

CLAUDEL'S POETIC ART

ON April 4th, 1946, Paul Claudel was elected a member of the French Academy by 24 votes out of 25, the 25th being an abstention. The recognition was tardy, for he was in his 78th year; and in reversing the resounding rejection of 1935 the Academy was only ratifying the place he occupies as one of the foremost modern poets, and the greatest modern Catholic poet.

It is opportune to analyse his poetic theory.

Not indeed that the hostility shown to Claudel in 1935 was mainly for literary reasons. These existed, certainly: a deliberate departure from accepted rule and custom, an apparently lawless technique and a degree of obscurity that seemed to flout the reader, a most personal choice of subjects and use of words as well as disconcerting syntax, transitions, sudden changes of tone, mingling of the loftiest with the most colloquial language. His poetic system, wrote a critic of the time, 'goes counter to all the advances laboriously realised since Ronsard and even Villon'. But there was also the strongest opposition on political and personal grounds: it is painful for example to read the virulent article in which Léon Daudet (*Action Française*, 3 Avril 1935), exults over Claudel's defeat, having first recorded his own early admiration for the poet.

Claudel though an official was no politician. His consular and diplomatic career was a step-by-step achievement of steady work. He contrasts himself¹ in this respect with Mallarmé the professor-poet, who hated his teaching and never crossed the Pont de l'Eveque 'without feeling inclined to throw himself over the parapet'. 'I felt a respectful admiration', writes Claudel, 'for this romantic attitude, but I found it hard to understand. I have an official heredity behind me. My cradle stood, not against a bookcase like Baudelaire's, but in a registrars office. . . . No doubt I owe to that same heredity a fundamental natural vice which compels me to be interested in whatever I do and to try to do it as well as I can. The vocation of the "accursed poet" . . . was foreign to my temperament'.

To try to do it as well as he could: that also was the religious attitude of the man who wrote in 1917 to P. de Tonquédec of his poetry as a means 'to a campaign of progressive evangelisation of all the regions of my intelligence and of all the powers of my soul'; and earlier to Robert Vallery-Radot²:

¹ In an article in the *Figaro littéraire*, 30th March, 1935.

² Quoted in the Introduction to his *Anthologie de la Poesie Catholique*, (Crés, 1916).

. . . the malady from which we have been suffering for several centuries is a split, not so much between faith and reason as between faith and imagination: imagination grown incapable of establishing a harmonious relation between the two parts, visible and invisible, of the universe. The whole representation that we have been making to ourselves of the world (science, art, politics, philosophy) for four centuries is perfectly pagan. God is on one side and the world on the other with no link between them. Who would suspect, reading Racine, Molière, Victor Hugo, that a God died for us on the Cross? That must absolutely cease.

Such an outright and intolerant-sounding statement, or the prayer in *Magnificat*:³

'Do not send me to perdition with the Voltaires, the Renans, the Michelets, the Hugos',

does not indicate a mentality acceptable to the generality of academic critics. The attitude is made understandable by the necessity for Christian thinkers in Claudel's formation-time to react energetically against the dominant philosophy. He makes the same point more explicitly in a chapter⁴ that has lost none of its appositeness for having been written in 1927, in the course of a discriminating estimate of Hugo's greatness and hollowness:

And I think too that Victor Hugo was not the only tormented soul on that wide heath dotted over with ruins and excavations which nineteenth-century literature presents. . . . All the trammels of superstition and morality had been swept away; what a triumph of life, what a radiant orgy of liberty and joy we were going to see! And we find nothing but despair, pessimism, nightmare visions, bitterness, aberrations, fury; the mind possessed by the most hideous spectacles, and ending in our own day in the stammerings of idiocy.

Nevertheless there was nothing narrow or exclusive about Claudel's mentality; there was only an absolute determination to put things in their due order, to see life whole and to have no water-tight compartments.⁵ His vast output is characterised, not only by his fervent all-pervading religious faith, but by the broadest culture, literary and artistic; by the receptivity he brought to a very diversified experience of countries and races; by a highly developed sensitivity and an amazingly quick and original imagination.

There is at first sight a strange duality in the combination Claudel presents to us of a practical man and a transcendent poet. But it was precisely the one that made the other possible. 'I cannot be too

³ *Odes*, p. 108.

⁴ *Positions et Propositions*, I, p. 53.

⁵ The rôle that in the *Correspondance*, p. 250, he assigns to himself and Jacques Rivière along with Patmore, Péguy, and Chesterton, 'to recreate a Catholic imagination and sensibility'.

thankful', Claudel told a literary reviewer, Frédéric Lefèvre, (*Les Sources de Paul Claudel*, p. 162) 'to the administration that accepted me and to the intelligent chiefs who have always left me a liberty of mind and action that I should not have found elsewhere'. The wrenching away from a settled existence and from Parisian literary influences, the separations caused by frequent changes of post, the long ocean voyages and the relative solitude of exile in strange lands, were propitious to fundamental reflection and an intensely inner life.

In the conversation just quoted, Lefèvre asked Claudel which of his books had cost him most to write and which he most valued. (id. p. 164). He named three dramas—*Tête d'Or*, *Partage de Midi*, and *Le Soulier de Satin*, which indeed reflect stages of his life experience—and added: 'I also attach great importance to my *Art poétique*, which hardly anyone has understood'.

It is in effect not an easy book to read, even with the help of Claudel's most approved commentator, Jacques Madaule; but it is indispensable to anyone who wants to penetrate Claudel's mind. It consists of four essays, but the fourth has only a loose connection with the other three. These, dated 1900, 1903, 1904, and published in 1907, are illuminated by writings of roughly the same period: *Connaissance de l'Est* (1895-1905), *Cinq grandes Odes* (1900-1908), the *Correspondance* with Jacques Rivière (1907-1914). They grow still clearer when we read *Réflexions et Propositions sur le Vers français* (1927), most valuable because given as 'the vindication of a personal technique after a practice of forty years', (*Positions et Propositions*, i. p. 84) as well as other essays included in *Positions et Propositions*. Claudel's principles did not change, however much he developed their practical application.

Like all vital principles, they were deeply rooted in his personal experience. In a well-known passage (*Connaissance de l'Est*, p. 117) he describes himself as a little boy, perched in the topmost fork of an apple-tree, gazing out at all that was happening 'on the stage of the world'. The child was drinking in the contours of the countryside, the foreground and the distances, the lines of road, the direction of the smoke from the chimneys, the qualities of light and shade, the progress of the tillage, the movement of some vehicle. No doubt he was thinking what Claudel the man sets down as an essential human instinct: 'that all things at every moment . . . were elaborating a mystery that must absolutely be discovered'. (*Art poétique*, p. 10). Then at eighteen he discovered Rimbaud, obsessed to the point of hallucination by this mystery which he too sensed in visible things; and later Mallarmé, whose receptions Claudel attended between 1887 and 1895, and whose desire to discover the meaning of things was ever

foiled by his inability to see anything beyond them.⁶ Claudel's observant and reflective tendency was intensified by these contacts; but he had meantime also got the complete Catholic view of the world—of the metaphysical and theological realities that underlie our current experience. Henceforward they are at the base of everything he writes. All this he brings to bear on his art of Poetry.

He had studied Aristotle and St Thomas; he describes himself (*Connaissance de l'Est*, p. 182) as retreating to the top of the house on a hot afternoon in China, with 'an inexhaustible book' in which he pursues 'the study of Being, the distinction between person and substance, qualities and predicaments'. Grounded in that 'angelical science,' he is describing in its light a poet's subtle and far-reaching interests, experiences, intuitions. He is investigating the poetic process vitalising the means of expression, compelling words to reveal their content; he is tempering so to say his own tool, as is the prerogative of the poet of genius.

A very personal treatment of language is perhaps the main, any-way the first, difficulty of Claudel's *Art poétique*.

Two or three definitions which we can extract from the first essay *Connaissance du temps* form a helpful introduction to his exposition. Time is the design of the universe as it produces itself in the movement of the whole. Duration is the continuity of this movement. Each thing—and person—has a purpose in the design. And each, apart from its own proper reality has because of its ramified relations with all other things a sign-value in regard of a given moment.

Now Claudel in the *Art poétique* is really analysing an art that he has already practised. He is writing a poem about the art of poetry, formulating what he calls a new Logic, a logic by metaphor. This is to be to rational logic as syntax, the art of assembling words, is to the morphological structure of a language. It will give us sequences of thought and expression due not to direct reasoning but to the suggestions of metaphor, to the sign-values of things. Metaphor arises from the co-existence of different things. Metaphor gives us 'the fresh word', it is 'the operation which results from the mere conjoint and simultaneous existence of two different things'. (*Art poétique*, p. 50). Nature herself speaks to us by things and their arrangement. The poet, observing her, 'is like a man standing in a high place, seeing around him a vaster horizon. In this wider view new connections are set up between things, connections not determined by logic or the law of causality but by association which is harmonic or complementary in view of a *sense*'. (*Positions et propositions*, p. 162). One day in Japan, for example, he sees 'the verdure of a maple com-

⁶ See *La Catastrophe d'Igitur* in *Positions et Propositions*, I.

pleting the harmony proposed by a pine'. (*Art poétique*, p. 50). The Japanese pine is strong and supple, made to resist the fierceness of the storm, able to draw its sustenance from dry and stony ground, 'lending the capricious framework of its branches to the lines of a harmonious countryside', 'setting off the charm and brilliancy of nature'. (*Connaissance de l'Est*, pp. 148-52). The maple, deciduous, speaks on the other hand of the changing seasons. There is no chance about this, or any other, nature combination: 'the plantation of that clump of pines, the form of that mountain are no more the effect of chance than the Parthenon . . . but come from a treasury of designs still richer and more ingenious'. (*Art poétique*, p. 51). And looking intently, with all five senses acutely alert, the poet tells us:

I feel, I scent, I disentangle, I track down,
I breathe in with a certain sense
How the thing is made. (*Odes*, p. 51).

How is the poet to express the discernment due to that 'certain sense'? What is the nature of the medium he has to handle as the painter does his colours and the musician his notes, so as to induce a state of joy in reader or hearer?

Words, the repository of the experience of mankind, have acquired in everyday use a purely utility function. In order to yield not merely a convenient designation of things but 'a picture at once intelligible and delightful', 'to make of a spectacle or an emotion or even an abstract idea a sort of equivalent or *species* soluble in the mind', (*Positions et propositions*, pp. 98, 11) they must be got to re-live both in their metaphors and their sound qualities. This life revealed in words as if they were being coined for the first time jerks us out of our inertia, often opens up in a flash long vistas to the thought and imagination. For example: *penser* (to think), the same word as *peser* (to weigh) means to appreciate the weight and the tension of each thing'. (*Art poétique*, p. 139). Its *tension* is the *intensity* with which it is *intended* (by the Creator) or apprehended (by the observer). *Definir* (to define) is to delimit the thing, to mark out its *fin*, its boundary: because no thing in creation stands alone. *Comprendre* (Lat. *cum-prehendere*) is to seize something, to take it with us, to make it our own, part of us; and lest we should fail to realise the energy of the mental operation indicated, we are given illustrations: 'as we say that the fire *catches*, or the cement *solidifies*, or the lake *freezes*, or an idea *takes hold* of the public' (id. p. 133)—in French *prendre* is used in each of these phrases. This handling of words whets our attention. The concrete meaning reinstated vivifies the abstract meaning—which it was all the effort of philosophy to detach and clarify! It causes indeed occasional confusion, as when the word

forme keeps shading from the current sense into the philosophical sense which it is intended to convey or illustrate. The procedure lends itself at times, as we shall see, to facile etymological criticism. But Claudel reminds us that we are trying imaginatively to represent metaphysical realities. And to have grasped the process is a singular help when we come to read the poems and dramas.

One could make a glossary of the metaphors thus occurring on every other page of the *Art poétique*. Two words at least are essential to its argument, and may serve as a key to it.

Sense in French, like *sense* in English, conveys several ideas: (1) perceptive faculty, (2) actual perception, (3) power of judging, (4) meaning; but further, perhaps linking up with the idea of right judgment, (5) the right aspect, e.g., of a piece of cloth, and (6) the direction, e.g., of the wind, or in which the earth turns. This idea of *direction*, whither a thing tends, its intention, gives rise to such a suggestive sentence as *Le temps est le sens de la vie* (*Art poétique*, p. 33); i.e., along with its right aspect and our perception of that, the direction in which it is moving, towards Eternity and God. Our direction, our intention in God's mind is our meaning.

The word *connaissance*, often re-spelt *co-naissance* is still more important: indeed the whole book turns on it. 'There is a sure relationship', Claudel tells us, 'linking in three languages the idea of *acquiring mentally* and of *springing into life* (id. p. 63)—that is, of knowing (*cognoscere*) and of being born (*nascere*). The etymological argument is weak enough, for Greek and Latin cannot give independent witness and the French is a phonetic transformation of the Latin. Still the poet is strictly in his domain when the shape and sound of a word bring resemblances and comparisons to his mind. By equating *connaissance* with *co-naissance*, he reminds us that we are not born into a vacuum, but into the continuity of creation—of which we are not independent but which we can and must use to form ourselves, and which we can and must influence. No thing inanimate or animate is independent of other things.

Connaissance is defined as 'the relations in which each thing stands to others through the resistance it presents, the action it exercises, and the reaction it undergoes'—'The principle of its existence and of its form is also the agent of its *connaissance*. (id. pp. 99, 100). And for conscious human beings, 'Things are not like the parts of a machine, but like the elements ever at work of an inexhaustibly new design. Man knows (*connaît*) the world, not by what he extracts from it, but by what he adds to it himself'. (id. p. 26). The equation *connaissance*, *co-naissance* further compendiously suggests the very important fact that the mind of the poet has an affinity with that of the

child, that he must retain the child's fresh receptivity and wonderment, the child's freedom from the staleness and flatness and familiarity which so often blur our powers of apprehension; that the poet must be—and we should all be—continually in a state of re-birth with regard to all that is outside and within us. 'At every breath we draw, the world is as new as it was at the first draft of air inhaled and exhaled by the first man for the first time'. (id. p. 45). Accordingly the section entitled *Connaissance du Temps* stimulates us to a vivid sense of time and duration as a continuous movement producing the design of the universe, repeating things in an only apparent uniformity, while what has been 'no more ceases to exist than the first words of a sentence when our eye reaches the last' (id. p. 44), but lives on in its effects. *Connaissance du monde*, the main part of the argument, analyses our experience of the universe through sensation and intelligence, in closely reasoned rejection of the materialist yoke; while *Connaissance de soi-même* lifts us to a sense of our own spiritual nature and immortal destiny. Further, with entire disregard of etymology, the simple word *naître* offers itself as a compendium: *naître, n'être*. When we are born, we are given by the supreme self-existent Being our little separate existence; we are the image, '*finissante et finie*', (id. p. 149) i.e., tending to and reaching a limit and a goal, 'of what has no beginning', we are *not-Being*. Which recalls the divine words spoken to St Catherine of Siena: 'Thou art what is not, and I am the great I AM'. (*Life*, by Bl. Raymond, i, 9). In the kind of Dantesque inferno introduced by Claudel into *Le Repos du Septième Jour* (1896-97), those who have fastened all their attention on *not-Being* suffer severe retribution. This development alone shows that Claudel's *Art poétique* lifts us into a region where, altogether apart from any poetic or literary purpose, we may breathe a pure and invigorating if rather rarefied air.

The epigraph is from St Augustine: 'God is both the Creator and the Controller. So that the beauty of the whole universe is like a great poem of the ineffable Singer'. There is a 'harmonic cause or movement which regulates the assembly of creatures at any given moment of temporal duration. That is the Poetic Art'. (*Art poétique*, p. 9). Our poetic art, for *poetry* means making, is a delegated share in the creation of the world and its beauty; man's part is to be 'an image of God's creative activity'. (id. p. 159). He must work out what he is in his own individuality, he is God's 'delegate as regards external things, his representative with power of attorney'. (id. p. 147). But he must first observe the universe, he must place himself 'before the whole of creation like a critic before the production of a poet, testing the thing fully, examining by what means he has produced his effects.

. . . ' (id. p. 13). He will deduce the appropriate form of his own activity.

The poet feels this creative urge in a super-eminent degree:

O forces at work around me,
I can do as much as ye can do, I am free, I am violently urged,
I am free in your way which the professors do not understand. . .
(In Claudel the disdainful recurrent word *professors* covers all those teachers and critics who are hide-bound by conventional standards and usage).

I, man,

Know what I am doing,

I am using the urge and the very power of birth and of creation,
I am its master. . . (*Odes*, p. 51-2).

God's creation does not take place once for all: 'under every new beginning there is continuance' (*Art poétique*, p. 48); and *we* are always making ourselves, going through 'a conscious birth determined by things outside us that limit our expansion', (id. p. 100), drawing on God's creative power for a renewal of our energies spiritual and physical.

Every created thing—even without conscious purpose—is creative in its turn; there is, so to say, an ever new and different acquired momentum in the universe. What has once been 'does not lose its operative power' which 'grows with the contribution of every second'. 'The concomitance of physical forces and the play of human wills co-operate in producing the mosaic Moment' (id. p. 44, 43). That sentence sums up some marvellously poetic pages which show us Claudel's unifying vision: he sees the universe as a whole, of which the parts are closely interdependent, not only in the present but throughout all time. (Which helps to explain the dramatic structure of the *Soulier de Satin*.)

The idea of the importance of the *moment* is fundamental: 'What time is it? Where am I and what point have I reached?' (id. p. 9).

For the past is not only operative in the present, it is 'the ever-swelling condition of the future' (id. p. 55).

'The object of poetry', writes Claudel, 'is not as is often asserted dreams, illusions, or ideas. It is that sacrosanct reality, established once for all, at the centre of which we are placed. It is the universe of visible things to which faith adds that of invisible things' (*Positions et propositions*, i, 165). Standing at this centre, he finds the meaning of things which eluded Mallarmé in 'their pure essence which is that of the creatures of God and of witnessing to God' (id. p. 100)—in *Connaissance de l'Est* we read the often-quoted words: 'In our ordinary hours we use things for some purpose, forgetting the pure fact that they exist' (p. 164). At every moment

'God reserves to himself witnesses to his creation. They have to give testimony differently according to their order' (*Art poétique*, p. 155), inanimate things, plants, animals. Man 'takes cognisance of himself (*se connaître*) in his own mode, he shapes and develops himself in his correlation with God, he recognises himself as produced in his correlation with the *Producer*. He knows himself as *producing* his own act and form' (*id.* p. 160). He is the key to the universe, inasmuch as he is the 'common point in which [things] are comprehended' (*id.* p. 154); inasmuch as by taking cognisance of things he gives them a birth in consciousness. He makes himself 'their common sign, the passing image of the moment at which they are capable of entering into this connection' (*id.* p. 154). He has the duty 'of summing-up at every moment; of consummating what is not [i.e. the universe that is not-being] by taking it into his own substance' *ce qui n'est pas, le consomme en le consommant* (*id.* p. 151). Things outside him are motives of his personal growth.

What is man's mode of growth and of bearing witness? He does not stand alone, but is conditioned, de-fined (i.e. he has his boundaries set) by what is other than himself; he is conditioned by the *other* and in his turn conditions the *other*; he must know the other, enrich himself by the other, become the other. This scholastic notion covers what the poet vibrantly says to the 'Muse who is Grace':

I am not entire if I am not entire with the world around me.
Thou demandest me entire—it is the entire world that thou demandest of me. . . .

All things are necessary to me in thee whom I see not. (*Odes* pp. 139-40.)

And it is what Claudel understands, as we have seen, by *comprendre*: 'Comprehension (*comprendre*) is the act by which we substitute ourselves for the thing that we comprehend; we take it with us, we take its name and make it ring like a gong under the hammer' (*Art poétique*, p. 137).

That 'ringing' of the 'name' really sums up Claudel's theory of poetic expression.

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(To be continued in the April issue.)