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DEOUINCEY'S DREAM-FUGUE

By

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DEQUINCEY'S DREAM-FUGUE*

By Lucile Price Leonard

E had been reading DeQuincey. Not for days, not for weeks had we been reading him, but for months. Herein lies the charm of living far away behind the hills, in the backwater of the world—one has time and inclination to live with books; and we three, the Master and Mistress of the Library, and I, had been living with DeQuincey.

Christmas barely had extinguished her candles when the Master one day suggested that he should introduce to us his old friend Thomas DeQuincey. Up to that time, I had had only the most formal of bowing acquaintances with this changeling of literature, and I welcomed eagerly such a presentation as I well knew the brilliant and scholarly Master could give. So, while winter sunshine poured through the western windows of the library, making a golden summer there, we read DeQuincey; when the chill of early spring yet demanded a wood fire "of evenings," we read DeQuincey; when the magnolia buds began to show tips of white, we left the library and the wood fire for the veranda and garden-fragrances; but—we still read DeQuincey.

We did not begin with Volume I and read the entire series, volume by volume. That was never the Master's way. With a delicate perception of value and sequence, he led and we followed, step by step, until the wee "Druid wight" became our daily companion, allowed to steal in and out without remark or apparent observation, himself an eager listener, enjoying with us our laughter and our tears, as dear to us as a member of the

family.

At last, one late afternoon in May, having drifted from the prose flights of our elaborate little genius, to literature about him, we found ourselves in the closing chapters of that just and sympathetic appreciation which David Masson has entitled quite simply DeQuincey.

*In giving a description of a fugue in music, I have purposely kept the wording of my authorities, even when I have not quoted literally. Besides Goetschius and Prout, I have used Grove's Dictionary as being authoritative and easy of access. L. P. L.

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With genuine delight, we surveyed with him, the gorgeous labyrinths through which we had found our leisurely and admiring way, dissenting mildly at times from his opinions, but, on the whole, agreeing with his generous estimates until, in his review of The English Mail Coach, we suddenly found ourselves face to face with this:

"I cannot say that this 'dream-fugue,' which is offered as a lyrical finale to the little series, in visionary coherence with the preceding pieces, accomplishes its purpose very successfully The artifice is too apparent, and the meaning is all

but lost in a mere vague of music."

At my exclamation of surprise, the Master looked up with

an amused but sympathetic smile.

"David Masson knew nothing about fugues," I declared with deep conviction, "and he never dreamed a dream in his life."

"Write me an appreciation of our beloved Dream-Fugue," I begged, "that my indignant feelings may be soothed."

"Write it yourself," the Master laughed, "since you take

it so greatly to heart."

Then he added seriously, "I should be glad to see you do it, for you may be sure that when DeQuincey writes a dream-fugue he understands exactly what he has undertaken. The objection cannot be made that he was no musician, nor can the musical form of his fugue be pronounced simply a curious coincidence. sensitive was he to the influence of music, so exquisite was his enjoyment of it, that he tells us in his Additions to the Confessions of An English Opium Eater of a luxury provided by his mother during his Manchester school-days whose 'anticipated pleasure turned out a total failure.' This was nothing less than a piano, and an instructor whose efforts were to assist him in playing the instrument. His own account is almost tragic:

"Too soon I became aware,' he writes, 'that to the deep voluptuous enjoyment of music, absolute passiveness in the hearer is indispensable. Gain what skill you please, nevertheless activity, vigilance, anxiety must always accompany an elaborate effort of musical execution; and so far is that from being reconcilable with the entrancement and lull essential to the true fruition of music that even if you should suppose a vast piece of mechanism capable of executing a whole oratorio, but requiring, at intervals, a co-operating impulse from the foot of the auditor, even that, even so much as an occasional touch of the foot, would

utterly undermine all your pleasure.'

"Notice the words he has used to express his enjoyment— 'voluptuous,' 'entrancement.' He gave himself up to it, body, mind, and soul, as we are accustomed to think only musical geniuses can do. The slightest movement was enough to destroy

his pleasure entirely.

"You can recall from our reading this winter how full of musical imagery, references to music, descriptions of music, and descriptions in terms of music are DeQuincey's works. Nor are they the words of a layman. From his essay on *Rhetoric*, I can quote you a favorite passage of mine showing his understanding

of fugue:

"In them first,' (he is referring here to Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor)—'In them first, and perhaps (if we except occasional passages in the German, John Paul Richter) in them only, are the two opposite forces of eloquent passion and rhetorical fancy brought into an exquisite equilibrium, approaching, receding—attracting, repelling—blending, separating—chasing and chased,

as in a fugue.'

"He even goes so far in his essay on *Style* as to hold up the whole English nation for censure, speaking of 'their obstinate obtuseness in regard to one of the most effective of the Fine Arts' with delightful and vigorous candor. I may be able to quote the entire passage if you are not too particular about exact wording. On the whole, we might better be exact and have DeQuincey's own words, if you will be good enough to get the book."

At the familiar touch of the Master's hands, the small

volume seemed to fall open at the proper place:

* * * "'We feel ashamed for the obstinate obtuseness of our country in regard to one, and the most effective, of the Fine Arts. It will be understood that we speak of music.'"

Omitting the passage on painting, sculpture, and poetry, the

Master continued:

"" * * We cannot be allowed to suppose any general defect of sensibility as a cause of obtuseness with regard to music. So little, however, is the grandeur of this divine Art suspected amongst us generally, that a man will write an essay deliberately for the purpose of putting on record his own preference of a song to the most elaborate music of Mozart; he will glory in his shame, and though speaking in the character of one confessing to a weakness, will evidently view himself in the light of a candid man, laying bare a state of feeling which is natural and sound, opposed to a class of false pretenders who, whilst servile to rules of artists,

in reality contradict their own musical instincts, and feel little or nothing of what they profess. Strange that even the analogy of other Arts should not open his eyes to the delusion he is encouraging! A song, an air, a tune—that is, a short succession of notes revolving rapidly upon itself, how could that, by possibility, offer a field of compass sufficient for the development of great musical effects? The preparation pregnant with the future, the remote correspondence, the questions, as it were, which to a deep musical sense, are asked in one passage, and answered in another: the iteration and ingemination of a given effect, moving through subtle variations that sometimes disguise the theme, sometimes fitfully reveal it, sometimes throw it out tumultuously to the daylight,—these and ten thousand forms of self-conflicting musical passion—what room could they find, what opening for utterance in so limited a field as an air or song? A hunting box, a park lodge, may have a forest grace and the beauty of appropriateness; but what if a man should match such a bauble against the Pantheon, or against the Minsters of York and Strasburg? A repartee may, by accident, be practically effective; it has been known to crush a party scheme, and an oration of Cicero's, or of Burke's, could have done no more; but what judgment would match the two against each other as developments of power? Let him who finds the maximum of his musical gratification in a song, be assured by that one fact, that his sensibility is rude and undeveloped. Yet exactly upon this level is the ordinary state of musical feeling throughout Great Britain; and the howling wilderness of the psalmody in most parish churches of the land, countersigns the statement. * * * in this cherished obtuseness as to a pleasure so important for human life, we find a second reason for quarrelling with the civilization of our Country. At the summit of Civilization in other points, she is here yet uncultivated and savage."

"What a magnificent passage!" I exclaimed.

"And how applicable to the musical form under discussion," replied the Master. "See how deep his insight is into large and complicated musical structure—'the preparation pregnant with the future, the remote correspondence, the questions, as it were, which to a deep musical sense are asked in one passage, and answered in another.' Then he speaks of the 'ingemination of a given effect, moving through subtle variations'—words luminous with comprehension of the middle section of a fugue.

"Some day we will gather DeQuincey's knowledge and love

end use of music into one volume for our own pleasure and referance—yes, and you shall write an article on that too!"

And this time, I was the one who smiled.

During the long warmth of the quiet May days that followed, my mind could not be appeased. It thought and remembered—especially it remembered. And the whole of its remembering faculty seemed to be filled with one picture:—

A library, lighted by the sun's afterglow and the flicker of a dying wood fire. Close to the window, catching the fast-fading light upon the pages of his book, sits the Master of the Library. His voice, in sympathy with thoughts and words before him, reflects every emotion of the great *Dream-Fugue*—rises in exultation as we 'sweep with bridal rapture over the Campo Santo of the cathedral graves;' rings like a silver trumpet as, "A thousand times, amongst the phantoms of sleep, have I seen thee entering the gates of the golden dawn;" sinks into silence with, "the endless resurrections of His love." Side by side, in the gathering shadows, sit the white-haired Mistress and I, both spell-bound. Twilight deepens into darkness. No sound disturbs our dreamhaunted silence. Only the voice of the winter night-wind rises to reiterate "the endless resurrections of His love."

Upon this memory of an utter comprehension jarred David Masson's remark:

"I cannot say that this 'dream-fugue' * * * accom-

plishes its purpose very successfully."

A pent-up, life-long horror of critics arose and took possession of me. Even when a child, I had been teased to frenzy by what I considered critical misunderstandings. In later years, my library was, to me, a symphony orchestra, each musician playing his instrument as became that instrument and his own temperament. Why fault the slender flute for its inability to lift a volume of tone beyond that of the violin? Why waive away the kettle-drums and trumpets because their voices are not the mystery of the wood-winds? Succeeding in this—with our orchestra so maimed, no 'velvet flute-note would ever fall down pleasantly upon the bosom of our harmony,'

"As if a petal from a wild-rose blown Had fluttered down upon that pool of tone;"

no fanfare would send our hero into battle, nor greet him when he returned victorious. And when the first violins had learned the deep tones of the double-bass, who would sing the love songs

for the waiting world?

Thus I fretted when critics lamented the "limitations" of a Shelley, of a Browning, especially of a Macaulay whose vivid word-painting and inimitable story-telling have been depreciated by certain "intellectuals," because, forsooth, he lacks philosophy. They did not pause to consider that the very qualities they wished to bestow would destroy the existing beauties. Add to a Macaulay the qualities of a Coleridge, if you will; and, accomplishing the impossible, lose forever the clearest trumpeter of our English Symphony.

Musing, I grew contemplative. DeQuincey's treasure-houses, like the art treasure-houses of Europe, reveal their contents only upon a fair exchange. Was David Masson to blame that no Master of a Library, half poet, half musician, had read DeQuincey's *Dream-Fugue* to him, in the twilight of a December evening? that he could not carry to DeQuincey the wealth of dreaming, and fugue-making? Could it be that (quoting DeQuincey, himself) "not the $\tau \delta$ apprehensible, but the $\tau \delta$ appre-

hendens" was "in fault?"

"The artifice is too apparent," says David Masson, "and the meaning all but lost in a mere vague of music." Now, when he spoke of a "too apparent artifice," David Masson was far from intending a complimentary criticism. How singular, then, that the words "apparent artifice" should recall to the fugue-lover's mind the clear and concise setting forth of the laws governing fugue.

The main idea of a fugue, we are told, is of one voice contrasting with others. It must be conceived in a definite number of parts or voices. The so-called "cyclical forms" are primitive,—the sonata may readily be traced to folk-song; but the fugue is artificial, directly descending from contrapuntal experiments of mediaeval monks. Indeed, so intentionally "apparent" is the "artifice" in a fugue that, not, "a fugue," but a composition written "in fugue" would be the better expression.

The fugue, Percy Goetschius tells us, is a *strict* and *serious* contrapuntal form, involving certain *special* conditions and limitations. It has seriousness of character and manipulation, and lacks something in freedom of detail. The question before

us, then, is not whether Professor Masson fancies the Dream-Fugue; but, did DeQuincey really write a Dream-Fugue upon a subject of importance taken from the previous chapters of the English Mail Coach, and did he write it in such a manner as to "successfully accomplish his purpose?" What are the special conditions and limitations governing the fugue? Do the same conditions and limitations govern the Dream-Fugue? Let us see.

"Of all existing musical forms" says Ebenezer Prout, "that of the fugue, as we find it in the works of a great genius, such as I. S. Bach, is certainly one of the most perfect, and, to an earnest

musician, one of the most interesting."

"The whole organic growth of the fugue is developed from one or two themes, often of extreme simplicity, and according to certain artistic principles and well-understood methods of procedure. Unless, therefore, the hearer of a fugue is able to trace its developments, he can derive but little pleasure from it as a

composition."

The most general divisions of a fugue (divisions quite profound enough for our present inquiry) are the exposition, the development, and the conclusion. A strict fugue develops each division symmetrically. A free fugue is irregular in plan or detail. Being the consummate form of the polyphonic style of composition, the fugue requires a mastery of all the devices of counterpoint as well as inventive and constructive genius. We have, therefore, a musical movement worthy of our careful consideration, one in which a definite number of voices combine in stating and developing a single theme, with the important addition that the interest be cumulative.

This "single theme" occupies the attention of the first division of the fugue—the exposition. Here, at the very outset, the theme or subject must be clearly presented. It must be of a character to arrest and hold attention whenever and wherever heard; long enough to contain a definite idea, not too long for the memory to retain perfectly. It must be thoroughly impressed upon the attention, and, like the hero of melodrama, its nature and characteristics must be understood thoroughly before the second act begins. Masters of fugue accomplish this in various ways. Bach, in his big organ fugue in G Minor, which the Dream-Fugue resembles, has stated his subject in the soprano, answered it in the alto, restated it in the tenor, and re-answered it in the bass,—the subjects being proposed in the tonic, answered by practically the same theme in the dominant.

The *Dream-Fugue*, DeQuincey writes, is founded on the preceding theme of "sudden death." Is such a theme one to "arrest and hold attention?" is it "serious" enough for fugue development? Let Section II of *The English Mail-Coach* answer for us. It is this theme, then, a theme fulfilling every technical requirement, which forms DeQuincey's exposition. Tumultuously and unaccompanied, the statement of the subject is made:

"Passion of sudden death! that once in youth I read and interpreted by the shadows of thy averted signs!"

"Rapture of panic!" cries the voice of the response.

"Ah, vision too fearful," breathes the subject in an undertone of agony.

"Epilepsy so brief of horror," shudders the response.

With one last sentence of passionate questioning, the exposition closes,—an exposition perfect in theme and perfect in musical form.

The middle section or development of a composition written in fugue consists of a series of "episodes" usually founded on the main subject (perhaps on a counter subject) interspersed with entries of the subject in various new situations, or guises.

These episodes have been called a contrapuntal web, into which have been woven, at intervals, now in one position, now

in another, the entire subject or some portion of it.

The subject might well be likened to a wondrous jewel of the Orient, for which its owner can find no setting worthy of its beauty; and each episode, to a separate setting wrought with increasing love and labor. Turning the the stone first in this way, then in that, the owner tries its beauty against his patterns of gold and silver and platinum. More and more elaborate grow the settings as he works with anxious care. More and more intricate grows each new design until, at last, he places his beloved gem with all its facets to the light, in the very center of a setting inwrought of gold and silver and platinum, revealing all the beauties of each discarded setting in one masterpiece of combination.

In the development of the G Minor Fugue, Bach uses eight of these episodal settings into which he enters his subject. He enters it in the key of B flat; twice in D Minor; in F Major, G Minor, C minor and E flat. Each episode reveals new contra-

puntal intricacies, until into the eighth one, he introduces the subject, again in the key of G Minor, and in that key, for the first time since it was announced in the exposition, in the soprano voice. With this entry, the conclusion begins, heralding the climax by a return to the original key. An exciting aspect of the jewel and its setting now presents itself as the tenor and alto voices rapidly take up the theme. Finally, with all the deep vibrant power of the massive organ bass, "the masterpiece of combination" is before us in all its cumulative splendor.

Such care has DeQuincey shown in the technique of the middle section of his *Dream-Fugue* that episodes and entries of the subject would be impossible to mistake. Not content with this, perhaps fearing there might arise a David Masson, he has actually numbered his episodes. There are five of them—four in the development and one in the conclusion.

Our jewel, then, is the theme of sudden death, and the five episodes are the settings arranged for it, by the loving hand of Thomas DeQuincey.

"Lo, it is summer," he begins, "almighty summer!" Tranquilly he arranges his first design,—an ocean "verdant as a savannah," upon which rides a "fairy pinnace." "Young women how lovely, young men how noble" dance together "amidst music and incense," "amidst blossoms from forests and gorgeous corymbi from vintages, amidst natural carolling, and the echoes of sweet girlish laughter." Among the dancing figures may be discerned the "unknown lady from the dreadful vision." All this joyous loveliness is "slowly drifting towards us"—us upon the English three-decker. Against this background, the theme flashes forth like an evil star:

"Was our shadow the shadow of death?" "Where are the lovely women that danced beneath the awning of flowers and clustering corymbi? Whither are fled the noble young men that danced with them? Answer there was none."

The movement grows agitated as we enter the second episode: "Sail on the weather-beam! Down she comes upon us!"

No more summer here; but "maddening billows and mighty mists and a terrible sea shaken with gathering wrath." Here, for the first time, DeQuincey uses a counterpoint of arches and long cathedral aisles borrowed from the tree-lined avenue in "The Vision of Sudden Death." Down this "Gothic aisle" races a frigate, amongst whose shrouds stands the lady of the

vision. "Off she forges without a shock," and is "borne away into desert spaces of the sea." As she flies past us, "rising, sinking, trembling, praying" the howling gale shrieks back to us the theme of sudden death, "until at last, upon a sound from afar of malicious laughter and mockery, all was hidden forever in

driving showers."

"Sweet funeral bells from some incalculable distance" awaken us to the third episode. "The morning breaks. A young girl crowned with a garland of flower runs in panic along a solitary strand. No warning can save her from the treacherous sands." Faster and faster, in frenzy of haste runs the counterpoint until in the early twilight, the fair young head sinks into darkness and only one white arm rises above her grave, "tossing, faltering, rising, clutching * * * uttering her dying hope and then uttering her dying despair."

We weep with DeQuincey—"to the memory of those that die before the dawn, and by the treachery of earth, our Mother."

Suddenly the funeral bells are hushed. A roar echoes from the mountains. "Is it strife? Is it victory?" With the rush of a Niagara we are swept into a veritable whirlpool of counterpoint, a counterpoint including in its dizzy structure every important theme in the entire Mail-Coach series, demonstrating at every point the "visionary coherence" of the *Dream-Fugue* with the "preceding pieces."

The English Mail-Coach in Lombard street, with its horses and men dressed in "laurels and flowers, oak-leaves and ribbons," has dreamed itself into a triumphal car, and we are "amongst

companions crowned with laurel."

In the second paragraph of "Section the First," we are told:
"The mail-coach it was that distributed over the face of the land, like the opening of apocalyptic vials, the heart-shaking news of Trafalgar, of Salamanca, of Vittoria, of Waterloo. * * *

The victories of England in this stupendous contest rose of themselves as natural Te Deums to heaven." From the same section, under the heading, "Going Down with Victory," are taken the themes of great darkness and crowds, of trampling horses and golden lights ("Bengal lights"), and a word to be carried to distant cities. "Section the Second" gives us our impatience of delay, our headlong pace, the illimitable aisle, the female child, the trumpet (the guard's horn which DeQuincey failed to reach), the frozen bas-relief (the immovable horror of the young man in the gig), and the woman's figure raving in despair. The mighty

Minster with its "city of sepulchers" and its vast recesses is a stupendous dream creation from the simple words, *Te Deum*.

With these themes in combination, the fourth setting for our jewel is wrought; and no words except DeQuincey's own can convey an idea of the splendid heights to which his "inventive and constructive genius" has lifted this episode. Suddenly, above the tumult of imagery, rises the apparition of the woman's figure, clinging to the horns of the altar, "sinking, rising, raving, despairing;" and by her side kneels her good angel "that fought with Heaven by tears for her deliverance."

It would seem that even the "literature of power" could rise no higher, that even a master of sustained flights of poetic prose might, here, continue to sail on level wing; but with the

fifth episode we enter the conclusion, and the climax:

"Then is completed the passion of the mighty fugue. Columns of heart-shattering music are ascending from the golden tubes of the organ, from choir and anti-choir, from trumpet and echo of the Dying Trumpeter, from the quick and the dead that sing together to God. All the hosts of jubiliation move as with one step; they wrap us round with thunders greater than our own and as brothers we advance, rendering thanks to God in the highest." With this tremendous orchestra of Minster choir, anti-choir, and all the Hosts of Heaven, the tragic theme swells in one last reverberating unison:

"A thousand times, amongst the phantoms of sleep, have I seen thee entering the gates of the golden dawn—with the secret word riding before thee—with the armies of the grave behind thee; seen thee sinking, rising, raving, despairing; a thousand times in the worlds of sleep have I seen thee followed by God's angel through storms; through desert seas; through the darkness of quicksands—through dreams and the dreadful revelations that are in dreams—only that at the last" (and here the counterpoint becomes harmony, pure and clear and true, dying into tender silence)"—only that at the last, with one sling of His victorious arm, He might snatch thee back from ruin, and might emblazon in thy deliverance the endless resurrections of His love."

Thus does Thomas DeQuincey end his noble composition in fugue—a composition as unique as was the man who wrote it; a composition as scholarly, as artistic, as poetic as the mind from which it sprang. It stands for us a masterpiece of its kind, per-

fect in form and expression, complete to the last detail.







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