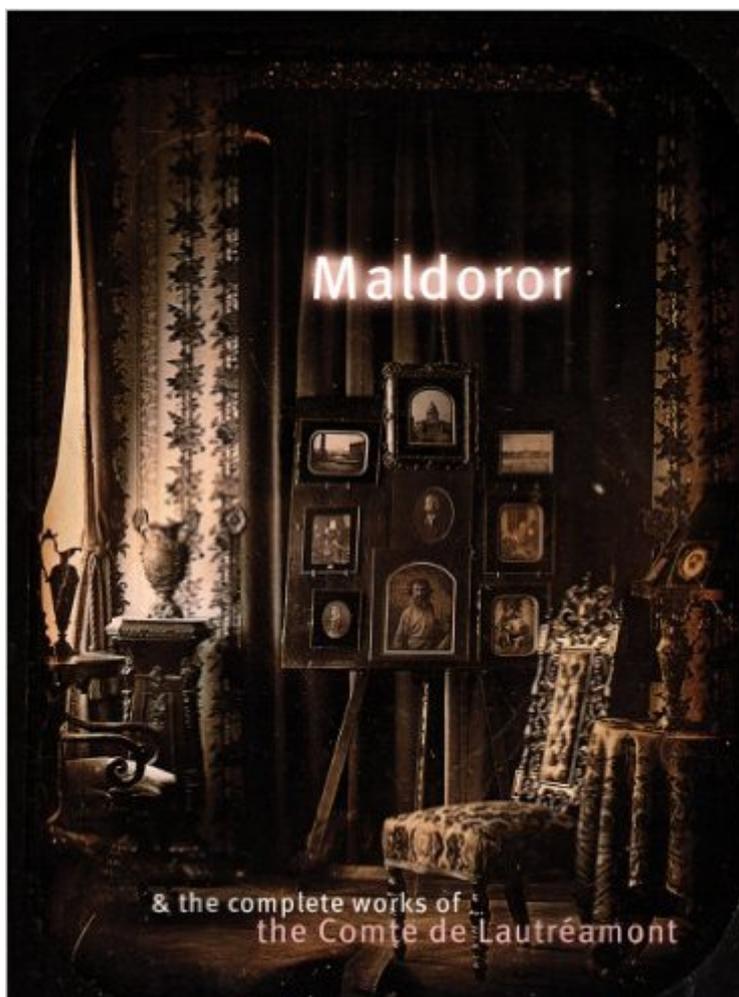


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Maldoror And The Complete Works Of The Comte De LautrÃ©amont



Synopsis

André Breton described Maldoror as "the expression of a revelation so complete it seems to exceed human potential." Little is known about its pseudonymous author, aside from his real name (Isidore Ducasse), birth in Uruguay (1846) and early death in Paris (1870). Lautréamont bewildered his contemporaries, but the Surrealists modeled their efforts after his black humor and poetic leaps of logic, exemplified by the oft-quoted line, "As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Maldoror's shocked first publisher refused to bind the sheets of the original edition--and perhaps no better invitation exists to this book, which warns the reader, "Only the few may relish this bitter fruit without danger." This is the only complete annotated collection of Lautréamont's writings available in English, in Alexis Lykiard's superior translation. For this latest edition, Lykiard updates his introduction to include recent scholarship.

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Customer Reviews

"The Songs of Maldoror" is not a book--it is a searing, rambling, poisonous "derangement of all the senses" in masquerade. After more than a century it still has the power to shock, startle and repulse. Precisely imagined, "Maldoror" is a fairly obscure classic of late 19th century French literature, and is on par with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, etc. You must read this if you love those writers! Maldoror is the narrator, and sometime character when the narrative shifts unexpectedly into third person, and the alter ego of the mysterious young Comte de Lautreamont--which was the pen name of Isidore Ducasse. Dead by 24, he left behind this

time-bomb. Maldoror is a sadist, a murderer, a philosopher, an outcast from the normal order of life. He encourages readers to kidnap a child and torture it, to taste its tears and its blood--all within the first 30 pages. Right on! You are not dealing with a rational, predictable mind here. One of the book's most fascinating aspects is its continuous imagery of animals, both everyday and exotic, majestic and absurd: sharks, turkeys, crabs, eagles, octopi, tigers, wovles, insects, serpents. These creatures are presented with the sharp eye of the biologist. By likening humanity to animals, Lautreamont achieves a double effect: man comes off as debased and at the same time, elevated: to be like an animal man must be rid of all his pretensions and vanities. It is this pretense to culture and civilized behavior that sicken Lautreamont/Maldoror. Many passages still shock and disgust--and yes, entertain with their feverish intensity, particularly the one in which Maldoror copulates with a man-eating shark.

Lautreamont's *Maldoror* is legendary for its bold and complex phrasing and imagery, for its reputation of embodying Surrealism *avant la lettre*, and for its remarkably extreme, savage imagery. Less frequently remarked is its obvious debt to the earlier literature of the *Frenetiques*, such as Petrus Borel. Given the very few English translations of the latter, one may pardon those who do not read French for overestimating the originality of *Maldoror*. Francophones such as the Surrealists and Lykiard, however, have no such excuse. The descriptions of *Maldoror* in the various reviews describe the content and style of the work perfectly well, so I shall neither repeat them nor try to outdo them. Instead, I shall offer a slightly less breathlessly adoring view of the work, in general, and of Lykiard's translation of it, in particular. My view of *Maldoror* is that it is primarily a parody of the extreme tendencies of the "dark side" of Romanticism, in general, and of Byron, in particular. Although Lykiard dismisses Mario Praz's view of Lautreamont and *Maldoror* rather abruptly, Praz's observations seem quite germane, to me: "[Lautreamont/Ducasse is] a macabre humorist in whom it is impossible to distinguish where sincerity ends and mystification begins". Those who doubt this observation should have a look at Ducasse's extant letters, many of which bear witness to his desire merely to be a successful writer, and to be judged by the literary critics of the day. In a word, Ducasse/Lautreamont appears to have been precisely the sort of careerist *litterateur* whom the Surrealists excoriated and excommunicated from their ranks with tedious regularity!

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