Paul CLAUDEL

Water’s Sadness

-translated by Mary Ann Caws

There is some conceiving in joy, I admit, there is some seeing in laughter. But this mixture of gladness and bitterness implied by the act of creation, so you can understand it, friend, at this time when a somber season is starting, I shall explain to you water’s sadness.

From the sky there falls or from the eye there spills an identical tear.

Don’t imagine accusing the cloud for your melancholy, nor the dimness of this downpour. Close your eyes and listen! The rain is falling.

Nor does the drone of this constant sound suffice to explain it.

It’s the weight of a grief bearing in itself its cause, it’s the caring of love, it’s the pain of work. The skies are weeping on the earth they are fertilizing. And it’s above all not the autumn and the coming fall of the fruit whose seed they nourish that is drawing these tears from the wintry cloud. The pain is summer and the spreading of death in the flower of life.

At the moment when this hour is finishing just before Noon, as I am making my way down into this valley filled by the sound of various fountains, I halt, taken by sorrow. How full of plenty are these waters! And if tears, like blood, have a perpetual source in us, our ear toward this liquid choir of voices abundant or slight, how refreshing it is to match to them all the nuances of its pain! There is no passion which can’t borrow its tears from you, oh fountains! And although there is enough for me in the shine of this single drop which from high up in its basin falls upon the image of the moon, I shall not have learned in vain during many afternoons to know of your retreat, vale of sorrow.

Here am I in the plain. On the threshold of this hut, where, in the dark interior there gleams a candle lit for some rustic  celebration, a man is seated holding a dusty cymbal. It is raining immensely; and I am hearing, alone, amid this dampened solitude, a goose cry.

Cities

-translated by Michel Delville

Just as there are books on beehives, on cities of birds’ nests, or on the constitution of madreporous corals, why should we not study human cities?

Paris, capital of the Kingdom, in its even and concentric development, multiplies, as it grows, the image of the island in which it was once enclosed. London, that juxtaposition of organic parts, stores and produces. New York is a railway terminal; they built houses between tracks, a pier, a jetty flanked by wharves and warehouses; like the tongue which takes and divides its food, like the uvula on the back of the throat between two channels, New York, between its two rivers, the North and the East, has set its docks and depots on Long Island side; on the other, through Jersey City and the twelve railway lines which align their storehouses on the Hudson Embankment, it receives and ships out the merchandise of the whole Western continent; the city’s active end, composed entirely of banks, stock exchanges and offices, is like the tip of that tongue which, not to push the metaphor, swings continually from one end to the other. Boston is made of two parts: there is the new city, pedantic and miserly like a man who, displaying his wealth and his virtue, keeps them to himself, as if the cold streets grew more silent and longer, listening with more hatred to the steps of the passerby who follows them, opening up avenues on every side and he, grinding his teeth in the northern wind; and there is the mound of the old town which, like a snail spiral, contains all the unfolding of traffic, debauchery, and hypocrisy. The streets of Chinese cities are made for a people used to walking in single file, each individual takes his place in lines which know no beginning nor end: where fissures have been created between houses resembling boxes with one side kicked in and whose occupants sleep pell-mell among the wares.

 Are there not special points to look at? The geometry of streets, the measurements of angles, the mathematics of junctions? Is not all movement parallel to them? And all that is rest or pleasure perpendicular?

 A book.