

# WHY WE NEED PAUL CLAUDEL

• D. C. Schindler •

“If the poet thus stands ‘before the Cross,’  
as the title of one of his books has it, the mystery  
upon which he meditates is not just one possibility of  
many, but is in fact the sole mystery that allows him to  
celebrate the universe in its totality, which means  
the mystery that allows him truly to be a poet,  
as Claudel understands the vocation.”

---

According to Paul Claudel, there are three qualities that a poet must possess in order to stand among the world’s greatest: inspiration, intelligence, and “catholicity.”<sup>1</sup> By this last term, which would no doubt surprise the average literary critic, Claudel intends the quality exhibited by those poets who “have received from God such vast things to express that nothing less than the entire world is adequate for their work. Their creation is an image and a vision of creation as a whole, of which their inferior brothers offer only particular aspects.”<sup>2</sup> If a poet’s significance tends to be as broad as his vision, then a “catholic” poet, as Claudel understands him, would be one who speaks not only to his own country and age, but in some sense to humanity. To use Thornton Wilder’s term, we might call an artist of this scope a “world poet.”

---

<sup>1</sup>Paul Claudel, “Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” in *Positions et propositions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 161–164. For an English translation, see “Religion and the Artist: Introduction to a Poem on Dante,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 357–367.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 164.

However short the list of such world poets from the twentieth century would be, “Paul Claudel” is certainly a name that belongs on it. It is strange, then, that the name seems to be recognized only within small, specialized circles. Though he is a writer of undeniable talent and vision, Claudel—who was once called by Charles de Bois the greatest living genius of the West, ranked by George Steiner as one of the two greatest dramatists of the twentieth century (along with Berthold Brecht), and compared by Hans Urs von Balthasar to the likes of Dante—has never been granted an undisputed place in French literature. Moreover, the several attempts to introduce Claudel to English-speaking audiences have regularly protested his “unjust neglect.” “Either one is for Paul Claudel, or else one is wholeheartedly against him,” wrote one critic in 1968.<sup>3</sup> The persistent ambivalence toward Claudel is due in part to the extraordinary demands his difficult language makes on the reader and the passionate intensity of his style, which some perhaps understandably find excessive. One cannot help but suspect, however, that the primary obstacle is the unabashed presence of his faith, the fact that, in his work, the worldly action passes so organically and immediately—one wants to say “naturally”—into supernatural drama, that it simply cannot be understood without reference to the great Christian mysteries.<sup>4</sup> For Claudel, to be Catholic is to be catholic, and vice versa.

Though a tension between faith and artistic creation has emerged in the Church from time to time since the beginning, the relationship between the two seems to be especially troubled in our age. The poet Dana Gioia recently observed that, while even non-specialists would be able to name American Catholic writers from the middle of the last century, at the present time there is virtually no one in either literature or literary criticism who is simultaneously respected by the mainstream and a serious Catholic in a forthright,

---

<sup>3</sup>Richard Griffiths, “Introduction: Claudel in all honesty,” in *Claudel: a reappraisal*, ed. R. Griffiths (Chester Springs, Penn.: Dufour Editions, 1968), 1.

<sup>4</sup>Agnes Meyer claimed that the reason for Claudel’s lack of success in his native France is that he was too “Biblical in thought and language” and “too tempestuous” for the “petty, polished classicists” (*Cahier canadien Claudel*, vol. 6 [Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1969], 167–170, cited in Harold Watson, *Claudel’s Immortal Heroes: A Choice of Deaths* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971], xi).

public manner.<sup>5</sup> Balthasar also remarked that the flourishing of Catholic literature in Europe around the turn of the century “seems to have left no heirs.”<sup>6</sup> While this split between religion and the imagination may be a function of the vagaries of artistic genius, it could also reflect a drift in the way both art and faith are understood and experienced, such that they are no longer compatible or at the least do not encounter one another in an essential way. But if this is the case, the split represents a crisis: it suggests that neither art nor faith bears any relation to *meaning*, to the great questions of human existence, and that both, then, have become impoverished.

Responding to this crisis requires not only forging new treasures but also recovering those that have already been given. It is in this spirit that we offer the following essay on Claudel, which intends to paint a basic portrait of the French poet. Because the name Claudel has become so obscure to English-language readers, we will give a brief account of Claudel’s life, a discussion of the meaning of poetry and the vocation of the poet as Claudel understands it, and suggest why, in spite of certain features contemporary readers might find outdated or irritating, he is particularly significant for us still now in the twenty-first century.

## I.

Paul Claudel was born in the small village of Villeneuve-sur-Fère of the Champagne region, on 6 August 1868, the fourth and last child of Louis-Prosper and Louise Cerveaux.<sup>7</sup> His sister, Camille, the sculptress who has been enjoying something of a revival the past two decades, was born in 1864. Though the house at Villeneuve remained the place the family spent their holidays, Louis-Prosper’s

---

<sup>5</sup>The observation was made in the course of a lecture entitled “Faith Seeking Beauty,” delivered 30 March 2007 at Villanova University, as part of the Humanities Department’s “Catholic Imagination” series.

<sup>6</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, trans. Erasmo Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>7</sup>The main sources for the biographical details are the following: Harold Waters, *Paul Claudel* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970); Louis Chaigne, *Vie de Paul Claudel et genèse de son oeuvre* (Paris: Mame, 1961); Paul-André Lesort, *Paul Claudel par lui-même* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1967); Wallace Fowlie, *Paul Claudel* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1957).

work required the family to relocate frequently. In 1882, the Claudel children moved with their mother to Paris in order to allow Camille to study sculpture under Auguste Rodin.

When Claudel gave an account of his youth, he spoke with pride of what he referred to as his “peasant origins,” and described himself as developing an intense love of nature. He was also a voracious reader. It was no doubt the constant quarreling in the Claudel household that encouraged Claudel to spend so much time in solitude, whether in the dark forests surrounding his native village, or in his room with a book. The Claudel family was Catholic, but not particularly pious, and in fact seemed to have followed Camille, who was quite headstrong in her opinions and who drifted away from the faith as she grew older. Claudel wrote that his own religious practice reached its peak, and ended, with his first communion. While he was a youth in the lycée in Paris, he absorbed the general atheism of his milieu. The dominant intellectual movement at the time was a mundane naturalism, though this was offset in reaction by the wild enthusiasms of the Symbolistes. When Claudel graduated from the lycée, he was awarded a prize that was presented to him by Renan, who is supposed to have predicted, in his address that day, that one of the young men present might one day turn into his fierce critic: Claudel in fact later in his life often denounced Renan’s naturalism with vehemence.

Writing began early for Claudel. He says he was writing poems “of a sort” already when he was five or six, and received a distinct sense of being a poet by vocation when he was just thirteen. But his true awakening to poetry came in what was to be the most significant year of his life. In 1886, Claudel discovered Rimbaud in two issues of a literary magazine, *La Vogue*: first his *Illuminations*, and then *Une Saison en enfer*. By the time these works, which were written in 1872 and 1873 respectively, were published in the magazine, Rimbaud had already given up on poetry and had all but disappeared. Indeed, Rimbaud’s friend Verlaine had thought Rimbaud was dead because of an unanswered letter, and had an edition of his poems published in 1886. Rimbaud returned to France after a decade spent in Abyssinia, and died in a hospital in Marseilles in 1891. Though he never met Rimbaud, Claudel’s encounter with Rimbaud’s poetry shook him to the core of his being. It appears to have been the glimpse of the reality of the “invisible” in his poetry that transformed him so greatly, liberating him from the banal materialism that weighed on him so heavily during his youth in Paris

that he had even once been tempted to suicide. Claudel maintained a deep love for Rimbaud's work for the whole of his life, even writing a preface to a later publication of his *oeuvre*, and strangely credits Rimbaud with igniting the faith that was to come to full blaze just several months later. Toward the end of *A Poet Before the Cross*, Claudel prays to God for Rimbaud, "without whom my eyes would not have been opened to your face."<sup>8</sup> Whether or not there is any truth to Isabelle Rimbaud's claim that her brother converted on his deathbed, Claudel for his part always saw him as a mystic "à l'état sauvage," and in any event as one who possessed a powerful sense of the despair of materialism. In the preface he wrote, Claudel quotes from Rimbaud a line he himself could have composed: "La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde." A passionate love for the world, coupled with a sense that a truer world lay somehow above, behind, and within it, can be found in Rimbaud's poetry, and marked Claudel's work from the beginning to the end.

At Christmas that same year, Claudel, searching for beauty, was inspired to attend vespers at Notre Dame, and it was there that occurred what he called "the event which dominated my whole life," an event that he described often (and which is memorialized on a plaque on the floor of the cathedral where Claudel stood when he was struck: "Ici se convertit Paul Claudel"). As the Magnificat was being sung, "my heart was touched and *I believed*." Faith took hold of him with a force that left no room for doubt and that never seems to have slackened at any point in his life. When he returned home that evening, a Bible that one of Camille's Protestant friends had offered to her as a gift happened to be lying on a table—which Claudel took to be a clear sign of "divine intervention." He opened it at the story of Emmaus in Luke, and found a confirmation of the faith he had just received. The Bible became from that moment on a constant companion of Claudel's, enriching both his life of faith and his literary imagination. As we will see in a moment, one of the most distinguishing features of Claudel's art is that his poetry passes completely naturally into prayer and back again. The faith to which he assented that evening established the horizon in relation to which he henceforward understood every aspect of his life. There was for him no artificial boundary between nature and grace, no chasm between natural events and their divine meaning, which would have

---

<sup>8</sup>Paul Claudel, *A Poet Before the Cross* (Leesburg, Va.: Alethes Press, 2007), 251.

to be bridged, if at all, by some arbitrary act of the imagination. This connection was not first created, however, by his conversion; instead, it would be truer to say that the conversion elevated and realized a relationship that already lay deep within him. Looking back on his earliest youth, the elderly Claudel wrote that, in the beauty of nature, his heart “opened to religion and to poetry at one and the same time.” Nevertheless, in spite of the strength of his conviction, four years passed before he was able to make his conversion known to his family and formally recommence his practice of faith as a Roman Catholic. He received communion on Christmas in 1890.

While Claudel continued to write poetry, and in fact began to participate regularly in a poetry group hosted by Mallarmé and which included at one point Valéry and Gide, he also began to write plays—though these, too, were always more lyrical than prosaic in style. By 1894, he had published two plays, *Tête d’Or* (1890) and *La Ville* (1893), and had composed several others (*L’Endormie*, 1887, *La Jeune Fille Violaine*, 1892, and *L’Echange*, 1894). As a result of these publications, he began receiving letters from established literary critics expressing wild enthusiasm, and could perhaps have won sufficient popular acclaim to attempt to make a living solely from his writing. But rather than make his creative work thus dependent on public taste, he decided to train for a more stable occupation, and began in 1889 to study political science with a view to becoming a foreign service interpreter. Instead, however, he passed exams to qualify for consulate duties, and so began his career as a diplomat, and eventually an ambassador, which carried him all over the world. A good deal of his time, in fact, was spent in various parts of the Far East. He energetically embraced the responsibilities his work as a diplomat laid upon him, and, except for particular periods when the work simply overwhelmed him, it did not seem to have impeded his creative activity, to which he devoted the earliest moments of the morning after Mass.

Claudel was successful in all of these activities. He became well known for his writing throughout the world, even as he was being promoted to higher diplomatic positions in one important place after another. When he came to the United States as the French ambassador in 1926 (where he was stationed until 1933), his plays were being staged to great acclaim. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1927 (which referred to him as “the great, the inexplicable Paul Claudel”). When he was able to devote himself

once again more or less full time to writing, during the last twenty years of his life after his retirement in 1935, it was mostly to commentaries on scripture or portrayals of biblical stories, though new productions of even his earliest plays continued to be performed.

There was a moment, however, at which Claudel nearly abandoned both his diplomatic career and his poetry, a moment that seems to have been a central preoccupation of his artistic work. This was no doubt the third of the four most significant events in his life. As he carried out his consular duties in China from 1895 to 1900, Claudel spent a great deal of time reflecting on the meaning of his life and sought earnestly to discern God's will for him. After a period of intense inner struggle, he decided to enter the Benedictines, and made a retreat at Solesmes once he had returned to France. His poetic work was flourishing, but he determined to give it up in order to serve God in the anonymity of monastic life. For some unknown reason, however, he left Solesmes for another monastery, Ligugé, where he remained for only a couple of weeks before he was turned away:

And after I had received "oblat" at the monastery at Ligugé, my superiors, probably in order to test me further, judged that I ought to return to China. It was devastating to me, because a sacrifice such as I had made [namely, the resolution to give up his poetry] is not something that happens twice in a person's lifetime. I recall that, at that moment, I went into the novices' chapel at Ligugé, and I remained there in great confusion about what I ought to do. And then I received a very clear response, altogether categorical and quite simple: NO. No other commentary, nothing but the response, a negation pure and simple, as clear and straightforward as it could be. On the other hand, no alternative was indicated, just that: NO. I was not permitted to enter, the path was barred to me.<sup>9</sup>

As we will see, the total consecration of the world to God that he was unable to embody in his life through the vows found expression in his writing, not simply in its content, which often enough dealt with the mystical and the miraculous, and evinced a thoroughly

---

<sup>9</sup>Claudé, from *Mémoires improvisés*, quoted in the "Introduction," by Jacques Madaule, to the Pléiade edition of volume one of his plays: *Théâtre*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), xv.

religious sense of renunciation and separation, but also in the very *form* of his poetry. In any event, this aspiration continued to inform his life: when he filled out the famous, somewhat tongue-in-cheek “Marcel Proust” questionnaire at the end of his life, to the question, “What would you like to have been?” he answered simply: “un prêtre.”<sup>10</sup>

The fourth major event occurred immediately after his time at the monastery. On the boat back to China, he met a young married woman and fell deeply in love with her. It plunged him again into a state of confusion, which he recounts with great pathos in one of his best-known plays, the strikingly autobiographical *Partage du Midi*. When they arrived in China, the woman left her family for Claudel, and they remained lovers for four years. The title of his play seems to signify, among other things, the drama of crisis and decision. The play’s protagonist, Mesa, is at a halfway point in his life, shaken from a rejected vocation and returning to China in despair. Ysé overturns his life. His meeting her does not bring him happiness, but nonetheless effects a profound, indeed a necessary, transformation. The development of the plot reaches a point of almost unbearable paradox: Mesa had “made careful plans to retire, to withdraw from mankind, yes, from all mankind,” ostensibly in order to serve God. But the impossible love that arrives with an unprepared-for violence teaches him to care for someone other than himself, that is, teaches him what it means to love: “The others—the others—the others. The others, for better or for worse, exist, and not just you alone. Have you finally learned that?” But the transformation is not in any sense an easy or harmonious resolution, for the love remains for all that a sin that cannot be affirmed.

The experience marked both Claudel’s life and his work; he betrays an acute sense of the tragic in all of his writings (it is not an accident, either, that he harbored a deep love, not only for Shakespeare, but also for Aeschylus, and taught himself Greek in order to translate his work). His massive play, *The Satin Slipper*, which is no doubt his magnum opus, written from 1919–1924, and which treats similarly of an impossible love that comes to embrace the entire world in transparency to God, has as its epigraph a Portuguese proverb, “God writes straight with crooked lines,” to which Claudel adds St. Augustine’s words, “*Etiam peccata*”—and with sins too. This

---

<sup>10</sup>A facsimile of the questionnaire is reproduced in *Vie de Paul Claudel*, 8–9.



does not mean, however, that Claudel cynically justified sin by pointing to the good that it produced. Rather, he insisted only that God can make use of what is in itself unjustifiable to bring about a good in spite of the evil of sin, and that this can be seen only from the transcendent sphere of God's providence, which, however, the artist, in his "transcendence" of his own work, can in some sense imitate. The complexity of Claudel's view on sin in art and life stands out in a letter he wrote to the author of an essay on him:

There is one exaggeration which I presume is due to a mere oversight in editing. It is where you say that for me the great, the only sin, is not to remain in one's destiny. For me, as for every Christian, sins are infractions of the Ten Commandments, and their gravity depends absolutely upon matter and intention. But, as an artist, I am at liberty to consider sin from other points of view: either as a symbol, as Our Saviour does in the parable where he praises the unjust steward, or as an application of the text of St. Paul: *Omnia cooperantur in bonum*: "All things work together for good," adding the gloss of St. Augustine, *etiam peccata*, "even sins." For example: the adultery of David, so severely punished, gave us one of those mothers from whom Jesus Christ was descended, as is specifically noted in his genealogy.<sup>11</sup>

As we will see below, the artistic vantage that allows a comprehensive assent does not, for all that, eclipse the simple Christian abhorrence of sin.

After Claudel returned to Paris in 1908, his life finally acquired the stability that had until then eluded him. He married, in his thirty-seventh year, the daughter of an architect, Reine Sainte-Marie-Perrin, who accompanied Claudel on his third mission to China, three days after the wedding. Their marriage was a happy one, and it bore the fruit of five children. He continued to write poetry and plays, as well as small theological and philosophical treatises, just as he continued his diplomatic career. In 1928, Claudel was asked to write a preface to a new French edition of the *Book of Revelation*. His reading and re-reading of that book, and of the universe in the rest of the New and Old Testament, that the request provoked, led him finally to write, instead of the desired preface, a

---

<sup>11</sup>Paul Claudel, *Letters to a Doubter*, trans. H. L. Stuart (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1927), 115–116.

massive commentary on *Revelation* called *Au milieu des vitraux de l'Apocalypse*. This began a series of commentaries on scripture, which were the primary occupation of his poetic activity over the last years of his life. Though Claudel was never known particularly for his contribution to scriptural exegesis—in fact, he never considered himself an “exegete” in the strict sense, and indeed harbored a certain suspicion toward those who would turn the reading of scripture primarily into a “scientific” academic discipline—by the end his commentaries made up about one-third of his entire literary output: ten of thirty volumes in the collected works.

In addition to his literary writings, Claudel kept up correspondence with several writers in France, most noteworthy of which is the series of letters he exchanged with Jacques Rivière, and with André Gide. Both of these exchanges were published—and translated into English—during Claudel’s lifetime.<sup>12</sup> The exchanges are perhaps remarkable above all for the zeal Claudel expresses regarding faith. The letters are filled with apologetics; Claudel begs his correspondent in both cases simply to open his eyes to the evident truth of God’s existence, and the necessity of the Church. Rivière converted to Catholicism just before his early death; Gide grew quite hostile to Claudel, and persisted even more strongly in his refusal. Nevertheless, in spite of his frustration with Claudel, Gide never ceased to admire his literary genius. In this correspondence, we see expressed Claudel’s general fate in French literature. He was considered one of the most important French writers of the twentieth century, and yet some of his greatest works were initially greeted by silence when they first appeared. This may be due to the extraordinary demand they sometimes place on the reader, but, as we mentioned at the outset, it seems also to be the case that the explicitly religious themes, and indeed the tendency toward triumphalism, caused some unease. Few twentieth-century poets of Paul Claudel’s generally acknowledged stature drew so readily and explicitly on their faith; T. S. Eliot comes close perhaps. It was not until 1946 that Claudel was invited to become a member of the Académie Française. He died in 1955, having lived with his family on the estate he had purchased in Bragues, since his retirement in 1935. He is buried on that property.

---

<sup>12</sup>See *Letters to a Doubter*, cited above, and *Correspondence 1899–1926 between Paul Claudel and André Gide*, trans. John Russell (New York: Pantheon, 1952).

## II.

It is not possible, in a brief introduction such as this one, to present Claudel's major works, or even to offer an idea of the most prominent themes he explores in his poetry, his dramas, and his prose works, though of course all of this would be necessary to communicate his significance. To attempt to do so in such a foreshortened fashion would be to fall back on generalizations and superficial characterizations that would fail to provide any real insight. What we will do instead is to sketch out what seem to be the basic features of what we could call either Claudel's poetic vision of the cosmos, or his cosmic vision of poetry—the vision, in short, out of which his art arises.

Here already we encounter something that sets Claudel apart from many of the best-known writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely, that his creative activity was rooted in what we could defensibly call a distinctive metaphysics. Significantly, Claudel wrote not only literary criticism and treatises on poetic inspiration, which would not be surprising for a writer of philosophical habits, but he also composed a substantial treatise on the nature of reality and time. This difficult and often obscure work, *L'Art poétique*, which Claudel appropriately referred to in a letter as a "mother book," containing in its womb, as it were, hosts of other books, represents the theoretical heart of Claudel.<sup>13</sup> As Claudel worked as both a diplomat and a poet early in his career, he worked his way diligently through Aquinas's "two *summas*," and saw this formation in metaphysics—which, to be sure, he assimilated not as a professional philosopher or theologian would have, but rather through the distinctive coloration of a poet's imaginative intelligence and productive intentions—as indispensable to his writing of plays and poems. In this interest in fundamental and comprehensive metaphysical questions, Claudel does indeed bear a resemblance to the medieval poet he admired so deeply, and to whom he has often been compared, namely, Dante. Unless we recognize the rootedness of Claudel's art in a distinctive, Christian vision of the real, we fail to appreciate his significance no matter how much we rightly enjoy and admire, say, the masterful agility of his imagination, the piercing

---

<sup>13</sup>See Claudel's letter to Frizeau, July 1905, cited in the notes to *L'Art poétique* in *Oeuvre Poétique*, 1060.

exactitude of his language, or the compelling force of his rhythm. Among modern French poets, perhaps only Charles Péguy equals Claudel in the integration of theology and poetry.

Let us begin by citing a famous “parable” Claudel wrote in a discussion of French poetry in which he offers a characterization of the difference between *animus* and *anima*. Because it offers a delightful sense of the color and spirit of Claudel’s writing, we present it here in full:

Not everything runs smoothly in the household of Animus and Anima, spirit<sup>14</sup> and soul. The time is distant, the honeymoon was soon finished, during which Anima had the right to speak freely and comfortably and Animus listened to her with rapt attention. After all, wasn’t it Anima who contributed the dowry, and keeps the household afloat? But Animus didn’t allow himself to be reduced to this subaltern position for long, and he soon made known his true, vain, pedantic, and tyrannical nature. Anima is ignorant and stupid, she never went to school, while Animus knows a whole bunch of things; he read a lot of things in books, he taught himself to speak with a pebble in his mouth, and now, when he speaks, he speaks so well that all his friends say that no one can speak better than he speaks. They can’t get enough of hearing him speak. Now Anima no longer has the right to say a word, he takes the words right out of her mouth, as they say, he knows better than she what she wants to say, and with the help of his theories and the things he remembers, he turns it over, he arranges it so well that the poor little thing no longer recognizes it anymore. Animus isn’t faithful, but that doesn’t keep him from being jealous, because at bottom he knows full well that Anima is the one who possesses the fortune, that he is a freeloader and lives completely from her handouts. Not only that, he never stops exploiting her and tormenting her in order to get money out of her. He pinches her to make her cry, he plays tricks on her, he makes things up in order to make her suffer and just to see what she’d say, and when he goes out at night, he recounts it all to his friends at the café. All this time, she stays quietly at home doing the cooking and cleaning up as best she can after his literary soirées that fill the place with the stench of upset stomachs and tobacco. At least it doesn’t happen that often; at bottom, Animus is a bourgeois: he has regular habits and always likes to be served the same dishes. But then something funny happened. One day when Animus came home on a whim, or perhaps when

---

<sup>14</sup>It should be noted that the French word for spirit, *l’esprit*, can also be translated as “mind.”

he was snoozing after dinner, or perhaps when he was absorbed in his work, he heard Anima singing alone, behind a closed door: a peculiar song, something unfamiliar to him, without his being able to figure out the notes or the words or the key—a strange and a marvelous song. Since then, he has slyly tried to get her to sing it again, but Anima acts as if she doesn't know what he is talking about. She falls silent the moment he looks at her. The soul falls silent the moment the mind [*l'esprit*] looks at her. And so Animus figured out a trick; he's going to make it so that she thinks he's not there. He goes outside, he chats noisily with his friends, he whistles, he plucks at the lute, he saws some wood, he sings some idiotic songs. Little by little, Anima reassures herself, she looks around, she listens, she lets out her breath, she thinks she's alone and without a sound she will open up the door to her divine lover. But Animus, as we said before, has eyes in the back of his head.<sup>15</sup>

Claudel's parable sets into relief that fascinating human paradox celebrated by his other countrymen, Henri de Lubac, and, a few centuries earlier, Blaise Pascal: man infinitely surpasses himself. There is something beyond the human *in* the human, and man thus exists as open in his core to the supernatural. This radical duality is the source of both the *misère* and *grandeur*, the ridiculous pretension and the sublime humility, that make equal claim on human life. But Claudel approaches this rich paradox specifically in connection with the poetic act, the moment of inspiration. The essential point to note in the way he characterizes this moment is the fact that the most genuine creativity arises not from the deliberate concentration of (merely) human effort but in the quiet, almost incidental attunement to what is greater than man. The voice of God is manifest in a hushed whisper, glory appears in the vulnerability of a baby.

The contrast between Anima and Animus is meant to show forth the radical receptivity of poetic inspiration, which for Claudel, however, is altogether different from a dull passivity in relation to the objective. Claudel vehemently denounced the crude materialism of the naturalist currents prominent at his time, which enervated, indeed denatured, the human spirit and its essential vocation: "we know that we were made to dominate the world and not the world

---

<sup>15</sup>This relatively independent text within a longer piece called, "Réflexions et propositions: sur le vers français," bears the title, "Parabole d'Animus et d'Anima: Pour faire comprendre certaines poésies d'Arthur Rimbaud," in *Positions et propositions*, 55–57.

to dominate us.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Claudel equally rejected the Romantic exaggeration of the poetic (from *ποίησις*, “production” or “making”) powers of human subjectivity. Such an idolization of poetry betrays a failure to understand both the nature of the artist and the nature of reality. It takes for granted the emptiness of the real, and desperately substitutes a world of fantasy that, for all its restlessness, reflects the very lifelessness of the reality it ostensibly replaces in protest: “A genuine poet has no need at all for greater stars or more beautiful roses. The one that is there is enough for him, and he knows that his own life is too short for the lesson it gives and the approbation it warrants.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the glorification of the formless infinite that Claudel laments in the nineteenth-century spirit,<sup>18</sup> though seductive for anyone dissatisfied with materialism, turns out to be the flip side of the same coin: both naturalism and the nihilistic exuberance of Romanticism presuppose a world that has no spiritual significance of its own precisely *qua* nature.

And here we come to a central claim implicit in all of Claudel’s work, which, as extravagant as it may initially seem, is compelling in its simplicity: poetry is possible only in a world created by God, for it is only in such a world that things bear a significance that is greater than they themselves are and for that reason is not simply arbitrarily imposed upon them from “the outside,” as it were. It is only in such a world that the human spirit can *contribute* to the *objective* meaning of things rather than merely intrude upon them with distortions of its own invention. That is the paradox that lies at the basis of Claudel’s poetic mission: *absolute* human creativity is no creativity at all but only a constant reconfiguration of the *nihil*; to *make* something in a genuine way, one has to be first a recipient, a receiver of the making that in fact constitutes what is. It is this that renders poetic inspiration truly ontological and thus allows it to resonate with such a warm depth; it is why we could call Claudel’s cosmos poetic and his vision of poetry cosmic. The key is coming to see the world as word, and thus to see the poet first as listener before he is speaker. Hence, the frequent appearance in Claudel’s work of

---

<sup>16</sup>Paul Claudel, “La catastrophe d’Igitur,” in *Positions et propositions*, 197–207, here: 205.

<sup>17</sup>Claudel, “Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” 169.

<sup>18</sup>See Claudel, *Letters to a Doubter*, 116–117; cf. “Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” 168–170.

the word that most succinctly describes the authentic disposition of the poet: *attention*.

The “ressourcement” of poetry in the divine act that establishes the world explains why Claudel affirms an analogy between poetic inspiration and prayer: “It is in this sense that poetry converges with [*rejoint*] prayer, because it distills from things their pure essence, which is their being creatures of God and their bearing witness to God.”<sup>19</sup> The term “analogy” is the right one here: the poetic act *resembles* prayer, because it ultimately shares the same source, but it can never be reduced to prayer or substitute for it. In a letter to Abbé Brémond, which was later published in his book *Positions et propositions*, Claudel ascribes three meanings to the word “inspiration”: the first is similar to what one generally means by “vocation,” namely, the natural aptitude for the integration of imagination and desire that is at the source of all truly creative work; second, the interior movement that brings all of the poet’s faculties to a “supreme state of vigilance and attention”; and, third, what Claudel claims to be the most subtle meaning: the capacity to “evade” in one way or another the omnipresent temptation to reduce things to their mundane significance, their service of quotidian projects, and instead awaken the sensitivity that allows things to display themselves in their “pure” state, as partial images of God that are both “intelligible” and “desirable,” in a freedom from their utility.

The word that the poet utters, then, becomes a transparent medium in which things may rise to a significance they would not otherwise have. He is then a font, if not the source, of their significance: “every word” that the poet pronounces in this respect is not an invention, but “a repetition.” Addressing the poet in one of his Five Great Odes, Claudel writes: “And when you speak, O poet, in a delectable enumeration / Uttering each thing’s name / Like a father you call it mysteriously in its principle, and according as long ago / You participate in its creation, you cooperate in its existence!”<sup>20</sup> In Claudel’s relatively early play, *La Ville* (second version), a character exclaims, “You explain nothing, O poet, but

---

<sup>19</sup>Paul Claudel, “Lettre à l’Abbé Brémond sur l’inspiration poétique,” in *Positions et propositions*, 93–100, here: 100.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Claudel, *Cinq Grandes Odes*, in *Oeuvre Poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 219–292, here: 230.

through you all things become explicable.”<sup>21</sup> If he adds, a moment later, that, “Every word is an explication of love,” it can be only because the world that the poet’s words articulate has its source in creative Love. The world becomes explicable because the poet, while indeed “saying” something with a particular meaning in distinction from other meanings, still more fundamentally brings to manifestation the source of significance itself.

It is thus no surprise that Aquinas, the great metaphysician of creation, should have been so important for Claudel’s understanding of his own work as a poet. Nevertheless, there was one aspect of Aquinas’ thought that Claudel did not find satisfactory, namely, what he took to be the “purely intellectual” knowledge that the separated soul possesses after death. In response to what he judged to be a deficiency in this doctrine, Claudel composed a dense and difficult philosophical treatise on “Co-naissance,” which he published with two other small treatises in the book we mentioned above, *L’Art poétique*, in 1907. He was concerned to show that sense knowledge never lost its significance, even in the eschaton when one’s earthly life has passed. What may seem at first to be a fairly secondary matter, relevant only to a state still at a distance from this world, is in fact quite central, for on it hinges the meaning of the created universe. This theme brings us into the heart of Claudel’s vision of the world. He begins his treatise with a bold claim: “Nous ne naissons pas seuls. Naître, pour tout, c’est co-naître. Toute naissance est une connaissance.”<sup>22</sup> Interpreting the roots of the French word for knowledge, “co-naissance,”—an etymology also reflected, as he shows, in Greek and Latin—Claudel seeks to recover the concrete rudiments of the spiritual act of cognition. The most radical truth of the world, as created, is that it is *not* God; the dependence that is thus constitutive of its being is reflected in its interdependence with all other things. One color has its proper character only in its exclusion of the character that belongs to others, and so its own reality consists in a *need* that is also an opposition of sorts. Being, for Claudel, is therefore essentially dramatic, even in its simplest instances. When he uses the term “co-naissance,” what he first means is the “necessity all things have to be a *part*.” Ultimately, there

---

<sup>21</sup>Claudel, *Théâtre*, I, 428.

<sup>22</sup>“We are not born alone. To be born is for all things to be ‘born with.’ Every birth is a co-birth, a *connaissance*” (*Oeuvre poétique*, 149).



is no thing in the universe without this need, and the universe in general is the interplay of these necessities. No part can exist without the whole, nor can it therefore exist in its complete meaning without all of the other parts. The meaning of any one thing awaits the meaning of all the rest, even as it is at the same time called upon by all the rest to contribute its own sense. As Claudel puts it in a striking phrase, “*Connaître* thus means: to be that which all the rest is missing.”<sup>23</sup>

There are a number of things that follow from this insight that are indispensable to Claudel’s understanding of reality; in a sense, one could say that his interpretation of “co-naissance” is the point at which the primary features of his vision converge. In the first place, it brings to light the significance of the senses in our knowing of the world and being known to the world. However one may evaluate Claudel’s interpretation of the act of knowledge from a strictly philosophical perspective, it lends a direct insight into his own *poësis*. If it is true, as he claims, that to know means to be “born with,” and thus to exist at the same time as and in relation to all things, then the perfect state of knowledge is not an abstraction from the movement of things of an eternalized concept, but rather a co-existing with concretely subsisting things *in* their eternal cause. The movement toward the universal, then, is not the empty formalizing that excludes differentiation, but a comprehensiveness that includes it. In this respect, sensible knowledge never gets left behind, even as it is increasingly purified, and, by being brought closer to its original source, is made increasingly intelligible. As Claudel insists—and this is indeed a pivotal notion in his work—the human being is the comprehensive whole composed of body and soul, which, however different these two aspects of his existence in fact may be, are ultimately mutually dependent and thus inseparable. The separation of the body and soul that occurs at death, he insists, is a state of *violence*, and for that very reason needs to be resolved. The history that one lives through and takes into one’s very flesh remains part of one in the life after this, even as it is revealed there for the first time in its total significance.

The essential weight of the senses, the permanent meaning of the body, comes to direct expression in Claudel’s treatment of the “spiritual senses,” in an essay published in his book *Présence et*

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 153.

*prophétie* called “La sensation du divin.”<sup>24</sup> Here he meditates on the spiritual significance of each of the five senses, in a manner that passes back and forth smoothly and seamlessly between the crudest elements of the physical and the loftiest heights of symbolic meaning. The reason for the unity that embraces the real difference between body and soul is twofold: on the one hand, the body is not first of all a self-enclosed entity, a merely physical mass, that would then get “connected” to the meaning of the soul in some second moment, but is rather essentially the “externalization” of the soul itself. It is, in other words, *nothing but* the soul, made physically manifest, the “place” where the soul perceives what lies outside of it. “The whole body is one sense,” he writes in *The Satin Slipper*, “a planet watching the other planets in the air.”<sup>25</sup> The sense organs are therefore “the product and exterior form of our internal faculties and of this need that shapes the depths of our being with regard to something outside of us, the need that enables us to apprehend it and receive its stamp.”<sup>26</sup> Notice the connection between this and the co-naissance: if we depend on what is other than, and thus in some sense outside of, us for our own meaning and thus for our most intimately spiritual acts, and if the senses are as it were the externalizing of just this need, the senses will be intrinsic to those spiritual acts. In other words, if the body is thus in this sense transparent to the soul, so that we may *see* the soul in the body, the soul for its part depends essentially on the body. What was perhaps lacking in the nineteenth-century Thomism in which Claudel was formed finds its response in this decisive Christian reality, which lies at the core of Claudel’s faith: the Incarnation, the *becoming flesh*, of God himself. The need that the soul has for the body has its deepest foundation in the fact that the spiritual meaning in which the soul possesses its ultimate destiny is not in the purity of a divinity that has separated itself from the weight of matter, but rather a divinity that has itself transformed

---

<sup>24</sup>Paul Claudel, “La sensation du divin,” in *Présence et prophétie* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Egloff, 1942), 49–130. This essay was completed just as Claudel was finishing his final ambassadorship in Washington, and just before he began to write *A Poet Before the Cross*.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*, trans. Fr. John O’Connor (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1931), 300.

<sup>26</sup>Claudel, “La sensation du divin,” 61.

matter by assuming it once and for all.<sup>27</sup> As Claudel points out, God became flesh, not for a moment or for only a few people, but eternally and for all, and this means that the God upon whom the redeemed will gaze is an incarnate one.<sup>28</sup> Henceforward, the sublimest heights of the spirit lie in the depths of the flesh. There is, of course, a logical connection between the doctrine of the Incarnation and that of the Resurrection of the Body—and this connection itself reveals the genuinely eternal significance of the life of the senses already now. Once again, Christianity proves to be naturally poetic.

But the “comprehensiveness” that Claudelian knowledge implies stems not only from his insistence on the union of body and soul, but even more directly from the breadth of his view of things. There is scarcely any word that is dearer to Claudel than “universe” and its cognates. If it is true that the poet has a *responsibility* to reality, a vocation to be the means by which things find their realization in significance, and if it is also the case that the meaning of any particular thing is born in and with the meaning of all other things, then nothing less than the entire universe is needed for the poet to express his inspiration. Speaking as the universal “man,” Claudel exclaims, “I am present to the world, in every part I exercise my *connaissance*. / I know all things and all things know themselves in me. / I bring deliverance to all things. / Through me / Not one thing remains alone anymore but I connect it with another in my heart.” Then, after the pause of a blank line, he adds: “This is still not enough!”<sup>29</sup> He finds himself drawn to the original Source of both the world and his own heart in which the world comes to expression, and in this God who alone is able to free him from his limitations he can embrace the entire universe at once, in an unconditional assent in which his poetic vision may properly be said to culminate: “Hail to you, then, O world new to my eyes, O world now total! O whole *credo* of things visible and invisible, I accept you with a catholic heart!”<sup>30</sup>

Again, the fulfillment of the meaning of any one part demands the fulfillment of the meaning of the whole, and if the

---

<sup>27</sup>Cf. *A Poet Before the Cross*, 150: “With all our senses we shall contemplate the first cause.”

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>29</sup>*Oeuvre poétique*, 238.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 240.

poet's vocation is indeed to serve the meaning of things, not in the pragmatic sense of figuring out their function, but in the more properly *aesthetic* sense of celebrating their irreducible and thus necessary significance, there will be an impatience in the poet ("o mon âme impatient!"<sup>31</sup>) that refuses to let him content himself with a partial perspective, a partial yes. Notice where this leads once again: first, the poet's most radical act is not the "I create!" of the Nietzschean will to power, but rather the "I accept!" of the womb that offers itself without restriction to bear the fruit of another. It is no accident that the third Great Ode, which follows the one just cited, bears the title *Magnificat* and begins with the line, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Second, there is an essential and deliberate ambiguity in two of the words from the passage cited above, "credo" and "catholic." On the one hand, the two words can refer to the specificity of the Church to which Claudel pledges his assent. On the other hand, however, these same words have a more universal meaning, which is of course nevertheless connected to their specific sense, and which Claudel clearly intends at the same time. The "I believe" is not only the first word of the Nicene creed, it is for Claudel also the witness things bear to their Creator *in* their being: their existence itself is the proclamation of their own assent to the Creator. And "catholic" (which would not be capitalized in French even if used in the proper sense), of course, means not only "Catholic" but also "according to the whole," καθ' ὅλον. A catholic heart is a universal heart, an unconditional embrace that lets things be and be together. It is just such a heart that *unifies*. *Coinnaissance au monde et de soi-même*: the knowledge of oneself is coincident with one's being "co-born" into the world and thus being present *to* the world as a whole.

But the assent is not without a certain tragic hue, though this hue, when comprehended within this catholic assent, serves in fact to augment the glory of God's providence. Claudel's sense of tragedy is perhaps expressed nowhere better than in *The Satin Slipper*, the drama that takes the entire globe of earth, and heaven too, for its stage, but it is not entirely absent from any of his work, including his poems and even his scriptural commentaries. There is, first, the more immediate tragic affirmation in God's writing "straight with crooked lines": a yes that embraces the whole universe and therefore also the

---

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 223.

whole of human history will find that it has included much that is ugly, regrettable, and indeed horrifying; it will have affirmed many things that simply and absolutely ought not to be and ought never to have been. Is this a contradiction? No, it does not need to be. But this is not because one “justifies” sin and suffering on account of its positive yield, or one denies that it is ultimately evil in fact. Claudel is unequivocal in his condemnation of sin, as we saw above. If he can nevertheless say yes to the whole, it is once again because of his Catholic heart, which marvels almost incredulously at the miracle of grace that can draw from sin what is perfectly contrary to evil and thus could in no way have come from sin itself: the gift of some indispensable goodness and ultimately of redemption itself. This miracle rests, of course, on the soteriological event of the Cross, which lies in the background of all of Claudel’s writing, an event to which his poems and dramas become regularly and unashamedly transparent. If the poet thus stands “before the Cross,” as the title of one of his books has it, the mystery upon which he meditates is not just one possibility of many, but is in fact the sole mystery that allows him to celebrate the universe in its totality, which means the mystery that allows him truly to be a poet, as Claudel understands the vocation. Without the gratuitous redemption of the world that Christ effects in his sacrifice, the poet would either have to leave much out of his embrace, or would have to deny the reality of evil. But if the deformation of the world brought about by sin is not evil, then the world itself is not good, it is not a thing ultimately to be desired, enjoyed, and celebrated.

Perhaps even more originary than the tragic affirmation of redeemed sin is, second, the paradox that arises from the world’s ultimate transparency to its Creator. Claudel’s love for the world is fierce. It is uncompromisingly human, burning with the pain and passion that exists when love is bodily; it is altogether unhampered by the sometimes subtle but no less real logic of resentment and self-contempt inevitable in moralism. It is, quite simply, boundless. But precisely because it is boundless it transcends the world. Herein arises a dramatic tension that will never be simply resolved: to love the world completely, one must love more than the world; the very desire that one sets on the world is a desire ultimately directed to God. As Claudel famously wrote, “Woman is a promise that cannot be kept.” The possession of the promise requires a renunciation, and for that very reason, the renunciation is no rejection or denial, but a supreme instance of affirmation. In *The Satin Slipper*, the lovers are

kept mercilessly apart over the whole course of the play and at a distance that literally spans the globe, precisely because their consummation lies (always already) in heaven. What is enacted in Claudel's surprising integration of *eros* and *agape*—which can perhaps be said to bring the two more paradoxically together than, say, Dante did—in relation to the sexual love between man and woman is a paradigm that sheds light on the poet's relation to everything he makes the subject of his songs. As we saw before, the poet joins himself to things *precisely* in their principle, and this union is therefore at once the most intimate imaginable and one that takes a respectful, at times an even wistful, distance. The more one loves the world, the more one loves God, and, because of God's own love for the world, the reverse is true at the same time: the circle is an eternal one, and, in itself, it generates the dramatic energy that fuels all great tragedy, even before the beautiful and painful complexities introduced by sin.

Here we come to the final feature of Claudel's poetic work that we wish to highlight in the present context: its inexorably *dramatic* character. Though he had attempted poems in his early youth, it is not accidental that Claudel's first serious artistic productions were dramas. The dramatic was indeed the natural bent of his mind. Claudel never had an interest, for example, in writing novels or short stories. In his poems, one cannot help but notice a constant tendency toward the dramatic, which occasionally becomes explicit—in, e.g., the Odes to the Muses which seem to turn, as if by an inner need, into *dialogues* with the Muses. It must be said that his dramas likewise invariably betray a poetic quality, they consistently exhibit a lyrical style—but this is just because the poetic and the dramatic stem, for Claudel, from the same source. “Ah! A single voice was not enough for the poet. . . .”<sup>32</sup> A single voice would make manifest only one view of the world, but a concert of voices gives rise to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is only such a whole that is adequate—or at least less inadequate—to the totality of the poet's aspiration. If the poet, in other words, seeks to help the world as a whole come to fruition in significance, the poet will naturally become dramatic. Again, if knowledge means “being born with,” then such an event is necessarily dialogical. “We are not born alone. . . .”

---

<sup>32</sup>Paul Claudel, *Oeuvres en prose*, 53, cited in Madaule, “Introduction,” *Théâtre I*, ix.

In a letter to the newspaper *Le Temps* that he wrote on the relationship between Christianity and theater, in lieu of an essay on his ideas about art that he had been invited to write but had to decline, Claudel explained how Christianity is essentially dramatic, and, in his explanation, we see the source of this same feature in his poetry: it turns, once again, on the *universality* implied in the name “Catholic.” There are two reasons for its dramatic character, he says.<sup>33</sup> First of all, Christianity, as a “principle of contradiction,” makes demands that seem excessive, but turn out in the end to be the sole demands to do justice to the whole human being in his entirety. The truth of Christianity, which lies beyond the sense world and the exhaustive grasp of reason, requires man to risk himself and all he has; it lays claim to all of him. It demands, he says, a “tensed humility,” such as we see in athletes, and in its demands gives rise to unsuspected resources in the human being. Second, because the truth it proposes is not an abstract idea but an “exterior and real object,” the human being is both sent deeply into himself for the never finished task of self-examination and reflection, and also called outside of himself into action. It is therefore a truth that cannot simply be passively known, but is grasped—or better: succeeds in grasping one—only through the drama of encounter, decision, and action. The same could be said for the truth the poet seeks to make manifest: it is a truth that demands the poet’s own co-birth into the world, it is thus a truth that becomes manifest in provocation, dialogue, and engagement. It is, in the end, not an inert idea, but an event that is produced precisely by being actively received.

What, then, of the scriptural commentaries that occupied the last twenty years of his life, during which he all but ceased to compose new poems and dramas in the strict sense? Are we to think that the sense of the dramatic thus dulled in his late years? The letter to *Le Temps* suggests another interpretation. We might speculate that Claudel’s conversion took such total hold of him in his youth precisely because he felt that his being coincided with his poetic (indeed, *dramatic*) vocation and because the revelation of Christ and the meaning of the world in his light, for all of its surprise, brought a fulfillment to this vocation. In this sense, Christianity represents the very truth of what drove Claudel’s writing, what he pursued in his art; it is the reality itself of which the poetic art of drama is the beautiful image.

---

<sup>33</sup>Claudel, “Lettre au ‘Temps,’” in *Positions et propositions*, 237–243.

When Claudel turns explicitly to his reflections on the Christian mysteries articulated in the Bible, then, he is not so much shifting directions in his writing as he is engaging more directly in the sort of meditation that had always nourished his poetry; we ought to recall that he was a reader of scripture from the beginning, and that his commentaries are the fruit of an activity that had occupied him since his conversion at eighteen. Moreover, we ought to recall that Claudel affirmed an analogy between prayer and poetic inspiration. It is interesting to note that, as autobiographical as his poetry and drama generally tended to be, they were nonetheless artistic productions, i.e., *fictions*; in his commentaries, by contrast, he speaks directly as *Paul Claudel*, and in fact makes this known already in the titles of some of these works: there is the book published as *Paul Claudel Interroge le Cantique des Cantiques*, and *Paul Claudel Interroge l'Apocalypse*, not to mention the book he called simply *J'aime la Bible*, as well as the work entitled, *A Poet Before the Cross*, which he wrote in his own person. At the same time, however, his more direct presence in these writings does not in the least make them more "subjective," and thus less "catholic." Ironically, his fiction more often relates personal events from his life; the Paul Claudel of the commentaries tends to be one who is wholly filled with the objectivity of the mysteries and their universal significance, the poet who stands before the Cross stands there simply as a Christian, who does not himself *produce* (*poēsis*) the mystery, but gratefully receives it. In short, Claudel the dramatic poet becomes transparent in these works to the *real* drama of the Christian life.<sup>34</sup>

The dramatic character of his writing, then, becomes no less palpable in these writings on scripture. The first aim of his meditations is to unfold the endless significance contained in every single detail of the biblical account of the mystery or event and the language and imagery used to articulate them. The towering tree is secretly contained in the mustard seed; the boundless theological meaning of things lies *within* their depths, and is not something distant, or merely conceptual, a meaning *to* which things point in an

---

<sup>34</sup>We might compare Claudel in this regard to Kierkegaard: Kierkegaard's religious works were published under his own name without being in the least "subjective." The aesthetic and ethical works, by contrast, which he invariably wrote under a pseudonym, often contained poeticized accounts of episodes from Kierkegaard's autobiography.



extrinsic way. But a meaning of this sort is something to which a poet, and above all one who sees with the eyes of faith, has special access. While it is true that Claudel admits he approaches scripture not as an exegete, but as a poet, there is nonetheless far more in his approach that bears an affinity to the great patristic tradition of spiritual interpretation than we find in the army of scientific scholars who represent today's professional exegetes.<sup>35</sup> Because of the immanent presence of the theological meaning within the events and symbols Claudel articulates, and because of the directness with which poetry enters into its matter, we could say that Claudel's writing mediates an immediate encounter between the reader and the truth contained in scripture. Through *exegesis*, by which Claudel *leads* (ἄγω) the symbolic meaning *out* (ἔκ), he *introduces* the reader into that meaning, leading (*duco*) him in (*inter*). The past event is made contemporary. As Fowlie shows in the introduction to *A Poet Before the Cross*, Claudel passes without notice from the past to the present, and back; as an author, he stands at a contemplative distance from what he relates, and then suddenly finds himself directly involved in it, in person. Thus, the reader, too, is not left to register what is being told as so much "objective" information, but is called upon in a personal way by the meaning described. To use the terms of the letter Claudel wrote to *Le Temps*, the reader is simultaneously sent inward to the task of self-examination and called outward to conform himself to a truth that is both objective and real. In this respect, the scriptural commentaries are supremely dramatic, and if the explicitly dialogical form has faded away in these later writings, it is only because the person being addressed and engaged is not a character in the story, but the reader himself: "Reader, this is about you."<sup>36</sup>

### III.

In 1969, Henri de Lubac wrote that, though Claudel seemed to be undergoing an eclipse in France, "[i]t is an inevitable but

---

<sup>35</sup>In *A Poet Before the Cross* (40–41), Claudel interprets the scourging of Christ as the slicing, the division, and the destruction, worked upon the Word by the scientific analysis of scripture: it violates its integrity, tearing away the flesh that keeps it whole.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

passing phenomenon to which we are resigned, certain that his genius remains as inalienable capital for the joy of future generations."<sup>37</sup> One of the best available introductions to Claudel in English, written in 1970, closes, after a complaint that he had not yet received the attention from English language readers that he deserved, with the words: "His time will come. Until it does, it is the English language's loss."<sup>38</sup> It may turn out that Claudel never finds a secure place in front of the mainstream literary audience: as we have suggested, it is not only the relative difficulty of his writing and the demands it regularly makes, without apology, on the reader, which would be obstacle enough, but perhaps even more so what we might call the "unapologetic" presence of his Catholic faith in his writing, which would seem to make him accessible to fellow Catholics alone. In response to this objection, Claudel himself insisted:

All I can say is that to get something from my plays there is precisely no need to be a Christian, all you simply need to be is, so to speak, a Claudelian; no more than, to get anything from Homer, would you have to believe in the various gods, in the various supernatural powers that he sends across the stage, but you must at least have a certain sense of the supernatural, a certain sense of the moral grandeurs, of the providential grandeurs which continually enter into human affairs.<sup>39</sup>

The validity of Claudel's point here is hard to deny in principle, and yet it has to be admitted that, because of their distance, the Greek gods are easier to appreciate from an aesthetic perspective, whether or not one believes in them, than are the mysteries of Christianity.

In spite of all this, however, it is remarkable how consistently one finds the certainty that Claudel's work will not, in the end, simply disappear. It is promising that Claudel societies continue to exist in various parts of the world, including North America, that *The Satin Slipper*, which is no doubt one of the lengthiest productions in the world of theater, has been performed recently in Switzerland and Edinburgh, that his plays are still being turned into movies, and that brand new translations of his works into English are

---

<sup>37</sup>Henri de Lubac, "Claudel as Theologian," in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 433–437, here: 436.

<sup>38</sup>Waters, *Paul Claudel*, 155.

<sup>39</sup>From *Mémoires improvisés*, 282, cited in Waters, *Paul Claudel*, 153.

appearing<sup>40</sup>—not to mention projects to bring previous translations back into print with new introductions.<sup>41</sup> If Claudel's audience remains particular, we can nevertheless be assured that interest is not flagging. It seems appropriate to end, here, with a suggestion of why we still need Paul Claudel.

Before proposing what we have to learn from him, however, it is perhaps worthwhile to mention an aspect of his work that seems more time-bound. It is hard to overlook the tendency toward triumphalism in some of his expressions of faith, which, while it may have been far more common in the middle of the twentieth century, the contemporary reader will no doubt find somewhat jarring. As someone who had undergone a radical conversion, Claudel had a spontaneous inclination to proselytize, which we see most famously in his correspondence with Gide, to whom he would explicate basic claims from Aquinas's *Summa* and demand that he take a position. Rivière recounts an episode that was apparently not so uncommon:

L.L., who knew Jammes, went to stay with him, and there met Claudel. Claudel tackled him about religion, took him up to his room for about an hour, and gave him a most appalling talking-to. L.L. came out in tears, a broken man, and left the house at once, saying to Jammes that his friend was really too cruel. Since then he has written to Claudel to ask for further information. . . .<sup>42</sup>

Claudel's tendency toward triumphalism shows up, as Fowlie points out in the introduction to *A Poet Before the Cross*, in the sarcasm he sometimes turns on Protestants, who he complains turn wine back into water, or in the occasional note of anger toward the Jews who rejected Christ. It ought to be noted, however, both that this text was written before the Second World War, and that these occasional notes are part of a more comprehensive chorus that sings in praise of Israel in their having been chosen by God. Claudel's work, in general, betrays an almost Dionysian character in the intensity of its

---

<sup>40</sup>A seven-hour adaptation of *Le Soulier de Satin* was produced by the Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira in 1985; *Tête d'Or*, directed by Anne Delbée, appeared in 2006. A new translation, by James Lawler, of *Knowing the East*, was published in 2004 by Princeton University Press.

<sup>41</sup>A number of republications of Claudel's work, as well as new translations of some that have already appeared, are being planned by Alethes Press.

<sup>42</sup>Cited in *Correspondence 1899–1926*, 7.

passion, and if this character takes here and there a form that is somewhat offensive to contemporary sensibilities, our impression may be softened somewhat if we see these outbursts, however unpardonable, as a result of the desire Claudel had to celebrate the redemption of the world as a whole, and the hostility he therefore felt toward anything he thought would frustrate this redemption.

This last comment brings us to the first of two observations we will make regarding Claudel's particular importance for our age. Both of these observations concern the "catholicity" or "universality" of his vision. There has been a decided inclination, certainly since the nineteenth century but especially common today, to reduce religion to morality. In this reduction, what is essentially a mystery—meaning an enveloping form in which one participates in the whole of one's being, a form that actualizes the meaning it expresses: the Latin *sacramentum* is one possible translation of the Greek *μυστήριον*—becomes a mere *message* that one "lives out" more or less successfully as an isolated individual. Such a reduction leaves us at once with pragmatism, moralism, and empty aestheticism. As a contrast to this fragmentation, Claudel offers an integrated vision, the wholeness of which derives from the praise and celebration, the glorification of God and the grateful elevation of the world, that lies at its center. This wholeness in his art reflects the wholeness of the Christian truth, and it does justice to the wholeness of human existence: there is an uncompromisingly sharp moral judgment in his poetry and drama, which some readers may find off-putting, and yet it would be impossible to dismiss his work as didactic. Instead, the final word invariably goes to the compassion and pity—or perhaps the *mercy*—that Iris Murdoch says necessarily joins with justice in the greatest art.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche famously lamented the moralism he saw in Christianity, and insisted that there can be no true Christian tragedy because for a Christian the moral judgment that needs to oversimplify in order to distinguish will always trump the aesthetic judgment that acknowledges and celebrates the profound complexity of being in history.<sup>44</sup> Claudel shows convincingly that the two may converge, and that a deeply moral vision can coincide with the "tragic sense"

---

<sup>43</sup>Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 87.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, section 5 from the "Versuch einer Selbstkritik" Nietzsche wrote as a preface to the republication of his first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie: Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Colli and Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 17–19.

that says “Yes and Amen!” Indeed, the moral vision for him heightens the tragic quality, as one can see most clearly in *The Satin Slipper*, which is arguably one of the greatest explicitly Christian tragedies ever written. Claudel in this regard stands as a striking counter-example to Nietzsche’s claim, and indeed as a paradigm of the *Christian* artist.

Finally, Claudel is important for us now because of his recovery of the imagination. We conclude here with a reference to the crisis we mentioned at the outset. If the nineteenth century suffered from the starvation of the imagination, as Claudel lamented,<sup>45</sup> the same could be said of the twenty-first century, in spite of the fact that, with the media explosion, we are flooded with images from all sides. Immediate sensory stimulation by itself does not move or nourish the imagination. When integration is lacking, it is first felt in the imagination, for the imagination is precisely the place where integration occurs: it is where concepts take flesh and thus where the senses and spiritual meaning are joined; it is where one receives the world and also where one gives that world form; it is where one dwells upon what one receives in a patient mood of contemplation, and at the same time where one’s emotions stir and where one first feels the impulse to act. In short, it is the place where body and soul meet. To say that the imagination is starved is not, then, simply to observe that a certain aesthetic enjoyment is missing or that the powers of creativity have been weakened. Instead, it is to indicate a fundamental crisis in the human being. Claudel was painfully aware of what was at stake here, and if he lamented contemporary man’s loss of images of heaven in his presentation of Dante’s significance, it is because of his conviction that, without such images, one cannot be said to *hope* in the proper sense. Hope is, after all, a longing of the whole person. The loss of imagination is therefore a crisis of despair.

But it is not only hope that suffers if the imagination is starved; faith itself begins to lose its substance. For Claudel, one cannot truly be said to have faith without a transformed imagination. The reduction of religion to morality that we just mentioned tends to be the cause or the effect of faith’s degeneration into the appar-

---

<sup>45</sup>“The crisis that reached its most acute pitch in the nineteenth century was not above all a crisis of intelligence. I would rather say it was the drama of a starved imagination” (“Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” 174–175).

ently arbitrary acceptance of a mere message or idea. But faith is not a mere intellectual assent or act of the will, it is rather an act of the whole man being taken up into a comprehensive order. Though he does not use the term explicitly here, Claudel clearly has the imagination in mind, the “formative part of us which precedes our faculties,” when he describes the action of grace upon man through the event of a miracle in *A Poet Before the Cross*:

The characteristic of a miracle is that it goes directly from God to man. It is addressed to the heart by an immediately creative power. The ray of Grace attacks us, following the latent dispositions of need, of desire and fruit, which it alone discerns, by that fundamental formative part of us which precedes our faculties. Intelligence, the apparatus of analysis and taste in us, has other means of reaching truth. The miracle passes through the zone of dialectical elaboration. It is Being which directly seizes being.<sup>46</sup>

We return here to a point made above: Christian truth is *dramatic* insofar as it is not simply a message one appropriates, but an “exterior and real object,” it is essentially a *person* into which one is appropriated. The imagination is where the spiritual life becomes *bodily*, where the body acquires the redemption of spiritual meaning. If faith is communicated without engaging the imagination, something less—dangerously less—than the Christian truth is being transmitted, and something less than the whole person is responding to it.

In this respect, Claudel’s poetic exegesis is especially significant. His meditation on scriptures is not a scholarly study, a historical or critical investigation. Rather, it is a *savoring* of the mystery of the Cross that gives full play to the imagination, and so attempts to allow the mystery to take hold of the reader’s being. The reflections are themselves a sort of prayer, but a prayer that makes a claim on the one praying, and thus initiates the drama, at the service of which Claudel intended to place the whole of his art: the drama of salvation.<sup>47</sup> □

*D. C. Schindler is assistant professor of philosophy in the Department of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions at Villanova University in Philadelphia.*

---

<sup>46</sup>Claudel, *A Poet Before the Cross*, 19–20, fn. 12.

<sup>47</sup>This essay is a modified version of the introduction written for the republication of Claudel’s *A Poet Before the Cross*, entitled “Reintroducing Paul Claudel.”

1. Paul Claudel, "Introduction À un poème sur Dante," in *Positions et propositions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 161–164. For an English translation, see "Religion and the Artist: Introduction to a Poem on Dante," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 357–367. 2. *Ibid.*, 164. 3. Richard Griffiths, "Introduction: Claudel in all honesty," in *Claudel: a reappraisal*, ed. R. Griffiths (Chester Springs, Penn.: Dufour Editions, 1968), 1. 4. Agnes Meyer claimed that the reason for Claudel's lack of success in his native France is