

Pascal Durand, "Sharing One's Death: *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873)," from *Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literatures: Several Authors, One Pen*, ed. Seth Whidden (2009); details of the definitive version are available at <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754666431>.

Sharing One's Death: *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873)

Pascal Durand

From Romanticism to Symbolism, high literature and more particularly poetry are gradually inclined to define themselves as activities isolated within the social world and pursued by individuals, each one of whom is firmly convinced of his own singularity towards his equals. Hugo, Lamartine, and Vigny already thought of themselves as pure subjectivities linked by a biography and a personal imaginary. But the romantic "ego" nevertheless remained in touch with history and politics, giving himself to the reader as the sensitive prism through which the whole world – and any of its members – could reach a full self-consciousness. Things do change to a considerable extent after 1850, when the side of the "artistes" triumphs over the side of the "utilitaires." Art, which has no other object than itself, becomes a matter for specialists, and the public is only allowed to view artistic products from a respectful distance. Poetry then closes itself like an oyster under the pressure of reality. Politics, ethics, the State and its superstitions are dismissed. Formulas such as "poésie pure," "l'Art pour l'Art," and "l'œuvre pure" tell of the institution of the writer as an expert dealing with a form of beauty devoid of any practical function. A religion of form takes the place of the formal religion of established cults. So, in such a purified space, the writer locks himself in a fortress of Solitude. No doubt he acknowledges only his peers' right to appreciate and to pass judgment on the verbal objects he shapes as a goldsmith. No doubt either, he frequents the last important "Salons" where writers and scholars, poets and artists, journalists and politicians mingle in a relative mutual lack of

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concern. Those frequent social visits may be the opportunity to feel a kind of community, but this solidarity appears only as a juxtaposition of solitudes. The writer is no longer an ego in which the world reflects itself; he is a reflexive self finding in language and formal concerns the circular condition of his own social irreplaceableness. Such is the illusion of this closed and very small world: each one is an indivisible atom, an isolated monad, and genius itself or aesthetic quintessence comes at the cost of this isolation. What those monads are ignorant of is that the very strong consciousness they have of their own singularity is nothing but an interiorized emanation of the power ideology at the age of the triumphant Bourgeoisie, based upon values such as individual, inventive originality, personal responsibility and, above all, effort and work as way of self-achievement.

However, from Romanticism to Symbolism, different kinds of practices remain and in some respects grow stronger, reintroducing, in that confined and anomy-threatened universe, the horizon of a community of interests. One of these practices is the advent, in the 1820's, of the social form of the "Cénacle", a meeting at some charismatic writer's home around whom gather a collectivity of admirers, who can decide on some strategies for conquest of fame and symbolic power which, gained for one – and the One –, will be shared by all the others. From Nodier to Mallarmé, from the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal to 89, rue de Rome, a new form of literary sociability takes shape with its rituals and regularities. Another condition of collective activity is the spatial and temporal organization of the literary and artistic field into schools, groups or movements placed under the control of a leader and a doctrine. This structure is consistent with the individualism their members share as a perceptive and cognitive form of viewing both their position in the symbolic universe to which they belong and the position of this specific universe within global

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society. At the same time, literary works and projects keep spreading on a collective level. Without taking under consideration the two-handed writing practiced at several levels by such authors as Nerval or Dumas, Gautier or Balzac, keepsakes of the years 1820-1830, panoramic literature of the years 1830-1840 and even some ephemeral literary journals enlighten the power exerted over the lonely spirits inhabiting the *République des Lettres* by a strong feeling of collectiveness and solidarity, in other words the feeling of viewing the world through the same specific frames of space and time.

An institution in itself, the genre of the "Tombeau" had known a great but rather short rise during the French Renaissance. The genre's return to the literary scene – somewhat before 1850 but in full force after 1870 – emphasizes in a significant way the collective orientation of the nineteenth-century poetic sensibility. First there was Hugo, whose *Contemplations* would be a great "Tombeau" for his daughter Léopoldine, had partly retrieved the genre in 1835 with a poem dedicated to Alphonse Rabbe, but six years after the death of the author of *Album d'un pessimiste*¹. A man of tradition and fidelity, Théodore de Banville had further retrieved the genre in the late 1850's as a specific piece of verse dedicated to the memory of fellow writers such as Heine (1857), Auguste Brizeux (1858), Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1860) and Alfred de Musset (1861). Distinct from the personal lamentations of a Lamartine or a Hugo, the genre was restored to life as a formal mix of funeral oration and symbolic moaning about a recently deceased poet. However, the form remained, in some respects, isolated and too idiomatic to turn itself into a specific genre. The real retrieval of the genre occurs in October 1873 with the publishing of *Le*

¹ See Hugo 864-67.

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Tombeau de Théophile Gautier. And the fact this retrieval concerns this poet and takes place in that particular period speaks volumes about the strange collective spirit which animates a collective field such as the community of poets, each living a solitary experience of literature. It is highly significant that more than a hundred years passed before there was a critical edition of that important volume, as if there were something in it that puzzled scholars' thinking categories; the great solitude of the intellectual mind is as common an illusion to the scholarly world as to the poets' one². Also significant is that Hugo's and Mallarmé's contributions, the two poems from the collection that remain in literary memory, are both most often discussed without being situated within the context of their original publication and, most of all, without seeing that the beauty of those two masterpieces produces a greater effect of poetic "aura" when they are read among the general dullness of the volume.

Théophile Gautier dies on October 22, 1872. Albert Glatigny soon recommends then to Alphonse Lemerre, the well-known publisher of Parnassian poets and "romanciers artistes," to edit and publish in as short a delay as possible a collective compilation of verse as a tribute to the late poet. A division of the editorial work is quickly determined: Lemerre activates from one poet to another the huge circle of which he occupies the center and formulates the general scheme of the project; Catulle Mendès, Gautier's son-in-law, takes the specifically poetic elaboration of the work under his responsibility, asking each member of the funeral homage to compose his part as a "Toast" dedicated to the late poet during a

² The present study is indebted to the invaluable factual information in François Brunet's excellent introduction to *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (see Works Cited).

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fictional banquet organized around Gautier's very grave. Lemerre's call receives a quick positive response from Gautier's contemporaries; and many of them, some remaining famous today but most of them having fallen into oblivion, manifest a comprehensible eagerness to take part in the homage, from Hugo to Ernest Legouvé, from Mallarmé to Louis-Xavier de Ricard, from the British Swinburne to the German Glazer, from the Italian Luigi Gualdo to "Félibres" such as Mistral and Aubanel. Catulle Mendès's plan was barely observed; the aesthetic principle he had formulated would be followed only by very few of them, including Mallarmé with his specific sense of protocol which leads him to, as he writes in a letter to Mendès, "se rattacher au point de vue général" (*Correspondance* 543) [join the general point of view]. Rapidly conceived and produced with a remarkable sense of editorial marketing, the book is issued in October 1873, almost on the anniversary day of Gautier's death. What would a deluxe edition be without a frontispiece? The frontispiece of this *Tombeau* inserts an engraved portrait of Gautier into a monumental, classic-style stele, bearing the inevitable allegorical laurel wreath.

The book is ostensibly luxurious. Could we say the same about the pieces it collects? The form fits well with its content; however, this does not mean that all the collected items are of equal poetic value. The literary quality ranges from the banal to the sublime. What matters is not the intrinsic value of each piece, but the cumulative effect and the value of the volume as a whole: on the one hand, about 80 poems and almost 80 poets (some, such as Banville or Swinburne, having contributed more than one piece); on the other hand, a remarkable variety of poetic forms, from the sonnet (almost half of the collected items) to other forms such as the ode, the odelette, the quintil, terza-rima pieces or "poèmes à rimes plates", the latter form having been chosen by both Hugo and Mallarmé ("A Théophile

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Gautier" et "Toast funèbre"). The stylistic spectrum is as wide as the linguistic one. The members of the Parnassian movement are of course the most present, since the school itself had initiated the project through Lemerre, Glatigny and Mendès. Nevertheless, Victor Hugo has his place in the volume alongside a Jules Janin or a Théodore Aubanel. As far as the languages are concerned, the dominant French shares space with English, Greek, Italian, German, the sunny Provençal and the solemn Latin. Mallarmé, having in mind between 1870 and 1875 the long-lasting institution of a "Société internationale des Poètes" will take for model this *Tombeau de Gautier*, "livre qu'on aurait pu faire plus international" (544) [book that we could have made more international], he writes one month later to Mistral, but which "[contenait] en germe [un tel] projet" (544) [contained the seeds of such a project]. As he explains, a society of that kind

[serait] tout simplement une franc-maçonnerie ou un compagnonnage. Nous sommes un certain nombre qui aimons une chose honnie [la poésie]: il est bon qu'on se compte, voilà tout, et qu'on se connaisse. Que les absents se lisent et que les voyageurs se voient. Tout cela, indépendamment des mille points de vue différents, qui ne le sont plus, du reste, après qu'on s'est étudié ou qu'on a causé. (544)

[would be quite simply a group of frank-masons or of artisans. There are a good number of us who love a disgraceful thing [poetry]: it is good that we are counted, and that we get to know each other, that those who are absent read each other and that those who travel see each other. All of that, independent of a thousand different points of view, which are, moreover, no longer different after we study or talk to each other.]

The important thing from our point of view is the wide spectrum of the *Tombeau de Gautier* and the alphabetical order used to classify the contributors: no prominence, no *passé-droit*, no *a priori* hierarchy, but a collective belonging to the same circle of lamentation which would also be the expression of the great symbolic circle of poetry itself. A scale model of a poetic space is provided, in which rivalries quiet down, as if they were in front of an open grave. There is just one exception to the rule. Hugo is set in the

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frontline, at the opening of the compilation, as a sign of respect to the great elder of course, but also as a sign of interest in having in that very place a kind of "poète d'appel" (to use, from the bleak language of French marketing, an expression close to what is called a "produit d'appel" [loss leader]). Hugo finds his place, in other words, at the first page of a book that is, in the same time, a product of marketing and a symbolic event.

Unity within variety is also shown by the emphatic recurrence of *clichés* and commonplaces throughout the *Tombeau's* many poems: themes of the poet's immortality – "cet endormi / Qui se réveille de la vie" [this sleeper / Who awakes from life]; the theme of "l'esprit [qui] ne meurt pas, mais retourne à l'esprit" [the spirit who does not die, but returns to spirit]; theme of a "forme parfaite" [perfect form] at last petrified by death; theme of a "temps si lugubre" [such a lugubrious time] and of a "temps sans idéal, sans brises, sans rayons" [time without ideal, without breezes, without rays of light]; or of a "temps de laideurs énormes" [time of enormous ugliness] from which the eternal poet at last escapes; theme of the poet as "dompteur de matière" [tamer of matter] whose name "restera pareil à la sphère / Qui n'a pas de point par où la saisir" [will remain similar to a sphere / That has no point at which to hold it] and who will consequently know no imitation:

Prosateur, et poète aux rythmes souverains
Encor qu'il ait été romantique à tous crins,
Il n'imita personne et reste inimitable.³

³ This string of citations comes from the contributions to the *Tombeau* from, respectively, Émile Bergerat, "L'ensevelissement" (71); Henri Cazalis, "Métempsycoses" (78); Jean Aicard, "La nature chez elle" (52); Malvina Blanchecotte, "Souvenir du vingt-cinq octobre" (two citations, 72); Cazalis, "Métempsycoses" (79); Théodore de Banville, "Les muses au tombeau" (59); François Coppée, "Théophile Gautier. Élégiacque" (84);

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[Writer of prose, and poet of sovereign rhythms

While he was a romantic through and through,

He imitated no one and he remains inimitable.]

And let us point out the motive of the "coupe d'or", which can be found in Leconte de Lisle's text as well as in Mallarmé's. It rejoins, among others, the representation of a poet who, in a time opposed to Beauty, would be like Christ asking, at Gethsemane, that the cup of sacrifice be kept far from his hand. Figures like those are very stereotyped and add to the general cohesion of the whole chain of texts; they anchor the words into a prescribed ritual and ceremonial, a sort of laic religiosity conforming to the very lofty idea the poets have of their own secular office, and of the very awareness they share of replacing the worldly and mundane conflicts with the other-worldly image of literary glory.

Unity cracks upon closer examination: whose *Tombeau* is this and for whom has it been written? A man of his century, to a lesser degree than Hugo, of course, and with less fidelity to his initial aesthetic purpose, Gautier belongs to both halves of a long century which is split, not only by the Second Empire, but more by the divorce between Romanticism and *le Parnasse*, the latter being, one might say, the poetic translation into intellectual space of that political rupture. Gautier is also a whole artistic field, all by himself: painter and graver, serial writer and artist writer, licentious poet and poet cherishing the "contour pur" (571) [pure contour]. Which Gautier is the real subject of these poets' funeral celebration? Is he the author of *Le Capitaine Fracasse* or of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*? Is he the main fighter of "la bataille d'Hernani" or the frequent

and Alexandre Cosnard, "Quant il était écolier" (87). The page numbers refer to the critical edition of the *Tombeau* in the list of Works Cited.

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visitor of Princess Mathilde's salon? Is he the poet who wrote *Albertus, La Comédie de la mort* or the one who stylized *Émaux et Camées*? The pure poet who, according to his own words, "[made] *Émaux et Camées*" "Sans prendre garde à l'ouragan / Qui fouettait [ses] vitres fermées" (443) [Without worrying about the hurricane / That whipped against his closed windows], several years before seeing the imperial counter-revolution passing under his poorly closed windows, is of course the most present Gautier in the mind of his fellow poets gathered at the edge of his paper tomb. In spite of the aesthetic eclecticism wished by its organizers, no doubt it is one of *le Parnasse*'s Tetrarchs who is placed under the spotlight of the glorious death and, circularly enough, no doubt it is the Parnassian school which celebrates itself through one of its founding members. However, this doctrinal coherence is not shared by all of the celebrants, including first and foremost Hugo, as one could guess. With Gautier, it is "l'âge éclatant" [the bursting age] of a Romanticism identified with the walk of "[un] siècle altier" [a lofty century] that he leads to the graveyard, and no doubt what he sees are a few ashes of his own body and a tiny part of his own glory, with a mix of melancholy and pride, inside the tomb of the poet who happened to be, in 1830, one of his henchmen:

Les chevaux de la Mort se mettent à hennir,
Et sont joyeux, car l'âge éclatant va finir ;
Ce siècle altier qui sut dompter le vent contraire
Expire... – Ô Gautier, toi, leur égal et leur frère,
Tu pars après Dumas, Lamartine et Musset.
L'onde antique est tarie où l'on rajeunissait ;
Comme il n'est plus de Styx, il n'est plus de Jouvence. (*Tombeau* 51)
[The horses of Death begin to whinny,
And they are joyous, for the bursting age will end;

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This lofty century which knew how to tame the contrary wind
Expires... Oh Gautier, you, their equal and their Brother,
You leave after Dumas, Lamartine and Musset.
The antique wave has tried up where we were rejuvenated;
As there is no longer a Styx, no longer is there a Fountain of Youth.]

Alfred Busquet also adds to the commonplace of a Gautier "classique malgré [lui]" (*Tombeau* 58) [classic in spite of himself] the lasting image of a Romantic who has not in fact forgotten his first ardors:

Moi, je dirai sa voix douce et si pénétrante !...
Timbre d'or de Hugo, de Gérard de Nerval,
De Rogier, de Stadler, de Houssaye et Dorval,
De ce groupe d'amis que la Muse apparente. (*Tombeau* 77)
[I will speak of his voice so soft and penetrating!
Golden tone of Hugo, of Gérard de Nerval,
Of Rogier, of Stadler, of Houssaye and Dorval,
Of this group of friends that the Muse brought together.]

To whom does Mallarmé address his "Toast funèbre" so neatly consistent with the scheme provided by Mendès? Considering the numerous coincidences between Hugo's and Mallarmé's contributions – the latter having most probably obtained a copy of the former's text –, Jean-Marc Hovasse assumes that the younger turns his elder's against itself by means of a palimpsest which might be seen as "le lieu symbolique où s'effectue la passation de pouvoir entre l'auteur de *La Légende des siècles* et celui du *Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*" (309) [the symbolic place where the author of *La légende des siècles* transferred power to the author of the *Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*]. A way to cancel Hugo's aesthetics: a convincing demonstration. However, the way Mallarmé praises Gautier, in his "Toast", is too emphatic to be really sincere; and, coming from some "démence" (*Tombeau* 138)

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[madness], the toast addressed to Gautier seems too consistent with the very image in which Mallarmé is enclosed in the mind of Parnassians: lacking irony (Mallarmé "plus fou que jamais" [crazier than ever]: the idea is shared by several, at that time, from Leconte de Lisle to Heredia, including Coppée). Mallarmé doesn't wish of course to minimize the contribution of the author of *Émaux et Camées* to modern poetry. If there is some kind of duplicity in this poem – the writing of which transgresses the laws of solar "transparency" followed by Leconte de Lisle's disciples – it comes from the fact that the agreement of its author with the Parnassian doctrine is rather superficial. As seen from the "Toast funèbre" and through the eyes of a disenchanted disciple, the *Tombeau de Gautier* could be the tomb of the whole Parnassian group.

In fact, what really matters is that the aim of the book dedicated to Gautier is not Gautier himself, not even as an indefatigable polygraphist, but a general and unified idea of poetry and literature. The strength recovered by the genre of the "Tombeau" emphasizes poets' strong feelings of being parts of the same time and space, the frames of which rule the poetic field of which this volume can be viewed as a scale model. The time beyond time of aesthetic inheritances and spiritual lines of descendants: the space beyond space of apparently peaceful approvals to the same general values and the same specific stakes. Beyond aesthetics, a regulating aesthetic: the shared illusion of belonging to a world sheltered from the vulgar determinations of historic events and of the social world. Beyond individual poets, an image of the Poet as a secular priest devoted to the cause of a Beauty superior to any of the forms into which can be shaped; these poetic forms maintain this Beauty, by their very imperfections, as a sort of common horizon that a great diversity of efforts hoped to reach. In this respect, the *Tombeau de Gautier* can be considered as the

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most significant collective work of the century, not only because it collects a huge number of signatures, but also because it makes manifest – beyond differences, rivalries, and aesthetic quarrels – the general solidarity of a symbolic body, which is literature itself as an institution and as a social space, both realized and denied by the pure minds who fill it with life.

Of course, time and space configured in this way cannot be separated from the shaping of modern societies, in which a division of labor and organic interdependence both prevail. The autonomy of the poetic field, as it appears as a fantasy throughout the whole volume, results again from a truly social determination to be separated from the social world. The atmosphere of grieving; the collective effort of commemoration; the constantly present insistence on the act of transmitting, from one poet to another, a shared spiritual mission through History: these dimensions are at the very heart of such a collective work. They are also intimately connected with the evolution of a century which simultaneously invented the future – i.e. the linear time of Progress, "ce paganisme des imbéciles" [this paganism of imbeciles], as Baudelaire said, following Monnier⁴ – and brought into the minds the fetish of the past, of the Origin, and of a lost genuineness always waiting for its own retrieval. The end of the century will see the commemorative discourse appear and grow bigger, as an effort of a whole secularized society to be endowed with alternative religion and tradition.

Whose "Tombeau" is this? I asked at the outset. The "Tombeau" of what? we may

⁴ Baudelaire 611. Baudelaire's phrase, from his letter of 18 February 1866 to Narcisse Ancelle, is a reformulation the subtitle of Henri Monnier's *Nouvelles scènes populaires: La religion des imbeciles* (see Works Cited).

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now eventually wonder. The "Tombeau" of Romanticism, from Hugo's point of view. Hugo's "Tombeau" and the "Tombeau" of *le Parnasse*, from Mallarmé's. What if it were a question of making, without the knowledge of all of the sad-faced poets gathered for the occasion, the "Tombeau" of all of the poetry of the century? Is it possible not to foresee what *Le Tombeau de Gautier* implicitly heralds? Two years later: the ouster of Mallarmé, Verlaine and Charles Cros from the columns of the third *Parnasse contemporain* and therefore the coming crisis of the great Parnassian stability. Twelve years later: Victor Hugo's death, in which Mallarmé will see the event to set off the "crise de vers" [crisis of verse] together with the collapse of poetry as institution and formal legislation.

The funereal tone which floods the volume is not only ordained by the situation and the funerary ceremonial it represents. The whole of nineteenth-century poetry sounds funereal and Julien Green is partly right when he claims, in his *Journal*, about Byron's *Manfred*, that "le romantisme, où l'on veut voir une sorte d'explosion de jeunesse, n'est en vérité pas autre chose qu'une bruyante manifestation de sénilité" (14) [Romanticism, in which we want to see a sort of explosion of youth, is in truth nothing other than a noisy manifestation of senility]. After all, young Hugo, in his *Odes*, first sung of the dead of the Revolution and the illusory miracles of the Restauration. From Lamartine to Mallarmé, poetry follows the same slope which carries it towards the depths of language and confines it to a more and more deeply hidden crypt in the ground. Lyrical lamentation, meaningless worship, negative theology are one and the same: to embrace a "thanatographic" register which, in its own way, expresses the self-isolation of poetry inside the social sphere of discourses – a poetry which consents to be deprived of the powers it used to possess when a whole world sounded within its verbal box, not only the sepulchral echoes of a "Aboli

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bibelot d'inanité sonore" (Mallarmé, *Œuvres* 37) [Abolished bauble of sonorous inanity].

Mallarmé will confide to the journalist Jules Huret: "le cas d'un poète, en cette société qui ne lui permet pas de vivre, c'est le cas d'un homme qui s'isole pour sculpter son propre tombeau" (Huret 104) [the case of the poet, in this society that does not permit him to live, is the case of a man who isolates himself to sculpt his own grave]. Earlier, in 1885, the same Mallarmé described to Verlaine his pieces of poetry as "carte[s] de visite" addressed "aux vivants" (*Correspondance* 587) [calling cards addressed to the living]. Poetry will only be brought out of this "thanatographic" register and of this dark crypt by the great call for fresh air and the new poetic frenzy that Apollinaire and Cendrars will create in *Alcools* and the *Prose du Transsibérien*. They will write these texts while waiting for new forms of symbolic community: those that will be invented – between cafés and rent-shared houses, by four hands writing together and games of collective pursuits – by the first *avant-gardes* after the First World War.

Translated by Philippe François

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