

An Overview of the Paul Claudel Society in America 1968-2001

(Part One)

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Somewhat by accident, I found myself present at the early organizational meetings of what became the Paul Claudel Society in America. Now, in the fall of 2001, I am one of the very few founding members who remains more or less active. As such and as a one time president of the group as well as a recent secretary-treasurer, I have been asked to write a history of our organization.

Since I am also a bit of a scholarly pack-rat, it is not surprising that I still possess a number of publications and other documents from our earliest period onward. These include the *Claudel Newsletter* and its successor *Claudel Studies*. Alas, most of the regular records maintained by our various secretaries seem to have disappeared. Reluctantly, I have agreed to do the best I can with what is available to me from my own collection. Caveat emptor? I shall also try not to insert mere anecdotal observations.

Herewith, then my first instalment: The Paul Claudel Society in America - The Early Years, 1968 through 1974.

Paul Claudel Society (America) The Early Years, 1968 through 1974

It is not surprising that the activity leading to the establishment of our Society coalesced in 1968, the centenary year of Paul Claudel's birth. The Society's birth was preceded by the establishment and publication of the *Claudel Newsletter*, the first issue of which appeared in April, 1968. Although the first Newsletter stated that it was "an occasional" to be sent to "about 300 subscribers" and "free to scholars and libraries on

demand," it soon settled into its publication pattern of twice a year, usually spring and fall. It was supported by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy and the University of Rhode Island. The Newsletter would appear in a simple folded 8 by 11 series of pages, typewritten and reproduced, with coloured typing paper as its cover. A series of printed illustrations were put on this cover as well as the title, date, and number of the issue. The illustrations on the cover, changed each year, were most often familiar representations in black and white of Paul Claudel himself at various ages, although numbers 7 and 8 are of Camille Claudel. The publication lasted from April, 1968 (No. 1) through February, 1972 (No. 9).

From the beginning, all communication was sent to the University of Rhode Island, the academic home of one of the members of the editorial committee listed in the first issue: Harold A. Waters, known familiarly as "Chris." The list of the members of this committee follows: Douglas Alexander, II (State University of New York at Albany); Jean-Pierre Cap (Lafayette College); Alfred Cismaru (Saint Michael's College); Calvin Claudel (West Virginia Wesleyan College); Henry Sexton (Morris Harvey College); and Harold A. Waters (University of Rhode Island).

On page 1 of this issue we are told about similar efforts elsewhere: "The present project co-exists with more formal efforts in France, Canada, Belgium, Germany, Japan, in all of which countries there are both Claudel societies and Claudel periodicals." So the thought of our Society was already present in the minds of these men, whose efforts were obviously being coordinated by Waters.

The lead article in this first issue - indeed, the sole true article - was obtained from Henri Peyre of Yale, the pre-eminent scholar of French literature in the United States at that time. The article's title is "Claudel and America." In the text Peyre gives a masterful overview of Claudel's life and work, as well as an assessment of the potentialities of this new newsletter, which Peyre refers to as "our" newsletter in the last paragraph.

This first Newsletter contains other fascinating information which I urge you to look at: lists of relevant current events in France and elsewhere (remember that this is the centenary year!), recent publications, announcements, recordings available, circulating exhibits, American performances, recommended library holdings, et cetera. Most interesting to us now is that we find among these a small paragraph:

A United States Paul Claudel Society?

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Professor Calvin Claudel (Chairman, Romance Languages, West Virginia Wesleyan College, Buckhannon, W. Va. 26201) is forming a working committee, which will conduct a meeting at the next MLA convention to discuss the possible founding of a United States Paul Claudel Society. He would appreciate hearing from those interested in attending this meeting.

Following the many miscellaneous informational items is a review article by this same Calvin Claudel, who was always careful to state that his family had no connection with the more famous family containing Paul and Camille. His article presents Alexandre Maurocordato's *Anglo-American Influences in Paul Claudel* (1964).

Calvin Claudel's article is then followed by lists of recent and "in progress" M.A. and Ph. D. dissertations dealing with the Claudels and a bibliography (still useful today) prepared by Harold A. Waters of Paul Claudel's works in English translations.

The second issue of the *Claudel Newsletter* was put together before that year's post-Christmas meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York City, but it does contain the time and place of the proposed meeting of Claudelians: "Those interested in our review, and in establishing a Paul Claudel Society in the United States please come to the Hilton Hotel, Room Clinton A., on Sunday, 29 December, at 8:45 a.m."

How I heard about this meeting I no longer remember. But I was there — especially since I was eager to share news of the early December, 1968, performances of *Protée* in Wisconsin — attended by Renée Nantet Claudel — in an English translation which I had co-authored with H. L. Zillmer. More about that organizational meeting at MLA comes along in a later issue of the Newsletter.

Harold A. Waters was on a sabbatical in France when the No. 2 issue appeared dated November, 1968. His job on the publication was filled for this issue only by Alfred Cismaru.

An interesting item in this issue is a letter from Agnes Meyer to Waters, dated May 31, 1968, commenting on her own contributions to Paul Claudel himself when Paul ("... 'Clau' as I used to call him. . .") had been translating his "Christopher Columbus" into English. She wrote. "I helped him very much but not enough." Poor Paul.

Waters' own contribution to this issue — immediately following her letter — is Waters' translation into English of a prayer which Claudel wrote on coming to his post in the USA in 1927 (does it refer to Mme Meyer?): "... May she (the Virgin Mary) grant me the strength to bear

patiently all the boredom awaiting me, the useless and silly conversations that I must learn to endure as my special cross”

Also to be found in this second Newsletter is a review article by Catherine Rita Martin (Fordham) of the *Cahier Canadien Claudel* 2 (1964) focusing on Claudel et l'Amérique. This excellent short examination of the essays contained in the Canadian publication doubtless sent most American scholars on a run to the original.

Next, the 28th Bulletin of the Société Paul Claudel (France) is carefully reviewed by Vera Lee (Boston College), followed by a review of Lesort's *Paul Claudel Par Lui-Même* (1963) presented by Leon Burke (University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh).

And finally in this Newsletter No. 2, we find a tentative listing of M.A. theses in the United States and Canada from the early 1920's on, collected by Douglas Alexander II. Not too surprisingly, he found 79 of them in nearly 50 years.

After the previous auspicious beginning issues, in the *Claudiel Newsletter* of April 1969 No. 3, we find solid evidence of the start of our Paul Claudel Society as recorded in the complete minutes of the Society's first meeting written by a newly appointed secretary-treasurer, Joan Freilich, a recent Claudelian Ph.D. from Columbia, whose dissertation soon became a book. Within these minutes we are told that Harold Waters and Calvin Claudel had worked together to launch the Society. The first regular officers were now elected by those present: Calvin Claudel, president; Anne-Marie Hamburg, vice-president; and Joan Freilich, secretary-treasurer. It was decided that the meeting for the following year would also be within the MLA convention; dues were set at \$2.00, with the Newsletter still to be free from the Cultural Services of the French Embassy and from the University of Rhode Island. Consult this Newsletter No. 3 for more details about the various plans and hopes for the Society's future.

The *Claudiel Newsletter* No. 3 also shows continuing scholarly research in two articles - one by Harold Watson (St. Benedict's College, Atchison, Kansas) and the other by William H. Matheson (Brandeis University), as well as an explication de texte from Paul Claudel's "Le Cantique à trois voix" done by Helmut Hatzfeld (Catholic University of America). It is important to note that, from the beginning we were a diverse group of scholars who contributed to the Newsletter from many academic and geographic locations.

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The *Claudel Newsletter* of November 1969 No. 4 still has the same six original men listed on the editorial committee, and the usual references to the French Embassy and the University of Rhode Island. An addition to this issue was a loose insert of a registration form for readers wishing to become members of the PAUL CLAUDEL SOCIETY. The form was to be mailed to the address of Joan Freilich in New York City.

Space and time encourage us to take a higher survol of the current announcements of various sorts - a leap over them, that is to say - to go to a presentation by Douglas Alexander of a speech given by Paul Louis Charles Claudel, LL.D., on the occasion of the award to him of that academic degree from the Board of Regents of the University of New York State on December 15, 1932. For those of us who read more often the various literary creations of Claudel, his journals, his art criticism, or his many letters, it is fascinating to have this evidence of his diplomatic skills at the peak of his career. (No other articles appear in this Newsletter.)

Claudel Newsletter Number 5 dated March 1970 continues the established patterns of publication, sans Henry Sexton of the original editorial committee. Once again the issue begins with various announcements, followed by the first speech by the Society's first president, Calvin Claudel, and the official minutes from the annual Society meeting of December 28, 1969, in Denver. A scholarly program included papers by Louise Witherell (Claudel and Milhaud in Brazil), Alfred Cismaru (research on a visit by Claudel to St. Michael's College in Vermont in 1928) and Anne-Marie Hamburg ("la rive de fièvre" dans "l'Echange"). During the business meeting, a proposed constitution was ". . . moved by Louise Witherell, seconded by Father Nagy, and passed unanimously . . ." A new election of officers was then held, resulting in Alfred Cismaru as the second president, Louise Witherell as vice-president, and Joan Freilich again as secretary-treasurer. The post of President-Founder was created for Calvin Claudel, while Mrs. Agnes Meyer and Henri Claudel were acclaimed Honorary Members. A representative from the Canadian Society attended this meeting. A membership list follows.

Newsletter Number 5 also continues to present scholarly publication, proceeding with a commented translation of introductions to Claudel's "Magnificat" and "La Muse qui est la grâce" by Alexandre Maurocordato. The issue ends with a carefully considered review article by Anthony J. Podlecki of William H. Matheson's Claudel & Aeschylus.

The Newsletters Number 6 and Number 7 carry on their now well established pattern of publication. In Newsletter Number 6 we find more numerous articles and review articles, all of which represent solid scholarly work. Especially interesting are Edwin Marie Landau's (Zurich) "Paul Claudel et Beethoven" and Renée Riese Hubert's (University of California Irvine) review of Richard Berchan's (Michigan State) *The Inner Stage* (1966) as well as Fernand Vial's (State University of New York at Albany) review of *Cahier Canadien Claudel 6 - Claudel et l'Amérique II* and Joan Freilich's (Walden School) review of Gilbert Gadoffre's *Claudel et L'Univers Chinois, Cahier Paul Claudel 8* (1968).

Newsletter Number 7, March 1971, now lacking also Alfred Cismaru from its editorial board (because he moved to Texas?) continues to maintain and improve upon the quality of previous issues. Membership fees in the Society are increased to \$4.00 to be sent to Joan Freilich: "While the Paul Claudel Society and the *Claudel Newsletter* are different enterprises, a subscription to the NEWSLETTER is automatically registered for new members of the Society." On the same page (2) is an enigmatic announcement: "Wider horizons". Because the NEWSLETTER may soon have an improved and expanded format, it will now also consider items dealing only indirectly with Claudel. At this time, an interpretation of its new direction is better left to the imagination of potential contributors."

The complete minutes of the annual meeting of our Society during MLA, December 28, 1970 are also here. Reverend Moses Nagy was Program Chairman for the day and introduced the speakers: Anne-Marie Hamburg, Harold Waters, Harold Watson, and Reverend Nagy himself. Alfred Cismaru, President presided over the business meeting, during which new officers were again elected: Louise Witherell, president; Reverend Nagy, vice-president; and Joan Freilich, a most efficient secretary-treasurer. Discussions during this meeting included possibilities for working with the present editors of the Newsletter in order to develop it into "a more formal journal" as a "means of further encouraging the study of Claudel's works in the U.S..... (Was this ever accomplished?)

In this Newsletter Number 7 we note on p. 9 an early mention of a possible world convention of Paul Claudel societies, probably at Brangues in France ... to be held in 1972. Jean-Louis Barrault had already expressed an interest in producing for such a meeting "la quatrième journée" of *Le Soulier de satin*. Indeed this international meeting - with such added riches as a Japanese ballet Croup doing a claudelian No bal-

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let, and a long lecture by Senghor himself on how he mixed the claudelian verset with African rhythms — would attract a relatively large American attendance and be a high achievement against which all following Claudel Society meetings would be measured.

But in the meantime, the rich variety and the originality of articles in the Newsletter continued from the pens of Jean-Pierre Cap (“Henri Ghéon et Paul Claudel”), Janis Pallister (“Presentation Motifs in the Prologue of Claudel’s ‘L’Annonce faite à Marier’”), and Edwin Marie Landau writing a brief consideration of the possible source of the basic plot of *Le Soulier de satin*.

In October, 1971, appeared the *Claudel Newsletter* Number 8, the second small volume to bear on its cover the sad downcast head of Camille from Rodin’s hand. Here we find the letter from Stanislas Fumet, president of the French Paul Claudel Society, to the editor of the Newsletter (sans doute to Harold Waters since his name and address had been constant since 1968; members of the French society seemed to feel that our yearly change of presidents lacked continuity) inviting American Society representatives to the July 1972 international meeting at Brangues.

The heart of Newsletter Number 8 is devoted to two substantial review articles and two shorter reviews. Richard Berchan (now at the University of Utah) examines Claudel: a Reappraisal (1970) a series of essays edited by Richard Griffiths; Janis Pallister (Bowling Green State) considers the presentations by such stalwarts as Germaine Brée, Henri Peyre, and Victor Brombert at a symposium on Romantics sponsored by the American Philosophical Society in 1970, wherein both Claudel and Malraux emerge as Romantics. (Peyre focused on Claudel alone.) The printing of the abstract of Joan Freilich’s Ph.D. dissertation which won an award in Columbia’s French Department closes this Newsletter.

What turned out to be the final issue of the Newsletter is the one dated February 1972 Number 9. This issue included a separate registration form for the coming *Rencontres claudéliennes de Brangue*”, to be returned to Joan Freilich. The other current events reported here include a whole Claudel session which occurred at NEMILA (Northeast MLA) in April 1972 at Skidmore with members of our Society presenting papers under the chairmanship of Harold Waters. Advice is also requested from the members on the coming changeover in the format of the Newsletter. And it was announced that the University of Toronto press would publish Freilich’s Paul Claudel’s *le Soulier de Satin*.

Louise R. Witherell

As usual, the minutes of the Society's meeting in Chicago on December 28, 1971, were printed in full. The newly elected officers would be designated representatives to the Brangues "rencontres:" Leon Burke, president, Moses Nagy, vice-president, and Joan Freilich, secretary treasurer. "Dr. Nagy indicated that \$2,000 has been donated by the University of Dallas towards the publication of the new Claudel review...."

This last issue had its quota of two articles, one by Louise Witherell ("Claudel and le cas Matisse") and a printing of two 1929 speeches in New England by Paul Claudel sans commentaire, plus two book reviews: Jacques Petit's Claudel et L'Usurpateur (Leon Bourke); Harold Watson's Claudel's Immortal Heroes (Joan Freilich):

The very last words are those of several dissertation abstracts.

À SUIVRE !