

Paul Claudel, “Japanese Women,” and Orientalism¹

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Abstract

The interwar period, which saw an increase in European imperialism, also saw intense missionary activity in Asia. Paul Claudel, who had previously been ambassador to China, served as French ambassador to Japan from 1921 to 1927. He kept up an abundant professional and personal correspondence with persons from the realms of politics, literature, and religion. It was during his time in Japan that Claudel met and began a correspondence with two French Carmelite sisters on mission in Asia. Thus, Claudel’s notable legacy in Japan has often included having a part in the foundation of the Carmelite monastery in Tokyo that was created by the monastery headed by these two sisters in Cholet, France. These sisters represent some of the lesser known, but nevertheless very active women with whom Claudel was in contact. Surprisingly, the correspondence with the sisters shows a passive Claudel in dialogue with active women. This very passivity on Claudel’s part may perhaps have saved him on this and other occasions from a hard orientalist stance.

Introduction

“How could us Japanese women forget our great and generous Friend?” [*Comment les Japonaises pourraient-elles oublier leur grand et ‘généreux’ Ami ?*] begins a letter from Sister Jeanne of the Child Jesus to Paul Claudel (Millet-Gérard 918). The sister is about to leave France to go on mission to begin a Carmelite monastery in Tokyo and playfully calls herself and her fellow sisters “Japanese women” [*les japonaises*]. Claudel himself is the generous friend and, as ambassador to Japan from 1921 to 1927, he has often been credited as the inspiration for the women’s Carmelite monastery in Japan founded in 1932. Nevertheless, a look at the correspondence between Claudel and the sisters shows how active the sisters were and how little Claudel tried to impose his views. This very passivity on Claudel’s part may have saved him from a hard orientalist stance on this and other occasions.

I. Paul Claudel's non-orientalist legacy in Japan, a literature review

Both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars writing about Claudel in Japan seem to agree that he was unlike other Western visitors. As early as 1968 Maurice Pinguet was asserting that Paul Claudel could not be accused of an attitude of cultural colonialism in his apprehension of Japan (4). Akane Kawakami has singled out Claudel's practice of walking extensively around Japan as indicative of an attitude toward the other that is "refreshing" and "humble" (91). The Japanese scholar Shinobu Chujo in the preface to his 2012 study, *Chronologie de Paul Claudel au Japon*, highlights that in Japan, Claudel is known as the ambassador poet, 詩人大使², a title which we can understand as differentiating him from other diplomats who were not poets. Some non-Japanese scholars also pose interesting questions about the nature of Claudel's interaction with Japan. Pamela Genova while underlining what is ambivalent, complex, and equivocal in the relationship, also claims that Claudel was not a heavy-handed manipulator of the inspiration he took from Japanese aesthetics: "the poet's touch may well be lighter than it might seem at first glance" (108). Indeed Jacques Bésineau, who collected impressions that Paul Claudel left on his Japanese friends, shows that while Claudel might have seemed physically intimidating and rather abrupt in his way of communicating, those who overcame those obstacles truly appreciated his unconventional ways and built long-lasting friendships with him (345-46).

Claudel's first-hand contact with Japan was a main difference between him and other French artists who took inspiration from "*japonisme*,"³ or the fascination with objects and prints coming from Japan. As Akane Kawakami notes, "popular *japonisme* probably did more to hinder, rather than aid, the dissemination of any real knowledge about Japan" (20). She goes on to demonstrate how "*japonisme*" constitutes a hidden, insidious type of Orientalism (22) which can be understood, following Edward Said, as a construction of "the Orient" posited as the "Other" of Europe rather than being an entity on its own right (Kawakami 175n.8). Claudel, as one who stepped on Japanese soil, was thus spared falling into the reductionist trap of thinking he understood Japan simply because he had contact with some pieces of Japanese art. Yet, other artists who visited the real places they tried to understand have nevertheless fallen into yet another trap: that of being blind to the reality of the culture before them because they saw it through the lens of their predecessors. If scholars of Claudel's work seem to agree that Claudel did not fall into this second trap either, to what can be attributed Claudel's seeming immunity to Orientalism?

A partial answer may be in Claudel's paradoxical passivity and receptivity in his relationships, as can be seen in his correspondence with two Roman Catholic religious sisters. Claudel's correspondence with Mother Aimée of Mary and Sister Jeanne of the Child Jesus consists of twenty-four documents. All the documents represent the women's side of the correspondence because Claudel's side was destroyed by the sisters. Even before their integral publication in 2008 by Dominique Millet-Gérard, André Blanc had studied the letters and published several fragments in 1998. Blanc makes several stimulating suggestions about the correspondence. He had consulted persons in the monastery of Cholet and suggests that the true reason for the destruction of Claudel's side of the correspondence was probably the private information Claudel confided to the sisters which they thought would embarrass him if discovered. For example, the letters seem to allude to Claudel's prior affair with Rose Vetch (Blanc 5, 12). Blanc also cites other internal documents from the Cholet monastery and does not hesitate to mention where the sisters' advice to Claudel might contradict their own actions toward him, as when they advise Claudel not to mold others according to his own experience, but nevertheless seem to mold him according to their experiences (16). A close look at the correspondence between Claudel and these missionary women therefore shows Claudel often in a surprisingly passive position, listening more than speaking and receiving advice rather than giving it.

II. The genesis and pursuit of a Carmelite monastery in Tokyo

Claudel's main encounter with Mother Aimée of Mary and Sister Jeanne of the Child Jesus took place on board the *Amazon*⁴ in February and March 1925 as the ship was making a run from Asia to Marseille. The ship and its layout played a crucial role in the meeting between Claudel and the sisters. It could accommodate 148 passengers in first class, 71 passengers in second class and 81 passengers in third class (Ramona). At the time Claudel and the sisters took the ship, the crossing from Hué (present-day Vietnam) to Marseille lasted about one month.

The encounter with Claudel on board the *Amazon* seems to have been materially beneficial to the sisters in at least two ways. First, Claudel was instrumental in getting the two sisters moved up from a third-class cabin to a more private second-class cabin. The third-class cabin with twelve beds made privacy difficult for the two previously cloistered sisters and Mother Aimée notes that no sooner had Claudel noticed the situation, then he spoke to someone in charge and the sisters were immediately moved up (Guillet 35).

Second, the sisters were also facing a challenge upon their arrival in France. Although both sisters were originally from France, it was unusual at the time for sisters sent on missions to Asia to return. In the case of Mother Aimée, twenty-seven years spent in a hot climate had weakened her heart and doctors recommended that she return to France. Health considerations were not the only reason for the return trip to Europe. The sisters planned to open up a new monastery in France specializing in training religious sisters for life in the Asian mission countries. The local bishop in Hué had approved this plan, but on the French side, no bishop was yet aware of it, and the sisters themselves did not know where their project should start (Guillet 33). They faced an uncertain future upon their landing in Marseille and they viewed the meeting with Claudel on board the *Amazon* as a providential encounter since he not only got them upgraded but also encouraged them in their project of building a monastery in France that would train sisters for Asia and particularly for Japan.

In Mother Aimée's account of the encounter, written to preserve the memory for later generations of Carmelite sisters, it is Claudel who insists upon a foundation in Japan and the sisters seem obliged to acquiesce:

[Paul Claudel] is persuaded that Carmel would be highly appreciated there and hopes to obtain, before we part, the promise that a foundation would be made in the land of the rising sun! We are rather of his persuasion, but what he wants is the promise that our first foundation be in Japan.

Il est [...] persuadé que le Carmel y serait très apprécié, et espère obtenir, avant que nous nous quittions, la promesse d'une fondation au pays du Soleil levant ! Nous sommes assez gagnées à sa cause, mais ce qu'il voudrait c'est obtenir que notre première fondation soit pour le Japon" (cited in Blanc 8).

Claudel is apparently already imagining a later step in the process: once the sisters set up the missionary training monastery in France, the first place the trained missionaries should be sent to would be Japan.

This account from the sisters' chronicle has commonly been accepted and it credits Claudel's invitation to found a Carmel in Japan as the impetus for the first Carmel. However, this view perhaps credits Claudel for too much responsibility in the foundation because a look at the correspondence itself shows how much the sisters themselves were active in pursuing this foundation and how little Claudel got involved in the work.

Of the twenty-four pieces of correspondence from the sisters to Claudel, the first

dates to April 1, 1925, just one week after the *Amazon* landed in Marseille and Claudel and the sisters went their separate ways. In the letter, Mother Aimée restates the providential nature of their meeting with Claudel on the boat and recalls with her missionary zeal the idea of a Carmel in Japan:

Was not our meeting - providential just like all that happens here below - yet another indication of God's loving heart and an invitation to multiply His "Edens" in the Far East, to the land of the rising sun? Who knows whether you and we shall not see the full blossoming of Carmel in Japan?

Notre rencontre, providentielle comme tout ce qui se rencontre ici-bas, n'est-elle pas encore une indication de son Cœur aimant, et une invite à multiplier ses 'edens' en Extrême-Orient, jusqu'au royaume du Soleil levant ? Qui sait si vous et nous ne verrons pas le plein épanouissement du Carmel au Japon ? (Millet-Gérard 858).

If in this letter Mother Aimée still reserves her judgment about the success of a Carmel in Japan, she nevertheless thinks their meeting with Claudel was an invitation from God to begin working on Carmelite missions to the Far East, particularly to Japan.

By the fourth letter from the Carmelites to Claudel, written four months after the landing of the *Amazon*, the sisters have moved from Marseille into the Cholet monastery. They were renovating the buildings and preparing to set up the regular religious life there. Sister Jeanne, who writes the letter, brings up the subject of Japan in the PS. She asks if Claudel is planning to return to Japan. The reason for her question follows. The sisters are indeed still hoping to bring Carmel to Japan: "As for us, we still keep the hope of establishing our Holy Order there as soon as God will allow it." [*"Pour nous, nous gardons toujours l'espérance d'y aller établir notre Saint Ordre, dès que le bon Dieu le permettra"*] (Millet-Gérard 868). If Claudel had indeed been the original impetus for a Carmel in Japan, four months after the sisters and Claudel disembarked from the *Amazon*, the sisters have thoroughly adopted the project as their own.

The next letter of the exchange was written with interruptions between the 1st and 3rd of January of the following year. Mother Aimée explains in the letter that she was taking a few moments out of the night of prayer and adoration to write to Claudel.⁵ Claudel's own letter seems to have arrived between the 1st and 3rd of January informing the sisters of his planned return to Japan on board the *Porthos*. Mother Aimée adds a line about the Carmelites own willingness to go to Japan as well: "Yes, Japan can count on us; at the hour of Divine Providence, sisters from the monastery of 'Jesus-Emmanuel'

will go out like a colony of bees to initiate into the great and beautiful life of Carmel—into the life of contemplation and of intimacy with God—the dear Japanese souls who will understand it so well.” [*Oui, le Japon peut compter sur nous ; à l’heure de la divine Providence, un essaim parti de ‘Jésus-Emmanuel’ ira initier à la grande et belle vie du Carmel, la vie de contemplation, d’union à Dieu, les chères âmes japonaises qui la comprendront si bien*] (Millet-Gérard 870).

By May of that year, the project of the new Carmel is so certain that Sister Jeanne need not name the place specifically; it is simply referred to as “the desired foundation” [*la fondation désirée*] which seems to be becoming a reality with more and more women entering the Cholet Carmel (Millet-Gérard 876).

The next letter dates three months later, from August 1926, and, in it, Sister Jeanne responds rather firmly to a letter in which Claudel must have told her that he was again leaving Japan and returning to Paris. She thought his post in Japan suited him better and that he could be more open to God there. Commentators of this letter have rightfully noted that the main concern of Sister Jeanne is the difficulties Claudel might undergo upon seeing Rosalie (Rose) Vetch again in Paris (Blanc 12, Millet-Gérard n. 877). Sister Jeanne specifically worries that his prayer life be distracted by his preoccupation with Rose, a subject that she implies by the periphrastic: “preoccupations, especially you know what” [*les préoccupations, surtout vous savez quoi*] (Millet-Gérard 877). Nevertheless, Sister Jeanne has not lost sight of her own mission to send Carmelites throughout the world, and, while writing in this same letter about her difficulties with a projected Carmel in Tunisia, she adds that the foundation in Japan is a higher priority: “The Japanese [mission] is higher up on the list. [*Celle du Japon passera bien avant*]” (877). Although she does not explicitly mention it as a reason for why Claudel should stay in Japan, it would be reasonable to think that Claudel’s presence as French ambassador there would be a help in the endeavor to begin a Carmel.

Three months later, on November 4, 1926, Sister Jeanne comments that the convent in France is doing well with twenty women, though some of the women do leave the convent. She writes about the convent’s projects which include sending three sisters to Asia of whom two are intended for Hué and one for Manila. In the same vein, she does not forget to mention Japan and asks when it will be time for a Carmel in Japan (881). This is clearly a preoccupation for her. She also offers to host Claudel for a brief retreat in their Carmel as a preparation for what seems to be a new assignment for the ambassador. Claudel was assigned to be the French ambassador to Washington.⁶

Several exchanges of letters occur in the meantime and the next mention of

Japan occurs three years later on September 28, 1929. The occasion is the surprise announcement from the bishop of Nagasaki that a young woman will come from his diocese to enter the Cholet Carmel in France with a view of a future Carmelite convent in Nagasaki. In fact, she was already preparing to depart for France. Less than two months later in November 1929 we learn that the Japanese sister arrived safely in Cholet to begin her training and has even brought with her materials to teach Japanese to the French sisters. It seems that the project for the Carmel in Japan is beginning to materialize. The sisters have thus set up their training program in France and the arrival of a young sister from Japan along with the offer of support from the bishop of Nagasaki indicate that a Carmelite monastery can soon be founded.

III. Paul Claudel's listening in silence and the opening of the Carmel

While the sisters accord a great deal of importance to the coming of the young sister from Japan, Claudel's reaction to the news seems less enthusiastic and even passive. In a letter from April 20, 1930, Sister Jeanne invites Claudel to come to the clothing ceremony for the sister and stand in as "father of the bride." The sisters' zeal manifests itself in the elaborate staging they imagine for the ceremony when they invite Claudel:

Could you be there, dear Sir? Our sisters count on it so much that they would be greatly disappointed if you were not there, Reverend Mother and yours humbly even more so. The sisters also expressed another request which I promised I would convey but not without fear of being indiscrete: they would like for you to put on your ambassador costume to walk to the altar our bride who will be wearing her Japanese kimono.

Pourrez-vous être là, cher Monsieur ? Nos Sœurs y comptent tant qu'elles auraient une grande déception, Notre Mère et votre humble sœur, plus encore. Elles ont aussi émis un autre désir, que j'ai promis de vous transmettre, non sans crainte d'être indiscrete : elles voudraient que vous mettiez votre costume d'ambassadeur pour conduire à l'autel notre mariée en toilette japonaise !

For his part Claudel was unable to free his schedule to attend the ceremony for the Japanese sister, and the sisters for their part were asked by the bishop of Nagasaki to postpone the ceremony to allow participants from Japan to come. The sisters invited Claudel again to come on the new date: "July 16 would be a propitious day for the

beautiful ceremony, unless another date would be better for you, dear Sir. I believe it would be a true sacrifice for our sisters not to have you there on that day since they speak of your coming as a done deed.” [*“Le 16 juillet [...] se trouve tout indique pour cette belle cérémonie, à moins qu’une autre date ne vous agrée mieux, cher Monsieur. Je crois que ce serait un vrai sacrifice pour nos Sœurs de ne point vous avoir ce jour-là, car elles parlent de votre venue comme d’une chose assurée !”*] (Millet-Gérard 906). Commentators of the letter have noted that Claudel did not make the effort to come the second time nor to suggest a better date but instead excused himself for needing to be with his family in another part of France. The tone of the sisters’ letters suggests that Claudel did not give the impression of someone who would discourage requests, even though in this case he did not honor theirs. The sisters’ side of the correspondence seems to show that they perceived Claudel as a gracious receiver of their letters, one whose reactions were not to be feared.

It also seems that Claudel did not impose on the sisters his views in the matter of the hierarchy of the Catholic church in Japan. As ambassador, Claudel reported to his superiors in France about political and other leadership matters. In his opinion, the French missionary priest, Jean-Baptiste Alexis Chambon, MEP, was unsuitable for the position of archbishop of Tokyo. In a report from 1926 to the foreign ministry in Paris concerning a nomination for bishop of Tokyo, Claudel had noted: “Choosing the man who is truly up to the position is of great importance for our country. [...] Father Chambon, whose name has come up, lacks the necessary qualities.” [*“Le choix pour évêque d’un homme vraiment à la hauteur de sa charge a en effet une grosse importance pour notre pays. [...] Le P. Chambon dont on a prononcé le nom n’a pas les qualités nécessaires.”*] (*Euvres diplomatiques* 352) Nevertheless, when Chambon was named to this post, and the sisters wrote to Claudel that Chambon would be officiating the ceremony in France for the Japanese sister, there is no indication that Claudel expressed any dissatisfaction to them.

Lastly, Claudel, the published poet, also allows himself to be rebuked for being a bad reader. In a letter from July 13, 1930, sister Jeanne tells Claudel: “I must admit that I found you quite severe and even wrong in your evaluation of the work of Father de Caussade and that because you did not properly understand the question” [*“mais je vous avoue avoir trouvé bien sévère et même injuste votre appréciation sur l’ouvrage du P. de Caussade, et cela je crois, faute de bien entendre la question [...]”*] (Millet-Gérard 913). The sisters’ side of the correspondence shows their boldness in even rebuking Claudel. It indicates that the sisters did not fear how Claudel would receive their letters.

Conclusion

Sister Jeanne of the Child Jesus along with Sister Maria-Theresia from Nagasaki⁷ and several other sisters reached Tokyo in February 1933 where, with the help of Archbishop Chambon, they set up Holy Trinity Carmel at 38 Shimoroku Bandro, Kojimachi, Yotsuya, Tokyo (Millet-Gérard 921).

In her earlier letter of December 3, 1932, Sister Jeanne had called herself a "Japanese woman" (Millet-Gérard 918). Regardless of whether Sister Jeanne herself can really be considered a "Japanese other," she is, in the very least, a simple "other" for Claudel. And if Orientalism is understood as molding a representation of the other that serves one's conscious or unconscious purposes and does not attempt to reach the reality of the other, then Claudel who often passively followed the plan for a Carmel seems not to have fallen into the trap of Orientalism. He even allowed himself to be confronted by the otherness of Sister Jeanne by having an attitude that allowed her to rebuke him on occasion. In Claudel's correspondence with the Carmelite sisters we perceive his refusal to impose his views and his reception of the other, a stance which frees him of an Orientalist attitude that could have vitiated his relationships with the sisters and all those with whom he came in contact. Claudel seems to listen more than to express and to politely not honor invitations, rather than to outright refuse. Rather than being a fault, this apparent passivity on Claudel's part may have been a key to the non-Orientalist legacy that he has seemingly left in Japan.

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Notes

- ¹ The author would like to thank two anonymous faculty bulletin readers for their careful readings and constructive suggestions, her mother for her precise and encouraging feedback on an earlier version of this paper, and a participant at the 2019 MLA convention, where a version of this paper was read, for her helpful question. The paper has greatly improved thanks to their help. All remaining errors are the author’s own.
- ² “Ambassador poet” is also the title of an exhibit at the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature to commemorate the 150-year anniversary in 2018 of the birth of Claudel. This anniversary has for its part stimulated several publications and cultural activities throughout Japan.
- ³ The taste for “japonisme” or the fascination with the prints and objects coming from Japan was widespread in France and painters such as Monet and Degas collected Japanese prints and took inspiration from them, but very few traveled to Japan with the result that their knowledge of Japan came uniquely from those objects.
- ⁴ The *Amazon* was a French merchant shipping boat bought by the French company “Messageries Maritimes.” Originally named the *Laos*, it was designed for and began

service between France and the Far East in 1897, but a case of the plague on board caused an important quarantine and the ship was reassigned to the South America route and therefore renamed *Amazon*. In 1914 it was requisitioned for use during World War I as a postal ship to and from the Far East. After World War I, the ship was returned to the "Messageries Maritimes" and took up service again on the Far East route until 1928 when it was confined to the Mediterranean Sea. The ship was finally demolished in 1932. The *Amazon* had two stacks and could attain a speed of over 18 knots or 33km per hour with a power of over 7,000cv (Dufeil *et al.*).

⁵ In Carmel as well as in the world, the change of the year was a time to look back upon the year past with its successes and shortcomings and look ahead to what was to be undertaken in the coming year.

⁶ Initially, it was mistakenly thought that Claudel was nominated to Berlin.

⁷ For the sister's name, see "Bulletin des Archives Vladimir Ghika."

