COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE, **SACRIFICE, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN** THE WORKS OF PAUL CLAUDEL

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Claudel's career as a writer spanned almost seventy years, from the 1880s to the 1950s. The publication of his collected works now runs to twenty-nine large volumes, excluding his correspondence and diaries, so a brief overview of any particular dimension of his writing must necessarily be reductive. On the other hand, Claudel's work lends itself particularly well to discussion in terms of the relationship between violence, sacrifice and religion. In a valuable study published more than twenty years ago under the title, *Claudel et l'usurpateur*, Jacques Petit drew attention to the recurrence in Claudel's plays, and in many of his non- fictional writings, of a narrative structure hinging on acts of usurpation and counter-usurpation. There is a pattern of conrlictual rivalry, domination and coercion, whereby acts of aggression are ultimately legitimized, or in some sense excused, in the light of a positive outcome, providential necessity and/or reconciliation between usurper and victim. Claudel's world is indeed "a world of violence," as Petit puts it (79, ch. title).[1] It is also a world of religion: after his return to the Catholic Church m 1890, all of Claudel's major dramatic works intermesh the process of usurpation with themes deriving from his religious beliefs, and the same is true of many of his non-fictional writings.

My aim is not to reinvent the wheel by going back over all of the terrain mapped out by Petit. Nor do I intend to rework Petit's empirical model wholesale in the light of René Girard's anthropological model of mimetic desire and sacrificial violence, although there are obvious areas of convergence between them. However, I shall draw implicitly on both, in order to

[1] Translations throughout this paper are my own.

argue that the notion of sacrifice, which is central to the resolution of rivalries in Claudel's major plays, is transformed into an idiosyncratic conception of international conflict resolution in various non-fictional writings which emerge from his forty years of experience in his parallel career as a profes sional diplomat.[2] I shall start with a schematic discussion of certain features of the plays.

The first point relates to Claudel's assumptions concerning the mecha-nisms involved in the outbreak of individual or collective violence. It needs to be emphasized that in his plays the path towards violence is always opened by a withdrawal or weakening of temporal and/or spiritual authority. This allows the crystallization, and the direct expression, of latent rivalries which eventually lead to an explosion of aggression. The causes of the violence invariably center on the fact that one individual or group is in possession of an object which is coveted by another individual or group.

The question of whether Claudel himself appears to recognize a mimetic element in this pattern of behavior would be too complex, and too fraught with imponderables, to discuss here, but there are some indications that he does so. Whatever the case, in the absence of authority, rivalry and jealousy engender verbal, and usually physical conflict, culminating in usurpation of the desired object. Thus, for example, in *Tête d'or,* the elderly Emperor of the unnamed kingdom has neither the authority nor the resolution to defend his kingdom against external invasion, or against the man who saves the kingdom only to usurp the throne and murder the Emperor himself.[3] Similarly, in the second version of *La Ville,* neither Besme, the positivistic scientist and plutocrat who has created the godless City, nor his brother Lambert, the former politician, has the will to maintain or defend the society against the tensions emerging within it. Thus, the City dissolves first into immobility, then revolution. Or again, in the family drama of *La Jeune Fille Violaine* (second version), the obsessional rage and jealousy of Mara towards her elder sister, Violaine, explodes into coercion, slander, and horrific violence when their father absents himself from the farm for an indefinite period, leaving Violaine to marry Jacques Hury: the fact that Hury loves Violaine, but does not love Mara, makes the latter all the more determined to take him from her sister.

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[2] The most valuable general source for Claudel's **diplomatic career is the biography by Antoine, though Moreau** is also useful.

[3] **All of the plays are collected in Claudel, *Théâtre,* vols. 1 and 2. Lioure remains a useful general study of Claudel's plays.**

The same play also illustrates another feature of Claudel's dramas; namely, that when the aggressor obtains the coveted object by defeating the rival, the initial act of violence is invariably followed by further violence sooner or later. Violaine, coerced by Mara into allowing Jacques to believe her unfaithful, is blinded and driven from the home by Mara. She eventually becomes a hermit in the forest, where she keeps company only with God, but performs miraculous cures of the sick, including the healing of Mara's own child. Yet, Mara subsequently lures her to a deserted spot and smashes her skull on a boulder, because she still perceives Violaine as a rival so long as she is alive.

Other plays show variant manifestations of the self-perpetuating nature of individual and collective violence, whether physical or verbal. When the object of desire is a person, the usurper may in turn lose the loved one to another rival, as Mesa, having detached Ysé from her husband, de Ciz, loses her to Amalric in *Partage de midi,* for example. And even then it may not be over, since a rival is only definitively eliminated once dead. In *Partage de midi* Mesa returns, as does Georges de Coûfontaine after losing his fiancée, Sygne, to Turelure in *L'Otage.* Likewise, in other types of situations violence is also self-perpetuating. So, in *Tête d'or,* Simon Agnel is not content with usurping a kingdom: that is merely the first step in a titanic drive to conquer the world with fire and sword. Or, in *La Ville,* the revolutionary overthrow of the established order is only the prelude to fourteen years of civil war, which is explained in terms which hint at the destructive force of mimetic desire, as a character remarks: "Once the individual [was] unleashed, what possession of his own was so large that his neighbor's did not appear better?" (470).

Nevertheless, as Petit observes, the dramas conclude with some form of reconciliation or quasi-justification of what has occurred, however attenuated or parodic it may be. This would be impossible if Claudel did not rely so heavily on the notion of sacrifice. Take *La Ville,* for example: in this play, after the years of revolution and civil war, the City itself has been reduced to rubble, and the faction led by Avare has forced the other survivors under its authority. Avare himself has no desire to participate in a new society, and withdraws into solitude, bequeathing his sword of authority to his adoptive son, Ivors. But the future goal of the society is only determined when Coeuvre, the poet-turned-bishop, reappears to convert the ex-revolutionaries to Christianity and endorse Ivors's temporal authority. The seal is set on the whole process when Coeuvre retrospectively redefines the destruction of the City in specifically sacrificial terms which presume that the process of immolation had served God's providential purpose by clearing the path

towards a truly Christian society, regardless of the conscious intentions of the revolutionaries. Thus, his words:

> Oh God, accept these bloodstained hands, accept these sacrificers!
>
> For they have accomplished a task which is agreeable to you, striking down the Beast which was seated among the hills, the city of Henoch, the horrible, toilsome monster of the Dream,
>
> The squirming Hydra, the City that vomits smoke ! And now, in place of the shapeless cry,
>
> Here is the revelation of the word spoken; in place of dreams
>
> The Truth and the reality of what is. (486)

Sacrifice may also be presented as a vocation of the saintly. To cite the case of *La Jeune Fille Violaine* again, the death of the heroine at the hands of her sister is explicitly represented as the culmination of a God-given calling to self-consecration through sacrifice for others, and is the spiritual foundation for the reconstitution of the family. It is also shown that, regardless of their conscious motivation, Mara's actions towards Violaine have served God's providential design by cutting the bonds of human love which tied her to the world. Indeed, Mara receives forgiveness from Jacques, albeit in a grudging, humiliating manner, explicitly at Violaine's behest.

Several of Claudel's plays have a specified historical setting which is in some measure enmeshed with the interaction of the central characters. Here too, the precondition is a weakening or absence of central authority, which permits the reign of rivalry, the spread of violence, and eventual resolution through the medium of sacrifice. Thus, in *L'Annonce faite à Marie,* a reworking of *Violaine,* the historical setting is the division of France in the early fifteenth century, which Claudel sets in parallel with the Great Schism of the Catholic Church. Through the communion of saints Violaine's passive suffering is linked to the active role of Jeanne d'Arc in the reunification of France, which is itself set in parallel with the reunification of the Catholic Church.

To take another obvious case, the references to the French Revolution, the Napoleonic period and the Restoration in *L'Otage* reflect a similar structure. The overthrow of the *ancien régime* in 1789 is attributed on one level, in an explanation given by the Pope to the royalist aristocrat, Georges de Coûfontaine, to the withdrawal of the King from God, and God's withdrawal from the King (248). Alternatively, as described by the former revolutionary, Toussaint Turelure, it had been the fault of the old system for being so ramshackle and for offering such a temptation to shake it up, then

collapsing completely when it was duly given a shaking (259). As to the consequences of the Revolution, Georges makes the claim that, having destroyed a society based on principles of Christian charity, personal bonds of loyalty, duty, and hierarchy, the new system has provided an entirely inadequate substitute by basing itself on the impersonal, secular rule of law, coupled with the sterile principle of civil and juridical equality, which merely leads in practice to the reign of rivalry, jealousy, and force. He laments:

> You have heard this doctrine with horror,
> That everyone holds the same right equally by nature,
> So that the right of others is a wrong done to him.
> Thus, there is no longer anything to give. There is no longer anything gratuitous between people. (246)

And later:

> I look around me and there is no society between people any more,
> But only the "law", as they say, and the text printed on a machine, the inanimate will, a stupid idol.
> Where the law is, there is no longer any affection.
> And the law of God was hard before Jesus Christ freed us from it. What will the law of man be like?
> What society, where everyone believes it is at the expense of his own charter? And force cannot replace sacrifice.
> As you can see with this man *[Napoleon]* who, as soon as he has taken one thing, is obliged to take all the rest,
> And to reconquer the world at every instant to guarantee a single step. (247)

Turelure's behavior amply illustrates the predatory way **of** thinking **to** which Georges refers. He is himself a senior official under Napoleon, "the Usurper" (239, 300), but while the Emperor is absent, pursuing his military campaigns, Turelure is willing to betray him by handing over Paris to the besieging forces of the Allies. In this play, the resolution is presented **in ironic form.** There is an ambiguously motivated act of sacrifice, whereby Sygne de Coûfontaine—who has already submitted to marrying Turelure two years earlier, in breach of her vows to Georges, in order to save the **Pope from** Napoleon's clutches—throws **herself in front of** a bullet aimed by Georges at Turelure. **The** way therefore remains open for a restoration **of the**

monarchy on constitutional terms dictated by Turelure, and under circumstances which make a mockery of the fine words spoken at the ceremony to greet the King's entry into Paris.

However, in anticipation of Claudel's thinking on international conflict resolution, the example which is particularly relevant here is *Le Soulier de satin*, a massive, triumphalist work, set amid the European wars of religion in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. With the positive, unifying authority of Rome under attack by the negative, divisive force of Protestantism radiating out from Germany, Europe is in turmoil. What is interesting here is the way in which the internal conflicts which divide Europe are correlated with the outward drive of Spain and other Catholic powers to conquer the world and evangelize it at swordpoint. This is made quite explicit when the Viceroy of Naples proclaims: "Attacked by brigands in one place, the Catholic Church is defending itself with the world!" (749). What is more, Lutheran Saxony, portrayed as a seething enclosed mass of negative energy, is nevertheless depicted as necessary to the positive military-evangelical drive of Spain at the head of Catholic Europe, as it reaches out to Asia, Africa and the Americas. Hence, St Boniface declares of Saxony's role: "That is why at the moment when Europe is conquering the Earth, God has placed this contradiction in the middle of her, so that her heart will be strong enough for this new body" (786). The supposition here is that war is itself the expression of a form of interdependence between the rival forces, and that they are involved in a collective enterprise.[4]

A bizarre corollary to this idea is also outlined in the play by the central character, Rodrigue. Under the illusion that the Armada has succeeded, and that he is to be Viceroy of a defeated Britain, he demands that the King of Spain should not only seek reconciliation with Britain, but with all the cramped, heresy-torn nations of Europe by opening up the Americas to them. If the European peoples cannot be united at their sources, he argues, then they can at least be united at their outlets. God has not placed the New World at Spain's disposal for the King of Spain alone, according to Rodrigue: it is too large for one man's appetite. Following the metaphor of dining, he points out that the Americas are large enough to provide a huge meal for everyone. "Feed your enemies," he tells the King, "Then they will not come interrupting your meal, and snatch the food from your mouth" (931). But the image of

[4] For discussion of the development of Claudel's thinking on the place of war in the historical process, the interdependence of rival belligerents, etc., as well as his thinking on the other international issues raised in this paper, see Flood, *Pensée politique*, using a non-Girardian analytical framework.

America becomes an altar as well as a dining table, when Rodrigue cries euphorically: "The Good Lord did not invite us to cross the sea after Columbus for nothing! I want all the nations to celebrate Easter around the table which He [God] had prepared for us between the Two Oceans!" (932). To put it another way, however, the New World would not only serve as a bargaining-counter and as a shared resource: in effect, it would also be a structural counterpart of the sacrificial victim which functions as the repository for collective violence.

The presentation of Rodrigue's scheme contains an element of parody. The stage directions show that it is to be played in a burlesque way. In any case, the audience knows the Armada has already failed, and the King is luring Rodrigue to his downfall. This duly occurs, obliging Rodrigue to turn to matters of the soul. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that, in mocking Rodrigue's exorbitant scheme, Claudel was also mocking himself. The idea of resolving conflicts between rival powers by substituting collaboration for competition through co-operative imperialism has parallels in his own non-fictional writings.

Between 1904 and 1905, while serving as a consul in China, Claudel had been the principal co-author of a draft for a book on Chinese affairs in which he had been preoccupied by the need for ending the anarchical rivalry among the imperialist powers which were vying with each other for control of ever greater areas of China, and thereby reducing the country itself to ruin. Instead, he believed they should be brought by stages to collaborate with each other in rebuilding China along modern lines, and collectively administering it for their own, and China's benefit.[5] Similarly, only two years after completing *Le Soulier,* he was the author of a long diplomatic memorandum, dated 13 September 1925 (see "Note sur la collaboration franco-allemande"), arguing that France should seek détente with Germany by involving the former enemy in the development of the French empire. In part, the aim would be to compensate Germany for the loss of her own empire, and to prevent her from coveting an asset which France had neither the will nor the resources to utilize fully. By the same token, it would ease trading relations

[5] The book, "Livre sur la Chine," was originally conceived in collaboration with Philippe Berthelot, but after completing several drafts, Claudel left it unpublished until 1948, when it appeared in politically emasculated form under the title, *Sous le signe du dragon.* The drafts **are lodged at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. The final text** is reprinted in *Oeuvres.* **For** detailed analysis of this **work, and** of the extent **to which** it anticipates ***Le Soulier de satin,*** see **Flood,** "The Dialectics"; and *Pensée politique,* for further discussion of Claudel's thinking on **the** future of China. These analyses both refute the widely quoted, but inaccurate account given in Gadoffre 143-72.

between France and Germany, while allowing Germany to work off her war reparations to France, then make a long-term profit.[6] At a later date, during France's dispute with the USA over the question of France's own unpaid war debts to her former ally, he outlined a proposal for inviting the USA to participate in another scheme for joint development of the French empire.[7]

Needless to say, given their diplomatic context, none of the projects were depicted in terms of religious sacrifice. In any case, they did not involve the literal immolation of a victim, but merely the consolidation of the victim's subordination as the price of receiving the notional benefits of European hegemony. There was no element of sacralization involved, except in the purely figurative sense that the agreements would have been sealed by formal treaties had they been concluded. Furthermore, unlike the Catholic sacrificial victims in Claudel's plays, the countries being subjected to collective absorption had not consciously accepted their vocation for the role of victim (although it could be inferred that their "backwardness" in relation to Europe or the USA meant that they deserved or needed to be dominated). Nevertheless, the intention to convert violent rivalry into peaceful co-operation through the use of the victim has a similar structure to that of sacrifice, and *Le Soulier* provides evidence of the link in Claudel's mind. Weak, geopolitically marginal territories were being offered in each case for collective exploitation by great powers which were themselves at odds with each other. In the Chinese case the solution was being offered in respect of the situation of rivalry in the Far East only, without reference to correlative effects elsewhere in the world. But in the other two cases collaborative imperial development was being proposed as a solution to problems within Europe or between France and America: in other words, Claudel was operating on the assumption that if imperialism by individual states displaced territorial rivalries between great powers from one part of the world to another, the corollary must be that if the great powers cooperated in the imperial sphere, the process could alleviate rivalries between them at home.

However, the structure could also be conceived in a somewhat different way. For Claudel, as we have seen, sharing an object of desire expresses a form of bond between the rivals themselves. That is why he sees it as possible and desirable in the international sphere for reciprocal violence to be converted into co-operation through collaborative domination of a weaker

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[6] For analysis of the document in relation to Claudel's anti-German war poetry, see Flood, "Poetry, Drama, Diplomacy."

[7] Untitled, undated draft memorandum on France's war debts, held at Bibliothèque Nationale.

power. Conversely, it follows that such a process can equally be engendered if a weaker country, or group of countries, actively, and one might almost say seductively, seeks to use its subjection to serve as an instrument of reconcilia tion between the rival powers which dominate it. Two versions of this notion emerge in Claudel's writings after the Second World War. One related to the future of Europe, and the other to the newly formed state of Israel.

Claudel had long believed in the need for European unification in some form or other. During the 1920s he had already seen it as a political, economic and diplomatic necessity in order to promote collective prosperity, to prevent wars and to generate order in place of international anarchy. Beyond that, he saw Europe as the hub of the Christian world, with a spiritual mission to develop closer contact with all of the other continents. More broadly, he had been developing an essentially dialectical conception of history as development towards unity through conflict and reconciliation, materialism and spirituality, destruction and rebirth.[8] This explains why an article entitled "Après la victoire," which he published in *Le Monde illustré* on 23 June 1945, announced unequivocally that the recent war had marked a decisive step in the providential unification of mankind. The struggle at the center of continental Europe had sucked in other nations, so that the resolution of the conflict had eventually been achieved by external forces, and Europe's future would now lie under the control of two enormous power blocks—the Anglo- American, with its colonies and other dependencies on one side, and the Russian on the other. He was not unaware of the potential rivalry of the two blocks, but he argued that this would be temporary, and itself constitute "a phase in the progress of our world's awareness of its overall solidarity" (290). Eventually, he maintained, instead of being pulled apart at the center by the effect of bipolar division, Europe's role should be to function as the unifying link between the two polarities, providing the channel for what he called "rivers of merchandise, ideas and suggestions" (294).

In the case of Israel, a somewhat similar vision was at work, as Claudel sought to translate his own residual anti-Semitism into an idiosyncratically pro-Zionist stance. During the war he had been revolted by the inhumanity and injustice of the persecution of Jews in France. Indeed, he had written to the Chief Rabbi, Isaïe Schwarz, on 24 December 1941 as an expression of

[8] See Flood, "Apocalyptic and **Millenarian Tendencies,"** for an overview of **this aspect of Claudel's** historical thought.

solidarity (letter reproduced in Galpérine 325-6).[9] But on another level he was tempted to see the immense sufferings of the Jews throughout the war as a collective sacrifice tantamount to an absolution, preparing their way for conversion to Christianity. It would thus end their role as the supreme embodiment of man's stubborn refusal of salvation, and so would terminate their function as what he called "a scapegoat to be expelled into the desert, loaded with the sin of all peoples" (*Paul Claudel interroge* 342). After the **end** of **the war, he** ascribed enormous providential as **well** as political significance to the struggle in Palestine from 1947 through 1949. Claudel was **the** author of a number of public declarations of solidarity with the Jewish struggle, and privately, he even advocated the eventual extension of the Jewish state to the whole of the Holy Land.[10] He also continued to speculate on the historical meaning of the events which were occurring. Admittedly, by 1949 he had repudiated the idea of an imminent conversion of the Jews, but **he** continued to assert that their return from exile was linked to their vocation, **as** God's chosen race, to fulfill an ecumenical mission to the rest of mankind in **its** search for unity. In *Une voix sur Israel,* a commentary on the Book of Isaiah published in 1950, he argued that they should accomplish this, firstly by rebuilding the Holy Sepulchre so that Israel could become a meeting-place **for** pilgrims from all over the world; and secondly—a suggestion which caused offense in some Jewish circles because it smacked too much of anti-Semitic stereotypes—by making Israel the financial crossroads of the world, **true** to their historic role as intermediaries in this vital sphere of activity.[11]

All of this may appear strange, and unpalatable, especially when presented in a highly condensed fashion. But it has its own logic, which can be summarized as follows. Jealousies arise in connection with convergent

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[9] The collection of documents and critical studies in Galpérine provides valuable background concerning Claudel's complex perception of Jews, but can be usefully supplemented by reference to relevant sections of Petit, *Bernanos,* and of my *Pensée politique* (which gives due weight to the antisemitic dimension of Claudel's thinking).

[10] See "Un message de Paul Claudel;" "La Réponse de Paul Claudel." *La Riposte,* which published the two articles, was produced by the *Ligue française pour la Palestine libre,* **of which** Claudel was an early member. See also Nantet, containing a declaration in favor of the Israelis authorized by Claudel; and Chouraqui, "La Méditation de Paul Claudel" (summary of several interviews with Claudel). Chouraqui's "La Voix de Claudel" recounts that Claudel had told him in 1951 of his desire to see Israel possess the entire Holy Land (188).

[11] The book was subsequently incorporated into *L'Evangile d'Isaïe* and reprinted in *Oeuvres.* See Galpérine 175-95 and 340-56 for Jewish reactions, and Claudel's defense of his good intentions; also Rabi, **for** criticisms of the Jewish contributors to *La Figure d'Israël* for their excessively sympathetic treatment of Claudel's ideas.

desires. Rivalries crystallize when authority is weak or absent, so that mutual dependence is translated into mutual loathing. Once violence has started between individuals or groups, it does not stop until some party to the conflict is destroyed. However, if the victim is designated as a shared object of sacrifice, then, ideally, the conflicting parties are bound back together in a higher form of unity which teleologically justifies the conflict itself by being the necessary end which could have been achieved in no other way.

In the world of international relations Claudel observed the interplay of rivalries between great powers in the absence of an effective, overarching authority. He could see that international conflicts spread easily, and that they can be projected from one part of the Earth to another. Moreover, rivalry over a desired territorial prize could damage the prize itself, as well as the rival claimants. On the other hand, he could see that the very magnitude of modern wars paradoxically testified to the fact that nations were becoming increasingly interdependent. Furthermore, by disrupting established patterns of interaction, wars could open the way for closer relations in peace.

In general terms, Claudel favored almost any form of supranational organization so long as it was ordered and coherent. But in the cases of specific rivalries between great powers or blocs in the absence of any higher authority to arbitrate, he believed that ongoing, active collaboration was the best means of mitigating the propensity for conflict. A valuable instrument for this purpose was the use of a weaker, marginal territory to **fulfill a similar** unifying function to the religious sacrifice, by serving as the basis for constructing a new order. Just as the efficacy of religious sacrifice is deemed to extend in time beyond the moment of the ritual itself, because it generates or regenerates community, so too, in its own sphere, the signing of an agreement between two or more powers to exploit a third has potential efficacy in preventing violence, precisely because it translates into an ongoing process of collaboration which makes negative interdependence positive. But, whereas the sacrificial victim endures physical destruction, the territory designated as an object of collaborative imperialism may derive material benefits in exchange for a more limited destruction or erosion of its autochthonous culture. Finally, in its attenuated form, as envisioned in my last two cases, we find the victim further transformed into intermediary, as the common object of convergent desires actively seduces the potential rivals, converts their shared desire into a positive bond between them, and derives profit for itself in the process. In this way, Claudel imagined the paradoxical triumph and survival of the victim.

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