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Paul Claudel: Knowing the East

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The Coconut Palm

Every tree of ours in the West holds itself upright like a man, though motionless; its roots thrust in the soil, it stands with outstretched arms. But here the sacred banyan does not rise singly: by pendent threads it seeks again the fertile soil and seems a temple self-engendering. Yet it is of the coconut palm alone I wish to speak.

It has no branches; at the top of its stem, it lifts a tuft of fronds.

The palm is the insignia of triumph: aerial, spreading its crest on high, it soars and expands in the sunlight where it plays, and yields to the weight of its freedom. In the warm day and long noon the tree in ecstasy parts its fronds and, at the points where they separate and diverge, there appear the great green heads of fruit like children's skulls. In this way it makes the gesture of showing its heart. For it reveals itself wholly, and the lower leaves hang down, and the middle ones spread as far as they can to each side, and those above, raised aloft, slowly make a sign as of a man who knows not what to do with his hands or signals his surrender. The trunk is not rigid but ringed, and supple, and long like a blade of grass; it sways to the earth's dreaming, whether it rises directly toward the sun or bends its tuft above swift loamy rivers, or over sea and sky.

At night, as I returned along the beach foaming with the thunderous leonine mass of the Indian Ocean driven by the southwesterly monsoon, and followed the shore strewn with fronds like the skeleton wrecks of boats and beasts, I saw on my left, through the empty forest and beneath an opaque ceiling, the image of enormous spiders climbing obliquely across the twilight sky. Venus, like a moon bathing in the purest rays, cast a broad reflection on the waters. And a coconut palm, bent over sea and planet like a being overcome with love, made the sign of bringing its heart to the heavenly fire.

I will remember that night, when I turned back on leaving. I saw heavy tresses hanging down and, across the huge peristyle of the forest, the sky where the storm set its feet on the sea and rose up like a mountain, and the pale ocean level with the earth.

I will remember you, Ceylon! Your leaves, and flowers, and soft-eyed people naked on your highways that are the color of a mango's flesh, and the long pink flowers the rickshaw man placed on my knees as, with tearful eyes and seized with pain, I rode along under your rain-soaked sky, chewing a cinnamon leaf.

[July 1895]

Pagoda

I get out of my carriage, and a frightful beggar marks the beginning of my way. With his one bloodshot eye he looks at me, and his leprous lip shows to their roots teeth as yellow as bones and as long as a rabbit's. The rest of his face has gone.

Rows of other poor wretches line both sides of the road, which is thronged at this city outlet by pedestrians, porters, and wheelbarrows laden with women and bundles. The oldest and fattest of the men is called the King of Beggars. They say that, crazed by the death of his mother, he carries her head about with him under his clothes. The last ones I notice, two very old women packaged in bands of rags, their faces black from the dust of roads on which at times they prostrate themselves, sing one of those plaints broken with long aspirations and hiccups that are these outcasts' professional sign of despair. I see the Pagoda afar off between the bamboo thickets and take a short cut across the fields.

The countryside is a vast graveyard. Everywhere, coffins. Mounds covered with withered reeds and, in the dry grass, rows of small stone posts, mitred statues or stone lions indicate the ancient sepulchres. Corporations and wealthy individuals have built whole edifices surrounded by trees and hedges. I pass between a hospice for animals and a pit crammed with the skeletons of little girls whose parents wanted to do away with them. It was closed when it became full; another will have to be dug.

The day is warm, the sky clear; I walk in the December light.

The dogs see me, bark, and run away. I go past the villages with their black roofs; I cross the fields of cotton plants and beans, cross the streams by old worn bridges; and, leaving the great empty buildings of a deserted gunpowder factory on my right, I reach my goal. You can hear the noise of bells and a drum.

Before me is the seven-storied tower. An Indian in a golden turban and a Parsee in a silk plum-colored one twisted like a stovepipe are going inside. Two other figures turn about on the topmost balcony.

I must first speak of the Pagoda itself.

It is composed of three courts and three temples flanked by accessory chapels and outbuildings. In the East, places of religious observance do not, as in Europe, barricade and segregate the mystery of a circumscribed faith and dogma. Their function is not to defend the absolute from outside appearances, but to establish a certain atmosphere; and the structures, as if suspended from the sky, gather all nature into the offering they make. Manifold, on a level with the earth, they translate space by the relationships of height and distance between the three triumphal arches or by the temples they devote to it; and Buddha, Prince of Peace, dwells inside with all the gods.

Chinese architecture, as it were, does away with walls. It amplifies and multiplies the roofs, exaggerates the horned corners that rise with an elegant surge, and turns their movements and curves upward to the sky. They seem to hang in the air; and the wider and heavier the structure of the roof, the more, by its very weight, its lightness grows from the massive shadow of the span underneath. Hence the use of black tiles forming deep grooves and strong sides that leave openings for the daylight to pass and make the summit bright and distinct. Their frieze, intricate and frail, stands out sharply in the clear air. The temple is thus a portico, a canopy, a tent whose raised corners are attached to the clouds; and earth's idols are stowed in its shade.

A fat gilded idol lives under the first portico. His right foot tucked under him, he presents the third attitude of meditation in which consciousness still exists. His eyes are closed, but beneath his golden skin one sees the red lips of a distended mouth whose long round opening, stretched at the corners, is like a figure eight. He laughs, and his laughter is that of a face asleep. What is it that pleases this obese ascete? What does he see with his closed eyes?

On each side of the hall, two on the right and two on the left, four painted and varnished colossi with short legs and huge torsos are the four demons, guardians of the four shores of heaven. Beardless like chil-

dren, one brandishes snakes, another plays the viola, a third shakes a cylindrical contrivance like a closed parasol or firecracker.

I go into the second court. A great brass incense-bearer covered with inscriptions rises in the middle.

I stand before the main pavilion. On the edges of the roof are groups of small painted figures that seem to go from one side to the other, or climb as they chat. On the roof, at the angles, two pink fish with long brass barbels trembling and curving and with their tails up; in the center, two dragons fighting for the mystic jewel. I hear songs and the sound of bells, and see the bonzes through the open door moving back and forth.

The hall is high and spacious; four or five golden colossi occupy the background. The largest sits in the middle on a throne. His eyes and mouth are shut, his feet drawn beneath him, and one hand, held in the gesture of witness, points down to the earth. Thus, under the sacred tree, the perfect Buddha conceived himself: escaping the wheel of life, he participates in his own immobility. Others, perched above him, cherish their abdomens with similarly lowered eyes. These are the heavenly buddhas who sit on lotus flowers: Avalokhita, Amitabha, the Buddha of measureless light, the Buddha of the Western Paradise. At their feet the bonzes perform their rites. They have grey robes, large, light-rust-colored cloaks attached at the shoulder like togas, white cotton leggings; and some have a sort of mortar-board on their heads. Others show their scalps, where the white marks of *moxas* indicate the number of their vows. One after the other, they file past, mumbling as they go. The last is a twelve-year-old boy. I reach the third court by a side opening, and see the third temple.

Four bonzes, perched on stools, are meditating inside the door. Their shoes lie on the ground before them, and they sit—footless, detached, imponderable—on their own thoughts. They do not move; their mouths, their closed eyes no longer seem anything but creases and fringes of wrinkles in the wasted flesh of their faces, which are like the

scars of a navel. Awareness of their own inertia is sufficient food for their thought. Under a niche in the center of the room I make out the shining limbs of another buddha. A chaotic public of idols is ranged along the walls in the darkness.

When I turn around, I see the middle temple from behind. High on the back wall a many-colored tympan depicts some legend among the olive trees. I go back inside. A great painted sculpture constitutes the rear. Amitofu rises to Heaven amid flames and demons. The lateral sun, passing through the trellised openings at the top of the wall, sweeps the dark box-like hall with horizontal rays.

The bonzes pursue the ceremony. Kneeling now before the colossi, they intone a chant for which their celebrant, standing before a bell in the shape of a cask, provides the lead measured by the beat of drums and the ringing of bells. He hits the jar with each verse, drawing a loud voice from its bronze paunch. Then, standing face to face in two lines, they recite some litany.

The side buildings serve as dwellings. One bonze comes in carrying a pail of water. I look at the refectory in which rice bowls are placed two by two on the empty tables.

I stand once more in front of the tower.

Just as the Pagoda, by its system of courts and buildings, expresses the breadth and dimensions of space, so the tower is its height. Poised beside the sky, it gives it scale. The seven octagonal stories are a section of the seven mystical heavens. The architect has skillfully narrowed the corners and lifted the edges. Each story casts its shadow beneath it. A bell is tied to every angle of every roof and the small globe of the clapper hangs outside. It is, as it were, a tied syllable, the imperceptible voice of each heaven; and the unheard sound hangs there like a drop of water.

I have no more to say of the Pagoda. I do not know its name.

[January 1896]

The City at Night

It is raining softly; night has come. The policeman takes the lead and turns to the left, putting an end to his talk of the time when, as a kitchen boy in the invading army, he saw his major installed in the sanctuary of the "Genie of Long Life." The path we trace is mysterious. By a series of alleys, passages, stairs, and gates, we come out in the temple courtyard where buildings with clawlike ridges and angular hornlike corners form a black frame for the night sky.

Dim firelight comes from the dark doorway. We go into the hall.

The inside cave, full of incense, glows with a red brightness. You cannot see the ceiling. A wooden grill separates the idol from his clients and the table of offerings where garlands of fruit and bowls of food are placed. The bearded face of the giant image can be faintly made out. The priests are dining, seated at a round table. Against the wall is a drum as huge as a cask, and a great gong in the form of the ace of spades. Two red tapers, like square columns, disappear in the smoke and night where vague pennants are hovering.

Forward march!

The narrow tangle of streets where we have entered among a shadowy throng is lit only by the open shops as deep as sheds that border it. These are the workrooms of carpenters, engravers; the street stalls of tailors, shoemakers, furriers. From countless kitchens, behind the displays of noodles and soup, you hear the sizzle of frying; from dark recesses the weeping of a child. Among stacked coffins, a lit pipe. A lamp, with a sideways flicker, illuminates strange jumbles. At the street corners, at the bends of solid little stone bridges, in niches behind iron bars, stunted idols can be seen between two red candles. After a long walk in the rain, night and mud, we suddenly come upon a yellow blind alley harshly lit by a great lantern. Blood-colored, plague-colored, the high walls of the ditch in which we find ourselves are daubed with an ocher so red they seem themselves to emit light. A door on our right is a round hole.

We reach a court. There is still another temple.

It is a shadowy hall from which there comes a smell of earth. It is full of idols disposed in two rows around three sides of the room, brandishing swords, lutes, roses, and branches of coral. We are told that these are "the Years of Human Life." While I am looking for the twenty-seventh, I am left behind and, before leaving, I think of peering into a niche on the other side of the door. A brown demon with four pairs of arms, his face convulsed with rage, hides there like an assassin.

Ever onward! The streets become more and more miserable. We go past high bamboo fences and finally, passing through the southern gate, turn east. The road follows the base of the high crenellated wall. On the other side are the deep trenches of a dry riverbed. We see sampans below, lit by cooking fires: a shadowy people swarms there like the infernal spirits.

And undoubtedly this pitiful shore represents the obscurely planned end of our exploration, for we turn around. City of Lanterns, we are once more amid the chaos of your ten thousand faces.

If we seek the explanation, the reason why this city through which we make our way is so completely distinct among all our crowded memories, we are at once struck by a fact: there are no horses in the streets. The city is entirely human. The Chinese hold as a manner of principle that animal or machine assistance is not to be used for a task by which a man can live. This explains the narrowness of the streets, the stairs, the curved bridges, the houses without fences, the winding alleys and passages. The city forms a coherent whole, an industrious mixture interconnected in all its parts, perforated like an ant-hill. When night comes, everyone barricades himself indoors; but during the day there are no doors, that is to say, no closed ones. The door here has no official function: it is merely a shaped opening. There is no wall that does not, by some fissure, allow a slender agile person to pass. The broad streets necessary for the rapid general traffic of a simplified mechanical existence would find no place here. There are only public corridors, constituted passageways.

An opium den and the prostitute market are the last things that occupy the frame of my memory. The smoking den is a vast nave, its two stories empty from top to bottom, superimposing their inner terraces each upon each. The house is full of blue smoke: you breathe the smell of burnt chestnuts. It is a deep, strong, macerated perfume, charged like the beat of a gong; it establishes a middle atmosphere between our air and our dreams, a funereal fumigation, which the client of these mysteries inhales. Through the fog you see the fires of small opium lamps like the souls of the smokers who will later come in numbers. Now it is too early.

On narrow stools, the prostitutes—their heads helmeted with flowers and petals, clothed in loose-fitting silk blouses and wide embroidered pants. Motionless, their hands on their knees, they wait in the street like animals at a fair, in the scramble and free-for-all of the passersby. Beside their mothers, dressed like them and as motionless, little girls sit on the same bench. Behind, a kerosene lamp lights the opening to the stairway.

I pass on, and take away with me the memory of a dense, naïve, disordered life; of a metropolis at once open and crowded, a single house containing a multiple family. I have now seen the city of former times, free of outside influences, where men lived in their hives in artless disorder. And indeed I had the sudden dazzled impression that I was emerging from all the past when, coming out of the double gate into the hubbub of wheelbarrows and sedan-chairs, in the midst of lepers and epileptics, I saw the glittering electric lights of the Concession.

[January 1896]

Gardens

It is half-past three. White mourning. The sky, as it were, is veiled in linen. The air is raw and humid.

I go into the city. I am looking for the gardens.

I walk in black gravy. Along the ditch whose crumbling edge I follow, the smell is so strong it seems explosive. Everything reeks of oil, garlic, grease, filth, opium, urine, excrement, and offal. I walk among a simple, cheerful people in thick buskins or straw sandals, the long hoods of the *foumao* or felt skullcaps, silk or cotton pants and leggings.

The wall twists and turns, goes up and down, and the coping, with its arrangement of bricks and open-work tiles, imitates the back and body of a dragon rampant. A sort of head tops it, from which there floats a curling fume of smoke.—I have arrived. I knock mysteriously at a small black door that is opened to me. Beneath overhanging roofs I cross a succession of vestibules and narrow corridors. I am in a strange place.

It is a stone garden. Like the old Italian and French artists, the Chinese have understood that a garden, by its enclosure, must be complete in itself and unitary in all its parts. Thus nature is adapted in a peculiar way to our thought; and thus by a subtle accord the master feels at home wherever he looks. Just as a landscape does not consist merely of grass and the color of the leaves but of the agreement of its lines with the slope of the ground, so the Chinese literally build their gardens with stones. They sculpt, they do not paint. Given that stones lend themselves to height and depth, contour and relief by the variety of their planes and features, they seem to them more congenial and appropriate to create a human setting than plants, which they reduce to their natural function as decoration and ornament. Nature itself has prepared the materials in accordance with the ways the hands of time, frost, rain have abraded and shaped the rock, perforating, gashing, probing it with a meticulous finger. Faces, animals, skeletons, hands, shells, headless torsoes, petrified wood like fragments of a congealed mass of people mixed with leaves and fish: Chinese art takes these strange objects, and imitates and arranges them with subtle industry.

This place represents a mountain slashed by a cliff, to which steep slopes give access. Its feet bathe in a small lake half-covered in green scum, where a zigzag bridge completes the skewed frame. Built on pink granite stilts, the teahouse mirrors in the greenish black water its triumphal double roofs, which seem to lift it from the earth like spread wings. Below, driven straight into the soil like iron candelabra, stark trees bar the sky, their giant stature dominating the garden.

I go among the stones, and by a long labyrinth whose twists and turns, ascents and evasions amplify and reduplicate the scene and simulate, around the lake and mountain, the ramblings of reverie, I reach the kiosk at the summit. The garden below me looks hollow like a valley full of temples and pavilions, and among the trees appears the poem of the roofs.

There are tall ones and low, single and multiple, some elongated like pediments and others swollen like bells. They are surrounded by friezes decorated with centipedes and fish. At the topmost intersections of their ridges the peaks display stags, storks, altars, vases, or winged pomegranates—all emblematic. Raised at the corners as you raise an outsize robe with your arms, the roofs have a chalky whiteness or sooty blackness that is yellowed and mat. The air is green, as when you look through an old windowpane.

The other slope brings us in front of the great pavilion, and the descent that leads slowly back to the lake by irregular stairs offers further surprises. At the end of an alley I see, outlined on the sky and pointing in disorder, five or six horns of a roof whose main part is hidden from me. No words can tell the drunken surge of these fairy prows, the proud elegance of these flowering stalks, which cast an oblique lily at the fretful clouds. Armed with this flower, the strong frame rises up like a bough you release.

I reach the edge of the pond, where the stems of dead lotus flowers emerge from the still waters. The silence is deep like that of a forest crossroads in winter.

This harmonious place was built for the pleasure of the members of the “Trade Syndicate for Beans and Rice,” who doubtless come here on Spring evenings to drink tea and watch the glimmering lower crescent of the moon.

The other garden is still more strange.

It was almost night when, entering the square enclosure, I saw it full to the walls with a vast landscape. Imagine a mass of rocks, a chaos, a confusion of overthrown rocks heaped there by a raging sea; the vision of a place of wrath, a landscape as pale as a brain with its crisscrossed fissures laid bare. The Chinese build flayed landscapes. As inexplicable as nature, this little corner seemed no less vast and complex. From the midst of these rocks grew a dark twisted pine tree. The thinness of its trunk, the color of its bristling tufts, the violent dislocation of its axes, the disproportion of this one single tree with the fictitious country it overlooks—like a dragon bursting from the earth in a mantle of smoke, combating wind and storm—removed it from the realm of reality and made it grotesque, fantastic. Funereal leafage—here and there, yews and arborvitae in their vigorous blacks—animated the disarray. I pondered this melancholy document in amazement. And from the midst of the enclosure in the low shadows of dusk a great rock rose up like a monster and a theme of reverie and enigma.

[January 1896]

The Feast of the Dead in the Seventh Month

These cardboard ingots are the money of the dead. The figures of persons, houses, animals, are cut from thin paper, and the dead are followed by these frail images, “patterns” of life that, when burnt, accompany them wherever they go. A flute guides their souls, a gong gathers them like bees, a sudden bright flame in the dark shadows calms and satisfies them.

Along the riverbank the ready barges wait for night to come. Scarlet tinsel is fixed to the end of a pole; and whether the stream, linked to the leaf-colored sky, seems to receive its waters from on high at this bend, or it rolls its swarming mass darkly under heavy clouds, the torch blazing at the prows, the festoon of lanterns tossing at the masts vividly light the gloom as a candle you hold in a large room illuminates night’s solemn emptiness. Meanwhile the signal is given: the flutes trill, the gong booms, the petards burst, the three boatmen lean to the long scull. The boat departs and turns, leaving a line of fires in the wide sweep of its wake: small lamps, fitful glows, are strewn on the vast flood of opaque waters, which flicker for a moment, then die. An arm grasps the golden shred, the fiery sheaf as it melts and flares in the smoke, and touches the watery grave with it. The illusory brightness fascinates the cold drowned dead like fish. Other lit barges come and go; distant explosions are heard; and on the warships two bugles answer each other and together sound lights out.

The lingering stranger, seated on the shore and contemplating from his bench the huge night open before him like an atlas, will hear the religious barge return. The torches are spent, the shrill oboe quiet, but the funeral gong pursues its tumult and dance to the beat of drumsticks swollen by a continuous roll of drums. Who is drumming? The noise rises and falls, stops and starts again: now a din as if impatient hands were beating the blade hung between two worlds, now a deep solemn reverberation at regular intervals. The boat comes near, follows the bank and fleet of moored craft, then, suddenly going into the deep shadow of the opium pontoons, is at my feet. I can see nothing but the

funeral orchestra that, having long been silent in the way of howling dogs, once more rends the darkness.

This is the feast of the seventh month, when the earth enters its repose.

On the road the rickshaw men have put sticks of incense and small candle-ends in the ground between their feet. I must go home. Tomorrow I shall come and sit in the same place. Everything has grown silent and, like a sightless dead man in the depths of infinite waters, I still hear the echo of the funeral sistrum and the shindy of the iron drum banging a terrible beat in the close shadows.

[February 1896]

Sea Thoughts

The boat makes its way between the islands. The sea is so calm it hardly seems to exist. It is eleven in the morning and you cannot tell whether it is raining or not.

The thoughts of the traveler go back to the previous year. He sees once more his voyage over the ocean in the night and storm; the ports, the railroad stations, his arrival on Shrove Sunday, the journey home when, with a cold eye, he looked out on the awful festivities of the crowd through the mud-spattered windows of his carriage. He would be shown once more parents, friends, familiar places, and then would have to leave again. A bitter glimpse! As if anyone could embrace his past!

That is why it is sadder to go back than to leave. The traveler returns like a guest; he is a stranger to all, and all is strange to him. Servant, hang up the coat and do not put it away! Soon he will have to leave again! At the family table, he again sits down, an unreliable passing guest. No, parents, no! This visitor you have greeted—his ears still full of the clatter of trains and the clamor of the sea, and swaying like a dreamer to the deep rhythms he still feels beneath his feet and that will again carry him off—is not the same man you took to the fatal wharf. Separation has come about, and the exile he entered follows him.

[March 1896]

Cities

Just as there are books on beehives, the cities of birds' nests, the way coral compounds are built, why do we not study human cities?

Paris, capital of the realm, even and concentric in its growth, multiplies and enlarges the image of the island which first enclosed it. London, that juxtaposition of bodily organs, stores and produces. New York is a railroad terminal. Houses have been built between the tracks, a pier, a jetty lined with wharves and warehouses. As a tongue takes in and divides its food, so New York, between its North and East rivers, has put its docks and storerooms on Long Island; while it receives and expedites the goods of Europe and its own continental West through Jersey City and the twelve railroads that align their depots on the Hudson embankment. The city's active end is wholly constituted of banks, stock exchanges, and offices, like the tip of a tongue that, just to pursue the metaphor, ceaselessly goes from one point to another. Boston is composed of two parts: on one hand, the new town, pedantic and miserly like a man who exhibits his wealth and virtue but keeps them for himself, as if the streets grew longer and more muted in the cold to listen the more spitefully to the steps of the passerby, opens up avenues on every side and grits its teeth in the wintry blast; and, on the other, the hill of the old town, like a snail that contains all the coils of shady traffic, debauchery, hypocrisy. The streets of Chinese cities are made for a people used to walking in single file, each person taking their place in the endless ranks that have no beginning; fissures have been contrived between the houses, which look like boxes with one side staved in, and the occupants sleep there pell-mell with their wares.

May there not be special features to study? The geometry of the streets, the angles of the corners, the mathematics of the junctions, the orientation of the axes? Is not everything that moves parallel to them? Everything that provides rest or distraction perpendicular?

A book.

[1896]

Theater

The palace of the Cantonese Corporation has a niche for its golden god, an inner sanctum where high seats, solemnly placed about the center, indicate rather than invite repose; and just as European clubs have a library at their disposal, so a theater has been placed with parade and pomp on the far side of the courtyard in front of the entire edifice. It is a stone terrace set back in between two buildings. The stage, a clear, tall block, is signaled only by a difference of level; it establishes a vast flat platform between the wings and the crowd below. A square canopy gives shade and consecrates it as a dais; a second portico in the foreground, framing it with four granite pillars, provides solemnity and distance. Here comedies are enacted, legends told, the vision of things that once were revealed in a roll of thunder.

The curtain, like the veil that separates us from the world of sleep, does not exist here. But as if each character, as he tore off a shred for himself, had been caught in the impenetrable cloth whose colors and illusory brightness are like the livery of night, each of them in his silken draperies shows nothing of himself but the movement that carries him forward. Beneath the plumage of his role, his golden headdress, his face hidden under greasepaint and mask, the actor is no more than a gesture and a voice. The emperor weeps for his lost kingdom, the unjustly accused princess flees to the realm of monsters and savages, armies march past, battles take place, years and distances are obliterated in a wave of the hand, debates proceed in the presence of the elders, the gods descend, the genie leaps from a jar. But never do any of the characters change their costumes, or deviate from the rhythm and encompassing recitative that measure distances and regulate action, as if all were engaged in a single chant or complex dance.

The orchestra at the back keeps up its evocative din throughout the performance as if the specters on stage, like swarms of bees you assemble by beating a cauldron, would vanish should there be silence; its function is less musical than supportive, playing the part of prompter, as it were, and answering in the name of the audience. It quickens or

slows the pace, heightens the actor's speech with a sharper accent or, surging up behind him, brings to his ears the feeling and noise. There are guitars, pieces of wood that are beaten like drums or clicked like castanets: a kind of single-string violin that carries the line of the elegy on the thread of its plaintive chorus like a fountain in a solitary courtyard; and, finally, in the heroic movements, the trumpet, a sort of bugle with a wide brass opening, whose sound, charged with half-tonics, has incredible brilliance and terrible stridency. It is like the braying of an ass, a hue and cry in the desert, a flourish of trumpets addressed to the sun, a clamor belched from the diaphragm of an elephant. But the gongs and cymbals have the main role. Their raucous din stirs and predisposes the nerves, dulling thought, which lives only by the spectacle before it in a kind of sleep. Meanwhile, on one side of the stage, hung in a woven basket, two birds like turtledoves (they are, it appears, *pelitze*, from Tientsin) innocently compete with the uproar in which they bathe and pursue a song of heavenly sweetness.

The hall under the second portico, and the entire courtyard, are crammed full like a pie with live heads from which emerge the pillars and the two sandstone lions with toad-like jaws capped by children seated on top. It is a pavement of skulls and round yellow faces, so dense that the limbs and bodies are not to be seen; all participate, their massed hearts beating as one. They sway and at times, in a single movement, stretch a row of arms and are driven forward against the stone wall of the stage; at other times they withdraw and are hidden by the sides. In the upper galleries the wealthy and mandarins smoke their pipes and drink their tea in brass-saucered cups, considering both spectacle and spectators in the manner of gods. As the actors are hidden in their gowns, so the drama unfolds beneath the living fabric of the crowd as in its very bosom.

[1896]