
DANTE ALIGHIERI,
DIVINE COMEDY,
INFERNO:
CANTO XXX, LINES 22-45

*Ma né di Tebe furie né troiane
si vider mai in alcun tanto crude,
non punger bestie, nonchéé membre umane,*

*quant'io vidi in due ombre smorte e nude
che mordendo correvan di quel modo
che 'l porco quando del porcil si schiude.*

*L'una giunse a Capocchio, e in sul nodo
del collo l'assannò, sì che, tirando,
grattar li fece il ventre al fondo sodo.*

*E l'Aretin che rimase, tremando,
mi disse: "Quel folletto è Gianni Schicchi,
e va rabbioso altrui così conciano."*

*"Oh," diss' io lui, "se l'altro non ti ficchi
li denti a dosso, non ti sia fatica
a dir chi è, pria che di qui si spicchi."*

*Ed elli a me: "Quell' è l'anima antica
di Mirra scellerata, che divenne
al padre, fuor del dritto amore, amica.*

*Questa a peccar con esso così venne,
falsificando sè in altrui forma,
come l'altro che là sen va, sostenne,*

*per guadagnar la donna de la torma,
falsificare in sè Buoso Donati,
testando e dando al testamento norma."*

*"their terrible fate is as
certain as the river's flow"*

*"these inclinations are like
the passing sounds of the
riverbank"*

A CLOSER LOOK AT *IL TABARRO*

If, in *Suor Angelica*, I sense much of *Butterfly*, in *Il tabarro* there is the crushing fatalism of Tosca. In its first bars, we hear in the slow, oppressive current of the river on which the characters live. Michele's frustrated conversations with his wife Giorgetta, and his outburst of jealousy, are like whirlpools in that current.

The current traps Giorgetta, 25 but prematurely aged by the monotony of work on the barge, by the memory of her dead child, and by fear of her husband. Trapped, too, are the stevedores Michele employs, none more than the young Luigi, 20 years old and already stiff with resentment at relentless, ill-paid physical labour. It seems natural that the ardent music in which he and Giorgetta sing their illicit love is hopeless, shuddering: their first duet seems lyrical and carefree, celebrating the banal pleasures of a working class suburb, but its insubstantiality is made clear by the second, a guilty sensuous exchange, full of hunger and fear. Against this current their clinging is a small affair, not star but a flickering match.

The match is one little sign of the expert dramaturgy of Puccini and the librettist, Adami. In the score Puccini insists that Michele's pipe is not lit when first we meet him; when, finally, he does light his pipe, he unwittingly gives the signal for which his wife's lover waits, and their terrible fate is as certain as the river's flow.

On land, it is imagined, there are refuges. Luigi's nascent Marxism, Giorgetta's nostalgic yearning for Belleville, even La Frugola's dedicated rag-picking (which she hopes will earn her a cottage in the country): strong as they seem, these inclinations are like the passing sounds of the riverbank, the timeless hurdy-gurdy, the wistful song seller, the courting couple who so ironically anticipate the terrible last scene. On the river there is no shelter, apart from Michele's coat: even the cabin is a place of sleeplessness, of dreadful memory of suffocation.



Paris XIXth district. The basin of the Villette and the quay of the Loire. About 1890.

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Masterful is the way Puccini and Adami shut down all choices in this short opera. Though Michele gazes at the river from the start (and in the play on which the opera is based, Didier Gold's *La Houppelande*, he is explicitly thinking of suicide), the unloading stevedores propose connection to the shore. Giorgetta dances with them, gives them wine; when her dance with Luigi becomes dangerous, the song seller's tune 'Primavera' lightens the atmosphere, jaunty even in its description of Mimi's lovesick death. Giorgetta's longing for Bellville, incompatible with her marriage, and Luigi's poignant answer, are rendered less perilous by Frugola's bizarre little arias that frame them. Dreaming, it seems, is not always dangerous.

Suddenly, night falls: all focus is on Michele, Luigi and Giorgetta as the others shuffle away. With them goes Paris, youth, the chance of escape. Luigi's and Giorgetta's guilty foreplay, then Michele and Giorgetta's intimate searching: the conclusion to these, Michele's devastating, bitter complaint, is a complaint of the Seine, forestalled for a moment by the voices of the passing lovers

on shore, a vignette of ironic delicacy. The river becomes a dark mirror: everything on shore, everything in daylight seems no more than a slight distraction from the fatal meetings of Giorgetta and Michele under his great coat, her dead young lover waiting there just as their little son once waited.

Puccini and Adami changed Gold's play in telling ways. The Louis of the play was so firebrand, but a guilty youth; this makes Giorgetta seem more of a predator, looking for any chance to escape the drudgery of the barge. Michele, moreover, is a brooding, lonely fellow, driven to thoughts of suicide by his wife's unfaithfulness. In the opera each of these characters is dangerous, and sympathetic by turn. Giorgetta it seems, may even be thinking of giving up Luigi, momentarily moved by her husband's appeal. Equally terrible, equally squalid, the opera guides our sympathy less certainly. The strongest character is the river, headless and fatal.

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