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Why start a Claudel Society on these, our little islands, so lost in the middle of the Pacific that they even escaped the attention of those world travellers, Rodrigue and Dona Prouheze? And why Jean Charlot as a first Honorary President of the group?

My own acquaintance with Claudel the author dates from my youth, when the *Cinq Grandes Odes* fell in my hands. My acquaintance with Claudel the man coincides with his ambassadorial stay in Washington. Only the other day I found my first draft of an answer to a letter of Claudel, then in his seventies, who reproached me for my long silence, "*Claudélien dès l'enfance comment me serait-il possible d'oublier Paul Claudel.*" In the final version I discreetly changed *enfance* to *adolescence*, Claudel's work not being, as a rule, considered childish fare and yet this first draft comes close to being the truth.

Our first meeting took place in Washington in 1928. I came there from Mexico, where I had worked in archeological diggings among Mayan ruins, a project financed by the Carnegie Institution of Washington. In Washington I was to report on the field work and prepare for publication our two volume monograph on the *Temple of the Warriors of Chichen-Itza*.

Strengthened by a letter of introduction from the French Consul in Mexico City I presented myself to Claudel at his office with some trepidation, and, under my arm, a fat typescript of my own poems. Ambassador Claudel received me kindly. His own private burden that day, that he did nothing to disguise from the young stranger, was that, approaching sixty, he felt old age gripping him irreversibly. I, in turn, mentioned my love for Mexico and shyly tended him my fat folder of rhymes. Courteously he accepted it and suggested we should meet the next day.

The next day, "I read your poems. They show lofty sentiments." This was the death knell for myself as a poet. I remembered Mallarmé to whom the painter Degas confided that he had just finished a sonnet, but for the last tercet for which he still lacked an idea, Mallarmé replied: "Degas, one does not write poetry with ideas. Poetry is written with words." Never again did the subject of my literary achievements surface.

Claudé had just given for publication to the *Forum*, a monthly, a fragment in English from his work in course, *The Book of Christopher Columbus*, "The Gods Churn the Sea". These were Mexican gods. Would I, an archeologist wise to the subject, illustrate the passage. I accepted, remarking however that the levity displayed, *à la Protée*, ill-fitted the beliefs of my ancestors, for I am proud of my quota of aztec blood; that the excess of x's and z's and tl's that mark the nahuatl language, here used for comic effect, on the lips of pagan priests and of their victims, at the drumming of the low-lying *teponaztle* and the shrill notes of the clay flute, had once been plainchant fit for gods.

Eventually, Yale University Press published the whole of *Columbus*. Next we tackled together the illustrations for the enormous bulk of a first version of the Commentaries on the Apocalypse. Based on Claudé's Japanese experience the illustrations were to be brush-and-ink knifed on *bois-de-fil* by a Japanese woodcutter, a craftsman able to transform my brush line into something stiffer, akin to a medieval pilgrimage penny sheet. Today, half a century later, these two hundred drawings, achieved in close collaboration, still await publication.

And now, why Hawaii? Most obviously because of the world-wide fame of Paul Claudé. To reminisce, there was a time when a critic felt daring who proposed for Claudé, a Frenchman, the status of Pan-European poet. The title today seems obsolete. Yet Claudé basked in this European fame, in this Europe of yesterday, still a closely meshed clan of nations huddled for warmth around

the common knowledge of their classical latin past.

Once he did wax indignant when a malingering critic write, "*Claudiel n'a pas le son français; on le dirait toujours traduit de l'ongro-finnois ou du tartare-mandchou.*" And yet, if our little community of Claudelians can attempt something that others, more centrally situated, have not attempted, it is to confront Claudel--that he would approve of it I am not sure--with modes of thoughts and with languages even further removed from the coziness of Europe than these *ongro-finnois* and *tartare-mandchou* tongues once propped up as scare-crows by an imaginative critic.

In Paris, while at a representation of *Le Soulier de Satin*, I watched Santiago-Orion, alone on the stage, declaim his intense, immense monologue churning into one seas and stars. Closing my eyes I visualized some Samoan Talking Chief, fly whisk thrown over his shoulder, keeping under a noble spell his squatting audience with rolling, thundering periods, their motions helicoidal as are those of the surf, multiple simultaneous propositions thrown like tentacles sucking to its conclusion the central thought as the octopus digests its prey.

Steeped though he was in latin, and well-articulated church latin at that, to me Claudel reluctantly admitted once, "Nowadays I let my writing write for me, and the less sense it makes on rereading, the better I like it." So it may well happen that this family of Pacific languages will help clarify some of Claudel's more difficult passages in the light of its peculiar genius.

At the first formal meeting that marked the foundation of the group, somewhat awed at the premonition of papers and theses on Claudelian subjects straining to be born in the academic future, I closed my opening speech with a word of caution: "Awe is not the best tool of research in the case of a Paul

Claudiel. The word *cosmique* brought a frown to his brow, all the more so since the formidable Teilhard de Chardin sponsored it. Indeed, Claudiel always rated *comique* above *cosmique*. *A bon entendeur, salut.*"

Jean Charlot  
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