

Garrick Davis

Of Théophile Gautier

“Il perira, je crois, tout entier.”

--Faguet, *Études littéraires XIXe siècle*

On forty consecutive nights, his applause
led the Romantics at the first enjambment
of *Hernani*, until he had won the cause
over the bourgeois, in a cherry doublet...

that shocked the crowd at the Théâtre-Français.
On red squares the secret word *Hierro* was passed,
while orgies at the Impasse du Doyenné
began as costume balls where young artists danced...

le galop infernal. Black hair to his waist,
he refused to stand with the National Guard
and was jailed, because he only served good taste
“in an army that respects the human form.”

Dressed like a Turk in caftan, fez and daggers
he brought home a small lioness from Algiers
to his salon of cats and antique sabres,
where Mallarmé and Flaubert came to hear...

of far countries from his verbal photographs.
Of the Duchesse de Plaisance, met in Athens,
whose infant daughter rested in a vat
of alcohol that she travelled with, for her sins.

And of the *soirées* of the Duc de Nemours
attended with Hugo, where they shined as guests
among royalty, since appearance was the core.
“Nothing is beautiful unless it is useless.”

He found Tin Tun Lung, professor of Chinese,
in a silk robe of chimeras and flowers,
with pigtail and parasol wandering the streets
and brought him home, a teacher for his daughters.

Le Corsaire-Satan published his conversations
as remembered by guests he entertained:
"in the midst of the crumbling of arts, religions...
only the stacks of banknotes remain."

From a few lines of Heine, he wrote the ballet
Giselle and idolized the lead, who imbued
the decor with myth by her leaps on the stage.
"There is something fine in loving a statue."

When it swept Paris, he denounced the polka
as a boring fashion perfect for the coarse
theater crowds, who asked why they should applaud
"heroes who did not speculate at the Bourse."

Exotic scourge of a mercenary age!
Yet he heard rhythms in the mechanized din
coming, as prophet of art for its own sake:
"The new Pegasus will be a railway engine."

But, supporting three Italian mistresses,
he turned critic and was crushed beneath the Press;
writing elegant copy on subjects not his,
he filled three hundred volumes, to cover debts.

His demon was the article. And his heart
waited, in between, for a grant of small script.
Denied the post of Inspecteur des Beaux-Arts,
"I am nothing now but a pen with three nibs."

Regretting a first and lost career in paint,
this pupil of Rioult left easel for pen
only to scrawl "transpositions of art" and make
a religion of color, vague description--sin.

At the funeral of the word-magician,
the priests left at the tributes, and poets saw
no blessing but their own cast on the coffin.
Friends sang, the best requiem, from the Opera.

O Gautier, your letters locked from view
to rot in the library at Chantilly
in the collection of Vicomte de Lovenjoul...
all that was modern, of which you were the key!

For Madame Liliane Ziegel

Of what is life composed? Of such moments
As stirred the heart's fire—coals, these eighty years
Amassed into a pile.

A Jewish girl
Awaits the Metro, nearing dawn, and keeps
Her star's yellow quite covered by her coat.
She must not board the train. For if she's caught
She knows she'll disappear—it comes—she leaps
And hugs the railing close until the halls
Of her Sorbonne are clear. Why risk one's life?
To take this last exam? She slips inside,
And finds her seat, quite late—the teacher coughs
And then her classmates stand, as one, and raze
Her shyness with applause.

That did not save
Anyone from dying. Of course, soldiers
Still carried off her grandmother one night
By pallet—the deathbed to Drancy—
And all the pale cousins were ground to powder.
Only her father, Baron Rothschild's doctor,
Kept them alive by never staying home.
And so, the doors were locked and no one slept
As she, tonight, alone in Paris, shall not sleep
But that is forty years later.

For now,
She's still a girl of twenty who is called
To the Ritz to help Ernest Hemingway
Translate *The Sun Also Rises*. The door
Opens and he's drunk, and naked, at noon.
He dresses, and they repair to the bar
Which Hem "liberates" with his "serve it up."
That was nineteen forty-four. A great day.
The start of her love-affair, one could say,
With America.

A few years later,
She marries the gallant Olivier;
Helps Henry Miller find his umbrella;
And St. John-Perse his grand country villa;

The Count Robert de Montesquiou

“Le sujet est inépuisable... Les injustices ont leur temps. Et au moins en esprit et en vérité il renaîtra.” -Marcel Proust

Where shall I go, where shall I go?
To that Circe of the Plaine Monceau?
In the starry firmament of Paris
All admire her carriage...

No, I was speaking of her bust
And please, please do not interrupt.
The Commander of Delicate Odors
Must bequeath his orders

To dear Yturri for the day.
There is yet so much to arrange
For my new Pavilion of the Muses:
Cloisonné and roses

Shall endeavor to present me
In my glory at the entry.
At this year's ball? Ah, we shall hear Verlaine,
Wreathed in pipe-smoke, declaim

From his latest moon-tinctured tears
To a perfumed chorus of cheers.
But the ladies of Faubourg Saint-Germain
Deserve Art, all the same.

For me, life began with a ball
Given by some baronne one fall
When I was twenty. And there Coppee,
Barbey d'Aurevilly,

And Heredia were excused
From a room stuffed with cockatoos.
And there I was ushered into Beauty!
Now, all else seems silly..

The ladies with fans and corsets,
All adorned like circus horses,
And those young fops of the debutante scene,
Wild hair plastered with cream!

Poor father at his Jockey Club,
And mother's gauche-blue chinese cups...
How stupid the scaled genealogies,
The dumb cousins at teas!

Instead I refined my disdain,
Chose a fine tailor, and became
Lord of both the auction-house and salon.
Friend of Proust and Gramont.

The national Petronius,
Not des Esseintes or Charlus.
To be recalled as a pervert and fake,
Not a priest for Art's sake!

Of course, to husbands I was queer
Since I made no move to endear
Myself to their wives with some stale caress,
But with thoughts on their dress.

But the bourgeois are always dim,
With each pale cravat and weak chin
Serving notice of their sworn attention
To the day's convention.

They could not condescend to me
Who made his dull countrymen see
That he lived, in spite of the age he graced,
A religion of Taste.

Garrick Davis is the founding editor of the *Contemporary Poetry Review*. His poetry and criticism have appeared in *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Criterion*, *Pacific Review*, *Verse*, and *McSweeney's*. *Child of the Ocmulgee: the Selected Poems of Freda Quenneville*, for which he served as editor, was published by Michigan State University Press in 2002. He is the literature specialist of the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, DC.