Paul Claudel (1868-1955)

Both the power of Paul Claudel’s writing and the controversial character of his politics were so well known in their time that Auden, in the original 1939 version of “In Memory of W.B Yeats,” could assume his readers’ knowledge of them: “Time that with this strange excuse/ Pardoned Kipling and his views,/ And will pardon Paul Claudel,/ Pardons him [Yeats] for writing well.” While still read today and taught, especially in France, Claudel has not entirely been pardoned and indeed is often remembered only for the ways in which the intense devotion to Catholicism that defined his life and work fed conservative, often intensely nationalist political views, which included support for French imperialism and, in his youth, anti-Semitism. Following Claudel’s dismissal of the group as “pederasts,” the Surrealists attacked Claudel in an open letter that divided many French intellectuals at the time, notably long-time friend of the Surrealists and future Nazi collaborator Drieu la Rochelle. Despite these early views and associations, Claudel ultimately opposed not only Nazism but also the Vichy government, specifically its anti-Semitism, to such a degree that he put himself at personal risk. Claudel’s gender politics and personal behavior –most famously emblematized by his role in his having his sister, the sculptor Camille Claudel, committed to a mental institution—have not aided his rehabilitation.

A prolific playwright, poet, and diplomat of seemingly boundless energy and great rhetorical gifts, Claudel garnered many official honors during his life, symbolizing for some French culture abroad for many years. Although of humble, rural origins, Claudel had an extremely successful career in both diplomacy and literature, ultimately being elected to the Académie française in 1946.

By his own account, the defining event of his life was a sudden and unexpected conversion experience, at the age of eighteen, on Christmas Day 1886, in Notre Dame de Paris. Despite flirtations with a withdrawal from secular life (he briefly entered a Benedictine monastery), he in fact took the very secular path of serving the French diplomatic corps for over forty years (1893-1936), during which time he held posts throughout the world, including various cities in the United States, China (1895–1909), Germany, and Brazil, ultimately becoming ambassador to Japan (1922–1928).

A lifelong reader of the Bible and of the major Catholic theologians, his major literary influences were largely from the Symbolist tradition, above all Rimbaud and Mallarmé, whose famous soirées he attended and whose fascination with the physical forms of book and typography influenced the younger poet, who would later be involved in the 1914 republication of Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dès*. (See, for example, Claudel’s 1927 essay *La Philosophie du livre*). Claudel’s best-known lyric work is no doubt the *Cinq Grandes Odes* (*Five Great Odes*, 1907/1910), whose long, irregular lines verge on a kind of prose poetry. His haiku-inspired *Cent phrases pour éventail* (*One Hundred Poems for Fans*, 1927) has also attracted much recent critical attention.

Throughout most of his life, however, he was no doubt best known for his plays, the most famous of which include *La Ville* (1890), *L’Echange* (1893), *Le Partage de Midi* (*The Break of Noon*, 1906), *L’Annonce faite à Marie* (*The* *Tidings Brought to Mary*, orig. 1910) and *Le Soulier de Satin* (*The Satin Slipper*, 1931; written 1924). The plays often feature anguished lovers and men of action (including kings and other leaders) whose trials allegorize religious crisis and devotion. The plays are often extraordinarily long (some known to extend to eleven hours) and strained the limits of performability, but were in fact intended for performance and indeed Claudel was deeply involved in the pragmatics of dramaturgy throughout his life.

Although Claudel’s religious and political views were deeply conservative, his literary works were often formally innovative. He pursued these innovations not in a spirit of experimentation, but in relation to his religious vision, in an effort to create formal analogues and catalysts for spiritual truths that could not be captured by conventional forms of language. His complex views on the ontology of poetic language are most fully represented in the essays collected as *L’Art poétique* (1903-04), which were written relatively early in his writing career, but to which he would refer repeatedly throughout his life. Meant as a critique of all forms of positivism, his poetics combined a deeply Aquinian reading of Aristotle’s metaphysics and a Mallarméan vision of the world as text.

**References and Further Reading**

Claudel, Paul. *Œuvres en prose*.

----. *Œuvres poétique*.

----. *Théâtre*. (2 volumes).

Wallace Fowlie. *Paul Claudel*.

The société claudelien maintains a helpful web site at: http://www.paul-claudel.net/

