

Persons and Personages

THE WORK OF PAUL CLAUDEL

By HENRI PEYRE

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SOME exciting literary questionnaires and a younger generation impatient to assert itself have lately proclaimed that the post-war period is over and have begun to bury it. They tell us that the search for sensation, imaginative debauches, lyrical analysis, disorder, and speed are going to give way to a more serene, ripe, finished art. The sole survivors of a shipwrecked generation will be certain masters who were known if not celebrated before 1914. The name of Paul Claudel has rarely been mentioned during these heated controversies. No doubt he is included in the general condemnation of disorder and excess.

The work of Paul Claudel always seemed to me to present one of the most striking examples of the eternal failure of critics to understand their contemporaries. Not that Claudel is ignored; he is so much recognized and accepted as a force that people fail to discuss and read him. But his admirers and detractors agree that he is an imaginative, brutal, romantic, disheveled genius, a primitive or pseudo-primitive, a kind of Christian Æschylus whose books incarnate exuberance and exaggeration. Such a man is a ready-made target for professorial criticism. Pierre Lasserre, a sympathetic, liberal spirit who wrote what was almost a great book on Renan but who does not deserve to be called clear-sighted, dismissed Claudel as an admirer of Rimbaud, a renegade from reason and ancient tradition. More subtle spirits who are often well disposed to Claudel, men like Henri Massis, Daniel Halévy, and P. de Tonquédec, shake their heads sadly over what they call his defiance of logic and order. Braver men, such as Georges Duhamel and Jacques Rivière, glory in Claudel's irrational disorder and joyfully praise his odes and dramas for pursuing their way 'without preconceived continuity and without logical development.'

Thus Claudel has become an enigma. The public appreciates the sublime, seething imagination, the active, obscure lyricism, the burning mysticism of a poet who is the most devout of Catholics, the most peaceful of fathers of families, the most lucid and practical of ambassadors. And the public, which likes clear-cut situations and definitely established forms, concludes that a man who is so straightforward in his diplomatic work and so obscure in his literary work is mocking it.

Historians of the next century will study the diplomatic correspondence of Ambassador Claudel, and even to-day anyone who read this material without knowing Claudel's literary work would at once recognize him as a man of superior intelligence. Despite his bizarre touches, his half-successes, and his failures, which are hardly surprising in a man who has written twenty-five or thirty books, Claudel is one of the most cultivated, solid, and wise spirits of our time. This poet and dramatist is at the same time a remarkable critic, a professor capable of dealing competently and penetratingly with such varied subjects as Japanese, Greek, Italian, and English literature, architecture, philosophy, the opera, and the cinema. What a strange fate it is for such a critic to be ignored by universities and professional critics, for a Catholic poet to be looked upon defiantly by other Catholics, for an ambassador of France and a great writer to be rejected by jealous guardians of the French tradition.

Our critics, who are often former professors and always old scholars, love to find books which they think possess a rigid framework, like the works of Livy or Bossuet. Nothing equals their joy when they finally discover a rigorous secret architecture in a book that was originally admired for its disorder. In our own time, Baudelaire and Proust have fallen victim to these seekers for a plan, who wish to show that *Fleurs du mal* and *La Recherche du temps perdu* are just as well composed as a tragedy by Racine or a meditation by Lamartine in order that they may attach these books victoriously to the great French tradition. What a sovereign title of glory Marcel Proust won because he foresaw, twelve volumes in advance, that Robert de Saint-Loup would marry Gilberte Swann. What mastery it was to begin Volume One with the word '*long-temps*' and then close Volume Fifteen with the word '*temps*.'

NOW IN THE FIRST of his *Grandes Odes* Claudel was so bold as to exclaim: 'O my soul, one must not draw up any plan.' On entering literary life he also boldly smiled at Anatole France and Sully-Prudhomme at a time when it was not good tone to do so. Did n't he rail at professors, members of the Academy, men of letters who regarded poor Verlaine as an inoffensive drunkard, a picturesque, eccentric character? 'The Archon-Despérouses Prize is not for him, nor is the esteem of M. de Montyon, who dwells in the skies. As for money, there cannot be too much of it for the professors who later will give courses on him and who are all decorated by the Legion of Honor.'

The author of *La Tête d'or* and *La jeune fille Violaine* therefore appeared as a rebel. One did not need the penetration of a Sainte-Beuve to discern behind his apparent violence a profound love and delicate sense of order. Far from being written haphazardly, Claudel's dramas are

perhaps too well composed. The poet develops some abstract idea barely concealed behind the characters who illustrate it. He advances regularly through intentional digressions, each day adding a few pages that had all been foreseen in his rough draft. 'When I begin writing, my plan is already made, and I add every day some lines to the lines written the day before,' Claudel declared to Frédéric Lefèvre in 1925.

Racine, we remember, proceeded in the same way, but his linear, progressive composition, like Shakespeare's in *Othello*, for instance, is merely one of the elements of a larger, more subtle unity that gives the book its general color and tone. Certain words are repeated at regular intervals, certain poetic or mythological evocations recur like musical phrases in a symphony to haunt our memory and imagination. It is this secret unity, more implied than imposed, this subtle order springing from apparent disorder, that Claudel's less effective dramas lack, rather than studied composition.

If Claudel is a conscious artist rather than the wild genius that he is supposed to be, he is also an abstract philosopher, an ardent dialectician skilled in handling ideas, and at the same time a poet devoted to images and concrete impressions. I am not even thinking of his *Art poétique* and his *Traité de la connaissance du temps*, which are metaphysical, sometimes humorous dramatic efforts. Turn instead to *La Connaissance de l'Est*, Claudel's masterpiece in the Mallarmé manner. On every page Claudel is interrogating the mysterious Orient, more eager to learn and explain than to describe and charm. A professor of languages like André Thérive cannot understand why a book that he would have called *Travels in the Orient* should have been entitled *Knowledge of the East*, but he must have read these prose poems very hastily and badly to have wanted to call them *Voyages en Orient*.

Claudel is poles apart from Chateaubriand and Loti. He does not paint the color and forms of objects. He questions them as Mallarmé did, asking, 'What does it want to say?' And he replies more clearly than Mallarmé. He explains as a physiologist what the brain means to him. As a botanist-philosopher he discovers and reveals the secret of the cocoa palm and the pine tree. As a professorial disciple of Descartes, who was devoted to clear, distinct ideas, he makes us understand the difference between European and Oriental art. The whole book reveals Claudel as a didactic poet, but a superior one who thinks for himself and does not put other people's theories into verse. He is a Virgil or a Lucretius, not a Delille nor yet a Baudelaire.

This same clear, critical intelligence explains other features and no doubt most of the limitations of Claudel's work. His long sojourns outside Europe, his profound knowledge of foreign civilizations and literatures have enabled the poet-ambassador to look at the works of his

compatriots more objectively than the traditional French writer, whose horizon rarely extends beyond the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Claudel revolted against this malicious narrowness, this preoccupation with form that French tradition and Parisian ways have imposed on our orthodox writers. Perhaps with sheer bravado and certainly with sure, concentrated decision, he has accentuated in his books a freedom and a foreignness that are more superficial than real. He has intentionally accentuated romanticism, and some of his books have failed on that account. This is too bad, for Claudel's best books are precisely those in which, without sacrificing his rich psychological observation, his intense religious life, and his throbbing spontaneousness, he has voluntarily adopted a more narrow form, a more severe reality, as in *La Connaissance de l'Est*, *Le Partage de Midi*, and *La Cantate à trois voix*.

TOO OFTEN in his other books the very liberty that Claudel permits himself in defiance of strict literary canons has opened the floodgates and released a flow of didactics and oratory. The gift of understanding and explaining that he possesses to a high degree tends to destroy his gift of expression and evocation. In his odes, in his poem on Dante, we witness a laboring intelligence that is searching itself, elaborating itself with prosaic slowness, forcing itself to achieve internal communication on every level, but that does not always succeed in making the reader share its hasty image. Claudel, who has analyzed poetic creation so beautifully in his parable of *animus* and *anima*, often forgets to still the *animus* within him, the reasoning, didactic spirit, and give the divine *anima* a chance to sing. Too often he reminds us of the pedestrian progress of Péguy rather than of the splendid condensation of Keats.

Claudel's rare clear-sightedness, his subtle intelligence, places him in the first rank of those eminently French creative writers who are also our best critics. It would be an injustice to this ardent Catholic to consider him a man of letters, a type that is detested by the missionary and man of action who dwell within him. His religious faith has saved him from that harried speculation peculiar to a certain *fin de siècle* kind of symbolism that regards the whole universe as culminating in the creation of a book. To take a purely practical point of view, one might suggest that religion in this respect is very salutary to a writer in that it prevents him from exaggerating the importance of literature, at the same time inspiring the scholar with a modest defiance by reminding him that the ultimate reality can be grasped only by faith and escapes all his tests and experiments.

But did not Claudel himself remark that every writer contains within himself a critic who discerns, eliminates, and selects as a sculptor

does before modeling the statue that he has dreamed of, first of all chiseling away the useless portions of the marble? The gifts that I have mentioned in Claudel, his penetration and the depth of his intelligence, the robust solitude of his spirit, his scrupulous clarity, his fondness for didactical expression, have made him a remarkable lecturer and one of our most eminent critics. His taste and judgment reveal the real character of his misunderstood and misinterpreted talent.

Nothing could be more Latin, more purely French than this man whom people have tried to label as a mystic Nordic, a German or a Saxon by nature. He has the minute powers of observation, the patient, methodical diligence of the French peasant or artisan who loves his work. He has a knowledge of human beings that should arouse the envy of all professional national psychologists. Our ambassador in Washington has long been familiar with the English language and is by no means ignorant of Anglo-Saxon literature, but it is curious that the English writers he turned to were not the Elizabethans, not Coleridge, Keats, or Shelley, not Swinburne or Yeats. His taste did not lead him to the purest, the most imaginative, the most Nordic of the English poets. Claudel seems to have preferred English Catholic literature; which is often more Latin and nearer to our own—the prose of Newman and G. K. Chesterton, the poetry of Coventry Patmore, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, the Catholic, Francis Thompson, and the mystic, Blake, whom modern France has discovered rather late and therefore tends to overestimate.

A firmly established *cliché* compares Claudel to Æschylus. *Tête d'or*, written in his youth, is the only one of his dramas in which he is haunted by the memory of *Prometheus Bound*. His translations of Æschylus's trilogy prove that he felt directly, with a freshness of perception that disarmed traditional philology, the sombre, mysterious, Dionysiac side of Æschylus and of Greek art in general. Nor does Claudel resemble Æschylus only. He also recalls Euripides, the 'Greek Baudelaire.' His large comprehension and the originality of his criticism, which is based on solid knowledge, make Claudel resemble the Greeks. The intellectual subtlety of Plato, the metaphysical power of Aristotle attracted him. But, in my opinion, Claudel is more Latin or French seventeenth-century than Greek or Biblical. He is a less purely artistic Racine, a less vivid Pascal, a more subtle Bossuet, but a no less determined fighter or ardent reasoner. Claudel has not bestowed his highest praise on the English, the Germans, and the romantics in general. He likes best of all free Latin versification, the iambics of Catullus, Persius, Phaedrus, Tacitus, and Seneca, to whom he feels a curious attachment, and finally Virgil, his '*duce, signore, e maestro*,' 'the greatest genius that humanity has ever produced.'

CLAUDEL'S SOLID GOOD SENSE, nourished by Latin culture, his serious depth, his professional knowledge as a writer have saved his criticism from the thousand forms of foolishness to which so many superior men have sunk because of fashion and a desire to appear brilliant. The grave honesty and calm, wise moderation of Claudel have appeared during some recent literary debates that have been afflicting the Paris public with an epidemic of madness.

Some of us may remember the endless, ephemeral discussions about pure poetry. Poe and his French interpreters persuaded modern readers that the long poems that our ancestors liked and that the great romantics tried to revive should be relegated to the past, that poetry, by definition, was a brief flash of lightning, that even the sonnet, in our era of hurry, must give place to the five-line *uta* or the three-line *baikai*. Claudel, who had read Virgil and Dante more carefully than he had read Poe, opportunely reminded us that the desire for successful grouping, harmonious construction, and the absorption of all one's senses were admirable virtues and rarer ones than technical virtuosity and the effect of surprise achieved by merely touching one's nerves. Our contemporaries have a selfish trick of using their sophisticated skill to raise our impotence and weakness into a universal rule.

The contribution Claudel made to the literary controversy originated by the Abbé Bremond contains the most penetrating and judicious words that were called forth by this exciting debate and they completely confirm the views that I have outlined here. Leaving the malicious Abbé to speculate on poetic flow and poetic prayer, Claudel clearly explained that the rôle of the intelligence is limited, of course, but primary. Confronted by the subtleties that this ecclesiastic member of the Academy had gathered together, the citations that he had borrowed from a thousand holy and lay authorities, and the compliments he had paid to a hundred tenth-rate critics, Claudel approached the question as a methodical thinker, a lucid analyst of confused ideas. A work of art, he declared, is 'the result of collaboration between the imagination and desire.' Inspiration is a complex state in which all the faculties combine in a supreme diapason of vigilance and attention. But taste is not lacking, nor is intelligence, which oversees, chooses, separates, distributes, and expands order, light, and proportion everywhere, so much so that 'from emotion emerges superior lucidity, not obscurity.'

Some years ago, in a magnificently wise tribute to Dante, Claudel defined the elements of great poetry in similar terms. Inspiration of course comes first, a divine current, if you like, exterior to the subject, but which must blow upon coals disposed to receive it. 'To this inspiration the subject must respond with exceptional natural forces controlled and administered by an intelligence that is at once bold, prudent, and

subtle.' It is this intelligence in the large sense of the word, this taste and critical spirit, that were lacking in Victor Hugo and Seneca, and sometimes in Shakespeare, but never in Virgil or Racine.

A theorist who writes in this way is anything but a genius in a savage state, a wild, brutal mystic, an adversary of reason and balance, as some of his critics have claimed. I believe that the greatest critical error of our century and the most unjust one is the lack of understanding that journalists and professors have shown toward Claudel. To reject him for not being characteristically French, as Balzac and Rimbaud were once rejected, is to misunderstand the true nature of this analyst, this patient commentator, this robust, methodical intelligence, which is one of the finest of our time. If the generation of 1930 to 1940, whose work is so impatiently expected, wants to adopt a programme of order, modest wisdom, and work well done, it could not find among its immediate elders a better master than Claudel.

VAIHINGER AT EIGHTY

By DR. MILO BLACH

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THERE are philosophers and professors of philosophy; the former are born, the latter made. 'All thinkers can be divided into two groups,' Schopenhauer said, 'those who think for themselves and those who think for others.' Vaihinger belongs to both categories. For that reason, the derogatory implication given by Schopenhauer to the words 'professor of philosophy' and 'philosophic teacher' when he described the masters of the 'philosophic profession' of his time cannot be applied here. Vaihinger would have refuted Schopenhauer's contention and shown that there can be professors of philosophy in the best sense of the word who are not mere teachers but free investigators and expounders of wisdom and truth.

Fate decreed that Vaihinger should long be known to us as a philosophy professor. Having a philosophic nature, he had to be a philosophy professor for decades. As the son of a Swabian clergyman, he was destined to study theology. But while studying in the Stuttgart gymnasium he became enamored of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, which led him to believe in evolution and pantheism and to adopt the philosophic attitude of Plato and Schiller. Equipped with these convictions, he attended the University of Tübingen, from which Schelling, Hegel, Vischer, Zeller, and others had graduated. Mastering the doctrines of Kant and Schopenhauer, and greatly influenced by