

## Books and Things

IF I were reviewing Frank J. Wilstach's "Dictionary of Similes" (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, \$2.50 net), I should pretend to a great familiarity with his subject. "We are at a loss to understand," so I should feel bound to say somewhere in my review, "the principle upon which Mr. Wilstach has based his exclusions. We look in vain under the heading 'sweet' for that simile which Calverley has made familiar to every schoolboy:

Oh, sweet—as to the toilworn man  
The far-off sound of rippling river;  
As to cadets in Hindostan  
The fleeting remnant of their liver—

Nor can we find, under either 'bare' or 'bears,' that comparison which has endeared itself to the hearts of such different judges as Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Reverend Henry Van Dyke:

altogether down upon him  
Bare, as a wild wave in the wide North-sea,  
Green-glimmering toward the summit, bears, with all  
Its stormy crests that smoke against the skies,  
Down on a bark, . . .

For Mr. Wilstach's benefit, when he shall prepare his second edition for the press, we call attention to a couple of misprints. Otway was not the first to say, 'Wide as a church door,' nor was it Shelley who called something 'as dear to me as are the ruddy drops that visit my sad heart.'

As it happens, however, that I am not reviewing Mr. Wilstach, and am not bound to pull a learned face, I am free to say that his book makes me envy him the many pleasant hours which went to its making. Ever since I was thirty I have wished for an invitation to read for a dictionary, to copy illustrative quotations neatly and send them to a fire-proof storehouse. No such invitation has come my way, though I have been patiently hopeful. Mr. Wilstach, being an enterprising man, did not wait and wait, dependent upon others for his amusement. He invented his own game. For twenty years he has been reading far and wide, in English and in translations, his eye on the lookout for passages containing the words "as" and "like." He has not only looked. He has listened. You will find among his fifteen thousand similes a good many which came to him by way of his ears. "It seemed an endless undertaking," he says, "but I pursued the work with growing interest and delight. As my occupation during the intervening years took me back and forth from New York to San Francisco and hither and thither to all parts of the country, much of the work was done on railroad trains, and many an evening hour was spent in the libraries of Boston, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis and other cities." From the extracts he collected he has chosen the ones he thought worth while, as is the custom, disguised or undisguised, of all anthologists. And for the result he makes no claim to completeness.

"It is hard to find a simile when one is seeking for one." This is the motto of Mr. Wilstach's book, from George Moore, and I find it alarming. I fear Mr. Wilstach means his collection to be of use to writers and speakers who feel that the moment for a simile has come, and who can't think of anything. And my second fear is that they will use it, hundreds of them, in just this fashion. The prospect is

infinitely disquieting to you and to me, who believe that no man ought to use a simile or a metaphor which he does not find for himself. I have a friend, a writer, whose pages are not free from quotations. Something in his use of these makes them sound not as if they had come into his head of themselves, at the suggestion of the context, but as if he had looked them up in Bartlett at almost fixed intervals. One day in his library I asked him about this, and he showed me, without shame, the largest collection of quotation books that exists outside a public library. In vain did I tell him that his method was the worst in the world, and that its mechanism was plain to be seen in his writing. He only smiled. "You'll be telling me next," he said, "not to use a dictionary of synonyms." Which was precisely what I was on the point of telling him. A man should find his own synonyms, I believe, his own quotations, metaphors and similes, just as he should find his own way to his mouth with a spoon. Reliance upon dictionaries is sure to betray him into wearing second-hand finery. It is such opinions as these which lead me to prophesy that Mr. Wilstach's book will be very popular and pernicious. Didn't George Moore mean to warn writers that similes were a gift from God?

It is possible, of course, to use Mr. Wilstach's book in such a way that the results will not be trite at all, but somewhat surprising. If you are going abroad, and consult Mr. Wilstach at the passport office, and describe your eyes as "fair as star-beams among the twilight trees," you will achieve an effect of novelty. So will the elevator boy who stops saying "going down," nakedly, and who shouts instead: "Descending! Like the spring whose breath is blending all blasts of fragrance into one." The weather man, predicting a day "fair as the fabulous asphodels"; the restaurateur, inviting us to come to his place and feast "like fiends upon the infidel dead"; Aunt Mary, newly arrived and telling little Harold that he has grown "like weeds on a neglected tomb"; the Congressman, saying he rises, "as ocean at the enchantment of the moon," to a point of order; the traffic cop, accusing the speeder of going "like some swift cloud that wings the wide air's wilderness"; the tailor, boasting his ability to fit customers "fat as a distillery pig" as perfectly as those who are "thin as Fraud"—all these persons might get out of the rut, and even well off the beaten road, by consulting Mr. Wilstach. And the born makers of simile, reading his book and finding specimens of their work, will be stimulated to activity.

Still, though I do not look for great change, as a result of Mr. Wilstach's labors of love, in the dialect of advertisers, policemen and weather forecasters, and although I do feel certain that those who steal from Bartlett will steal from this new dictionary, yet I believe there is a wholesome and depressing use to be made of Mr. Wilstach's collection. Let a writer or a speaker who finds an "as" or a "like" in his manuscript, or in the draft of his speech, look up his key-word and find out whether his simile is new, and if he finds it here let him remove the same. His writing will be barer after this operation, and its tint will be more nearly neutral, but it will also be more nearly his own. By this means he will avoid imputing to himself the saying that "a warring nation, like an orator, should know when to stop," for Mr. Wilstach will tell him that this figure has already appeared in *The New Republic*. Used in this way the "Dictionary of Similes" will prove as indispensable as your skin, as clean linen, as the majestic laws that rule yon rolling orbs.

P. L.

## Paul Claudel

*The Tidings Brought to Mary, translated from the French of Paul Claudel by Louise Morgan Sill. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$1.50.*

IT is the gesture of Paul Claudel that sets him apart from the literary figures of our time. Astute man of affairs, consul in Boston and New York, in Tientsin and Fouchow, in Frankfurt and in Hamburg, where the outbreak of the war found him, authority on the economic situation in China, he comes to tell us once more that life lies in the search for beatitude. There are other Catholic poets. There are other Catholic poets in France. But the ardor with which Claudel has given himself to the search for God pales the Virgilian piety of Francis Jammes, makes the mystic sociology of the late Charles Péguy appear veritable Tolstoy and water. For Claudel, there is but one grand theme. It is the knowledge of God. That is the subject of his odes and of his dramas. One has to go back to Aeschylus to find another dramatist so preoccupied. And that impulse comprises the life of Claudel. As if to make bodily attestation that "la vision de dieu engendre la vie éternelle," he went into the exile of distant consulates, the Frenchman's bitter exile, to sink into himself. And through that sundering he came to self-realization and won his goal. The dramas he wrote during those twenty years of self-imposed banishment bear ample witness to the acuteness of the agony. Perhaps, like Mesa in "Partage du Midi," or like Sygne de Coufontaine in "L'Otage," he was broken by the revelation. Perhaps, like the Chinese Emperors in "Le Repos du Septième Jour," he searched for God in the very realms of death. Only in "L'Annonce fait à Marie," the gorgeous play translated by Mrs. Sill, a new and tranquil light shines. The play brings tidings of the coming of God. "The face of the Father appears again on a world born afresh and comforted." Claudel has found beatitude.

Not until we remember how regularly French genius shifts from search for God through reason to search for God through faith, from the thought of Paris to the thought of Chartres, does Claudel become explicable. After Voltaire there came Chateaubriand. So, after Anatole France there comes Claudel. It is not by chance that he lays the scene of all his plays that take place in France in that triangle that lies between the cathedrals of Rheims, Soissons and Laon. Physically and spiritually he sprang from the soil out of which they arose. If that sinking into himself, characteristic of his work, constitutes an introversion, his art does not suffer from it. Rather more in it lies his very strength. To it he owes the tang of his style, the style of a cloistral Whitman, formed on the Greek and Hebrew poets, violent and exalted, and sown thickly with foreign and scientific terms which it has taken up into itself. Nor has it jaundiced his contact with life. The world revealed in his dramas is a poignant and vital expression, and at the same time soaked in his personality. In the array of proud lyric personages that he shows us working out their destinies and confronting the eternal truths, the poet has maintained a nice balance between the symbolic and the realistic. His art is indeed a product of that

"fonction double et réciproque  
Par laquelle l'homme absorbe la vie, et restitue dans  
l'act suprême de l'expiration  
Une parole intelligible."

Without presumption, he can say,

"Je connais toutes choses, et toutes choses se connaissent en moi.  
J'apporte a toute chose sa délivrance.  
Par moi  
Aucune chose ne reste plus seule, mais je l'associe à  
une autre dans mon coeur."

The thought of God is always associated in the mind of Claudel with the thought of renunciation of the world. His earliest drama, "Tête d'Or," the first version of which was written in 1889, when he was but twenty-one years old, reveals the cast of idea that was to dominate the entire work. The play tells the tragedy of a humanity without God, futilely seeking to possess the earth, and coming despairingly against the black wall of death. The overwhelming sense of mortality, the deep and abiding grief over a world that cannot be held which speaks in grandiose and pathetic, if uneven, accents from out his first play, is ever-present in the work of Claudel. But, in the twenty years that elapsed between the composition of "Tête d'Or" and of "L'Annonce," Claudel's vision became gladder while his art ripened. The note in the latter play is one of joyous resignation. For, he has learned that all that tears us from the love and hope of happiness here on earth, brings us nearer the one great happiness, the one great love, God. To all the people in the play, the knowledge comes. It comes to Violaine, the innocent girl smitten by leprosy, and taken from all human ties till "only the soul lives in the human body"; to her two lovers, who can never possess her here on earth; to the old man, Anne Vercors, who sets out from home and surfeit of joy on a lonely pilgrimage to God. Over them all, as over the leper woman in the scene of the miracle, the Heavens open. For Death and God are one.

"Is the object of life only to live? Will the feet of God's children be fastened to this wretched earth?"

Claudel asks. And, in resignation, he adds

"It is not to live, but to die, and not to hew the cross, but to mount upon it, and to give all that we have, laughing!

There is joy, there is freedom, there is grace, there is eternal youth."

However little one agrees with Claudel's teaching, however little one admires his aristocratic and royalist bias, it is impossible to escape feeling how freighted with importance, not only for the Catholic community but for the entire age, his personality is. Nothing perhaps better demonstrates the quality of his genius. No doubt, there are those who will see in him only the Catholic Puritan who bases his "Art Poétique" on Thomas Aquinas, prays that he may not be damned with Hugo and Michelet and Renan, and anathematizes the heresiarchs Goethe and Kant and Nietzsche and "leur père à tous, l'apostat Martin Luther, qui est avec le diable!" They will doubtless enjoy the sly story, at present circulating in Paris, that Claudel's next book is to be written entirely in the Latin of the Church Fathers. It is a great pity that to many he will come no nearer, for Claudel's significance by far transcends his relationship to Catholicism. It is not, after all, to war upon heretics and infidels, Turks and Jews, in the theological sense, that he comes. It is rather more to force again upon the world the sense of the necessity of faith, to remind those people of whom Blake tells us that "they are not capable of a firm persuasion of anything," that without real conviction life is impossible. He