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COLOUR - IMAGERY
IN THE
POETRY OF GAUTIER.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in French at
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Unless otherwise specified, references for poems are taken from the Garnier edition of Emaux et Cameées

(Texte définitif 1872). Esquisse biographique, Choix de Poésies, Premières Poésies, La Comédie de la Mort, España, Poésies Diverses, Derniers Sonnets and Notes by Adolphe Boschot refer to the same edition.

INTRODUCTION

"Dans son pourpoint de satin rose,
 Qu'un gout hardi coloria,
 Il semble chercher une pose
 Pour Boulanger ou Deveria." (Le Château du
 souvenir, p 109, v 40)

"A rose-coloured doublet," - unforgettably the words are linked with the night of February 25th 1830, when the young revolutionaries of the Romantic movement arrived in force to support the first staging of Victor Hugo's play, Hernani, and to do battle with the traditionalists. Prominent among the revolutionaries was Théophile Gautier, wearing the famous garment, which was to become known as the "gilet rouge", a fitting symbol for a man who was above all a visual poet - a poet of colour.

Years later, in describing his career as a Romantic writer, he remarked, "J'étais le peintre de la bande." 1. It is the purpose of this thesis to explore how and to what extent Gautier used colour as a means of expression in his poems, with particular reference to what is probably his finest and most mature work - the collection entitled Emaux et Camées.

Some notes on the poet's background are worth
 1. Matoré, Le Vocabulaire et la Société p 203.

including because they help explain why he became the visual poet," l'homme pour qui le monde visuel existe". 1. Gautier was born in Tarbes in the Pyrenees in 1811 and at the age of three he shifted to Paris with his family. Although he was never again to have his home away from the capital, he remained at heart a Southerner, "Quoique j'ai passé ma vie à Paris," he remarked, "j'ai gardé un fond méridional." 3. The fact is significant in that a brilliant memory of the south lingered on in a form of nostalgia, which can be seen in many of his poems, for blue skies, warm weather and warm colours. At the age of fifteen Théophile began taking drawing and painting lessons from the artist Rioult, and from these lessons he developed an intense awareness of the artistic possibilities of the visual world, and a strong sense of form, line and colour, which he was able to transfer to his writing. Although he gave up painting to become a writer, as an art-critic and art-lover, he continued to serve in the cause of the plastic arts as much as of literature.

"En effet," Adolphe Boschot writes of Gautier's earliest collection of poems (1830 - 32), "Théo est un artiste. Il sera (et il est déjà) un artiste du verbe: prodigieusement doué comme écrivain, il voit

1. Revue des deux Mondes 1911 p 327.

2. Esquisse biographique p III

les choses, il conçoit, il sent il aime en artiste....
C'est déjà, comme il le fera plus tard, une "transposition"
d'un art dans un autre." 1.

"Trois choses me plaisent; l'or le marbre et la
pourpre: éclat, solidité, couleur," says one of
Gautier's characters, d'Albert, in the novel,
Mademoiselle de Maupin 2. It might have been the
author speaking for himself. This emphasis on the
visual and tangible in art springs from a profound belief
that in a world where everything is doomed to perish,
art alone can impose order on the flux of time and can
preserve things that are beautiful,

"Tout passe - L'art robuste

Seul a l'éternité

Le buste

Survit a la cité." (L'Art p 132, v 11)

The artist's role is to perceive and order the world
of experience. Art is sacred; for Gautier it has no
moral except beauty, and beauty must make up for the
essential hollowness of things. In his worship of
art as the consolation for life ("L'art est ce qui console
le mieux de vivre, 1.") Gautier is a pagan longing for
the return of the pagan cult of beauty,

"Reviens, reviens, bel art antique,

De ton paros étincelant

1. Esquisse biographique p XVIII

2. p 134

Couvrir ce squelette gothique;

Dévore - le, bûcher brûlant!" (Bûchers et tombeaux
p 77, v 25).

Frequently, Gautier reminds us in his poems, the exterior of things is beautiful and the interior is hideous. For instance, in Portail 1. there is a description of tombs,

"Ce ne sont que festons, dentelles et couronnes,
Trèfles et pendentifs et groupes de colonnes
Où rit la fantaisie en toute liberté." (p 189,
v 18).

"Toujours vous trouveriez, sous cette architecture,
Au milieu de la fange et de la pourriture
Dans le suaire usé le cadavre tout droit,"
ibid. v 21).

Not only is there a kind of despair at the perishing nature of things, but there is frequently disillusionment about pleasure and about relationships, for example,

"Dans ma pensée, ami, je trouve qu'une femme
Qui sous de beaux semblants cache une vilaine
âme,

Pour ceux que sa beauté decevante a séduits
Pareille au feu follet, ... 2." (A mon ami,
Auguste M. p 45, lls 15-18). Similarly, hopes are
doomed to failure,

1. La Comédie de la Mort.
2. Poésies complètes vol 1.

"Beaux rêves avortés, ambitions déçues,
Souterrains ardeurs, passions sans issues,
Tout ce que l'existence a d'intime et d'amer.

L'Océan tous les jours me dévore un navire;
Un récif, près du bord, de sa pointe déchire
Leurs flancs doublés de cuivre et leur quille
de fer." (Portail p 191, v 5, lls 29-30).

Two major themes result from Gautier's love of beauty and inward disillusionment. One is a preoccupation with death, a fascinated horror of ugliness, and an emphasis on deception - which frequently takes the form of a siren. The other is a desire to observe and record the beautiful in the exterior of things. There is a great delight in the sensuous and sensual pleasures, a feeling that beauty is its own morality and requires no other. Consequently, outward beauty is all that Gautier requires. Its creation and preservation in art is the highest form of human activity. This is important in that it gives Gautier the aim to describe physical beauty. There are flights of fantasy in his poems, but little attempt to explore spiritual levels, or to find deeper significance. A woman's looks, for instance, have often far more importance than her moral qualities. Gautier's writing tends to be concrete and clear-cut and to lack vague trains of thought that lead into the irrational consciousness.

This affects his choice of colours and images; both are usually very precisely-defined, and Gautier conveys an exact impression by a few carefully-chosen details. Each poem is a small picture - a landscape, silhouette or portrait, perhaps, brought to life by an economy of line, colour and image.

"Ce sont d'abord de petits intérieurs d'un effet doux et calme, de petits paysages à la manière des Flamands, d'une touche tranquille, d'une couleur un peu étouffée, ni grandes montagnes, ni perspectives à perte de vue, ni torrents, ni cataractes. Des plaines unies avec des lointains de cobalt, d'humbles coteaux rayés où serpente un chemin, une chaumière qui fume, un ruisseau qui gazouille sous les nénuphars, un buisson avec ses baies rouges, une marguerite qui tremble sous la rosée. Un nuage qui passe jetant son ombre sur les blés, une cigogne qui s'abat sur un donjon gothique...1."

Thus Gautier describes his "transposition" of one art into another, setting the concrete limits to his subject-matter "ni grandes montagnes ni perspectives a perte de vue," and defining his own position within the French Romantic movement. Hugo before him, had in Les Orientales shown how brilliant colours could be used in poetry, but Hugo, like de Vigny and Lamartine, was primarily a musician of language. It was Gautier

1. Esquisse biographique p XIX

who applied the artist's terminology to poetry, in creating visual poems. At the same time, in his worship of beauty and form, he brought order and clarity to his writing, checking the Romantic excesses of feeling and it was this precision which the Parnassians were later to develop in their creation of an impersonal poetry, in which form and a strong sense of objective reality were to be of major importance.