Lautréamont's Outrageous Text: Language as Weapon and Victim in the Chants de Maldoror

Published in 1869, Lautréamont's Chants de Maldoror enjoyed little success until resurrected by the Surrealists and hailed as an exemplary surrealist text. But this revival was brief, and the Chants fell back into obscurity until recently proclaimed by "textualist" critics (Kristeva, Sollers, etc.) as exemplary of modernist écriture. Why such short bursts of popularity? Why is this work still omitted from most anthologies of French literature?

The Chants de Maldoror has long been considered an inaccessible and even unreadable text for reasons of structure as well as of content. The work is composed of six Chants, or cantos, containing five to sixteen "strophes" each and recounting seemingly unrelated incidents of violence and perversions. While our response to a literary text is always colored by our personal experiences, our social, economic, and political context—"the reader brings to the text certain expectations which are the result of his culture"—the nearly universal response to the Chants de Maldoror is outrage, disgust, and horror. For, indeed, who would not be offended and outraged by the violence and perversity of Lautréamont's subjects: incest, rape, seduction of innocents, torture, mutilation, blasphemy, etc. Our cultural grid, which includes our system of values and our understanding of a logical order, is turned upside down and shattered by Lautréamont. None of our experiences—literary, cultural or otherwise—can provide any stable point of reference to help us overcome the feelings of revulsion and disorientation provoked by this work. The litany of taboos and horrors, the perversely fantastic characters and events which make of the Chants a
kind of twisted fairy tale, transgress all bounds of decency.

It is on this level of content that the outrageous nature of the Chants is first evident. But the very composition of the Chants is outrageous, even monstrous, in that it manifests a certain unclassifiable crossing of genres: narrative, commentary, allegory, parable, poetry, novel, critique, and drama are all intertwined. In addition, time, space, and character have new meaning: events are commented on before they occur and the narrator, who is both je and il, is both ici and là-bas, in and out of the "plot." Indeed, a study of the work's internal structure reveals that, far beyond the unspeakable images, events, and construction that characterize the work, it is Lautréamont's language, his manipulation (use and abuse) of language that is the work's most outrageous element. It is not merely what he says but how he says it; as Chaleil tells us, "... le renversement de l'ordre établi ne s'opère plus simplement au niveau de simples phénomènes, mais aussi, comme le dit Playnet, "à celui des structures linguistiques.""2 Lautréamont liberates language from rhetorical and referential limitations. This liberation, this change of meaning which is simultaneously destruction and creation, is accomplished not merely by a certain choice of words but by the very organization of the words and of the Chants as a cohesive, organic whole. This work, where words no longer function merely as referents, is a "cri contre le langage-prison"; words take on new (not merely extended) meanings and functions within the context of the whole.

Change of meaning takes place in the very first lines of the Chants but, ironie suprême, the reader cannot be aware of this change until the entire work has been read.

Plût au ciel que le lecteur, enhardi et devenu momentanément féroce comme ce qu'il lit, trouve, sans se désorienter,
son chemin abrupt et sauvage, à travers les marécages désolés de ces pages sombres et pleines de poison; . . . Par conséquent, âme timide, avant de pénétrer plus loin dans de pareilles landes inexplorées, dirige tes talons en arrière et non en avant.

The beginning not only anticipates the end, but depends on it for its impact. In the very first line, by invoking le ciel the poet invokes none other than himself, for the entire text is the experience of the genius poet who, by the supreme power of his language, makes himself the "Tout Puissant." This initial twist is one of the most outrageous and most spectacular, for here the end precedes the beginning. This, however, is not understood by the reader until the "end" when it is too late, so the beginning remains off-center and sets the tone for the entire text. A sense of balance emerges only as we penetrate further into the "landes inexplorées," but it is a sense of balance that is, at best, precarious. Aware of this and of what is to come, the poet flaunts his superior knowledge and power by invoking himself as "protector" of the reader. This initial deception is also one of the cruelest, for the reader has not yet been taught to "trouve[r] . . . son chemin . . . " and is clearly defenseless. We are duped from the beginning, led to believe that the poet is addressing an outside, superior force to warn us, while all the time he is addressing himself, and his solemn tone of concern is but a silent, mocking laugh. Indeed, the "warning" to the reader constitutes an invitation, even a tease, that piques the reader's curiosity and lures him into this texte piégé. This is the first of many such warnings/seductions that spur curiosity mixed with fear and a sense of foreboding—a nameless sensation.

Nowhere is the effect of Lautréamont's language more striking than in Chant II, strophe 6, ("Cet enfant, qui est assis sur un banc du jardin des
Tuileries, comme il est gentil!"), the strophe on ruse, in which saying is doing. In this strophe—which is a transformation of Chant I, strophe 11 ("Une famille entoure une lampe . . .") and a premonition of the fatal seduction of Mervyn in Chant VI—the poet demonstrates the power of his language on an innocent child whom he is warning against the wickedness of mankind and of the necessity of being armed against attacks. The ruse which he advocates here as "le plus bel instrument des hommes de génie, une arme mortelle, un pouvoir transformateur" is the very language which he is using to illustrate the notion of ruse. The power of the ruse to transform is evident in the animalisation of the child by Maldoror's words:

Maldoror s'aperçoit que le sang bouillonne dans la tête de son jeune interlocuteur; ses narines sont gonflées, et ses lèvres rejettent une légère écume blanche. Il lui tâte le pouls; les pulsations sont précipitées. La fièvre a gagné ce corps délicat.

Maldoror does not accomplish this transformation of the child by describing or giving examples of a ruse; rather, the best illustration of ruse is its demonstration, its use. As in the liminal strophe where the "warning" to the reader seduces him into the text, the attack on the innocent child is accomplished within the warning against such attacks. Meaning is reversed, the performative is twisted, and the unarmed child is the victim of the warning against the very attack he suffers, the victim of ruse in action. The "meaning" of the words is subverted by their utterance and the child, like the language used, is transformed. There is no longer any distance between notion and action: Maldoror uses ruse to define ruse, and the child learns the power of ruse by being subjected to it, by becoming its victim. In this way, the whole strophe is a
kind of performative in which saying is doing; the only subject of the strophe is, then, the very language which constitutes it. The double twist of language is as outrageous as is the effect of the language on the child, for it leaves us helplessly suspended in a kind of limbo where words no longer merely "mean" but "do."

As effective as this is in this early stage of the Chants, it becomes even more so as the text evolves, especially in Chant VI when another innocent child, Mervyn, is similarly transformed but by the written word, by the letter from Maldoror:

Mervyn est dans sa chambre; il a reçu une missive ... Il jette la missive de côté. ... la curiosité de Mervyn s'accroît et il ouvre le morceau de chiffon préparé. ... Des larmes abondantes coulent sur les curieuses phrases que ses yeux ont dévorées, et qui ouvrent à son esprit le champ illimité des horizons incertains et nouveaux. Il lui semble (ce n'est que depuis la lecture qu'il vient de terminer) que son père est un peu sévère et sa mère trop majestueuse ... Ses professeurs ont observé que ce jour-là il n'a pas ressemblé à lui-même; ses yeux se sont assombris démesurément, et le voile de la réflexion excessive s'est abaissé sur la région péri-orbitaire. (Chant VI, Chapter iii)

The notion of performative language is thus expanded from the spoken word to the written word, and there is no distance between writing/reading and doing. The written word, a transformation of the verbal ruse, is l'arme of the genius poet that is capable of transforming and destroying the reader, as well as language and meaning.

This change in the capacity of words from "meaning" to "doing" is evident in strophe 12 of
Chant II ("O Créateur de l'univers . . .") where the notion of prayer is degraded in and by a "prayer." The traditional beginning and end formulas ("O Créateur . . . Ainsi soit-il") are its only "prayer" elements, and they are emptied of meaning by the "prayer" itself which these formulas bracket. The prayer destroys itself as it is prayed, and the abusive degradation of the prayer becomes itself the prayer. The terms "O Créateur" and "Ainsi soit-il," far from attaching this "prayer" to any notion of reverence, make it all the more blasphemous. These formulas are instead "syllabes sonores," and make of the passage a kind of exemplary non-prayer; the real prayer is the denouncing of prayer. Lautréamont's language manages here to destroy a revered notion and formula, to empty the word "prayer" of any meaning, and to elevate degradation to a level of prayer. The reversal is complete and doubly outrageous in that a formula of reverence is used to mock and degrade that very reverence.

Throughout the Chants, Lautréamont demonstrates the capacity of his language to destroy meaning, and this very demonstration is the glorification of his own supremacy. In this outrageous text, ruse and prayer, weapon and victim, saying and doing, exaltation and degradation exist beyond any notion of polarity. The poet's weapon--his language--destroys any system of values founded on opposites and puts these "opposites" on the same level, where the supreme value is the glorification of the very process which destroys polarity, where opposites are not mutually exclusive, where words are eviscerated of their meaning, and where the process illustrates and exalts itself.

This power to transform meaning, and the resultant tension within the reader and the language itself, is particularly striking in the haunting strophe of the omnibus, where it is a question of both a frantic pursuit and a desperate inability to move:
Il est minuit; on ne voit plus un seul omnibus de la Bastille à la Madeleine. Je me trompe; en voilà un qui apparaît subitement, comme s'il sortait de dessous terre .... L'omnibus, pressé d'arriver à la dernière station, dévore l'espace, et fait craquer le pavé .... Il s'enfuit! .... Mais, une masse informe le poursuit avec acharnement, sur ses traces, au milieu de la poussière. Il s'enfuit! .... il s'enfuit! .... Mais, une masse informe le poursuit avec acharnement, sur ses traces, au milieu de la poussière. (Chant II, strophe 4)

The entire strophe plays on the tension between the pitiful child's desire and inability to catch up with the bus: the more desperate and frenzied his pursuit, the more firmly rooted in place he remains. However, despite the child's pursuit and the rapidly receding bus that "dévore l'espace," this strophe is not full of movement but is, instead, paralyzed. Everything is tension, immobility, suspension in a kind of eternal midnight that is reflected and emphasized by the repeated return to the refrain, "Il s'enfuit! .... Mais une masse informe le poursuit avec acharnement .... ...." Lautréamont destroys the ordinary meaning of words in a uniquely outrageous way in this strophe, for while it is charged with words of movement, of agitation, of frustrated activity, these very words communicate immobility and silence, and do so with an exactness and a precision that could not be communicated by words designating absence of movement. Here, words of pursuit, action, and movement do not express these activities but rather negate them, demonstrating the poet's power to reverse things and to empty words of their usual meaning: the child runs but gets nowhere; the bus drives away but doesn't disappear over the horizon until the child stumbles and falls. Just as in the strophe of
the prayer, where the negation of prayer is the prayer par excellence, here the words of movement create an absence, indeed a negation, of movement, and finally destroy the very notion of movement. Words have been disconnected from their usual meaning, and it is precisely this subversion of meaning that creates and sustains the terrible, haunting quality of this strophe (we are now far beyond both the simple image of a pathetic child pursuing a bus, and the familiar nightmare of trying to run and being unable to move). The refrain "Ils s'envuit!" rivets us, at every reprise, more firmly in place. Indeed, this cry, whose urgency is underscored by the frequent repetitions, exclamation marks, and ellipsis points, is chillingly silent and evokes vivid memory of Edvard Munch's "The Scream"--the very essence of terror, beyond the human voice. So transformed is the language that we do not feel sympathy for the child but actually participate in his terror; the reader's heartbeat races with the child's, whose pursuit of the ever-receding bus may be seen as analogous to the reader's pursuit of ever-changing meaning.

This transforming power of Lautréamont's language and his glorification of himself is nowhere more evident than in the strophe of the scarabée, which evolves into the description of a horrible, unnamable monster, a unique creation/creature that resembles nothing else in the world. The strophe, like the monster it describes and like Lautréamont's entire work, is a "combinaison particulière," a mélange of genres, a unique and unrepeatable cross-breeding of several different species. The monster, which Lautréamont qualifies as "beau," is the manifestation of the poet's destructive-creative ability; what is monstrous is beautiful in this "marécage"/universe of reversed values, and what is beautiful is what the poet writes. This strophe, then, is the manifestation of this monstrous language that glorifies itself. This passage of "beau comme" is meta-
morphosed in the same strophe ("Le grand-duc de Virginie, beau comme un mémoire sur la courbe que décrit un chien en courant après son maître . . .") and later in the celebrated Chant VI, chapter i:

Il est beau comme la rétractilité des serres des oiseaux rapaces; ou encore, comme l'incertitude des mouvements musculaires dans les plaies des parties molles de la région cervicale postérieure; ou plutôt, comme ce piège à rats perpétuel . . . et surtout, comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!

Philippe Sollers has noted that what is beau here is the strophe itself; it is compared to itself since it has no equal (equivalent) outside. Furthermore, the terms "comme" and "ou plutôt" and "et surtout"—found, in changing order, in each of the "beau comme" passages—do not separate the elements of the "comparison" in order to distinguish them from each other, but rather propel the passages, function as verbs to motivate the transformation of each element into the next. "Beau" and "comme," their usual meanings and functions destroyed, combine to create a new "verb" that charges the passage with movement and activity.

This transformation of such basic linguistic elements as "comme," "ou plutôt," etc. is a continuation of the formula set in motion in Chant IV, strophe 1 ("C'est un homme ou une pierre ou un arbre qui va commencer le quatrième chant . . .") where the "ou" is not proof of Lautréamont's indecision or indifference, as Marcel Jean would have us believe, nor a word that separates and maintains as different the three elements involved here, but rather a word that transforms "homme" into "pierre" and "pierre" into "arbre," much as "deux piliers" are transformed
into "deux baobabs" later in the same Chant. These transformations/destinations prepare us for the ultimate one, where Falmer, by a prolonged projection of the last syllable of his name (which recalls the "mère" of the liminal strophe), is transformed into Mervyn and finally into a fronde, the final metamorphosis of the innocent child seduced, victimized, and tortured by the language of the poet. Mervyn's fate is sealed when he reads Maldoror's letter. The spectacle of Mervyn--"squelette desséché, resté suspendu" (Chant VI, viii)—on the dome of the Panthéon provokes, in the students of the Latin Quarter, a prayer that they may escape the same fate. Their prayer, however, is hollow, no more than "des bruits insigneants," a transformation but repetition of the meaningless "syllabes sonores" of the "prayer" we have already discussed.

Throughout the Chants, Lautréamont's language functions as a weapon that changes, even mutilates, its victims. The entire work is the manifestation of this process in action, a prolonged demonstration of the poet's capacity to transform through the use of his language/weapon. The innocence of the victims intensifies the outrageousness of the crimes committed against them, and not the least of the victims is language itself. Lautréamont's mutilation of language, his changing of the meaning and function of words into something (horribly) other, is far more outrageous than the litany of monsters and horror which he creates, for it leaves us helpless and disoriented; our own familiar and reliable sense of language provides us no security against the vertiginous current of the text. Lautréamont's mutilation of language is indeed his most monstrous creation. Impossible to classify according to genre, the Chants de Maldoror is a beautiful monster, one that creates in us a feeling which is itself beyond language; appropriately, there exists no word for this feeling of outraged admiration, of speechless, horrified wonder.
Notes


4 "The name is derived, of course, from 'perform' . . . it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action . . ." J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 6-7.


