

The Prose Poems in *L'Œil écoute*

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L'*Œil écoute* is a collection of essays on various art forms—painting, music, tapestry, ceramics, stained glass and architecture. In these texts, Claudel develops and illustrates his theory that the function of art is to signify and “magnify” the spiritual dimension of the cosmos. Both the practice and the reading of art, our relationship to it, is an allegorical or analogical experience, that is a process of signifying and understanding ideas, abstractions, through concrete representation. In other words, for Claudel, our understanding and appreciation of art is not only a visual and aural experience but also, fundamentally, a spiritual one.

These texts are generally marked by the formal language and objective tone of the essay form. Rhetorical structures such as “Nous avançons que...” and “On ne saurait nier cependant...” reveal Claudel’s intention to develop an argument or to explain or prove a point. The prose poems in these texts often appear as exegeses of the art form being discussed. Generally, they have descriptive, figurative and lyrical qualities and they are often placed at the beginning or at the end of the essay. Their descriptive, figurative and lyrical qualities and break the rhetorical form and official tone of the essay. These prose poems are also dramatic in form and content. Claudel stages a dynamic scene in order to capture and hold the reader’s attention. At the same time, he highlights the dramatic nature of his poetic writing.

In reading *L'Œil écoute*, one readily identifies certain stylistic and ideological traits that relate these essays to the texts of *Connaissance de l'Est*. Indeed, in the art essays, Claudel often makes reference to the orient and, especially, to the cultures of China and Japan. In particular, one notes the following references: “une légende chinoise” (OE 27), “les philosophes chinois” (OE 54), “la légende japonaise” (OE 204), “vase chinois” (OE 106) and an anecdote about an old oriental panther (OE 110-111).

This intertextuality is reinforced by the fact that Claudel’s first prose poem on the subject of painting (dated November 1896) appears in *Connaissance de l'Est*:

Que l'on me fixe par les quatre coins cette pièce de soie, et je n'y mettrai point le ciel; la mer et ses rivages, ni la forêt, ni les monts, n'y tenteront mon art. Mais du haut en bas et d'un bord jusqu'à l'autre, comme entre de nouveaux horizons, d'une main rustique j'y peindrai la terre. Les limites des communes, les divisions des champs y seront exactement dessinées, ceux qui sont déjà en labour, ceux où demeure debout le bataillon des gerbes encore. Aucun arbre ne manquera au compte, la plus petite maison y sera représentée avec une naïve industrie. Regardant bien, on distinguera les gens, celui-ci qui, un parasol à la main, franchit un ponceau de pierre, celle-là qui lave ses baquets à la mare, cette petite chaise qui chemine sur les épaules de ses deux porteurs et ce patient laboureur qui, le long du sillon, conduit un autre sillon. Un long chemin bordé d'une double rangée de pinasses traverse d'un coin à l'autre le tableau, et dans l'une de ces douves circulaires on voit, avec un morceau d'azur au lieu d'eau, les trois quarts d'une lune à peine jaune.

This poem commands attention because it is unique in the collection in terms of its subject. "Painting", moreover, makes only indirect reference to the East. In fact, only the expression "silk" canvas at the beginning of the poem and the reference to a "parasol" and a "small chair on the shoulder of two porters" may, perhaps, suggest that the scene being described is Oriental. For the most part, it depicts a typically Western or, more specifically, French rural scene, the "fields". Like many of Claudel's sonnets written at the close of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century—the texts of the "Early Poetry"—this prose poem is striking because of the use of the imperative at the opening. Here, it is the use of the subjunctive ("que l'on me fixe") that expresses an imperative, urgent exhortation. This kinetic beginning launches a dramatic movement, carried at first by the deictic expressions (*du haut en bas, d'un bord jusqu'à, entre*) and then picked up by the various actions noted (*franchit, lave, chemine, conduit*), and which is thus sustained throughout the poem. The poet impersonates the painter and the reader follows his brush strokes to the four corners of the canvas, up, down and sideways and from foreground to background, to horizon and back.

“Painting” is essentially an affirmation of difference and self-identity. Alone in a distant land and foreign culture, Claudel affirms his Western cultural identity through the medium of art, painting in this case. In the first sentence of the poem, he rejects oriental painting style with its emphasis on general static landscapes with sky, horizons, mountains, forests and sea shores. The accented negative (“n’y mettrai point”), strengthened by the adjacent “ni...ni” structure and, further down, by the equally strong negative “aucun...ne”, translates his adamant determination to express difference and opposition. Instead, in his own painting, he focuses, with “precision”, on various elements of a rural setting. Throughout the poem, the notation of numbers, quatre, un, une, deux, trois quarts, identify his meticulous, orderly effort in expressing exactitude. The expressions, *limites*, *divisions*, *exactement*, *la plus petite*, emphasize the degree to which he opposes the general, impersonal portrayal in oriental painting. Moreover, the countryside he depicts is not static but a living and active space, a work environment (*labour*) which involves both men and women. He directs attention to everyday activities such as the images of a woman washing tubs and a farmer plowing his field. These realistic details identify the rural geography and existence of his native French region. The poem can thus be seen as a rather nostalgic representation of a familiar setting, constructed against the immediate presence of cultural difference. It is an affirmation of identity, in Whitman’s term, a “song of the self”.

The prose poems in the art essays are also self-referential. However, in general, the movement in these poems is centrifugal, away from the self and towards the horizon, beyond the physical and towards the spiritual. In fact, one encounters often in these poems a process of “liquification” or “pulverization” of reality. At this time, in the 1930’s and 1940’s, Claudel is no longer in a foreign land, no longer surrounded by a culture that dilutes and diminishes his identity. Thus in his analysis of Western art, he can make with confidence occasional reference to aspects of oriental culture which he has retained as knowledge from his experiences in those lands.

In reading the art essays, it becomes evident that Claudel’s exegesis of art forms is a tripartite process involving first of all *contemplation*, then *communication* and finally *imagination*. The contemplative phase is essentially a visual experience that reveals the structure of a work of art and the dynamic movement between the different elements of the

composition: "Nous n'attachions pas notre attention à une scène sans que toute une armature de rapports en zigzag entre en mouvement et que tout se met à communiquer autour de nous, comme une toile d'araignée quand un souffle l'ébranle." (OE 95). It is clear that, for Claudel, art, in all its forms, is not static. It has always an active, dramatic, living essence. Its movements leads away from the contemplated object (scene) and towards what he calls "the limits of two worlds", the horizon of the physical and the spiritual. The communicative phase consists essentially of the dialogue or associations established between the various elements of the composition. In Baudelairean terms, « les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent. » Finally, for Claudel, contemplating an art form and communicating with it inevitably stimulates the imagination and leads to creating art. "Mon imagination complète ce tableau," he writes. (OE 64) These inspired texts are the prose poems in the art essays, texts which exhibit a change in language and style and, invariably, a kind of upward movement or *elevation* towards the spiritual.

Typical is the prose poem that closes the exegesis of four tapestries depicting the life of the Virgin Mary. The fourth of these represents Mary's ascension to heaven and the crowning moment of her existence. Claudel's contemplation of this scene and his communication with it as he listens to "l'innombrable balbutiement du textile" (OE 95) inspire the prose poem, a song or ode, which closes the text:

Viens, dit-il, mon épouse, ma sœur, ma colombe. Et quel autre nom te donner encore? tous ceux qui tressera la litanie de Lorette. Et montre-moi ton visage, car il est beau, et fais-moi entendre ta voix comme elle est douce! Mais que je n'entende point douloureusement de ta bouche ce mot par lequel Salomon termine son cantique: Fuis, *fuge!* L'heure a changé, le moment est venu. Viens, tu seras couronnée! Et que peut-elle répondre sinon: Me voici! Celle dont la vie entière n'a été que l'explicitation d'une totale bonne volonté. Me voici donc, dit-elle, et de tous côtés se propage à travers l'univers, à larges plis de tissus, et de pourpre, et d'or infus, et de velours bleu, l'onde immense du *Magnificat*. (OE 95-96)

Unlike Baudelaire's "Invitation au voyage," Claudel's poem is an invitation to end a voyage, an existential voyage culminating in spiritual fusion with

God. The scene, typically claudelian, is dramatic. The imperative opening, "Viens," followed by the tripartite rhythmic structure "mon épouse, ma sœur, ma colombe," echoing Baudelaire's "mon enfant, ma sœur," of "Invitation au voyage," launch the movement of the scene. This movement is amplified by the sequence of imperatives, *montre-moi, fais-moi entendre, fuis, viens*, which ends with the dramatic, affirmative reply of the Virgin accepting unconditionally, without hesitation, the invitation: *Me voici!* This dialogue between Mary and her "spouse" becomes, at the end of the poem, a song, the *Magnificat*, spreading across the universe in a wave of colours. (68) The spiritual fusion is suggested by the blending of sounds and colours.

A similar imaginative, dramatic and poetic ending follows the exegesis of Rembrand's painting "La Ronde de nuit" (OE 48). The repetition, three times, of the expression "On part!" carries the same dramatic and kinetic force as the use of the imperative. This prose poem is also an invitation, this time, however, an invitation to begin a journey. Claudel's imagination moves outwards from the scene in Rembrand's painting to represent the deciding moment that launches explorations of new worlds: "est-ce la grande "sortie" de la Hollande qu'il s'agit?" (OE 50). Furthermore, Claudel expands the painted scene and the notion of historical departures towards new worlds, to signify the point of inspiration that stimulates the creative process in the mind: "tout le personnel heteroclite de notre imagination s'est mis en marche à la conquête de ce qui n'existe pas encore." (OE 51) Again, we see that *contemplation* of art and *communication* with its scene, gives impetus to the creative *imagination* of the poet, giving rise to a new artistic form, "ce qui n'existe pas encore."

Not all the prose poems in *L'Œil écoute* are inspired by or related to objects of art. Others could be called elemental poems inspired by the contemplation of changing landscapes and seasons. These poems are generally more lyrical than those associated with art exegesis. Claudel expresses in these seasonal or elemental poems the themes of change and return, the ephemeral and the eternal, common in his writing. Typical is the beautiful prose poem that opens and also closes the essay "Avril en Hollande" which celebrates the end of Winter's "immobility" and the return of the active, creative, living seasons: "alors la merveille une seconde réalisée de cette terre avec toutes les fleurs qui dit merci à Dieu pour cette mort à quoi elle est en train d'échapper." (OE 52) Here the natural, cyclical passage from Winter into Spring implies, through the

grace of God, the certainty of resurrection following death. Similarly, in the closing prose poem, the awakening of Spring and the poet's awakening in the night, signify a spiritual rebirth as announced in the echoing bells that usher a new hour: "C'est l'avènement de l'heure." (OE 60).

There is also an opening and closing prose poem, thus framing the essay, in "La Cathédrale de Strasbourg." The scene depicted here is Winter in Alsace. Claudel describes in figurative terms ("blanket," "curtain," "invisible nothingness") snow-covered landscape. These physical references are followed by spiritual allusions. Winter is a period of "mortification," like a self-inflicted punishment that brings atonement. The 'blizzard' of snow, moreover, is seen as a salutary "violence" that blows away impurities and purifies being. And the swirling snowflakes and stinging ice pellets are transformed by the poet's creative imagination into "little angry angels." They are like the "strong wind" which announces the presence of the Spirit in the Scriptures.

In the closing paragraph of this essay (OE 166-7), Claudel picks up again the metaphor of the swirling snow as he contemplates the pigments of light ("brouhaha de pigments") filtered through the upper windows of the cathedral. This "pulverized light" stimulates the poet's imagination which spins a sequence of metaphors, such as *miettes colorées, danse incessante, le printemps lui-même, l'alpage éternel sous le regard de Dieu.* In this instance too, the imagination develops these associations as the poet contemplates a formless, colourful movement which affirms a spiritual presence and essence.

As the above examples illustrate, the prose poem in *L'Œil écoute* serves a very specific function in breaking the formal, explanatory, argumentative tone of the essay. The prose poem in these essays is often derived from an exegesis of an object of art. At times, however, it is a lyrical text celebrating seasonal, elemental changes or natural cycles. More importantly, Claudel uses the prose poem to explain the process of the creative imagination. He shows us how both nature and art stimulate visually and aurally the imagination which generates, through a creative, associative process, a dramatic, ascending movement towards the spiritual. Finally, if the poems of *Connaissance de l'Est* are an affirmation of self-identity against a cultural difference which diffuses the Self, the prose poems of *L'Œil écoute* are 'Songs of the Self' which affirm, confirm and celebrate self-identity and reality through direct, intellectual and creative interaction with cultural artifacts and landscapes of the West.

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"The promises of the West are not lies!" he writes in "La Dérivation," (OP 59) a prose poem of *Connaissance de l'Est*.

Bibliography

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