

Théophile Gautier: Variations on The Carnival of Venice

I

On the Street

There's an old folk tune,
Scraped by all violins,
And whined by every barrel-organ
Accompanied by barking dogs. [4]

It's played by every musical-box,
It's a classic for all canaries.
Even my grandmother
Learned it as a child. [8]

To this tune, cornets and clarinets
Make coquettes and bookkeepers
Dance beneath the dusty trees,
While birds flee from their nests. [12]

The café under its bower
Of hops and honeysuckle,
Celebrates the gaiety of cheap wine and Sunday,
By blaring out the tune. [16]

The blind man sobs it
Fumblingly on his bassoon, while near by,
His poodle, begging-bowl in mouth,
Growls along in an undertone. [20]

Young girl guitarists,
Scrawny in their tight-fitting tartans,
Screech it out in plangent voices,
Over the tables of *cafés-chantants*. [24]

But one night, unearthly Paganini,
As if with a crochet-hook, took up
The ancient air with the tip
Of his heavenly bow, [28]

And, working upon the tattered gauze,
So the faded finery bloomed anew,
Turned the despisèd theme into
A filigree of golden arabesques. [32]

II

On the Lagoons

Tra la, tra la, la, la, la lar,
Who doesn't know the tune?
It pleased our mothers,
Tender and mocking, plaintive and gay. [36]

The tune of 'The Carnival of Venice',
Sung on the canals in bygone days,
And borne to the ballet on sighs
Of a rapturous breeze. [40]

I seem to see, when people play it,
A gondola with a prow
Like a violin's neck, sliding
Through its blue furrow. [44]

At a chromatic scale,
Venus of the Adriatic,
Her breast swathed in pearls,
Rises, pink and white, from the water. [48]

The domes on the azure waves,
Follow the pure contours of the tune,
Swelling like full breasts,
That lift with sighs of love. [52]

My skiff lands and I alight,
Casting the mooring-rope round
The pillar of a marble staircase
In front of a pink façade. [56]

With its palaces, its gondolas,
Its seaside masquerades,
Its sweet sorrows, its mad gaities,
All Venice lives in this melody. [60]

A frail string vibrates and there
- summoned up by a pizzicato -
Joyous and free, as in former days,
The city of Canaletto! [64]

III

Carnival

Venice is dressing for the ball,
In sequins all starry,
It sparkles, swarms and chatters away
The multi-coloured carnival. [68]

Harlequin, negro by his mask,
Serpent by his thousand hues,
Gives Cassandra, his whipping-boy,
A comical thrashing. [72]

Flapping his winged sleeves,
Like a penguin on a reef,
The white Pierrot applies his powder,
And blinks his eyes. [76]

The doctor from Bologna rehearses
His endless *basso* patter.
Pulcinella, getting agitated,
Finds at last his crooked nose. [80]

Colliding with Trivelin, who
Extravagantly trills in his handkerchief,
Scaramouche returns to Columbine
Her fan or her glove. [84]

A mask slips at a cadence,
But it only reveals
A sly, sidelong look behind
Its eye-patches of black satin. [88]

Ah! Fine beard of lace,
Moved by each guiltless breath,
This arpeggio said to me: 'That's her!'
In spite of her veil, I'm sure of it. [92]

And I recognized, pink and fresh,
Under the ugly cardboard mask,
Her lip, beneath its peach-down,
And on her chin the beauty spot. [96]

IV

Sentimental Moonlight

Through the wild hilarity,
Echoing from St Mark's to the Lido,
A scale rockets upward
Like a water-jet by moonlight ... [100]

As the tune gossips jestingly,
And shakes in the wind its little bells,
A regret, like a dove one stifles,
For a moment blends its sighs. [104]

Far off, in the echoing mists,
As in a nearly forgotten dream,
I contemplate, still pale and sad,
My old love of yesteryear. [108]

In tears my soul recalls
The April day when, looking
For early violets in the woods, we lay
Deep in the grass and entwined our fingers ... [112]

That e-string note,
Vibrates like a glass harmonica,
Its thin and childish voice
A silver arrow piercing me. [116]

A sound so unnatural, so tender,
So mocking, so sweet, so cruel,
So cold, so burning, that, on hearing it,
One feels a fatal pleasure. [120]

And my breast, like a vault,
Weeping into its pool,
Lets fall, drop by drop,
The red tears of my heart. [124]

Happy and sad,
Ah! Old carnival theme,
Where laughter replies to tears,
How your charms harrow me! [128]

(Trans. M. W. Rowe)