

DE LAMARTINE

HARMONIES

POÉTIQUES ET RELIGIEUSES,

AVEC COMMENTAIRES

POÉSIES DIVERSES

Poetics of the Pretext
Reading Lautreámont

Roland-François Lack

FURNE et C^o. — PAGNERRE, — L. HACHETTE et C^o.

ÉDITEURS

MDCCLVI

EXETER

POETICS OF THE PRETEXT
READING LAUTREAMONT

POETICS OF THE
PRETEXT
READING LAUTREAMONT

Roland-François Lack

UNIVERSITY
of
EXETER
PRESS

First published in 1998 by
University of Exeter Press
Reed Hall, Streatham Drive
Exeter, Devon EX4 4OR
UK

www.exeterpress.co.uk

© Roland-François Lack 1998

The right of Roland-François Lack to be identified as author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 9780859894982

Hardback ISBN 9781804131220

PDF ISBN 9781804131497

Pour N.M.J.

'Et tout cela, pourquoi?'
(Lamartine, *Harmonies*, III.ix)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	viii
Preface: 'Pretexts'	ix
Part One: The Names of the Poet	1
1 Critical Preliminaries	3
2 Ducassian Practice	16
3 The Divine Names	37
Part Two: La Pensée Poétique	57
4 Préfaces	59
5 Poétiques	72
6 Genres	93
7 Pensées	106
Part Three: Intertexts and Influence	137
8 Father Figures	139
9 Figures of Influence	178
10 Pretextuality	201
Postface	229
Notes	232
Bibliography	272
Index	282

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to express my deep gratitude to Karen Alexander, Annie Vergin-Bonte and Michael Temple for their help and encouragement over the time it took writing this book, and to Professors Malcolm Bowie and Jennifer Birkett for their invaluable comments on an early version of the text. My particular thanks go to Professor Michael Worton for his patient supervision and friendship over the years.

Without the love and support of my mother I could have done nothing. This book is dedicated to her memory.

Preface: 'Pretexts'

In a straightforward sentence from an otherwise enigmatic text, Isidore Ducasse, the poet formerly known as the Comte de Lautréamont,¹ rephrases a remark by the eighteenth-century moralist Vauvenargues:

Ducasse: Le prétexte de ceux qui font le bonheur des autres est qu'ils veulent leur bien.²

Vauvenargues: Le prétexte ordinaire de ceux qui font le malheur des autres est qu'ils veulent leur bien.

Vauvenargues's phrase is literally the pre-text of Ducasse's phrase. Other phrases in Ducasse have other pre-texts, from Vauvenargues but also from Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Lamartine, Hugo, and others. This book is principally concerned with the pretext in this strict sense of the term, though beneath lies its ordinary sense, the sense it has in Vauvenargues's 'prétexte ordinaire'. My pretext for researching and writing it was the pursuit of texts that have been rephrased in Ducasse's work, in the *Poésies* and also in the better known *Chants de Maldoror*. Though many such plagiarisms await discovery in the 'landes inexplorées' of Ducasse's œuvre, the conquest of the terrain as a whole—complete knowledge of the texts' pretexts—is a conclusion that has had to be deferred.

Strictly, 'pretext' here means the text plagiarized, corrected, the 'sophism' in this explicit definition of Ducasse's practice:

Si on corrigeait les sophismes dans le sens des vérités correspondantes à ces sophismes, ce n'est que la correction qui serait vraie; tandis que la pièce ainsi remaniée, aurait le droit de ne plus s'intituler fausse. Le reste serait hors du vrai, avec trace de faux, par conséquent nul, et considéré, forcément, comme non avenu. (PI.45, Besnier 248)

But it also includes, less strictly, 'le reste' that finds itself outside of the regime of truth, 'nul' and 'non avénu'. As categorical as Ducasse is in this programme, I allow myself to read this remainder in my own terms, as that textual supplement which the discovery of the pretext brings into the frame of the text: not only its own traceable pretexts,³ and not only its contexts,⁴ but also the innumerable texts wherein the undiscovered pretext *might* have been found, texts that remain to be read or, once read, remain bound up with the reading. Another, more familiar name for that 'reste' is the intertext,⁵ the vast network of writings—pretextual sources, contemporary contexts, critical readings—which this reader has attempted to know in order to understand the work of Ducasse in terms of its overall significance.

The intertext is the object of a theory: intertextuality. This book construes the pretext as the object of 'pretextuality', a theory much like its homologue except that it foregrounds obsessively a text's determination by precedence, the text's own sense of dependency on something that pre-exists and our sense, as readers, that our knowledge of the text depends on prior knowledge. Such a generalization is at least true of the allegories in the *Chants de Maldoror* and the plagiarisms of *Poésies*.

Though this book largely consists of literary-historical criticism premised on traditional, source-hunting scholarship, the theorization of pretextuality remains a real motive behind its writing. As strong a motive is the theorization of the theorist, the reader who would make more of Ducassian pretexts than mere sources. All literary critics, even mere 'chercheurs de sources', are necessarily theorists, and may attend to particular texts not just for reasons of scholarship but in pursuit of quite other rhetorical ends. Notions of how literature signifies are applied not to a randomly chosen author but to one whose texts already postulate and exemplify the same notions by some evident means. In Ducasse the possible prefigurations of theory are legion, including pretextuality: when Ducasse rewrites Vauvenargues's phrase on the 'prétexte ordinaire', an extraordinary notion of the pretext is implicated in his refusal to see anything concealed beneath 'le bonheur' but 'le bien'.

Of the other prefigurations of theory traced in this book, influence comes close to dominating the whole, running alongside pretextuality to the point of confluence. At that point pretextuality is preferred because it is, more or less, my own. Such possessiveness

has precedents. The appropriation of a text on discovery of a theory's figurative presence therein will be familiar to readers of the journal *Tel Quel*: Kristeva seizes on the 'scientificity' of *Poésies*; Sollers discovers 'une désénonciation généralisée' in Ducasse that makes him a textual practitioner the equal of Sollers himself.

Michel Pierssens, an exemplary reader of Ducasse, concludes his literally historical approach to the *Chants de Maldoror* otherwise, turning towards the past:

Nous sommes radicalement impuissants à épouser la cause de Ducasse, même si nous parvenons à nous le représenter. Cette cause —propagande du bien, lutte contre le mal—si réelle pour Ducasse, elle fait trou dans le réel de ses lecteurs modernes.⁶

Pierssens objects to those totalizing misreadings or misprisions—his word is 'méprise'—that seek in a period-bound author the grounds of modern critical practice. His corrective, historical approach discovers the face value of statements upon which readers from surrealists to textualists have collectively imposed an entirely ahistorical literalism in order to read them as precursive. Their persistent polemical reading of 'la poésie doit être faite par tous' from *Poésies II* is only the most notorious example of this.⁷ Pierssens is convincing in his literalism, seeking truth only and resisting the rhetorical simplifications of cultural polemic and critical theory. But he cannot be so neatly distinguished from the searchers after figure. He may differentiate himself from previous readers of Ducasse, but it is not a coincidence that his ethical stand against them is prefigured by Ducasse's own stand against previous writers: he and his author are both moralizing critics irritated with the excesses of those who have gone before. The literalism of Pierssens's reading remains a useful purgative of those excesses, and as he reads a way through the *Chants de Maldoror* strophe by strophe, his evidence for Ducasse's literalism is contained and compensated by the text's own rhetorical excess. But when he comes to read the more evident literalism of *Poésies* he does the text a disservice:

Aussi les *Poésies* ne méritent-elles pas plus que de se faire épinglez, fragment par fragment, à la marge du grand texte dont elles ne sont à tout prendre que le satellite un peu extravagant. Elles en ont épousé les mouvements, elles sont nées de sa naissance, et ne se sont

condensées à l'écart que de façon artificieuse, en supplément inattendu. (*Ethique à Maldoror* 192)

It is in part to supplement the want in Pierssens's book that here I have prioritized the pretextuality of *Poésies* over that of the *Chants*, its extravagant pretext. Ora Avni's *Tics, tics et tics*,⁸ despite having taken its title from *Poésies*, is also concerned mostly with the *Chants*. Avni concentrates on Ducasse's use of metaphor and comparison, which she reads as an elaborate thematization of those figures, to conclude, citing Riffaterre, that 'le sens', both meaning and direction, is the 'ultimate hypogram' of the text. Yet Ducasse's writing bears also a large part of *non-sens*, moreover is pleased to confess it and offers itself plainly as not-yet-sensical, at least, if not nonsense: 'ce n'est que plus tard, lorsque quelques romans auront paru, que vous comprendrez mieux la préface du renégat, à la figure fuligineuse'.⁹ Such understanding is slow to come not least because the promised series of novels has left no trace. It is a *tic* of this writer not to keep promises. Four sentences above he announces a forthcoming 'petit roman de trente pages' that in the text adds up to forty-five, and though this is accountable detail, elsewhere, when counting counts, writing for money to his banker and father-substitute Darasse (letter dated 22 May 1869, Besnier 277), Ducasse announces a preface of sixty pages which can be neither *Poésies* I as one editor suggests, nor *Poésies* II as Pierssens does, for together these two parts total no more than twenty-five pages.¹⁰ In another letter he again promises an imminent text, and again impedes its passing for *Poésies* with too specific a description:

Dans un ouvrage que je porterai à Lacroix aux 1^{ers} jours de Mars, je prends à part les plus belles poésies de Lamartine, de Victor Hugo, d'Alfred de Musset, de Byron et de Baudelaire, et je les corrige dans le sens de l'espoir; j'indique comment il aurait fallu faire. J'y corrige en même temps 6 pièces des plus mauvaises de mon sacré bouquin. (letter dated 21 February 1870, Besnier 280)

Close as this comes to describing the text we have, the realization of the letter's promise in *Poésies* differs markedly, supplementing its promised pretexts (now down to two fragments of Lamartine, a passage from Hugo and one from the *Chants*) with texts of quite different origin: 133 'original' or untraced reflexions and seventy-five corrections of moralists such as Vauvenargues and Pascal. If it were

otherwise and *Poésies* did correspond exactly to the description given in the letter, clarity might descend and dispel the confusion surrounding the status of *Poésies* and its relation to the *Chants de Maldoror*. With the realization of the poet's intent and the fulfilment of his promise, no misunderstanding can persist, and to know if such an ideal has been realized wants only some test of the evidence: does the eventual text fulfil the promise? This fixes the interpretation on the second, thereby the secondary, text. The question is, 'Is it an adequate solution?', whereby the first text is discovered to be a rebus, an enigma waiting to be deciphered. If the solution is consistently found wanting, inadequate to the enigma and unable to answer the rebus, the usual solution is to discover a different 'solution'. Ducasse criticism abounds in conjectural models of *Poésies* whose original supplements to its own, different pretext (the 212 paragraphs we have) supply this wanted solution, fulfilling the needs of the enigma as they fulfil the criticism's need of such fulfilment.

Evasions such as these might be avoided by testing not the 'discovered' solution but the originating enigma, interpreting not the fulfilment but the promises made. We discover, in effect, that for Ducasse a promise does not need fulfilment to function, that the riddles he proposes need no solution. He employs the forms and procedures of a play on meaning and can afford its luxuries on the promise of an end to it eventually, but not yet:

Mais, je ne veux pas soumettre à une rude épreuve ta passion connue pour les énigmes. Qu'il te suffise de savoir que, la plus douce punition que je puisse t'infliger, est encore de te faire observer que ce mystère ne te sera révélé (il te sera révélé) que plus tard, à la fin de ta vie, quand tu entameras des discussions philosophiques avec l'agonie sur le bord de ton chevet . . . et peut-être même à la fin de cette strophe.
(*Chant V. 2*, Besnier 173)

The solution's deferment enables the text to continue as enigma, but it is not the solubility of the enigma which enables but rather its insolubility, or at least its being not-yet-solved. What happens when it comes to a solution is a different and, to the first text, a secondary matter. By the time *Poésies* might serve as an explanation of the *Chants de Maldoror*, the rhetorical value of the enigma/solution, promise/fulfilment strategy will have been realized. Any

solution that is offered in *Poésies* has no bearing on problems in the *Chants*, since these are no longer problems if the virtues of the problematic *per se* have been proved. When *Poésies* arrives it is not the promised end, 'la morale de la fin' (letter dated 23 October 1869); the text is already inscribed in its own problematic, whose end, to rhetorical effect, has itself been promised—'mon volume ne sera terminé que dans 4 ou 5 mois' (letter dated 12 March 1870)—and, *ergo*, deferred.¹¹

Deferral is part of the rhetoric of contemporary criticism,¹² and an attractive figure for the reader who would ground his reading in theory. It also facilitates the work of the literary critic, opening the text up to intertexts without binding them to its literary-historical 'truth'. The space in which he then operates is one of strategic collocations and conjunctions, attractive but 'hors du vrai'. There are also dangers, not just that the 'trace du faux' be discerned, but that finally the critic be dismissed as part of the discountable remainder, 'par conséquent nul, et considéré, forcément, comme non venu'. A preference for pretextuality over deferral might avert these dangers, inasmuch as pretextuality is premised on the immediate real of the pretext, a real that cannot be discounted, whose trace is those superscript numbers that mark the once-pristine pages of Ducasse's work.¹³

The real is itself a figure of peculiar force in Ducasse, passing as it does unnoticed in the letters I have cited, texts that have proved so useful to the reader in search of a fixed point from which to judge the 'literary' works. In reality these letters are, no less than *Poésies* or the *Chants*, messages loaded with figural ambivalence and pretextual self-awareness. A letter to Ducasse's banker Darasse, his father's agent, and the notorious 'strophe des pédérastes' foreground, in the same terms, the same desire for 'real' contact between sender and receiver:

Que ne puis-je regarder à travers ces pages sérapiques le visage de celui qui me lit. S'il n'a pas dépassé la puberté, qu'il s'approche. Serre-moi contre toi, et ne crains pas de me faire du mal; rétrécissons progressivement les liens de nos muscles. Davantage. Je sens qu'il est inutile d'insister; l'opacité, remarquable à plus d'un titre, de *cette feuille de papier*, est un *empêchement* des plus *considérables* à l'opération de notre complète jonction . . . Pourquoi frémissez-vous de peur, adolescent qui me lisez? . . . Vous vous montrez souverainement

injuste . . . Vous avez raison: *méfiez-vous* de moi, surtout si vous êtes beau. (*Chant* V.5, Besnier 186)

Certainement j'aurais éprouvé autant de joie à ne pas vous écrire ces trois lettres que vous en auriez éprouvé vous-même à ne pas les lire. Vous avez mis en vigueur le déplorable système de *méfiance* prescrit vaguement par la bizarrerie de mon père; mais vous avez deviné que mon mal de tête ne m'*empêche* pas de *considérer* avec attention la difficile situation où vous a placé jusqu'ici *une feuille de papier* à lettre venue de l'Amérique du Sud, dont le principal défaut était *le manque de clarté*; . . . vous n'auriez qu'à m'écrire un mot, et il est probable qu'alors je le recevrai presque aussitôt que la demoiselle qui tire le cordon, ou bien avant, si je me rencontre sur le vestibule . . . (Letter dated 22 May 1869, Besnier 277)

The rhetoric here (circumlocution, redundant detail, misplaced formality), though it may serve Ducasse in de-dramatizing his financial situation, turns on an opposition indifferent to that end. The 'vagueness' of communication over great distance (Ducasse *père* to Darasse) is opposed to demonstrably immediate communication (Darasse to Ducasse *fils*), demonstrated not by opposing script to voice, absence to presence, but by the hyperbolic fiction of an entirely immediate script, capable ideally of dispensing even with the concierge ('la demoiselle qui tire le cordon'). Maldoror's address to the pederasts and Ducasse's letter to the banker propose the same ideal of immediacy, though each does so within different systems of exchange, homoeroticism in the *Chants*, finance in the letters. It is not this difference, however, that explains why this ideal is realizable according to the letter and yet according to the poem not. Nor is it naïveté in Ducasse and sophistication in Maldoror: 'the cognitive function resides in the language and not in the subject'.¹⁴ In the *Chants* the opacity of the text is an insurmountable obstacle to the desired communion of writer and reader; Maldoror gives up the attempt and the strophe ends on a return to mere narrative. On the other hand, the letter where this communion is still celebrated does not bypass the obstacle of text but embodies it, translating a fiction of opacity appropriate to literature into the fact of Ducasse's quite incomprehensible rhetoricity in this letter, an achievement possible only because the letter is real enough to register immediately an opacity that literature achieves only through figuration. In other words this letter is literature of a certain kind,

in which particular, non-literary expectations, in this instance clarity, are frustrated, promises unfulfilled—and that, through figuration.

It is in this class of literature that *Poésies* belongs, and here that it makes the promises which, unfulfilled, make its figurations possible. Neither 'real' nor 'literary' figurality comes first, and *Poésies* can freely invert the figure of opacity above, translating the clarity appropriate to a letter into the quite comprehensible rhetoric of its first line: 'Les gémissements poétiques de ce siècle ne sont que des sophismes' (Besnier 239). The pretext of this phrase is not one of those 'sophismes' corrected 'dans le sens des vérités correspondantes à ces sophismes', but a phrase from Ducasse's last extant letter, to Darasse again: 'Les gémissements poétiques de ce siècle ne sont que des sophismes hideux' (Basnier 281). Marcelin Pleynet comments on the difference between the two: "'hideux" n'apparaît pas dans les *Poésies* . . . , la correction ou le rajout à son importance'.¹⁵ It is, I would argue, the difference between 'correction' and 'rajout' that is important, because between these terms the logic of each text's relation to its pretext, its relation to the real, becomes unfixed. Without the priority that they leave undecidable there is no *real* pretext, only the fictions that best suit each case.

In Pleynet's reading, the textual psychologist comes first: 'Que certaines phrases des *Poésies* se trouvent dans sa correspondance, cela signifie que, dans leur tracé, elles peuvent servir d'expression aux multiples pensées qui se les destinent, et que leur auteur en était conscient.'¹⁶ My reading claims to privilege the reader, and reads Darasse as a peculiarly privileged reader of *Poésies* I, the first in a position to perceive in that text the presence of phrases from Ducasse's letter to him. The modern reader, of course, shares this privilege, since these texts are invariably printed together in the same volume and often cross-referenced to each other, but the banker's position is still archetypal, a model in miniature of reading *Poésies* II, with the one brief letter standing for the vast literature upon which Ducasse draws for his pretexts, and Darasse's perceptions a figure for the reader's more or less successful reading of Ducasse's text, where success consists in detecting each pretext. But this game of detection too has been spoiled for the modern reader, in whose annotated text a pretext out of La Bruyère and Ducasse's correction come together on the page. The purity of 'le plagiat' is lost to us who come too late, who read editions marked with the

editor's own version of evidence, *his* grounds for the text, another seductive 'real' against which to read its rhetoric.

In this shift from prospective theorist of the pretext to victim of another's editorial pretextualizations, I hope a certain anxiety has become apparent. It is an anxiety about where, as reader, we are situated in relation to Ducasse's writing. Superficially we are spoilt for choice. His published *œuvre* opens and closes on two very different figurations of its reader:

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; car à moins qu'il n'apporte dans sa lecture une logique rigoureuse et une tension d'esprit égale au moins à sa défiance, les émanations mortelles de ce livre imbiberont son âme comme l'eau le sucre. (*Les Chants de Maldoror*, chant premier, août 1868, Besnier 287)

Cette publication permanente n'a pas de prix. Chaque souscripteur se fixe à lui-même sa souscription. Il ne donne, du reste, que ce qu'il veut. Les personnes qui recevront les deux premières livraisons sont priées de ne pas les refuser, sous quelque prétexte que ce soit. ('Avis', *Poésies* II, juin 1870, Besnier 272)

Somewhere between these two figures, the aggressed, seduced, cretinized 'lecteur' in the *Chants* and the 'souscripteur' to *Poésies*, prospective client for poetics in a buyer's market, the modern reader is situated, caught between irreconcilable extremes. Modern critical readers tend to take the first figure as guide, theorizing textual violence from the viewpoint of its intended victim. This book has tried to resist that reading, subscribing to the perverse view that the first thing to be read is the last thing written, taking everything read as a pretext of *Poésies*. This inevitably stretches the sense of pretext: it includes the signature, the last word written of a letter, expanded upon at length in Part One, on the name; it includes the context, everything read that would make sense of *Poésies* as poetics, and the poetics of that effort to make sense (see Part Two); and pretext includes, paradoxically, the term that would seem to encompass it, that 'pretextuality' which closes Part Three. If these expansions seem hard to accept, I hope, nonetheless, that the reader will read on, 'sous quelque prétexte que ce soit'.¹⁷

Part One

THE NAMES OF THE POET

l'écho des syllabes de ton nom . . .¹

Chapter One

Critical Preliminaries

1.1 Signature

The peripheries of Ducasse's œuvre are well-trodden paths. The texts are circled by predators apprehensive of their prey, keener to examine their own predatory natures than to strike. The more daring cut lines or make dashes across the arena, proliferating peripheries as they go, and reducing thereby the dimensions of the unassimilable. It may be proper and natural to linger thus at the thresholds of a text, if the argument is that certain preliminaries are necessary to any serious critical enterprise. Whereas, the story goes, a traditional criticism assumes the need to establish an author's biography and the literary context of his writing before plunging into analysis, it is proper for the modern critic to question such assumptions, and to question the assumption of the authority that makes them.

The peripheral configurations of Ducasse's œuvre usefully expose those of traditional criticism: the *Chants/Poésies* dichotomy mimes in miniature the bio-critical cliché of the subject's spiritual conversion (*à la* Baudelaire); the trichotomy Maldoror/Lautréamont/Ducasse—the sequence of signatories to the texts—reproduces, in reverse, the usual sequence of biographical personality, writing-subject, and fictional narrator. This correspondence with contemporary critical questions is a feature of the œuvre that is, if not inherent, now inseparable from it, and manifest throughout.

As the text's first threshold, the Name (signature and designation) is a privileged site of critical periphrasis. The name 'Maldoror', the designated signature of the 'Chantre', has been variously glossed as 'mal d'horreur', 'horreur du mal', 'mal d'aurore' and 'aurore du

mal'. From such derivations thematic criticisms are generated, for example where Maldoror (that improper name) designates the singer of 'une épopée de la masturbation':

Les Chants de Maldoror apparaissent comme une immense 'coulée', comme un 'jet' poétique transposant, en mille symboles divers, la même expérience fondamentale, celle du Mal d'aurore.²

Or when an echo of the Maldororian monetary theme is heard in the (echoing) occurrence of 'or', 'gold' (mirroring 'les miroitements de l'or' of *Chant* III.1). This glossographic topos can be expanded to accommodate the more proper name 'Ducasse', a near-homonym of 'ducats', gold coinage with a literary connotation.

In examples such as these, the name is the matrix from which the commentator's gloss is generated, by a process either of conversion or expansion (in Riffaterrean terms),³ though the non-variable, the poetic name, should really be the result of the process and not its premiss. Typically, the poetic figure is derived from a cliché. The verbal behaviour of the glossographer parodies the behaviour of the poet, deriving more or less complex transformations from a pre-existent text, with 'Maldoror' standing for the cultural cliché and the *Chants* for the culture in which it is inscribed.

The source-critic in search of pretexts is less likely to draw such attention to his behaviour, trusting faithfully in the eventual discovery of the literary matrix from which the name was derived in the first place: some close combination or other of stereotypical Romantic semes ('mal', 'aurore', 'horreur'), buried somewhere in the work of any poet, major or minor, writing some time before 1868. For a moment, a verse dated 1854, by the nineteenth century's greatest poet, seems to provide a perfect solution:

O sainte horreur du mal! devoir funèbre! ô haine!⁴

This is the opening of Victor Hugo's paean to the great poets who have opposed evil. Generating the satanic Maldoror from this saintly 'horreur du mal' would have given the appropriation of pretexts a thematic resonance to rival the onanism and venality cited above. The phrase might even have provided *the* interpretative key to Ducasse's practice as both moralist and poet, succinctly illustrating both the ethical *and* the poetical revisionisms at work. This verse is

not, however, the key since, though Hugo's poem was written in 1854, it wasn't published until 1880, in 'Le livre satirique' of *Les Quatre vents de l'esprit*, coming too late for the *Chants* and for the searcher after perfect solutions.

More promising is a phrase embedded in Lamartine's 'Hymne de la Mort', a poem as thematically consonant as Hugo's and chronologically more fitting. On the threshold of death, the poet addresses his own soul:

Détestais-tu la tyrannie,
Adorais-tu la liberté,
De l'oppression impunie
Ton œil était-il révolté;
Avais-tu soif de la justice,
Horreur du mal, honte du vice;
Versais-tu des larmes de sang
Quand l'imposture ou la bassesse
Livrait l'innocente faiblesse
Aux serres du crime puissant;⁵

Or the name might be generated anagrammatically from a line in Lamartine's paraphrase of Isaiah:

Malheur à vous qui dès l'aurore
Respirez les parfums du vin!
Et que le soir retrouve encore
Chancelants au bord du festin! ('La poésie sacrée'⁶)

This also reads like a pretext of an analogous inscription of the name in the *Chants*, where the rebus is followed immediately by its solution:

'je reste seul à côté du *malade*, jusqu'à l'apparition de *l'aurore* et du chant du rossignol.' *Maldoror*, caché derrière la porte, n'a perdu aucune parole. (*Chant VI.4*, Besnier 211)

François Caradec, who first noted this anagrammatic inscription of the proper name, also notes the presence in Baudelaire of the ubiquitous 'horreur du mal':

Mais je prétends, au cas même où on me contraindrait à me

reconnaître quelques torts, qu'il y a une sorte de prescription générale.
Je pourrais faire une bibliothèque de livres modernes non poursuivis,
*et qui ne respirent pas, comme le mien, L'HORREUR DU MAL.*⁷

Disappointingly, this fragment, from the 'Notes et documents pour mon avocat', was first published in 1887 and so, like the same phrase in Hugo, was unavailable to Ducasse. In effect, the full dossier of texts peripheral to the publication and prosecution of the *Fleurs du Mal* is a dangerous minefield for the searcher after sources, so often suggesting appropriately Ducassian remarks only to reveal a first date of publication years after Ducasse's death.

Baudelaire and Hugo resist appropriation, then, and perhaps Lamartine gives himself too willingly. Nonetheless there remains a large enough stretch of lesser work to mine, and it may be better to discover the source in a more obscure author. There is, after all, no virtue in proving that Ducasse read Lamartine, Hugo or Baudelaire when he repeatedly says as much. As evidence, instead, that Ducasse read the moderns as closely as he did the ancients, and knowing he knew the work of some youthful near-contemporaries among the Parnassians—Sully-Prudhomme and Coppée at least—we might settle for these lines from the *Parnasse contemporain* of 1866, in a poem by Auguste de Chatillon:

Le fou chantait, disant encore:
La foudre, en crevant mon chapeau,
A failli briser mon cerveau.
Le malheur est à son aurore. ('Un Fou')⁸

Our sense that we have found a clue to a pretext is reinforced by the presence in the *Chants de Maldoror* of similar lunatics, lightning bolts, and ominous dawns. This is source-hunting at its simplest.

Speaking of a different case, Marcelin Pleynet raises a cogent objection to collocations such as these:

Le rapprochement, vrai ou vraisemblable, est tiré par les cheveux, et ne nous apporte finalement rien d'autre que la certitude, que nous pouvons facilement avoir par ailleurs, que Ducasse fut un lecteur attentif des écrivains romantiques.⁹

It is important to show that Ducasse the post-Romantic read other post-Romantics as attentively as he did their elders, but the theme-

for-them correspondence of two post-Romantic authors can be demonstrated without discovering a seme-for-seme correspondence between them. Reference to Chatillon would be as pertinent as reference to any text exploiting the same descriptive system, whether or not the text was read by Ducasse.

If the search for Maldororian pretexts is to go on, and since it cannot be shown conclusively that Ducasse is explicitly rewriting Chatillon's text, a better collocation might be one where the correspondence of text to pretext is closer. The ideal pretext of a proper name is another proper name, or something sharing the characteristics of the proper name, so that the two are functional homologues. This is the case with none of the glosses on Maldoror mentioned so far, where the name of a fictional character is decomposed into its semic components and reassembled as critical commentary. The pretext to the name 'Maldoror' I am looking for is another name, homologous in both form and function. I was long tempted by Shelley's poem 'Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude', a collocation reinforced by evidence that Ducasse had read Shelley in school and by thematic similarities between each text.¹⁰ But there is simply not enough of a homology between the two names, no formal proof of an appropriation. Alastor and Maldoror are just two in a series of consonant names (Antenor, Belphegor, Chandor, etc.), usually sharing certain semic associations, and all more or less equally different from each other. The intertext of each is the whole series, and if any one is more specifically the pretext of another it is only in degree, according to the number of semic associations they share. If Ducasse had written the 'Chants de *Malastor*', then his hero's name could be said to have been generated by straightforward expansion, actualizing a latent seme ('mal') in the model, bringing out the latent evil in Alastor by the simple addition of a letter. Then the name would have but one irrefutable pretext, the name of Shelley's errant poet.

Onomastically actualized intertextual relations are not necessarily so speculative. Riffaterre signals an important instance in the conclusion to his article on the *Chants de Maldoror*: 'The very name the author chose for himself is symbolic: from Eugène Sue's text *Latréaumont*, Lautreáumont is generated by conversion.'¹¹ This suggestion was first made by Philippe Soupault, but its implications are only fully unfolded by Pleynet, who declared that 'ce nom de Lautreáumont, avant d'être un pseudonyme, est un programme, sur

lequel on ne s'arrêtera jamais assez'. In appropriating the name 'Lautréamont' Ducasse displaces the letter *U*, which Pleynet, still patrolling the peripheries, interprets as the author's personal 'griffe', the sign of his appropriation. The *U* of Ducasse is evidence of the system at work within what he calls the '*Complexe lautrémontien*': 'un déplacement signifiant, une transformation signifiante qui sert de signature'.¹² Exercising the creative glossographer's right, he is untroubled by the—genuinely troubling—possibility that the form 'Lautréamont' may be simply a misprint, that Ducasse had intended to appropriate the name of Sue's hero quite untransformed. It has been demonstrated that the familiar form of Ducasse's *nom de plume* occurred in print only once in his lifetime, on the title page of the abortive first edition. Furthermore, a contemporary reference to the text, an advertisement placed in Evariste Carrance's *Fleurs et Fruits* of January 1870, announces 'les *Chants de Maldoror* par le Cte de LATREAUMONT'.¹³

Proper or improper, the name 'Comte de Lautréamont' has received the same close glossographical attention paid to 'Maldoror'. The theme of venality recurs in the most elaborate of these glosses: *Le compte [en banque] de l'autre [i.e. le père] est à Mont [-evidio]*, an allusion to Ducasse's dependence on money sent by his father from the Uruguayan capital. This method has also generated the reading: *L'autre est amont*, 'the other is upstream', which, if it hints at the 'coulée' of Maldororian onanism, is semically not as persuasive a gloss as the first. Even less so is Lucienne Rochon's 'système hiéroglyphique intérieur au récit qui décompose le nom de Lautréamont en personnages, et le nom des personnages en éléments du récit'.¹⁴

L: Lecteur, Léman, Lohengrin, Lombano, Lampe-ange, (aile)

A: Aghone, Ange, A (privatif)

U: Vivienne, Vendôme, ventricules de la circulation—vie-vent: vivant

T: Tremdall—par inversion Latrem (la mère, tremble)

R: Réginald: Regina-elle-d'Elsseneur, Air, erre, Juif errant

E: Elsseneur, Edouard, Elle-se-neur-aile-elle (es, ai, hais)

A: Aghone

M: Mario, Mervyn, Marguerite, Maldoror, mort, mer, (aime)

O: Océan, (invocation), eau, céans

N: Neige: la fille de neige, (haine)

T: Tremdall: T=r'es, t'hais. Mer, dalle (potence tau).

Unlikely as Rochon's totalizing acronym is, her decomposition of the component names and themes illustrates the potential and the dangers of onomastic glossography. Jean and Mezei's expansion of 'Falmer' into 'phalle-mère' is a case in point. Even for the less adventurous, these components remain notorious temptations to the speculative, the source-hunters who derive characters' names from some analogous outside source, as 'Lautréamont' derives from Sue's 'Latréaumont' or 'Lohengrin' from Wagner's opera. Most editors repeat, however sceptically, various suggested sources for the names Aghone, Elsseneur, Mario, and Mervyn, though those of Lombano and Tremdall (and Holzer, excluded, like Falmer, from Rochon's acronymic system) have, for all their evident peculiarity, so far resisted the advances of the etiologist.

Naming within the *Chants de Maldoror* can be considered under three distinct headings, each generating a different kind of critical response. The first is the derivation of the characters' names, mentioned above, which at worst reduces criticism to anecdote: if the name Mario derives from the tenor Guiseppe Mario, then Ducasse moved in theatrical circles, if it comes from the novelist Mario Uchard, then he probably read his books. At best, openings are created for the investigation of the intertext beyond the familiar Romantic canon.¹⁵ Perhaps such suggestions for sources meet resistance not only because they are unlikely but also because no-one wants to add the voluminous works of Uchard, of Mie d'Aghonne, or even of Walter Scott, to the known body of the intertext, for fear they might want reading. Paul Eluard's legendary search through every author mentioned by Ducasse is said to have borne fruit, but such prospects remain daunting.

The second practice is the explicit citation of 'real' names, the names of friends, writers, criminals, heroes, gods and demi-gods, etc., and the titles of texts. In the definitive version of the *Chants de Maldoror*, Pythagoras, Descartes, David, Goliath, and Satan are mentioned. From the first edition of the first *Chant* the names of Ducasse's friend Dazet, of Byron and of his friend, Dorset, are suppressed. Real names proliferate in *Poésies* and, for the critical reader, ground its metadiscursive status. In the *Chants*, the practice is significant for not being the means of that text's grounding in the real. When it is announced in *Chant V.7* that 'Nous ne sommes plus dans la narration. . . . Hélas! nous sommes maintenant arrivés dans le réel', that 'real' turns out to mean the emergence from the body

of a tarantula of 'Réginald' and 'Elsseneur', two transfigured victims of Maldoror who recount their experiences and awaken their aggressor from ten years of tormented sleep; the whole episode being the allegorical transfiguration of an elaborate literary intertext.¹⁶

The third practice is the use of epithets, circumlocutions, and substitutions to designate the protagonists of the drama, 'les trois personnages nommés': 'l'homme, le Créateur, et moi-même', i.e. Maldoror (*Chant VI.1*, Besnier 202). The *Chants* play obsessively with problems of designation, satisfying the reader's 'passion connue pour les énigmes'. This is not only a relation between the 'scripteur' Lautréamont and his 'lecteur'. When Maldoror himself takes to writing, the inscription of the name becomes the promise of violence:

Mervyn est dans sa chambre; il a reçu une missive. Qui lui a donc écrit une lettre? Son trouble l'a empêché de remercier l'agent postal. L'enveloppe a les bordures noires, et les mots sont tracés d'une écriture hâtive. Ira-t-il porter cette lettre à son père? Et si le signataire le lui défend expressément? (VI.5)

Unlike a book, where the name of the signatory is displayed over the threshold of the text—unlike modern editions of '*Les Chants de Maldoror* par Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont', whose covers happily display their multiple signatories—Maldoror's letter suspends the revelation of the author's name until the end of the text. Mervyn discovers at the end of the letter that the site of the name is a dangerous place, a place where threats are veiled and enigmas proposed: "'Trois étoiles au lieu d'une signature, s'écrie Mervyn; et une tâche de sang au bas de la page!'"

The Ducassian œuvre as a whole is framed by such an enigma, one that begins simply enough but threatens finally to mark the site of the name with an indelible indeterminacy. Ducasse's very first signature is composed of these three stars, appearing on the cover of the first edition of *Chant I* (August 1868), at the end of its re-publication in the *Parfums de l'âme* (January 1869), and as signature of the possibly apocryphal 'Choses trouvées dans un pupitre' (published December 1868). Maldoror's own signature can be read easily enough into these instances to suggest a play at the thresholds of fiction and reality. It is more difficult to read the last

paragraph of *Poésies* II (June 1870), placed where a signature might be expected:

Les trois points terminateurs me font hausser les épaules de pitié. A-t-on besoin de cela pour prouver que l'on est un homme d'esprit, c'est-à-dire un imbécile? Comme si la clarté ne valait pas le vague, à propos de points! (PII.159, Besnier 271)

If these 'trois points terminateurs' are, as most commentators clearly believe, 'points de suspension', then Ducasse's conclusion is a refusal of continuance—or at least of its formal inscription—that might, despite the anxieties expressed in my preface, be accommodated by a discourse on Ducassian deferral. But if these 'points' are analogous to Maldoror's 'étoiles', then Ducasse's last word is some kind of rationale for the rejection of pseudonymity on the cover of *Poésies*, and the discourse that accommodates it is one on his onomatographic practice (as here).¹⁷ There is a third conceivable place for it, dealing with Ducassian indeterminacy, where 'la clarté' and 'le vague' collapse into each other for want of the means to determine the correct reading of the text that contrasts them. Such a discourse has no one place in this book, but it lurks in the sub-text, threatening occasionally to trouble the surface.

1.2 Epitaph

Solving onomatographic enigmas can seem like solving a crime, especially when the name is signed in blood. In our biographico-critical past we would have followed the trail of blood and discovered a body; now we are led to a merely textual corpus, be it the vast Shakespearean intertext¹⁸ signalled by the 'tâche de sang' at the end of *Poésies* I ('au lieu d'une signature'), or the no less expansive name 'Maldoror'. Even the relatively empty space of anonymity can proffer onomastic solutions: Maldoror's enigmatic signature suggests the nickname 'lord Trois-Etoiles' given by Parisian satirists to Byron after his bloody death at Missolonghi.¹⁹ Maldoror is enough of a Byronic type to have declared his literary origins in an inscription, a funerary tribute to a fallen hero. Byron himself is, after all, a notorious inscriber of his own name.

The familiar objections to 'le mirage des sources' are already echoing; first voiced by Blanchot in 1948 and frequently repeated since.²⁰ Just as enticing, however, is what here might be called 'le

mirage des noms'. Sollers's 1979 *Tel quel* article 'L'Auguste Comte' illustrates the fixation in its purest form, combining a simple piece of historico-biographical research (Ducasse's father may have named his son after his intellectual idol *Isidore Auguste Comte*) with a neat piece of glossography (Ducasse subverts the father's positivist mythology by reading himself as '*Isidore, l'Auguste Comte de Lautréamont . . .*'), to finish by applying to him the Nietzschean assertion that, 'en toute logique de l'écriture qu'il met en place, tous les noms qui ont dit quelque chose, en effet, c'est lui'.²¹ The result of this is once again to dispense with the biographical subject: unbound by his father's outdated fixation on Comte, and at one with an equally unbound Nietzsche, Ducasse is, in a now dated phrase, our contemporary.

In 'La Science de Lautréamont', Sollers had already dealt the biographical subject a fatal blow, fatal not the least for taking the death of the biographical subject Ducasse as the premiss from which he develops his seductive theme. In Sollers's reading the want of a body—the actual corpse, lost in the 'fosse commune', or the biographical corpus²²—far from hindering discussion of the texts, increases the force of the discussion; the body's absence looms there behind each word, the ghost of the biographical plenitude each reader has naïvely yearned for, an insistent reminder of the textualist truth, a *memento mori*. What we are reminded of each time Sollers evokes so seductively the images of those things we lack—certain knowledge of the author's literary purpose, certain knowledge of his Oedipal relations—is that only a critical discourse free of these and all other personalist obsessions can come to terms with 'La Science de Lautréamont'. For his own part Sollers refuses to be interested in the personality of Ducasse. Where there had been rife speculation on the causes of death (suicide, consumption, plague, military action, etc.) with Sollers the cause is only to be discovered within the bounds of the text itself, in the event at that point where the text opens onto infinity. The post-liminary 'avis' on the last page of Ducasse's last printed text announced that 'cette publication permanente n'a pas de prix'. Sollers comments that Ducasse died 'de cet acte—et probablement de nul autre'.²³ Publication is nothing less than fatal.

Similarly, in the place of real birth-traumas, genuine mystery around his mother's death, and evident hostility to his father, Sollers offers the traumas of textual birth, death, and rebirth, the passage