

# History as a Backdrop in the Fictions of Théophile Gautier: The Case of *Le Roman de la Momie*

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**Submitted:** 16 August 2024    **Accepted:** 22 August 2024    **Published:** 26 August 2024

**doi** <https://doi.org/10.63620/MKSSJER.2024.1052>

**Citation:** Kougou-Mbougath, G. (2024). History as a backdrop in the Fictions of Théophile Gautier: The Case of *Le Roman de la Momie*. *Sci Set J of Economics Res*, 3(4), 01-04.

## Abstract

*Théophile Gautier's relationship with history has been the subject of a number of criticisms over the years. In the collective work edited by Martine Lavaud and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin (2012), it is argued that Gautier is an an historical writer, even a contempt of history. Indeed, for these critics, Théophile Gautier's fictions have no real connection with history: Théophile Gautier does not write history in the sense of Michel de Certeau (177). The aim of this article is to study Le Roman de la momie (1858). The aim is to show that, contrary to what critics think of Théophile Gautier's relationship with history, he sees it as a channel through which to access his first passion, painting. Indeed, through history, Théophile Gautier sets up a transposition of art through pictorial writing. Drawing on the mechanisms of pictorial writing developed by Bernard Vouilloux (1994) and Liliane Louvel (2002), we show how history serves as Théophile Gautier's backdrop.*

**Keywords:** History, Pictorial Writing, Transposition of Art, Backdrop.

## Introduction

*Le Roman de la Mummy* is a historical novel by Théophile Gautier (1858) whose narrative framework is located between two moments: the 19th century on the one hand and ancient Egypt on the other. The 19th century is the time when Lord Evandale and Doctor Rumphius discovered the mummy of Tahoser where there is a parchment which traces the story of his life in the first story: "Drawings of a particular nature announced scenes all different, relating to human life, and not to the journey of the shadows into the extra-world. (Théophile Gautier, 1858:53).

The inscriptions found in the parchment near the mummy do not give information on the mortuary ritual but on other information relating to the history of the mummy and, from ancient Egypt which constitutes the period in which the framed story takes place: "Oph (this is the Egyptian name of the city that antiquity called Thebes of the Hundred Gates or Diospolis Magna) seemed asleep under the action devouring a blazing sun. (Théophile Gautier, 1858:55). This first detail that the narrator gives is the beginning of the second story. Indeed, it is through the mise en abyme that the story of Tahoser and that of the Hebrew people held in captivity in Egypt by Pharaoh unfolds in parallel.

In the story, Tahoser, daughter of the high priest Pétamounoph, falls in love with Poeri, a young Hebrew for whom she runs away and goes to live in his home, pretending to be Hora, a destitute woman. One night while Poeri the young slave goes to the camp of the Hebrew people to find his family, Tahoser discreetly follows him to find out where the young man is going so late but after walking and swimming across the river for a long time, the young woman becomes unwell and falls ill. Finding herself between life and death, Moses the patriarch of the Hebrews is urgently called to her bedside to pray for her to be saved:

Under his thick eyebrows his eyes shone like flames. He looked, despite his simple clothes, like a prophet or a god. Informed by Poeri, he sat down near the couch of the Tahoser, and said, stretching out his hands over her: "In the name of him who can do all things and near whom the other gods are only idols and demons, although you do not belong to the chosen race of the lord, young girl, be healed! (Théophile Gautier, 1858:171).

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By mentioning this intervention by Moses in the text, the narrator wishes to show that the period in which the story of Tahoser takes place coincides exactly with that in which the Hebrews were held in slavery in the land of Pharaoh. Thus, this description of Moses gives a certain credibility to the story and attests that it is a historical novel. The prayer which is pronounced in order to save the young Egyptian woman from the illness takes on its full meaning because it is addressed to the God of the Hebrew people who is the one and only God of the universe. And it is by invoking his name alone that the sick obtain healing.

This article aims to show how the story in *Le Roman de la Momie* constitutes a backdrop for Théophile Gautier. Indeed, Théophile Gautier, through the transposition of art, transcribes the story of Tahoser through a pictorial writing that gives readers the impression of being in a visual art gallery. Thus, by referring to the processes of pictorial writing developed by Bernard Vouilloux (1994) and Liliane Louvel (2002), we will show how history represents a backdrop for Théophile Gautier.

### **The historical quotient in The Mummy Novel**

Talking about the historical quotient in *Le Roman de la momie* (1858) by Théophile Gautier amounts to identifying, or even listing, the historical elements which make it possible to classify this text in the category of historical novel. According to Georges Lukacs, the historical novel appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, more precisely in 1814 at the instigation of the Scottish writer Walter Scott with *Les Waverley Nouvelles*. In France the rise of this new genre coincided with the fall of Napoleon in 1815 at Waterloo.

In her text entitled *The Historical Novel* published in 2008, Isabelle Durand-Le Guern gives an attempt to define this genre: "a historical novel is a novel, that is to say a fictional story, which integrates into its diegesis a historical dimension. Its first particularity would therefore be its referential dimension, to the extent that lived reality nourishes the composed story." She adds that this definition is incomplete because it is necessary to justify what reality is in question in the novel and to this she affirms: "the reality in question belongs to the past of humanity and falls within the domain of studies of historians." » » (Isabelle Durand-Le Guern, 2008:5)

Claudie Bernard, for his part, in his work entitled *Le Passé recomposé* (1996) defines it as follows: "The historical novel is characterized by duality. The two terms associated in the syntagm, "novel" and "story", refer to two traditionally opposed activities, fiction and (human) science. On the one hand that of history - the patience of research and verification, imagination being reduced to a heuristic auxiliary function; on the other - that of the novel - the rights to fabrication, to which the ambitions of realistic "observation" as well as naturalist "experimentation" remain subordinate. In view of these multiple definitions, we can say that the historical novel is therefore a novel which takes into

account in its narrative deployment elements specific to history to use Claudie Bernard's formula, that is to say that this novel "inseparably mixes the referential and the invented." »

The *Mummy Novel* (1857) is a historical novel whose narrative framework is built around a very specific historical context: That of the period evoking the desire of the Hebrew people to leave Egypt where they were held in slavery for several years by pharaoh. Théophile Gautier, through the process of *mise en abyme*, traces the story of Tahoser, a young Egyptian who lived in the time of Moses. Even if the plot of the novel does not focus on the primary concern of the Hebrews which is the exit from Egypt, the fact remains that the story of this young girl takes place in parallel in this same period. Indeed, in the story several Hebrew names are mentioned during the narration including "Moshe to speak of Moses", "Yacoub for Jacob; Ra'hel for Rachel" » and "Aharon" (Théophile Gautier, 1858:171-173).

Also, in the story, the young woman meets Moses twice. Firstly when she is between life and death in the house of Ra'el and secondly in the house of pharaoh when the latter comes to meet him to ask him to let his people go: "Without prostrating, as was the case Usually when a king was approached, Mosche advanced towards Pharaoh's throne and said to him: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate me a solemnity in the desert"" (Théophile Gautier, 1858: 201) All these examples that we have cited help to show that this text by Théophile Gautier contains elements linked to history.

### **History as a Backdrop in the Mummy Novel**

The background in the pictorial domain is a fabric that is covered with paint before starting to paint. In the theater, it is a smooth fabric that is placed at the back of a stage to serve as decor during a performance. In literature, the backdrop refers to the historical setting where the events in the text take place. To this end, talking about history as a backdrop in Théophile Gautier's fiction amounts to showing how the latter, through history, manages to carry out a transposition of art. Thus, based on the processes of pictorial writing developed by Liliane Louvel in her work entitled *Texte/Image* (Images to read, texts to see) published in 2002, we will show from the pictorial description and its different typologies how Théophile Gautier uses history as a backdrop.

According to Liliane Louvel, a literary text is said to be pictorial when we find in this text motifs allowing the presence of a "pictorial description" to be identified. Here are some of them:

- The painting effect consists of identifying the presence of a painting image in a literary text. It is a pictorial process which produces a suspension of time, the characters are generally represented in a static manner.
- The picturesque view is a genre of painting based on the description of landscapes that can be painted such as streets, "evocative" places, abysses or dizzying alpine heights, sea-side etc.
- Hypotyposis is a figure of speech generally linked to history painting, it allows you to paint things in such a vivid and energetic way that it gives the impression of seeing the scene before your eyes. It has the same characteristics as a painting but does not give rise to a direct reference to painting.

- The tableau vivant is a popular method in the 19th century. It is a painting which is generally composed from characters arranged in “speaking” poses with the aim of reproducing a famous painting or scene from history.
- The aesthetic arrangement here consists of composing a “still life” which allows the character to immerse himself in contemplation and satisfy his narcissism.
- The pictorial description constitutes the highest degree of saturation of the text by the pictorial just before ekphrasis. It consists of identifying the opening and closing operators of the text with the image, refers to changes in the regimes of the text such as effects, typography, graphics, title, deictics, embedding of stories, focalization, tenses and aspects, the pictorial and metapictorial lexicon.
- Ekphrasis is a high-level literary exercise aimed at describing a work of art, to make the transition between the visible and the readable.

Théophile Gautier uses several pictorial markers during the narration, namely the tableau effect, the aesthetic arrangement, the pictorial description, the tableau vivant and ekphrasis. For our study we chose to focus on two pictorial processes: the painting effect and the picturesque view.

Regarding the painting effect, it is perceptible in *The Romance of the Mummy*, through the following pictorial descriptions: “On a green background ending in a blue line, processions of emblematic figurines took place on each side of the corridor with colors as fresh, as vivid as if the artist's brush had applied them the day before; they appeared for a moment in the light of the torches, then vanished into the shadows like ghosts” (Théophile Gautier, 1858:27).

“All these figures, surrounded by a line carved in the limestone and variegated with the most vivid colors, had this immobile life, this frozen movement, this mysterious intensity of Egyptian art, thwarted by the priestly rule, and which resembles a gagged man trying to make his secret understood” (Théophile Gautier, 1858:38).

As for the picturesque view, it is generally displayed by the mention of the pictorial references which follow: “in front of the palace extended a vast esplanade descending to the river by two staircases placed at its corners; in the middle, a criosphinx dromos, perpendicular to the Nile, leads to an enormous pylon, preceded by two colossal statues, and a pair of obelisks whose pyramids protruding from its cornice silhouetted their flesh-colored points against the plain azure of the sky. (Théophile Gautier, 1858: 76).

“The bank was only a few armfuls away; the prodigious shadow of the pylons and enormous walls of the Northern Palace, which outlined its opaque piles, surmounted by the pyramids of six obelisks, through the purplish blue of the night, spread immense and formidable over the river, and protected Tahoser, who could swim without fear of being noticed” (Théophile Gautier, 1858:147).

By noting the presence of markers of pictorial descriptions in *The Romance of the Mummy* we can say that Théophile Gautier throughout history manages to access painting by means of

the transposition of art. Thus, history constitutes a backdrop in these two fictions because they offer the author the possibility of painting his story.

### Critical look at the Fictions of Théophile Gautier

This particularity of Théophile Gautier in using history as a backdrop has earned him several criticisms. Indeed, these critics assert that unlike Balzac in *Chouans* (1829) or Alexandre Dumas with *The Three Musketeers* (1844), Théophile Gautier does not orient his historical novels around historical figures or historical facts having influenced the period in which he makes his characters evolve: “This is not surprising: Gautier is not the author of the historical novel in the manner of Walter Scott or Alexandre Dumas and, apart from the figures of Antiquity, Moses, Cleopatra, Candaule, characters with a proven historical existence are absent from all his fictional work” (paradoxical writing, 2012: 113).

They also note that his historical novels generally contain fewer details about the chosen period. In *The Mummy's Novel* the central element which allows us to identify the period in which the narration takes place is found on page 141: “Although he bears an Egyptian name and is in the service of the pharaoh, he belongs to this barbarous race of Israel; and, if he goes out at night, it is undoubtedly to attend the child sacrifices that the Hebrews celebrate in deserted places where the owl chirps, where the hyena yelps, or the viper hisses” and in *Le Capitaine Fracasse* the only temporal clue which allows us to place the story in a specific period is the expression “arose under the reign of Louis XIII” apart from the mention of this period no other dates are given.

The reason why in the collective work entitled *Théophile Gautier*, a paradoxical writing of history directed by Martine Lavaud and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin (2012), it emerges that Gautier is an ahistorical writer, even a despiser of history.

These critics consider that Théophile Gautier's fictions do not have a historical dimension because they most often take place on the fringes of the historical context evoked by the latter. “It's not that Théophile Gautier cannot represent History; but he does not want it; she doesn't interest him enough for him to stop; he doesn't even give in; like Musset and many of his colleagues in poetry under the July Monarchy, with easy reactionary considerations on the bourgeois decline of France, the end of “symbols” and great doctrines, the disenchantment or disillusionment of modern society” (paradoxical writing, 2012: 105).

However, we find that this approach is contradictory to the extent that they affirm that Théophile Gautier has a preference for the past and not for history. Now we know that history is a story of the events of the past: “If there is an absence of history, there is on the other hand a strong presence of the past, or more precisely the figuration of a ghostly past, which haunts fictions: the past without history which is at the center of the story is haunted by an older past” (paradoxical writing, 2012: 203).

This conception that they have of Théophile Gautier's relationship to history is erroneous because for they use the historical elements contained in these fictions to deconstruct the link to history in his novels: “King Louis XIII having heard of Isabelle's adventures, praised her for her wisdom and showed particular

esteem for Sigognac for his restraint, not liking, as the chaste monarch that he was, bold and overwhelmed youth" (paradoxical writing, 2012: 201).

This mention of King Louis XIII in *Le Capitaine Fracasse* sufficiently proves that contrary to their hypothesis, Théophile Gautier interview has a personal relationship with history because it allows him to access beauty [1-5].

To conclude, we will say that even if Théophile Gautier's fictions are not historical novels in the strict sense of the term, the fact remains that they contain a historical dimension in their narrative configuration. Théophile Gautier in his fiction uses history as a backdrop for aesthetic purposes. Indeed, through the transposition of art and pictorial writing the latter wishes to achieve an ideal dear to the Parnassian movement which is "art for art's sake" [6-11].

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