to make him see that he does not face a true dilemma of evils, but that there is a *via media* that will lead him safely past the two monsters that on the right and on the left seem to bar his way. But for him to adopt that road, the first need is to realise that infallibility, so far from being a silly invention of obscurantist priestcraft, is a need of the very warp and woof of his nature. Only then surely can one expect him also to consider whether the Catholic formula is not perhaps after all the only one that fully safeguards the freedom of man's will, without reducing human society to chaos.

THE CLAUDEL-GIDE CORRESPONDENCE[1]

MARY RYAN

THE publication of this exchange of letters is in some ways unique, and of great religious and philosophical significance. The two men are of absolutely outstanding eminence and influence, and each in his way of outstanding experience. They are of the same generation, Claudel born in 1868, Gide in 1869. They were friends and have long since fallen apart. They stand for two absolutely opposite conceptions of man's duty and destiny.

During his recent visit to Rome, Claudel told an Italian interviewer (Mario Guidotti) that neither he nor Gide had taken the initiative in publishing this correspondence. It came from Robert Mallet, a friend of Gide's (who has supplied the letters with a minute and enlightening factual commentary). Claudel consented, in the hope of exercising a moral influence: 'I should like the letters to do good today to young people whom Gide may have harmed: the good that I tried to do, unhappily in vain, to a great writer and friend'.

Both correspondents hold strongly to what they stand for.

1 Paul Claudel et André Gide: *Correspondance* 1899—1926. Préface et notes par Robert Mallet. Paris; Gallimard.

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Both have allowed the letters to be supplemented by other documents: passages from Gide's *Journals*, and one from a literary interview of 1947 in which Claudel utterly disavows the other's position. That position is indicated in a typical passage picked out by the English, or rather American, translator of the *Journals:* 'In the name of what God, of what ideal, do you forbid me to live according to my nature? And where would that nature lead me if I simply followed it? Until now I had followed the rule of Christ, or at least a certain puritanism that had been taught me as the rule of Christ. My only reward for having striven to submit to it had been a complete physical and spiritual upset. I could not agree to live without a code, and the demands of my flesh required the consent of my mind....' If we eliminate the word 'simply', for Gide's difficult course was marked by many misdirections, gropings, reasonings, nostalgic backward glances, he did end by following his complex nature, even in its most perverse elements, whither it led him. The principle of uncontrolled individualism he erected into a rule of life.

Claudel did exactly the opposite. He tells us of his experience in, for example, an address of 1946: 'A magnificent thing happened to me, I got the knowledge of the living God, the personal God whom the Blessed Virgin in the *Magnificat* promised to successive generations. And another magnificent thing happened to me.... in the midst of a crumbling world I felt beneath my feet, living and once again conquering, triumphant, insubmersible, the ship called the Catholic Church, bearing on its mainmast the ensign of the Crucified.... Where now are those professors of gloom, of scepticism, of nothingness and despair who were the incubus of my youth?.... I was right, with all the strength of my heart, to resist them. I was right to revolt against them with all my intelligence and my will.... I was right to believe in light and joy.'

The two positions are obviously irreconcilable. We may ask ourselves, in passing, which of the two is the sounder, even only on grounds of reason and experience, quite apart from religious faith. Why may I not live according to my nature? asks Gide. Claudel wrote to him one day: 'I deny the individual the right to be judge and litigant in his own case'.

Claudel's position was visible from the first. Not so Gide's, even to himself. We can to some extent trace the development

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and see the contrast unfolding itself in these letters, and in doing so we are perhaps responding to Claudel's desire of doing good by their publication.

From the appearance of his early dramas Claudel began to have considerable prestige in the eyes of younger men like Rivière and Mauriac, and contemporaries like Jammes and Gide. Personal contact increased it: Gide would speak later of the impression made by Claudel's 'joy'—'an immense, triumphant joy, not frenzied (*pathétique:* Gide is contrasting it with an excitement that his friend Philippe had found in Nietzsche) but quiet, solid, assured, safe.... Nothing is more contagious than sadness, more convincing than joy. The example of Claudel's joy was for many of us a very gripping thing'.

Claudel's first 'convert' was Gabriel Frizeau, a friend of Jammes and Rivière, whose name often occurs in these letters. 'Frizeau was the first', he told Gide, 'who, coming back to God through my dramas and discerning that religion dominated everything in them, made me think I had not written in vain. The literary beauty of my work has no more importance for me than what any workman might find who feels that he has done a good job: I did my best, that is all....'

It was in 1905 that Claudel and Gide came into effective contact. They had both frequented Mallarmé's Tuesdays but without meeting. They did meet in a passing way in 1895 at the house of a common friend, Marcel Schwob. Then Claudel went to China. Gide sent him copies of certain of his books as they appeared. The first two letters—1899 from Kuliang, 1900 when Claudel was on leave—are courteous acknowledgements, expressing appreciation of the rare quality of Gide's mind and style. In 1899 he makes the penetrating remark, quoted later by Gide in his *Journal* with much satisfaction: *Votre esprit est sans pente* ('slope', bent or trend). Next year he writes, after reading *Paludes* and *Les Nourritures terrestres*, 'I will not speak of the ideas of the nature of your mind that your two books give me. It is too delicate a subject....'

Gide was a bad correspondent and there is an interval of three years before Claudel writes again, this time after reading *Prétextes*. He thanks Gide for certain pages, speaks of his charm and distinction and 'rare' critical faculty. But certain views he cannot share. He cannot understand Gide's admiration for the 'flatulent

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Verhaeren', nor for Nietzsche, 'although the pages you devote to that restless spirit are very interesting.... One sentence that you quote from him is enough for me: "I want that man who is proudest, most alive, most affirmative; I want the world, I want it as it is, I want it still, I want it eternally, etc., etc." Do you not feel the horror and platitude of these repetitions, of a man who wants to say something and cannot, who is so violent and so terribly voluble? How can one like a theory so antimusical?'

It is useful to look for a moment at that word which is like a key-word to Claudel's view of life. He sees the world as a divinely concerted, complex harmony, in which each man has to play in tune—to follow and at need to improvise his part; a much harder and nobler thing than to be a superman. 'There is something finer and rarer than a superman', he said in his address to the Academy, 'that is a just man, a man in tune (*juste*) as a note is in tune, one of those men praised by Holy Writ because not only they do not mar the music, but by their appearance on every line of the stave to which one after the other they were called by Providence, they bring plenitude, create concord'. *Ne impedias musicam*, he quotes elsewhere from Ecclesiasticus; but evil does, as far as is humanly possible, spoil the music. And this seems to explain Claudel's words used later to condemn Gide and resented by him: *Le mal ne compose pas*. It is almost an aesthetic objection to the intrusion of evil into art and into life.

To come back to our dates, in 1905 Claudel is home from China. Gide is under the spell of the recently published Ode, *Les Muses*, which has 'shaken his whole being'. A little earlier he had heard Frizeau read a letter written by Claudel: 'I listened to that letter', he wrote to Jammes, 'as if it were addressed to me. It was terrible'. In July he writes that he has been thinking, and hesitating, about trying to see Claudel. At last, in September, he asks for a meeting, adding: 'Thank you, Claudel, for writing the *Ode to the Muses*. It has been food and sustenance to me this winter'. Claudel responds gladly. 'We might have long gone on looking at each other like a pair of china dogs. You are certainly one of the men I most esteem, and most wished to see when I came home to France.'

The letters, supplemented by Gide's *Journal*, now become full and revealing. Claudel (badly dressed, notes Gide, who in more than one place comments on Claudel's appearance) lunched at Gide's. His conversation was 'alive and rich': 'one feels an internal

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high pressure of images and ideas'. 'His voice is, I think, the most *gripping* that I have ever heard. No, he does not charm, he does not want to charm, he convinces—or impresses. I did not even try to defend myself against him; and when after lunch he spoke of God, of Catholicism, of his faith, of his happiness, and I said I quite understood him, and he added: "Then why, Gide, are you not converted?".... I let him see into what mental tumult his words had thrown me.' Claudel talked *intarissablement*. And that evening he wrote, enclosing some Scripture extracts: 'What would you? You must take me as I am, and a Claudel who was not a zealot and a fanatic would not be Claudel. How I would have liked to be more eloquent!'

That strong inner urge is characteristic, as is also the afterthought, and requires some explanation. We may quote here a passage written later from Tientsin. He had received a presentation copy of 'an abominable book' by André Ruyters, a friend of Gide's, the author of clever, blasphemous, amoral Gospel sketches. His acknowledgement was such as we can imagine. But a couple of months later he writes to Gide: 'Forgive me for hurting you by the way I spoke of Ruyters. Realise the position of a Catholic in the happy times we live in, to whom all the papers, books, reviews, that he gets from France bring, in bundles and cartloads, nothing but insults, mockery, attacks, of every kind and from all sides, on the only things he venerates in the world—news of downfalls, persecutions, apostasies. When someone attacks the Church it is to me as if he struck my father or my mother, and when I was sent those pretty inventions (it is hard to translate the irony of *gentillesses*) as something that I should be pleased to read, I confess that I saw red.... I have no doubt that M. Ruyter is an estimable man according to his lights.... My convictions have not prevented me from having good friends among Jews, Protestants, and atheists, like Schwob, Suarès, or Berthelot, but they are purely passive unbelievers, and not personal enemies of Christ. I acknowledge that I cannot bear those terrible insults in cold blood.... A little more charity would evidently be better....'

In their intercourse Gide enjoys principally the satisfaction of his thirst for sympathy and understanding. He has recoiled from 'a practical and temperate religion'; to some 'lukewarm compromise between art and religion' he has preferred giving up the reading of the Bible, formerly his 'daily food', and prayer which

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had been his 'first need'. He discerns an opposition, 'not so much between two faiths as between two ethical systems'. Claudel has given him a glimpse of 'an acceptable fighting position'. He has an obscure longing for holiness, and Claudel speaks of 'the absolute duty of being a saint'. 'Ah, how right I was to shrink from meeting you! At present how I fear your violence!' In a few days he does however suggest another talk, and in March 1906 he records a 'very beautiful letter from Claudel'. That was their nearest approach to a real understanding.

Claudel, going back to his post after his marriage in March 1906, left to Gide and other friends in search of truth a short *Abrégé de toute la doctrine chrétienne*, a sort of souvenir. But in May, Gide wrote to Jammes that he had had an 'explanation' with Claudel: 'His zeal and my sympathetic response together deluded us about my real state. It was not communion with the Eucharist that attracted me, but communion with Claudel, the desire to go on longer with him, a certain curiosity about his thought, and the impossibility of understanding without experience on my own part. If Claudel has "his God".... I have mine.... there was no rupture between us....'

A letter of November acknowledges *Partage de midi*, of which certain pages made Gide 'tremble like Moses before the burning bush', but he seems to indicate a certain reserve. Claudel answers at Christmas: 'I was often on the point of writing to you. But what could I say? I have only too much reason already to reproach myself for having been indiscreet and tactless with you....' Then, speaking of writers in general, and this is just as he was busy with his splendid Ode, *Magnificat*, 'Anyone at all, without virtue, talent, intelligence.... conceives an idea, one poor idea, as absurd as you like, as repugnant as you like: crowds take it up and follow him. The doctrine of Christ, which is peace, joy, a rule, a promise, light, enrichment of character and reason, is abandoned as he foretold.... It is easier to give up one's joy than one's pride'. On which Gide notes in his *Journal* that this 'holy anger' affects him disagreeably.

Next year Gide sent Claudel *Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue*, a clear manifesto of aversion from the idea of returning to the Father's house: Jammes read it as such. Claudel, for his part, is gentleness itself in criticising the book, 'which I like because it makes me understand you better'.

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There is a moving exchange of letters in 1909 on the death of Gide's great friend Charles-Louis Philippe. He died unexpectedly after a short illness, at home in the country away from all his friends. He too had come momentarily under Claudel's influence, and had been sadly 'disappointed' by the *Enfant prodigue*. Claudel wrote from his new post in Prague: 'I once had a long conversation with him which I now reproach myself for not having taken up again this last time. But it is a sad consequence of one's moral inferiority that one does not feel one has the right to speak to others.... And now Philippe in his turn has silently opened and closed behind him the door through which Schwob had vanished .... I reproach myself for not being fanatical enough, not preaching enough.... Those who have received the light and do not make desperate efforts to spread it are very guilty'.

The next letters turn again on Philippe—Gide was devoting to him a memorial number of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*—and on books, authors, questions of publication. Towards the end of 1911 one of Gide's sisters-in-law became a Catholic. This brought the religious question into the forefront again and there are many significant passages. 'I am almost afraid to tell you', writes Gide in December, 'how much the other part of your letter moved me.... but imagine what it is to have been surrounded in childhood by admirable, holy figures.... my difficulty is in the fidelity that they demand of me....'

Claudel answers: 'A principal cause that helps to keep people away from the Church is that they see so many noble and lofty souls outside the Church, fulfilling all their human duty, and amongst us in most devout persons something disagreeable interposing itself, a sort of crust preventing contact....' In a series of letters that follow at short intervals, to which Gide's answers have not been preserved, Claudel keeps urging, or rather pleading, the true nature of Catholicism. Interspersed with literary news, criticisms, questions of translation and dramatic production, and an invitation to Gide to come and lecture in Frankfort, we find such passages as: 'Alas, if you wait to be converted until all Catholics or so-called Catholics impress you as being saints, you will wait long. Even today the face of the Saviour is hidden under spittle and the most hideous distortions'. 'I am distressed because you seem to take all these people.... amateur Christians or recent converts, for authentic representatives of Catholicism....' 'A lip-

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acknowledgement is not enough to make a man a Christian without the assent of the heart. . . .' 'It is not with the motes that one finds in the neighbour's eye that one builds up the house of God, but with the beams that one removes from one's own.' 'For the moment you must absolutely tranquillise your heart and get away from that *tête-à-tête* with yourself that no outside diversion will distract from you.' 'It is a great thing that today you know and acknowledge Christ. . . . but that is not enough. Only one thing can satisfy love and that is possession, and it is because the Church has never wavered in her assertion of the *real presence* that we recognise her as truly divine.' 'One thing only is necessary, that you should draw near to Christ, and eat after long hunger. . . .' 'One only goes to him by prayer.' 'The word *religion* means a tie and a constraint stronger than you think. . . .' 'The only wisdom is to yield to the divine call. . . .'

But meantime Gide had noted in his *Journal*: 'I wish I had never known Claudel. His friendship weighs on my thought, and constrains it, and impedes it. . . . I cannot yet bring myself to grieve him, but my thought asserts itself in offence to his. How can I explain the position to him?' It became clear with the serial publication of *Les Caves du Vatican*. Rumour made Claudel somewhat anxious about that book, and the publication of a very vicious passage which Gide refused to suppress provoked a breach between them early in 1914. Gide refused on the ground that it would be hypocrisy. 'There is something infinitely more odious than hypocrisy', replies Claudel in a long, sad letter, 'that is cynicism'. For cynicism brings about 'a perversion of the conscience and the judgment. You are taking on you the responsibility for the souls you ruin'. The painful story is told in a long series of letters, including some to Rivière and some to and from Jammes. 'See the results I have achieved after seven years' correspondence', writes Claudel to Rivière under an impression of 'frightful desolation'. 'He is going his way with the obstinacy of a sleep-walker. . . . Poor fellow!'

The rupture is not however complete. Gide, who had thrown himself into relief-work for Belgian refugees, wrote again in 1916 to ask for a preface to a book by a modernistic Spaniard, and was naturally refused. During those war years, 1916 to 1919, he was again definitely preoccupied with religious ideas. He kept a little 'green note-book', in which he wrote for example: 'Lord, I come

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to thee like a child.... I renounce all that was my pride and that in thy presence would cause me shame. I listen and submit my heart to thee'. Yielding to the persuasion of his friend Charles Du Bos, he published these notes under the title *Numquid et tu?*—but not until 1922 when, as his commentator puts it, 'the book no longer reflected his opinions'. Claudel in Japan received and read it in 1924 and conceived a great hope. 'It seems to me', he wrote, 'that in these ten years (i.e. since the breach in 1914) your path has after all converged somewhat on the highway that I humbly follow....' 'Your great discovery which is perfectly exact is that eternal life is not for some future time, that it is beginning now, this very moment, that the Kingdom of God is within us....' This 'admirable letter', as Gide calls it, was apparently not answered —Gide was abroad—but they met again in the following year in Paris, when Claudel was on leave. 'I want to see you again', wrote Gide in answer to an invitation, '....and I am afraid of you, Claudel.... our conversation can only be serious, and your words shake me terribly....' We have two accounts of that meeting. Claudel made a note on the letter: 'I saw Gide on the evening of the 14th. We had a long and grave conversation. He tells me that his religious disquiet is over, that he is enjoying a sort of *felicity* based on work and sympathy. The goethian side of his character has won against the Christian side....' Gide in his *Journal* describes the room in detail, and Claudel's appearance with a slightly caustic note. He ends: 'He dominates me, beetles over me; he has more footing and more surface, more health, money, genius, power, children, faith, etc. than I. I only think how I can slip away.'

After this, Gide was about to go on a long journey to Africa. 'He is going off to French Equatorial Africa with the idea that perhaps he will never come back', notes Claudel; and he is moved to write to Madame Gide and offer to go to see her. She answers that it will be best for them to meet by both praying for her husband. In a last letter, of July 1926, Claudel assures Gide that many Catholics are praying for him. The last extract we get from Gide's *Journal*, dated December 1931, is a Parthian shaft: '.... Claudel. I like him and I want him as he is, giving a lesson to compromising, lukewarm Catholics who seek to come to terms. We can accept him, admire him; he owes it to himself to vomit us out of his mouth. As for me, I prefer to be vomited than

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to vomit'.

Those who, like Claudel, go the whole length of their Christian conviction in condemning whatever militates against it, are sometimes accused of want of charity. We have seen Claudel suggest this of himself. We have seen him exercise considerable discernment and make considerable allowances for those who were separated from him by a gulf. We have seen him use great gentleness in criticism of Gide's writings. But there is a limit, and he ended by reaching it. In his Academy discourse he asks, after Louis Veuillot, 'Where is the place for charity? towards evil-doers or towards their victims?'

He has the most acute sense of Christian responsibility: 'Our generation has a great work to accomplish, and to repair the crime of our predecessors....' And of the responsibility of writers: 'Literature can sometimes do a little good, but above all it can do a great deal of harm'. 'When we appear before the judgment seat of God, let us fear to hear the terrible outcry of those legions of unfortunates, of those submerged myriads who will bear witness against us saying: "Lord, we were born in ignorance, wretchedness, crime, servitude. And these others were rich, had good and honourable parents, leisure, education and knowledge...." What a responsibility for us writers, who are leaders of men and guides of souls! By the fact that we are enlightened we shed light. We are the delegates of the rest of the universe to achieve knowledge and truth, and there is no other truth but Christ.'

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