

# The art of Claudel's *l'Art poétique*

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## Introduction: is the *Art poétique* an *ars poetica*?

In his *Mémoires Improvisés* Claudel assured J. Amrouche that he considered his *Art poétique* to be the key seminal text that served as a roadmap for all his subsequent intellectual and literary production: “*Toute la philosophie de mon œuvre, tout le côté purement philosophique et intellectuelle s’est cristallisé dans deux traités, qui sont la Connaissance du Temps, et le Traité de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-même, ce livre très important, auquel je n’ai cessé de puiser dans tout le reste de ma création littéraire, à la fois intellectuelle et artistique.*”<sup>1</sup> Yet critics are often puzzled as to what to make of these two treatises and how to correctly classify them. Critics such as J. Whitaker contend that despite its title, this text says nothing on the subject of art.<sup>2</sup> It is true of course that this *Art poétique* bears little resemblance to most other works bearing the same or a similar title and therefore cannot be considered an *ars poetica* in the traditional sense. Claudel’s primary aim here is not to conduct a general survey or analysis of man-made works of art or to expound on narrowly defined aesthetic matters, but rather to explore and promote a complex notion of *poesis* informed by wide-ranging scientific, metaphysical and theological concerns. And yet, Claudel does not completely eschew the aesthetic agenda normally associated with traditional *ars poetica*. It is undeniable that a part of the philosophy of this difficult-to-classify text is a philosophy of art, and that this curious and original *Art poétique* does function, at least minimally and implicitly, as an *ars poetica*.

The bulk of the *Art poétique*<sup>3</sup> consists of a series of theoretical commentaries and didactic lessons about the nature of reality and the self—Claudel’s chief objective is to explain to his readers his viewpoint concerning the origin, purpose and structure of the universe and humanity’s position and role therein. The universe (including humanity) is, he argues, created by God, and its elements, both individually and

collectively, function as signs that point to their Creator. The mission of humanity (whom he himself exemplifies) is to understand how all the elements of the cosmos relate to each other on a horizontal level and to God on a vertical level, and to assist them in establishing and maintaining these relationships.

At several points in the text however, this discourse focused on analyzing reality becomes, for the space of a few words or sentences, an implicit *ars poetica* as Claudel either metaphorically designates the universe (or some part of it) as God's work of art or analogically compares it to one of several different art forms. These metaphors and analogies propose and promote the idea—while nonetheless avoiding its explicit articulation—that art can (should) serve as a complement and ally to theoretical discourse in the enterprise of illuminating the true nature of reality.<sup>4</sup> They point to art as a means of expression that can bolster, diversify and illustrate in a more intuitive and indirect manner, through the mediation of symbolic systems, the truths and principles that the surrounding analytical discourse presents in logical (philosophical, scientific) terms and tries to prove through persuasive argument.<sup>5</sup> Working in tandem, theory and art provide a richer, more complete insight into the true nature of reality as image of God. In this present discussion I will explore the notable role that Claudel's limited, non-systematic but surprisingly suggestive references to various art forms and works of art play in illustrating and validating the cosmic worldview espoused by the theoretical discourse of the *Art poétique*.

### General art metaphors and analogies

Claudel is eclectic in his choice of art metaphors and analogies—he makes references to all of the following art forms: drama (57, 59, 74) music (45, 46, 52-3, 61, 83, 129, 134), dance (52), sculpture (73, 120), photography (71), weaving (43-4, 75), writing (46-7, 48-9, 53, 54, 56, 58, 86, 72), poetry (102, 122-3, 127-8, 132-3), architecture (54, 58), painting/drawing (38, 44, 54, 66, 71-2, 75, 121, 124).<sup>6</sup> The natural world is either designated metaphorically as a work of art created by a divine Author—cosmic elements and created beings are designated as notes, words, colors, etc.—or else it is compared to human works of art through analogies often introduced by conjunctions such as “de même”, “comme”, “pareil”. Most metaphors and analogies involve allusions to general art forms

rather than references to specific works of art. Their presentation is neither systematic—they appear more or less at random—nor extensive—a few consist of as little as a single word (such as the word “dessin” used on several occasions to designate the design of the universe) while most are on average one to two sentences long. Claudel's purpose is not at all to analyze the art forms/works of art that he mentions but only to briefly highlight one or a few basic aspects of the art that he thinks will elucidate some particular truth about the natural world that he presents in his discourse. Most analogies make an explicit link between a particular theoretical idea and the art form/work of art that is meant to exemplify it. A few metaphors are more elusive—they alert the reader that some link between nature and art needs to be made but ultimately leave it up to him to draw specific conclusions as to exactly what aspect of the art is being compared with what principle or idea.

One of the major themes that recurs throughout the *Art poétique* is that God created the universe as a thoroughly integrated organic whole in which each particular element is assigned a specific inviolable place and role. Each individual entity is obligated to and inseparable from the whole—nothing is created by or for itself. Claudel demonstrates this global unity of the universe by comparing it to a single, complete word: “*Tout cherche partout sa fin, complément ou efférence, sa part dans la composition de l'image, le mot qui profère son sens. Et le mot total, c'est l'univers (“l'univers” version à l'unité), cela qui impose le sens et le devoir.*” (110-11) An analogy from painting and weaving serves to point to the fact that every cosmic element is the focal point of convergence of the entire universe and is related in some way or another to every other element: “*De même que le coloré est limité par un autre coloré, il désigne de toutes parts autour de lui les derniers termes, constants ou non, de séquences venant de l'infini. Il les appuie, les arrête et les coordonne; il noue, il est le lieu du croisement infiniment complexe du fil avec la trame.*” (75) This particular analogy supports Claudel's vigorous polemic against the positivist view of causality—Claudel utterly discounts and denounces (especially in *De la cause*) the positivist claim to be able to isolate particular cosmic phenomena from their surroundings in order to identify their specific causes. For Claudel, any effect is not the result of a single cause or even a limited number of causes, but of a multiplicity, almost an infinity, of causes.

Claudel also evokes the deliberate organization and composition of the universe by referring to it as a “dessin” on multiple occasions (44, 45, 48, 54, 57, 58, 124). Twice, through a play on the words “dessin” and

“dessein”, he indicates that the intelligent design of the universe and the place of each of its elements within it is the direct result of God’s deliberate plan and intention: “*L’existence d’un mouvement n’est limitée que par sa fin, par le dessin de la nature et par le dessein de Dieu.*” (124) “*J’apparais et je cesse à la place et à l’instant que le commande le dessin et le dessein à quoi je suis nécessaire.*” (57) The individual must fulfill the position and role set up for him by God in the greater whole. An example from drama confirms this necessary deference of the individual to the common good and God’s intention or plan for his existence: “*Le temps passe, dit-on, oui: il se passe quelque chose, un drame infiniment complexe aux acteurs entremêlés, que l’action même introduit ou suscite [...] il ne s’agit pas d’une rangée d’automates isolés produisant le même geste indéfiniment, mais d’une action commune, d’une commedia dell’arte qui se poursuit. J’y ai moi-même mon entrée et ma sortie; mes répliques sont stipulées.*” (59, *De l’heure*) The actors in the cosmic drama enjoy a certain degree of creative freedom—they are not robots or machines, and they act out their own roles, but they are also obliged to abide by a set script. The individual actor is not autonomous or self-serving but is told to come on and off stage according to the requirements of the global action. And yet the individual is also vastly enriched by being a part of the “action commune” instead of existing in isolation.

Claudé draws attention to the equilibrium between the unity of the cosmos and the distinctness of each individual component part through the image of a mosaic: “*Les rencontres des forces physiques et le jeu des volontés humaines coopèrent dans la confection de la mosaïque Instant.*” (54). This image also accentuates the extreme mobility of the individual units that make up the universe—although the cosmic building blocks always constitute an organic unity at every moment in time, due to their never ending dynamic movement, the form of the universal composition is never exactly the same from one moment to the next.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, each individual entity, as well as the universe as a whole, is in a relentless state of formation, re-formation and ongoing actualization—it is never a “finished” product. Claudé imitates this existential condition of perpetual “becoming” by portraying the process of creation rather than the final (static) form of certain works of art. For example, the passage of time is compared to the progressive construction of a building: “*Le passé [...] ne cesse pas de se développer, de s’organiser en lui-même, comme un édifice dont les nouvelles constructions changent le rôle et l’aspect [...]*” (54) The force that impels the forward movement of a writing hand, “*la main*

*de celui qui écrit va d'un bord à l'autre du papier*" (48-9), "*la main écrivante qui forme des mots du mouvement qui l'anime*" (54), becomes a reflection of the cosmic force (originating in God) that drives the forward thrust of time in the universe. The world is also portrayed as a drawing or painting in the process of being born: "*Mais le dessin n'est pas fini. Nous le voyons qui se fait sous nos yeux.*" (48)

Finally, by means of a metaphor in which he describes the movement of the earth around the sun as a sacred dance, Claudel tries to offset the positivist ambition to evacuate all traces of the divine from the world and explain the behavior of natural phenomena through a series of abstract mathematical equations: "*Le jour, c'est la Terre qui se roule dans le soleil l'année, la figure de sa danse, la salutation à son Roi, la ronde qui l'éloigne ou l'approche de sa face perpétuelle; les saisons, ses attitudes.*" (52) If the earth is here taken as a metonymy for the whole of creation and the sun as a symbol of God, this image represents the universe's submission to God and the homage that it pays to its Creator.<sup>8</sup> Unlike in the positivist scheme of the world, the elements of creation do not follow arbitrary rules for no good reason, but actually give praise to their Maker by their obedience to his commands. In addition, a dance, especially the sort of ritual dance described here, is a deliberately thought-out and well-planned set of steps, not at all an "accident" born of pure chance. Claudel's conception of the divine design excludes any possibility of chance, yet it also avoids the pitfalls of strict determinism (with its tyrannical and inflexible laws) by leaving room for a certain degree of freedom, spontaneity and unpredictability in nature. Nature for Claudel functions much more like a musical instrument than the machine that the positivists imagine it to be: "*Où vous suivez la marche d'une machine, je goûte la pratique d'un instrument*" (46).

### Poet's role as interpreter, co-creator and explainer of nature

A very important assertion of the theoretical discourse of the *Art poétique* is that humanity is (must be) actively involved in discerning as well as actually helping to form the complex system of relationships between themselves, the world and God. Some of the art analogies thus also call attention to man's privileged role as active reader, spectator and/or composer (co-creator) of the reality that he experiences. In two

metaphors from the world of drama Claudel portrays himself both as an actor and as a critic of the cosmic play: "*Au-dessous des choses qui arrivent, je suis conscient de cette partie confiée à mon personnage de l'intention totale [...] Le temps passe, dit-on, oui: il se passe quelque chose, un drame infiniment complexe aux acteurs entremêlés [...] Qu'un critique se poste devant la scène béante!*" (57, 59) "*Chaque homme a été créé pour être le témoin et l'acteur d'un certain spectacle, pour en déterminer en lui le sens.*" (117) This double role (as actor and critic/witness) reflects his mediating role between the cosmos and God—he is a created being like everything else in the universe, but he is also, as the crowning glory of that creation, God's special representative: "*Par rapport à Dieu, il est le délégué aux relations extérieurs, le représentant et le fondé de pouvoirs.*" (109) As an actor in the great cosmic play he is called to both understand and perform his part; as a critic of this same play he enjoys a bird's-eye view and tries to ascertain its global meaning. But as critic, he does not simply discover the already-existing meaning of the play—in fact he actually helps to create that meaning through the work of his understanding. As Claudel explains in *De la cause*: "*L'homme connaît le monde non point par ce qu'il y dérobe mais par ce qu'il y ajoute: lui-même. Il fait lui-même l'accord qui est l'objet de sa connaissance, comme un clavier sur qui je promène les doigts.*" (45) Man plays an activating role with regard to the composition, and hence the meaning, of the universe: the universe provides the notes of the keyboard—a virtually infinite number of potential chords—but the human being actualizes a certain number of these possible chords (relationships).

A metaphor from the art of painting allows Claudel to further explore the role of the discerning human mind in helping to organize and compose the disparate elements of the universe: "*Toutes s'inscrivent dans une forme plus générale, s'agencent en un tableau: c'est une question de point de vue à chercher, ce regard à qui elles sont dues, le retrouver. [...] les choses se connaissent entre elles par l'exploitation d'un principe commun, soit la lumière semblable à un œil qui voit. Chacune obéit à la nécessité d'être vue.*" (71-2) The *eye* that observes this "*tableau*" represents first and foremost God's omnipotent gaze, but it also symbolizes the vision of God's human representative on earth who shares to some degree in the privileges of the divine vision. The fact that the universe is seen as it were "from above" indicates that its existence as a horizontal composition is possible only because it is vertically connected to God. The non-rational (non-human) elements of the universe are driven by instinctive pressures to come

together to form a composition, but they do so *in order to* be seen (and understood) by the human intellect as an image of God. It is the poet who, through his vision and intellect, determines that the scene before his eye is a *tableau*, that is, a work of art deliberately created by the Divine Artist to be a sign of his wisdom and creative power. The human observer thus becomes the *cause* of the conglomeration and organization of the elements of the *tableau*: although God “programs” things to come together, by themselves they only form an unfinished composition which the human observer must “complete” by serving as the organizing nexus or central point of convergence where all lines and angles of the universe can come together.

Besides being a spectator of the *tableau* of the natural world, the human being is also a reader of the text of nature. Claudel explains that the aggregate of cosmic phenomena “*forment ensemble comme une étoffe [qui] est l’objet de nos regards, la considération de notre esprit, la matière de notre science.*” (44-5) In *Du temps*, he portrays the passage of time as the creation of a story that is meant to be read and interpreted by humanity and then compares the continuing presence of the past within the present to the process of reading a sentence: “*l’heure totale, créatrice, accomplit une œuvre, parfait des résultats, avance une histoire que nous pouvons lire*” (53) [...] [*Le passé*] *détermine le sens, et, sous ce jour, il ne cesse pas d’exister, pas plus que les premiers mots de la phrase quand l’œil atteint les derniers.*” (54) Later in *De la connaissance brute*, he revisits this same idea in another linguistic analogy: “*Il y a connaissance, il y a obligation de l’une à l’autre, lien donc entre les différentes parties du monde, comme entre celles du discours pour former une phrase lisible.*” (72) In these analogies Claudel is plainly highlighting a key tenet of his metaphysical worldview: that history is a coherent, continuous and meaningful progress tending towards an end goal predetermined by God. But he calls attention not only to the way in which the cosmic constituents link up together in time and space to create a meaningful text, one that makes “sens”, but also to the way in which his own act of reading makes this text intelligible. Although the story or text exists in the outside world, it only becomes meaningful when it is absorbed into the mind of the reader and processed therein. It is only the reader’s act of assembling the progressively unfolding words into an organic whole within his mind that makes the sentence or text of nature intelligible.

Although it is in fact the task of all of humanity, “l’homme” in general, to interpret and co-create reality, many people are not able to do

so on their own. Therefore the individual who has the ability to discover the divine “sens” of the universe and express it through theory or art is obliged to share his insight and experience with those who lack his powers of discernment. In the following citation from *De la Cause*, Claudel refers to the world and its creatures as a masterwork created by God, “*le produit d’un poète*”, “*l’œuvre d’un peintre*”, and presents himself (along with his reading public) in the role of a critic, “*un critique*”, as well as an artist, “*un peintre*”, who scrutinize, appreciate and try to make sense of the mysteries of God’s creative power displayed in the world: “[...] *nous nous placerons devant l’ensemble des créatures, comme un critique devant le produit d’un poète, goûtant pleinement la chose, examinant par quels moyen il a obtenu ses effets, comme un peintre clignant des yeux devant l’œuvre d’un peintre, comme un ingénieur devant le travail d’un castor.*” (38) The text of the *Art poétique* as a whole testifies to the fact that Claudel’s purpose in studying the universe is not just to understand it in his own mind but to share his knowledge with others through the creation of a (didactic) text. The plural “nous” that Claudel uses here (as the “nous” found in the above quoted passage about reading the “*histoire*” created by the passage of time) constitutes an clear invitation to his readers to share in his investigation and understanding of the universe through their act of reading of his text.<sup>9</sup> Claudel also seems to be implying here that the artist (exemplified by the painter) examines nature with the same judicious eye as the critic not only to comprehend its meaning for himself but also in order to be able to create his own works of art according to the pattern he finds in nature, which will in turn provide his public with an insight into the truth about the cosmos. This double reference to the critic and the artist is again an allusion to the fact that the artist and theorist pursue the same objective—revealing the truth of reality—and require the same prerequisite understanding of reality before they can hope to explain it to others. The double reference to the critic and the artist is also a subtle nod in the direction of Claudel’s own “real life” identity as critic and theorist in this particular text but also as creator of many poetic and dramatic texts.

### Metaphor of the two trees: “un nouvel Art poétique”

In the third section of the first treatise, *De l’Heure*, Claudel describes a remarkable epiphany event that occurred during a road trip in



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Japan. While traveling he remarked a marvelous complementarity between two trees caught within his field of vision although in reality they were situated far apart from each other and seemingly had little or nothing to do with each other. Claudel's description of this experience constitutes one of the most important passages of the *Art poétique*, one in which he comes closest to explicitly enunciating the principles of the art-nature symbiosis:

*Jadis au Japon, comme je montais de Nikkô à Chazenji, je vis, quoique grandement distants, juxtaposés par l'alignement de mon œil, la verdure d'un érable combler l'accord proposé par un pin. Les présentes pages commentent ce texte forestier, l'énonciation arborescente, par Juin, d'un nouvel Art poétique\*\* [\*\* Poïein—faire] de l'Univers, d'une nouvelle Logique. L'ancienne avait le syllogisme pour organe, celle-ci a la métaphore, le mot nouveau, l'opération qui résulte de la seule existence conjointe et simultanée de deux choses différentes [...]. La seconde Logique en est comme la syntaxe qui enseigne l'art de les assembler, et celle-ci est pratiquée devant nos yeux par la nature même. Il n'est science que du général, il n'est création que du particulier. La métaphore\* [\* Avec ses transpositions dans les autres arts: "valeurs", "harmonies", "proportions"], l'iambe fondamental ou rapport d'une grave et d'une aiguë, ne se joue pas qu'aux feuilles de nos livres: elle est l'art autochtone employé par tout ce qui naît. Et ne parlez pas de hasard! La plantation de ce bouquet de pins, la forme de cette montagne n'en sont pas plus l'effet que le Parthénon ou ce diamant sur qui vieillit le lapidaire à l'user, mais le produit d'un trésor de desseins certes plus riche et plus savant. J'allègue maintes preuves de géologie et de climat d'histoire naturelle et humaine; nos œuvres et leurs moyens ne diffèrent pas de ceux de la nature. [57-8]*

Instead of simply noting his discovery of the rapport between the two trees in straightforward discursive terms, Claudel hopes to enhance his readers' understanding of it by designating it as a "metaphor". For the application of the linguistic/artistic concept of metaphor to the natural world to have the desired effect of promoting insight into the nature of

reality, Claudel makes sure that the public have a grasp of the linguistic/artistic meaning of metaphor by defining the term (albeit briefly) as might a literary critic or theorist whose task it is to explain the meaning and purpose of certain techniques in literature: "*l'opération qui résulte de la seule existence conjointe et simultanée de deux choses différentes [...] l'iambe fondamentale ou rapport d'une grave et d'une aiguë*" (58). Knowing precisely what metaphor is and how it functions in language/art, the public will then be able to transfer their understanding of this concept from art to nature. But art only functions as a hermeneutic tool to reveal the intelligent design of nature because nature is itself the *source* of art before it is its object. Nature provides the model of metaphor (for example, the rapport between the two trees) and the artist (someone possessing both special insight and powers of expression) then creates metaphors out of words or other symbols through which he tries both to imitate and clarify the original "metaphors" of nature. And so the operation comes full circle when the concept of metaphors in language/art is then offered to the public as an aid to understand their original source, the "metaphors" of nature.

Towards the end of the passage Claudel explains *why* the categories of art are useful in helping to understand the workings of nature. The rapport between the "pin" and the "érable" (as well as all the other "metaphors" of nature) is decidedly *not*, Claudel maintains, a fluke or a product of chance: things are expressly created by God in order to exist in a harmonizing relationship with each other. In order to bolster his philosophical rejection of the possibility of blind chance acting in the natural world (the positivist hypothesis), Claudel uses examples from human art. Claudel explains that God's designs at work in the universe (ascribed metonymically here to nature itself) are better—richer and wiser—than ones evidenced in human arts or crafts (the Parthenon or a beautifully cut diamond). Yet despite their greater richness and wisdom, God's designs in nature are not clearly visible at first glance to everyone—that is why Claudel compares nature to human works of art, which, despite their inferiority and greater simplicity (or maybe because of it) are able to convey the concept of deliberate design and authorial intention more successfully to untrained human eyes. The special efficacy of art for Claudel, as for Aristotle, stems from the fact that it *concentrates, amplifies and/or clarifies* critical meaning by filtering out the extraneous and distracting elements in the real world that impede the public's ability to perceive God's image therein.

This epiphany-producing “texte forestier”, as it is presented in this passage, is not merely a mirror image of external reality as it exists independently of the human observer, but rather, one which is strongly influenced/colored by the observer's *understanding* and *creative activity*. Indeed one could say that there is not any one single “texte forestier”, rather, it exists in three different spaces and three different “versions”. The first text is constituted by the trees themselves in the outside world and is not a fully-realized text. The second text, which is arguably the most perfect of the three, exists within the poet's mind and consists of the natural spectacle shaped by the poet's organizing vision and informed by his intellect. The third text is the “les présentes pages” that the author is writing in which he employs his expressive and explanatory skills to communicate his mental text to his public through the medium of language.

The “metaphor” practiced by the “pin” and the “érable” constitutes a text that *enunciates* (that is, purposely reveals) the *ars poetica* or underlying intelligent design and divine creative power which presides over its existence and ordains its proper functioning, as well as that of all the other possible metaphors that it represents: “*Les présentes pages commentent ce texte forestier, l'énonciation arborescente, par Juin, d'un nouvel Art poétique\*\* [\*\* Poëin—faire] de l'Univers, d'une nouvelle Logique [...]*” (58). Besides practicing the art of “metaphor”, the two trees also *teach*—as syntax teaches how to combine words—the discerning observer what metaphor in fact is insofar as it is practiced by nature: “[*La métaphore*] est comme la syntaxe qui enseigne l'art d[...]*assembler [les mots], et celle-ci est pratiquée devant nos yeux par la nature même. Il n'est science que du général, il n'est création que du particulier.*” (58) The metaphor formed by the Japanese trees is not merely a particular *practice* of metaphor, one isolated example of a momentary connection between two seemingly discrete plant species, but—and herein lies its greatest point of interest—is *exemplary* of an almost infinite number of possible “metaphors”, that is, the endless inter-connectedness of everything in the universe regardless of distance or separation in space or time. Although Claudel ostensibly draws a distinction between the general knowledge (of logic) and a specific creative act—he in fact unites the two when he uses the particular metaphor of the trees as a means of understanding the general composition of the world. A specific work of art is likewise a unique phenomenon, but it is able to illustrate a general truth about the world.

The power of theory and/or art to open the minds of the public to the truths of nature that they were unable to see directly derives from the fact that seeing nature through the lens of art means seeing it through the lens of the artist's understanding and composing activity. What the poet/artist reveals to the public is as much about himself—his connection to God—as about the universe. By selecting and isolating these trees from all the intervening middle terms that separate them in the real world as well as by framing and aligning them within his field of vision, mind and text, the poet renders their complementarity more evident. By extracting the trees from the perpetual motion of reality and immobilizing them in his mind and text, Claudel offers a schematic illustration of the permanent divine design which underlies, informs and directs the constantly evolving relationships between things in the world. And, most importantly, after listening to the “*énonciation arborescente*” of the “*texte forestier*” and understanding its message, the poet lends his own voice to the voice of nature: the language that results is neither exclusively that of the world nor his own, but a blending of the two: “*Ce qui subsiste d'une chose dans ce signe qu'est d'elle un mot, c'est seulement son sens, son intention, ce qu'elle veut dire et que nous disons à sa place. C'est ce sens que nous adaptions au nôtre, que nous assimilons et qui devient la matière de notre intelligence.*” (102) But there is also a third voice involved. The words or names that the poet employs to express the spiritual “*sens*” of created things are not arbitrary linguistic signs that he invents on his own, but are echos of the names that God gave them when he created them. In naming the world the poet recalls, imitates and re-enacts the original act of naming by virtue of which God creates the world and maintains it in existence: “*L'acte par lequel l'homme atteste la permanence des choses [...] par lequel il la conçoit dans son cœur et répète l'ordre qui l'a créée, s'appelle la parole* (122)<sup>10</sup>

### L'homme après la mort

In the last article of the *Art poétique*, *L'homme après la mort*, Claudel shifts gears to describe the situation of disembodied souls who, having departed from the world at the moment of death are now in the presence of God. Although they are no longer *in* the world, they still have contact with the cosmos in its entirety, as Claudel explains through a poetic analogy: “*Et de même qu'un vers dans sa mesure uniforme peut renfermer tous les rythmes et tous les êtres, de même toute la création pourra s'inscrire*

*sur le mètre que l'âme constitue.*" (133) But the separated souls' relation with the material universe is not at all the main focus of this article; the spotlight here is on the (vertical) relationship between God and the separated souls and secondarily, on the (horizontal) rapport between the souls themselves. As in the preceding pages of the *Art poétique*, in order to describe these relationships Claudel resorts to a number of art metaphors and analogies, a few of which are musical, while the rest are almost exclusively poetic or linguistic. Claudel refers to the relations between disembodied souls as "*relations harmoniques*" (130) and existential time becomes musical-metrical time as the souls form themselves into a choir: "*le temps établi, voici qu'éclate de toutes parts le chœur!*" (134) The poet figures the life essence of the separated souls as "*cette mesure qui est ma personne*" (127), "*notre prosodie essentielle [...]* *notre mesure admirable*" (133), and as "*ce "nom nouveau"....ce nom propre....ce nom ineffable*" (127) that they receive from God. A contrast between two uses of language, one non-poetic and the other poetic, underscores the difference between this life and the next: "*Mais, tandis que notre existence ici-bas est pareille à un langage barbare et rompu, notre vie en Dieu sera comme un vers de la justesse la plus exquise.*" (132)

This association between language and the life force of the soul is not peculiar to the heavenly sphere—it also existed, Claudel argues, on earth. The names that the poet gives to things in the world reveal not only the divine "sens" or "intention" that they exemplify (102) but also reveal his own eternal spiritual essence, both in this life and for all eternity: "*Nommer une chose, c'est la produire inexterminable, car c'est la produire par rapport à son principe qui ne comporte point cessation [...]* *Pour exercer connaissance, c'est-à-dire pour reproduire chacun des mouvements particuliers dans son état de corrélation avec l'origine [...]* *il me faut avoir la faculté de me régler sur leur principe commun, il me faut avoir avec lui un contact, ou, ce qui revient au même, une différence permanente.*" (123) The poet then communicates the essence-revealing words or names that he formulates to an audience: "*Le poète, qui a le magistère de tous les mots, et dont l'art est de les employer, est habile, par une savante disposition des objets qu'ils représentent, à provoquer en nous un état d'intelligence harmonieux et intense, juste et fort.*" (132-3) The "objets" that the poet helps the public to understand are not just his own spiritual essence (i.e. connection to God) and that of the world, but also *their own* potential link to God. (If the poet offers his poetic word to his public at all it is in large part because many of them suffer from a deficient or even non-existent rapport with God).

Since the poet argues that *everything* in the universe is associated with God, and since he styles himself a representative of humanity, he implies that his own personal contact with God is exemplary of the potential communion of all of humanity with God. Since human beings (unlike the world) have their own free will, the poet cannot by himself establish a relationship between them and God, but through his word he invites them to learn about and relate to God internally through their souls and externally through the world (and thereby also to discover and actualize their own true identity, since to be truly oneself is to accomplish God's intention for one's life). In heaven the "âmes séparées" will no longer need to rely on the poet's word to guide them to look within themselves and to the world to establish a personal relationship with God. They will receive their "*prosodie essentielle [...] mesure admirable*" (i.e. life force) directly from God without the mediation of linguistic signs and will be able to both know and realize perfectly God's intention for their lives: "*Mais, alors, nous serons les poètes, les faiseurs de nous-mêmes. Ce sentiment aigu de notre prosodie essentielle, cette impossibilité d'échapper à notre mesure admirable, nous seront alors conférés directement sans l'appoint empirique et hasardeux du langage extérieur.*" (133)

Despite the fact that in heaven the poet's word will be displaced by God's own ineffable and omnipotent word, his poetic use of language in the here and now accomplishes a task of great import: it reveals, in at least an approximate degree, God's image within the cosmos as well as the nature of the soul's connection with God both on earth and in the celestial sphere; in addition, it offers readers the knowledge of their own (potential) relationship with God and incites them to cultivate that relationship which will eventually come to fruition in heaven. The evocation (even glorification) of the singular role of the poet and the spiritual power of his poetic word, as well as the liberal use of analogies that compare the life of the separated soul to poetry and language in this last article, can certainly be read as Claudel's manifesto of the sublime character and extraordinary value of poetry in general and of his own poetry in particular. The *Art poétique* was written at a time of personal and artistic crisis in Claudel's life—a few years earlier he had thought of completely abandoning his literary career in order to enter the monastic priesthood. When his bid for the priesthood failed, he found himself at liberty to pursue his art, yet felt troubled that literature might be a perilous avocation that could lead him further away from God. This sense of distress and uncertainty with regard to the moral legitimacy and

## The art of Claudel's *l'Art poétique*

soundness of his art was one of the reasons that led him to write the *Art poétique*. This critical text did more than announce a new theocentric cosmic philosophy that established an indissoluble link between the cosmos, humanity and God—it also proclaimed the possibility of a meaningful type of poetry that would exemplify its fundamental ideas in symbolic terms, and thus became the justification and inspiration for all the rest of Claudel's artistic production.

### Notes

- 1 Paul Claudel et Jean Amrouche, *Mémoires improvisés* (190)
- 2 Whitaker calls the *Art poétique* “un *De rerum natura* moderne [...] où ne figure pas une seule ligne sur la poésie” (235)
- 3 In this essay I will only be considering the first two treatises of the *Art poétique*, *Connaissance du temps* and *Traité de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-même*.
- 4 D. Alexandre maintains that “toute œuvre chez Claudel est poème et exégèse, création et compréhension.” (33)
- 5 In using art as a tool to promote comprehension and acceptance of his theocentric philosophy of the cosmos, Claudel doesn't just reveal truths about nature but also makes a very important polemical statement about the nature and purpose of art. Art truly worthy of the name is not that which many of Claudel's modernist contemporaries considered it to be: it is not a vehicle of individual self-expression (romanticism); it is not just a decorative or beautiful object whose sole purpose is induce aesthetic pleasure (aestheticism); and although it is reality-oriented it is not a documentary study or mirror image of the merely material aspects of reality (realism).
- 6 It should be noted that the more overtly lyrical first essay, *Connaissance du temps* contains a higher concentration of these artistic metaphors and analogies than the second, more theoretical treatise, *Traité de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-même*.
- 7 E. Friche suggests that many of the artistic images of the *Art poétique* allude to one of two aspects of the universe: “*l'ordre de la conservation des choses*” and “*l'ordre de la direction des êtres*” (216, c-f. 217-220)
- 8 My analysis of this metaphor is inspired by D. Alexandre's discussion of it. (299)

- 9 D. Alexandre comments: "Claudel associe constamment son lecteur à sa démarche. Le pronom personnel *nous* est plus fréquent que le *je* au stade de l'énonciation [...] Ce collectif fait partager au locuteur et au lecteur une situation existentielle, le fait de penser et d'écrire les traités." (98)
- 10 According to D. Alexandre, "la parole poétique est ainsi le moment d'une union du sujet connaissant et co-naissant à l'objet connu et co-naissant, qui avère le sens du présent par rattachement à une fin divine." (34)

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