

Claudel: Poetics of Separation

Sergio Villani
York University

*But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost

This paper directs attention on one of Claudel's most beautifully crafted and subtly suggestive sonnets of the *fin de siècle*. It has no precise date and no title. It begins with the striking first line: *Séparons-nous ici, vous êtes arrivé*. My analysis sets this poem within the context of the group of poems designated in the Pléiade edition of Claudel's poetry as *Premiers vers* and *Vers d'exil*. These categories give a somewhat vague temporal and spatial reference to the gestation of these poems, but add little to our understanding of their nature and purpose. I prefer to view these poems as part of Claudel's poetic activity that spans from the 1880s to the First World War, a group of generally short lyrics that excludes of course the *Five Great Odes*. It is in these poems that Claudel enunciates what I call a Poetics of separation, a dialectic discourse through which he distances himself from his symbolist influences and develops characteristic stylistic traits and a personal poetic voice. These poems reveal the emotional and philosophical tensions, the difficulties of choices that marked the formative years of the poet. In this context, my study¹ of the sonnet *Celui-là seul saura sourire*, argues that in this sonnet Claudel praises the achievements of Stéphane Mallarmé and demonstrates that he has masterfully assimilated his temper and form. At the same time, Claudel expresses in bellicose terms the necessity to reject these traits, to separate himself from Mallarmé's school, in order to develop a poetic identity of his own. This sonnet is then a watershed, a point of demarcation and separation. Like Caesar, Claudel casts the dice and crosses his Rubicon. Once the rejection of Mallarmé's poetics articulated, there is no turning back. The sonnet *Séparons-nous ici, vous êtes arrivé* continues this dialectic and gives other dimensions to this process of separation and affirmation of self-identity.

Sergio Villani

Séparons-nous ici, vous êtes arrivé
Voici le lieu, voici l'arbre, voici la porte.
Compagnon, nous avons marché de bonne sorte,
Coursant ainsi, depuis que le jour s'est levé.

Eh bien, c'est là le toit qui fut par vous trouvé.
Dites: C'est moi! criez, heurtez l'huis à main forte!
La femme et le repas vous attendent. Qu'importe
Le compagnon d'un jour? Vous êtes arrive.

La vieille mère est là; l'épouse douce et sage
Est là, prenez-les dans vos bras. Le reste est vain.
L'enfant nouveau vous met les mains sur le visage.

Adieu. Riez, soyez heureux jusqu'à la fin,
Mangez de votre pain, buvez à votre verre.
Pour moi un long chemin encor me reste à faire. (OP, 17) ²

This sonnet is striking for its simplicity and clarity, two principle tenets of Claudelian poetics. No Mallarmean ellipsis here, no tortuous syntax, no challenging images, no elitist posturing. Rather, Claudel relates a simple anecdote, one that a child could summarize without hesitation: after a long day's journey together, two companions part ways for one has reached his destination, as he reintegrates his home and his family. It is time to say goodbye. Could there be a simpler and clearer expression? And yet this simplicity of language and form is deceiving for this sonnet is laden with shades of meaning. Simplicity is not synonymous here with shallowness of thought. The simple tale masks tensions that have reached a point of resolution. Like a fable or a parable, in its simplicity, this anecdote expresses a wisdom, a lesson, both a personal and universal truth.

The very first line of the poem stresses the notion of separation. The adverbial *ici* denotes spatially the point of separation which is reinforced stylistically by the break of the line at the hémistiche. The first part of this line (*Séparons-nous ici*) forms one phonic unit because of Claudel's use of elision. This unity is then broken by the silence after *ici*. The binary structure of this first line is followed by the tertiary rhythm of the second line, marked by the three repetitions of *voici*, echoing the *ici*

Claudél: Poetics of Separation

of the first line and, thus, marking and stressing again the point of separation and the point of articulation, the voicing of the separation, the uttering of the *adieu* which is the subject of the poem. What follows is the verbalization of this moment of separation. These are superficially simple words but, in the subtext of this simple language, we can read the tensions of an intertwined poetic and personal drama. It is a drama of difficult choices for this separation involves existential values: the choice between two divergent lifestyles and the abandonment and rejection of the easier one, the more comfortable one, the normal or customary one. Hence the tensions, the internal struggle and turmoil.

The discourse is “diegetic” in nature, – another characteristic aspect of Claudél’s poetry. The speaker here has a familiar voice, friendly in tone, soft, and yet dynamic and authoritative with its use of the apostrophe and sequence of imperative injunctions. With his *adieu*, the speaker, the one who has not reached his destination and who has still a “long road” to follow, to an undetermined or uncertain place, reveals to us the nature of their conversation as he had journeyed side by side with his companion since the break of dawn. His companion must have talked to him about his home with its identifying tree and familiar entrance and about his family: first his “old” mother, then his “sweet” and “wise” wife, always attentive to the needs of the family, and finally the tenderness of a new-born child: *L’enfant nouveau vous met les mains sur le visage*. The speaker urges his companion to forget their brief friendship (*Qu’importe le compagnon d’un jour?*) and enter his home and embrace his family members: *prenez-les dans vos bras*. He sketches here scenes of an idyllic existence. His insistence and the urgency expressed in the series of imperatives – *criez, heurtez, prenez, riez soyez, mangez, buvez* – seem at first to indicate hesitancy on the part of his companion to separate himself from his wandering friend. But in fact the imperatives translate a hortatory tone that underscores the value that the speaker attaches to that lifestyle of intimate relationships and family warmth. For him, that lifestyle constitutes the essence of existence. “The rest is vanity,” he affirms, echoing the biblical *vanitas vanitatis*.

However, as much as he urges his companion to embrace that lifestyle again, as much he seems to distance himself from it, and indeed reject it. The three adverbial, spatial, expressions – *c’est là le toit, la vieille mère est là, l’épouse douce et sage est là* – in the second and third stanzas, form a counterpoint to the repetition of *ici* in the first stanza and place the speaker irremediably outside of that world of happiness consisting of

home and family. This exclusion and the difference between himself and his companion is underlined by the repetition of the phrase *Vous êtes arrivé* at the end of the second stanza as well as by the repetition of the possessive to indicate what belongs to the companion and not to him: *vos bras, votre pain, votre verre*. The companion is part of a space of belonging, of inclusion, while the speaker is an outsider, in a space without personal belongings, “unattached” as it were, in a state of “depossession”. Strangely, we note that the companion makes no gesture to invite his friend to enter his family sphere for a brief rest, to eat, drink and share the warmth and joys of his household. There is to be no temptation, no distraction. He is to pursue his *long route* alone.

This poem relates a kind of parable. The anecdote describes a point of existential choices, a point of existential crossroads. Young Claudel, it seems, recognizes and appreciates the value of friendship and family ties. He is aware of the stability and comfort offered by the home and the family. “The rest is vanity,” he says. Indeed, could we not consider the companion in this anecdote as an *alter ego* of Claudel, a double, an image of the young man who has recently married and experienced the satisfaction of love, companionship and fatherhood. And yet, to serve his country and pursue his artistic quest, he chooses to separate himself from this stability and comfort to engage in the long route of exile from homeland and friendship. Claudel recognizes separation to be a necessary sacrifice to patriotic service and literary creativity. We know how much he bemoans being far from his country and his friends and family. At times he touches the depths of despair: *Mes yeux sont pleins de nuit et mon coeur est plein d'eau!* (OP, 18) And yet, the more he is isolated and distant, the more he is creative and productive. The tensions of separation and distance become catalysts of his creative impulse. He thus sacrifices all in order to respond to a beckoning call: *L'inexorable appel de la voix merveilleuse*. (OP, 28)

This sonnet expresses an aspect of Claudel's poetics of separation, marks an important stage in his growth as a poet. The short, lyrical poems which he writes between the 1880s and the First World War trace the development of this poetic of separation. I often refer to these texts as anti-odes for they lack the lofty tone and the breadth of the *Great Odes*. Still they incorporate stylistic traits – repetition, contrast, apostrophe, diegetic and dialectic discourse. – that characterize the temper of the mature and accomplished poet, in full control of his poetic skill and voice. The fact that he writes some of these texts at the same time as he

Claudé: Poetics of Separation

is working on the *Great Odes*, and that he oscillates between the rigours of traditional form and a more free verse, also indicates, as we have seen in the sonnet *Séparons-nous ici, vous êtes arrivé*, the indispensable necessity in him for integration and separation, egoism and altruism, rigour and freedom. These tensions nurture his creativity.

Notes

- 1 « *Casser la branche militaire: Claudé et la poétique de fin de siècle*,» Paul Claudé Papers, Vol. I (January 2003): 15-21.
- 2 Paul Claudé, *Œuvre poétique*. Introduction Stanislas Fumet. Textes établis et annotés par Jacques Petit. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967.)