revised text as an appendix after the version based largely on the 1906 text. There are many cuts in our translation(s), and some minor liberties have been taken with the French, but these English renderings have been put together with an eye to future productions of the play on English stages.

John Naughton
Break of Noon

Characters:

Yssé
Mesa
Amalric
De Ciz
ACT I

The deck of a large stream ship somewhere in the Indian Ocean heading toward the Far East.
Amalric  My friend, you’ve let him tie you up in knots.
Mesa       It’s not done yet.
Amalric  Then don’t do it. Trust me. I like you, Mesa: Don’t do it.
Mesa       It doesn’t seem to me such a bad deal.
Amalric  But the man who’s making it?
Mesa       Well, he has his qualities.
Amalric  I hate weak people and it scares me.
          Just you do it. Just you go in with that fancy fellow!
          And there you’ll be, like a man with an overflowing
          seltzer bottle, and nowhere to put it down.
          I hear he’s going to move in with you, bag and
          baggage. Bag and baggage, including the wife. I’m warning
          you, Mesa.
          And what do you make of her, the wife?
          Here they are.

Ysé and De Ciz appear on the deck coming up from the first class.

Ysé       Noon.
De Ciz     We will soon reach a viewpoint.

          Boat horn.

Mesa       What a cry in the desert of fire!
De Ciz     Sh! Look!

          Opening the awning.

Ysé       God of our fathers! Don’t open the awning!
Amalric  Blinding. Like a gun flash! That’s not a sun anymore!
De Ciz: It’s lightning! How reduced and consumed one feels, in this blast furnace!

Amalric: Each thing is horribly visible, like a flea between two glass plates.

Mesa: How fine it is! How hard!
The sea, with her resplendent spine,
Is like a stunned cow being branded with the red-hot iron.
And he, you know, her lover they call him, the one whose sculpture you see in the museums,
Baal,
This time he’s not her lover, he’s the executioner sacrificing her! Those are not kisses, it’s the knife in her entrails!
And face to face she returns him blow for blow.
No form, no colour, pure, enormous, fulminating.

Ysé: How hot it is! How many days more to the Minnicoi light?

Mesa: I remember that little night-light on the waters.

De Ciz: Do you know how many more days, Amalric?

Amalric: God, no! And how many days already since we left? I’ve forgotten.

Mesa: The days are so alike, they make only one single huge day, white and black.

Amalric: I adore this huge, motionless day. I’m at my ease. I adore this huge hour without shadow.
I exist, I see.
I am not sweating. I’m smoking my cigar. I am satisfied.

Ysé: Listen to him, satisfied! And you, Mesa?
Are you satisfied? Me, I’m not satisfied!
De Ciz  She’s crazy.  You’d better see about our luggage. The whole ship’s in confusion because of the party this evening.

Mesa  The party? Marvellous! That gives us the whole day with the ship to ourselves. I’m in favour.

De Ciz  My dear, I need your help, really I do.

Ysé  I run! I fly! I must see to my children.  And you two, don’t you stir from here! I’m coming back, I forbid you to stir.

They both exit.

Amalric  There. Is she not charming?

Mesa  You know very well I know nothing about women.

Amalric  That, I’m sure is true. And women will never know anything of you.  I like you, and I know you. Better than you think! – She’s in love with me, that is a fact.  And yet you attract her, it’s funny, she’s frightened of you! And she always wants to know what you think of her.  That’s vexing for me, don’t you think?

Mesa  I think she’s a shameless coquette.

Amalric  You make me laugh with your “shameless coquette”.  You’re off the mark.  My dear man, she’s a superb woman.

Mesa  That’s what you’ve never stopped ramming down my throat since we left Marseille.

Amalric  But it’s true. And you still don’t see it! Well, well! Miles away as you are, I do believe I’ve got that into your head, just a little at last!
The scene you made yesterday evening! And that cigarette she gave you,
You who don’t smoke, how devotedly you finished it!
Come on, don’t be coy!

**Mesa**
You’re being stupid.

**Amalric**
My dear man, say what you like, I only go for blondes.
She’s not a coquette, you watch out! She’s a warrior, she’s a conqueror!
She has to subjugate and tyrannise, or give herself
Clumsily like a great beast!
She’s a thoroughbred, and it would amuse me to mount her, if I had time.
But she is riderless, with all those foals following her about,
She runs free like a naked horse.
I see her shying, smashing everything, smashing herself up.
She’s a foreigner among us.
She’s out of her place and not in her breed.
She’s a wife for a chief; she should have had great duties to bind her, a great gold horse-cloth,
But that husband of hers,
That fancy fellow, that thin Provençal with the soft eyes, a sort of dud engineer and wheeler-dealer.
You can see that for her he’s a vice. All he’s managed is to get her with children.
It’s frightening to see them all on their way to China!
They will not leave you. Be careful with them, my young friend!
– Here they are.

*Ysé re-enters followed by De Ciz carrying her luggage.*

**Ysé**
Laughing, after looking at each of them one by one.

Me, I’m not satisfied!
*(Pointing at Mesa.) And here’s another one who’s unsatisfied. (Pointing at De Ciz.) And another who’s unsatisfied.*
It bothers him, fetching and carrying for me! The gentleman is not content. Why is he not content? He always looks as if he’s pretending to smile. But I am content. But I am contented, like it or not!

_She laughs out loud._

**Mesa** You are content and Amalric is satisfied.

**De Ciz** Because he’s successful.

**Amalric** Me? I was cleaned out last year. Rinsed like a beer-glass! Heigh-ho! I’m starting again.

**Mesa** Contented, because he is needed.

**Amalric** Because he is busy, quite simply! A lot of things that I need, A lot of things that need me.

**Ysé** Amalric, you will be successful. You know how to use your hands. What you do you do well. I like a person who can use his hands.

**Mesa** He has pleasing hands. (Because life is like a cow And she knows all about not getting milked unless she wishes.)

**De Ciz** He’s well sprung. He’s assured of his place everywhere, no matter where!

**Ysé** And I have no place anywhere. A deck chair tied to a piece of luggage, a bunch of keys in my hand bag. For the last ten years, that has been my household and my hearth!

**Mesa** _Pointing at the sun._ Hearth? There is our hearth, straying flock that we are! Alight and drawing splendidly isn’t it?