GAUTIER CRITIQUE : LIBERTÉ, FRATERNITÉ ET LA DÉFENSE DU RÉALISME

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Thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

After a century of misrepresentation, the importance of Théophile Gautier’s art criticism in our understanding of the art and artists of the Romantic and Realist periods is beginning to be recognized. There are, however, two important areas, which require attention; two particular aesthetical questions that are responsible for the majority of the misconceptions, misunderstandings are “out of context” quotations relating to Gautier’s aesthetic values and the nature of his art criticism.

Firstly there is the question of Art for Art’s sake. It is necessary to ask what this notion signified to the Romantic generation in France and what it signified to Théophile Gautier in particular. It is equally important to ascertain whether our rather narrow contemporary perception of the notion of Art for Art’s sake is compatible with Gautier’s ardent fight for the freedom of artistic expression at a time when every republican, utilitarian and utopian movement was demanding art’s involvement in, even subservience to, its particular cause and goal:

Art as propaganda, social art, prophetic art? A tendency to associate Gautier with a perception of this aesthetic as the advocate of a purely formalist even “classical” or ideal art, devoid of ideas, where sentiment is purely instinctive and where the artist observes total impartiality towards his subject and to his creation in general, has lead to false assumptions about Gautier’s lack of political and social involvement or commitment and even to accusations of conservatism.

The second area where Gautier’s aesthetic vision and critical role has been much maligned and continues to be so — partly due to misconceptions relating to the first question — is that of Realism and, in particular, that of his attitude to the artist who epitomizes the French Realist movement of the nineteenth century for us today, Gustave Courbet. What did the term Realism signify to Gautier and his fellow critics and what was the nature of the Courbet’s Realism in comparison with that of other Realists, his contemporaries and his precursors?

That Gautier’s comments relating to Courbet and to his art are still frequently cried out of their temporal or textual context has been particularly detrimental to our comprehension of Gautier’s art criticism and has contributed to the perpetuation of the idea that the critic was hostile to any form of social art or Realism. That Gautier was, in fact, one of the first avant-garde critics to encourage and support the renaissance of Realism in France, the first to talk of a Realist School and one of the few critics to support Courbet’s early artistic success, is generally overlooked.
In this work I have attempted to address these questions in the context of this particularly turbulent period of French history, with the hope of redressing some of the misconceptions relating to Gautier's art criticism, artistic vision and appreciation. Also, with a view to re-establishing the critic in the illustrious position that he held among his peers and from which posterity unjustly ousted him, it has been necessary to look at his criticism in general, in comparison with that of other avant-garde critics of the period.

Part one therefore considers the notions of liberty and of Art for Art's sake and discusses the complex perceptions of art's role in this society of the industrial revolution, a society in almost constant political and social metamorphosis.

The second section looks at the critical climate, the aims and the nature of Gautier's art criticism from his critical début to his maturity — that is from soon after the July Revolution through to the eve of the revolutionary turmoil of 1848 — and compares his artistic vision and expectations with those of his fellow critics.

Part three deals with the renaissance of the Realist aesthetic in France. Gautier's role in it and that of artists, such as the Leleux brothers, who were subsequently overshadowed by Courbet's rather dramatic entrance into the art world and unjustly ignored by posterity. While the dreams of liberty — and dreams of republican support for artists — fail with the collapse of the Republic, Realism, or the direct interpretation of nature or of contemporary life, is nevertheless victorious. This victory is partly due to Courbet's audaciousness but also to the talent, persistence and sincerity of artists like Leleux, Duveau, Antigna, Millet, Bonvin. His, Daumier and the landscape artists of the new school. It is also due to the encouragement and support of a celebrated critic like Théophile Gautier.

A comprehensive study of Gautier's art criticism inevitably reveals his relentless support of artistic innovation and experiment and his tireless fight for the freedom of art and artistic expression. His struggle to ensure art's freedom from undue political and social manipulation, from outmoded and oppressive academic restrictions and from the mediocre artistic values of the industrial bourgeoisie, seems, in fact, to constitute his Art for Art's sake and therefore calls into question our habit of so closely linking his name with our rather conservative perception of this aesthetic.
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