

***THE DYNAMICS OF IMAGINATION AND THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE:
SCIENCE AND NATURE AS METAPHOR IN BACHELARD'S READING OF
LAUTRÉAMONT'S MALDOROR***

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Abstract

“Imagination is always considered to be the faculty of forming images. But, it is rather the faculty of deforming images, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images; it is especially the faculty of changing images.”

Gaston Bachelard

This essay presents an investigation of Bachelard's writings on the poetic imagination and reverie as an attempt to abolish the frontiers of internal and external worlds. As he writes in *Instant Poétique et Instant Métaphysique* ‘Poetry should give us both a view of the world and the secret of a soul, a being and objects at one and the same time.’ Bachelard interprets Lautréamont's use of metaphor in *Maldoror* as an example of ‘projected poetry’. A situation in which metaphors evoke one another and in the poetic mind become a syntax of metaphors that distort images and provide fresh interpretations of science and nature. In the writing of Lautréamont, Bachelard finds not the insane ramblings of a disturbed mind but an example of the dynamic imagination at work. Using Bachelard's reading of Lautréamont as a platform, this paper will show how the literary imagination evaporates the steadfast notions of science and nature as centred truths by changing their imagery through the dynamic imagination until they become arbitrary paradigms of thought.

We have only to speak about nature to think that we are being objective. But, because we choose it in the first place, nature reveals more about us than we do about it. This statement, a reworking of Bachelard's opening lines of ‘The Psychoanalysis of Fire’, can be taken as the main thrust of phenomenology; that our perception of the natural world should first consider not nature itself but how the objects of nature are understood from

within. Phenomenology brackets off the external world so that we may first understand how our consciousness interacts with the objects of the external world.

Although phenomenology has been deconstructed through poststructuralist critiques in the late nineteen sixties, which unravelled all ideas of stable foundations to our representation and understanding of the world; revealing a slippery, disseminating, rhizomatic existence without any full or present meaning. However, it still remains 'common sense' after all this poststructuralist debate to consider our basic ideas concerning nature as having been formed through scientific investigation in a search to reveal irrefutable truths. In the construction of our theories of nature, we form principles that have all the appearance of true knowledge. But, our knowledge, our scientific search, is flawed because this quest for fundamental truth is lost in the gap between immediate and mediated experience. This paper will suggest that it is not enough simply to imply that science and nature are human, all too human, inventions, interpretations of existence, or that the thing-in-itself is forever beyond our grasp. This is far too easy to say and quite misleading on so many levels. What this essay will explore though an investigation of Bachelard's reading of Lautréamont's *Maldoror*, is that it is not the finding of a truth to nature that is important but rather the act of the scientific search itself, a scientific search that is intrinsically linked to the poetic and the dynamic imagination. It is this act that can provide infinite points of discussion concerning nature, not a single truth but an ever-expanding universe.

The point of departure for this discussion is the poetic novel *Maldoror* written in six cantos between 1868 and 1870 by Le Comte De Lautréamont the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse. This strange and haunting novel presents the reader with an unlimited view of existence through the juxtaposition of surprising and unfamiliar words and phrases, which destroy the conventional laws of association and logic, and cause objects to shriek at finding themselves together. The most famous of these being, "The chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a Sewing machine and an umbrella." A line referred to by Andre Breton as a perfect example of surrealist writing.

Maldoror is a manifesto in poetic prose of how our perception of the world need not be limited by tradition, method, cliché or morality. Through his poetic use of language, Lautréamont expands our universe, and refuses to observe nature as fixed or science as the search for truth. Rather in Maldoror, nature becomes a point of discussion upon a fluid and chaotic universe and science when linked to poetry becomes a way to expand our view of existence.

Maldoror shocks the reader not because it is immoral, which from a liberal judgment it is in the way that it transgresses the law and all that is stated to be heroic and good; but rather it shocks the reader because it creates new laws, new ways of perceiving nature and radically new points of discussion in the way we perceive our existence and the methods we use to comprehend our worlds. The question that Lautréamont asks of the reader in Maldoror is why if the world can be described and viewed in an infinite variety of ways, do we choose to make it so dull? Why do we limit and restrict our mode of constructing and creating our lives by binding them to dead metaphor, unsophisticated dialectics and untested science. Lautréamont poses the question in Maldoror, is this because of human weakness; is it through fear, or more worryingly is it because of a human lack of imagination?

So how can a novel that appears to revel in the pleasures of cruelty, paedophilia, necrophilia, rape, murder, debauchery, blasphemy, self-mutilation and the powers of evil, to name only a few of its themes, create a new perspective of the world? I will address this question in the conclusion of this paper but for those of you have not read Maldoror I will not spoil your enjoyment but simply tell you that it is the tale of a fallen angel, Maldoror who resembles Milton's archangel Satan, if Maldoror had not been made human, all too human for his own liking and for his own good. After his fall from heaven and suffering from amnesia, Maldoror finds himself in the body of a man trapped in mortality yet intensely seeking the infinite.

Like the dogs, I too feel the longing for the infinite...I cannot, cannot satisfy this need! I am son of man and woman, so they tell me. That astounds me...I thought myself more!

Maldoror is a dark, brooding, cloaked figure riding on horseback in the tradition of the romantic hero but he is no Mr Rochester, he is the embodiment of pure evil, bringing a trail of death, destruction, and ill luck to whomever he chooses and to whomever he passes. Maldoror in his search for a way out of humanity transforms into the wild beasts of nature such as hogs, sharks, eagles, and octopi where he feels far more at ease without the fetters of human rationality and morality. The control over this process of metamorphosis is in the hands of the Creator, a flawed and fallen God who frequents brothels and murders innocent men, a creator who mocks Maldoror by continually returning him to human form. Yet throughout the novel Lautréamont presents the self as little more than a game, which mocks the dying tradition of Romanticism and its cornerstone of subjective truth. Lautréamont's position as author is unstable, partly because he positions himself as an unreliable narrator in the text who is both intrusive yet strangely invisible.

The biographical information concerning life of the author of Maldoror is scant at best. Scholars have uncovered that he was born in Uruguay in 1846, the son of a French consular and that he returned to France alone aged twelve to attend boarding school where he was to die alone and unrecognised during the Paris Commune of 1870. There are no photographs of Ducasse and few records of his life exist, but there have been attempts to fictionalise his existence, not least of these by the Surrealists who re-discovered in Lautréamont's writing the predecessor to own their cause. Yet, this lack of biographical detail is fitting for an author who predicts his own death and anonymity within his writing, I know my annihilation will be total...I will leave no memoirs.

Lautréamont is a poet who challenges the author as genius and originator, seeing the derivative nature of literature as part of his art. As he writes in his only other published work *Poésies*, "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it." And in the same work he calls to each individual to consider themselves poets with the words that would inspire both Guy Debord and the author of the *Revolution of Everyday Life*, Raoul Vanigem, almost 80 years later, "Poetry must be made by all. Not by the one."

The name Lautréamont was in all probability taken by Ducasse from the central character in Eugene Sue's novel of the same name that was published in 1838. The reason for this is two-fold; first, to protect his anonymity, for the author of such a controversial and blasphemous novel as *Maldoror* was sure to attract unwanted attention from the agents of the State in late 1860s Paris. And secondly, this self-conferred nobility, *The Comte de Lautréamont*, positions the writer alongside Lord Byron and *The Marquis de Sade* in a symbolic trinity of writers who each defy God and social taboo while remaining superior yet outsiders of their societies. However, unlike Sade whose work is the attempt to transgress nature, to overcome its limits, Lautréamont's *Maldoror* is an attempt to transgress the imposed restrictions of language and to violate the laws of metaphor, form and genre. Lautréamont achieves this by giving language back its youthfulness, rejuvenating the word, and by implication our worlds. His work is an attempt to widen the scope of language and restore its intensity, not simply by imagining that he can transcend the language and move beyond the limits of existing language and metaphors but by re-appropriating those aspects of language which already exist but have been hidden under cliché and common knowledge, by twisting and transforming tropes and playing with the reader's expectations. This can be seen in the title of the novel in the way that it falls between the meanings of both good and evil. *Mal*: suggests pain, harm, sickness, and evil whereas *D'or* is gold that precious substance so valued by man. It is this deliberate falling between boundaries that has attracted so many readers to the novel.

Maldoror is a work of counter-fiction, intentionally crossing and falling between genres. It challenges the linear narrative structure of the traditional novel by breaking free from accepted forms. It is a work of both poetic prose and prose poetry, but reads like a work of gothic fantasy while incorporating aspects of both horror and humour. It satirises serial fiction and includes a mini thirty-page novel in canto six which undermines the construction of conventional novelistic form and exposes its affectation.

Mervyn the hero of this short novel is executed in a violent and symbolic fashion. His hands tied behind his back and a length of rope tied to his feet and fixed to a fifty-foot high column on which he stands. God in the form of a rhinoceros attempts rather pathetically to save Mervyn from his fate but is fatally wounded from the careful aim of

Maldoror revolver. At the same moment as Gods demise Maldoror pushes the young hero to his death. Mervyn's body is released and speeds through the air followed by the rope like a comet with its flaming tail, before splattering against the dome of the literary Pantheon. This image is an unmistakable symbol of the death of the nineteenth century novel of social and psychological realism, brutally murdered and left to rot without a civil memorial. And in the last lines of the book Lautréamont urges us to 'go and see for yourself; if you are loathed to believe me.' This image is not the absolute death of fiction or the novel because it represents the possibility of the novels re-birth; a resurrection that was to take place in the early 20th century in the writing of James Joyce and other avant-garde novelists. Yet, Maldoror is not simply a plea for the myth of avant-garde originality and revolution but rather a song to an on-going aesthetics of discussion and recreation. It is a novel that rejects the myth of originality by including within its pages several aspects of plagiarism, such as whole sections detoured from Dr. Chenu's Encyclopaedia of Natural History as well as lines and ideas taken from Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Homer, Baudelaire and The Bible.

Lautréamont exploits literary forms and modes of genre in the novel, but it is his use of metaphor that is of most interest to us here, especially the way in which it embodies what the French physicist, philosopher, and poet, Gaston Bachelard terms the Dynamic Imagination. Bachelard writes: "Imagination is always considered to be the faculty of forming images. But, it is rather the faculty of deforming images, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images; it is especially the faculty of changing images."

Bachelard's phenomenological approach endeavours to find some common ground between science and poetry and his writings on the poetic imagination and reverie in such books as The Poetics of Space, The Psychoanalysis of Fire, The Poetics of Reverie and Lautréamont, sets out to question the frontiers of internal and external worlds. As he writes in a 1939 article entitled 'Instant Poetry and Instant Metaphysics' "Poetry should give us both a view of the world and the secret of a soul, a being and objects at one and the same time." Bachelard sees Lautréamont's use of metaphor in 'Maldoror' as an example of what he terms 'projective poetry', a situation in which the elements of poetic form are distorted by non-sequential creative metaphor, while maintaining a poetic

coherence. One example of this occurs in Canto Five: “The beetle, lovely as the tremor of the hands in alcoholism”

For Bachelard, Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* is a work that offers freedom to the art of metaphor by encouraging the distortion of symbols, similes, and clichés, and by implication enabling them to evoke one another within an evolving poetic form that creates a syntax of poetic metaphors and figures of speech that alter images and provide fresh interpretations of science and nature. In Canto Two Maldoror endeavours to destroy humanity and hatches a plan that will annihilate this evil creature by creating an invisible enemy of super head-lice. Maldoror mates with a female louse creating a vast riving pit of this new destructive species that he transports in the dead of night into the main thoroughfares of every city. Soon, the lice spread throughout the human population and devour their prey from within as Maldoror with angel wings, hovers motionless in the air to view this spectacle.

Maldoror also tells us in Canto Two of his tempestuous affair with a female shark as the pair display their affection for one another by wreaking murderous havoc in the depths of the briny abyss. We are also told the tale of the abandoned stand of God’s hair in Canto three who attempts to commit suicide after falling from the creator’s head and left trapped in a brothel. The existential angst the hair feels at his loss of faith creates a fantastic image that is not merely absurd and non-sequential but also comic and poignant.

In the fourth canto Maldoror dreams that he has entered the body of a hog and can behave unhindered by the restrictions of human morality. The distance between dream and waking life in the novel is so close at times they often constantly overlap one another leaving the reader intentionally confused.

These images and allegories transform the fixed concepts of the human condition; they challenge humanist clichés that position us as causal creatures with self-knowledge who exists at the centre of our world and ourselves. For Lautréamont humanity is a debilitating category that binds the creative chaotic possibilities of existence to the limiting myths of rationality, morality, and productivity.

Bachelard sees a unique quality in Lautréamont's distortion of imagery in which the steadfast notions of science, and nature begins to evaporate. By altering our perception of certain images, the poets dynamic imagination can transform our methods of science and our view of nature so that they become not only arbitrary paradigms of thought but creative points of discussion. We can see this in Lautréamont use of the image of the Old Ocean, a metaphor that expresses several ideas in one image including the sublime the vastness of knowledge.

Old Ocean ... your moral magnitude, image of the infinite, vast as the philosopher's meditation, woman's love, the heavenly beauty of a bird, or the musing of a poet. You are more beautiful than the night. Answer me, ocean, do you want to be my brother...

During six pages of the First Canto, Maldoror struggles with the Old Ocean relating its vastness to man's infinite and horizon-less search for knowledge – a metaphor that represents Maldoror's Faustian struggle between finite and infinite existence where he finds it impossible to grasp the enormity of knowledge while desiring absolute knowledge, to own and have the power to control knowledge and even to be related to knowledge as part of its kin. Eventually, Maldoror begins to see the Ocean as not something he can own or know but as a changing chaotic aspect of his own psyche, nothing more and nothing less than a point of discussion.

Existence in Maldoror is represented as a mad jumble of bad metaphor and cliché, but the possibilities of these clichés are endless, especially if seen poetically without the demand for truth and the psychotic desire to own knowledge. In some ways this is close to the Romantic ideas of Kant, Schelling, and Coleridge who can be read as suggesting that through poetry and art one can express a feeling of the sublime nature of existence that can forge a link between mind and nature, subject, and object. Yet, Lautréamont is far closer to a post-Structuralist position in the way he removes the central point of romantic thinking, the 'I', the stable thinking ego whose category of mind constructs an image of

its world. In *Maldoror*, an ego exists but it is not fixed and is only restricted by the internal categories of space and time because of a lack of imagination.

In *Maldoror*, subjectivity or rather consciousness is not seen in the way Sartre suggests in *Being and Nothingness*, as always a consciousness of something, that consciousness is not aware of itself but of that elusive metaphysical concept, Being. For Lautréamont consciousness is always consciousness of nothing, a consciousness of chaos, of the nothing-ness of existence. In the pages of *Maldoror*, Lautréamont shows us that imagination can create infinite worlds, which are both frightening and exhilarating. This infinite realm of possibilities reveals to us the genuine character of existential existence and not the existentialism of Sartre that stumbles back upon a reverse Kantian thing-in-itself of seeing the something of existence not in the sublime, or Wordsworthian ‘spots of time’, but in Joycean moments of epiphany such as boredom and nausea which provides us with an immediate access to the ground of existence; consciousness as always consciousness of something. Lautréamont; however, avoids this form of bad faith by seeing the ground of existence as nothing other than perception, a perception that is constructed via the points of discussion provided by science that gives us a view of nature. A science that is not fixed or searching for universal rules but a science like that of Paul Feyerabend and Gaston Bachelard that is closer to myth and poetry than common sense.

Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* creates points of discussion concerning science and nature. His work perceives science as a creative act and not the search for truth and observes nature not as reality but as our perception of an ever-changing world. And in answer to the question, how can a novel that appears to revel in the pleasures of cruelty, necrophilia, murder, and debauchery create a new perspective of the world? The answer lies in Lautréamont’s poetic honesty, which implores the reader to expose their darkest fears and desires and open them out to view instead of burying them under the illusion of morality and good taste.