Paul Claudel *L'Oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant* (*The Black Bird in the Rising Sun*) (1927)

Takashi Naito

Paul Claudel (©Indivision Paul Claudel)

Paul Claudel was born in 1868 in Villeneuve-sur-Fère-en-Tardenois, in Aisne, northern France. His father was a regional officer in the Ministry of Finance. At the suggestion of his sister, the sculptor Camille Claudel, he left for Paris at 13 years of age to receive his education at the Louis Le Grand secondary school. He then attended the Faculty of Law at the University of Paris and the Paris Institute of Political Studies. He had a difficult time adjusting to life in Paris, but in 1886, he encountered Rimbaud's "Illuminations," and was inspired to pursue a career in literature. In December of the same year, he was moved to convert to Catholicism during a service at the Notre Dame de Paris. His writing shows the influence of his devout Catholicism and also of his affinity with the works of Stéphane Mallarmé. In

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1890, he passed the diplomatic examination with the highest grade and was posted to Boston in 1893, followed by posts as a diplomat in various parts of the world. He spent a long time in China, and in 1898, he made a month-long excursion from Shanghai to Japan, visiting Tokyo, Nikkō, Shizuoka, Kyoto, amongst others. In 1935, he retired from the diplomatic service in Brussels, but continued his creative work and biblical commentaries. He died in Paris in 1955. While working as a diplomat, he engaged in vigorous creative activities. His representative works (as translated into English) include the plays *Golden Head*, *Break of Noon*, *The Shoes of Satin* and the poems "Five Great Odes" and "Knowing the East?" in addition to various art essays, diaries, and biblical commentaries.

Starting with Boston, Claudel had assignments in many cities, including Shanghai, Fuzhou, Prague, Frankfurt, and Rio de Janeiro, before arriving in Japan as the French ambassador in November 1921 (Taishō 10) in the fulfilment of a longstanding wish. Except for a temporary return to France in 1925, he remained in Japan as a diplomat until February 1927, when he finally left for Washington, D.C. In addition to his official duties, Claudel deepened his understanding of Japanese society and culture through a range of activities, including travel, his lively curiosity about art and theater, and association with a variety of personalities. *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun* (*L'Oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant*) is a collection of short essays that emerged from individual encounters Claudel had during his exploration of Japanese culture.

The title suggests a reference to Claudel as "the black bird" in Japan. Claudel was amused to share how his name, pronounced "klodɛl" in French, reminded him of kurodori (black bird) in Japanese, and so he likens himself to an old raven that comes to the garden of the ambassador's residence every year, as a witness to the passing of time.

The content of the essays is diverse, and the main works are as follows: "A glance at the Japanese soul" (Un regard sur l'âme japonaise), which deals with the nature of Japanese ethos and the human emotions and modes of behavior that are permeated by it; "Hinterland" (L'arrière-pays) and "The solar abyss" (L'abîme solaire), which describe the forces of nature and the four seasons at work within the country; "Through the burning cities" (A travers les villes en flammes), a document of the Great Kanto Earthquake; "Abdication among the pines" (L'abdication au milieu des pins), "Meiji," and several other essays which examine, for example, the symbolic role of the emperor; "Noh" (Nô), the court dances and music of "Bugaku," the traditional puppet play of "Bunraku." "Nature and morality" (La nature et la morale), addresses the meaning of "allusion" in Japanese art. "A promenade through Japanese literature" (Une promenade à travers la littérature japonaise) was written for a lecture on Japanese literature given in Europe during his temporary return to France in 1925. "The house at Pheasants Bridge" (La maison du Pont-des-Faisans), was an attempt to evoke the origin and historical resonance of the land where the ambassador's residence is located. There are also several beautiful prose poems inspired by works of art he came in contact with. Finally, "Farewell, Japan!" (Adieu, Japon!) written much later in August 1945, just after the end of World War II, was subsequently added to these collections. It evokes Claudel's memory of how Japan's

foundations, such as its paucity of resources, coexisted with the richness of meaning in artistic expression.

With the exception of the last work and the aforementioned essay written at the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake, each of the works in *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun* may be inadequately characterized as a record of the social events that Claudel encountered during his stay in Japan. But what Claudel seeks to discover in Japan is more than mere individual historical incidents. Rather, he attempts to interpret what exists behind appearances and beyond the passage of time. What Claudel presents is not a scholarly theory of Japanese culture based on expertise and analysis. He admits that he is not a professional Orientalist and that his theory lacks a systematic method, declaring that all of his knowledge of Japan is the result of the atmosphere he has immersed himself in, the various conversations he has had, and his daily impressions. For a stranger, he says, "the truth is beautiful but error has charms of its own." In this regard the book is not a guide for foreigners trying to learn about Japan. In this context, the author is a man of letters, not a diligent diplomat that he was, and readers are expected to read this book as they would read a literary work (and a rather arduous one at that).

Despite this, however, Claudel's book holds our attention as an excellent writing on Japanese culture. As a poet and playwright, his keen eye often captures Japan at a deeper level than would the ordinary analyst.

Then, what did Japan mean to this poet? Claudel had been interested in Japan since his youth. Although he was not immediately assigned there, it was his first choice for a diplomatic posting when he took his first steps into the diplomatic service. Having spent his youth suffocating in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, when a materialistic atmosphere strongly dominated the scene, Japan may have seemed to him, first and foremost, a suitable place to escape to. At the time, Japonism was flourishing in literature and art. Paul's elder sister, the sculptor Camille Claudel, was an avid lover of Japanese art and, under her influence, Paul also became familiar with Hokusai's prints and other works from early on.

However, what Claudel sought in Japan was not simply a country that had been naively perceived as exotic, but rather a country that would reveal a glimpse of its origins. During his stay in Japan, Claudel showed little interest in Tokyo, which was undergoing rapid modernization at the time. In contrast, as his work shows, he was drawn to images of nature, dense forests, wild and roaring craters, and sanctuaries deep in the mountains in Nikkō and other places where he spent summers each year.

When Claudel seeks to immerse himself deeply in Japanese nature, he is not content to simply see and savor it as if it were a landscape painting. He pays attention to the emotions of the people who live in it, and the connection between nature and the people. Claudel addresses this issue in particular in his essay, "A look into the Japanese soul," in which he locates the root of the French soul in the constant verbal expression and assertion of one's self and one's righteousness. The French people always find themselves in the midst of discussions and open courtrooms, where words and intelligence are valued above all else to explain to others the reasons for their own righteousness. In contrast, for Claudel, the Japanese people, who live in nature and in sympathy with various other beings, show a spontaneous acceptance of

and respect for things inaccessible to intelligence, and this sentiment shapes their mentality. The Japanese people submit their personal existence to the presence of the mystery that surrounds them, Claudel says. And so nature takes on a religious nuance in the light of this mystery and awe. In this country, "the supernatural is therefore nothing other than nature," and "all of nature is a temple already prepared and arranged for worship."

For Claudel, the various phenomena and artworks seen in everyday life are imbued with a sense of ritual, an expression of respect for nature. In such a world, not only human beings but also every creature has its own meaning and shows it in its own image. While walking in one of the beautiful gardens in Kyoto, Claudel noticed a big pine tree about to fall down supported by a kind of huge crutch, and wrote, "It was a living being, a kind of vegetal grandfather to whom its human children and grandchildren lend filial assistance." He is also moved by a newspaper article in which printmakers offer a memorial service for the cherry trees they used to make their woodblocks. The tree is a being like a human being, and in such an act, the poet shows human respect for that which sustains its existence.

When talking about these things, Claudel's tone is sympathetic and gentle. However, he also focuses on a deeper force, a more disturbing force and destructive side of this sustaining nature. A country made up of volcanoes at its core is always susceptible to earth tremors. The Great Kanto Earthquake, which occurred in the third summer of his stay in Japan, made an impression on him. At the time, the French Embassy was burned to the ground and Claudel lost valuable books and manuscripts he was working on. Claudel made his way first by car, then on foot, through Yokohama and then further south to Zushi, where his daughter was waiting for him. "Through the burning cities" is unique among the essays in *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun* as it chronicles the events that unfold: the flames rising over the cities he passes, the concern for the safety of his acquaintances, the reported mass deaths, the restrained actions of people in the midst of panic, the fire in the port of Yokohama and the courageous act of a foreigner, for example.

Claudel alludes to how this unstable force shapes the emotions and actions of the Japanese people. "The Japanese never lose the sense of the dangerous mystery that surrounds him. His country inspires in him an ardent love, but not confidence. One must always be careful. The man here is like the son of a highly respected but unfortunately short-tempered mother. He has found only one way of safety on her shifting ground: to make himself as small and as light as possible," he writes.

The forces of nature work against man, sometimes gently, sometimes wildly and violently. This interaction between nature and humanity is the central theme of *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun*. Claudel views many Japanese rituals and behaviors as expressions of an arrangement of the relationship between nature and humanity that continues from their genesis. It is from this perspective that Claudel is interested in the mythological structure of Japanese society, including the existence of the emperor system.

And the variety of Japanese art that Claudel deals with in *The Black Bird in the Rising Sun* reveals this sensitive correspondence between nature and humanity. Japanese paintings are not mere reproductions of nature, but are expressions of the

life hidden within it, as well as "a perpetual allusion to Wisdom" that has dwelled in the world since ancient times. Claudel is also attracted to the term "ahare" (*mono no aware*, or a sensitivity to the impermanence of life), which appears in Japanese literature. He emphasizes how this word, which includes the interjection "Ah!" is above all a straightforward demonstration of the mystery of the life that exists in front of us for a moment, the fresh surprise of its discovery, and the moment of disclosure of a new world.

This relationship between the forces of nature and human behavior is sharply examined on a mythic level in his essays on traditional Japanese arts such as "Noh," "Bugaku," and "Bunraku." Many Western writers have shown interest in Noh, but none were as involved as Claudel was, by actually going to the theater and seeing the stage and the actors' performances with his own eyes. (This experience was actively incorporated into his playwriting after his return to France, thus sustaining its value as a new experiment in contemporary European theater.) Beginning with the famous definition that "Noh is someone who arrives," the essay "Noh (Nô)" focuses specifically on the interaction between the supernatural world and human beings initiated by the appearance of the dead. By bringing the past to life before our eyes, it reveals our present existence, which has followed the currents of the past. The Noh performance teaches us that the insignificant gestures we perform by chance are an "unconscious and improvised imitation" of the eternal.

While discussing the New Year's Noh play *Okina*, Claudel sees the representation of earth and flowing water performed in it as a ritual for possessing the earth. Imitating nature is a ritual to tame the wild part of it and to cooperate with it through mimicry. It is in his understanding of theatre that Claudel's eye is most acute, when he sees the land as a stage and human behavior as a single act defined by nature, myth, and the like. The best part of this essay lies in the fact that he sees Japan not as a fragment, but as a whole place composed of nature flowing from the past.