Lautréamont's Plagiarisms;  
or, The Poetization of Prose Texts

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Since two texts that are verbally identical do not necessarily have the same sense or implications, it is useful to distinguish different types of meaning. E. D. Hirsch differentiates between meaning and significance.\(^1\) Meaning, for him, is what a text means originally, what the author intended it to mean; significance is what a text means subsequently, to later generations of readers. This distinction, however, requires one modification: meaning is not what the author intended (although Hirsch makes a valiant attempt to defend the intentional fallacy), but rather the literal meaning that a statement or textual fragment has in its initial generic and cultural context. **Significance** is, then, what a text would mean in other historical periods, as a consequence of the evolution of the reader's culture, or when it is in a different verbal or situational context. A fictional account of this process can be found in the Borges story entitled "Pierre Ménard, Author of the Quixote" in which an imaginary nineteenth-century French symbolist decides to rewrite Don Quixote without actually copying Cervantes's novel, but by recreating the mental conditions of its production. Ménard does indeed reproduce a part of the work, and it is exactly the same as the original, although as Borges tells it, Ménard's text is "almost infinitely richer." Written by a contemporary of Valéry and of William James, it has a completely different import and effect.\(^2\)

In actual literary practice, many examples of semantic shifts, far from being only expressions of Borges's playfulness, are due to diachronic changes or to contextual transpositions. The effect is all the more striking when the displacement is made from a nonliterary genre to a literary one. André Breton's poem "PSTT," for instance, seems to reproduce the page of the Paris telephone directory that lists his name. It is a verbal collage, a literary analogue of Marcel Duchamp's ready-made sculptures. But when such a segment appears in a collection of poems (Clair de terre), the reader is forced to seek out the features that make it an artistic composition, i.e., the name Breton as the invariant of the poem and the added signature (Breton, André) whose inversion imitates the style of the listings and, simultaneously, marks it as an original creation. A collage, however, stands out, by its very nature, as a borrowed fragment
against the background of the supposedly personal compositions that make up the rest of the book of poems. It has shock value as an improper intrusion. Plagiarisms, on the other hand, are more sneaky. They tend, if they are at all well done, to go unnoticed because their source cannot be easily identified (otherwise, they would simply become quotations or parodies). They have to be integrated into an existing verbal framework so as not to be perceived, for they are not simply amusing little provocations. They are serious transgressions, a theft of other people's property, a major cultural taboo. It is therefore not surprising to find examples of this transgression in works that are representative of a type of writing that puts into question ordinary modes of composition and narration and has thus become emblematic of what the Tel Quel group used to call the "pratique signifiante de l'avant-garde." A case in point is Lautréamont and Les Chants de Maldoror.

In 1952 Maurice Viroux discovered that six bird descriptions in Les Chants de Maldoror were taken from L'Encyclopédie d'histoire naturelle du Dr Chenu. Subsequently Marguerite Bonnet found that certain scientific references in Les Chants seemed to come from Michelet (La Mer, L'Insecte, and so forth), or, more precisely, from Michelet's scientific informant, Dr. E. A. Pouchet, who was an opponent of Pasteur in the controversy over spontaneous generation. When, for instance, Lautrémont writes, "Et, de même que les rotifères et les tardigrades peuvent être chauffés à une température voisine de l'ébullition," he is referring to one of Pouchet's experiments, in which the scientist demonstrated that these creatures died when the temperature reached about 90°C. Similarly, Marie-François Guyard has shown that some of the more sadistic themes in Maldoror, such as the human body used as a slingshot, come from Lamartine. But the last two cases are, at best, allusions in which the surface texts in Les Chants are noticeably dissimilar from the texts of origin. I shall therefore only deal with the examples uncovered by Viroux, outright plagiarism being a more unusual method of composition than the traditional allusion (see Appendix for the plagiarized texts). Lautrémont does perform a certain number of minor modifications on the encyclopedia fragments. They are minor, but essential, for they erase the marks of their provenance and thus integrate the borrowed texts into the new contexts perfectly. These are the changes:

1. The reduction of capitals to small letters: "oiseaux" in Plagiarism 1, "stercoraires" in P2, "pélicaninés" in P3, "buses" in P5.
2. Explicitations for the reader's understanding: "Ces troupes" → "Les bandes d'étourmeaux" in P1, "Cette famille" → "la famille des pélicaninés" in P3, "Il a" → "Le milan royal a" in P5.
3. Suppressions such as "Labbes" in P2; "1°," "2°," and so forth, and "n'est que la reproduction de celle des Pélicans de Cuvier et Lesson" in P3.
4. Additions like “aimanté” in P1, the demonstrative adjectives and the color “jaune” in P4, the phrase “la queue ne se trompe pas” in P5.

5. The continuation, after a colon, of the last sentence in P5, with the casual address to the reader, “vous ouvririez les yeux comme la porte d’un four, que ce serait d’autant inutile.”

6. Transformations such as the fusion into one sentence of “les stercoraires . . . se plaisent” in P2; the shift from “qui y comprenaient les genres” to “comprend quatre genres distincts” in P3 and from “une large membrane dilatable” to “cette large poche” in P4; the syntactic inversion, after “comme” in P6, to make “caroncule charnue” the main subject of the comparison.

Other changes could be the result of a concern to write well, in the normative sense: the transfer of the conjunction “et” from before “creusée” in P4 to the beginning of the clause, making the sequence an asyndetic, falling group; the poetic noun/adjective inversion in P5, “sa situation favorite” — “sa favorite situation”; or, in the same passage, the replacing of one “semble” by “croit” to avoid repetition.

On the semantic and stylistic levels, the integration of the borrowed descriptions into other contexts brings to the foreground meanings and effects that were dormant in their former contexts. P1 (“les Stourneaux”), P2 (“les stercoraires”), P5 (“le milan royal”), and P6 (“le bec du dindon”) are vehicles for similes. That is, given that shape A is like B, A would be the tenor and B the vehicle. But, except for P6, Lautréamont uses the form B so A, which, in P1 and P5, make the encyclopedia articles seem like arbitrary insertions, introduced only to confuse the reader, until the postplaced tenor (“Toi, de même . . .”) reveals a meaningful connection. P2 is clearer since it has the mark of a simile (“de même que . . . ainsi”), and P6 occurs as one of many vehicles in an example of the well-known beau comme . . . group of comparisons. P3 and P4, on the other hand, are presented as statements of factual scientific and personal knowledge (“je savais que . . .” and “Je recherchais vaguement, dans les replis de ma mémoire, dans quelle contrée torride ou glacée, j’avais déjà remarqué ce bec . . .”). As descriptive units in vehicles, or as statements of facts, these fragments are, like all vehicles, smuggled into the fiction, but they also become part of the fiction, insofar as they force the reader to make them consistent with his search for literary coherence. This is how the process works: the first of the plagiarized passages is in the opening stanza of chant 5. The flight of the starlings illustrates the organization of the whole work. The starlings move forward as a group, but each individual bird flies in a circle toward the center of the flock, in a spirallike manner. This description is a counterpoint to the flight of the cranes, at the very beginning of the book, where the reader is warned that he ought to be very careful before adventuring into
such unknown and dangerous territory as the pages he is about to read. He is
told to behave like the crane who leads the group but who, sensing the storm
ahead, wisely turns around. The difference between the flight of the cranes and
the flight of the starlings is that the former fly in a straight line toward a
specific point on the horizon. The opposition cranes versus starlings actual-
izes, in bird code, the thematic structure linear versus circular. This opposi-
tion, as Blanchot has pointed out, goes back at least as far as Dante. In Artaud
de Montor’s translation of the Inferno (the one closest in time to Maldoror),
we read in the fifth canto: “De même que le froid fait prendre aux étourneaux un
vol irrégulier, de même cette tourmente emporte, heurte, repousse, ramène les
âmes coupables. Sans qu’aucun espoir vienne leur rendre quelque courage //
Telles les grues disposées en files allongées fendent l’air et le frappent de leurs
cris lugubres, telles les ombres enlevées par la tempête poussent de longs
gémissements.”

In Les Chants the distance between the two flight descriptions (from stanza
1, chant 1, to stanza 1, chant 5) is much greater because they represent two
modes of composition, the straight line classical narration against the repetitive
and elliptical type of exposition. The space between those two stanzas is taken
up by a search, through constant repetitions, for the proper formal expression.
The whirlwind as a motif progressively becomes the whirlwind as a form and it
is precisely when Lautréamont becomes aware of how this can be done that the
first plagiarism appears. (There are probably no direct transcriptions of other
texts before chant 5.) The whirlwind catches in its own motion whatever
surrounds it (here, other texts) and symbolizes therefore the instinctual manner
of writing that is repressed, for the sake of clarity and communication, in
culturally sanctioned literature. But Lautréamont writes the forbidden; his
message is obscure and is communicative only when he addresses the reader
directly, as he does in the context of the copied segment. Up to this point in the
text the reader probably suspects that he is reading nonsense and it has become
necessary to show him that there is some master plan for all these disconnected,
supernatural stories, that the description of the flight of the starlings really does
have a function: “Toi de même, ne fais pas attention à la manière bizarre dont je
chante chacune de ces strophes. Mais sois persuadé que les accents fondamen-
taux de la poésie n’en conservent pas moins leur intrinsèque droit sur mon
intelligence.” It now becomes clear that there is a metaphoric relationship
between the stanzas and the starlings, and from here on, all the other constitut-
ive elements fall into place: “une manière de voler qui leur est propre”
corresponds to “la manière bizarre dont je chante chacune de ces strophes,” “la
voix d’un seul chef” to “je chante,” and so on. Lautréamont even completes
the description of the flight, to make certain that the analogy is inescapable: the
birds never lose sight of their ultimate destination (“Malgré cette singulière
manière de tourbillonner . . .”), and the reader can rest assured that the poet
also knows where he is heading ("Mais sois persuadé que les accents fondamentaux de la poésie n'en conservent pas moins leur intrinsèque droit sur mon intelligence"). The same method of semantic integration governs P2: the reduction of the two kinds of birds to one, by the suppression of "Labbes," so that there is a single subject in the vehicle to correspond with the "je" of the tenor, the deletion of "plus voraces encore que les autres et" and its replacement by "oiseaux inquiets" in apposition (just in case the reader does not know that "les stercoraires" are birds); this emphasizes the adjective "inquiets," which shares with "je n'étais pas tranquille" the semantic features that make the analogy possible. And, true to the principle of a crisscross progression (one theme coming out of the form of another), the context of P5 ("le vol du milan royal") is a theory of similes that discusses the problem of distance (or lack of common features) between the two parts of a comparison. The topic is the appearance of the face of a dead child high above his coffin, and it leads to a digression on difference and similarity:

C'est, généralement parlant, une chose singulière que la tendance attractive qui nous porte à rechercher (pour ensuite les exprimer) les ressemblances et les différences que recèlent, dans leurs naturelles propriétés, les objets les plus opposés entre eux, et quelquefois les moins aptes, en apparence, à se prêter à ce genre de combinaisons sympathiquement curieuses, et qui, ma parole d'honneur, donnent gracieusement au style de l'écrivain, qui se paie cette personnelle satisfaction, l'impossible et inoubliable aspect d'un hibou sérieux jusqu'à l'éternité. Suivons en conséquence le courant qui nous entraîne. [Chant 5, stanza 6, p. 208.]

This is followed by the encyclopedia fragment, then by comments on its apparent lack of motivation and its self-evident reason:

Chacun a le bon sens de confesser sans difficulté (quoique avec un peu de mauvaise grâce) qu'il ne s'aperçoit pas, au premier abord, du rapport, si lointain qu'il soit, que je signale entre la beauté du vol du milan royal, et celle de la figure de l'enfant, s'élevant doucement, au-dessus du cercueil découvert, comme un nénuphar qui perce la surface des eaux; et voilà précisément en quoi consiste l'imparable faute qu'entraîne l'inamovible situation d'un manque de repentir, touchant l'ignorance volontaire dans laquelle on croupit. Ce rapport de calme majesté entre les deux termes de ma narquoise comparaison n'est déjà que trop commun, et d'un symbole assez compréhensible, pour que je m'étonne davantage de ce qui ne peut avoir, comme seule excuse, que ce même caractère de vulgarité qui fait appeler, sur tout objet ou spectacle qui en est atteint, un profond sentiment d'indifférence injuste. Comme si ce qui se voit quotidiennement n'en devrait pas moins réveiller l'attention de notre admiration! [Chant 5, stanza 6, pp. 208-9]

The relationship between the flight of the "milan royal" and the face of the child is their majestic, and perfectly peaceful, appearance. They are both superior and immovable (as in Le Sommeil du condor). Although the thematic difference between this flight and the starlings' is a dynamic versus static opposition, it nonetheless repeats the same meaning (the narrator's creative
technique), so that "et la queue ne se trompe pas" simply becomes a vulgar way of saying "c'est à la voix de l'instinct que les étourneaux obéissent."

A similar point is made, in anatomical code, in P3 and P4, through the metaphor of a hybrid mythical being, the man with a pelican's head. In the previous stanza Lautréamont had tried to reassure the reader that the logic of his narrative is not inconceivable, and he cited as an example one of the wonders of modern science: "Eh quoi, n'est-on pas parvenu à greffer sur le dos d'un rat vivant la queue détachée du corps d'un autre rat?" (p. 189). (The editor of the Pléiade edition tells us [p. 1132] that such an operation was described very precisely in La Revue des deux mondes of 1 July 1868.) This scientific procedure can be applied to literature, since the description of the transplanted pelican's head is itself a transplant from an encyclopedia. But, unlike the original context, in which the term precedes its definition, the words "tête de pelican" appear after the description, like the word to be guessed in a riddle or a crossword puzzle, the space between the formulation of the enigma and its solution (about thirty lines further down) being filled with an interior monologue that proceeds, by elimination, through a series of negative statements (\(x n'\text{était pas } y\)) until, out of four possible types of birds, there is only one left.

Once he has become conscious of the fact that his undertaking requires the text that is being written to include, within itself, texts that are already written elsewhere, Lautréamont simultaneously puts the theory into practice by telling the reader, through a plagiarized article, that his developments are inclusive. From then on the circular motion accelerates, and the text begins to incorporate, not just paragraphs from other books, but as many sentences as possible, and ever more closely together—which is what happens in the beau comme comparisons that provide the context for P6: all the vehicles, except the last one, have a recognizably nonliterary origin (the third is even given as a quotation), but they are assimilated into a literary framework (the genre chant) through the aesthetic judgment beau comme, which is the center, the "point aimanté," of the formal cyclone.

Syntactically and semantically Lautréamont's borrowed descriptions blend into his own text. Yet lexically they are marked enough to prompt scholars to go to the reference rooms of libraries in order to search for sources. And, because the conditions of reading are different, it would appear that the more similar the surface texts are, the greater is the change in their meanings. The integration of the encyclopedia articles into the poetic text makes it possible to produce an exegetical discourse about them. Thus, Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei are able to write:

Le cinquième Chant, scientifiquement, systématiquement, va développer les aspects de ce retour cyclique. Dans la première strophe, nous trouvons une sorte de théorie mathématique de l'obsession, exposée au moyen de la remarquable description du vol des étourneaux.
... Il s'agit d'un mouvement suivant une courbe du quatrième degré, c'est-à-dire non pas une courbe, mais un groupe de courbes, semblable, si nous le simplifions, à celui de la roue d'une voiture. Tous les petits points de la roue (excepté le centre) décrivent une cycloïde: ils reviennent à leur position première tout en étant, pendant ce temps, entraînés par le déplacement de la voiture, lequel est fonction des mouvements particuliers. Par exemple, le point de la roue qui touche terre à un moment donné, s'élève, puis s'abaisse et touche terre à nouveau, tandis que la voiture avance d'une distance égale à la longueur de la circonférence décrite.

... Ce mouvement possède donc la caractéristique de reproduire, après un déplacement en avant, les positions précédemment occupées par les différents points de l'ensemble. C'est l'image même du mécanisme de l'obsession cyclique.¹²

Unlike Maurice Viroux, I am quoting this interpretation not to ridicule it (I tend to agree with it) but to suggest that this type of explication could not, or at least would not, have been generated by the same description in its encyclopedia context. In a broader perspective, we may consider the question of the validity of plagiarism as a creative technique for the global meaning of Maldoror's message. It seems to me that the criterion of originality, even if it were not illusory to begin with, can apply only to an author who presents a work as his own product. But as far as Lautréamont is concerned, it is not really relevant to speak of plagiarism, since there is no plagiarizer. "Le Comte de Lautréamont" was not a human being of flesh and blood. The name's reference is not Isidore Ducasse but Eugène Sue's Latréaumont and the historical character who is the subject of Sue's novel. It is a name used simply to fill the slot for an author's name on the title page of a book. The knowledge that Lautréamont was Isidore Ducasse's pseudonym did not reach the general public until the 1890 edition of Les Chants, when the fact was revealed in Léon Genonceaux's preface. The first chant had even been published twice anonymously before the first complete edition. Ducasse, the author of Poésies I and II, had done his best to erase his biography when he wrote Lautréamont's Chants de Maldoror. In other words, that text is rather like Dr. Chenu's Encyclopédie d'histoire naturelle, containing the knowledge of our culture, circular in composition and consisting of other people's contributions (the bird articles were written by Guénéau de Montbeillard, who used the material of his collaborator Buffon), so that the question of literary property is, in any case, very nebulous. Written from an Encyclopédie d'histoire naturelle, Les Chants de Maldoror is actually an Encyclopédie d'histoires surnaturelles. Its signature is a name that has no substance, a mask, a persona. Lautréamont is literally a self-made man of (purloined) letters. His text, through the incorporation of texts around it, is a self-centered, narcissistic artifact. And, like all personae, or personalities, it is made up of fragments stolen from others.

But beyond the question of the logic of plagiarism within the global meaning of Lautréamont's work, the transposition of these articles helps to explain the
process of the poetization of nonliterary texts. The literariness of a message, i.e., the specific quality by which it imposes itself as an artistic text on the reader's perception, is not limited to a particular formal arrangement of its internal features. The contextual framing of a statement contributes as much to its poeticalness as does Jakobson's syntagmatic projection of linguistic equivalences. The Jakobsonian poetic function is obviously an important element of aesthetic verbal sequences, especially in cases of phonological repetitions of the "I like Ike" type. When we come to less noticeable features, however, similarities and parallelisms can be found in just about any text. The principle of equivalence cannot really be restricted to intrinsic phonological, morphological, or grammatical components. The paradigm from which the equivalences are selected is one of sentences and paragraphs, and these combine with the existing sentences and paragraphs to make up the whole discourse. Any text can indeed become literary, but only if it is placed in a context where its literal meaning is so blurred that the reader has to find a significance that can be justified in terms of literary coherence.

3. See Maurice Viroux, "Lautréamont et le Dr Chenu," *Mercure de France* 1070 (December 1952): 632-42. For the texts of both Lautréamont's plagiarisms and the "original" passages in *L'Encyclopédie d'histoire naturelle du Dr Chenu*, consult the appendix at the end of this study.
14. See, for example, Jonathan Culler’s Jakobsonian analysis of a page from Jakobson’s *Questions de poétique*, in *Structuralist Poetics* (London: RKP, 1975), pp. 63–64.

APPENDIX

*Les Chants de Maldoror*  
*Cours de Maldoror*  

**Chant 5, stanza 1**

P1 *Les bandes d'etourneaux* ont une manière de voler qui leur est propre, et semble soumise à une tactique uniforme et régulière, telle que serait celle d’une troupe disciplinée, obéissant avec précision à la voix d’un seul chef. C’est à la voix de l’instinct que les étourneaux obéissent, et leur instinct les porte à se rapprocher toujours du centre du peloton, tandis que la rapidité de leur vol les emporte sans cesse au-delà; en sorte que cette multitude d’oiseaux, ainsi réunis par une tendance commune vers le même point *aimanté*, allant et venant sans cesse, circulant et se croisant en tous sens, forme une espèce de tourbillon fort agité, dont la masse entière, sans suivre de direction bien certaine, paraît avoir un mouvement général d’évolution sur elle-même, résultant des mouvements particuliers de circulation propres à chacune de ses parties, et dans lequel le centre, tendant perpétuellement à se développer, mais sans cesse pressé, repoussé par l’effort contraire des lignes environnantes qui pèsent sur lui, est constamment plus serré qu’aucune de ces lignes, lesquelles le sont elles-mêmes d’autant plus, qu’elles sont plus voisines du centre.

**Chant 5, stanza 2**

P2 *Les uns, tels que les stercoraires, oiseaux inquiets comme s’ils étaient toujours affamés, se plaisent dans les mers qui baignent les deux pôles, et n’avancent qu’accidentellement dans les zones tempérées, ainsi je n’étais pas tranquille, et je...* Les chaises se plaisent dans les mers qui baignent les deux pôles, et n’avancent qu’accidentellement dans les zones tempérées, ainsi je n’étais pas tranquille, et je...
portais mes jambes en avant avec beaucoup de lenteur. Mais qu'était-ce donc que la substance corporelle vers laquelle

P3 j'avançais? Je savais que [la famille des pelicaninés comprend quatre genres distincts: le fou, le pélican, le cormoran, la frégate.] La forme grisiâtre qui m'apparaissait n'était pas un fou. Le bloc plastique que j'apercevais n'était pas une frégate. La chair cristallisée que j'observais n'était pas un cormoran. Je le voyais maintenant, l'homme à l'encéphale dépourvu de protubérance annulaire. Je recherchais vaguement, dans les replis de ma mémoire, dans quelle contrée torride ou glacée

P4 j'avais déjà remarqué [ce bec très-long, large, convexe, en voûte, à arête marquée, onguiculée, renflée et très-crochue à son extrémité; ces bords dentelés, droits; cette mandibule inférieure, à branches séparées jusqu'au-dessus de la pointe; cet intervalle rempli par une peau membraneuse; cette large poche, jaune et sacciforme, occupant toute la gorge et pouvant se distendre considérablement; et ces narines très étroites, longitudinales, presque imperceptibles, creusées dans un sillon basal!] [P. 191]

Cette famille [des Pélicaninés] n'est que la reproduction de celle des Pélicans de Cuvier et Lesson, qui y comprenaient les genres: 1° Fou . . . 2° Pélican . . . 3° Cormoran . . . 4° Frégate. [Oiseaux, Sixième partie (1854), p. 261]

Chant 5, stanza 6

P5 Le milan royal a les ailes proportionnellement plus longues que les buses, et le vol bien plus aisé: aussi passe-t-il sa vie dans l'air. Il ne se repose presque jamais et parcourt chaque jour des espaces immenses; et ce grand mouvement n'est point un exercice de chasse, ni poursuite de proie, ni même de découverte; car, il ne chasse pas; mais, il semble que le vol soit son état naturel, sa favorite situation. L'on ne peut s'empêcher d'admirer la manière dont il l'exécute. Ses ailes longues et étroites paraissent immobiles; c'est la queue qui croit diriger toutes les évolutions, et la

Il a [dit Buffon du Milan royal] les ailes proportionnellement plus longues, que les Buses, et le vol bien plus aisé: aussi passe-t-il sa vie dans l'air. Il ne se repose presque jamais et parcourt chaque jour des espaces immenses; et ce grand mouvement n'est point un exercice de chasse ni de poursuite de proie, ni même de découverte, car il ne chasse pas; mais il semble que le vol soit son état naturel, sa situation favorite. L'on ne peut s'empêcher d'admirer la manière dont il l'exécute. Ses ailes longues et étroites paraissent immobiles; c'est la queue qui semble diriger toutes ses évolu-
queue ne se trompe pas: elle agit sans cesse. Il s'élève sans effort; il s'abaisse comme s'il glissait sur un plan incliné; il semble plutôt nager que voler; il précipite sa course, il la ralentit, s'arrête, et reste comme suspendu ou fixé à la même place, pendant des heures entières. L'on ne peut s'apercevoir d'aucun mouvement dans ses ailes: [P. 208]

Chant 6, stanza 6

ou encore, comme la caroncule charnue, de forme conique, sillonnée par des rides transversales assez profondes, qui s'élève sur la base du bec supérieur du dindon; [P. 235]

Sur la base du bec supérieur s'élève une caroncule charnue, de forme conique, et sillonnée par des rides transversales assez profondes. [Oiseaux, Sixième partie (1854), p. 100]