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Raphaële Fleury, *Paul Claudel et les spectacles populaires: le paradoxe du pantin*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012. 877 pp. 48.00€. (pb). ISBN : 978-2-8124-0370-5.

Review by Shelly Cavaness, Central College.

Raphaële Fleury's *Paul Claudel et les spectacles populaires* analyzes numerous writings around Claudel's productions and how stage elements are employed to effect the audience, real or imagined. The subtitle of Fleury's work, *Le paradoxe du pantin*, alludes to how Claudel borrowed from less noble art forms to try to create a theater with noble aspirations; an art form that aspired to a higher goal than simple entertainment theater. The key phrase in the title of Fleury's work is "*spectacles populaires*" which really doesn't have an exact English equivalent, but might be translated as the popular show. In the category of *populaire*, Fleury deposits a myriad of performances such as the music-hall, cabaret, café-concert, circus, and marionettes.

The first thing notable about these performances is what they have in common—or rather what each has missing—for they all are art forms that function without a written text. This seems all the more ironic given that Paul Claudel is a landmark in French poetry and verse; *le verset cladelien* is a standard. Claudel's written oeuvre is massive: among the six *Pléiades*, two volumes are dedicated to theater. Raphaële Fleury argues that most of earlier critiques of Claudel's theater ignore the stage elements' effect upon the public and how their symbolic meaning is woven into the plays themselves. One explanation for the limited number of studies on Claudel's staging is that the playwright's multiple rewrites of his own plays have kept scholars busy, and have certainly cast a large shadow over his theoretical texts and essays on theater. Moreover, Claudel's theatrical vision is dispersed throughout his oeuvre, making it less accessible as a corpus of study. Finally, the limited number of studies might be attributed to the fact that Paul Claudel has been out of fashion with literary critics and theater producers until recent years. Fleury's publication follows suit with a renewed interest in Claudel that begins with Olivier Py's 2003 production of the monster seven-hour play of the *Soulier de satin*. Another sign of this renewed interest in Paul Claudel is the new 2011 re-edition of Claudel's two *Pléiades* volumes. (The previous edition dated from 1956.)

Fleury distinguishes three traits to regroup popular shows. First, she claims that they all have a pejorative connotation or might be seen as low-brow art. Second, popular shows have a heterogeneous nature due to their ever-changing form because they are composed of a series of "numbers," such as song, illusions, juggling, et cetera. Third, they are crowd-pleasers, with the aim of seducing audience. Fleury also wants to distinguish two types of *spectacles populaires*: one with a written text and the other without a written form, because this helps her tie these performances to Claudel's stage ambitions. Beyond these three principal characteristics, Fleury formulates that the popular show has a unique relationship with the audience in that it directly addresses the theatergoer. For Fleury, the popular show has a built-in public; the spectator is always virtually present. She attributes audience awareness to a majority of Claudel's works and gives examples of how the playwright directly addresses the audience in many of his works, or at least breaks with established conventions of the period. Yet one could also argue that the ambiguity or interpenetration of genres, or heterogeneousness as Fleury calls it, have other antecedents beyond the popular show.

The diegetic figures in Claudel, what Fleury is calling the popular show, are at the center of Claudel's vision since they are necessary to break with the tired conventions of French theater at the time. Rather than present an imitation or representation, characters embrace the different genres that break up the play. Many are all too aware of the stage and its limits. Heterogeneous demonstrates an intentional theatricality and an aversion to illusionist theater. Fleury documents how the playwright frequently used multi-faceted elements such as puppets, film, music, shadows in order to control, confront, even interrupt the dramatic representation. It is well known that the mixing or merging of genres was also the hallmark of late nineteenth-century symbolists, not to mention twentieth-century avant-garde theater works in France and Europe.

Divided into three parts, the book begins with the section entitled "*Contact et Circonstance*" in which the author examines elements borrowed and assimilated into the Claudelien stage. Here the author discusses the rôle of Claudel as an observer of different cultures and the nature of this contact within the context of the World's Fair, Asia, Brazil, and Germany. Fleury considers Claudel as a spectator/theatergoer, both as the boy who remembers his childhood and the man who analyzes his impressions as a mature playwright. She contextualizes these performances within the author's life and historical period. On the one hand, foreign contacts provided Claudel with new dramaturgical ideas; on the other hand, they reconfirmed his earlier experiments. The playwright was chiefly drawn to foreign theater's dramaturgical components. To be more specific, he was acutely sensitive to visual and aural elements in foreign productions' *mise en scène* because he lacked linguistic ability in these foreign surroundings.

In the second part, *Mise en œuvre des ressources*, Fleury ties together diverse popular genres such as puppets shows, shadow theatre, and cinema. In this chapter she regroups performance genres where the physical actor is absent and objects or images take the place of the physical actor on stage. Fleury underlines how such forms are marked by an invisible presence and how they escape realist theater techniques to evoke other worlds. She argues these *populaires* genres are central to renovating the Claudelien stage, yet are also strongly aligned with symbolist theatre techniques and aspirations.

In the third part of her book, Fleury formulates a strategy of seduction in which Claudel used a combination of the actor's physical body, music and machinery to reach the audience members and even seduce them. The playwright dreamed of defying French theatrical conventions and overwhelming the public's senses with music, cinema, elaborate staging and movement. The human body combined with gestures is used as a means of distancing the audience from the performance. Under these circumstances, the Claudelien ideal resembles more closely Antonin Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* than widely-known performances of *Partage de Midi*. In short, this section shows how the myth of a communal theater is exemplified in Claudel's integral-arts productions.

This new study on Claudel is of value because it is a goldmine of references regarding Claudel and staging. (All 877 pages, including notes, annexes and references, concentrate on the stage elements themselves.) Fleury takes a holistic approach that allows one to understand the symbolic nature, as well as the complexities of Claudel's oeuvre. Raphaële Fleury is correct to emphasize the playwright's hands on nature concerning dramatic productions. The playwright was more than passive spectator. As Fleury demonstrates in her work, the playwright often assumed a position where he remained in control of the live performance, often through a multitude of elements written into the text. Claudel was constantly trying to bridge the gap between author and interpreter, stage and audience, real and dream, sacred and profane.

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