Book reviews

Paul Claudel. *Knowing the East.* Translated with an introduction by James Lawler. Princeton: Princeton U P, The Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation, 2004. xxx + 137 pages.

It is hard to understate the importance of Claudel's collection of prose poems *Connaissance de l'Est* that first appeared in 1900, and whose definitive edition was assembled and printed through the efforts of Victor Segalen in 1914. An inspiration not only for the latter's *Stèles* but also for later innovators of prose poetry such as Francis Ponge or Roland Barthes's personal recreation of Japan in *l'Empire des signes*, the 61 short pieces that Claudel wrote during his stays in China and Japan from 1895 to1905 have become, alongside Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* and Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, an archetype for the hybrid genre of prose poetry. Prof. Lawler's subtle new translation of Claudel's masterpiece, combined with his insights into the poems' composition, is the best of the English translations of the work published so far.

Whereas Baudelaire's prose poems transmit the shock of extraordinary situations encountered while wandering through Paris, and Rimbaud's evoke the porous boundaries between dreams and reality, Claudel's choice of the genre allowed him to convey the numerous surprises, coincidences and dizzying unfamiliarity that he felt during his frequent long walks through cities and countrysides while occupying diplomatic posts at Foochow, Shanghai and Hankow. Prof. Lawler's probing introduction underscores the diversity of styles employed in the different poems—from the peasant humor of "The Pig" to the precise descriptions of "Rain" and "Toward the Mountain" or the serene meditations of "Hours in the Garden." It is not a planned book, with a sustained argument, but instead a series of searches (or what Claudel once called "travel notes") that gradually unfold a growing affection for unknown cus-

toms, strong sensations and unexpected vistas. Arranged in their chronological order of composition, the poems intersperse descriptions of vegetation ("The Coconut Palm," "The Banyan," "The Pine Tree") with thoughts on architecture ("Pagoda," "Doors," "Considering the City"), festivals ("The Day of the Feast-of-All-Rivers,") and climate ("Heat," "October"). It would be facile to label these sketches exotic; instead they depart from the picturesque passages of a Pierre Loti by closely scrutinizing sense impressions, by examining the complexities of Buddhist ritual and Confucianism, and by searching for hidden meanings in everyday scenes. An inveterate explorer, Claudel believed that first encounters with unfamiliar territory triggered off insights and understanding (in a similar way to G. M. Hopkins' intuitions of inscape), and Prof. Lawler argues persuasively in his introduction for giving equal weight to the poems' evocations of material joy and spiritual illumination. Both dimensions are woven intricately together in such poems as "The Temple of Consciousness" which describes the difficult two-day ascent to the monastery of Kuchian, the unalloyed joy of "sink[ing] teeth and fingers into the thick rind of a grapefruit" once the walker reaches his destination and then the equilibrium he senses between a simple prayer mat and the landscape that seems to emanate from its center, then stretch as far as the distant mountains and clouds.

By choosing simple and often quite literal English terms to translate the rich sensations in this and other poems, Prof. Lawler has succeeded marvelously in conveying the unembellished immediacy of Claudel's language (e.g. "I walk in black gravy. Along the ditch whose crumbling edge I follow, the smell is so strong it seems explosive."). Each poem is a nuanced progression from isolated impressions to underlying meaning so that the kind of "knowing" named in the book's title is never doctrinaire (the Catholicism that marked many of the poet's later works is still tentative in this book). It is instead, as Prof. Lawler remarks, an "idiosyncratic," or physical as well as spiritual, knowing. The biographical summary as well as the short accompanying notes to each poem give the first-time reader of Claudel all the signposts needed to savour these

poetic gems, while readers more familiar with the poet will enjoy the excellent introduction for its new insights into "Night on the Verandah," "The Golden Ark in the Forest," or "The Sedentary."

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Lettres de Paul Claudel à Jean Paulhan (1925-1954). Correspondance présentée et annotée par Catherine Mayaux. Bern: Peter Lang, 2004. 300 pages.

Cette correspondance permet de connaître un aspect important de la carrière de Claudel pendant les décennies avant et après la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale: le sujet principal des lettres est la participation du poète à la *Nouvelle Revue Française*, dirigée par Paulhan après la mort de Jacques Rivière en 1925. Pendant cette période, Claudel a publié dans la *NRF*, pour ne nommer que quelques-unes de ses contributions, un grand nombre de ses essais les plus importants sur les questions d'esthétique et de poétique (notamment les "Réflexions et Propositions sur le Vers Français" et "La Catastrophe d'Igitur"), des oeuvres courtes influencées par le séjour japonais, *La Légende de Prâkriti*, *Sous le rempart d'Athènes*, et le début des commentaires bibliques. L'excellente introduction et la documentation complète fournies par Catherine Mayaux aident à éclairer le fond complexe des rapports souvent difficiles entre le poète et la revue. La *NRF* occupe une place éminente dans la vie littéraire de l'époque, accueillant les contributions d'auteurs venus de divers horizons idéologiques: comme le note Mayaux, "le premier point de cette politique [de la revue] consiste à observer 'la charte de neutralité qu'on suppose à la base d'un programme délibérément littéraire' [...] En conséquence, la revue a le devoir de laisser la porte ouverte aux tendances contradictoires" (127). Cette politique d'ouverture se heurte aux croyances intransigeantes de Claudel et sa répugnance violente pour certaines