

Published in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, Ed. Wayne Dynes, New York: Garland, 1990, pp. 681-682

Lautréamont, Comte de (pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse), 1846-70. Lautréamont's masterpiece is *Les chants de Maldoror*, a book-length poem in prose. It is a fantasy and meditation in which the title character addresses the reader, sometimes reporting things said to him or switching to the third person. Maldoror's narration is a unique revel in the horrible and macabre, as he delights in sadism and gloats over human wickedness, weakness, and cruelty. The disgusting, repulsive, and painful are stressed. The work contains murder, torture of children and animals, and bestiality (intercourse with a female shark, his "first love"). God, whom Maldoror sees as an inferior, sits on a throne of excrement and gold and eats men. The work is seemingly a study in hatred and self-loathing, but it is actually a work of self-affirmation and even innocence, and Maldoror is a powerful example of a Romantic hero. Though he despises himself and is disgusted by the universe, Maldoror at least recognizes and admits what he and it are, and this is his claim to moral stature. It is a statement that one is human and that one accepts [p. 682] that. He faces death and annihilation as a pagan, without sorrow or fear.

The homosexual theme of the book is central. Male homosexuality is presented positively, and women rejected. Homosexuals are "crystallizations of a superior moral beauty," whose "prostitution to any chance comer exercises the logic of the deepest thinkers." What tenderness and compassion is found in the work is directed toward beautiful, angelic boys, although Maldoror tortures and kills them. Compared with the violence, sodomy is made to seem positively benign. Maldoror wishes the universe were an "immense celestial anus," through which, with his penis, he would "discover the subterranean spot where truth lies slumbering."

The relationship between the narrator Maldoror and the author Lautréamont is of course ambiguous. The reader cannot help but speculate about the author's personality, but little biographical information is available, which adds to the work's allure. Born in Uruguay of French parents, Ducasse attended school in France, and died in obscurity at the age of 24. His only other work is a less interesting *Poésies*. None of the few biographical details laboriously unearthed long after his death explains the work in the slightest. The reader is left with speculations. Ducasse certainly shows more strongly the influence of Baudelaire and Sade than does any other writer. Like Sade, he is rarely studied in universities.

Lautréamont had a great influence on the decadent and surrealist writers of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Daniel Eisenberg

Bibliography: Text translated by Guy Wernham (New York: New Directions, 1943). Wallace

Fowle, *Lautréamont* (New York: Twayne, 1973); Guillermo de Torre, *Historia de las literaturas de vanguardia* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1971), II, 65-72.