IDEALS IN MODERN FRENCH LITERATURE.

PAUL CLAUDEL.

‘Vivre c’est connaître.’

‘Tu n’expliques rien ô poète, mais toutes choses par toi nous deviennent explicables.’

LTHOUGH the poet pursues ‘not the truth but *his* truth,’ it is never wise in studying social problems to neglect his efforts for the relief of man’s estate. He often reveals new aspects of the universe, evolves guiding lines from confused and complex surroundings, and even renders visible the things that are invisible. Paul Claudel in his published work does some if not all of these, but since he chooses to express himself in a symbolism hard for the definite and direct mind to follow, his writing has never been and never will be popular. For that fact he cares nothing, and had it not been for the persuasion of his friends, would possibly never have published anything at all.

The symbolist in literature, like the mystic in religion, tries to explain the vision he has seen. It was Carlyle who declared that a symbol included both concealment and revelation—‘silence and

speech act together. . . . If both the speech be itself high, and the silence fit and noble, how expressive will their union be.”¹ Claudel believes that it is contrary to all the conditions of art to paint life directly. A poem is not only ‘ces choses qu’il signifie,’ but a sign, an imaginary act, ‘à l’imitation de l’action humaine étudiée dans ses ressorts et dans ses poids.’ And so Claudel gives us impressions, sensations, never facts or information. Every poet has his own way of expressing what he sees and feels. Claudel prefers to express the really simple matters that form the basis of his thought by a symbolism of his own. His chief themes are the relations of man to man, of man to woman, and of woman to man, of man to nature, of man to God. At the same time as he recognises that science has taught that man is not the centre of the universe, yet man and the nature around him being all we know for certain, all that the ordinary human mind can grasp, he finds it inevitable that the poet’s subjects must be related to man.

It is not possible here to analyse in detail Claudel’s philosophy. More ample quotation would be required than the limits of this article allow. I can only attempt in describing some of his works to indicate its main lines. He explains it himself in his ‘Art poétique’ (1907). The first part, ‘Connaissance du temps,’ sets forth the doctrine that it is time that brings and produces all things. Time is continuity; ‘sous ce qui recommence, il y a ce qui continue.’ In the chain or

¹ Cf. ‘Sartor Resartus,’ Book III, chap. iii.

actions nothing begins or ends, the universal drama is perennial—

‘L’année change, et de nouveau se levant du noir
hiver, cramoisi, tout d’or,

‘De nouveau le nouveau soleil se peint sur les fleuves
chargés de glaçons.’

In the same way, the spirit of man never passes, indeed, it is the only thing besides God that subsists. In the universe as understood by Claudel each man has his prescribed task, his piece of time to specify, as it were. He must obey his ‘voie,’ hold to his part, follow his particular route, accomplish his day’s work. The other beings in this vast and mysterious world are also needed by it, they unceasingly and freely co-operate to form it, but man alone with his senses, intelligence and will, gives value to external nature: ‘toute la nature sans moi est vaine; c’est moi qui lui confère son sens.’

For Claudel God is the end of all things, and with him God means absolute faith in the teaching and spirit of the Roman Catholic Church, a faith that is the only remedy for the ills of mankind. Nothing goes right if God, the end, is lost sight of. The misery of humanity is always caused by the crime of a man who usurps the place of God. Claudel illustrates this everywhere in his work, but most effectively perhaps in his drama ‘La Ville,’¹ where the city perishes because it forgot God, and gave itself up to Isidore de Besme, the engineer who by his genius has enslaved the elementary

¹ See ‘Théâtre,’ vol. ii. (1911).

forces of nature, and beneficently, as he believes, imposed his domination on men. But his organization brings general misery; men did not offer their work gratuitously to Besme, they exacted payment, and so the régime of exchange was established. Everything had its price, all things were valued by gold. And the gold paid for work suppressed joy and liberty, and dissolved the ties between men. God has no place in that sort of social life, and man has nothing but 'le néant' before him.

'L'homme ne sortira point du sépulcre qu'il s'est construit.'

In order to promote the good, it is essential that God shall be present in our hearts and in our cities. Only the society which recognizes this will live and prosper. There must be absolute, indestructible harmony between the city and all men, a secure balance between the needs of each and his function. Then the workman will not demand wages, will expect his needs to be satisfied by others who are his brethren. It is not 're-form' that is required to bring about this harmony, Society with its various component parts exists, complete in all its organs, but the body needs a head, and that head must be God. It is in order to fix this presence, and to keep God among them, that men build churches. The Church becomes the centre, the kernel of the community. And that is why in our old cities the cathedral is always as it were caught amid the houses—

²³ 'L'église levait de la ville, et la ville naissait de l'église.'

It is the sign of communion in God and of the living unity of the city. We, in these latter days, must strive incessantly to make the presence of God felt and understood—

‘Pour nous, moins forts que nos pères, nous avons besoin d’une assistance plus continue,

‘Et nous disons au Seigneur de rester avec nous,

‘Parce que le soir approche.’

This absolute faith in the will of God, this worship, not of justice or progress, or truth, or divinity, or humanity, or the laws of nature, or art, or beauty, but of God alone, must come from within and cannot be imposed from without: ‘la lumière est à l’intérieur et les ténèbres sont au dehors.’ The finest poetic expression of Claudel’s faith is to be found in the ‘Magnificat’:¹

‘Soyez béni, mon Dieu, qui m’avez délivré de moi-même,

‘Et qui faites que je ne place pas mon bien en moi-même. . . .

‘Mais dans votre volonté seule,

‘Et non pas dans aucun bien, mais dans votre volonté seule.

‘Heureux non pas qui est libre, mais celui que vous déterminez comme une flèche dans le carquois !’

For the expression of his ideas Claudel has invented a form that is neither prose nor verse. He casts aside the restraints of received prosody, and makes use of a line freed from arbitrary servitude to ordinary metre. The result is a ‘parole cadencée,’ a rhythmical prose in which the rhythm is not

¹ See ‘Cinq grands odes’ (1913), Ode III.

imposed by external rules, but by the writer's own feeling. Coeuvre, the poet, in 'La Ville,' exclaims 'que mon vers ne soit rien d'esclave,' and thus explains his system which is Claudel's:

'O mon fils! lorsque j'étais un poète entre les hommes,
J'inventai ce vers qui n'avait ni rime ni mètre,
Et je le définissais dans le secret de mon cœur cette
fonction double et réciproque
Par laquelle l'homme absorbe la vie, et restitue, dans
l'acte suprême de l'expiration,
Une parole intelligible.'

In the dramas the length or brevity of the line reflects the feelings of the speaker, and the tone and the language differ according to the character. Words in Claudel's *credo* are more than conventional signs. When pronounced their rhythm reproduces the rhythm of the object named, they become concrete things, and perfect union exists between the word and the idea.

'Le son des paroles et leur sens, fondu en une phrase commune,

'Ont de si subtils échanges et de si secrets accords, que l'âme recueillie sur l'esprit,

'Aperçoit que l'idée pure ne se refusera pas à un attouchement délectable.'

It is, after all, but another interpretation of the fact that style is the writer's manner of expressing himself.

'Ainsi, qu'est la plume, pareille au style sur le cadran solaire?

'Que l'extrémité aiguë de notre ombre humaine promenée sur le papier blanc.'

I must confess that Claudel is not easy reading. The symbolism itself forms the first stumbling block, and the monotony of the rhythmical prose fatigues the ear, a monotony that is never present in the customary forms of verse when handled by great masters.¹ But a great reward is certain if we persevere with Claudel. We come constantly on passages of wonderful beauty, and their classical purity and absolute simplicity give a kind of pleasure that defies definition or reduction to a formula. I may instance one or two such passages here. The farewell of Anne Vercors to his family is typical of Claudel at his best.

'Peut-être que ce sera le matin, peut-être à midi quand on mange.

'Et peut-être que la nuit, vous réveillant, vous entendrez mon pas sur la route.

'Adieu !'²

The hymn of praise to night and sleep in 'La Ville' abounds in beauties. I wish I could quote it in its entirety. After salutation to the moon as 'toi qui par la nuit témoignes du soleil que tu vois !' there follows the benediction :

¹ Those who are making Claudel's acquaintance for the first time may be recommended to read the following works in the order given :—'Connaissance de l'Est' (1900), 'L'Otage' (1911), 'L'Echange' (1910), 'L'Annonce faite à Marie' (first version of *Violaine*, 1913), 'Tête d'or' (1911), 'La Ville' (1911), 'La jeune fille Violaine' (1910), 'Cinq grands Odes' (1913). The dates refer to the edition, not to the year of composition or of first publication. It is Claudel's habit sometimes to write two versions of a work, especially in the case of his dramas; where he has done this, the second version is always superior to the first, and at the same time clearer.

² 'L'Annonce faite à Marie.'

'Bénie sois-tu, ô toi qui en commençant ta course annonces

'Que le jour est fini; le temps est revenu de dormir.

'Tu délies les esclaves.'

Thou deliverest,

'le pauvre de son oppression, et l'avare comme un petit enfant ouvre les mains.

'Tout oeil est clos, toute bouche s'est tue; il n'est plus d'hommes, ni de femmes, ni de maîtres, ni de savants.

'L'homme dort.'

As a writer of normal prose Claudel stands in the same rank as Flaubert and Renan. His phrase is full and musical, and always perfectly balanced. There is no straining of the syntax, the epithets are sober, the images direct, and the comparisons simple. His intense love of nature and his Wordsworthian sympathy with her in all her moods, leads him to derive the greater number of his images from the processes of the natural world. His finest prose is to be found in a volume written in 1900, entitled 'Connaissance de l'Est,' a series of Eastern pictures chiefly drawn in China. Here is a paragraph from 'Le Cocotier':

'La palme est l'insigne du triomphe, elle qui, aérienne, amplification de la cime, s'élançant, s'élargissant dans la lumière où elle joue, succombe au poids de sa liberté. Par le jour chaud et le long midi, le cocotier ouvre, écarte ses palmes dans une extase heureuse, et au point où elles se séparent et divergent, comme des crânes d'enfants s'appliquent les têtes grosses et vertes des cocos. C'est ainsi que le cocotier fait le geste de montrer son cœur. Car les palmes inférieures, tandis qu'il s'ouvre jusqu'au fond, se tiennent affaissées et pendantes, et celles du

milieu s'écartent de chaque côté tant qu'elles peuvent, et celles du haut, relevées, comme quelqu'un qui ne sait que faire de ses mains ou comme un homme qui montre qu'il s'est rendu, font lentement un signe. La hampe n'est point faite d'un bois inflexible, mais annelée, et, comme une herbe, souple et longue, elle est docile au rêve de la terre, soit qu'elle se porte vers le soleil, soit que, sur les fleuves rapides et terreux ou au-dessus de la mer et du ciel, elle incline sa touffe énorme.'

The most important part of Claudel's lyrical work is to be found in the volume entitled 'Cinq grandes odes' (1913). The first, 'Les Muses,' shows his understanding of the antique spirit, in effect, of Greek paganism; the second, 'l'Esprit et l'eau,' is a magnificent *credo*. The poet, captive so to speak within the walls of Pekin—Claudel for many years filled the office of Consul in various places in the Far East—thinks of the sea. Water is at the same time the infinite and liberation. But spirit is its superior in inter-penetration and in liberty, for God alone can free us. Unhappily in this earthly life of ours we are separated from him, but although he is invisible he is there all the same. His spirit manifests itself in the tears (water) that flow from a contrite heart and illumine and clarify the spirit. Then amid profound silence the poet hears the spirit of God whispering at his ear, and the voice of the wisdom that, too often, alas, unheeded is addressed to every man.

The third ode, the Magnificat, is a hymn of praise and gratitude for the benefits of God who has delivered 'me from idols, from death, from myself,' and who has accepted 'me' as 'une chose

qui sert.' It contains perhaps Claudel's fullest expression of his faith in the will of God. Claudel may be said to think in images, but while the comparisons are sometimes fanciful, the underlying thought is always simple. As I read him I am reminded of Crashaw and Vaughan at their best.

Claudel's greatest work, and the work in which he gives his view of contemporary society is in his dramas.'

'Ce n'est point le futur que j'envisage, c'est le présent même qu'un dieu nous presse de déchiffrer. De moment à autre, un homme redresse la tête, renifle, écoute, considère, reconnaît sa position; il pense, il soupire, et, tirant sa montre de la poche logée contre sa côte, regarde l'heure, *Où suis-je? et, quelle heure est-il?* telle est de nous au monde la question inépuisable; *où suis-je? et où en suis-je?*'

His view of modern times is scarcely reassuring—

'Les temps de la foi sont finis,
 'Foi en Dieu, foi du vassal en son lige,
 'Le Roi image de Dieu à qui seul obéissance est
 donnée à Lui seul due.
 'Maintenant recommence la servitude de l'homme à
 l'homme, de par la force plus grande et la loi,
 'Ainsi qu'au temps de Tibère, et ils appellent cela
 liberté

'Ces gens de la loi qui pensent que tout se règle par
 un contrat!'

When it is asserted that 'la loi est la raison écrite,' there comes the retort, 'la raison de ceux-là qui l'ont écrite.' 'Interest,' says one of the

' See his 'Théâtre,' 4 vols. 1911-12.

characters in 'L'Otage,' 'keeps men together,' but says another, it does not unite them, only the love 'qui a fait l'homme l'unit.'

It must be clearly understood that Claudel's dramas are lyric in character and wholly unsuited for performance in the contemporary theatre. Neither the conditions of audience, actors, nor stage representation could do them justice. Neither time nor place is defined, the action takes place 'n'importe où,' the characters are not human beings as we know them, all scientific reasons and causes are ignored.¹ And yet Claudel undoubtedly realizes the place of the stage in modern life, for he puts the following observations into the mouth of an actress,² and I do not remember anywhere a better description of the general audience.

'Il y a la scène et la salle.'

'Tout étant clos, les gens viennent là le soir et ils sont assis par rangées les uns derrière les autres, regardant.

'L'homme s'ennuie et l'ignorance lui est attachée depuis sa naissance.

'Et ne sachant de rien comment cela commence ou finit, c'est pour cela qu'il va au théâtre.

'Et il se regarde lui-même, les mains posées sur les genoux.

'Et il pleure et il rit, et il n'a point envie de s'en aller.'

And among the audience will be found the cashier who knows that his books will be verified tomorrow, and the mother who is an adulteress and whose child has just fallen ill, and the thief who

¹ See 'La Ville' ('Théâtre,' vol. ii.).

² See 'L'échange' ('Théâtre,' vol. iii.).

has stolen for the first time, and the idler who has done nothing all day.

‘Et ils regardent et s’écoutent comme s’ils dormaient.’

In ‘L’Echange’ there are four characters: a husband and wife, representing the average man and woman, are brought into contact with a rich business man, an American, and an actress, his wife, or more properly his mistress, for the time being. Laine, the husband, a man of adventurous spirit but lacking ballast, tired of the conventional life of Europe, flees with Marthe, the type of the faithful loving wife true in everything to the old Christian ideas and virtues, to the new world. But Laine tires of her and sells her to the rich American, whose one idea is his money—‘je suis tout! J’achète tout, je vends tout. . . . Toute chose a son prix. Ne donner jamais rien pour rien’—for a sum which will enable him to realize his ambition, which is actually a love of continual change. But he dies miserably because he denied the sacrament of marriage, and yielded to the actress-courtesan. The portrayal of Marthe, the wife, is admirable. Every word she says fixes the ideal which the only true relation between man and woman, that of husband and wife, should take. Marthe, like Cordelia, says little but listens much—‘peu de gens savent écouter.’ Into her has entered since her marriage ‘la passion de servir.’ As a child she was taught not to walk on the young corn, nor to throw her bread on the ground, nor to take things that belonged to others. Her ideas are called old-fashioned to-day. She

believes in marriage as the highest good for both man and woman, although she recognizes that it does not necessarily ensure unclouded happiness to either partner

‘Mais c’est raison qu’arrivant à l’âge dû le jeune homme

‘Ressente, voyant le visage de la femme,

‘Cette joie,

‘Car il était seul et maître de lui-même,

‘Et voilà que quelqu’un est toujours là, partageant même son lit quand il dort, et la jalousie le presse et l’enserre.

‘Il était oisif et il faut qu’il travaille tant qu’il peut ;

‘Insouciant et voici l’inquiétude.

‘Et ce qu’il gagne n’est pas pour lui, et il ne lui reste rien.

‘Et il vieillit pendant que ses enfants grandissent,

‘Et la beauté de sa femme, où est-elle ?

‘Elle passe sa vie dans la douleur et elle n’apporte que cela avec elle,

‘Et qui aura ce courage, qu’il l’aime ?

‘Et l’homme n’a point d’autre épouse, et celle-là lui a été donnée, et il est bien qu’il l’embrasse avec des larmes et des baisers,

‘Et elle lui donnera de l’argent pour qu’il l’épouse.’

And when her husband, the husband who broke faith with her, is dead, faith in God never wavers, and her lamenting is full of submission to the Divine will.

‘Que sais-je ? Me voici veuve.

‘Hélas, Laine ! O

‘Mon mari ! ô la seule chose que j’avais !

‘Mais cela est bien ainsi.

‘Oui, il est bon que tu sois mort et que je me trouve ainsi seule et désolée,

'Et il est juste et bon qu'il n'en ait pas été selon que j'aurais voulu.

'Ce n'est pas à moi de savoir pourquoi, car je suis

'Une simple femme et je n'ai affaire que d'obéir.

'Nous ne voyons pas Dieu ; mais nous voyons l'homme qui est l'image de Dieu,

'Et ne louerons-nous pas le soleil qui nous permet de le voir et de le regarder?'

'La Ville' may be characterized as a 'social tragedy. It offers a symbolical picture of contemporary society, of a society in decadence, exhausted, agitated by anarchy, and of its struggles and its various attitudes of mind. The city falls; the scholar, the poet, the anarchist, the woman, the politician, try to rebuild it all in their own fashion, but they fail, and it is only the men of faith who succeed in the task.

Besme, the engineer, is a realist. He understands the forces of nature and uses them for the benefit of mankind ; but, while he is master of all the sciences, he understands neither the soul of nature nor of man.

Coeuvre, the poet, finds truth not by scientific knowledge but by love and intuition. He possesses all things because he cares nothing for their material side, only for their signification, their pure essence. There is no scientific reason, he declares, for the fading of the leaf in autumn—

'Elle jaunit pour fournir saintement à la feuille voisine qui est rouge l'accord de la note nécessaire.'

The capitalist, the man of science, the engineer, have brought wretchedness on earth. Formerly the artisan had his work entirely in his own hands,

and as the eye is gladdened at the sight of colour, he found beauty in his work, and delighted in it; knowing the purchaser of it, he took trouble to please him, and to render him what he specially wanted. But to-day, all the charm and the honour and the genius of work has been extracted from it, and the man's aim is no longer to give satisfaction to another man, but to provide for general needs; the sole merit of his work is its utility, and machinery does it for him. Thus the workman is deprived of choice of means and order in his work, and neither the intelligence, which envisaging the end resolves to attain it, nor the will which attaching itself to the work forgets the toil, is required of him. And so, whatever the wages, the workman becomes a servile workman, and being a slave, seeks his liberty. Hence follows the continual unrest among the workers.

Salvation is found for the new-built city in a prince, the ruler of free men, a prince who commands, teaches, and judges with tender solicitude and exemplary authority. It is the prince's duty to administer happiness to the nations, happiness which means a firmer security, a wider satisfaction. Order resides in sacrifice, and the sacrifice must seem beautiful. 'Je veux être un conducteur des hommes,' says the prince, 'et non pas un pasteur de bêtes broutantes.' Not until he confesses his belief in God and the Church, is he ordained to form a new society of men, to work for the happiness of his people, to turn his face towards the poor and the unfortunate, to be in fact the heart of mankind.

In 'Tête d'Or' Claudel gives us the attempt of the strong man, the conqueror, to raise himself to the heights, but alone, without the help of God. The enterprise is beyond his strength, and he fails because his effort 'arrive à une limite vaine, se défait lui-même comme un pli.' Tête d'Or reminds me in many ways of Marlowe's Tamburlaine; Claudel's hero is a man become strong by force of his armed will, a man drunk with action and conquest. 'Je marcherai,' he exclaims, 'je combattrai!' J'écraserai l'obstacle sous mes pieds! je briserai la résistance frivole comme un bois mort! It is perhaps the most dramatic of Claudel's plays, and seems to show Shakespearian influence!*

'La jeune fille Violaine' and 'L'Otage' are dramas of sacrifice and renunciation. Sygne, in the latter play, finds renunciation painful, while Violaine's sacrifice is mingled with happy tears and smiles; Violaine reaches peace and death while the soul of Sygne—Sygne also has to die—is in conflict till the end.

The statement—

'Il est des gens pour qui la souffrance est très bonne
'Et d'autres pour qui elle est un mal et un poison'

well applies to the two heroines. Sygne in 'L'Otage' is the unwilling victim of a man of the new régime, Toussaint Turelure, whose purpose is 'flanquer toute la vicillerie par terre,' and 'faire

* See 'Théâtre,' vol. i.

* Claudel is well read in English literature. He has published translations from Coventry Patmore, G. K. Chesterton, and Edgar Allan Poe.

quelque chose de bien plus beau!’ To save the life of the Pope she marries Turelure, but the conflict between what passes away and what endures causes her death. Enforced sacrifice is sadness itself.

‘Il y a une chose plus triste à perdre que la vie, c’est la raison de vivre,

‘Plus triste que de perdre ses biens, c’est de perdre son espérance,

‘Plus amère que d’être déçu, et c’est d’être exaucé.’

The keynote to Violaine’s character and self-renunciation, on the other hand, may be found in the words,

‘Ce n’est point mon affaire de comprendre, mais de prier dans l’amour et le tremblement.’

Further, the virtue of renunciation is the faculty that distinguishes and differentiates man from the beasts. The end of life is not to live but to die, not to fashion the woodwork of the cross, but ‘to climb on to it, and to give smiling all we possess.’ Therein is joy, liberty, grace and eternal youth.

All the dramas form a glorification of the Christian faith, which is regarded by Claudel as the corner stone of any social system that can remedy the tragic despair, the moral incertitude of men in the world as it is to-day. Only believers can find peace of mind and soul and heart. Society can only find salvation and sanction in the observance of Christian laws. Claudel believes absolutely in the sacredness of marriage and family ties, and in the gospel of work.

'L'ouvrier de sa propre richesse lui-même, voyant sans cesse son travail

'Fructifier entre ses mains? s'il avait une femme qui l'aime, des enfants braves et beaux?

'Et s'il se portait toujours bien.

'Et en cas de malheur, s'il possédait toujours avec lui comme des outils

'Pour réparer le dommage, l'intelligence, la patience, la force,

'Ne peut-on dire qu'il serait heureux?'

Beyond and above these there is God, the way to whom is a progress towards joy, joy absolute residing in God alone. And God exists in proportion to how men honour him, for to be great God needs the greatness and the generosity of men.

Here is Claudel's definition of men:

'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, 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.'

But there is no life except in God, without faith no one is capable of anything eternal. The poet can help man to faith; indeed, it is the poet's duty to find God in everything, to seek to understand

the harmony of the universe, and to aim at surprising the melody.

Whether we believe with Claudel or not, we cannot fail to recognize the genius which inspires his conceptions, and the sincerity which underlies and shapes them. With deep sorrow he sees that with time doubt has crept into the world, and in order that God may not be forgotten, His presence must be made more evident by the Church. With Claudel nothing is of importance outside the domain of ideas, beliefs and sentiments, and it says much for his genius that, while we read him, we feel with him. Whether society is to be saved by one way or by several ways, I do not know, but that necessity for salvation should be acknowledged by four great contemporary writers of such different ways of thinking as Anatole France, Maurice Barrès, Paul Adam and Paul Claudel, is a sign of awakening in the present and of hope for the future.¹

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