

G.-Albert Aurier,

Critic and Theorist of Symbolist Art

by

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Abstract

This is a study of all the published writings on art by the Symbolist poet-critic G.-Albert Aurier, intending to elucidate the systematic theory of art that underlies all his criticism.

It includes a brief biographical account of Aurier's career as an art critic as well as a Symbolist poet and publisher, with emphasis on his involvement in the Decadent phase of literary Symbolism, as it relates to the development of his particular tastes in art.

While Aurier's theory is Symbolist, and therefore self-consciously modern, it is here analyzed from a traditional point of view, in order to place Aurier and Symbolism in the context of the preceding tradition of French art theory. The major themes explored include: the possibility of a definition of Beauty in art; the relationship of art to nature and the question of representation; the discovery of the Ideal and its expression in art; the aesthetic emotion, its character, sources, and means of expression in art; the meaning of artistic "genius"; art considered as a "language" and the implications for style.

Thesis Supervisor: Wayne Andersen
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Chapter 1

Introduction:

G.-Albert Aurier in the Context of Symbolism

In all the vast literature on the subjects of pictorial and literary symbolism of the 1880s and 1890s, one finds with difficulty a few fragmentary references to a coherent Symbolist pictorial aesthetic. Writers on literary symbolism, if they consider the question at all, most often remark upon the lack of such a unified and systematic Symbolist theory of art.¹ Studies that aim conscientiously to elucidate the question of Symbolism in art from a theoretical point of view serve to underline the difficulties. Pictorial Symbolism, if such a creature can be said to have existed at all, seems to have consisted chiefly of a fashion for certain types of themes and certain eccentricities of style rather than a single world-view (philosophy) or way of seeing (technique). The artists commonly identified as Symbolists (e.g. Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Maurice Denis, Filiger, etc.) do not

¹E.g., A. G. Lehmann, The Symbolist Aesthetic in France (1885-1895) (London, 1950), p. 21, notes that, "The symbolists, we have suggested, are mainly remarkable for contributions of aesthetic fact rather than system."

form a coherent group or school. Instead they represent many individual outlooks, many small, factional schools. If they are all truly related at all, it is by something other than a common philosophy of art--something other such as a common milieu, perhaps, friendships with identifiably Symbolist literary figures, or, what is almost a philosophical stance, a common anti-naturalist bias.² But particularly considering the great diversity of their responses to naturalism and to familiarity with Symbolist poetry, all this amounts to little more than saying that they shared a common historical moment.

Among Symbolist writers the picture is not very much clearer. That eye-witness chroniclers of the heyday of literary Symbolism gave their accounts titles such as La Mêlée Symboliste³ or Les Premières Armes du Symbolisme⁴ is itself evidence of a lack of any unified doctrine. On the other hand, being writers, the Symbolist men of letters left much more evidence of their theoretical points of view than did the painters. Still, there are pitfalls to watch for in

²The anti-positivist basis of "synthetist" art is a major theme of the study by H. R. Rookmaaker, Synthetist Art Theories (Amsterdam, 1959); reprinted as Gauguin and 19th Century Art Theory (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1972).

³Ernest Raynaud, La Mêlée Symboliste, 3 vols. (Paris, 1918-1922).

⁴J. Moréas, Les Premières Armes du Symbolisme (Paris, 1889).

trying to derive a general Symbolist ars poetica from the plethora of manifestoes published during those years. The most voluble theorizers and manifesto-writers were seldom those recognized as the most talented poets. Most often, manifestoes that give the illusion of setting forth universal Symbolist doctrine were written deliberately to put forward the view of an ambitious individual or small faction as though it were the original and orthodox doctrine. If all the smoke and heat from the battle does not make it difficult enough to find one's way to the issues at stake for the literary men, attempting to derive from their argumentation a coherent ars pictura is riskier still.

In the midst of the mêlée stands a remarkable figure--G.-Albert Aurier, Symbolist critic and more importantly, theorist of art par excellence. He was a poet, a novelist, a playwright and a publisher, but only secondarily. His poetry may perhaps have been personally more important to him than his art criticism, but at his death at age twenty-seven his contemporaries, wishing to eulogize him, could do so more honestly as a critic than as a poet. Because he died so young, the weakness of his poetry and fiction could easily be attributed to his youth (though youth was certainly no impediment to Rimbaud, for example, who renounced literature at nineteen, or to Jules Laforgue or Ephraim Mikhael, who

died at twenty-seven and twenty-four, respectively. Such apologies have generally not seemed necessary to commentators on Aurier's art criticism, leading one to ask why, then, has his writing on art not continued to enjoy a greater influence and reputation, if not on a par with the likes of Baudelaire, comparable at least to, say, Félix Fénéon. The answer seems to lie mainly in that Aurier's art writing eludes comfortable classification as a particular genre of art-related literature. While he wrote as a critic, his work does not completely satisfy as criticism. Where his judgments demonstrate a keen critical sense, as in his advocacy of the art of Vincent van Gogh and especially Gauguin, his writing is hardly adequate to the art he describes, serving better to elucidate his own theory. His choices are often inconsistent in quality, and moreover are too apparently unsystematic immediately to proclaim the kind of specific point of view that one expects of the critic. (But then, it bears repeating, the art available for consideration as Symbolism represents a wide range of quality and scarcely any system.) In spite of these objections, Aurier's contribution is significant, though more so in intellectual than historical terms. For Aurier may be said to have enunciated a theory for which no art (in the sense of a broad movement) existed. The evidence of his own criticism suggests this was the

case. Can criticism be viable in the absence of art? Perhaps not, or only, perhaps, by transcending criticism to become theory. Only, perhaps, in Symbolism where, as Aurier put it, the sensuously perceived mark is of nothing in itself, but is valuable only as a sign of the Idea.

The known facts of Aurier's early years are scanty and little remarkable. He was born Gabriel-Albert Aurier on 5 May 1865, at Châteauroux.⁵ His father was a notary, his only sibling a younger sister, Suzanne. The young Albert was schooled at the local Lycée, where he was a good student, earning honors in drawing and French. On 16 November 1883 he was received bachelier ès lettres at the Faculté des Lettres of Poitiers. That same year his father died, and Albert left for Paris to study law. It had been his father's wish that his son earn a law degree and, in spite of the youth's antipathy for the subject, the realization of that wish became his mother's most fervent desire. During the next five years, the correspondence between Aurier and his mother is full of the evidence of this struggle--from the son, complaints about

⁵ Unless noted otherwise, biographical details are taken from Svetozar Rusic, "Biographe d'Albert Aurier," Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique, Dossier 15, Gidouille, LXXXVIII (Summer 1961), 51-62.

his studies, news of exams more often failed than passed, requests for more money to purchase law books, etc., and from the mother, evidently, compliance with her son's requests for financial assistance, but accompanied by reminders of his duty to his studies and of her unswerving determination to see him succeed. At last, on 11 January 1888, he received his diploma of licencié en droit, but he did not register at the bar until 16 May, and never practiced law.

All the while reluctantly pursuing his legal studies, Aurier was with more enthusiasm establishing himself in a literary career. Already while still a student at the Lycée he had written verse, often emulating the romantic poetry of Musset, but not always seriously, as in his parody of Musset's "Nuit de Mai": "Regarde-moi. Ne suis-je pas assez cochonne?/ Poète, prends ton luth et me donne un baiser."⁶ Aurier's first published poems appeared in one of the most ephemeral of the ephemeral periodicals of those years, Le Faucon Noir. Edited by several habitués of the brasserie of the same name, it

⁶M. Coulon, "Une Minute de l'heure symboliste--Albert Aurier," Mercure de France (February 1921), p. 620.

had a lifetime of four issues, from 19 April to 10 May 1885.⁷ One gets a sense of the tone of Aurier's contributions, as well as of the review in general, from these defensive lines penned to his mother:

J'ai été très étonné de ce que tu m'as écrit à propos du journal "Le Faucon Noir". Tu me reproches d'écrire des articles immoraux. Je n'ai certes pas la prétention d'être un bien grand moraliste. Néanmoins je ne crois avoir rien écrit que de bien innocemment léger. D'ailleurs, le journal "Le Faucon Noir" ne s'adressait pas précisément aux jeunes filles ni aux pensionnaires des Ecoles plus ou moins chrétiennes...⁸.

From 1886 through 1888 Aurier collaborated on the review Le Décadent littéraire. Le Décadent, première série was founded by Anatole Baju in April 1886, first as a newspaper but soon as a weekly magazine. After a hiatus of several months, the second series, monthly, appeared in 1888. Aurier's role was to contribute mostly poems, but also works of prose and literary, theatrical, and art criticism, sometimes signed with his own name but often under a number of pseudonyms including Marc Torelli, Marc d'Escorailles or Albert d'Escorailles (or d'Escaurailles--also A. d'E.). "Marc Torelli," the by-line for Le Décadent's regular column of theater criticism, called

⁷ Michel Decaudin, "Aurier l'ignoré," Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique, Dossier 15, Gidouille, LXXXVIII (Summer 1961), 41.

⁸ Rusic, P. 48

"Semaines théâtrales" or "Théâtralités," seems to have been a collective pseudonym for several collaborators of the review. Among Aurier's papers have been found several rough drafts in his hand for the "Théâtralités," indicating that he was the author of at least some of the "Marc Torelli" pieces.⁹ Marc or Albert d'Escorailles, on the other hand, was Aurier's alone. His nephew, M. Jacques Williame, gave this account of the origins of the pseudonym:

En effet Aurier signait Marc d'Escorailles ou A. d'E.--ou d'Escaurailles. Qui est bien le nom d'un village du Cantal. Le nom avait été porté par une véritable famille des Seigneurs d'Escorailles, qui paraît s'être éteinte vers la fin du XIII^e siècle en descendants mâles. . . . la tradition orale qui m'a été transmise par ma grand'mère assurait que les Aurier étaient du Cantal, le grand-père d'Albert Aurier ayant émigré vers le Poitou où il s'était fixé à l'Isle-Jourdain, et marié là. Il est donc parfaitement possible qu'Albert Aurier allant en vacances chez son grand-père dans ce pays poitevin ait entendu prononcer le nom d'Escorailles.--peut-être berceau de la famille??? d'où le pseudonyme. . . .¹⁰

It was in Le Décadent and under the pseudonym Marc d'Escaurailles that Aurier published his earliest lengthy piece of art criticism, a two-part "Salon de 1888" (15 May and 1 June 1888).

⁹ Noël Arnaud, "Aurier aux savates ailées et Irénée," Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique, Dossier 15, Gidouille, LXXXVIII (Summer 1961), 55n.

¹⁰ Letter from M. Jacques Williame to Noël Arnaud, quoted in Arnaud, loc. cit.

Rémy de Gourmont would later discount the seriousness of Aurier's collaboration on Le Décadent,¹¹ but there can be no doubt that his months of décadisme¹² had a lasting effect on Aurier's aesthetic outlook. Certainly, "fumisme" was a characteristic both of Aurier's natural make-up and of the "decadence" of the 1880s, particularly among the staff of Le Décadent. (It is well known that Anatole Baju, in his extremism, was not generally taken very seriously even by the collaborators on his own review. There was, for example, the hoax perpetrated by Ernest Raynaud and Laurent Tailhade, of bogus Rimbaud poetry published in Le Décadent.)¹³ But Aurier's participation in the Decadent phase of the Symbolist movement was genuine. In 1886, he wrote to his sister, "J'achève en ce moment un volume de poésies décadentes appelé à révolutionner le monde littéraire et à stupéfier la

¹¹ Rémy de Gourmont, "Notes sur G.-Albert Aurier," Mercure de France (December 1892), pp. 289-90. This article was reprinted in two more versions: in an abridged form in Le Deuxième Livre des masques (Paris, 1898), pp. 241-54; and slightly expanded, as the "Notice" of G.-Albert Aurier, Oeuvres Posthumes, ed. Rémy de Gourmont (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), pp. xiii-xvii. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Gourmont will refer to the Mercure article.

¹² A term coined by Baju, June 1886; see Kenneth Cornell, The Symbolist Movement (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 47.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 47 and 68.

bourgeoisie. Il y a des choses d'une déliquescence hyperbolifiante."¹⁴ During the same period, he wrote his mother that he had sent a poem to, and received an invitation to visit Stéphane Mallarmé, whom Aurier described as "le chef de l'Ecole 'décadente'.¹⁵ Of course, Aurier's poetry and other creative writing from this period to the end of his brief career offer the most conclusive evidence of the extent of his "décadisme".

By 1887 Aurier had started work on his first novel, Vieux. The book was reportedly finished sometime in the fall or early winter of 1888, but Aurier continued to "polish" it, and to look for a publisher (Savine) until at last it appeared early in 1891.

Vieux is the story, set in Aurier's native Châteauroux, of a retired military officer, Godeau, who commits the tragi-comic indiscretion of falling in love with a performer at the local café-concert. The woman, Bertha, strings the old fellow along until he marries her, then ruthlessly cuckolds, robs, deserts and generally mistreats him. The book caused quite an uproar at Châteauroux, where a certain "digne retraité" who thought he recognized a parody of himself in the character

¹⁴ Quoted Rusic, p. 49.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of Godeau, threatened to sue, but was ultimately dissuaded from taking legal action.¹⁶ The critical consensus, both at the time of the book's appearance and later, after its author's death, by both favorable and unfavorable reviewers, was that this was a work of surpassing naturalism, recalling Scarron (particularly in its comic aspects), Balzac, Gautier, Flaubert, and even Zola (L'Assommoir is mentioned, but especially Nana).¹⁷ Rémy de Gourmont, writing after Aurier's death and, by his own admission fearing that, on risque, en voulant être trop juste, d'être trop dur," had to admit that, "La personnalité d'Aurier n'y est pas encore bien nette; son esprit ne s'y affirme qu'à l'état de collaborateur, --collaborateur de Scarron et de Théophile Gautier, de Balzac et même de certains petits naturalistes qui tentèrent d'être gouguenards," But, he immediately demurred, "le plus grave défaut de ce livre fut qu'il n'exprimait plus, quand il fut achevé, les tendances esthétiques de l'auteur, ou qu'il n'en exprimait que la moitié et la partie la moins neuve et la plus caduque."¹⁸

¹⁶ Jean de la Baume, "Albert G. Aurier," La Revue Indépendante, NS 25 (October 1892), 134.

¹⁷ See Coulon, pp. 610, 628, and 630; Decaudin, p.44; La Baume, p. 132.

¹⁸ Gourmont, p. 299.

To find Aurier publishing a realistic novel in 1891, at the height of his development of his Idéiste theory of art, does at first sight seem rather anomalous. However, in spite of its naturalism, even through its naturalism, Vieux expressed much that was characteristic of Aurier's point of view at that period. The realistic detail of the fleshly encounters of Godeau and Bertha make these scenes rather repugnant than erotic, reflecting the same anti-sensualist attitude upon which the anti-naturalist aspects of his idealism rest. The novel demonstrates, in one critic's words, Aurier's "dépit d'un sensualisme inesthétique, antipoétique, inintellectuel, mais invincible; et sa volonté d'en guérir par une cure de dégoût."¹⁹

There are other indications, too, that the impression the book gives of belonging to the naturalist mode may be only apparent, a deliberate illusion. The incapacity for amorous illusions²⁰ that Aurier displays there is but a facet of the pessimism that was characteristic of the décadisme of the '80s. Decadent, too, is the style of the most veristic descriptive passages. Gaston Deschamps,

¹⁹ Coulon, p. 624.

²⁰ Ibid.

writing for the Journal des Debats (30 April 1891), reproached Aurier for his tortured vocabulary, citing as evidence a passage in which colors, perfumes, images of jewels are combined in the most "deliquescent" fashion:

Son récit, bien que l'action se passe platement à Châteauroux, est une fantasmagorie de maillots couleur de chair et un arc-en-ciel de chairs couleur de maillot. . . . Ce ne sont partout que "gorges poudrederizées, mollets maillottés de nuances tendres, roses épidermes, flamboyantes fournaises de tignasses rousses qui flamment et pétillent, formes menues de bottines, flottaillements bienheureux en des vapeurs d'alcool, senteurs de chair suante mêlée à des parfums de croylopsis, images viandues", que l'auteur déshabille avec une friandise d'anthropophage. C'est un vertige où les moindres objets tourbillonnent en sarabandes éperdues et grossissent démesurément. Une rose rouge et piquée au corsage d'une chanteuse de café-concert. . . . Voyez le changement à vue et admirez l'habileté de l'opérateur, j'allais dire du fort en thème: la petite rose devient une tache écarlate; elle s'enfle, grandit, s'allume de rutilements, de "coruscations de rubis", se fait attirante, obsédante . . .

M. Aurier a dû faire de bonnes études, à l'ancienne mode. N'en doutez pas : cet art de mettre les mots, à côté des autres, pour l'euphonie, de multiplier les épithètes sensationnelles qui ne correspondent pas à des sensations, de confondre la lettre écrite avec les choses vues, de jeter sur n'importe

quoi, pour le plaisir, des vocables embrasés et des phosphorescences d'adjectifs, cela droit tenir à une habitude invétérée du vers latin.²¹

Aurier's only other publication, outside the pages of the many Symbolist reviews to which he contributed poetry and other writing, was a long poem, L'Oeuvre Maudit, published as a pamphlet in the summer of 1889. Dedicated to Caravaggio whom Aurier selected as typifying the tormented artist in revolt, the poem shows a darker side of the Decadent image. The theme of L'Oeuvre Maudit is the misunderstood artist, outcast from society: "Nous sommes les Maudits, les Excommuniés./ Trafant, comme un boulet, nos chefs d'oeuvre niés." It includes this disdainful exhortation to artists to relish their status as pariahs: "Ne soyons plus le Fleuve vain qui se déroule,/ Courons, drapeaux dressés, où ne va pas la Foule..."²² This attitude towards the artist's position in society and the importance to the artist of his milieu, became an important component of the aesthetic that Aurier began to fashion coincidentally with the publication of his poem.

Aurier's interest in art went through a relatively long period of incubation before blossoming into a career as an art critic. As early as 1886 he enrolled in a course

²¹ La Baume, p. 135n.

²² Oeuvres Posthumes, pp. 75-79.

on the history of painting, taught by Georges Lafenestre at the Ecole du Louvre. The next year he took up classical studies at the Collège de France. He reported to his mother, "Je fais, en ce moment, de l'archéologie grecque. Je suis au Collège de France le cours de M. Homolle sur l'Histoire du Royaume de Pergame et de l'Ecole de Pergame. Ça se passe d'ailleurs en famille, car nous ne sommes que deux auditeurs dans la salle..."²³ At the beginning of 1888, Aurier was due to pass an examination in one of these courses (it is not clear which one; the latter seems more likely). A twenty-eight-day tour of military duty in February (the only military service required of Aurier, because he was the only son of a widow) interfered with the examination schedule, and Aurier was obliged to re-schedule his exam on 15 March. But when the day came he did not present himself, apparently feeling unable to return his attention to the subject. Thus ended Aurier's formal instruction in the history of art.

During the summer of 1888 occurred an event which was to have a major impact on the direction Aurier would take as an art critic. While vacationing with his mother and sister at Saint-Briac, in Brittany, Aurier was attracted to some mural decorations at the local inn, and he sought

²³ Letter by Aurier to his mother, dated 4 February 1887; quoted Rusic, p. 50.

out the artist. The friendship between Aurier and Emile Bernard that developed from this beginning proved very valuable for Aurier, as Bernard introduced him to a world of art previously unknown to the poet. Later, Bernard would introduce Aurier to a group of artists who included Gauguin, Sérusier, Filiger and Guillaumin. During the summer of 1888, the two engaged in long discussions especially of Bernard's own work, of course, but also of Vincent van Gogh, whose letters and sketches Bernard showed to Aurier.

In the spring of 1888 Aurier had already published, in two consecutive numbers of Le Décadent, his first major Salon review. Although this is a lengthy piece, and very characteristic of Aurier in its ironic tone, it is of little importance for Aurier's later development as an art critic. Returning to Paris after the summer, Aurier resumed his friendship with Bernard and through him continued to develop contacts in the art world. Together they attended several exhibitions, and upon Bernard's urging, Aurier went with his literary colleague Julien Leclercq to see Vincent van Gogh's paintings at père Tanguy's shop.

During the course of 1889, Le Moderniste illustré, of which Aurier was editor-in-chief,²⁴ published not only several bits of art criticism by Aurier, but also articles by Bernard and Gauguin. The articles by Aurier are mostly on the order of comptes rendus, but in them he does show an awareness of the moderns, including Gauguin, Bernard, Anquetin, Degas, Renoir, Monet and others, and his two-part article on J.-J. Henner includes some important theoretical statements. The year 1889 was the year of the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Gauguin, Bernard and several other artists in their circle, unable to have their work included in the official exhibition halls, engineered their own showing on the walls of a nearby cafe.²⁵ Shortly before the opening of the Cafe Volpini exhibit, Bernard wrote Aurier in the hope of getting some free publicity. What Bernard had in mind was a catalog published in a special issue of Le Moderniste, which could be sold at the exhibition. Aurier did not go this far, but he did include a congratulatory mention of the group in his review of the Exposition Universelle, and he may have been

²⁴ Aurier founded Le Moderniste Illustré in March 1889, the first issue appearing 6 April 1889; it ceased publication after twenty-three numbers, 28 September 1889.

²⁵ For a complete account of the history of this exhibition see John Rewald, Post Impressionism From van Gogh to Gauguin, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), pp. 255-66.

responsible as well for notices of the Cafe Volpini exhibition by Gustave Kahn in La Vogue and by Félix Fénéon in La Cravache. It was during the run of this exhibition that Aurier met Gauguin for the first time.

Later that year began a series of events culminating in the article that established Aurier's reputation as an art critic. Sometime during the second half of 1889 Emile Bernard sent Aurier a draft of a short article on Vincent van Gogh, which he hoped Aurier would publish in one of the Symbolist periodicals with which he was associated. The article was accompanied by a letter detailing certain facts of Vincent's biography.²⁶ Aurier's interest in van Gogh and his art had already been kindled by the sketches and letters Bernard had shown him at Saint-Briac. Since then he had followed up with a visit to Tanguy's shop, and now, accompanied by Bernard, Aurier paid a visit to Vincent's brother Theo to see more of his work. The result was the article dedicated solely to van Gogh which appeared in the first issue of the newly founded Mercure

²⁶Ibid., pp. 341 and 358, n. 71.

de France, 1 January 1890,²⁷ written not by Bernard but by Aurier himself. In this article, Aurier appeared for the first time in his role of authoritative champion of the artistic avant-garde, a role he filled so convincingly he was invited immediately to contribute art criticism to the Revue Indépendante, a periodical of considerably greater reputation than the fledgling Mercure. Aurier's major articles published during the course of 1890 include: "Les Aquarellistes" (February), "Camille Pissaro" (February), and "Meissonier" (April-June) in the Revue Indépendante, and "Raffaelli" (September) in the Mercure de France.

That two of these articles were on Pissarro and Raffaelli is indicative of the friendship that grew up between Aurier and Theo van Gogh; both artists had been given one-man shows in Theo's art gallery that year. The correspondence of the van Gogh-Bernard-Aurier circle suggests that Aurier was in frequent contact with both the van Gogh brothers during this period. In July of 1890

²⁷ Though dated 1 January 1890, this first issue of the Mercure de France actually appeared 25 December 1889. The Mercure was founded by Alfred Valette, with the collaboration of Louis Dumur, Edouard Dubus, Julien Leclercq and Aurier, as a transformation of the second Pléiade, which had suspended publication in September 1889. See Arnaud, op. cit., p. 58, for a letter from Valette to Aurier (21 September 1889) concerning the founding of the Mercure.

Aurier met Vincent for the first time while he was visiting his brother in Paris. Vincent must also have called upon Aurier at his own apartment, as Aurier's friend Julien Leclercq reported having seen him there.²⁸ When Vincent died in July 1890, Theo turned to Aurier to write the catalogue and a biography of his brother for a projected retrospective exhibition at the galleries of Durand-Ruel.²⁹ Although Aurier agreed enthusiastically,³⁰ the project was never carried out. At the time of Theo's death in January 1891, the exhibition still had not been arranged.

Aurier published art criticism even more prolifically in 1891, beginning with his very important, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," in the March issue of the Mercure de France. The previous July, Bernard had written Aurier urgently requesting him to publish an article on Gauguin in the Mercure (or preferably the more influential Revue Indépendante), to publicize the auction intended to

²⁸ Julien Leclercq, Introduction to catalogue of "Exposition Vincent van Gogh," Bernheim-Jeune Galleries, Paris, 15-31 March 1901; quoted in this context in Rewald, p. 375.

²⁹ Rewald, pp. 382-83, quotes a hitherto unpublished letter to Aurier from Theo van Gogh, dated 27 August 1890, on this subject.

³⁰ See Emile Bernard, "L'Enterrement de Vincent van Gogh," Arts-Documents (February 1953), for Aurier's letter to Bernard on this subject, dated (Châteauroux) 29 August 1890; quoted in Rewald, p. 383.

finance Gauguin's voyage to Tahiti.³¹ (At that time, it was Bernard's intention to accompany Gauguin on his flight from civilization.) Unfortunately for Gauguin, the article did not appear until about a week after the auction had been held. Sadly, what Aurier wrote there caused the end of his friendship with Bernard, as the young artist could not forgive his friend for his failure to emphasize--or even mention--the part he felt he had played in the development of both Gauguin's art and the theory Aurier constructed around it.

At the same time, the Revue Indépendante published a second article by Aurier concerning Gauguin, entitled "Monticelli--Paul Gauguin" (NS 18 [1891], 418-22). The pairing of Monticelli with Gauguin in this article may have been, at least in part, a posthumous concession to Vincent van Gogh. In the letter he wrote to Aurier thanking him for his appreciative article in the Mercure de France, Vincent insisted that Aurier had been mistaken in singling him out for praise. Specifically, he averred that, "your article would have been more correct and consequently, it seems to me, more powerful if, in treating the question of the future of 'art in the tropics' as well as the question of color, you had, before speaking of me,

³¹ Letter from Bernard to Aurier, July 1890; see Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1949), pp. 322-23; quoted in Rewald, p. 416.

done justice to Gauguin and to Monticelli."³² (On the other hand, Vincent's protests in the same letter that, "I do not understand how you can speak of Meissonier's 'infamies.' . . . I have inherited a boundless admiration for Meissonier. . . ." had not prevented Aurier's publishing a brutal attack on Meissonier in the spring of 1890.)

The year 1891 also saw the publication, in the Mercure de France, of Aurier's articles on "Eugène Carrièère" (June), "Renoir" (August), and "Henry de Groux" (October). "Claude Monet" (Mercure de France), and "Les Symbolistes" (Revue Encyclopédique) followed in April 1892.

Aurier also may have had in mind in 1892 an article on Seurat. During his vacation in the Midi that summer he met with Signac in Marseille, possibly to gather information about Seurat. If such an article was in his plans at the time, it did not progress beyond the germinative stages. Aurier contracted typhoid fever and died on 5 October 1892. He was then twenty-seven years old.

As was the case also with his creative writing, Aurier's final publications of art criticism were posthumous --first, his "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art" in

³² Vincent van Gogh to Aurier (Saint-Rémy, 15 February 1890), quoted Rewald, p. 344; the entire letter is published, in French, in Aurier, Oeuvres Posthumes, pp. 265-68.

the December 1892, issue of the Mercure (a special number devoted to Aurier), and at last, the book that could find no publisher while its author lived, his collected critical writings, presented as Book III, "Les Affranchis", of his Oeuvres Posthumes. For this edition, but for a little editorial intervention presented as Aurier planned it, Aurier divided his criticism among eight headings, the first being simply the "Préface...", retitled, "Essai sur une nouvelle Méthode de Critique." Paul Gauguin, Camille Pissarro, and Raffaelli are each given their own headings as, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture", "Le Néo-Impressionnisme", and "Le Caractérisme", while Claude Monet and Renoir together represented "L'Impressionnisme." A projected series on "Les Isolés" that Aurier had begun with his article on Vincent van Gogh is here disappointingly completed by reprints of Aurier's articles on Henry de Groux, Eugène Carrière, and J.-J. Henner. "Les Symbolistes", re-titled "Les Peintres Symbolistes" and given a new, dramatically anti-positivist opening paragraph,³³ stands alone. Finally, under the heading, "Simples Chroniques" are grouped a selection of less important

³³ A more accessible source for this superb bit of Aurier's writing is Rookmaaker, p. 1 (in English), and p. 281 n.a (in French).

essays: "Le Faux Dillettantisme: Monticelli, Paul Gauguin"; "Meissonier et Georges Ohnet", which adds nothing whatever to the original "Meissonier"; "Les Aquarellistes"; "A propos de l'Exposition Universelle de 1889", combining three short columns from Le Moderniste: "Concurrence", "Chronique d'art", and "Revanche"; and finally, "A propos des trois Salons de 1891."

While Aurier's arrangement of his art criticism in the Oeuvres Posthumes is not without a certain logic, the "book" remains a loose grouping of individual articles, each written in response to a different set of circumstances, for publication in several different periodicals, meeting different editorial requirements. That is not to say that the collected, yet separate essays, as well as other bits of criticism not included in the collection, do not together document a particular approach to art criticism, the product of a coherent philosophy of art, producing a coherent theory of art. They do. That these various essays do, in combination, elaborate a single, logical, complete, Symbolist art theory is the thesis of the present study. To demonstrate the logic and completeness of that theory will be the task of this study, but with the implicit acknowledgment that the theory thus exposed is often more coherent, more single-minded than the "criticism" for which it forms the intellectual foundation.

That it is a Symbolist theory hardly needs demonstrating. What is a Symbolist theory--that is, what in a Symbolist theory distinguishes it from a theory of some other persuasion, while allowing it to remain recognizable as essentially the same type of intellectual construct--is the question to be explored. Enough has already been written about the catch-words and -phrases of the Symbolist movement, e.g. "rêve", "mystère", "synthèse",³⁴ that to analyze Aurier's theory only in terms of Symbolism would be redundant. Instead, without removing Aurier from his Symbolist milieu, I have endeavored to place his work in the larger context of art theory generally, not by means of explicit comparisons with the great theorists of art who preceded him, but by analyzing Aurier's theory into the same fundamental components that must form the basis of any systematic aesthetic, of any time: Beauty, nature and representation, style, the aesthetic emotion, and the gift or genius of the artist. Readers who are well-versed in the history of aesthetics will immediately recognize both familiar themes and new directions in Aurier's approach, and can form their own judgments of Aurier's right to stand in the tradition of French art theory.

³⁴ E.g. by Rookmaaker and Lehmann.

Chapter II

The Nature of the Work of Art and the Role of Criticism:
"Préface pour un livre de critique d'art"

In his "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art" (Mercure de France, December 1892), Aurier assails Taine's "méthode de critique scientifique" on two fronts, objecting first, that Taine's method is not in fact what it claims to be, namely, a philosophy of art; and secondly, that Taine's method is false. As Aurier himself stated his goals in the "Préface", "Esperons que cette discussion convaincra le lecteur combien paradoxale est la thèse de M. Taine, combien vain et même nuisible est sa méthode de critique, combien enfin elle est à coté de la tâche que doit se proposer la vraie critique" (p. 310).

In Aurier's presentation, these arguments are most often given virtually simultaneously, but for purposes of comparison with Aurier's own theory, it is instructive to separate them, distilling from his refutation of this particular method the set of criteria that, it would appear, Aurier would find essential to any true

philosophy of art. In the course of demonstrating Taine's failure, Aurier lists these as issues an aesthetic must address: above all, that it account for the value of art qua art; that it allow for judgments of quality or relative value (as art); and that it distinguish works of art as a class of objects apart from other objects. Now, the single principle that answers all three questions is beauty, or the beautiful. Aurier never pronounces it so baldly, but it is everywhere implied that his first postulate is that art is concerned with beauty, that by definition aesthetic is beautiful. This may appear to be an astoundingly obvious truism, but nonetheless seems to have escaped M. Taine's notice. Repeatedly, Aurier attributes Taine's failure to answer his objections to his refusal to provide a "définition du beau."

Let us consider an example of each of Aurier's requisite issues. At the outset of his analysis and refutation, Aurier gives this interpretation of the basis of Taine's theory:

La doctrine de M. Taine, on le sait, est basée sur cette idée qu'une œuvre d'art est un phénomène essentiellement relatif et contingent, qui n'existe pas en soi, et dont la seule valeur est d'être le témoignage de l'état psychologique d'un peuple à une époque donnée. Il nous explique bien quelque part certaines conditions esthétiques de l'œuvre d'art, mais ce sont plutôt les conditions par lesquelles une œuvre

devient, par sa synthèse imitative, un bon document historique, que les conditions qui la rendraient belle en soi. (p. 311)

It is apparent already that to Aurier en soi, repeated and reinforced as belle en soi, amounts to saying as art. He concludes, ". . . en effet, M. Taine, sans l'avouer explicitement, s'insoucie fort de la valeur esthétique absolue et intrinsèque des œuvres" (p. 311).

His next objection is that Taine's method fails to provide any standards for making judgments of quality, in Aurier's view, a fundamental duty of the critic. To drive home this point, Aurier need do little more than quote Taine's own words:

Aussi, la critique qu'il préconise "a des sympathies pour toutes les écoles, même pour celles qui semblent les plus opposées; elle les accepte comme autant de manifestations de l'esprit humain..."--Et il ajoute plus loin, un peu naïvement, "elle fait comme la botanique, qui étudie avec un intérêt égal tantôt l'oranger et le laurier, tantôt le sapin et le bouleau; elle est elle-même, une sorte de botanique appliquée non aux plantes, mais aux œuvres humaines". Evidemment, le devoir du botaniste est d'étudier avec le même zèle le cèdre et la moisissure, mais est-ce bien ce qu'on est en droit d'attendre d'un critique? (p. 311)

Closely related to this second objection is the third, that Taine's method is incapable of distinguishing art from

any other object of human production. The two are related, obviously, in that the same criteria that would allow a judgment such as, "This work of art has greater (aesthetic) value than that," would also operate in judging, "This work has aesthetic value while that has none." In Aurier's words, "Si le critique scientifique ne s'aide pas de quelques principes dogmatiques la critique lui deviendra purement et simplement impossible, puisqu'il sera obligé pour être logique d'accepter comme œuvres d'art, indistinctement, toutes les productions cérébro-manuelles de l'humanité" (p. 315). And what are these "quelques principes dogmatiques" to be? In short, nothing less than a definition of beauty, which amounts, virtually, to posing two questions: "what is the special emotion that ensues from looking at works of art?" and, "what special quality of art produces this emotion?".

Déjà, dans les pages qui précèdent, nous avons pu être surpris de le [Taine] voir prendre comme thèmes d'expérimentation les œuvres de Rubens et de Michel-Ange. Pourquoi celles-là plutôt que telles ou telles croutes, évidemment aussi intéressantes pour lui, s'il veut être logique avec sa déclaration antécédente: qu'il a "des sympathies" pour toutes "les manifestations de l'esprit humain"? . . .

.
Serait-ce parce qu'elles l'ont surtout et d'abord ému par certaines qualités spéciales en elles immanentes?

Sans aucun doute. Mais alors n'aurait-il pas été logique de commencer par nous parler de cette émotion spéciale du sujet et de ces qualités spéciales de l'objet? N'aurait-il pas été plus logique de nous parler d'abord de cette mystérieuse sensation de beauté qu'il avoue implicitement avoir éprouvée, de ce mystérieux don de beauté qu'il avoue implicitement avoir constaté? En un mot, ne fallait-il pas poser le problème du beau et de la sensation esthétique avant celui des contingences conditionnelles de l'œuvre d'art?
(p. 315)

The answers are given by definition, as it were: the emotion is the aesthetic emotion; the special quality is beauty. It is clear that without some account of beauty in art the issue dissolves in a senseless tautology.

Let us turn now to Aurier's objections to the particular details of Taine's method, considered apart from questions of its relevance to any true aesthetic theory. It is important first to understand that in rejecting specific claims of Taine's theory, Aurier is also rejecting--as did virtually the entire symbolist generation --the whole substructure of positivism on which it rests, and which A. G. Lehmann has described as follows:

Positivism aimed broadly at extending to the anatomy of art certain principles which it assumed to be valid in the natural sciences. Its first attempt was on historical data, and to this end it adapted its conception of the scientific method. The positivists "thought it consisted of two things: First, ascertaining

facts; secondly, framing laws. The facts were immediately ascertained by sensuous perception. The laws were framed through generalizing from these facts by induction." (R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, 1946, pp. 126-7) If it could be shown that the laws of art thus discovered were in some way related to similar laws of society which it hoped ultimately to discover in a similar way, the first step would have been taken towards breaking down the intolerable mystery which surrounded the question, "What is art?" All subsequent development of an aesthetic would then take the form of a minute investigation and detailed classification of artistic phenomena under headings provided by the theory of society. Art would, in short, be explained initially from a sociological viewpoint.¹

Obviously, such a program would be odious to an intellectual of Aurier's leanings on several counts, most basically, the positivist understanding of scientific method and its possible applications. This is made quite clear in the opening paragraphs of the "Préface...", where Aurier blasts the nineteenth century for having wanted to "introduire la science partout, même dans les choses où elle a le moins affaire" (p. 309). By "science," he clarifies, he means not "la mathématique, la seule science à proprement parler, mais bien ces bâtardeuses obtuses de la science, les sciences naturelles." His reasons follow:

¹Lehmann, p. 21.

Or les sciences naturelles, ou sciences inexactes, par opposition aux sciences rationnelles ou exactes, étant, par définition, insusceptibles de solutions absolues, conduisent fatalement au scepticisme et à la peur de la pensée.

Il faut donc les accuser, elles, de nous avoir fait cette société sans foi, terre à terre, incapable de ces mille manifestations intellectuelles ou sentimentales qu'on pourrait classer sous le nom de dévouement. (p. 309).

We have already seen Aurier derisively quote Taine's description of the "botanical" approach to art criticism, faulting the method for its incapacity to make quality judgments. And we noted there, too how Aurier's suggested remedy (his recommendation that Taine be "dogmatique" in beginning with a definition of beauty) would, by its very dogmatism, have forced "solutions absolues." But beyond his scorn for the scientific pretensions of a positivist aesthetic, Aurier takes exception to the basis in sociology of Taine's method, as well as to the imitative theory of art that he tacks onto it. Aurier's tirade against the natural sciences continues:

Elles sont donc responsables--Schiller l'avait constaté--de la pauvreté de notre art, auquel elles ont fixé pour unique domaine l'imitation, seul but constatable par les procédés expérimentaux. Donner à l'art ce but, contradictoire de l'art même, n'est-ce point le supprimer purement et simplement? C'est ce qui est advenu, sauf pour les rares artistes qui ont eu la force de s'isoler loin de ces milieux d'idées dissolvantes. (pp. 309-10)

Let us now examine, from Aurier's point of view, just how Taine derives a theory of art from sociology, Aurier's objections to Taine's system, and the alternative theories he proposes.

Following on the assumption that the "scientific method" of the natural sciences (gathering data and framing laws) is equally valid for the human sciences, Taine seems to assume that the laws controlling the data of art will be similar to those of botany. Observing, for example, the obvious effect of climate on the flora and fauna of a given region, Taine derives an analogous theory in which the social "climate" determines the art product. In his well-known introduction to the Histoire de la littérature anglaise he systematizes the social determinants as Race, Milieu and Moment. It is to this theorem that Aurier refers when he writes:

La doctrine de M. Taine, on le sait, est basée sur cette idée qu'une œuvre d'art est un phénomène essentiellement relatif et contingent, qui n'existe pas en soi, et dont la seul valeur est d'être le témoignage de l'état psychologique d'un peuple à une époque donnée. . . La Kermesse de Rubens, selon lui, est un chef-d'œuvre parce qu'elle synthétise merveilleusement l'état psychologique et social des Flandres au temps de Rubens. (p. 311)

Taine analyzes the outside influences by considering the work of art not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a part of three larger entities. Aurier quotes Taine extensively to describe this process:

"Le point de départ de cette méthode, dit M. Taine lui-même, consiste à reconnaître qu'une œuvre d'art n'est pas isolée, par conséquent à chercher l'ensemble dont elle dépend et qui l'explique". . . . Suivant cette direction, on constatera donc avant tout que l'œuvre en question "appartient d'abord à l'œuvre totale de l'artiste qui en est l'auteur", que cette œuvre totale, elle aussi, fait partie d'un ensemble "qui est l'école ou la famille d'artistes du même pays et du même temps à laquelle il appartient". . . . "Cette famille d'artistes elle-même est comprise dans un ensemble plus vaste qui est le monde qui l'entoure et dont le goût est conforme au sien. Car l'état des moeurs et de l'esprit est le même pour le public et pour les artistes, ils ne sont pas des hommes isolés." (pp. 312-13)

All this may be summed up in one additional quotation Aurier takes from the Philosophie de l'art: "L'œuvre d'art est déterminée par un ensemble qui est l'état général de l'esprit et des moeurs environnantes" (p. 318).

As a corollary to his theory of the environmentally determined work of art, Taine introduces the concept of the personnage régnant. This is a synthetic creature, in whom are represented all the sentiments, aspirations, etc, of the age--for example: for the ancient Greeks, the

athlete; for the Middle Ages, the knight; for the early nineteenth century, Werther. This personnage regnant serves as a model for the artist, either to be reproduced in the work of art, or to be addressed by it.

Aurier has several objections to this approach. First, he presents Taine's three-phase system for defining the environmental forces shaping the work of art as three expanding circles leading ever further away from the goal of knowledge of the work itself, and remarks ironically that "L'ancienne critique consistait à pénétrer autant que possible dans l'œuvre même, la nouvelle consiste à s'en éloigner méthodiquement autant que possible (p. 312).² Further, he finds empirically unverifiable Taine's assumption that all artists are influenced by their milieu and necessarily give evidence of this influence in their work. With some evident satisfaction at turning the empiricist tables, Aurier invalidates Taine's argument by citing examples of artists (e.g., Callot) who remained relatively isolated from their milieu, or, in contradiction to the notion of a personnage regnant, others whose work seems to run counter to the outstanding trend of the age:

² This characterization reflects Aurier's bias; the same three-part system has been described by a more objective writer as "three stages in ever-increasing precision" (Lehmann, p. 22).

Pensez-vous que l'Angelico ait beaucoup subi l'influence de l'Italie dissolue et sensuelle du XV^e siècle; que, de nos jours, Puvis de Chavannes, cette âme de mystique païen, ou Gustave Moreau, ce rêveur de chimères triomphales et somptueuses, aient beaucoup à démeler avec leur siècle de myope analyse, hideusement industrialiste et utilitariste? (p. 313)

On the other hand, Aurier can also dispense with those cases that seem to verify Taine's thesis. The great artist, Aurier contends, indeed, the only true artist, leads his milieu and creates the personnage regnant. To illustrate, he takes one of Taine's own examples of a personnage regnant -- Werther--and notes that this character was created singlehandedly by Goethe, to be subsequently exploited by lesser imaginations of the romantic period. He suggests that other examples of personnages regnants, such as the medieval chevalier or pindaric ideal athlete, may similarly owe their birth to but one dominating figure. In summary, he contends that Taine's system is valid only

. . . pour les artistes médiocres, pour les artistes qui sont, à la vérité, le moins artistes--pour ceux-là même qui sont incapables de réagir contre l'influence des ambiances et qui, incapables de découvrir en eux un idéal, en sont réduits à en chercher un au dehors, et à exploiter, dans leur incapacité de création, l'idéal créé par d'autres.

En résumé, cette loi, presque vraie lorsqu'il s'agit des artistes médiocres, c'est-à-dire des artistes que ne peuvent nous intéresser que comme manifestations historiques, devient absolument fausse dès qu'il s'agit des grands artistes vraiment originaux, qui seuls doivent compter. (pp. 320-21)

Far more interesting and revealing than Aurier's frequently obvious objections to the positivist system are his proposals for alternative laws of aesthetic production. Deliberately phrased in direct contradiction to all Taine's insistence on the milieu as "la cause primitive qui détermine le reste" (p. 314) in art, is Aurier's formula: "L'oeuvre d'art est, en valeur, inversement proportionnelle à l'influence des milieux qu'elle a subie" (p. 320). If this assertion at first sight seems little more than rhetorical overstatement or petulant contrariness on Aurier's part, there is in fact more here than immediately meets the eye. Aurier's formula is rooted in his participation in the Decadent taste for Schopenhauerian pessimism, with its attendant contempt for everyday reality, specifically, late nineteenth century bourgeois materialism. Consider his reply to Taine's assertion that artists "ne sont pas des hommes isolés" (p. 313):

Certes, non, les artistes ne sont pas des hommes isolés, et malheureusement! Malheureusement, oui, ils subissent l'influence des milieux, plus

oui, ils subissent l'influence des milieux, plus ou moins, malgré leur désir, qui est un devoir, de s'en éloigner et de s'en abstraire. Ils sont en quelque sorte des cygnes qui, par hasard tombés dans un bourbier, tâchent de se renvoyer vers le ciel, mais dont les ailes ont été souillées par la boue du marécage. La critique scientifique a-t-elle donc raison de ne vouloir se préoccuper exclusivement que de ces taches de boue sur les ailes blanches? (p. 313)

The result of this stance--Aurier's personal ideal of the artist as willfully isolated from society--permeates his art criticism even to the plan for the volume he projected to follow the "Préface..."; several of his articles were to appear under the heading, "Les Isolés."

From his postulate that the value of art is greater as the artist succeeds in isolating himself from the nefarious influence of society, it follows (in Aurier's system) that an important distinguishing characteristic of the true artist is his ability to hold himself apart--at least where his artistic production is concerned--from ordinary reality. The artist thus divides himself between two worlds--reality as it is experienced by "la foule", and the "remote" and "abstract" realm of his aesthetic sense. Along with this duality in the artist's experience Aurier postulates a corresponding rift in his personality, which at the same time, first, accounts for the phenomenon

of the artist who is apparently very much a participant in his milieu, yet who creates an art which in its greatness rises above, and, secondly, gives a name to that quality of the artistic personality that makes such achievement possible:

...du fait qu'un artiste physiquement sensualiste a produit une oeuvre sensualiste, il ne faut point inférer que tout artiste physiquement sensualiste produira une oeuvre sensualiste. Je crois, en effet, pour ce qui est de ce dernier cas, qu'il y a toujours lieu de distinguer en un artiste une double âme, son âme d'homme et son âme d'artiste. Les exemples à l'appui seraient nombreux. Voyez Corneille: son oeuvre est éloquente, grandiloque, abondante; ce qui caractérise son âme d'artiste, c'est l'éloquence et la fierté; ce qui caractérise son âme d'homme, au dire de tous les biographes, c'est la timidité, le manque d'éloquence, la difficulté d'exprimer, le bégayement. Perugin, dont l'oeuvre est d'un croyant et d'un mystique, était, dit-on, dans sa vie d'homme, un athée et un matérialiste. nous sommes donc forcés d'en conclure que si, dans l'artiste, il est une partie de l'âme qui subit l'influence des milieux, l'autre partie, la seule qui compte pour nous, peut s'isoler et ne rien subir de cette influence. (pp. 318-19)

In the foregoing explanation, "âme d'artiste" is roughly equivalent to what, in the traditional vocabulary of French art criticism (a vocabulary which Aurier does not hesitate to employ), had been known as "genius."

Reconsidering the formula quoted above, "L'oeuvre d'art est, en valuer, inversement proportionnelle à l'influence des milieux qu'elle a subie," in light of this interpretation of "âme d'artiste", one can hardly escape the conclusion that, in Aurier's view, the value of a work of art is proportional to the degree to which it exhibits "genius", defined in Aurier's peculiarly Decadent terms. That certainly is not new, nor is it satisfactory as a complete explanation of what gives art its value qua art. Considering how Aurier seized upon Taine's sociologic determinism and bludgeoned it for failing to take into account either beauty as an inherent quality of the art work or the aesthetic emotion it produces, one would expect that Aurier should do no less than meet his own requirements. In fact, it is apparent in many of Aurier's articles on individual artists that he does use this purely negative standard of being out of phase with popular taste or morals as the basis of his personal taste. Certain points in Aurier's aesthetic system are founded on decisions more properly belonging to the realm of taste--his ideal of the isolated artist is a particularly striking example--and in most cases his preference is for artists who meet the criteria of his aesthetic. But it is a mistake to assume that taste and system are one and the same, and an injustice to Aurier too quickly to find him passing off a

decree of personal preference as a logical deduction. His definition of beauty, arcane though it may be, is to be sought elsewhere.

Though Taine of course would not have agreed with Aurier that the milieu in which a work of art is created plays no role in shaping the work, he must have been aware of the validity of the objection that his socio-biographical "botany" of art is not an aesthetic. As though in reply, he proceeds in the Philosophie de l'art to a discussion of the nature of art, or more precisely, of the process by which nature is transformed into art. Here again, Aurier finds his method false.

The cornerstone of Taine's theory of the arts is his conviction that they are imitative: "Ils ont tous un caractère commun: celui d'être, plus ou moins, des arts d'imitation."³ But imitation alone is not sufficient to qualify a work as art, nor is simpleminded exactitude a criterium of importance. Rather, in studying his model, the artist must pick out "les rapports et les dépendances mutuels" which he will modify in his rendering in order to bring out some "caractère essentiel" of the model: "l'artiste, en modifiant les rapports des parties, les modifie dans le même sens, avec intention, de façon à

³H. Taine, Philosophie de l'art, 2nd ed, (Paris, 1872), p.26.

rendre sensible un certain caractère essentiel de l'objet, et par suite de l'idée principale qu'il s'en fait. Notons ce mot, Messieurs. Le caractère est ce que les philosophes appellent l'essence des choses.⁴ In the "Préface..." Aurier twice quotes passages from the Philosophie in which Taine describes this process, and makes two separate arguments against it. His objections are first, that perception of such a "caractère essentiel" is merely intellectual (and thus not aesthetic), and secondly, that the whole elaborate process of "modifiant les rapports," etc., amounts to naturalism. Both objections ultimately bear on the question of the aesthetic emotion.

This portion of Taine's theory is first encountered in the "Préface..." in the form of Taine's definition of art:

L'œuvre d'art a pour but de manifester quelque caractère essentiel ou saillant, partant quelque idée importante, plus clairement, plus complètement que ne le font les objets réels. Elle y arrive en employant un ensemble de parties liées, dont elle modifie systématiquement les rapports. Dans les trois arts d'imitation, sculpture, peinture, et poésie, ces ensembles correspondent à des objets réels. (Taine, pp. 63-64; Aurier, p. 316)

Aurier is scornful that Taine should have attempted a definition of art without having first defined beauty or the aesthetic emotion, reasoning that of the three, art is

⁴Ibid., pp. 50-51

the "chose plus concrète et conséquemment moins suspecte de métaphysicisme" (p. 316). His objection to this "definition" is stated briefly, and once again is seen to stem from the need first to "poser le problème de la sensation esthétique, et peut-être aussi celui du beau, avant de résoudre le problème de l'art":

Cette définition, quelque pauvre qu'elle soit, permettra à M. Taine de joindre à sa méthode de sélection sans laquelle rien n'eût été plus impraticable. Mais on observera dès maintenant combien cette définition, qui sert d'instrument de sélection, est étrange, puisqu'elle ne trouve dans l'art que des éléments intellectuels et aucun élément émotif ni même sensationnel. (p. 316)

What Aurier finds unsatisfactorily "intellectual" in this portion of Taine's method has been precisely summarized by A.G. Lehmann:

1. The artist makes use of material presented to his senses and already interpreted intellectually before he comes to treat it in the way claimed to be peculiar to art (i.e. by bringing out the 'essential character' of the theme it combines to form). Therefore two elements alone need to be distinguished in an aesthetic activity: a passive element of perception, and an active element of rational interpretation. The rest of the artist's work is pure routine: putting his material into communicable form.

2. The kind of attitude which the artist adopts in the face of his material is intellectual, in the sense that he decides from a number of possible alternatives, what essential feature he ought to emphasize, or use as a guiding principle of design, and then proceeds to try and accomplish this self-imposed task of giving it requisite prominence. In short, he proposes to himself an end. It is in this sense that Taine can speak of posterity trying to understand a work of art, and in this sense that his aesthetic is intellectualist.⁵

Understood thus, it is not difficult to see that, although he does not state it explicitly, Aurier's objection implies this distinction--that Taine's definition of art is in reality a definition of the object of art. And it is the attempt to define art by means of an analysis of its object that makes of art a "chose plus concrète et conséquemment moins suspecte de métaphysicisme" than any question of beauty or aesthetic could be. It is important to note that determining the object of the work of art is not among Aurier's requirements for an aesthetic. Simply put, Aurier's approach seems to be to look at art rather than through it (he asks that a work of art be "belle en soi"). Thus, Aurier can avoid (for the moment) raising the question of representation. The significance of this distinction will become more clear through examining Aurier's second objection to the notion of a "caractère essentiel, i.e. that it amounts to naturalism.

⁵Lehmann, p. 24.

Further on in the "Préface..." Aurier quotes Taine rephrasing his concept of a "caractère essentiel," here in a study of, in Aurier's paraphrase, "cette qualité spéciale qui fait que le réel n'est pas seulement le réel mais l'idéal":

"Les choses, écrit-il, passent du réel à idéal, lorsque l'artiste les reproduit en les modifiant d'après son idée, et il les modifie d'après son idée, lorsque, concevant et dégageant en elles quelque caractère notable, il altère systématiquement les rapports naturels de leurs parties pour rendre ce caractère plus visible et plus dominateur." (p. 322)

Aurier is quick to note that, as in other parts of Taine's method, there is no mechanism provided here for judging the aesthetic value either of the artist's ideas or of the alterations he makes in his model for the sake of visualizing that idea--

La première objection qui vient à l'esprit est celle-ci: sans doute, cette définition est acceptable bien qu'un peu étroite, mais elle a le tort de ne point différencier la valeur des diverses réalités logiquement altérées en vue de telles et telles diverses idées. Un imbécile, doué d'une bonne science acquise ou native, qui aura altéré les rapports de tels objets réels d'après une idée à lui, mais une idée stupide, aura idéalisé cette chose évidemment, mais quelle sera la valeur de cet idéal? De plus, il est évident que la valeur de l'idéal ainsi entendu dépendra d'un autre élément, le degré de logique et de perfection des altérations et déformations systématiques dont on nous parle. (p. 322)

However, Aurier in no way questions the basic assumption of the existence of such a thing as the ideal, nor the relevance of the ideal to art. (But while tacitly accepting the notion of an ideal as somehow fundamentally related to art, he still in no way implies that its relationship is as the object of art.) Some of Aurier's ensuing remarks sound very mild, almost as though he could be satisfied with this definition if only Taine had defined the beautiful and limited the province of art to the "belles idées" of the artist. But the process Taine describes for realizing the artist's ideal is still objectionable to Aurier, and further, Taine introduces his own system of criteria for a hierarchy of ideals that cannot conform to Aurier's notion of the aesthetic.

The criteria Aurier quotes for Taine's "hiérarchie de l'idéal" are three: "le degré d'importance du caractère dominateur, le degré de bienfaisance du caractère dominateur, le degré de convergence des effets" (p. 322). Immediately Aurier objects that once again Taine's theory is found to be not what it claims to be. In this instance, his hierarchy of ideals, which presumably should be based on the differentiation of ideas, has nothing to do with ideas, properly speaking, at all. Aurier takes this moment to insert his own definition of idée: ". . . c'est-à-dire des phénomènes subjectifs que l'artiste peut

avoir à matérialiser à l'aide des réalités objectives (travail de tout l'art idéaliste)" (p. 323). In Taine's definition, on the other hand, what go by the name of idées of the artist are in reality nothing more than, "les modes d'être ou de penser des réalités objectives." The resulting ideal is thus only naturalism in disguise. Taine's "importance" and "bienfaisance," as Aurier rightly contends, are only attributes of the objects of art, and have more to do with morality than with aesthetics. In his notes for the "Préface...", Aurier copied this passage from Schiller in support of his point of view:

Toutes les propriétés par lesquelles un objet peut devenir esthétique peuvent se ramener à quatre classes que, aussi bien d'après leur différence objective que d'après leur différente relation avec le sujet, produisent sur nos facultés passives et actives des plaisirs inégaux, non pas seulement en intensité, mais aussi en valeur: Classes qui sont aussi d'une utilité inégale pour le but des beaux-arts. Ce sont l'agréable, le bon, le sublime et le beau. De ces quatre catégories, le sublime et le beau seuls appartiennent proprement à l'art. L'agréable n'est pas digne de l'art et le bon n'en est au moins pas le but: car le but de l'art est de plaire, et le bon, que nous le considérons soit en théorie, soit en pratique, ne peut ni ne doit servir de moyen pour satisfaire aux besoins de la sensibilité...Un objet peut, par sa nature intime, révolter le sens moral, et néanmoins plaire à l'imagination qui le contemple, et néanmoins être beau.--Schiller. Réflexions détachées sur diverses questions d'esthétique.
8. 151. (p. 323)

The third point, "le degré de convergence des effets," in other words, the degree of success with which the artist "altère systématiquement les rapports naturels de leurs parties pour rendre ce caractère plus visible et plus dominateur," has less still to do with idealization, but guarantees rather, in Aurier's words, "un art réaliste, ultra-réaliste même, puisque son but sera non seulement de représenter l'objectivité, mais encore de la représenter exagérée et plus visible" (p. 325).

Aurier closes this section of the "Préface..." with this curious conclusion--a careful remolding of Taine's statement into his own definition of the ideal. As in Taine's definition, the ideal is created through modifying real objects according to the ideas of the artist, though only his "idées belles," but not only this. There are also in the objects themselves certain "caractères" which Aurier is careful to distinguish from any "caractère dominateur" or "caractère essentiel" of Taine's in this respect--that his own "caractères" are modalities of ideas existing in the objects themselves, the presence of which affect the subjective ideas of the observing artist. The resulting ideal is thus a collaboration of the deforming action of these two sorts of ideas, objective and subjective, synthesized in the work of art:

. . . Si l'idéal consiste d'abord et avant tout dans les déformations que subissent les objets réels sous l'action des idées de l'artiste, et non point de toutes ses idées, mais des ses idées belles (chose que n'a pu établir M. Taine, je le répète, faute de croire à la possibilité d'une définition du beau), il n'en est pas moins vrai que les choses ont en elles des caractères qui sont en réalité les modalités des idées incluses en elles-mêmes, et que ces idées objectives rétroagissent de façons diverses sur les idées subjectives, et que dans la genèse de l'idéal collaborent deux travaux déformateurs du réel simultanément effectués par deux sortes d'idées et pour la définitive expression de ces deux sortes d'idées définitivement synthétisées dans l'œuvre d'art. (p. 326)

The precise nature of the objective "idées incluses en elles-mêmes" is one of the most dangerously obscure aspects of Aurier's theory. Here he only hints that they may be vaguely Platonic with the remark, "Mais, pour voir cela, il fallait avoir du monde une conception moins matérialiste et ne point préférer Aug. Comte et Condillac à Piotin ou à Platon" (p. 326).

Aurier abandons this tack for the remaining several pages of the "Préface..." These contain mainly a tirade against the biographical method of Sainte-Beuve and a blanket condemnation of the critics of the nineteenth century, among whom Emile Hennequin, Théophile Sylvestre and Emile Deschanel (La Physiologie des Artistes) are singled out for individual mention. A few notable exceptions to the nefarious rule of "la critique scientifique"

are noted: "le dogmatique" Saint-Victor, Théophile Gautier ("qui tenta, mais sans aucun sens critique, des transpositions d'oeuvres picturales en œuvres littéraires"), and Charles Baudelaire; and among Aurier's contemporaries, J.-K. Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau, Jean Dolent, Roger Marx, Geoffroy, and Charles Morice.

The "Préface..." remained incomplete at its author's death. In its published form it concludes with a highly rhetorical statement of, or plea for, Aurier's personal method, a fragment discovered by Mercure de France editor Alfred Valette among Aurier's notes for the article.

On the surface this fragment seems not to belong to the rest of the article. Its tone is strikingly different, and it employs none of the phrases that have become familiar in the preceding pages. Yet in spite of this first impression of surprise, of new material suddenly pulled out of the air, point by point it effectively summarizes Aurier's attitude in the "Préface..."

The first point, from which the remainder of the final proclamation derives, returns to the theme of the obscure passage just quoted, the interaction in the art work of the ideas of the artist and of his object--"Une œuvre d'art est un être nouveau qui non seulement a une âme, mais une âme double (âme de l'artiste et âme de la nature, père et mère)" (p. 331)--and once again reinforces

Aurier's determination to focus on the work itself. Next, he offers a simple alternative to all Taine's analysis of milieu as a means to penetrate to the core of this "être nouveau":

Le seul moyen de pénétrer une chose, c'est l'amour. Pour comprendre Dieu, il faut l'aimer; pour comprendre la femme, il faut l'aimer; la compréhension est proportionnelle à l'amour.

Le seul moyen de comprendre une œuvre d'art, c'est donc d'en devenir l'amant. Cette chose est possible, puisque l'œuvre est un être ayant une âme et la manifestant par un langage qu'on peut apprendre.

Il est même plus facile d'avoir pour une œuvre d'art l'AMOUR véritable que pour une femme, puisque dans l'œuvre d'art la matière existe à peine et ne fera presque jamais dégénérer l'amour en sensualisme. (p. 331)

Thus at last it seems we have been given a description of "cette émotion spéciale du sujet et de ces qualités spéciales de l'objet." The aesthetic emotion is love, but a special strain highly resistant to the baser attractions of sensualism. The qualities of the art work that give rise to this emotion--the wellsprings of its beauty--are its soul, newly created through the marriage of artist and nature, and the expression of its soul in a language sufficiently coherent, "qu'on peut apprendre."

Finally, just as Taine's method is profoundly rooted in a positivist attitude, a faith that all mysteries can

be solved by application of the scientific method, so Aurier's system rests on the antithetical mental attitude of mysticism. He claims for mysticism the power to reverse the degenerative trends that in the first pages of the "Préface..." he attributed to the influence of the natural sciences:

Oui, sans doute, c'est là du mysticisme, et c'est le mysticisme qu'il faut aujourd'hui, et c'est le mysticisme qui seul peut sauver notre société de l'abrutissement, du sensualisme et de l'utilitarisme. Les facultés les plus nobles de notre âme sont en train de s'atrophier. Dans cent ans, nous serons des brutes dont le seul idéal sera le commode assouvissement des fonctions corporelles; nous serons revenus, par la science positive, à l'animalité pure et simple. Il faut réagir. Il faut recultiver en nous les qualités supérieures de l'âme. Il faut redevenir mystiques. Il faut rapprendre l'amour, source de toute compréhension.

Mais, hélas, il est trop tard pour reconquérir l'amour dans tout son intégralité primitive. Le sensualisme du siècle nous a désappris de voir en la femme autre chose qu'un bloc de chair propre à l'assouvissement de nos désirs matériels. L'amour de la femme ne nous est plus permis. Le scepticisme du siècle nous a désappris de voir en Dieu autre chose qu'une abstraction nominale peut-être inexistante. L'amour de Dieu ne nous est plus permis.

Un seul amour nous est encore loisible, celui des œuvres d'art. Jetons-nous donc sur cette ultime planche de salut. Devenons les mystiques de l'art. (pp. 331-32)

Chapter III

Nature and the Ideal:

Aurier's Theories of Imitation and Ideality

With the hindsight of the twentieth century, 1886 is commonly taken as the date by which Impressionism in painting had ceased to be a coherent movement. The eighth and last Impressionist group exhibition, held that year, included a host of new talents whose approaches to painting were little understood by the original Impressionists, mostly conspicuous by their absence from the show. Two years earlier, the publication of J.-K. Huysmans novel A Rebours had announced the birth of literary symbolism, and also through its references to the mysterious images of Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau, attested to the development of a similar trend in the visual arts.

To the young generation of artists and literati struggling to find their own personalities during those years, the standards of naturalism in art and letters, still powerfully symbolized by Emile Zola and the Impressionist painters, appeared outmoded but none the less dominant. The image,

which had originated with Delacroix early in the century, of brash, youthful talent storming the bastions of a senile but entrenched old guard, had lost none of its original romantic appeal.

In Aurier's published statements, announcements of the demise of naturalism and the rise of Symbolism abound. In an interview with Jules Huret (1891) for Huret's Enquête Littéraire, Aurier responded to the question, "Is naturalism dead?": "Je crois, vraiment, qu'il agonise et ma joie en est grande... Ou plutôt, non: ce qui est en train de mourir, ce n'est pas le naturalisme, c'est l'Ecole Naturaliste et l'inconcevable engouement du public à son égard . . ."¹ More rhetorically still, he wrote in his long theoretical article, "Les Symbolistes":

Depuis quelques années, il devient plus qu'évident, pour qui sait observer, qu'une évolution paradoxale se prépare dans le développement de notre intellectualité nationale. Avec l'engouement pour la science positive, avec les enthousiasmes qu'elle avait suscités dès son, baptême, agonize, râle, se meurt l'esthétique qui était née d'elle. En vain l'art exclusivement matérialiste, l'art expérimental et immédiat, se débat contre les attaques d'un art nouveau, idéaliste et mystique. De toutes parts on revendique le droit au rêve, le droit aux pâturages de l'azur, le droit à l'envolement vers les étoiles niées de l'absolute vérité.²

¹ La Baume, pp. 136-37.

² G.-A. Aurier, "Les Symbolistes," Revue Encyclopédique, II (1 April 1892), 474.

But behind the bravura, one detects the implicit acknowledgment that the contest had not yet been formally decided. In his panegyrics to and explanations of the new symbolist aesthetic, Aurier consistently addresses his remarks to the naturalist point of view, explaining his idéiste theories by contrast to the better known and accepted naturalist doctrine. If Symbolism was the wave of the future, there still remained the task of ushering naturalism into the past.

It would be a simple task to present Aurier's theory by means of newly-coined "definitions" and dogmatic proclamations gleaned from the pages of his critical writing. But such an approach could never do justice to the elegant complexity of Aurier's system, that often appears to crystallize suddenly out of murky contradiction. One such dogmatic proclamation, seeming to give in one terse statement the final word concerning Aurier's position on the representation of nature in art, is this: "Il est incontestable qu'une oeuvre d'art n'est point le résultat d'une imitation plus ou moins exacte de la réalité matérielle des choses."³ Yet one need not search very far in Aurier's criticism to find him expressing opinions that seem to contradict this statement. The

³Ibid., col. 476.

phrase, "une imitation plus ou moins exacte de la réalité matérielle des choses," is heavily loaded with significant terms, not all of which need be objectionable to compromise the acceptability of the entire assertion. Aurier's open admiration for the realism of several artists--e.g. Raffaelli, Vincent van Gogh, Pissarro--is more readily reconciled with his resolute opposition to an imitative art if these distinctions are borne in mind: art may indeed represent reality, even a reality "of things," but still not a material reality; and the means of representation is to be other than through imitation.

Of all the artists Aurier discusses (excepting Meissonier, whom he discusses only negatively), the most truly realist is certainly Raffaelli. But in contrast to his scathing attack on Meissonier, Aurier does not condemn Raffaelli's realism as simply a pretentious and costly hand-made chromo-lithography. Rather, he exclaims admiringly that Raffaelli's subjects are "notés, saisis avec leur caractère propre, leur accent essentiel, dans leur coutumier aspect, avec l'exact geste qu'il faut!"⁴

Aurier's praise for Raffaelli is not without reservations. He finds Raffaelli to be "un de ceux qui présentent

⁴G.-A. Aurier, "Raffaelli," Mercure de France (September 1890), p. 325.

but among his virtues are: "la sincérité; la haine du banal, de la fausse élégance, des formules d'école, des techniques compliquées, du convenu et du chic; l'acuité d'un esprit fureteur, à la fois pitoyable et ironique, patient à la recherche et prompt au pourchas des plus instantanées notations" (p. 325). Raffaelli's faults, in Aurier's estimation, are mainly two. Of lesser importance to Aurier, he finds Raffaelli lacking in painterly skills: "Comme peintre, en effet, comme coloriste, pourquoi ne pas l'avouer? M. Raffaelli existe à peine" (p. 328). He describes Raffaelli's failure of color in terms that betray standards learned from Impressionism:

Sa palette est sale, boeuse, morose. Malgré de louables efforts vers le clair, ses toiles restent le plus souvent grises, veules, plâtreuses, souillées de lignes d'esquisses, de hachures noires qui pour être voulues n'en sont pas moins choquantes. Il ignore les réelles vibrations des ensoleilements, les mystérieuses colorations des ombres. Il n'a guère la science des valeurs. Trop souvent il ne sait différencier le solide des fluidités: je connais tel de ses tableaux où l'on marcherait sur le ciel avec plus de confiance que sur le terrain... (p. 328)

Yet he readily excuses this shortcoming--"Mais qu'importe? M. Raffaelli, je l'ai déjà dit, est un illustrateur, et, comme tel, peut aisément se passer du don de la couleur" (p. 328).

Ironically, the very characteristic of Raffaelli's art that excuses his lack of coloration had been found by

Aurier to be the more important of his faults. It is a certain superficiality that leads Aurier to draw a subtly deprecating--though not at all malicious--distinction between true works of Art and Raffaelli's products. "Ce sont moins des tableaux que des illustrations, mais de miraculeuses, d'incomparables illustrations" (p. 327). However Aurier may qualify his statement, even dubbing Raffaelli "illustrateur de génie" (p. 327), the implications are clear. The realism that Aurier praised--Raffaelli's talent for capturing the "caractère propre, leur accent essentiel"--does not go deep enough to satisfy Aurier's conditions for Art. He finds Raffaelli to be "très matérialiste, très réaliste et, en même temps, très analytique, . . . surtout attiré par l'extériorité des êtres et des choses, par le caractère de leurs surfaces, plus que par leur nature profonde, intime. Ce qui le préoccupe, ce sont les signes de la pensée plus que la pensée elle-même, et ces signes l'intéressent plutôt par le pittoresque de leur modalité propre que par leur sens représentatif" (p. 326).

In another article, using similar language but reaching a different conclusion, Aurier discusses the vastly different realism of Vincent van Gogh. He too, is

⁵G.-A. Aurier, "Les Isolés, Vincent van Gogh," Mercure de France (January 1890), p. 26.

"d'abord, en effet, comme tous ses illustres compatriotes, . . . un réaliste, un réaliste dans toute la force du terme."⁵ In his paintings everything "estreâ et choses, ombres et lumières, formes et couleurs, se cabre, se dresse en une volonté rageuse de hurler son essentielle et propre chanson . . ." (p. 24). Aurier praises him for "la conscience d'étude des caractères, la continue recherche du signe essentiel de chaque chose, mille significatifs détails [qui] nous affirment irrécusablement sa profonde et presqu'enfantine sincérité, son grand amour de la nature et du vrai--de son vrai, à lui" (p. 26).

Yet Vincent's realism does not reduce him to the status of an "illustrator." Rather he transcends mere realism to become a "symboliste." The difference, essentially, is this, that "Dans presque toutes ses toiles, sous cette enveloppe morphique, sous cette chair très chair, sous cette matière très matière, git, pour l'esprit qui sait l'y voir, une pensée, une Idée, et cette Idée, essentiel substratum de l'œuvre, en est en même temps, la cause efficiente et finale" (p. 27). The contrast between this characterization of Vincent's essential symbolism and Raffaelli's preoccupation with "les signes de la pensée plus qu la pensée elle-même" is striking. Certainly this point is at the core of Aurier's

Idéisme, but it is well to bear in mind that the main thrust of the Raffaelli article was not to lament his failure as a symbolist but to hail a type of realism that is found to be meaningful, if limited, in contrast to other popular realisms which Aurier finds merely banal. And Vincent, too, if he is "presque toujours, un symboliste," is "d'abord . . . un réaliste." Realism is a far from inconsequential element in Aurier's total aesthetic.

In order to gain insight into the kind of realism that Aurier finds acceptable--indeed essential--to his Idéiste aesthetic, it may be instructive to examine more closely some of the vocabulary he consistently employs to signal this realism wherever he finds it. Among the most frequently recurring terms are sincérité, propre, and essentiel(le), referring to the object, and often linked with caractère, as in "leur caractère propre, leur accent essentiel"; also vrai and vraiment as in reference to Vincent, "vraiment vraie," "parfum de bonne foi et de vraiment-vu," "son grand amour de la nature et du vrai--de son vrai, à lui."

When caractère occurs in Aurier's writing in close proximity to essentiel, even though the one does not modify the other, one can hardly escape being reminded of Taine's notion of caractère essentiel, so vehemently opposed by Aurier. Just how does Aurier's emphasis on the

caractère and the essentiel of the objects represented in painting differ from Taine's imitative theory?

Throughout the history of art since the Renaissance, when artists discovered virtually simultaneously both the techniques of a convincing naturalism and the compelling models of classical antiquity, great artists had re-created a beau idéal by choosing between or compromising the only two models available, nature and the antique. This became the great classical tradition of French art. But early in the nineteenth century it began to break down, so that by the 1880s the two possible solutions to the dilemma of nature vs. ideal were a cold and styleless naturalism or an equally cold idealization by formula.

Already with Ingres, perhaps the last great master in the classical tradition, there are the unmistakable signs of losing one's way. Among his recorded pronouncements on art, in those comments relating to this question, there is an equivocation that frequently crosses the boundary into confusion. Even early in the century, the word "idealize" carried such connotations of convention or formula that Ingres was reported by one of his students to have protested vehemently if ever accused of idealizing his models, insisting that he was completely faithful to nature:

La haine de cette beauté de convention, apprise par tout le monde et presque au même degré, était poussée chez M. Ingres à un tel point, qu'il avait érigé en principe absolu la règle de copier, copier servilement ce qu'on avait sous les yeux, et le grand homme ne se doutait pas que s'il avait, tout simplement, comme il le disait, copié son modèle, il ne serait arrivé qu'au résultat d'une photographie médiocre; mais il s'en gardait bien: sans en avoir peut-être conscience, il ôtait un détail, appuyait sur un autre qui le frappait et dont il faisait un beauté; enfin, son ouvrage n'était qu'un résumé complet de ses impressions. Mais non, la passion l'entraînait, et il croyait nous faire copier la nature en nous faisant copier comme il la voyait.⁶

But at the same time, even if he refused to call what he did "idealizing", he recognized that there was more to his art than the "stupid" imitation of the model that he demanded of his students: "La différence est grand," Ingres told his students, "entre l'art de reproduire dans un tableau les traits caractéristiques de la nature que l'on a relevés à l'avance, et le talent qui consiste simplement à copier avec exactitude sur la toile 'l'homme qu'on a fait venir pour poser'."⁷

Aurier draws a similar distinction in his article on J.-J. Henner, where he defends the artist's right to

⁶E. E. Amaury-Duval, L'Atelier d'Ingres (Paris, 1878), pp. 91-92.

⁷J. A. D. Ingres, Ecrits sur l'art, ed. Raymond Cogniat (Paris, 1947), p. 15.

idealize, so long as the Ideal is his own and not, "ni celle de M. Tout-le-monde, ni celle de MM. les peintres de l'Ecole.":

Tout artiste est libre de ne pas s'en tenir à cette sincérité immédiate des réalistes, c'est-à-dire à cette absolue copie immédiate des impressions naturellement perçues, sans pour cela cesser d'être sincère. L'appareil de perception de l'artiste est essentiellement modifiable par l'artiste lui-même: les pasticheurs habiles en sont une preuve. L'artiste a donc le droit d'essayer de le modifier, de le perfectionner, mais à condition de perfectionner les caractères qui lui sont spéciaux, qui le singularisent, qui constituent son Moi distinctif, de ne jamais les abandonner et de ne jamais emprunter des éléments inexistantes en lui. En un mot, ce perfectionnement devra s'opérer seulement par exagération ou atténuation de qualités déjà nativement existantes. Ainsi, tel peintre possède une tendance au synthétisme de la vision, à tel ordre d'émotion poétique, à telle conception philosophique, à tels sentiments de grâce sensuelle, à telle méthode d'idéalisation. Ne devra-t-il pas s'efforcer de combiner, de coordonner, d'exagérer, d'atténuer ces divers dons naturels, de façon à tirer d'eux le meilleur parti possible?⁸

Amaury-Duval had called the results of Ingres's selective vision a "résumé complet de ses impressions." Had he written in 1890, he might have said synthèse instead. Call it résumé or synthèse, his description of the process--"il ôtait un détail, appuyait sur un autre

⁸G.-Aurier, "J.-F.(sic) Henner," Le Moderniste, I (13 April 1889), 10.

qui le frappait et dont il faisait un beauté"--is not very different from Aurier's: "Ne devra-t-il pas s'efforcer de combiner, de coordonner, d'exagérer ces divers dons naturels, de façon à tirer d'eux le meilleur parti possible". Ingres's own descriptions of his method, however, differ from his student's naive observations and from Aurier's ideas on one fundamental point. The spontaneity before the model implied by Amaury-Duval is replaced in Ingres's own Ecrits sur l'art by the same kind of calculated, intellectual approach found in Taine's theory. Ingres considered his work to be, "l'art de reproduire dans un tableau les traits caractéristiques de la nature que l'on a relevés à l'avance. . ."⁹ and advised his students, "Ayez tout entière dans les yeux, dans l'esprit, la figure que vous voulez représenter, et que l'exécution ne soit que l'accomplissement de cette image posée déjà et préconçue."¹⁰

Aurier's addition of the word propre to his praise for artists who portray the essentiel of the caractère of their objects immediately and sharply differentiates his point of view from that of Taine and the disciples of Ingres. The essence the artist discovers is to be the object's own rather than a preconceived and superimposed

⁹ Ingres, p. 15; emphasis added.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

essence of the Ideal or of the Antique. The result is thus vrai, having a "parfum de bonne foi et de vraiment-vu" as in Vincent's work, yet still to be distinguished from the naive faithfulness to nature or "sincerity" highly touted among realist circles. The artist should be faithful to nature and to the truth, but as Aurier qualifies it, "de son vrai, à lui." Brilliantly original as a painter, but dogmatic and tyranical as a teacher, Ingres communicated to his students a confused message, as Amaury-Duval aptly put it, "il croyait nous faire copier la nature en nous la faisant copier comme il la voyait."¹¹

Not surprisingly, most of Aurier's attacks on practitioners of art are aimed at Salon painters or academics generally, though he is fond of naming the most highly reputed (and most highly remunerated) of these, as in, "telle ou telle idéalerie de boîte à dragées, signés Lefebvre ou Bouguereau, telle ou telle réalisterie d'Epinal signée Meissonnier, Neuville, ou Détaille. . ."¹² And on Meissonnier he conferred the dubious distinction of an entire article of invective in the Revue Indépendante.¹³

¹¹ Amaury-Duval, p. 92.

¹² G.-A. Aurier, "Chronique d'art," Le Moderniste, I (24 August 1889), 138.

¹³ G.-A. Aurier, "Meissonnier," La Revue Indépendante, NS 15 (April-June 1980), 324-29.

All the Salon painters are found guilty of having commercialized art, of having made of the Salon, "point question d'art, point d'artistes, mais simplement d'une industrie de luxe, très importante aujourd'hui, et dont l'étude ressortit davantage de l'économie politique que de l'esthétique."¹⁴ This commercial spirit in art is also responsible for the further fault that, "rien ne ressemble plus à un Salon qu'un autre Salon," since all the entries are "fabriquées selon les identiquement mêmes procédés, pour les mêmes fins, à la vente et les récompenses officielles."¹⁵

But beyond the general monotony, Aurier distinguishes two types of Salon artist. They are the realists, whose ideal he describes as, "La copie myope des anecdotes sociales, l'imitation imbécile des verrues de la nature, la plate observation, le trompe-l'oeil, la gloire d'être aussi fidèlement, aussi banalement exact que le daguerréotype . . .",¹⁶ and the older school of so-called idealists, all of whom "usaient des mêmes

¹⁴ G.-A. Aurier, "Ratiocinations familières, et d'ailleurs vaines, à Propos des trois Salons de 1891," Mecure de France (July 1891), p. 31; hereafter cited as "A Propos des trois Salons de 1891".

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁶ "Les Symbolistes," col. 474.

formules, des mêmes procédés, professaient la même croyance en l'infaillibilité d'un seul Idéal, qui était l'idéal fabriqué et estampillé par l'Ecole de Rome."¹⁷ Aurier thus rejects the 1880s versions of both the possible solutions to the age-old artistic dilemma, nature vs. the ideal.

With the rise to prominence after mid-century of Courbet's vital and individual realism, it became apparent that there was a third, modern alternative to the stale academic choices of style-less naturalism or formalized idealism. Emile Zola dignified the trend with a quasi-theory when he coined his definition of art as "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament"¹⁸ By the late 1880s, from the point of view of Aurier's generation, Zola's definition was fulfilled in practice by the Impressionists. Zola himself, it seems, did not find the Impressionist painters adequate to his conception. By the 1880s his support for them had certainly waned, and there were suspicions and accusations that he had betrayed the Impressionist cause.¹⁹

¹⁷"A Propos des trois Salons de 1891," p. 32.

¹⁸Emile Zola, Le Roman Expérimental, 5th ed. (Paris, 1881), p. 11.

¹⁹Lillian R. Furst, "Zola's Art Criticism," in French 19th Century Painting and Literature, ed. Ulrich Finke (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 172.

In Aurier's writings, his impressions and opinions of naturalism in painting, Emile Zola, and the Impressionists often seem confused, as his perceptions of the affinities among this triad are not stable. On Zola, at least, he is unequivocal. Zola appears in Aurier's criticism in only one form, as the personification of his formula, that art is "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament." Embodied in this definition, Zola becomes Aurier's most dangerous adversary, as will be seen. On naturalism in painting, not to be confused with the vrai of Vincent, Raffaelli, or Pissarro, Aurier is also consistent in his disapproval, but less consistent in his identification of which painters he would designate under this heading, and what is their relationship to Zola. In most cases his denouncements of naturalism are clearly references to the academic realists--painters such as Meissonier and Détaille. In these cases, Zola and his formula scarcely come into question. These painters are direct descendants of Ingres, heeding literally his admonition to "copier, copier servilement ce qu'on avait sous les yeux." Thus Aurier clearly considers them not to be in possession of "temperaments" at all. He wrote of Salon painters in

general, "S'il n'ont point d'âmes, ils ont, du moins, des doigts inimaginablement adroits . . ."²⁰ And in "Les Symbolistes" he wrote:

Les peintres, il est vrai, et il est bon d'y insister, qui s'autorisent de cette esthétique [i.e. Zola's definition], c'est-à-dire presque tous les peintres contemporains depuis Meissonier Jusqu'au dernier genriste, depuis M. Bouguereau jusqu'au plus infime académique, s'insoucient fort, en général, de ce deuxième élément, pourtant sine qua non de la définition.

N'ayant point de tempéraments marqués ou ayant délibérément banalisé leur tempéraments natifs, ils se contentent d'exposer à nos indulgentes admirations de patients ouvrages témoignant d'un habile pastichage de la nature, parfois arrangée suivant le catéchisme de l'Académie ou suivant la mode du mois, mais toujours perçue à travers la plus impersonnelle des visions et des âmes, et partant, lamentablement dénuée de tout intérêt.
(cols. 476-77)

On the other hand, an important part of Aurier's theory was the division of the artist's personality into two independant aspects, his tempérament d'homme and his tempérament d'artiste. Thus a painter who is without âme--a synonym for tempérament only as tempérament d'artiste--might still fulfill Zola's definition with his soulless imitations of nature. This is implied in Aurier's article on Henner:

²⁰"A Propos des trois Salons de 1891," p. 32.

Mais tout cela, dira-t-on peut-être, revient au fameux dogme des réalistes "Soyons sincères"; or, si tel et tel artiste strictement naturaliste, copiant servilement ses sensations et rien que ses sensations (la nature vue à travers un tempérament), est un artiste sincère, pourra-t-on appliquer cette épithète à M. Henner qui, incontestablement, idéalise la vision qu'il a des choses? Pourquoi pas? Tout artiste est libre de ne pas s'en tenir à cette sincérité immédiate des réalistes, c'est-à-dire à cette absolue copie des impressions naturellement perçues, sans pour cela cesser d'être sincère . . . Ainsi, tel peintre possède une tendance au synthétisme de la vision, à tel ordre d'émotion poétique, à telle conception philosophique, à tels sentiments de grâce sensuelle, à telle méthode d'idéalisation. . . Le résultat de cette besogne intellectuelle constituera son tempérament, non pas son tempérament originel et natif, ce qui importe peu, mais son tempérament d'artiste.
(p.10)

Aurier's position on Impressionism is equivocal.

However radically he opposed Zola, his attitude towards the Impressionist painters is much milder than towards the academics. About half his articles on individual artists are devoted to the original circle of true Impressionists-- Renior, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Berthe Morisot. The opinions he expresses there are generally positive, admiring, but almost always subtly reserved.

While recognizing in the works of the Impressionists many positive qualities that set them apart from the academics, Aurier nevertheless cannot overlook that at bottom, the Impressionists, too, are realists. "Ce vocable: "impressionnisme"," he wrote,

suggère tout un programme d'esthétique fondée sur la sensation. L'impressionnisme, c'est et ce ne peut être qu'une variété de réalisme, un réalisme affiné, spiritualisé, dilettantisé, mais toujours le réalisme. Le but visé, c'est encore l'imitation de la matière, non plus peut-être avec sa forme propre, sa couleur propre, mais avec sa forme perçue, avec sa couleur perçue, c'est la traduction de la sensation avec tous les imprévus d'une notation instantanée, avec toutes les déformations d'une rapide synthèse subjective. MM. Pissaro (sic) et Claude Monet traduisent, certes, les formes, et les couleurs autrement que Courbet, mais, au fond, comme Courbet, plus même que Courbet, ils ne traduisent que la forme et que la couleur. Le substratum et le but dernier de leur art, c'est la chose matérielle, la chose réelle. Le public a donc fatallement, en prononçant ce mot d'"impressionnisme", la vague notion d'un programme de réalisme spécial; il s'attend à des œuvres qui ne seront que la fidèle traduction sans nul au-delà d'une impression exclusivement sensorielle, d'une sensation.²¹

It is not surprising, then, that Aurier seems to like the Impressionists best when he is able to make "symbolists" of them. For Renoir, this transformation is complete, and he is the only one of the group whom Aurier admires unreservedly. Aurier sees in Renior's art an "aimable et pomponné microcosme, d'aspect si charmeusement artificiel, si adorablement pas-très-vrai," the result of, "une âme d'artiste naïve, avec des subtilités de naissance; bonne, indulgente, joueuse, avec d'insaisissables ironies qui s'apitoient; une âme-enfant,

²¹G.-A. Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," Mercure de France (March 1891), p. 157.

ignorant nos grognons pessimismes, s'egayant, s'ejousisant, s'extasiant, dans le monde vrai, comme un bébé dans un bazar . . . comme un bébé très malin et quasi sceptique, mais sceptique avec tant de bon coeur! et de candeur!"²²

In those qualities of Renior's art which at first sight may seem to be merely jolie or superficielle Aurier finds a profound significance, and Renior's hidden symbolism:

Superficielle, il n'en fut rien: profonde, au contraire, car si, en fait, l'artiste a presque absolument supprimé l'intellectualité de ses modèles, il a, par compensation, prodigué dans ses tableaux sa propre intellectualité, et l'on vient de voir combien exceptionnellement curieuse était cette intellectualité. Quant au caractère de joli, il est, dans son oeuvre, indéniable, mais combien différent ce joli là de l'insupportable joli que pratiquent les peintres à la mode. Le joli de Renior, qui est le joli poussé au dernier degré de la mièvrerie, le joli par excellence et même le joli impossible, devient prodigieusement intéressant, d'abord par son excès même et ensuite parce qu'il est, en quelque sorte, un joli philosophique, un joli symbolique, symbolique de son âme d'artiste, de ses idées, de ses compréhensions cosmologiques....Psychiquement organisé comme il nous est apparu, comment, en effet, eut-il pu percevoir les choses et les êtres autrement qu'avec des extériorités jolies, puisque la seule fin des êtres et des choses lui semblait de charmer, de réjouir, d'amuser son âme d'enfant, son âme d'artiste? (p. 104)

²² G.-A. Aurier. "Renior," Mercure de France (August 1891), P. 103.

Pissarro, too, Aurier credits with having, "réussi à préciser adéquatement les formes nécessaires de don génie, de son tempérament d'artiste. Il s'était créé une manière très à lui."²³ This "manière" consisted in his having, "cherché, étudié, trouvé dans la nature . . . surtout le caractère profond des choses et des êtres, l'emotion, le parfum, la poésie des ambiances, la pensée intime des couleurs et des lignes, la psychologie des formes,"²⁴ So it is with a note of disappointment that Aurier describes the re-direction of Pissarro's aesthetic goals that accompanied his conversion to neo-impressionism:

Le peintre, pensait-il, ne doit pas être seulement un psychologue ou un poète, ni seulement parler à l'âme. Il doit surtout, et avant tout, être un peintre et parler aux yeux, et leur parler aussi intensément que possible. Son rôle est de faire d'abord la joie de nos prunelles et nous aurons le droit de ne point lui tenir compte de ses sentiments, de ses émotions et de sa poésie s'il ne sait les bien vêtir de ce somptueux manteau, la couleur, ni les baigner dans ce fluide rutilant et féérique, la lumière.²⁵

²³ G.-A. Aurier, "Camille Pissaro," Revue Indépendante, NS 14 (February 1890), 506.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 507.

²⁵ Ibid.

This program, ascribed by Aurier to the neo-impressionist Pissarro, is also very close to his understanding of the work of Claude Monet. In his article on Monet, written on the occasion of an exhibition consisting mainly of the Haystacks and Poplars series, Aurier does his best to "symbolize" Monet, too. In Aurier's elaborate and imaginative prose the artist is transformed into a priest of the sun-god Baal, a priest whose brilliant paintings are, "d'effervescentes et joyeuses oraisons, infiniment jaculatoires" or "d'admirables hymnes attendries à l'astre dispensateur de la vie, de la joie et de la beauté", but still not all that Aurier could wish. He adds, "mais peut-être un peu trop, si j'ose ainsi dire, télégraphiques . . . hymnes de pontife pressé et sans beaucoup d'haleine, mais pourtant si sincères et tellement splendides!"²⁶

In writing about Pissarro and Monet, Aurier seems uncharacteristically timid in voicing his objections. His respect for these men is obvious, as is his pleasure in their work. However their views may differ from his own, he recognizes them as sincerely dedicated to the same cause of Art that motivates his own work. Even as he

²⁶ G.-A. Aurier, "Claude Monet," Mercure de France (April 1892), p. 303.

points out what are their failures by his standards, he excuses them on the grounds of their different goals, which he seems compelled if not to accept, at least to respect. Of Pissarro he noted, regretfully, "nous aurons le droit de ne point lui tenir compte de ses sentiments, de ses émotions et de sa poésie s'il ne sait les bien vêtir de ce somptueux manteau, la couleur, ne les baigner dans ce fluide rutilant et féerique, la lumière" (p. 507). Similarly, Monet accomplishes so splendidly that portion of Aurier's ideal art that concerns him, that all other requirements must be dismissed: "Qu'on n'aille point, surtout, lui demander, à cet amoureux de la divine lumière, autre chose que son amour de la divine lumière. La voluptueuse passion qui l'exalte, les sensations ineffables qu'il connaît le dispensent de rêver, de penser, presque de vivre" (p. 303). What is more, Aurier clearly likes this art. In his summing-up, after soberly, almost severely reiterating the shortcomings of Monet's art, he returns once again to the delights:

Sans doute, il est permis de glisser des réticences, de critiquer cette œuvre où manquent bien des indispensables éléments de la parfaite beauté, de constater le rudimentaire de ces pochades instantanées, souvent trop pochades et trop instantanées, de blâmer ce constant sacrifice des formes significatrices et ce partiprisme de plonger les êtres dans ces atmosphères si

splendidement embrasées qu'ils semblent s'y vaporiser; sans doute, aussi, il est légitime de souhaiter un art moins immédiat, moins directement sensationnel, un art de rêve plus lointain et d'idée; mais, pourtant, il serait injuste de ne point aimer le grand peintre, si vraiment et si exclusivement peintre, qui sut, en nous traduisant excellement les joies et les coruscations de ses seules visions, si souvent éblouir nos prunelles et égayer nos coeurs, le magicien qui sut voler, pour nous, les gemmes fabuleuses éparses dans la rutilante chevelure de la tête errante de Baal.
(p. 305)

As much as Aurier delights in the purely sensuous beauty of Monet's painting, he finds something more there that sets him apart from the merely joli academic painters. Monet's color, he says, is responsible for a "petite révolution de la technique picturale..." He elaborates, "Claude Monet a eu, sans y penser, une considerable influence sur les peintres contemporains. Il leur a appris à connaître, au moins de nom, les gaies et crues clartés du plein-air, à rougir des bitumes, des noirs, des sépias, de toutes les boues excrémentielles de leurs palettes." But his widely imitated bright palette is not what raises Monet's work above the ordinary. "Mais peindre clair, il faut le répéter," Aurier cautions, "ce n'est point, en art, chose fort capitale: tous les peintres du Salon, sans exception, le font aujourd'hui, et ne sont guère plus intéressants pour cela qu'au temps encore récents où il travaillaient

dans les poix et les cambouis" (p. 304). And besides, in Aurier's scheme of things, sensualism belonged in a class with materialism, scepticism and utilitarianism as the great faults of the century.²⁷ and this attitude carried over into his aesthetics. Describing true (symbolist) artists, he wrote that, "ils n'ont pas cherché les belles formes pour la seule jouissance des belles formes, les belles couleurs pour la seule jouissance des belles couleurs, ils se sont efforcés de comprendre la mystérieuse signification des lignes, des lumières et des ombres, afin d'employer ces éléments, pour ainsi dire alphabétiques, à écrire le beau poème de leurs rêves et de leurs idées. . ."²⁸ Monet is certainly no symbolist in this sense; rêves and idées were among the "indispensables éléments" that Aurier found lacking in his art. What sets Monet apart is a more subtle and elusive quality even than color: "Ce qui, surtout, nous charmer en l'oeuvre de Claude Monet, c'est (bien plus que la clarté) la somptuosité et l'harmonie, et aussi la belle âme d'artiste, naïf, extasié, heureux, qui s'en

²⁷ "Préface...," pp. 331-32.

²⁸ "Les Symbolistes," Cols. 474-75.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of Aurier's applying the phrase, "la belle âme d'artiste" to Monet. Aurier could easily enough dismiss the productions of the academic realists as falling outside aesthetic consideration because they had no âmes, because in rendering their "coin de la nature" they neglected to give any evidence of "temperament" at all, or because the "temperament" in evidence was merely the "originel et natif", the "tempérament d'homme" and not the "tempérament d'artiste" requisite to true artistic creation. But with the phrase, "la belle âme d'artiste," Aurier removes Monet from this category of the merely and obviously non-aesthetic, and gives himself a problem in placing Monet in his proper relationship to the ideal Art, and the dangerous Zola.

With the addition of the phrase, "à travers un tempérament," Zola described a subjective naturalism that, by its subjectivity, was a significant departure from the "imitation plus ou moins exacte de la réalité matérielle des choses" that Aurier unconditionally disqualified as a work of art. Aurier himself readily admitted the distinction, noting, for example, in his article on Vincent van Gogh, "Ars est homo, additus naturae a dit le chancelier Bacon, et M. Emile Zola a défini le naturalisme 'la nature vue à travers un tempérament'. Or, c'est cet 'homo additus' c'est cet 'à travers un tempérament' c'est ce

moulage de l'objectif, toujours un, dans des subjectifs, toujours divers, qui compliquent la question . . ." (p. 26). He even used it to bolster his own position on the inherently non-aesthetic character of naturalist imitation pure-and-simple, and the necessity of symbolism to Art, for, what the subjective aspect of modern naturalism adds is a certain (limited) degree of "symbolism," proving, says Aurier, "qu'une simple imitation des matérialités ne signifiant point une quelconque spiritualité n'est jamais de l'Art, en d'autres termes, qu'il n'y a pas, qu'il n'y a jamais d'art sans symbolism."²⁹ Referring evidently to Zola he elaborates:

Si beaucoup, si la plupart des peintres actuels ont réduit, en fait, l'art à cette question de servile imitation, nul parmi les théoriciens, même les plus radicalement réalistes, n'a songé à se satisfaire de cette ridicule définition par laquelle Pierre Petit ou Nadar seraient de bien plus grands artistes que Gustave Moreau ou Puvis de Chavannes. Tous ont reconnu l'évidente nécessité de compléter la définition de la manière suivante: l'imitation de la réalité matérielle des choses, telle que cette réalité est perçue par les divers tempéraments d'artistes, présupposés divers à l'infini. Et c'est seulement le deuxième élément de cette définition qui explique que l'Art puisse légitimement être et légitimement nous intéresser.

Or, qu'on y songe, cette définition, évidemment élémentaire et incomplète, laisse pourtant entendre, bien qu'en puissent penser les esthéticiens matérialistes qui l'ont formulée, la nécessaire présence en l'œuvre d'art d'une sorte de symbolisme, il est vrai rudimentaire,

²⁹ Ibid., col. 477.

mais indispensable. Cette réalité, en effet, qu'on nous annonce devoir être, pour la genèse de l'oeuvre d'art déformée par un tempérament, qu'est-ce, en dernière analyse, l'oeuvre réalisée, sinon un signe visible de ce tempérament, qu'est-ce, sinon un SYMBOLE de ce tempérament, le SYMBOLE de l'ensemble idéique et sensitif de l'oeuvrier.³⁰

Now, using naturalism to prove the necessity of symbolism to true art is one thing--admitting that naturalism can be symbolism, and thus true art, is something else. This Aurier will not do. For the majority of contemporary realist painters, this is no problem, since, Aurier explains, "Les peintres, il est vrai, et il est bon d'y insister, qui s'autorisent de cette esthétique, c'est-à-dire presque tous les peintres contemporains depuis Meissonier jusqu'au dernier genriste, depuis M. Bouguereau jusqu'au plus infime académique, s'insoucient fort, en général, de ce deuxième élément, pourtant sine qua non de la définition."³¹ For the Impressionists--Monet, for example, who possesses a "belle âme d'artiste"--a more sophisticated argument is needed. While the creative personality is divided, consisting of the independent tempérament d'homme and tempérament d'artiste, the work of art has a soul which is double, formed of two halves which like father and mother, must complete one

³⁰ Ibid., col. 476.

³¹ Ibid.

another to make the work whole and give it life. The father and mother are the artist and nature. When the "temperament" that completes Zola's definition is merely the tempérament d'homme, capable of perceiving only the material aspect of nature and not its soul, the object as object and not as "signe d'idée", the work is aborted; banal imitation results. The tempérament d'artiste, on the other hand, is one specially gifted with the capacity to read the idées hidden behind material reality, and thus is potentially capable of consumating the marriage of artist and nature on that higher, spiritual plane of Art. This is Aurier's great frustration with the Impressionists, that artists like Monet or Pissarro, whom he credits with having tempéraments d'artistes, should turn away from idées to paint objects, portraying their sensuous rather than their spiritual beauties. "Sans doute," he admits ruefully,

l'art réaliste, l'art dont l'unique but est la représentation des extériorités matérielles, des apparences sensibles, constitue une manifestation esthétique intéressante. Il nous révèle, en quelque sorte, par contre-coup, l'âme de l'ouvrier, puisqu'il nous montre les déformations qu'a subies l'objet en la traversant. D'ailleurs, nul ne conteste que le réalisme, s'il fut prétexte à bien des hideurs, impersonnelles et banales comme des photographies, a aussi parfois produit d'incontestables chefs-d'oeuvre, qui resplendissent dans le musée de toutes les mémoires. Mais, pourtant, il n'en est pas moins indisputable qu'à qui veut loyalement réfléchir l'art idéiste

apparaît plus pur et plus élevé--plus pur et plus élevé de toute la pureté et de toute l'élévation qui sépare la matière de l'idée. On pourrait même affirmer que l'art suprême ne saurait être qu'idéiste, l'art, par définition, n'étant (nous en avons l'intuition) que la matérialisation représentative de ce qu'il y a de plus élevé et de plus vraiment divin dans le monde, de ce qu'il y a, en dernière analyse, de seul existant, l'Idée.³²

Aurier asks whether the degree of symbolism implicitly and almost grudgingly admitted in the naturalists' subjectivity is sufficient: "Mais il reste à déterminer si pareille concession est satisfaisante, si cette part accordée à la symbolisation suffit à expliquer une oeuvre d'art, à expliquer toutes les œuvres d'art. . ."³³ His answer, indicating the danger of the Impressionist fallacy, is yes, but only for "de purs idéalistes ne répugnant point à admettre l'identité de l'âme et de l'ensemble cosmique" (col. 478). But since the Impressionists are not such "pures idéalistes," there remains a second crucial and more subtle element missing from

³²"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 159.

³³"Les Symnbolistes," cols. 477-78.

their work--the âme of nature, that is to say, idées. In Taine's theory of the caractère essentiel as the principle by which the artist systematically modifies nature, transforming the real into the ideal, this element is also missing. In the "Préface..", Aurier substitutes for the intellectualized, imposed-from-without concept of the caractère essentiel his own notion that, "les choses ont en elles des caractères qui sont en réalité les modalités des idées incluses en elles-mêmes . . ." (p. 326). This remark is allowed to remain somewhat cryptic in the "Préface...", but in "Les Symbolistes," where Aurier attempts a thorough exposition of his theory, the nature of these idées inherent in objects in nature and the principles guiding their interaction with the idées of the artist, are spelled out in greater detail. It is an indication of the threat Aurier feels from subjective naturalism--what I have dubbed on his behalf the Impressionist fallacy, i.e. the illusion of sufficient "symbolism" in an art in which the representation of what is materially given exhibits also the interpretation, attitude or sensibility of the artist--that he frames his argument for this fundamental tenet of his theory as a rebuttal to what he sees as the naturalist position, taking as the logical point of departure for his "proof" the disputed

notion of the reality of the material world. "Mais comme il est de notoriété que les esthètes réalistes admettent fort volontiers l'existence objective des choses, qu'ils nient même avec plaisir l'entité de la pensée et que pour eux le réel, le démontré, est plutôt l'objectif que le subjectif, il importe de se placer sur leur terrain de discussion et d'admettre provisoirement avec eux l'hétérogénéie de l'âme et des choses, la réalité des extériorités."³⁴ Although thus provisionally admitting the validity of the "nature" in Zola's definition (but of course intending ultimately to disprove it), Aurier then proceeds to discredit the assumption inherent in the second part of Zola's definition--"à travers un tempérament"--that the artist's subjective responses alone could value a work of Art:

Or, ainsi envisagé, le problème devient d'autant plus simple. La définition donnée par les naturalistes apparaît, de façon plus manifeste, s'il est possible, incomplète et insuffisante. Nous ne pouvons, en effet, logiquement nous persuader que l'Art, mode suprême d'expression, ne puisse exprimer l'universalité des psychies, lesquelles notre infaillible intuition, lesquelles l'intuition de sauvage même, devine ou discerne

³⁴ Ibid., col. 478.

jusque dans les moindres molécules de la matière; nous ne pouvons nous persuader qu'il ne puisse exprimer, comme on s'efforce de nous le faire croire, que cette chose misérable et infinitésimale dans l'infini du monde: un homme.³⁵

The painstaking proof of the existence and description of the character of "idées" as objective entities, follows:

L'ensemble cosmique, en effet, qui, considéré subjectivement, apparaît comme une série d'inégalités dont le terme disproportionément le plus fort est le sujet, le moi pensant, et dont les termes disproportionnément les plus faibles jusqu'à zéro, les objets suivant leur degré d'éloignement du sujet, cet ensemble cosmique, au contraire, considéré, par hypothèse, objectivement, ainsi qu'il est nécessaire dans la position de notre problème, devient une série d'unités, sinon égales, du moins équivalentes, dans laquelle les termes précédemment cotés zéro deviennent, de toute évidence, équivalents du terme maximum, c'est-à-dire de ce qui était, dans la série précédente, le sujet -- devenu, lui aussi, objet, dans la série actuelle.

Si donc nous admettons,--et nous sommes forcés de l'admettre par toutes les lois logiques, --que, placé à ce point de vue purement objectif, l'entité d'un objet équivaut toujours à l'entité d'un autre objet quelconque, quelles que soient la diversité et l'inégalité des attributs, nous serons forcés d'admettre que pour tout ce qui n'est point attribut, que pour tout ce qui est essence, un objet quelconque doit être estimé conforme aux modalités d'être du seul objet que nous puissions absolument connaître et qui est nous mêmes. Or, une des plus certaines modalités d'être de notre moi c'est la conscience de son être, c'est-à-dire la pensée. Cette conscience n'est

³⁵ Ibid.

certes pas un attribut de l'être, mais bien une des ses modalités nécessaires, sans laquelle il ne serait plus; il nous faut donc admettre, en tout autre objet de la série, l'être avec la conscience de son être, c'est-à-dire la pensée. D'autre part, notre moi nous apparaît, encore essentiellement limité dans l'espace, modalisé en une form définie, qui est identique à lui-même, qui est lui-même. Cette forme, c'est notre corps, signe tangible de notre moi; il faut donc aussi admettre, pour que subsiste la loi logique des équivalences, que la forme, que le corps de tout autre objet est également la tangible modalité de tout autre objet est également la tangible modalité de son être, c'est-à-dire la signification visible d'une pensée.³⁶

In sum, from beginning by assuming with the naturalists the "réalité des extériorités" and the resulting objective equivalence of all things, Aurier suddenly turns the subjectivist tables, adding to the objective equivalence of all things the subjectivist notion that we can only know things outside ourselves through what we perceive of ourselves. What we know most immediately and surely of ourselves is our thought, our self consciousness; to carry the assertion of equivalence to its logical conclusion, all things must

³⁶Ibid., cols. 478-79. The obvious source for this formulation is Swedenborg, possibly familiar to Aurier via Balzac; see J. van der Elst, "Autour du 'livre mystique', Balzac et Swedenborg," Revue de la littérature comparée, X (1930), 88-123.

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also possess this pensée. In our own case, consciousness--perceived, identified, and manifested to others as self--appears clothed in a tangible, spatially limited form: our bodies. Thus, for ourselves and for all other objects, the material body is "la tangible modalité de son être, c'est-à-dire la signification visible d'une pensée."

The ultimate conclusion Aurier draws from this reasoning is this: "Dans la nature, tout objet n'est, en somme, qu'une Idée signifiée."³⁷ Nature, then, does play a significant role in the creation of a work of art, but not as a visible model to be copied. For Aurier nature is a cosmic totality that can be directly experienced only through mysticism. Thus the artist's âme or "temperament" also is integrally involved in art-making, but in communication with rather than in observation of nature. Nature communicates with the artist, specially gifted creature that he is, through signs or symbols--the physical appearance of things that the uninitiated take to be reality itself.

³⁷ "Les Symbolistes," col. 479.

Chapter IV

The Style of Ideality:
Synthesis, Primitivism and the Decorative

Aurier's reluctance to allow Impressionism--more specifically, Pissarro's and Monet's work, both of which by 1890 and 1892, respectively the years in which Aurier wrote about them, had been so transformed as to be scarcely identifiable as Impressionsim proper--more than a grudging and limited admiration, was based on more than an ideological difference of opinion. Aurier almost certainly never had a theoretical discussion of the philosophical bases of naturalism with either of these two men, and he was free to impute to them any theoretical stance that coincided with his interpretation of their work, just as he imaginatively painted Monet as a high-priest of the cult of Baal, a purely figurative portrayal, to be sure, but so laden with the trappings of Symbolism that Monet, if he read it, must surely have scoffed at it.

What is more, Aurier had found Pissarro's work to be perfectly acceptable up to the point in his career when

his contacts with the younger neo-impressionist group influenced him to alter his style. In his article on Pissarro, Aurier laments (only half-heartedly, one suspects), but will not disguise, his lack of sympathy for neo-impressionism. Its main fault, he finds, lies in its unnecessarily complicated technique, which leads inevitably to serious formal shortcomings:

En principe, je serais désolé qu'on proclamât la toute infaillibilité et la toute nécessité de cette formule, et je me navrerais qui beaucoup se l'appropriassent. Elle a, en effet, je crois, bien des inconvénients. D'abord, elle complique, le plus souvent, sans nulle utilité, la facture, l'exécution manuelle et est, par conséquent, en contradiction avec ce péremptoire axiome de l'actio minima, qui est un des plus incontestables de l'esthétique: "Il faut obtenir le plus grand effet possible avec les moindres moyens possibles." De plus, elle superficialise l'oeuvre d'art, si je puis ainsi dire, en accoutumant l'oeil à se satisfaire de rutilements et de papillottements harmonieux de couleur, sans se préoccuper du reste. Elle est, enfin, souvent peu compatible avec la précision du dessin, avec la pureté des lignes, avec l'accentuation du caractère, avec les nuances du modelé, avec, pour tout dire, le style. (pp. 509-10)

These remarks are perfectly consistent with Aurier's criticism of Monet, and a comparison of several passages will serve to illuminate that as much stylistic as ideological analysis framed Aurier's objections to Monet's approach. His paintings are, in a word, a bit too "télégraphique;" They are like hymns, but "hymnes un peu plus

brèves sans doute qu'on ne souhaiterait, hymnes de pontife pressé et sans beaucoup d'haleine . . ." (p. 303). More to the point, Aurier finds it necessary "de constater le rudimentaire de ces pochades instantanées, souvent trop pochades et trop instantanées, de blâmer ce constant sacrifice des formes significatrices et ce parti-pris de plonger les êtres dans ces atmosphères si spendidement embrasées qu'ils semblent s'y vaporiser . . ." (p. 305). With these comments, Aurier echoes the objections to Monet's painting put forth in 1876 by the critic Armand Silvestre, that, "Peu soucieuse de la forme, elle est exclusivement décorative [a pejorative usage, not related to Aurier's "decorative"] et coloriste. Son idéal est, à notre humble avis, absolument incomplete."¹ While Aurier's reproaches to the Impressionists for allowing coloristic effects to take precedence over the more "formal" aspects of pictorial technique--drawing and modelling--may sound in certain phrases like the conservative criticism levied throughout the nineteenth century

¹Armand Silvestre, "Exposition de la rue Peletier," L'Opinion Nationale (2 April 1876); quoted in Steven Z. Levine, Monet and his Critics (New York, 1976), p. 15.

against colorists from Delacroix through Monet, the motivations for his criticism and his alternative ideals are completely modern and in step with the most advanced artists of his generation.²

In the 1870s and '80s, negative criticism of Monet's work commonly pointed out his unnatural exaggerations of color and looseness of drawing, directly contradicting his supporters, who most often based their defense on an interpretation of Monet's Impressionism as an advance in naturalism.³ But by the mid-1880s it was possible for some critics to view Monet's departures from naturalism as positive qualities. In 1886 Alfred Wolff wrote, "La Mer à Etretat n'appartient toutefois pas au genre naturaliste. C'est un lac de féerie. Le prince charmante arriverait au fond dans sa nacelle sans qu'on en éprouvât une surprise. C'est donc une mer de fantaisie dans une coloration fantaisiste, mais très distinguée, avec des rochers fantaisistes. Remarquez que je ne veux pas faire ici un

²See Fritz Novotny, "The Reaction Against Impressionism from the Artistic Point of View," in Problems of the 19th and 20th Centuries--Studies in Western Art, ed. M. Meiss, Acts of the 20th International Congress of the History of Art, Vol. 4 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1963), pp. 93-103.

³Levine, pp. 23-24, and 71.

reproche à M. Monet, car cette vue d'Etrétat est réellement charmante, et comme je souhaiterais au peintre d'en faire souvent; il peut être convaincu que je n'apporte aucune idée préconçue dans les questions artistiques."⁴

By Aurier's standards, to see Monet's landscapes as "fantasies" would have solved none of the problems he found there: the result is still at best one-sided--a representation of the ideas of the artist without corresponding input from nature. On the other hand, other critics of Monet's later work put aside older notions of Impressionism as a technique of extreme verism or an instantaneous recording of particularized moments in nature, and instead appreciated such works as the Haystacks or Poplars series as profound, even mystical, interpretations of the hidden life of nature. Employing a vocabulary that sounds very much like Aurier, Octave Mirbeau in 1891 described Monet as "celui qui fit les tableaux respirables, grisants et parfumés, qui sut toucher l'intangible, exprimer l'exprimable, et qui enchantà notre rêve de tout le rêve mystérieusement enclos dans la nature, de tout le rêve mystérieusement épars dans la divine lumière," and said that, "Ce qui enchante, en Claude Monet, c'est que, réaliste évidemment, il ne se borne pas à traduire la nature, et ses harmonies chromatiques et plastiques...(sic) Les

⁴Alfred Wolff, "Exposition Internationale," Le Figaro (19 June 1886); quoted Levine, pp. 71-72.

paysages de Claude Monet sont, pour ainsi dire, l'illumination des états de conscience de la planète, et les formes suprasensibles de nos pensées."⁵

Mirbeau, like Aurier, was deeply involved with literary symbolism, so it is no mere coincidence that he couches his recognition of the most profound truths art can express in phrases such as "des états de conscience de la planète," or, "le rêve mystérieusement enclos dans la nature." Aurier's inability likewise to see such profundity in Monet's art results from what is perhaps one of the weaker aspects of his total aesthetic: that he allows his theory to lead him into certain definite ideas about style, resulting in a dogmatic, prescriptive attitude that dates his aesthetic as a matter of taste or fashion, and limits its usefulness by curbing its potential for universal applicability. On the other hand, Aurier must be credited for his unique effort to translate what might have remained a literary theory or an epistemology into a truly pictorial aesthetic.

The style of ideality is based on three closely related notions: simplification, the decorative, and the primitive. Of the three, simplification results most

⁵ Octave Mirbeau, "Claude Monet," L'Art dans les Deux Mondes (7 March 1891), pp. 183-84; quoted Levine, p. 117.

directly from Aurier's theory. His conceptions of "the decorative" and "the primitive" are derived from his personal view of the history of art--which is itself, of course, colored by his general aesthetic bias--and are used to reinforce his arguments for pictorial simplification and give his image of a "simple" art its peculiar stylistic coloration.

In order to unravel the web of these relationships and to reveal the weave of Aurier's thoughts on pictorial style, it seems most logical to begin with an exploration of that portion of his theory which leads to his call for aesthetic simplification. In the article, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," Aurier lists as requisite for the true, Idéiste work of art these five points:

- 1° Idéiste, puisque son idéal unique sera l'expression de l'Idée;
- 2° Symboliste, puisqu'elle exprimera cette Idée par des formes;
- 3° Synthétique, puisqu'elle écrira ces formes, ces signes, selon un mode de compréhension générale;
- 4° Subjective, puisque l'objet n'y sera jamais considéré en tant qu'objet, mais en tant que signe d'idée perçu par le sujet;
- 5° (C'est une conséquence) décorative--car la peinture décorative proprement dite, telle que l'ont comprise les Egyptiens, très probablement les Grecs et les Primitifs, n'est rien autre chose qu'une manifestation d'art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste. (pp. 62-63)

The meaning of Aurier's first point, "Idéiste, puisque son idéal unique sera l'expression de l'Idée," should at this point be at least partially clear. The term of real importance here is idée, a quasi-mystical concept roughly equivalent to and frequently interchangeable with pensée. In its most fully developed sense, as described in the previous chapter, this idée or pensée is a sort of synthesis or mystical union of the "conscience de son être" of the objects in nature themselves and the specially gifted consciousness of the artist, who alone can fathom the mystic life embodied in, yet concealed by, the objects' material forms. But Aurier frequently uses idée less precisely, referring alternately to a vague Absolute reality or to the rêve of the artist.⁶

The requirement of an active, interpretative participation of the artist's "tempérément" with the "pensée" immanent in nature means that although Aurier can state simply that in nature, each object is the visible form of an idea, it does not follow that the artist need only faithfully copy the forms of objects in order to create an art of ideas. Aurier is very clear on this point, always

⁶For a discussion of the uses of the term reve in Symbolist circles see H. R. Rockmaaker, op. cit., pp. 188-92, and A. G. Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 85 ff.

taking care to distinguish form-as-object from form-as-abstraction. When he gives his second point as, "Symboliste, puisqu'elle exprimera cette Idée par des formes," he evidently intends form-as-abstraction.

A case in point is his article on Raffaelli. As we have seen, Rafaelli is an artist Aurier admires, but with praise that is conscientiously qualified. Raffaelli's own term for what he is, artistically speaking, is "caractériste". That this term is a perfectly apt description of Raffaelli's art explains at once Aurier's admiration and his rejection of it as Art. In his pictures, Aurier says, Raffaelli succeeds in capturing things with "leur caractère propre, leur accent essentiel, dans leur coutumier aspect, avec l'exact geste qu'il faut!"⁷ But in his sharply analytic study of the appearance, the exterior of things, Raffaelli fails to penetrate to their "nature profonde, intime." What interest Raffaelli, Aurier says, are "les signes de la pensée plus que la pensée elle-même, et ces signes l'intéressent plutôt par le pittoresque de leur modalité que par leur sens représentatif."⁸

In several places in his writing Aurier uses the metaphor of language to clarify this distinction. On one level, he uses the language analogy to de-emphasize the

⁷"Raffaelli," p. 325.

⁸Ibid., p. 326.

material existence of the painting itself--which in most cases interests him almost as little as material reality in general--and to focus attention instead on the ideological content, as when he writes of Vincent:

Sans doute, comme tous les peintres de sa race, il est très conscient de la matière, de son importance et de sa beauté, mais aussi, le plus souvent, cette enchanteresse matière, il ne la considère que comme une sorte de merveilleux langage destiné à traduire l'idée.⁹

This also is the message conveyed by a passage in "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin"

Aux yeux de l'artiste, en effect, c'est-à-dire aux yeux de celui qui doit être l'Exprimeur des Etres absolus, les objets, c'est-à-dire les êtres relatifs qui ne sont qu'une traduction proportionnée à la relativité de nos intellects des êtres absous et essentiels, des Idées, les objets ne peuvent avoir de valeur en tant qu'objets. Ils ne peuvent lui apparaître que comme des signes. Ce sont les lettres d'un immense alphabet que l'homme de génie seul sait épeler. (p. 160)

By bringing object/signs down to the level of letters in an alphabet, Aurier makes his language metaphor much more

⁹"Les Isolés, Vincent van Gogh," p. 27.

specifically meaningful. In "Les Symbolistes" the metaphor occurs again, further refined:

Cela revient à constater que les objets, c'est-à-dire, abstrairement, les divers combinaisons de lignes, de plans, d'ombres, de couleurs, constituent le vocabulaire d'une langue mystérieuse, mais miraculeusement expressive, qu'il faut savoir pour être artiste. Cette langue, comme toutes les langues a son écriture, son orthographe, sa grammaire, sa syntaxe, sa rhétorique même, qui est : le style. (col. 40)

Here it seems that whole objects are to be understood as analogous to words (vocabulaire), and that by inference, although Aurier does not use the term here, what are "alphabetical" are the abstract, formal constituents of objects. The discussion that follows bears out this interpretation:

Dans l'art ainsi compris, la fin n'étant plus la reproduction direct et immédiate de l'objet, tous les éléments de la langue picturale, lignes, plans, ombres, lumières, couleurs, deviennent, on le comprendra, des éléments abstraits qui peuvent être combinés, atténués, exagérés, déformés selon leur mode expressif

propre pour arriver au but général de l'oeuvre: l'expression de telle idée, de tel rêve, de telle pensée. (col. 480)¹⁰

By thus placing the burden of signification in art on the abstract form elements, Aurier was led to an interest in the expressive potential and the inherent psychological properties of lines, colors, etc. In "Les Symbolistes," he cites as sources of further investigations on this subject the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, the schematic renderings of human expressions in Humbert de Superville's Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art, and the work of Charles Henry. In his own critical writing, Aurier rarely attempted to analyze works of art abstractly. One notable exception is his commentary on Henry de Groux's Le Meurtre. Aurier first describes the painting, a horrific depiction of a traveler waylaid by thieves, in literary terms. He wholeheartedly approves

¹⁰ In describing abstract form elements as "alphabetical" Aurier refines Delacroix's well-known metaphor of nature as a dictionary; with Delacroix, too, the selective imitation of nature thus described was a means to express the âme of the artist: "Les formes du modèle, que ce soit un arbre ou un homme, ne sont que le dictionnaire ou l'artiste va retremper ses impressions fugitives ou plutôt leur donner une sorte de confirmation, car il doit avoir de la mémoire. Imaginer une composition, c'est combiner les éléments d'objets qu'on connaît, qu'on a vus, avec d'autres qui tiennent à l'intérieur même, à l'âme de l'artiste." (E. Delacroix, Oeuvres littéraires d'Eugène Delacroix, ed. Elie Faure, Vol. I [Paris: G. Cres, 1923], 58.

of the picture, for it seems to him to satisfy completely the demands of Art, expressing a profound and universal content, an Idée, meaningful beyond the single episode it seems to portray only on its most superficial level. Aurier asks how this seemingly miraculous transformation is worked by art.

Comment un fait particulier peut-il instantanément se métamorphoser en une idée générale, en une haute synthèse, en toute une troublante philosophie? Ce n'est point ici le lieu d'étudier cette mystérieuse et difficile, mais peut-être point insoluble question. Qu'il suffise d'avérer que ce phénomène se reproduit constamment en tous les chefs-d'œuvre incontestés, et de faire remarquer combien Le Meurtre de H. de Groux serait, en réalité, dissemblable d'un sujet identique qu'eût traité un habile peintre anecdotaliste . . . Regardez, par exemple, dans Le Meurtre la subordination évidente des contours, des surfaces, des lumières, des ombres, observez le rythme désespéré, tragique, des lignes, de la toile à ses angles inférieurs, constatez la concordance lugubre des couleurs, cette sinistre harmonie en vert sombre, en bleu obscur, en noir, et réfléchissez aux rythmes de lignes et de couleurs qu'eût nécessairement employés le réaliste anecdotaliste dont je parlais tout à l'heure.¹¹

¹¹ G.-A. Aurier, "Henry de Groux," Mercure de France (October 1891), p. 226; compare D. P. G. Humbert de Superville, Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art (Leyden, 1827-1832), especially pp. 1-10, and synoptic table, p. 25. For a brief discussion Humbert's theory in comparison to that of Charles Henry, see W. I. Homer, Seurat and the Science of Painting (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1964), pp. 200-11.

Setting aside those instances where synthèse is used more or less rhetorically, without any clear theoretical significance, "synthesis" almost always occurs in Aurier's writing in connection with one or the other of two related concepts: simplification, or the individual vision of the artist. Just how these are related is one of the trickier aspects of Aurier's theory; only in his later writing is he at pains to make this relationship clear.

In his article on J.-J. Henner, for example, Aurier refers to "synthesis" three times. In the course of drawing a distinction between Henner's idealization, of which Aurier approves, and the application of a pre-formulated ideal by the run-of-the-mill academic painter, Aurier describes the task of the truly original artist as, "Produire une oeuvre qui soit la synthèse des sensations, des idées, des impressions morales, des philosophies du Moi de l'artiste, une oeuvre qui soit, en toutes ses parties, le résultante fatale de tous les divers fonctionnements et des seules fonctionnements de ce Moi et qui, partant, ne puisse jamais être, au besoin, ni celle de M. Tout-le-monde, ni celle de MM. les peintres de l'école" (p.10). In producing this synthesis the artist may be allowed to alter the natural appearance of objects, i.e. their appearance to his sensorial or natural perception, in favor of their

appearance to his intellectual or artistic perception. Thus, synthesis becomes synonymous with idealization (of the desirable sort): "Ainsi, tel peintre possède une tendance au synthétisme de la vision, à tel ordre d'émotion poétique, à telle conception philosophique, à tels sentiments de grâce sensuelle, à telle méthode d'idéalisation" (p. 10).

In the second part of the article we find synthesis used differently, in association with simplification. One of Henner's gifts, Aurier says, is that he "voyait simple," a talent which usually predisposes artists to grand decorative works. In Henner's case, this simplification is applied to small works, "des tableautins, par la dimension, des fresques, par l'esprit, par la synthèse du dessin, du concept et de la couleur!"¹² Similarly, in "Camille Pissaro" Aurier twice praises Pissarro's paintings for their synthèse in close association to simplicity. La Cueillette des pommes reminds Aurier of the Florentine primitives by its "simplicité, par la synthèse de son dessin, par le grandeur de sa composition . . ."(p. 512), while his Berger sous un averse is "d'une synthèse de dessin si magistrale . . . [and] à ce point de vue de la simplification technique, un vrai chef-d'œuvre"(p. 514).

¹²G.-A. Aurier, "J.-F. Henner (Suite)," Le Moderniste, I (13 April 1889), 18.

Without further explanation of this combination of associations, it almost appears that "synthèse" has become a code-word for a modern "idealization" or stylization chiefly characterized by simplification of the forms. (And in fact, for the work of some less-talented artists of the symbolist/synthetist circle this is a fairly accurate assumption.) In "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," Aurier gives a precise explanation of the theoretical connections between synthesis, understood as modification or deformation (thus subordination) of the natural appearance of things according the artist's personal "ideal"; and formal simplification. First he tells us that formal simplification is a necessary and obvious consequence of one of the fundamental postulates of his theory, that the sign as a physical entity, either existing in nature as an object, or translated into painting as a representation of an object, is of no consequence whatever for its own sake, but is meaningful only as it translates the idée:

Ecrire sa pensée, son poème, avec des signes, en se rappelant que le signe, pour indispensable qu'il soit, n'est rien en lui-même et que l'idée seule est tout, telle apparaît donc la tâche de l'artiste dont l'oeil a su discerner les hypostases des objets tangibles. La première conséquence de ce principe, trop évidente pour

qu'il faille s'y arrester, c'est, on le devine, une nécessaire simplification dans l'écriture du signe. Si ce n'était, en effet, le peintre ne ressemblerait-il point au littérateur ingénú qui penserait ajouter quelque chose à son oeuvre en soignant et en ornementant de fuites paraphes sa calligraphie? (pp. 160-61)

Simplification of the sign also may answer a practical consideration--and here is where "compréhension générale" comes into play. Since it is the natural tendency of ordinary men to see objects only as objects, rather than as signs of ideas, and likewise to see representations of objects in paintings as representing only objects rather than the ideas they signify, the idéiste artist should strive to avoid this confusion. By simplification, he emphasizes the sign quality over the object quality of his representation, thus leaving no question in the viewer's mind that his intention is not the reproduction of concrete, material reality:

. . . à nos myopes yeux les objets apparaissent le plus souvent comme objets, rien que comme objets, indépendamment de leur symbolique signification--au point que, parfois, nous ne pouvons, malgré de sincères efforts, les imaginer en tant que signes.

Conséquemment, certaines lois appropriées devront régenter l'imitation picturale. L'artiste, de toute nécessité, aura la tâche de soigneusement éviter cette antinomie de tout art: la vérité concrète, l'illusionnisme, le trompe-l'oeil, de façon à ne point donner par son tableau cette fallacieuse impression de nature qui agirait sur le spectateur comme la nature elle-même . . . c'est-à-dire (qu'on me pardonne le néologisme barbare) idéicidement. (pp. 161-62)

Such simplification also serves a further purpose, clarifying the idée to be represented. The fundamental message of Aurier's second point, "Symbolique, puisqu'elle exprimera cette Idée par des formes," was that in art, as opposed to nature, ideas are "written" not with whole objects but with an "alphabet" of signs consisting of the lines, colors, etc. used to represent objects visually.

Thus:

Chaque détail, en effet, n'est en réalité, qu'un symbole partiel inutile le plus souvent à la signification totale de l'objet. Le stricte devoir du peintre idéiste est, par conséquent, d'effectuer une sélection raisonnée . . . de n'utiliser en son oeuvre que les lignes, les formes, les couleurs générales et distinctives servant à écrire nettement la signification idéique de l'objet, plus les quelques symboles partiels corroborant le symbole générale. (p. 162)

The idéiste artist must choose from the multitude of such alphabetical signs composing each object only those which most succinctly express the idée. As a demonstration of just this sort of synthesis-as-simplification, Aurier had this to say of Daumier: "Rien qu'une large synthèse des formes générales, du geste, de la silhouette, rien qu'une indication de la ligne d'ensemble pour cette magistrale fixation du caractère, rien que le strictement indispensable! C'est moins exact, peut-être, mais indiscutablyment, c'est plus vrai."¹³

Further, the idéiste artist should modify or deform the forms of the object according to both his personal vision and the special requirements of the idée:

Même, il est aisé de le déduire, ces caractères directement significateurs (forms, lignes, couleurs, etc.), l'artiste aura toujours le droit de les exagérer, de les atténuer, de les déformer, non seulement suivant sa vision individuelle, suivant les moules de sa personnelle subjectivité (ainsi qu'il arrive même dans l'art réaliste), mais encore de les exagérer, de les atténuer, de les déformer, suivant les besoins de l'Idée à exprimer. (p. 162)

This requirement returns the concept of synthesis to the kind of personal "idealization" first advocated in "J.-F. Henner," which guides the selection of forms/signs to be

¹³"Raffaelli," p. 327.

used in writing the idea. The result is style, "du vrai style, qui au fond n'est que la compréhension de l'intellectualité des formes, et qui est devenu impossible, d'abord par l'oubli de tout synthèse en art, et ensuite par cette croyance universelle que la composition et le dessin, s'apprenant dans des écoles et des manuels, ne sont point le résultat d'un travail déductif, très personnel de l'esprit de l'artiste."¹⁴ This true style is very different from the invariable beau idéal, the stylistic badge of the academic painter. The great masters of cette hypothétique Perfection, soit disant absolue et incontingente, quasi-entité métaphysique inventée par les peintres de Salon et qui serait LE Dessin, LA Couleur, etc., mais, qu'en revanche, ils possèdent, en dessin et en couleur, une perfection pour ainsi dire psychologique, c'est-à-dire très relative, très variable et très individuelle,--résultante, ou plutôt synthèse expressive de toutes les diverses spécialisations de leur âme propre."¹⁵

Synthesis, then, is ultimately the link between the artist and nature: "L'œuvre d'art complète est donc un être

¹⁴"A Propos des trois Salons de 1891," p. 38. achieved true style, says Aurier, because, "ils ignorent

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 33-34.

nouveau, on peut dire absolument vivant, puisqu'il a pour l'animer une âme, qui est même la synthèse de deux âmes, l'âme de l'artiste et l'âme de la nature, j'écrirais presque l'âme paternelle et l'âme maternelle.¹⁶

Aurier's fourth point, "Subjective, puisque l'objet n'y sera jamais considéré en tant qu'objet, mais en tant que signe d'idée perçue par le sujet," needs no further elucidation in view of the foregoing discussions. Suffice it to say that this is a reminder that Aurier's subjectivity has to do less with sensation than with intellect, or perhaps one should say--to avoid confusion with the intellectuality of Taine's theory--with psyche.

The fifth and final point of Aurier's summary is presented as a kind of summary in itself of the four points that have gone before: "5^o (C'est une conséquence) décorative-- car la peinture décorative proprement dite, telle que l'ont comprise les Egyptiens, très probablement les Grecs et les Primitifs, n'est rien autre chose qu'une manifestation d'art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste." But there is also much more implied here than a summary of

¹⁶"Les Symbolistes," col. 476.

theory. As Aurier makes clear in several contexts, "decorative" has a very specific and literal meaning for him, simply, as large-scale mural art. The links between his purely theoretical determinants of style and his call for mural painting are tenuous. Aurier brings together history and theory to arrive at this conclusion. He follows his list of five criteria for art with this discussion of "decorative" and its significance as a consequence of the four preceding terms:

Or, qu'on veuille bien y réfléchir, la peinture décorative c'est, à proprement parler, la vraie peinture. Le tableau de chevalet n'a pu être créée que pour décorer de pensées, de rêves et d'idées les murales banalités des édifices humains. Le tableau de chevalet n'est qu'un illologue raffinement inventé pour satisfaire la fantaisie ou l'esprit commercial des civilisations décadentes. Dans les sociétés primitives, les premiers essais picturaux n'ont pu être que décoratifs.

Cet art . . . se trouve donc, en dernière analyse, ramené à la formule de l'art simple, spontané et primordial. . . . L'art idéiste, qu'il fallait justifier par d'abstraites et compliquées argumentations, tant il semble paradoxal à nos civilisations décadentes et oubliueuses de toute initiale révélation, est donc, sans nul conteste, l'art véritable et absolu, puisque, légitime au point de vue théorique, il se trouve, de plus, au fond, identique à l'art primitif, à l'art tel qu'il fut deviné par les génies instinctifs des premiers temps de l'humanité. (p. 165)

Several points that Aurier makes in these paragraphs are also to be found elsewhere in his writing. His original premise, that some necessary connection exists between decoration and a symbolic and "synthetist" or simplified art, first appeared in "J.-F. Henner". Aurier had written of Henner, "Par nature, il voyait simple, sans détails, sans complication de vaines minuties," adding that, "Presque toujours les artistes ainsi nativement doués sont prédestinés aux grandes œuvres symboliques et décoratives, aux vastes compositions murales." In Henner's case, the paintings are small, but after commenting again on their admirable simplification, Aurier praises them as, "des fresques, par l'esprit, par la synthèse du dessin, du concept et de la couleur!" (p. 18)

In similar fashion, Gauguin's paintings seem in spirit more appropriate to walls: "Gauguin, il faut le répéter, de même que tous les peintres idéistes, est, avant tout, un décorateur. Ses compositions se trouvent à l'étroit dans le champ restreint des toiles. On serait tenté parfois de les prendre pour des fragments d'immenses fresques, et presque toujours elles semblent prêtes à faire éclater les cadres qui les bornent indûment!..."¹⁷

¹⁷ "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 165.

The association of mural painting with a simplified or reduced pictorial style may stem partly from a taste conditioned by the decorative painting of Puvis de Chavannes, who was considered a sort of prophet among Symbolist circles,¹⁸ and the Italian "primitives" of fifteenth century Florence. Aurier has little of substance to say about either Puvis de Chavannes or the Italians of the early Renaissance, though he makes frequent passing references to them, even comparing them. Puvis is admitted to be, second to Gauguin, one of the two great decorators of the nineteenth century,¹⁹ and he is acclaimed (along with Gustave Moreau and the Pre-Raphaelites, "au rêve" in the "bonne tradition: celle des Primitifs."²⁰ The association of the Italian Primitives with a simplified and decorative style is also affirmed in Aurier's comments on Pissarro's La Cueillette des pommes, "cet admirable tableau qui, par sa simplicité, par la synthèse de son dessin, par la grandeur de sa composition, fait songer aux primitifs florentins."²¹ Other examples of

¹⁸ See Robert Goldwater, "Puvis de Chavannes: Some Reasons for a Reputation," Art Bulletin (December 1940), pp. 366-70.

¹⁹ "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 165. oddly enough) for having restored to painting the "droit

²⁰ "Les Symbolistes," col. 482.

²¹ "Camille Pissaro," p. 512.

past art that Aurier cites repeatedly as precedents for l'art idéiste are the Assyrians, Egyptians and Greeks. He gives scant evidence of his reasons for choosing these, only hinting at their affinities with the generation of 1890 by saying that "Ils [les symbolistes actuels] sont, à proprement parler, les fils directs des grands imagiers mythologists de l'Assyrie, de l'Egypte, de la Grèce de l'époque royale . . ."²²

Simplified style and decoration were also associated in Aurier's mind as antidotes to the overly-analytic age in which he lived, symptomatized in art by over-refinement both in terms of complication, in the vogue for microscopic illusionism, and in size, as easel painting. He wrote of the emerging generation of Symbolist artists that, "Avec, comme dogmes fondamentaux, le symbole et la synthèse, c'est-à-dire l'expression des idées et la simplification esthétique et logique des formes, c'est à un art de décoration, à un art de fresques monumentales, plutôt qu'à la peinture de chevalet, que devaient, en effet, aboutir, s'ils en eussent eu la possibilité matérielle, les artistes de cette école."²³ If the easel painting is an "illogique raffinement inventé pour satisfaire la fantaisie

²²"Les Symbolistes," col. 482.

²³Ibid., col. 484.

ou l'esprit commercial des civilisations décadents,"²⁴ then its opposite, the wall-size decoration, must be a primordial form. By a similar logic in other writings he associates the minute realism of Third Republic genrists with an overly-analytic era, contrasting it to a simplified art, as in his review of the exhibition by Gauguin et al at the Cafe Volpini: "J'ai cru remarquer dans la plupart des œuvres exposées, et plus particulièrement dans celles de P. Gauguin, Emile Bernard, Anquentin, etc., une tendance marquée au synthétisme du dessin, de la composition et de la couleur, ainsi qu'une recherche de simplification des moyens qui m'a paru fort intéressante par ce temps d'habileté et de truquage à outrance."²⁵

In much the same spirit he wrote of Vincent van Gogh, "Puis, comme conséquence de cette conviction du besoin de tout recommencer en art, il eut et longtemps il caressa l'idée d'inventer une peinture très simple, populaire, quasiment enfantine, capable d'émouvoir les humbles qui ne raffinent point . . . [several of his paintings] indiquent, avec la plus grande netteté, cette tendance vers la

²⁴"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 163.

²⁵G.-A. Aurier, "Concurrence," Le Moderniste, I (27 June 1889), 74.

simplification de l'art, qu'on retrouve d'ailleurs, plus ou moins, dans tout son oeuvre et qui ne me paraît point si absurde ni si méestimable en ces temps de complication à outrance, de myopie et de maladroite analyse."²⁶

In this passage the grouping of the words, "simple, populaire, quasiment infantine," may be misleading, for it seems to associate Aurier with a type of primitivism current in realist circles during the nineteenth century but in many ways distinctly different from Aurier's own.²⁷ The notion that decorative art is primitive in the sense of native, spontaneous, etc., was one of Aurier's favorite themes. He often expressed his belief that the quasi-mystical clairvoyance, the ability to communicate with the Absolute, was universally enjoyed by primitive humanity, but was lost in modern times by all but a few specially gifted artists: "La plupart d'entre nous en sont incapables,--soit nativement, soit plutôt que soit plutôt que l'éducation ait atrophié en eux cette faculté, --plus incapables, je crois, que les sauvages mêmes, dont le langage, dont les religions, dont les barbares ébauches

²⁶"Les Isolés, Vincent van Gogh," p. 28.

²⁷See Meyer Schapiro, "Courbet and Popular Imagery," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 4 (1941), 164-191.

artistiques témoignent souvent d'une très intime communion avec l'immanente pensée de la nature, avec l'âme des choses."²⁸ Thus, decorative art, being a "manifestation d'art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste," by requiring the artist to restore communication with the inner life of nature, is a return to the beginnings of art, "cet art qui a pu paraître compliqué et que tels chroniqueurs traiteraient volontiers d'art déliquescents, se trouve donc, en dernière analyse, ramené à la formule de l'art simple, spontané et primordial. . . . ils se trouvent, de plus, au fond, identique à l'art primitif, à l'art tel qu'il fut deviné par les génies instinctifs des premiers temps de l'humanité."²⁹

²⁸"Les Symbolistes," col. 480.

²⁹"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 163.

Chapter V

The Aesthetic Emotion

Aurier's romantic primitivism--his nostalgia for an imaginary primordial state of blissful communion with nature --forms the basis for his conception of the aesthetic emotion. To see how this is so, it is necessary to return to one of the major themes of Aurier's "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art": the importance to any aesthetic theory of providing a definition of Beauty. In the "Préface...", Aurier reduced his call for a definition of Beauty to these two questions: first, "what is the special emotion that results from looking at works of art?", and secondly, "what is the special quality of the work of art that produces this emotion?"

Stated in this fashion, these two questions are truly fundamental; they could (and must) be answered by any true theory of art, from the most self-absorbed theory of l'art pour l'art to the most unabashedly didactic classicism. Aurier embraced neither of these two extremes, as his attitudes towards the Impressionists, on the one hand, and Taine on the other--both comparatively moderate positions

--make clear. Yet he might be said to stand somewhat nearer the latter pole than the former. Aurier was quite scornful of the moral posturing implied in Taine's hierarchy of ideals, with its standards of importance and bienfaisance, strictly nonaesthetic considerations in Aurier's view. Yet in his own writing he expresses the belief that art can work a moral transformation on society, and it is largely on moral grounds that he condemns the naturalistic art he sees as born of positive science. To encompass all of Aurier's views on the subject, the simple inquiry into the special emotion produced by works of art would have to be re-phrased to ask, "What effect does a work of art have on the viewer?", opening the possibility of an answer much broader than the sensation of beauty narrowly defined.

Let us begin the search for the aesthetic emotion with the work of art itself, attempting first to define that "special quality" of the work of art that produces its unique effect. To this end, it may be helpful to add a third question to the definition of beauty, that is, "how is a work of art, materially only a prosaic object, imbued with this 'special quality'?" This question is made necessary by Aurier's description of the "special quality" of art. As he described it in the "Préface..." that unique aspect of the art work is its âme, making it like a living being, and its ability to express this living soul through a mysterious

language. It would seem that for producing the aesthetic emotion this language is paramount, as it is only through the art work's expressive language that the viewer perceives its soul. The work of art is given its soul by the mystical union in the work itself of the soul of the artist and the soul of nature. This union is accomplished by the artist's reading in the prosaic objects of nature a language that reveals a pensée, and thus a soul, hidden behind the merely material reality.

At this point the question of the aesthetic emotion seems to double itself, as it has done in earlier aesthetic systems. With Delacroix, for example, imagination is key--the imagination of the artist in creating the work of art, and equally, the imagination of the viewer in re-creating it for himself. As for Aurier, for Delacroix the work of art seemed to lose its materiality, becoming only a "bridge" between the soul of the artist and that of the viewer. In this way, neither the work of art nor the aesthetic emotion is defined; there is left open the possibility of a discrepancy in the respective productions of the artist's imagination and of the viewer's. Furthermore, through deliberate vagueness or unfinish, Delacroix augmented the importance of the creative function of the

viewer's imagination in completing the picture.¹ In what then does the true work of art consist? Is it the intention of the artist, the possibly various interpretations of his audience, or simply the physical presence of the painting itself?

Aurier is in some respects less ambiguous on these points. Analysis reveals, at least, that the apparent dichotomy of the aesthetic emotion--artist's and viewer's--is illusory. Yet the similarity of the processes of artistic creation and aesthetic enjoyment is striking and not without significance. The artist perceives the soul of nature through its language; the viewer perceives the soul of art through its language. In an imitative theory of art, where the object of the art work is understood as nature pure and simple, and the function of the art work to represent (i.e. stand for) or duplicate its model--even in a subjective naturalism where the object is the artist's impression or sensation of nature--the experiences of artist and of viewer would be, intentionally, alike. But Aurier's is not an imitative theory. Through the agency of the artist, the soul and the language of the art work are created quite distinct from the soul and the language of nature.

¹For a discussion of Delacroix's ideas on the role of the imagination in the creative process, see George P. Mras, Eugène Delacroix's Theory of Art (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 72-98.

The next question that imposes itself in the logic of this inquiry is this: "what exactly is the function of the artist in creating the work of art?" In Aurier's description of the soul of the art work, its creation is a collaboration--a marriage--of artist and nature. But the role of nature is a passive one; this is implied even in Aurier's identification of the participants--the artist as père, nature as mère. The more active participation of the artist, in fact, is required to realize the contribution of nature in the work, which is not, it bears repeating, as a model to be copied. At this point it must be re-emphasized that for Aurier, the term artiste was not to be used indiscriminately to denote any maker of any picture. The true artist was for him only that rare individual who possessed a tempérament d'artiste, distinct and independant of his tempérament d'homme, capable of isolating himself from the influence of society, and most importantly, capable of seeing through the material aspect of nature to the Absolute reality beyond, the soul, the pensée of nature--the world of Idées.

Besides the cumbersome but evocative tempérament d'artiste, Aurier used another term to denote the artist's special gift: génie. The notion of the artist as genius in Aurier's theory at once places him within an older tradition and distinguishes him from it. His idea that the artist's

genius sets him apart, isolates him from ordinary society is conventional enough, even if stated somewhat hyperbolically,² but his further definition of the artist/genius as seer or clairvoyant, "l'Exprimeur des Etres absolues,"³ is distinctly Symbolist. One such true artist is Paul Gauguin, described by Aurier as, "un de ces sublimes voyeurs."⁴ He quotes Swedenborg to convey a sense of the artist's particular clairvoyance: "Oh! Combien rares, en vérité, parmi ceux qui se targuent de 'dispositions artistiques', combien rares les heureux dont les paupières de l'âme se sont entrouvertes et qui peuvent s'écrier avec Swedenborg, le génial halluciné: 'Cette nuit même, les yeux de mon homme intérieur furent ouverts: ils furent rendus propres à regarder dans les cieux, dans le monde des idées et dans les enfers!...' Et pourtant n'est-ce point là la préalable et nécessaire initiation que doit subir le vrai artiste, l'artiste absolu?..."⁵

²Refer to the discussion in Chapter II of Aurier's Statement, "L'oeuvre d'art est, en valeur, inversement proportionnelle à l'influence des milieux qu'elle a subie" (Préface...," p. 320).

³"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 160.

⁴Ibid., p. 159.

⁵Ibid., p. 158.

The nature of the artist's gift as a "seer" into the world of Idées is a key to a second aspect of his role in creating a work of art. Since the artist alone possesses the transcendent vision required to see the objects of nature not as objects but as signs of nature's immanent pensée, it falls to him to reveal the absolute reality of Idées by making the mystical language of nature apparent to the unintiated eye:

Aux yeux de l'artiste, en effet, c'est-à-dire aux yeux de celui qui doit être l'Exprimeur des Etres absolues, les objets, c'est-à-dire les êtres relatifs qui ne sont qu'une traduction proportionnée à la relativité de nos intellects des êtres absolues et essentiels, des Idées, les objets ne peuvent avoir de valeur en tant qu'objets. Ils ne peuvent lui apparaître que comme des signes. Ce sont les lettres d'un immense alphabet que l'homme de génie seul sait épeler.

Ecrire sa pensée, son poème, avec ces signes, en se rappelant que le signe, pour indispensable qu'il soit, n'est rien en lui-même et que l'idée seule est tout, telle apparaît donc la tâche de l'artiste dont l'oeil a su discerner les hypostases des objets tangibles. La première conséquence de ce principe, trop évidente pour qu'il faille s'y arrêter, c'est, on le devine, une nécessaire simplification dans l'écriture du signe.⁶

⁶Ibid., pp. 160-61.

This, obviously, is the process Aurier described in his requirement that the work of art be, "Synthétique, puisqu'elle écrira ces formes, ces signes, selon un mode de compréhension générale."

Even so, allowing for the necessary effort of translation from a language that is hidden and mysterious, obscured behind the appearance of material reality, into the self-proclaiming symbolic language of the forms of "synthetist" art, the artist still has more to do than simply to transcribe a message whispered to him by nature. Nature does not provide a message, as such, ready-made, but only the symbolic language or alphabet which the artist may employ to write his own message, variously named by Aurier his pensée, his poème, or his rêve. Yet paradoxically it is the possibility of such a symbolic language, the existence of a pensée, understood as "conscience de son être", given a material representation in every visible form, and the cosmic communion of consciousness this revelation implies, that is ultimately to be the message of art. Aurier continues his description of the artist's gift and his concomitant responsibility:

Mais s'il est vrai que, dans le monde, les seuls êtres réels ne puissent être que des Idées, s'il est vrai que les objets ne sont que les apparences révélatrices de ces idées et, par conséquent, n'ont d'importance qu'en tant que signes d'Idées, il n'en est pas moins vrai

qu'à nos yeux d'hommes, c'est-à-dire à nos yeux d'orgueilleuses ombres d'êtres purs, d'ombres vivant dans l'inconscience de leur état illusoire et dans l'aimée duperie du spectacle des fallacieuses tangibilités, il n'en est pas moins vrai qu'à nos myopes yeux les objets apparaissent le plus souvent comme objets, rien que comme objets, indépendamment de leur symbolique signification--au point que, parfois, nous ne pouvons, malgré de sincères efforts, les imaginer en tant que signes.

Cette néfaste propension à ne considérer, dans la vie pratique, l'objet que comme objet est évidente et, l'on peut dire, quasiment générale. L'homme supérieur, seul, illuminé par cette suprême vertu que les Alexandrins nommaient si justement l'extase, sait se persuader qu'il n'est lui-même qu'un signe jeté, par une mystérieuse préordination, au milieu d'une innombrable foule de signes; lui seul sait, dompteur de monstre illusion, se promener en maître dans ce temple fantastique

Où de vivants piliers

Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles...

alors que l'imbécile troupeau humain, dupé par les apparences qui lui feront nier les idées essentielles, passera éternellement aveugle

A travers les forêts de symboles

Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.⁷

One is tempted to conclude the inquiry into the aesthetic emotion at this point, since the discussion has come full circle, and the most basic questions posed along the

⁷ Ibid., p. 161; on the importance of Baudelaire and the theory of correspondances to the Symbolist generation see H. R. Rookmaaker, op. cit., pp. 165-67.

way can now be given answers. Beauty, that ultimate abstraction without which an aesthetic emotion or even works of art become inconceivable, may be understood as the unity of cosmic consciousness or the "universalité des psychies" that Aurier implied in "Les Symbolistes" is the only appropriate object of Art, "mode suprême d'expression." The "special quality" elevating works of art above ordinary objects, then is their ability to make apparent the "universalité des psychies." The resulting special emotion, or rather, the effect on the viewer, is a profound alteration of his personal level of consciousness. Like the artist, the viewer would find his interior eyes opened and, "'rendus propres à regarder dans les cieux, dans le monde des idées et dans les enfers.'" In effect, such a deepening or expanding of consciousness would be a moral transformation; equivalent to a return to the primordial state of attunement to the pensée of nature that Aurier imagines is the natural state of primitive humanity, uncorrupted by materialism and positive science.

Yet all of this remains on the periphery of the question of an aesthetic emotion, since these solutions are far more metaphysical than truly descriptive. This summary may be considered correct in its general outlines, but if

accepted as complete, it would seem to imply that all works of art are essentially alike, and could not possibly account for their endless diversity. Belying his decidedly mystical proclivities, Aurier insists on a more concretely descriptive definition of the aesthetic emotion and the special quality that produces it, by emphasizing the secondary questions: "how is the art object imbued with this special quality?" and "what precisely is the artist's role in creating the aesthetically effective work of art?" The link between these issues is yet another faculty, in addition to his clairvoyance, that Aurier requires the artist to bring to his creative work. In the same article on Gauguin in which he describes at length the artist's powers as seer into the Absolute, Aurier explains his need of the further gift of "*émotivité*":

Mais est-ce encore tout? Ne manquerait-il point encore quelque élément à l'art ainsi compris pour être vraiment l'Art?

Cet homme qui, grâce à son génie natif, grâce à des vertus acquises, se trouve, devant la nature, sachant lire en chaque objet la signification abstraite, l'idée primordiale et supplantante, cet homme qui, par son intelligence et par son adresse, sait se servir des objets comme d'un sublime alphabet pour exprimer les Idées dont il a la révélation, serait-il vraiment, par cela même, un artiste complet? Serait-il l'Artiste?

N'est-il pas plutôt un génial savant, un suprême formuleur qui sait écrire les Idées à la façon d'un mathématicien? N'est-il pas en quelque sorte un algébriste des Idées et son oeuvre n'est-elle point une merveilleuse équation, ou plutôt une page d'écriture idéographique rappelant les textes hiéroglyphiques des obélisques de l'antique Egypte?

Oui, sans doute, l'artiste, s'il n'a point quelque autre don psychique, ne sera que cela, car il ne sera qu'un compréhensif exprimeur, et si la compréhension complétée par le pouvoir d'exprimer suffit à constituer le savant, elle ne suffit pas à constituer l'artiste.

Il lui faudra, pour être réellement digne de ce beau titre de noblesse--si pollué en notre industrialiste aujourd'hui--joindre à ce pouvoir de compréhension un don plus sublime encore, je veux parler du don d'émotivité, non point certes cette émotivité que sait tout homme devant les illusoires combinaisons passionnelles des êtres et des objets, non point cette émotivité que savent les chansonniers de café-concert et les fabricants de chromo--mais cette transcendante émotivité, si grande et si précieuse, qui fait frissonner l'âme devant le drame ondoyant des abstractions. Oh! combien sont rares ceux dont s'émeuvent les corps et les coeurs au sublime spectacle de l'Etre et des Idées pures!⁸

Once again, the complex problem of the dual or reflexive nature of the aesthetic emotion demands to be addressed.

⁸"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," pp. 163-64.

What Aurier describes as the émotivité of the artist corresponds closely to what he implies elsewhere is the aesthetic emotion experienced by the audience before a work of art. Aurier himself states explicitly that this particular emotion of the artist is to be the basis of the aesthetic emotion experienced by the viewer: "Une œuvre d'art n'est réellement œuvre d'art qu'à condition de refléter, ainsi qu'un miroir, l'émotion psychologique éprouvée par l'artiste devant la nature ou devant son Rêve. Cette émotion peut, à la dernière limite, n'être qu'une sensation pure: sensation d'un accord particulier de lignes, d'une symphonie déterminée de couleurs."⁹

But the artist's émotivité is a way of responding to nature. If it is not essentially different from the aesthetic emotion of the viewer of a work of art, does that not imply that nature is not essentially different from a work of art? The problem of differentiating the experience of a work of art from the experience of the actual scene or

⁹"A Propos des trois Salons de 1891," p. 37; compare this statement to Gauguin's remarks in his letter to Emile Schuffenecker, 14 August 1888, "Do not paint too closely after nature. Art is an abstraction. Draw from nature while dreaming before it. . . . Seek the suggestion more than the description indeed as music does. . . . Art, instead of being the copy, becomes the subjective deformation of nature."

action represented is one that has for long troubled theoreticians of art. In his "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art," Aurier quotes an attempt by the critic Emile Hennequin to uncover the mechanism of the aesthetic transformation. He gives Hennequin credit, that at least he, "pose franchement le problème de la sensation du beau," adding that, "il analyse un peu superficiellement mais avec beaucoup de finesse et de subtilité":

L'oeuvre d'art, dit-il, a pour but, "de produire une sorte spéciale d'émotion, l'émotion esthétique, qui a ceci de particulier qu'elle est fin en soi... Et plus loin il ajoute: "Tous les systèmes de classification des émotions mettent à part les émotions esthétiques et en forment une division spéciale séparée des émotions ordinaires. Or nous avons vu que l'émotion esthétique est une forme inactive de l'émotion ordinaire et que chacune de ces dernières peut tour à tour devenir esthétique..." L'émotion esthétique, en effet, selon Hennequin, manque du caractère distinctif des émotions ordinaires: le plaisir et la peine;--car il faut distinguer dans toute émotion ordinaire deux éléments; 1^o l'excitation neutre, qui la constitue; 2^o le phénomène interne, cérébral, ajoutant des images douloureuses ou gaies. Or, ajoute Hennequin, "si on admet cette hypothèse, l'émotion esthétique d'un spectacle représenté se distinguera de l'émotion d'un spectacle réel perçu en ce que la première de ces émotions, tout en conservant intact l'élément excitation, laisse à son minimum d'intensité l'élément éveil des images de douleur ou de plaisir qui s'associent d'ordinaire à cette excitation, mais qui demeurent inertes parce qu'elles sont fictives, mensongères, innocentes. Au contraire, dans l'émotion réelle

ces images ont toute l'intensité que leur donne la certitude de leur réalité...Or, si l'on accepte la théorie de M. Spencer d'après laquelle les plaisirs sont des sentiments modérés et les douleurs des sentiments extrêmes, on apercevra aussitôt la raison pour laquelle les œuvres les plus émouvantes et les plus estimées expriment des spectacles ou des idées tristes. C'est que dans celles-ci l'émotion causée par des images fictives, douloreuses, sera extrême; et, dans celles-ci également, l'émotion étant de l'ordre factice, fictif, esthétique, ne sera extrême que comme excitation et non comme douleur". Et M. Hennequin conclut en se résumant: "Les mots sensation du beau sembleront donc désigner cette situation d'esprit: excitation intense d'un ou plusieurs sentiments ordinaires; absence des images positivement c'est-à-dire personnellement douloreuses qui accompagnent et timbrent d'habitude cette excitation intense: en d'autres termes, le transport, le heurt de la douleur sans son amertume ou sa terreur".

D'où cette définition un peu éloignée de celle de M. Taine: "L'art est la création en nos coeurs d'une puissante vie sans actes et sans douleurs". (pp. 317-18)

Aurier's only further comment on Hennequin's analysis is to find it "évidemment superficielle et insuffisante" (p. 318). One is left to infer his reasons for this judgment from the passages relating to the aesthetic emotion found scattered in his other writings. In general, it seems that

Aurier's approach to the aesthetic emotion differs from one such as Hennequin's principally in that, by renouncing the absolute value of the experience of ordinary reality, and proscribing the translation of such experience as the object of art, he obviates the differentiation of the experience of a scene as real and as represented. In other words, he is freed to describe the aesthetic emotion rather than as a different way of responding to such-and-such scene or event, as a response to something essentially different from any scene or event. This "something essentially different" he described in decidedly formal terms as "le drame ondoyant des abstractions,"¹⁰ when it was a question of the artist's response before nature or, even more specifically formal when referring to its reflection in a work of art as, "sensation d'un accord particulier de lignes, d'une symphonie déterminée de couleurs."¹¹ Even in his discussion of paintings by Henry de Groux, an artist whose grisly subject matter easily overwhelms the abstract formal qualities of his work, Aurier maintains this position. Although it is clear that Aurier is strongly attracted by the shocking subjects, he ascribes their impact to the artist's manipulation of abstract pictorial elements ("Regardez, par exemple, dans Le Meurtre la

¹⁰"Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," p. 164.

¹¹"A Propos des trois Salons de 1891," p. 37.

subordination évidente des contours, des surfaces, des lumières, des ombres, observez le rythme désespéré, tragique, des lignes, de toutes les lignes, tombant en courbes douloureuses, parfois dramatiquement brisées, du milieu supérieur de la toile à ses angles inférieurs, constatez la concordance lugubre des couleurs, cette sinistre harmonie en vert sombre, en bleu obscur, en noir . . .");¹², insisting that the resulting emotion is only aesthetic and results only from the contemplation of these "abstractions":

Et cela, pourtant, qu'on ne s'y trompe pas, n'est point une simple anecdote, un vulgaire fait-divers bête et sanguinolent, une quelconque scène pathétique de mélo d'Ambigu. C'est autre chose, qui est moins particulier et moins immédiat, autre chose qui est bien de l'art vrai et pur, puisque ce qu'on éprouve, au regarder de cette oeuvre singulière et poignante, ce n'est point seulement les banaux sentiments de terreur, de pitoiement qu'inspirerait telle analogue atrocité réelle, par hasard aperçue, ce n'est point cette sensation de nerfs bouleversés au heurt de telle vision spécialement apeurante, c'est plutôt une mystérieuse émotion d'ordre plus intellectuel, une émotion qui, sans affecter en rien les nerfs ni la sensibilité, ne bouleverse (et d'une façon combien délicieusement épouvantable!) que les facultés supérieures de notre âme, une émotion, enfin, comparable au trouble absolument idéal, insensoriel, que suscite en l'intellectualité d'un penseur qui est aussi poète la

¹²"Henry de Groux," p. 226.

conception d'un ensemble d'idées abstraites, qui, soudain, dans le ciel de l'imagination, se précisent, s'incarnent, douloureuses ou terribles.¹³

But separating the abstract Idée from the real or represented scene or event does little to clarify the necessary distinctions between artist and audience, nature and art, simply because such "abstractions" can be discovered regardless of whether the spectacle is real or represented. For several reasons, to draw both these distinctions is necessary to, and the natural outcome of, the logical completion of Aurier's theory. For all the apparent similarity of the processes of creation and appreciation of a work of art--the artist reads the language of nature to discover its soul and experiences the emotions provoked by the "drame ondoyant des abstractions"; the work of art, through an abstract language, makes its soul known to the viewer, who experiences a "sensation d'un accord particulier de lignes, d'une symphonie déterminé de couleurs" --there is this subtle but ultimately fundamental difference: in the intercourse of artist and nature, as has been seen, the artist is active, nature passive, as he discovers her secret language and uses it to write his own poème. In the confrontation

¹³Ibid., pp. 223-24.

of art work and viewer, the viewer is passive, the work of art active. The work of art communicates to the viewer the existence of its living soul using the language of nature to express the Rêve of the artist. The viewer's emotion, like the artist's, is a response to abstractions, but these abstractions are given their particular character by the émotivité of the artist.

The passivity of the viewer's role is specified by Aurier in a passage in "Les Symbolistes," where he summarizes very completely his doctrine of the aesthetic emotion and related issues. Like the "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art," this passage ends with a dramatic description of the aesthetic emotion as Amour, once again giving art a mission in his fantasy of a moral transformation of nineteenth century society:

L'oeuvre d'art est la traduction, en une langue spéciale et naturelle, d'une donnée spirituelle, de valeur variable, au reste, laquelle est comme minimum un fragment de la spiritualité de l'artiste, comme maximum cette entière spiritualité de l'artiste plus la spiritualité essentielle des divers êtres objectifs. L'oeuvre d'art complète est donc un être nouveau, on peut dire absolument vivant, puisqu'il a pour l'animer une âme, qui est même la synthèse de deux âmes, l'âme de l'artiste et l'âme de la nature, j'écrirais presque l'âme paternelle et l'âme maternelle. Cet être

nouveau, quasiment divin, car il est immuable et immortel, doit être estimé susceptible d'inspirer à qui communique avec lui dans certaines conditions, des émotions, des idées, des sentiments spéciaux, proportionnés à la pureté et à la profondeur de son âme. C'est cet influx, ce rayonnement sympathiques ressentis à la vue d'un chef-d'œuvre, que l'on nomme le sentiment du beau, l'émotion esthétique, et ce sentiment et cette émotion, ainsi expliqués par la communion des deux âmes, l'une inférieure et passive, l'âme humaine, l'autre supérieure et active, l'âme de l'œuvre, apparaîtra sans doute, à qui voudra de bonne foi approfondir, très analogique à ce qu'on nommer: l'Amour, plus vraiment même l'Amour que l'Amour humain toujours maculé de quelque boueuse sexualité. Comprendre une œuvre d'art, c'est en définitive l'aimer d'amour, la pénétrer, dirai-je, au risque de faciles railleries, d'immatériels baisers. Je sais tout le ridicule que doit provoquer, en ce siècle de grossier scepticisme, pareille esthétique sentimentale. Mais qu'importe? Qui donc, je le demande, peut se vanter d'avoir vraiment compris la Joconde ou le saint Jean de Léonard, la Vierge glorieuse de l'Angelico ou celle de Botticelli, avant d'avoir senti, devant ces êtres mystérieux et beaux, comme la délicieuse fusion de son âme, à soi, en une autre âme, la leur? avant d'avoir senti, à leur vue, comme un premier frisson d'amour? Et ne fut-ce point seulement de cette minute inoubliée d'intime rapprochement que, tous, nous avons commencé de vraiment entendre et de vraiment comprendre l'harmonieuse langue de ces images sublimes, de converser avec elles ainsi qu'avec de divines amantes, de pénétrer en l'intimité de leurs âmes éblouissantes, pressentant qu'elles auraient toujours à nous révéler quelques nouvelles et miraculeuses joies, éternellement? (col. 481)

Chapter VI

Aurier as a Critic

With his requirement, expressed in the "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art," that the critic first of all establish a clear definition of beauty in art, Aurier fuses the roles of critic and theorist. In his own critical essays he is true to his ideal of the critic-/theorist; one finds bits of his theorizing --often very important bits in the least important articles--scattered in virtually everything he wrote on the subject of art. But the fusion is not perfect. Although always his criticism--the descriptive and judgmental aspect of the art-writer's trade--is intermingled in the same articles with the most hermetic theory, the combination is in most cases more of a suspension than a solution. For it seems that Aurier writes about art through two or more distinct persona.

Partly, this is a matter of literary style. As a theorist, Aurier's tone is sober and meticulously, if arcaneously, logical. But as a critic, he allows his natural

irony to dominate, or else is swept away on a sea of "poeticizing" verbiage. Both these tendencies can be traced to Aurier's affinities with the Decadent literary movement. But also, undeniably, there is some question here of variation in quality of Aurier's critical judgments. In short, his subtlety as a theorist is not always matched by his astuteness as a critic.

Aurier's irony, as one might expect, is mostly evident in articles such as "Meissonier" or "Les Aquarellistes" whose subjects would seem to direct them to a wider, more "popular" audience than the comparatively small handful of amateurs discriminating enough to follow the career of a Gauguin or van Gogh. The scorn Aurier heaps upon the former artists and their admiring public is typical of the contempt for anything sullied by appreciation by the masses that is among the foundation stones of the concept of Decadent dandyism. Nowhere is Aurier's scornful irony more apparent than in his two-part "Salon de 1888," written for Le Décadent under the pseudonym "Marc d'Escaurailles." The entire article, literally a "galloping" review of the official Salon by a reviewer who claims to have been allowed "au moins 300 minutes pour examiner, analyser, comparer, juger les 2586 toiles, les 1119 aquarelles pastels, dessins miniatures, les 1059

statues, bas reliefs, bustes, médailles, pierres gravées, les 180 plans d'architecture, les 522 eaux-fortes et lithographies--ou, pour me résumer, les 5523 objets, prétendues d'art, exhibés cette année, aux halles des champs Elysées.."¹ is a parody of the Salon itself, in its ridiculously vast proportions, and of the entire genre of popular salon review, which claims to give a comprehensive judgment of the aesthetic merits of so extensive an exhibition.

But not only the most conservative enclaves of the Parisian art world are the objects of his satire. Another example is "Monticelli; Paul Gauguin," written on the occasion of Gauguin's moderately successful sale at the hôtel Drouot in 1891, in which Aurier mockingly expresses his amazement at the progressive aesthetic taste of the Parisian middle class. As proof of their astounding modernity he relates an anecdote about his housekeeper who, he says, had her tableau à musique repainted by a pupil of Signac, so that, "Aujourd'hui le clocher s'érigé dans une pluie de petits pains à cacheter multicolores et, quand l'horloge marque midi le nouveau carillon joue la Chevauchée des Walkyries.

¹Marc d'Escaurailles, "Le Salon de 1888," Le Décadent (15 May 1888), p. 10.

"Le tableau impressionniste à musique wagnérienne, voilà, n'est-ce pas, le comble de la modernité en art!"²

In large measure, the source of the apparent unevenness in Aurier's critical perceptions is his difficulty in finding artists whose work is equal to the high standards imposed by his theory. Only Gauguin and perhaps van Gogh fulfill perfectly Aurier's ideal of the Idéiste artist. But the dearth of great talents creating according to his idéiste cannons cannot excuse Aurier's occasional failures to differentiate clearly between greater and lesser achievements in the translation of pure Idées. Particularly considering his intransigence towards some otherwise excellent artists, whose chief fault lay in working from an opposing aesthetic frame of reference, these indulgent lapses in critical rigor seem all the more anomalous.

Standing apart from articles such as "Meissonier" or "Monticelli; Paul Gauguin," whose main purpose is to comment on some aspect of the state of affairs in the Parisian art world (and where, consequently, Aurier's satire is most mordant), others such as "Les Symbolistes," which are nearly totally theoretical, or still others, for example, "J.-F. Henner" or "Ratiocinations familières, et d'ailleurs vaines, à propos des trois salons de 1891",

²G.-A. Aurier, "Monticelli; Paul Gauguin," Revue Indépendante, NS 18 (1891), 419.

which blend keen theoretical observation with ironic commentary, is a group of eight essays that treat at close range the work of a single artist. With two exceptions, "Camille Pissaro" and "Eugène Carrière," all these articles conform to a constant format and, despite the diversity of their subjects, reveal a more or less consistent aesthetic bias.

The styles of the artists discussed in these articles are indeed diverse; the group includes (in 1890) Vincent van Gogh, Camille Pissarro, Raffaelli, (in 1891) Eugène Carrière, Gauguin, Renoir, Henry de Groux, and finally (in 1892), Claude Monet. The judgments of nearly a century since Aurier wrote have not treated these artists equally. Aurier showed remarkable prescience by his early recognition of the genius of van Gogh and Gauguin, but Carrière and Raffaelli are today obscure at best, and Henry de Groux is virtually unknown. Of course, Aurier did not treat them all equally either. As has been seen, he had serious reservations about Raffaelli, for reasons that make his otherwise high ranking of this artist seem more just, and about Pissarro, again, for reasons that at least a certain faction of current opinion would not dispute. If his severity towards Monet, today universally recognized as the great master of Impressionism, seems mistaken, it is

well to recall that Aurier himself readily admitted Monet's mastery. Only the idea of Impressionism, which Aurier could not divorce from naturalism, and its atomized pictorial structure, which he could not reconcile with his own notion of synthetic and decorative structure, drew his disapproval even while charming him. The remaining artists--van Gogh, Carrière, Gauguin, Renoir and de Groux, are all presented as examples of truly symbolist artists. Yet there are striking differences in Aurier's approaches to writing about Gauguin or writing about, say, Eugène Carrière or Henry de Groux, clearly indicating that on some level Aurier was aware of the unequal stature of his choices.

It can hardly be mere coincidence that what Aurier wrote of Gauguin was almost always highly theoretical, often quite abstractly theoretical, and only rarely descriptive, while at the same time, where his critical sense seems least keen, his expositions are also leanest in supporting theory and rely most heavily on lengthy evocative descriptions and appeals to the Decadent/Symbolist taste. At the same time, certain contradictory statements suggest that Aurier was not incapable of confusing aesthetic-as-theory and aesthetic-as-taste, allowing the latter to pass for the former.

After nearly three pages of emotionally and syntactically over-wrought description of Henry de Groux's painting, Le Meurtre, Aurier could assert, quite earnestly, that the critic's role was to translate pictures into their equivalents in written language:

L'existence en une oeuvre de ce prolongement spirituel, la quantité et la qualité de ce prolongement spirituel, voilà, je crois, les meilleurs critères pour reconnaître et évaluer une oeuvre d'art. Voilà aussi la cause pour laquelle, si je ne me trompe, la meilleure critique picturale sera toujours celle faite par un poète. Ces ensembles d'idées, en effet, qui composent essentiellement l'oeuvre vraiment d'art et que j'ai appelés le prolongement spirituel, il les précisera, lui, le poète, en les transposant dans son language propre, vers ou prose, language évidemment plus clair et plus intelligible, puisqu'il est plus familier à la masse des hommes, que le language universel, mais assez ésotérique, des lignes et des couleurs. Et ainsi seront pleinement illuminées les essentielles conditions de l'oeuvre d'art, ce qui est, à n'en point douter, la seule bonne critique.³

There is obviously much here that stands in direct contradiction to Aurier's more carefully thought out theoretical pronouncements. Not only is his concern that the poet translate pictures into a language that is "plus intelligible, puisqu'il est plus familier à la masse des hommes. . ." antithetical to his usual attitude of contempt for the interests of "la masse des hommes," but such a

³"Henry de Groux," p. 225.

concern flies in the face of the confidence he exhibits elsewhere in the inherent expressive qualities of abstract pictorial elements. The "prolongement spirituel" that Aurier here names as among the best criteria for judging the quality of a work of art, he insists earlier in the same article to be something quite distinct from the emotions aroused by the spectacle represented--"ce n'est point seulement les banaux sentiments de terreur, de pitié qu'inspirerait telle analogie atrocoté réelle, par hazard aperçue. . ."⁴ The source of this unique "prolongement spirituelle" is rather "un ensemble d'idées abstraites,"⁵ specifically, the abstract arrangement of the pictorial elements: line, colors, "des contours, des surfaces, des lumières, des ombres. . ."⁶ Yet, what the poet-critic is so admirably suited to translate into his own (literary) idiom is not this abstract arrangement, but merely the pathos of "telle vision spécialement apeurante."⁷

In sharp contrast, when confronted with a work whose beauty is truly pictorial and abstract, Aurier is at a loss to find an adequate literary equivalent. In "Le Symbolisme

⁴ Ibid., p. 223.

⁵ Ibid., p. 224.

⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

⁷ Ibid., p. 224.

en peinture--Paul Gauguin," Aurier follows more or less the same formula employed in "Henry de Groux": beginning with a description of a single work, then proceeding to his commentary and analysis. But his description of Gauguin's Jacob Wrestling with the Angel is much briefer than that of de Groux's Le Meurtre. It is followed by one of Aurier's most highly concentrated theoretical statements, in which little further reference is made to specific paintings. Far from claiming to have given a literary transposition of the pictures, Aurier then issues this disclaimer:

Son oeuvre, merveilleuse déjà, je ne puis la décrire ni l'analyser ici. Il me suffit d'avoir essayé de caractériser et de légitimer la conception très louable d'esthétique qui paraît guider ce grand artiste. Comment, en effet, suggérer avec des mots tout l'inexplicable, tout l'océan d'Idées que l'oeil clairvoyant peut entrevoir dans ces magistrales toiles: le Calvaire, la Lutte de Jacob avec l'Ange, le Christ Jaune, dans ces merveilleux paysages de la Martinique et de Bretagne, où toute ligne, toute forme, toute couleur est le verbe d'une Idée, dans ce sublime Jardin des Oliviers où un Christ aux cheveux incarnadins, assis dans un site de désolation, semble pleurer les douleurs ineffables du rêve, l'agonie des Chimères, la trahison des contingences, la vanité du réel et de la vie et, peut-être, de l'au-delà...Comment dire la philosophie sculptée dans ce bas-relief ironiquement libellé: Soyez amoureuses et vous serez heureuses, où toute la Luxure, toute la lutte de la chair et de la pensée, toute la douleur des voluptés sexuelles se tordent et, pour ainsi dire, grincent des dents? Comment évoquer cet autre bois sculpté: Soyez mystérieuses, qui célèbre les pures joies de l'esotérisme, les troublants caressements de l'éénigme, les fantastiques ombrages des

forêts du problème? Comment raconter enfin ces étranges et barbares et sauvages céramiques ou, sublime potier, il a pétri plus d'âme que d'argile?...(pp. 164-65)

Though Aurier judged his descriptions adequate to convey the deep mystical content of Gauguin's aesthetic productions, this listing of some of his works with brief suggestions of their import to Aurier's imagination serves almost as a catalogue of the themes he attempted to translate descriptively in the work of other artists: "les douleurs ineffables du rêve, l'agonie des Chimères, la trahison des contingences, la vanité de réel et de la vie . . . la lutte de la chair et de la pensée, toute la douleur des voluptés sexuelles . . . les pures joies de l'esotérisme, les troublants caressements de l'éngime . ." Of all the perverse attitudes and bizarre tastes affected by his generation, Aurier seems to have been most attracted by pessimism. His entire aesthetic system is, in effect, based on the Decadents' particular version of a pessimist outlook, in that this aesthetic is formulated as a reaction to the perceived decadence of contemporary civilization. This attitude is composed of several

inter-reflecting facets. Above all, there is the conviction that positivism, with its resultant attitudes of materialism and sensualism, is leading society inexorably towards the ultimate debasement of bestiality, seen as an utterly sensual and instinctual existence after the atrophy of the finer faculties of spirit and intellect. This is precisely what Aurier expressed at the end of his "Préface pour un livre de critique d'art" with his heartfelt plea for a return to mysticism. His aesthetic program reflects this attitude in its emphasis on discovering the hidden meanings behind appearances and de-emphasis of the material reality of objects through subjective and decorative distortions of their actual physical forms. The pessimist's alternative philosophical stance (to positivism) is a negative attitude towards reality. In metaphysical terms, this is manifested in Aurier's theory as his idealism--simply, the philosophical position that material reality is not truly real; the only absolute reality is to be found in Idées. In more mundane terms, the same negative attitude can be seen in certain aspects of the Decadent posture and taste adopted by Aurier--his disdain for the ordinary and his judgment that the world created by industrialism is intolerably ugly.

Aurier's article on Henry de Groux amply demonstrates his pessimism with repeated evocations of "les douleurs . . . d'agonie . . . la trahison des contingences, la vanité du réel et de la vie." The bloody spectacle of Le Meurtre with its "contorsions d'agonie" and "sang ruisselant" (all described by Aurier in graphic detail) is for Aurier a poem expressing "la douleur de vivre, l'épouvante de vivre, l'angoisse de l'Ignoré aventureux embusqué dans l'avenir, la bêtise méchante de la fortune, la pitoyable vanité de la galopade humaine parmi les douleureuses conjonctures de l'existence...." De Groux's murdered traveler is seen by Aurier as the victim of "quel banal accident de la vie stupide," of "l'absurde hasard" (p. 224).

Eugène Carrière and Raffaelli, too, though with vastly different pictorial styles, offer occasions for Aurier to express his disgust of life and the ugliness of reality. Raffaelli seeks to accentuate the caractère in his scenes of everyday reality. The caractère that Aurier underlines in his prose translation is pessimist. Of Raffaelli's Banlieu he describes "des ciels gris, ennuyés, salis par des suies d'usines...des champs plats, lugubres, avares, fumés de platras, de tessons de bouteilles et de coquilles d'huitres, de pitoyables champs qu'on devine proches des fortifications, anémiés, contaminés par la respiration

viciée, par les sueurs pestilentielles de Paris. . . . tous les pitoyables êtres, toutes les lamentables choses de ce monde spécial, si complexe, si mornement et si monotonement divers, qu'est la Banlieu..."⁸ Carrière's approach, all details drowned in a misty obscurity, could hardly be more different from Raffaelli's caractérisme, but Aurier draws from his work a similar interpretation:

La réalité plate et brutale, en laquelle nous vivons nos banales aventures, est-elle donc un spectacle si intéressant et si beau, pour qu'on s'efforce de nous le parodier éternellement? Ne vaudrait-il point vraiment mieux que l'artiste ne nous la montrât, cette abjecte objectivité, que le moins possible, très lointaine, et noyée dans des brumes de crépuscule? C'est ce que Carrière a compris. Cette réalité écoeurante, dont, dans doute, son âme délicate de poète eut souvent à souffrir, il s'efforce de nous la voiler, de nous la présenter baignée de mystère. De parti pris--et il convient de l'en féliciter-- il éloigne de nous la nature, la détestable nature, la vie, la sale et banale et méchante vie . . ."⁹

The anti-sensualist aspect of Aurier's pessimism is frequently manifested in his criticism as mysogyny. Yet nowhere does Aurier evoke the popular Symbolist images of woman as vampire, siren or Chimera. To him women are

⁸"Raffaelli," p. 324.

⁹G.-A. Aurier, "Eugène Carrière," Mecure de France (June 1891), p. 333.

rather merely stupidly animal-like, symbols of brute sensuality in contrast to spirituality and intellect. This attitude is summarized in his description in "Le Symbolisme en peinture--Paul Gauguin", of the wood relief, Soyez amoureuses et vous serez heureuses as, "toute la Luxure, toute la lutte de la chair et de la pensée, toute la douleur des voluptés sexuelles . . ." (p. 165), and in the "Préface...", where he complains that, "Le sensualisme du siècle nous a désappris de voir en la femme autre chose qu'un bloc de chair propre à l'assouvissement de nos désirs matériels. L'amour de la femme ne nous est plus permis" (p. 332). And in the course of his article on Raffaelli, he remarks that Degas has translated, "la turpide bestialité de la femelle humaine" (p. 327).

The appeal of Renoir's art for Aurier lies mainly in the opportunity it presents for him to elaborate this theme. To the sensuous animality that he seems to believe comes naturally to the female, Aurier contrasts an image of femininity as a mechanical doll that is his interpretation of Renoir's art:

La femme, il voulut peindre la femme,
l'exquise, la joliette babiloie babilleuse,
sautilleuse, qu'il adorait et dont l'âme,
il le devinait, ne devait certes point être très
différente d'un mouvement d'horlogerie, souvent
détraqué, au reste.... et, parmi toutes les
femmes, parmi toutes ces gentilles amusettes
automatiques, parmi tous ces mignards étroïdes
artificiels, ce furent celles chez qui ce

caractère d'artificiel était le plus marqué, le plus évident, qui le plus l'attirèrent et le séduisirent. D'instinct, il dédaigna un peu les robustes et saines femelles des campagnes, trop voisines, à son gré, de la nature et de l'animalité et quasiment contradictoires de la coquette machinette-articulée qu'il concevait. Au contraire, ainsi qu'il était normal, il s'éprit de la mignonne et poupine poupée très civilisée des villes, de la poupée si nativement poupée et encore, s'il se pouvait, artificialisée par une vie toute conventionnelle, toute aphysique, de la poupée la plus poupée, de la Parisienne....¹⁰

This doll-like woman, he implies, would appeal to "des goûts d'artificiel dignes du subtil des Esseintes,"¹¹ but is none the less the product of the mindless sensualism born of the materialism of the age. Analogous to popular salon art, she displays a superficial prettiness, which, if it masks a void of more substantial qualities, suffices to satisfy childish desires:

La femme, surtout, l'obsédante femme, à quoi lui serviraient d'autres plus intimes qualités?...Il la voit, il veut la voir jolie, seulement jolie, et, en vérité, n'est-ce point assez? Pourquoi serait-elle belle, puisqu'elle est jolie? Pourquoi intelligente, pourquoi bête, pourquoi fausse, pourquoi méchante? Elle est jolie! Pourquoi aurait-elle un cœur, un cerveau, une âme? Elle est jolie! elle est jolie!.... Et cela lui suffit et cela nous

¹⁰ G.-A. Aurier, "Renoir," Mercure de France (August 1891), p. 103.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 106.

suffit.... A-t-elle même un sexe? Oui, mais qu'on devine stérile et seulement propre à nos puériles amusailles. . . .¹²

Finally, Aurier explicitly confirms the connection between Renoir's light and graceful visions and his own pessimism, to which more brooding images would seem more appropriate. Renoir, he says, is, "intuitivement convaincu de la futilité de la vie, de la vanité de la femme, de l'illusoire du monde," but, "loin de tomber, pour cela, dans l'aigre pessimisme, s'égaie au contraire de ces choses, glorifie leur futilité, leur vanité, leur illusoire, et, heureux aux larmes, les proclame les très admirables, très précieux et très jolis joujoux nécessaires aux enfantines récréations de son âme..."¹³

While in many respects Aurier's taste and the style of his descriptive writing seem typically Symbolist, there are several characteristics of the Symbolist mode that are notably absent from Aurier's criticism. Though he may appreciate in Renoir "des goûts d'artificiel dignes du subtil des Esseintes," and quote Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances" in his article, "Le Symbolisme en Peinture--Paul Gauguin," the synesthesia associated with Huysman's

¹²Ibid., p. 104.

¹³Ibid., p. 106.

character and, by many, with Baudelaire's sonnet, nowhere forms a part of Aurier's aesthetic. Certainly, one can find in his criticism phrases such as his comment upon the "parfum de bonne foi" in Vincent's paintings, but such scattered and largely figurative usages can hardly be construed as a commitment to synesthesia. Similarly, "musicality" is not named as an important characteristic of Aurier's ideal art.

Equally significant are several conspicuous omissions from the roster of artists granted pages of Aurier's analysis. Although he frequently names Gustave Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes as examples of true Idéiste artists, he has very little concrete to say about either of them. His most elaborated comments on these artists occur in "Les Symbolistes," where he says that they, along with the Pre-Raphaelites, have, "combattu le même combat, revendiquant le droit au rêve, à l'essor hors des marécages matérialistes et ayant le courage de proclamer l'excellence de la vraie et de la bonne tradition: celle des Primitifs." Aurier continues to say that the current generation of Symbolists are like these older masters in being, "les fils directs des grands imagiers mythologistes de l'Assyrie, de l'Egypte, de la Grèce de l'époque royale, les descendants des Florentins du XIV^e siècle, des Allemands du XV^e, des Gothiques du moyen âge, un peu aussi les

cousins des Japonais" (col. 482). One can infer, considering the high value Aurier placed on simplified pictorial style and his elevation of mural painting to a position of particular spiritual significance among art forms, that it was to these aspects of Aurier's aesthetic that Puvis's art seemed especially appropriate. Moreau is another matter. Though he frequently drew his imagery from "des grands imagiers mythologistes" named by Aurier, unlike Puvis, he does not share with his "primitive" predecessors a simplified and "synthetic" decorative style. Like Carrière or de Groux, Moreau's appeal for Aurier must have been more a matter of taste than true theoretical compliance.

Moreau had been canonized by J.-K. Huysmans in A Rebours as a paragon of the Decadent taste for the bizarre and sickly lavish. Perhaps it was the precedent of Huysman's description of Moreau's work that prevented Aurier from repeating the exercise. Instead, he borrowed the over-wrought style and vocabulary to create his prose evocations of other artists' work. Vincent van Gogh's landscapes, for example, he described in terms of an abundance of jewels and metals. His skies are, "tantôt taillés dans l'éblouissement des saphirs ou des turquoises, tantôt pétries de je ne sais quels soufres infernaux, chauds, délétères et aveuglants. . ." His foliage is "de bronze antique, de cuivre neuf, de verre filé . . ." Even

the flowers are "moins des fleurs que de richissimes joailleries faites de rubis, d'agates, d'onyx, d'émeraudes, de corindons, de chrysobérils, d'améthistes et de calcédoines . . ."¹⁴

A careful search reveals a few, but only very few, instances of thematic correspondances between Aurier's poetry and the descriptive writing of his art criticism. But the dates of the poems in relation to the publication of the critical articles, as well as significant divergence in mood, indicate that even these similarites are most likely only coincidental. In "Le Subtil Empereur", published in the Mercure de France, April 1891, there occur these lines:

Je regarde en raillant agonize l'empire
 Dans les rires du cirque et les cris de jockeys,
 Et cet écroulement formidable m'inspire
 Des vers subtils fleuris de vocables coquets!...

Aurier's description of Henry de Groux's Les Trainards, a depiction of the horrible aftermath of battle--"l'Envers de la Gloire," Aurier called it--ends with this exclamation directed towards the victorious ruler: "Bel empereur victorieux, bel empereur, êtes-vous dans votre capitale en fête, dans votre capitale pavoisée et illuminée, à parler

¹⁴"Les Isolés, Vincent van Gogh," pp. 24-25.

de vos merveilleux exploits avec les belles dames de votre cour, à respirer le métaphorique encens de vos poètes et de vos historiographes!"¹⁵ But the article is dated August 1891, making it appear most improbable that the picture inspired the poem. Outside any direct connection, the appearance and re-appearance in Aurier's writing of a legendary emperor, in the heyday of Symbolism, is hardly remarkable. On the other hand, the existence of a second such coincidental thematic correlation between one of Aurier's poems, "Le Pendu" (published in the Mercure de France, November 1892, but in the Oeuvres Posthumes dated April 1890) and another of de Groux's paintings, also titled Le Pendu, lends support to the suspicion that in his critical judgments a sense of psychological affinity with a particular artist could count for as much, in Aurier's reckoning, as a style that by its decorative simplification clearly announces its idéisme.

In general, although occasionally in handing out praise, he did allow what was actually only a superficial appeal to taste to substitute for the true, deeply felt Idéisme his theory describes, Aurier must, in the final analysis, be counted among those few critics whose insights have deepened their reader's understanding of art rather than simply chronicling its existence. His system

¹⁵"Henry de Groux," p. 228.

was not perfect; none has yet been so. His answers to the questions, "what is beauty?", "what is the source of art's 'mysterious power to move us in its unique way?'" perhaps do not satisfy so well now as they did nearly a century ago. The same questions had been posed for centuries before, and always had to be answered anew as the point of view from which previous answers seemed correct shifted. In spite of their author's aversion to Taine's ideas on historical contingency, Aurier's theory and criticism are unmistakably stamped by the conditions of race, milieu and moment under which they were created. But at the same time, Aurier's critical work is what he insisted a true work of art must be: interesting and in its own way true of itself, beyond its capacity to document a moment in history.

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Margaret Rauschenbach was born in 1954 in New Orleans and grew up in Lafayette, in the heart of French Louisiana. She attended the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette from 1972 through 1973, then in 1974 transferred to McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, after marrying Frank P. Lunn, III. There she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in French in 1975, having earned Summa Cum Laude Honors. She studied Art History at Tulane University in New Orleans from 1976 to 1978, receiving the Master of Arts degree in 1978, and publishing a study, "Los Dibujos de Juan Carreno de Miranda" in Archivos Espanol de Arte (Madrid), along with Virginia E. Carrion, trans. Ms. Lunn became a student at M.I.T. in 1978.