

## Paul Claudel's East

*The East I Know, by Paul Claudel. Translated into English by Teresa Frances and William Rose Benét. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$1.25 net.*

THE East that M. Claudel knows is one of glamor and thought, a Japanese print done by a Monet. This series of impressions of pagodas and stone gardens and Chinese tombs, of the dim tangle of streets at night, the haze of autumn, the odor of grain, the perfume of the harvest, the vast and yellow river, bells and pine trees and rice fields, fuses into a shimmering picture of astonishing unity. In his wanderings through town and countryside the poet has absorbed and assimilated this East, and converted all these unrelated impressions into the color and contour of his own mystic soul. But always there is the sense that his own soul is much more real than the things he mirrors. And always behind the things lies the sense that they, too, are but the symbols of something which he sees through them. The scenes are only an interpretation to the poet of the mystery beyond, an iridescent veil upon which it projects its outlines.

For Claudel the East does here what his characters do for him in his poetic dramas. Read "L'Echange" and "La Jeune Fille Violaine," and they seem almost incomprehensible until the realization comes that the characters are but appearances, a kind of personal phantasm projected upon the screen of your consciousness to interpret to you the ideas which they represent. This is a very different thing from allegory. The ideas are too complex and subtle; they are as complex and subtle as personality itself. The characters are, therefore, not robust enough to be allegorical. The plays are genuine dramas with genuine characters, but with characters that are personal ghosts of ideas. This is the reason for the strange power and beauty of the dramas, with the implication that people are more than themselves, are inextricably woven with a thought and glamor that are deeper than life itself.

It is not strange that this elusive poet should have had to wait twenty years for recognition. Even now, when some of his dramas have been produced in Paris, and the "Connaissance de l'Est" is translated into English, it is likely that the beauty of Claudel's expression captivates, rather than the mysticism of his thought. His critics are wary about interpreting him. They know that he is a Catholic mystic, whose work is a "long pilgrimage towards God," but the symbolism of some of his plays is equivocal. It is interesting to find this haunting beauty in a man about whose outward life we know nothing except that he was for many years in the French Government Service in Cochin-China, and has served as Consul in Boston and New York. Indeed, it was while he was at Boston in the early nineties that "L'Echange" was written, with its curious American setting and its picturesque antithesis of characters—the dreamy poet, torn between the fiery courtesan and the patient wife faithful to every convention, and the deliciously preposterous American plutocrat, bluntly offering his mistress to the poet in exchange for uncritical loyalty. This poetry, written in long, grave, unrhythmical lines, with almost a Biblical imagery and detachment, has the same beauty as the imaginative color of the prose of "The East I Know." Long monologues, beginning far away from the idea and groping their way towards it, would seem strange and purposeless, did they not give the solemn setting for those ideas.

air and sea, but mostly they are bathed in light. So often the East is seen in the flaming opal of dawn or the deepening colors of twilight. Light is the symbol of the mystery towards which he journeys. The plays are framed in light, as in "La Jeune Fille Violaine," with its theme of blindness and recovery. Claudel sees the world of the spirit and the mystic searchings of the soul with the eyes of a true French impressionist. The universe, both outer and inner, is in its reality light; and things and ideas are vague contours, vantage-points and interpretations of the light that is through all things. As he says in a passage from his little sketch "November," which expresses all this poetic yearning:

"By the dark roads of the villages, among pines and tombs, and along the far-stretched fields, I am the setting sun. Neither the happy plain nor the harmony of these mountains, nor the alluring color of the verdure on the ruddy harvest, can satisfy the eye which demands light itself. Below in that square moat, enclosed by the mountain with a rude wall, the air and the water burn with a mysterious fire. I see a gold so beautiful that all nature seems to me a dead mass; in comparison with that light the clarity which she can diffuse is darkest night. Desirable elixir, by what mystic route will I be led to participate in thy avaricious waters?"

## "Fear and Conventionality"

*Fear and Conventionality, by Elsie Clews Parsons, Ph.D. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$1.50 net.*

AN idler, who had read none of Mrs. Parsons's books, and who knew nothing about her, might be led to suppose, if he turned over the pages of "Fear and Conventionality," that she had spent her whole life in a library, taking notes. This rather short book contains more than five hundred references to authorities. Hardly anywhere can you read half a page without striking a reference to the author of "The Golden Bough," to the second volume of Dobrzhoffer, to Zeyneb Hanoum, Terence, Westermarck, Castiglione, or some contemporary treatise on "Manners and Social Usages." Mrs. Parsons's pages are stiff with citation. They look as if their author were the most industrious woman on earth.

This same idler, if he stopped to read here and there, would assuredly find some of the facts cited less important than others. He would wonder at the triviality of the less important. Among the shorter ways of saying goodbye are "tam tara," which is Abipone for "I shall see you again"; "roaroa," which is Fijian for "the morning of to-morrow," "au revoir" and "auf wiedersehen." The discovery of these facts, and of others such as these, does not make an idle reader glow. A passage like the following is hard to forgive:

"Among the Akikuyu a little girl is called *ka-ré-go*, a little boy, *ká-he*; a big girl or boy not yet initiated or circumcised, *ki-ré-gu* or *kí-he*; a girl or boy after initiation or circumcision, *moi-ré-tu* or *mú-mo*; a woman betrothed or married, but not yet a mother, *mu-hí-ki*; a warrior, *m'wa-ná-ke*; a married man, *wa-ka-ny-u-ku*. . .

and so on for half a page.

But it is not page by page that Mrs. Parsons should be read. If you read "Fear and Conventionality" through, you cannot help perceiving that she has put these odds and ends together so that they form a pattern. Her mosaic,

and the present which she set out to show you. Equally clear is her picture of the future, again in mosaic, patiently formed by placing side by side the opposites of truths which once were, and which are now fast losing their truth. Her book is chiefly a description of the conventionalities, the "customs in decomposition, more or less conscious of their own decay," which more or less gregarious societies have erected as barriers against the direct action of personality. In a concluding chapter called "An Unconventional Society," he foresees "a society in which so much of our fear of one another will have disappeared," and of which the *raison d'être* will be "the play of personality upon personality." Mrs. Parsons looks forward to a time when, "unsuspicious of one another, unafraid of mutual influences, men and women will no longer avoid one another because they are different," but "will seek one another for the stimulus of their very differences, natural differences."

Perhaps one would not quarrel with the overabundance of the details which Mrs. Parsons has lavished upon us in the hope of impressing her meaning upon our stupidest, if they had not so nearly excluded her from her own book. By how much she overestimates the importance of many of her facts, by so much does she undervalue the importance of her own comments, which she is as likely as not to hide in footnotes, where she often scores neatly. It is in a footnote that we read: "A lady is told, for example, that she 'should not be under obligation to a man for presents that plainly represent a considerable money value' (Morton, p. 206), the idea being, I suppose, that her favors are purchasable."

But such few impressions of the author as one does get from this book are distinct impressions. She is not merely the laborious note-taker and the efficient arranger of notes who produced "Fear and Conventionality" in collaboration. She has found time to meet a great many men and women, to travel and to lead an outdoor life. Her method of composition reveals her as a humorist. She lays a fact about manners and customs in Uganda alongside an analogous fact about manners and customs in New York. From this juxtaposition she derives a remote, private, *pince-sans-rire* sort of amusement. And she is amused, too, not only by the relation between the Uganda fact and the New York fact, but by the New York fact in itself. She watches her contemporaries with cool detachment, and makes without smiling endless notes about their little ways. But though she never smiles, she is mirthlessly diverted, quite as diverted when her models move in her own world as when they don't. She likes the resemblances between our American behavior, in high circles or circles not quite so high, and the behavior of savage tribes. It would please her to read, in the third volume of Warazynkowski on the Trantesians, his description of the after-dinner ceremonial:

"When the meal is over, and the women have withdrawn a little space into the forest, the chiefs sit together for about half an hour, smoking and drinking small cups of k'nàk. Then the chief who pays for the feast rises and exclaims, 'Glow'n-f-ar-m'nas?\*' The others rise also, and precede their host to that part of the forest where the women are assembled, engaged in various occupations designed to screen their expectancy. When a chief draws near one of the women, she always looks up and says to him, 'El-ne-yet-m'wan?†'

\*Trantesian for "Shall we join the ladies?"

†Trantesian for "Well, have you been settling the affairs of the nation?"

have finished. Was she born calm? Or did she stalk this Final Imperturbability through patient years before running it down? It is hers now, no matter how she came by it. Impossible to catch her off her guard, whether she be at Cody in Wyoming, on the Gold Coast, at dinner in New York, in Tokio or Seringapatum. By extracting many books and making many notes, by arranging and remembering, she has mastered the natural history of the right thing, curiously, a little disdainfully. In all countries she could choose, in the light of full knowledge, between observing and ignoring their conventions, herself a free spirit even in the act of conformity. Nothing could be more deliberate than either the conformity or the freedom. She would be as free when conforming in Thibet as when she was in New York and non-conforming; no freer when she declined to say, despite the wistful look in the eyes of the New Yorker on her right, "What awful weather we've been having lately," than when she broke fluently into the standard small talk of Senegambia.

## Town-Planning and the Law

WE are too prone in this country to believe that anything like a bold application of the art of town-planning, as practised in Germany with such impressive social and artistic results, is impossible to emulate here because of the excessive reverence with which our legal and judicial principles treat private property in land. At a time when the intelligent public is becoming more and more attracted towards the ideal of a closer social control of city development, a book like Mr. Flavel Shurtleff's "Carrying Out the City Plan" is highly important and encouraging. Here we have the first clear summary and discussion of what the American municipality can and cannot do under existing law. And in spite of diverse state codes and judicial interpretations there emerges a distinct suggestion of progressive tendencies in legislation, and in the ideas that lie at the back of the court decisions on the application of town-planning principles.

The success of any town-planning scheme, whether it be concerned with the laying out of a new district, the construction of parks and parkways or the alteration of existing streets, depends upon the ability of the city to acquire land easily, to control the street plans, and, to a considerable extent, upon the class of buildings to be erected upon them. Overshadowing the whole practice there is, of course, the universal constitutional limitation of the power of eminent domain, namely, that land cannot be taken unless necessary for the public use. Furthermore, it must be for a specific public use. This principle at once limits seriously the power of the municipality in its efforts effectively to control its own growth, and design the building-up of the city and the public improvements which it undertakes. Although this strict provision of a specified use does prevent the abandonment of a town-planning project when once the land has been acquired, yet, on the other hand, it possesses the grave disadvantage of preventing the city from acquiring land at favorable opportunities and then holding it against the day when it will be required for public purposes as yet unspecified. As a consequence, the principle of "excess condemnation," or the condemning of more land than is required for the public improvement, in order either to control its development or to sell it again and obtain for the city the increased valuation, has been declared unconstitutional in