



MALDOROR *and* POEMS

LE COMTE DE LAUTRÉAMONT was the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse, a Frenchman born in Montevideo in 1846. He seems to have taken the name of Lautréamont from the title of a novel by Eugène Sue, inspired by the extreme arrogance of its Byronic hero. He came to France to complete his education, but died in Paris after only three years, in 1870. His sadism and his voluntary self-abandonment to fantasies from the depths of his mind led to his acclaim by the early surrealists, who considered him a spiritual ancestor.

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COMTE DE LAUTRÉAMONT

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★

*Translated with Introductions by*  
PAUL KNIGHT

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## CONTENTS

Introduction to *Maldoror*

*Maldoror*

Introduction to *Poems*

*Poems*

## INTRODUCTION TO *MALDOROR*

ISIDORE DUCASSE, who wrote the *Chants de Maldoror* under the pseudonym 'Comte de Lautréamont', was born in Montevideo on 4 April 1846, the son of a French consular official. From 1859 to 1862, Ducasse was a boarder at the Imperial Lycée in Tarbes, where he appears to have been a good scholar, distinguishing himself in arithmetic and drawing and showing aptitude for Latin verse translation, an exercise which he later came to detest, according to M. Paul Lespès, who was his classmate at the Imperial Lycée of Pau where, from October 1863 to August 1865, Ducasse was again a boarder. Lespès, interviewed in 1927, when he was eighty-one years old, recalled Ducasse as a silent, withdrawn boy, pale and long-haired, an admirer of Sophocles, Racine and Corneille as well as Edgar Allan Poe. Ducasse once showed Lespès some of his own poetry which the latter judged to be 'bizarre and obscure'. Yet, Lespès tells us, despite his dreamy, abstracted air, Ducasse was considered a 'good fellow' by the majority of the boys – an assessment which, in its naïve condescension, would certainly have brought an ironic smile to the lips of the author of *Maldoror*.

No record exists of Ducasse taking the Baccalauréat while at Pau, nor is much known of his activities between 1865 and August 1868, when the first book of *Maldoror* was published. According to A. Lacroix, Ducasse's first editor, he had come to Paris from South America intending to study at the Polytechnic or the College of Mining. In 1867, he was lodging at number 23 Rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. Lacroix goes on: 'He was a big, brown-haired young man, unshaven, nervous, of regular habits, and hard-working. He worked only at night, sitting at his piano. He would declaim and work out his sentences, accompanying his prosopoeias by chords thumped out on the piano.' This mode of composition, Lacroix continues, 'drove the other tenants to distraction'. There is no corroborating evidence for this account, published twenty years after Ducasse's death, though it has been eagerly seized on and fancifully embroidered by would-be biographers frustrated by the lack of solid information. Even the testimony of Lacroix cannot be accepted without reservation. As Marcelin Pleyne pointedly asks in his book on Lautréamont, why should Lacroix, who printed *Maldoror* without reading it and then refused to distribute the copies, treat the author with greater respect than he treated the work? Biographical information so far is scanty, and it does not get better. Lespès presents us with a picture, blurred through time, of a stereotype 'romantic' youth, wholly anonymous. Lacroix's account is not considered reliable. Yet that is virtually all there is. In the words of Edmond Jaloux: 'This man who is our contemporary is more unknown to us than Homer, Socrates, or Caligula.'

In the year or so before August 1868, we can assume that Lautréamont

must have been working on *Maldoror*, the first book of which, a booklet of thirty-two pages costing thirty centimes, was published in August 1868, although it did not immediately appear on the bookshelves. In a letter to an unknown critic of 9 November 1868 Ducasse, signing himself 'the author', asks him to write a review of the first book, and we learn that it is now on sale, its distribution having been held up by 'circumstances beyond my control'. In 1869, probably in January, the first book is included in an anthology called *Parfums de l'âme*. And on 23 October of the same year, Poulet-Malassis announces in his *Quarterly Review of Publications Banned in France and Printed Abroad* the forthcoming publication of the *Chants de Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautréamont. At the end of the same review, however, Poulet-Malassis states that the printer refused to hand over the copies just as they were about to go on sale. Given the extremely repressive atmosphere in Paris just before the Commune and the sensational and radical nature of the work, the printer's timorousness is at least understandable. Alarmed at this development, Ducasse wrote on the same day, 23 October, to his publisher Verboeckhoven, in an effort to reassure him of the moral intent behind the work. Although the letter is clearly dictated by the wish to have his work published, Ducasse's justification of his work is still interesting: 'Let me begin by explaining my position. I have written of evil, as Mickiewicz, Byron, Milton, Southey, A. de Musset, Baudelaire, etc., have all done. Naturally I have exaggerated the pitch along the lines of that sublime literature which sings of despair only to cast down the reader and make him desire the good as the remedy. Thus one is always, after all, writing about the good, only by a more philosophical and less naïve method than the old school, of which Victor Hugo and some others are the only representatives who are still alive...' 'It is the beginning of a publication which will only be completed later, after my death. Thus the moral of the end has not yet been drawn.' And Ducasse then offers, if the work is well received, to cut out certain sections which are 'too strong'. He ends this letter by saying that what he desires above all is to be judged by the critics.

Ducasse's publisher intended to sell *Les Chants de Maldoror* in Belgium and Switzerland. In a letter of 27 October, Ducasse tells him that the minds of Swiss and Belgian readers are 'better prepared than the French to savour this poetry of revolt'. Mentioning the effect of Naville's lectures in Lausanne and Geneva on the 'Problem of Evil', Ducasse implies that there is a similarity in their approach to this problem. He says he will send a copy of *Maldoror* to Naville, 'for I am taking up this strange thesis more vigorously than my predecessors'. Ducasse's clear intention here is to invoke a respected ally, to categorize and thereby make it appear respectable, to allay his publisher's anxieties about its possible repercussions.

In January 1870, the anthology *Fleurs et Fruits* of Evariste Carrance referred on its back cover to the *Chants de Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautréamont as a work which had recently been published. In July of the same year the *Revue populaire de Paris* announces the forthcoming publication of *Poems* by Isidore

Ducasse (note that the pseudonym has been discarded).

Ducasse died on 24 November 1870. His death certificate simply states: 'The twenty fourth of November, eighteen hundred and seventy, two p.m., death certificate of Isidore Lucien Ducasse, man of letters, aged twenty-four, born in Montevideo (South America), died this morning at eight o'clock in his domicile, Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, 16 – single (no further information).' His life and his death are utterly consistent in their mysteriousness and impenetrability. In *Maldoror*, Lautréamont says: 'I know my annihilation will be complete.' And in the *Poems*: 'I will leave no memoirs.'

The death of this young man without connections whose family was living in South America could not be expected to arouse great interest, especially as his writing had not then made the impact it was to make later. There were also strong historical reasons why it should pass almost unnoticed. The people of Paris had other concerns. Paris was under siege by the Prussian army and the city was not expected to be able to hold out beyond mid-December. Strict rationing of fuel and food had been introduced. The mortality rate had jumped dramatically and between 6 and 12 November it was 112 per cent higher than normal. As an indication of how desperate things were, François Caradec mentions that on 24 November, the day of Lautréamont's death, dog meat sold at 2.50 francs a pound, while cats' meat cost 12 francs.

Ignorance of the circumstances of Lautréamont's death and of most of his life has opened the door to all kinds of speculation and a mystique has arisen around this mysterious, elusive individual. The search for Ducasse the man behind the work of Lautréamont the writer goes on, as if what is contained in *Les Chants* were primarily of autobiographical interest. There are moments when a personal note is sounded, as when Lautréamont writes with such intense hatred of a teacher, 'a pariah of civilization', that we sense he must have suffered this kind of tyranny. But these moments are very rare. The facts we know about his life hardly tell us anything about his personality or his character. We have none of that intimacy of knowledge which comes from personal letters, from the judgements and reminiscences of friends. No photograph of Ducasse exists, and his facelessness intrigued the Surrealists, who are to be credited for recognizing Lautréamont's importance and 'resurrecting' him in the nineteen twenties.

If the annihilation of the historical Isidore Ducasse is almost complete, the same cannot be said of his pseudonym, the writer, Lautréamont. The *Chants de Maldoror* remain and so, too, do the *Poems*, written under the name of Ducasse (why the return to his real name?). In the face of these texts the 'problem' of biography recedes into the background, the question of the historical personality is secondary; perhaps fortunately, the would-be critic is left with no option but to concentrate on what is essential: the reading of the texts, the examination of their complex interrelation.

Yet with the majority of texts the identity of the author is a simple, unquestioned fact. The name of the work and its author appear together on

the binding in reassuring and indissoluble union, the relation of one to the other is taken for granted; it is quite simple, apparently: the author writes the text, signs it, and it is his. The work of *Lautréamont* shatters this expectation, anticipating the way in which the texts themselves call in question and undermine 'innocent' assumptions about the essential problems of fiction: the relation between the written text and the world (or 'reality'), between the writer and the reader; the arbitrariness of the fictional text, the dangers and absurdity of expecting an easily digestible meaning; the relation of literary forms and devices consciously and ironically played against one another; the question of originality. It is the problem of writing fiction which is continually posed in these texts.

*Lautréamont* was the title of a novel by the then extremely successful sensational novelist Eugène Sue. (*Lautréamont* refers to himself in *Maldoror* as a sensational novelist.) The adoption of the pseudonym can be construed as a self-protective measure to avoid being identified by the censor. Certainly, *Maldoror* has some features in common with the 'romans noirs' of writers such as Sue. But it is also a metamorphosis, an alias assumed by one who fully realizes that, in the eyes of literary orthodoxy, his work is a criminal act: 'He knew that the police, that shield of civilization, had for many years been looking for him doggedly and single-mindedly, and that a veritable army of informers and agents was continually at his heels. Without, however, managing to catch him. So did his staggering skill foil, with supreme style, tricks which ought indisputably to have brought success, and arrangements of the most cunning meditation. He had a particular gift for taking on forms which were unrecognizable to the experienced eye.' *Maldoror*, master of disguises, obsessively pursued by the police as the incarnation of evil: *Lautréamont's* text, with its bewildering and deliberate multiplicity of literary registers, initially banned, rejected, considered unreadable. The parallel is clear, the quotation one of many which could have been chosen to show the author's awareness of his text and its implications.

This awareness of the danger, the 'criminality', of the act of writing is evident from the first lines of the book, which address the reader. 'May it please heaven that the reader, emboldened and having for the time being become as fierce as what he is reading, should, without being led astray, find his rugged and treacherous way across the desolate swamps of these sombre and poison-filled pages; for, unless he brings to his reading a rigorous logic and a tautness of mind equal at least to his wariness, the deadly emanations of this book will dissolve his soul as water does sugar. It is not right that everyone should read the pages which follow; only a few will be able to savour this bitter fruit with impunity.' Marcelin Pleynet in his book on *Lautréamont* has shown how this opening passage is itself an inversion of the rhetorical topos of affected modesty, where the author traditionally begs the reader's indulgence and asks him to make allowances for his many deficiencies. Pleynet observes that 'almost immediately, *Lautréamont* calls his reader in question. Right from the first lines, he makes the reader face up to

his limitations and inadequacies, and, far from seeking to win him, advises him to give up reading the book.' Yet by suggesting that there are some readers capable of 'savouring this bitter fruit with impunity', he cleverly plays on the reader's vanity, knowing that every reader will immediately wish to count himself among the select few. This 'warning' is followed by the image of the flight of cranes, which ornithologists have praised for the accuracy of its observation. It has been suggested that such passages describing the flight of birds are lifted from or heavily based on books on ornithology and are not the product of Lautréamont's own observation, so that the ornithological accuracy which experts have admired becomes less uncanny. This does not reduce the literary effect, and the image loses none of its force for not being part of Lautréamont's own experience; the original on which this passage might have been based is completely transformed by its inclusion here. Lautréamont, himself the most original of writers, expresses contempt for the obsession with originality and even says, in the *Poems* that 'plagiarism is necessary'.

The opening passage foretokens much of what is to come – it, too, is 'the precursor of the storm', for it is shot through with that indefinable menace so characteristic of Lautréamont. Here, too, we see what he means by the 'rugged and treacherous way': the writing, the arrangement of main and subsidiary clauses, is uncompromisingly complex, making strong demands on our attention. (This separation of verb from object, and the interpolation of seemingly endless sub-clauses and restrictions becomes more marked in the latter books and has the effect of keeping the reader in suspense, and at the same time underlining his, the writer's, despotic control. He will decide when the moment is right to end that suspense.)

Meanwhile, our absorption in the crane simile is so complete that we momentarily forget its apparent function: to remind the reader that he, like the wise crane veering away, should, 'because he is no fool, take another, a surer and more philosophic line of flight'. Here the simile has almost become an end in itself, independent of the purpose for which, ostensibly, it was introduced. Later, the simile will be subjected to a far more radical distortion: 'The lamb-eating vulture, lovely as the law of arrested chest development in adults whose propensity to growth is not in proportion to the quantity of molecules their organism can assimilate...', or: 'the beetle, lovely as the alcoholic's trembling hands'. These examples are similes in form only, in their use of the word 'as'. We are struck here by the grotesque dissimilarity between the terms of the comparison, between the word 'lovely' and the image to which it is annexed. This difference between the simile as Lautréamont uses it and the similes we are accustomed to in our reading experience is crucial. Every aspect of Lautréamont's writing is an ironical pointer back to conventional modes of writing which it displaces, distorts, questions. We are forced to reflect on the triteness of most of the similes we have ever come across: 'sentences which have been passed under the screw-plate and subjected to the saponification of obligatory metaphors'. There is an

implicit contempt here for all that is automatic and predictable in writing. The simile, in common with numerous other literary forms and devices, has become fossilized, reduced to the level of an automatic gesture, so bland as to go almost unnoticed. It is a device to which the author often has recourse when he wishes to relax in his writing, a moment of self-indulgence at the reader's expense. With Lautréamont the simile is a complex of similarities and differences – the reader, far from being borne effortlessly along to the next point in the narrative, is shocked into awareness of the process taking place on the page before him. Lautréamont himself admits he is unable to understand this compulsive need for comparison: 'It is, generally speaking, a strange thing, this captivating tendency which leads us to seek out (and then to express) the resemblances and differences which are hidden in the most natural properties of objects which are sometimes the least apt to lend themselves sympathetically to curious combinations of this kind, which, on my word of honour, graciously enhance the style of the writer who treats himself to this personal satisfaction, giving him the ridiculous and unforgettable aspect of an eternally serious owl.'

Not just at the beginning, but throughout *Maldoror*, Lautréamont addresses the reader. The tone he adopts for these apostrophes, these intimate conspiratorial conversations, varies greatly, but always behind them lurks his witty, patronizing irony: 'Let the reader not be angry with me if my prose does not have the good fortune to appeal to him.' Thus the reader is initiated into the text with allegedly helpful advice from the author, made an accomplice in Lautréamont's criminal act. Lautréamont diagnoses the reader's hypothetical response, weighs the effect his text has had so far, and reaches, among others, this conclusion: 'Is it not true, my friend, that to a certain extent these songs have met with your approval? Now what prevents you from going all the way?' The process of contagion which the reader was warned against at the beginning of the book is going forward to the author's satisfaction. The reader is overcoming initial objections, resistances, shedding preconceived ways of looking at a text, coming to accept the text on and in its own terms and to recognize that it is 'within the order of possible things'. The process of manipulation has been completely successful. By the sixth book, Lautréamont is even prepared to make concessions like this to the reader: 'Since you advise me to end the strophe at this point, I am willing, this once, to accede to your wish.' Lautréamont regrets, or feigns regret, at the necessarily limited nature of the writer-reader relationship – he would wish it to be more physical! 'If only I could see the face of him who is reading me through these seraphic pages. If he has not passed puberty, let him approach. Hold me tight against you, and do not be afraid of hurting me; let us contract our muscles. More. I feel it is futile to continue. The opacity of this piece of paper, remarkable in more ways than one, is a most considerable obstacle to our complete union.'

How is *Maldoror* different? What is it about this work which demands a re-thinking of our approach? Lautréamont's letter to his banker of 12 March

1870 is a variation on the letter already quoted to his publisher. In it he says: 'It is something of the same genre as Manfred of Byron and Konrad of Mickiewicz, but far more extreme.' This self-interpretation by Lautréamont points to a possible method which can be applied to *Maldoror*. This consists of looking at the way Lautréamont exploits the literary forms and modes of his genre – 'tics', as he calls them in the *Poems*, 'stage effects' in *Maldoror* – and then analysing the differences between these forms and modes in their 'innocent' state and the way in which Lautréamont reworks, distorts them. Then perhaps we will be able to see whether *Maldoror* is merely 'far more extreme' or radically different from other works of 'the same genre'.

Let us call the genre of Lautréamont's *Maldoror* the 'roman noir' or 'black novel'. It is clear that there are resemblances between *Maldoror* and the writings of Sue, Maturin, Radcliffe. In these novels the author needs to make no pretensions to realism and the action is packed with the supernatural, the unaccountable, the satanic. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* has been singled out as being especially close in spirit and intent to *Maldoror*. This novel, published in 1821, was much admired by Baudelaire and Balzac. Melmoth has sold his soul to the devil. In return he is given supernatural powers and a term of life far longer than most men, but still limited. The escape clause is this: he will be released from his part of the contract if he can find a man or woman to replace him and make the pact in his stead. The novel tells of his attempts, in various parts of the world, to find such a person. Melmoth is presented as a dark and menacing figure, inscrutable and sinister, contemptuous of the narrowness of human aspirations. Maturin endows Melmoth with a Satanic dignity, and his diabolical actions are represented as springing from a superhuman despair and regret at the irreversibility of his compact. Unable by any means to escape his fate, he waits with mixed terror and anticipation for his death and his inevitable damnation. *Maldoror* shares some of Melmoth's characteristics. Yet whereas Melmoth is seeking escape and redemption, *Maldoror*'s mission is quite different: 'Stupid, idiotic race. You will regret having acted thus! It is I who tell you. You will regret it! My poetry will consist exclusively of attacks on man, that wild beast, and the Creator, who ought never to have bred such vermin. Volume after volume will accumulate, till the end of my life; yet only this single idea will be found, preoccupying my consciousness.' The identification of Lautréamont with *Maldoror* here is absolute, whereas Maturin is forced to recoil in horror from his 'hero'. In Maturin's novel, Melmoth is seen standing on a high cliff, contemplating a ship sinking amid the despairing cries of crew and passengers. Melmoth is unmoved by this, and this reaction is considered unnatural. *Maldoror* views a similar spectacle with equal calm until he notices a survivor swimming towards the shore. He then dispatches him with a single, well-aimed bullet. (Note how effective a killer *Maldoror* is in his human form: sudden, lethal, economical in his movements.) Other similarities of incident could be found, and it will be agreed that *Maldoror* and Melmoth have certain traits in common. But already it is clear that *Maldoror* is 'more extreme' than

Melmoth. He is no tragic illustration of the dangers of the Faustian urge. He is the blasphemous, remorseless opponent of God and man: in him there is no trace of repentance, no hope of redemption. Maldoror cannot be conveniently classified in the long and honourable tradition of the 'romantic hero'. He treats the romantic aspiration for the divine and the transcendental with supreme irony. What else can he be aiming at when, in the first book, he talks of the dogs howling at the moon and his mother's words of advice: 'When you are in bed and you hear the barking of the dogs in the countryside, hide beneath your blanket but do not deride what they do: they have an insatiable thirst for the infinite, as you, and I, and all other pale, long-faced human beings do. I will even allow you to stand in front of your window to contemplate this spectacle, which is quite edifying... Like those dogs, I feel the need for the infinite. I cannot, cannot satisfy this need. I am the son of a man and a woman, from what I have been told. This astonishes me... I believed I was something more.' Later, when Maldoror tells of his dream that he had become a hog, he says: 'At last the day had come when I was a hog!... Not the slightest trace of divinity remained: I raised my soul to the excessive height of that unspeakable delight.'

Maldoror's attitude to God and man is one of utter and insolent defiance and he takes this revolt to unequalled extremes, further even than Baudelaire. There is nothing comparable in the intensity of this hatred, nor in the variety of the forms it takes, ranging from frenetic outbursts to cold, calculated jeering. Here, too, the identification with Lautréamont is complete, the passages in question being frequently in the first person. God is portrayed as a visitor of brothels, anxious to hush up his crime: 'They wanted to know what disastrous resolution could have made me cross the frontiers of heaven and come down to earth to indulge in pleasures which they themselves despised... Tell them a bold lie, tell them that I have never left heaven'; as a murderer, a sadist (both of these qualities he shares with Maldoror), and a cannibal; as a besotted drunkard incapable and unworthy of holding the reins of the universe, drivelling; and here Lautréamont takes pity on him and puts in a few good words for him, to mitigate the circumstances (although it could also be the Creator himself who is speaking here): 'Oh, you will never know how difficult it can be to keep on holding the reins of the universe! Sometimes the blood rushes to one's head when one is seriously trying to conjure a last comet from nothingness, and with it a new race of spirits. The intellect, stirred to the depths, yields like a beaten man and, for once in its life, lapses into the aberrations which you have witnessed!' The stock of conceivable insults seems to have been exhausted, but we are reckoning without Lautréamont's inventive audacity: 'A final word... it was a winter night. While the cold wind whistled through the firs, the Creator opened his doors and showed a pederast in.' Maldoror is in a continual struggle with God, on equal terms, as a feared and respected adversary. He can never be victorious in this struggle, but God is not strong enough to defeat him.

God also is a danger to the writer. Maldoror puts a piece of wood between

his eyelids to keep awake and protect himself from ‘God spying’ – i.e. dreams which in their seeming illogicality can be unravelled, interpreted and used in evidence against the dreamer. When he dreams, the individual is not free, but unceasingly bombarded by weird uncontrolled images springing upon the screen of his consciousness. It seems strange that Lautréamont should reject the dream when his work itself has such a surrealistic, nightmarish quality. But the assertion of the writer’s control over his material is all-important. When dreaming, the individual is a bemused spectator as images from his waking consciousness and subconscious succeed one another in an order over which he has no control. The writer is master of his own fictions; his selection and presentation depend only on himself, he is his own censor, a creator whose omnipotence rivals God’s. Lautréamont rejects the passivity of the dream, and this rejection is at the same time a defiance of God, conscience and remorse: ‘A pitiless scalpel probes among its undergrowth. Conscience utters a long rattle of curses; the veil of modesty is cruelly torn away. Humiliation! our door is open to the wild curiosity of the Celestial Bandit. I have not deserved this ignominious punishment, hideous spy of my causality! If I exist, I am not another. I do not acknowledge this ambiguous plurality in myself. I wish to reside alone in my inner deliberations. Autonomy... or let me be changed into a hippopotamus.’

The idea of the writer’s independence and control is central to *Maldoror*: indeed Lautréamont’s ironic sensitivity to the problem of being a writer of fiction is perhaps the essential distinguishing feature of his work. *Maldoror* presupposes the traditional novel with all its assumptions, deliberately breaks all its rules. It has to be read with these texts in mind, parallel with them, as a form of counter-fiction which is continually pointing back to them. The traditional novel cannot be abolished. But it can be subtly undermined, its forms can be experimented with, its philosophical structure and its pretensions exposed. For Lautréamont the writing of fiction does not subserve any higher ideal; it is its own end: ‘Even if I had no true event to recount to you, I would invent imaginary tales and decant them into your brain.’ Fiction is ‘engendered by the stormy flood of a love resolved not to quench its thirst with the human race. A hungry love, which would devour itself, if it did not seek sustenance in celestial fictions: creating, in the long run, a pyramid of seraphim more numerous than the insects which swarm in a drop of water, he will weave them into an ellipse which he will whirl around himself.’ This whirling ellipse is destined to come up again, and at the end of it is Mervyn (the name of the hero of Scott’s *Guy Mannering*, a name which seems to epitomize the romantic hero). Mervyn is here the hero of the ‘little novel’ in the sixth book and symbol of the traditional novel. In an act of controlled and well-aimed violence, his body is released, speeds through the air, and splatters against the dome of the Pantheon (the literary Pantheon? What more appropriate symbol could be found?) There it remains, a dreadful warning. The significance of this act is unmistakable: the novel is dead, brutally murdered, but not decently buried; and Lautréamont invites us to ‘go and see

for yourself, if you do not believe me’.

Mervyn’s death can be symbolically interpreted as the death of the novel; but at the same time it can be seen as the possibility of its rebirth. For it is only the death of one form of the novel, but a form so influential, so monopolistic, as to come to be identified with the novel as such – the monolithic nineteenth-century novel, safe and settled in its form, unquestioned vehicle of social and psychological ‘reality’, resting on a philosophical and formal base which Lautréamont skilfully collapses. ‘It is my opinion that the synthetic part of my work is now complete... from now on my intention is to start upon the analytic part... Today I am going to fabricate a little novel of thirty pages; the estimated length will, in the event, remain unchanged... I believe I have, after some groping attempts, at last found my definitive formula. It is the best: since it is the novel.’ This triumphant cry of discovery can only be ironic. But the words ‘fabricate’ and ‘analytic’ have to be stressed. For Lautréamont’s ‘little novel’ is at the same time a critique: it takes all the ingredients of the traditional novel and binds them together in an absurd but supremely self-conscious melodrama which explodes the traditional novel from within and almost makes the symbolism of Mervyn’s death superfluous. This ‘little novel of thirty pages’ is a *reductio ad absurdum* in which Lautréamont demonstrates his critical insight and his sense of humour. But the conclusion to be drawn from it is unmistakable: henceforward it is impossible to write in the manner of Flaubert and Balzac, Scott and Dickens.

The omniscience of the author is immediately called in question. Mervyn, that ‘son of fair England’, is sixteen years and four months of age. Lautréamont knows this not because he is the omniscient author whose assertion of a character’s age is necessarily unassailable, but because he claims to be ‘an expert at judging age from the physiognomic lines of the brow’. Later on, Lautréamont even feigns partial ignorance: ‘He has reasons which have not come to my knowledge and which I consequently cannot communicate to you, for hinting that he cannot remain on good terms with his brothers.’ By scrupulously admitting this self-imposed gap in his knowledge, Lautréamont, far from reassuring the reader of his honesty and good faith, literally disorients him. The confession of the minutest ignorance is disturbing. For is it not the traditional novelist’s claim to total knowledge which makes us believe him? Lautréamont’s deviation from the rule here casts an ironic sidelight on this aspect of the traditional novel; here again the reader is confronted with the fictivity of the text. He may reflect that the novelist usually interrupts his narrative only for explanation, for psychological reflection. He is bemused by this ironical confession of ignorance. This is part of the process the reader was warned against at the beginning of *Maldoror*. He is being manipulated, his expectations are being turned against him, the ground is giving way under his feet. And in this little novel, where he might have expected to find refuge, the process is, if anything, intensified.

The characters are perfect stereotypes: Mervyn, the dreamy adolescent; his father, the retired naval commander, stern and imperious, utterly dominating his timid, ladylike wife; his brothers in their velvet breeches and red silk stockings, tiptoeing across the carefully-polished parquet-floor. Their conversation is grotesquely pompous and literary: 'My gentle master, if you will permit your slave, I shall go and look... for a phial of turpentine spirit which I habitually use when migraine invades my temples after I have returned from the theatre or when reading a stirring chronicle of British chivalric history throws my dream-laden mind into the bogs of drowsiness.' And Mervyn's mother hurries towards the stairs, though 'she does not run as quickly as a member of the lower classes'. The characters are as if hypnotized, filled with nameless dread at the heaviness and gloom which hang over their house. Numerous other 'stage tricks' are introduced: the secret letter signed in blood, the rendezvous, attempted murder, a last-minute rescue, then the catastrophe; a 'subplot' in which God unsuccessfully sends one of his archangels, disguised as a crab, to rescue Mervyn; the absurd 'story within a story' of the three daisies which is meant to explain Aghone's madness, and which underlines Lautréamont's unaccountability, his freedom, along the way of the book, to fabricate 'celestial' (!) fictions. At the same time, the little novel is deprived of the last slim vestige of credibility. But whether we find the narrative credible or not, whether we are convinced by the little novel, is irrelevant: indeed if we look at the novel in these terms, we will not be cooperating with the author at all. He has already told us that 'I do not think the reader will have cause to regret it if he brings to my narration less the harmful obstacle of stupid credulity than the supreme service of profound confidence, examining lawfully and with secret sympathy the poetic mysteries, too few in number in his opinion, which I undertake to reveal to him as and when the opportunity arises...' Lautréamont's concern in writing the little novel is purely with form, specifically with the linear narrative form. He infiltrates that form, distorts and subverts it from within. The little novel at the end of *Maldoror* is 'counter-fiction' posing as fiction – a pose we have to see through.

Thibaudet described *Maldoror* as a 'frenetic monologue'. Lautréamont's work, however, does not lend itself to these easy critical formulations. (Adjectives such as 'volcanic', 'intense', 'dynamic', 'sinister', come to mind; but they are pale approximations, stammering confessions of impotence to describe this work. As for placing it, we lack categories; it is unique. And so in talking of this text one has to be content with such approximations.) Baudelaire, in his poem 'To the Reader' at the beginning of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, wrote: 'If rape, poison, the dagger and the conflagration have not yet embroidered their agreeable designs on the banal canvas of our pitiable destinies, it is because our soul, alas, is not bold enough.' The reader of *Maldoror* will be able to judge whether Lautréamont was bold enough. But it is important not to be blinded by the violence of this text, its rejection of all moral constraint. This false perspective has led some critics to interpret

*Maldoror* either as a ‘particularly intense expression of Byronic despair’ or else as ‘frenetic’, ‘pathological’. Both these judgements show a failure to grasp a whole dimension of this work: the dimension of controlled, ironic reflection on the interrelation of fiction and reality. For from the fourth book onwards we notice a change in Lautréamont’s writing. The dialogue with the reader already mentioned is part of this significant change of emphasis. The narrative episodes are broken into: we are made aware of the presence of the writer. The identity of the narrator with *Maldoror* becomes more problematic. Our attention is increasingly drawn to the fact that, here, a text is being produced: ‘Look at this old spider of the large species, slowly protruding its head from a hole in the ground at one of the intersections of the room. We are no longer in the narrative. It listens carefully to hear if any rustling sound is still moving its mandibles in the atmosphere. Alas! we have now come to reality as far as the tarantula is concerned...’ Lautréamont merely asserts that the transition from narrative to reality has taken place. And who can contradict him? And note how the spider egocentrically attributes all rustling sounds to the movement of mandibles!

These examples could be multiplied. They are evidence of an extreme critical awareness of literary form as well as of a brilliant wit. They also anticipate the essential preoccupation of modern French fiction precisely with its relation to the nineteenth-century novel. In the works of so-called ‘new novelists’ such as Butor and Robbe-Grillet we find this same awareness of fictivity, this realization that the implicitly vast claims of the nineteenth-century novel to ‘reflect’ social and psychological reality can no longer hold good. And so the novel deliberately restricts itself, becomes increasingly inward-looking; the process of writing itself becomes the subject of fiction: the break with the tradition means a greater concentration on formal possibilities, a continual search for, and experimentation with, new structures.

In recent years, structuralist literary criticism has emphasized this neglected and extremely modern element in Lautréamont’s *Maldoror*. This new critical reading is invaluable. Yet no critical essay, least of all this, can do justice to an inexhaustible work; the ‘definitive interpretation’ of Lautréamont will never be written. *Maldoror* has been called an oceanic text; it has also been called schizophrenic, adolescent, absurd, infantile, brilliant. André Breton said that it was ‘the expression of a total revelation which seems to surpass human capacities’. Gide said that reading Rimbaud and the sixth book of *Maldoror* made him ashamed of his own works. That such a diverse text should provoke such varying responses is hardly surprising. The reader can turn to *Maldoror* and judge for himself: he will meet ‘the best professor of hypnotism he has ever known’; he will cross ‘uncharted, perilous wastelands’ to reach what Philippe Sollers calls ‘the limits of literature’.

# MALDOROR

## FIRST BOOK

### 1

MAY it please heaven that the reader, emboldened and having for the time being become as fierce as what he is reading, should, without being led astray, find his rugged and treacherous way across the desolate swamps of these sombre and poison-filled pages; for, unless he brings to his reading a rigorous logic and a tautness of mind equal at least to his wariness, the deadly emanations of this book will dissolve his soul as water does sugar. It is not right that everyone should read the pages which follow; only a few will be able to savour this bitter fruit with impunity. Consequently, shrinking soul, turn on your heels and go back before penetrating further into such uncharted, perilous wastelands. Listen well to what I say: turn on your heels and go back, not forward, like the eyes of a son respectfully averted from the august contemplation of his mother's face; or rather like a formation of very meditative cranes, stretching out of sight, whose sensitive bodies flee the chill of winter, when, their wings fully extended, they fly powerfully through silence to a precise point on the horizon, from which suddenly a strange strong wind blows, precursor of the storm. The oldest crane, flying on alone ahead of the others, shakes his head like a reasonable person on seeing this, making at the same time a clack with his beak, and he is troubled (as I, too, would be, if I were he); all the time his scrawny and featherless neck, which has seen three generations of cranes, is moving in irritated undulations which foretoken the quickly-gathering storm. Having calmly looked in all directions with his experienced eyes, the crane prudently (ahead of all the others, for he has the privilege of showing his tail-feathers to his less intelligent fellows) gyrates to change the direction of the geometric figure (perhaps it is a triangle, but one cannot see the third side which these curious birds of passage form in space) either to port or to starboard, like a skilled captain; uttering as he does so his vigilant cry, like that of a melancholy sentry, to repulse the common enemy. Then, manoeuvring with wings which seem no bigger than a starling's, because he is no fool, he takes another philosophic and surer line of flight.

### 2

READER, perhaps it is hatred you wish me to invoke at the outset of this work!

What makes you think that you will not sniff – drenched in numberless pleasures, for as long as you wish, with your proud nostrils, wide and thin, as you turn over on your belly like a shark, in the beautiful black air, as if you understood the importance of this act and the equal importance of your legitimate appetite, slowly and majestically – its red emanations. I assure you, they will delight the two shapeless holes of your hideous muzzle, if you endeavour beforehand to inhale, in three thousand consecutive breaths, the accursed conscience of the Eternal One! Your nostrils, which will dilate immeasurably in unspeakable contentment, in motionless ecstasy, will ask nothing better of space, for they will be full of fragrance as if of perfumes and incense; for they will be glutted with complete happiness, like the angels who dwell in the peace and magnificence of pleasant Heaven.

### 3

I WILL state in a few lines that Maldoror was good during the first years of his life, when he lived happily. That is that. Then he noticed that he had been born evil: an extraordinary fatality! As far as he could, he hid his real character for a large number of years; but in the end, because of the concentration this required, which did not come naturally to him. the blood used to rush to his head every day; until, no longer able to bear such a life, he flung himself resolutely into a career of evildoing... a sweet atmosphere! Who would have thought so! Whenever he kissed a little pink-faced child, he felt like tearing open its cheeks with a razor, and he would have done so very often, had not Justice, with its long train of punishments, prevented him. He was no liar, admitted the truth and said that he was cruel. Human beings, did you hear that? He dares to say it again with this trembling pen. So it is a power stronger than will... Curse! Could a stone escape from the laws of gravity? Impossible. Impossible, for evil to form an alliance with good. That is what I was saying in the above lines.

### 4

THERE are those whose purpose in writing is, by means of the noble qualities of heart which their imagination invents or which they themselves may have, to seek the plaudits of other human beings. For my part, I use my genius to depict the delights of cruelty: delights which are not transitory or artificial; but which began with man and will end with him. Cannot genius be allied with cruelty in the secret resolutions of Providence? Or can one, being cruel, not have genius? The proof will be seen in my words. You have only to listen to me, if you wish... Excuse me, for a moment it seemed as if my hair was standing on end; but it is nothing, for I had no trouble in putting them back in place again with my hand. He who sings does not claim that his cavatinas are utterly unknown; on the contrary, he commends himself because

his hero's haughty and wicked thoughts are in all men.

## 5

THROUGHOUT my life, I have seen narrow-shouldered men, without a single exception, committing innumerable stupid acts, brutalizing their fellows and perverting souls by all means. They call the motive for their actions fame. Seeing these spectacles, I wanted to laugh like the others but I found that strange imitation impossible. I took a knife with a sharp steel cutting-edge on its blade and I slit my flesh where the lips join. For a moment I believed I had achieved my object. I looked in a mirror at this mouth disfigured by an act of my own will. It was a mistake! The blood flowing from the two wounds prevented me from discerning whether the laugh really was the same as others'. But after comparing them for a few moments I saw clearly that my laugh did not resemble that of human beings, i.e. I was not laughing at all. I have seen men, ugly men with their eyes sunk in dark sockets, surpassing the hardness of rock, the rigidity of cast steel, the insolence of youth, the senseless rage of criminals, the falseness of the hypocrite, the most extraordinary actors, the strength of character of priests, beings whose real character is the most impenetrable, colder than anything else in heaven or on earth; I have seen them wearing out moralists who have attempted to discover their heart, and seen them bring upon themselves implacable anger from on high. I have seen them all now, the strongest fist raised towards heaven, like a child already disobedient towards its mother, probably incited by some spirit from hell, eyes full of the bitterest remorse, but at the same time of hatred; glacially silent, not daring to utter the vast ungrateful meditations hidden in their breasts, because those meditations were so full of injustice and horror; I have seen them grieve the God of mercy in his compassion; and again at every moment of the day, from their earliest childhood right up to the end of their old age, I have seen them uttering unbelievable anathemata, void of all common sense, against everything which breathes, against themselves, and against Providence; prostituting women and children, thus dishonouring the parts of the body consecrated to modesty. Then, the waters of the seas rise up, engulfing ships in their bottomless depths; hurricanes and earthquakes level houses; plague and all kinds of diseases decimate families. But men do not realize this. I have seen them blushing, or turning pale for shame at their conduct on this earth – rarely. Tempests, sisters of the hurricanes; bluish firmament, whose beauty I refuse to acknowledge; hypocritical sea, image of my own heart; earth, who hold mysteries hidden in your breast; the whole universe; God, who created it with such magnificence, it is thee I invoke: show me a man who is good... But at the same time increase my strength tenfold; for at the sight of such a monster, I may die of astonishment: men have died of less.