

**Théophile Gautier:
Advocate of “Art for Art’s Sake” or champion of Realism?**

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*For all time there has existed, in painting, two schools, that of
the idealists and that of the realists.... The former has soul the
latter has life.*
Théophile Gautier¹

Théophile Gautier must rank as one of the most misrepresented and underrated literary personalities of the French nineteenth century and particularly in his role as art critic, enthusiast and activist for the freedom of artistic expression, in which guise he was perhaps better known to his contemporaries than in any other of his literary personae. Relegated to an undeserved obscurity for nigh on a century, most of Gautier’s huge body of critical work still remains unpublished.

The extent and the importance of the critical role he played in the evolution of nineteenth-century artistic expression, towards that which we term “modernism,” was, however, substantial. His enduring support and encouragement of young and innovative artists in their search for new techniques and individual expression, including those who pursued the new realist aesthetic, was indefatigable. His contribution to the debate surrounding the nature and the role of art in a society in rapid social, political and industrial metamorphosis was considerable. Yet, outside his early polemical comments, generally seen either as clever pieces of satirical writing or anti-utilitarian and anti-bourgeois tirades, this contribution is still undervalued or largely ignored.

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¹ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51*, *La Presse*, 15 February 1851.

Théophile Gautier's thirty odd *Salons* and numerous other treatises on art span some of the most turbulent but artistically productive years in France's history. That is, from the height of Romanticism through Realism to Naturalism or, in other words, from the establishment of Louis-Philippe's essentially bourgeois and disappointingly "illiberal" regime through the struggles, euphoria and final demise of the Second Republic, to the solid entrenchment of Louis-Napoleon's new bourgeois imperialism. For at least twenty-five of these years, Gautier was one of the most revered, respected and consequently influential of the *avant-garde* art critics. As a contributor as well as principal *salonniste* with Émile de Girardin's highly successful newspaper, *La Presse*, from 1836 to 1853 and for many years following—whether published in *L'Artiste* or in *Le Moniteur universel*—Gautier was, without a doubt, one of the most read critics of his time. He was also the most colourful, the most supportive, the most enthusiastic, as well as being the most persevering in his criticism of the blindness and bigotry of the Salon jury—until its dissolution in 1848—and of its *juste milieu* favourites, those two *ballons boursouflés de louanges*, Delaroche and Vernet.²

It was to Théophile Gautier's review of the Salon that many Parisians would first turn, and it was in his writings that provincials, travelers and certainly political exiles—of which there were often many among the artistic and literary community—would seek an in-depth and pictorially instructive account of the latest pieces of artwork. It was here too that they would be regaled with a detailed analysis of the latest developments and controversies in the world of art;³ as Baudelaire—who, incidentally, recognized in Gautier his *Maître*⁴—assured his readers in 1859:

He has filled, for many years, Paris and the provinces with the sound of his *feuilletons*, this is true; it is indisputable that numerous readers, those with literary interests, impatiently await his recent week's judgment of dramatic works; just as indisputable is the fact that his critical accounts of the *Salons*, so calm, so full of candor and majesty, are oracles for all those exiles who are not able to judge and feel by their own eyes.⁵

The denigration of the works of the Romantic Movement as a whole, and that of Gautier in particular as one of its most colorful representatives, by turn of the century new republican activists and religious pragmatists, such as André Gide, initiated Gautier's literary and consequently his critical demise. Théophile Gautier had, in short, the great misfortune not to fit into the Third Republic's notion of "Frenchness" or "*patrie*." For Gide, who discounted as equally insignificant the works of Nerval and even those of Hugo, the open-mindedness and freedom of thought that

² Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1834, La France industrielle*, 1834: 17.

³ It was Gautier, for example, who first attempted, and succeeded, to explain the nature of and the enormous difference between the techniques of Delacroix and Ingres, an astuteness for which Baudelaire, among others, gave him credit. Charles Baudelaire, *Salon de 1845*; cited in Pierre-Georges Castex, *Baudelaire critique d'art* (Paris, 1956), 51.

⁴ Contrary to the myth of antagonism between these two literary greats, which has its origin in the writings of Ernest Raynaud, who, among other things, decided that Baudelaire was being sarcastic in his praise of and in his dedication to Gautier. Ernest Raynaud, *Ch. Baudelaire* (Paris, 1922), 324.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "Théophile Gautier," *L'Artiste*, 13 March 1859. Reprinted in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1976), 458.

characterized the Romantic generation was nothing but frivolous, individualist, even irreligious self-indulgence, often combined with an outmoded fascination for the antique, for paganism and for gothic folklore. In Gide's view, Gautier "stubbornly and deliberately" focused only on the superficial or external contour of existence, a practice that the great novelist attributed to the adherents of the notion of "Art for Art's Sake".⁶

Gide's influence was such that in order to affect the revival of the Romantic genius of Baudelaire, also fallen into disrepute, supporters of Romanticism, such as Ernest Raynaud, deemed it necessary to separate Baudelaire as much as possible from this "*magicien ès-langue-française*" and the influence of his works, and consequently further denigrated Gautier's reputation.⁷ The net result was a fairly blatant and enduring misrepresentation of the true or complete nature of Gautier's aesthetic.⁸ Where he was allowed one, it became inseparable from that of the protagonists of his best-known novels. In *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, for example, D'Albert's obsessive quest for the ideal feminine form is seen as a direct and absolute extension of Gautier's own aesthetic perception.⁹ But as Gautier himself remarked, it is "the character who speaks and not the author."¹⁰

Throughout the twentieth-century, this tendency persisted. Gautier was either associated with a flagrant or exaggerated Romanticism, embodied in his famous *gilet rouge*—the red waistcoat he wore when noisily defending Hugo's *Hernani*—or, more commonly, with a notion of "Art for Art's Sake," perceived progressively as the appreciation of a purely formalist, even academic, "classical" or ideal art; an art

⁶ Gide, scandalized in particular by the suggestion that Gautier's narrative poem *Albertus* was a religious work, condemned the poet's aesthetic perception as useless. Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France* (Paris, 1962), 114-115. See also *Albertus ou l'âme et le péché* in *Poésies complètes de Théophile Gautier*, vol. I, ed. René Jasinski (Paris, 1970), 180.

⁷ Raynaud, *Baudelaire* (Paris, 1922).

⁸ Those who sought to defend Gautier at the same period, for example René Jasinski and Adolphe Boschot, fought in vain against the weight of Gide's judgment. The glowing accounts of Émile Bergerat and Maxime Du Camp were also largely discounted as was Spoelberch de Lovenjoul's abortive attempt to collect and annotate Gautier's entire literary output; even the fact that the celebrated art historian Léon Rosenthal gave Gautier great credit for his vision and art criticism made little impact on the "Gidien" view. René Jasinski, *Les années romantiques de Théophile Gautier* (Paris, 1929); Adolphe Boschot, *Théophile Gautier* (Paris, 1933); Émile Bergerat, *Théophile Gautier: Entretiens, souvenirs et correspondance* (Paris, 1879); Maxime Du Camp, *Théophile Gautier* (Paris, 1907); Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, *Histoire des œuvres de Théophile Gautier*, vol. I, II (Paris, 1887); Léon Rosenthal, *Du romantisme au réalisme* (1914) (Paris, 1987).

⁹ Michael Spencer, for example, determines his aesthetic as "pure, formal and classical, or translated into realisable terms, the statue of a beautiful woman." Michael Spencer, *The Art Criticism of Théophile Gautier* (Geneva, 1969), 13. However, it should be noted that even D'Albert's pursuit of ideal beauty or of the ideal female form oscillates between the unattainable perfection of an antique sculpture or a Raphael Madonna, the sensuality of the Venetian masters and the voluptuousness of Rubens.

¹⁰ Théophile Gautier, Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, ed. Adolphe Boschot (Paris, 1966), 18.

devoid of ideas, where sentiment is purely instinctive and where the artist observes total impartiality towards his subject. He was presumed, therefore, to be the archenemy of social art and, by association, of Realism, and, by association again, of Gustave Courbet.¹¹ In consequence, Gautier has been attributed a total lack of political and social awareness, involvement or commitment and even artistic conservatism.¹² Where he appears to expound progressive or innovative social or artistic ideologies, it has been assumed either that he was being ironical or that he was being indulgent, or he is accused of inconsistency or the wish to be in vogue.¹³ Where he obviously praises and supports an artist whom posterity venerates as “progressive,” there is a tendency to look for reserve, uncertainty, irony or sarcasm, because it is simply too difficult to accept the fact that he was being sincere.¹⁴ Even among commentators more favourably disposed towards the critic, there remains a tendency

¹¹ That is, our modern and somewhat erroneous perception of Courbet as the only or the first nineteenth-century French Realist and the only artist who successfully portrayed his society, a perception promoted by the artist himself: “I alone of all the French artists, my contemporaries, had the power [and artistic prowess] to convey and interpret in an original way both my personality and my society” (Pierre Courthion, *Courbet: Par lui et par ses amis*, T.II [Geneva, 1948], 81). One should also question what Courbet stood for exactly, or, rather, whether what he and the latest bohemian coterie stood for was really very different in its essentials from the ideologies and goals of the earlier coterie of the Doyenné days, the “little coterie,” or even from those of the first Romantic coterie, that of their elders and mentors, Hugo and Musset?

¹² This is still the case in recent works, for example in those of Wolfgang Drost and Anita Brookner. Wolfgang Drost and Ulrike Hennings, *Exposition de 1859* (Heidelberg, 1992) and Anita Brookner, *Romanticism and its Discontents* (London, Viking, 2000). Even the works of Peter Hambly and Rosemary Lloyd, which throw a different light on Gautier’s social perception and involvement in his epoch, joined with more recent works on Gérard de Nerval by Claude Pichois and Michel Brix, and also by Jean Fornasiero, which inadvertently touch on Gautier and his involvement with Fourierist, Republican or “Bouzingot” ideologies, have as yet failed to significantly amend the accepted Third Republic perception of a Gautier devoid of any “quarante-huitard” feelings and with no interest in ideologies or doctrines relating to humanity. Peter Hambly, “Théophile Gautier et le fouriérisme,” *Australian Journal of French Studies*, XI, No. 3 (1974): 210-236; Rosemary Lloyd, “Gautier est-il aussi partisan de la doctrine de l’art pour l’art qu’on veut nous le faire croire ?,” *Bulletin des Études parnassiennes*, VII (June 1985): 1-13; Claude Pichois and Michel Brix, *Gérard de Nerval* (Paris, 1995); Jean Fornasiero, “Nerval et l’impossible ‘cité merveilleuse’: entre la bohème parisienne et le symbolisme fouriériste,” in *Images of the City in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. John West-Sooby (Mt. Nebo, 2000): 75-90. See also: Jean Fornasiero, “Fouriérisme, politique et chimères chez Gérard de Nerval,” *Revue Romane* 36-1 (2001): 59-72.

¹³ T. J. Clark, for example, presumes that Gautier’s appreciation of Courbet’s *After Dinner at Ornans* must have been an attempt to be in fashion. T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois* (London, 1973), 31 and *Image of the People* (London, 1973), 133. When viewed in the context of Gautier’s previous enthusiastic support for the re-emerging Realist aesthetic, this judgement has no foundation.

¹⁴ Even Marie-Hélène Girard falls into this error. Marie-Hélène Girard, *Théophile Gautier critique d’art, Extraits des Salons (1833-1872)* (Paris, 1994).

to quote him out of context or to adopt, without question, a previous commentator's judgement, who, in turn, was reiterating that of a predecessor.¹⁵

The accepted twentieth-century perception of these two seemingly diametrically opposed notions, "Art for Art's Sake" and Realism, are responsible for the majority of misunderstandings and out-of-context quotations relating to Gautier's aesthetic and his art criticism. It was necessary therefore to return to the source, to examine contemporary perceptions of these notions, to place Gautier's criticism back into its textual and temporal context.¹⁶ This done, Gautier emerges, ironically, as one of the few important *avant-garde* critics who supported the renaissance of Realism in France as well as Gustave Courbet's beginnings and who favourably, even enthusiastically, commented on the latter's work.

Examining Gautier's art criticism as a whole reveals that, in general, rather than being imbued with nostalgia for the artistic glories of either the classical or the medieval or even the neo-classical past, Gautier focused his attention on "any attempt at originality."¹⁷ From the first, he believed passionately in the young Romantic generation, a generation which he recognised as "ardent, studious, experimenting, always searching, often succeeding" and which had made "the French school the most beautiful in the world."¹⁸ This alone distinguished him clearly from most of his fellow critics, those *absurdes*, *détestables* and *monstrueux*¹⁹ judges who were forever

¹⁵ Paul Bénichou, for example, appears simply to reiterate Cassagne, Spencer, McWilliam or Drost when he declares that Gautier totally sacrificed idea to form and is the incarnation solely of the notion of "Art for Art's Sake" to the exclusion of everything else. Paul Bénichou *L'École du désenchantement* (Paris, 1992), 495. See Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art en France* (Paris, 1950), 73, 228; Michael C. Spencer, *The Art Criticism of Théophile Gautier* (Geneva, 1969), 13; Wolfgang Drost and Ulrika Hennings, *Exposition de 1859* (Heidelberg, 1992), IX. Neil McWilliam, also reiterates the accepted vision of Gautier and of "Art for Art's Sake" and quotes out of context from his Töffler article of 1847. Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of happiness* (Princeton, 1993), 27.

¹⁶ Lynette Stocks, *Gautier critique: liberté, fraternité et la vérité du réalisme* (Paris and Biarritz, 2008).

¹⁷ "We will be indulgent towards any work where we perceive an idea, an intention, an attempt at originality even where the author has not succeeded or only partially succeeded; we will praise, and without fearing to be accused of camaraderie, things which seem beautiful to us, with all the enthusiasm and fury that works of genius have always inspired in us." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1837, La Presse*, 1 March 1837. This attitude was seriously disturbing to many of his fellow commentators who believed that the critic's role was to guide the young artist along the path of true art, to prevent artistic decadence and to prevent art becoming trivial. Anonymous, « La critique et les artistes », *L'Artiste*, t. XII, 1836, pp. 73-74. Gautier was, however, quite exigent in his choice of works to comment on, contrary to Michael Spencer's accusation, that he "praised almost everyone." Michael Spencer, *The Art Criticism of Théophile Gautier* (Paris, 1979), 69. He would spend days searching among "the two thousand works that carpeted the walls of the Louvre, the twenty or thirty paintings" that were "worth the effort of stopping and returning." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1837, La Presse*, 8 March 1837.

¹⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1840, La Presse*, 11 March 1840.

¹⁹ Gautier had slated the aesthetic incompetence and negativity of the critical establishment as a whole: "Le critique avance ceci et cela. Il tranche du grand et taille

complaining about the decadence of contemporary French art. From the beginning of Gautier's, initially reluctant, journalistic career, he avowed his intention to reveal the beauties rather than "to expound at length on the faults."²⁰ He was well qualified in this boast of his ability to reveal new beauties. Besides having a considerable technical proficiency himself, he had a profound understanding of the history and development of art.²¹ It was principally he, for example, who ardently encouraged the landscapists to study the seventeenth-century Dutch masters and, more importantly, to work from nature rather than to aspire to a "Poussin or Claude like" classical perfection of the natural world.²² It was also Gautier who first revealed the genius of Spanish seventeenth-century painters, often with their terrible but powerful Realism, to French readers and who most fully understood and appreciated the works of Goya.²³ This made his criticism, technical observations and support not only welcome to young and innovative artists but invaluable.²⁴

To those for whom critical appreciation is closely linked to a particular philosophy, style or tradition, Gautier's aesthetic enjoyment would certainly appear to be exceptionally wide-ranging, if not eclectic. His was the ability to appreciate, analyze and comprehend an enormous range of artistic styles and disciplines without recourse to, or being restricted by, a particular moral, political or philosophical stance. He could, on the one hand, passionately admire the art of and fully comprehend the system of Delacroix,²⁵ with its ardent color and movement, its "real life" drama and

en plein drap. Absurde, détestable, monstrueux : cela ne ressemble à rien, cela ressemble à tout." Théophile Gautier, Preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, ed. Adolphe Boschot (Paris, 1966), 35.

²⁰ "Our criticism will differ from that of other newspapers, our friends before God or before the devil (as it has not yet been established whether the newspaper is something divine or diabolical), in that, instead of expounding at length on the faults and curiously bringing them to the fore, it will commit itself rather to revealing the beauties. We barely understand any other form of criticism." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1834, La France industrielle*, 1834: 17.

²¹ He himself had studied art in Louis-Edouard Rioult's studio in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

²² See, for example, Théophile Gautier, "Écoles de Rome et de Paris", *La France littéraire*, October, 1832: 75 or Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1836, L'Ariel*, 9 March 1836.

²³ See, for example, Théophile Gautier, "Collection des tableaux espagnols," *La Presse*, 24 Septembre 1837 and Théophile Gautier, "Les Caprices de Goya," *La Presse*, 5 July 1838.

²⁴ Quite apart from his artistic capabilities and his understanding of artistic techniques and developments, Théophile Gautier had an amazing capacity to invoke with his pen the visual image of a work, to create visual poetry. As Boschot's put it, "in his mind there is a spontaneous blending, a fusion, which unites literary elements with pictorial elements. ...From the world of ideas and words to that of forms and colours, [his thought] finds analogies, *correspondence*. It *transposes* from one mode to the other, but without ceasing to proclaim the distinction between the two." Adolphe Boschot, *Théophile Gautier* (Paris, 1933), 243. This visual poetry, coupled as it is with an astute artistic analysis and enhanced by his knowledge of the artists themselves, their motivations, ambitions and hardships, is invaluable, especially as regards lost, little known or destroyed works of art.

²⁵ See, for example: Gautier, *Salon de 1834, La France industrielle*, 1836: 18; *Salon*

dramatic battles and, on the other, without contradiction, understand and appreciate the essence of Ingres' genius.²⁶ Where other critics simply saw Ingres as either a savior of art in decline or as a reactionary who was preventing its progress,²⁷ Gautier perceived in the artist's drawing, or in his line, a new element, which, while contributing to the immense calm of his figures, allowed them a romantic sensuality more akin to life and nature.²⁸ Similarly, while he could admire Pradier's perfect female forms, Gautier, almost alone, supported the young Romantic generation of sculptors who "were attempting to break the old mould and to give clay and wax the suppleness of life and the quiver of passion,"²⁹ that is, to imbue sculpture with a dramatic or realistic element.³⁰ Likewise, he could praise the true depictions of the Orient—like "open windows" on the Arab world³¹—, champion the French landscapists for whom nature had become the only teacher,³² but still applaud those for whom the pantheism or poetry of nature was the essence of landscape painting.³³ Nevertheless, what all the artists whom Gautier praised had in common was a newness, an originality, often an ardor and always the essence of life—*l'âme et le souffle*—regardless of their chosen style or domain.

One of the admirable things about art is that completely contradictory elements can be reconciled.—For example, here we have M. Adolphe Leleux who is able to produce good art with a rigid Realism which does not allow him to invent even a blade of grass, and here we have M. Diaz who obtains happy results with an entirely contrasting method; he is as fantastic as the other is real, and both produce great paintings.³⁴

de 1836, L'Ariel, 13 April 1836; *Salon de 1837, La Presse*, 9 March 1837; *Salon de 1838, La Presse*, 22 March 1838; *Salon de 1840, La Presse*, 13 March 1840; *Salon de 1841, Revue de Paris*, 1841: 259.

²⁶ However, contrary to Snell's belief that it was Ingres who was "the presiding deity in Gautier's serene temple of art," Gautier's artistic god was Delacroix. Robert Snell, *Théophile Gautier, a Romantic Critic of the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 1982), 90.

²⁷ See for example: Farcy, *Journal des Arts* I, 1827: 359 and Gustave Planche, *Salon de 1833, Revue des Deux Mondes*, ser. 2, vol I, 1833: 91

²⁸ "...his drawing contains the form more closely [than that of Raphael]; and the character of his style is the truthful exaggeration of external details, since M. Ingres is particularly careful about the linear silhouette of his characters and draws more on the outer edges than in the middle; a procedure, which, eliminating much of the relief, results in a large and simple aspect which is altogether masterly, and makes it possible to distinguish at a glance one of Ingres' paintings from a thousand." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1834, La France industrielle*, 1834: 17. See also, for example: Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1837, La Presse*, 15 March 1837.

²⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Histoire du romantisme* (Paris, 1927), 29.

³⁰ In particular, Préault, Maindrion and Barye, but also David d'Angers and Duret.

³¹ By artists such as Decamps, Marilhat and Fromentin

³² In particular, Théodore Rousseau, Jules Dupré, Camille Corot and, a little later, Charles Daubigny.

³³ Such as, Paul Huet, or even the more classical, Aligny.

³⁴ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845, La Presse*, 16 April 1845.

Gautier constantly demonstrated his respect and empathy for the artists themselves. Before all else, he was their partisan. For him, it was essential for the critic to appreciate each artist's goals, objectives and point of view:

The critic, whose duty it is to understand everything, can without contradicting himself, accept points of view which are in appearance contradictory. Therefore, one must not be astonished to see us praise works opposite in character. We will judge them in relation to the principles chosen by the artists themselves.³⁵

The accepted perception of the theory of "Art for Art's Sake" appears, therefore, to be totally incompatible with Gautier's Romantic open-mindedness. It appears to be equally incompatible with this critic's ardent fight for the freedom of artistic expression in a climate where art and artists found themselves not only restricted by the academic traditions of the past, but under pressure from the various progressive movements which vied with each other for philosophical and moral supremacy. At the time of his critical debut, Gautier's defiant tirades were aimed at two very specific elements in French society. On the one hand, he attacked the bourgeois element who displayed a "particularly narrow utilitarianism," a moral and political conservatism, a profound lack of interest in art and an acute indifference to any form of idealism³⁶ and, on the other, those among the Saint-Simonian, Fourierist, Republican and various Catholic reformists who were demanding art's total involvement in, even subservience to, their particular cause and goal: *art as propaganda, social art, prophetic art?* We "have seen," protested one of Gautier's journalistic colleagues in 1836, Ed Séguin, "the question of moralist goals replace that of artistic achievement; the notion of politics replace that of art."³⁷

While Gautier and those of the bohemian coterie to which he had belonged since the "rue du Doyenné" days shared many utopian and Republican ideals, his personal quest was a determination to maintain the freedom and the sincerity of artistic expression in the face of even the most noble of these ideals.³⁸ Did that mean that he was advocating the pursuit of only ideal and antique beauty or an art that existed totally outside the contemporary reality, that so-called "Art for Art's Sake"? To further complicate the issue in question, even at the moment of the reestablishment in France of the notion of "Art for Art's Sake," inherited from Germany, the precise nature of the theory was difficult to define.³⁹ It was quickly confused with arguments

³⁵ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1859, Moniteur universel*, 25 August 1859.

³⁶ A society, in short, that was totally focused on its own material enrichment. Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art en France* (Paris, 1950), 6-7.

³⁷ Ed. Séguin aîné, "Des Doctrines exclusives appliquées à la critique," *La Presse*, 8 September 1836.

³⁸ This was both courageous and understandable at the time, and, even if he had advocated an art devoid of ideas and totally dependant on ideal form, it would have been comprehensible. As Séguin notes, that "faced with this aberration by exclusion one would not be astonished to know of the appearance of a contrary doctrine, ... a doctrine, a *negation* of all doctrines," one which "denies all that is reasoned, all that moralizes, all that shows a sign of intellectual life; but instead it cultivates the spirit, pure spirit; pure art, spirit for spirit, *art for art*." Ed. Séguin aîné, *La Presse*, 8 September 1836.

³⁹ In the words of a certain Hippolyte Fortoul, in 1833, "the theory of art for art's sake

concerning the real and the ideal, form and idea, truth and beauty and even those of good and evil. The theory of “Art for Art’s Sake” presented by Victor Cousin, for example, differed from the line of thought inspired by Madame de Staël, which was more Romantic and also more subjective. As for Heine, the German champion of an “Art for Art’s Sake” pure and ideal—an ideal that nevertheless promoted social change—his interpretation was imbued with his own perception and experiences. Where they were all in agreement—and this aspect accorded with Gautier’s vision for art—was in their advocating of the independence of art.⁴⁰

Gautier, for his part, did not specifically mention the notion of “Art for Art’s Sake” in his early 1830s diatribes against the philistines of that utilitarian society, and, in fact, he never claimed it as his own. Not until 1847, in his critique of the artistic theories of the Swiss artist Töpffer, did he attempt to explain this theory or notion as he saw it, but as if he was looking at it from the outside. In this same critical article he also questioned the nature of beauty, emphasizing its subjectivity and relativity: “What will be the artist’s goal? Beauty? But what is beauty? This here is a very complex, very abstruse, very difficult question Does beauty exist in itself or relatively? A flower—is it beautiful in itself or only because it appears so to us?” Gautier concludes that beauty perceived purely as something universal and immutable denies reality and excludes the material world, where beauty indubitably exists.⁴¹

As for the question of the role of art, even as early as 1836, in two articles which appeared in *La Presse*, the young critic, while strongly defending the conception of an art that is not subjugated by either official or everyday life, accepted the fact that artistic creation and society were irrevocably linked:

Nobody has ever suspected us of being utilitarian, humanitarian, negrophile and philanthropic, thank God! But we would wish that artists understand that they are wrong to isolate themselves ... in some sort of ideal abstraction outside of any possible application.⁴²

From 1844 on, Gautier expounded extensively on the role art should play in the rapidly changing industrialized society of the mid-nineteenth-century:

All the old mythologies are to be reworked. The old symbols signify nothing anymore. One must create a complete and extensive symbolism

has not had, to my knowledge, an avowed or comprehensive code; but simply circulates *incognito* in a few confusing prefaces.” Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l’art pour l’art en France* (Paris, 1950), 228.

⁴⁰ Albert Cassagne, in his important work on the theory of “Art for Art’s Sake,” is forced to admit that this was the only point of agreement between all those who professed the notion of “Art for Art’s Sake” or who are accused of supporting it. But, he also concedes, like Gautier’s echo, that “never has “Art for Art’s Sake” demanded of its adepts that they degrade themselves to construct forms empty of ideas.” Albert Cassagne, *La Théorie de l’art pour l’art en France* (Paris, 1950), 6, 30.

⁴¹ Théophile Gautier, “Du Beau dans l’art,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 Sept. 1847: 898-899.

⁴² Théophile Gautier, “De l’Application de l’Art à la vie usuelle,” *La Presse*, 13 December 1836.

that expresses the ideas and needs of the times, theological, political and allegorical.⁴³

At times he advocated an almost Fourierist mission for artists, for which Laverdant praised him.⁴⁴ Poets, “painters and sculptors, have a duty to record the commentary of creation,” he declared, “to study directly from nature; in a few years from now, the Salon ought to be a panorama of the world.”⁴⁵

In truth, rather than being the enemy of those painters who were seeking to portray life around them as truthfully as their techniques permitted and who were searching for new ways to interpret nature and their world, Gautier was their most ardent supporter.

Painting has a double goal: to portray what is and to predict that which we wish will transpire. The portrait and the dream are equally its domain. Reality and the ideal, these are the grand, the only divisions of art.⁴⁶

From as early as 1837, 12 years before Courbet’s shaky salon debut, the “strong and simple manner” of Adolphe Leleux’s depictions of rural life, where nature or life “was portrayed exactly as it is in its stark reality and in all its vulgarity” and without “any coquetry,” received some of Gautier’s greatest eulogies.⁴⁷ He soon identified Leleux at the “head of the Realist School,” a “partisan exclusively of Realism,”⁴⁸ who does not consciously “seek either elegy or melodrama,” who “doesn’t flatter the taste of the bourgeois,” but rather “finds that nature is an adequately beautiful subject without complicating it.”⁴⁹ While Adolphe Leleux did not specifically choose to paint poverty or destitution but rather the simplicity of rural life, this artist certainly had no recourse to the prettifying or idealizing of peasant life that characterized the more utopian vision of artists such as Léopold Robert. These are not “the peasants of opera,” Gautier reminded his readers that “you can trust M

⁴³ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1848*, *La Presse*, 22 April 1848.

⁴⁴ Désiré Laverdant, *Salon de 1844*, *La Démocratie pacifique*, 24 April 1844.

⁴⁵ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1846*, *La Presse*, 31 March 1846.

⁴⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845*, *La Presse*, 17 April 1845.

⁴⁷ At the 1841 Salon, Leleux’s *Rendez-vous de Chasse* provoked praise of some significance: “M. Leleux paints what he sees with firmness and conscientiousness, without adding anything, without taking anything away, without contrivance; what he produces might not please society ladies, as he only depicts coarse peasants dressed in rough clothes and goat skins, or peasant women dressed in homespun skirts and blue stockings, in clogs or bare foot; he has no coquetry, does not clean up his models and is very shy of peaches and cream complexions. But from these paintings, of a dismal and poor aspect [of life] emanates the scent of gorse and flowering heather; ...the drab foliaged shrubs have an air of convincing sincerity; ...the poachers seated on a green mound with their emaciated dogs stretched out on the ground, are indisputably real.” Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1841*, *Revue de Paris*, 1841: 260.

⁴⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845*, *La Presse*, 16 April 1845. This makes total nonsense of the idea that Gautier had to invent the category of Realism in 1849 in order to understand Courbet. François Moulinat, “Théophile Gautier et Gustave Courbet,” *Bulletin de la Société Théophile Gautier*, no. 11 (1989): 86.

⁴⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845*, *La Presse*, 16 April 1845. *Salon de 1841*, *Revue de Paris*, 1841: 260.

Leleux in this, he will not cheat you out of one gaiter button.”⁵⁰ He praised Leleux’s “sincere love of nature, a frankness at all costs, a search for truth [or the real] whatever it may be” and a “healthy, strong, solid” painting technique “graced with all the simple and rugged qualities of the peasant.” The critic accepted without reserve Leleux’s rustic scenes, the coarseness of the country folk who were the artist’s preferred subjects: “Often they are even very ugly,” admits Gautier, “but they are real and alive, and in art life is always beautiful.”⁵¹ No artist, declared Gautier, “is less academic or of a more virginal originality, no Realist is more loyal to his system.”

If he paints a sky where the clouds stream by, a ground capable of being walked on, a tree trunk dappled with sunlight and the shade of leaves, a man passing, sleeping or seated, a dog which makes us want to whistle to call him out of the picture, he is content, and we are of the same mind. Is it not enough?⁵²

For most of Gautier’s fellow critics, nonetheless, Leleux’s Realism was either too much or not enough; it needed either idealizing or exaggerating. Even among those critics on the aesthetic left there seems to have been a universal reticence when faced with an art that depicted the real world too literally.⁵³ But, insisted Gautier, “truth is still the only thing that is new.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1844, La Presse*, 29 March 1844.

⁵¹ And what is more, insists Gautier, Leleux is an excellent colorist; “his palette contains all the nuances of the colour of the open air, from the hue of the reddened skin of an old labourer, to the rosy glow which highlights the bare legs and arms of the haymakers.” Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1846, La Presse*, 3 April 1846.

⁵² Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845, La Presse*, 16 April 1845. But Gautier’s demise was equally that of Leleux’s and that of others whom this critic, almost alone, supported and encouraged in the face of the critical establishment, whether that of the right or of the left.

⁵³ Haussard, for example, judged that the artist’s Realism was too stark and advised him to enhance and “expand the truth to the level of poetry.” Prosper Haussard, *Salon de 1844, Le National*, 31 March 1844. Laverdant, although he preferred Robert’s more idealistic rendition of peasant life as a prophetic vision of the more harmonious future in store for farm labourers, saw the didactic potential in Leleux’s Realism if only he would choose particular subjects, subjects that specifically exposed the degradation and suffering of poor peasants. See, for example: Désiré Laverdant, *Salon de 1843, La Phalange*, 28 May 1843 or *Salon de 1845*, ser. 1, vol I, 1845: 293. Gustave Planche, for whom the term Realism had already acquired a pejorative sense, who complained of the degradation of French art and who insisted that, in art, reality must only constitute the point of departure and not the goal, deemed the forms in Leleux’s art negligent. The artist had sacrificed form for the sake of color. Gustave Planche, *Salon de 1847, Revue des Deux mondes*, April-June 1847, ser. 5, vol. 18: 364. Both Thoré and Blanc, for their part, while they too praised Leleux, continued to prefer either the idealization of Robert and Jeanron or a moralizing element where rustic or contemporary subjects were an artist’s preferred expression. See, for example: Théophile Thoré, *Salon de 1846*, reprinted in *Salons de T. Thoré*, ed. W. Bürger (Paris, 1868), 335-339; Charles Blanc, *Salon de 1846, La Reforme*, 12 May 1846.

⁵⁴ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845, La Presse*, 17 April 1845.

Other artists too, among this first generation of new French Realists, such as Adolphe's brother, Armand, their friend, Hédouin, Guillemin, Muller, Célestin Nanteuil and Jean François Millet, received Gautier's support and invoked his enthusiasm. In particular—contrary to another popular myth, which sees Gautier as the advocate of a highly polished academic technique and the enemy of Millet—it was this critic who first delighted in Millet's rugged brushstrokes and his humble subjects.⁵⁵ Although Millet's *Winnower*, exhibited at the 1848 Salon, was not his first image of peasant toil, a controversial subject in itself, it was the first recognized at the Salon, and in particular by Gautier.⁵⁶

It was also Gautier who first greeted with enthusiasm the life-size interiors, depicting poor or unfortunate citizens, painted by Boissard, Lessore and Antigna.⁵⁷ Moreover, in 1846, Duveau's very large genre painting, *The Day after a Storm*, a scene of "distressing effect" with figures five foot high, inspired Gautier to applaud the idea of executing life-size works depicting everyday, contemporary subjects and events.⁵⁸ He took up the theme again the following year:

I believe that new effects could be achieved by executing genre scenes in historical proportions. Simple, familiar or romantic motifs would acquire, thus, an importance that one did not expect ...why should not modern real life receive the same honors as ancient and mythical life? Why should one not paint beggars, peasants, sailors, urban and rural women five foot high? ...What reason could we have for denying a child of today the proportions of the young Astyanax?⁵⁹

⁵⁵ "Il truelle sur de la toile à torchons, sans huile ni essence, des maçonneries de couleurs qu'aucun vernis ne pourrait désaltérer. Il est impossible de voir quelque chose de plus rugueux, de plus farouche, de plus hérissé, de plus inculte ; eh bien ! ce mortier, ce gâchis épais à retenir la brosse est d'une localité excellente, d'un ton fin et chaud quand on se recule à trois pas. Ce vanneur qui soulève son van de son genou déguenillé, et fait monter dans l'air, au milieu d'une colonne de poussière dorée, le grain de sa corbeille, se cambre de la manière la plus magistrale. Il est d'une couleur superbe ; le mouchoir rouge de sa tête, les pièces bleues de son vêtement délabré sont d'un caprice et d'un ragoût exquis. L'effet poudreux du grain qui s'éparpille en volant ne saurait mieux être rendu." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1848, La Presse*, 2 May 1848.

⁵⁶ *Le Vanneur*, first version 1847-1848. Gautier had earlier ardently praised Millet's rugged technique: Gautier, Théophile, *Salon de 1847* (Paris, 1947), 118. That Gautier did not entirely appreciate Millet's *Man with a Hoe* at the 1861 Salon—in company with the rest of the critical milieu—has become the basis for the perpetuated assumption or proof that he was "an enemy" of Millet. See, for example, Jean Bouret, *L'École du Barbizon et le paysage français du XIXe siècle* (Neuchâtel, 1972), 93, 187.

⁵⁷ Antigna, declared Gautier, "seeks more for truth than beauty" his manner recalls Caravaggio and El Greco and his work radiates "strength and a certain plebeian vigour" or savour which Gautier deemed "quite the order of the day." Gautier encouraged the artist "to persevere in this vein." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1848, La Presse*, 2 May 1848.

⁵⁸ For example: *Le Lendemain d'une tempête*. Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1846, La Presse*, 2 April 1846.

⁵⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1847* (Paris, 1847), 142-144.

Even more pointedly, the brutal force of Adolphe Leleux's 1847 self portrait inspired the critic to specifically advise him to work on a large canvass: "This vigorous study makes us wish to see Mr Leleux execute his genre subjects in the dimensions of an historical work."⁶⁰

Gustave Courbet's first Salon success, his *After Dinner at Ornans*, corresponded marvellously, therefore, with Gautier's recommendations—of which Courbet would certainly have been aware.⁶¹ Gautier was one of the few critics who were not hostile to this audaciously large genre painting. He sincerely praised its "banal provincial subject" executed in a "frank and masterful manner":

This powerful and lively painting has the charm of simple things and doesn't lack poetic feeling, as rough as it might appear to society ladies who prefer the troubadour style or Spanish dandies.

Gautier's enthusiasm for this controversial painting did not conflict with his admiration for the work of artists such as Delacroix or Couture. For him, "excellent, real and solid painting" would always deserve praise as long as there was life, colour, genuine artistic expression and a sincerity of execution.⁶² For Gautier, Courbet's painting worked because of the solid reality of his forms and the strong illusion of life: his figures "have a body under their garments....; they breathe, they look around them, their arms are attached to their shoulders, they would be able to stand up without losing their legs." "His talent grants him a place apart," continued Gautier, "he only takes after himself, ...M Courbet's pictorial manner is male, robust, a little heavy and rustic, but with all the healthy qualities of the country." Gautier even defends the supposed ugliness of the motif that critics such as Planche, Piesse and Delécluze deplored. Courbet, stated Gautier, "paints what he sees; too bad for the good Lord if the form is not beautiful and if the complexion is not delicate."⁶³

Thus, Gautier, whose influence at this moment in artistic history was considerable, was perfectly ready to support and encourage this young artist and to praise his originality. He acknowledged the young *Franc-comtois* as distinctly Realist, one of that category of Realists "who concern themselves little with the beautiful or the naive in art ... and take counsel only from nature."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1847* (Paris, 1847), 119-120. But, Adolphe Leleux headed for Africa with Hédouin and his brother, Armand, became enamored with Spain. The stage was set for the entrance of Gustave Courbet.

⁶¹ Until his *Après-dîner à Ornans*, Courbet certainly had not produced anything as blatantly Realist or original as had the Leleux brothers or Millet, or even been as bold as Boissard, Duveau or Antigna. Only his friend Champfleury would mention him in 1848, signalling his mediocre satirical painting *Walpurgis Night* and Haussard, briefly, who recognized a *caravaggèsque ciaro-sciuro* in his *Violoncellist*.

⁶² "Any hideous beggar, blotched by the sun and covered in grime by Ribeira, is beautiful, while a charming Greek hero who resembles a wax head is abominable." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1845*, *La Presse*, 16 April 1845.

⁶³ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1849*, *La Presse*, 8 August 1849.

⁶⁴ It is quite natural that in Gautier's commentary there is an echo of those praises he levelled at Leleux; Courbet had precursors other than the Realist masters of Spain and Flanders; whatever his friend, Champfleury, or he himself, might have professed. "I have studied, outside of any system and without prejudice, the art of the ancients and the art of the moderns ...I have had no more wish to imitate the one lot than to copy

Courbet's *After Dinner*, was not, however, the only life-size genre painting at the Salon. There was also Antigna's *Widow*, which depicted a family mourning the death of the father and which, reflected Gautier, conveyed a powerful and "pathetic feeling of reality."⁶⁵ Neither was the *After Dinner at Ornans* the most disturbingly Realist work at the Salon, nor was it the most politically or socially provocative. This honor or dishonor was the domain of two works inspired directly by the horrific June days in 1848, where the artists had, without prejudice and without resource to blatant propaganda, expressed most powerfully, Gautier believed, the horror of the June debacle.⁶⁶ At least, remarked the critic:

These terrible and disastrous June days will have produced two masterpieces: *The Word of Command* by Leleux and *The Street*, by Meissonier. On these mounds of paving stones and corpses, art has already germinated two flowers, tragic flowers, drooping and tainted with blood, which will be all that remains of these horrifying massacres.⁶⁷

It was Ernest Meissonier, usually the painter of "peaceful beer drinkers," who gave the martyrs of the barricades "a banner" other than that of misery, a Republican banner, and Adolphe Leleux, who managed to illustrate the ideological confusion of the moment through his "mysterious word of command."⁶⁸

In Meissonier's *The Street after the June Days*, a work sketched on sight and shocking in its Realism, Gautier perceived the symbolic death of the newly won Republican aspirations:

the others. ...I have wished simply to draw from the entire traditional knowledge a reasoned and independent awareness of my own individuality." Courbet, cited in Courthion, Pierre, *Courbet par lui-même et par ses amis*, vol. II (Paris, 1848), 60. "This life size interior, these family portraits disguised as colossal genre paintings, are strangely novel; this has never been done before, which is precisely Mr Courbet's singular merit and the audacious coup of his talent." Champfleury, 1849 (cited by A. Tabarant, *La Vie artistique au temps de Baudelaire*, Paris: Mercure de France, p. 146).

⁶⁵ Antigna's, *Veuve*, which Champfleury chose to ignore, reaffirmed Gautier in his belief that simple everyday subjects were as deserving of being executed on as large a scale as historical or mythological works: "since why should the pain of a worker's wife having lost her husband not be shown in life size as would be that of Andromaque having lost Hector? Isn't this event just as interesting to us?" Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1849, La Presse*, 4 August 1849.

⁶⁶ As it is important politically not to confuse the February and the June uprisings, the one full of hope and camaraderie and the other chaos and confusion—where it was difficult to know which side was actually defending Republican ideals—so it is important to be clear in our artistic analysis.

⁶⁷ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1849, La Presse*, 8 August 1849.

⁶⁸ Nevertheless, just as Gautier's art criticism has often been misinterpreted because of a false assumption of his conservatism, so the works of Meissonier and Leleux have been misunderstood, maligned and undervalued, because it was decided that these two artists were not clearly enough on the side of the people. Since many of those who had been on the barricades in February were totally confused about June and kept a very safe distance, and since it was the Republic which called on the National Guard, this approach is invalid.

On the front of the barricade is sprawled a corpse dressed in deep red trousers and a blue smock, which, in the gap between them, reveals the bloodless, white flesh of the chest. This juxtaposition of tones, disturbingly bizarre, recalls the colors of the *Tricolore*. This corpse, streaked thus with color, resembles the overthrown flag of the uprising.⁶⁹

For Gautier, this work, in “all its horrific beauty”—which recalled for him Ribera, Salvator Rosa and El Greco—and with its strength of hand and “astonishing drawing science,” was “a page of historical exactitude like a judicial report, without emphasis, without rhetoric, a specimen of that real truth that nobody wishes to utter,” and which “sends shivers down the spine.” The fact that the artist had been able to keep his *sang froid* and reproduce what he saw made it, in Gautier’s opinion, both a more powerful work of art and a more powerful statement than an exaggerated or idealized depiction of the scene would have been.⁷⁰

For the most part, other critics were simply scandalized by its realism. Similarly, confronted with Leleux’s *Word of Command*,⁷¹ the critical consensus was incomprehension at the choice of subject. Why paint the dirty and the uncouth of Paris?⁷² Even the *salonnist* from the Republican newspaper *Le National*, Prosper Haussard, generally more sympathetic than most to Realism, demanded a more heroic and idealized approach to the events of the day. He declared that where politics are introduced into art the work must “exalt the truth, the great and the beautiful in social crises,” rather than paint their brutal reality.⁷³

Gautier, by contrast, although he had always deemed Leleux’s scenes from Breton, Spanish or Arabic life, “good subjects” for art, felt that Leleux’s *Word of Command* demonstrated progress in the artist’s work. While remaining perfectly real and without “sacrificing his firmness of brushstroke, his naïve design or his fidelity to detail,” Leleux had added “a new element; the dramatization of the truth,” he had created a work which made the spectator think. And part of the work’s power, like in Meissonier’s *Street*, was its lack of obvious or partisan propaganda.⁷⁴

That it was Gautier, who commented the most favorably on these works and he alone who recognized both their artistic value and their symbolic significance,⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *La Rue après les Journées de Juin*. Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1849*, *La Presse*, 8 August 1849.

⁷⁰ The goal of Realism, Linda Nochlin informs us, is to represent, in a true, objective and impartial manner, the real world, based on an acute observation of everyday life. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Middlesex, 1971), 13. This is surely then one of the most frankly Realist works of the moment.

⁷¹ This painting is often erroneously thought to depict the February uprising, which accounts for some of the confusion about its significance and the artist’s intended message. Gautier and Leleux knew each other well; they were in fact close friends from the Doyenné days. Thus, if Gautier believed this work to depict the June days, it almost certainly did.

⁷² See for example: F. Lagenevais, *Salon de 1849*, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 July 1849, ser. 6, t. 3, 1849: 574-575.

⁷³ Prosper Haussard, *Salon de 1850-51*, *Le National*, 22 January 1851.

⁷⁴ As early as 1842, Gautier had acclaimed Adolphe Leleux’s ability to “copy nature as it is without peering through glasses tainted by a particular perspective on things.” Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1842*, *Cabinet de l’Amateur*, 1842: 125.

⁷⁵ An astute analysis, for which T.J. Clark, at least, gives him some credit. Clark, T.J.,

totally disproves the common presumption of Gautier's total lack of interest in art as an expression of the events and issues of the day. In fact, in 1848, Gautier had asserted that art was a "summary of civilization," that "in every epoch, and with all peoples," art "is always the most vivid and the most complete expression of the state of civilization; a faithful mirror which reflects the morals, the habits, the tastes, the needs and the hopes of a nation." This mirror must though, to be genuine, reflect the evils of that civilization as well as its glories:

The painter has an advantage over the historian in that he does not have to formulate a doctrine, to take obvious sides with this or that party; he simply exposes and proceeds with images as mute as nature: it is up to the spectator to draw his own conclusions about the meaning of his paintings. Only the painter can render subjects of such bloody actuality, without condemning the vanquished, without praising the victors.⁷⁶

But the realities of June 1848 were disturbing to all and incomprehensible even to the majority of Republicans. Nevertheless, while other *avant-garde* critics such as Haussard saw only the "ugliness" of Leleux's *Sortie*—another work inspired by the June days and exhibited at the following Salon (1850-51)—Gautier perceived the power of its Realism. This work, depicting the distraught women of the people watching their men folk leave for the June barricades, a scene "portrayed with a chilling truth" and with a "rugged and brutal frankness," conveyed to him the horror and despair of all women faced with war and insurrection. Gautier was, therefore, unperturbed by the realistic element of even the most controversial of works.

In his *Salon of 1850-51*, Gautier consecrated an entire article to Gustave Courbet's celebrated and audacious contribution. He warmly praised the *Stonebreakers*—how could he have done otherwise, its likeness to Millet's early works is striking⁷⁷—and totally accepted the moral or social power of this image of "two poor devils" labouring "on this arid and rocky terrain" and "wearing rags that barely cover them, which bare witness to the harshness of their job." Quite probably provoked by the exaggerated claims of the work's political or even socialist comment by the likes of Proudhon, he added that these poor labourers "do not in the least appear to be making a socialist declaration; they have not the time and protest silently against the unfair distribution of wages with the ragged edges of their trousers and the holes in their shirts."⁷⁸ However, this silent protest was, for Gautier, more powerful than a blatantly partisan or propagandist image, like that proposed by Proudhon.⁷⁹

The Absolute Bourgeois 1848-1851 (London, 1973), 23-25.

⁷⁶ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51*, *La Presse*, 11 April 1851.

⁷⁷ Particularly to Millet's "Wood Sawyers" and "Quarrymen" of c1847. However, at this Salon, Gautier still considers Millet's *Sower* to be the best and most powerful representation of peasantry: "...he is bony, gaunt and scrawny under his livery of misery, and yet life pours forth from his large hand, and with a superb gesture, he who has nothing, scatters on the earth the bread of the future." Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51*, *La Presse*, 15 March 1851.

⁷⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51*, *La Presse*, 15 February 1851.

⁷⁹ Proudhon would have liked Courbet to juxtapose his stonebreakers with a noble's castle to enhance the work's message. P-J Proudhon, *Du Principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (1865; reprint, Paris, 1971), 208-211.

Gautier also found much to praise in the *Burial at Ornans*: a profound sentiment of human suffering in some of the afflicted figures, a “stifling, sinister, heavy” sky “well in harmony with this melancholy ceremony,” “a grand local tone, refined and true, a simple but masterly effect.” But, unfortunately, in the critic’s opinion, Courbet had not remained sufficiently serious: “his intention is not clear” and “one does not know whether one must laugh or cry.” Some of the people in the procession “fall too easily into the category of caricature [the two beadles certainly]. In addition, one finds for the most part, instead of distressed family mourners,” local characters “gathered together in a rather artificial manner.”⁸⁰ Without wishing that Courbet paint stereotypical or “conventional heads” Gautier believed that the artist’s approach to the subject diminished the interest of the work for the general public:

...there is a vast distance between the liberal study of nature, fashioned to the meaning of the scene one wishes to render, and this juxtaposition of portraits which do not concur at all with what is expressed, and seem to isolate themselves in their resemblance to each other.

Gautier did not waver in his conviction that familiar or everyday subjects deserved, as much as the glorious exploits of official history, to be executed on large scale canvasses, but he hesitated about the too familiar or even personalised element in *The Burial*. It “is only by sticking to a more general” perspective, and thus avoiding an “exaggerated individualism, which could make this sort of subject ridiculous, that genre painting will attain its rightful status,” he insisted. If his commentary had a didactic tone and was somewhat severe at times, he explained:

We have been very severe with Mr. Courbet; but he is strong enough to take it; he possesses enough robust qualities to support criticism. We have insisted on his faults because he does not lack flatterers.⁸¹

Whatever Gautier’s reserve concerning Courbet’s intentions and motivation, in an article concerning the distribution of prizes, the critic displayed considerable indignation at the fact that Courbet had been passed over:

He took the Salon by storm; he combines with faults, about which we have strongly berated him, superior qualities and an indisputable originality; he inspired the public and the artists.... He should have been given a first class medal.⁸²

Nonetheless, Gautier began to suspect Courbet of artistic insincerity and soon accused him of being “brutal” in his artistic approach just for effect, of being a “mannerist in ugliness.”⁸³ He suspected the artist of having exaggerated the coarse or

⁸⁰ They were in actual fact precisely that, Courbet’s compatriots who turned up one by one at his studio in the hope of having their portrait included in the work. (Letter to Champfleury in Champfleury, *Souvenirs et Portraits de jeunesse* (Paris, 1872), 174.)

⁸¹ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51*, *La Presse*, 15 February 1851.

⁸² Théophile Gautier, *L’Artiste*, 15 May 1851.

⁸³ His justification for this judgement is the artist’s self-portrait exhibited at the same Salon, *Man Smoking his Pipe*, whose style is in direct contrast to Courbet’s other contributions that year, especially to that of his *Burial*. Gautier praised this work with a certain irony: “It’s a beautiful head, very proud, very elegant, for which M. Courbet

trivial elements of his subjects intentionally, in order to draw attention to his work or in order to please his two champions Proudhon and Champfleury.

One must remember that Gautier's main cry throughout his critical career was for the freedom of art and artistic expression, but a freedom coupled with absolute sincerity of intention. While an artist was a product of his or her environment or that his or her work reflected that environment was inevitable, even desirable, as long as the artist's inspiration was genuine and not contrived or manipulated. The moment an artist allowed him or herself to be persuaded to blatantly promote an idea or began to manipulate his or her work in order to better express a particular philosophy or doctrine—a prostitution of talent—the work was not only in danger of being artistically inferior but the idea itself would also lose its impact.

This, in truth, is the essence of Gautier's aesthetic, which ironically embraces Realism just as easily as it does idealism or fantasy. The artist must be free to

reflect in his work, whether he shares them or whether he rejects them, the loves, the hates, the passions, the beliefs and the prejudices of his times, on the condition that the sacredness of art will always remain his goal and not his tool.⁸⁴

What then remains to tie Gautier irrefutably to the notion of “Art for Art's Sake” or to support the accepted idea that he was the arch enemy of Realism, of an art depicting contemporary society or even of an art with social or political influence? Gautier certainly did not advocate our rather “Cousinian” perception of the notion “Art for Art's Sake,” nor the more frivolous, irrelevant and superficial perception of an André Gide, nor was he an enemy of Realism; in fact he was one of its principal champions. The fact that Courbet executed real subjects, provincial subjects, or even that his early paintings were often construed as being politically controversial, neither unduly concerned Gautier nor clouded his judgment; these were all areas of expression that the critic had accepted and supported since the early 1840s and continued to promote:

One is in error, in our opinion, to affect a positive repugnance or rather a positive disdain for purely contemporary figures. We believe, for our part, that there are new effects, unexpected possibilities in the intelligent and honest representation of what we term modernity.⁸⁵

It was his distrust of Courbet's motivation and his annoyance at the claim—by both the artist and his champions—that Courbet was the only painter of reality, that his talent was totally original and unique, that greatly angered Gautier and affected, for a brief period, the critic's famous “objectivity.”⁸⁶ This claim took no account of

has departed from his usual method; he has idealized [and] beautified himself, and executed with careful and clever brushwork [this work] in the accepted way.”

⁸⁴ Théophile Gautier, *Le Beau dans L'Art, Revue des deux Mondes*, 1 September 1847: 901.

⁸⁵ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1852, La Presse*, 27 May, 1852.

⁸⁶ To hear them speak, the young master had recently discovered nature, which nobody had noticed before him; compared to him everyone was a mannerist; he alone had simplicity, naivety, truth.” Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1852, La Presse*, 11 May 1852.

artists such as Leleux,⁸⁷ Millet or Daumier, Courbet's precursors and contemporaries. Nevertheless, Gautier never doubted Courbet's talent and would continue to praise his works—particularly his landscapes—long after his champions had ceased to be interested in him.⁸⁸ Courbet is a true artist, affirmed Gautier: “the real painter, without knowing it, leaves his particular stamp on his work; he signs each brush stroke or always imbues his work with something of himself.” That is, continued the critic, “when one is sincere and does not look at creation through academic glasses”;⁸⁹ or through any other glasses for that matter.

When viewed without preconceived ideas and analysed in the context of the social and artistic developments of the time, Gautier re-emerges quite simply as one of the most complete and the most important critics of the mid-nineteenth-century. His open-mindedness, coupled with his acute and dispassionate judgement, is invaluable for our comprehensive, unbiased understanding of the artistic developments of this vibrant period in the evolution of art. His adulation of Delacroix becomes as comprehensible as his praise of Ingres, his admiration for Couture and Chassériau as credible as his support of and esteem for Leleux, Millet or Courbet.

Gautier's primary “social and political” commitment was always to art and to the artists. In 1852, for example, when the hopes of Republican liberty and freedom of expression were all but dead, Gautier attempted to maintain his optimism and once again came out in defence of young artists and of the much criticized new artistic developments. He appealed to the government and to industry to support “all these disparate talents” in danger of disappearing, in danger of being wasted and from which it would be possible to create a “radiant sheath” of future art:

We do not represent dusk but a dawn, and that which we take for decadence is quite simply a renaissance. The nineteenth-century, a crucial period in human history, is seeking the formula for new generations and it will find it. In the meantime, each one is bringing to light his or her own personality; for want of ideas, dreams transpire; one experiments, one studies, one feels one's way, one adopts past recipes, one invents others. If the brain is uncertain, the hand is sure; aptitude is shared by all; it is rare to find a blunderer and, if all these people here had something to express, how well they would express it!⁹⁰

Thus, to ignore or to sideline Gautier, the highly respected “feuilletoniste” and art critic of his time, is not only to ignore half the man, but is also to deprive posterity of some of the most illuminating and comprehensive commentaries on nineteenth-century French art ever penned. Furthermore, it is to disregard the works of many artists unjustly discounted by later generations because Gautier—and sometimes

⁸⁷ “Adolphe Leleux, well before M Courbet, had executed realist works, but without exaggeration, without charlatanism, without posturing.... With a strong and naïve painting he rendered all the aspects of rustic life with a brutally honest brush, but which did not vilify either the ugliness or the poverty.” Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1853, La Presse*, 21 July 1853.

⁸⁸ He was the most ardent admirer of Courbet's landscapes and also, almost alone, he praised Courbet's 1866 *Woman with a Parrot*. Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1866, Moniteur universel*, 4 July 1866.

⁸⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1850-51, La Presse*, 15 February 1851.

⁹⁰ Théophile Gautier, *Salon de 1852, La Presse*, 4 May 1852.

Thoré and Haussard too—supported and encouraged them, but Baudelaire, Champfleury or Zola did not.