CLAUDEL'S POETIC ART (II)

FULLY to understand Claudel's theory of poetic expression we must follow his analysis of movement. Being, self-existent, is motionless; created things, both matter and spirit, are in movement. This motion imprinted on them by the Creator-Spirit gives them their *sense*: we have seen how much Claudel means by that word. He uses the metaphor of flight (*fuite*) to express their movement out from the Creator; but their origin is also their end (*fin*, goal and limit) and they are moving back thither. 'Now every movement results in the creation or maintenance of a state of equilibrium' (p. 75), but only through a constant tension because everything other than complete and self-sufficing Being is in a condition of 'interplay and contradiction' (p. 147). Man, like other creatures, is perpetually in movement for 'there is movement wherever there is variation in existence'.[14] It may be a movement of inner vibration tending to produce the *form*; or a movement of efference or outward process.

That the whole of creation, even inanimate, is in a state of alternating movement is also a hypothesis of modern science. But while its materialist exponents 'observe the working of a machine', the Christian thinker 'enjoys the use of an instrument' (*Art Poétique*, p. 28). For these changes, contacts, responses, man has, in common with the animals, senses: sensation is the first phenomenon of our activity, but we are not, like the animals, passive under it. Our senses are our tools: 'as we learn the use of a tool by apprenticeship so we educate our senses' (id. p. 91). We exercise them and use their different kinds of information—Claudel develops this at length, refuting at every point the materialistic view. 'We *lend* an ear'? (id. pp. 28-9). Precisely, *we* lend ourselves to impressions from without. Our brain is only an organ. Our nerve-system can be compared to a charged electric system which we control. 'It will no doubt be a very long time before we . . . can get back to the very source of sensation, to the switch-board, to the control station, where the wave destined to supply the different organs of the periphery receives its first elaboration. The same nerve pulsation which maintains our vision, when directed on other systems, enables us to hear and to smell. Our sensitive organs are only an apparatus for transforming the initial current, as it were a sparking apparatus constructed for different contact-breakers. It follows that they are interdependent and that the pressure, for example, which produces sight determines

[14] *Art poétique*, p. 168. Claudel attached great importance to this idea, as we see from the *Correspondence*, pp. 128, 134, 140.

the same activity at the circumference which elsewhere results in sound' (id. pp. 111-2). All of which throws an interesting light on the poetic use of which Rimbaud's famous sonnet on the colour of the vowels is an extreme and rather fantastic example. Claudel himself calls the vowel *a* 'crimson' (*Positions et propositions*; p. 78), and endows the blind *Pensée de Coufontaine* with some sense of colour.

Man's reason enables him to take stock of his sense-impressions. 'The keyboard of all his organs which connect him with the movement of the outer world, his own body, is to him as a document in which he follows the works of the spirit that stirs him. He finds in himself tastes and inclinations, appetites and resistances, a temperament, a character, habits, manners, passions that he combats or cultivates according to the light of his will. He takes his place and finds his poise, he knows what is expected of him, and with these instruments at his disposal he knows what according to circumstances he has to do'. (*Art poétique*, pp. 161-2.) 'Knowledge (*connaissance*) . . . is a reading at every moment of our position in the whole; intelligence bears on the matter of our knowledge. Knowledge is an estimation of the form of things, intelligence an evaluation of their force.' (id. p. 137.)

By attention we can distinguish and combine the data of our different sense-impressions. Each of them becomes for us a *sign*, 'an indication of the special perceptive operation we are called on to accomplish' (id. p. 130), and a complete set of signs is an *image* of the thing.

Further, things are *signs* of something beyond them. Happier than Mallarmé, Claudel had won through to the conviction

> that the world is a text, and that it speaks to us, humbly and joyously, of its own absence, but also of the eternal presence of someone else, to wit the Creator . . . that we are *a certain beginning of the creature, that we see all things in an enigma and as in a glass darkly*, that *the world is a book written within and without*, and *that visible things are made to lead us to the knowledge of the invisible*. (*Positions et propositions*, i, pp. 206-7.)

That is what things mean, what, in the French idiom, they *want to say*. Man's duty is to study and question them, then to find the word.

A word in its turn is a *sign*, a summary of experience and of our effort and success in assimilating experience. A word names (*appelle*), calls, calls up, the thing, expresses the sense (which is also the direction, the intention), the meaning of the thing. But 'the word is not only the formula of the object', its 'abbreviated repetition', 'it is the image of myself as I am *informed* by the object' when I have *comprehended* it. 'The name is a conjuring formula

which we use to induce a certain state of our personal tension, corresponding to such and such an external object . . .' (*Art poétique*, pp. 132-8.)

Such is the function and power of the word for any sensitively endowed person. And with what a thrill of joy we advert to the almost limitless scope of connotation, association, suggestion! 'In our memory, in our imagination, in our intelligence, we contain the vastest and most complicated ensembles. With the one word, Paris, we make up a whole town. Our mind adapts itself to every species of greatness and externalises its conceptions on whatever scale it wills, as is proved by the example of the sculptor, the engineer and the architect'. (*Positions et propositions*, ii, p. 64.) But the poet who 'has the magistery of all words and whose art is to use them, is competent, by a skilful disposal of the objects they represent, to awaken in us a state of intelligence that is harmonious and intense, right and strong'. (*Art poetique*, p. 190.) He longs to exercise his function, to be all voice, to be 'a totally intelligible word'. (*Odes*, p. 62.)

The poet eternises things. Claudel often recurs to the theme of the instability of this world. Time deludes us. 'Tomorrow in the number-circle on the clock-face, the same line will announce midnight. And on the dial of earth itself from year to year July shows similar features. But it is never the same midnight, the same July'. Time is 'the Invitation to die'. (*Art poétique*, pp. 47, 48, 57.) Yet though

The leaf grows sere and the fruit falls . . .
The leaf in my verses does not perish
Nor the ripe fruit, nor the rose among the roses. (*Odes*, p. 62.)

The fundamental principles we have been studying may be thus summed up. Every man has his function, assigned to him by God's purpose. Man differs from man 'according to the nature and degree of *co-naissance*'—i.e., observation, assimilation, use at his hands, of the universe external to him—'to which he is destined, according to the part and moment of creation of which he is called to remain forever in the sight of God the offerer and the witness'. (*Art poétique*, pp. 178-80.) The poet's function is a supereminent case of man's duty to be at the summit of creation as its image and sign. Through his mind he can in a sense assimilate matter; and he must complete it by voicing its witness, by expressing what it *wants to say*. This, we may say in passing, is the meaning of the inspired *Benedicite*. He voices creation in every work that expresses his penetration into the endless variety and glory of created things.

O lifeless earth, speak in my hands.

I, a poet, have found the yard-stick: (*mètre*)
I measure the universe with its image that I make.

I know all things and all things know themselves in me.
I bring deliverance to all things.
Through me
No thing now remains alone, but I associate it with some other in my heart.

He makes oblation of nature, is its priest:

. . . without me nature is vain; it is I who give it its meaning; in me everything becomes
Eternal, in the notion that I have of it; it is I who consecrate and sacrifice it. (*Odes*, pp. 164, 167, 52, 174.)

In all this, we have said, the poet is super-eminent, but he does not stand alone. Every man has his part to play. It is worth while transcribing a passage quoted by Madaule:[15]

He who, like a perfect musician, keeps an ever-present feeling of that concert of innumerable instruments in which continually, in the midst of ever-recurring surprises, he has to follow or invent his part, is what we call a just man, which is infinitely more than a superman. (The French word *juste* means *just* in the Biblical sense, but it also means *exact*, and *in tune*.) He is right and true (*juste*) as one's whole heart feels that a note, a musical phrase, is right. . . . The crowning word of the moral law has been spoken in one of the books of the Old Testament . . . which sums up all that is most exquisite and excellent both in sacred and profane Wisdom: *Ne impedias musicam. Hinder not music.* Act so that your actions and your most hidden thoughts not merely do not hinder the harmony of which you are an element, but so that they awaken or create it about you.

This, we may say in passing, explains the rôle of gentle Doña Musique in *Le Soulier de Satin*.

Man's activity of knowing—of enriching himself by contact with the *other*—is not bounded or ended with this terrestrial life. But death will release from sense-knowledge and the spirit will be wholly intent on God. 'After death we shall be the *poets*, the makers, of ourselves', (*Art poétique*, p. 190)—which is reminiscent of Mallarmé's famous saying that eternity changes a man into himself. Death gives us a new name, and as we have seen that the name is a summing up of the substance the new name will express the whole completion of which we are capable; death will give us direct knowledge of God 'in the perfection of liberty and vision and the purity of flawless love'. (id. p. 181).

All this conception of the matter and function of poetry lifts us above the neat and clear prescriptions of the old *artes poeticae* into a great Christian view of man's destiny and of the poet's duty and service in its regard. We feel ourselves truly *educti in latitudinem*,

15 Jacques Madaule, *Le Génie de Paul Claudel*, p. 130.

and the book can be read as a powerful apologia for Christian work. In this sense poetry joins prayer—as Claudel wrote to the abbé Brémond in words already quoted but worth repeating—'because it brings out the pure essence of things which is that of creatures of God and witnesses to God'. (*Positions et propositions*, i. p. 100.) (What follows may also be quoted, even though it is a digression here: 'But in this sense also it is infinitely inferior to prayer because man is made for God alone and not for things, and while it is excellent to go to God by any path, nevertheless the most direct is the best').

This theory of poetic creation is reflected at every turn in Claudel's work, in his subjects and in his technique.

A word is not only a *sign*, it is also *sound*. Claudel suggests in more than one place what he says in *Connaissance de l'Est*, that

> a person losing his interest in the sense of words uttered before him can lend them a subtler ear . . . Lightened of the thing that it signifies, [the word] subsists only by the unintelligible elements of the sound that convoys it, emission, intonation, accent. (pp. 54-5.)

Sound is a special, very tangible case of the movement of vibration existing in creation. That is prevailingly an alternating movement: the soul comes from God and ceaselessly seeks to revert to God; the mind observes, then abstracts; man takes in impressions and expresses them. We find this alternation in our human frame which is the instrument of the soul's activity and self-expression: inhalation and exhalation; systole and diastole: 'as the flame leaps under the bellows, so at every breath flashes forth the life of the body and of the soul, substantial verse, sentence or act' (*Art poétique*, p. 47). We find it in the physical world; the pendulum swings; there is a continual pulsation from weak to strong, flat to sharp, short to long, 'the great fundamental iambus', as Claudel calls it repeatedly (Cf. id. pp. 51, 190; *Positions et propositions*, i, p. 13).

Now the true poet must speak at the dictation of the spirit. The first inarticulate gasp of recognition and emotion is the 'profound *a*' —is not this reminescent of Jeremias, who could only say 'Ah, ah, ah, Lord God, behold I cannot speak'? 'The energy of the hidden gold' (*Odes*, p. 21) is striving to reveal itself. 'The simplest rendering of the pulsation which marks time in our breast' (*Positions et propositions*, i, pp. 16, 17) is the iambic verse universally used in ancient drama: Claudel tells us that his translation of the *Agamemnon* (1896) was principally a study of iambic verse. For narration, measured verse, of which when unrhymed the Latin hexameter is the finished type, has the advantage of putting the reader into 'an harmonious state', a 'state of ease and happiness', of 'poetic ecstasy' —with, in the long run, the danger of monotony avoided by only

the greatest poets. 'It is not always easy to produce hypnosis, but it is very easy to produce sleep' (*Positions et propositions*, i, pp. 16, 17).

Free verse avoids this danger of monotony. Governed by extremely flexible prosodic rules, it can adapt itself to the utmost variety of things and thoughts; it can make of poetry 'a document and text and the very word (*mot*) of Creation' (id., i, p. 26).

The French sentence is made up of phonetic members accented on the last syllable of the group of words, so that each group is a sort of long-drawn-out iambus. These groups can be rhythmically arranged; internal consonances and the strong finals can give richness of timbre. This is the secret of Claudel's variable verses—*versets* as he did not like them to be called.[16] 'O my son, when I was a poet amongst men', says Coeuvre in *La Ville*, 'I invented that verse that has neither rhyme nor metre.' Long or short as the sense requires, they are dominated by the rhythmical accent, and use all the resources of sound: the sonority of single words, contrasts and concordances of vowel music, assonance, alliteration, even rhyme when it suits the poet's purpose. The end of each verse, caught by the ear or the eye, marks a pause however slight for appreciation and understanding. This pause is an essential feature of Claudel's art: 'The poem is not made of these letters that I plant like stepping-points, but of the blank that remains on the paper (*Odes*, p. 21), what he expresses elsewhere by saying that he wants to be 'a sower of silence' (id. p. 163). We should indeed add that Claudel sometimes puts the 'blank' in the oddest places—not at random or in a burlesque fashion, but to arrest attention; and he thinks that typography should help to produce this result.

The verse so treated is like a phrase on a musical stave, lifting us into something of the indeterminate ecstasy of musical audition: *cette portée*, writes Claudel of a sentence quoted from Rimbaud, and to Euterpe he sings

> May the new language . . .
> Pour out irresistibly through every opening . . .
> The steady lyre in thy hands
> Is as the stave on which the whole song is inscribed. (id. p. 22.)

'Poetic inspiration is distinguished by the gifts of image and *number*' (*Positions et propositions*, i, p. 162), and thus 'The sense reaches the intelligence through the ear with a delightful plenitude'.

> The sound of the words and their sense, fused in one common sentence,
> Have such subtle exchanges and such secret harmonies that the soul recollected above the mind
> Perceives that the pure idea does not refuse to respond to the touch of delight. (*La Ville*, p. 288.)

[16] He said this to Lefèvre, *Sources*, p. 139.

This magic of 'image and number' transmutes the most ordinary and familiar words:

> The words I use
> Are the words of every day, and they are not the same as every day!
> You will find no rhymes in my verses, nor any spell. The phrases are your own—not one of them that I cannot use anew.
> (*Odes*, p. 120.)

Such an entirely personal poetic technique must be justified by its results. It obeys a hidden law. There *is* a control, a measure, 'a secret taste of the spirit' (*Art poétique*, p. 22), attributed to the cardinal virtue of temperance, which is 'the infallible consciousness and the supreme taste of the poet superior to explanation' (*Odes*, p. 172). The appeal to *taste* is truly French, and even in the classical tradition! But it is no routine or unanalysed control. When the poet is under the direct and immediate influence of his inspiration, 'all the faculties are in the supreme state of vigilance and attention . . . memory, experience, fancy, patience, intrepid and sometimes heroic courage, taste which immediately judges of what is contrary or not to our not yet clearly formed intention, intelligence above all which watches, weighs, questions, counsels, checks, stimulates, separates, condemns, connects, distributes, and puts light, order and proportion into everything' (*Positions et propositions*, i, p. 90).

Such is the skilled and conscious art of the seemingly lawless poet, bursting the bonds of fixed forms: forms of which he was a master as some rare poems show. For words are like the stones of the lapidary in the rough: 'handfuls of them on the black velvet background. The perfect jeweller plays with them as a musician does with his notes. That apparently insignificant pebble will suddenly make the whole necklace flash. Thanks to that dull opal, Cassiopoea will melt into tears in the night' (id. p. 71). Or they are like the elements in the chemist's bath: as at a touch of his wand some beautiful crystal is fixed, so will words combine by sense and sound.

Often enough Claudel writes as if the poet, soaring away into a remote region, were utterly indifferent to his readers. Transported by the ecstasy of the poetic movement he cries:

> That rhythm only!—
> What does it matter whether they understand me or not?

And again:

> I have no need of you, yours to get something out of me
> As the grindstone does of the olive and as the chemist succeeds in extracting the alcaloid from the most intractable root.
>
> I am drunk; I am possessed by the god.
> I hear a voice in me and the measure quickening, the movement of joy,

The stirring of the cohort of Olympus . . .
What do all men matter to me now? Not for them am I made but
To be carried away by that sacred measure!
(*Odes*, pp. 120, 156, 119.)

But that is because, in defiance of what is conventionally regular and of facile approach, he has first of all to be faithful to his inward vision. He is very conscious of his duty to his 'brothers', and longs to fulfil it:

Mercy is not the easy gift of what we have too much of; it is a passion, like science,
It is a discovery, like science, of Thy face in this heart that Thou hast made . . .

To me Thou hast not given a poor man to feed nor a sick man to tend
Nor bread to distribute—but words, which are more completely absorbed than bread or water—and a soul soluble in other souls. . .

Make me amongst men like one without a countenance and my Words amongst them soundless, sowing silence, sowing darkness, sowing churches,[17]

Sowing the measure of God
Like a little seed . . .
cast into good ground . . .
So is a word in the mind.

Make me to be like a sower of solitude and may he who hears my words go home moved and heavy with thought.

We might stop on this noble utterance, leaving the last word to our author; were it not that in translating we have deprived the verses of their *charm*, in the full sense of the word. 'You will not find any spell in my verses', we heard Claudel say. That was a provocative statement, a sort of challenge. But in 1927 he wrote words which sum up a good deal of the theory we have been studying. 'Habit which substitutes for the real nature of things a second nature—a purely practical, easily handled, efficacious value—has become the enemy of their real nature; an enemy that must be taken unawares and put to sleep, as Hermes's flute did to cruel Argus long ago. That is the use of the repetition of sounds, the harmony of syllables, the regularity of rhythm and all the music of prosody. Once the working part of the soul,[18] the everyday servile part, is thus

17 This is a recurring conception with Claudel, for example in the chapter entitled *Développement de l'église*, the poem *l'Architecte* in *Feuilles de Saints*, the Sunday discussion in *Conversations dans le Loir-et-Cher*, the rôle of Pierre de Craon in *L'Annonce*.

18 As in Claudel's famous fable of Animus and Anima.

dominated and occupied, *Anima* moves forward freely with an infinitely light and rapid step amongst things in their purity.' (*Positions et propositions*, i, pp. 98-9.) That is the *carmen*, the *charm*, the music which is a very subtle element of Claudel's poetry.

We have by no means touched on all the questions or solved all the difficulties that arise in one single book; but we have got a serviceable clue to Claudel's ideas and to his procedure: acute intensity of sense-perception covering every single aspect of tangible reality, equal intensity of inner spiritual activity rising above tangible things to a coherent view which adds the invisible to the visible world, a personal use of words and a tremendous consciousness of their power and of responsibility for the poet's gift.

Duhamel wrote that 'All Claudel's dramatic and lyric work is a leading towards God'.

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NOTE.—Owing to the great demand for copies of the March number of BLACKFRIARS dealing with WALES we should be very grateful if any readers who are willing to part with their copies when read would send them to 'Aldate', Llanarth Court, Raglan, S. Wales. In this way it may be possible to make the number available to many people in Wales who are anxious to read it.—EDITOR.