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“THE CITY” OF PAUL CLAUDEL AND THE INTELLECTUAL MILIEU IN FRANCE AT THE END OF XIX CENTURY

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Claudel's enthusiasm for the Illuminations is well-known. It was the beginning of the new orientation when the thought of Claudel was adopted after leaving behind the famous tetrasyllable Taine-et-Renan. For the same reason the impact of the Rimbaudian genius can be found in the heart of La Ville (The City). The poet captivates the interacting phenomena, even those that extend into the ineffable. Following the spirit of the religious defence on which Christian existentialism was based Claudel would set out in search of the broken relationship between man and his original bond. The protagonists of the dramas are in search of plenitude: all struggles between nothing and everything, between misery and greatness. They embody different faces of the author who cherished the fundamental text of the Christian apology. The person of the author was like God in creation: present everywhere, visible nowhere since appearing under the many faces that the thought of the playwright adopted during the turbulent period. In this way La Ville is a mature synthesis of the talents of young Claudel. While constructing “The City” the playwright enunciates the postulates he has developed in Poetical art, which culminate in the predominance of the eye, based on the Thomist analogy of the light, the symbol of the eternity. In this sense the author introduces the couple of Cœuvre and Lâla into the drama. As the poet and his muse, they aim to devaluate the present profane and secular world in favour of its purpose, both intrinsic and final. The latter is, as the protagonists testify, so well accomplished that it can only be fulfilled eternally.

«МІСТО» П. КЛОДЕЛЯ ТА ІНТЕЛЕКТУАЛЬНЕ СЕРЕДОВИЩЕ У ФРАНЦІЇ КІНЦЯ ХІХ СТОЛІТТЯ

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Ключові слова: *Клодель, Рембо, християнство, позитивізм, «Місто», поезія, аналогія.*

Широко відомо, що П. Клодель захоплювався збірником “Illuminations” («Осяяння») А. Рембо. Він став початком нового напрямку, коли думка Клоделя стала прийнятною, залишивши позаду відоме чотирискладове “Taine-et-Renan”. З цієї ж причини вплив генія А. Рембо виявляється і у драмі “La Ville” («Місто»). Поета причаровують явища взаємодії, навіть ті, що поширюються на невимовне. У душі релігійного захисту, який ліг в основу християнського екзистенціалізму, Клодель вирушив на пошук зруйнованих відносин між людиною та її початковим зв'язком.

Головні герої його драм перебувають у пошуках повнотіння: вони віддані боротьбі між нічим і всім, між нещастям та величчю. Вони втілюють різні обличчя автора, який плекав фундаментальний текст християнської апології. Особа автора була як Бог у творінні: присутня скрізь, але ніде не помітна, оскільки з'являлася під численними обличчями, яких набувала думка драматурга під час бурхливого періоду. Таким чином, "La Ville" репрезентує зрілий синтез талантів молодого Клоделя. Під час створення «Міста» драматург розгортає постулати, котрі він розвинув у поетичному мистецтві і які увінчуються переважанням всевидячого ока, заснованим на традиційній для томізму аналогії зі світлом, символом вічності. У цьому сенсі П. Клодель вводить у драму пару Кевра та Лали. Як поет та його муза, вони мають на меті обезцінити сучасний нечестивий мирський світ заради його мети – і внутрішньої, і кінцевої. Остання, як свідчать протагоністи, є настільки довершеною, що її можна досягати вічно.

At the start of his career as a poet and playwright, Paul Claudel was an opaque and impenetrable entity, rebellious as to the predominant spirit of the time. He struggled with "the tetrasyllable Taine-et-Renan" [8, p. 21]: this could be taken as the phrase explaining the intellectual climate at the end of the 19th century. "During the last thirty years of the 19th century, the tetrasyllable Taine-et-Renan gave in the language of letters an indivisible sound like Tarn-et-Garonne. It was the name of two masters, associates and complementary, of a generation; the name of a collegiate magistracy" [8, p. 21].

The poet was at a crossroads: he has not yet begun to reap the fruits of nobility which is the principle by which we exist: "I only knew through Renan the story of Jesus and, on the faith of this impostor, I did not even know that he would never have called himself the Son of God" [3, p. 38]. The thesis of Ernst Renan went in the direction of dismantling the substantial union of Christ by depriving it of its essential element. Jesus, in Renan's vision, was only an idealist who would have succeeded – at the dawn of time – in imposing his feelings, later becoming our own. In fact, it was a question of reducing the essence of the hypostatic unity of the second element of the Trinitarian whole: this one would no longer subsist in the form of the union of two natures of which one (divine) would exist beforehand as to the other (human). Christ would have become a kind of historical figure who would have been concerned above all with founding a magisterium, a school, a religion. Ultimately, the "Christianity" would only be a social phenomenon with long-term consequences.

The core of such a posture could be explained by the formula: "absolute purity, the total abstraction of the defilements of the world, finally freedom, which real society excludes as impossibility, and which has all its amplitude only in the domain of the thought" [11, p. 445]. It would have been born from the religion of which "Christianity" would have become almost the synonym. Taken from this perspective, Christ would have been a kind of promotor of a new

and universal movement whose ability to overcome obstacles would be overwhelming. The project of Christ would have spread through the centuries with the same ease as it would have spread among the nations until it encompasses the planet, in the form of a universal, "Catholic" religion. The appearance of "Christianity" would have been similar to the project that leads philosophers to establish their schools, from the time of Parmenides on. Above all, there was an intuition and skill of the mind regarding the application of the fantastically extraordinary doctrine: "Christianity" has thus become almost synonymous with "religion". Anything that is done outside of this great and good Christian tradition will be sterile. As Renan said: "Jesus founded religion in mankind, as Socrates founded philosophy, as Aristotle founded science. There was philosophy before Socrates and science before Aristotle. Since Socrates and since Aristotle, philosophy and science have made immense progress; but it was all built on the foundation they laid. The essential notion that Jesus created is that he fixed forever the idea of pure worship" [11, p. 446]. Renan's attitude contributed to the dissatisfaction that young Claudel and his generation felt. The common denominator of the insatiability, more precisely of the general feeling of incompleteness was something that can be called "the dark side of the Christ". This cut him off from the sacred by bringing him back to the sociological dimension. It has become the exclusive set of beliefs and dogmas defining the relationship with the object of such a practice. However, that could not be a solution. Claudel would later formulate what he thinks of such a shaping: the fruit of his folding, he will put it in the mouth of Violaine in the eponymous drama: "When religion is not, God exists. If there are men, it is because He is and all their good comes from what is the source of good" [6, p. 621].

The materialism of Renan's "Christology" collided with the pessimistic determinism of Hippolyte Taine. Claudel could not admit that the ultimate point, in which human civilization disappears, would be expressed by the dismal formula which, however,

immortalized the instigator of positivism: “What a cemetery the history” [13, p. 3]. In order to transform the “history” that Taine and Renan professed into history, that is to say, taking into account the study of the facts marking the past of a human activity, which cannot exist univocally, Claudel wrote his first plays, among which there was the first version of *La Ville* [6, p. 305].

La Ville (The City) tells the story of human pride which only trusts in the continuous progress of science: it would only end when the last corner of all that exists is not conquered and explained; this proving that “behind” there would be nothing. The City is a parable which is ostensibly based on the apologies of the Old Testament, in particular those of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as on the account of the construction of the Babel tower. “The City of Act I, dominated by the law of the market and the positivism of the scholar, resembles the accursed cities of the Bible, Sodom or Babylon”¹. The stories of the incredible adventures give way to a more in-depth reflection on the place of man within creation, in every sense that this formulation may imply. “To build the City, we must erase the old order, which is at the same time political, economic and intellectual to allow the advent of a new order <...>. This advent supposes the passage through death and purification” [Ibidem].

In order to reject the banalities of positivist mercantilism and its excesses, young Claudel had to make two decisive encounters, corroborated by each other. We note the imprint of both in *La Ville*. In a letter to André Suarès of June 22, 1905, he underlined the bond which linked, more than *Tête d’Or*, *La Ville* de 1893 to his conversion: “The first two acts were written before my conversion and the last one since” [Ibidem]. But conversion is an event which coincides with another of equal importance. This is the revelation offered to him by reading the *Illuminations* [12, p. 173]. Rimbaud’s idea was to make a clean sweep of everything that could obliterate the revelation of the supernatural.

Albert Camus in his 1951 essay *L’Homme révolté* hailed Rimbaud as the greatest poet of the revolt, mainly for his last two works, the *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer*. “Rimbaud’s greatness bursts forth at the moment when, giving the revolt the strangest language, it has ever received, he speaks of both his triumph and his anguish. He utters the cry towards the impossible and the rough reality to be embraced, the rejection of morality and the irresistible nostalgia for duty. At this moment when carrying within him illumination and hell, insulting and salutary beauty, he turns an irreducible contradiction into a double and alternating song, he is the poet of revolt, and the greatest” [2, p. 113].

In *Illuminations*, Rimbaud seems to protest against everything that the society he lives in has to offer. The intransigence of the insurrection, the attitude of refusal and hostility before the mandarins of the time who captured the spirit of independence and indulged in the silliness of a subordinate intelligence, this is what spawned to Claudel the path to the exaltation of the self, to his freedom. Reading Rimbaud was essential for the liberation of the young poet’s individuality. He bequeathed the shock to posterity with the following words: “I will always remember that morning in June 1886 when I bought the journal of *Vogue* which contained the beginning of the *Illuminations*. It really was for me a shock. I was finally coming out of this hideous world of Taine, Renan and other Molochs of the nineteenth century, this prison, this dreadful mechanism entirely governed by perfectly inflexible laws” [7, p. 102].

Illuminations open with the text “After the Flood”. Rimbaud uses the capital letter to specify the reference to the context of the Old Testament. The covering of the land by water is occasioned by the exasperation of God in the face of the degeneration of men. God gives himself up in vengeance deciding to make a heavy rain fall, a flood or life on earth will swallow up. An ark is being built to safeguard what – after 200 days of catastrophe – will present the beginnings of a new race of the living: “As soon as the idea of the Flood had subsided. A hare stopped in the sainfoins and moving bells and said his prayer to the rainbow through the spider’s web” [12, p. 173]. It is also the index of a new chronology which will date from now on the events after the great misfortune in the light of a living history, synchronized with the eternal innocence such as the children present: “In the big house of windows still dripping, the mourning children looked at the wonderful images. A door slammed – and, in the hamlet square, the child turned his arms, including weathervanes and roosters from steeples everywhere, under the dazzling rain shower” [Ibidem].

The City might well bear traces from the author’s encounter with the *Illuminations*. In fact, in the collection there are a number of explicit references to conurbations. In fact, there are whole series of prose poems unfolding around the subject of the “city” within the *Illuminations*. First of all, there is the “City” [12, p. 194] in the singular, then several “cities” in the plural: thus: “Cities” [12, p. 196], “Cities” [12, p. 199] and the “Metropolitan” [12, p. 210]. The vocabulary concerning large agglomerations abounds, too.

Rimbaud expresses himself through aquatic images in order to designate the reality that Claudel evokes using the terms of “*lambour*”, i.e. intense heat engulfing the megalopolis. The common denominator of the constitutive transformation in the two texts is the idea of a new spirit which would enter humanity:

¹ Cf. URL: <https://societe.paul-claudel.net/oeuvre/la-ville> (Last accessed: October 17 2020).

the latter would no longer be a prey to the snags, the debasement and the final agony that is taking place. It is a corollary of everything we have just mentioned. From the encounter with the Illuminations Claudel comes out rejuvenated. From Rimbaud, Claudel drew the idea of liberation: it touched the domain of spirituality and language later leading him to the discovery of the Spirit as movement and liquidity, breath and respiration to which nothing can be opposed.

However, in order that the tetrasyllable “Taine-et-Renan” disappears from the horizon, Claudel needed another proof, in the form of the real and effective presence of Christ, Claudel says: “I myself was standing in the crowd, near the second pillar at the entrance to the choir on the right side of the sacristy. And it was then that the event that dominates my whole life occurred. In an instant my heart was touched and I believed. I believed, with such a force of adhesion, with such an uprising of my whole being, with such a powerful conviction, with such a certainty leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that since all the books, all the reasoning, all the chances of a hectic life, could not shake my faith, nor, to tell the truth, touch it. I had suddenly had the heart-rending feeling of innocence, of the eternal childhood of God, an ineffable revelation” [5, p. 1002]. The conversion took place the same year as the reading of the Illuminations: in the meantime, which followed these two “unforeseen events” Claudel set out to study the philosophers who contributed to the formation of his creative conscience.

In the light of his liberation from positivism he approaches the reading of the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal [10] and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle [1]: “The books which helped me the most at that time are from first the *Pensées* de Pascal, an invaluable work for those who seek faith, although its influence has often been disastrous <...>. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* had cleared my mind and introduced me to the realms of true reason” [5, p. 1012]. From Pascal he retains the elements of the apology for the Christian religion. He commits himself to this process: his subsequent dramatic work would consistently defend the position adopted by the *Pensées*: a “new man in the face of unknown things” [6, p. 171] was born: he would not forget the effervescence of conversion. He is “on board” [10, p. 224]: “It was at this time that I wrote the first versions of my dramas: *Tête d’Or* and *La Ville*. Although still a stranger to the sacraments, I was already participating in the life of the Church, I was finally breathing and life entered me through every pore” [5, p. 1012].

Following the spirit of the religious defence on which Christian existentialism was based Claudel would set out in search of the broken relationship between man and his original bond. The protagonists of the dramas are in search of plenitude: all struggles between nothing and everything, between misery and greatness. They are driven by the instinct to pursue

grace and avoid neglect: there is not a single protagonist in young Claudel’s theatre that is plagued by this vice. They conquer the universe in the consciousness of their dignity which is founded in ardour as well as in the insatiable quest for final happiness. This would signify a realization of them in accordance with the doctrine their author embraced.

They embody different faces of the author who cherished the fundamental text of the Christian apology. The person of the young Claudel was like God in creation: present everywhere, visible nowhere since appearing under the many faces that the thought of the playwright adopted during the turbulent period. In this way *La Ville* is a mature synthesis of the talents of young Claudel.

While constructing “*The City*” the playwright enunciates the postulates he has developed in Poetical art, which culminate in the predominance of the eye, based on the Thomist analogy of the light. Continuing this “august ceremony of the day”, Claudel reaches the universe in his own domain, substituting for the objective nature of things their deep secret, that of being. One cannot reconstruct the human society without taking in account the ontological context. As the Thomist philosophy is based on the senses, Claudel achieved this through sight and above all through the introduction of the pronominal paradigm, with which he begins the analysis. Thus: “See around you the healthy and cleansed earth, consider the limitless expanse, the day with the purity of the night, the splendour of the Lion in the clarity of winter and know that all things are revealed. Don’t you see that everything is prepared for peace and that you could no longer refuse the truce and the pact?” [6, p. 480].

As the narrative structure of the play is perhaps even too typified, the personal pronoun of the first person used in the singular is its necessary and meaningful framework. All verses², with a few rare exceptions, begin with the visualizing “I”, in which we discover the poet’s³ main intention. Some examples can be cited to show this approach. The poet obstinately resists this spectacle, dominating it and imperiously submitting it to his will, to his intelligence: “I will complain about this avarice of the Creator who wants to lose nothing of his creature and find the fund with interest. I accuse the betrayal of this internal assent which he has deposited in us like an igneous seed. I recognize a truly royal heart in this caution” [6, p. 482–483]. Sometimes we have the impression that the poet works slavishly, that he turns his back on the spectacle of the city, plunging into a kind of laziness. It may be so, but Claudel briefly formulates the prerequisite for the transformation of the world,

²The French term is “verset”. In English it would be the “biblical verse”.

³Claudel is represented by *Cœuvre, l’alter ego*, and himself also a poet.

the light. When the latter awakens, the moorings that held the poet disappear. But in these majestic visions there can be a moment of surrender. This is not the work of the senses, but of reason; the “surface” which “remains impenetrable to the sight” is more a symbol of the ineffable than a descriptive painting, executed in its smallest details. It is a symbol of the advancing fire that will consume “The City”.

The game of sight nevertheless continues. Among the sense the eye is the most adapted to apprehend the danger of the fire. Sometimes the eye sees things with a profound melancholy foretelling what is to come: “It is in vain that I see the evergreen trees”; sometimes it is confronted with the mystery of the visible, which lies in its inexpressible depths: Cœuvre uses again the game of pronominal paradigm: “I live on the highest floor and the corner of the spacious and square house. I built my bed into the window opening, and when evening comes, like the wife of a god who taciturnly climbs up on the couch, all my length and naked, I stretch out face against the Night. At some point, lifting an eyelid weighed down by the likeness of death, I mixed my gaze with a certain colour of red” [Ibidem].

The sight is a symbol of the quest. Cœuvre unites the poetic tools: he combines the perspective that offers the eye with what the word expresses. Most of the figures (besides Cœuvre) can be found in the characters of the protagonists. “The City” has been explained with regard to its hidden meanings, as follows: “It is also a quest for oneself and an interrogation of poetry that takes place in this complex work. Conceived as symbolic figures, the characters are not only the medium for a debate on political or spiritual values. They can be understood as the instruments of a conflictual dialogue bringing together the opposing facets of a plural self: political conservatism (Lambert) against anarchist revolt (Avare), scientific knowledge (Besme) against poetic knowledge (Cœuvre)”⁴.

Claudél was this entire in one person: he had strong feelings for the Commune: politically he was conservative; scientific knowledge against poetic knowledge is the subject of this writing. In addition, the names of the characters, he borrowed were from the names of the municipalities: come Besme from

his native region of Aisne and Ceuvres-et-Valsery in the same department.

Claudél captivates interacting phenomena, even those that extend into the infigurable. As the finality of all that exist cannot be found within the things that exist, the poetic verb sets out to recreate the universe in the homogeneity of transcendent speech. The Claudelian universe is the version in unity; the mysteries of poetic creation remain in the opacity of the unspeakable. “Making” the city by means of “poëin” implies an essential shortage, the analogy of the ineffable. To carry out the final task Claudél engages the couple of Ceuvre and Lâla. As the poet and his muse, they aim to devalue the present, profane and secular world in favour of its purpose, both intrinsic and final. This is – as the protagonists testify, so well accomplished that it can only be fulfilled eternally. This is now his order. It is of the ontological level and therefore it will persist till the end of the civilization.

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⁴ Cf. URL: <https://societe.paul-claudel.net/oeuvre/la-ville> (Last accessed: October 17, 2020).