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H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 164

Andrea S. Thomas, *Lautréamont, Subject to Interpretation*. Amsterdam-New York: Brill, Faux Titre 403, 2015. 252 pages. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. ISBN 978-90-420-3925-4; \$77.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-94-012-1207-6 (E-Book).

Review by Damian Catani, Birkbeck, University of London.

The late nineteenth-century poet Isidore Ducasse, more commonly known by his alluring pseudonym le comte de Lautréamont, has generated a plethora of critical responses as diverse, provocative, and contradictory as the two works that forged his controversial but singular reputation: his powerfully transgressive homage to evil and revolt, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, and the more philosophically measured, but equally subversive, *Poésies*. In her well conceived, original, and timely book Andrea S. Thomas meticulously retraces Lautréamont's reception from the initial publication by Albert Lacroix of the first Canto of *Les Chants* in 1869, via the Belgian Symbolists who wrote for the journal *La Jeune Belgique* in the 1890s, the Surrealists in the 1920s and '30s, the *Tel Quel* poststructuralists of the 1960s and composer John Cage in the early 1970s. She convincingly demonstrates that all too often, Lautréamont has not so much been re-interpreted, as *re-appropriated* by his critics and admirers—to say nothing of his detractors—in ways that primarily serve their own personal, theoretical and commercial interests. She pithily encapsulates this paradox thus: “every portrait of Lautréamont is to varying degrees a self-portrait” (p. 23).

Her lucid introduction identifies two main reasons for the considerable artistic license taken by those who have moulded Lautréamont according to their own image. The first is the scarcity of accurate biographical information about his life, owing to his obscure birth in a far away country (Uruguay) and his untimely death in Paris aged only twenty-four in November 1870. Both the poet and the work have thus become imbued with an air of mystery that makes it easy to align him with other “tragic geniuses” and “outcasts” who died too young, such as his fellow rebel-poet and contemporary Arthur Rimbaud, or more recently, cult Rock singer Kurt Cobain. The second reason is that his works are “interpretatively malleable” (p. 15): their multiple layers of subversive intertextual irony lend them an elusive, ambivalent quality that, even today, continues to defy standard generic categorization. Both the mystique of the man and polyvalence of the text thus make “authorial intention,” that thorny literary paradigm first problematized by Barthes, extremely difficult, if not impossible, to pin down.

If textual authority cannot satisfactorily be located in the writer, especially Lautréamont, then it naturally follows that it resides with, and is often usurped by, his readers. But by readers, Thomas refers not only to critics and fellow writers, but also Lautréamont's editors and publishers (the French word “éditeur” encapsulating both meanings). Her detailed analysis of the editor's power to determine the reception of Lautréamont is perhaps her book's greatest strength. In an early section wittily entitled “Lautréamontage,” she begins with the visual, rather than textual means by which this early reception was determined: specifically, the portrait. Given that only his first editor and publisher, Albert Lacroix, had met him and no photographic or reliable portrait of the writer survived, the only basis for “portraits” were second-hand verbal descriptions and speculative expectations of what he looked like.

Renowned artists such as Félix Vallotton thus essentially had free rein to produce entirely imaginary depictions of the poet that were exclusively premised on the Romantic fallacy of the melancholy artist and “poète maudit” who resembled Edgar Allen Poe. Such portraits, in turn, spawned further imaginary depictions by other artists (such as Enrique Ochoa in 1918), consolidating the prevailing perception and enduring image of Lautréamont as a tragic and eccentric genius. Simply put, the real-life individual Isidore Ducasse was transformed into artistic “versions” of the literary persona Lautréamont.

This account of visual “invention” segues neatly into chapter one, which reminds us of the largely forgotten role played by the *Jeune Belgique* poets of the 1890s in their own literary construction of Lautréamont, their genuine admiration of his writing being matched only by their opportunistic capitalization on his marginal status as a means of penetrating the equally marginal, but prestigious Parisian Symbolist circles whose approval they avidly sought. Despite Baudelaire’s scathing comments on the country in the 1860s, Belgium offered a liberal safe haven to more subversive French literary outcasts who sought publishing outlets denied them by the strict censorship laws of their home country. But if the French gravitated towards the Belgians, the opposite was equally true, Lautréamont proving to be instrumental in this shift when *La Jeune Belgique* published Stanza 11 from Canto I, the Goethe-inspired depiction of a bourgeois family gathered around a lamp. By manipulating this stanza and assimilating it to a mystical type of Nordic symbolism, *La Jeune Belgique* was implicitly appealing to the sensibilities of the French Symbolists with whom they wished to be associated.

This strategy had the desired effect, since their publication caught the eye of key players on the Parisian cultural scene, initiating a fierce “battle of interpretations” (p. 52) between prominent Symbolist Remy de Gourmont who defended Lautréamont’s calculated genius, original metaphors and parody against the arch-Catholic, anti-Symbolist Léon Bloy’s condemnation of his pessimism, debilitating madness, and obscenity. Bloy was the main casualty in this debate, his opposition to Lautréamont leading to his complete ostracization by the literary avant-garde. Thus, Lautréamont’s posthumous reputation was not only elaborately constructed by other writers, but also acquired sufficient power to make or break literary careers. Building on the work of critic Maurice Saillet, Thomas also provides a welcome corrective to the orthodox view that Lautréamont was exclusively discovered and invented by the Surrealists, when in fact the Belgian Symbolists had preceded them by over three decades.

Another equally important but forgotten figure, and the subject of chapter two, is the man who was first responsible for *selling* as well as publishing *Les Chants de Maldoror* in 1890, the Belgian-born, but Paris-based Léon Genonceaux. A figure as elusive and controversial as Isidore Ducasse himself, Genonceaux had already gained quite the reputation for endorsing freedom of expression in his “updating of disreputable works with new and shocking illustrations to improve their sales” (p. 79). So far as *Les Chants* was concerned, Genonceaux cleverly bypassed the strict French censors by charging a high price (so as to restrict readership) and providing a “cloaked yet graphic frontispiece to safeguard his edition” (p. 80). Yet it is what Thomas calls his prefatory “pseudo-biography” that had the biggest influence on the invention of yet another version of Lautréamont: this time, a dignified martyr-figure, as opposed to Léon Bloy’s depraved madman. In accordance with Genette’s notion that the preface is a paratext that can overshadow the literary text, Genonceaux’s preface was (inaccurately) to influence all subsequent Lautréamont biographies for years to come. Genonceaux’s positive valorisation was further boosted by engraver José Roy’s frontispiece, depicting a man in God’s bordello (Canto III, 5), whose skin, like clothing, “has become a symbol of dignity” (p. 81). Genonceaux further “authenticates” his preface by invoking a graphologist to analyse Ducasse’s handwriting, with a view to “proving” his sanity and implacably logical caste of mind.

Chapter three shows how Breton and Soupault resumed this fierce territorial battle for Lautréamont’s legacy from 1920 onwards, culminating in Breton’s inclusion of him in the First and Second Surrealist manifestoes of 1924 and 1929. Their particular praise was reserved for the *Poésies*, rather than the *Chants*, because they saw in the former’s distortion of classical maxims a precursor to their own *creative*

subversion, as opposed to the absolute negation of Dada, for whom there could be no precursors. Lautréamont, then, became a strategic pawn, co-opted by the Surrealists as a means of differentiating themselves from a similar, but rival avant-garde movement. More pragmatically, however, this Surrealist privileging of the *Poésies*, was also the result of a bitterly contested publishing war: Blaise Cendrars published *Les Chants* with *La Sirène* in 1920 before his arch-enemy Breton could do so with *Sans Pareil*; so Breton quickly published an edition of *Poésies*, even though an edition had already been announced by *La Sirène*.

Turning to the Surrealism of the 1930s, chapter four is perhaps the most suggestive of Thomas's study. It subtly shows how Dalí in 1934 and The Surrealist movement in 1938 further enriched and reoriented the reception of Lautréamont's works via the visual images of eminent artists who were both central and peripheral to the movement. It quickly becomes apparent that selected extracts from Lautréamont's *Chants* merely served as a springboard for the artist in question to produce an alternative reality that corresponded to his own aesthetic aims or fantasies. Thus for Dalí, Lautréamont's famous passage on the sewing machine and umbrella are mere pretexts to illustrate what he calls his "paranoid-critical method." Dalí does broadly fulfil the Surrealist aim to renounce mimetic representation for a purely internal model for art, but his excessive artistic individualism and unruly personality rendered him, according to Breton, a real threat to his absolute control over Lautréamont's legacy and the future direction of Surrealist aesthetics. It is ironic, then, that it should be an artist who was only peripheral to Parisian Surrealism, René Magritte, who in Thomas's estimation, unwittingly comes closest to Lautréamont's style (his creation of surprise) in his famous 1934 painting *Le Viol*.

The divisive, domineering figure of André Breton unsurprisingly casts the longest shadow over the Lautréamont of the 1920s and '30s, his motives for re-appropriating him, perhaps more than any other key player, paradoxically emerging as both self-serving and noble. In both chapters three and four, Breton often comes across as an insufferably self-important tyrant, the sole, self-appointed guardian of Lautréamont's legacy, jealously protecting it like a mother hen from any perceived attempt to steer it away from strictly Surrealist aims, ruthlessly blacklisting all those who had the audacity to propagate their own "version" of Lautréamont (Cendrars, Soupault, Dalí). Neither was Breton above producing highly profitable new editions of Lautréamont's work, while at the same time disingenuously denouncing the vulgar venality of others, who, outside Surrealist circles, dared to do the same. And yet, one can also detect in Breton a genuinely heartfelt sense of kinship with Lautréamont, almost to the point of obsession, an overwhelming anxiety to cosset and rehabilitate the one writer who, even more than the over-mythologised Rimbaud, truly inspired and resonated with his Surrealist credo.

Shifting its primary focus from artists to editors, chapter five is illuminating in two respects: first, it weighs up the strengths and weaknesses of the two belated Pléiade editions of Lautréamont's works by Pierre-Olivier Walzer (1970) and Jean-Luc Steinmetz (1990, revised 2009); secondly, in so doing it retraces the origins of editorial practice in France as well as the Pléiade itself, which did not specifically target an erudite and academic, as opposed to popular and uninformed readership until the 1950s and 1960s. Paving the way for the Pléiade we know today, Thomas usefully charts the relatively recent introduction of editing as a rigorous scholarly pursuit from Karl Lachmann onwards. She makes the subtle point that the editorial practices of Walzer's 1970 edition still bear the imprint of the genealogical approach to editing (where the writing *process* is prioritized over the finished work through a detailed comparison of the various stages of its textual production), as well as structuralism (where the internal logic and coherence of a text is sought) and was thus already out of step with the critical trend of poststructuralism represented by *Tel Quel*, which valorized, above all, the subversive potential of Lautréamont's intertextuality.

This difference is why Walzer's tendency merely to classify Lautréamont's sources and to "correct" what he saw as grammatical incongruities was regarded as heresy by the likes of Marcelin Pleynet, who, on the contrary, sought to cultivate in readers an awareness of Lautréamont's "mistakes" as deliberate

examples of his playful irony. In addition to its penetrating insights into the reception of Lautréamont, this chapter also raises two important ethical questions that pertain to literature more generally: first, at what point does the role of the editor become too interventionist and normalizing; and secondly, what exactly constitutes the French literary canon and adequate forms of cultural consecration? Thomas challenges the prevailing view that the latter question has satisfactorily been answered by the reassuringly meticulous and up-to-date production of La Pléiade: the case of Lautréamont, however, suggests that this venerable publication has not always provided the national rubber-stamp of excellence that we assume.

Chapter six, on *Tel Quel*, revisits largely familiar arguments about how Pleynet, Sollers and Kristeva both admired and incorporated Lautréamont's irony and intertextuality within their own critical discourses, thereby paying homage, via imitation, to his subversive spirit of revolt. Sollers, for instance, deliberately includes citations without acknowledging their sources, thereby wickedly frustrating his readers in the same manner as Lautréamont, whose long-suffering critics and editors have struggled to retrace his own unattributed citations. Kristeva's critique frequently deploys mathematical symbols, both as a nod to Lautréamont's own interest in mathematics and to flag up, by way of counterpoint, the sheer artifice of standard literary discourse. Given that, elsewhere in her study, Thomas successfully interweaves cultural context with textual analysis, it is surprising that she does not say more about Kristeva's comparison of the political anarchism of the 1880s and 1890s with the textual anarchism of the Symbolists, mediated via such figures as Félix Fénéon. But although this is, relatively speaking, the book's weakest chapter, it does offer an effective critique of how the *Tel Quel* group consciously sought to differentiate itself from the Surrealists: where the latter praised Lautréamont's poetry as a machine that replaced old ways of thinking, *Tel Quel* wished to examine how this machine worked by investigating the "power of the mechanics of language itself" (p. 190).

The book ends on a high note, this time with a musical, as opposed to textual or visual version of Lautréamont: namely, John Cage's 1971 composition *Les Chants de Maldoror pulvérisés par l'assistance même*, which was performed only once, in 1982. Cage's selective shattering of Lautréamont's syntax, his erasure and de-contextualization of his text, which is then subjected to audience scrutiny, selection, and participation as an integral part of each performance, produce a constantly shifting artistic effect of arbitrariness, distortion and elusiveness that constitutes a kind of mise en abyme of the fragmented style and creative reception of Lautréamont's work itself.

All told, Thomas has produced an engagingly written, ground-breaking work that is bolstered by an apposite selection of attractive illustrations. It raises fundamental questions about the complex power dynamics between writers, artists, composers, editors, and publishers in the production of textual authority and is likely to remain for some time as the "*point de référence*" for any scholar seeking to understand the history of Lautréamont reception. It leaves no stone unturned in its sharp analysis of the manifold ways in which Lautréamont has been co-opted and regularly re-invented by a succession of influential cultural players, each of whom, to varying degrees, has been propelled by an unlikely combination of selfless admiration and hard-nosed self-interest, a combination that is every bit as intriguing and contradictory as the man himself.

Damian Catani  
Birkbeck, University of London  
[d.catani@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:d.catani@bbk.ac.uk)

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ISSN 1553-9172