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Defining Paul Claudel.

Mann, Klaus

1943-04-19

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Defining Paul Claudel

Klaus Mann Calls Him Poet, Visionary, Anti-German, With Pro-Fascist Tendencies

To the New York Herald Tribune:

Mr. Jean Wahl suggests—in his letter published in your columns on April 18—that I have “allowed myself,” in my book on Andre Gide, to speak irreverently, if not slanderously, of “a great poet and very courageous man,” namely Paul Claudel. The sentence which Mr. Wahl disapproves, and which he quotes from my book in order to prove my lack of fairness and respect, indicates that Claudel is “an adherent to law and order who prefers authority, even with a German accent, to liberalism in every form.” I wonder if Claudel—that implacable antagonist of democracy, enlightenment and progress—would be as shocked by this statement as is Mr. Jean Wahl.

It is true—Mr. Wahl admits—that Claudel published in 1940 an ode to Petain, but “since that time he completely changed his mind (and the ode to Petain was not at all pro-German).” It is good to know that the grand old man of literary Catholicism in France does not abide by his political mistakes. Let us hope that he revised also his opinions about General Franco, whom he used to admire—in contrast to his more liberal Catholic colleagues, Bernanos, Maritain and Mauriac.

As for Claudel's anti-German feelings, they are beyond any question. I do not think that I disregarded or belittled them when I wrote that Claudel was torn, in 1940, “between his furious hatred of

the German people and his penchant for their authoritarian regime.” (Andre Gide, p. 297.) Nor do I feel that I underestimate the greatness of Paul Claudel, who is undoubtedly one of the most original and most impressive figures in the realm of modern literature. There are many praising remarks about him scattered through my book on Andre Gide, in whose intellectual biography Claudel, as a friend and rival, played such a significant, if somewhat ambiguous, role.

According to Mr. Wahl, I mispresent Paul Claudel as a cheap “collaborationist.” In reality, I have tried to present him as he actually is—an inspired poet and religious visionary of frantically anti-German disposition but with definitely pro-Fascist tendencies.

KLAUS MANN.

U. S. Army, April 19, 1943.