

Maldoror (Canto II / Stanza 7: The hermaphrodite)

original text in French (1874) by Isidore Lucien Ducasse AKA Comte de Lautréamont  
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text in English:

There, in a flowery grove, the hermaphrodite sleeps a deep, heavy sleep, drenched in his tears. The moon's disc has come clear of the mass of clouds, and its pale beams caress his gentle adolescent face. His features express the most virile energy as well as the grace of a celestial virgin. Nothing about him seems natural, not even the muscles of his body, which clear their way across the harmonious contours of a feminine form. He has one arm curved over his forehead and another leaning against his chest, as if to restrain the beating of a heart closed to all confidences and laden with the heavy burden of an eternal secret. Tired of life and ashamed to walk among beings who do not resemble him, he has given his soul up to despair and wanders alone, like the beggar of the valley.

By what means does he live?

Though he does not realize it, compassionate souls watch over him closely, without him suspecting it, and they will not abandon him: he is so good! He is so resigned! Sometimes, he willingly talks with sensitive people, without touching their hand, and keeps his distance for fear of an imaginary danger. If he is asked why he has taken solitude as his companion, he raises his eyes to the sky, scarcely restraining tears of reproach against Providence; but he does not reply to this tactless question, which fills his eyes, otherwise white as snow, with the redness of the morning rose. If the conversation goes on, he becomes anxious, looks around him in all directions as if trying to flee from an approaching enemy, quickly waves goodbye, and moves away on the wings of his awakening sense of shame to disappear into the forest. He is generally taken for a madman.

One day four masked men, who had been given orders, fell upon him and bound him tightly, so that he could only move his legs. The rough thongs of the whip crashed down on his back as they told him to make his way without delay to the road leading to Bicêtre. He started to smile as the blows rained down on him and spoke to them with such feeling and intelligence of the many human sciences he had studied which indicated great erudition in one who had not yet crossed the threshold of youth, and of the destiny of mankind fully revealing the poetic nobility of his soul, that his attackers, their blood chilled with fear at the act which they had committed, untied his broken limbs, and falling at his knees, begged forgiveness which was granted, and went away, showing signs of a veneration not ordinarily accorded to men.

Since this event, which was much talked about, everyone has guessed his secret, but it seems to be ignored, so as not to increase his suffering; and the government granted him an honorary pension, to make him forget that, for a moment, without prior investigation, they had wanted to introduce him by force into a lunatic asylum. He uses

half of his money; the rest he gives to the poor.

When he sees a man and a woman walking along a path shaded by plane trees, he

feels his body splitting in two, from top to bottom, and each new part going to embrace one of the walkers; but it is only a hallucination, and reason soon takes over again. This is why he does not mix his presence among men or women; for his excessive modesty, which arose with the idea that he is only a monster, prevents him from giving his burning sympathy to anyone. He would consider it self-profanation, and profanation of others. His pride repeats this axiom to him: "Let each remain among his own kind". His pride, I say, because he fears that by sharing his life with a man or a woman he will sooner or later be reproached, as if it were a dreadful crime, for the conformation of his body. So, he shelters behind his self-esteem, offended by this impious supposition, which comes from him alone, and he persists in remaining alone and without consolation amidst his torments.

There in a flowery grove the hermaphrodite sleeps a deep, heavy sleep, drenched in his tears. The birds, awake, gaze with delight at this melancholy figure, through the branches of the trees, and the nightingale will not sing its crystal-toned cavatinas. The wood has become as august as a tomb, with the nocturnal presence of the unfortunate hermaphrodite.

O wanderer, misled by your spirit of adventure which made you leave your father and mother at an early age; by the suffering that thirst caused you in the desert; by your homeland that you may be looking for, after long wanderings as an outlaw in strange lands; by your steed, your faithful friend, who with you has borne exile and the inclemency of the climes which your roaming disposition has brought you through; by the dignity which is given man by journeys through distant lands and unexplored seas, amid the polar ice-floes, or under the torrid desert sun, do not touch with your hand, like a tremor of the breeze, these ringlets of hair on the grounds among the grass. Stand back several steps and you will act more wisely. This hair is sacred; it is the wish of the hermaphrodite himself; he does not want human lips to religiously kiss his hair, perfumed by the mountain breeze, nor his brows, which shines like the stars of the firmament in this instant. But it is better to believe that it is a star itself that has descended from its orbit, crossing space, on that majestic forehead, which it surrounds with its diamond clarity, like a halo.

The night, casting off sadness with its finger, puts on all its charms to celebrate the sleep of this incarnation of modesty, this perfect image of angelic innocence: the rustling of insects is less perceptible. The branches bend their bushy elevation over him, in order to preserve him from the dew, and the breeze, making the strings of his melodious harp resound, sends joyful chords, through universal silence, towards these lowered eyelids, which believe they are watching, motionless, the cadenced concert of suspended worlds. He dreams that he is happy; that his bodily nature has changed; or that, at least, he has flown away on a purple cloud, towards another sphere, inhabited by beings of the same nature as himself. Alas! That his illusion is prolonged until the dawn awakens! He dreams that the flowers dance around him in circles, like huge mad garlands, and permeate him with their sweet perfumes, while he sings a hymn of love, in the arms of a human being of magical beauty. But what his arms are clasping is only twilight mist; and when he awakes, his arms will clasp it no longer.

Do not awaken, hermaphrodite; do not awaken yet, I implore you. Why won't you

believe me? Sleep... Sleep on forever. May your breast rise as you pursue the chimeric hope of happiness, I grant you that; but do not open your eyes. Ah, do not open your eyes! I want to leave you thus, so that I do not have to witness your awakening.

Perhaps one day, with the help of a voluminous book, I will tell your story in moving words, frightened by what it contains, and by the lessons to be drawn from it. So far, I have not been able to do so, for whenever I wished to do so, abundant tears fell on the paper, and my fingers trembled, though it was not from old age. But now I want to have

this courage at last. I am shocked that I have no more nerves than a woman, and that I faint like a little girl every time I think of your great misery. Sleep... sleep on; but do not open your eyes. Ah, do not open your eyes! Farewell, hermaphrodite! I will not fail to pray every day for you (if it were for myself, I would not pray). May peace be with you!