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PAUL CLAUDEL'S *CINQ GRANDES ODES*:
A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

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BY

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In memory of Beatrix and Paul. *À bientôt*.

Pessulum ostii mei aperui dilecto meo, at ille declinaverat, atque transierat. Anima mea liquefacta est, ut locutus est; quæsivi, et non inveni illum; vocavi, et non respondit mihi.

— Cant. cant. 5:6

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Introduction

The Odes are Claudel's first masterpiece. In a 1908 letter to Georges Frizeau, he called them, "the rapture of the poet in full possession of his means of expression, mingled with memories of his past life, in the ecstasy of a freedom that is at last conquered, the contemplation of a now catholic universe."[1] As a poet, Claudel had now fully entered the paradox of poetic expression. He was feeling ecstatic and yet in control, before a world that is overwhelmingly intelligible and beautiful. Enraptured by the possession of his technical talents and ecstatic in his mastered freedom, he had begun to contemplate the depths of meaning in his own life and the beauty of the universe, whose unity he could now see and express.

Claudel began writing the first Ode, "The Muses," in 1900, the year of his second voyage to China. He had recently left the novitiate at Ligugé Abbey, the oldest monastery in Europe, because of serious doubts as to whether he was called to the religious life. Readers of the Odes may hear, in each poem, the rhythms of the many sea voyages Claudel made during this first decade of his diplomatic career: the pull of the ocean swell (*la houle*); waves breaking; the blowing of winds over the water (*souffle*). The word *souffle*, recurrent in the Odes, can describe the blowing of the wind and human breathing. Its corresponding verb is "*souffler*," used to translate the phrase from the Gospel of John, "The wind blows where it lists, and you hear its sound, but cannot tell whence it comes, and whither it goes: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."[2] This has given the saying, in French as in English, "The Spirit blows where it will," "*l'Esprit souffle où il veut*." To the two primary meanings of *souffle*, the act of breathing and the blowing of the wind, is joined a third, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. *Souffle* is also used to

[1] *Œuvre poétique,* p. 1064; all translations are mine unless otherwise specified.
[2] John 3:8.

translate the life God breathes into man in Genesis: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."[3]

Souffle (and not *esprit*, whose meaning includes our words mind and ghost), like *spiritus* in Latin, can be used for the movements of the air, for human breathing, for the breath of life, and finally, for inspiration. In the Five Great Odes, the human body breathes with the same movement as the Earth and the cosmos, as well as the Holy Spirit and the human mind. Paul Claudel's poem unites these forms of breathing, which can be felt and heard but not seen, and orchestrates them into a kind of harmony. This theme will be present in each of the Odes, but it comes to its full development in the Second Ode, *L'Esprit et l'eau,* beginning with this opening stanza:

> *Après le long silence fumant,*
> *Après le grand silence civil de maints jours tout fumant de rumeurs et de fumées,*
> *Haleine de la terre en culture et ramage des grandes villes dorées,*
> *Soudain l'Esprit de nouveau, soudain le souffle de nouveau,*
> *Soudain le coup sourd au cœur, soudain le mot donné, soudain le souffle de l'Esprit, le rapt sec, soudain la possession de l'Esprit !*
> *Comme quand dans le ciel plein de nuit avant que ne claque le premier feu de foudre,*
> *Soudain le vent de Zeus dans un tourbillon plein de pailles et de poussières avec la lessive de tout le village !*

The image is of the tilled fields in late March, when the earth has been overturned after the fields have lain more or less frozen and dead of vegetation in January and February. From a birds' eye view, the earth steams under the Spring sun, all the more fragrantly if it has been laid with manure, and the great French cities are like golden foliage sending decorative tendrils into the countryside. All of a sudden, the Spirit, like a strong wind, comes over the valley. There is, evidently, a parallel here between the landscape and the soul of the poet, who is "possessed," or

[3] Genesis 2:7, KJV.

enraptured, by the breath of the Spirit, as a valley is overcome by a strong wind. This rapture is brought about by the use of escalating repetition—"*après*," "*silence*," "*fumer,*" and, finally, "*soudain*," with a complex scansion that escalates, stabilizing in the well-balanced caesura of the third verse, only to accelerate rapidly, in the fourth, with the Spirit's arrival. The second image is of a village overcome by wind before being illumined by lightning's fire. Likewise, inspiration stirs the soul of the poet violently before the vision of unity manifests itself.

To situate the mystical element in Claudel's poetry, one would eventually have to take into account a broader context, which would include Augustine of Hippo, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. The Odes, in particular, are a conversation that involves both God and Claudel's own soul, in its varied elements. But Claudel's work is at the same time mystical—which is to say, concerned with the mysterious exchange between God and man—and modern, and as such it doesn't avoid the profane and the secular. It becomes clearer why the great twentieth-century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, would have been so interested by the Odes. He translated the Odes several times for publication in German, and oblique and direct references to the Odes can be found throughout his work. Balthasar's theology is, in fact, one of the greatest aids to understanding the more obscure passages Claudel wrote. The comparison Balthasar once made between the Odes and the Divine Comedy then comes to full light as being, perhaps, the most appropriate of all. Claudel's inner, spiritual ascension in the Odes is a modern parallel to Dante Alighieri's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and the heavenly spheres; this comparison will be particularly fruitful if one can begin to grasp the radical and fascinating change in popular cosmology from the early Renaissance to the present day.

With Dante, Claudel shared a particularly expansive Catholic faith. Like Charles Péguy, François Mauriac, or Georges Bernanos, he could be considered a part of the twentieth-century

French Catholic Renaissance, a flourishing of writers and thinkers who were openly Catholic, despite persecution and increasing secularism. Claudel, like the other Catholics of his time, was deeply disturbed by the closing of Catholic schools and expulsion of forty to fifty thousand Catholic religious in the context of the 1905 separation laws. Those laws preserved liberty of religion and expression, while attempting to erase the presence of the Catholic Church in education and public life.[4] The expulsion of the religious orders marked the third great expulsion in France, after the first persecution of the Jews under Louis IX and the expulsion and massacre of the nobility during the French Revolution.[5] But what distinguished Claudel, as a Catholic writer, was his great optimism and desire to find ways to assert and support the unity of the world. In keeping with his lifelong service to the French Republic as a diplomat, Claudel never indulged in monarchism or pre-Revolutionary nostalgia. His attitude towards the modern world is perhaps best resumed in the following lines from *Processional pour saluer le siècle nouveau*, the poem he wrote to welcome the 20th century, when so much trouble was on the horizon for French Catholics:

> *Voici le monde extérieur où est notre devoir laïc,*
> *Sans le mépris du prochain, avec amour du prochain, si je le puis, sans violence et passion inique,*
>
> *Observant les Dix Commandements mieux qu'on voit que je ne le sus,*
> *Faisant ma prière matin et soir et rendant à chacun ce qui lui est dû.*
>
> *Voici la terre entière sous le soleil et la lune qui amènent la nuit et le jour,*
> *La terre avec toutes ses productions, le ciel qui dessus et la mer qui est autour.*
>
> *Je crois que Dieu est ici bien qu'il me soit caché.*

[4] Catholic schools and religious orders in France would be reinstated after World War I by the Third Republic, in gratitude for the participation of Catholics in the military effort.

[5] This expulsion would be followed in the 1940s, and greatly exceeded in numbers and brutality, by the murder of nearly eighty thousand French Jews, about a quarter of the Jewish population in France, by the Nazis, with the collaboration of the Vichy government and many ordinary French people. Despite having initially welcomed the peace granted by the 1940 Armistice with a rather clumsy "Ode to General Petain," Claudel would openly oppose the anti-Jewish laws and deportation, writing a public letter of support to the Great Rabbi of France and quietly arranging for Jewish friends and family members to receive asylum abroad.

Comme il est au ciel avec tous ses anges et dans le cœur de la Vierge sans péché,
Il est mêmement ici, dans la gare de chemin de fer et l'usine, dans la crèche, dans l'aire et dans le chais.[6]

The rhyming couplets of the *Processional* give a kind of playful lightness to a heavy subject. Claudel begins by using the word *laïc,* which means at the same time lay and secular, to describe his own duty in the world. He describes his faith, and even the observation of the moral law, as being most effective when it goes unnoticed. In the entire earth and heavens, God, he says, is "*caché*." Just as surely he hides himself in the heavens and in the heart of the Virgin Mary, God can be found hiding in all the places of modern activity—the train station, the daycare center, the public garden, the distillery cellar, the factory. In other words, by quietly living a virtuous life in a secular world, Claudel hopes to imitate God.

The *Five Great Odes* were written at a time of both personal and historical upheaval—both in terms of European politics and in the history of Western thought. Claudel finished the Odes in 1908; Einstein's 1905 papers are roughly contemporaneous. In poetry, the Symbolist movement was still in full swing, but this was also just a few years from the beginning of Dada; in Russia, young and eager socialists were preparing the revolution by going on visits to the just-emancipated serfs; and the long prelude to World War I had already begun in the Balkans. In France, the 1905 law on the separation between church and state enflamed the division that had

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[6] Here is the outside world, our secular duty's location,
Without neighborly scorn, with neighborly love and, if I may, without violence or wicked passion,

Observing the Ten Commandments all the better if no one sees what I'm doing,
Praying morning and evening and giving to each as it is fitting.

Here is the whole entire earth, under the sun and the moon, bringing the night and day,
The earth with all its production, the sky above, and the sea around and away.

I believe God is here, even though from me, he is hidden.
As he is in heaven with all his angels and in the heart of the Virgin who always did as she was bidden,
He is here just as well, in the railway station and in the factory, in the nursery, in the cellar, and in the public garden.

reigned since the Revolution, parochial schools were shut down, and religious congregations were sent back into exile. In painting, the Odes are contemporaneous with Matisse and Picasso; in music, with Debussy and Ravel, but also with Schoenberg, and soon Stravinsky. It was an unsettling time; and yet, the *Five Great Odes* are a cosmic poem, a long hymn to an intelligible, unified, and harmonious—but never static—universe.

In "*Les Muses,*" Claudel calls the universe "*le Jeu*," and "*l'énorme cérémonie*." In a passage whose vocabulary is scholastic, Claudel describes the role of the poet in this game, ceremony, or symphony:

> *Ainsi quand tu parles, ô poëte, dans une énumération délectable*
> *Proférant de chaque chose le nom,*
> *Comme un père tu l'appelles mystérieusement dans son principe, et selon que jadis*
> *Tu participas à sa création, tu coopères à son existence !*
> *Toute parole une répétition.*
> *Tel est le chant que tu chantes dans le silence, et telle est la bienheureuse harmonie*
> *Dont tu nourris en toi-même le rassemblement et la dissolution.* […]

The poet, who speaks the name of each thing, from its principle, in "*une énumération délectable,"* cooperates in its existence, just as the human spirit once participated in its creation, through naming. The repetition of the word "père" in "coopère" is intentional—the poet exercises a kind of fatherhood. Just as, through language, man once took part in the begetting of the world, now he nourishes it through that same faculty. Each word repeats what has already been said. The poet's song is silent, and the building up and resolution of its harmony is "nourished" in the poet's own soul. The cosmos as a symphony, and the poet as a kind of vocalist or maestro, will be a recurrent theme in the Odes, and in Claudel's work in general.

In a 1907 letter to André Saurès, Claudel wrote that the Odes "consist of themes united in various ways—a lyrical exhalation of thought, memories of past life, hopes and liberty of a Christian, art and the vocation of a poet, and so forth." He mentioned that he had just finished the

first two, "The Muses," and "The Spirit and the Water," and that he intended to finish writing a third, and then go on to compose a fourth.[7] Six months later, Claudel explained to the critic Jacques Rivière that these poems were "psalms or monologues," where he was mixing events from his life and his theories.[8] Claudel had previously written several treatises, which could be described both as works of metaphysics and of poetics or aesthetics, which he published as the *Art poëtique*. His theories were inspired at the same time by the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and by Henri Bergson's work, *L'Évolution créatrice*. The greatest influence on the Odes, however, was neither the *Summa* nor Bergson. A reading of the poems will show that they are, in fact, heavily embroidered with Biblical allusions, and in particular with the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and the Book of Isaiah. As Betsy Erkkila shows in her excellent book, *Walt Whitman among the French,* the Odes' nearest stylistic cousin is, without a doubt, *Leaves of Grass*, with whom Claudel's poems share an ecstatic style; a frequent recourse to direct address and to the first person; and an overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic attitude towards life, the body, and the modern world.[9]

The Odes were the capstone of the late 19th-century movement in French verse beyond the usual twelve-to-fourteen syllable line, the alexandrine. As a young man, Claudel played an active part in the fin-de-siècle experimental hothouse in Paris, participating in the Tuesday evenings organized by Stéphane Mallarmé. From Mallarmé, Claudel would learn the preeminence of beauty and the detachment that marks all great artistic work. This contrasted greatly with the scientific materialism Claudel was taught in the philosophy course at the end of high school, where Kant's work was interpreted for the students by a lesser version of Auguste

[7] *Oeuvre poétique,* p. 1063, trans. A. Nichols, o.p., *The Poet as Believer*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011, p. 19.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Betsy Erkkila, *Walt Whitman among the French,* pp. 126-135.

Comte. But it was reading the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud that would irrevocably open, for Claudel, the door to the spiritual world, the possibility of the existence of God, and the intoxicating intelligibility of the world. This movement would lead to the Catholic Church and, later, to the Benedictine Abbey of Ligugé, where Claudel would begin a lifelong habit of both praying the Liturgy of the Hours and reading the Vulgate. Like Whitman, Claudel's verse would be primarily inspired, metrically and otherwise, by the Bible: in this case, the Latin Vulgate, rather than the King James. One can also hear echoes of Pindar, the later works of Shakespeare, and Pascal's *Pensées*.

The "Claudelian verse" of the Odes, when they were published in 1908, was both hailed and criticized as a truly new form of French poetry. This verse form, in fact, need no longer be analyzed according to its variation on the alexandrine—his verse throws out the notion of counting altogether. Claudel's verse still uses caesuras, rhyme (internal and at the end of the line), and enjambment. Lines, however, are not determined syllabically, but rather by breath, and in varying amplitudes. The length of Claudel's verses and their rhythm, like Gregorian chant or English plainsong, are phrased by the quantity of breath expended. The amplitude of the line, then, also determines the speed with which it is uttered. The verse's Psalmodic quality gives it a certain solemnity, while its close relationship to ordinary speech makes it more intimate than "formal" syllabic verse. The vocabulary in Claudel's verse reflects this new form: the registers of language are more varied than what was previous usage in French poetry (English poetry has played on all the registers, Shakespeare is a good example), and at the same time there is a breadth and richness of vocabulary that goes far beyond ordinary speech and even prose. Claudel's new verse—hailed as a truly "modern" verse—prepared the way for the next

generation of poets, such as Victor Ségalen and St.-John Perse, who were both quite vocal about the debt they owed to the poet of the *Five Great Odes*.

English readers will inevitably ask whether Claudel could be described as a French Modernist. His work builds upon the history of Western literature, while consciously breaking out of traditional forms and ideas. Claudel's erudition and originality are indeed close to Joyce's, Pound's, and Eliot's. His poetry, however, is never allusively crowded, nor is it ever melancholic or resigned. The Odes borrow the exultation, in love and war, of the Psalms and Song of Solomon, and they do not contain a trace of the esoteric. For that reason, Claudel's closest poetic relatives in our language are Patmore, Hopkins, and above all, Whitman. Like Eliot's, however, Claudel's poetry is a rich mine for the comparative study of literature, since he also derives great freedom, as well as allusiveness, from his acquaintance with many different languages and cultures. In Claudel's case, in addition to an unparalleled range of vocabulary and syntax in French, those languages are primarily English, German, Greek, and above all, Latin. His later works—but not the Odes, despite an obvious Chinese influence—also show some familiarity with Chinese and Japanese literature.

Many commentators have examined the Odes from a technical standpoint: placing the poems in the context of literary history, tracing out the game of references in the poems, demonstrating the way certain literary devices are used and to what effect,[10] and studying the manuscripts.[11] Many excellent books and articles have been written in French and German on the

[10] For example: L. Perché. *Claudel et les Cinq Grandes Odes*. Paris: 1947; G. Antoine. *Les Cinq Grandes Odes de Paul Claudel ou la poésie de la répetition*. Paris: 1959; M.-F. Guyard. *Recherches claudéliennes. Autour des "Cinq Grandes Odes,"* Paris: 1961; *Paul Claudel : les Odes, poésie, rhétorique, théologie*. Ontario: Editions Albion, 1994; D. Millet-Gérard, « Lecture scolastique des *Cinq Grandes Odes »,* in *La prose transfigurée : vingt études en hommage à Paul Claudel*, Paris : Presses Paris Sorbonne, 2005.

[11] A.-L. Carrière. *Cinq Grandes Odes de Paul Claudel, études des manuscrits*. Besançon: Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon 222, 1978.

debt the poems owe to authors as varied as Aquinas, Shakespeare, Descartes, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Walt Whitman, Mallarmé, Coventry Patmore, Bergson, and Einstein. The poem is discussed at length in two longer monographs on Claudel's work as a whole by Dominique Millet-Gérard and in two by Didier Alexandre, who take into account Claudel's relationship with Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, medieval scholasticism, and even with modern physics. The most recent edition of the Odes, published under the direction of Marius-François Guyard in 1990, makes much of this reference work readily available to the casual reader of the Odes, in the form of endnotes. The published work on the extensive relationship between the Odes and the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal is in German, and there is a generous bibliography on the Odes in that language, thanks to Hans Urs von Balthasar's successful translations. This body of work focuses in particular on the relationship between the Odes and German romanticism. Again, despite Claudel's own fondness for our language, there is very little scholarship in English; one author worth noting is Alexandre Maurocordato, who wrote on Anglo-American influences in the *Odes* (and in particular, on the inspiration Claudel gleaned from the work of Coventry Patmore), hoping to raise the interest of English-speakers.

My goal, in the commentary that follows, is to make the poems more accessible to an American audience, to whom the Odes have not yet been formally introduced. To accompany my new translation, I have given a close reading of the Odes, in the tradition of the New Criticism, the school of literary interpretation that arose in the United States as a close relative to our Jewish and Protestant traditions of Biblical hermeneutics. As a translator, reading must always come down to the question of "how close": there is, in effect, no closer reading than a translation. And close reading, or close attention to what is being said and how it is being said, has always been the method at the heart of the practice of literary criticism.

As a critical technique, in fact, close reading parallels Claudel's own conception of his work as a poet. The skilled reader listens attentively and skillfully, for explication, with a careful ear that has been trained to interpret and recognize form and meaning. He does not unduly impose his own cares and concerns upon the work; he gets out of the way and lets it say what it means to say. At the end of his life, Claudel, having expounded at length on form, technique, and the importance of "delectation," or pleasure, in poetry, resumed his advice to younger poets in the words, "*N'empéchez pas la musique !"*—"Don't prevent the music;" get out of its way! His final exhortation was to say, "*Ne te décourage pas, jeune poète ! Prête l'oreille ! Écoute !*"[12] In turn, I would encourage you, dear reader, as you open this new translation of the *Odes*, to begin by momentarily putting aside the commentary that follows. You may use it as you would use a program at the opera, to get and keep your bearings, to navigate the more difficult aspects of the work, and to deepen your appreciation for its form and meaning. Choose a comfortable chair and, as you enter into beauty's silence, do not be discouraged by what you do not yet understand! Lend an ear! Listen!

[12] *Œuvres en prose*, "La poésie est un art," pp. 55, 57 (1952).

Chapter 1. *Les Muses*

First Ode. The Muses[1]

Nine Muses; in the center, Terpsichore!

I know you, Maenad! I know you, Sibyl! I await in your hand not a cup nor your breast even

Writhing under your nails, Cumaean woman, in the whirl of golden leaves[2]!

But this heavy flute pierced with mouths at your fingers is enough to show

That you no longer need to join it with this breath that fills you,

And bids you, O virgin, arise!

No twisting round: nothing of the neck disturbs the fair folds of your dress down to the feet it hides from view!

But how I know the meaning of this side-turned head, this drunken, inward air; this face that listens, shining full with orchestral jubilation!

One arm only you could not contain! Rising up, it tenses,

All eager with furor to strike the first measure!

Hidden vowel! Quickening of the word come forth! Modulation to which the whole spirit is consonant!

Terpsichore, who found the dance! What would the chorus be without the dance? Who else could enthrall

[1] "Sarcophagus recovered on the road to Ostia." –In the Louvre.
[2] Cf. *Aeneid* III, 448-449.

The eight fearful sisters together, bring in the vintage of the rising hymn, invent the inextricable figure?

Into whom would the chaste sisters consent to enter

If first, you, vibrating virgin, having planted yourself in the middle of his mind,

Did not cast out reason, base and coarse, burning it up with the wing of your rage in the salt of the cracking fire?

The nine Muses! For me, not one too many!

I see all nine on this marble. To your right, Polyhymnia! And to the altar's left on which you lean!

High, unchanging virgins, line of eloquent sisters,

I want to tell on what step I saw them pause, how they interlaced each other,

In a way other than what it is that each hand

Plucks from those outstretched fingers.

And first, I recognized you, Thalia!

On the same side, I recognized Clio, I recognized Mnemosyne, and I recognized you, Thalia!

I knew you all for who you were, O full council of nine inner Nymphs!

Mother phrase! Profound instrument of language and cluster of living women!

Creating presence! Nothing could come forth were you not nine!

Suddenly—when, filled by the intelligible explosion,

All of life's dark clamor knotted by the navel in the upheaval of his belly,

The new poet opens, the attack

Blows up the enclosure, breath itself

Lashes the sharp jaws—

Here are the shuddering Nine with a cry!

Now he can no longer be silent! The question that came out from him, like hemp

For journey-women, he entrusted forever

To the wise chorus of the inextinguishable Echo!

Never do they all sleep at once! But before great Polyhymnia can arise,

Another is there, opening the compass with both hands, Urania, Venus' image,

When she teaches, bending his bow, Amor;

Or laughing Thalia sweetly marks the measure with her toe; or in the quiet of quiet,

Mnemosyne sighs.

The eldest, the one who doesn't speak! The eldest, as old as all the others! Mnemosyne who never speaks!

She listens, she considers.

She feels (being the inner sense of the spirit),

Pure, simple, inviolable! She remembers.

She is the spiritual weight. She is the relation expressed by a most beautiful number. She is placed ineffably[3]

On the very pulse of Being.

She's the inner hour; the outflowing treasure and the welled-up spring;

The joining of that which isn't time to the time expressed by language.

[3] For this description of Mnemosyne, see Augustine's description of memory in *Confessions* X, VIII.

She will not speak; she's busy not speaking. She coincides.

She possesses, she remembers, and all her sisters watch the movement of her eyelids.

For you, Mnemosyne, these first verses, and the detonation of the sudden Ode!

Thus all at once from the middle of the night, may my poem strike on every side like lightning's trident flash![4]

And no man can foresee where suddenly it will make the sun breathe fire,

Oak, or ship's mast, or humble chimney, liquefying the pot like a star!

O my impatient soul! We will establish no shipyard! We won't push out, we will roll no trireme out

To a great Mediterranean of horizontal verse,

Full of islands, navigable for merchants, surrounded by the ports of all the peoples!

We have a more laborious affair to orchestrate

Than your return, patient Odysseus!

Every sea-route lost! Pursued and rescued

By the restless gods, hot on the trail,

Never seeing anything of them except now and then

In the night a golden ray on the Sail, and in the splendor of the morning, for a moment,

A radiant face with blue eyes, a head crowned with parsley,[5]

Until the day you were alone!

What a combat the mother and child waged in far-off Ithaca,

While you mended your garment, while you questioned the Shadows,[6]

[4] Cf. *Metamorphoses*, I, 325.
[5] As in the Nemean games.

Until the long Phaeacian bark brought you back, weighed down by profound sleep![7]

And I must also abandon, although bitterly,

Your poem's shores, O Aeneas, the expanse between two worlds of its pontifical waters!

What calm fell in the midst of the centuries, while the fatherland[8] behind and Dido[9] fabulously burned!

You yield to the boughed hand! You fall, Palinurus, and your hand no longer keeps the tiller.

And at first we only saw their endless mirror, but suddenly, under the widening of the immense wake,

They come to life and the entire world paints itself on the magical cloth.

For see how by the great lunar light

The Tiber hears the nave coming, laden with the fortune of Rome

But now, leaving the level of the liquid sea,

O rhymer of Florence! We will not follow you, step after step, in your investigation,

Descending, mounting up to heaven, descending down into Hell,

As one who, placing a foot on the logical soil, advances the other in a firm enjambment;

And as when in the autumn one walks through the puddles of little birds,

So images and shadows rise from under your stirring foot!

None of that! Every path to follow bores us! Every ladder to climb!

O my soul! The poem is not made of these letters that I hammer like nails, but from the white that abides on the paper.

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[6] *Odyssey*, XI.
[7] *Odyssey*, XIII.
[8] *Aeneid*, II.
[9] *Aeneid,* IV.

O my soul! I mustn't orchestrate any outline! O my wild soul, we must keep ourselves free and ready,

Like the vast, frail bands of swallows, when voiceless sounds the autumnal call!

O my soul, impatient as the artless eagle! How could we ever make any verse fit? As the eagle who doesn't know how to make its nest?

May my verse know nothing slavish! But be as the sea eagle who has swooped down upon a great fish,

And nothing is seen but a flashing whirl of wings and a splash of foam!

But you will not abandon me, O moderating Muses.

And you among them all, providing, untiring Thalia!

You, for one, do not dwell in the house! But as a hunter in the blue alfalfa

Follows his hound, though he does not see him, through the long hay, so a little shudder in the world's grass

Shows the ever-ready eye the chase you give;

O beater of bushes, you were figured well with staff[10] in hand!

And in the other, prepared to rouse the inextinguishable laughter,[11] as one studies a strange beast,

You hold the enormous Mask, the snout of Life, the terrible and grotesque hide!

Now you've stripped it off, and now you seize the great Comic Secret, the adaptative trap, the transmutatory formula!

But Clio, stylus between three fingers, waits, posted in the corner of the shining box,

[10] Cf. Plutarch, *Lives*, *Pelopidas*.
[11] *ἄσβεστος γέλως*, Iliad i. 599

Clio, soul's clerk, such as she who keeps the accounts.

It is said that a certain shepherd was the first painter

Who, observing the shadow of his billy-goat on the boulder's flank,

Took a brand from his fire and rounded the horned stain.

Is the pen like a stylus on the sundial?

Like the narrow edge of our human shadow strolling over the white paper.

Write, Clio! Give to each thing its authentic character. No thought

That our personal opacity does not reserve the means to circumscribe.

O observer, O guide, O inscriber of our shadow!

I have told of the nourishing Nymphs; they who do not speak and do not show themselves; I have told of the spirit-breathing Muses, and now I will tell of the inspired Muses.

For the poet, like a hollow fire-blower into which one breathes

Between his brain and nostrils for a conception like the acid awareness of smell.

His soul opens in the same way as the little bird who,

When ready to sing with all its body, fills itself with air, even to the hollows of its bones!

But now I will tell of the great understanding Muses.

Yours, with a callus in the fold of her hand!

Here she is with her scissors, and this one who mixes her colors, and look at how this other one is attached to her rows of keys by all her members!

—But these women are the workers of the inmost sound, the personal ringing, that fateful thing,

The emanation of the profound *a*,[12] the energy of dark gold,

Which the brain draws up with all its roots from the bottom of the intestines like fat, awakening the very extremities of the members!

This thing does not suffer us to sleep! Fuller sigh than the vow with which the favorite fills our slumbering heart!

Precious object, will we then allow you to escape? What Muse will I name quick enough to seize and to embrace it?

Behold her who holds the lyre in her hands, behold her who holds the lyre in her hands with the lovely fingers,

Like a weaver's manufacture, captivity's complex instrument,

Euterpe of the wide belt, holy flamen[13] of the spirit, lifting the great, insonorous lyre!

The thing that serves to make speech, the clarichord that composes and sings,

In one hand the lyre, like the warp stretched on the loom, and with her other hand

She applies the plectrum as a shuttle.

No fret that does not contain the entire melody! Abound, gilded timber, opime orchestra! Spring forth, virulent word! Let the new language, like a lake full of springs,

Overflow all its breaks! I hear the singular note prosper with an invincible eloquence!

It persists, the lyre in your hands,

Persists like the staff on which the entire song falls into place.

You are not the singer, you are the song itself at the moment it unfolds,

The soul's activity composed on the sound of its own word!

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[12] Jeremiah 1:6 : "*et dixi a a a Domine Deus*." See also the lengthy note of Marius-François Guyard, folio edition of the Odes p. 206.
[13] *flamen*, breath.

The invention of the marvelous question, the bright dialogue with unfathomable silence.

Do not leave my hands, O seven-stringed Lyre, so like an instrument of measurement and description!

May I see everything in your well-tensed strings! And the Earth with its fires, and heaven with its stars.

But the lyre is not enough for us, and the sounding grate of its seven tensed nerves.

The great deeps, which the sublime regard[14]

Forgets, daringly darting from one point to another.

Your leap, Terpischore, would not be enough to bound them, nor the dialectical instrument to digest[15] them.

One needs the Angle[16], the compass that Urania forces open, the compass with two rectilineal arms

That only come together at the point they come apart.

No thought, such as a sudden planet pink or yellow over the spiritual horizon,

No system of thought like the Pleiades,

Ascending through the moving sky,

For which the compass wouldn't suffice to span the intervals, calculating each measure as the open hand.

You don't disturb the silence! You do not mix the noise of the human word with any thing. O poet, you would not sing your song so well

[14] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, 85: "*os homini sublime dedit* […]."
[15] As in *digerere*, to classify.
[16] As in *lapis angularis, pierre angulaire*—the cornerstone.

If you didn't sing in time.

But the chorus needs your voice when it's time to sing your part.

O grammarian in my verses! Don't seek the way, seek the center! Measure, comprehend the space encompassed by these solitary fires!

May I not know in the least what I say! May I be a note in labor! May I be annihilated in my movement! (nothing but the slight pressure of the hand to guide the helm).

May I maintain my weight like a heavy star across the swarming hymn!

And at the other end of the long coffer, empty of the capacity for a man's body,

Melpomene has been placed, like a martial ruler, a builder of cities,

For, the face of tragedy raised on her head like a helmet,

Leaning on her knee, foot on a quarried stone, she considers her sisters;

Clio is posted at one end and Melpomene at the other.

When the Fates have determined

The action, the sign to be inscribed on the face of Time like the hour by means of its number,

They recruit from all the corners of the world the wombs

That will furnish the actors they need,

At the appointed hour they are born.

Not only in the image of their fathers, but secretly knotted

With their unknown extras, those they will know and those they won't know, those from the prologue and those from the final act.

Thus a poem isn't like a bag of words, it is not only

The things it signifies, but is itself a sign, an imaginary act, creating

The time necessary for resolution,

For the imitation of human action studied in its forces and weight.

And now, choragus,[17] it is time to recruit your actors, so that each may play his part, entering and exiting when he must.

Up goes Caesar to the praetorium, the cock cries on his barrel; you hear them, you understand both of them very well,

Both the trumpet's[18] acclamation and the Latin of the cock[19];

You need both, you know how to bring both in; you know how to use the whole chorus.

The chorus around the altar

Completes its revolution: it stops,

It waits, and the laureled herald appears, and Clytemnestra, axe in hand, feet in her husband's blood, her sole on the man's mouth,

And Oedipus with his eyes gouged out, diviner of riddles!

Rises up in the Theban gate.

But the only pause radiant Pindar allows for his jubilant troupe

Is an excess of light and that silence, to drink from it!

O great game-day!

Nothing knows to break away from it, but everything goes to it, one by one.

The pure ode like a comely naked body all shining with sun and oil

Goes out to seize the gods by the hand to draw them into his chorus,

To welcome triumph with a full-on laugh, to welcome in a thunder of wings the victory

Of those who at any rate by the force of their feet have fled the inert body's weight.

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[17] As in *chorāgus*, χορηγός, the leader of a chorus responsible for recruiting the actors.
[18] Literally, *la classique*, *classicum*, the trumpet call to announce the Roman general.
[19] French.

And now, Polyhymnia, O you who stand among your sisters, enveloped in your long veil like a contralto,

Leaning on the altar, leaning on the podium,

Enough of waiting, now you can assail the new song![20] Now I may hear your voice, my one and only!

Suave is the nocturnal nightingale! When the violin begins, powerful and well-pitched,

The body, suddenly cleansed of its deafness, all the nerves on the harmonic table of our sensible body in a perfect chord

Stretch, as under the tuner's agile fingers.

But when he makes his own voice heard,

When man is at once bow and instrument,

And when the reasonable animal sounds in the modulation of his cry,

O well-pitched and strong alto phrase, O sigh from the Hercynian forest, O trumpets over the Adriatic!

The first Gold infuses the human substance even more essentially than it rings in you!

Gold, or that inner knowledge that each thing possesses of itself,

Buried in the heart of the element, jealously guarded under the Rhine by the Nixe and the Nibelung!

What else is the song but the tale that each

Tells in the enclosure of himself, the cedar and the fountain.

But your song, O poet's Muse,

[20] *canticum novum*, Psalm 95:1.

Is not the drone of the humble-bee, the warbling spring, the bird of paradise in the clove trees!

But just as God most holy invented each thing, your joy is to possess its name,

And as he said in the silence, "Let it be so!,"[21] full of love, you repeat, according to what he called it,

Like a child, you sound out, "Indeed, it is so.[22]"

O God's handmaid, full of grace!

You substantially approve it, you contemplate each thing in your heart, and you ask each thing how it may be said!

When he composed the Universe, when He laid out the Game with beauty, when He set off the immense ceremony,

Something of us with him rejoiced in his work,[23] seeing everything,

His watchfulness in his day, his act in his Sabbath!

Thus when you speak, O poet, proffering of each thing

The name, in a delectable enumeration,

Like a father you call it mysteriously in its principle, and just as

You participated in its creation of old, now you cooperate in its existence!

Every word a repetition.

So is the song you sing in quiet, and so is the blessed harmony

Whose gathering together and breaking apart you nourish within yourself. And so,

[21] *Fiat,* Genesis 1:3, 6, 14.
[22] *fiat,* Luke 1:38.
[23] Cf. Proverbs 8:27-30.

O poet, I won't say that you receive the least lesson from nature; upon her you impose your order.

You, considering all things!

To see what she'll answer you amuse yourself, calling each thing after the other by its name.

O Virgil under the Vine![24] The broad and fecund Earth

Was not, for you, on the other side of the hedge, like a cow

Who benevolently instructs man to work her, pulling milk from her teat.

But for your first speech, O Latin poet,

You legislated. You tell everything! He explains everything to you, Cybele, he formulates your fertility,

He substitutes himself for Nature to say what she thinks, better than an ox! Behold the springtime of the word, behold the temperature of summer!

Behold the golden tree that exudes wine![25] Behold how, in every country of your soul,

The Genius melts together,[26] like the waters of winter!

And as for me, I produce by plowing, the seasons roughly work my hard, clay soil.

Foundational, compact,

I am called to the harvest, I am under the order of agriculture.

I have my roads from one horizon to the other; I have my rivers; I have in me a separation of the waters.

When old Septentrion appears over my shoulder,

[24] *Georgics*.
[25] Cf. *Eclogues*, IV, 30.
[26] Cf. Horace, *Odes*, I, 4, 1.

All the night long, I know how to tell him the same word, I have a terrestrial familiarity with his company.

I've found the secret; I know how to speak; if I so desire, I'll know how to tell you

What each thing *means to say*.

I have been initiated into silence;[27] there is the unfathomable living ceremony, a world to invade, an insatiable poem to fill by producing grain and every fruit.

—I leave this task to the land; I flee back to Space, open and empty

O wise Muses! Wise, wise sisters! And you, drunken Terpsichore!

How did you think you could capture this madwoman, hold her by one hand and the other,

Stifle her with the hymn, like a bird who sings only in its cage?

O Muses, patiently sculpted on the hard tomb, that living woman, that thrilling woman! What's the interrupted measure of your chorus to me? From you I take back my madwoman, my bird!

Behold the inebriated woman, and not by pure water and subtle air!

A drunkenness like red wine and a mess of roses! Like grapes spurting under the naked foot, wide flowers heavy with honey!

The Maenad, panicked by the drum! At the piercing cry of the fife, the Bacchante stiffen'd[28] in the thundering god!

Burning! Dying! Pining! You give me your hand, you open your lips,

You open your lips, you gaze on me with an eye full of desires. "Beloved!

Enough, enough of waiting! Take me! What are we doing here?

How long will you busy yourself, all this time, with my wise sisters,

[27] "*Je suis maître du silence,*" Rimbaud, "*Enfances*," *Illuminations*.
[28] The *Maenad* of Scopas?

Like a master-builder among his team of workers? My wise and active sisters! And I am mad and hot, naked and impatient!

What are you doing here still? Kiss me and come!

Break apart, tear off these bonds! Take me away with you as your goddess!

Do you not feel my hand upon your hand?"

(And indeed, I felt her hand upon my hand.)

Do you understand my anguish, that I desire you? This fruit to devour between the two of us, this great fire to make with our two souls! This has gone on too long!

This has gone on too long! Take me, I cannot bear it! Enough, enough of waiting!"

And indeed I looked and I saw myself all alone in an instant,

Apart, refused, abandoned,

Without a charge, without a task, outside in the middle of the world,

Without right, without cause, without force, without admission.

"Do you feel my hand upon your hand?" (And indeed, I felt, I felt her hand upon my hand!)

O, my darling on the ship! (For that year

When I began to see the foliage decompose and fire lick the world,

To escape from the seasons, the cool of the evening appeared to me as the dawn, autumn as springtime with a more steadfast light,

I followed like a retreating army that burns everything behind it. Ever

Onward, into the heart of the gleaming sea!)

O, my darling! For the world was no longer there

To allot us our place in the composition of its manifold movement,

But launched from earth, we were alone with one another,

The only inhabitants of that moving, black crumb, drowned,

Lost in pure Space, there where the very ground is light.

And every evening, behind, at the place where we left the shore, to the West,

We would find the same conflagration

Fed by the entire crowded present, the real world's Troy in flames!

And as for me, will this secret fire gnawing at me like the lit fuse of a mine under the earth,

Flame out in the wind? Who can contain the great human flame?

Dear lady, you should have kept your hair close about your head,

Your long blond hair in the sea wind; it falls! The heavy rings

Roll off your shoulders, the whole mirthful[29] thing

Takes off, everything flies away under the moonlight!

Are not the stars like the glowing heads of hairpins? And doesn't the world's whole edifice give off a splendor as fragile

As the royal mane of a woman, ready to give way under the comb!

O dear lady! O Muse in the sea wind! O long-haired ideal[30] at the prow!

O grief! O bitter claim!

Erato! You watch me, and I read a resolution in your eyes!

I read an answer, I read a question in your eyes! An answer and a question in your eyes!

The hourra coursing through you like gold, like a fire in the hay!

An answer in your eyes! An answer and a question in your eyes.

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[29] Literally *joconde*, from Latin *jocundus/jucundus*.

[30] As in ἰδέα, idea or form.

Paris, 1900.

Fuzhou, 1904.

Commentary on *Les Muses*

The First Ode begins with an invocation and ends with an enigma. Paul Claudel invites eight of the Nine Muses—he completes their number with their mother, Memory—to come down into the poem off a bas-relief on a sarcophagus. Using their gifts, he blesses God by pronouncing the name of the Cosmos. In this first part of the poem, written while Claudel was exploring the possibility of a priestly and monastic vocation at the Benedictine Abbey of Ligugé, we experience what he called in a letter to Jacques Rivière, "the rapture of the poet in full possession of his means of expression," as well as "the contemplation of a now catholic universe."[31] The atmosphere of the monastic cell is part of the poem's initial lightness and freedom; in an ordered and harmonious silence, under the gaze of a loving God and in the midst of a benevolent community, Claudel descends within himself and listens to the harmony of the spheres. This was, indeed, Claudel's initial project for the Ode. But then something happens. Something within himself, in his prayer, leads him out of the silence, and he leaves the cloister. At this point, Erato, the Muse of erotic poetry, enters the poem. As the Ode reels out of control, the world begins to burn. At the end of the Muses, all that is left is "an answer and a question" in

[31] *Œuvre poétique,* p. 1063.

Erato's eyes. What is this enigmatic answer in her eyes? What is the question? In other words, why does this particular Muse so disturb the created order?

The First Ode, which contains great harmony and an even greater dissonance, is a first movement for the entire cycle that asks that crucial poetic question and introduces all of the themes that go out from it. The *ekphrasis* of the Nine Muses on the sarcophagus explores the way the poet's own mind breathes and is inspired, "in-breathed." This bodily breathing and mental and spiritual inspiration reveals, through naming, the order of the universe and divine love. Divine love gives way to human love, which comes into conflict with the inspired order and reveals that Erato's question concerns not only the lovers, but also the cosmos. "The Muses" is a first movement in every sense of the term, introducing the themes of the four Odes that follow—the poet and poetic inspiration, the world and creation, woman and human love, God and divine love, and, finally, beauty and grace.

Claudel's meditation on the bas-relief of the Nine Muses from a sarcophagus in the Louvre allows him to explore his own poetic art. The form follows the same principle as the matter, and in fact, the form of the poem steps right off of the sarcophagus. Terpsichore herself, Muse of dance, gives the poem its appropriate form: an Ode made up of Claudel's new rhythmic lines, or *versets*. This new line comes from the rhythm of the human body in breathing. Each line, as in singing, takes one breath, and the quantity and quality of the syllables determine the speed of recitation. In the opening image of the poem, Terpsichore prepares to lead her sisters in a dance. The first line is almost an alexandrine:

Les Neuf Muses, et au milieu Terpischore !

And the second line is what will be called a "*verset claudélien*" :

Je te reconnais, Ménade ! Je te reconnais Sibylle ! Je n'attends avec ta main point de coupe ou ton sein même.

This *verset* breaks with the alexandrine and, at the same time, reminds us that the alexandrine itself is meant for a single breath, with a "stop" in the middle—a characteristic it shares with the way the Psalms are phrased for the monastic practice of singing the Psalms in choir, which Claudel would have practiced six times a day at Ligugé. Unlike the alexandrine, and like the Psalms, the *verset* in the Odes does not depend on syllabic counting. It requires a varying deepness of breath and a recitation that will be slower or faster depending on the quantity and quality of the syllables. Claudel's *verset* is thus both old and new. Hearkening back to Latin verse, the *verset* takes the principles behind the alexandrine, with greater freedom. Human breathing provides the continuity between these forms.

By giving the leading role to Terpischore, Claudel is also telling us that his Ode, like Pindar's, will be led by the natural rhythm of speech.[32] Describing the figure of Terpischore, he reassures the more classical reader: "*Point de contorsions : rien du cou ne dérange les beaux plis de la robe jusqu'aux pieds qu'elle ne laisse point voir !*" Like Terpischore's graceful movement, the result is a more varied but still subtle movement in the language. Rather than the counting of syllables, what primarily determines the rhythm of the line is the movement of breath. In the next line, Claudel focuses on Terpsichore's breathing:

Mais cette grosse flûte toute entrouée de bouches à tes doigts indique assez
Que tu n'as plus besoin de la joindre au souffle qui t'emplit
Et qui vient de te mettre, ô vierge, debout !

Terpischore's movement, rather than following the outside music of the flute, will follow naturally from her own breath.

[32] *Œuvres en prose*, p. 31.

It is not by chance that Claudel invokes Terpsichore as a Sibyl (twice) and as a virgin. He does not expect a chalice, for poetic inebriation, and the purity of her movement shows that she is not dancing for anyone in particular. Instead, Terpsichore is fully given over to "the orchestral jubilation." In other words, she is listening to an inner music, something that is both orchestral and inside her, so much so that Claudel calls it a kind of joy. This quiet, inner music is nothing other than the music of the spheres, the harmony of the world that Terpischore can hear in her own breast. In this part of the invocation, the poet is asking Terpsichore to initiate him into this harmonious world, so that he may hear it. A virgin and a prophet, Terpsichore will give the first measure, and the words themselves will be formed by the in-breathing of a silent music. Terpischore's breathing sets the other sisters into motion; and, Claudel tells us, the words themselves go out from this in-breathing of life with the first measure. The next line, "*Secrète voyelle ! animation de la parole qui naît ! modulation à qui tout l'esprit consonne !*" describes how the intelligible word comes out from Terpsichore's breathing like a hidden vowel and, in a play on words, a "key change to which the entire spirit is consonant [resonates]." Terpsichore's movement comes out of the same breath that forms the words, and indeed, her creating breath leads us into an older mystery. That the breath-inspired movement of Terpsichore creates the Ode reminds us of the creation of Adam and the world in one of the two accounts in Genesis. The Spirit (in Jerome's translation, *spiritus*, a strong wind) is upon the waters before the time of creation begins, and on the sixth day, God breathes the breath of life into the clay to create Adam. The Gospel of John also refers to the beginning of time, when, the Evangelist says, the Word was with God. This is the origin of Claudel's mysterious juxtaposition. Within Terpsichore's movement is an intelligible word, the "secret vowel" at the beginning of the

world—secret precisely because, according to the Johannic account, the Word is already present, albeit hidden, in Genesis: “God said.”

To hear the words that are being said, the rhythm does not suffice; the poet needs inspiration beyond Terpsichore's rhythm, just as it is nearly impossible to guess the tune when someone else is tapping his fingers. And, indeed, nine Muses are present. In his account of the Muses, Claudel only leaves out Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry; in her place, he has included Mnemosyne, Memory—in Hesiod, the Mother of the Muses. This is because he is focusing on the Muses’ quality as inspirers, portraying them as goddesses not strictly of works that are produced by human beings (comedies, tragedies, epic poems, love poems, songs…), but more broadly as the patrons of the human mind that produces those works, its mental faculties and “gifts of the Spirit.” Claudel later calls them the “*conseil complêt des Nymphes intérieures*,” the complete counsel of inner Nymphs.

Like a created thing, the poem, Claudel says, comes forth naturally. In the human mind, or soul—the "*âme*," from *anima*—life's breath becomes the intelligible word, the vowel hidden in secret that will come into the flesh. Claudel, correspondingly, names the poem “*l’hymne jaillissante*.” The poem will be a hymn rising up as though it were a spring, praising with its beauty. And like the created world, it will be a figure that cannot ever be definitively separated into its component parts, taken apart, and then put back together without defect: while intelligible, it is also a “*figure inextricable*.” Something is lost by analysis. Like a living thing, the poem cannot be undone and then regenerated with synthetic parts, outside of the initial act of creation.

This limit on the powers of reason extends to the genesis of the poem itself. To prepare the poet for the entry of the Muses so that they can fertilize him with the seeds of the poem,

"*raison grossière et basse*" has to be lost. Claudel says that it must be consumed like salt in the cracking fire. At the Easter Vigil, salt is indeed thrown into the fire, as a symbol of purification through divine love. Human reason must be purified by divine love so that inspiration can take place. This goes back to the origin of the word reason, raison, which comes from the Latin verb *reor*, to calculate. To understand, says John Chrysostomos, is to love; and reason, while it has its place, is certainly not the primary faculty involved in loving. Claudel's poem aims to speak of the things themselves, to name them; and naming requires the kind of knowledge that comes from loving. For that to happen, Claudel's own reason has to be consumed in order to welcome the Muses, rather than turn them to his own ends.

The presence of the inner counsel of Nine Muses leads to the birth of a question, a movement or action, the kind of breathing proper to thought. Claudel calls the Nine Muses, "*Phrase mère*," mother phrase; "*Rien ne naîtrait si vous n'étiez neuf !*" The number nine is not arbitrary: it is the number of gestational months before birth. Now that all nine Muses are present, the poet gives birth to his own physical and mental breath in a stanza that is full of references to physical birth. He then gives over this breath, which comes out in the form of an unstated question, to the choir of Muses, so that they can give it its final form.

But Claudel gives the most central place in his meditation on human thought to Mnemosyne, who personifies Memory. For Claudel, the Memory is not only a storehouse for past, sensory impressions; it is also a place of spiritual meeting. In order to portray Mnemosyne, Claudel draws heavily on the meditations on memory in Augustine's Confessions, which were inspired both by Augustine's own experience in prayer and by the Platonic teaching on reminiscence. In the *Meno*, Socrates explains that when the soul learns, it is in fact "remembering," or "recollecting," what it already once knew. The reason for this, Socrates says, is that the soul is

immortal and in fact has a latent knowledge of all things, which must be re-awakened by learning.[33] This is the reason that, as Socrates explains in the *Apology*, the truth has its own eloquence and is, by itself, more persuasive than any clever argument.[34] For Augustine, it is the *capax Dei*, the soul's innate capacity for God, which explains this latent kind of knowledge. By the power of divine grace and the cooperation of its own good will, with time, the soul can become a sanctuary for God himself.

In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes the memory as the silent place within himself, and then explains that this is where God can be found. Claudel's Mnemosyne sighs in this "*silence du silence*," what in Hebrew would be the heart and what is now commonly called the soul, the center of the human person that exists under all the outside, busy layers of words, worries, and actions. In Book X of the *Confessions*, memory is the place into which, "*in tenebris atque in silentio*"—"darkness and silence"—I can draw colors and sounds; this is why Claudel calls Mnemosyne the "*sens intérieur de l'esprit*," because the memory is the spiritual sense of taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. Augustine marvels that these colors and sounds, in the silence of memory, do not disturb each other. This is because each sound and color comes when called. The will—Augustine calls it the "hand of the heart"—is what does the calling. Later in the Confessions,[35] Augustine says that weight not only makes things go downward, but upward also, as liquids do when they are poured into each other. He makes an analogy between physical weight and spiritual weight: "*Pondus meum amor meus ; eo feror, quocumque feror*"—"My weight is my love; by that am I carried, wherever I am carried." Claudel, accordingly, calls

[33] *Meno* 85d-86a.
[34] *Apology* 17b.
[35] *Confessions* XIII, IX.

memory the "*poids spirituel*": it is the place where everything is ordered according to what one loves.

For Claudel, as for Augustine and Plato, everything is stored up, in a latent way, in the memory. The human mind contains the entire universe. Claudel calls it the "*source emmagasinée*." And for Claudel, as for Augustine, memory is "ineffable," "*ineffabilis*."[36] It is the place that cannot be described, although it is a faculty that is common to all human beings, and it is the most intimate part of the human person. Mnemosyne, Claudel tells us, is the weight of the spirit, in the sense that memory is where each thing takes its place, according to desire. Memory allows the human mind to communicate with what is; and as such it is "*l'heure intérieure ; le trésor jaillisant et la source emmagasinée ; / La jointure à ce qui n'est point temps du temps exprimé par le langage*," ineffably poised on the very pulse of Being. Mnemosyne, for Claudel, represents not only the center of the human person, but also the place where the present touches what is eternal, as well as the place where everything is ordered according to what a man loves.

The memory is the place each person can go to weigh what is. It is at the same time incommunicable--different for every person--and what allows us to communicate with each other. Claudel calls Mnemosyne the eldest, she who does not speak, "*L'aînée, celle qui ne parle pas ! l'aînée, ayant le même âge ! Mnémosyne qui ne parle jamais !*" She is the eldest, but the others are as old as she is. What he means by this is that memory precedes speech, but also coincides with it, to the extent that events themselves can be like intelligible words; and it is possible to read one's own life as one would read a book, and to tell it to someone else. He says that the first verses of the poem will be dedicated to her, and indeed what follows the invocation

[36] *Ibid*. X, VIII.

of memory is the "explosion" of the poem, the flash of lightning that speeds up the pace and signals the true departure of the *versets*.

What is the relationship between memory and the explosion of poetic inspiration? Memory, silence, is the place out of which the poem rises up; for Claudel, as for Augustine and Plato, a certain effort is required to cultivate this inner space. Only by going to the place of complete silence, where each thing can be drawn to its place, does the poet welcome the poem as inspiration, as something that is as natural as his breath. The poem will come up out of the silence of silence that Claudel finds at the center of his own being; what is happening, in fact, is a poem as a contemplative exercise. This also gives us the unity between the form of the poem, the *verset claudélien* in which the rhythm is determined by breathing just like monks singing the Psalms, and the poem's meaning, which will come out of the kind of spiritual breathing that is known as contemplative prayer. Claudel's poem will be an intimate dialogue that takes place with God in his own soul, as he allows his own memory to unfold in the "silence of silence"—the very silence of God. The Muse to which Claudel gives the most importance in the poem is the one that is most closely associated with contemplation itself, that is to say, the memory, which is where man must go to meet God. And the faculty that moves the memory is love.

The next parts of the poem read like a voyage through the memory, as Claudel calls up at the same time the remaining Muses, memories of great works of literature, and images of the heavens and the Earth. Claudel now describes his poem as a lightning strike. Like human memory, the poem will be both free and contingent, as it "strikes" where it wishes. "*O mon âme impatiente !*" says Claudel, as he begins a voyage inside his own soul. Beginning with the Odyssey, we are given a series of impressionistic flashes of cosmological works that Claudel holds in his memory: the Odyssey, the Iliad, the Aeneid, and the Divine Comedy. These bits and

pieces of the memory of reading are full of action; they exploit the verset's potential for movement, and they are full of color:

> *Nous avons une affaire plus laborieuse à concerter*
> *Que ton retour, patient Ulysse !*
> *Toute route perdue ! sans relâche pourchassé et secouru*
> *Par les dieux chauds sur la piste, sans que tu voies rien d'eux que parfois*
> *La nuit un rayon d'or sur la Voile, et dans la splendeur du matin, un moment,*
> *Une face radieuse aux yeux bleus, une tête couronnée de persil,*
> *Jusqu'à ce jour que tu restas seul !*

Like a Symbolist painting, the versets paint Claudel's memories of the Odyssey, with a touch of gold and blue; we see the gold and blue very clearly, but instead of a rosy-fingered dawn, Claudel gives us the "splendor of the morning." The crown of victory is the very quiet green of parsley. The effect is like chiaroscuro using color, giving us a fleeting but beautiful impression of the epic poem. Odysseus sleeps on as his Phoenician bark comes ashore, and then Aeneas pushes off into the "Pontifical waters." The entire Mediterranean is in Claudel's soul, and he only has to travel inland to follow Dante's "investigations."

At this point, Claudel takes a great breath—there is a pause—and leaving Dante's "shadows and images" behind, he dives once again into the unknown. Addressing his soul a second time, he says, "*le poëme n'est point fait de ces lettres que je plante comme des clous, mais du blanc qui reste sur le papier*." What he must do, now, is plunge more deeply into silence. The silent voice, the music he is looking for, will be like the "*appel automnal*" that noiselessly lifts up the swallows. But it is not yet time for the wordlessness of music and of nature; he goes back to the ekphrasis, and to allusive memories—this time, of history and of theater.

The next Muse that Claudel calls upon is Thalia, the muse of comedy. This is, in fact, her second appearance. Thalia receives a surprisingly important role, from the beginning of this first movement that is "The Muses." One might think that the proper genre of such a solemn poem

would be the objectivity of something that is neither comic nor tragic; or that it would necessarily be tragic in tone, since it concerns love, and the lot of love is to either pass away, or to see what it loves pass away—whichever happens first. And yet Claudel has chosen to give his cosmic poem a very particular color: it will be comic, not tragic. In her first appearance, Thalia surrounded her sisters Clio, the Muse of history, and Mnemosyne:

> *Et d'abord, je t'ai reconnue, Thalie !*
> *Du même côté j'ai reconnu Clio, j'ai reconnu Mnémosyne, je t'ai reconnue, Thalie !*
> *Tu ne romps point le silence ! tu ne mêles pas à rien le bruit de la parole humaine. O poëte, tu ne chanterais pas bien*
> *Ton chant si tu ne chantais en mesure.*
> *Mais ta voix est nécessaire au chœur quand ton tour est venu de prendre ta partie.*
> *Quand les Parques ont déterminé,*
> *L'action, le signe qui va s'inscrire sur le cadran du Temps comme l'heure par l'opération de son chiffre,*
> *Elles embauchent à tous les coins du monde les ventres*
> *Qui leur fourniront les acteurs dont elles ont besoin,*
> *Au temps marqué ils naissent.*
> *Non point à la ressemblance seulement de leurs pères, mais dans un secret noeud*
> *Avec leurs comparses inconnus, ceux qu'ils connaîtront et ceux qu'ils ne connaîtront pas, ceux du prologue et ceux de l'acte dernier.*

He gives the Fates a role not just in tragedy, but also in history; he says that the Fates hire mothers' wombs throughout the world, to furnish the actors they will need. History, then, is like a play; this reminds us of the line from *As You Like It,* "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"—and it is not surprising that this metaphor would re-occur in the Odes, for Claudel had also, by this point, translated much of Shakespeare. But then he takes the metaphor in another direction: these people not only resemble their fathers, but also many unknown others, who went before them and will come after them. This is a novel idea, that there is a kind of spiritual parenthood between human beings that goes beyond genetics. It is a new logic of relationships. This is where he brings in the parallel to poetry:

> *Ainsi un poëme n'est point comme un sac de mots, il n'est point seulement*

Ces choses qu'il signifie, mais il est lui-même un signe, un acte imaginaire, créant
Le temps nécessaire à sa resolution, A l'imitation de l'action humaine étudiée dans ses ressorts et dans ses poids.

A poem is not a mere heap of words, just as a person is not a mere heap of genes; not only what it signifies, but is itself a sign, an act of the imagination, that determines its own beginning, middle, and end—the time necessary to its resolution—in imitation of human action, studied in its ins and outs, and in its weight. This gets us back to the idea of weight: of each thing going to its place. Claudel is saying that poetry is imitation of life—and life, for Claudel, is not determined by blind chance; it is providential, and moreover, intelligible. Life, also, is a sign; it is readable. Reading and writing poetry could thus be a formidable preparatory exercise for reading the signs in one's own life, and in the lives of others. But lest we take the parallel between life and tragedy too seriously, he reminds us that he has chosen the poetic form of Pindar. His Ode belongs to the gods' "great game day," and it will finish not in blood, but in the giddiness of victory.

This contemplation in the memory culminates in an encounter with God himself, and the profound unity between God's creation and the creation of poetry. Now Claudel addresses Polyhymnia, the muse of sacred poetry. He calls her, his "one and only," and says that he can finally, now, listen to her voice. In this way, he is situating the poem, and rightly, as a sacred Ode; what we are indeed hearing is the voice of his soul singing to God, in contemplative prayer. Claudel tells us that this voice is the golden knowledge that each thing possesses of itself:

L'Or, ou connaissance intérieure que chaque chose possède d'elle-même,
Enfoui au sein de l'élément, jalousement sous le Rhin gardé par la Nixe et le Nibelung!
Qu'est le chant que la narration que chacun
Fait de l'enclos de lui, le cèdre et la fontaine.

From the perspective of Thomas Aquinas, what Claudel is speaking of is the *mysterium* that is inseparable from *ordo*, the mystery at the heart of things that cannot be put apart from the intelligible order. And this mystery is what poetry is able to talk about; for Claudel, the poet gives a voice to the "inner knowledge (*connaissance*) that each things possesses of itself," the co-naissance, from his *Art poétique,* that comes from being born together. In this song that can be found in the silence of his memory, Claudel finds the entire world, and it gives him joy:

> *Mais ton chant, ô Muse du poëte,*
> *Ce n'est point le bourdon de l'avette, la source qui jase, l'oiseau de paradis dans les girofliers !*
> *Mais comme le Dieu saint a inventé chaque chose, ta joie est dans la possession de son nom,* […].

His song is not a particular sound, like a bee's humming or the murmurs of a spring, but the possession of each creature's name. He says that he has the joy to possess each thing's name; and what gives joy, is love. Understanding is possible only through love; otherwise, naming something becomes a kind of control. This is where Claudel brings in the last of his Muses—remember, he had called them all chaste virgins—as Polyhymnia is now called Mary:

> *Et comme il a dit dans le silence* "Qu'elle soit!"*, c'est ainsi que, pleine d'amour, tu répètes, selon qu'il l'a appelée,*
> *Comme un petit enfant qui épelle* "Qu'elle est".
> *O servante de Dieu, pleine de grâce !*
> *Tu l'approuves substantiellement, tu contemples chaque chose dans ton coeur, de chaque chose tu cherches* comment la dire *!*

Just as God, in Genesis, said, "Let it be," so the poet says, full of love, "It is." In his own soul, he has found this woman to contemplate, and she is a contemplative woman; in fact, she is at the same time Mary and his own soul. "O God's handmaid, full of grace! ... you contemplate each thing in your heart, you seek how to say each thing." At this point, Claudel reveals that his poem is, in fact, contemplative prayer; he has gone to the center of himself to contemplate the Word,

written through everything—literature, history, sacred, profane, Greek, Hebrew—and in his own soul, he has discovered a woman, ready to love each thing that God has made out of love.

To recapitulate, this First Ode, an ekphrasis of the sarcophagus of the Nine Muses, in the Louvre, leads to the exploration of the way Claudel's own mind, or soul, breathes and is inspired. Terpischore opens the ball, giving the poem's form and movement, the new *versets*, in which breath determines the rhythm of the poem. The form of the poem corresponds to its sense, which comes rather from Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses: my weight is my love. The poem itself is revealed as a kind of spiritual breathing, or a kind of contemplative prayer. This breathing in mind and body reveals, through naming, the order of the universe, which is indeed ordered by divine love. The order of the universe becomes intelligible in its very mystery, through contemplation, which takes place through love in the depths of memory, the silence of the poet's own heart. The poem is part of the dialogue of contemplative prayer, which, involving all things, deepens the poet's relationship to God.

Claudel contemplates the relationship between God's own creation and human—poetic—creation in this part of the poem. He compares the act of creation to the composition of a piece of music, the laying out of a game, and the planning of a ceremony. He makes a reference to Adam's role in Genesis, watching in wonder alongside God and participating in creation through the mysterious naming of all things:

> *Quand il composait l'Univers, quand il disposait avec beauté le Jeu, quand il déclenchait l'énorme cérémonie,*
> *Quelque chose de nous avec lui, voyant tout, se réjouissant dans son œuvre,*
> *Sa vigilance dans son jour, son acte dans son sabbat !*
> *Ainsi quand tu parles, ô poëte, dans une énumération délectable*
> *Proférant de chaque chose le nom,*
> *Comme un père tu l'appelles mystérieusement dans son principe, et selon que jadis*
> *Tu participes à sa création, tu coopères à son existence !*

The poet who speaks the name of each thing is at the same time Adam, Claudel himself, and every poet; each man has the capacity to name every thing in its principle, and by doing so, he not only reiterates that initial participation in its creation, he cooperates in its current existence. This, for Claudel, is poetry as a vocation: participating in creation and cooperating in the existence of everything, by naming things, with love, like a father delighting in his children. Possessing the name of each thing, for Claudel, is nothing like the classification of modern science, for example; that is why Claudel compares it to a father naming his child. It is personal, and it is full of wonder.

From divine love, Claudel has moved to human love, and in particular, the love of nature. At this point, he evokes Vergil's *Georgics*, saying that the poet does not receive lessons from nature; on the contrary, he imposes his order—but only after "considering all things." This is a reference to St. Luke's Gospel, in which the Virgin Mary "considers all these things in her heart"; he is once again referring to the attitude of contemplation. Virgil, according to Claudel, is not taught by nature, but imposes his order upon it; but this order comes not arbitrarily, but from contemplation of the things themselves. He goes so far as to say that Vergil's discourse is a kind of lawmaking; his *ars poetica* here includes a metaphor between poetry and culture. All kinds of human making (*poiesis*) should originate, for Claudel, from this attitude of contemplation of the mysterious principle of things, rather than from either of two alternatives: a purely external domination of nature, or from what he calls "taking lessons" from nature—the attitude that assumes that nature knows best.

This section is part of a long tradition in poetry of comparing the work of the poet to agriculture; the *Georgics* are one example. A more recent example can be found in the poem,

"Digging," by Seamus Heaney, which compares Heaney's pen and work with words to a spade digging up potatoes. Claudel, here, also evokes his peasant heritage:

> *Et moi, je produis dans le labourage, les saisons durement travaillent ma terre forte et difficile.*

He refers, as well, to the curse of Adam, in Genesis; Adam's lot, after the fall, is to work the earth with great difficulty. As a poet, Claudel also must labor and deal with the passage of time in his work of writing. Paul Claudel, indeed, has this kind of closeness to farming; he comes essentially from a peasant family, and his childhood was spent, before Paris, in a village in the East of France.

And this closeness to the agricultural year would have only been heightened by his experience with the Benedictines, which after all is the context of this particular poem; and it makes perfect sense that after speaking about *ora,* the work of contemplation, Claudel would now be giving some time to *labora*, the work of agriculture. And like a novice, as a poet, he has undergone the initiation into silence:

> *J'ai trouvé le secret ; je sais parler ; si je veux, je saurai vous dire*
> *Cela que chaque chose* veut dire.
> *Je suis initié au silence ; il y a l'inexhaustible cérémonie vivante, il y a un monde à envahir, il y a un poëme insatiable à remplir par la production de céréales et de tous les fruits.*

Claudel is now truly in full possession of his poetic gifts; through poetic contemplation—a kind of contemplative prayer on paper, a retreat inside himself to speak to God and all things—he has discovered what each thing "means." Claudel attributes this question to Mallarmé.[37] Claudel himself puts the emphasis on meaning as an act of the will—what each thing *wants* to say ("*veut* dire"), rather than merely asking, "What each thing means," in an objective, impersonal way.

[37] Notes to the Folio edition of the *Odes*: P. Claudel, *Cinq Grandes Odes*, ed. Marius-Fr. Guyard, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1990, p. 211.

Another poetic master, for Claudel, is Rimbaud; "the initiation into silence," comes from the *Illuminations*.[38] Mallarmé and Rimbaud have initiated him to poetry.

But there is also, undeniably, a Benedictine influence, which deepens the unity between Claudel's vocation as a poet and the original vocation of man, the *ora* and *labora* of daily life. The world now appears to Claudel as an "inexhaustible living ceremony," unfolding in the intelligible harmony of seasonal work, the liturgical year, and the daily singing of the Offices. It is the original Great Office. Prayer and work become, together, a kind of living poem, and the poet's task is to sing it in words. He has discovered the great harmony between his initiation as a Benedictine monk and his initiation as a poet.

And then, there is the great drop-off, whose abruptness cannot be over-emphasized:

Je laisse cette tâche à la terre ; je refuis vers l'Espace ouvert et vide

Over the Earth, Claudel chooses open and empty space. There is no punctuation at the end of this strophe; it is a brutal departure. He is attracted to this space, open and empty, more than to the ordered world he has discovered. And yet the method is the same; he is still in the silence of silence, travelling within the horizons of his own soul. His weight is his love; he leaves the task of ordering the Earth willingly, because of his own desire. But he can give no account of it. It is the most mysterious passage in the poem. With the Earth, Claudel now contrasts "open and empty space." This is rather surprising! The way he approached poetic inspiration could not have been more classical; the most modern reference—that was explicit, at any rate—in the previous part of the poem was to Dante. One would expect him to speak, not of outer space, but of the populated heavens of Dionysius the Areopagite or Thomas Aquinas. But this would be to underestimate to what extent Claudel was affected by the cosmology of his own time.

[38] *Ibid*.

The break-off at this point in the poem also corresponds to the decision, which would cause him anxiety throughout his life, to leave the monastery. It would, however, be a mistake to interpret this passage in an overly personal way; the meditation on events in Claudel's personal life can only be understood as one level of meaning. Just as in contemplative prayer, events in one's life are only one subject for meditation among the many "words" God addresses to us, so in poetry these events only find a place insofar as they make a part of the greater harmony, the specific "part" that the poet must sing, as Claudel described in the previous section. This dramatic shift in the poem can then be understood as a kind of "*dabar*," from the Hebrew for word, action, and event. It is an *event* that is also a *word* because it has an intelligible significance beyond Claudel's own life, a meaning that must be at the same time metaphysical, poetical, and personal. And Claudel includes it in this Ode, which is at the same time a dialogue with his own soul, and with God.

Why does Claudel abandon the Earth at this point, to go to Space? Just previously, he has praised the monastic *labora* that makes the cultivation of the earth like a great "poem to fill" with wheat and fruit, in the same rhythm as the seasons, which follow the Divine Office. His work as a poet is now revealed as the same kind of work, in no way incompatible with the rest of the great earthly liturgy; and it has a special relationship to contemplative prayer, that initiation into silence where Benedictines—and many others—listen to what each thing means, what each thing has to say.

A sketch of an answer may perhaps also be found in the previous section, particularly if we consider what will come after; Claudel has repeatedly identified with Adam in the creation account in Genesis—and in particular with Adam, after the Fall. Adam's curse, after original sin, is to work the hard earth; but this curse is not so much a curse as a cure, since the work that

Adam undertakes is ultimately salvific, and allows him to participate with God in the hard work of the Redemption. Claudel describes himself as an Adam; with Adam, he exults in God's creation, and now he "participates" in it, and "cooperates in existence" itself. But what about Eve? His helpmate is all but missing from the previous section; he has described his own soul as a kind of Virgin Mary, giving her assent to all of God's actions; but this is quite different from the wonder and drama of the first bodily encounter between the human parents: "Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones!"

That this is the missing piece is confirmed by the eruption of Erato, in the next section. Erato, the muse of erotic poetry, is indeed the only Muse that has not yet found her place in Claudel's exploration of poetic inspiration. Several commentators have argued that Claudel's erotic muse is at the same time Terpsichore and Erato; if this is the case, then there is a great difference between the Terpsichore at the beginning and the end of the poem. And it may also be the case that the two Muses are, in fact, separate. At the beginning of the section, Claudel invokes the other Muses, and asks them how they could hold this last Muse captive:

> *O sages Muses ! sages, sages soeurs ! et toi-même, ivre Terpsichore !*
> *Comment avez-vous pensé captiver cette folle, la tenir par l'une et l'autre main,*
> *La garrotter avec l'hymne comme un oiseau qui ne chante que dans la cage ?*

It is true that calling Terpsichore "drunken" seems to suggest that she, the one who first led the dance, must be the Muse that is now caged by her wise sisters; but the Terpsichore of the beginning of the poem is very different from this caged woman, "*la vivante*"—the literal meaning of Eve—who has awoken the desire of Claudel's Adam. Here is how he describes this woman:

> *Voici celle qui n'est point ivre d'eau pure et d'air subtil !*
> *Une ivresse comme celle du vin rouge et d'un tas de roses ! du raisin sous le pied nu qui gicle, de grandes fleurs toutes gluantes de miel !*

La Ménade affolé par le tambour ! au cri perçant du fifre, la Bacchante roidie dans le dieu tonnant !

This Muse is inebriated with wine and roses, and she dances to the wild rhythm of Bacchus' fife and drum. By contrast, Terpsichore, at the beginning of the poem, while described as inebriated, was full of the "orchestral jubilation," and as a Maenad, she was also a "Sibyl," and a "virgin." She was not dancing for anyone in particular, but rather, was inebriated on the "pure water and subtle air"—the beauty of the music of the Spheres that she heard in silence. This woman, on the other hand, is mad with desire. And at the same time, it would seem appropriate that Erato would also be Terpsichore, the Muse behind the movement of the poem, who moves the rhythm of the poem according to her breathing. For the spiritual breathing that moves the poem is the dialogue that takes place in silence, and for Claudel, as for Augustine, this inner, intimate movement is caused by what the soul loves. And Claudel's soul loves the harmony of creation, but desires Erato even more.

The conflict is, in fact, as aesthetic and cosmological, as it is moral. For Erato asks him, *"Ne comprends-tu point mon ennui, et que mon désir est de toi-même ? ce fruit à dévorer entre nous deux, ce grand feu à faire de nos deux âmes !"* She is speaking of original sin, of the forbidden fruit; and the soul's fire is at the same time human passion and the dangerous fire of life. This is human love in its most anarchic form, and Claudel has a deep sense that it is dangerous, destructive, and disobedient. But it is also beautiful. There is, in fact, a major aesthetic problem here. How could Claudel, who called himself a catholic[39]—as in, all-encompassing—poet, write an Ode, inspired by all Nine Muses, without giving a place to Eros? His aesthetics would not be a credible aesthetics without the contribution of Erato. And he did

[39] When the word Catholic is capitalized, it refers to the Roman Catholic Church; when it is not, it is an adjective whose root is the Greek καθολικός: all-encompassing, universal, pertaining to the whole.

promise, after all, that "all Nine" would be needed. He has, indeed, given a place to Erato, and not in her tamest version.

But this leads to the cosmological problem. To seize Erato, Claudel must reject the harmony that he has sung at length in the many previous sections of the poem—"*que m'importe la mesure interrompue de votre chœur ?"* He will now see himself, not as an obedient monk lovingly contemplating the splendor of creation, but as a lonely modern, drifting in space:

> *Et en effet je regardai et je me vis tout seul tout à coup,*
> *Détaché, refusé, abandonné,*
> *Sans devoir, sans tâche, dehors dans le milieu du monde,*
> *Sans droit, sans cause, sans force, sans admission.*

In these verses, he describes himself at the moment that he left Ligugé; and it does not seem that these are mere reactions after-the-fact to his great crisis, but that the act of leaving corresponds to a kind of dissatisfaction with the monastery itself. The harmony of poetry, agriculture, and liturgy is not enough for Claudel, who seeks something else. He is still a modern man; he sees himself "all alone" in the universe, "detached, refused, abandoned, / without a duty, without a task, outside in the middle of the world." This is the alienation of the individual, positively hurled out of the old cosmology by forces beyond his control. And the touch of the woman's hand is more consoling than all of the beautiful music he has heard, and more attractive than what he has previously experienced of God in prayer. But giving in to his desire sets the world on fire; the night becomes like the dawn, and autumn lighter than springtime. "The world," he says, "was no longer there,"

> *Pour nous assigner notre place dans la combinaison de son mouvement multiplié,*
> *Mais décollés de la terre, nous étions seuls l'un avec l'autre,*
> *Habitants de cette noire miette mouvante, noyés,*
> *Perdus dans le pur Espace, là où le sol même est lumière.*

The two lovers lift off of Earth; they have, in fact, lost the Earth, they have lost their connection to the intelligible word of creation, and they are lost in Space.

And again, this conflict is not strictly personal, and it is not only moral; it is truly an question of the order of the world. Claudel accuses the other Muses, the harmony found at Ligugé, of keeping Erato in a cage; and Claudel asks, *"qui contiendra la grande flamme humaine ?"* There is, indeed, a problem in rejecting the beauty of Eros, the beauty of human love, on moral grounds; and at the same time, for Claudel, without moral order, without the intelligible word—Law—between God and man, there can be no harmony, no poetry, even. Nothing is intelligible if the universe is not personal, and the beauty does not make any sense. But no account of beauty can leave out the inherent beauty of erotic love. He paints the universe herself as a woman:

> *Et les étoiles ne sont-elles point pareilles à des têtes d'épingles luisantes ? et tout l'édifice du monde ne fait-il pas une splendeur aussi fragile*
> *Qu'une royale chevelure de femme prête à crouler sous le peigne !*

The world's splendor is as fragile as the beauty of a woman; and in fact, this image of the cosmos sends us back to the origin of the word *cosmos*: it comes from the same root as cosmetics and is first used to designate the "beauty resulting from order," like the making-up of a woman.[40] Before finally naming her as Erato, Claudel calls her a "long-haired idea"; this encounter has great importance for his view of the world. In other words, guided as the poet must be by desire, how can he make sense of the world, given that there is a manifest conflict between divine love and human love? Erato is the *"réponse*," the answer, to the flight from Ligugé; but she also opens up a greater question, which is how to reconcile the encounter with God, which gives meaning to the universe, and human love.

[40] R. Brague, *La sagesse du monde. Histoire de l'expérience humaine de l'univers*, Paris: Fayard, 1999, p. 35.

With Erato, Claudel's invocation of "The Muses" comes to an end. (It is curious to note that the invocation is at the same time a *memento mori*, since the bas-relief of the Muses is on a sarcophagus). The Muses' inspiration, in this case, is incarnate. This new form of the *verset* corresponds to the process of poetic inspiration, which Claudel describes as a kind of spiritual breathing, in the *templum* of the human spirit, the memory. This goes back to the etymology of the word contemplation itself: the *templum* was the outside space the Roman augur "read" to understand the messages of the Gods. The contemplative—the Benedictine monk, for example—descends into himself, into his own *templum*, to read nature, Scripture, and personal events, all of which are God's intelligible words. The poet, for Mallarmé as for Claudel, descends inside himself to hear what each thing *means to say*; and for Claudel, the contemplation of the poet and the contemplation of the Benedictine are one, since what each thing *means to say* is its own part in God's music. The poem, like prayer, comes naturally out of this spiritual breathing.

The faculty that contemplatives use is not, however, primarily the intellect, or judgment; it is human love. The contemplative poet discovers that the words of God to which he listens are, in fact, messages of a most personal kind, and they require the trust, wonder, and desire of love to decipher. The poet's own "weight" is his love, and through repetition of the divine word, he participates in the profoundly subjective order of the universe, giving voice to what each thing "means to say." *Ora* leads directly to *labora*, just as Terpsichore's feet are moved by the inner fullness of the orchestral jubilation. Inspired by the divine Muse, Claudel sings the music of the spheres; and what opens himself to this is his own faculty to love. But this love itself leads to a contradiction: how can one reconcile divine love with human love, since in many cases the one forbids the other? In the context of poetic contemplation, this question is not merely personal, for

it takes on a philosophical, as well as a cosmological, character. The universe itself appears to be disordered, or worse, silent.

The answer and the question in Erato's eyes are in fact the place of erotic desire in contemplation. The place of contemplation is the great silence, the *templum*, of the human memory; its motor, what orders, is human love. And yet, that motor becomes the obstacle to the very harmony it is meant to contemplate, that harmony in which, by repetition and action, it is meant to participate. Erato is Claudel's answer because she is the element that is missing from his contemplation of the cosmos; and she is no small element—she *is* the cosmos, a mirror of the horizons in his own soul that is, at the same time, an irresistible mystery. But Erato is also the crux of Claudel's question, since union with her makes the old order impossible. The promise is that he will no longer be alone; but the price of this companionship is the harmony of the entire world.

This problem is, in fact, at the crux of the age-old conflict between poetry and philosophy, the idea that the poets lie by making what is ugly seem beautiful, and what is untrue seem true. Nietzsche's major objection to metaphysics, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is that metaphysics—and he takes Christianity to be a vulgarized metaphysics—can never, in fact, be life-giving, because it will always sacrifice life to truth. Claudel was not a reader of Nietzsche, but he did read Bergson; in fact, later in life, he would speculate about reconciling vitalism with the metaphysical theology of Thomas Aquinas. Claudel, like Nietzsche, refuses to sacrifice life out of hand; but he is also unable to accept the death of God. The pain of sacrificing the old Christian metaphysics is indeed too great, but Claudel is too much a poet, and too much a modern poet, to sacrifice life-giving, species-preserving Eros. "The Muses" opens the poetic

question that will unfurl in the next four Odes: how to unify divine and human love, the divine word and human life.

Chapter 2. *L'Esprit et l'eau*

Second Ode. The Spirit and the water

ARGUMENT

The poet, held captive by Beijing's walls, ponders the Sea. Drunkenness of water, which is infinity and liberation. But spirit is superior even to water for penetration and for freedom. Flight towards the absolute God, who alone frees us from the contingent. But in this life, we are separated from him. He is there, however, albeit invisible, and we are tied to him by this fluid element, spirit or water, which penetrates all things. Vision of Eternity in fleeting creation. The voice, at the same time spirit and water, the malleable element and the will imposing itself upon her, is the expression of this blessed union. The spirit clears out the water in all things, illuminating and clarifying. Ask God to be oneself and cleared of the deadly shadows. The water that purifies when it springs up at God's call, are these tears coming from a penitent heart. Memory of past errors. All is finished now, and the poet listens in a profound silence to the Spirit of God, who whispers to the voice of Wisdom addressed to every man.

After the long, smoking silence,

After the great, civil silence of so many days fuming with smoke and rumor's sound,

Warbling of the great, golden cities and breath of the tilled ground,

Suddenly the Spirit again, suddenly breathing again,

Suddenly a dull blow to the heart, suddenly the given word, suddenly the breathing of the spirit, snatched away, suddenly the possession of the Spirit!

As when in the sky full of night before the first fire of lightning strikes,

Suddenly the wind of Zeus in a whirl full of straw and dust with the laundry of the whole village!

My God, who in the beginning separated the waters above from the waters below,

And who have once again separated from the wet waters I am saying,

The dry land, cleaved like a child from the abundant maternal body,

The warming earth, tender-leaved and nourished by the milk of the rain;

And who in the time of sorrow as on creation day seize in your almighty hand

The human clay, and the spirit spurts out everywhere between your fingers,

Once again after the long terrestrial paths,

Behold the Ode, behold how this new, great Ode is present to you,

Not like a thing beginning, but little by little like the sea that was there,

The sea of all the human words whose surface may here and there

Be known by a breath below the fog and the eye of the matron Moon!

And now, near a marigold palace, among the many-roofed trees shading a rotted throne,

I live in the principal ruin of an old empire.

Far from the free and pure sea, in the earthiest of earth I live yellow,

Where the very earth is the element one breathes, immensely soiling air and water with its substance,

Here where the grimy canals and the old, worn-down roads and the donkey and camel paths converge,

Where the Emperor of the apportioned soil traces his furrow and raises his hands towards the useful Sky from which good and bad weather comes.

And just as on squally days along the coast one sees the lighthouses and tips of rocks wrapped in mist and shattered foam,

In the old wind of the Earth, the square City lifts up its fortifications and its gates,

Terraces its colossal Gates in the yellow wind, three times three gates like elephants,

In the wind of dust and ashes, in the great grey wind of the powder that was Sodom, and the empires of Egypt and of the Persians, and Paris, and Tadmor, and Babylon.

But what do I care now for your empires, and everything that dies,

And you others whose hideous road I've left behind!

Since I am free! What does it matter to me that you've come to such a cruel understanding? Because I, at least, am free! Because I've found something! Because I, at least, am outside!

Because I no longer have my place among created things but partake of what creates them, the liquid and lascivious spirit!

Can you dig the sea with a spade? Can you fertilize it like a plot of peas?

Can you choose a rotation for it, alfalfa or wheat or cabbages or beets, yellow or red?

But this is the life without which all things die, oh! I want life itself without which all things die!

Life itself, and everything else that is mortal kills me!

Oh, I haven't had enough! I look at the sea! Everything finite fills me up.

But here and wherever I turn and on the other side

There is more and more and there, too, and always and ever and ever more! Always, dear heart!

No fear that my eyes could see the end of it! Oh, I've had enough of your drinking water.

I don not want the water you've arranged, sun-harvested, filtered and distilled, distributed by the mechanism of the mountains,

Corruptible, flowing out.

Your springs are not springs. The true element!

The original material! It's the mother, see, I must have!

Let me take possession of the eternal and salty sea, the great grey rose! I lift an arm towards paradise! I advance towards the sea and its grape entrails!

I've signed on forevermore! I am like the old sailor who now only knows the earth by its lights, the systems of green or red stars taught by the map and the portulan chart.

A moment on the quay among the bales and the barrels, papers to the consul, a handshake to the stevedore;

And now once again the cable cast off, a ring of the bell to the engine room, sailing past the breakwater, and under my feet

Once again the widening out of the sea's swell!

Neither

The sailor, nor

The fish led away by another fish

To be eaten, but the thing itself and the entire barrel and the live flash,

And the water itself, and the element itself, I play, I gleam! I partake of the freedom of the omnipresent sea!

Water

Always coming and going back to water,

Making up a unique drop.

If I were the sea, crucified by a billion arms across her two continents,

Feeling the rough traction of the circular sky over my belly with the sun as still as the burning wick under the cupping glass,

Knowing my own quantity,

It is I, pulling, calling on all my roots, the Ganges, the Mississippi,

The thick tuft of the Orinoco, the long thread of the Rhine, the Nile with its double bladder,

And the nocturnal lion drinking, and the marshes, and the subterranean silt, and the round and full hearts of men who last for their moment in time.

Not the sea, but I am spirit! And as water

From water, spirit knows spirit,

Spirit, the secret whisper,

The creating spirit who makes us laugh, the spirit of life and the great pneumatic breath, the release of the spirit,

Tickling and making drunk and making us laugh!

O, it's so keen and nimble, no fear of being left high and dry! Deep as I dive, I cannot overcome the elasticity of the abyss.

As when we see a dozen goddesses rise up from the bottom of the water,

With lovely limbs, all at the same time, greenish, in an eruption of air bubbles,

Playing at the rise of the divine day in the great white lace, in the cold and yellow fire, in the fizzing, sparkling sea!

What

Door could stop me? What high wall? Water

Scents water, and I am even more liquid than she!

As water dissolves earth and cemented stone, I have secret insights everywhere!

The water that made the earth breaks it apart, the spirit that made the door opens the lock.

And what is inert water next to spirit, its power

Beside its activity, matter to the price of the maker?

I feel, I flair, I untangle, I scent out, I breathe with a certain sense

For how the thing was made! And I, too, am full of a god, I am full of ignorance and of genius!

O forces at work around me,

I know how to do as much as you, I'm free, I'm violent, I'm free as you are, and not in the way professors understand!

Just as the tree, new every year in springtime,

Invents, worked by its soul,

Green—same as the eternal one—and creates its pointed leaf from nothing,

I, man,

Know what I'm doing,

Growing and this very power of birth and creation

I use, I master,

I'm in the world, I exercise my understanding everywhere.

I know all things and all things know themselves in me.

I bring to each thing its deliverance.

Because of me

Nothing stays alone, but I associate it with something else in my heart.[1]

That still isn't enough!

What does the open door matter to me, if I do not possess the key?

My liberty, if I am not its rightful master?

I watch all things; and see, all of you, that I am not the slave, but the ruler.

Each thing

Suffering less than imposing, forcing us to deal with it, each new being

A victory over the beings that were already there!

And you, who are the perfect Being, have not prevented me from being this way!

You see this man I make and this being I am becoming in you.

O my God, my being yearns for yours!

Deliver me from myself! Deliver this being from its condition!

I am free, deliver me from freedom!

I see so many ways not to be, but there is only one way

To be, which is to be in you, who are yourself!

Water

Apprehends water, spirit scents essence.

[1] Comprendre, prendre avec, c'est-à-dire, aimer (St Jean Chrysostome)

My God, who separated the waters below from the waters above,

My heart groans to you, deliver me from myself because you are!

What is this freedom, and what do I have to do elsewhere?

I must sustain you.

My God, I see the perfect man on the cross, perfect on the perfect Tree.

Your Son and ours, nailed by the feet and the hands with four nails in your presence and in ours,

Heart broken in half, and the great Waters have penetrated unto his very heart!

Deliver me from time, and take my wretched heart; take, my God, this beating heart!

In this life, I cannot break through

To you because of my body, and your glory is like the resistance of salt water!

The surface of your light is invincible and I cannot find

The flaw in your radiant shadows!

You are here and I am here.

And you stop me short, and I, also, stop you from going forward.

And you are my end, and I, also, am your end.

And just as the scrawniest worm uses sunlight to live, and the machinery of the planets,

So there is not a breath of my life that I have not taken from your eternity.

My freedom is limited by my position in your captivity and by my ardent role in the game!

So that the ray destined for me in your life-creating light will not escape.

And I stretch my hands out to the left and to the right

So that no empty space

May take its place in the perfect fortress made by your creatures!

I do not need to be dead for you to be alive!

You are in this visible world just as you are in the other.

You are here.

You are here and I cannot be elsewhere unless I am with you.

What is happening to me? For it's as though the old world were now closed.

As of old when, brought from heaven, head over temple,

The keystone came to capture the pagan forest.

O my God, I see the key, the key that now delivers,

Not the one that opens, but the one that closes shut!

You are here with me!

The key is closed by your will as by a wall, and by your power as by the strongest of ramparts!

And now as Ezekiel once measured with the reed of seven and a half cubits,

I could take the dimensions of the City from the four cardinal points.

The City is closed, and now, suddenly, in my eyes all things

Have acquired proportion and distance.

Behold, Jerusalem and Zion have kissed like two sisters, the one from Heaven

And the Exile, washing the sacrificial linen in the river of Chebar[2],

And towards her royal Consort, the earthly Church lifts her head crowned with towers!

Hail, then, O world, new to my eyes, O now total world!

O entire creed of visible and invisible things, I accept you with a catholic heart!

[2] For French spelling (Khobar), cf. Leconte de Lisle, *Qaïn* … Ezekiel 1:1.

Wherever I turn my head

I behold the vast octave of Creation!

The world opens itself and, as wide as it spans, my eyes traverse it from one end to the other.

I have weighed the sun like a fat sheep that two strong men hang on a pole between their shoulders.

I have counted the army of the Heavens and drawn up a report,

From the great Figures that lean over old man Ocean

To the rarest fire sunk in the most profound abyss,

Like the dark blue Pacific, where a whaler watches for the blowhole of a dolphin like white down.

You are taken and from one end of the world to the other around You

I have cast out the vast net of my understanding.

Just as the phrase that starts in the brasses,

Gains the woodwinds, and progressively invades the depths of the orchestra,

And just as solar eruptions

Echo over the earth in water shortages and in tidal waves,

Just as from the highest Angel who sees you, down to the pebble on the road, and from one end of your creation to the other,

There is no break in continuity, no more than from the soul to the body;

The ineffable movement of the Seraphim spreads to the Nine orders of Spirits,

And behold how the wind, the Sower, the Harvester, rises in turn over the earth!

So water continues spirit, and holds it up, and feeds it,

And between

All your creatures and up to you there is something like a watery bond.

Hail thee, O world, bounteous to my eyes!

I understand through what you are present,

It's that the Eternal is with you, and wherever the Creature is, the Creator has not left.

I am in you and you are mine and your possession is mine.

And now in us at the end

The beginning dawns,

The new dawn breaks, and I know not what angelic youth dawns in the possession of the source!

My heart no longer keeps time, it's the instrument of my perdurance,

And the undying spirit views things passing away.

But did I say they were passing? Now they begin again.

And dying? Death is no longer with me.

Each being, since it is a

Work of Eternity, is the expression of it.

Eternity is present and all present things come to pass in it.

This is not the bare text of light: see, everything is written from one end to the other:

We can point to the drollest detail: not a syllable is missing.

The earth, the blue sky, the river with its boats and three trees carefully on the bank,

The leaf and the insect on the leaf, this stone that I weigh in my hand,

The village with two-eyed people all talking, weaving, haggling, making fire, carrying burdens, complete as a playing orchestra;

All this is eternity and the freedom not to be is withdrawn from it,

I see them with bodily eyes, and I reproduce them in my heart!

With bodily eyes—in paradise I will use no other eyes than these!

Do we say that the sea has perished because one wave, and then another, and a third wave, and the tenth wave, the decuman, come one after

The other, each triumphantly falling into foam?

The sea is bounded by its shores and the

World by its limits, nothing is lost in this closed place,

And freedom is bounded by love,

Frolics

In all things to invent the most exquisite approximation, all beauty in its inadequacy.

I do not see you, but I am continuous with the beings that do see you.

We only return what we have received.

And since all things from you

Have received being, in time they return the eternal.

And I also

Have a voice, and I listen, and I hear the sound it makes.

And I create water with my voice, such water that is pure water, and because it nourishes all things, all things are portrayed in it.

Thus the voice with which I make eternal words out of you! I can name nothing that isn't eternal.

The leaf turns and the fruit falls, but the leaf in my verses never dies,

Not the ripe fruit, nor the rose among roses!

She dies, but her name in the spirit that is my spirit dies no more. Here she is, escaping from time.

And make me, who with my voice make eternal things, entirely

This voice, a totally intelligible word!

Free me from the slavery and weight of this unmoving matter!

Clarify me, then! Pluck these dreadful shadows from me and make it that at last I may be

That whole thing desired darkly within myself.

Enliven me, the way air sucked in by our machine makes our intelligence shine like embers!

God, who blew on chaos, separating what is dry from what is humid,

And on the Red Sea, and it divided before Moses and Aaron,

And on the wet earth, and here was man,

You command my waters in the same way, you've put in my nostrils the same spirit of creation and of form.

Impurity doesn't ferment; purity is life's seed.

What is water other than the need to be liquid

And perfectly clear under God's sun, like a translucent drop?

Why are you talking to me about this blue air that you liquefy? O, the human soul is a more precious elixir!

If the dew glitters in the sun,

How much more the human carbuncle and the substantial soul in the ray of intelligible light!

God, who baptized chaos with your spirit,

And who on the eve of Easter exorcise the pagan font by your priest's mouth with the letter psi,

You seed our human water with the water of baptism,

Nimble, glorious, unmoving, undying!

Clear water sees by our eyes and sonorous water hears by our ears and tastes

By the vermillion mouth drinking from the six-fold spring,

And colors our flesh and shapes our moldable body.

And just as the seminal drop fertilizes the mathematical figure, separating

The burgeoning seed of the elements from its theorem,

So the body of glory desires from under the body of mud, and night

Wants to be dissolved in visibility!

My God, take pity on these desiring waters!

My God, you see that I am not only spirit, but water! Take pity on these waters in me that are dying of thirst!

And the spirit is desiring, but water is the desired thing.

O my God, you have given me this minute of light to see,

Like the young man, thinking in his garden during the month of August, who sees the whole sky and the earth by turns in a glance,

The world filled in a glance by a great bolt of golden lightning!

O strong, sublime stars, and what fruit glimpsed in the black abyss! O sacred bending of the great bough of the Little Dipper!

I won't die.

I won't die, but I am immortal!

And everything dies, but I believe like a more pure light!

And, as they make death with death, from its extermination I make my immortality.

May I altogether cease to be dark! Use me!

Express me in your fatherly hand!

Squeeze out once and for all

All the sun in me and the capacity for your light, so that I may see you

Not only with my eyes, but with my whole body and my substance and the sum of my radiant and resounding quantity!

The divisible water that measures a man

Doesn't lose its nature, which is to be liquid

And perfectly pure, which is how it reflects all things.

Like those waters that carried God in the beginning,

So these hypostatic waters in us

Never stop desiring him; all desire is for him alone!

But what is desirable in me isn't mature.

May night thus fall while I await my division, as slowly my soul becomes

The drop, ready to fall most heavily.

Let me make a libation to you in the shadows,

Like a mountain spring that gives the Ocean to drink with its little shell!

My God, you who know each man by name before he is born,

Remember me when I was hidden in the crack of the mountain,

There where the springs of boiling water rise up, and my hand on the colossal face of white marble!

O my God, when the day grows cold and Lucifer[3] appears alone in the East,

Our eyes only, not only our eyes, our heart, our heart acclaims the inextinguishable star,

Our eyes turned towards its light, our water turned towards the splendor of that glorified drop!

My God, if you put that rose in the sky, endowed

That globule of gold with so much glory in the ray of created light,

How much more immortal man alive with eternal intelligence!

Just as the vine under the heavy bunches of grapes, just as the fruit tree the day of its benediction,

So is the immortal soul to whom the perishing body is no longer sufficient!

If the exhausted body desires wine, if the adoring heart hails the star it has found again,

How much more to resolve the desiring soul is another human soul worth?

And I also found the death I needed in the end! I knew that woman. I knew the love of woman.

I've possessed the ban. I've known that source of thirst!

I wanted the soul, to know her, the water that does not know death! I've held the human star in my arms!

O my lady, I am not a god,

And I cannot share my soul with you and you cannot take me and contain me and possess me.

And behold, like someone who turns away, you have betrayed me, you have gone, O rose!

Rose, I will never see your face again in this life!

[3] In the Latin Liturgy as in the Vulgate, Lucifer is the name for the Morning Star.

And here I am, all alone on the edge of the torrent, face against the earth,

Like a penitent at the foot of God's mountain, arms outstretched in the thunder of the roaring voice!

Here come the heavy tears!

And I am here, like someone who is dying, and who cannot breathe, and feels sick, and my entire soul gushes out from me like a great spout of clear water!

My God,

I see and judge myself, and I am no longer worth anything to myself.

You gave me life: I give it back to you; I would rather you took everything back.

I finally see myself! And I am devastated, and the inner pain opens in me like a liquid eye.

O my God, I do not want anything anymore, and I give everything back to you, and nothing is worth anything to me,

And now I only see my misery, and my nothingness, and my want, and that, at least, belongs to me!

Now the deep springs gush out, my salty soul gushes out, the deep sac of seminal purity bursts with a great cry!

Now I am perfectly clear to myself, most

Bitterly clear, and there is nothing in me

But a perfect want of You alone!

And now, once again, a year has passed,

Like the reaper Habakkuk, whom the Angel carried to Daniel before he could let go of his basket handle,

The spirit of God has ravished me right over the sea, and here I am in this undiscovered country.

Where is the wind now? Where is the sea? Where is the road that brought me here ?

Where is everybody? Nothing's left but the still pure sky. Where is the old storm?

I lend my ear: and all that is left is this trembling tree.

I listen: and all that's left is this insistent leaf.

I know that the struggle is over. I know that the storm is over!

The past was, but is no more. I feel on my face a colder wind.

Behold, once again, the Presence, the terrifying solitude, and suddenly, the wind, once again, on my face.

Lord my vine is in my presence, and I see that my deliverance can no longer escape from me.

He who knows deliverance now makes light of every bond, and who can understand the laughter that he has in his heart?

He looks at all things and laughs.

Lord, it is good for us to be in this place; may I not return before the sight of men.

My God, steal me away from the sight of all men, may I no longer be known by any one of them,

And like the eternal star's

Light, may my voice be all that remains of me.

The intelligible verb and the word that has been *expressed* and the voice that is the spirit and the water!

Brother, I may not give you my heart, but where matter has no use, runs and ransoms the subtle word,

Myself, with an eternal intelligence.

Listen, my child, and incline your head towards me, and I will give you my soul.

There are many noises in the world, but the lover with a torn heart only hears, high in the tree, the shaking of the Sibylline leaf.

Thus, among the human voices, which one is neither high nor low?

Why, then, do you only hear it? Because it's the only one that obeys the divine measure!

Because it's only measure, through and through,

Holy measure, free measure, all-powerful and creating measure!

Oh, I feel it, the spirit never ceases being carried over the waters!

Nothing, my brother, including you,

Exists except by an ineffable proportion and the right number over the infinitely divisible waters!

Listen, my child, and do not close your heart, and welcome

The invasion of the reasonable voice, in whom is the liberation of the water and the spirit, by whom

Every relationship is explained and resolved!

This is not the teaching of a schoolmaster, nor the lesson given to be learned,

It is an invisible food, it is the measure above all words,

It is the soul receiving the soul, and all the things in you have become clear.

Here she is on the threshold of my house, the Word, like an eternal maiden!

Open the door! And the Wisdom of God is before you like a tower of glory, like a queen with her diadem!

O friend, I am neither man nor woman, I am the love that is above all words!

Hail, brother, my beloved brother.

Do not touch me! Do not try to take my hand.

Beijing, 1906.

Commentary on *L'Esprit et l'eau*

In Claudel's first ode, love is the faculty that allows the poet to give voice to what each thing "means to say"; and at the same time, his own love for Erato brings him into direct conflict with the inspired order. At stake is the relationship between life and truth, between poetry and metaphysics. By the beginning of the Second Ode, Erato's passion has run its course; all that is left is a smoking plain of overturned earth, and Erato herself has fled. This Ode was written in 1906, about a year after the end of Claudel's affair with Rosalie Vetch. He had married a respectable young woman and returned to a diplomatic post in China; his wife would soon give birth to their first child. A hasty reading of the Second Ode might give the impression that it does no more than mark Claudel's retirement into a comfortable, prosperous middle age.

The Ode's title, "The Spirit and the water,"[4] gives a clue that this may not be the case. One of the themes "The Muses" introduces is man's participation in God's creation through contemplation and calling things by their name. The title of this Ode, "The Spirit and the water," tells us that its subject will go beyond man's participation with God in creation to his

[4] The title is indeed a quotation from the First Letter of St. John: "For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement" (*Ibid.* 212).

participation in the redemption of all things. Given Claudel's immersion in the Church Fathers and the Bible, the title brings to mind the water symbolism in the Five Books of Moses, the Wisdom Literature, and the Prophets that later permeates John's account of the Redemption. The Biblical references in this Ode are almost too numerous to count, and they all point to the story of Creation and Redemption, as told through the symbolism of Spirit and water. The Ode also alludes to the great crisis in Claudel's life, during a moment of peace and consolation. This re-reading reveals that the primary locus of the crisis was indeed Claudel's relationship with God, rather than his passionate affair with Rosalie Vetch. From a philosophical point of view, the Second Ode is in fact moved by the question of the place of erotic desire in the inspired order. The Second Ode, rather than dodging the subject of Eros, sings of its Redemption.

If we were to compare "The Muses" to the Creation, we could compare "The Spirit and the water" to the Redemption. This Ode is a new beginning that is at the same time continuous with the previous one. In John's Gospel, the suffering of the Redemption is shown to be a new kind of Creation, through the Holy Spirit. The Gospel begins with a reference to the first verses of Genesis, as the Spirit comes again over the waters of the Jordan during Christ's baptism. Augustine gives a reading of the beginning of Genesis as the action of the Holy Spirit upon the soul, a painful but beautiful process of purification.[5] The relationship between Claudel's own contemplative practice outside of the monastery and the passages in Augustine's *Confessions* may be confirmed by an entry in the *Journal*, which he filled with citations from the Bible and Church Fathers in the period after his major spiritual crisis, in between writing the first and second Odes. In February of 1905, Claudel—who was, according to François Varillon and

[5] Cf. *Confessions* XIII.

Jacques Rivière, meditating on the end of his affair with Rosalie Vetch[6]—wrote a series of quotations from Book X of the Confessions. After the meditation on the memory as a place to meet God, Augustine begins, in effect, describing his own inner, arduous path towards God. The first quote recorded in the *Journal* praises continence as a way towards inner coherence and unity; the second asks God for his commandments and expresses obedience. The third and fourth quotes are more directly related to the practice of contemplative prayer. The third speaks directly to meeting with God in silence:

> *Et aliquando intromittis me in affectum multum inusitatum introrsus, ad nescio quam dulcedinem, quae, si perficiatur in me, nescio quid erit, quod ista vita non erit.*[7]

Augustine is speaking of meeting directly with God in prayer, and how it can feel to experience the mysterious presence of God directly: an indescribable sweetness. This meeting with God, Augustine says, takes him beyond what belongs to this life. (Ludwig Wittgenstein once said something similar: "Prayer means feeling that the world's meaning is outside the world.") The fourth quote in the *Journal* concerns the desire to possess God, and at the same time to continue in possessing things that are contradictory to possessing God—Augustine's great struggle, as well as Claudel's. In the next chapter, Augustine will explain that this meeting with God, culminating in union, is made possible by Jesus Christ, who is both God and man: *cor ad cor loquitur*, to use the expression of John Henry Newman. This is a common experience not only among the great mystics, but also among ordinary people who practice contemplative prayer; and it doubtless spoke to Claudel.

In this Ode, Claudel makes the same parallel between creation and the working of the Spirit on the soul as Augustine once did in the *Confessions*. The first strophe ends in an

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[6] *Journal*, v. I, p. 1052.

[7] Confessions X, 65. "Sometimes you initiate me into a strange, intimate fullness of sentiment that, if it were to attain its highest degree in me, would become something, I know not what, that would not belong to this life."

anaphoric crescendo, as the wind comes again suddenly, like lightning in a heavy night sky. The poet's grieved soul is like the overturned earth waiting to be seeded; the strong wind, the Holy Spirit, again takes possession of it, just as the Spirit of God "hovers over the waters." The second strophe continues this parallel with the Creation account:

> *Mon Dieu, qui au commencement avez séparé les eaux supérieures des eaux inférieures,*
> *Et qui de nouveau avez séparé de ces eaux humides que je dis,*
> *L'aride, comme un enfant divisé de l'abondant corps maternel,*
> *La terre bien chauffante, tendre-feuillante et nourrie du lait de la pluie,*

The first act of Creation is the separation of the waters above from the waters below. Next, God separates the dry from the wet, the Earth from the waters. The parting of the waters becomes a symbol for the process of purification by which the Spirit cleaves the soul from everything that could detach it from God. The next two lines develop this parallel between the creation of man and his redemption:

> *Et qui dans le temps de la douleur comme au jour de la création saisissez dans votre main toute-puissante*
> *L'argile humaine et l'esprit de tous côtés vous gicle entre les doigts,*

This time, Claudel uses an image from the letters of Paul, showing God taking him into his hands and working his human clay through the present trial, just as in the beginning, he formed him from clay.

The poet's struggle is more than personal. In fact, it has implications for all of mankind. The end of this second section addresses God directly, presenting the new great Ode to him like an everlasting sea, the sea of all the human words:

> *Voici l'Ode, voici que cette grande Ode nouvelle vous est présente,*
> *Non point comme une chose qui commence, mais peu à peu comme la mer qui était là,*
> *La mer de toutes les paroles humaines avec la surface en divers endroits*
> *Reconnue par un souffle sous le brouillard et par l'œil de la matrone lune !*

This Ode, unlike the previous one, is *not* a brand new utterance. Instead, it is the great sea of words that has forever been there.

All the words, however, are presented by a particular man, speaking in the first person, in a specific place. "I," Claudel says, "live in the principal ruin of an old empire." He now lives in Beijing, and the next verses describe the Forbidden City, far from the sea, assaulted by yellow earth like a wave-battered lighthouse. But there is also a more general sense to his words. As he describes the dust of Beijing, he also mentions the ashes and dust of all the great cities, represented by a short but evocative list:

> *Dans le vent de cendres et de poussière, dans le grand vent gris de la poudre qui fut Sodome, et les empires d'Égypte et des Perses, et Paris, et Tadmor, et Babylone.*

In these verses, he is referring to his state as a man of the world, a city-dweller, far from the retreat of the contemplative life and immersed up to his ears in daily business. The world, in 1906, is already such a city, turning at a furious rate; but Claudel might as well be in Memphis or in Babylon. The ashes and dust of the cities refer to the Liturgy of Ash Wednesday, the first day of the penitential season of Lent, which prepares for the second great feast of the Redemption, Easter. The priest, referring to Genesis and the Wisdom literature, says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." This passage describes the paradox of the intense activity of life in a world that is passing away. This world is "dust," and at the same time, it is so precious that God's own son came into it: "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son."[8] For Claudel, the world is beautiful and good, even precious, but it is also passing away. What all of the great empires have in common is that they turned to dust; the current state of affairs is no different. And Claudel knows that he, himself, will die.[9] The Ode that Claudel is

[8] John 3:16, from memory.
[9] Claudel died in 1955.

presenting to God is the state of his own, busy soul, and at the same time, it is the many words of all human activity.

There is a fundamental tension in Claudel's soul with regard to all this activity. He lives in a great imperial capital, and as a member of the diplomatic corps, he is very busily involved in daily affairs. He has confided to Francis Jammes that he only has fifteen-to-twenty minutes a day to work on his Ode. Whatever time he has put aside for the contemplative work of prayer and poetry, however, has been enough to give him a degree of distance from daily concerns. The next passage begins with an angry rejection of the world's self-importance and casual cruelty:

> *Mais que m'importent à présent vos empires, et tout ce qui meurt,*
> *Et vous autres que j'ai laissés, votre voie hideuse là-bas !*
> *Puisque je suis libre ! que m'importent vos arrangements cruels ? puisque moi du moins je suis dehors !*
> *Puisque je n'ai plus ma place avec les choses créées, mais ma part avec ce qui les crée, l'esprit liquide et lascif !*

In the heyday of the great European empires, he asks, "What do your empires matter to me?" and he refers to "your cruel arrangements"—the social arrangements that, although cruel, do not raise so much as an eyebrow. He refers to the "hideous path," which only a little while ago was his own, the hubris of the materialism and economic utilitarianism that closes the mind to the sense of wonder, even in the midst of unprecedented scientific discovery and cultural encounters .

Claudel declares himself now to be "free." Life in both its material and social aspects is made intelligible through the spirit, symbolized by the sea. One of the consequences of the theories he rejects is determinism. Rather than free will, which is a fundamentally spiritual concept, for materialists, choice is the consequence of the laws of nature and blind chance. Reducing life to its material and social aspects requires the amputation of the heart of man, his freedom. Claudel says that now, he is free; he is not only matter, but has a part in "liquid and

lustful" spirit. The next few lines, which poke fun at what could only be called, in the words of Josef Pieper, the "society of total work," are similar to a passage in the Book of Job.[10] Here are the lines from the Ode:

> *Est-ce que l'on bêche la mer ? est-ce que vous la fumez comme un carré de pois ?*
> *Est-ce que vous lui choisissez sa rotation, de la luzerne ou du blé ou des choux ou des betteraves jaunes ou pourpres ?*

In the passage from the Book of Job, the patriarch Job has just lost all his children, his possessions, and his health, and as if that weren't enough, his friends have accused him of being responsible for his own ills because of some hidden, unrepentant sin. After his friends have sufficiently tormented him, God answers, and this is how his great lyrical interrogation begins:

> Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
> Tell me, if you have understanding.
> Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
> Or who stretched the line upon it?
> On what were its bases sunk,
> Or who laid its cornerstone
> When the morning stars sang together
> And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?[11]

Claudel's lines, like the lines from the Book of Job, also ridicule human arrogance. He asks whether the sea can be burned like heath, or whether it could be used to grow crops. Just as human beings cannot explain the creation of the Earth as though it were the building of a house, they cannot harness the freedom of the sea, and by analogy, the freedom of the spiritual life. The sea, Claudel says, "is the life without which everything dies." The sea becomes a symbol for life itself, which cannot be mastered for human use, or fully explained by natural laws.

In fact, this metaphor of water as life comes from the Bible. In Genesis, life is created, abundantly, in the waters. Later, in the first account of human love after Adam's wonder at the

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[10] J. Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture,* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009, ch. 1.
[11] Job 38:4-7, NASV.

creation of Eve, the patriarch Jacob meets his cousin, Rachel, at the well at Sychar; "he kissed her and wept aloud," it says. In John's Gospel, the meeting of Jesus with a Samaritan woman also takes place at the well of Sychar and draws upon the ancient encounter between Jacob and Rachel. This is where Jesus tells the woman, who has had many husbands, that he is the living water, and that all those who drink this water will no longer thirst. In the Temple, during the feast of Sukkot, Jesus refers to the prophet Isaiah (ch. 55), saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" John adds that he said this about the Holy Spirit, "whom those who believed in him were to receive," after his death. Finally, John, at the foot of the Cross, sees water and blood running out of the left side of Jesus, after his heart is pierced with a lance; this echoes the prophet Ezekiel's vision of water gushing out of the left side of the Temple and desalinating the Dead Sea. Water is the symbol of God's creation, as well as of erotic love, which involves both life and death. In the Gospel, the symbol of the Redemption and of Christ's love is still water, but it is now "living water" which does not contain death and can quench all thirst for love.

What Claudel wants is this living water, when he says he wants life itself; he desires the life of the spirit, and not merely the modern, utilitarian attitude towards nature—"*vos eaux arrangées, moissonnées par le soleil, passées au filtre et à l'alambic, distribuées par l'engin des monts, / Corruptibles, coulantes.*" Here, he is speaking of an attitude primarily adapted to life in society, that serves human ends well, that is both "corruptible" and "easy-flowing." It represents the way of thought that reduces philosophy to the art of good governance, or in our day, to

'critical thinking skills.'[12] To this truncated spiritual life, he contrasts being in contact with the source itself, using a pun on the words mother (*mère*) and sea (*mer*): "*Vos sources ne sont point des sources. L'élément même ! / La matière première ! C'est la mère je dis, qu'il me faut !"* We can put this desire for life beyond worldly utility in relation to what Claudel says about the specificity of being human in his *Art poétique*: What is singular about being human is the *"sentiment de la tige"* (the feeling of having a stem), the "religious sentiment" as in *religare* (to attach), the "mysterious placental attachment." The other face of this feeling is, he says, "*la conscience, ou sentiment de la scission,"* consciousness, which is, for Claudel, the same thing as conscience, the feeling of being split off. Man, he says, is an "excluded principle, a foreclosed origin."[13] He is at the same time distinct from God and attached to him, like a child is attached to its mother. His spiritual life must originate in this attachment, which is beyond the world. It cannot take root in any other, more convenient, source, nor can it be limited to the hard, but self-sufficient, labors of reason.[14] Without the "useless" freedom of contemplation, the spiritual life undergoes a kind of corruption as it becomes enslaved to worldly ends.

The next section uses the freedom of the *verset* form to great effect, as Claudel pushes off into the spiritual waters. In a letter in June 1906 to Francis Jammes, Claudel writes that in this Ode, he is finally exploring the possibilities of the genre. In effect, Claudel takes far more liberties with his *verset* in this Ode than in the previous one, and that is particularly true of the following passage. Claudel describes an embarkation "*pour toujours*"—once and for all—like an old mariner that now navigates the Earth by starlight. The versets start on the firm ground of

[12] J. Pieper, *ibid.,* ch 2.
[13] *Art poétique,* p. 109.
[14] J. Pieper, *ibid.*

short phrases paralleled by commas that sound like a man walking on the docks. Then the jerky movement of casting off is followed by a definitive enjambment:

> *Un moment sur le quai parmi les balles et les tonneaux, les papiers chez le consul, une poignée de main au stevedore ;*
> *Et puis de nouveau l'amarre larguée, un coup de timbre aux machines, le break-water que l'on double, et sous mes pieds*
> *De nouveau la dilatation de la houle !*

The section ends with the rhythmic swelling of the word "dilatation," as the ship leaves port. The next lines will imitate the movement of fish and the dripping and flowing of water. They have such great freedom that some of the lines are reduced to only one syllable. Claudel, as a poet and as a human being, regains his freedom through this watery attachment to the Spirit. He now "shares in the freedom of the omnipresent sea." The sea, like the spiritual life of things, unites the entire world, from all the great rivers to the watery heart of man; it is "*une goutte unique*." Claudel imagines himself as the sea, and he names river deltas throughout the world as if to reiterate the overwhelming unity not only of all creation, but also of all peoples, for this is the level at which every human being is connected, the "*coeur rond et plein des hommes qui durent leur instant*."

From water, Claudel again takes us to spirit, and the interconnectedness, the catholicity of all things. Just as water knows, or communicates with, water, spirit knows spirit—the word he uses is "*reconnaître,"* which he says, in his *Art poétique*, involves knowing "in advance." For Claudel, rightly or wrongly, *connaître* has an etymological relationship with the word *naître*, and can indeed be replaced by *co-naître,* being born together. The definition he gives of knowing is that it always takes place in the Biblical sense ("And Adam knew his wife"). Every person, and every thing, "is what it is by the necessity of answering, of being born together with (*co-naître à*) what it isn't, being in itself alone the absence of all the other things, to be that in common to

which they also belong."[15] His definition of persons and things is relational; everything, he says, is intelligence at work. His cosmology is no longer the blind interplay of random forces, or even the exhilarating, but uncommunicative, force of life; the world, for Claudel, is personal. Spirit, he says, recognizes spirit, "*le souffle secret, / L'esprit créateur qui fait rire, l'esprit de vie et la grande haleine pneumatique, le dégagement de l'esprit / Qui chatouille et enivre et qui fait rire !"* What he is saying is that his own spirit communicates directly with the intelligence at the heart of things, the creator spirit "that tickles and intoxicates and makes one laugh." Every created thing is, in fact, a word to all the others.

The discovery of this great creative world of the spirit inspires Claudel to celebrate something like Henri Bergson's vital force ("*l'élan vital*"), the creative energy at the heart of the world. Unlike the positivist "*professeurs*"—an allusion perhaps to the generation educated by Taine and Renan—Claudel is as free as the forces of nature, which he addresses directly, even personally:

> *O forces à l'œuvre autour de moi,*
> *Je sais faire autant que vous, je suis libre, je suis violent, je suis libre à la manière que les professeurs n'entendent pas !*
> *Comme l'arbre au printemps nouveau chaque année*
> *Invente, travaillé par son âme,*
> *Le vert, le même qui est éternel, crée de rien sa feuille pointue,*
> *Moi, l'homme,*
> *Je sais ce que je fais,*
> *De la poussée et de ce pouvoir même de naissance et de création*
> *J'use, je suis maître,*
> *Je suis au monde, j'exerce de toutes parts ma connaissance.*
> *Je connais toutes choses et toutes choses se connaissent en moi.*
> *J'apporte à toute chose sa délivrance.*
> *Par moi*
> *Aucune chose ne reste plus seule mais je l'associe à une autre dans mon cœur.*

[15] *Ibid.* p. 113.

Just as the forces of nature "know what to do," Claudel, in full possession of his poetic freedom, now knows what to do; as the tree each new spring invents the eternal green, creating its pointed leaf from nothing, so man knows what he makes. His own making—for man's essential action is, for Claudel, *poïesis*—continues the work of creation. Man is in the world, and he can exercise his knowledge, his being-born-with, everywhere. He is born with everything and everything is born together in him.

This account of human action in the world is a far cry from the imposition of human will on inert matter. It is impossible for Claudel to look at nature as passive matter for the following reasons. First, every thing is not only beautiful, but also has a meaning that becomes more mysterious through repetition[16]; every spring is a new spring, and each tree invents the eternal green. Nature, for Claudel, has a *telos,* which is best described not as a clearly defined, but rather impersonal, "end," but rather, to quote Mallarmé again, as *what it means to say*. Second, there can be no separation between human will and natural matter because human beings, for Claudel, are part of nature; they are "born together with" all the other created things. Human action, which is distinguished by spirit, is meant to bring each thing to its deliverance, so that it can become what it is meant to become. The poet, and the human being in full possession of his freedom, allows each thing to say what it means to say, rather than "torturing nature so that it will reveal its secrets" [Pieper, p.?]. Man is both part and participant in the creation, and he must use his intelligence to understand the word at the heart of each thing, rather than imposing his will upon mere matter. It is the poet's freedom, the spiritual nature of his reason, that allows him "to say what each thing means to say."

[16] This theme is the subject of Gérald Antoine's study, *Les cinq grandes odes de Claudel; ou, La poésie de la répétition*, Paris: Minard, 1959.

But freedom poses its own dilemma.[17] In a kind of counter-movement to the great crisis in the First Ode, Claudel begins a flight towards the Creator of all things as he asks the question, "What is my own freedom for?" By asking this question, Claudel discovers the intense desire that he now feels for God himself. In "The Muses," the turning of the poem occurs in the decisive, broken line, *"—Je laisse cette tâche à la terre; je refuis vers l'Espace ouvert et vide*," followed by empty space. The next part of the poem takes a turn into rebellious, beautiful and tortured Eros. In "The Spirit and the water," Claudel makes a parallel movement: after this account of creation and the place of the poet, as co-creator, there is a break, and a strophe that is a single, again decisive, line: "*Ce n'est pas assez encore !*" This is unequivocally the movement of desire, but for what? The next strophe searches for an object:

> *Que m'importe la porte ouverte, si je n'ai la clef ?*
> *La liberté, si je n'en suis le propre maître ?*

In a rather mysterious juxtaposition of phrases, he says, why does the open door matter to me, without the key, and why does my freedom matter to me, if I am not its rightful master? Claudel has experienced his own freedom, but he knows that without a suitable object, this freedom is a vain thing. The "Why?" [*À quoi bon ?*] must have its due. The next lines make a parallel between Claudel's own work as a poet—his participation in the birth of each thing as "a victory over all the others"—and what God can do for him:

> *Vous voyez cet homme que je fais et cet être que je prends en vous.*
> *O mon Dieu, mon être soupire vers le vôtre !*
> *Délivrez-moi de moi-même ! délivrez l'être de la condition !*
> *Je suis libre, délivrez-moi de la liberté !*
> *Je vois bien des manières de ne pas être, mais il n'y a qu'une manière seule*
> *D'être, qui est d'être en vous, qui est vous même !*

[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar develops the idea of human freedom as a dilemma in the first chapter of the second section of his book *In Gottes Einsatz Leben* (Johannes, 1971), published in English as *Engagement with God* (Ignatius, 1975).

The metaphor here comes from birth. Claudel is asking to be delivered from himself. Freedom, in fact, becomes burdensome when it does not point to the direction of its own meaning, or end. The question Claudel is now asking God is, "What do *I* mean to say?" for he has discovered he does not have an answer to this question. He is not the person who holds the key to his own freedom, the direction of his own meaning. This is a troubling paradox: Claudel has discovered how to listen to all the other things in order to help them become what they are meant to be, but he cannot do this for himself. The failure of erotic love has shown him that it cannot be someone like him, despite love's initial promise. He appeals, instead, to God, returning to Augustine's reading of Genesis and asking God to separate his own inner waters. He says, "*Mon cœur gémit vers vous, délivrez-moi de moi-même parce que vous êtes !*" which echoes Augustine's phrase, "My heart is restless until it rest in thee."

Going even further, Claudel asks the question of the role he must play: "*Qu'est-ce que cette liberté, et qu'ai-je à faire autre part ?*" The answer he gives seems cryptic, at first glance: "*Il me faut vous soutenir*," which sounds like it should mean, "I need to support you." Claudel is, in fact, in the habit, in all of his poetry of taking words directly from the Latin of the Vulgate and putting them into French.[18] If this is the case here, then "*soutenir*" does not mean giving God some kind of moral support. It would be better to go back to the Latin root, *sustineo*, and the way it is used by St. Jerome. As it so happens, there is a passage on what man's attitude should be towards God in the Book of Ben Sirach the Wise (2, 2-5), which is punctuated by this word:

> *Deprime cor tuum, et sustine: inclina aurem tuam, et suscipe verba intellectus: et ne festines in tempore obductionis.*
> *Sustine sustentationes Dei: conjungere Deo, et sustine, ut crescat in novissimo vita tua.*
> *Omne quod tibi applicitum fuerit accipe: et in dolore sustine, et in humilitate tua patientiam habe.*

[18] Cf. A. Vachon, *Le Temps et l'Espace dans l'oeuvre de Paul Claudel,* Paris: 1965.

In the Douay-Rheims version, which follows the Vulgate closely, this passage is translated as follows:

> Humble thy heart, and endure: incline thy ear, and receive the words of understanding: and make not haste in the time of clouds.
> Wait on God with patience: join thyself to God, and endure, that thy life may be increased in the latter end.
> Take all that shall be brought upon thee: and in thy sorrow endure, and in thy humiliation keep patience.

Here, what St. Jerome translates as *sustineo* is rendered as endurance in humility, as waiting on God with patience and accepting whatever happens as his will. This seems to be what Claudel means by, "*Il me faut vous soutenir*." A translation into accessible, modern English would sound something like, "I must wait on you with patience, and accept everything you send my way." What Claudel *means to say* with his freedom—with his life, as with his poetry—is not, fundamentally, his to decide. He will have to wait on God, to cooperate with God, to allow his own meaning to unfold.

Claudel goes on to give the life of Christ as the singular example of freedom brought to perfection:

> *Mon Dieu, je vois le parfait homme sur la croix, parfait sur le parfait Arbre.*
> *Votre Fils et le nôtre, en votre présence et dans la nôtre cloué par les pieds et les mains de quatre clous,*
> *Le cœur rompu en deux et les grandes Eaux ont pénétré jusqu'à son cœur!*

In Jesus crucified, he sees the "perfect man." By calling the cross the "perfect Tree," he reminds us that Christ's obedience on the Cross has undone Adam's Fall—at Golgotha as in Eden there is, again, a man (Christ), a woman (Mary, at the foot of the cross), and a tree. "Your Son and ours," says Claudel, "in your presence and ours"; for Christ is a son of Adam, and the parents at the cross are God the Father and Mary, his mother, by whom mankind participates in its own

redemption. The soldier's lance pierces Christ's heart, and John tells us that water and blood flowed out of it. Claudel says Christ's own heart is broken in half at the cross. The great Waters of creation have penetrated into God's very heart, and they have come out purified. Christ, by waiting patiently on the Father, has cleansed the world.

Claudel asks God, at this point, to take his own heart once and for all. But he cannot "force" God to take his heart; he cannot go towards God out of the sheer force of his own will and desire. What he can do is meet God in the struggle of prayer. The next lines evoke the mysterious wrestling match between God and Jacob in the Book of Genesis.[19] In this passage, Jacob is preparing to meet his estranged brother, Esau, on the other side of the Jordan. First, he sends his servants in two droves to meet his brother with gifts; and in the middle of the night, his personal camp—his wives, female servants and children—attempts the crossing. At the end, he is left alone, on the other bank, and a strange Man accosts him; he wrestles with him "until the breaking of day." This Man, when he sees that he is not winning against Jacob, touches his hip socket and puts it out of joint. He tells Jacob, "Let me go, for the day his breaking." And Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" At which point the stranger gives him a new name: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." Jacob, now Israel, then limps across the Jordan, preparing to reconcile with his brother; and he names the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."[20] Claudel's next few lines refer to this struggle between God and Israel. "*Vous êtes là et je suis là. / Et vous m'empêchez de passer et moi aussi je vous empêche de passer*." Like Jacob and the stranger, Claudel and God face off; Claudel won't let him pass, and

[19] Pope Benedict XVI gives an in-depth reading of this passage as "struggle" in his catechesis on prayer, "The Nocturnal Struggle and Encounter with God (Gen 32:23-33)," *A School of Prayer*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013.
[20] Gen. 32:22-31.

God won't let him pass. He goes on to say, "*Et vous êtes ma fin, et moi aussi je suis votre fin*." This line at first glance seems shocking—how could man be the end of God? And indeed, the line is shocking; as Paul says, the death of Christ is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles." According to Thomas Aquinas, knowing and loving God is the "end" of every man—"the principle in human operations," or that for which man does everything he does.[21] Claudel adds that loving man is literally the "end" of Christ, since it brings him to his death. The struggle between the Man and Jacob becomes, in fact, a prefiguration of the Cross.

Claudel continues to give the cosmological sense of his own struggle with God, the deeper meaning it has in the life of the world. His spiritual work has an effect on countless known and unknown others, and it has a special urgency and importance because only he can play his specific part in the Redemption of all things:

> *Ma liberté est limitée par mon poste dans votre captivité et par mon ardente part au jeu !*
> *Afin que pas ce rayon de votre lumière vie-créante qui m'était destiné n'échappe.*
> *Et je tends les mains à gauche et à droite*
> *Afin qu'aucune par moi*
> *Lacune dans la parfaite enceinte qui est de vos créatures existe !*

The limit on his freedom is his part in the game and his post in God's "captivity"—in the great wrestling match—and the point is to make sure none of the part of God's "life-creating light" that was given specifically to him may escape. He puts his hands out on either side, like a wrestler, so that he can prevent the existence of a hole in the "*parfaite enceinte qui est de vos creatures*." This seems like a very strange phrase, but it's convoluted both because Claudel is playing with a Latin-like syntax and because he is expressing a rather complex idea about ecclesiology. What is riding on Claudel's struggle with God, this wrestling match between his

[21] *Summa Theologiae,* 2. 1. 8.

freedom and God's, is his contribution to the work of the Church, the physical *body* of Christ. The "*enceinte*" or "tower" is an ancient ecclesiastical symbol. This vision of the Church goes far beyond the hierarchical structure. The goal of the Redemption—the work of the Church—is to make *all* of creation new, and not just to save a few 'elect.' Claudel believes that his own spiritual struggle has consequences for countless others—not just other human beings, but also other creatures: plants, animals, pebbles, stars! What is riding on his struggle with God goes far beyond his own salvation. As with Jacob/Israel, what is at stake is the future of the entire host of beings, human and otherwise, that depends on him. This is the logic that is expressed, in the Nicene Creed, by the phrase, "the communion of saints." Finally, Claudel says, "*Il n'y a pas besoin que je sois mort pour que vous viviez !*" because, like Jacob, he has discovered that this struggle with God is intended to wound him—to destroy his pride—rather than to kill him. The Fathers of the Church saw this struggle between God and Israel as a symbol for man's purification as he advances towards union with God in this life, the struggle that Claudel has undertaken by engaging with God in prayer. And again, this struggle has a wider, cosmological sense, as well as a personal one. In the words of Elizabeth of Dijon, a contemporary of Claudel's, "*L'âme qui s'élève, élève le monde*," "The soul that rises lifts up the world."

It is as if the old world, Claudel says, were now "closed." It could be tempting to take this in a rather literal sense—Claudel wrote enthusiastically to his friends about Alfred Russel Wallace's 1903 essay, *Man's Place in the Universe*, in which Wallace disputes the then-dominant theory of the infinite universe. Wallace argues that the universe has, in fact, distinct boundaries, and that the Solar System occupies its center. This, however, is too limited a reading of what Claudel means by "closed." In his own *Art poëtique,* Claudel says that something that is "closed" has an end—it is finite, in the sense of being made for some specific purpose, and even

more so when it has reached its fulfillment.[22] The world, for Claudel, has been "closed" in this way since the Incarnation. The line, "*Comme jadis, lorsqu'apportée du ciel la tête au-dessus du temple, / La clé de voûte vint capter la foret païenne,*" refers to the "head," as well as the "keystone"—two names for Christ. He is, as Claudel says in the next lines, "the delivering key, / Not the one that opens, but the one that closes shut!" The coming of Christ into the world closes the world's possibilities by revealing its meaning. As delivering key, Christ does not free mankind by opening up all possibilities; he delivers in the sense of only leaving one. Claudel has asked to be delivered from his limitless freedom. Now he has seen the key that delivers; and he repeats, "*Vous êtes ici avec moi !*"—Emmanuel, God with us. The world, he says, is now closed by God's will "as by a wall, and by his power as by the strongest of ramparts." The world, for Claudel, is primarily closed in this spiritual sense, having reached its fulfillment in the Incarnation.

At this point, Claudel receives a kind of vision, like what he had transcribed in "The Muses," but of even greater depth, and this vision has to do with his own vocation, the thing which his "end" calls him to do in the world. Claudel would say later that his vocation as a poet began when, as a child, he climbed up into a tree and saw the countryside spread out before him as though it were the entire world. Now, he says that like Ezekiel and his measuring reed of seven and a half cubits, he could take the dimensions of the City itself:

> *Et voici que comme Ézéchiel autrefois avec le roseau de sept coudées et demie,*
> *Je pourrais aux quatre points cardinaux relever les quatre dimensions de la Cité.*
> *Il est fermé, et voici soudain que toutes choses à mes yeux*
> *Ont acquis la proportion et la distance.*

[22] Claudel explains what he means by "end" in Article V of his "Traité de la co-naissance," the second treatise in his *Art poétique*: "Every movement in a being has an end that stops it and gives a form to its testimony," "*Tout movement dans un être a une fin qui l'arrête et qui donne une forme à son témoignage*" (192).

The City "is closed," and now all things "have acquired proportion and distance." The City Claudel is talking about is the New Jerusalem; the passage of the measuring reed refers both to the vision of Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 40, as well as the vision of the New Jerusalem (new meaning both new and the same) that John the Apostle has in the Apocalypse, Chapter 21. Both prophets see a man with a golden measuring reed, who gives them the dimensions of the City. Claudel confirms that this is what he is talking about in the next few verses:

> *Voici que Jérusalem et Sion se sont embrassées comme deux sœurs, celle du Ciel*
> *Et l'Exilée qui dans le fleuve Khobar lave le linge des sacrifices,*
> *Et que l'Église terrestre vers sa Consort royale lève sa tête couronnée de tours !*

Ezekiel has his vision of Jerusalem during the Exile in Babylon, and he and his wife live on the river Chebar. For John, the New Jerusalem is the Bride of Christ. Claudel sees John's New Jerusalem and Ezekiel's Zion embracing like two sisters, and he makes the parallel with the earthly Church, whose head is crowned with towers—as in the Song of Solomon—and the royal Consort, the heavenly Spouse, which she will one day become. Claudel is intimating that he, like the two prophets, can now take the dimensions of the heavenly City.

The Spouse Claudel addresses is not a handful of elect persons, or a "perfect society"; she is all of Creation, from the angels to the pebbles. To be more specific, she is the new Creation—new like the new Heavens and the new Earth, which, in the Apocalypse, are both new and the same, rather than new and different. The Redemption does not demolish and then replace Creation; instead, it makes all things new.

> *Salut donc, ô monde nouveau à mes yeux, ô monde maintenant total !*
> *Ô credo entier des choses visibles et invisibles, je vous accepte avec un cœur catholique !*
> *Où que je tourne la tête*

J'envisage l'immense octave de la Création !
Le monde s'ouvre et, si large qu'en soit l'empan, mon regard le traverse d'un bout à l'autre.

Claudel now says a kind of Ave Maria to all of creation, now redeemed: "Hail, then, O world new to my eyes, O now total world!" What he is saying is that he can now *see* the world as it is, temporally and eternally, the visible and invisible things. The world "opens itself" and he can survey it from one end to the other. *This* is what he "means to say": God has made him a poet, and a prophet. The meaning of what was whispered to him as a child has now become clear.

The next passage describes the ultimate union of all of Creation with God; Claudel sees it as though it were already achieved, as though the eternal reality were more palpable for him than the temporal one. As a personal, human center of this union with God, he says, God is "taken"—just as Communion is taken—and now he, the poet, can cast the "vast net of his understanding" (*connaissance,* knowledge in the Biblical sense, or *co-naissance*) around the entire world. But this passage is filled with the wonder of Eros, rather than the triumph of a conqueror:

Vous êtes pris et d'un bout du monde jusqu'à l'autre autour de Vous
J'ai tendu l'immense rets de ma connaissance.
Comme la phrase qui prend aux cuivres
Gagne les bois et progressivement envahit les profondeurs de l'orchestre,
Et comme les éruptions du soleil
Se répercutent sur la terre en crises d'eau et de raz de marée,
Ainsi du plus grand Ange qui vous voit jusqu'au caillou de la route et d'un bout de votre création jusqu'à l'autre,
Il ne cesse point de continuité, non plus que de l'âme au corps ;
Le mouvement ineffable des Séraphins se propage aux Neuf ordres des Esprits,
Et voici le vent qui se lève à son tour sur la terre, le Semeur, le Moissonneur !
Ainsi l'eau continue l'esprit, et le supporte, et l'alimente,
Et entre
Toutes vos créatures jusqu'à vous il y a comme un lien liquide.

The "liquid bond" between God and his creatures—the waters that penetrate the heart of Christ—is like a musical phrase that begins in the string section, moves onto the woodwinds and

progressively invades the deepest depths of the orchestra; or like a solar eruption that is repeated in the movement of the tides. It is the discrete and irresistible movement of goodness, truth, and beauty, which does not need violence to spread. Everything in Creation, from the angels that see the face of God to the pebble on the side of the road, is connected. The reference to the Seraphim and the Nine orders of Spirits comes from Dionysius the Areopagite, who has a similar vision of the world as a kind of rose—another name for the Bride of Christ—where each thing is continuous with all the others in an eternal harmony.

We could say that for Claudel, "The meaning of the world is beyond the world," but it is somehow not outside it. The eternal meaning can be seen at the same time as the temporal reality, and it has, in fact, more weight. He begins another Hail Mary to all of creation: "*Je vous salue, ô monde libéral à mes yeux !*" "*Libéral,"* for Claudel, is a strongly positive word; a faithful servant of the Republic, Claudel has accepted the liberal-democratic order. Any nostalgia for the monarchy is notably missing from his work. The political metaphor emphasizes the great freedom of being after the Redemption. The world, in his eyes, is already free from death; and the reason it is "present," the reason it exists, is its union with God:

> *Mon cœur ne bat plus le temps, c'est l'instrument de ma perdurance,*
> *Et l'impérissable esprit envisage les choses passantes.*
> *Mais ai-je dit passantes ? voici qu'elles recommencent.*
> *Et mortelles ? il n'y a plus de mort avec moi.*

Claudel can now recognize eternity in every passing thing. He says that his heart is no longer primarily the metronome that measures the passing of time, but that it is the instrument of his perdurance. In other words, his heart not only beats, it allows him to continue to exist, through its adhesion to what is eternal. The Redemption has washed away spiritual death, and even the

passing things will begin again. He now gives a poetic example of what he means by "*connaissance*," or being born together:

> *Tout être, comme il est un*
> *Ouvrage de l'Éternité, c'est ainsi qu'il en est l'expression.*
> *Elle est présente et toutes choses présentes se passent en elle.*
> *Ce n'est point le texte nu de la lumière : voyez, tout est écrit d'un bout à l'autre :*
> *On peut recourir au détail le plus drôle : pas une syllabe qui manque.*

Every thing, because it is a work of Eternity, is an expression of it. The present moment is also eternal. This is not, he says, the naked text of light—a rational reduction of things; every detail is present. He then goes on to describe what he is seeing at the present time, showing the particular relationship between the act of poetic description and the present moment. Everything he sees is part of eternity, and "*la liberté de ne pas être lui est retirée"*—the freedom not to be is taken away from it. "To be or not to be," can only concern the future, and only in a limited sense; everything that is *has to be*. This is the source of Claudel's great optimism, even in political matters, and the reason for his rejection of political nostalgia. He looks upon the present moment with love and wonder, telling the reader, "Look! Everything is written from one end to the other." Claudel says that what he currently sees, he sees with his bodily eyes and produces in his heart—perhaps he means by producing, that he sees the present moment actively and lovingly, through writing.

Claudel's voice becomes the symbol of "the Spirit and the water," the redemptive union between God and man in Christ. A voice, he says, can also create things and make them eternal. The union between Spirit and water in his voice is a symbol of the redemptive union between God and his creation, in Christ. Claudel's voice can be heard, it is, and at the same time it has the capacity to create. The leaf turns and the fruit falls, but in his verses they do not perish because they are captured in the eternal present:

Et moi aussi
J'ai une voix, et j'écoute, et j'entends le bruit qu'elle fait.
Et je fais l'eau avec ma voix, telle l'eau qui est l'eau pure, et parce qu'elle nourrit toutes choses, toutes choses se peignent en elle.
Ainsi la voix avec qui de vous je fais des mots éternels ! je ne puis rien nommer que d'éternel.
La feuille jaunit et le fruit tombe, mais la feuille dans mes vers ne périt pas,
Ni le fruit mûr, ni la rose entre les roses !

It is commonly said that the written word allows something of the present life to continue into the future, but Claudel is going much further here. He is saying that his words are eternal. He will not perish, so his verses will not perish, either. Claudel compares his words to pure water, to being that has been purified through redemptive suffering and thereby reaches its end. This pure water nourishes all things, and all things paint themselves in it. Moreover, he says that he cannot name anything that is not, itself, eternal, since the Redemption concerns all of creation, and not just the soul, or even human beings. His poetic contemplation thus prefigures the redemption of the world.

The erotic love in his verses does not perish, either; the ripe fruit and the rose among the roses symbolize his love that has come to an earthly end, but is eternally captured in his verses and in God's eternal present. The rose is also a trope for the ephemeral beauty of erotic love, the most famous French example of which occurs in Pierre Ronsard's Ode that begins, "*Mignonne, allons voir si la rose.*" In this Ode, the poet urges a young woman to cede to their love before her beauty fades and his desire subsides, just as the rose loses its petals. Claudel, however, uses the image of the rose to very different effect; he says that the rose cannot perish, in his verses or in reality, for the very reason that it has been captured by its passage through time. Erato has come and gone, but her presence will never be erased from the eternal poem.

This strophe concludes with a prayer of supplication, asking God for conversion, which is a cooperative effort. The poet addresses God directly, asking God to lighten his "deadly shadows"[23]; the image comes from the Gospel of St. John and from the liturgy of the Easter Vigil. He again takes up the parallel between what he does, as a poet, and what God can do for him:

> *Et moi qui fais les choses éternelles avec ma voix, faites que je sois tout entier*
> *Cette voix, une parole totalement intelligible !*
> *Libérez-moi de l'esclavage et du poids de cette matière inerte !*
> *Clarifiez-moi donc ! dépouillez-moi de ces ténèbres exécrables et faites que je sois enfin*
> *Toute cette chose en moi obscurément désirée.*

Claudel asks that God make him into a completely intelligible word. He wants to become only that which he means to say. He must be liberated from "the slavery and weight of this inert matter," a way of speaking about the desires of the flesh. Claudel does not reject his body, but he wishes to be freed from the weight of sin—like Paul and Augustine, he is seeking an end to the contradiction in his own desires. The "weight" of matter comes from the beginning of the *Confessions*.[24] He desires "obscurely" what he is to become, a reference to the Hymn to Charity in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians ("If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love …"). He cannot know what he ultimately means to say because it is beyond him; he is being pulled out of himself by God's desire. The reference to St. Paul confirms that Claudel's language is indeed the language of divine Eros. Claudel responds to God's action, to God's love, with his own desire; his Eros cooperates with God's, just as the world's beauty shines in his poetry.

What will happen is that God's desire for him will purify his own desires, which is to say that they will be elevated and unified (and not erased!). Claudel now repeats the references to

[23] The vocabulary here is also close to Ronsard's *Odes* (cf. *À Cupidon*).
[24] *Confessions* I, I.

Genesis he made in the first strophe; he says that God "commands" his waters, just as it was the wind over the waters, God's breath (*souffle)*, His Spirit, that separated the dry land from the waters during the Creation; and it was again, in Exodus 14, a strong wind—God's breath—that divided the waters of the Red Sea, delivering the people of Israel from the armies of Egypt; and it was the breath of God on "wet earth," clay, which created man. Only purity, he says, can create new life—"*Ce n'est point l'impur qui fermente, c'est le pur qui est semence de la vie.*" And the water itself, human love itself, is, he says, the need to become pure in the eyes of God:

> *Qu'est-ce que l'eau que le besoin d'être liquide*
> *Et parfaitement clair dans le soleil de Dieu comme une goutte translucide?*

Human desire itself, says Claudel, is the need to be "liquid and perfectly clear in God's sun, like a translucent drop." Claudel then makes a playful reference to the liquidation of oxygen, achieved in 1877 by the chemist Louis Paul Cailletet:

> *Que me parlez-vous de ce bleu de l'air que vous liquéfiez ? Ô que l'âme humaine est un plus précieux elixir !*
> *Si la rosée rutile dans le soleil,*
> *Combien plus l'escarboucle humaine et l'âme substantielle dans le rayon intelligible !*

God liquefies and purifies the soul just as Cailletet liquefied oxygen; and just as the dew sparkles in the sun, his intelligible light makes the human soul shine like a precious stone. Claudel is speaking of both Spirit *and* water; God's light not only illumines human intelligence, but also desire. He says, you fecundate our human water with your baptismal water: "*Vous ensemencez avec l'eau baptismale notre eau humaine.*" This baptismal water penetrates everything that makes up a human being. *"Ainsi, le corps de gloire désire sous le corps de boue, et la nuit / D'être dissoute dans la visibilité !"* The glorified body, he says, desires from within the body made of clay. Claudel is, in fact, making the same distinction between the desires of the spirit and of the flesh that St. Paul makes; but the way Claudel says it puts an emphasis on the

continuity of desire before and after the Resurrection. The glorified body desires "under" the flesh. This is a singular way to affirm the goodness of the world, while at the same time acknowledging the wounds of evil.

In the last section of the poem, Claudel engages in a redemptive rediscovery of his own life that ends with a profound and erotic encounter with the risen Christ. The section begins again, with a prayer of supplication that expresses his desire for God:

> *Mon Dieu, ayez pitié de ces eaux désirantes !*
> *Mon Dieu, vous voyez que je ne suis pas seulement esprit, mais eau ! ayez pitié de ces eaux en moi qui meurent de soif !*
> *Et l'esprit est désirant, mais l'eau est la chose désirée.*

The waters that are "dying of thirst" refers to the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, which plays upon the passage in Genesis where Jacob/Israel meets and falls in love with Rachel, the daughter of Laban. Jesus tells the woman, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water," and then goes on to say, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."[25] In this passage, the water becomes a metaphor for erotic love, which has left this woman unsatisfied five times—she has had five husbands, and is now living with a man who is not her husband. By asking God to have pity on his desiring waters, Claudel is referring to this passage, which is about God's own desire to give life.

The next lines deal with Claudel's own mortality and the sense of the time he will pass under the sun. He speaks of a minute of light, the present hour that he knows will pass:

[25] John 4:10, 13.

O mon Dieu, vous m'avez donné cette minute de lumière à voir,
Comme l'homme jeune pensant dans son jardin au mois d'août qui voit par intervalles tout le ciel et la terre d'un seul coup,
Le monde d'un seul coup tout rempli par un grand coup de foudre doré !

Compared to eternity, his life is over 'in a flash,' and at the same time it is his particular calling to have a complete vision of the heavens and the Earth during that short moment. And at the same time, he says, "*Je ne mourrai pas,*" "I shall not die." His life will end, but he will not die because he believes "like a more pure light."

This time that is given to him is the time necessary for his Redemption, which occurs through the giving of his own life. He consents to God's work in him and through him:

Que je cesse entièrement d'être obscur ! Utilisez-moi !
Exprimez-moi dans votre main paternelle !
Sortez enfin
Tout le soleil qu'il y a en moi et capacité de votre lumière, que je vous voie
Non plus avec les yeux seulement, mais avec tout mon corps et ma substance et la somme de ma quantité resplendissante et sonore !

He wants all his shadows to disappear, and he also wants to be used by God; and in fact, the one thing means the other. The phrase "*Exprimez-moi dans votre main paternelle !*" plays on the double meaning of the word "*exprimer*": like the English word "express," this verb can mean either to verbalize a thought or to wring the water out of something. It further develops the motif of God as a poet, writing with human lives on the pages of time. Claudel asks God to wring all the sun—all the time under the sun—out of him, as well as his "capacity for light," all the goodness of which he is capable, so that he will finally see God. He desires *union* with God: not only to see him with his eyes, but with his body and substance and "the sum of [his] quantity" both in terms of light (*resplendissante*) and sound (*sonore*). In other words, with his entire life, as a finished poem! Death, here, becomes the completion of the poem. The poet asks to offer his

life to God, a "libation in the shadows," like a spring that gives its water to the ocean. This is an image for man's participation in his own redemption.

Now the re-reading of Claudel's own crisis begins. The strophe retraces how he came to the point where he desires only to give his life back to God. Claudel begins with an invocation of God as unconditional love, who knows each man by name before he is born, and he asks God to remember when he was "hidden in the crack of the mountain":

> *Mon Dieu qui connaissez chaque homme avant qu'il ne naisse par son nom,*
> *Souvenez-vous de moi alors que j'étais caché dans la fissure de la montagne,*
> *Là où jaillissent les sources d'eau bouillante et de ma main sur la paroi colossale de marbre blanc !*

What Claudel is describing is most probably a specific memory of the time he spent at Eaux-Chaudes, in the Pyrenees, in 1905; it was at this time that he realized that Rosalie Vetch, his beloved, had definitively left him. The tone for the strophe is set—he is asking God to remember with him, to go back over this particular event in his life, and he is expressing his confidence in God's love for him.

In the next line, he praises erotic desire. The eyes and heart are right to adore the Morning Star, but the human star, the immortal soul "animated by eternal intelligence," is even more desirable:

> *Mon Dieu, si vous avez placé cette rose dans le ciel, doué*
> *De tant de gloire ce globule d'or dans le rayon de la lumière créée,*
> *Combien plus l'homme immortel animé de l'éternelle intelligence !*
> *Ainsi la vigne sous ses grappes traînantes, ainsi l'arbre fruitier dans le jour de sa bénédiction,*
> *Ainsi l'âme immortelle à qui ce corps périssant ne suffit point !*
> *Si le corps exténué désire le vin, si le cœur adorant salue l'étoile retrouvée,*
> *Combien plus à résoudre l'âme désirante ne vaut point l'autre âme humaine ?*

He compares the soul whose "perishing body no longer suffices," to the vine under its heavy clusters of grapes and the fruit tree in summer; the tired body desires wine, the heart rejoices

when it finds the Morning Star, and the desiring soul is quenched by another soul like it. The vine and the fruit tree are images of bodily fertility; the soul, upon whom death weighs, seeks to give life.

But this particular union between man and woman ends in a kind of death:

> *Et moi aussi, je l'ai donc trouvée à la fin, la mort qu'il me fallait ! J'ai connu cette femme. J'ai connu l'amour de la femme.*
> *J'ai possédé l'interdiction. J'ai connu cette source de soif !*

Claudel says that he also found the "death" he needed to find, by knowing this particular woman. In his case, he has possessed what is forbidden—for his union, an adulterous one, was forbidden under law. But what he is saying about this particular relationship is also true, in one sense, for all relationships. No union between man and woman can definitively quench the desire of the immortal soul, for at best that kind of Eros only provides temporary relief. This is what Christ is saying to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well: no human love has satisfied you, because no human love, alone, could ever do so. The love of woman has been, for Paul Claudel, a source of thirst.

In the next passage, Claudel explains that he is not a god, and unlike Christ, his love does not satisfy the deep human hunger. This inability, in another marvelous paradox, becomes the source of his own redemptive suffering. He cannot take his soul and give it to his lover, Rose, like bread:

> *Ô amie, je ne suis pas un dieu,*
> *Et mon âme, je ne puis te la partager et tu ne peux me prendre et me contenir et me posséder.*
> *Et voici que, comme quelqu'un qui se détourne, tu m'as trahi, tu n'es plus nulle part, ô rose !*
> *Rose, je ne verrai plus votre visage en cette vie !*

It is all the more true that Claudel cannot give himself to Rose because they cannot marry; she cannot possess him, in this sense. But the deeper reason for the failure of their love, in Claudel's re-reading, is that they are not gods. Their Eros only goes so far. Rose betrays him because he cannot quench her desire. The failure of his love becomes Claudel's cross, his own death:

> *Et me voici tout seul au bord du torrent, la face contre terre,*
> *Comme un pénitent au pied de la montagne de Dieu, les bras en croix dans le tonnerre de la voix rugissante !*

After the betrayal, and finally alone, Claudel takes the position of a penitent, under the thundering mountain of God like the Hebrews at the foot of Horeb, in the Book of Exodus. But his arms are in the form of a cross because his repentance participates in his own redemption.

Claudel's dying, through Rose's betrayal, becomes a new birth. In this last part of the stanza, the poet describes an experience of great loss and humiliation. His tears are his soul flowing out of him like water, as he sees his own "misery and nothingness" clearly for the first time:

> *Et je suis là comme quelqu'un qui meurt, et qui étouffe et qui a mal au cœur, et toute mon âme hors de moi jaillit comme un grand jet d'eau claire !*
> *Mon Dieu,*
> *Je me vois et je me juge, et je n'ai plus aucun prix pour moi-même.*
> *Vous m'avez donné la vie : je vous la rends ; je préfère que vous repreniez tout.*
> *Je me vois enfin ! et j'en ai la désolation, et la douleur intérieure en moi ouvre tout comme un œil liquide.*
> *Ô mon Dieu, je ne veux plus rien, et je vous rends tout, et rien n'a plus de prix pour moi.*
> *Et je ne vois plus que ma misère, et mon néant, et ma privation, et cela du moins est à moi !*
> *Maintenant jaillissent*
> *Les sources profondes, jaillit mon âme salée, éclate en un grand cri la poche profonde de la pureté séminale !*
> *Maintenant je me suis parfaitement clair, tout*
> *Amèrement clair, et il n'y a plus rien en moi*
> *Qu'une parfaite privation de Vous seul !*

Because of the use of enjambment, after "*Maintenant jaillissent,"* the stanzas themselves sound like sobbing. The intense pain of humiliation and loss allows Claudel to face his own weakness, and he asks God to take back everything he has; all that is left is his own need, his own hunger. The state he is describing resembles, in the language of the mystics, the effect of a dark night of the soul, a kind of spiritual desolation in which God allows a person to experience his absence. That is the effect that the failure of his love has had upon Claudel; he now only possesses "a perfect want of You alone." And at the same time, this death is as paradoxical as the "night more lovely than the dawn" of John of the Cross,[26] in that it heralds birth; Claudel says that it causes the amniotic sac of "seminal purity" to break open, like the waters breaking before a new birth. It is the moment of redemption, a new beginning.

The last stanza returns to the place of the Ode's beginning. Just as the Redemption is a new Creation—new, but still the same—the first stanza can be recognized in the last, but it is nonetheless new. Like the first stanza, the last stanza evokes the sudden coming of the Spirit; but in this "undiscovered country," there is no road, no sea, and no wind. The storm is over, and the eternal sky is clear. Claudel's long spiritual journey opens up to an "unknown place," a place of mystery, which is at the same time familiar. The vocation of the prophet is not to tread old paths, to repeat lines from the catechism. It is, in fact, first and foremost a matter of listening, which is why this stanza contains just about every expression in French that has to do with hearing. For Claudel, as for Benedict of Nursia, the key to human freedom is listening, and another word for listening is "obedience," from *obedire*, "to give ear." Only through a humble listening to God and to one's brothers does human freedom (and creativity) truly flourish, because this is how the

[26] Juan de la Cruz, *La Noche Oscura del Alma,* "Canciones del Alma," 5th stanza: "¡Oh noche que guaiste! / ¡oh noche amable más que el alborada! / ¡oh noche que juntaste / Amado con amada, / amada en el Amado transformada!"

bond of selfishness is broken. The self only gains its true freedom through selfless (and not mindless!) obedience, learning to listen to the voice of wisdom and the needs of others.

The last stanza is an encounter—a kind of theophany. In the calm, the poet hears a trembling leaf that heralds the wind's coming. A cold breeze brushes his face. The Lord is in his presence like a vine, and he sees the coming of his deliverance. He feels that he can make light of every bond, and a mysterious laughter comes into his heart. Claudel quotes Peter's words during the Transfiguration, "Lord, it is good for us to be in this place," and asks to be taken away from the sight of men, to be only a voice on the page, an intelligible word—a "word that was *expressed*." Now, he listens to "the voice of Wisdom that is addressed to every man": "*Écoute, mon enfant, et incline vers moi la tête, et je te donnerai mon âme. /Il y a bien des bruits dans le monde et cependant l'amant au cœur déchiré entend seul au haut de l'arbre le frémissement de la feuille sibylline*." This line echoes the *Schema Israël,* "Listen, Israel," the words of God to Moses that form the foundation of Jewish prayer, as well as Psalm 45:10, "Listen, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear." It is a meditation on what listening is. The person speaking is most fundamentally Christ, who invites the poet to listen and to lean his head against his chest, just as the young apostle, John, reclined with his head on Jesus' chest at the last supper. "I will give you my soul," says Jesus, just as he gave himself as bread on the night before the Passion. He says that the only person who can hear "the shaking of the Sibylline leaf"—the still, small voice of the Spirit—is the lover with a torn heart. Christ himself is such a lover, and so is Claudel. The passage reminds us of the phrase of John Tauler, "God became man so that men could become gods."

Claudel compares the voice of the Spirit, which he now hears, to the mean, which both virtue and beauty observe in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. For Claudel, the

voice of the Spirit *is* the mean, or measure; she is the only voice that is "*ni plus basse ni plus haute,"* and she is the only thing that the "*amant au cœur déchiré"*—Christ, the poet—can hear, just as the lover sees the beloved immediately when he enters a room full of people. This voice is the only one that is "*soumise à la mesure divine,*" which is to say that it is obedient to the divine voice, fully engaged in listening. All that is left in this voice is "holy, free, all-powerful, creative measure." In this Ode, Claudel has finally achieved what he asked for in "The Muses." Like Terpischore, he is now listening to the orchestral jubilation: "*l'esprit ne cesse point d'être porté sur les eaux,*" the Creator Spirit is endlessly carried over the waters, and he can hear her voice. This divine measure, the "ineffable proportion" and the "right number," brings all things into existence, including Claudel and his reader.

For Claudel, the voice of the Spirit makes all things understandable, through love. The line, "*Écoute, mon enfant, et ne me ferme point ton cœur, et accueille,"* both repeats the command to listen and expands it; "close not your heart to me" is a kind of lover's entreaty—as Bernanos once said, "Love is either a free choice, or it's nothing at all"—and "*accueille,"* "welcome," followed by enjambment, acts out love's risk. What love does after it is welcomed is the "invasion of the reasonable voice." This voice is only reasonable because it is the voice of another person, and in this other person is the liberation of the water and the spirit, which resolves every relationship. Rather than being like a schoolmaster's lesson, the voice of the spirit is like spiritual food—the good milk Peter recommends to the readers of his Letter. Claudel says that it is also "*la mesure qui est au-dessus de toute parole,*" the measure that is also compared, by the mystics, to a golden silence. The soul, says Claudel, receives the soul, *"et toutes choses en toi sont devenues claires"*: he has reached the peace and understanding that is only possible through union with God.

At the end of this stanza, which is also, like so many stanzas in the Odes, a kind of contemplative prayer, the Word comes into the poem, and into Claudel's soul. The Word, he says, is like an ageless young woman, standing before the threshold of his house; she is also God's Wisdom, the child that played in the beginning upon the waters:

> *La voici donc au seuil de ma maison, la Parole qui est comme une jeune fille éternelle ! Ouvre la porte ! et la Sagesse de Dieu est devant toi comme une tour de gloire et comme une reine couronnée !*

Open the door! echoes the Song of Songs, and in this passage the Church—for whom the tour and the crowned queen are images—and Christ—the Word—are indistinguishable. That is why the ageless young woman says that she is neither man nor woman. Instead, she is the "love that is beyond every word," which reminds us of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, in which he writes that love "surpasses all knowledge."[27] The last lines record this meeting with Christ and the Church, which is both unmistakably erotic and mysterious. The line, "*Ne me touchez point !*" quotes Christ's mysterious words to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection, the *noli me tangere* that has so often been depicted in art; and unlike Erato, the Risen Christ, who has just revealed himself to Claudel, asks him not to take his hand.

At this point, it might be useful to go back to Claudel's own argument. First, the poet, while firmly anchored in the world, revels in his own freedom. Trapped in Beijing—which represents the all-encompassing world of daily affairs—he "ponders the Sea." From the "infinity and liberation" of water, he moves to spirit, which is "superior to it for penetration"—for understanding—"and for freedom." Then, in a movement parallel to the one that sent him into the arms of Erato, he asks, what is my *own* freedom for? What do *I* mean to say? At this point, he takes "[f]light towards the absolute God." Although Claudel, as poet (and as a man), reveals

[27] Guyard edition 216

what things mean to say, only God knows the answer to the question, "What do *I*, Paul Claudel, mean to say?" In order to find out, he must engage with God. God is, thankfully, present in the world, and the "fluid element, spirit or water, which penetrates all things," ties us invisibly to Him. This engagement with God further reveals Claudel's calling as poet, now as prophet. It is possible for him to see "Eternity in fleeting creation." In the poet's voice, Claudel sees a symbol of "this blessed union" between "spirit and water," life and "the will that imposes itself upon her"—the redemptive union between God and man. The Ode now becomes a prayer of supplication; the poet asks God "to be oneself, to clear out the deadly shadows." God calls up the purifying water, which is none other than the "tears" that come from Claudel's own "contrite heart." Only God can make Claudel who he most profoundly *is*, just as only Christ is capable of giving life without death. The redemption of Claudel's own Eros comes as he meets with Christ as lover. "Everything is finished," and the poet has finally learned "to listen in a profound silence to the Spirit of God, who whispers to that voice of Wisdom, which is addressed to every man." The conflict between poetry and metaphysics is resolved when it is revealed that divine love is the foundation of being.

Chapter 3. *Magnificat*

Third Ode. Magnificat

ARGUMENT

The poet remembers God's benefits and lifts up a canticle of thanksgiving to him. — Because you have delivered me from the Idols. Solemnity and magnificence of real things, which are a spectacle of activity; everything serves. The poet asks for his place among the servants. — Because you have delivered me from death. Horror and execration of a brutifying and homicidal philosophy. Embrace of the poetic duty, which is to find God in all things and to render them assimilable to Love. — Pause. Weariness of created things. Pure and simple submission to the divine will and ordination. — Be blessed, my God, for delivering me from myself, and for placing yourself in my arms in the figure of this little newborn child. The poet, carrying God, enters into the Promised Land.

My soul magnifies the Lord.

O, the long, bitter streets of the past and that time I was alone, and one!

Walking in Paris, the long street that goes down toward Notre Dame!

Then, like the young athlete heading towards the Oval surrounded by the attentive group of his friends and of his trainers,

And this one speaks in his ear, and as he lets his arm fall, another fastens the band tight around his tendons,

So I walked among the hastening feet of my gods!

Fewer murmurs in the forest on St. John's Day in summer,

Less birdsong in Damascus when the sigh of the desert and the evening bustle of high plane trees in the clear air

Join the telling of the waters tumbling down from the mountains,

Than words in this young heart overflowing with desires!

O my God, a young man and the son of woman is more pleasing to you than a young bull!

And I was before you like a wrestler who yields,

Not that he believes himself weak, but because the other man is stronger.

You have called me by my name

Like someone who knows it, you have chosen me among all those of my age.

O my God, you know how full of affection the heart of young people is, and how little it cares for its stain and its vanity!

And now, all of a sudden, you are someone!

You struck down Moses with your power, but to my heart, you are as a being without sin.

O, I truly am the son of woman! For now reason, and the teachers' lessons, and absurdity, none of that holds out at all

Against the violence of my heart and against the outstretched hands of this little child!

O, tears! O, faltering heart! O, bursting mine of tears!

Come, all you faithful, and let us adore the newborn child.

Don't believe that I am your enemy! I don't understand at all, and I can't see at all, and I don't know at all where you are. But I turn this face covered with tears to you.

Who would not love the one who loves you? My spirit has exulted in my Savior. Come, all you faithful, and adore this little child who is born to us.

— And now I am no longer a newcomer, but a man in the middle of his life who, knowing,

Stops, and stands upright in great force and in patience, and looks on all sides.

And from this spirit and noise that you've put in me,

Behold, how I've made up many words and stories, and people together in my heart with their different voices.

And now, the long debate suspended,

Behold, how I hear myself begin to sing another one to you all alone

With a myriad voice like the violin the bow takes on two strings.

Since here I have no other sojourn but this patch of sand and the never interrupted view of the seven crystal spheres, one on top of the other,

You are here with me, and I set off leisurely making a lovely canticle for you alone, like a shepherd on Mount Carmel who is watching a little cloud.

In this December month and in the dog days of cold, though every embrace is tightened and cut short, and in this very same brilliant night,

The spirit of joy enters no less directly into my body

Than when the word was spoken to John in the desert under the pontificate of Caiaphas and of Anne, Herod

Being tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip, his brother, of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias of Abilene.

My God, who speak to us with the very words we address to you,

You do not scorn my voice in this day any more than a single one of your children or even your servant Mary,

When in the excess of her heart she cried out to you because you had looked upon her humility!

O mother of my God! O woman among women!

You have reached me after this long journey! And behold, all generations in me and up to me have named you blessed!

Thus, as soon as you enter, Elizabeth lends her ear,

And behold, already the sixth month of the woman who was called barren.

O, how heavy is my heart with praise, and how it pains to lift itself up to You,

Like the ponderous, golden censer stuffed with incense and with embers,

Which momentarily flying at the end of its out-flung chain,

Comes back down, leaving in its place

A big cloud in the sun's ray of thick smoke!

May noise become voice and may the voice in me become word!

Amid the whole stammering universe, let me prepare my heart like someone who knows what he has to say,

Because this profound exultation of the Creature is not in vain, nor this secret that the celestial Myriads guard in an exact vigil;

May my word be equivalent to their silence!

Neither the goodness of things, nor the shudder of the hollow reeds, when from the old tumulus between the Caspian and the Aral,

The Wise Man witnessed a great preparation in the stars.

But may I find only the right word, may I breathe only

This word from my heart, having found it, and may I die then, having said it, and may I bow then

My head onto my chest, having said it, like the old priest who dies consecrating!

Be blessed, my God, for delivering me from the idols,

And who have made it so that I adore You alone, and not Isis and Osiris,

Or Justice, or Progress, or Truth, or Divinity, or Humanity, or the Laws of Nature, or Art, or Beauty,

And who haven't allowed all these things that aren't to exist, or the Emptiness left by your absence.

Like the savage who builds himself a dugout and, from the leftover plank, fashions Apollo,

Thus all these speakers of speech, from their leftover adjectives, have made themselves monsters without substance,

Hollower than Moloch, eaters of little children, crueler and more hideous than Moloch.

They have a sound and no voice, a name and there is no person,

And the foul spirit is there, that fills the desert places and all the vacant things.

Lord, you have delivered me from books and from Ideas, from Idols and from their priests,

And you haven't allowed Israel to serve under the yoke of the Effeminates.

I know that you are not the god of the dead, but of the living.

I will not honor dolls and phantoms, nor Diana, nor Duty, nor Liberty and the bull Hapis.

And your "geniuses," and your "heroes," your great men and your over-men, the same horror for all these men without faces.

For I am not free among the dead,

And I exist amidst the things that are, and I compel them to have me indispensably.

And I don't want to be superior to anything, but a *just* man,

Just as you are perfect, just and living amidst the other real spirits.

What do I care for your fables! Only let me go to the window and open the night and explode before my eyes in a simultaneous number

What cannot be counted, like so many zeros after the I-coefficient of my own necessity!

It's true! You have given us the Great Night after the day and the reality of the nocturnal sky.

Just as I am there, it is there with the billions of its presence,

And it gives us a signature on the photographic paper with its 6,000 Pleiades,

Like the criminal with the trace of his ink-covered thumb on the case file.

And the observer seeks and finds the pivots and rubies, Hercules or Alcyone, and the constellations

Like a morse on a pontiff's shoulder and great ornaments thick with stones of many colors.

And here and there on the bounds of the world where the work of creation is being finished, the nebulae,

As, when the sea violently beaten and tossed

Calms down, here again the foam and great slabs of cloudy salt bob up all around.

So the Christian feels the All Hallows of all his living brothers pulsing in the sky of faith.

Lord, you haven't enlisted lead or stone or rotten wood in your service,

And no man will consolidate himself in the form of the one who said: *Non serviam!*

It's not death that overcomes life, but life that destroys death, and the one cannot hold against the other!

You have thrown down the idols,

You have put down all the mighty from their seat, and as servants you have desired the fire's very flame!

As in a port, when the ice suddenly breaks up, one sees the dark crowd of workers cover the quays and bustle about all along the boats,

So are the teeming stars to my eyes, and the immense, active sky!

I've been captured and can't escape, like a number imprisoned by the sum total.

It's time! For the task put aside for me, only eternity can suffice.

And I know that I am in charge, and I believe in my master as he believes in me.

I have faith in your word and I don't need paper.

That's why let's break the bonds of dreams, and trample the idols underfoot, and kiss the cross with the cross.

For the image of death produces death, and the imitation of life

Life, and the vision of God begets eternal life.

Be blessed, my God, for delivering me from death!

So, face veiled, with loud cries,

Sang Mary, Moses' sister,

On the other shore of the sea that had swallowed Pharaoh,

Because behold the sea behind us!

Because you have gathered your child Israel to you, having remembered your mercy,

And giving him your hand, you have raised this humbled man to yourself, like someone coming out of the pit.

Behind us, the troubled sea with its crashing waters,

But your people cross over with dry feet by the shortest path, behind Moses and Aaron.

The sea behind us, and before us the desert of God and the mountains, horrible in lightning,

And the mountain, in the lightning that shows it and absorbs it turn by turn, looks as though it were skipping like a ram,

Like a colt struggling under the weight of a heavy man!

Behind us, the sea has swallowed the Persecutor, and the horse with the armed man has descended like a metal ingot into the deep!

Just as the Mary of old, and just as, in the little garden of Hebron,

The other Mary trembled within herself when she saw the eyes of her cousin who held out her hands

And that the waiting of Israel had understood that she was the one!

And me, as you took Joseph out of the cistern and Jeremiah from the low pit,

This is the way you've saved me from death, and I cry out in turn,

Because he has done great things for me, and Holy is his name!

You've put the horror of death in my heart, my soul has no tolerance for death!

Sages, epicureans, masters of Hell's novitiate, practitioners of the Introduction to Non-being,

Brahmins, bonzes[1], philosophers, your counsels, O Egypt! The counsels of all of you,

Your methods and your demonstrations and your discipline,

Nothing reconciles me, I am alive in your abominable night, I lift my hands in despair, I lift my hands in the trance and transport of Hope, deaf and wild!

Whoever no longer believes in God, no longer believes in Being, and whoever hates Being, hates his own existence.

[1] Japanese or Chinese Buddhist monks.

Lord, I've found you.

Whoever finds you no longer has tolerance for death,

And he questions all things with you and this intolerance of the flame that you've put in him!

Lord, you didn't set me apart like a flower in a greenhouse,

Like the black monk under hood and cowl who flowers every morning all in gold for the Mass at the rising sun,

But you planted me in the thickest part of the soil

Like the dry and tenacious crabgrass, invincible, that grows through the ancient loess and the layers of sand stacked one upon the other.

Lord, you have put a germ in me not of death, but of light;

Be patient with me, because I'm not one of your saints

Who grinds down the bitter and hard bark with penance,

Eaten away by works like an onion by its roots[2];

—So weak, everyone believes it has gone out! But here it is, operating again, and it never stops doing its work and chemistry with great patience and time.

For it's not just to the end of this body I must come, but to this raw world altogether, supplying

What's needed to understand and to dissolve it and to assimilate it

In you and no longer to see anything

Deviate your light in me!

For there are people who see and who hear with their eyes and with their ears,

But only with the spirit do I watch and do I listen.

[2] Probably meant "shoots."

I will see with this dark light!

But how do I regard each thing I see, compared with the eye that makes it visible to me,

And the life I receive, if I don't give it, and everything to which I am foreign,

And everything that is something other than you, yourself,

And this death next to your Life, that we call my life!

I am weary of vanity! You see, I am subject to vanity, not willing it!

Why do I consider your works without pleasure?

Don't speak to me of the rose! No fruit has any taste for me.

What is this death you've taken from me next to the truth of your presence

And this indestructible non-being that is me,

With which I must sustain you?

O, length of time! I can't take it anymore, and I'm like someone who is pressing his hand against the wall.

Day follows day, but behold, the day the sun stops.

Behold, the rigor of winter, farewell, O lovely summer, the trance and the seizure of immobility.

I prefer the absolute. Don't give me back to myself.

Behold, the inescapable cold, behold, God alone!

In you I am before death! —And behold, the year is already starting over.

In the past, I was with my soul as with a great forest

That you still hear as soon as you cease to speak, a people with even more murmuring voices than were ever in History and the Novel,

(And sometimes it's morning, or it's Sunday and one hears a bell in the world of men.)

But now the alternating winds have gone silent and the leaves themselves fall around me in thick lumps.

And I try to speak to my soul: *O my soul, all the countries we've seen,*

And all the people, and the seas crossed so many times!

And she is like someone who knows and prefers not to answer.

And about all the enemies of Christ around us: *Take up your sword, O woman of arms!*

But I'm like a child teasing the hideous little scorpion with a piece of straw, and it doesn't even attract her attention.

"Peace! Rejoice!

And say: using something other than words, my soul magnifies the Lord!

She asks to stop being a limit; she refuses to be an obstacle to his holy will.

It must be; it is no longer summer! And there's no more green, nor any passing thing, but God alone.

And look, and see the country that has been laid bare; and the land made naked everywhere, like an old man who has done no evil!

Behold the solemn earth in the image of death about to receive ordination for another year's tilling,

Like the priest face down between his two assistants, like a deacon about to receive full orders,

And on the ground the snow falls down like absolution."

And I know, and I remember,

And I see that forest again, the day after Christmas, before the sun was high,

All was white, like a priest dressed in white and one only sees his hands the color of dawn,

(The entire wood as though imprisoned in a thick, dark glass),

White from the trunk all the way up to the thinnest twigs and the very color

Of dead leaves' russet and the almond green of pines,

(The air during the long hours of peace and night decanting like a tranquil wine),

And the long spider's thread loaded with down bears witness to the praying person's recollection.

"*Whoever takes part in God's will must take part in his silence.*

Be wholly with me. Let us be quiet before all eyes!

Whoever gives life must accept death."

Be blessed, my God, for delivering me from myself,

And for making sure that I don't invest my possessions in myself and in the narrow dungeon where Teresa saw the damned walled up,

But in your will alone,

And not in anything I possess, but in your will alone.

Blessed not the one who is free, but he whom you determine like an arrow in the quiver!

My God, who in the beginning of everything and of yourself have put fatherhood,

Be blessed for giving me this child

And laying up in me what I needed to give the life you gave me back to you,

And behold, I am her father with You.

I'm not the one who begets, I'm not the one who is begotten.

Be blessed because you did not abandon me to myself,

But because you have accepted me as a useful thing, which is good for the end you offer yourself.

Behold, you're no longer afraid of me, as of the proud and the rich you have turned away empty.

You've put your might in me, the might of your humility, the way you completely disappear behind your works,

In the day of his generations when man remembers that he is earth, and behold, I've become with you a principle and a beginning.

As you needed Mary, and Mary, the line of all her ancestors,

Before her soul could magnify you and you could receive greatness from her in the eyes of men,

So you've needed me in turn, so you wanted, O my master,

To receive life from me as from the hands of the priest who consecrates a host, and to place yourself in this real image, in my arms!

Be blessed because I have not remained unique,

And because out of me has come existence, and the quickening of my immortal child, and because from me in turn, in this image real forever, a soul sealed to a body,

You have received shape and dimension.

Behold, I'm not holding a rock in my arms, but this small human being, crying and waving its arms and legs.

Behold, I'm met by ignorance and the generations of nature and ordered to an end I do not know.

So you're the one, newcomer, and I finally get to see you.

You're the one, my soul, and I finally get to see your face,

Like a mirror that was just taken away from God, still bare of any other image.

From myself something foreign is born,

From this body a soul is born, and from this outer and visible man

A certain something, secret and feminine, with a strange likeness.

O, my daughter! O, little child, likeness of my essential soul, and who must become like it again

When desire will purge desire!

Be blessed, my God, because in my place, a child is born without pride,

(Thus in the book, instead of the stinky and tough poet,

The virginal soul, defenseless and bodiless, all gift and welcome),

Something new is born of me, with a strange likeness!

To me and to the profound tuft of all my ancestors before me a new being begins.

We were required according to the order of our generations

So that to this especial will of God, blood and flesh would be prepared.

Who are you, newcomer, stranger? And what will you do with these things that belong to us?

A certain color of our eyes, a certain position of our heart.

O child, born on foreign soil! O little heart of rose! O little bundle, fresher than a heavy bouquet of white lilacs!

Two old people are waiting for you in the old family house cracked through and through, mended with pieces of iron and hooks.

Three bells in the same bell-tower that rang out for your father are waiting for your baptism, like angels and little girls of fourteen,

At ten o'clock when the garden is fragrant and all the birds sing in French!

Waiting for you is the fat planet above the bell-tower, in the starry sky like a *Paternoster* among all the little *Aves*,

When the day fades and we can begin to count two dim stars above the church, like the virgins Patience and Euodia!

Now what has changed between all men and me is that I am the father of one of them.

The man who has given life doesn't hate it, and he won't say that he doesn't understand.

Just as no man comes from himself, no man was made for himself.

Flesh creates flesh, and man the child that wasn't made for him, and spirit

The word addressed to other spirits.

As a wet nurse is burdened by her overflowing milk, so the poet by the word in him that was meant for others.

O gods of the ancients whose empty eyes did not reflect the little doll! Loxias Apollo, whose knees were kissed in vain!

O Golden Head at the road crossing, behold, you have something to pour out to the suppliant other than your vain blood and the oath on the Celtic rock!

Blood unites with blood; spirit weds spirit,

And the savage idea, written thought; and pagan passion, rational and ordered will.

Whoever believes in God, receives God's letters of credence. Whoever has the Son, has the Father with him. Embrace the living text and your invincible God in this breathing document!

Take this fruit that belongs to you and this word meant for you alone.

Blessed is he who carries the life of others in him and not their death, like a fruit that ripens in the time and place, and your thought creating in him!

He is like a father who divides his substance between his children,

And like a plundered tree on which no fruit is spared, and through which magnificence is to God who fills those-who-hunger with good things!

Be blessed, my God, for leading me into the land of my afternoon,

As You gave the Wise Men passage through the tyrants' snare, and as You led Israel into the desert,

And as after the long and harsh climb upward a man, having found the summit, makes his way down the other slope.

Moses died on the mountaintop, but Joshua entered the promised land with all his people.

After the long climb upward, after the long legs of the journey in the snow and at cloud level,

He is like a man who begins the downward climb, guiding his horse with his right hand on the bridle.

And his women are with him behind on the horses and the donkeys, and the children in the packsaddles, and fighting-gear and equipment for making camp, and the Tables of the Law behind them,

And he hears, behind him in the fog, the sound of an entire people, walking.

And behold, he sees the rising sun just above his knee, like a pink stain on the cotton,

And the mist thins out and all of a sudden

The whole Promised Land appears to him in a brilliant light like a new maiden,

Green and streaming with waters, like a woman stepping out of her bath!

And here and there they see, from the bottom of the chasm in the humid air, clouds lazily rising up, wide and white,

Like islands casting off, like giants laden with wineskins!

For him there is neither surprise nor curiosity on his face, and he doesn't even look at Canaan, but at the first step to be taken on the downward climb.

For his business is not to enter into Canaan, but to carry out Your will.

That's why, followed by all his people on the move, he emerges in the rising sun!

He didn't need to see You on Sinai, there's no doubt or hesitation in his heart,

And all the things that aren't in Your commandment might as well be null to him.

There's no beauty for him in idols, no interest in Satan, no existence in what isn't.

With the same humility with which he stopped the sun,

With the same modesty with which he measured who was delivered to him

(Nine and a half tribes beyond the Jordan and two and a half tribes before it),

This earth of Your sensible promise,

Let me invade Your intelligible sojourn at this post-meridian hour!

For what are appropriations and use and property and development

Next to the intelligence of the poet, who makes many things one with himself,

Since to comprehend is to make again

The very thing you have seized with yourself.

Stay with me, Lord, for night is falling, and don't abandon me!

Don't lose me with the Voltaires, and the Renans, and the Michelets, and the Hugos, and all the other infamous people!

Their soul is with the dead dogs, their books are in the dung heap.

They're dead, and even after death their name is a poison and a rotten thing.

Because you have scattered the proud and they cannot be together,

Nor comprehend, but only destroy and dissipate, and put things together.

Let me see and hear all things with the word

And hail each thing by its very name with the word that made it.

You see the earth, your innocent creature. Deliver her from the yoke of the infidel and the wanton and the Amorite! For it was for You and not for him that she was made.

Deliver her by my mouth of the praise that she owes You, and like the pagan soul that thirsts for baptism, may she receive authority and the Gospel everywhere!

Just as the waters that rise up from solitude pour down in a roll of thunder on the drenched fields,

And just as, when the birds' crying flight announces the coming season,

The laborer on all sides rushes to clean the ditches and the arroyo, to build up the dams, to open up the fields clod by clod with the plowshare and the spade,

And likewise, just as I have received nourishment from the earth, may she receive mine in turn as a mother from her son,

And may the arid region deeply drink the blessing flowing out from all the openings of its mouth like crimson water,

Like a low meadow that drinks with all its gates open, like the oasis and the huerta by the roots of its wheat, and like the woman Egypt on the double flank of her Nile!

Blessing on the earth! Blessing of water on the waters! Blessing on the cultivated lands! Blessing on the animals, each according to the distinction of its kind!

Blessing on all men! Increase and blessing on the work of good men! Increase and blessing on the work of bad men!

This isn't the Invitatory for Matins, nor the *Laudate* in the sun's ascension and the canticle of the Children in the furnace!

But this is the hour when man stops and considers what he himself has made, and his work together with the day,

And all the people in him come together for the *Magnificat* at the Vesper hour when the sun takes the earth's measure,

Before night begins and the rain, before the long night rain begins on the sown earth!

And behold, I am like a priest covered with the ample cloak of gold who stands upright before the burning altar and you can only see his face and his hands the color of man,

And he looks face to face with tranquility, in the force and the fullness of his heart,

At His God in the monstrance, knowing perfectly well that you are there under the accidents of unleavened bread.

And in a little while he's going to take You in his arms, like Mary took You in her arms,

And mingled with this group in the choir that officiates in the sun and smoke,

Show you to the dark generation that is coming,

The light for the revelation of the nations and the salvation of Your people, Israel,

According to what You swore one time to David, having remembered Your mercy,

And according to the word You gave to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever and ever. Amen!

Tianjin, 1907.

Commentary on *Magnificat*

Claudel's first and second Odes, "*Les Muses*," and "*L'Esprit et l'eau*," form a neat pair: the first Ode asks a question, which the second Ode answers; the first Ode sings of Creation, the second of Redemption; the first Ode presents a crisis, the second, a peaceful resolution. What place is left for a third Ode? Written just after the second (1906-1907) and even more quickly, the third Ode is a song of praise that bears the same title as Mary's Canticle in the Gospel of St. Luke, the *Magnificat*. A recurring theme in the Odes is the movement of Mary's soul as the paradigm of spiritual flourishing. In "*Les Muses*," Claudel makes a parallel between Mary's loving reply to Gabriel, her *fiat* (let it be done to me) that echoes the *Fiat lux* (Let there be light) of Genesis, and the work of a poet, who lovingly "repeats" God's work. And the loving struggle with God that makes up "*L'Esprit et l'eau*" ends with an erotic theophany. Like Mary, now that Claudel has known God, his work as a poet can begin in earnest, and the third Ode, "*Magnificat*" heralds the conception of the Christ child in his own heart, as he begins to sing the "Word" that is the equivalent of nature's eloquent silence.

In this Ode, the Marian theme, relatively minor in the first two Odes, now breaks out and becomes dominant. The Ode's first movement, in which the poet "*se souvient des bienfaits de Dieu et elève vers lui un cantique de reconnaissance,*" places the poem in the heritage of not one, but two Marys: the Mother of Christ, in the Gospel of St. Luke, and Miriam, the sister of Moses, in the Book of Exodus. Mary, in the first trimester of pregnancy, makes the arduous journey to visit her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, in Hebron; and when she arrives, John the Baptist leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb, and both mothers exult in the child Mary carries. The Ode opens with the first verse of her canticle, which announces the tenor of the poem: "*Mon âme*

magnifie le Seigneur." Claudel's French closely mirrors the Vulgate: "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*."[3] But like Mary's canticle, the Ode also echoes the song of Miriam, who leads the Hebrews in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea, when the waters part before Moses and his people and then violently crash over the pursuing Egyptian host. Like Myriam and Mary, Claudel remembers, "*se souvient,*"-- he makes God's past blessings "come under" (from the Latin *subvenire*) his spirit and lifts up a song of thanksgiving.

After a pause, the first strophe opens with the lightness of Pindar, as Claudel narrates the moment of his encounter with God, giving thanks for the young man that he once was. He is young again, walking swiftly down the "long road" that leads to Notre Dame Cathedral, the evening of Christmas. The next lines echo the Olympian Odes. Claudel, a student, walks "*comme le jeune athlète,*" and his own gods—his desires—fuss over him like a group of friends and trainers. His young heart is, indeed, *"comblé de désirs,*" and these desires make more noise than the forest at St. John's Day (June 24), which is the far side of the year; or in Claudel's memories of a trip to Damascus, when birds sang over the rumbling of waters, "*le soupir du desert et l'agitation au soir des hauts platanes*." There is no shame or embarrassment in these lines; God takes more pleasure, he says, in the strength and beauty of a young man than in a young bull. He repeats the image from the second Ode of the meeting with God that is like a wrestling match, like Jacob under the Jordan. These two sporting images, the Olympic runner and the wrestler, convey the jubilation and beauty of Claudel's encounter with God. Life, and prayer, has now gained something of the joy of the game day.

[3] The Ode borrows in particular from the Gospel, the Psalms, and the passages in Isaiah and Exodus that are read during the forty days of Advent, the darkest time of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, when the Church marks the long waiting of Israel and the forty weeks that Mary carried the Christ child.

Now Claudel remembers his decisive encounter with God. What strikes him the most about this meeting is God's eternal youth and innocence. During Christmas Vespers in the Cathedral, Claudel suddenly sees God as a little child. The next part of this first stanza is full of strong contrasts and paradoxes: God has "*foudroyé Moïse de [sa] puissance"*—a reference to the hopping and shaking mountain of Exodus and the Ten Commandments—but to Claudel, he is "*ainsi qu'un être sans péché."* The "*violence*" of his heart, his intense desire for God, joins with the outstretched hands of the Christ child to defeat all the resistance he could have mustered to faith. God has not come to take away all the glorious desires of youth; he has come to fulfill them. What the heart wants is this innocent child. Claudel bursts into tears, and into a Christmas hymn: "*Venez, fidèles"*—"O come, all you faithful." In the great cathedral, he is overcome by the simple and unexplainable love of the newborn child, and in a phrase similar to the second line of the *Magnificat*, he says, "*Mon esprit a exulté dans mon Sauveur,"* because Mary's joy has become his own.

At this time, Claudel pauses to look at himself as he is now, in the middle of his life; he has now entered not just physical, but also spiritual maturity. This poem marks a new beginning in his life, and, accordingly, it is a new kind of writing for Claudel, at least: a song of praise that is for God alone. This is the portrait he paints of himself: a man in the middle of his life who *knows*, *"qui s'arrête et qui se tient debout en grande force et patience et qui regarde de tous côtés*." He feels both his own strength and the patience he has developed through many trials, and he stops to look around him, in order to take stock of his life. He speaks of his work as a poet and playwright with as much simplicity as possible, the many words he has written and stories he has invented, and the "*personnes ensemble dans mon cœur avec leurs voix différentes."* This current work marks a break in that *"long débat,"* which he has momentarily paused. This poem

comes out almost unbidden, and, in an echo of the First Ode, its *"voix plurielle"* is "*comme le violon que l'archet prend sur la double corde,"* the two strings being his own spirit in harmony with the Holy Spirit. On a sandy beach with the stars above—an image of the fragile, present moment, held in eternity—he announces that he will leisurely, freely, begin "*pour vous seul un beau cantique."* More than any of the other Odes, this one has been written for God alone: it is a love poem, meant for the Christ child, that you and I have chanced to read.

The matter of this poem is, as usual, Claudel's own life; and the next lines emphasize the concrete, embodied reality of Claudel's encounter with God. He is conscious that his own life—the life of any human being, in fact—is also a part of sacred history. God writes with our lives, and everything between the water of Genesis and the fire of Revelation is part of His story. Claudel is writing this poem during another Christmas night, and its time and place matter, just as it mattered that the events narrated in the Gospels took place in a specific time and country:

> *En ce mois de décembre et dans cette canicule de froid, alors que toute étreinte est resserrée et raccourcie, et cette nuit même toute brillante,*
> *L'esprit de joie ne m'entre pas moins droite au corps*
> *Que lorsque parole fut adressée à Jean dans le désert sous le pontificat de Caïphe et d'Anne, Hérode*
> *Étant tétrarque de Galilée, et Philippe son frère de l'Iturée et de la region Trachonitide, et Lysanias d'Abilène.*

Claudel quotes the Gospel of Luke, which begins with the secular and religious authorities who were in power at the birth of Christ, to emphasize that his own experience is as much event, as much a part of sacred history as the Incarnation itself. The joy of the Spirit that enters into Claudel on this night, inspiring the poem, is the same as the Holy Spirit that spoke to John the Baptist in the desert, who cried out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Claudel compares himself, as a prophet, to John the Baptist. He also announces the coming of Christ here and now.

Claudel's canticle, since it is addressed only to God, becomes a way for God himself to speak. Claudel says, *"Mon Dieu, qui nous parlez avec les paroles mêmes que nous vous adressons,"* because God speaks to us with the words that we use to pray to him. The Psalms are the greatest examples of this; they are at the same time prayers that were written to God and a gift from God that console and instruct the people who pray them. Claudel's own voice is no different: *"Vous ne méprisez pas plus ma voix en ce jour que celle d'aucun de vos enfants ou de Marie même votre servante, / Quand dans l'excès de son cœur elle s'écria vers vous parce que vous avez consideré son humilité !"* In the Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke, Mary's heart overflows into a cry of praise, and like the Psalms, her canticle becomes God's own word. And just as God "looked upon" Mary's humility—from the word *humus,* for soil—he looks upon Claudel's. Humility is the state of a heart that is like overturned soil, ready to be planted. Claudel imagines that, like Elizabeth, he is receiving Mary after a long journey, across time rather than space:

> *O mère de mon Dieu ! O femme entre toutes les femmes !*
> *Vous êtes donc arrivée après ce long voyage jusqu'à moi ! et voici que toutes les générations en moi jusqu'à moi vous ont nommée bienheureuse !*

Like Elizabeth, this visitation inspires Claudel with praise. He describes his heart as "heavy" with glowing incense; the praise weighs so much that it must lift itself up "arduously," like the censer that flies out and comes back down in an instant, leaving only "a great cloud in the sun's rays of thick smoke." These few lines that he has written must seem thin compared with the fullness of his heart.

The next few lines are an *ars poetica*. Claudel's desire, as a poet, is to say the words that are stammered by the cosmos, to speak the words that are meant by the silent universe. Claudel

calls up the world's noise his own heart, and he prays that it may become a human voice, and that the human voice may form a word. The poet asks:

> *Parmi tout l'univers qui bégaie, laissez-moi preparer mon cœur comme quelqu'un qui sait ce qu'il a à dire,*
> *Parce que cette profonde exultation de la Créature n'est pas vaine, ni ce secret que gardent les Myriades célestes en une exacte vigile ;*
> *Que ma parole soit équivalente à leur silence !*

The universe stammers, but the poet must know what he has to say because all the stammering of creation has meaning. There is, on the one hand, the "profound exultation of the Creature"—Mary's joy, which is paralleled by all human joy; and on the other, the "secret" guarded by the "celestial Myriads"—the hidden meaning kept by the stars and the angels. A few lines down, Claudel speaks of "the goodness of things," and "the shudder of the hollow reeds" when the Wise Man witnessed "a great preparation in the stars." Neither one nor the other is mere noise. What he is saying is that both the profound joy and desire in the human heart and the movements of the cosmos around him have a hidden meaning; he asks that his word translate what is said in their silence. In fact, this is the very substance of his life on earth: to find this "right word," and, "having found it," breathe it out and die, "like the old priest who dies consecrating." This is his vocation as a poet: like a priest who dies consecrating, he would like to die saying these words.

Now, Claudel thanks God, specifically, for delivering him from the Idols. In the same way that Mary, after "My soul magnifies the Lord/my spirit rejoices in God my savior," goes on to list what the Lord has done for her, Claudel begins a list, and what comes first is deliverance from idols: "*Soyez béni, mon Dieu, qui m'avez délivré des idoles*." The unseeing idol that nevertheless devours is one of the major Biblical themes in the *Odes*. An idol is something, other than God, in whom you put your trust, and you sacrifice other things to it. Claudel gives a list of idols that contains a few surprising items. It includes not just "Isis et Osiris," but also "Justice,"

"Progress," "Truth, "Divinity," "Humanity," "Laws of Nature," "Art," and "Beauty." After Isis and Osiris (whose myth was nonetheless a popular subject in Modernist poetry) the idols listed are decidedly modern. "Progress" seems rather obvious—technological progress is an unseeing god to which men will eventually sacrifice the basic, relational fabric of society. "Truth," should raise some eyebrows, given that it is considered, following John 4:16 ("I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,"), to be another name for God himself. But truth, when it is seen as a cold idea and not as a loving Person, quickly becomes an unmerciful god that demands unholy sacrifices—as can "Divinity," and even "Art" and "Beauty." All these ideals are rightly attractive, but they can quickly become goals in and of themselves, more important, for example, than the livelihood or even lives of other people, when they become detached from their place in the beautiful dialogue between God and man.

The modern idols are indeed ideals—values—rather than old gods or fallen angels. The passages about idolatry echo Isaiah 40.[4] Isaiah says that rich men hire craftsmen to make idols from gold or silver, and poor men have gods made out of trees.[5] Claudel compares a man making Apollo with an extra board for his canoe and the "*monstres sans substance*" that are made by "*tous ces parleurs de surplus de leurs adjectifs*." In Europe in 1907, and today, idols are made with empty words instead of boards. But these idols/ideas, although they are dematerialized, nonetheless demand very real sacrifices; they are "*mangeurs de petits enfants, plus cruels et plus hideux que Moloch*." Justice, for instance, so quickly becomes about getting what is mine; but even beyond that, the very idea of justice, as beautiful as it might be, becomes an idol as soon as it appears more important than the very people whose rights it is meant to protect.

[4] This is the prophetic chapter that is read in the Church during the Advent season, in preparation for Christmas.
[5] Isaiah 40: 19-20.

Claudel is describing a post-relational world, in which ideas describe something other than the order that comes from the loving relationship that should exist between God and man and between man and his neighbor—and all his fellow creatures are his neighbor. In this world where relationship and meaning are no longer at the center of understanding, the very words themselves become idols. Claudel says of these words: "*Ils ont un son et point de voix, un nom et il n'y a point de personne, / Et l'esprit immonde est là, qui remplit les lieux déserts et les choses vacantes*." Each of these words—Justice, Progress, Truth, Divinity, Humanity, etc.—is effectively emptied of its substance when it is detached from a relationship between persons or fellow creatures. There is a kind of rationality about them, but they are detached from reality, from what things "mean to say." There can now be sound without a voice and a name without a person. And the foul spirit who comes and inhabits the heart devoid of love takes up residence in these ideals.

To these counterfeit gods correspond counterfeit saints: geniuses, heroes, great men and, in the only place where Claudel seems to directly refer to Nietzsche, *übermenschen*. He finds them as horrible as "*les fantômes et les poupées*," the bloodthirsty, unseeing, impersonal idea-gods; he says that these superior people are also "*défigurés*—which we could even translate as "faceless." Claudel then quotes something Jesus said that is reported in the Gospels, that God is, as He said to Moses in Exodus (3:6), "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," and "not the God of the dead, but of the living."[6] Jesus is quoting this event from Exodus to defend the Resurrection of the body; when God says that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He is not saying that He is a God of static tradition and faceless authority. Rather, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continue to live in God—"Love is strong as death." The same God who desires mercy, not

[6] Matthew (22:32), Marc (12:26-27), and Luke (20:37-38), memory.

sacrifices, identifies Himself by his relationship with real people and invites those in the present to enter into a relationship with Him that will extend beyond death. When Claudel then says that he is not "*libre entre les morts*," what he is saying is that he is not free among all the things that will fade and die forever, because they came from nothing and will return to nothing. He exists "*parmi les choses qui sont et je les contrains à m'avoir indispensable*"—his freedom means that he is indispensable to everything else that exists. Because of his ability to choose, all the other things need him; they receive life without death from his openness to God.

Instead of being a superior being, Claudel says, he wants to be a *just* man. Claudel doesn't want to be god-like, in the sense of human excellence; he wants justice. This echoes the Magnificat: "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." In French, "*juste*," "just," is the same adjective you would use to describe a "well-tuned" instrument or the "right" word. This is the first reference in this long passage to the story of Abraham, whose faith in God's promise was counted as "justice."[7] Claudel uses the word three times, like the three men who came to visit Abraham:

> *Et je désire de n'être supérieur à rien, mais un homme juste,*
> *Juste comme vous êtes parfait, juste et vivant parmi les autres esprits réels.*

With "*n'être supérieur à rien*," Claudel makes a play on words—"*être supérieur*" also means "a higher power." "*Juste comme vous êtes parfait*," echoes Jesus' words, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Claudel, by changing perfect to just, emphasizes the analogy between justice, or human perfection, and God's own perfection. Justice means being well-adjusted to God's will, rather than attempting to usurp God's power. While the hero/great man/genius/*übermensch* is disfigured by his own excellence and takes his victory from other

[7] Gen. 15:6.

creatures, from nature or from the poor, the just man corresponds to God. He is a life-giving instrument, a "*vivant*," a metaphor from the Gospels that can also be taken literally, alive among all the other living things, as the life he receives brings life in abundance to his neighbors, who are all the fellow creatures.

Bringing down the idols, for Claudel, is not a disenchantment of the world; instead, he has discovered, in the intelligible beauty of the natural world, a mysterious language—behind the veil, rather than vanity, horror, emptiness, and pathetic disappointment, is profound and unsearchable meaning. In a long passage that borrows from Pascal, Genesis, and Isaiah, Claudel gives an example by describing what it is that the night sky now says to him. Leaving the "fables" of the world man has made for himself, he runs to the window and "opens the night." The night sky, rather than being un-nameable (*innomable)* is innumerable (*innombrable*), like the promised children of Abraham:

> *Que m'importent vos fables ! Laissez-moi seulement aller à la fenêtre et ouvrir la nuit et éclater à mes yeux en un chiffre simultané*
> *L'innombrable comme autant de zeros après le I coefficient de ma nécessité !*
> *Il est vrai ! Vous nous avez donné la Grande Nuit après le jour et la réalité du ciel nocturne*.

Unlike the modern man in Pascal's spiritual exercise, the *Disproportion de l'homme*, Claudel does not feel despair or fear in the presence of the stars; he is not "*néant*" compared to the infinite (*Disc*. 63-4/15/197a-199a). Instead, to the vastness of nature, Claudel gives a response inspired by the prophet Isaiah, who likewise directed man to lift up his eyes:

> Lift up your eyes on high
> And see who has created these stars,
> The One who leads forth their host by number,
> He calls them all by name;
> Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power,
> Not one of them is missing (Isaiah 40: 26, NASV).

Like Isaiah, Claudel understands the visible world as God's "signature." He says, "*Comme je suis là, il est là avec les milliards de sa presence, / Et il nous donne signature sur le papier photographique avec les 6 000 Pléiades,"* and playfully accuses God of being like a criminal who puts his thumbprint on the written record. For Claudel, as for Isaiah, the world is personal; every star has a name. Man is the "necessary" creature because he is the one who names all the others. Just as man depends upon God's creative freedom (His will), the other creatures depend upon man's free will (his creativity). But this is a divinely-inspired, mutual relationship, light years away from the sad dyad of will and matter. For Claudel, in fact, the primary element of a proper relationship with nature (or with anyone else, for that matter) is wonder.

The "Great Night," for Claudel is not a source of terror, but of hope. The nocturnal sky is "reality" (and it is probably indicative of the state in which we find ourselves that the stars are now hidden from sight in most of the Western world.) Claudel describes how the observer can search and find "*les pivots et les rubis, Hercule ou Alcyone, et les constellations."* The night sky, seen from earth, becomes familiar; the constellations and names tell stories, just as European topology once preserved a record of the men, events, and languages of every little river and hillside. For Claudel, the stars are, "*Pareilles à l'agrafe sur l'épaule d'un pontife et à de grands ornements chargés de pierres de diverses couleurs,"* in a comparison that puts papal jewelry in relation with the chest-piece of the Temple priests, as they are described in Exodus; each piece has a hidden meaning. In the context of Claudel's spiritual life, this night has great significance. Like St. John of the Cross, he has discovered, in the dark nights, the closeness of God. His light shines most brightly in the darkest places. Now, Claudel calls upon the nebulae, those regions of the heavens where stars are born:

Et ça et là aux confins du monde où le travail de la création s'achève, les nébuleuses,

Comme, quand la mer violemment battue et remuée
Revient au calme, voici encore de tous côtés l'écume et de grandes plaques de sel trouble qui montent.

In this image, the sea answers the sky; the nebulae are like the foam and salt lifted up out of the sea after a violent storm. Just as creation is still achieving itself at the boundaries of the world—Claudel now uses this word to refer to the cosmos as a whole—"*Ainsi le chrétien dans le ciel de la foi sent palpiter la Toussaint de tous ses frères vivants.*" In a splendid reversal of images, the Christian is the unfinished part of creation, and he feels the "All Saints' Day" of his brothers pulsing in the heavens of faith.[8]

Claudel now returns to the idol and the man who becomes like the god he has made with his hands, who "has a mouth but cannot speak, and eyes but cannot see."[9] Like Teresa of Avila and her Interior Castle, Claudel points out that what God makes is mostly hidden. Idols can be seen, and most of what people do to serve them can be seen, too, but the growth of the human heart is invisible. God does not use rocks or lead or wood as servants, but human beings. There seems to be a little joke in the next few lines, which read something like the 1917 equivalent of a shoot-'em-up[10]:

Seigneur, ce n'est point le plomb ou la pierre ou le bois pourrissant que vous avez enrôlé à votre service,
Et nul homme ne se consolidera dans la figure de celui qui a dit : Non serviam *!*
Ce n'est point mort qui vainc la vie, mais vie qui détruit la mort et elle ne peut tenir contre elle !
Vous avez jeté bas les idoles,
Vous avez déposé tous ces puissants de leur siège, et vous avez voulu pour serviteurs la flamme elle-même du feu !

[8] "It is always Advent until our life's end on the earth, always Christmas in the hiddenness of heaven," (H. U. von Balthasar, "Waiting for God," *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness,* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).
[9] Cf. Psalm 135: 15-18.
[10] The first Western, *The Great Train Robbery,* came out in 1903.

The alliteration of "*point, plomb, pierre, pourrissant*," sounds like a gunfight, "pow pow pow." Claudel combatively says that you cannot become a man by following the devil—literally, that no man can consolidate himself into the figure of the one who said, "I will not serve." Men who serve idols become, in fact, worse than idols—they are disfigured, they are fragmented, and like the picture of Dorian Gray, they are beginning to decay. Death, Claudel says, cannot overcome life—he could have said that you couldn't fight death with more death. What overcomes death is the fragile child of Bethlehem.

God has thrown down the idols, and Claudel quotes the Magnificat: "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones," changing the second half of the verse, "He has lifted up the lowly," to, "As servants, you have desired the fire's very flame!" The flame of the fire comes from Exodus 3,14—those are the words that are used to describe the burning bush in which God appears to Moses. Tongues of fire, likewise, appear over the Apostles' heads at Pentecost, as the Most High comes to dwell in the hearts of men. In this context, Claudel puts God's desire to have the flame of the fire as servants in parallel with Mary's statement that God has "lifted up the lowly." The lowly are like the flame of a fire: what is seemingly the most fragile part of humanity is in fact its burning centre. They are the flame that cannot be blown out.

These servants are as numerous and brightly burning as the stars in the sky—and they are also tirelessly active. Eternity and the present moment meet in their action. Claudel says that he cannot escape from his own part in this activity. He is like a "*chiffre prisonnier de la somme*" (perhaps a play on words with his beloved *Summa theologiae*). In a marvellous paradox that does indeed reflect St. Thomas' great analogy, he says, "*Il est temps ! A la tâche qui m'est départie l'éternité seule peut suffire.*" There is work to do, and now is the time to do it; but this present moment only receives its fullness in the light of eternity. In other words, the meaning of

what Claudel is doing can only be understood through God's eyes: "[…] *je crois en mon maître ainsi qu'il croit en moi*." (This sounds like something Leonard Bernstein once wrote: "I'll believe in any God, if He'll believe in me!") And now, in a modest allusion to his own life, Claudel says that it is time to break the bonds of dreams, trample the idols underfoot, and embrace the cross with the cross. This is the personal, specific, urgent work of the present moment: to embrace his own cross, so that it can become *the* Cross.[11] Idols, which are images of death, produce death; but the imitation of life produces life, and the vision of God "*engendre la vie éternelle*."[12] Claudel praises God for delivering him from the idols, but rather than leaving him with a "disenchanted" world, where all the minor deities are dead and only will and matter remain, he beholds a world that is more marvelous than it was before—an abundance of meaningful life.

In the previous section, Claudel has given thanks for deliverance from the idols; and his embrace of God as the only person or thing worthy of adoration and trust, rather than emptying the world of meaning and leading to nihilism with regards to his fellow creatures, instead has allowed him to look with restored wonder upon his fellow creatures, as the beauty of the world has become breathtakingly intelligible. In this next section, he blesses God for delivering him from death. This is the deliverance of Passover, the first born of Israel who did not die in the night and the whole host who has crossed over the Red Sea to dry land, with Pharaoh and his army drowning behind. To Mary's Magnificat, Claudel joins the song of Myriam, "*l'autre Marie,*" singing on the other shore after the parting of the waters. Claudel had visited the Levant at some point while he was in the process of writing the First Ode, and that trip leaves its traces

[11] From a meditation on the sorrowful mysteries by Josemaría Escriva.
[12] Cf. J.-L. Marion's discussion of icons vs. idols in the first chapter of *Dieu sans l'être,* Paris, PUF: 1991. In sum, when you look at an icon, what is really happening is that the icon is looking at you and changing your heart.

in this section as well. Myriam's face, he says, is unveiled before God, and she sings loudly; Claudel gives this detail that denotes with the extreme modesty and hiddenness of women in that region, but he may also be making an allusion to the veil Moses would wear to protect the Israelites from the light that came off of his own face. God, Myriam-Claudel says, tenderly picks up Israel, his child. Claudel puts the emphasis on the heart of God that is touched by the misery of his people with the phrase, "*vous étant recordé votre miséricorde*"—*recorder* means, "to learn by heart," and *miséricorde,* from the Latin *misericordia,* means something like "heart-pity." Claudel is talking about himself when he says that God has brought "*cet humilié*" up to Him like a man coming out of the grave: and this is indeed what has happened. Claudel believes that God called him to be a priest, and that instead, he slept with someone else's wife; and now, by the grace of God, he is living in as close a relationship with God as any monk or nun. He has gone through a kind of spiritual death, not to return to life as it was before, but now in a new intimacy with God.

Claudel puts himself in the shoes of the people of Israel as the images from Exodus become a way of looking at his own path from death to life. Leaving behind "*la mer confuse aux flots entrechoqués,*" Claudel journeys on into the desert and the mountain of God, Horeb, which, he says, looks like it is jumping up and down like a ram because of the lightning that flashes on and off of it, or like a bucking colt under the weight of a fat cowboy. Horeb is the place of the promise, the private sign God promised Moses so that he would remember who had brought the whole people out of Egypt. The Persecutor, Claudel says, confirming that this is about a death worse than death—for "Persecutor" is a name for the devil—has sunk to the bottom of the Red Sea, along with the "*cheval avec l'homme armé,*" another Western image that makes me wonder

whether Claudel is not also singing his relief that his lover's husband has died without first taking some kind of revenge.

Now comes the central moment of the Odes. From the eyes of Miriam, "*l'ancienne Marie*," Claudel imagines that he is seeing through the eyes of Mary in the garden in Hebron, when Elizabeth holds out her hands in a gesture that carries the full weight of Israel's expectation. Claudel participates in Mary's joy because his life, also, has come to its fulfillment in this Ode. Like Joseph out of the well and Jeremy out of the [basse-fosse], God has saved him from death and he cries out the word he was meant to say, from the foundations of the world: "Because he has done great things for me and Holy is his name!" This is the heart of the poem, and it expresses the *"Καιρός του ποιήσα τω Κυρίω*',"[13] the "*In illo tempore*" of the Divine Liturgy that signals the awaited time, the expected hour, in which the Lord acts—and here, the word for action is the same as the word for poetry. It is Claudel's own *Magnificat*.

The coming of the Christ child delivers from death. But whoever, seeing the fragile child in the manger after the announcement of the angels, goes away in disappointment, now hates his own life. This is why Claudel explains that God's flame has chased the love of death from his heart: *Vous avez mis dans mon cœur l'horreur de la mort, mon âme n'a point tolérance de la mort !* From this announcement, Claudel immediately begins a direct and unambiguous attack on philosophy. Why does he do this? In the *Confessions*, Augustine argues that man loves truth in such a way that he wills that anything he loves become the truth.[14] It is like a rightful heir who returns to his kingdom. Many will welcome his coming, but some will fight tooth and nail to

[13] "It is time [*kairos*] for the Lord to act."
[14] See J.-L. Marion's explanation of truth's double effect in *Au lieu de soi. L'approche de Saint Augustin,* Paris: PUF, 2008, pp. 157-159.

maintain the *status quo*. Claudel sees this as the main goal of the philosopher who attempts to understand the world without entering into dialogue with God after the coming of Christ:

> *Savants, épicuriens, maîtres du noviciat de l'Enfer, praticiens de l'Introduction au Néant,*
> *Brahmes, bonzes, philosophes, tes conseils, Égypte ! vos conseils,*
> *Vos méthodes et vos démonstrations et votre discipline,*
> *Rien ne me réconcilie, je suis vivant dans votre nuit abominable, je lève mes mains dans le désespoir, je lève les mains dans la transe et le transport de l'espérance sauvage et sourde !*
> *Qui ne croit plus en Dieu, il ne croit plus en l'Être, et qui hait l'Être, il hait sa propre existence*.

Claudel gives a litany of names of those who seek wisdom, an anchor, outside of the marvelous exchange between God and man that happens in the Incarnation—Myriam's deliverance and Mary's fullness. He calls them, "Sages, epicureans, masters of Hell's novitiate, practitioners of the Introduction to Non-being, / Brahmins, bonzes," and finally, "philosophers." Having renounced dialogue with God, the methods, demonstrations, and discipline of the philosophers become not a way to seek wisdom, but instead the tools of man's will to power. The kind of contemplation that reveals being as matter—what Heidegger describes in his essay on technique—is now the only alternative way to see the world. It is no longer sufficient to transform trees into canoes and idols. We must grind them into woodchips and mold them mechanically into tables that can then be dumped in a landfill when they predictably fall apart. This abominable night—the orange night where it is no longer possible to tell the difference between night and twilight, the last watch and the dawn—has fallen on the world, and Claudel, unlike Hegel, refuses to reconcile himself to it. The name of this night is despair, hatred and rejection of man's own life. Claudel raises his hands in the midst of this dark night, in hope—wild and deaf hope.

One kind of philosophy attempts to build a system outside of God; another seeks God, who lets himself be found. Claudel says, "Lord, I have found you," and in finding him, he has lost all tolerance he once had of death, as one could lose all tolerance of a poison:

> *Seigneur, je vous ai trouvé.*
> *Qui vous trouve, il n'a plus tolérance de la mort,*
> *Et il interroge toute chose avec vous et cette intolérance de la flamme que vous avez mis en lui !*

Finding the Christ child has fundamentally changed his relationship to all things. Now he questions everything with God and the fire that is burning inside himself; he cannot stand anything that smells of death, and any philosophy that leads to anything other than God is rejected by his bodily system.

Now Claudel speaks of his own calling as a layman and a poet. If all the forms of life are like plants in God's garden, Claudel is like "*chiendent*"—crabgrass. He contrasts himself with the Benedictine in his black habit, who vests in gold for Mass at dawn; this monk is like a flower in a greenhouse:

> *Seigneur, vous ne m'avez pas mis à part comme une fleur de serre,*
> *Comme le moine noir sous sa coule et le capuchon qui fleurit chaque matin tout en or pour la messe au soleil levant,*
> *Mais vous m'avez planté au plus épais de la terre*
> *Comme le sec et tenace chiendent invincible qui traverse l'antique læss et les couches de sable superposées.*

Having renounced the world, the monk's fragile beauty is protected from the elements. The Benedictine monk is like a delicate flower put aside in a greenhouse so that it can absorb as much light as possible. Claudel, on the other hand, is the most tenacious of weeds, whose many roots go down into the deepest earth—impossible to uproot. God has planted him in the thickest part of the soil. This poet is a high-ranking diplomat with a wife and many children. He has a

God-given duty to feast, host, carouse, and politick—in fact, the peace and prosperity of many depend upon it.

Continuing the horticultural images, Claudel makes a vital distinction about where he is headed. As a man nearing middle age, he no longer grows, but ages; every year, one step closer to the grave. But, Claudel says, God has not put a "germ" in him of death, but of light—the foundation of his being is not "sin" or "misery," but *life*, and this germ of light takes over more territory with every passing year, even as the body grows older. And even though it is not outwardly visible, it is steadily growing:

> *Seigneur, vous avez mis en moi un germe non point de mort, mais de lumière;*
> *Ayez patience avec moi parce que je ne suis pas un de vos saints*
> *Qui broient par la pénitence l'écorce amère et dure,*
> *Mangés d'œuvres de toutes parts comme un oignon par ses racines ;*
> *— Si faible qu'on le croit éteint ! Mais le voici de nouveau opérant, et il ne cesse de faire son œuvre et chimie en grande patience et temps.*

The germ of light, he says, is so weak it appears to have gone out; but just when he thinks it has died, it continues to operate, transforming his soul until it can become a region of pure light. Claudel again contrasts himself with another kind of soul, the ascetic who wears down his hard outer shell with acts of penance, and looks from the outside like an onion eaten alive by its shoots of good works. Claudel's seedling, his inner life, just keeps steadily going, patiently, using time. This is the "little way," the prayer of desire that slowly transforms the humble acts of daily life into occasions to love God and neighbor.

Claudel's "germ of light," is not just working for his own, inner transformation. There is nothing private or individual about his relationship with God. At stake is not the salvation of his own soul, but rather the destiny of all the Earth. The next few lines contain a marvelous, apocalyptic paradox. Claudel must come to the end not only of his own body, but also of the

entire world, which is like raw material that needs to be transformed; and yet this world is somehow in his body:

> *Car ce n'est pas de ce corps seul qu'il me faut venir à bout, mais de ce monde brut tout entier, fournir*
> *De quoi comprendre et le dissoudre et l'assimiler*
> *En vous et ne plus voir rien*
> *Réfractaire à votre lumière en moi !*

The little plant growing inside him—his soul in union with Christ, becoming a little Christ child—has to digest the world, which is in his body. It is his work as a poet and as a man to "understand," and "dissolve," and "assimilate" the world in Christ ("*Vous*") so that nothing will be left that rebels against the light (literally, that is "*réfractaire*," a play-on-words with optics in English and Latin, if not in French). But this is not an instance of will acting on helpless matter; Claudel's metaphor is organic. The plant must transform the cosmos within him into humus—the root of humility—a most fertile soil, which implies that the goal is not domination for the sake of imposing the will, but "assimilation," in order to allow for more abundant life to grow. This is the "total Christ" of Gregory of Nyssa, the good news that is to be proclaimed to the ends of the Earth and to all the creatures, not just human beings but also plants, animals, rocks. Like Augustine, Claudel believes that the human spirit is a microcosm of the world, and human freedom gives direction to the life of all the other creatures, just as God's freedom gives direction to man's. What occurs in Claudel's inner life has an effect on the host of beings who depend upon him. They cannot fully become themselves until Claudel fully becomes himself. This is the work of Claudel's spirit ("*l'esprit seul*"), that dark light ("*la lumière ténébreuse*") with which he now sees and hears, and with which he will see and hear again, after the end of the world. This little light, "so weak it appears to go out," is tenaciously eating through the entire world.

His own vanity, however, continues to bother him constantly—that part of himself that wants to be honored and celebrated over other people, the part that gets hurt and lashes out at the smallest slight, but does not even notice when other people are passed over. He says that he is tired of vanity; even though he no longer wants to have anything to do with it, he cannot rid himself of it: "*Je suis las de la vanité ! Vous voyez que je suis soumis à la vanité, ne le voulant pas !"* His other major annoyance is either acedia, an inappropriate distaste for good things, which would be a highly unpleasant thing to experience for a *bon vivant* such as Claudel, or perhaps a kind of spiritual desolation, a sort of night of the five senses, which would be just as unpleasant. He asks, "*D'où vient que je considère vos œuvres sans plaisir ? / Ne me parlez plus de la rose ! aucun fruit n'a plus de goût pour moi."* At this time, he does not feel any great taste for good things. This is all, fortunately, a normal part of the spiritual life. Only time and patience will lead to the end of vanity and all other forms of distance from God. In the mean time, they are an excellent reminder that God is God, "*la vérité de votre presence,"* and Claudel is just Claudel, "*ce néant indestructible*." As in "The Spirit and the water," he uses the verb, "*supporter*," *sustineo,* to sustain, to describe his own part in this process of spiritual transformation—he is the earth that is worked by the Gardener.

During this section, Claudel is praising God for delivering him from death, but the truth of the matter is that Claudel is still going to die, just like everything else in this world. He now says how coming death appears to him, through the eyes of faith. To the dying, time seems very long; he feels like a man pressing up against a wall; day comes after day, but one day the sun stops, like a rigorous winter after the beautiful summer of earthly life:

> *O longeur du temps ! Je n'en puis plus et je suis comme quelqu'un qui appuie la main contre le mur.*
> *Le jour suit le jour, mais voici le jour où le soleil s'arrête.*

Voici la rigueur de l'hiver, adieu, ô bel été, la transe et le saisissement de l'immobilité.
Je préfère l'absolu. Ne me rendez pas à moi-même.
Voici le froid inexorable, voici Dieu seul !
En vous je suis antérieur à la mort ! — Et déjà voici l'année qui recommence.

He says farewell (adieu, to God) to the beautiful, Mediterranean summer that is life as we know it; and yet despite its beauty, he prefers "the absolute," and he asks God not return him to himself—and by this, he also means that God should not return the world as it was. Here, he says, is the inescapable cold—inescapable death, and God himself, for death is a return into God, a painful stripping away and renouncing of anything other than Him until the soul is naked in His presence. In God, Claudel discovers, he is "before" death—for God made time itself. The "*Voici*," repeated throughout this section is like the constancy of the present moment to the soul, which is revealed to be none other than God's presence, holding the soul in being. At the end of the last line, a new year begins. This is a signal that Advent and the Octave of Christmas have passed, and the writing of this part of the poem takes place during a new calendar year, but also that time itself may one day rise again in Christ, when all creation will be reconciled to itself (people, animals, plants, rocks …).

Now, there is a kind of pause as Claudel's soul descends into a silent purification. He remembers how his soul used to be filled with voices, as many voices as the murmurs in a great forest, "more numerous than all the productions of History and the Novel." He would go into his soul and listen to these voices, and every once in awhile realize that it was Sunday and a bell was ringing in the world of men, or that it was morning again. But now, all the winds have ceased and the leaves of the forest have fallen around him in this winter of the soul. When he tries to speak to her about all the countries they have seen and the people they have met, and all the oceans they've crossed, she does not answer him: "*Et elle est comme quelqu'un qui sait et qui*

préfère ne pas répondre." She keeps her secret. He tries to excite her anger against the "enemies of Christ," to get her to care about concrete action in the world; but she is like a great scorpion that does not even feel the piece of straw the child uses to tease it. Instead, she says:

> *"Paix ! réjouis-toi !*
> *Et dis : autrement que par des paroles mon âme exalte le Seigneur !*
> *Elle demande à cesser d'être une limite, elle refuse d'être à sa sainte volonté aucun obstacle."*

His soul is introducing him to silence, to silently listening and waiting upon God. His soul, like Mary, "magnifies the Lord," quietly desiring his holy will, asking to no longer put up any resistance at all to his work within her and in the world.

His soul tells him that summer is over, and that now is the time for all things to die in her, except God. This explains why Claudel, whose heart was once filled with so many glorious desires, has no taste for all the marvelous things. As in winter, the country is "*dépouillée,"* the earth is "*dénuée*." His soul is lying down like the land awaiting its blessing for the new year, in the posture of a dead man, like the celebrant on Good Friday, or like a deacon about to be ordained a priest. His soul now (in a distant echo of James Joyce, from the last line of "The Dead") describes the snow descending upon the land like an absolution (rather than a "last end.")

This winter of the soul is a time of purification and of passive penance. The soul does not rise up to God by great acts, but submits itself quietly, desiring God's will and cooperating with his grace. Claudel remembers the forest the day after Christmas, in the early morning. The landscape is white like a priest draped in vestments, and the wood can be seen, "as through a glass, darkly," a quote from Paul in the Letter to the Corinthians, who refers to the way we see in this life. The dead leaves and pines are rose pink and almond green in the snow, like *fruits déguisés*. The frost's decoration on the cobwebs becomes an image of prayerful recollection, as

though it had snowed on prayer. Participating in God's will, whispers Claudel's soul, means participating in his silence. *"Qui donne la vie, il faut qu'il accepte la mort."* The soul's work is the contemplation of a severe beauty, the acceptance of this death that is the only means of giving life.

First, Claudel praised God for delivering him from the idols, and giving him renewed wonder for his fellow creatures; next, he praised God for delivering him from death, both eternal death and the fear of death. In this next section, Claudel praises God for delivering him from himself, by allowing him to become a father. He is playing on the double meaning of deliverance—liberation and birth. Now, ordinary, everyday life becomes as endless a source of wonder as the stars, or Spring's new green. This section celebrates the birth of Claudel's daughter, Marie, in January 1907. He begins by repeating the phrase, "*Soyez béni, mon Dieu …*," for the third time. What does this mean? First, that Claudel does not put his "*bien,*" a word that means both "good" and "possession"—the expression "*placer son bien*" literally means to invest one's money—in himself. In other words, he's not betting on himself, and his treasure does not lie in himself ("Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also"). That would be, he says, like putting everything he has in the narrow cells the damned had made for themselves in one of Teresa of Avila's visions.[15] His hope is not in himself, nor in anything he has, but in God's will. In a play on the Beatitudes, he says, "*Heureux non pas qui est libre, mais celui que vous déterminez comme une flèche dans le carquois !"*—blessed not the free, but the determined, like an arrow in the quiver; in the Psalms, arrows are a symbol for children. Being the son of

[15] Teresa de Avila, *Autobiografia,* ch. XXXII.

someone and the father of someone else, having a place in the generations of human beings, is a gift.

In fact, God himself, Claudel says, is first Father—God made fatherhood "*le principe de tout et de vous-même.*" God is Father, Father of the Word, His Son, but also Father of all, who gives life without carrying it, and holds life in being with protective benevolence, who gives everything he has to his children, even his beloved Son. This newborn child comes, not first and foremost from a mechanical, predictable process, but from God himself, who "lays up" the capacity to give life in a man's testes. Claudel is this child's father with God; the act of engendering does not come from him. In fatherhood, a man participates in the end God "offers" (*se proposer)* to himself—God reveals that He is the Father who loves the Son, and the Son who loves the Father. Claudel marvels that God has chosen him for this same purpose. Quoting the *Magnificat* again, in a rather surprising way, he says that now, he is sure that God does not fear him as he does the rich and the powerful he sends away empty. The blessing of a child is indeed the great joy of God's poor, as it is the joy of the Father himself. God's might, Claudel says, is none other than his humility, which means that he effaces himself ("*vous vous anéantissez*") before his works, as parents desire to give their place in society to their children. God the Father does, indeed, allow himself to be revealed first, by the world as word, and second, by his Son, who takes his flesh from the world; and the Son, in ascending into Heaven after the resurrection, gives way to the Church, his body, inhabited by the Spirit. Claudel also will efface himself before his daughter.

Now Claudel shows that his daughter is an icon of God, and an image of his own soul. He mentions how God needed Mary, and Mary the line of all her ancestors. Claudel—and this would be true for any other parent—is another Mary, who has given life to another Christ. [His

wife might have, rightly, taken issue with Claudel's claim that he gave life to his daughter!] His daughter is like an "*image réelle"* and a consecrated host in Claudel's arms, an icon of the Christ child. This is because Claudel knows that God is present in his daughter. After Christ, man is revealed to be an image of God in a rather literal sense; and God dwells in the heart of every man. Every child, then, is like an icon or representation of Christ. And Claudel, like most new parents, has a hard time believing that he actually has a living, kicking human being in his arms—it somehow seems like it would be more appropriate to have been given a rock, or even a kitten.

The child is also made in the likeness of Claudel's own soul, "My soul is within me like a weaned child in the arms of its mother" (Psalm ?), or a mirror "*qui vient d'être retiré à Dieu, nu de toute autre image encore*," since a newborn child still lives in union with God. Claudel says that the newborn child is the image of his "*âme essentielle*"—the essence of every human being is not original sin, as Calvin and Jansenius taught, but the humble beauty of a newborn child; and Claudel says that his daughter will have to become as she is now again, "*Lorsque désir sera purgé par le désir"*—as the desire for God slowly purifies all the other desires, finally taking its place as the strongest of all. The truth of the matter is that all of God's creatures are good and deserve to be desired. The great problem of human beings, however, is that we tend to settle rather easily for the little things, like money, or romantic passion, or a good reputation, when we could have the very thing that God himself most desires: loving relationships with him and with other people.

The poet also makes an analogy between himself and his daughter, on the one hand, and himself and the poem, on the other. His daughter, unlike him, has no pride (*orgueil)*; the poem is like Claudel's own virginal soul, his essential soul, written out on the paper, entirely "*donnante*

et accueillie," unlike the stinky, hard (*puant et dur*) poet. This gives us a clue as to what Claudel means by "virginal soul"—it is a soul that is entirely given over and welcoming to God and neighbor, rather than a soul that is occupied with lesser battles. This is a far cry from the usual meaning of virginal—shut off, unexplored, or in the primary, sexual sense of never having known a man, "undefiled." There is no distinction here between virgin and mother; the act of welcoming God (or a spouse, for that matter) as spouse does not defile the soul at all. On the contrary, this self-giving, for Claudel, is the primary condition for purity, and what is impure, "stinky and hard," is the soul that refuses to welcome its spouse because it has given itself over to lesser things.

The poem itself, Claudel says, comes from that part of his own soul that is completely given over to God. This is the reason we can say that writing the poem is a kind of contemplative prayer. The tender verses that follow praise God for now giving to his daughter what he once gave to him. The verses use commonplaces about babies in an uncommon way ("*petit cœur de rose," "petit paquet plus fraîche qu'un gros bouquet de lilas blancs"*), as well as images from Claudel's own childhood (*"Il attend pour toi deux vieillards* […] / *Il attend pour ton baptême* […] / *Il attend pour toi cette grosse planète* […]"). In this poem, there is no separation between writing and life, just as there is no separation between writing and prayer. Claudel makes an analogy between the birth of a child and the writing of a poem—the child that is not born *for* its parents and the word that is not written *for* the one who writes it. The poet, he says, is like a woman whose breasts are engorged with milk meant for a child; to find relief, the woman must nurse, and the poet must put the words down on paper so that they can be read by the people for whom they were meant.

Because the poem is born of Claudel's union with God, it becomes a personal thought for those people who read it—it is not merely a text or an artistic representation, it has its own creative, relational force. The next two verses are addressed to the idols, the mortifying gods who are not persons: the "*dieux sans prunelles des anciens où ne se reflète point la petite poupée*." That the eyes of these gods have no pupils, and can therefore not reflect the little doll, is a play on the Latin word *pupilla*, which gives our English word pupil, from the Latin *pupus*, little boy. They do not have "prunelles," "apples of the eyes," so they cannot have beloved children. In his *Journal*, Claudel makes the connection between the pupil and the "little doll," the tiny reflection of ourselves we recognize in the eyes of other people,[16] and it is also the image of God in us, since God has revealed that he himself is fundamentally relational (one God in three Persons). Loxias is a name of Apollo associated with oracles, which appear mysterious but more often than not have a disappointingly superficial meaning.[17] Idols cannot see or care about the people who pray to them. Golden Head, in the play, makes a sacrifice of his own blood and oath on the rock, but this sacrifice is in vain, since there is no one there to receive it. Claudel's words, however, make an efficacious sacrifice. They come from the union between his spirit and the Spirit, and they are said in a sacrifice to God. The Son is in Claudel, who reveals the Father; this poem, which is the result of his union with God, can then be, for the reader, "*ce mot à toi seul adressé*," a word that gives life, and not death, to those that read it—a witness to God's love for them. In the same way, the sacrifice of his "life," giving of his life in the sexual act, is not in vain, but leads to the birth of this marvelous little child. His daughter, in turn, will some day become a wife and a mother, a word addressed primarily to someone else.

[16] *Journal*, cahier I, Novembre-Décembre 1904, p. 17.
[17] Cf. Herodotus I, 91.

A new beatitude ends this section: blessed is he who becomes a source of life, and not of death, for others, "*comme un fruit qui mûrit dans le temps et lieu, et votre pensée en lui créatrice !"* Blessed is he, says Claudel, who grows old when and where he should be, like a ripening fruit, and God's own thought gives life in him and through him. He is "*comme un père qui partage sa substance entre ses enfants*," like a father who divides up everything he has between his children, "*comme un arbre saccagé dont on n'épargne aucun fruit,*" like a tree from which every fruit is taken and eaten. He magnifies God by growing God's own gifts and giving them away, just as the faithful steward in the parable of the talents multiplies the talents and gives them back to his master, and just as Mary's soul "magnifies the Lord," in words of praise and most fully, in the birth of Christ. God fills the hungry with these good things—and one of his good things is this Ode, read by many readers who hunger for truth and beauty. The Lord has, indeed, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

After blessing God for deliverance from idols, for deliverance from death, and for deliverance from himself, in this last section, Claudel now blesses God for bringing him into the afternoon of his life, a time of great peace and fullness. He compares his maturity, as a man and as a poet, to the escape of the Wise Men from Herod and to the people of Israel who have crossed the desert. In a long midrash, he describes the moment when Joshua sees the Promised Land for the first time. He comes down from the mountains with all the hosts of Israel behind him, and he sees the rising sun above his knee "*comme une tache rose dans le coton,*" and suddenly the Promised Land appears, green and shining with rivers, like a woman rising out of her bath. But instead of stopping to look at Canaan, Joshua concentrates on the task of leading the people carefully down the mountain. Claudel asks for the humility and modesty of Joshua—the humility that stopped the sun and the modesty that made him divide up Israel equitably—as

he himself enters into God's land of promise, the "intelligible sojourn" of all things that God has given to him. Claudel has become a contemplative, and his inheritance is the beauty of all things, humility the guarantee that they will remain in his purview.

Like a landholder with a vast property, Claudel feels the immense possession of the sensible world in his intelligence. He asks what all the things a powerful man can do to land ("*prise et jouissance et propriété et aménagement*) are next to what a poet does to reality with his own mind. "*Puisque comprendre, c'est refaire / La chose même qu'on a prise avec soi.*" To comprehend—literally, in Latin, "to seize with oneself"—is to reproduce the thing one has 'seized' in one's own mind. His poetic gift gives him, like Joshua, great power, and he is seized with a kind of holy fear. The great risk is to misappropriate God's gifts, to become enslaved once again to selfish pride. Claudel now alludes to the Magnificat again: "*Parce que vous avez dispersé les orgueilleux et ils ne peuvent être ensemble, / Ni comprendre, mais seulement détruire et dissiper, et mettre les choses ensemble.*" The proud, in the Magnificat, are "scattered in the imagination of their hearts." Claudel says here that the proud cannot stay together, that they are alienated from each other and destructively separate what should not be separated, putting things back together in a haphazard way.

Humility is the guarantee that Claudel's poetic gift, in the imagination of his heart, will not become a terrible kind of alienation. It is also an instrument of liberation for all things. Claudel asks God, "*Laissez-moi voir et entendre toutes choses avec la parole / Et saluer chacune par son nom même avec la parole qui l'a fait.*" The word, here, is the word of God. Claudel wants to see and hear everything with this word, so that he can hail it by name, like the angel's greeting to Mary, with the very word that once created it. This is an approach of great wonder and respect for all the fellow creatures, in marked contrast with the contemporary attitude of

colonization, rationalization, and domination. It addresses nature not as a raw material, but as a 'you.' Claudel goes even further: he asks God to look at the earth, his "innocent creature," and deliver her from the yoke of her oppressors, for she was not made for them, but for God himself. Using the other sense of the word deliverance, he asks God to deliver her of the praise she owes him through his mouth, as we say that a midwife delivers a child through the mother's perineum, painfully stretched around the child's crown. He believes that his work as a poet can deliver the earth itself from its torturers, so that it can become, instead, a living sacrifice of praise, the abundance of life it was meant to be from the beginning. He asks that his word fall like water, like a blessing upon the earth, as he pronounces a blessing upon all things.

Claudel blesses God for the afternoon of his life, and at the end of the poem rings the hour of Vespers, or Evening Prayer—six o'clock, at Ligugé, the end of the workday and just before dinner; four-thirty on Sundays. Magnificat is the Gospel canticle sung every day during this time of prayer, which follows the end of the day's labors—"*son œuvre conjointe à celle de la journée*." It is the hour when, Claudel says, the "sun takes the earth's measure," before the long and quiet rain of the night. The poem ends like Vespers, with a blessing from the Holy Sacrament. Claudel says that he is like the priest, covered in the ornate, golden mantle, who comes before the altar burning with candlelight. He looks at God in the monstrance. The priest/poet slowly takes it in his arms, like Mary once carried the Christ child, and shows it to the assembly, that "*obscure génération*" of readers that have not yet been born, in a final blessing, the last lines of the *Magnificat*: "He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for ever."

Chapter 4. *La Muse qui est la Grâce*

Fourth Ode. The Muse Called Grace

ARGUMENT

Invasion of poetic drunkenness. Poet's dialogue with the Muse, who slowly becomes Grace. He tries to turn her away; he asks her to leave him to his human duties; instead of his soul, he offers her the entire universe, which he will recreate by intelligence and the word. In vain, the Muse called Grace won't stop speaking to him personally! She reminds him of divine joy and of his duty of personal sanctification. — But the poet plugs his ears and turns back towards the earth. Supreme evocation of fleshly and human love.

Again! Again, the sea comes for me like a little boat,

The sea returns for me again at the syzygial tide[1], lifting and shaking me out of my launching bed like a lightened galley,

Like a little boat held only by its rope, furiously dancing, and rapping, and bobbing, and tossing, and charging, and toppling, tethered to its pole,

Like a great thoroughbred held by his nostrils, pitching under the weight of the Amazon who leaps on to him from the side and roughly seizes the reins with a burst of laughter!

Again the night comes for me,

[1] An extreme tide caused by the perfect alignment of three or more astral bodies.

Like the sea that attains its fullness in silence at the hour that joins the human ports, full of waiting ships, to the Ocean, and unsticks the gate and the sluice!

Again leaving, again establishing contact, again the gate opens!

Oh, how tired I've grown of the character I play among men! Here is the night! Again, the window opens!

And I am like the young girl at the window of a magnificent white castle, in the moonlight,

Who hears, heart leaping, that blessed whistle beneath the trees and the sound of two shifting horses,

And she doesn't miss her home, but she is like a little crouching tiger, and her entire heart is lifted up by love of life and by the great comic force!

Outside of me, the night, and within me the fireworks of the nocturnal force, and the wine of Glory, and the pain of this overflowing heart!

If even the vintner cannot go into the vat with impunity,

How could I be strong enough to tread my great harvest of words

Without its fumes rising to my brain!

Oh, this evening belongs to me! Oh, this great night belongs to me! The whole chasm of the night lit up like a ballroom for the young girl at her first dance!

It has only just begun! There'll be time to sleep another day!

Oh, I'm drunk! Oh, I've been given over to the god! I hear a voice within me and the accelerating measure, joy's movement,

The first steps of the Olympian cohort, the divinely tempered march!

What do all men matter to me now! I'm not made for them, but for the

Transport of this sacred measure!

O, cry of the muffled trumpet! O, dull blow to the orgiac tun[2]!

What do any of them matter to me? Only this rhythm! Whether they follow me or not? What does it matter whether they hear me or not?

Behold the unfolding of the great poetic Wing!

Do you speak to me of music? Only let me go put on my golden sandals!

I don't need all the trappings he needs. I won't ask you to stop up your eyes.

The words I use

Are everyday words, and they're not at all the same!

You won't find rhymes in my verse, nor any magic spell. They're your very phrases. There's not one of your phrases I can't take over!

These flowers are your flowers, and you say you don't recognize them.

And these feet are your feet, but behold, I'm walking on the sea, and I'm treading the waters of the sea in triumph!

STROPHE I

— O Muse, there will be time to sleep another day! But since this entire great night is ours,

And I'm a little drunk, in such a way that another word sometimes

Takes the place of the right one, just the way you like it,

Let me make myself clear to you,

[2] A large vat or cask containing thirty-six gallons of wine.

Let me drive you back into this strophe, before you come back onto me like a wave with a feline cry!

Leave me for awhile! Let me do what I want for awhile!

For whatever I do, and even when I do my best,

Sooner or later, I see an eye rise over me in silence, as though I were pretending.

Let me be needed! Let me forcefully occupy a recognized and approved position,

Like a builder of railroads, everybody knows he isn't useless, like a founder of trade unions!

When a young man whose chin is adorned with yellow down

Makes verses, one only smiles.

I've waited for age to deliver me from the frenzy of this Bacchic spirit.

But far from making a burnt offering of the ram, I must find, with this laugh that reaches deeper layers,

That I no longer do its bidding.

Let me at least do what I want to do with this paper and fill it with a studious art,

My task, like those who have one.

Thus the Egyptian scribe with his meticulous point drew up an inventory of tributes, and the lots of spoils, and lines of ten attached captives,

And the measures of grain that were taken to the banal millstone, and the boats to customs.

Thus the antique sculptor, bush of hair reddened with lime, caught on the stone of black basalt with the hammer and the chisel,

And from time to time he blows on his characters like so many crossed nails, to remove the dust, and steps back, pleased.

And I would like to compose a great poem brighter than the moon that shines serenely on the countryside during harvest week,

And draw a great triumphal Way across the Earth,

Instead of running as best I can, hand on the spine of this winged quadruped that drags me along in its broken race, half wing and half bound!

Let me sing of the works of men, and may each person find in my verses those things he finds familiar,

As upon the heights, one takes pleasure in recognizing one's house, and the train station, and the city hall, and this fellow with his straw hat, but the surrounding space is immense!

For what's the writer good for, if not to keep the books?

Whether his own, or those of a shoe store, or of all humanity.

Don't be offended! O, sister of the black Pythia who chews the laurel leaf between her teeth, tightened by the prophetic lockjaw, and a line of green saliva leaks from the corner of her mouth!

Don't wound me with this dart of your eyes!

O, giantess! Don't rise up that way, with that air of sublime freedom!

O, desert wind ! O, my beloved, like to the four-horsed chariots of Pharaoh!

As the ancient poet spoke for the never-present gods,

And I, for one, say that nothing in nature is without design and meaning addressed to man,

And as light is for the eye and sound is for the ear, so each thing is for the mind's analysis,

Continuous with the mind that

Remakes it from the element that it recovers,

Whether it's the pickaxe that hacks it out, or the prospector's gold-pan and the mercury amalgam,

Or the scholar, pen in hand, or the looms' weaving, or the plow.

And I can speak, continuous with every mute object,

A word that is, in its place, mind and will.

I will sing the great poem of man rescued from chance!

What those around me have done with the cannon that opens the old Empires,

With the collapsible cannon that goes up the Aruwimi, with the polar expedition that takes magnetic measurements,

With the batteries of high furnaces that digest ore, with the frenetic cities panting and knitting, (and here and there the blue bend of a river in the solemn countryside),

With the inner shell of the ports all lined with claws and antennas and the transatlantic cable that signals in the distance through the fog,

With the locomotive hitched to its convoy, and the canal that fills up when the Chief Engineer's daughter, her fingertip on the circuit-breaker, blows up the double dike,

I'll do it with a poem that will no longer be the adventure of Ulysses among the Laestrygonians and the Cyclops, but instead the knowledge of the Earth,

The great poem of man, finally beyond secondary causes, reconciled with the eternal forces,

The great triumphal Way across the reconciled Earth so that man, rescued from chance, may go forward!

ANTISTROPHE I

— Why should I care about all your machines, and all your slave labors, and your books, and your writing?

O true son of the earth! O big-footed bumpkin! O truly born for the plow, uprooting each foot from its furrow!

This one was made to be a scrivener, filling the records and dispatches.

O the lot of an Immortal attached to this heavy imbecile!

A living man cannot be made with a hammer and chisel, but only with a woman; one cannot make a living word with ink and pen!

How do you account for women? Everything would be so easy without them. And I, I am a woman among women!

I am not accessible to reason, you will not make, you will not make of me what you want; instead, I sing and dance!

And I do not want you to love any other woman, but me alone, for none is as beautiful as I am,

And you will never be old for me, but always younger and more comely to my eyes, until you become an immortal with me!

O fool, rather than reasoning, enjoy this golden hour! Smile! Understand, blockhead! O donkey-faced man, learn the great, divine laugh!

For I will not always be here; no, I am fragile on the ground of the earth with my two feet feeling their way along,

Like a man pushing up from the water's bottom, like a bird looking for a perch, wings half-unfolded, like the flame on the wick!

See me before you in this short instant, your beloved, with this face that destroys death!

He who has only drunk his bowl-full of new wine no longer knows the lendor and the owner;

He is no longer the spouse of a meager soil and the colonist of a quarrelsome woman, with four daughters at home;

But here he is, jumping naked like a god on the stage, head crowned with vines, purple and sticky from the sweet tit of grape,

Like a god next to the thymele[3], brandishing the skin of a piglet full of wine, the head of King Pentheus,

While, awaiting their turn, the choir of boys and little girls with fair voices watches him, eating salty olives!

This is the virtue of that earthly drink: the intoxicated man little by little, full of gaiety, sees double,

Things as they are and as they are not and people begin not understanding what he says.

Could truth be weaker than lies?

Just close your eyes and breathe in cold life! I spurn you, O stingy earthly days! O wedding feasts! O first fruits of the spirit! Just drink of this unfermented wine!

Go forth and behold the eternal morning, the earth and the sea beneath the morning sun, like someone appearing before the throne of God!

Like the child Jupiter when he stood dazzled on the threshold of the cave of Dikte,

The world around you, no longer as a submissive slave, but as the heir and the legitimate son!

For you are not meant for it, but it is meant for you!

What's done is done! Why harden yourself even more and resist

[3] Altar of Dionysius in the center of the orchestra of an ancient Greek theater.

The evidence of your joy and the vehemence of this celestial breath? Yield!

Triumph, and strike the earth with your foot, for if someone is attached to nothing,

It is because he is no longer the master; and tread the earth under your feet like someone dancing!

Laugh, then, I would like to see you

Laugh, immortal! At seeing yourself among these transient things!

And make fun, and see what you took seriously! For they pretend to be there and then they pass on.

And they pretend to pass on, and yet they never cease being there!

And you, you are with God forever!

To transform the world, you do not need a pick and an axe and a trowel and a sword;

You only need to look at it, with the two eyes of the spirit that sees and listens.

STROPHE II

— No, you cannot make me back up any further. Words, words,

Words, words of woman! Words, words of a goddess! Words of a temptress!

Why do you tempt me? Why do you drag me there, where I cannot fly? Why

Show me what I cannot see?

And speak of freedom to this son of the earth!

I have an unfulfilled duty! A duty towards each thing, not one

To which I am not obliged, so just let me

Hold on to what I can't possess!

A woman has no duty!

Let us laugh, for this is good! O sweetness! At least this instant is good. O, the woman that is in me!

I have laboriously acquired manhood, from the habitual things that don't come for free,

And that must be seized to have, to learn, to understand them.

Ah, though my heart would break, no!

That isn't what I want! Leave me for awhile! Do not tempt me so cruelly!

Do not show me

This light that is not for the sons of Earth!

This particular light is for me, so weak that it must be night for it to light me, like the lamp in the cockpit!

And outside is darkness and the Chaos that hasn't received the Gospel.

Lord, how long?

How long in this darkness? You see that I've almost been swallowed up! The darkness is my dwelling place.

Darkness of mind! Darkness of sound!

Darkness of the absence of God! Active darkness that pounces on you like the panther,

And the breath of Ishtar[4] in my gut, and the hand of the Mother of the Dead on my flesh! Darkness of my wicked heart!

But my duty isn't to go away, nor to be elsewhere, nor to let go of anything I'm holding,

Nor to overcome, but to resist;

[4] Mesopotamian goddess of war and sexual love.

And not to overcome, but to resist, and to hold the place I occupy!

And not to overcome, but not to be overcome.

How long, O Lord? This solitary vigil and enduring this darkness you did not make?

You have not commanded me to overcome, but not to be overcome. You have not put a sword in my hands.

You have not put a ringing cry in my mouth, like Achilles when he appeared naked on the other side of the trench,[5]

Not the wail of the cow-eating lion, but the human cry!

And in an instant the Invader, shuddering to a stop at the sound,

And the hearts of the women in the gynaeceum and the gods in the penetrant depths

Resounded at the voice of the Son of the Sea!

But you have put me in the earth, so that I may endure discomfort and narrowness and obscurity,

And the violence of these other rocks that press on me,

And that I may occupy my place forever, like a cut stone with its form and weight.

Don't allow me

To escape from your will, from the earth that is your will!

Stone under stone, and my work in your work, and my heart in your heart, and the passion of this heart full of cities!

So don't allow this person to come tempt me as though I were a young man,

Not with a song and with the beauty of her face,

(Where would I follow her, who is no longer there after four steps?),

[5] *Iliad*, Book XVIII: Achilles learns of the death of Patroclus and lets out a cry that reaches his mother, Thetis, in the depths of the sea.

But if even the poor beast answers to its given name,

How much more will my spirit find contagious

Language, finally real, and the feminine sigh and the intelligible kiss

And the pure, ineffable, contemplated meaning

For which it is my art to make a miserable shadow in letters and in words?

ANTISTROPHE III

— O thick companion! No! I will not let you go and I will not give you any rest.

And if you do not want to learn joy from me, you will learn suffering.

And I will not let you go down your road at the pace of other fellows,

Until you have guessed all that I mean to say, and it is not easy to hear

A woman who has no voice or mouth, no glance or raised finger.

And I will be, however, harder on you and crueler than if I were to dictate the word and the comma,

Until you have learned the measure I want, no use counting one-two, one-two; you will learn, even if it is with the death rattle!

Like your uncle, the fat hunter; when his apoplexy hit, they heard him groaning on the other side of the village.

It is your turn to be my master; get up! Walk with me, that's what I want,

So that I may watch and laugh, and so that I, the goddess, may imitate your mutilated progress!

I have not allowed you to walk with an even gait, like other men,

For you are too heavy to fly

And the foot that you put on the earth is wounded.

Not in joy, nor in suffering, with me there is no rest!

Why do you speak of a foundation? Rock alone is not a foundation, the flame is also a foundation,

The dancing and pitching flame, the flame leaping and snapping with its unequally forked tongue!

STROPHE III

— O portion! O reserved one! O inspiration! O, reserved part of myself! O, prior part of myself!

O, idea of myself, who were before I was!

O, part of myself, who are foreign to every place, and my eternal resemblance, you

Who touch on certain nights

My heart (like the dear friend who is a hand in my hand)

More unfortunate than the two stars, lovers, who find themselves each year on one side

And the other of the impassable Milky Way

Look at me, wounded and ridiculous, suffocating among all these stifling men, O blessed one, and say a celestial word!

Say only a human word!

Only my name in the Earth's maturity, in the sun of the hymeneal night,

And not one of those unbearable, silent words that you communicate to me alone

Like a cross to which my spirit should stay bound!

O, passion of the Word! O, retreat! O, unbearable solitude! O, separation from all men!

O, death of myself and of everything, in whom I must suffer creation!

O, sister! O, relentless guide! O, unpitying thing, how much longer?

Already, when I was a little child, you were there.

And now, I stay forever an isolated and unpaired man, full of worry and work.

He who has bought a woman at the right age, having put money aside little by little,

Is with her as in a closed circle, as in an indissoluble city, like the flawless joining of the beginning with the end,

And their children between them mature like tender, ripening seeds.

But you, I have no rights over you, and who knows when you'll come?

Who can know what you ask of me? More than ever, a woman.

You whisper in my ear. You ask me for the whole world!

I am not whole if I don't make a whole with the world around me. You're asking for all of me! You're asking me for the whole world!

When I hear your call, not a single being, not a single man,

Not a single voice that isn't needed for my unanimity.

But how am I needed? Who

Needs me, other than you, who won't say what you want.

Where is the society of all mankind? Where is the need between all mankind? Where is the city of all mankind?

Even though I understood every being,

Not a one of them is an end in itself, nor

The means to be what it must be.

And, however, when you call me, I mustn't answer only with myself, but with all the beings that surround me,

A whole poem like a single word, like a city within its walls, like the round of the mouth.

As the magistrate accomplished of old the sacrifice of the bull, of the pig, and of the sheep,

So must I drive the whole world to its end in a hecatomb of words!

I only find that I am needed in you, whom I cannot see, and I need all things in you, whom I cannot see,

They were not made for me, their order is not with me, but with the word that created them.

You want it! In the end, I must give it! And for that I must find myself

In everything, I who am of every latent thing the sign and the portion and the host.

What do you want from me? Must I create the world to understand it? Must I sire the world and bring it forth from my belly?

O, work of myself, in pains! O, work of this world to be represented!

As one sees on a printer's roll by successive layers

Appear the various parts of the drawing that does not yet exist,

And as a great mountain that divides its simultaneous waters between opposite pools,

So I work and will not know what I've done, so the spirit with a mortal spasm

Casts the word out from itself like a spring that knows

Nothing but its pressure and the sky's weight.

ANTISTROPHE III

— You call me the Muse, and my other name is Grace, the grace that is given to the condemned man and by which law and justice are tread upon.

And if you seek the reason, there is none other than

This love there is between you and me.

You did not choose me; it is I who chose you before you were born.

Among all the living beings, I am the word of grace addressed to you alone.

Should not God be free like you? Your freedom is the image of his own.

Behold, I have gone out to meet you, like mercy embracing justice, having called it forth.

Do not try to pull the wool over my eyes. Do not try to give me the world instead of you,

For I am asking for you, yourself.

O, liberator of mankind! O, he who unites images and cities!

Free yourself from yourself! You have united all mankind, unite yourself with yourself!

Be a single spirit! Be a single intention!

It is not the mason's board and trowel that reassemble and construct,

It is pure and simple fire that makes of many things, one.

Know that my jealousy is more terrible than death!

It's the death that calls all things to life.

As the word drew all things from non-being, so that they might die,

So you were born so that you could die in me.

As the sun calls all visible things to birth,

So the sun of the spirit, so the spirit like crucified lightning

Calls all things to knowing and behold, they are present to him all at once.

But after the abundance of April and the over-abundance of summer,

Behold the work of August, behold the extermination of High Noon,

Behold the broken seals of God, who comes to judge the earth by fire!

Behold how the destroyed earth and sky make a single nest in the flame,

And the relentless cry of the cricket fills the deafening furnace!

So the sun of the spirit is like a cricket in the sun of God.

EPODE

— Get away from me! I desperately turn towards the earth!

Get away from me! You will not take the cold taste of the earth from me,

This obstinacy with the earth that is in the marrow of my bones and in the pebble of my substance and in the black pit of my entrails!

In vain! You will not consume me!

In vain! The more you call me with the presence of fire, the more I draw down, towards the solid ground,

Like a big tree that inches down to find the rock and the tuff in the embrace and the screw of its eighty-two roots!

Whoever has bitten the earth keeps the taste between his teeth.

Whoever has tasted blood will no longer feed on bright water and ardent honey!

Whoever has loved the human soul, whoever has once been compact with another living soul, is caught there forever.

Something of him, forever outside of himself, lives from the bread of another body.

Who cried out? I hear a cry in the depths of the night!

I hear my dark sister of old, rising up to me once again,

The nocturnal spouse coming to me once again without a word,

To me once again with her heart, like a meal one shares in the darkness,

Her heart like the bread of suffering, like a vase full of tears.

Once again from Tenarus![6] Once again from the other side of this low canal that isn't even lit

By the ray of a leaden star and the gloomy horn of Hecate!

Tientsin, 1907.

Commentary on *La Muse qui est la Grâce*

The Fourth Ode, "*La Muse qui est la Grâce*," is as playful as the previous Ode was pious; and it ends in what Claudel calls "the ultimate evocation of human love." More critical readings of this Ode have been given than of any of the others, but most of them have focused on what is taken to be an irreducible conflict between pagan and Christian ideals. As in Alfred de Musset's

[6] Ancient town in Laconia, the entrance to Hades through which Eurydice was to follow Orpheus.

Nuits,[7] there is a dialogue in this poem between a poet and his Muse, and many critics have seen the poet as representing pagan romanticism and the Muse, austere Christian asceticism.[8] There is indeed an argument in this poem, and the "argument" Claudel gives at the beginning of the Ode is an outline not only of the Ode, but also of the lover's quarrel. First, the poet becomes poetically inebriated, in roughly the same state he was at the end of "The Muses." He begins to argue with his Muse, who slowly becomes Grace.[9] The drunken poet tries to send her away, saying that he is too busy with his human duties to be able to do what she wants him to do. He offers to give her the entire universe, recreated by his words—instead of his soul, which is what she wants. She refuses, reminding him of divine joy and his duty for holiness. Their argument ends with a dash, when the poet puts his fingers in his ears and goes back to life on earth, in the "highest possible evocation of fleshly and human love."

While Claudel refuses the path offered by the Muse at the end of the Ode, nothing in this Ode indicates an irreducible conflict between paganism and Christianity. The Muse, who makes the case for a retreat from the world, is a pagan goddess, while famously pious Claudel pulls her towards fleshly love. In fact, there is no more conflict between paganism and Christianity in Claudel's Ode than there is in the art of Michelangelo, or of Poussin. This receptiveness to pagan antiquity has been characteristic of the Catholic faith and art. Accordingly, the Greek and Roman gods and myths, as well as the pagan philosophers, are prophecies for Claudel, not abominations. There is no Puritanism in these verses. It would be more appropriate, rather than speaking of

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[7] This is where any comparison between Musset's *Nuits* and this Ode must end.

[8] E.g., Leo Spitzer, "Interpretation of an Ode by Paul Claudel," in *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics*, Princeton: 1967, pp. 183 et pass.

[9] The Muse who is also a Grace is Thalia, named as a Muse in Hesiod (*Theogony* line 77) and as a Grace, "lover of dancing," in Pindar (Olympic Ode 14). In the context of the Bible, grace is the word most often used to translate the Greek χαρις and the Hebrew חֵן, for divine blessing. The angel Gabriel, announcing the conception of Christ, calls her, "Full of Grace," and when he tells her not to be afraid, he says that she has found χαρις, grace or favor.

"antagonism" between the views of the poet and his Muse, to speak of the exchange as being agonistic, like an athletic contest that brings out the best in both athletes; and also, to a great extent, as erotic.

In this Fourth Ode, which was also written in 1907 (the exact period of composition is unknown), Claudel creates a variation on the three-part Pindaric Ode. Instead of a strophe, an antistrophe, and an epode given by a single chorus moving to different sides of the stage, there are succeeding strophes and antistrophes in which the poet and his Muse converse with each other. The poet ends their conversation with an epode. This Ode develops the dialogic form, which has been present in all the previous Odes. The dialogue became most explicit in the "pause" section of "Magnificat," when the poet has a conversation with his own soul. In this Ode, the argument between the poet and his Muse expresses the complexity of the soul's own feminine and masculine aspects, as well as the divine and the human. Their dialogue culminates in the great paradox of divine and human love, evoked with unparalleled depth and passion.

Like "*L'Esprit et l'eau*," "*La Muse qui est la Grâce"* surprises Claudel like a natural phenomenon. In "*L'Esprit et l'eau*," the breath of the Spirit comes over the tilled earth, in a crescendo of images punctuated by the words "*après*" and "*soudain*." The sea and the night overwhelm the port and the poet, and the repetition of the words "*encore*" and "*comme"* gives an underlying rhythm to the section, like a steady drum line. At the origin of the Ode is an "invasion of poetic inebriation"—inspiration coming upon the poet, unbidden and rather wild. The sea, image of life, death, and human love, rises up to "rattle" the poet like a dinghy in the shipyard. The syzygial tide ("*marée de syzygy*") of the beginning of the Ode is the extreme tide brought

about by the conjunction or opposition of the Sun and the Moon.[10] The poet, who became aware in the last Ode of the birth of Christ in his own soul, is the Sun, and his Muse, who is also part of his soul, and a Marian figure, is the Moon; this Ode will show us what happens during their conjunction and opposition.

In this first, introductory part of the Ode, the poetic transport, or furor, takes Claudel out of his respectable daily life into a state that would be more appropriate to a sentimental 19th century novel. These opening lines see Claudel express his weariness with the *"personnage"* he plays in the world; as a poet, he compares himself to a young woman waiting for her lover at the window of a white castle:

> *Ah, je suis las de ce personnage que je fais entre les hommes ! Voici la nuit ! Encore la fenêtre qui s'ouvre !*
> *Et je suis comme la jeune fille à la fenêtre du beau château blanc, dans le clair de lune,*
> *Qui entend, le cœur bondissant, ce bienheureux sifflement sous les arbres et le bruit de deux chevaux qui s'agitent,*
> *Et elle ne regrette point la maison, mais elle est comme un petit tigre qui se ramasse, et tout son cœur est soulevé par l'amour de la vie et par la grande force comique !*

In the first verset, Claudel exclaims his lassitude, and then in two short phrases set off by exclamation marks, sees the night and opens the window. The image begins to move quickly as he imagines himself as a young lady, at the window of a castle; an enjambment signals her surprise as she hears her lover's whistle and the sound of two moving horses. The last, longer verset conveys the way the girl pounces like a tiger, flying through the air, lifted up by lust for life and "the great comedic force" (in other words, Eros) as she falls onto the waiting horse.

If daily life is like daylight, the poetic state is like nighttime—and like being inebriated. Claudel compares himself to a vintner; his words are like fermenting grapes, and treading them

[10] "Syzygy" is also a literary term, in both Greek drama (Aristophanes) and poetry, and its etymological origin is, by way of late Latin, a Greek word for coupling.

goes to his head. The next lines are, accordingly, full of short, giddy, and even silly exclamations:

> *Ah, ce soir est à moi ! ah, cette grande nuit est à moi ! tout le gouffre de la nuit comme la salle illuminée pour la jeune fille à son premier bal !*
> *Elle ne fait que de commencer ! il sera temps de dormir un autre jour !*
> *Ah, je suis ivre ! ah, je suis livré au dieu ! j'entends une voix en moi et la mesure qui s'accélère, le mouvement de la joie,*
> *L'ébranlement de la cohorte Olympique, la marche divinement tempérée !*

For the second time, he feels like a young lady, now full of the excitement and anticipation of her first ball. The Olympian gods come to join in the dancing. He then becomes so merry that the heady rhythm of the next few versets breaks up, with an enjambment, followed by a trumpet blast and the sounding of a gong:

> *Que m'importent tous les hommes à présent ! Ce n'est pas pour eux que je suis fait, mais pour le*
> *Transport de cette mesure sacrée !*
> *O le cri de la trompette bouchée ! ô le coup sourd sur la tonne orgiaque !*

As the rhythm of the versets becomes more and more jerky, this time with question marks, Claudel declares, rather self-consciously, albeit drunkenly, how he could care less what other people think of him, whether they can follow him or even hear him or not: "*Que m'importe aucun d'eux ? Ce rythme seul ! Qu'ils me suivent ou non ? Que m'importe qu'ils m'entendent ou pas ?"* At this point, the poet is tipsily dancing to a rhythm in his head.

In the final riff, the poet makes a Pindaric boast about his ability to make poetry out of ordinary language, not resorting to rhymes or even magical formulas (marking his emancipation from the High Symbolism of Mallarmé). His poems are just made of everyday words:

> *Ce sont les mots de tous les jours, et ce ne sont point les mêmes !*
> *Vous ne trouverez point de rimes dans mes vers ni aucun sortilège. Ce sont vos phrases mêmes. Pas aucune de vos phrases que je ne sache reprendre !*
> *Ces fleurs sont vos fleurs et vous dites que vous ne les reconnaissez pas.*

Et ces pieds sont vos pieds, mais voici que je marche sur la mer et que je foule les eaux de la mer en triomphe !

The poet teases the reader, telling him that he is using his own phrasing, his own flowers, and his own feet, even though ordinary language and objects have become unrecognizable in the context of the poem. This is the "magic" of poetry—not ritual incantations or even a specific way of writing, like the rhyme or a particular device, but transforming the everyday into something strange and wonderful. In the final line of this introductory section, the drunken poet walks on water, advancing triumphantly over the sea and taking the reader with him.

After the "invasion of poetic inebriation," the first strophe, or 'turn,' begins, as though the introduction had been an invocation, and the poet was only now beginning to write the promised poem. He addresses his Muse, teasing her, and tells her that he intends to write a grand old poem about the victory of man over chance (*"le grand poëme de l'homme soustrait au hasard"*). The first lines of the strophe read almost as though he is leaning over the table to speak to a beautiful woman with whom he is rather familiar:

— O Muse, il sera temps de dormir un autre jour ! Mais puisque cette grande nuit tout entière est à nous,
Et que je suis un peu ivre en sorte qu'un autre mot parfois
Vient à la place du vrai, à la façon que tu aimes,
Laisse-moi avoir explication avec toi,
Laisse-moi te refouler dans cette strophe, avant que tu ne reviennes sur moi comme une vague avec un cri félin !

He looks at her and tells her he's not ready to go to sleep; the "great night" of the Ode is theirs. He knows that she likes it when he's in this state, having lost control over which word goes where; he begins repeating, "*Laisse-moi*," like a man trying to wear down a woman's resistance, and his proposition of having "*explication*" with her is as sexual as it is literary. He proposes to drive her back (*refouler*) into this strophe, before she can come back "like a wave with the cry of

a cat."[11] Claudel is proposing that they do a kind of agonistic dance—I lead, then you lead, my strophe, then your antistrophe. Rather than being primarily meter-driven, Claudel's sections are direct responses to each other, in an erotic dialogue.

Soon, like old lovers, the Muse and the poet begin to bicker; the silent Muse listens petulantly to the poet, who reacts to her impatient looks and gestures. He asks her to leave him alone, with the entreaty, "*laisse-moi*," as well as the subjunctive, "*fasse*," continuing to beat a soft cadence in the middle of the strophe. He claims to suffer from her critical eye on him, accusing him of pretending; he asks her to let him be "*nécessaire*," needed, to strongly fill "*une place reconnue et approuvée*," like someone who constructs railroads or founds trade unions:

> *Va-t'en de moi un peu ! laisse-moi faire ce que je veux un peu !*
> *Car, quoi que je fasse et si que je le fasse de mon mieux,*
> *Bientôt je vois un œil se lever sur moi en silence comme vers quelqu'un qui feint.*
> *Laisse-moi être nécessaire ! laisse-moi remplir fortement une place reconnue et approuvée,*
> *Comme un constructeur de chemins de fer, on sait qu'il ne sert pas à rien, comme un fondateur de syndicats !*

He is seeking her approval for doing those things that other men now recognize as useful; and "*constructeur de chemins de fer*," and *"fondateur de syndicats,"* sound comically modern in this Pindar-inspired Ode. The poet asks that his Muse allow him to fulfill a socially acceptable, masculine role, and he expresses his discomfort at the action she does lead him to do, instead. At this point, his thoughts begin to turn away from her, even as he continues to speak directly to her, and his versets take on a rhythm more adapted to regular speech. He explains to her that he was waiting for age to deliver him from the "furors" of the poetic bacchanal; but rather than burning

[11] W. Fitzgerald (*Agonistic Poetry: The Pindaric Mode in Pindar, Horace, Hölderlin and the English Ode*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 212N27) and Spitzer (1967) see this verset as a direct reference to Pindar. This seems unlikely, as the wave metaphor they refer to in *Olympian X* refers to the erasing of the memory of a debt Pindar owes, and this verset does not appear to parallel Pindar's in any other way.

the he-goat, like Bacchus, he proposes to make do with this deep laughter by turning it to his own uses ("*Mais, loin que j'immole le bouc, à ce rire qui gagne des couches plus profondes / Il me faut trouver que je ne fais plus sa part.*")

Sounding increasingly desperate, like a husband trying to convince his wife of an investment plan she believes to be unsound, he proposes to at least go into a more useful form of writing, like the small statue in the Louvre of an Egyptian scribe recording the contents of tributes, booty, trade, and customs. As the Muse becomes more and more skeptical, the poet attempts to persuade her with a lyrical sally, multiplying words and images and resorting to the repetition of "*Ainsi*," to emphasize the nobility of the proposed task:

> *Ainsi le scribe Égyptien recensait de sa point minutieuse les tributs, et les parts de butin, et les files de dix captifs attachés,*
> *Et les mesures de blé que l'on porte à la meule banale, et les barques à la douane.*
> *Ainsi l'antique sculpteur avec sa tignasse rougie à la chaux attrapé à sa borne de basalte noir avec la massette et le ciseau,*
> *Et de temps en temps il souffle sur ses caractères pareils à des clous entrecroisés pour ôter la poussière et se recule avec contentement.*

He describes the respectable note-taking of the middle-aged scribe, and the self-satisfaction of the ancient sculptor of a basalt slab, in order to tell her how pleased it would make him to do what he is proposing—i.e., something useful—rather than what she has in mind.

Finally, the Muse silently breaks Claudel's *élan* and forces him to get to the point. Claudel proposes soaring images of light and the cosmos to win her over, but as he reveals the essence of his plan to become a successful poet, beloved of his contemporaries, her skeptical reaction comically undermines his poetic flight. In long, lyrical versets, he compares his great poem to the serene moon over the countryside in harvest, and to the Milky Way; and he asks her to let him, like Homer and Pindar, sing of the works of men—and then there is a comic turn:

Et je voudrais composer un grand poëme plus clair que la lune qui brille avec sérénité sur la campagne dans la semaine de la moisson,
Et tracer une grande Voie triomphale au travers de la Terre,
Au lieu de courir comme je peux la main sur l'échine de ce quadrupède ailé qui m'entraîne, dans sa course cassée qui est à moitié aile et bond !
Laisse-moi chanter les œuvres des hommes et que chacun retrouve dans mes vers ces choses qui lui sont connues,
Comme de haut on a plaisir à reconnaître sa maison, et la gare, et la mairie, et ce bonhomme avec son chapeau de paille, mais l'espace autour de soi est immense !
Car à quoi sert l'écrivain, si ce n'est à tenir des comptes ?
Que ce soit les siens ou d'un magasin de chaussures, ou de l'humanité tout entière.

After the exalted images and the final repetition of "*Laisse-moi,*" he proposes a crowd-pleasing poem that would be like a short trip in a biplane or a hot-air balloon, in which the bourgeois man can enjoy looking from above at his own house, and the train station, and the city hall, all while wondering at the great height and space in which he has been projected. But the banality of his project overtakes him, as he tells her that the real purpose of writing is accounting—keeping one's own books, or those of a shoe store, or even the books of all humanity. At this point, she's had enough, and he has to calm her down:

Ne t'indigne pas ! ô sœur de la noire Pythie qui broie la feuille de laurier entre ses mâchoires resserrées par le trisme prophétique et un filet de salive verte coule du coin de sa bouche !
Ne me blesse point avec ce trait de tes yeux !
O géante ! ne te lève pas avec cet air de liberté sublime !
O vent sur le désert ! ô ma bien-aimée pareille aux quadriges de Pharaon !

The poet primarily tries to appease the angry Muse with florid praise, calling her the sister of the Delphic Sybil, Pythia, and, by extension, a prophet, and multiplies the "O"s and biblical references, even as he begs her not to wound him with her eyes or "rise up with this air of sublime liberty." The final compliment is Biblical: she is the wind over the desert, the beloved as mighty as Pharaoh's chariots.

In his final attempt to calm the Muse's anger and impatience, the poet resorts to the philosophical language and metaphors of the previous three Odes (more evidence that this conversation is not a simple matter of pagan against Christian, or even of flesh against spirit). He proposes to speak in her stead, "*Comme l'antique poëte parlait de la part des dieux privés de présence,"* as Homer once spoke for Jupiter or Virgil for Juno. For Claudel, these gods did not have a real presence, but instead needed to receive a voice from the ancient poets. In turn, he asks whether the Muse would like his voice, which would speak for intelligible nature, "*propos à l'homme adressé*." Each thing, he says, was meant for intelligent analysis, just as light was meant for the eye and sound for the ears. He makes a parallel between his work as a writer and the miner, prospector, chemist, scholar, machine weaver, or farmer. This last part of the strophe is rhythmically similar to the more theoretical passages in "*L'Esprit et l'eau*," where the use of enjambments in the versets makes for a kind of effect like the amalgamating flow of liquids from tubes to beakers:

> *Et comme lumière pour l'œil et le son pour l'oreille, ainsi toute chose pour l'analyse de l'intelligence,*
> *Continuée avec l'intelligence qui la*
> *Refait de l'élément qu'elle récupère,*
> *Que ce soit la pioche qui le dégage, ou le pan du prospecteur et l'amalgame de mercure,*
> *Ou le savant, la plume à la main, ou le tricot des métiers, ou la charrue.*
> *Et je puis parler, continu avec toute chose muette,*
> *Parole qui est à sa place intelligence et volonté.*
> *Je chanterai le grand poëme de l'homme soustrait au hasard*[12] *!*

In the final line, the essence of the poet's proposal to his Muse has been distilled into the refined, albeit contentious, product of their testy exchange: the poet would like to sing the "great poem of man," finally "freed from chance," as the modern project of taming nature has succeeded. He has

[12] This may be a defiant allusion to the 1897 version of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, "Jamais un coup de dés n'abolira le hasard."

been able to analyze nature just as he could see light or hear sound, and this kind of contemplation has, in fact, allowed him to reveal her very laws and elements. Speaking for every thing, he tells the Muse that he will sing the victory of man, using all of nature for his own liberation from chance.

The first Antistrophe gives us the Muse's petulant reaction; now, she is *énervée*, and in the first line, she lets Claudel have it: "*Que m'importent toutes vos machines et toutes vos œuvres d'esclaves et vos livres et vos écritures ?*" She begins with machines, and then she declares all of man's work to be slavish—and books and writing, all his beautiful theories, are no better! She makes fun of him as a "son of the earth," a "*pataud,*" a word for oaf that originally meant "dog with big paws." She even takes a low blow at Claudel's father's position as a minor clerk, as well as to Claudel's own, rather prosaic work in financial diplomacy, and then laments her own lot as "*une Immortelle attachée à ce lourd imbécile*"—she is part of his own soul, so she cannot get away from him!

Since she cannot escape from him, she instead must explain why his plan to sing of the victory of human intelligence will never be good or "high" enough. At this point, her volley of insulting versets changes to longer, and more patient, exclamations:

> *Ce n'est point avec le tour et le ciseau que l'on fait un homme vivant, mais avec une femme, ce n'est pas avec l'encre et la plume que l'on fait une parole vivante !*
> *Quel compte donc fais-tu des femmes ? tout serait trop facile sans elles. Et moi, je suis une femme entre les femmes !*

We can almost see her holding her head in her hands as she explains to Claudel, using a parallelism reminiscent of Hebrew wisdom poetry, that Pygmalion was only a myth—a living person cannot be made with a hammer and chisel, and a living word cannot be made with plume and ink. This is a reference to Bergson's opposition between *le mécanique* and *le vivant*, what is

mechanical and what is alive. Everything, says the Muse, would be so easy without women! She is not "*accessible à la raison*," and he can't make whatever he wants to make with her. If he analyzes her, separating her into the elements of her composition, he will kill her. It is not possible for him to make life, only to give it—and for that, he needs a woman. So it is, she says, for living words.

In the next lines, the Muse begins to woo Claudel, proposing another poetic future. She uses a repetitive, almost hypnotic cadence, as well as internal repetition and images from the Song of Songs:

> *Et je ne veux pas que tu aimes une autre femme que moi, mais moi seule, car il n'en est pas de si belle que je suis,*
> *Et jamais tu ne seras vieux pour moi, mais toujours plus à mes yeux jeune et beau, jusque tu sois un immortel avec moi !*

Like Solomon's lover, she is jealous; and she justifies her jealousy with a Pindaric boast, saying that she has a right to be jealous because she is the most beautiful woman of them all; and furthermore, in her gaze, he will never become old, and like the other human lovers of the gods, she will make him an immortal.

The Muse is not like the Egyptian scribe, faithfully transcribing the accounts for the ages, and she does not fulfill a "recognized place." In another paradoxical description, although she is immortal and spiritual, she emphasizes her own transience and fragility. She enigmatically tells Claudel that she will not always be with him. Her feet rest on the surface of the earth like a man pushing himself up off of the bottom of a pond, or a bird trying to land, or a flame on a wick. She is, nevertheless, the beloved, with "the face that destroys death." Here, she gives the paradox of divine time that was a major theme in "Magnificat": eternal, but at the same time, only in the present moment, and never something that could be nailed down and repeated—a paradox for the

poet or artist, and perhaps the main reason that Claudel be reduced to a simple "bookkeeper" of the most familiar and worldly-important aspects of his time.

Now she identifies her poetic furor with the new wine of the Gospels. This wine does exactly what Claudel complained about it doing, when he told her how people tolerate this kind of silliness in a downy-faced youth, but not in a mature man. The Muse makes a joke when she gives the example of "*l'époux d'une terre maigre et le colon d'une femme querelleuse"* (rather than the spouse of a querulous wife and the settler of a wretched land). This miserable man, after drinking his fill of her wine, "*ne connaît plus le créancier et le propriétaire"*—he forgets his lenders and his landowner, and instead, mirroring Claudel's reference to Bacchus, he leaps like a god on the stage, crowned with vines. She ends her image by saying that the man intoxicated by this wine, "*plein de gaieté, voit double, / Les choses à la fois comme elles sont et comme elles ne sont pas et les gens commencent à ne pas comprendre ce qu'il dit."* The inebriated man sees double, and what he sees is things as they really are, as well as the way people usually see them; which is why the Muse ends the image with an interrogation: "*La vérité sera-t-elle moins forte que le mensonge ?*" What people do not understand is the truth; the man who has drunk of this "new wine" sees the truth and appearances, at the same time.

In between insults, she tells him to enjoy the golden hour, rather than reason; she asks him, rather, to understand, and to learn how to laugh like a god. As in Pindar, the form of the antistrophe reflects, in some way, the strophe that came before it. Besides using, like the poet, a similar cadence in the versets, the Muse alternates apostrophe, images that are also extended metaphors, and direct commands. The repetition of direct commands in this first antistrophe has a similar effect to what the poet does with "*Laisse-moi*" in the first strophe—but the variation in the Muse's verbs makes her response much more lively than his first speech. She introduces the

previous image, the inebriated settler, with the verset, "*O sot, au lieu de raisonner, profite de cette heure d'or ! Souris ! Comprends, tête de pierre ! O face d'âne, apprends le grand rire divin !*" In the last part of the antistrophe, she tells him, successively, "*Avance-toi et vois l'éternel matin*"; "*Triomphe et frappe du pied la terre"; "Ris […] Et raille, et regarde*." This makes for a kind of unfolding of the previous command, or what it means to give in fully to the poetic furor, to drink the "new wine": rather than reasoning, he should look at the beauty of the eternal morning and smile. *"Comprends*," she says, in the sense of "*prendre avec*," with an emphasis on the prefix com- (the same as in the word "community"). Triumphing and striking the earth with his feet means that he should free himself from worldly cares, but it is also fairly close to the word for understanding in German, of which Claudel would have been aware—*verstehen,* to stand upon. Lastly, the Muse commands the poet to laugh. True understanding, in other words, implies both wonder and detachment.

As an alternative to the poet's desire to describe familiar things from an airplane, or to say a word with "intelligence and will" for all the mute things, she proposes that he go out and see the "eternal morning, the earth and the sea under the morning sun, like someone appearing before the throne of God," or like Jupiter himself coming out of the Dikteon Cave. He must see the world, "*non plus comme un esclave soumis, mais comme l'héritier et le fils légitime*." She tells him that he has at the same time inherited the Earth, and he is its legitimate son; he cannot speak for it in the way he has proposed, previously, both in this Ode and the others. She accuses him of using his intelligence and will to resist the evidence of joy and the violence of the "*souffle céleste*."

Next, the Muse asks him to "triumph" over the Earth, but not in the way that he wants to celebrate, the triumph he has proposed to sing of the 19th century colonists, adventurers, and

builders of railroads, who believed they had finally freed man from the caprices of Fortuna. No, she wants him to triumph over the world as a man who is no longer attached to anything—to dance over the earth in the way he is afraid to do, lest others think he is ridiculous. And finally, she tells him to "laugh" at all the perishable things he took seriously, for "*elles font semblant d'être là et elles passent. / Et elles font semblant de passer, et elles ne cessent d'être là !*" He is with God, so the way to transform the world is not with human instruments, "*la pioche*," *"la hache*," "*la truelle*," et "*l'épée*," but with the eyes of his spirit. She has now reached the essence of her counter-proposal: forget trying to do something "useful," lose yourself in the poetic furor or spirit, and be content to look at all things with divine eyes—and that also means, with total detachment.

How does the poet respond to her proposal? In this second strophe, he claims to stand his ground—"*Non, tu ne me feras pas reculer advantage*"; and at the same time, his intensified use of repetition, as well as the predominance of short, exclamatory phrases, shows that he is responding to her challenge both by making an emotional outburst and by seriously mulling over what she has said. The first word he repeats is "*paroles,*" and then, a series of questions punctuated by "*pourquoi"*:

> *— Non, tu ne me feras pas reculer davantage. Paroles, paroles,*
> *Paroles, paroles de la femme ! paroles, paroles de déesse ! paroles de tentatrice !*
> *Pourquoi me tenter ? pourquoi me traîner là où je ne puis pas voler ? pourquoi*
> *Montrer ce que je ne puis pas voir ?*
> *Et parler de la liberté à ce fils de la terre !*

He sees her proposal that he let go of usefulness and of human purpose to lose himself in the poetic furor, to be lost in the Spirit, as a kind of temptation; he argues that she is proposing to "drag him" to a domain he cannot visit on his own. He accuses her of trying to show him

something that he cannot see. He desires to do what she says—otherwise there would be no temptation—and he even believes that it is divine; and yet he still resists.

The poet asks how he, who is so tied to the earth, could be free. He uses the word "earth" instead of the word "world," because he is bypassing the familiar Christian opposition between what belongs strictly to this world and what transcends it. Instead of the world, he speaks of the earth, a co-created thing—his creaturely brother. And isn't this *earthly* duty a good thing? The crux of it all is the word duty, "*devoir,*" the next repeated word, which seems to be another word for care or obligation:

> *J'ai un devoir qui n'est pas rempli ! un devoir envers toute chose, pas aucune*
> *A quoi je ne sois pas obligé, laisse-moi donc*
> *Tenir à cela que je ne puis posséder !*

To the old idea that nothing on this old earth can be possessed, since it all rusts and rots anyway, he replies, with another "*laisse-moi*," that she should at least allow him to be attached to those things that he cannot possess. In fact, he has a duty towards each of them. It is good for him to be attached to them; they need him.

"A woman," he says, "has no duty"—for Claudel, this particular kind of understanding, implying wonder and detachment from the world, seems to be a kind of feminine genius. The figure of the contemplative life, in Catholic tradition, is Mary Magdalene, who sits in the Gospel of Luke rapt at the foot of Jesus while her sister, Martha, prepares the meal. This kind of attentive listening not only requires leaving worldly duties to others; it also contrasts greatly with the kind of intelligent analysis Claudel previously proposed. This kind of contemplation temporarily leaves duty aside, but ultimately, it allows for greater control and efficiency (the victory of man over chance). That kind of contemplation, sooner or later, proves itself useful. Claudel, here, sees a conflict between his duty as a man, which is to make the conditions for

continued human existence possible, and the kind of poetic contemplation his Muse is proposing, which is all about giving a "living word," and being for the sake of being.

The poet now re-appropriates the Muse's invitation to laugh at all the passing things. Jacques Houriez suggests that the italicized phrase, "*Rions, car ceci est bon !*," refers to "And God saw that it was good," in Genesis[13]—another reference to the creation passages that have figured so frequently in the previous Odes. Claudel pauses in this present moment and its goodness, and he speaks to the woman that is in him (*O la femme qui est en moi !*)—not, at this time, his Muse, but the part of his soul who experiences great attachment and tenderness for the people and things around him. When he says, "*Rions*," he echoes the Muse's command that he should laugh and not take the world seriously, since it is so moveable. No, he says—it is appropriate to laugh, but because this moment is so *good*. That said, he quickly returns to explaining his duties as a man, which implies another, albeit related, kind of attachment. The poet explains that he has had to work hard for all the things that are not given away for free, "*qu'il faut prendre pour les avoir, apprendre, comprendre*"—the good, hard work of getting through school, having a job, and providing for himself and for his family. Her proposition that she lose himself completely in the kind of contemplation that requires wonder and detachment from the world tempts him "cruelly"; "*Ah, quoique mon cœur se brise, non !"* he says.

What the Muse is proposing is like a light "*qui n'est pas pour les fils de la Terre*." He proposes, instead, a light that is well-adjusted to his eyes; an earthly light, weak enough to need the darkness to be able to see it, just like the lamp of a tabernacle in a dark church. At this point, a darkness descends upon the poem. Outside are "*les ténèbres et le Chaos qui n'a point reçu*

[13] Houriez 1998, p. 56.

l'Évangile." The passage continues like a meditation; the words "*Ténèbres*," "*vaincre*" and *"résister*" give it a sacred cadence, as the theme becomes more and more profound:

> *Seigneur, combien de temps encore ?*
> *Combien de temps dans ces ténèbres ? vous voyez que je suis presque englouti ! Les ténèbres sont mon habitation.*
> *Ténèbres de l'intelligence ! ténèbres du son !*
> *Ténèbres de la privation de Dieu ! ténèbres actives qui sautent sur vous comme la panthère,*
> *Et l'haleine d'Istar au fond de mes entrailles, et la main de la Mère-des-Morts sur ma chair ! Ténèbres de mon cœur mauvais !*
> *Mais mon devoir n'est pas de m'en aller, ni d'être ailleurs, ni de lâcher aucune chose que je tiens,*
> *Ni de vaincre, mais de résister,*
> *Et ni de vaincre, mais de résister, et de tenir la place que j'occupe !*
> *Et ni de vaincre, mais de n'être pas vaincu.*
> *O Seigneur, combien de temps encore ? cette veille solitaire et l'endurance de ces ténèbres que vous n'avez pas faites ?*

Claudel must stay—he must "resist"—in these shadows, like the Host in the dark church, in silence, with a light so weak that it can be difficult to see. The shadows are in his own mind, of all the things that he cannot understand; all the things that he cannot hear; and they are in his heart, in the darkness in prayer, when God seems absent; the fleshly darkness of unbidden, gnawing desire and death; and finally, the worst kind of darkness, one's own lack of love. When he speaks of his duty, he is not talking to her about worldly ambition or greed. What he says is that it is his duty to hold on to all the things that he is holding in his hands, to resist those things being lost to the darkness—but this also means that he, himself, must stay here, in the *hic et nunc*! It is as though the Muse who has revealed herself as Grace has become too difficult for him to bear, like a light that is too bright for his eyes. Perhaps it is because he fears that what he loves will disappear in the light.

His resistance, he says, is not about winning—he has no sword, no cry of Achilles, whose grief wakes the gods of the deep. Instead, and the versets in this section are ponderous because

they are heavy with meaning, he has been placed in the Earth, so that he must "*endure la gêne et l'étroitesse et l'obscurité,*" as well as the "*violence*" of all the other rocks pushing up against him.[14] He is tempted to detach himself completely from the earth, but he reminds God that nature itself is also his will:

> *Ne me permettez point*
> *De me soustraire à votre volonté, à la terre qui est votre volonté !*
> *La pierre sous l'autre pierre, et mon œuvre dans votre œuvre, et mon cœur dans votre cœur, et la passion de ce cœur plein de cités !*

He is a rock under other rocks; his work, he says, lies within nature ("*votre œuvre")*, and his heart is inside God's own heart, since that heart has now come into the world as a human heart. The duty he asks to accomplish in *this* world is the "passion" of a man's heart, "full of cities." He is begging to stay in the dark of this Earth as a creature, imperfect and real.

Now Claudel addresses God, asking him not to allow the Muse to come to tempt him, as though he were a young man again, but not with singing and a beautiful face—her presence is more fleeting than that—but with "*le langage enfin réel et le soupir féminin et le baiser intelligible / Et le sens pur ineffablement contemplé.*" The Muse is inviting him to lose himself in the intelligible beauty, in the divine; she wants him to detach himself completely from the earth. His art as a poet, he says, is to pick this language of the reality of things, the divine language of the Bride and the Bridegroom that is the hidden meaning of the world, and to make a "miserable shadow" of it using "letters and words." But he *cannot* leave the earth to listen exclusively to this divine language: he has work to do.

Claudel has asked the Muse to stop tempting him. In this second Antistrophe, she accepts his attachment to the Earth, but she refuses to leave him alone; in fact, she tells him that she

[14] Cf. Proverbs 2:17.

intends to make him suffer all the more. She will not allow him to rest, and like an angry sorceress, she solemnly enumerates the ways he will suffer throughout this short passage. The repetition of the words "*Et,*" and "*Jusque,*" at the beginning of several versets gives a heavy rhythm to the passage, just as the Muse accuses Claudel himself of being heavy and speaks to him of his own inevitable death. Since he does not want to learn "joy" from her, he will learn "pain."[15] She has offered total detachment from the Earth, which would bring him joy without suffering. He has chosen attachment out of love for all things. The result of this is a fate that is as ponderous and awkward as the rhythm of her antistrophe. He cannot "*aller du pas des autres bonhommes*," since she will force him to understand everything she tells him—and it is hard to understand a spirit. She suggests that the process may take his entire life, even until his "death rattle"—and she gives the example of his uncle's loud death to give her words more morbid force. Cruelly, she asks him to stand up and walk, so she can watch him and laugh at his "*avancement mutilé.*" His foot is wounded, and he is too heavy to fly—his life already contains too many painful relationships, including with his mother, his older sister (whose death will be famously tragic), and the woman he impossibly loves. And his Muse says that she will not let him rest, not in joy or in suffering. She has accepted his attachment to the world, but she will make him pay for it in full—the pull towards the divine will never end. And finally, she tells him, enigmatically, that rock is not the only foundation—the dancing and pitching, double flame is also a foundation. Here, she is speaking of the spiritual meaning of each thing, which also holds up the world.

In the third strophe, Claudel begins again with direct address, but this time he gives a much clearer picture of who his Muse actually is:

[15] Cf. Paul on marriage in 1 Co 7:18.

— O part ! ô réservée ! ô inspiratrice ! ô partie réservée de moi-même ! ô partie antérieure de moi-même !
O idée de moi-même qui étais avant moi !
O partie de moi-même qui es étrangère à tout lieu et ma ressemblance éternelle qui
Touches à certaines nuits
Mon cœur (comme l'ami qui est une main dans ma main)
Plus infortunés que ces deux astres amants qui à chaque an se retrouvent d'un côté
Et de l'autre de l'infranchissable Lait

The Muse is the highest part of his soul, "set aside," his inspiration. He calls her the earliest part of himself, the "idea of myself who was before me," only a sojourner in this life, and yet an eternal resemblance. She touches his heart, his inmost person, in the same way as "the friend who is a hand in [his] hand." He may be speaking of Erato, his lover, who touched his hand in "The Muses," but here, he uses the masculine instead of the feminine. In his correspondence, Claudel often ends letters to close male friends with, "I warmly shake your hand," so it seems likely that he is speaking here of that kind of friend. And yet he and this part of his soul are also like "star-crossed lovers," in a first reference to the Chinese legend of the weaver girl and the cowherd who became the stars Vega and Altair, separated by the Milky Way.[16]

Claudel asks his Muse to take pity on him, "*ridicule et blessé, étouffé au milieu de ces hommes irrespirables,"* and to tell him a heavenly word—a word that is at the same time celestial and human. He says it could be his name as it will be, in the maturity of the world, "*ce soleil de la nuit hyménéenne,"*[17] the glorious consummation of all things that Christ called a wedding feast. He asks her *not* to tell him a word that will crucify him: "*Et non pas un de ces terribles mots sans un son que tu me communiques un seul / Comme une croix pour que mon esprit y reste attaché !"* The tortured syntax of these two versets, as well as the awkward enjambment, models the work and pain that such an enigmatic word would cause for his spirit.

[16] Claudel will later use this image to represent Prouhèze and Rodrigue in the *Soulier de satin*.
[17] This is a reference to Revelation 21:23 and 22:5.

The Muse now releases a volley of epithets that again describe who his Muse is. He has already said that she is the "set-apart" and "eternal" part of his soul, as well as his inspiration. Now he says that she is his passion, his retreat from the world, his terrible solitude, his separation from other men, and even his own death:

> *O passion de la Parole ! ô retrait ! ô terrible solitude ! ô séparation de tous les hommes !*
> *O mort de moi-même et de tout, en qui il me faut souffrir création !*
> *O sœur ! ô conductrice ! ô impitoyable, combien de temps encore ?*
> *Déjà quand j'étais un petit enfant, c'était toi-même.*
> *Et maintenant pour toujours je demeure l'homme unique et impair, plein d'inquiétude et de travaux.*

By calling him to rise above all things, the Muse separates him from the earth, as well as from his fellow men; she is at the same time the death of his own self and of all things, in which he must "suffer creation." He calls her his sister, the pitiless thing that drives him during his short life on Earth. He has suffered her inspiration from childhood, and now that he has matured, she has grown with him, a man "*unique et impair*," like a prime number, full of worries and work. He does not go looking for inspiration; his Muse comes upon him and *works upon him*. He is giving voice to his own experience of writing under the inspiration that comes, unbidden and even unwelcome.

Unlike the steady presence of a spouse, Claudel's Muse comes and goes—although she can demand even more of him than his own wife. He uses a priamel, a poetic device Pindar uses often in his Odes, beginning with a detailed list of alternatives that serve as foils to the real subject, revealed at the end. In these lines, he emphasizes how unpredictable and yet demanding his Muse can be:

> *Celui qui a acheté une femme à l'âge juste, ayant mis l'argent de côté peu à peu,*
> *Il est avec elle comme un cercle fermé et comme une cité indissoluble, comme l'union du principe et de la fin qui est sans défaut,*

Et leurs enfants grandissent entre eux deux comme de tendres graines mûrissantes.
Mais toi, je n'ai aucun droit sur toi et qui peut savoir quand tu viens ?

A man and his wife are like a closed circle or a fortified city, and they make a space between them where their children can safely grow; but a man has no rights over his Muse and never knows when she will come to him. He doesn't know what she will ask; and at this instant, she whispers in his ear, and asks for the entire world. He tells her that the whole world is in him, so she is asking for all of it.

Unlike any of his regular activities, when he hears her call, he needs all the voices of all the things in the world to answer it—but, he asks, do they need him? "*Mais en quoi ma propre nécessité ? à qui / Suis-je nécessaire, qu'à toi-même qui ne dis pas ce que tu veux.*" He must listen to this silent voice that does not say what it wants, and even makes him feel useless. In this retreat from the world, the "unnecessary" contemplation of poetry, he looks for human society and doesn't find it. He says that were he to understand all the beings, not one of them would be an end in itself, nor even the means for being itself:

Quand je comprendrais tous les êtres,
Aucun d'eux n'est une fin en soi, ni
Le moyen pour qu'il soit il le faut.

The mysterious space in this verse is the "gap" in understanding, the missing, useless, unnecessary piece that is the end and the means. "*il le faut,*" says Claudel, repeating what he said in the First Ode about the spaces being even more important than the writing on the page. And yet she calls him to answer with all the beings, with the entire city, and with the entire city—"*Un poëme tout entier comme un seul mot tel qu'une cité dans son enceinte pareille au rond de la bouche*." Like the Roman magistrate, he must make a sacrifice; but instead of beef, pork, and mutton, he must burn the entire world in words. His own providential necessity can

only be found in her, whom he cannot see; but the necessity of all things for him can also be found in her.

And now, he reveals that she, herself, is the creating word in him. All the things in the world were *not* made for him, and their order is not up to him, but to the word that created them. This is what she wants: that he give himself and find himself in all things, since he is "*le signe et la parcelle et l'hostie*" of the world. His questioning reaches a new pitch of intensity in two versets that rhythmically parallel parts of the dramatic exchange between Job and God in the Book of Job: *"Qu'exiges-tu de moi ? est-ce qu'il me faut créer le monde pour le comprendre ? / Est-ce qu'il me faut engendrer le monde et le faire sortir de mes entrailles ?"* The first question makes a reference to his desire to sing of man's works: "Do I actually need to (re-)create the world myself, in order to understand it?" And the second refers to her accusation that there would still be no room in his system for women, were he to do this: "Do you want me to engender the world and then give birth to it?" It would seem that this is, indeed, what she wants him to do—to suffer the painful birth of himself and the world, to literally give birth: "*O œuvre de moi-même dans la douleur ! ô œuvre de ce monde à le représenter !*" The representation of the word is a work of this world, and representation is a kind of spiritual suffering, like birth, that comes about because of the creating word, the spirit that works inside the poet.

Poetic representation is a process, like print-making, in which the drawing appears by successive layers of ink; what it will become is not obvious until the very end. This image reflects the importance that Claudel gives to repetition—he prefers to repeat the same idea over and over again, so that it slowly grows in relief and becomes more real. He also compares himself, as a poet, to "*une grande montagne qui répartit entre des bassins contraires ses eaux simultanées*"—he is unaware of what exactly what it is that he is producing, as a poet. The spirit

works like a woman in labor, releasing words with a "*spasme mortel*," like a spring that can only feel its own pressure and the weight of the sky.

The final antistrophe begins with a gentler and quieter rhythm that is reminiscent of the versets in the "pause" section of "Magnificat." The Muse reveals to the poet who she really is: Grace, "*la grâce qui est apportée au condamné et par qui sont foulées au pieds la loi et la justice"*—in other words, mercy. The only reason for her mercy is the love between the two of them. She chose him before he was born, and she is the word that is only for him; this is the splendid freedom of God, who loves freely and impossibly, with no rational explanation. She warns him that he cannot replace the gift of himself with the world, for he is what she desires.

In a repetition of the direct address that has punctuated the entire poem, she calls him names that are not insults, but exhortations:

> *O libérateur des hommes ! ô réunisseur d'images et de cités !*
> *Libère-toi toi-même ! Réunisseur de tous les hommes, réunis-toi toi-même !*
> *Sois un seul esprit ! sois une seule intention !*

The poet frees men, by giving voice to the meaning of the universe; he brings images and cities together in his understanding. His Muse calls on him to free himself and to bring himself together into one spirit and one intention: "Unify my heart, that I may fear your name."[18]

In versets whose regularity is almost martial (and using another priamel), she says that the poet's task is not, like the mason's, to gather and build, but rather, like fire, to amalgamate things together, unifying the heart in one love. This fire is the fire of her romantic passion, the "*jalousie qui est plus terrible que la mort*."[19] The Muse called Grace explains that death calls all things to life—this is an eschatological statement, having to do with the end of the world. He, she says, must die in her: "*Comme la parole a tiré toutes choses du néant, afin qu'elles meurent, /*

[18] Ps. 86:11.
[19] Song of Songs 8:6.

C'est ainsi que tu es né afin que tu puisses mourir en moi." She makes a parallel here between creation, in which the word brought things out of nothing so that they would die, and his utterances as a poet—he was born for this poetic "death," brought about by an outside-inside kind of inspiration. He will, indeed, "die" in his Muse.

In a second metaphor that is meant to explain what she means by poetic death, she compares seeing the visible world to seeing the invisible world:

> *Comme le soleil appelle à la naissance toutes les choses visibles,*
> *Ainsi le soleil de l'esprit, ainsi l'esprit pareil à un foudre crucifié,*
> *Appelle toutes choses à la connaissance et voici qu'elles lui sont présentes à la fois*.

Just as the sun illuminates the world and makes it visible—"calls it to birth," she says—so the spirit, like "crucified lightning," brings all things into consciousness, at the same time. Here, Claudel has again made a parallel between birth, *naissance*, and consciousness/knowledge, or *connaissance*—"co-birth," the way all things are born together in the human spirit.

In what will become the most overtly mystical part of the passage, the end of this last antistrophe parallels the end of "The Muses," repeating the words, "*Voici,*" or "Behold" and invoking the seasons:

> *Mais après l'abondance d'Avril et la surabondance de l'été,*
> *Voici l'œuvre d'Août, voici l'extermination de Midi,*
> *Voici les sceaux de Dieu rompus qui s'en vient juger la terre par le feu !*
> *Voici que du ciel et de la terre détruits il ne se fait plus qu'un seul nid dans la flamme,*
> *Et l'infatigable cri de la cigale remplit la fournaise assourdissante !*
> *Ainsi le soleil de l'esprit est comme une cigale dans le soleil de Dieu*.

This is again an eschatological, or apocalyptic, image. The Muse speaks of the abundance of springtime and the over-abundance of summer, and anyone who has seen spring and summer in the French countryside will know what she is talking about, since by late July the woods become wildly overgrown and the undergrowth is covered with so many blackberries, that many dry in

the sun on the bush; the apples are so abundant that many of them rot on the ground; the tomato vines have to be propped up with iron stakes, and their branches crack from the heavy fruits; the cows have to be milked twice a day and low in pain; and the wheat is high for the harvest. With August comes harvest time, the culmination of the year, "*Midi,*" or "High Noon," in the agricultural calendar. The Muse called Grace is telling the poet about the harvest of the angels at the end of time, described in the Gospels and John's Apocalypse.[20]

After the Lamb of God breaks the seals, God comes for judgment. The heavens and the earth, says the Muse, will now form "*un seul nid dans la flamme*," and the cry, or song, of the cicada, she says, will fill the deafening furnace—and the sun of the human spirit is like a cicada in God's sun.[21] This is *not* an image of Hell, and it has *nothing* to do with the Puritan pastor's famous image of mankind hanging by a slender thread over the fire of God.[22] The heavens and the earth, the Muse says, will come together in the fire of God's love like a single nest. The human spirit sings as melodiously and gently as cicadas[23] when it is in the Trinity, which shines like the sun.[24] In this context, she seems to be speaking not only of the end of the world, but also of the "end of the world" in the soul of the poet, which would be brought about by his own union with God.

After this last antistrophe comes the poet's epode, which makes a movement parallel to what happened at the end of "The Muses." In that First Ode, Claudel, after describing the *ora* and *labora* of the Benedictine life, laboring the earth both physically and spiritually, according to the rhythm of the seasons, says, "*Je laisse cette tâche à la terre ; je refuis vers l'Espace, ouvert*

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[20] Matthew 13:24-30, 13:36-43; Revelation 14:14-16.
[21] Cf. Vergil, *Georgics*, II, 13.
[22] Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," delivered during the Great Awakening in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741.
[23] Cf. *Iliad*, 3, 76-160.
[24] Cf. Psalm 36, 9: "In your light we see the light."

et vide," leaving the verset without end punctuation. What follows, in that Ode, is the fire of forbidden human love, and his affair with Erato. In this epode, he yells at the Muse, "*Va-t'en ! Je me retourne désespérément vers la terre !*", refusing to leave his earthly loves behind in order to obtain union with God. (What a contrast with Dante, who is content to see his Beatrice from the other side of the Divine Light.) The poet repeats, "*Va-t'en !*":

> *Va-t'en ! tu ne m'ôteras point ce froid goût de la terre,*
> *Cette obstination avec la terre qu'il y a dans la moelle de mes os et dans le caillou de ma substance et dans le noir noyau de mes viscères !*
> *Vainement ! tu ne me consumeras point !*
> *Vainement ! plus tu m'appelles avec cette présence de feu et plus je retire en bas vers le sol solide,*
> *Comme un grand arbre qui s'en va rechercher le roc et le tuf de l'embrassement et de la vis de ses quatre-vingt-deux racines !*

To his desperate "Get away from me," he adds the repetition of "In vain," to give this passage the feeling of a diatribe, or of an angry mage's incantation. The words *moelle* and *os* put together with *caillou* and *noir noyau* make the body sound as though it really were made of clay. The poet, here, is as much a figure for Adam as he has been for Christ. Grace will not consume him with her fire, he says; the more she calls him with her spiritual fire, the more he goes back towards the solid ground, like a great tree. The tree is a symbol for Christ, the "Tree of Life" of Genesis. A well-known medieval icon, after a poem by Bonaventure, represents Christ crucified on the tree of life, rather than the cross.

Claudel explains, using another, rather Biblical priamel, that whoever has loved someone else can never leave the beloved behind. Whoever has bitten the earth, can never lose its taste; whoever has tasted blood, can no longer feed on "brilliant water and ardent honey"; and whoever has loved the human soul, whoever has become "compact" with another living soul, can never leave it—"*Quelque chose de lui-même désormais hors de lui vit au pain d'un autre corps*."

Claudel refuses to renounce the world in order to love God alone because he belongs to the earth, to the trees, and to his flesh-and-blood loved ones. Rather than leave them all behind, he tells his spiritual Muse, literally, to "Get away." He walks away from the spiritual resurrection that some people mean when they talk about the "Beatific Vision," or that Dante sees in the *Paradisio*. Unlike the resurrection of the body, this vision does not have dirt, blood, trees, and human bodies. The poet fears that spiritual union with God will separate him definitively from what he loves in the flesh.

At this point, the beloved he longs for, so much that he puts off union with God, becomes more specific. Her cry, in the night, echoes the song of the cicadas in the Muse's final antistrophe:

> *Qui a crié ? J'entends un cri dans la nuit profonde !*
> *J'entends mon antique sœur des ténèbres qui remonte une autre fois vers moi,*
> *L'épouse nocturne qui revient une autre fois vers moi sans mot dire,*
> *Une autre fois vers moi avec son cœur, comme un repas qu'on se partage dans les ténèbres,*
> *Son cœur comme un pain de douleur et comme un vase plein de larmes.*
> *Une autre fois du Ténare ! une autre fois de l'autre côté de ce bas canal que n'éclaire pas même*
> *Le rai d'un astre de plomb et la corne lugubre d'Hécate !*

The poet's impossible love rises out of the profound night, in silence, and the meal that they share is their suffering, described by images with sacred echoes, "a bread of pain," and a "vase full of tears." The place of this encounter is the darkest place on earth, Tenare, or Hell. Even the light of a "lead star," or the horn of the pagan Moon, cannot shine there. All that is left in the darkness is the shared pain of the separated lovers. This dark suffering—"the highest evocation of fleshly love"—is what Claudel fears he will lose to the divine light.

Chapter 5. *La Maison fermée*

Fifth Ode. The Closed House

ARGUMENT

The poet is taken to task for the closed character of his art and his lack of concern for those around him. — And the poet's wife answers: I know that he needs the cloister; it is time for all his life to be ordered inward, and he has that inwardness through me. — And the poet answers: my mercy is to be useful and faithful to my duty. My first duty is to God and the work he has given me of uniting all things in him. Contemplation of the Closed House where everything turns inward, and each thing toward the others according to God's order. My Mercy is commensurate with the universe; it is *catholic*, it embraces all things, and all things are necessary to it. To be capable of containing, the poet himself must be closed, in imitation of the Universe, which God created inexhaustible and finite. Learn to be closed, as I am. The light is inside, and the shadows are outside. Memory of the closed church in days gone by, where the poet found God. The soul, closed and guarded by the Four Cardinal Virtues. Hail the new century to whom my duty lies; we do not inhabit a wild and strange desert, but rather, a closed tabernacle where everything is brotherly to us. Salutations for the dead, from whom we are not separated and who will never cease to be neighbors to us.

Poet, you betray us! Spokesman, where do you speak the word we entrusted to you?

Now you have gone over to the enemy! Now you have become like nature and your language about us as heedless of us as the hills.

We asked you to finish the incomplete things around here with your spirit.

Nothing is happening as it should. Joy or grief, no one to the very end.

You, there! Tell us the story, and make the scene tremble under the unleashing of the perfect comedy!

Have you betrayed our cause? It was our turn to speak, at least! And you—did we send you to school for this?

So you could increase the quantity of things we do not understand with your runes?

Plead, you who have taken our case! Are you among the satisfied? Is man's lot good? Who will don the cope in your stead? Who will say the daily office of our imprecation?

But they say you have grown fat and gotten married, and are as far from your people as the earth will allow, with no care in the world,

You live alone like a baron in your big, square house with its thick walls.

There, set apart from everything by the dazzling whiteness of the paper, as the celestial liquor surrounds the Elysian isles,

You bring the hands of the indivisible Muses together in this festival day of the pure word, born of the spirit that no human mouth has proffered!

Is this the language of a man, or of some beast? For we no longer recognize in you those things we brought to you.

But you turn over and mix them all up in the pounding surf of your intertwined verses, you pick up and toss and carry all away with you in triumph, joy and pain together, in the retreat and the return and the rude ascension of your laugh!

— *And the guardian of the poet answers:* God placed me here as his guardian,

So that he might render unto each his due,

Man to man, to woman what he has of woman,

And to God alone what he has received from God alone, a spirit of prayer and of words.

As the cloister is for a monk, so is the sacrament for him who makes one flesh of the two of us.

The beam of our house is not of cedar, our bedroom panels are not of cypress,

But taste the shade, my husband, of the blessed dwelling within these thick walls that protect us from the outside air and the cold.

Your interest no longer lies outside, but in yourself, there where there was no object,

Hear, like a life undergoing division, the beating of our three-fold heart.

Behold, you are no longer free, and you now share your life with others,

And you are ruled by necessity as by a god,

Inseparable, without whom we cannot live.

Tell me whether, in my heart, there is a thought that is not for you alone.

Now you are no longer abandoned to chance and you have become established among men and you are no longer dependent upon others,

And you no longer seek your duty on the outside; instead, you carry your necessity with you,

No longer that of your arms, nor only of your spirit, but the necessity of your soul to mine.

That alone is necessary to whom you are necessary. What effect could the shadowy men around us have on you?

What could they give you? And what could you receive from the man who still needs to ask?

Age is coming; you have wandered long enough; let us dwell with Wisdom together.

How could she set up house with bachelors, in whom there is no firmness?

Their heart turns outward, but ours is turned inward, toward God,

Whose will has been entrusted to us like a little child; let us live with the Word together.

You have given your word. Keep it, so it may keep you, and do not make commerce with it as for the old clothing sold to the Canaanite.

—*And the poet replies:* I am not a poet,

And I do not care about making you laugh or cry, nor whether you like my word or not; no praise or blame from you could alter its modesty.

I know I am here with God and every morning I open my eyes in paradise.

Once I knew passion, but now I know only the passion of patience and of the desire

To know God in his steadfastness and to acquire truth by attentiveness and each thing, which is all the others, by recreating it with its intelligible name, in my mind.

He who makes lots of noise makes himself heard, but the thinking spirit has no witnesses.

And there is no use in unrest, but the mind of the man who advances in geometry can be compared to the silent progress of a river of oil.

I do not have to worry about you; it is up to you to come to terms with me,

Just as the millstone does for the olive, and just as from the toughest root, the chemist can extract the alkaloid.

O, the joy of the child who wakes up on the first day of vacation and hears his brothers and cousins shouting for him from the next room,

And the groan of the lover who obtains the bestial body of his beloved in his arms after the long combat;

What are these compared to the divine energy of the spirit opening its eyes,

Beginning its day again, finding each thing in its place in the vast workshop of knowing.

And the universe before the big, working sun of the intelligence, yet visible, and the construction of all the heavens lit by a sufficient star?

What, to me, is your human glory and the deserved laurel you use to adorn the brows of conquerors and of Caesars, uniters of the earth?

My desire is to bring God's earth together! Like Christopher Columbus when he set sail,

His thought was not to find a new land,

But in that heart full of wisdom, the passion for the boundary and the sphere, calculated to perfect the eternal horizon.

The Word of God is He in whom God made himself giveable to man.

The created word is the word in which all created things are made giveable to man.

O my God, you who have made all things giveable, give me a desire commensurate with your mercy!

So that in turn, I may give those who can receive it that which, in me, has been given to myself.

O, point where, from every place around me, the indivisible ends calibrate themselves! O, untearable universe! O, closed and endless world!

It is the vision of St. Peter when the angel showed him, in a sheet, all the fruits and animals of creation, so that he might freely use them.

All the figures of nature have been given to me, as well; not at all like beasts we hunt and flesh to devour,

But so that I may bring them together in my mind, using each one to understand the rest,

Better with a living being than with copper and glass assembled together.

(Like the chemist who does not hesitate to try out the same thing he has seen succeed in comets on his table of white wood).

O, certainty, o, breadth of my domain! O, dear universe in my knowing hands! O, consideration of the perfect number, from which nothing can be subtracted and to which nothing can be added!

O God, nothing exists, except through an image of your perfection!

Can a single one of your creatures escape from you? But you hold them captive by rules as severe as that of a penitent heart and with an ascetic law.

And you, who know the number of the hairs on our heads, do you ignore the number of your stars?

All of space is filled with the basics of your geometry; it is busy with a blinding calculation, like the computations of Revelation.

You have set each milliary star in its position, like the golden lamps that guard your sepulcher in Jerusalem.

And as for me, I see all your stars keeping watch, like the Ten Wise Virgins whose oil does not fail.

Now I can say, more surely than old Lucretius: You are no more, O terrors of the night!

Or rather, like your holy Prophet: *And the night is my exultation in my delights!*

Rejoice, my soul, in these Ambrosian verses!

I have no fear of you, O great celestial creatures! I know it is I who am necessary to you, and I stand like a pilot in your crossfires,

You, my dear little star, between the fingers of my hand like a sugar-apple!

Not a thing that is not necessary to the others.

And you are all in my possession, like a banker who, from his office in Paris, makes money with the accounting of Senegambian rubber,

And from the shovelful of ore on the bank head of the Antarctic mine, and from the pearl of the Tuamotos, and from the great heap of Mongolian wool!

My God who have led me to this far end of the world where the earth is no more than a bit of sand and where the sky you made is never hidden from my eyes,

Do not allow me, surrounded by this barbarian people whose language I do not understand,

To lose the memory of my brothers, who are all men, like my own wife and my own child.

If the astronomer, with beating heart, spends his nights on the equatorial orbit,

Scrutinizing the face of Mars with the same poignant curiosity as the coquette studies her mirror,

For me, how much more than the most famous star

Should be your most humble child, made in your own image?

Mercy is not a paltry gift of the thing we have too much of; it is a passion like science,

It is a discovery like the science of your face at the bottom of the heart you made.

If all your heavenly bodies are necessary to me, how much more are all my brothers?

You have given me no poor man to feed, nor a sick man to dress,

Nor bread to break, but rather, the word that is received more completely than bread or water, and the soul soluble in the soul.

Make it so that I give forth from the best substance of my heart, something like a harvest growing everywhere there is earth (from the spikes of wheat to the middle of the highway),

And as the tree, in holy ignorance, awaits no glory or gain from its fruits, but gives what it can.

And whether it's men who pick it clean, or the birds of the air, it is well.

And each one gives what he can: one bread, another the seeds of bread.

Make it so that I may be among men as a person without a face and my

Word concerning them without sound as a sower of silence, as a sower of darkness, as a sower of churches,

As a sower of God's measure.

As a little seed we do not know anything about

That, once thrown in a good soil, sucks up all the energy and produces a specific plant,

Roots and all,

So is the word in the mind. Speak, then, O inanimate dirt between my fingers!

Make me as a sower of solitude and may he who hears my words

Return home anxious and heavy.

How will God enter your heart if there is no room in it,

If you do not make him a dwelling place? No God for you without a church, and all life begins with a single cell.

Or who would put a cordial in a leaky vial?

My God, I remember the darkness where we came face to face, just the two of us, those somber, winter afternoons in Notre-Dame,

I was all alone, in the very back, lighting up the face of the great, bronze Christ with a 25-cent taper.

All men were against us then and I did not answer, science, reason.

Only faith was in me and I gazed at you in silence, as a man prefers his friend.

I descended into your sepulcher with you.

And now, where are the Powerful who were crushing us? All that is left are a few obscene masks at my feet.

I have not budged and the limits of your tomb have become those of the Universe.

As a man lights a whole procession with his leaning candle,

See how, with this four-penny wick, I have lit around me all the stars keeping an inextinguishable watch in your presence.

The beam of our house is not of cedar, our bedroom panels are not of cypress,

And the cubbyhole where we receive the Lord grows more silently in us than the temple of Solomon, built without the sound of axe and hammer.

Listen to the Gospel counseling you to close the door of your room.

For the darkness is within; the light is without.

You can see only by the sun and know only by God in you.

Bring all creation into the ark like old Noah, into the tightly closed dwelling of the parable,

When the father of the family, to the person knocking at the door in the night, unwelcome, to ask for three loaves of bread,

Answers that he is resting with his children, profound and deaf.

Be blessed, my God, who do not leave your works incomplete

And who have made me a *finished* being, in the image of your perfection.

That is how I am capable of understanding, being capable of holding and measuring.

You have put ratio and proportion in me

Once and for all; for a figure can be changed, but not the ratio between two figures: therein lies certainty.

You have made my spirit a bottomless jar, like the one that belonged to the widow of Zarephath.

Not for me alone, but for any man who wishes to put his lips to it,

Like the Japanese man who sees, as he drinks, the great, native landscape reveal itself, painted on the inside of the bowl,

And snow-capped Fuji on the cup's edge, rising as the liquor's level falls,

And the whole horizon once the drink is drained.

As a Poet, I've found the meter. I measure the universe with its image, constituted by me.

O heavens, let me recognize in myself, as in you, the North and the Occident, the Meridian and the East,

Not as they are emblazoned on your pan with the figure of the eternal stars,

But my four doors, like a mighty citadel, guarded by the immoveable Wills.

Formerly, I celebrated the inner Muses, the Nine indivisible sisters,

But behold, in the ripeness of my age, I have learned to recognize the Four Seats, the Four Great Outer Ones,

As in the land of Bod and of Sin, in the temples the guardians of Heaven's four beaches can be seen, in horrible disguise.

I will sing of the great, solid Muses, the Four Cardinal Virtues, oriented with celestial rectitude,

The women who guard each of my doors, Prudence,

Force, Temperance, that one among the three others,

Justice.

They are as the statue of Rome or of mother Cybele; through sun and fog I eternally see the four formidable faces in their place,

Such that ancient Egypt cut the image of humanity's first types in stone, the august visages of those children of the gods, Titan and Sem.

Prudence is to the north of my soul as the intelligent prow that pilots the whole ship.

And she looks straight ahead and never to the side, nor behind,

For it is forward we go, and what is to the side is to the side, and what is behind is behind.

And in her, there is no regret, nor memory, nor curiosity,

But only devouring duty and the trance of rectilinear direction,

Like the driver at full speed in the night, way over there, gaining on the little white lamp at the bottom of the valley for hours.

Snow cannot mask her hard face, nor can frost sew her inflexible eyelids,

Nor can any cloud veil the pole.

Force is to the South, there where the walls are no more, save only a few broken palisades and the earth trod down by the unceasing battle, inch by inch,

Like the sure Theban on whom the Chief's eye fell when, to the messenger recounting Capaneus, he replied:

"Who will we choose, against this denigrator of the gods?"

She is seated on the immovable rock,

The tempest and the sun have eaten away her nose, the smoke of war has blackened her visage.

Only her eyes can still be seen, like those of a leper in the pumice of a corroded face.

But her right hand holds lightning, her left hand strangles the serpent,

She crushes the Kalmar and the crocodile under her foot,

And against her broad breast, the charge of the Ifrit and the sobbing devil comes to be broken!

All the bad winds beat against her face.

The South wind, like hell's exhalation,

And the wet wind of the Southwest blowing on Paris during carnival,

And the first gust of the summer monsoon, like a sweaty and naked woman,

(O, the straits of Malaysia where a black tree rolls on, covered in birds! Strait of Banda! Sea of Sulu where old Dutch hulks[1] navigate, hard and fat as a painted walnut! O, the first drops of the downpour, rolling in the dust of the rain of the Equator like lukewarm rum!)

But all the powers of the air cannot prevail against the invincible rock.

Temperance guards the East, she watches the gates of the Sun.

To her, the pure, great mysteries are shown, and the very birth of Day and of Night.

[1] An unwieldy, two-masted ship.

For she has eyes and sees not and ears and hears not and a mouth and speaks not.

She resists on both fronts;

She is the mediatrix between the world and the city; between man and the earth, between desire and the good, she is the intervening barrier.

She is the one who receives, who eliminates, who excludes.

She is the creating measure, she is the form of being,

She is the rule of life, the clamp at the sources of life, maintaining the exact tension,

Like the viola clef, like the soul of the archlute.

She is, in us, the continuation of the mother; she knows what we need; she is mandated with our destiny.

She is the infallible conscience, and the poet's supreme taste, above explication.

She is that thing in us maintaining us, with a secret art, amid all change

The same; the mainspring of the imperturbable accord and that in us

Preserving; in the manner of God when he creates.

Justice looks to the West, and the striped sky is hers

When the sun's seven rays, crossing the wide, clean-swept azure, join at the other point of the diameter.

At her feet, the great plain, fertile and irrigated, the canals lined with mulberries, and in the high, green harvest, villages smoking by the dozen.

She considers the endpoint of all things, and the day consumed in the color of flame and of blood,

This sixth day, the one preceding the Sabbath and following the first five.

She settles my accounts; she pays for me what is owed;

For how could I know what I owe, and what exchange is there if I render only what I have received?

Like the vicar in the sacristy receiving money for masses, between matter and spirit, between country and town,

She presides over a mysterious commerce.

For, on the one hand, all nature without me is vanity; I confer its meaning; each thing in me becomes

Eternal in the notion I have of it; I consecrate it and sacrifice it.

Water no longer washes the body only, but also the soul; my bread becomes, for me, God's very substance.

As a man in winter crumbles a chunk of bread in his hands for the little birds,

So with my hands full of rosary prayers, I feed the souls of purgatory.

—On the other hand, I know each thing is blessed in itself, and I am blessed in it.

For man, heir of the five days before him, receives upon his head their accumulated blessings.

He is like Jacob who covered himself with the skin of a kid to receive the imposition of his father's crossed hands.

He is the desire of the eternal hills, he will receive the benediction of the underlying abyss, the benediction of the breasts and of the vulva,

The benediction upon his brow will be strengthened by the benediction of his fathers.

Hail, dawn of this beginning century!

Others may curse you, but I fearlessly dedicate this song to you, like the one Horace entrusted to the choruses of young boys and of young girls when Augustus founded Rome a second time.

In the place of so many holy churches falling face down,

(As I once saw in that impious city of Burgundy the fallen statue of Our Lady, lying under the snow with her face against the ground, supplicant for her people's iniquity),

Of so many sanctuaries opened with the pickaxe that knows not what it does,

Behold, once again, a house for our prayers,

A new temple whose lamps Satan's rage will not snuff out, nor undermine her adamantine vaults.

For the cloister of Solesmes and of Ligugé, behold, another cloister!

I see before me the Catholic Church of the whole universe!

O, catch! O, miraculous haul! O, million stars taken in the mesh of our net,

Like a great bounty of fish half out of the sea, whose scales come alive in the torch's gleam!

We have conquered the world and we have found that your Creation is accomplished,

And that the imperfect has no place with Your finished works, and that our imagination cannot add

A single figure to this Number in ecstasy before Your Unity!

As of old, when Columbus and Magellan joined the two halves of the earth,

All the monsters of the old maps vanished,

So the heavens no longer hold any terror for us, knowing that as far as they extend

Your measure is not absent. Your goodness is not absent.

And we consider Your stars in the sky

Peacefully, like heavy sheep and grazing flocks,

As numerous as the descendants of Abraham.

Just as one sees little spiders or certain larvae of insects hidden away like gems in their purse of wadding and satin,

So I was shown a brood of suns still encumbered by the cold folds of the nebula,

So I see you, all my brothers, in the mud and in disguise, like waiting stars!

Everything is mine, catholic, and I am not deprived of a single one of you. Death, rather than obscuring you,

Brings you into focus like a planet beginning its eternal orbit,

Crossing equal areas in equal times,[2]

According to the ellipse, of which the sun we see represents only one of the foci.[3]

Hail, firmament of all the dead!

Like a planet reduced for us to its light and its mathematical movement,

Blessed souls, we no longer see anything in you except the quantity

Of God's glory you reflect, suspended in the ecstasy of perfect poverty, comparable to the rarefaction of astronomical space!

Holy souls, may that I, one day, be as the last among you!

Your glory is our salvation. He becomes good to whom good is done; he who gives the most light is he who receives even more,

Using the many means God gives him, either riches, or poverty,

Or intelligence, or leisure, or work, according to the law

Imposed on all the animals to seek their living.

[2] Kepler's second law of planetary motion.
[3] Kepler's first law.

Let us turn our eyes toward the already-finished sky, O my brothers of this sky in labor!

For since the days of the star of Bethlehem, our darkness is in need of stars,

And I feel in the night around me great, pure beings, more radiant than Sirius, and the profound movements the chosen souls make together,

Like the stellar mass of Hercules and the sections of the Milky Way!

A little light is better than much darkness. Let us not be troubled by what lies outside us.

Let us not judge, for fear of being judged; let us not curse the present, with us as our eternity.

Like the monk returning to his devastated convent,

And it seems as beautiful to him under the ash and the hair shirt as on the day of its dedication,

When the hundred-foot bell tower rose like a ship's mast in the sun brighter than wine

With its four bronze bells, new, yellow, and pure as lilies.

For what more could he need, as long as he has his book and a superior over him?

And here he is again, sitting down, having made the sign of the cross, and spreading out the first page of the Gospel before him, the better to copy it,

He begins the golden initial once again on the scarlet charter.

And now that I have hailed Heaven and Earth and all the living, according to the rite,

Like the Celebrant pausing during the invocation, while the trumpets fall silent, and only the fat and flesh of the victims can be heard crackling on the live coals at the four corners of the esplanade at the Noon Hour,

I will turn toward the Dead; I will not omit the oldest human duty,

Joining my breathing word to these extinguished mouths.

Will we be more impious than the pagans

Who did not believe they could cease doing good to the dead, and the dead to them?

We are not the sons of dogs and of brutish beasts, and our fathers are not vain shadows on the road;

But we were born of their real flesh and their real soul, and truth is not born of lies, and what is true does not become delusion or illusion.[4]

Behold, I can give them a better food than sticks of incense and mulled wine and ground meat in bowls for narrow mouths.

Taste, O Manes, the first fruits of our harvests.

The angel of God, once a year,

Takes up the golden ciborium from the altar and moves toward the people of the dead,

Like a priest clothed in a golden chasuble who, going before the acolyte with a candle, moves toward the communion rail,

With a ciborium, full and flowing over with our good works consecrated by God,

With our supplications and mortifications, and rosaries recited and masses offered,

Like white hosts and a little star gleaming between his fingers.

Thus, one somber Christmas morning, I saw row after row of Macanese people and Chinese women,

Heads covered with long, black veils, allowing only the mouth to be seen, thronging to the communion table.

Listen to the plaintive cry of the dead!

[4] Plato, Cratylus, line ?.

I hear the innumerable crowd of the deceased pressing around me like a sea begging for mercy!

"Have mercy on us—you, at least—our friends!"

Do not hold us in horror because of our destitution, for even the flesh of our faces has disappeared and only the teeth in our mouths are left.

Sons of our Christian bones, have compassion on our rot, which God once said was your mother and your brothers!

Look! We have left you our land and our goods; will you not give us a crumb from your table, a drop of water from your glass?

Vain tears, a brief sob, and all is forgotten,

And my own familiar friend, who ate the sweet bread with me, has lifted up his heel against me.

O, the living, who can still acquire merit! O, possessor of bottomless riches!

As for us, we endure the fire and the dungeon and the beam of our house is not of cedar!

Pray for us, not that our suffering may diminish, but that it may increase,

And that the evil in us may end, and the abomination of this hateful resistance!"

But already the Angel, with downcast eyes, goes toward the people of the dead with the golden bowl he has taken from the altar,

Filled with the first fruits of the earthly harvest,

The custodial only, and not the cup, for we will not taste of the fruit of the vine until we drink it new in the Kingdom of God.

Tientsin, 1908.

Commentary on *La Maison fermée*

The Fifth, and final, Ode, "The Closed House," is the most cosmological of all the Odes. In a 1908 letter to Jacques Rivière, Claudel speaks of the "abomination" of the infinite; the world, rather, is "finished and closed," "a single earth inhabited by living and intelligent beings." [5] And at the same time, Jacques Petit takes the starting point for the Ode as from a letter Claudel wrote to Saurès on August 5, 1907: "Today, I am no longer anything but a good-for-nothing, fat bourgeois with a pot belly. […] The well-being of family life, the fighting and dreadful worries of business are poor conditions for the intellectual life, and unfortunately, for the spiritual life, as well."

In fact, in the "The Closed House," Claudel finds a way of looking at the world that not only finds a solution to the problem of the new cosmology and the Catholic faith[6], but also reconciles the life of the satisfied, married bourgeois with the vocation of the poet (or contemplative). The solution to both queries—both of great import for Catholic theology in the

[5] Letter to Rivière from January 11, 1908: "The idea of a finished and closed world, of a single earth inhabited by living and intelligent beings, which I found in Coventry Patmore and was confirmed for me scientifically by Wallace, is for me a source of light. The idea of the infinite—which Renan is so stupidly proud of, as though it were a precious conquest—is, on the contrary, only the imagination of barbaric and infantile brains. Thus the old maps peopled the formless confines of the world with monsters and prodigies. Christopher Columbus did more than discover a world; he reunited the earth. The *infinite* is everywhere, for the spirit, the same abomination and the same scandal (I speak of the infinite in those things that are, by nature, finite). The objection: where does the earth begin and end, is as infantile as the one that denied that the earth was a sphere because our heads were never upside down.
"When we read an astronomical treatise, for example, the work of Lagrange on planetary disturbances, we are seized with admiration for the precautions taken so that each planet would keep its orbit with an exquisite precision. The heavens are a mathematical ecstasy, and the infinite, which is only the imperfect, has no place in them."
[6] Claudel's cosmology will find an echo later, not in the theology of Teilhard de Chardin, but in Balthasar's.

20th century—is the image of the closed house. Claudel takes this image in part from *Man's Place in the Universe*. In that essay, Wallace, who co-published the initial paper on natural selection with Charles Darwin, makes the argument, from physics and biology, for the likelihood that the earth is the only inhabited planet in the finite universe; this allows him to see man as the culmination, or crown, of nature, the intelligent end towards which evolution is ordered. For Claudel, the entire universe, then, has become man's closed house; not a realm of infinite possibilities, but a single "road"[7] God is making into the heart of each person. The humble commitment of married life, then, becomes an image of the communion God seeks from man, a personal commitment that can also be read at the level of the Church and, in fact, of the entire universe.

The Ode does not, however, repeat the ancient and medieval parallel between the microcosm (man) and the macrocosm (the universe). While the Ode deals with uniting the entire universe, it contains a map, not of the universe, but of the human soul, and ends with words spoken by the dead. The cosmology of "The Closed House," thus marks a great shift from Boethius, and even from Dante. The world does not clearly parallel a spiritual hierarchy, with the heavens above and the fires of hell below. Rather, the world speaks first not of God (Augustine's "Who made us,"), but of man ("Know thyself."). Evolution, as well as the laws of physics, lay down the possibility for human existence; the human being is the pinnacle of nature and must study nature primarily for the purpose of understanding himself.

In Claudel's Ode, rather than losing the ancient and medieval sense of wonder, this reversal becomes a kind of re-enchantment.[8] It begins in man's soul and extends out to the world.

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[7] Cf. "Legem tua dilexi," Claudel's translation from Patmore, *OP,* 312-313.
[8] While working on this *Ode*, Claudel copies, in his personal journal, a quote in English from Thoreau's *Walden*: "How may I grieve, who have not ceased to wonder?" Journal, Cahier 1, juillet-octobre 1907.

Man is a marvel; through his profound and intimate union with God, he becomes no longer a stranger, as in Sartre or Camus, but a newfound wonder. All of a sudden, wonder is everywhere: it extends from man to the world, who speaks to man of himself and of God, just as the world revolves around two lovers. The Ode brings the universe together, just as it brings together and resolves all of the themes from the four, previous Odes.

The poem begins with a direct, and anonymous, reproach—a distant, yet real, echo of the exalted dialogue between the Poet and his Muse in the previous Ode. A chorus (which may, in fact, be the Nine Muses of the First Ode) accuses the poet of betrayal. Now, "fat and married," the poet has taken the "word" they gave him, and "gone over to the enemy." The poet is not bringing creation's work to completion with his spirit; instead, he has been making new problems—increasing the number of riddles with his "runes." Beginning with the First Ode, for every answer he has found in the Muse's eyes, there has been a new question! The question, here, is whether Claudel can be fully immersed in the daily life of the family and the embassy, and yet also be faithful to his vocation as a poet.

Claudel finds himself as immersed as he can be in the daily routine of world affairs. Rather than pleading mankind's case, and asking the important questions, he now finds himself on the far side of the earth, and his own "big, square house with thick walls," has come to replace the outlines of the Forbidden City.[9] Now, the poet is a "good-for-nothing, fat bourgeois with a pot belly," busy with the mundane worries of family and diplomatic life. Having becoming "like nature," his language is "as heedless as the hills," and his house is "set apart from everything by the brilliant white of the paper," as distant as the Elysian Iles. He is no longer set apart in the sense of the solitary contemplative; in fact, he is completely surrounded by people—his growing

[9] Cf. beginning of the second Ode.

family, the diplomatic staff, the French expatriate community in China—and save for a few hours early in the morning, when he writes and attends the Mass, he is active from morning to night.

And yet, the chorus says, Claudel continues to "bring the indivisible hands of the Muses together"; and, furthermore, it is precisely at this time that this word is no longer a human word: it is "pure word, born of the spirit that no human mouth has proffered." The poet has become like the sea of the Fourth Ode, taking what the human Muses have brought him in his own, powerful, receding wave, in "the retreat and the return and the rude ascension of [his] laugh." He is a force of nature, fully immersed in the world's work, and yet full of peace and joy. Now, he brings together, "in triumph," joy and pain, contemplation and action, rest and labor, because he has come to live in the silence at the heart of the world.

The first answer to the chorus comes not from the poet's own soul, or from God, but from his wife. This is the poem's final word on the love between man and woman. The heart-rending appearance of Erato at the end of the previous Ode was the last one, and Claudel will not mention erotic love again in this work. His wife, "the guardian of the poet," explains to the chorus that her God-given role is to make a cloister for the poet in this world:

> — *And the guardian of the poet answers:* God placed me here as his guardian,
> So that he might render unto each what he is due,
> Man to man, to woman what he has of woman,
> And to God alone what he has received from God alone, a spirit of prayer and of words.
> As the cloister is for a monk, so is the sacrament for him who makes one flesh of the two of us.

Where previously, Claudel had given the feminine voice to the Muses themselves and to his own soul, now, he allows his own wife—a real woman—to speak. And she patiently explains that his union with her in marriage has given the poet a kind of justice with regards to each thing, a kind

of healthy economy (running of the household) in which each receives what he is due. This circle, opened out onto the world, has at its center a divine exchange made of prayer in the spirit and of words. Their marriage forms a kind of cloister; God is the monk inside of it.

The refrain of this Ode will be a negated quote from the Song of Songs: "The beam of our house is not of cedar, the panels of our bedroom are not of cypress." In the Song of Songs, the beams of the house *are* of cedar and the panels of the bedroom *are* of cypress; and it is the home and nuptial chamber of the king and his bride, who represent, in the interpretation of the Church Fathers, both the mystical union between Christ and the Church, as well as the mystical union between Christ and the soul who seeks him in prayer. Marriage is the sacrament, the symbol, of the union between Christ and the Church, but what the wife is saying, here, is that their marriage is not mystical—it is flesh and blood! The cedar and cypress of the Song of Songs are the cedar and cypress of the Temple; but their house is not the Temple, it is an ordinary house, and they are just a husband and his wife, living their daily life.

And yet, she tells the poet to "taste the shade […] of the blessed dwelling within these thick walls that protect us from the outside air and the cold." His "interest," now, no longer lies outside, but inside; what was once empty, now is filled with "the beating of our three-fold heart": the heart of man and wife united, together, to God, but also, the heart of the man, the wife, and their child. She invites him to listen to this heart, just as a wife invites her husband to listen to the child inside her womb. Once, he was free and solitary, and the form of his engagement with the world and with God was open to possibility. Now, his wife says, he is "no longer free," for his life is shared with others; he is "under the rule of necessity as to a god." The enjambment, "Inseparable," puts a great emphasis on his profound attachment to the world, through his wife, in marriage. The poet no longer needs to look for his duty outside in the world; now, he carries it

with him. And this necessity is carried not only with the body, nor only with the spirit, but also with the soul itself; the necessity of his soul to hers. They are united by the most intimate part of themselves, in the beauty and fullness of a this-worldly union.

This "cloister" also gives a kind of detachment, or separation. The poet must be indifferent to "the shadowy men" around them; compared to his wife and child, they are not important. The weight of old age will come quickly enough, and his solitary, free state was a kind of wandering. Now, they will "dwell with Wisdom together." Wisdom, for her part, cannot live with "bachelors," since they have no permanence, and "[t]heir heart turns outward." Marriage makes the united heart of the poet and of his wife turn "inward," which is God's own direction, since God dwells in the heart of every man; his will and his Word dwells in the heart "like a little child." The poet, like God, has given his word; and this commitment keeps his attention centered on God, who is present at the heart of his life. His wife ends her strophe with an exhortation and a warning: "You have given your word. Keep it, so it may keep you, and do not make commerce with it as for the old clothing sold to the Canaanite." If he exchanges his word for something else, he will lose in the exchange; instead of God, he will be left with empty goods.

Now, the poet begins to speak for himself. The first line is the strangest, and most contradictory, *ars poetica* Claudel has given yet: "— *And the poet answers:* I am not a poet." In this final Ode, the poet disavows being a poet. He is finished, in fact, making anything man-made (*poeisis*), or anything for man at all. He says that he no longer cares "about making you laugh or cry, nor whether you like my word or not; no praise or blame from you could alter its modesty." He has, indeed, become "as heedless as the hills," and the praise or blame of the chorus, of the Muses or the critics, cannot change what he says at all. He brings the dialogue

back to his writing process: "I know I am here with God and every morning I open my eyes in paradise." In other words, he begins every morning with God, in prayer and at the Mass, and his writing, which also takes place in the early morning, has become a daily joy. He is "here," in the world, and yet he is with God: he no longer needs to seek God in some faraway place, for his own home is a kind of inhabited solitude.

The characteristic of this poet who isn't a poet is a kind of inscrutable silence—the "runes" the chorus complained about. Before, the poet was moved by "passion"; now, he knows "the passion of patience and of the desire / To know God in his steadfastness and to acquire truth by attentiveness to each thing, which is all the others, by recreating it with its intelligible name, in my thought." In other words, this passion is a kind of passivity, a being worked upon by God, who is faithful and unchanging; he will set out to "acquire truth" by being attentive—by listening—to each thing, connected to all the others. The things are still accessible to him in thought, but he does not primarily control them; they reveal their names to him. And all of this takes place in silence: "the thinking spirit has no witnesses," and "the spirit of the man who advances in geometry can be compared to the soundless progress of a river of oil."[10] Claudel does not have to worry about his chorus, or his critics; it is up to them to understand and to listen, "Just as the millstone does for the olive, and just as from the toughest root, the chemist can extract the alkaloid."

The next strophe is one, long priamel about the re-enchantment of the world. The child awakens with joy on the first day of summer vacation, hearing his brothers and cousins calling him; the lover groans with bodily joy as he finally possesses the body of his beloved; but even greater is the "divine energy of the spirit," whose eyes open, beginning the day again and finding

[10] Journal p. 44; Plato, *Theaetetus* 144b.

everything in place in the "immense workshop of knowing." The poet now possesses the universe, and his mind is like the sun, shining on the heavens. His work as a poet is done daily, in silence, but with overwhelming joy. All of the cosmos speaks to him with an intelligible voice, and his newfound relationship with it gives him great joy. For Claudel, there can no longer be any cupidity, *ennui*, estrangement, horror, or even romantic illusion in his relationship with nature. No, the physical universe is not divine; yes, it is under his purview; but it is primarily a source of joy.

Greater than the human glory of conquerors and Caesars, uniting vast stretches of the earth under one government, is bringing the earth together with intelligence. Claudel compares himself to Columbus, not wanting to discover a "new" earth, but instead, "perfecting the eternal horizon," with "the limit and the calculated sphere." His passion is not for undiscovered territories, but for the known world; just as he now finds his wonder and meaning, not in all the open possibilities, but in the hidden sweetness of his own daily life and his life-long commitments.

The next statement is set off like an aphorism, and it summarizes the poet's thought about God's Word and its relationship to his own word: everything is a gift that, at least potentially, keeps on giving. The first verset describes God's "Verb," he in whom God makes himself capabae of being given to man: "Le Verbe de Dieu est Celui en qui Dieu s'est fait à l'homme donnable." The second verset describes the "created word," as that in which all created things become capable of being given to man: "La parole créée est cela en qui toutes choses créées sont faites à l'homme donnables." Claudel makes a mysterious parallel between God becoming capable of being given to man through the Incarnation, by entering concretely into space and time, and the word spoken by all things to human intelligence. And in a phrase that could have

been written by Husserl, Claudel says that all created things give themselves to man by speaking a word to him.

The next strophe begins a series of prayers, addressed directly to God in an echo of "Magnificat," as well as one strophe in "The Spirit and the water." Moving from the given-ness and giving-ness of all things, Claudel asks God to give him a desire as great as the divine mercy, so that he may give, in turn, what has been given to him:

> *O mon Dieu, qui avez fait toutes choses donnables, donnez-moi un désir à la mesure de votre miséricorde !*
> *Afin qu'à mon tour à ceux-là qui peuvent le recevoir je donne en moi cela qui à moi-même est donné.*

The overall effect is one of a rather rhythmic exchange: God makes things to be given, God gives desire, from desire Claudel gives to others what he once received, himself.

Now, Claudel sings universe's unity, which is at the same time a kind of liberality. He addresses the point where everything around him comes together to an indivisible end; this point is the divine center of his own heart, where everything is given. He calls the universe, "*univers indéchirable ! ô monde inépuisable et fermé !*" The cosmos, he says, is at the same time united, closed, and inextinguishable—it is finite, but at the same time, no one will ever come to the end of its intelligible beauty. In addition to the use of direct address, the regular and particularly Psalmodic length of these versets (including repeating caesurae), give this strophe of the Ode a particularly exalted character. Claudel uses a Biblical image, the vision of St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles, to express the generosity of creation. The angel shows Peter all the fruits and animals of creation so that he may eat them. Accordingly, Claudel has received, not beasts and flesh to devour, but all the figures of nature so that he can put them together in his spirit and use

them to understand all the others, in the joy of intellectual contemplation and scientific discovery.

With words, the poet can re-assemble the universe. A living being, a word, the poet explains, is better than man-made copper and glass together; the physicist-poet is like a chemist who will try, on his own white table, the same combination he has seen react together in the comets. He calls upon the "certitude and immensity" of his "domain"—a pun, since it both means the land one possesses and the field one studies. With affection, he holds the "dear universe between [his] knowing hands"; he marvels at the "perfect number," to which nothing can be added. Existence, he says, is an image of God's perfection. Claudel does not repeat Galileo's error; nature's exacting rules are not an imposition on God, but rather, the net in which he holds his creatures, who cannot escape him; these rules, in another pun, are like the ascetic law of a penitent heart—a monastic "rule." Asceticism is the basis of culture; for example, there can be no coming together to share a meal if everyone simply eats when they are hungry. In a similar way, the laws of nature allow life to flourish.

In a passage that echoes the middle of "*Magnificat*," the Third Ode, when Claudel opens the window to the innumerable stars, "coefficient of his necessity," the poet again breaks out in wonder at the geometry of space, its occupation with "*un calcul éclatant pareil aux computations de l'Apocalypse*." Rather than seeing man as "*neant*" compared to the infinite, like Pascal in the *Disproportion de l'homme*, Claudel sees the entire universe preparing the conditions of human existence, just as time is coming together for the fulfillment of all things. Each "milliairy star" is set in its place, like the golden lamps around the Holy Sepulcher. This is an extremely rich image: the entire universe is a Holy Sepulcher, prepared for the evolution of man, culminating in the birth, life, and death of Christ, God made man; and now, it is, above all else, an empty tomb.

The stars, he says, are watching for his return, like unto the ten wise virgins of the Gospel, whose oil did not run out. Unlike Poe, Mallarmé, or Valéry, and like Whitman, the night no longer holds any terror for Claudel.[11] Lucretius compares, in *De rerum natura* (several places), the fear of death with children's fear of the dark. Here, as in Lucretius, the night is also the most natural metaphor for death. Because, for Claudel, the universe is an empty tomb, he has even less reason to fear death than Lucretius.

Instead, Claudel's night has become not only full of wonder, but also of joy and of tenderness. He quotes Psalm 138, 11: "Perhaps darkness shall cover me: and night shall be my light [my exultation] in my pleasures" (Douay-Rheims). This is a verse beloved in the Benedictine tradition; it expresses the delight of praying Vigil in the dark night, as well as the joy of the man who no longer fears death because God has become more familiar to him than his closest friend. The next line echoes the Hail Mary—"*Réjouis-toi, mon âme, dans ces vers ambroisiens !*" These lines evoke Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, for two reasons: one, the prayer that was held by laypeople, day and night in his basilica, in time of persecution; two, his hymn *Deus creator omnium*, and in particular, the verse, "*ut cum profunda clauserit / diem caligo noctium / fides tenebras nesciat / et nox fide reluceat.*"[12]

The next lines burst out with exuberance, breaking the Psalmodic pattern. Like early Christians, freed from the fear of natural phenomena, and in particular, the sun, Claudel exclaims:

> *Je ne vous crains point, ô grandes créatures célestes ! Je sais que c'est moi qui vous suis nécessaire et je me tiens comme un pilote dans vos feux entre-croisés,*
> *Et je vous ris aux yeux comme Adam aux bêtes familières.*
> *Toi, ma douce petite étoile entre les doigts de ma main comme une pomme cannelle !*

[11] For a more detailed exposition, see *Walt Whitman among the French,* pp. 129-130.
[12] And when the darkness closes / The day shrouded in nightly mist, / Faith does not know the shadows, / But night shines again with faith."

Claudel has been freed, by revelation and modern science, from the religious weight of the celestial bodies; but rather than existing in the terrifying emptiness of an incomprehensible, impersonal, and infinite universe, he sees the cosmos as culminating in man. This newfound celestial hierarchy, however, does not mean that the universe is mere material for man; it has a spiritual reality and dignity, akin to personhood. Playfully, the poet navigates between the celestial fires like a pilot; he laughs with the planets and comets like Adam, with the familiar beasts. The sun is like a little cinnamon apple between his fingers; he is filled with wonder and with tenderness at all these things, which are necessary to him and to all the others. The poet marvels at the riches of the universe; they are all in his "possession," like the banker in Paris making money with Gambian rubber, minerals from the Antarctic mine, "the pearl of the Pomotou," and "the great heap of Mongolian wool." And yet, he does not possess them like the banker, and he does not exploit them like the mining company; instead, he exults in the word they speak to him. The universe, which gives himself to him, becomes the riches he can give in poetry.

The next strophe begins another prayer; this time, Claudel asks that God, who has led him to this far-flung country, not allow him to forget that all men are his brothers. In a universe where nothing visible is now "above" man in the old sense of the hierarchies of angels, since man has been revealed to be the culmination of the physical universe, the "brother"—he in whose breast God also dwells—has becomes the primary locus of the divine encounter.[13] Claudel is stationed in Tianjin, near Beijing, in the Hai River Estuary that opens out onto the Bohai Sea. No buildings or mountains obscure the skies, and the earth is reduced to "a bit of sand." Claudel

[13] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man,* Seabury Press: 1967, especially the chapter entitled, "The Sacrament of the Brother."

does not understand Chinese; he calls the people there "barbarous" in the Greek sense, which is to say, incomprehensible because of the language barrier. He asks God to help him to remember that all these people are his brothers, as much as his wife and his child.

Another intricately constructed priamel explains the poet's priority; if Mars makes the heart of the astronomer beat fast as he spends nights in the observatory, how much more passionately should the poet consider the face of the "least of these":

> *Si l'astronome, le cœur battant, passe des nuits à l'équatorial,*
> *Épiant avec la même poignante curiosité le visage de Mars qu'une coquette qui étudie son miroir,*
> *Combien plus ne doit pas être pour moi que la plus fameuse étoile*
> *Votre enfant le plus humble que vous fîtes à votre image ?*

The astronomer studies the face of Mars in the equatorial-mount telescope with the same curiosity as the coquette studying her mirror; and Claudel wishes to consider, with even more intensity—more precious even than sparrows, more precious than stars—the least of children, made in the image of God. The succession of images in the mirror telescopes from Mars, to the coquette's mirror, to a star, to the child, to God in his own image. The brother, in fact, is both a mirror, and an icon.

The relationship to the brother is one of mercy, physical and spiritual; and Claudel makes a surprising parallel between mercy and scientific discovery. Mercy, he says, is not "*un don mol de la chose qu'on a en trop, elle est une passion comme la science*." Loving one's brother, taking his misery to heart (*misericordia*), is not giving the excess of what one has; it is, he says, discovering the face of God in the heart of another person—in the singular, since this discovery is always particular, and personal. He again compares his "brothers" to the stars; and, beginning with the negative enumeration of all the acts of mercy God has not given him to do (for it is not up to him to go out and seek them, but to welcome what God gives him each day in an act of

surrender), ending with the Mass (*pain à rompre*), the poet says that his particular act of mercy is "*la parole qui est reçue plus complètement que le pain et l'eau, et l'âme soluble dans l'âme*." His poetry is spiritual food, a gift of his own substance; and he asks to produce it like a harvest that springs up everywhere, even in the middle of the road—across all human boundaries.

In this act of mercy, he would like to emulate the attitude of the tree: "*une sainte ignorance*." The tree does not seek gain from its own fruits, but gives for the sake of giving. The language of the versets in this section imitates the Gospel parables. The length and pauses of each verset vary such that it could almost be prose:

> *Et comme l'arbre dans une sainte ignorance qui lui-même n'attend pas gloire ou gain de ses fruits, mais qui donne ce qu'il peut.*
> *Et que ce soient les hommes qui le dépouillent ou les oiseaux du ciel, cela est bien.*
> *Et chacun donne ce qu'il peut : l'un le pain, et l'autre la semence du pain.*

The words themselves are Gospel words, from the Sermon on the Mount: "fruit," "birds of the air," "bread," "seed." His word is not the "bread of life," but it is a seed of the bread in the human heart. Like the tree, the poet should not know what he gives, or to whom he gives it. In fact, he would like to disappear; his words, he says, should "sow silence," "sow shadow," "sow churches," "sow God's measure." Like the seed of the parable, his word should, sown in a good earth, produce a specific plant—but one that is unknown. He asks the earth itself to speak: "*Parle donc, ô terre inanimée entre mes doigts !*"

This word, says the poet, will make whomever hears it return home, "*inquiet et lourd*"—carrying a new burden, suddenly anxious about his well-planned life. How, he asks, could God come into the heart if there is no room for it? He addresses the reader directly now: "*Point de Dieu pour toi sans une église et toute vie commence par la cellule*." Claudel is writing in the context of the 1905 laws and the exile of the religious congregations, when Combes' government

sought to remove any trace of the Catholic faith and institutions from public life. Secularization is a political process in Claudel's France, but it is also a part of daily life. The poet tells the reader that he cannot find God without a church. God is not in nature, since it can be subdued. Man himself is most certainly not God—although his lot may have considerably improved in modern times, he is still poor, mortal, and mean. The only alternative, at this point, is the unknown God of the Jews and the Christians. And further, in a play on words, says the poet, "All life begins with the cell." Cellular organisms are the beginning of life, and the beginning of new life is being alone with this unknown God in the heart's cell.

He remembers being a student in Paris and the "somber winter afternoons in Notre Dame," when he first learned to spend time with God, lighting the great bronze Christ with "25-cent tapers." "*Tous les hommes*"—all his professors and fellow students—were against them, and in the era marked by Comte, he did not have any answers to "science" and "reason." Not knowing why, all Claudel had at that time was faith like the preference a man has for his friend. This was like descending into the tomb with Christ. But now, says the poet, where are those great men ("*ces Puissants*")? They are all dead, and all that is left is "a few obscene masks" (their books) at the poet's feet. He compares their words to masks because they conceal rather than reveal. The poet, for his part, has searched for God, and he has found that the limits of his tomb are the entire universe. But he is no longer dead; he is at the same time outside the world, and in the most intimate region of the human heart.

That prayer, he says, was like a man whose torch candle makes enough light to light the way for an entire procession; it was enough to light all the stars that guard the divine presence. In other words, by reaching out to God in the night of disbelief, he has found light—the revelation of the many intelligences directed towards God, an entire night sky lit up in faith. The stars are

both luminous and numerous; they are the countless descendants promised to Abraham. Claudel may be talking about his discovery of the Prophets, the Psalmists, the Four Evangelists, the Church Fathers, the Desert Fathers, St. Benedict, Thomas Aquinas, and even contemporary writers with faith, like Coventry Patmore and George Wallace. None of these people oppose faith and reason; instead, their intelligence is lit up by the divine intelligence. He repeats the negated phrase from the Song of Songs, "La poutre de notre maison n'est pas de cèdre, la boiserie de notre chambre n'est pas de cyprès." This time, he adds to the refrain, "*Et le réduit où nous recevons le Seigneur croît plus silencieusement en nous que le temple de Salomon qui fut construit sans aucun bruit de la hache et du marteau*." This confirms that the house of which he is speaking is made, not of cedar and cypress, but of flesh. He receives the Lord in his own, living body. Even beyond faith, he has discovered God in the "sacrament of the brother"[14]: every human being, in fact, is like a precious star, lit up by the hidden presence of God.

The next lines are almost a whisper, as he urges the reader to open himself to this quiet communion with God, who can be found in the heart. Listen, he says, to the Gospel, telling you to close the door of your room to pray. Outside, there is nothing but shadow, the world that is quickly passing away; inside, there is an eternal light. "Tu ne peux voir qu'avec le soleil, ni connaître qu'avec Dieu en toi": you can only see with the sun, and you can only know with the divine light; human reason, when it turns away from God, mutilates itself. He urges the reader to let all of creation come into the "*arche*," the refuge of the human heart, or into the "closed house," "*cette demeure bien fermée de la parabole*," where the neighbor knocked to ask for bread, and the father of the family replied that he was resting with his children, "*profond et sourd*." He who finds this kind of peace cannot be disturbed by the noise of the outside world—

[14] *Ibid.*

he, too, becomes "as heedless as the hills." But paradoxically, this is the answer to his prayer to not forget his fellow man: the most intimate connection between them is the hidden presence of God in the human heart.

Another section begins with a short strophe, as the poet blesses God "who does not leave [his] works unfinished," and who has made the poet finite. He says that finitude, rather than the infinite, is an image of divine perfection. Being closed in space and time is, indeed, what separates us from other people and things; it is an important component of personhood, and it makes relationship possible. Claudel says that being finite is what makes him capable of comprehending (*comprendre*), taking together, since he can take (*tenir*) and measure (*mesurer*). Measuring is, in effect, like surrounding things with one's mind, just as one takes physical things into one's arms. God has placed in him, he says, "*le rapport et la proportion*," "ratio and proportion," and this gives his thought a kind of certainty.

The poet compares his mind to the bottomless jar of flour of the widow of Sareptha. The human mind, in this passage as in the tenth book of Augustine's *Confessions*, is both finite and closed, and yet a bottomless storehouse. And, Claudel adds, it is this way not only for himself, but also for others, since he can communicate his own riches to them in words. It is as though the reader who wishes to drink from his mind is putting his lips to a little saké bowl, and as he drinks, he sees the country of his birth—the world—faithfully painted on the inside, snowy Fuji and the complete horizon. God is the poet Claudel addresses, and he has found the meter in his own heart; now, he can measure the universe with the divine image inside him.

Claudel has returned to the old parallel between the microcosm and the macrocosm, but it is now inverted: whereas the old image described man by studying the universe—the heavens above and the earth below—this new image sheds light on the universe by looking at man. It is

as though a re-enchanting of the world were occurring, beginning with the discovery of God at the center of the human person. This discovery gives new meaning to all of the other phenomena and allows them to speak to man of God, who has a new identity as the lover who is closer to me than I am to myself. This is not cosmology as anthropology, in the old sense, but anthropology as cosmology. As never before, man is the center of the universe, but God, unknown and outside the world, is even more central and life-giving.

A new strophe begins as Claudel puts this new cosmological anthropology into effect. He asks the sky to help him recognize the four directions in himself. He makes an analogy between the four cardinal directions and the four cardinal virtues, as they are described in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas (and others):

> *O cieux, laissez-moi reconnaître en moi comme en vous le Nord et le Couchant, le Midi et l'Est,*
> *Non point comme ils sont blasonnés sur votre poêle avec la figure des astres éternels,*
> *Mais mes quatre portes, ainsi qu'une forte cité, gardées par les Volontés immuables.*

The four directions cannot be found in his soul like the figures of the Zodiac, but they are upon the "four doors" that are the mouth, the eyes, the ears, and the nose, guarded by the angels, who have "immovable Wills." Jacques Petit notes that the image of the virtues as edifice comes from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, 2, quest. 61[15]; the quotation he gives, *Solidum mentis nostrum ædificium justitia, temperantia, prudential et fortitudo sustinet*, is not found in the *Summa*, but rather, is very close to a line from St. Gregory the Great,[16] who St. Thomas does copiously quote on the cardinal virtues.

Claudel makes a reference to "The Muses." Where he once celebrated the inner Muses of the human spirit, now he is ready to sing of the four virtues that guard the mind's exterior, seated

[15] Notes in *OP*, p. 1075.
[16] *Patrologiae, cursus completus,* tôme V, *Opera Omnia Sancti Gregorii Papae*, Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1849, p. 689.

at its entries and exits, "*les Quatre Assises, les Quatre grandes Extérieures*." They are like the four creatures that represent the four directions in Chinese and Tibetan temples (Sin for China, Bod for Tibet). Like Thomas Aquinas, he begins the virtues with Prudence, and continues with Force and Temperance; but he gives Justice the most important place. These virtues are also Muses, in that they orient art towards the heavens, giving the right pitch. Their faces are as terrible as that of Cybèle, mother of the gods, whose entry into Rome is described in Augustine's *City of God*. They have the august face of Egyptian statues, the "first types of humanity." Claudel calls Titan and Sem Egyptian gods; he may be incorrectly recalling a passage from Champollion about a statue of the god Memnon who spoke to the emperor Hadrian. (In the passage, Champollion calls Memnon a Titan.) The cumulative effect of these ancient images is to remind the reader that the four cardinal virtues carry the cumulative weight of the ancient wisdom traditions—whether Tibetan, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, or Latin, the most ancient sources explain that these virtues are the seat of a well-lived life.

Like Thomas Aquinas, Claudel begins with prudence, which he identifies with the cold North—giving the direction, like "*la proue intelligente qui conduit tout le bateau*." Prudence belongs to reason; it is a kind of seeing, looking forward, and never to the side or behind: it has the end in mind, always looking towards God. In her, "*il n'y a […] ni regret ni mémoire ni curiosité,*" but only a "*devoir dévorant et la transe de la direction rectiligne*": the love of going only in the right direction. Like a driver who is able to drive at high speed in a valley, with his little lamp shining through a blizzard, nothing obscures her vision as she gives the soul direction. The negative parallelism of the last sentence gives a kind of finality to Claudel's description. Prudence will not be moved: "*Ni la neige ne masque le dur visage, ni le gel ne coud les*

paupières inflexibles, / Ni aucun nuage ne voile le pôle." The final word, "*pôle*," refers both to the extreme North and to the function prudence holds in the soul.

Thomas Aquinas continues his discussion of the virtues with justice; Claudel chooses force. Force, says Claudel, is to the South; there are no walls here, only broken palisades and earth patted down by hand-to-hand (*pied à pied*) combat. The virtue of force is what allows the soul to resist temptation, the weaknesses of the flesh. Claudel compares it to a dialogue in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*; the strong and arrogant Capaneus has blasphemed, saying that he will take Thebes even if Zeus were to oppose him. Force replies with calm assurance to such a challenge. The "*roc inébranlable*" is like the rock of the Gospel; force continues to resist, even as the elements erode its very face. Even the demons cannot prevail against it. The vocabulary of this passage is erudite, even esoteric; it contrasts with the simplicity of the resisting virtue.

Claudel now speaks of the bad winds that cannot prevail against Force, and the repetition of the word "*souffle*," as well as alliteration and an ecstatic ending, make the strophe quite windy and humid, indeed. The South wind brings warmth, humidity, and bad health, but also an intoxicating beauty:

> *Tous les vents mauvais soufflent sur sa face.*
> *Le vent du Sud pareil à l'exhalation de l'enfer,*
> *Et le vent mouillé du Sud-Ouest qui souffle sur Paris à l'époque du carnaval,*
> *Et le premier souffle de la mousson d'été, pareil à une femme suante et nue,*
> *(O les détroits de Malaisie où roule un arbre noir couvert d'oiseaux ! détroit de Banda ! mer de Sulu où naviguaient les vielles hourques hollandaises, grosses et dures comme une noix vernie ! ô les premières gouttes de l'averse qui roulent dans la poussière de la pluie de l'Équateur pareille à du rhum tiède !)*
> *Mais toutes les puissances de l'air ne valent pas contre la pierre invincible.*

All the "powers of the air"—a term for demons—cannot overcome the rock of force; but in this long, lovely set of geographical versets, the beauty of the Southern regions of the Earth comes alive, and the reader almost regrets that force brings it all to a close. As often happens in

Claudel's writing, the beauty of life on Earth has made it difficult to find even an approximate metaphor for evil.

The next virtue is Temperance. Claudel situates this virtue at the East, meeting the Rising Sun. He begins with a paradoxical description of Temperance welcoming the "great pure mysteries," and the "birth of Day and of Night"; and yet this is because, in another Biblical phrase, Temperance has "eyes for not seeing and ears for not hearing and a mouth not for speaking." It is the moderating and restraining virtue, and yet it allows the soul to welcome the purest joys. Temperance, he says, is a kind of resistance:

> *Elle résiste des deux côtés ;*
> *Entre le monde et la cité elle est la médiatrice ; entre l'homme et la terre, entre le désir et le bien elle est la barrière interposée.*
> *Elle est celle qui reçoit, qui élimine et qui exclut.*
> *Elle est la mesure créatrice, elle est la forme de l'être,*
> *Elle est la règle de la vie, la pince aux sources de la vie qui maintient l'exacte tension,*
> *Comme la clef de la viole, comme l'âme de l'archiluth.*

He compares Temperance to the part of a stringed instrument maintaining the necessary tension to create a beautiful sound, its key or its soul. Temperance is both receiving and excluding; with Cicero, Claudel calls it a kind of measure, for material as well as spiritual things. Claudel adds that it is a "creating" measure, the form, or idea, of being, a kind of perfect pitch, placed between man and what he desires—"the world and the city," "man and earth," "good and desire"—to maintain a just, or harmonic, relationship with all things. This passage has great echoes of "The Muses," and in particular, the description of Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred music.

Temperance, Claudel says, is the "continuation of the mother," the ability of the soul to determine what is needed for the good of the person, as much "*conscience infaillible*," as good taste—"*le goût supreme du poëte supérieur à l'explication*." The two final enjambments get to the heart of the matter, going further in the description of temperance than any of the ancients: it

is the virtue that maintains the human organism, physically and spiritually, "in the midst of all change." The enjambment emphasizes that temperance keeps the human person "The same"; it keeps the soul's secret accord together, "Conserving," emphasizes the second enjambment, in the way that God creates. Like a mother nourishing her child, temperance maintains life.

Claudel places Justice at the West, on the horizon of the setting sun, looking towards the point at which all things converge. The sun sets, in this strophe, as Claudel's cosmological anthropology is coming to an end, and as he is coming towards the end of this final Ode. The image is one of his most striking:

> *La Justice regarde l'Occident, et ce ciel rayé est le sien*
> *Lorsque les sept rayons du soleil traversant l'immense azur déblayé se réunissent à l'autre point du diamètre.*
> *A ses pieds la grande plaine fertile et irriguée, les canaux bordés de mûriers et dans la haute moisson verte les villages qui fument par dizaines.*

This is the saturated light of a closing autumn day, over the patchwork of high, green fields, irrigated by little rivers bordered with blackberry bushes, and yet a chill is already in the air, and the chimneys in the village are sending up smoke.

Justice, he says, in an echo of the Muse's call to immolation near the end of the Fourth Ode, considers the "*terminaison"* of all things, the day *"quand il se consomme dans la couleur de la flamme et du sang*." It considers the sixth day, the day of the crucifixion, before the Sabbath, the day on which, in the Biblical account, man was created; for all of nature culminates in him. Like Aquinas and Aristotle, Claudel associates justice with giving what is owed. And yet there is something marvelous, "mysterious," about this exchange. For one thing, says Claudel, all of nature without man is in vain; he gives it an eternal meaning, consecrating and sanctifying it. Water now can wash not only the body, but also the soul, and bread can become "*la substance*

même de Dieu." This exchange extends to spiritual goods, as well; like a man giving crumbs to little birds, he says, his prayers nourish the souls in Purgatory.

And yet, Claudel says, each thing is "*bénie en elle-même*," and therefore, he is blessed in it—they have a "blessing" that precedes their relationship to man, who inherits the blessing of all of nature that came before him—the "five days that preceded him." (Claudel is anything but a Biblical literalist—but he knows that the Biblical days of creation still have a deep meaning, for whoever cares to look.) Man receives their blessing, like Jacob stealing the blessing of Esau. Claudel quotes Jacob's own blessing to his son, Joseph:

> *Il est le désiré des collines éternelles, il recevra la bénédiction de l'abîme subjacente, la bénédiction des mamelles et de la vulve,*
> *La bénédiction sur son front sera fortifiée de la bénédiction de ses pères.*

Man, says Claudel, is the "desire of the everlasting hills"—taken by the Fathers to be a name for Christ—and he will receive the benediction of the heavens and of the abyss (the seas), the benediction of the breasts and of the vulva. Justice means that all of nature nourishes the life of man; it leads to abundant life, to fertile hills and seas and to the blessing of many children.

The penultimate strophe of the Odes is one of unbridled optimism. "Hail, dawn of the new, beginning century!" Others, says Claudel, may curse you (he is probably referring to the general, and understandable, moroseness of Catholics in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, following the secularism laws), but I consecrate to you, fearlessly, "*ce chant pareil à celui qu'Horace confia à des chœurs de jeunes garçons et de jeunes filles quand Auguste fonda Rome pour la seconde fois*"—he is referring to Horace's Secular Hymn, commissioned by Caesar Augustus in 17 BC. In the place of the fallen churches, of asylums that one breaks open with the pickaxe that, like the Roman soldiers, "knows not what it does," Claudel declares the entire universe to be a house of prayer. He has, he says, exchanged the cloister of Solesmes and

of Ligugé, closed by the 1905 laws, for another cloister—"the Catholic church, which is the entire universe!"

This church is the "capture," the "*pêche miraculeuse*," millions of stars caught in the net, like the many fish caught by Peter in the still-dark morning after the Resurrection. We have conquered the world, he says, and have found that Creation is finite, and that the imperfect—another word, for Claudel, for the infinite, which does not exist—has no place in it. Our imagination, he says, delights in this finitude, this closed-ness, because it cannot add "Un seul chiffre à ce Nombre en extase devant Votre Unité !" The heavens, he says, are no longer terrifying because we now know that God's measure is present in the entire universe. His measure is there, and his goodness is there. Claudel again compares the stars to the descendants of Abraham.

In another priamel, Claudel repeats an image from "The Spirit and the water:"

> *Comme on voit les petites araignées ou de certaines larves d'insectes comme des pierres précieuses bien cachées dans leur bourse d'ouate et de satin,*
> *C'est ainsi que l'on m'a montré toute une nichée de soleils encore embarrassés aux froids plis de la nébuleuse,*
> *C'est ainsi que je vous vois, tous mes frères, dans la boue et sous le déguisement pareils à des étoiles souffrantes !*

This image is, again, telescopic, like the coquette's mirror; just as little insects are hidden like precious stones in their purses, so the little suns hide in the nebula's folds, and so Claudel sees all his brothers hidden under the mud and the "disguise," of sin and death, like "suffering stars."

This image is right out of Gregory of Nyssa, who saw all of humanity as the church in the making, so irresistible is God's grace. Claudel says that he cannot lose a single brother. Death, in another splendid enjambment, "*Vous dégage comme une planète qui commence son éternelle orbite*." He quotes Kepler's first and second laws of planetary motion. He hails the "firmament

of all the dead," as he would hail Mary. Like a planet reduced to light and mathematical movement, he hails the "*Heureuses âmes*," who only show the glory of God that they reflect, "*suspendues dans l'extase de la parfaite pauvreté,"* distilled to their essence by losing everything else. He compares human life to animal life: just as animals must seek their "lives," so humans live from God's light, using all the means God gives.

For Claudel, there is a "heaven in labor," just as there is a heaven that is already made; this is the sky of the saints, which can illumine the darkness of life on earth. Around him, he says, he feels, in the night, "*de grands êtres purs plus radieux que Sirius et de profonds mouvements ensemble d'âmes élues*," as radiant as the Herculean bundle and the Milky Way. A little light, he says, overcomes much shadow; he counsels his fellow beleaguered French Catholics not to worry about what is on the outside, not to judge, and never to curse the present, which is given—in the same analogy as the one he made between being finite, or closed, and the perfection of God—to us as our eternity. The right attitude is that of the monk, he says, who enters in his devastated convent, but it is as beautiful in desolation as it once was on the day of dedication; for all he needs is his prayer book and a superior above him. And he lifts up his pen and begins to write out the first page of the Gospel. Faced with the destruction of "Christendom," Claudel says that the most important thing to do is not to fret or sermonize or weep and wail, but to rewrite the Gospel with one's life.

The beginning of the last strophe emphasizes the religious aspect of the Odes, in the sense of re-legere, tying together. The poet compares himself to a Roman celebrant of an animal sacrifice, hailing the Heavens and the Earth and all the living:

Et maintenant que selon le rite j'ai salué le Ciel et la Terre et les vivants,

Comme l'Officiant qui fait une pause dans l'invocation, cependant que les trompettes se taisent, et l'on n'entend que la graisse et la chair des victimes qui crépitent sur les charbons ardents aux quatre coins de l'esplanade dans l'heure de Midi,
Je me retournerai vers les Morts, je n'omettrai pas le plus vieux devoir humain,
Reliant ma parole soufflante à ces bouches éteintes.

The last lines of the Great Odes will be not for the living, but for the dead, "the oldest human duty," giving his word—his "*souffle*"—to their "extinguished mouths." Death is the last phenomenon that will be re-enchanted by these Odes; for even the dead are part of the great unity of the world, of this "Closed House."

Claudel says that even the pagans believed that they could continue doing good to the dead, and the dead to the living. Our fathers are not shades, he says; we come from "*leur chair réelle et de leur âme réelle*," and, quoting a line from the Cratylus, he says that truth cannot come out of lies, and the "truth" of the soul does not become "*songe et mensonge*." The Chinese nourish the dead with incense, warm wine and chopped meat; but Claudel can give them a food that will nourish their living souls: "*Goûtez, ô Mânes, les prémices de nos moissons*."

In a passage that parallels the Eucharistic benediction at the end of "The Spirit and the water," Claudel recounts how the angel of God goes to take the ciborium off the altar and gives the hosts "de nos bonnes œuvres consacrées par Dieu" to the people of the dead:

L'ange de Dieu une fois par an
S'en va prendre le ciboire d'or sur l'autel et se dirige vers le peuple défunt,
Tel qu'un prêtre vêtu d'une chasuble d'or qui précédé de l'acolyte avec un cierge s'en va vers la barre de communion,
Avec un ciboire tout rempli et débordant de nos bonnes œuvres consacrées par Dieu,
De nos suffrages et de nos mortifications, et de chapelets récités et de messes offertes,
Telles que de blanches hosties et une petite étoile éclatante entre ses doigts.

The rhythm of the versets reflects the angel's action: the enjambment corresponds to him taking the ciborium off of the altar, and the lack of breaks, combined with the verbs of direction in the first four versets, makes it seem as though he is gliding towards the mouths of the dead with the

litany of good works. The last verset shows him holding up the white host, like a little star, before the waiting, prayerful dead. In the next versets, Claudel imagines the dead with long, black veils, like the crowd of men from Macao and their Chinese wives he once saw, pressing around the Communion table.

In a final, direct address to the reader, Claudel makes the entreaty, "Écoutez le cri pitoyable des morts !" He can hear, he says, the dead crowding around him like a great sea, asking for mercy. "Take pity on us, our friends!" they say; and Claudel, continuing this study of his brother in mercy that is like a science, makes the dead speak of their poverty:

> *N'ayez point horreur de nous à cause de notre dénuement, car la chair même de notre visage a disparu et il ne nous reste plus que les dents autour de la bouche.*
> *Fils de nos os chrétiens, aie compassion de notre pourriture, dont Dieu a dit qu'elle est ta mère et tes frères !*
> *Vois ! nous t'avons laissé notre terre et nos biens, n'aurons nous pas une miette de ta table, une goutte d'eau de ton verre ?*
> *Des larmes vaines, un bref sanglot, et tout est oublié,*
> *Et l'homme de ma paix qui mangeait le doux pain avec moi a magnifié sur moi sa supplantation.*

This passage of the Odes is almost unique, in that it speaks of something naturally repulsive; but Claudel has determined that even the dead will be a part of his united, closed universe. This is, in fact, going farther than Lucretius, the only way the night can hold no more terror. The dead plead piteously with the living not to hold them in horror because of their poverty; and it is true that it takes an effort to hold the body even of a dead loved one, since our own life and flesh recoils from it. The dead beg for the compassion of the living; they have left the living everything they had, they were once loved, and yet, after only a few tears, they are forgotten.

The dead continue to address the living: "*O vivant qui peux encore mériter ! ô possesseur d'inépuisables richesses !*" Even the poorest of the living is richer than the dead, for he possesses life, and time, and the means to become closer to God. But the dead, for their part, endure "the fire and the dungeon," and even the tabernacle of flesh, in a final evocation of the cedar beam, is gone. And yet they ask that the living pray not that their suffering diminish, but that it increase, so that all the "detested resistance" in them can be burned away.

The final image of this Ode—and, in fact, of the Odes as a whole—is the Angel, eyes lowered, taking the "golden vase" towards the dead with the "first fruits of the earthly harvest." But he only takes the custodial, and not the cup, "car nous ne goûterons point de ce fruit de la vigne avant que nous le buvions nouveau dans le Royaume de Dieu." Having united even the dead to his "Closed House," the universe made new again through union with God, Claudel quotes the final words of Christ to his disciples at the Last Supper. His Odes end apocalyptically, looking towards the consummation of the heavens and the earth and the great wedding feast, when the Lord will come again to espouse the universal Church.

Conclusion

All the most beautiful things bear the mark of silence. Not the silence of empty space, or a simple absence of words—a vacuum, on the contrary, quickly draws in noise—but rather, the golden silence of a peaceful, common presence; the quiet of a child playing in the presence of his mother, or of a wooded path in August. The silence of beauty is inhabited. It is alive. This is is what Paul Claudel means when he says, in the Third Ode:

> Amid the whole stammering universe, let me prepare my heart like someone who knows what he has to say,
> Because this profound exultation of the Creature is not in vain, nor this secret the celestial Myriads guard in an exact vigil;
> May my word be equivalent to their silence!

The great secret of the "celestial Myriads," and the hidden joy of the "Creature," is a love song; the spheres sing of the presence of God, which now illumines Claudel's own soul and work. Augustine once questioned the heavens and the earth, looking for God. They replied that they were not he; instead, their silent beauty cried out, "*Ipse fecit nos*"—He made us. Claudel also discovered that same beauty, ever ancient and ever new: as he says in "The Closed House," "*Je sais que je suis ici avec Dieu et chaque matin je rouvre mes yeux dans le paradis*." By "re-inventing the eternal green," in the repetition of poetry, Claudel is lovingly participating in the ongoing creation of the world.

The Odes' complex structure can be compared to that of a symphony, with five movements instead of four, and various themes that are presented, developed, and recapitulated. A first movement, "The Muses," begins with a rollicking *ekphrasis* of the Nine Muses that introduces the main themes of the entire work: the vocation of the poet, the cosmos, human love,

divine love, and ordinary life. The poet's word is born in the "*explosion intelligible*" of their creating presence, in a parallel between the moment of inspiration and of conception. The poet embarks upon a journey deep into ancient memory, where he meets with each Muse, and at the same time, takes a voyage through literature. Polyhymnia, Muse of sacred music, leads him to the Virgin Mary, Vergil's *Georgics,* and the abundant French countryside.

But something in the exultation of life causes him to leave the "*inexhaustible cérémonie vivante*" for an open and empty space, the deaf and blind pull of human desire. This is the turn. Erato, *"la folle*," calls to him from among her sisters, in the heady dance of desire. Their nightly "conflagration" causes the well-ordered cosmos to erupt in flames:

> *Quand je commençais à voir le feuillage se décomposer et l'incendie du monde prendre,*
> *Pour échapper aux saisons le soir frais me parut une aurore, l'automne le printemps d'une lumière plus fixe,*
> *Je le suivis comme une armée qui se retire en brûlant tout derrière elle*. […]

The poet's desire has destroyed the well-ordered world, and among other things, it has forever barred his entrance into the peaceable society of the monastery. He is left with Erato's hand in his hand and "*une réponse et une question dans ses yeux*": the paradox of the innate goodness of human love and the utter havoc it can wreak upon a human life (as well as on society, and, metaphorically, on the landscape).

In "*Les Muses*," love is the faculty by which the poet understands the order and creation of the world, and yet it reveals itself to be the single most disruptive force in his life. By the beginning of the Second Ode, "*L'Esprit et l'eau*," Claudel's erotic passion has also shown its mortal face; he is left with the smoke of tilled earth and his lover's absence. The title, taken from the water symbolism in the Bible, refers to the erotic exchange between God and man. Where *"Les Muses*," is Claudel's Ode of creation (and fall), "*L'Esprit et l'eau*" is his Ode of

redemption. From the image of the overturned field, and the dust of great cities, Claudel sets off for the "*dilatation de la houle";* water becomes Spirit, and the poet exults in his power of creation.

In a turn parallel to the one that sent him hurtling into the arms of Erato, the poet proclaims the "*délivrance*" he brings to each thing, but then exclaims, "*Ce n'est pas assez encore !"* He has ventured even further into the "empty space" of his own desire, past Erato and into the unknown. The next section begins, *"Que m'importe la porte ouverte, si je n'ai pas la clef ? / Ma liberté, si je n'en suis le propre maître ?*" He has discovered that his freedom is what gives meaning to the world, for better or for worse; but what gives his own freedom meaning? The culmination of this Ode is his encounter with Christ as lover, which is also the unveiling of the ultimate object of his desire. The Ode ends with the *Noli me tangere*, do not put your hand in my hand, as Christ pulls the poet, by way of his love, out of the world.

"*Magnificat*," the Third Ode, shows how this newfound union with God illuminates Claudel's ordinary life, as well as his relationship with nature. The Ode is organized as a song of praise, and it contains Claudel's ultimate *ars poetica*, the phrase, "*Mon Dieu, qui nous parlez avec les paroles mêmes que nous vous adressons*."As in the Psalms, Claudel's own words are revealed to be God's words to him. His words are the "deep exultation of the Creature," which translates nature's eloquent silence. Claudel is able to convey, using language, the goodness of the world and its hidden joy in being. But as in the other Odes, in this Ode there is a moment of struggle, as well as a turn. Claudel, unlike Mary, sees *in himself "*the powerful you have cast down from their thrones" and "the rich you have sent away empty." He thanks God for delivering him from idolatry, and at the same time, he continues to fight with himself: "*O longueur du temps ! Je n'en puis plus et je suis comme quelqu'un qui appuie la main contre le*

mur." The turn in this poem is again inward. The poet enters into a dialogue with his own soul, a little preview of the Fourth Ode, who tells him, "*Paix ! Réjouis-toi !"* and leads him back into nature's silence.

After this purification, the poet now finds great joy and illumination in the birth of his son and in his own daily life. His fatherhood is a repetition of the fatherhood of God, who "effaces himself before his works." His newborn daughter is an "*image réelle*," before whom her father can only exclaim, "*Qui es-tu, nouvelle-venue, étrangère* ?" With all the tenderness of a new parent, he tells her that the old family farmhouse is waiting for her baptism in France; even the dear heavens, *"cette grosse planète au-dessus du clocher qui est dans le ciel étoilé comme un* Pater *parmi les petits* Ave," have their familiar role to play in the preparation of the festivities in honor of the new birth. Finally relieved of so much pride and its accompanying obtuseness, the poet "enters the land of his afternoon," the Promised Land of daily life; and at the end of the Ode, he blesses the entire world as though he were a priest holding up the Blessed Sacrament for the benediction at the end of Sunday Vespers.

The Fourth Ode, "*La Muse qui est la Grace*," is like a turn in and of itself; its structure is unique among the five Odes. The poem most fully develops the dearness of the perishing world and the simultaneous pull towards the meaning that lies the beyond it. The Ode opens with the sea coming to pick up the poet, in a metaphor for poetic inspiration, which leads at the same time to a kind of illumination of everyday life, not unlike inebriation or being in love, and to that something more, something beyond. An agonistic/erotic dialogue ensues between the poet and his Muse, a kind of fight between divine love and human love that brings out the best of both.

In the first strophe, the poet elaborates a great poetic project, "*Le grand poëme de l'homme enfin par-delà les causes seconds réconcilié aux forces éternelles, / La grande Voie*

triomphale au travers de la Terre réconciliée pour que l'homme soustrait au hasard s'y avance !" It is a vision of poetry like Haussman's Parisian boulevards. In the first antistrophe, the Muse makes a counter-proposal: that the poet learn instead "*le grand rire divin,"* learning to see the world with the eyes of his spirit rather than becoming a slave to its transformation. The poet's second strophe speaks of his duty to the world, his spirit's duty and desire to make, for the feminine language of reality, "*une ombre miserable avec des lettres et des mots."* The Muse answers, in the second antistrophe, what she perceives to be a lack of detachment: if the poet does not learn joy from her, in his obstinacy with this world, he will learn suffering. The third strophe reveals that the Muse is the most sacred part of the poet's soul, at the same time the most intimate and the most estranged; picking up the birth/poetic creation theme that began in "*Les Muses,*" he exclaims to her, "*Est-ce qu'il me faut engendrer le monde et le faire sortir de mes entrailles ?*" In reply, the Muse answers that she is also called Grace; she reveals herself to be the fire of God's own desire—"*Connais ma jalousie qui est plus terrible que la mort*." In the epode, which concludes the poem, it is as if the poet does give birth to the world; the poet descends into the very entrails of the beloved earth and answers the call of Erato in the darkness of Tenare, the mouth of Hell where Eurydice once piteously followed Orpheus.

The Fifth, and final, Ode, "The Closed House," is marked by the absence of Erato—the call from Tenare was, in fact, a kind of swan song, called up in all its beauty by the divine light. "The Closed House," closes the cycle of Odes with Claudel's new cosmology, an ordered and closed world, reflected in the ordered and closed household of marriage. The poet's wife compares their marriage to the cloister of the First Ode; his quest has ended in this communion with wife and child, giving a form that "extends through all the levels of life—from its biological roots up to the very heights of grace and of life in the Holy Spirit. And now, suddenly, all

fruitfulness, all freedom is discovered within the form itself, and the life of a married person can henceforth be understood only in terms of this interior mystery."[1] Sacramental marriage makes a closed circle of human love, ordering it towards divine love, which is also the guarantee of its stability. Rather than flaming out and leaving only the memory of beauty, like the relationship with Erato, human love, in permanent marriage, joins with divine love to become a sustainable source of life. In Claudel's Fifth Ode, the family becomes an icon for the universe; divine love is man's center and his end, just as man is revealed, through the theory of evolution and the finite universe, to be the center and summit of the natural world. He is the lone particle of life on a fragile planet supported by myriads and myriads of stars and other celestial bodies, just as divine love is the most intimate region within a man's soul, which is as vast as North and South, East and West.

This new, anthropomorphic cosmology—a decidedly modern inversion of the medieval one—is reflected in the embodiment of the four cardinal directions in the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Force, Temperance, and Justice. Prudence, to the North, gives the right heading, firmly anchored in the present moment and heedless to memory, worry, or regret. Force, to the South, resists temptation, all the bad winds. Temperance, in the direction of the rising sun, the direction of life, keeps each thing at its place; she is the "creating measure," the "form of life," "*la clef de la viole*" that maintains the exact tension so that life stays in tune. Justice, to the West, the direction of the setting sun, considers the end of all things and, presiding over "mysterious exchanges," gives to each thing its due. Together, the four virtues ensure abundant life, the full benediction of the earth upon "*le désiré des collines éternelles.*" For Claudel has been reconciled to the universe; he now sees it as "The Closed House," where God makes his

[1] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* vol. I, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, p. 27.

home, not in the celestial regions above the Earth, but in the souls of men. The love of God spreads out from that center to all of creation, in a kind of re-enchantment. Since God's love, and not matter or even human will, is the center of the universe and the connection between all things, even the dead are still with us. The Odes end with a positive and a negative image: the Angel of God fulfils the sacred duty the living owe to the dead by bringing them the bread of offering, but he does not give the sacred wine to them, "*car nous ne goûterons point de ce fruit de la vigne avant que nous le buvions nouveau dans le Royaume de Dieu*."

The final Ode reveals that the *Cinq Grandes Odes* are a suite, in five movements, of the slow re-enchantment of all aspects of existence. The sacred fire comes out from the heart of man to warm the entire world. "*Les Muses*," begins the cycle with an exploration of artistic intelligence, coming ultimately into the memory as a ship would sail into the Mediterranean, filled with the most exalted poetic productions—from Homer to Vergil to Dante. In a parallel movement to Book X of Augustine's *Confessions*, the memory is also marked as the place where the poet encounters God, in mental prayer. The Muse Claudel has neglected, however, is Erato, the Muse of erotic poetry; a consuming fire begins in this meeting between the lovers. But human desire, by itself, soon fails; and the poet is left grieving. In "*L'Esprit et l'eau,"* his search for God, in the absence of the lover, leads to another erotic encounter, the "gift of God," that gives him the key to his own freedom. "*Magnificat*," brings the poet into the fullness of communion with God and exultation in daily life, culminating in the birth of his first child. But the reality of desire, both human and divine, pursues the poet again in "*La Muse qui est la Grâce,"* giving the ultimate expression of love in the flesh, destined for loss. The final Ode, *"La Maison fermée,"* orders human love to divine love and expresses the goodness and sublime

beauty of the "closed" universe, reflected in the poignancy and eloquence of human life, which always has a beginning and an end.

Perhaps the most useful comparison, for understanding the *Odes,* is with Augustine's *Confessions*. The *Odes* are a confessional poem, in the same sense as Augustine's*;* off of the lips of the poet comes a confession of praise and of faith, both personal and cosmic, that far outshines the initial admission (in Claudel's case, also wisely short) of sorrow and of regret. And like Augustine, Claudel is a man of desire. The hidden secret of the *Odes*—although it should not be altogether surprising, since it is indeed so common, it remains marvelous—is that Claudel has found the same kind of divine joy in his bourgeois life as a father and a diplomat as Augustine once found as the busy bishop of Hippo. It is important to note that for both authors, writing was not a primary occupation. Claudel spent only fifteen to twenty minutes per day writing the Odes, over the course of eight years. But for both men, writing was a primary locus for the encounter with God. In a 1917 letter to a priest, Claudel wrote:

> When I am writing, the idea of the intrinsic beauty of what I'm doing or the pleasure that it gives me is completely foreign to me. Poetry is, for me, the expression of strong and profound feelings, and secondly, the means of this campaign of the progressive evangelization of all the regions of my intelligence and of all the regions of my soul that I have attempted to pursue since the day of my conversion."[2]

The *Odes*, in one sense, overpowered Claudel; and at the same time, they were the fruit of his contemplative practice, of consciously opening his soul on paper to the divine gaze, and thereby unifying the world.

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[2] July 13, 1917 letter to Father de Tonquedec, as quoted in the 4th volume of the Journal of Charles du Bos, January 1930 to July 1931, La colombe, Paris, 1955, p. 8: "*Quand j'écris, l'idée de la beauté intrinsèque de ce que je fais ou du plaisir que je puis procurer m'est complètement étrangère. La poésie est pour moi l'expression de sentiments forts et profonds, et secondement le moyen de cette campagne d'évangélisation progressive de toutes les régions de mon intelligence et de toutes les puissances de mon âme que j'essaie de poursuivre depuis le jour que je me suis converti.*"

By descending daily into the great aquifer that is the human spiritual life, Claudel found himself irresistibly seduced by the divine beauty: "*O ami, je ne suis point un homme ni une femme, je suis l'amour qui est au-dessus de toute parole !*".[3] His love is his weight (*Amor meus, pondus meum*), and it takes him to the heart of all things, the meaning that can be found at the same time in the most intimate regions of the human soul and beyond the world. The *Odes* are a song of desire, of the awakening of love. The mysterious "*souffle poétique*," the Muse who becomes Grace, is a kind of music towards which Claudel's ear turns, becomes attuned, and in which it participates. Desire provokes desire, and its fruit is an awakening of the spirit, which illuminates ordinary life until it is filled with peace, joy, and wonder. The *Odes* are proof that even the hullabaloo of a busy life is powerless when faced with the joy of the spirit—just as Augustine was once able to die peacefully, quietly leaving the world even as the Vandals were besieging his own episcopal see. The spiritual life is accessible to any human being who cares to spend a little time each day in his own room, seeking the Presence in silence. And if it is not possible to be alone, even just allowing oneself, for a short time, to feel the divine gaze before sleeping and just before waking, will suffice to open the soul to the rushing, living waters of the Muse called Grace.

[3] *L'Esprit et l'eau,* final lines.

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