

PAUL CLAUDEL

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POETRY and diplomacy are so rarely allied that there is the possibility of overlooking the fact that the great poet who has just died was also a distinguished diplomatist, ambassador at one time in Tokyo and at another in Washington, where he negotiated the Kellogg-Briand pact. This leading of a full life in the world of practical affairs and the simultaneous creation of an immense body of poetry, mystical in inspiration, denotes, not a dichotomy, but indeed a rare harmony. Claudel was not a poet who had strayed by chance or mischance into the diplomatic service; neither was he a professional diplomatist who wrote verse as a relaxation from official memoranda. He was at one and the same time a diplomatist by choice, rising through the various grades of consular service to ambassadorial status, and a poet from whose God-centred vision nothing human was alien. What influence his poetic genius may have had on his diplomatic activity one does not know, but it is clear that his poetry was enriched by the fulness of his human experience. It is rare nowadays for a poet to be a man taking full joy in all that is human, for whom the material world is a thing of beauty, yet who recognizes that the loveliness of God's creation is but a foretaste of the absolute beauty which is in God. As he writes in his poem on St Teresa:

Si ce qui a l'air d'exister est beau, grand Dieu, que sera-ce
de ce qui existe en effet?

Si nous nous réjouissons tellement du rossignol une seconde
et de la rose,

Que dirons-nous de celui qui en est la provocation et la
cause

Et dans le sein de qui la terre odorante tout entière se fond
en ces pauvres expressions naïves?

So often in recent times the tendency of the poet has been to revolt against the human condition, not to accept the state of civilization, so that he has taken refuge in a deliberately restricted concern with the trivial, with his own being, or with the difficulties of his art. Thus, the rich, fully-dimensional world of Claudel,

solidly existing, not for its own sake only, but as the handiwork of a Creator, appears as a unique phenomenon. Claudel's joy in creation, the works of man included, is typically expressed in the following words taken from a letter written in China, whither consular service had taken him as a relatively young man: 'It is a real joy for me to deal with all those very big, very real things, trams, sewers, electricity and pitiless accountancy.' With Claudel we are far from a faked Arcadia, as we are far from a machine-mad technocracy. The poet's task of restoring the world to its harmonious proportions he fully performs.

It is true that in some ways Claudel appears as the poet of renunciation, but that renunciation is no gloomy and loveless abandonment, but, with the possible exception of *L'Otage*, the renunciation of the human, fully loved in all its own beauty and worth, in favour of the divine which the earthly beauty has revealed. The mere joy of being alive, however, finds its place in his lyrical poems. As he writes in his poem on St Geneviève:

C'est quelque chose de se retrouver avec ses deux bras, le cœur joyeux et l'esprit clair!

And in that same poem love of nature is expressed with all the freshness of genius in a delightful verse:

Et toi, écoute, gardeuse de deux vaches, la cloche, et regarde ce saule qui frémit soyeusement dans le soir livide!

In that adverb *soyeusement* is apparent the direct sensuous impact of nature. It is no accident that in the great renunciation scene in *L'Annonce faite à Marie* Violaine appears to her *fiancé* through the flowering branches, with the sun shining down upon her. It is when the world is at its loveliest, when the human joy of reciprocated love seems within her grasp, that Violaine, bearing already on her body the mark of God's choice of her, must renounce all human joy, but only because a joy more ardent awaits her, the joy of an intimate communion with God in solitude and suffering. The scene is intensely poignant because we are made fully aware of what Violaine is renouncing. It is one of the main purposes of Claudelian drama, however, to reveal that the beauty of the world we must renounce is but the prefiguration of an even greater beauty, and elsewhere than in *L'Annonce faite à Marie* the poet modifies the abrupt act of renunciation, making it less categorical, a more gradual transcendence of the human by the divine which, though it is not free from anguish,

seems less harsh. It is no doubt a concern for human fragility that has made Claudel attempt in different dramas the transmutation of human into divine love through long and devious processes which allow the human creature time for progressive adjustments.

It must be borne in mind that the greatest human factor in Claudel's return to the Catholic faith, which took place when he was twenty-two years old, four years after the moment of sudden belief which came to him in Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, was Arthur Rimbaud. He has left us no possible doubt on this subject, testifying time and again to this influence of the author of *Une Saison en Enfer*, but it is in the letter quoted in his book on Rimbaud by Paterné Berrichon, the husband of Rimbaud's sister, that he expresses himself most emphatically: 'It is to Rimbaud', he there writes, 'that on the human level I owe my return to the faith.' To some it may seem unaccountable that that precocious and unpleasant youth who was in revolt against everything traditionally accepted should have had such a decisive spiritual influence over Claudel, but we must remember the atmosphere in which the latter was brought up, rigidly positivist, the fact, too, that he was of an impressionable age when he read Rimbaud, and, not least, the fact that Rimbaud is a great poet, the reading of whose work, wrote Gide, made him ashamed of his own and filled him with horror at everything that is merely the result of culture. For Rimbaud the writing of poetry and spiritual experience were inseparably associated; he it was who wrote that the spiritual struggle was as brutal as the battles of men, and certain phrases of his, *La vraie vie est absente, Nous ne sommes pas au monde*, echo throughout Claudel's work. In Rimbaud's poems it was poetry at its deepest level that the young Claudel encountered. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer* should have given Claudel, to quote his own words, 'the living and almost physical impression of the supernatural'. Nor is it surprising that for Claudel also the aesthetic and the religious should be intimately connected, so that he could regard poetic creation as a means of self-Christianization and that in the religious conception which the plays reveal beauty is a paramount factor.

Between Claudel and other writers of the period who became Catholic there is as little similarity, faith excepted, as between him and those writers who remained outside the Church. The

late nineteenth century and the early twentieth were particularly fertile in conversions in France. The factors involved on the human plane vary with each writer, though as a background to all these conversions there is the reaction against what had been the dominant philosophy, positivism, and the usual reappraisal of values which follows war and especially defeat. Claudel, however, stands apart, in a sort of massive solitude, rugged, far from easy of approach. That is not, of course, to say that he did not exercise considerable influence over the generation coming to maturity in the years before and after the First World War. It was mainly through his agency that Francis Jammes became a Catholic and on Rivière he exerted a deep influence. The reading of the correspondence that passed between him and Rivière, as well as that exchanged between the latter and Alain Fournier, reveals the profound impact made by Claudel on a young intellectual tormented by the desire of fathoming the truth of things. In the literary sphere, though, Claudel has an originality too strongly marked by his own powerful idiosyncrasy to have had followers. He himself owes little to his immediate predecessors or indeed to any French poet. His verse recalls more than any other form the Hebrew verset with which the Bible has familiarized us, and the conception of love which is at the basis of his most important plays owes much to Dante as well as to the world's immense store of the literature of romantic love from the Provençal poets onwards. However, the romantic conception of love is renewed by Claudel, baptized, as it were, by force, and one of the intellectual interests his plays afford is his struggle in successive endeavours to reconcile elements of Neo-Platonism with Christian belief.

Claudel's greatest single achievement is undoubtedly *Le Soulier de Satin*, which Mgr O'Connor translated into English nearly twenty years ago. It was the poet's last and finest attempt to express in dramatic form his vision of man's life and destiny. The principal male protagonist, Rodrigue, has in him aggrandized elements of Rimbaud, the restless roving spirit, the almost insane ambition; he it is who is chosen by the King of Spain in this deliberately conventional sixteenth century to knead and mould the New World. His final humiliation, which echoes the physical humiliation of Rimbaud himself when he returned from Africa to the Marseille hospital, is the prelude to his closer

union with God, the keen desire of which, according to his sister Isabelle, Rimbaud had in his last days, receiving the last rites. As well as the frustration of his inordinate ambition, Rodrigue must undergo also the frustration of his intense love for a woman. The vicissitudes of the lovers, where free will co-operates with the Grace which the force of events urges insistently upon them, are handled with the mastery for which a lifetime's preoccupation with the subject had prepared the poet-playwright. The dialogues between Rodrigue and Prouhèze have in a high degree that peculiarly Claudelian poignancy compounded of strong human passion and the agonizing restraint imposed by a sense of supernatural exigency. Throughout the play we are reminded of the Communion of Saints with which the individual drama is associated and it is to the Blessed Virgin that Prouhèze confides her satin slipper, the symbol of her fundamental desire to be held back from the sin she will strive to commit. In Camille, whose eternal salvation is mysteriously linked with the acceptance by Prouhèze of the sacrifice of her lover, one is tempted to see something of Gide; there is the same *inquiétude*, the same lucid perception of the cracks in the armour of the faithful, the feline quality of the wit. There is no one else in Claudel's drama resembling Camille, and in his exchanges with Prouhèze one may see, not so much the dialogue of doubt and belief, as that of revolt and acceptance. This is a play pregnant with meaning, of a profundity and a breadth of vision with which no other dramatic poetry in our own age can sustain comparison.

Without question Claudel is among the foremost poets of his day and is likely to emerge even as the greatest, for no other has his range, his universality. Others may have a greater subtlety of perception in more restricted fields and be more exquisite craftsmen, but to rank among the very great, a poet must surely have his plenitude of life, his consciousness of the world outside himself, his intensity of feeling, his sense of the deep mystery and significance of love and suffering.