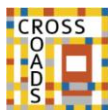


The Tidings Brought To Mary

A play by Paul Claudel



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Love as the Generator of What is Human:
A Reading of Paul Claudel's *The Tidings Brought to Mary*

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I used this text a lot when I taught high school. Objectively, *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is one of the greatest works written in this century. It's not highly acclaimed because it is not understood, but all of the genius of Catholic Christianity is concentrated within its pages. For me, it represents the greatest poetry of this century.

The *theme* of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* can be defined like this: love is the generator of what is human according to its total dimension, that is to say, love is the generator of the history of a people because it is the generator of a people.

The play's *central figure* is a complex one. One that is interpreted upon the stage through three characters: Pierre de Craon, Violaine, Anne Vercors:

Anne Vercors, the rough and now elderly builder of the family, who directs their work, who renders the earth useful;

Violaine, a simple figure, beautiful, and obedient, who is about to marry someone whom her father has chosen and who is, by chance, exactly the one she likes: Jacques;

Lastly there is Pierre de Craon, the character who is most immediately expressive of the play's message.

The common denominator of these three characters is love. Not love as the expression of one's own will, as reactivity, nor as "sentimental tendernesses."

Emmanuel Mournier, in his book *The Christian Adventure*, says that the young no longer know the difference between love and tenderness.

One of the most famous contemporary Italian philosophers has said: “The violence of ideologies having ended, tenderness remains.”

The way of life of today’s young people demonstrates its own ethical inconsistency. Tenderness is precisely a reactive emotion, which love is not.

Love is to be for, to be for the Ideal, to be for the whole plan where beauty and justice are safe.

The theme of *The Tidings Brought to Mary* is the creative love of totality. Within the person, in fact, there can be the awareness of reality in its totality, of the universe. Understanding these things, one can understand the text.

Anne Vercors is the tree’s root, a man who has amassed riches from honest work and he protects his family. In an absolutely gratuitous act that reveals the greatness of his heart. he maintains a monastery of cloistered nuns with his work.

Yet he who has everything is no longer able to live in a France where one no longer knows who is King, in a Church where one no longer knows who is Pope, among a Christian people that is divided, crushed, confused: so he makes a huge decision: He will to go to the Holy Land to implore at the Holy Sepulcher for the return of the unity of the people with a King and a Pope. At the beginning of the thirteenth century going on a pilgrimage almost certainly meant dying. Very few returned.

Totality as a dimension of this man’s awareness is already indicated by the love with which his attention is detached from the fields and from the family, He thinks about “God’s sparrows” as he calls them, about those doves who sing less and less, because no one any longer enters the monastery and times are sad. He has the perception that gratuitousness has fled and he decides to go die, abandoning his wife, his daughters, and his lands. This is the first character, the seed of the play’s development. Anna

Vercors is like a root that is rarely seen: he appears at the beginning and then disappears to resurface at the end, against all conjecture.

Only a beautiful flower could be born from such a root: and such is Violaine our striking protagonist. She is an very simple woman, whose richness lies in responding with the heart, moment by moment, to the issues that the Mystery of God proposes to her through life.

Her availability to the solicitations of God, through things, is rich, intelligent and immediate. She has the good fortune that everything God asks of her corresponds to what she desires.

She will say, in the prologue, to Pierre de Craon: “Ah, how beautiful the world is, and how happy I am!”

“It’s not up to the stone to decide its place, but up to the Master of the Work who chose it,” Pierre de Craon tells her, who, as a builder of cathedrals knows well how to place stone. Violaine then responds: “Praised be God, therefore, who assigned me my place right away so that I don’t have to look for it. And I don’t ask another of Him. I am Violaine, eighteen years old, my father’s name is Anne Vercors and my mother’s is Elizabeth. My sister’s name is Mara, my fiancé’s is Jacques. This is everything, you see, there’s nothing else to know. Everything is perfectly clear, all is arranged beforehand, and I am very glad. I am free, I don’t have to worry about anything, and it is he who guides me, poor man, he who knows what he has to do!”

But at a certain point this simple, providential, and gracious correspondence between her tenderness, her reactivity as a woman, her human desire, and life’s demands, this concordance that is so fascinating, unexpectedly breaks apart. It is broken, and it will be the death of her. Thus Anne Vercors, returning, now an old man who should have died, comes upon the corpse of his daughter who has herself just died though she should have lived.

In this unforeseen break we see the ultimate logic of Violaine's drive. In fact, she had always been placed in front of daily, normal, ordinary occasions which she has lived with intelligence, cordiality and ready obedience. Thus, confronted by something exceptional, filled with pain and fascination; the love for Pierre de Craon and his leprosy, the logic of this availability cannot but make her adhere, that is, make her share that exceptional and "irregular" pain. The same loving outlook with which she builds the order assigned to her each day, carries her, pushes her to share that fascinating and painful presence. Yet that presence carries a terrible evil, leprosy. In the gesture of charity with which Violaine kisses Pierre de Craon on the mouth out of pity, out of compassion, the sharing of pain, the leprosy passes to her.

On the one hand, therefore, there is her wealthy father, struck by the exceptional historical situation; on the other there is Violaine, who serves the order of all things in the normality of her life, the one who says "excuse me for being so happy!" The third aspect of this *central figure* is Pierre de Craon, who is the key actor of the whole work.

Pierre de Craon is the character who most fully expresses what man is, the human "I". He is the genius, the architect, the one creates for everyone, who builds the world where everyone is one, reaching for the ideal and full of mutual help. He is the builder of cathedrals, which are the greatest symbol of the unity of a people.

The genius, in fact, is one who expresses a people, and expressing it in an exceptional way, recalls it and unites it. The function of unity among men is given naturally by the genius, who, in whatever camp he expresses himself, possesses the function of coagulator and unifier. This is why the genius, who expresses everyone, is truly vulnerable in front of the recall of that beauty, justice and utility which reality mysteriously evokes.

In this supreme perception of the ideal sign which things are,

Pierre de Craon yields to temptation in front of Violaine, a symbol of beauty. He forgets justice and utility, and tries to rape her. This is the antecedent fact which is the premise upon which the play is based which we find mentioned in the prologue.

Full of justice, she evades him and he is not even able to dominate her physically; she ridicules him.

However, as we have said, Pierre de Craon is a genius who more than others understand the design and utility of everything. Thus the impetus with which he attempts to possess one element, forgetting to offer it to the totality, immediately inflict a mortal wound on him and he becomes “the man of pain.” Symbolically, following the Biblical tradition, the punishment of God makes him a leper. Thus, he who gives life to the inspiration of everyone is a stranger among all, since lepers have to live apart from the people. He who gives unity to everything must be a stranger to everyone. Pierre de Craon accepts these consequences, recognizing the instant of error; he becomes one who *dedicates* the totality of his life and is, paradoxically, a virgin. He dedicates his entire life to creating that which is the sign of the ideal toward which everyone tends: the cathedral, dwelling place of unity, for the beauty of everyone. He dedicates his life to building among the people the sign that evokes their destiny, thus it is he who will help everyone.

Therefore, next to the exceptionality of the decision to sacrifice himself, we discover the recognition of what love is, in reality, notwithstanding one’s own error and evil.

Pierre accepts the consequences of his evil, his leprosy, and dedicates his life to the one human good that creates hope. The cathedral, in fact, is dedicated to hope. Justice is the basis of hope; the cathedral is the place of hope. All of this is intimated in the prologue, when Pierre says to Violaine: “May you be blessed in your chaste heart! Sanctity is not being stoned in a pagan land or kissing a leper on the mouth, but doing the will of God with promptness; it has to do with remaining in our place, or with

moving higher up.”

He accepts that his evil, throughout his life, will be dedicated to everyone, because everything re-enters the horizon of this sinner-genius.

Violaine: “Ah, how beautiful the world is and how happy I am!”

Pierre de Craon: “Ah, how beautiful the world is and how unhappy I am! [...] So many bells that toll away the hours of the city with their moving shadows. And will I never carry the design of an oven or a baby’s room?”

Violaine consoles him.

Pierre de Craon: “It’s not for this that you should cry for me; we are set apart. I don’t live as other men.” Here we have a unique definition of virginity.

They are in the portico, in the courtyard of the house. Violaine points out to him the shortest path and with her fragile arms opens the large door. Purity indicates the shortest path. As he departs, with an impetus of compassion, she embraces Pierre and kisses him. Previously a significant gesture had been occurred: Violaine had given him the only thing she possessed, the ring of her engagement to Jacques. The second impetus is more total and radical, she gives him herself, the kiss.

Mara, Violaine’s sister, sees this.

This new character opens the second part of the play. In Mara, whose name is derived from the word *amara* which means bitter, we meet the *second figure*, which as with the *central figure* is played out upon the stage by three characters: Mara, Elizabeth, Jacques.

Jacques is the man who interprets these three figures. Jacques

is perfect, he is a worker, faithful and constructive. But love in him is defined; it is measured.

The third scene of the second act, which is, for me, the most beautiful love scene ever written, develops the dramatic arc of human love. On the day of the engagement of Jacques and Violaine, she draws near and he notices she is not wearing the ring. Mara comes up next to him right away and accuses her sister of betrayal, but Jacques believes Violaine because he loves her. Yet at a certain point, Violaine must tell her fiancé something terrible: in fact, that morning, upon awakening, she noticed on her own breast the first mark of leprosy. She has to tell him.

She is seized by anxiety, full of mystery, because she must test how much he loves her. It is not that she believes he does not love her, but his attitude in front of the sign of leprosy will be her proof. She must put him to the test. As far as the ring is concerned, Jacques believes her. Then she begins to utter strange phrases and to say strange things in their conversation. Jacques points this out. The climax, the cornerstone is when Violaine affirms: "Ah, how vast the world is, and how alone we are." He becomes agitated and she tells him not to be afraid, to trust, that his strong arms will sustain him in life. Yet Violaine continues her train of thought and begins to ask him if he really loves her, like Christ asked Peter. Jacques grows more agitated, but she insists that if he really loves her he must entrust himself totally to her. Jacques says that he does, that he trusts. So she opens her dress and shows him the sign of leprosy.

For the mentality of that time, leprosy constituted punishment for sin, thus the sign, in the eyes of Jacques, is clear proof of Mara's denunciation. The two continue speaking, suddenly turning their backs on each other. Already there is an unfathomable abyss between Violaine, who enters more and more into the pain of this disappointment, and Jacques, who grows more dogged in his evidence for accusing her, until he cries out for her to get out of there. She still tries to obtain his trust, asking to be embraced even if she is leprous, because if one loves he

embraces another even if she is leprous. But he tells her to go away from the city and live as an outcast. When Jacques has to face the things which Violaine says, with which she recalls “the world is vast, and how alone we are,” he responds that she’s making strange comments, tells her she doesn’t know how to philosophize, and asks her to not complicate things. He says that he is a serious man who knows how to work, to plant and to sew. He is a man for whom the measure of life is duty as it is perceived and felt by him.

Jacques is not someone who recognizes the essence of his person as a function of the totality, as something greater and more mysterious. The Mystery, in fact, reveals itself to him through the paradoxical presence of that woman who has apparently betrayed him. Jacques is the emblem of the gentleman who carries out his duty. But it is not this that defines man, because what defines life is the relationship with the infinite. Jacques, however, does not live out his life in relation with the Mystery. He does not “throw it away”: everything has to be calculated, precise and convenient for this gentleman.

From these observations about Jacques we can understand the other two figures of the drama.

Mara is totally in love with Jacques and doesn’t understand why Jacques has to marry her sister since she herself is naturally in love with him. Jacques is the “right” person for her. Mara in the name of righteousness will kill her sister.

Elizabeth, their mother, feels more for the unfortunate Mara. Here we have the fight between love that makes one perceive one’s own existence in function of something without measure, on the one hand, and an ideal of life that, coincides with one’s own measure, with one’s own justice, on the other.

Violaine goes off and lives alone, far from the town; they bring her food every day which she goes out to get. She knocks two castanets together so that the others, aware of her condition,

move back. In the end the leprosy makes her blind.

While she is away, Mara marries Jacques. They have a daughter who dies. Mara thinks that this death is her sister's vengeance on her. Early in the morning Mara bring the cadaver to the leper. She throws the body at her calling her a child killer.

Violaine takes the body of the little one in her arms, a drop of milk issues forth from her breast, touches the baby's mouth and the baby lives. A miracle has happened. Crazed with joy, Mara brings the baby home. When he sees the child he husband can not take his eyes off the eyes of the reborn child. because they are the same color as Violaine's. The baby's eyes have taken on the color of Violaine's.

This is the emblem of nostalgia for the Absolute, for the Ideal, that cannot but pass through sacrifice: the tremendous pain of Pierre de Craon, the brokenness of Violaine's life, Anne Vercors' risk of dying.

The Tidings Brought to Mary is God's invitation to us to remain in our own place in the world. This cannot but pass through the cross, but from the cross to resurrection, not in the next world but in this.

Logic always remains faithful to itself. The logic of good and evil enlarges: seeing her husband who from that moment continues looking at the eyes of the resurrected child, Mara reaches the pinnacle of hatred and kills her sister, throwing her beneath a gravel cart.

After 7 years Anne Vercors returns home and passes by the place where the mortally wounded body of Violaine is found. Just after sunrise, Anne brings Violaine home and, with Jacques' help, places her body on the table.

From the aesthetic point of view this drama is full of correspondences, symmetries. Every word corresponds to another

that comes later. It is an endless beauty.

There, with Jacques and his dead child, now incapable of remaking that which has been destroyed, he summarizes the story in the final monologue.

“The purpose of life is not to live... It is not a question of living, but of dying [...] and giving what we have joy-fully. This is what is meant by joy and freedom, by grace and eternal youth!”

“What worth is the world by comparison with life? And what worth does life have except to be used and given? Why be tormented when it is so simple to obey [...]?”

Violaine’s path is the simplest, next to the painful one of Pierre de Craon and the exceptional one of Anna Vercors.

These pages contain the ideal of everything. Their theme is love, that is, the conception of one’s own being in function of the total design. This design has a name, it is a man, Christ and our life is called to be in function of Him, in a way that may be through burning pain, or the exceptional thrust of generosity, or the normality of daily obedience. The alternative is meanness.

Every day, we must choose between the two roots: either the root of Anne Vercors or the root of Elizabeth.

¹. This text is from a reading of the play with a group of university students in 1982. _