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

    Published in 1869, Lautréamont's <u>Chants de Mal-</u>
<u>doror</u> enjoyed little success until resurrected by the
Surrealists and hailed as an exemplary surrealist
text. But this revival was brief, and the <u>Chants</u>
fell back into obscurity until recently proclaimed
by "textualist" critics (Kristeva, Sollers, etc.) as
exemplary of modernist <u>écriture</u>. Why such short
bursts of popularity? Why is this work still omit-
ted from most anthologies of French literature?
    The <u>Chants de Maldoror</u> 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 re-
sult of his culture"[1]--the nearly universal response
to the <u>Chants de Maldoror</u> 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 <u>Chants</u> a

kind of twisted fairy tale, transgress all bounds of
decency.

It is on this level of content that the outra-
geous nature of the Chants is first evident. But the
very composition of the Chants is outrageous, even
monstrous, in that it manifests a certain unclassi-
fiable 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 struc-
ture 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 out-
rageous element. It is not merely what he says but
how he says it; as Chaleil tells us, " . . . le ren-
versement de l'ordre établi ne s'opère plus simple-
ment au niveau de simples phénomènes, mais aussi,
comme le dit Playnet, "à celui des structures lingui-
stiques.'"[2] Lautréamont liberates language from
rhetorical and referential limitations. This liber-
ation, this change of meaning which is simultaneously
destruction and creation, is accomplished not merely
by a certain choice of words but by the very organi-
zation 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";[3] words take on new (not merely ex-
tended) 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 de-
pends 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 spec-
tacular, 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 re-
mains off-center and sets the tone for the entire
text. A sense of balance emerges only as we pene-
trate 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 read-
er 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, mock-
ing laugh. Indeed, the "warning" to the reader con-
stitutes 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/se-
ductions 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 pre-
monition 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 demon-
stration, 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 accom-
plished 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 sub-
verted 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[4] in which saying is doing; the
only subject of the strophe is, then, the very lan-
guage which constitutes it. The double twist of lan-
guage is as outrageous as is the effect of the lan-
guage on the child, for it leaves us helplessly sus-
pended 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 Créa-
teur . . . Ainsi soit-il") are its only "prayer" ele-
ments, 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 de-
gradation 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 re-
verence.

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, exalta-
tion and degradation exist beyond any notion of po-
larity. The poet's weapon--his language--destroys
any system of values founded on opposites and puts
these "opposites" on the same level, where the su-
preme 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 resul-
tant tension within the reader and the language it-
self, 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 des-
> sous terre. . . . L'omnibus, pressé
> d'arriver à la dernière station, dévore
> l'espace, et fait craquer le pavé . . .
> Il s'enfuit! . . . Mais, une masse in-
> forme 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 acharne-
ment . . . ." Lautréamont destroys the ordinary
meaning of words in a uniquely outrageous way in this
strophe, for while it is charged with words of move-
ment, 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 move-
ment do not express these activities but rather ne-
gate 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 "Il s'enfuit!" 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,"[5] 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-

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morphosed in the same strophe ("Le grand-duc de Vir-
ginie, beau comme un mémoire sur la courbe que dé-
crit 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 par-
> ties molles de la région cervicale
> postérieure; ou plutôt, comme ce
> piège à rats perpétuel . . . et sur-
> tout, 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 <u>beau</u> here
is the strophe itself; it is compared to itself
since it has no equal (equivalent) outside.[6] Fur-
thermore, 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, com-
bine 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 contin-
uation 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,[7]
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/destructions prepare us for the ul-
timate 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 <u>fronde</u>, the final meta-
morphosis of the innocent child seduced, victimized,
and tortured by the language of the poet. Mervyn's
fate is sealed when he <u>reads</u> Maldoror's letter. The
spectacle of Mervyn--"squelette desséché, resté sus-
pendu" (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
insignifiants," a transformation but repetition of
the meaningless "syllabes sonores" of the "prayer"
we have already discussed.

  Throughout the <u>Chants</u>, 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 vic-
tims intensifies the outrageousness of the crimes
committed against them, and not the least of the
victims is language itself. Lautréamont's mutila-
tion of language, his changing of the meaning and
function of words into something (horribly) <u>other</u>,
is far more outrageous than the litany of monsters
and horror which he creates, for it leaves us help-
less 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 <u>Chants de Maldoror</u> 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.   .

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Notes

[1] Peter Nesselroth, Lautréamont's Imagery: A Stylistic Approach (Genève: Droz, 1969), p. 115.

[2] Chaleil, Introduction, Entretiens, no. 30 (1971), p. 33.
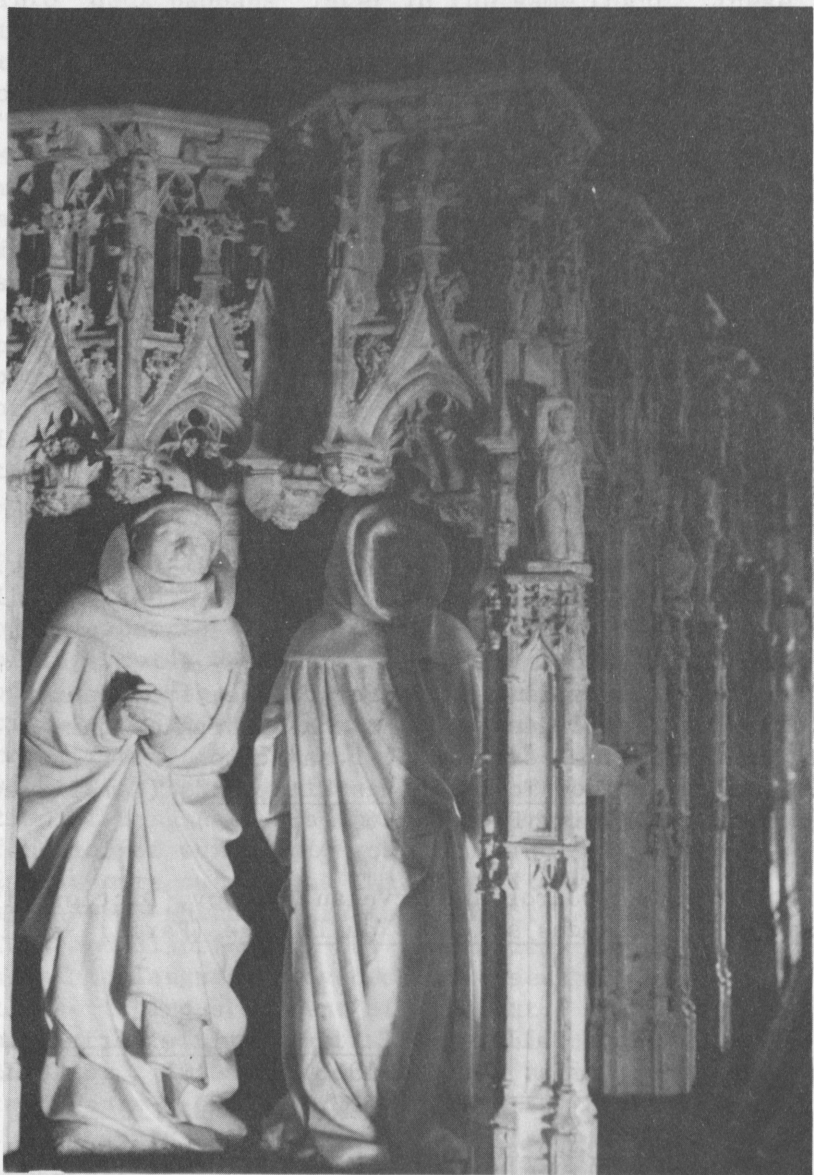
[3] J. M. G. Le Clézio, Introduction, Oeuvres complètes de Lautréamont (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 9.

[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.

[5] Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 352.

[6] Philippe Sollers, L'Ecriture et l'expérience des limites (Paris: Seuil, 1968).

[7] Marcel Jean and Arpad Meizi, Les Chants de Maldoror: Essai sur Lautréamont et son oeuvre (Paris: Editions du Pavois, 1947), p. 140.