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Didier Alexandre, ed., with Pascale Langlois, *Paul Claudel, aujourd'hui*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020. 497 pp. Names index and abstracts. €49.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406104209.

Review by Pamela A. Genova, University of Oklahoma.

This collection of essays (with its related material) embodies a significant contribution to Claudel studies and beyond, in large part because it addresses directly issues as timely as globalization, East-West relations, linguistic systems, and interdisciplinary modalities. Even excluding its thorough metatextual elements, this publication represents a substantial tome, offering 439 pages of a variety of critical essays, ranging from some more introductory in tone to others of a highly technical nature, proposing in the end a very rich overview of research regarding Claudel's work. The essayists explore a multiplicity of aspects that reflect the complexity of Claudel's own interests, from theater to poetry, from literary criticism to diplomatic reports, as well as to his unique distinction between the terms "connaître" and "co-naître" (a neologism that he coined, underscoring his deep interest in the birth of art through a collective link, whether with other artists or with his Christian god). The essays are based on presentations given by scholars at three 2018 colloquia (Chicago, Paris, Tokyo), to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth year since the birth of Claudel (1868-1955). These studies truly help students and scholars, as well as a general readership, to understand better the multiform work of the "poète-ambassadeur" (as he was described affectionately by many from the Eastern cultures in which he took great interest, especially in Japan).

The essays are grouped into four main sections; thus, the editor Didier Alexandre's introduction proves useful in preparing to make one's way through the intricacies of the thinking of this celebrated figure, scrutinized here in his multiform roles, including poet, dramaturg, ambassador, Catholic, and controversial cultural icon. Much of the analysis presented does not focus exclusively on Claudel's poetic work but includes his involvement in political, economic, and religious matters. The question at hand, i.e., the "contemporaneity" of Claudel, takes on a host of implications throughout these essays (as Alexandre points out (p. 9), "les visages de Claudel sont nombreux"); and the interpretations of what the author/diplomat might represent today are equally varied, as the authors of these studies rethink the notion of "le contemporain" and present a range of ways in which Claudel engages with the notion of exchange, whether material, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, literary, or other.

Given that the studies are presented in separate parts assembled thematically, it might prove most effective to proceed by reviewing some exceptional essays representative of each of the four sections, though this is a difficult choice, given the very high quality of much of the work

published here. In the first part, “Caudel Contemporain” (which presents a total of four essays), especially engaging is Pascal Dethurens’s contribution, in which he considers the question of whether or not Claudel still speaks to us today. The critic examines the relationship of Claudel with the epoch in which he lived, as well as with the predecessors who most strongly influenced him, such as—perhaps surprisingly to some readers unfamiliar with the complexities of the author at hand—Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, as well as more likely figures, such as Dante Alighieri. We thus discover how Claudel faces his present while keeping in mind a past that long precedes him (and a future he could not predict). Ultimately, argues Dethurens, what we find in Claudel is “un poète qui ne s’est pas laissé aveugler par les lumières et les ombres de son siècle” (p. 50). This motif of lucidity recurs throughout the collection.

The second section of the compilation, “The World is One,” presents seven pieces, many of which focus on the concept of “la mondialisation” and consider how Claudel engages with the world on a macrocosmic scale, particularly with regard to his work in a variety of governmental positions (including those of vice-consul in New York and Boston, consul in China, and ambassador in Japan). Claude Pérez’s elegantly developed study, “Caudel: Mondialisation, modernité, nostalgie” (I give his title in this case, because Pérez has two different contributions in this second part), we discover Claudel’s interest in celebrating cultural differences and in aiming to highlight the often overlooked connections among various national mores and artistic practices, while he has been simultaneously criticized for displaying an Orientalist stance, particularly with regard to China and Japan. Pérez also explores the question of a unique kind of nostalgia that arises when we think of Claudel today, especially given the complex (and often equivocal) reception of his work, opaque as it has become by ambivalence toward the author’s complicated political and religious beliefs. Yet Pérez ends with a provocative quote from Claudel: “Je ne peux pas être moi-même à moi tout seul” (p. 115); indeed, through this essay, the reader can appreciate more fully Claudel’s innate connections to near and far, to past and present (and, in fact, to the future).

Another notable piece in this second part of the book is the contribution by Alexandre, who centers on Claudel’s diplomatic years in Japan (1921–27), arguing that Claudel creates a paradoxical system of logical relations between France and Japan, accenting such elements as globalization, distinct characteristics of various regions, and a personal sense of familiarity with Japan’s culture. Alexandre’s focus here is on Claudel’s 1923 “Discours aux étudiants de Nikkô,” entitled “Un regard sur l’âme japonaise,” which was published both in the renowned Japanese journal, *Rekonstrue*, as well as in France’s celebrated *Nouvelle Revue Française*. By addressing two very different reading publics, the author creates what Alexandre describes as “l’interculturalité claudélienne” (p. 129), highlighting the importance of “le regard” of the Other in understanding oneself, while he suggests that Claudel is quite aware of the potential ethnocentric dangers of such a relationship. Alexandre accents the inherent incongruity of this notion: “L’interculturalité claudélienne est ... ambiguë: si elle se veut partage de différences culturelles et création de communautés internationales dans le respect, elle recouvre aussi des jeux de force, matériels et économiques” (p. 132). Alexandre also emphasizes Claudel’s fascination with Japanese aesthetics, particularly with the significant role of nature in the arts.

“Caudel et ses contemporains,” the third grouping of essays (the longest section, made up of ten separate entries), presents Michel Jarrety’s exploration of the equivocal relationship that Claudel carried on with Paul Valéry, whom he had met at Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Mardis.” At first, their connection was not close, and at times Claudel severely critiques Valéry’s poetry and theoretical principles in his journal. However, World War II brings them closer together, since they shared

a deep hostility for the Occupation; and as they grew more mature, old rivalries were eventually forgotten. Despite the fact that some of the studies in the present collection analyze Claudel's poetic or dramatic work (particularly *Le Soulier de satin*), since much of the focus in the other essays is specifically on the political and/or religious aspects of Claudel's work and thought, Jarrety's consideration of explicitly poetic issues stands out and represents an intriguing in-depth consideration of two of the most important French poetic figures of the first half of the twentieth century. The discussions between the two men on such forms as "le vers libre" and what came to be known as "le verset claudélien" reveal Claudel's early hesitation toward Valéry's ideas, yet the latter reached out to him more and more over the years to express his growing admiration. Also engrossing is the drama surrounding the election of writers to empty chairs at the "Académie." While Valéry was chosen in 1925, Claudel finds himself overlooked time and again, until he receives his chair in 1946. In an original way, Jarrety's extremely approachable essay definitely brings to the collection an intimate portrait of Claudel's personality.

Taking a multidisciplinary stance, Marie Gaboriaud turns to the art of music and to the collaborations Claudel established with, or his admiration of, celebrated composers such as Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky. The critic points out that, because of his many diplomatic duties, Claudel was often absent from Paris during the premiere seasons, so the question of how he remained informed about the goings-on in the capital unearths some interesting connections. Gaboriaud reminds us that Claudel was not actively engaged with music. He is often described, she contends, as "un musicien frustré, manqué, empêché" (p. 221), and she writes of his "wagnérisme repent" (p. 221). Later, his youthful enthusiasm for the work of Richard Wagner becomes for him what he describes as "poison wagnérien" (p. 223), even though the influence of Wagner on Claudel's theatre, especially of the *Leitmotiv* and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, has been widely studied. The role of silence in music and in poetry draws him to Mallarmé--and, on a spiritual level, to his own conversion to Catholicism in 1886. He is reluctant at first to integrate music into his own dramas, but he comes to appreciate "la musique comme 'porte-voix,' la musique comme outil dramatique, et enfin l'usage dialectique du bruit et du silence" (p. 228). Exploring the indistinct border between what is spoken and what is sung, Claudel moves toward the idea of a music "en mouvement," as we can trace, according to Gaboriaud, how Claudel "se dégage progressivement des brumes du wagnérisme littéraire pour ancrer son 'agir' musical dans la recherche concrète de l'effet musical et dramatique" (p. 234). Both in his poetry and in his dramas, Claudel's work clearly integrates on a nuanced and often beautiful level the dynamics of music.

Sever Martinot-Lagarde offers an excellent analysis of the relationship of the work of Claudel and of the extraordinarily important figure in dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht, underscoring important parallels, such as a lyrical, even anarchistic, tonality. The critic also examines what is described as "une dramaturgie de la parabole" (p. 488), an approach that aims to give powerful meaning to theatrical gesture, while including commentary on the dramatic action itself. Despite the fact that Claudel's Catholicism could be said to have had less of an impact on theater audiences than did Brecht's Marxism, the links between these two playwrights and the influence of such figures as Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud emphasize the poetic and stylistic approaches they share in modernizing the European stage, through such revolutionary techniques as "la distanciation" (p. 297).

The fourth and final selection of essays (nine entries), "Claudel, notre contemporain," opens with one of Bei Huang's two essays in this section: "Claudel, promeneur à Shanghai, devant une Chine intemporelle et actuelle." Huang notes that between 1895 and 1898, Claudel spent most of his

time in Shanghai, where he held his first Chinese diplomatic post (in total, he spent fourteen years in China on diplomatic missions). Through an examination of five key poems from Claudel's *Connaissance de l'Est*, the essay uncovers first an image of the city of Shanghai as frozen in time and in tradition. Not surprisingly, however, there exists another presentation of the city, equally vital, embodied in its inexorable movement toward modernization, epitomizing the economic facet that also attracted Claudel's attention. We encounter through Claudel's varied experience with Chinese culture an interesting balance, then, of both rural and industrialized regions and the ideological problematics that accompany both. Taoism also undeniably piques his interest, and this religion plays an important role in the composition of the poems studied by Huang, notably through the function of the supernatural and the festivities associated with the honoring of the dead.

In this fourth part, we also return to Alexandre, with his examination of Claudel's experiences in the United States (1927-33). The focal point in this piece is tripartite: the image of France in the U.S. at that time, the pressing economic question of debts, and the related crisis of the infamous 1929 stock market crash. Fascinated by iconic incarnations of speed and progress, such as the automobile and the plane, Claudel was equally curious about modes of communication and the role of the media and of advertising in these forces of movement that urged on capitalism and its propaganda-related complications. Yet in the complex chaos of American life, Claudel perceived a kind of harmony in which "les dissemblables . . . se complètent" (p. 341). This impression of a deeply seated duality is not without parallels in Claudel's own thinking and writerly production, whether aesthetic or bureaucratic.

Finally, with regard to the essays in part four, we find the contribution of Raphaële Fleury, the librettist for the transformation of *Le Soulier de satin* at the Opéra nationale de Paris, a spectacle that was originally planned for the 2017-18 season but, because of a number of complications among the collaborators (the first group started work on the project in 2015), was only finally staged in spring 2021. Fleury's essay is truly unique, given the hands-on nature of the essayist, and especially given that the piece was written before the opera was eventually staged. The conception and development of the operatic version—which was conceived in a number of versions, with one lasting up to eleven hours (it was eventually cut down to just over six)—is presented in fascinating detail, unveiling how the numerous individuals involved were obliged to compromise with regard to a production involving many constantly moving parts. The importance of the presentation of the play in 1987 in Avignon by the influential director Antoine Vitez had an undeniable impact on the formulation of the more modern version. Also pertinent are the modalities that were ongoing with regard to the poetry/music dynamic, and Fleury writes that it is crucial to keep close to the heterogeneity of the original work, "en passant par le parlé-chanté, le cri et le chant" (p. 428). This carefully documented description of the birth of a new version and genre of a previous artwork is truly fascinating to discover.

The collection ends with a "Table ronde," bringing together many of the motifs that appear in the essays that precede it, such as questions of poetic language, the role of the sublime, and the role of what we might call "la vérité" in the work of an obviously complex cultural figure. Questions of the teaching of Claudel's art, his religious beliefs, and his political philosophies arise throughout the discussion by actors and directors, none of whom contribute essays to the body of the collection. They convey not only theoretical musings but also thoughts about the praxis of working with Claudel's texts on stage. The discussion helps us understand how Claudel's

totalizing vision of the work is biblically based, in his support of human understanding and unity, translated to the public through the means of linguistic art.

Ultimately, this collection is well organized and clearly presented, offering many innovative methodologies in the consideration of Claudel's life and work, while it brings to the forefront impactful artistic, ethical, and social issues of our own "contemporain."

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