**Lautréamont, Le Comte de (*nom-de-plume* of Isidore Ducasse, 1846-1870)**

Born to French parents in Montevideo, Uruguay on 4 April 1846, Isidore Ducasse came to prominence as the French writer known as Le Comte de Lautréamont. His poetic prose sequence *Les Chants de Maldoror*, translated as *The Lay* (or *Songs*) *of Maldoror*, and his enigmatic persona and resistance to biography, were inspirational to the avant-gardist and Modernist figures who re-discovered and promoted his work in the twentieth century, reviving Lautréamont’s experimental and radical status.

Reissues of *Maldoror*, originally published in part in 1868 and in full in limited editions from 1869, began to emerge in France in the late nineteen teens and early twenties, prefaced by Surrealists such as PHILIPPE SOUPAULT, ANDRÉ BRETON, ROGER CAILLOIS and LOUIS ARAGON. Lautréamont’s work, certainly as a referent in Breton’s manifestoes, attained canonical importance as a precursor of SURREALISM, both in style and content. It also suggests a radical tradition spanning the age of RIMBAUD, through the French Symbolists and into Modernism, an alternate genealogy present in the British reception. An earlier translation history to the Surrealist popularisation exists in England, where RICHARD ALDINGTON and JOHN RODKER competed to produce rival editions. Rodker’s *The Lay of Maldoror* was published by his Casanova Society imprint in 1924, having appeared in parts in *Broom* magazine during 1922, while Aldington had translated Canto I for *The Egoist* in issues between 1914 and 1915. However, Lautréamont’s centrality to Surrealist theory and practice remains as his abiding legacy.

Little is known of Lautréamont’s biography, suiting the anti-biographical ethos of his work and the claims involved in his reception by the Surrealists. His death certificate relates the simple facts of his youth (24), his residence (Montmartre, Paris) and his marital status (single); Lautréamont writes in his only other work, the aphoristic *Poems* (*Les Póesies*, 1870), ‘I will leave no memoirs.’ The controversy courted by the eventual, limited publication of *Maldoror* under Ducasse’s pseudonym, the indifference greeted by his *Poems*, and his early death, nearly completed the effacement of subjectivity and authorship his works seem to invite. Yet the enduring qualities of his work have been of continuing importance to movements of aesthetic radicalism. Lautréamont’s attack on the institution of literature resounded in the avant-garde, particularly in Surrealism, in which all forms of rationalism – literary, social and philosophical – were considered as objects of deconstructive critique.

The figure of Maldoror in the eponymous work is a master of disguise and personification of metaphysical evil, and can thus be considered as representative of a wider symbolic battle against tradition, originality and notions of decency and sincerity. The narrative position is frequently ironised, raising attention to the constructed nature of the text and addressing the reader directly as implicated in the ethical positions of the work. Opening up a sense of poetic licence, Lautréamont invites a democratisation of literary production, stating that ‘Poetry must be made by all. Not by one.’ This coincides with his borrowings from and infiltration of literary genres and subjects from the Greek myths to Milton, Scott, Byron and BAUDELAIRE. He went as far as to suggest that contemporary literature must spring from not only a revisionist impulse, but a kind of violence on established forms: ‘Plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in the idea of progress. It [...] eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea.’ Lautréamont’s logic of negation, refusal and contradiction presents a text of resistance that should be understood in the overall context as a process-oriented critique of sense-making and anthropocentrism. His work remains challenging in its own right, not only as a key source of twentieth-century literary experimentation.

**List of Works**

*Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869)

*Les Póesies* (1970)

*Maldoror and Poems*, trans. Paul Knight (London: Penguin, 1978)

**References and Further Reading**

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