

Théophile Gautier and the Orient

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Abstract: In her article, "Théophile Gautier and the Orient," F. Elizabeth Dahab discusses the function of the Orient in general, and in particular, the function of Ancient Egypt in some of Gautier's *contes fantastiques* written between 1835 and 1857. Gautier and many of his contemporaries including Baudelaire wanted to escape from a society dominated by the idea of progress. They expressed deep doubt in many of their texts and strived to find solace in the notion of permanence in art characteristic of Ancient Egyptian architecture and mortuary customs. They also believed that Ancient Egypt may provide an answer to humanity's quest for immortality. Their opposition to progress may also explain at least in part Gautier's personal obsession with Ancient Egypt. Since Gautier visited Egypt only three years before his death, it becomes of great interest to scholars of culture and literature to determine the influence Ancient Egypt has made in his writing and to refer to the accuracy of his accounts, notably in *Le Roman de la momie* (1857).

F. Elizabeth DAHAB

Théophile Gautier and the Orient

In the cult of beauty professed by Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), the Orient played a significant role. Five years after his death, two volumes edited by Charpentier, bearing the title *L'Orient, voyages et voyageurs* (1877) relate Gautier's account of his travels to the Near East and his various exposures, through paintings and exhibits, to the Far East. Gautier's first initiations to the Orient was his voyage to Spain in 1840, to Algeria in 1845, and to Constantinople in 1852. He also visited Marseilles, Malta, and Smyrna on that occasion where he complained: "Je songe au Caire et à l'egypte" (Boschot xxvii). Egypt, which he managed to visit only three years before his death, despite his yearning to do so throughout his life, occupied more than two thirds of the second volume of *L'Orient*. The Orient had several precise functions in Gautier's imagination and consequently in his writing. To begin with, it served as an alternative to the West. Fortunio, the protagonist of the novel bearing the same title, upon leaving Paris to go back to his native India, says the following, which can be taken as Gautier's orientalist manifesto: "Adieu, vielle Europe qui te crois jeune; tâche d'inventer une machine à vapeur pour confectionner de belles femmes, et trouve un nouveau gaz pour remplacer le soleil. -- Je vais en Orient, c'est plus simple" (219). The Orient was for Gautier and his friends, Nerval, Baudelaire, Villiers de L'Isle Adam, Barbey D'Aurevilly, Arsène Houssaye, and many others, that *elsewhere* where they could find beauty and escape from the ugliness of their society. A whole generation revolving around Baudelaire rebelled against *l'esprit bourgeois* of the *monarchie de Juillet*, with its utilitarian world view which could be summed up by such notions as money, work, progress, and utility. The writer-Dandy found it more and more stifling to live in a city beladen by industrial and demographical expansion. He rebelled against work as an enslaving power (*Mademoiselle de Maupin* 46-47; *Mon coeur mis à nu* 64); against the materialism imported from *L'Amérique*, and especially against the idea of progress, an idea made up of the sum of all that is useful, with its implicit rejection of genius and its denial of individuality. Gautier expresses this in his famous preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835): "A-t-on inventé un seul péché capital de plus?" (48), and Baudelaire will echo him in *Mon coeur mis à nu*: "il ne peut y avoir de progrès (vrai, c'est-à-dire moral) que dans l'individu et par l'individu lui-même" (94).

The notion of usefulness when it comes to the mission of the work of art was totally outrageous in the eyes of those writers who, like Gautier himself, dedicated their life to the pursuit of beauty. Thus Gautier's famous utterance which caused a great scandal at the time: "Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien: tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature -- L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines" (*Mademoiselle de Maupin* 45). For those weary of Western civilization, around 1840, the Orient represented an *elsewhere* of beauty where they could leave behind the daily mediocrity of life and the narrowness of human nature. For a long time, and as early as 1833, when he started writing *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier dreamt of happiness in the guise of Greek beauty and the Oriental, more precisely, Arabic sensuality. Here is how Gautier makes D'Albert in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* describe "supreme happiness": "C'est un grand bâtiment carré sans fenêtre au dehors: une grande cour entourée d'une colonnade de marbre blanc, au milieu une fontaine de cristal avec un jet de vif-argent à la manière arabe, des caisses d'orangers et de grenadiers posées alternativement; par là-dessus un ciel très bleu et un soleil très jaune; -- de grands lévriers au museau de brochet dormiraient ça et là... Moi, je serais là, immobile, silencieux, sous un dais magnifique, entouré de piles de carreaux, un grand lion privé sous mon coude, la gorge nu d'une jeune esclave sous mon pied en manière d'escabeau, et fumant de l'opium dans une grande pipe en jade" (210).

There, in this decorum, the only possible sensations are a great well-being or peacefulness amidst beauty and a sweet state of remoteness caused by opium. In fact, three years after the publication of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier published "La Pipe d'opium," a short tale which appeared in *La Presse* in 1838, and where the effect of opium is translated into a spiritual communion between two lovers whose respective souls are transparent to each other. For Gautier, the Orient is first and foremost Ancient Egypt. He had a lifelong passion for this land which he considered his true native

land, a fact which made him assert: "Je suis Turc, non de Constantinople, mais d'Egypte. Il me semble que j'ai vécu en Orient ... J'ai toujours été surpris de ne pas entendre parler l'Arabe; il faut que je l'ai oublié" (qtd. in Boschot xxxv). The interesting point here is that Gautier has written all his works of fiction revolving around Egypt before he ever set foot in that country. In 1837, he began a project of a ballet called *Cléopatra*. Nothing came of it, but a year later, he published "Une nuit de Cléopâtre" (1838), a short story where the Egyptian queen grants a night of love to a young man who loves her more than life and who agrees to be put to death at dawn. Two years later, in 1840, Gautier published a forty-page gem, a *conte fantastique* which bears the influence of Hoffmann: "Le Pied de momie" (for work about the genre, see, e.g., Castex). Here, the protagonist buys, in a Parisian antique shop, a paper-weight which is nothing other than a mummy's foot. The same night, Princess Hermonthis to whom the foot belongs, visits him, reclaims her foot, and as a reward, takes him back in time to the days of the Pharaohs and to visit her father. In 1842, Gautier publishes one more *conte fantastique*, "La Mille et deuxième nuit." As the title suggests, it relates yet another story by Shéhérazade: a young man in love with a Peri, a supernatural, angel-like being common in Middle-Eastern mythology. (It is interesting to note that Edgar Poe came up with a tale, "La Mille et deuxième nuit de Schéhérazade," published in 1869. It is available in French as a children's picture-book.) A year later Gautier wrote the script for a ballet called *La Péri*, based on his 1842 *conte*. It was put into music by Josef Burgmuller, and presented at the Opera in July 1843 where it enjoyed a tremendous success. In 1857, Gautier produced his acclaimed masterpiece, a culmination of more than two decades of interest in Ancient Egypt: *Le Roman de la momie* in which he depicts Lord Evandale who discovers a tomb in Egypt, that of Queen Tahoser. Evandale falls in love with her retrospectively, takes her mummy to London, and suffers a life-long alienation owing to his impossible passion. The novel also relates the story of Tahoser and the Pharaoh's love for her.

Gautier's fascination with Ancient Egypt has been linked to his antipathy towards what he labeled "modern barbarity," as well as to his obsession with mortality, decay, and the passage of time (see, e.g., Smith). The importance of time is stressed in all the narratives related to Egypt, and a strong link is found to exist between art and time. Craftsmanship and embalming techniques defy the effects of time, and thus, in a sense, preserve life. Egyptian architecture with its grandiosity, and the ethos this grandiosity reveals, conveys a sense of eternity and a concern for permanence unknown to Western sensibilities. Thus, in *Le Roman de la momie*, Lord Evandale and his companions, as they uncover the content of Tahoser's tomb, marvel at the exquisite jewelry, beautiful figurines, and valuable objects of personal toiletry buried with the mummy. Furthermore, everything possible was done to protect the body from annihilation and destruction, a concern Gautier finds touching and noble, one that approximates progress better than any Western notion of progress: "Peut-être, répondit Lord Evandale tout pensif, notre civilisation, que nous croyons culminante, n'est-elle qu'une décadence profonde.... Nous sommes stupidement fiers de quelques ingénieux mécanismes récemment inventés, et nous ne pensons pas aux colossales splendeurs, aux énormités irréalisables pour tout autre peuple que l'antique terre des Pharaons. Nous avons la vapeur; mais la vapeur est moins forte que la pensée qui élevait les pyramides, creusait les hypogées, taillait les montagnes en sphinx, en obélisques, couvrait les salles d'un seul bloc que tous nos engins ne sauraient remuer, ciselaient des chapelles monolithes et savait défendre contre le néant la fragile dépouille humaine, tant elle avait le sens de l'éternité" (53). Fascinated by the findings in the tomb of little pretty, intact figurines of divinities offered by family and friends at the burial site, instead of flowers which wilt so fast, Lord Evandale further comments: "seulement, nos fleurs se fanent vite, et après plus de trois mille ans, le témoignage de ces antiques douleurs se retrouvent intacts, car l'Egypte ne peut rien faire que d'éternel" (37).

In *Le Pied de momie*, when the protagonist returns to his apartment where the mummy's foot had been kept for a few hours, he is struck by the suave fragrance with which he is met at the doorstep and that four thousand years could not alter. He exclaims, admiringly: "Le rêve de l'Egypte était l'éternité: ses odeurs ont la solidité du granit, et durent autant" (180). When Princess Hermonthis takes him to her time and place of burial, he asks for her hand (in exchange for her foot: "La main pour le pied me paraissait une récompense antithétique d'assez bon goût" 192) from her father who flatly refuses because of his concern for durability, and the transience of the young man's existence

compared to that of a three-thousand year old girl: "Ma fille Hermonthis durera plus qu'une statue de bronze. Alors le vent aura dispersé le dernier grain de ta poussière" (192).

Since happiness could not exist in this world, then let the splendors of bygone civilizations be revived and solace be found in those historical recollections. This seems to be another function the Orient plays in Gautier's *imaginaire*. In both *Le Pied de momie* and *Le Roman de la momie*, the protagonist experiences intense pleasure when they manage to travel back in time. While exploring a crypt, Lord Evandale describes his intense sensation of being transported to a different epoch (45-46) and the near religious experience he goes through before being jolted back to reality by his companion: "Il lui sembla, d'après l'expression de Shakespeare, que "la roue du temps était sortie de son ornière": la notion de la vie moderne s'effaçait chez lui. ... Une main invisible avait retourné le sablier de l'éternité, et les siècles, tombés grain à grain comme des heures dans la solitude et la nuit, recommençaient leur chute" (45).

In 1844, Gautier explained in an article published in *La Presse* his fascination with the Orient. He gives two reasons, a political one: the siege of Algiers, and a literary one, *Les Orientales* of Victor Hugo which he had read as a young man and where Hugo had suggested that the whole continent was leaning towards the Orient. Later in his life, India, which Gautier never visited, attracted him. He devoted to it some of his works of fiction: *Fortunio* (1838), first published under the title *L'Eldorado* (1837) in *Le Figaro*, *Avatar* (1856), *Spirite* (1866) as well as *Çakuntala* (1858). To explain his intense interest in Egypt, Gautier claims the influence of Orientalist painters such as Marilhat -- who had painted on the wall of Gautier's apartment three palm trees and a mosque -- as well as the influence of his writer-friends such as Nerval, Maxime du Camp, and Flaubert (*L'Orient*, 186-88). But are these the sole pointers to the direction Gautier took?

The vogue of Egypt began in France before 1789 and blossomed with Napoleon's expedition in 1798 and thanks to the group of scholars who accompanied him, as well as to the creation of the Egyptian Institute (see El Nouty). Need we remind that before 1830, Champollion had deciphered the Rosetta stone; that his *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie* appeared between 1835 and 1845 and was preceded by Champollion-Figeac's *L'Égypte ancienne* in 1840, and Lenormant's *Le Musée des antiquités égyptiennes au Louvre* in 1830. Gautier's romantic imagination had been struck by this country to which Chateaubriand had devoted several chapters in his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811). Gautier had read Antoine Galland's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704). In fact, *Le Roman de la momie* has its direct sources from Ernest Feydeau's *Histoire des usages funèbres et des sépultures des peuples anciens* (1856). Gautier had written a glowing review of this book in *Le Moniteur universel*, and shortly after, he befriended Feydeau who put at Gautier's disposal the many engravings he had brought back with him and that Gautier spent a whole winter studying before writing *Le Roman de la momie* (Gautier then dedicated the book to Feydeau). Maxime Du Camp's book, *Le Nil. Égypte et Nubie* (1853) also provided a host of details to Gautier. He effected marvellous "art transpositions" from the visuals and the accounts he was provided with. The result was a very accurate and yet dazzling account of the ancient city of Thebes, of the underground tombs, of the valley of Biban el Molûk, of the sarcophagi, the embalming techniques, and the customs and beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians.

Obviously, Gautier had to rely intensively on his friends' accounts and impressions. That his friends' influence was notable in his passion for Egypt is revealed in an open letter he wrote in 1843 to Nerval while the writer was visiting Egypt. Not being able to join him there, Gautier consoles himself with the Oriental decor of the ballet, *La Péri*: "J'aurais bien voulu, mon cher Gérard, t'aller rejoindre au Caire, comme je te l'avais promis... J'aimerais me promener en devisant avec toi au bord du Nil... Ne pouvant te suivre, je me suis fait construire un Orient et un Caire, rue Le Peletier, à l'Académie royale de musique et de danse" (qtd. in Boschot xxiii). When Nerval returned from Cairo, he came back with the making of his book, *Voyage en Orient*, and he gave Gautier a mesmerizing account of the Orient in general, Cairo, The Nile, Beyrouth, as well as a host of Egyptian traditions, especially with regard to women and marriage. Since he had traveled with an Egyptologist, Nerval was also able to provide his friend with historical details. Flaubert traveled to Egypt with Maxime du Camp in 1849 and brought back a travel diary which was published only after his death and which nevertheless provided ample opportunity for inspiring conversations with Gautier. At the Salon annuel of 1833, Gautier saw a painting which made on him a "profound and bizarre impression" (188): it was a painting by Prosper

Marilhat, "a singular and violent" painting (*L'Orient* 187-88) depicting *La Place de l'Esbekieh au Caire*. Gautier was so enchanted that fourteen years later he gave from memory a detailed and precise description of it. He asserts in his book on the Orient that Marilhat's painting bore an "incredible ferocity of colour" and a "terrible, blinding light" (*L'Orient*, 187-88). This provided him with a basis from which his fantasies departed on fantastic errands on the narrow streets of old Cairo where Haroun Al Raschid and his faithful vizier had strolled (*L'Orient*, 189-190). In his own words: "On se fait des villes que dès l'enfance on a souhaité voir et que l'on a longtemps habités en rêve, un plan fantastique bien difficile à effacer.... Nous, notre Caire, bâti avec les matériaux des *Mille et une nuits*, se groupait autour de la Place de l'Esbekieh de Marilhat" (*L'Orient* 187-88) and "Aucun tableau ne fit sur moi une impression plus profonde et plus longtemps vibrante. j'aurais peur d'être taxé d'exagération en disant que la vue de cette peinture me rendit malade et m'inspira la nostalgie de l'Orient où je n'avais jamais mis le pied. Je crus que je venais de connaître ma vraie patrie" (see Boschot xxxiv). And the opening sentence of *La Mille et deuxième nuit* locates the protagonist on the very same Esbekieh Square painted by Marilhat: "Il y avait une fois dans la ville du Caire un jeune homme nommé Mahmoud-Ben-Ahmed, qui demeurait sur la place de l'Esbekieh" (224). It is interesting to note the existence of a *Mille et deuxième nuit* in French, with a totally different content than Gautier's and illustrated in the manner of a children's book. It is attributed to Poe, under the caption of "conte inédit."

As an art critic, Gautier was well acquainted with the achievements of the Orientalist painters whose works representing Egypt, Syria, or Turkey elicited and fortified his nostalgic imagination. At the beginning, it was such painters as Dauzats, Decamps, Marilhat, Célestin Nanteuil, Camille Rogier, and Corot: Orientalist themes were much in fashion in 1830. There had been earlier influences such as Delacroix's *Massacres de Scio* (1823) and other such vibrant paintings inspired by the painter's trip to Algeria and Morocco, such as *Femmes d'Alger* (1834). Gautier agreed with Delacroix that for painters to go to Algeria was as necessary an endeavour as going to Italy: they would find, in Algeria "primitive and biblical traditions." When Gautier gives a description of Ingres' *L'Odalisque couchée*, he sees in this masterpiece the convergence of three ideals: The Oriental (Arabic or Turkish), the Egyptian of the times of the Pharaohs, and classical Greek (Lemaire 337). Gautier transposed in writing the paintings of Orientalist painters, and drew what he called "tableaux à la plume" in his own literary works: Such are, for example, in *Le Roman de la momie* the scenes of the triumphant return of the army, the dance of the slaves, and the Pharaoh's feast. *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* abounds with lavish details where forms, colours, and shapes are captured much in the same descriptive vocabulary Gautier uses when describing paintings with Oriental themes: There are portrayals of a marble palace, rich temples, golden barges with triangular sails, the Nile, dull and mat under a powerful light, Cleopatra's bath, as well as the furniture, clothes, and apparels belonging to the Egyptian queen.

Throughout *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* -- the opening pages of this story, with the Queen gliding on the Nile in her golden barge, are strikingly reminiscent of Act II of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* -- Gautier refers to the "small world" and the "miserable habits" (492) of modern humanity. In contrast, he wants to portray "exorbitant fantasies" of "prodigious lives" (492-93), those of the *Oriental elsewhere* of sumptuousness and voluptuousness which the Dandy was dreaming of, in contradistinction to the sad "vie du Boulevard." However, he doubts that the French language could relate the splendors of the "supreme orgie" Cleopatra arranged for Meïamoun: "Comment avec la langue française, si chaste, si glacialement prude, rendrons-nous cet emportement frénétique, cette large et puissante débauche qui ne craint pas de mêler le sang et le vin, ces deux pourpres, et ces furieux élans de la volupté inassouvie se ruant à l'impossible avec toute l'ardeur de sens que le long jeûne chrétien n'a pas encore matés?" (494-95). Strangely enough, however, and here we see that Gautier's creative imagination was deeply entrenched in his age, Cleopatra is not exempt from that existential boredom so well known to the Romantics betaken by the "mal du siècle" around 1830 (!): in a long tirade she delivers to her confidante, she speaks at length of that ailment, with its accompanying symptoms of weariness, fatigue, and melancholy. Her laments are (58-59) dissonant in a character as crafty, ambitious, and powerful. Her counterpart, the Pharaoh, the powerful god-like figure in *Le Roman de la momie*, is equally beladen, and he finds solace and a remedy in his love for Tahoser, a mere mortal.

Another function of the Orient, one which takes an ultimate configuration in Gautier's works, has to do with those fantasies which Gautier and his friends -- Baudelaire, Boissard, Moreau, Aubert-Roche -- and all those who partook in the Club des Hachichins experienced. The *Club des Hachichins* appeared in 1846 in the *Revue des deux mondes*. The experience he narrates begins with hilarious visions and well-being: "j'étais dans cette période bienheureuse du hachich que les Orientaux appellent le Kief. Je ne sentais plus mon corps; les liens de la matière et de l'esprit étaient déliés" (204) and ends with a nightmare. The point of interest here, however, is that any escape from the ugliness of daily life to an elsewhere of Beauty can essentially be attained through dreams: Baudelaire had brought back from his travels, apart from exotic images which transpired throughout his *Fleurs du mal*, a profound disillusionment. His poem "Le Voyage" is clear in this regard: Boredom is everywhere, even in those exotic countries one aspires to. The world is painted with the same brush of horror: "une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui" (154). The remaining solace is the escape in "the immense opium" (154). The point of issue here is that in the heart of *Le Club des Hachichins* there is the sudden intrusion of a reference to Le Vieux de la montagne, or Prince des assassins, an Oriental Sheikh who was, Gautier explains, at the head of a fearsome sectarian order. The men he commanded obeyed him blindly and with an unflinching devotion, even when their lives were in danger: they were rewarded with magnificent hallucinations, for the Cheikh, so they believed, held in his hands the key to the heaven of Mohammad and "les houris aux trois nuances": A magic paste, *hachich*, he administered to them. Hence the origin of the word assassin, from *hachichin* (12-13). The relevance of this seeming digression by Gautier lies precisely in the fact that he wanted the narration of his *fantasia* -- *fantasia* is the name of a chapter in "Le Club des Hachichins" -- to be evoked under the auspices of the Oriental reference. In 1866, he announced a project of a work entitled *Le Roi des assassins*, relating the ambitions of that very *cheikh*, a project which never materialised.

To conclude, Gautier dealt with the Orient as an idea greater than the sum of its parts: the Orient is not only a geographically identifiable entity made up of hot countries ranging from India to Morocco, it is first and foremost an ideal: esthetic, artistic, philosophical, emotional. In that, Gautier partook in the tendency of a whole generation around the 1840s who made of exotism a dream come true. Some brought back wells of images to draw on for future inspiration, others the certitude -- much like the author of "Le Spleen de Paris" -- that the *real elsewhere*, Orient included, is "Any Where out of the World" (Baudelaire *Les Fleurs du mal*, 208).

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