

THE POET AS BELIEVER

Aidan Nichols, *The Poet as Believer: A Theological Study of Paul Claudel*. Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011.

Aidan Nichols' recent book, *The Poet as Believer: A Theological Study of Paul Claudel*, appears as an installment in the Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts series from Ashgate Press. (Nichols' earlier book, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacred Aesthetics*, appeared in the same series.) In this present work, Nichols explores the theological dimensions of the French poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955) by examining a selection of his poems, essays, and dramatic plays. Claudel figures importantly in certain strands of twentieth-century theology with which Nichols is sympathetic; Nichols himself says the notion of Claudel as a theologian originated with Henri de Lubac.

The majority of the book is organized according to theological theme, rather than chronology of composition. Chapters four through seven are liturgically organized, the first around the theme of the Mass and the others according to the rhythms of the (pre-1962) Roman Calendar that re-contextualized Claudel's life and experiences after his conversion. The final chapters deal with the Virgin Mary and Claudel's spiritual approach to Biblical exegesis, while the last chapter provides a brief treatment of Claudel's theatrical plays (for which he is most widely acclaimed).

Although historical trajectory does not structure his analysis, Nichols does rely heavily on personal-historical context in his analysis of each aspect of Claudel's work. Nichols begins with a brief historical preface, which becomes a running subtext for the following chapters. In this much he exhibits a deep sensitivity for the significance of Claudel's personal struggles and the cultural milieu that shaped them.

Paul Claudel was born in rural France at a time when Catholicism was still culturally intact. He traveled abroad early in life, and spent the majority of his working life as a French diplomat. He was stationed in places such as China and Prague, and was eventually appointed French ambassador to Denmark and finally to the United States. Nichols' theological treatment of Claudel's work is careful to take into account the full scope of these public and private dimensions of Claudel's life experience.

Educated in Paris as a young man, Claudel assimilated the agnosticism he found among the Parisian intelligentsia, sinking for a time into a kind of materialism. Deeply disaffected by the Kantian explanations of his professors, he even contemplated suicide in 1895. Nichols points out the similarities between Claudel and Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, whose conversion would track along similar lines only a few years later.

For Nichols, Claudel's work is an example of what he calls 'literary modernism.' In his youth, Claudel was influenced by French symbolism, a movement in both literature and the visual arts that is characterized by an emphasis on emotion, experience and transcendence. Nichols believes that the effects of this can still be observed long after Claudel parted ways with the secularist intelligentsia of his day. Claudel reports that it was his encounter with the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud that first shook the foundations of his materialism and opened him to the possibility of the metaphysical and the religious. Although Rimbaud himself was decidedly heterodox, Nichols observes that even after Claudel's return to Catholicism, the stylistic influence of Rimbaud can still be felt strongly.

Nichols attempts to distance Claudel from theological modernism to some degree, however, periodically making reference to Claudel's criticism of Modernist thinkers such as Loisy and his distaste for the excesses of historical-critical scholarship. For Nichols, Claudel's task as a Catholic and a twentieth-century poet is daunting:

The modern poetic subject, if he or she wishes to be catholic in both the lower case and upper case senses of that word,

has to come to terms with an almost unmanageable freight of tradition in an inhospitable climate of pragmatism and positivism as well as secularity.

Nichols portrays Claudel as one who has given voice to the Church's faith and tradition within a mode of discourse that remains intelligible – and therefore culturally present – to modern men. Nichols argues effectively for a theologically informed reading of Claudel's poetry, defending Claudel from those who would wrestle him into more conventional literary categories and downplay the import of his Catholicism. In short, Nichols presents Claudel as a model for Catholic poets who find themselves in modern times.

But what is Claudel's relationship to theology? At times, Nichols seems to position Claudel alongside theologians such as Balthasar and de Lubac as a kind of poetic counterpart to the *Resourcement* movement. While it is easy to appreciate the affinities that exist between Claudel and the *Nouvelle Theologie*, one wonders if this is in fact a relationship of necessity. In making these associations Nichols raises questions about the relationship between poetry, theology, and culture that he could not rightly be expected to resolve in the space of this book.

However, some readers may be tempted to explore other possibilities. How would Claudel appear if viewed through more traditional Augustinian or Thomistic categories? Questions of this kind lend themselves to no certain answers, and there may be no single lens through which to view his work. But precisely because of the living, unsystematizable complexity of his art, it is clear that future generations of Catholic thinkers will continue to appreciate the cultural resonance and spiritual penetration of Claudel the poet, and perhaps even Claudel the theologian.

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