Theories and Methodologies

Soft and Sick, Lautréamont

YASSER ELHARIRY

This is for the bozos who don't know
Don't join the circus if you ain't a clown

—Tobe Nwigwe, "BOZOS"

Enchained

The world grinds to a halt in March 2020 as I desire closeness with my friends' phantom bodies. We convened a ghost nonconference that would never happen because it was a secret, that would never happen because it never happened. In Tivoli, New York, we would have gathered, in a small house by a small waterfall by the Hudson near Hannah Arendt's "vast, tremulous . . ./ grave on grave of water-grave" (Zukofsky 283). Together reading Lautréamont. The world stops happening as we fall and I hold on to Lautréamont. I want to dwell in Lautréamont I want to still be in the company of others I want to lose all my self in friends. I was afraid. Reading him alone felt illicit. Inoculation administered by a convalescent young mind braced to bring itself and the whole world down. For his crimes Leo Bersani calls him "unoriginal and boringly adolescent," "corny" even, the inventor of a kind of "sadomasochistic comic book" (191–92). I assign him to my students. In the shallow, *Zoom*-flavored waters of the pandemic's early riffles I place him at the end of my syllabus, before Aimé Césaire, for a spring-quarter undergraduate course called French and Francophone Poetry (and Poetics) from Baudelaire to Césaire (and Beyond (and Before)). We read Louise Labé, the Pléiade, Alphonse de Lamartine, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paulette Nardal, Suzanne Césaire. Here and there I drop the Pharcyde rhyming alexandrines ("Now in my younger days I used to sport a shag / When I went

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to school I carried lunch in a bag"). Ben Lerner scanning Donald Trump's iambic pentameter ("I like the numbers being where they are" ["Trump"]). The Weeknd on urban alienation (Kenny G is back). 070 Shake on closet desires ("You on another one's body").

The world is upturned.

The world is upturned and the university, "cette lourde machine" 'that cumbersome machine,' 'the onerous engine' (Sartre, "Préface" 25, 28; "Introduction" 19, 23), "a machine involved with itself, a concentrated / hot lump of a machine" (Oppen 40), its pop-cultural underbelly fat on extended-shelf-life poco (Larsen 174), its mouth full of PC, churns on, teaches excellence, respects diversity. Available, mindful, open for business, open to libel (Camerato). In and out of fear I teach. The same texts. Say the same things. Business as usual. Two weeks and "now, online is a capability that we have" (Hanlon). Nine time zones spread student screens. Souped-up *Zoom* poetry their uptake of news that is not the news.

We get to Lautréamont. We know little about him, that he was born Isidore Ducasse in Montevideo in 1846, that he was bicultural and bilingual (Perrone-Moisés and Monegal), maybe bisexual (Steinmetz xiii, xxii; Guitard), likely exposed to Baudelaire sometime around 1863 or 1864 while in boarding school in Tarbes in southwest France, where he was a mediocre student, then (speaking of news) unceremoniously found dead by the bellboy in the bed of his rented Parisian hotel room at eight o'clock on the morning of 24 November 1870, leaving behind *Les chants de Maldoror* (*The Songs of Maldoror* [1869]) and two pamphlets (*Poésies I* and *Poésies II* [1870]), plus a few pages of correspondence with Victor Hugo (Albert Lacroix, the original publisher of *Les misérables*, printed *Chants*), Auguste Poulet-Malassis (Baudelaire's editor), and Joseph Darasse (his father's financial administrator).

Like his life, our lives, 2020, or the ambiguous vanguardist-surrealist distaste for the descriptoanalytic pretense of prose, the novel, and the news (Breton, *Manifestes* 17 and *Manifestoes* 7; Ramazani 67), the logorrheic outpourings and verbal avalanches of Lautréamont's texts barely string a narrative. For "le roman est un genre faux," Lautréamont proclaims, "il décrit les passions pour elles-mêmes" 'The novel is a fake genre; it spouts crap for its own sake' (*Poésies* 7).[1] Nothing less than apocalyptic, parasitic poetry will do for a world in free fall. Nothing washes anymore. He retaliates by short-circuiting "vos méthodes admirables de l'analyse, de la synthèse et de la déduction" 'your lofty methods of analysis, synthesis and deduction' (*Chants* 104). He turns "le scalpel de l'analyse" 'the scalpel of analysis' (199) and "la partie analytique" 'the analytical aspects' of mathematics, science, politics, the novel, the news, all of poetry's others, back onto themselves, revealing the staggering "balance de l'idiotisme" 'scale of idiocy' concealed within them (283).

Pronouncements that electrify (Césaire, "Isidore Ducasse" 428) more than edify.[2] Like the parasitized world on a wire we wake to overnight, nothing ever lets (or adds) up. Waves "rise, fall, rebound . . . in ever repeated mutation" (Zukofsky 283). Poetry and *Zoom* become antidote, "antigenre to the news," its "soul-sustaining opposite" (Ramazani 63). *Poetry*, like *Zoom*, like *parasite*, becomes "one of those words which calls up its apparent 'opposite'" and "has no meaning without that counterpart" (Miller 441). Meanwhile the news, that "false and deceitful god," commandeering poetry's hubristic "contention" with it, remains "essential for modern citizenship" (Ramazani 73, 105, 64). "Quickly read, easily disposed of," it "permeate[s] every corner of modern experience" (64, 73). Long ago Stéphane Mallarmé had pointed a finger at

> des contemporains [qui] ne savent pas lire—
> Sinon dans le journal; il dispense, certes, l'avantage de n'interrompre le chœur de préoccupations.
> ("Mystère" 234)

> contemporaries [who] don't know how to read—
> Anything but in a newspaper; which has, of course, the advantage of not interrupting the chorus of preoccupations. ("Mystery" 236)

So "fight fire with fire" (Metallica, "Fight"). One gritty, angsty hit after another. Five pentagrammatic syllables to the bar:

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Do unto others
As they've done to you
But what the hell is
This world coming to? (01:01:11–22)

On his mettle, Lautréamont sticks it to an ever-shifting lineup of targets—gods and men, logic and reason—reserving his most stinging fusillades for the newsy prose, flatulent aspirations, and epic failures of poets of every stripe, who might as well be our leaders and quacks. Like someone calling a president a clown on live TV (Lahut), Lautréamont hurls a long, ever unfurling chain of insults at them. *Posers! Suckers! Losers!* (Kreps): "Poseur[s]" 'Bozo[s]' (*Poésies* 5); "dadas de bagne! Bulles de savon! Pantins de baudruche! Ficelles usées! . . . fabricateurs, à la douzaine, de rébus défendus . . . Automates fantastiques" 'penal colony hobby-horses! Soap suds! Farty muppets! Old pants! . . . dime-a-dozen makers-up of insufferable riddles . . . Pansy automata' (9–10); "chiennes cocasses, faiseurs d'embarras, poseurs!" 'coquettish bitches, embarrassing schmucks, wannabes!' (11); "écrivassiers funestes" 'pathetic pen-pushers' (13). I feel like he's talking to me as I struggle to write this essay in lockdown. Criticism, poetry, and the news have, after all, always dialogically infiltrated each other (Ramazani 7–8, 62). There has been no recent shortage of the kind of easy, uninterrupted stream of choral preoccupations abhorred by Mallarmé (Garner). Poetry always engages and addresses the world. Against a backdrop of scorched transpacific coasts (Gabbert 30), a disquieting "Then came fire" opens Christopher Nealon's *The Shore* (3). Jean-Marie Gleize attributes the modern emergence of poem and subject, the unsettling jolt of poetic experience, to the immediate, tangible, physical world, reflected, ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Henry David Thoreau, in the real and figurative lakes and ponds before and around us (11, 46–47). Lautréamont electrifies, per Césaire, but the dark pleasures or joys or *jouissances* (Steinmetz xl) taken in riding the lightning with him mirror and light up entire countries waking to news of despots losing, failing, and falling ill ("Trending").

Lautréamont's short-lived but intense literary surge invented a new idiom, shaping a malleable poetic work, open, despite him, despite it, to the world, its prose, its news, slipping in among "a series of rings, each ring open to receive the next, enclosed by the next, and the whole possibly open-ended, always open to the possibility of having another link added" (Miller 445). This old poetry becomes vulnerable as it ages, open to infection by the prose of today's world. Beyond his overbearing smell of teen spirit or sense of revolt, Lautréamont betrays a parasitic impulse, centuries in the making, within the world and within lyric, which he lambastes as the greatest of literary scourges, "the parasite [that] is always already present within the host, the enemy always already within the house," for "the ring [is] always an open chain" anyway (446). Poetry reaches out, holds, withholds, then pulls the world down with it. "Depuis Racine," he rails in another salvo, "la poésie n'a pas progressé d'un millimètre. Elle a reculé" 'Poetry has gone down the drain since Racine' (*Poésies* 14). By applying pressure on the breaking points of the lyric chain, its historic and ongoing failures, Lautréamont realigns it with the potential, at the heart of poetic idiom, for constant referential (re)invention. His work, spongy, absorbent, vulnerable, enchained, offers itself as an example of the autosacrificial parasitization necessary for the rejuvenation, justification, and continued existence of lyric.

The pandemic of 2020 answers his call, "lui trouv[ant] un idiome, un langage approprié" 'dredg[ing] up an idiom for him, an appropriate[d] language' (Khatibi 145), a "palimpsestic conjunction" and a "*transformative* process that alters the inner structure of [poetic] language through multiple imbrications" within the parasitic chain (Talbayev 92). Transformations that once allowed Charles Reznikoff to hew to the news and the law in their "precision, narratives, and suasive rhetoric" (Ramazani 59). To scour "law reports of the several states" and "several hundred volumes of old cases" (Reznikoff xv, 527). To dig up the line "Work was scarce and the weather bad" (109). Words resonant with Anthony Fauci's "I think that December,

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January and early February are going to be terribly painful months" (qtd. in Wolfe and Pasick). Lines transformative of Lautréamont's link in the chain:

> Nous sommes dans une nuit d'hiver, alors que les éléments s'entre-choquent de toutes parts, que l'homme a peur. . . . Que le vent, dont les sifflements plaintifs attristent l'humanité, depuis que le vent, l'humanité existent, quelques moments avant l'agonie dernière, me porte sur les os de ses ailes, à travers le monde, impatient de ma mort. (*Chants* 33)

> We're in a winter's night and all around the elements clash, humanity's afraid. . . . May the wind, whose wheezing saddens humanity, ever since the wind, humanity have existed, dash me, moments before my death-throes, upon bony wings, across the world, impatient for my death.

Logic of the Parasite

Everywhere hearts are grieving, soft and sick. Revitalize them all you want, just "ne rougissez pas à la pensée de ce qu'est le cœur humain . . . poulpe, au regard de soie! . . . qui command[e] à un sérail de quatre cent ventouses" 'don't blush at the human heart for what is . . . an octopus with a silken gaze! . . . heading an army of four hundred suckers' (*Chants* 23). A peculiar fallout of our parasitized world will metaphorize the material toll already excised on the wretched, colored, poor, postcolonized, unemployed, incarcerated, elderly, dead, dying, undead of the earth. Already a well-greased machine, the normal new regime of mask mandates and elbow bumps pummels our hearts, reduces our bodies to creased collections magnifying ocular orbits. How have I never noticed the wrinkles around the eyes of all your bodies in all this detail ever before? Far more than the corporeal and the human and the humane in humanity has been parasitized. Whatever will be left or reemerge of it will resemble a reanimated cadaver, immortal cancer, carrion, dead-undead calque, softened, weakened, debilitated, sickly. And we will wait "que le crépuscule du matin vienne apporter, par le changement de décors, un dérisoire soulagement à [notre] cœur brisé" 'for morning-dusk and its shifting landscape to bring derisive relief to our soft, sick hearts' (279).

The systematic coupling of softness with corporeal sickness lays the groundwork for the brick wall of image-insults that Lautréamont smashes upon the splattered heads of centuries of politicos and literary wannabes, a fat swath of the Western canon. To this day, Lautréamont's ultimate hope—"exterminer, une par une, les fourmis humanitaires" 'to exterminate, one by one, the humanitarian ants,' that is, "faire périr entièrement les hommes" 'to totally wipe out people' (*Chants* 286)—continues, defiantly, to be thwarted. Human populations have exploded in the century and a half since his death. And failure breeds insult in Lautréamont. It "call[s] forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose" (Ngai 11). Lautréamont carves a niche for himself out of lyric's debouching streams of failure upon failure. Armed with the seed of his dialogic new lyric idiom, he weaponizes the literary insult. He relates to, and mediates his relationship with, gods, news, authority figures, and lyric lineage by parasitizing them with insults that moonlight as prognostics of civilizational decadence and sickness, sparing no one from politicians like Lamartine, "la Cigogne-Larmoyante" 'the Wanking-Stork' (*Poésies* 14), to Baudelaire, "l'amant morbide de la Vénus hottentote" 'that morbid lover of the Hottentot Venus'[3] (11) who "peignit autrefois, avec amour" 'once painted, tenderly' "l'immortel cancer, Une Charogne" 'the immortal cancer, Carrion' (11, 10). Since insults, slurs, and stereotypes, according to Didier Eribon, are always a simultaneous blast from the past and projection into the future (151, 201), or what Mireille Rosello describes in terms of iterative fixity (22), Lautréamont's chain, parasitic, hooks itself to lyric and all its petty and grandiose pen pushers for all eternity. It subsumes, then effaces them. "Stigmatisé par lui," in Jean-Luc Steinmetz's shrewd quip, "signé d'un sobriquet indélébile, bien peu en réchappent" 'Stigmatized by him, signed off by an indelible sobriquet, very few have gotten over it' (xxiv). Unshakeable, a reminder or memento, a stigma or stigmata, his insults nail them in place

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once and for all. He leaves them behind. Forever debilitated.

Can they kick it? (No, they can't! They're gone.) From the depths of 2020's new normal, in pursuit of Lautréamont's irreverent prognostics and diagnoses of the eternal pandemic brandished by lyric, I show in the remainder of this essay how his dialogical idiom births a new architext—the parasitizing mode of lyric—out of an inexhaustible stockpile of image-insults, forged from a dual process of, in the phraseology of today's world, confinement and negation. Image-insults diagnose the sickness of lyric poetry and poets, and, absent treatment (death and eradication), permanently parasitize them. In a brief detour on poetics by way of André Breton and Mallarmé, I illustrate the confining and negational aspects of the Ducassian image on its path to all-consuming parasitic-lyric enchainment. I then close with a litany of tailor-made insults from *Poésies*, followed by a scene of necrophiliac reerection in *Chants*, which I read as a model of Lautréamont's parasitic (non)salvation.

In the conveniently barren landscape of *Chants*'s negationist aftertime, where everything vanishes, the image-insult, parasitic, remains. Like the titular announcement of singing (Maldoror's *Songs*), the image-insult, in Lautréamont's logic, distinguishes or ennobles itself, detaches itself from the ambient noise of a world in free fall. It becomes a kind of "figure sur fond, comme un feu sur la brume, comme tout message, tout cri, tout appel, tout signal, doivent se détacher du vacarme occupant le silence, pour être, pour être perçus, pour être connus, pour être échangés" 'silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog, as every message, every cry, every call, every signal must be separated from the hubbub that occupies silence, in order to be, to be perceived, to be known, to be exchanged' (Serres, *Genèse* 33; *Genesis* 13). To be sure, not all insults are image-silhouettes popping out of a background. Only the most childish, the most juvenile are. Farty muppets. Wanking storks. Where adult insults cut to the quick, childish image-insults take a radical detour away from reality. The parasitism of the Ducassian image lies in its conception as a form of comparison that "use[s] the second term of a comparison as a leap away from rather than as an illuminating reference to the first term," such that "*b* doesn't have to be like *a* in order to be compared to it" (Bersani 218, 228). In Pierre Reverdy's classic formulation from 1918, the image emerges from "[le] rapprochement de deux réalitées plus ou moins éloignées" 'bringing two more or less distant realities closer together' (1; qtd. in Bohn 92). Lautréamont severs all of humanity's connections and contacts with the (adult, hale) world. His future lyric of image-insults becomes a debilitating, regressive infection, "il suit la logique du parasite, chose très petite, raison sans suffisance, cause souvent sans conséquence, qui peut s'évanouir à gauche de la queue d'aronde, qui peut croître et grandir, à droite de l'instauration" 'it follows the logic of the parasite, a very tiny thing, an insufficient reason, a cause without consequence at times, which may vanish to the left of the dovetail, which may increase and magnify to the right of the instauration' (Serres, *Genèse* 100; *Genesis* 57). Michel Serres pursues his reflection in short, jerky spurts, the way Lautréamont's parasitic body snatching alternates between invading and abandoning the enchained entirety of literary space:

> L'espace tout entier, créneau par créneau, est parasité. . . . Quand l'espace est parasité, il n'y a que deux solutions. Ou prendre la place en criant: mort au parasite, car un parasite n'est mis à mort que par un parasite plus fort. Et la place n'a pas changé de nature. Ou céder la place et s'enfuir. Prendre la place ou céder la place, voilà toute la question. (*Genèse* 125)

> The whole of space, breach by breach, has been parasitized. . . . When space is parasitized, there are only two solutions. One can seize the place shouting *death to the parasite*. And this is the solution of the parasite, for a parasite is put to death only by a stronger parasite. And the place has not changed in nature. Or one can give the place up and flee. To take a place or to give up a place, that is the whole question. (*Genesis* 74)

"L'accroissement parasitaire," he writes later, "a tout immobilisé" 'Parasitic growth has brought everything to a standstill,' and literature "peut désirer se faire

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copiste ou vivre en parasite, c'est même confortable. On peut aussi rire de la parodie" 'may well wish to become a copyist or to live as a parasite, it's even a comfortable existence. One may get a laugh from a bit of parody, as well' (157, 169; 95, 103). Lautréamont's images "déchaîne[nt] le rire" 'unleash laughter,' alright (Breton, *Manifestes* 50; *Manifestoes* 38; trans. modified). They imply "la négation de quelque propriété physique élémentaire" 'the negation of some elemental physical property' in his targets. His insults parody and satirize them. They caricature and ridicule. They reduce the literary landscape to a handful of silhouettes—dim ones—in the meek fogs of the poetic establishment. He infests lyric with a bunch of wet rags.

Confining

Lautréamont curses the "poésie moite" 'clammy poetry' (*Poésies* 6) inherited and produced by the mid–nineteenth century, "défalcation faite des tristesses goîtreuses et des fiertés stupides qui décomposent, à sa source, la poésie marécageuse de ce siècle" 'written off by the sad goiters and stupid prides nibbling at the source of the century's marshy poetry' (8), a century ripe with "les odeurs de poule-mouillé, les affadissements, les grenouilles, les poulpes . . . qui nous . . . courbe[nt] si souverainement" 'wet-chicken smell, gusts of revulsion, frog, octopus . . . that . . . supremely bust our balls' (6–7),[4] its source infested with "moribonds de maremmes perverses" 'moribund, malarial perversity' (10). Unsurprisingly, upon his death Lautréamont is cast into immediate obscurity by the very century that disgusted him. Though a handful of essays on Lautréamont's work and prefaces to it by such figures as Léon Bloy, Léon Genonceaux, Remy de Gourmont, and Valery Larbaud appear between 1890 and 1914, the full scope of his vision for a lyric aftertime emerges with the salvational figure of André Breton, whose 1919 reedition of *Poésies I* and *Poésies II* in the pages of the review *Littérature* remapped Lautréamont within surrealism's new constellation of poetry and poetics. Lautréamont's sharp verbal incisions henceforth form the cornerstone of Breton's theory of the poetic image (*Manifestes* 50; *Manifestoes* 38).

But there's more to Lautréamont for Breton, who, in his preface to the 1938 edition of the poet's complete works, discerns a "figure éblouissante de lumière noire" 'dazzling figure of black light' ("Préface" 425). "En proie au rayonnement cristallin du centre de la terre" 'Assailed by the crystalline radiation of the earth's core,' Lautréamont floods it out with "la lumière même de l'apocalypse" 'the very light of apocalypse.' Breton turns mystical. Messianic. Mallarméan: "*Apocalypse définitive* que cette œuvre dans laquelle se perdent et s'exaltent les grandes pulsions instinctives au contact d'une cage d'amiante qui enferme un cœur chauffé à blanc" 'A *definitive apocalypse*, this work where grandiose instinctual impulses are lost and exalted upon contact with an asbestos cage confining a hot white heart.' Breton situates infectious, definitive apocalypse in the very instant that the vitalism of the literary organism—its "grandes pulsions instinctives" 'grand instinctual impulses'—comes into contact with and is materially inscribed by a parasitized-parasitizing space, the cage of poison ("amiante" 'asbestos') that confines and isolates ("qui enferme" 'confining, immuring, locking up' [426]). "Armageddon's here" (Metallica, "Fight"). As a toxic substance, asbestos becomes hazardous when its fibers are released into the air. The potentially hazardous cage of fibrous asbestos, in Breton's image, encages death itself, a petrified heart.

The formulation reads like an exercise in fatality. Infection, ever a constant threat. The absoluteness, in Breton's phrasing, of the adjective *définitive* is pivotal, critical because it denotes crisis. "Le verbe," he observes, "subit avec Lautréamont une crise fondamentale, il marque un *recommencement*" 'With Lautréamont, the verb suffers a fundamental crisis; it blazes *renewal*' ("Préface" 426). Mallarmé, in "Crise de vers" 'Crisis of Verse,' writes that "la littérature ici subit une exquise crise, fondamentale" 'literature is here undergoing an exquisite and fundamental crisis' (204; 201), right before railing against an imperfection, a peculiar affliction plaguing lyric, wherein poets may very well add a syllable or three to the alexandrine here, rob it of one or two there, more or less successfully loosening its confines, superficially liberating lyric from metrical straitjackets and

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their attendant affective and semantic connotations, yet in all instances never going far enough, never quite hitting the "cœur chauffée à blanc" 'hot white heart' of the alexandrine, which, in a backhanded compliment, he calls lyric's "joyau définitif" (206). A most "*definitive* jewel" (203; my emphasis).

Jewels and mirrors of the world crack. In Lautréamont, in Mallarmé, in Breton, lyric definitively leaves behind, from Rousseau to Baudelaire by way of Lamartine and Alfred de Musset, all reflective (post-) Romantic coherency of human selfhood, of the speaking or enunciating subject of lyric, ever emergent, ever present (Gleize 11). Lyric poetry, poet, and poetic subject are concurrently petrified hearts (white and dead) and impassioned hearts (hot and alive). This new lyric of the aftertime, poisoned or infected, parasitized and confined midair, ripped between hot and cold, life and death, adamantly inches onward to "noninterpretable being, it begins to show suicidal tendencies," it begins to intuit "desires or states of being unassimilable to the structural designs of a [poem] or a self," it "leads to a loss of [poetic] energy *and* of life energy" (Bersani 195).

Big-Fat-Dum-Dum-Heads

Wouldn't it be great, when you've had it with the world, as we all have, to just lay into the nincompoops who (think they) run it? Lautréamont's reaction against vitalistic loss, in the form of self-aggrandizing tantrums, insults, or bullying, as cemented by presidential legacy, "is, it is easy to see, parasitical in its turn on earlier poems, or contains earlier poems as enclosed parasites within itself, in yet another version of the perpetual reversal of parasite and host" (Miller 446). The downward spiral, toward the earth's core, of vitalistic loss, in *Chants*, in *Poésies*, shines black light back on Breton's theory of elemental, physical negations within the image. The more whimsical, the better. So, unsatisfied to only be attributing goiters and abnormal physical protuberances to poets, or merely calling the lyric of his time smelly, sweaty, and ball-busting, Lautréamont diagnoses lyric poetry and those in charge of it as progressively wasting away in self-consumption. "Je constate, avec amertume," his tongue turns deep in his cheek, "qu'il ne reste plus que quelques gouttes de sang dans les artères de nos époques phtisiques" 'I hereby bitterly do declare that no more than a mere few drops of blood remain in the arteries of our phthisic times' (*Poésies* 10). And what better illustration than a run-down of the moment, as impressively questionable for its Eurocentric internationalism as for its excess of whimsy and, at times, downright mystery?

> Depuis Racine, la poésie n'a pas progressé d'un millimètre. Elle a reculé. Grâce à qui? aux Grandes-Têtes-Molles de notre époque. Grâce aux femmelettes, Châteaubriand, le Mohican-Mélancolique; Sénancourt, l'Homme-en-Jupon; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, le Socialiste-Grincheur; Anne Radcliffe, le Spectre-Toqué; Edgar Poë, le Mameluck-des-Rêves-d'Alcool; Mathurin, le Compère-des-Ténèbres; Georges Sand, l'Hermaphrodite-Circoncis; Théophile Gautier, l'Incomparable-Épicier; Leconte, le Captif-du-Diable; Goethe, le Suicidé-pour-Pleurer; Saint-Beuve, le Suicidé-pour-Rire; Lamartine, la Cigogne-Larmoyante; Lermontoff, le Tigre-qui-Rugit; Victor Hugo, le Funèbre-Échalas-Vert; Misckiéwicz, l'Imitateur-de-Satan; Musset, le Gandin-Sans-Chemise-Intellectuelle; et Byron, l'Hippopotame-des-Jungles-Infernales. (14)
>
> Ever since Racine, poetry has not progressed so much as an inch. It's been flushed down the toilet. Thanks to who? the Big-Fat-Dum-Dum-Heads of our time. Thanks to the pansies, Chateaubriand, the Melancholy-Mohican; Senancour, Dude-in-Underskirts; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Socialist-Grinch; Anne Radcliffe, Cray-Cray-Bogeyman; Edgar Poe, the Mamluk-of-Boozy-Dreams; Mathurin, Jedi-of-the-Dark-Side; Georges Sand, the Circumcised-Hermaphrodite; Théophile Gautier, the Primo-Grocer; Leconte, the Devil's-Bitch; Goethe, Suicide-Boo-Hoo; Saint-Beuve, Suicide-Ha-Ha; Lamartine, the Wanking-Stork; Lermontov, the Raging-Pussy; Victor Hugo, the Slimy-Green-Beanpole; Misckiewicz, Satan's-Monkey; Musset, the Topless-Fop; and Byron, Hippo-of-Jungle-Steam.

Even Breton would be hard-pressed to qualify "Raging-Pussy" as a poetic image. As with the image, an implicit comparison underlies the insult,

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even if "Lautréamont refuses to acknowledge that there has to be any recognizable similarity of nature between the two terms of a comparison" (Bersani 195). He methodically "contributes to the dispersion or the crumbling of fixed identities" (196–97). However fixed, that is, we may have, once, prepandemic, thought of our identities as being. Had we not reached a point where hybridity and intersectionality were de facto deposits, layered into our identitarian strata? Tossed into sovereign instability instead, there no longer remains any "stable psychological content" (214). Lautréamont identifies his targets' instabilities, and he cuts his image-insult out of the brittle old cloth of fragility.

Can there still be a life to be had, once life has been parasitized through and through? Can I kick it? Lautréamont does not exactly offer the most uplifting of answers, though one episode in *Chants*, modeled, like a retrospective paradox, after the newsy *fait divers*[5] of his own future death (*Chants* 33),[6] hints at a kind of afterlife, or postlife, rendered in dark, erotic, and, of course, juvenile humor. One day, begrudgingly, "la Seine entraîne un corps humain" 'the Seine drags along a human body' (129), just as Maldoror, ever on the prowl, preying on hale and innocent youth, conveniently happens to pass by on horseback. Breaking up the small crowd ogling the seventeen-year-old's body, Maldoror heroically intervenes:

> Aussitôt, il a arrêté son coursier, et est descendu de l'étrier. Il soulève le jeune homme sans dégoût, et lui fait rejeter l'eau avec abondance. À la pensée que ce corps inerte pourrait revivre sous sa main, il sent son cœur bondir, sous cette impression excellente, et redouble de courage. Vains efforts! Vains efforts, ai-je dit, et c'est vrai. Le cadavre reste inerte, et se laisse tourner en tous sens. Il frotte les tempes; il frictionne ce membre-ci, ce membre-là; il souffle pendant une heure, dans la bouche, en pressant ses lèvres contre les lèvres de l'inconnu. Il lui semble enfin sentir sous sa main, appliquée contre la poitrine, un léger battement. Le noyé vit! (130)
>
> He perkily stops his horse and bounces off the stirrups. He picks up the young man with bravado, making him barf up tons of water. The mere thought that this inanimate body may live again at the touch of his hand was enough to send his heart racing, and, hot and bothered, he doubles down hard on him. Useless! Useless efforts, I said, and it's true. The cadaver remains lifeless as Maldoror has his way with it. He rubs the temples; he massages this leg and that; he blows for an hour, into the mouth, smushing lips with the stranger. He finally feels a light throbbing against his hand, pressing the breast. He lives!

It is difficult not to read the drowned body and its feeble reerection as a figure intertwining the clammy poetry and wet-chicken smell so reviled by Lautréamont with our grieving hearts, soft and sick. Maldoror has his way with the drowned young man the way Lautréamont parasitizes the history of lyric with insults, logic of the parasite erected sovereign of our lives. In Maldoror's scene of exhibitionist necrophilia, watching crowds, readers of poetry, all but disappear, as our "life, it seems, will fade away / drifting further, every day" (Metallica, "Fade"). No mention is made of them, of us, again. Everyone dislikes poetry (Lerner, *Hatred* 7–9). *This* poetry. This life. Maldoror is alone with the body, Lautréamont with lyric, we at home. Again Lautréamont confines and negates. In our tongue. He isolates the drowned body of lyric in death or near-death, Maldoror the dark angel of poetry from us, his there/not-there crowd of readers. Lautréamont doubles down, locks us up while already locked down, in a scene of misplaced intimacy, in an asbestos cage confining not one but two hearts, one dead, or near-dead, the other, Maldoror's, parasitic. With nowhere to go, we witness Maldoror turned on by the thought of reanimating the limp *membre*—limb, or penis—of the dead/undead body. And lest we mistake reerections or resurrections for signals of hope, Maldoror slays a dragon called *Espérance* (*Hope*) a few pages later (157–61). When you feel the endlessly cyclical logic of the parasite close in on you, like the soft and sick bodies of poetic lineage, negated and infected by the prose of the world, know that, as the lyricist of the future, "dans un accès d'aliénation mentale . . . cour[t] à travers les champs, en tenant, pressé sur [s]on cœur, une chose

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sanglante . . . comme une relique vénérée" 'in a fit of madness . . . dashes across the fields, pressing something soft and bloody to his heart . . . like a holy relic' (228), know that we have all assumed the role of morbid lover.

Notes

I wish to thank my undergraduate research assistant, Helen X. Liu, for openly receiving Lautréamont's images, and for her generous stream of queries on eel-like lyric.

1. Unattributed translations are mine. While I was unable to consult the first English translation of Lautréamont, by John Rodker (1924), I owe a debt to the later renditions of Guy Wernham (1943), Alexis Lykiard (1970), and Paul Knight (1978).

2. Elsewhere, Césaire discusses Lautréamont's electrifying images of the class enemy, like "le 'créateur' anthropophage et décerveleur" 'the cannibalistic, brain-devouring "Creator"' (*Discours* 48–50; *Discourse* 66–67).

3. On the explosive conjunction of race, politics, and poetics in the context of Baudelaire's relationship with the Haitian-born Jeanne Duval, see Waldrop xiii–xv and Lionnet 730.

4. For a gloss of the Flaubertian dimensions and translational poetics of "affadissements" 'gusts of revulsion,' see Davis.

5. Untranslatable into English, *fait divers* designates a sensational yet miscellaneous news story or news in brief (Brancky 9–17).

6. For an account of the aporia of witnessing one's own future death, see Blanchot 12.

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