

**THREE POEMS  
OF THE WAR**

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Three poems of the war by Paul Claudel & Edward Joseph Harrington O'Brien

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**PAUL CLAUDEL & EDWARD JOSEPH HARRINGTON O'BRIEN**

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THREE POEMS  
OF THE WAR *By*

PAUL CLAUDEL · *Translated*  
*into English Verse by* EDWARD J.  
O'BRIEN · *With the French Text.*  
*Introduction by* PIERRE CHAVANNES

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*These poems were recited  
for the first time by  
Mlle. Ève Francis.*

*Introduction to Three Poems of the War.*

**I**N France and elsewhere these three poems have been greeted by different critics as the most beautiful that the war has so far inspired; and as they have won over the critics they have also won the applause of vast audiences. They have done more, perhaps, for the fame of Claudel than all the work he has accomplished in the course of a life that has already entered upon its second half. And in this fact there is something strange. Claudel is not a "national poet" in the ordinary sense of the term. He is solitary, even in his own country. He is so partly by the force of circumstances: nearly always away from France, first as consul in America, then in China, lastly in Germany, he was not borne to fame by any literary school or coterie. But solitary he is by the very nature of his mind and art. In the French literature of yesterday Claudel appeared as something of a stranger. Whence came he? He is not like any other poet, the logical and incontestable heir of a clearly traced lineage; he does not belong to the French tradition of clearness, elegance, measure, perfec-

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tion, united in a form that is far removed from all excess and from all extremes. His originality is baffling, and his form is strange. His *vers libre* may be linked, perhaps, with that rhythm of Rimbaud, Maurice de Guérin, Châteaubriand, and with the beautiful tradition of French poetical prose; but based as it is on a personal theory of respiratory rhythm, stamped with the seal of an originality that is forceful, conscious, meditated, it is his alone, it is "Claudelian verse." Furthermore, Claudel is a religious genius. The faith he holds is not a comfortable, reassuring, accommodating and modern one; but a harsh and inflexible faith which sometimes seems to delight in all that shocks reason and terrifies sensibility in dogma and discipline. He has lived the long drama of the pursuit of absolute truth alone, and in proportion as he entered more deeply into the possession and the knowledge of that truth it seemed as if he were drawing away from his contemporaries; he is the man who embarks for a mysterious voyage and has left wife, children and friends behind on the quay; his words, coming out of the distance, arouse, among those who hear them, only "a little amusement, a little fear"; and their own words are not understood any better by the traveller!



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“. . . Art, science, the life of freedom . . .” O  
brothers, what is there between you and us?

“Only let me depart, why will you not leave me in peace?  
*We will come back no more among you.*”\*

\* \* \* \* \*

War breaks out, disrupting everything, entailing the brusque separation which suddenly carries the present back into the distant past. The poets, surprised by the cataclysm, attempt to sing, and into their songs they put, no doubt, all their soul and energy. But who does not feel how thin, feeble and inadequate are their voices? They are lost in the mighty unbridling of forces, in the great anonymous conflict of nations in arms, of civilisations at grips with one another, of opposed ideals,—a confused *mêlée* from which will be born in woe some unknown future. This is true of all; but the voice of those poets who seemed so much of their age is just the one which now seems to us to come from afar, from a world that is dead. Why, then, is it the voice of the solitary traveller in metaphysical lands, which is after all nearer, firmer, less unworthy of these events which are

\* “*Corona Benignitatis Anni Dei.*”

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carrying us along, and, as they bear us away, are infinitely beyond our comprehension?

Claudel's art explains much of this apparent anomaly. His art, which unites different, and at times contradictory, elements with unequal success, has been much discussed; and on so controversial a problem time alone can pronounce a definite verdict. But we must recognise in it the quality of greatness. Claudel's art did not have to exert itself to attain that gravity, to sound that Dorian mode which alone is worthy of the poetry of war: he was at once equal to events; he was ready. In these poems, in which Claudel's qualities seem to have attained a happy equilibrium, his poetry—as always with Claudel—is like some massive piece of architecture, the logical arrangement is rigorous and simple, a help rather than a hindrance to the sentiment. It is clothed in a wealth of images, full of fresh power culled directly from life by a poet whose vision is both naïve and studied. Claudel, by the rugged freshness of his images and by this direct contact with the world, resembles Whitman a little, but he is the Whitman of an older traditional civilisation, the old peasant, warlike, Catholic nation of France.

This grave eloquence, present in all three poems, differs

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somewhat in each. Familiar and popular in the first, it shows something of the brusqueness, fervor and intensity, that hallucination—or illumination—which is seen in the eyes of those who return from the combat; at the same time it has the great impassioned movement and the sublime inspiration which bear up a whole nation through the suffering and horrors of the conflict, enabling it to make its willing and supreme sacrifice:

“As often as you will, Sir! O France, as often as thou wilt!”

The second poem is the most Claudelian. Châteaubriand, speaking of the murder of a poor Italian fisherman by Napoleon, said: “There is blood that is dumb, and blood that cries aloud: the blood of the battlefield is drunk silently by the earth; the peaceful blood that is spilt spurts out, groaning, towards heaven. God sees it and avenges.” Claudel takes over this mystical idea and gives it a deeper significance; it is the earth itself which revolts against the slaughter of the innocent: the crime is contrary to her nature; and the corpse of the innocent, terrible seed, germinates like corn in the ground, producing slowly its harvest, the terrible harvest of justice and