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INTRODUCTION: PREFACE WITHOUT MEMOIRS BY ALEXIS LYKIARD

I

RE-CREATIONS

... The poem demands the demise of the poet who writes it and the birth of the poet who reads it.

Octavio Paz: *Alternating Current*

On the twenty-fourth of November 1870 Edmond de Goncourt noted in his *Journal* that "the rag-picker of our boulevard, who at the moment keeps a place in the queue at the market for a low eating-house keeper," had told a servant "that he was buying, for his employer, cats at six francs, rats at one franc, and dog-flesh at one franc fifty, the pound." Also that morning, at his lodgings not far off—a modest hotel, 7 Faubourg-Montmartre—the almost unknown pseudonymous author of an extraordinary, unread masterpiece of black humour (in which a ragman appears as one of the few disinterestedly charitable characters) died from unspecified causes aged only twenty-four.

It was the strange destiny of Isidore Ducasse to be born in curious domestic circumstances whose precise details are lacking, in one capital city under siege—Montevideo—and to die very young, thousands of miles away in another capital city under siege—Paris, where his death certificate

boldly stated *sans autres renseignements*. Of such ironies, coincidences and ambiguous phrases are legends made. It is not the purpose of this Preface to add to the biographical inventions and speculation through which Ducasse's brief life has been re-created and indeed distorted for more than a century. Readers who wish to know the facts about Ducasse's life, meagre though these facts may be, can refer to the Chronology on pp. 279–286. There has been one indispensable biography, impeccably researched and documented, lucidly written: *Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont* (Paris, Editions de la Table Ronde, 1970), by François Caradec, to whom all those interested in Ducasse and his work must be grateful. But the last quarter of a century has, not altogether surprisingly, witnessed the expansion of the Lautréamont industry too: a mass of shamelessly inflated books, academic and otherwise, inspired by myth-making necrophilia, blind adulation, or a pedantic desire to debunk or dissect (the various authors being unable actually to exhume, through ignorance of their exact resting place, Ducasse's mortal remains) a controversial and thus still fresh body of work, in quasi-Surrealist terms an exquisite corpus.

The odour of humourless reverence surrounding so much Ducassian criticism ought, I believe, to be dispelled, along with the glib dismissals of his work by the staid establishment factions which ignored it then as they belittle it now. With this in mind, my opening paragraph and the first sentence of the next, while valid statements containing no untruths, are intended as examples of the "literary-detection" style, the popularising bait on the bookmaker's hook. This attention-grabbing device, of which the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (especially in *Chant 6*) was so well aware, he himself celebrated and exposed simultaneously. The point I want to make is that all his work — and herein lies much of its originality — contains its own built-in criticism, and that this criticism, too, continually varies its approach. Ducasse's jokes, in fact, reveal their underlying deadly seriousness to the reader via that reader's own awareness of style and sensitivity to tone. Of course, to mix genres, to deal in paradox and parody

and make abrupt transitions whether thematic or stylistic, ensures a stimulating and multifaceted, rather than an easy or easily classifiable, read.

It also explains some of the enduring fascination of Lautréamont-Ducasse (whose very choice of titles and proper names is significantly paradoxical and is examined in the second section of this Preface) and why a literary historian as eminent as Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933) — a very long book indeed in which one would expect "our" author to be of central importance — consigns *Les Chants de Maldoror* to the tail-end of a chapter, allotting it just one almost apologetic page and some footnotes and ignoring the *Poésies* altogether. Postwar editions included no revisions or expansions of his original judgements that the *Chants* were "a late but extreme case of cannibalistic Byronism" and their author "a macabre humourist in whom it is impossible to distinguish where sincerity ends and mystification begins."

But both these comments, though inadequate, are well worth examining. The only cannibalism as such in the *Chants* is that of God preying upon man — one reason why Maldoror their eponymous hero (*mal d'aurore*, or dawn's evil, as one commentator suggests) opposes the Deity and indeed all authority that cramps the spirit. If Praz meant Lautréamont's *own* cannibalism (the insertion and assimilation within the *Chants* of items based on contemporary news and whole passages transcribed from Dr. Chenu's *Encyclopédia of Natural History*, for instance, not to mention many very conscious echoes, borrowings and reworkings from sources as diverse as Dante, Homer, Shakespeare, the Bible, Maturin, Baudelaire and Sue) he was quite correct. Even more so, in a sense, if referring to autophagy — for Ducasse more emphatically than most writers lived *in* and *for* books, drew material from them, expressing himself through them, consuming himself and becoming his work, remaining otherwise memoir-less, faceless and anonymous both by intention and, finally, accident. Praz (again, whether by intention or accident) was touching on subjects that have become crucial to Lautréamont studies. Peter Nesselroth in *Lautréamont's*

Imagery puts it thus: "The poet . . . incorporates into the text, into the creation of his own personality (since Lautréamont is non-existent, an assumed name taken from a fictional character), the world around him: plagiarisms, literary precedents, his own judgements on what he has just written, the reader, etc. The text is inclusive and must of necessity be discontinuous." This sort of technical experimentation did not really fit Praz's thesis, so, faced with what Roger Caillois called "a work which contains its own commentary," he tried to label and dismiss it simultaneously, resorting to talk of "sincerity" and "mystification," moralising generalities here irrelevant, for as Octavio Paz says, "the writer's morality does not lie in the subjects he deals with or the arguments he sets forth, but in his behaviour towards language."

All Lautréamont-Ducasse's work is consistent: it explores the different possibilities and limitations of fiction, of literature as artefact. *Les Chants de Maldoror* and the *Poésies* are different approaches to the alchemy of the word. When we read in *Les Chants*, "I know that my annihilation will be complete," it is as if death is seen as illegibility, oblivion being the state beyond language and words: words are our very life, and in the beginning was the Word, Word as Life. If our culture too is rooted in language, and that culture is unsatisfactory or the time has come to reshape it, we must first attack language and remake that. Which is what Ducasse, single-handed, ambitiously and in some ways suicidally, tried to do. By means of what Francis Ponge called the "*Maldoror-Poésies* apparatus" Ducasse sought to demonstrate and explore new ways of reading and writing, and it is how he did it that makes him so important to both writers and readers today.

II

NAMES AND TITLES

Words are very much like lizards; they change colour according to position.

Lafcadio Hearn: *Talks to Writers*

. . . language is a sort of transformation mechanism: the different combinations of words—that is to say, their position within the phrase—produce meaning. This phenomenon is repeated again on the level of the text: the meaning varies according to the position of the sentences.

Octavio Paz: *Alternating Current*

Ducasse's ambiguities, mystifications, wordgames—labels themselves implying different degrees of interest or support granted by reader to author—begin at the very beginning, with names and titles. What are we to make of *Chants*, songs that are not songs, the word implying "canto," "lay," "epic," leading us in turn to expect conventional modes of storytelling, narratives of a certain musicality. Instead, we find mixed genres, prose-poetry and poetic prose, the Gothic fantasy, the serial novel, horror and humour, authorial interventions, disruptions of space and time, stories-within-stories, plagiarisms, techniques of collage, changes of style as frequent as the ubiquitous Maldoror's own metamorphoses, and an elliptical rather than linear structure. The name Maldoror, suggesting as it does evil, gold, horror, dawn, sadness etc., seems a curious hybrid, but on reading the work its full title, *Les Chants de Maldoror* par Le Comte de Lautréamont, seems to contain and imply the constant switches in narrative

emphasis—the self as a game (*je-jeu*) and the author as observer, participant and invisible man—as well as being an inevitable and accurate condensation of, or hint at, the contents. And these particular pieces are both popular (in the sense that many of their props belong to the romantic and serial fictions then in vogue) and esoteric (in that the apparently familiar surface meanings are always being questioned if not undermined on deeper levels). These “songs” do not comfort or flow along mindlessly: they herald a black lyricism of the future that will influence twentieth-century literature, through Surrealism, via Céline and Genet—a note also sounded by Kafka, Henry Miller, Beckett, Burroughs and many others since. As Artaud recognised, “If the Maldoror pose is acceptable in a book, it is acceptable only after the poet’s death—maybe a hundred years later—when the astringent explosives of the poet’s virid heart have had time to calm down,” while for Octavio Paz, Lautréamont is “the poet who discovered the *form* in which to express psychic explosion.”

The risk-taking originality of such a controversial book (and discussions about blasphemy and obscenity are the least of the controversies it has aroused), coming at a time when in France Romanticism as a movement seemed outworn if not dead, when war and revolutions were commonplace and yet so often inconclusive, and when politics were sterile and unsettled with the established order—the Second Empire—falling apart, ensured that it would encounter the predictable reactions: a history of censorship problems and clandestinity, of incomprehension and scarcely any sales or reviews.

It might, too, have caused personal offence. When the first *Chant* was published—separately and anonymously—by Balitout, Questroy et Cie, Paris, in August 1868, and subsequently reprinted at Bordeaux in Evariste Carrance’s anthology *Parfums de l’Âme* in January 1869, it contained various specific references to Georges Dazet, one of Ducasse’s former schoolmates and a dedicatee of the later *Poésies*. When the *Chants* were all published together in book form these references were deleted, the name Dazet metamorphosed into various rather unappealing creatures—octopus, toad, vampire bat and so on. We do not know whether these deletions

were on artistic grounds (certainly the book version is the more successful) or because Ducasse or the publishers feared they were libellous.

In these circumstances a pseudonym was a wise decision. But when we look at the actual choice of name, further conjecture seems inevitable. Does this self-conferred nobility, *Comte de Lautréamont*, purposely link the writer with the Marquis de Sade and Lord Byron in an aristocratic élite of the intellect? A symbolic trinity perhaps, of men in many senses superior to their own societies, yet forced beyond the pales of those societies. Sinners who defied God and social taboos, who despised their own fame and infamy alike with patrician detachment or scathing wit. And that other sympathetic failure and aristocrat, the Marquis de Vauvargues, “corrected” in the *Poésies*, had died as Ducasse himself would, young, poor and unread in Paris leaving, like him, no portrait other than his work. . . . Or was it yet another anti-bourgeois joke—that to be well-read, in both senses, a title couldn’t be bad, might even be *necessary*?

As for “Lautréamont,” Lautréamont was Eugene Sue’s hero in the novel of that title published in 1838. Was this clear homage to Sue, whose work we know Ducasse had read? Or is the slightly altered name merely a joke on Ducasse’s part: i.e. readers be warned, do not expect a straightforward school-of-Eugene-Sue novel? Hubert Juin, with Maurice Saillet one of the few really excellent editor-critics of Ducasse, notes that the name appears nowhere except on the first, Lacroix edition (anyhow printed in Belgium); and that there is no explanation or mention of it in the Letters. Nor, of course, is there a manuscript of *Les Chants de Maldoror* against which to check. Could the displaced *u* then be a printer’s error that has itself entered the fiction, become a mythprint? Others have read into the name anagrammatic references to such as Amon-Ra (the Egyptian god) and ingenious coded jokes by Ducasse: he was printing the book with the allowance sent by his father, to whom it would almost certainly not appeal; hence, a sardonic reference—*Le com/plte* (the account/bill)—*est à l’autre, à Mont/evideo!*

Ducasse only put his own name to the *Poésies*, which are not, naturally,

poems at all but prose—gnomic comments and maxims from Pascal, Vauvenargues and others, juxtaposed without explanation or notes, as if to disconcert the reader with preconceptions still more thoroughly. This material is then turned into a collage of new aphorisms with a new logic of their own, in an attempt to sweep away many stale ideas and clichés and evolve a new kind of writing in the process. By implication a whole bourgeois culture based on tradition, on neat literary pigeonholes within which false polarities like “classic” and “romantic” can be contained, and upon the concept of literary ownership, is threatened. Is plagiarism proper? Is it valid as procedure? And what is plagiarism anyhow? Who owns what? How does an author own his work? Buyers of the *Poésies* were urged to pay what they liked, but not to refuse to accept the booklets, which themselves originally appeared as two small brochures, neither book nor magazine—thus raising further questions about form and content. Are the *Poésies* to be regarded as the “correction” of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, a sort of moral antidote, as Ducasse maintains in his correspondence, or was this assertion also a tongue-in-cheek ploy to extract extra funds from suspicious bankers and to impress publishers like Poulet-Malassis? His tone keeps changing as he declares his intention to sing of good as opposed to the “evil” *Chants*: perhaps the lofty, impressive-sounding *Poésies* implies a different kind of morality, an opposition to merely pragmatic prose. Is it the preface to a longer work-in-progress, as suggested, or a final renunciation of fiction in general and of its romantic and classical forms in particular? In relation to the *Chants* are the *Poésies* conversion, reversal, denial, logical progression, the other half of a dialectic, temporary footnote or last word? The author, Isidore Ducasse, is also the editor, I.D., of this ephemeral periodical that through publication in book form has now become permanent. Who really is the author, what is his identity and relationship to the reader? Is the author himself a fiction, an idea (*idée* and I.D. have the same French pronunciation) in the reader’s mind? “*Si j’existe*,” he wrote, “*je ne suis pas un autre*,” yet Ducasse as author is elusive, a chameleon altering colour as swiftly as his words, Whitmanically con-

tradicting himself and containing multitudes. Evidently recalling “My name is Legion, for we are many,” a medical man like Dr. Soulier has, in all sanity, produced a whole book, *Lautréamont Génie ou Maladie Mentale* (Geneva, Droz, 1964) devoted to proving that Ducasse was mad. At any rate, when reading *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont and the *Poésies* by Ducasse we should be aware of the different literary personae and tactics employed without necessarily diagnosing schizophrenia. Researchers delving into the life or the works or both will find that the only ultimate certainty is that interpretations, like the texts themselves, lead to infinity. Perhaps that is the only “meaning” to be drawn from the labyrinth of Lautréamont, the *dédales* of Ducasse.

Finally, it may be salutary to recollect what Kenneth Rexroth wrote in *An Autobiographical Novel*: “For a while I used pseudonyms—the only one which I remember was ‘J. Rand Talbot.’ There is no reason in the world why I did this except that I was fifteen years old and thought writers should have pen names.”

III

LETTERS AND CRITICS

... the magnetic extravagance of his letters, those dark iron-fisted dictates he sent with such elegance—cordiality, even. . . . Extravagant? Of course. Those letters have that harsh extravagance of a man who rushes forward with his lyricism like an erect avenging blade in one hand or the other. . . .

Antonin Artaud: *Letter on Lautréamont*

Seeking a writer’s identity, biographers try to catch that writer off-guard, looking for revelations of intimacy, personal glimpses, casual remarks

made to friends. Ducasse presents further problems: he had so few friends, despite the yearning emphasis upon friendship throughout his work, despite "As long as my friends do not die, I shall not speak of death" (*Poésies* II)—and his isolation in Paris is confirmed by the mere handful of letters that survive, none of them to friends. Acquaintances and associates, such as the journalists Sircos and Damé (see *Poésies* Note 1) were Parisians anyhow, easily accessible.

So what is to be gleaned from the Letters? The impression of a certain caustic impatience, curious and furious phraseology, macabre humour: all this can be found in his published works too. Yet in the belligerent tone of the Letters there is an appealing rawness, a *naïveté* along with the self-confidence. Although his work is "vanity-published" and he has little if any experience of the literary rat-race, he knows what he is doing. Convinced of his own merit, his arrogance is balanced out by anxiety, that anxiety he shares with most authors who want to see their work published, reviewed, recognised—at least to provoke some reaction other than delay and silence. Probably through hurt pride he feigns Olympian indifference, lack of interest. To Darasse the banker he writes in a different tone, discussing the new direction his writing is taking but probably only in order to convince Darasse of his reliability, whatever his father may have said. What a strange way, however, for a remittance man to reassure the banker in charge of those paternal payments from Uruguay!

Valéry Larbaud even saw the *Poésies* as a book fabricated for M. François Ducasse's benefit—to show him that his son was working, that the morbidity of *Malдорor* and its contemptuous references to grey-beards and patriarchal authority in general had given way to something more . . . wholesome. Ducasse's one and only return visit home to Montevideo, in 1867, was, considering the long and hazardous ocean journey involved and the fact that he had been away at school in France for so many years, short indeed—and may have been cut shorter by disagreements. Ducasse the established civil servant had probably (from the existing evidence) been party to a social cover-up when his young

wife committed suicide so soon after her son's birth, and had ensured that the documents relating to her death were misleading and vague and that her grave was unmarked. (It remains untraceable to this day.) This Ducasse, Ducasse père, the respectable public official, would scarcely have thought too highly of a bizarre young stranger, returning like a prodigal after scant educational success. Exams either not taken or not passed. Isidore's manner sardonic, his lack of respect marked. . . . However, it is all too easy to fill in the fascinating lacunae, to point up the paradoxes: such speculation is conjectural, as Larbaud himself must have been aware when advancing what remains just another possibility, an interesting theory or angle. I find it unconvincing: Isidore Ducasse was too conscious a writer not to know that the book and its methods would be misunderstood, even ignored, just as *Malдорor* had been. One pays a price for innovation, and innovators, knowing this, are hardly conciliators: books are not written specifically to please others; they are written, like it or not, to please oneself—and Montevideo and his father must have seemed, on Isidore's return to Paris, even further away.

Edmond Jaloux, in his perceptive 1938 Preface to the Corti edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, seems to me much nearer the point when sensibly insisting on the fact of Ducasse's own youth: the letters of young people are filled with posturing and however earnest or apparently sincere at the time of writing are not holy writ, nor mature, permanent statements of belief or intent, based as they inevitably are upon inexperience. Thus it is preferable to regard the Letters as tactical rather than as expressions of Ducasse's long-term policy or as forming any kind of definitive credo about his work or methods. They are fascinating fragments to be sure, but we do not know what response they aroused in their recipients, and we should remember that Ducasse himself wrote: "Criticism must attack the form, never the content of your ideas, of your language." Epistolary form, almost more than any other, is of necessity temporary and incomplete, time's prisoner, as books are not. It is to the books one must return therefore, and, inevitably if reluctantly, to the critics, because critical

responses to Lautréamont have been so plentiful and so confusing, so misguided and so illuminating, and because his work more than most demands explication, dealing as it does with so many crucial ways of writing *and* reading a book. To outline however briefly some of the points raised by *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies* and developed or appropriated by the different critical schools of thought may be of use to readers now faced with what is still, in 1994, the first and only comprehensive annotated edition of the *Complete Works* to appear in English.

It must be said that Ducasse's style in both *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies* would not endear him, in any century, to Academe. As a widely read, deeply serious intellectual he would appear to be that "literary" writer beloved of academic critics, but then he slips through the net, evades categorisation even more emphatically because of *how* he writes than what he says. In the *Poésies* as in the *Chants* Ducasse will treat the reader sometimes as an accomplice, making him do the work of re-establishing or supplying missing links; on other occasions the reader is treated like a child faced with an omnipotent teacher—the author—who yet again is adopting an ironic, tongue-in-cheek metamorphosis. Sly jokes harnessed to or emanating from, deadpan seriousness. The conventions are not being observed, and such breaches threaten critical strongholds! Critics need categories: their bread and butter depends on their dictating fashions, founding Movements, and generally deciding which books are readable (prescribed) and unreadable (proscribed).

There is relatively little easily available or reliable criticism of Lautréamont in English (see the Bibliography included on pp. 335–340) and the "official" or textbook approach is best summed up by this extract from *French Literature and Its Background 5: The Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1969)—the only fleeting mention of Lautréamont in 229 pages: "Hugo visualised the poet as a giant with his head in the clouds. Rimbaud, Nerval, and possibly Lautréamont are also vivid examples of this barely literary position: they appeared, through semi-madness or a state of quasi-hypnotic enthusiasm, to have 'jumped' the

process of metaphoric analogy, and experienced directly, in hallucinations and dreams, incursions of real life into the Ideal. The subsequent image of madman/genius can only appear to an idealist such as Mallarmé as an utter misconception." All well and good for Mallarmé and academic caution. The cosy brush-off, the misleading bedfellows, all lunatics together!

Mention of mental instability leads us to the views of Léon Bloy and others, a chiefly French school of thought which we may call the Analysts. This group brand Ducasse the mad genius, and its adherents include the aforementioned Dr. Soulier producing entire books diagnosing paranoid schizophrenia in Ducasse. An overlapping group is that of the Biographers, who cogitate, often at inordinate length, like Edouard Peyrouzet, on Ducasse's life, the effect being one of building bricks without straw and unverifiable if occasionally interesting hypotheses. Facts and particulars concerning Ducasse are specially hard to come by, and assiduous researchers in Montevideo and the Tarbes area are needed more urgently than hyper-imaginative biographers, as only M. Caradec, who has written the one valuable full-scale biography of Ducasse to date, has realised. The preceding sentence remains as true now as in 1977 when I originally wrote it. Just as the first edition of my *Poésies* translation neared publication, the only known photograph—hitherto presumed entirely lost—of Isidore Ducasse, was rediscovered by a young researcher from Tarbes, Jacques Lefrère, who included it in his important book, *Le Visage de Lautréamont* (see Bibliography).

There are the Religious Apologists, who interpret *Les Chants de Maldoror* in the light of a struggle between God and the Devil, interesting themselves in Biblical references, visions of the Apocalypse, and any links with Milton, Dante, Blake, etc. Léon-Pierre Quint was one of the earliest and best of these critics, whom the Surrealists, the next school, often scornfully dismissed, for as Alquié states in *The Philosophy of Surrealism*, "Surrealism charges the idea of God with limiting man, of hindering him from essaying the conquest of all his powers. This is no satanism, but humanist confidence . . ." For the Surrealists anyway, Lautréamont was

a kind of sacred ancestor: he had after all been rediscovered, reprinted and extolled by Breton, Soupault, Aragon and co., interpreted as oracle, precursor of their movement, and was sweepingly adopted as authority for the use of random imagery — the famous *beau comme* series in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the chance meeting on a dissection table of sewing machine and umbrella, etc. — and for automatic writing, although it is doubtful if a work as complex as the *Chants* could have been written at great speed.

The Surrealists begat further progeny, such as the Myth and Symbol-Hunters, among them the interesting Bachelard (Lautréamont's bestiary) and that indefatigable double-act Mezei and Jean, who plumb the hermetic depths of Jung, the cabbala and alchemy, managing simultaneously to be speculative and dogmatic. The Philosophers (usually Procrustean) include Camus, who could not make the Lautréamont of the *Chants* fit his thesis in *L'Homme Revolté* and therefore patronised the Ducasse of the *Poésies* ("laborious banalities"), and Georges Bataille, who in his book *Literature and Evil* (in which Lautréamont is an obvious omission), probably because of Bataille's own bitter defection from Breton and followers, evades the issue altogether in an awkward footnote. Oddly enough, the Camus book's English edition, *The Rebel* (Penguin), completely omits the section on Ducasse! Which leads us to the Omitters, Excluders and Dismissers, men like Mario Praz and academic literary historians such as those in the Oxford University Press publication mentioned earlier: these critics and their guided tours are themselves set to rights and supplemented by the Thesis-Makers and Bibliographers. Excellent pioneering work has been done in this field by the likes of Pierre Capretz, Paul Zweig, Frans de Haes, P-O. Walzer and Nesselroth — the latter also appearing under the last and to date most stimulating category, that of the Word-Men, who believe in textual analysis rather than windy theorising. Maurice Blanchot, whose long study of Lautréamont remains one of the very best critical works, has greatly influenced this group, including many writers associated with the *Tel Quel* magazine, like Marcelin Pleyne and Philippe Sollers, and Lucienne Rochon and Claude Bouché. Alex de Jonge, in *Nightmare*

Culture (see p. 336-7) sums up their approach, with which he largely concurs: "Ducasse is not concerned to tell us what he thinks, but to create a text, an object designed to show us how we all think." Here we are a long way from the stereotype of the suffering poet; from the oversimplifications of such Lautréamont admirers as Pablo Neruda, who commented in his *Memoirs* that "... the promised change in Ducasse's poetry, the swing towards goodness and health, which he did not fulfil, has stirred up much criticism. He is venerated for his sorrow and condemned for his move toward joy"; and from what Nesselroth rightly castigates, "the mistake of a Freudian interpretation such as Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei's *Maldoror*," which is "that it considers the text as the expression of the experience of an individual, as probably Freud himself would have done, instead of the neurosis of a culture."

Bearing in mind that about ninety authors are mentioned by name in the two slim volumes of the *Poésies* — which are concerned throughout with the function of language and rhetoric — and realising that for Ducasse as for the later Surrealist painters Anna Balakian was discussing in *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute*: "the important thing was not the choice of object as much as the circumstances of its viewing and its location or position in relation to other things or beings," the stylistic analyses by Nesselroth, Pleyne, Bouché and others (even the erratic Faurisson) have many valuable insights to contribute. Lautréamont-Ducasse's work is subversive, defining and parodying what was no longer required — outworn styles, clichés of thought, literary postures — and this clearing of the decks in the latter half of the nineteenth century has enabled late twentieth-century writing to free itself from all restriction. As Octavio Paz recognised: "No one is a poet unless he has felt the temptation to destroy language or create another one, unless he has experienced the fascination of non-meaning and the no less terrifying fascination of meaning that is inexpressible." Ducasse, on the evidence of the texts, certainly did understand the truth of this statement, and it was also his great achievement to have perceived the narcissism inherent in his own work and in writing in

general. Thus the writer, placed at the centre of his images, spun his literary web outwards to include, fascinate, even entrap the reader. He succeeded in constructing a beautiful artefact, delicate yet tough, woven out of the various excretions and endless ramifications of the Self, a semi-transparent maze of meanings that signified all *and* nothing, that would question to deadly effect the conventional linear progression of fiction itself by means of a sort of dazzling cubism that rearranged lines and perspectives, and whose unpredictability had its own wild logic. His work represents a love-hate relationship with the past and with tradition: by means of parody, a key device in his writing, he expresses simultaneously both his nostalgia for that past and his hope for the future.

IV

THE POÉSIES

*For so long as there have been men — and men who read Lautréamont —
everything has been said and few people have gained anything from it.*

Raoul Vaneigem: *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

All opinions, Ducasse is saying in the *Poésies*, can be attacked and reversed, just as all words can be rearranged. Nothing is fixed or static. Stasis is death. The idea of a Hall of Fame, a Pantheon of Classics is death. After all, against what did Mervyn's body beat in vain at the end of *Les Chants de Maldoror*? Where *but* the Panthéon itself, the very repository and morgue of fame. Nothing is sacred in the *Poésies*. Ducasse attacks reason and the *Pensées*, thought *and* thoughts, not forgetting the "great" men who leave behind "great" works: unlike Chateaubriand and the others he pillories, Ducasse declares early on that *he* will leave no memoirs! This kind of

negation appears a form of literary suicide yet paradoxically it assures him the literary immortality for which he has no use.

We examine a text full of personality and humour to find that "Poetry should be made by all. Not by one." Ducasse referring back to a synthesis of all the senses and methods available? The whole man — all of himself — makes "art," which then becomes the property of all, in all languages, everything anyhow initially acting as grist to the poet's mill. Nothing *should* be privileged in art, and as Paul Zweig notes, this is how Narcissus, no longer isolated, is unmasked and becomes universal.

But this attitude of Ducasse's does not pave the way for community art or populist and "performance" poetry, nor does it provide a license for plagiarism as substitute for talent. Plagiarism, like collage, was a device employed to make a point. As when, for example, Ducasse ridicules the "Great-Soft-Heads" by means of absurd lists and epithets, these epithets themselves pithily sum up various aspects of the authors to whom they refer, through a sort of shorthand, just as maxims are a kind of shorthand for philosophy. Where the metamorphoses in *Les Chants de Maldoror* were protean attempts to escape from taboo, morality and laws, in *Poésies* they are linguistic ruses, efforts to break down the tyranny of language itself, ridiculing poetic and philosophic clichés, received ideas and outdated styles, and thereby trying to forge a new kind of language — to be poetic and philosophic at once, both precise and general, both criticism and creation, for as Octavio Paz writes, "criticism and creation live in permanent symbiosis."

Nothing is new under the sun, and the writer re-works, re-creates old themes, re-interpreting them just as the reader does. The "originality" of the work is therefore beside the point. Vauvenargues himself "corrected" Pascal, approving the principle. Ducasse not only corrects Vauvenargues in *his* turn, but applies the process to himself (or rather to his earlier self — Lautréamont), reworking a passage from *Les Chants de Maldoror*. By changing orders, re-orientating words, different texts emerge, shedding ironic light on their "originals." Gertrude Stein and William Burroughs have

their predecessors too. . . . And Ungaretti seventy years or so ago perceptively observed that words in the *Poésies* had been shown to mean everything and nothing. Likenesses can be perceived between anything the author chooses: Ducasse's approach is a *reductio ad absurdum* of Aristotle's views of the poet's function. In *Poésies* truths can be reversed, annihilated by changes of syntax and omission as much as by shifts of context. Classical can be made Romantic or vice versa: terms and labels are meaningless, for we have to learn a new way to read. "Terrorist" to one may signify "freedom fighter" to another, and we all know the subtexts of "termination with extreme prejudice" or perennially bland phrases like "sensational new offer." Ducasse in one sense leads to the Orwell of *Politics and the English Language* and beyond, to Vaneigem and the Situationists who by shrewd use of collage and juxtaposition exposed both the poverty and richness of slogans, and the thinly veiled hypocrisy of a "spectacular" society which by not respecting words abuses people, and by insulting the intelligence creates a state of political cretinisation in which the many and various forms of authoritarian control may dominate.

The *Poésies* tell us about both rigidity and flexibility, compression and distortion. In one sense "no matter what its content may be, an aphorism is always true: Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Vauvenargues can be corrected in the sense of optimism, but the form remains," and yet, Nesselroth (op. cit.) continues, "it was Lautréamont's discovery that the fragmented form of the aphorism is the poetic form which unifies opposites, which is capable of satisfying his *besoin de l'infini*." To adopt a procedure Ducasse might have liked, it is appropriate here to quote Nesselroth quoting Norman O. Brown in turn quoting Bachelard and Blake: "Aphorism is exaggeration or grotesque; in psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations; and in poetry '*cet extrémisme est le phénomène même de l'élan poétique*.'" Aphorism is exaggeration, extravagant language; the road of excess which leads to the palace of wisdom. . . . Aphorism, the form of the mad truth, the Dionysian form." So much for the view that the *Poésies* are in any way dull or dry. One remembers Artaud's use of the word "extravagance" in con-

nection with Ducasse, and another comment by that mad re-maker of language: "One point I insist on is that Isidore Ducasse was neither madman nor visionary, but a genius who never ceased for as long as he lived to see with perfect lucidity."

Readers may question whether a "madman" can define or recognise lucidity, but down the centuries the sane have not yet succeeded in defining or recognising madness. It depends which way you look at it, who received what label from whom. This is what Ducasse is trying to tell us. And so this Preface has not been concerned with labelling Ducasse. There has been enough speculation about his personal habits (some of the more ridiculous fabrications by Soupault and Malraux, for example), enough bogus controversy about his supposed drug-addiction, insanity, homosexuality, involvement in radical politics, etc., and guesses at whether his death was through disease such as tuberculosis (see the references to TB in *Les Chants de Maldoror*) or due to smallpox (five hundred Parisian victims in one week in November 1870 — the month Ducasse died). Was it malnutrition? (There are plentiful contemporary accounts of the appalling conditions during the siege. Only five days before Ducasse died, for instance, Edouard Manet, another then unappreciated artist, wrote: "We are beginning to suffer here, horsemeat is a treat, the price of donkey meat is astronomical, there are butchers selling dogs, cats, and rats.") A drug overdose, assassination, suicide? Does it really matter? Ducasse, cut off by war from both money and relatives, his freedom restricted, fearing perhaps that he would be called up to fight at any moment for an order in which he almost certainly did not believe, hungry like everyone else, but (unlike everyone else) aware of his worldly if not artistic failure, may just have lost the will to live. Outsiders pay a heavy price for existence — material and spiritual — and for Ducasse at twenty-four time, funds and perhaps hope, too, all ran out at once. No memoirs, no grave. Their lack ensures the legend — but let us look instead at the legacy.

NOTE ON THE TEXT & TRANSLATION

No manuscript of *Les Chants de Maldoror* exists: it has been lost as irretrievably as its author's own bones.

The three earliest complete editions (Lacroix, Verboeckhoven: Brussels 1869; E. Wittman: Paris and Brussels 1874; and L. Genonceaux: Paris 1890) supply the text generally accepted by twentieth-century editors.

Chant Premier was published separately and anonymously by Balitout, Questroy et Cie., Paris, in August 1868, and subsequently reprinted at Bordeaux in Evariste Carrance's anthology *Parfums de l'Ame* (January 1869). Lautréamont revised this section for the Lacroix, Verboeckhoven first edition, making mostly insignificant changes, of which the principal was the deletion of various specific references to Georges Dazet (see p. 298), the former schoolmate who would be a dedicatee of the later *Poésies*.

I prefer Lautréamont's final revised version — the flawless impersonal

pearl rather than the rough-edged oyster. So do most editors, although the earlier version is occasionally reprinted, notably in Soupault's 1958 edition. (See Bibliography.)

Censorship problems and wary publishers were responsible for the book's not being sold in France during Lautréamont's lifetime; copies of the early editions are extremely rare. Until almost half a century later, when Cendrars and the Surrealists Breton and Soupault hailed Lautréamont as a forefather who with Baudelaire and Rimbaud was part of an unholy Trinity of genius, this exciting and revolutionary classic remained truly an "underground" work, little discussed and less read.

Lautréamont's dazzling style with its wild pyrotechnics welded poetry and parody into a coherent and beautiful structure, full of sensitivity as well as strength. I hope this translation of *Les Chants de Maldoror* — still the first complete annotated edition to be generally available in English — may persuade readers to try the French text. For faced with strange puns and punctuation; with curious syntactical constructions which weave unexpected opposites into daring new patterns; with grim humour continually dissolving ecstatic lyrical flights in a cloud of ambiguous and teasing commas, a translator can only approximate.

The first English translation, Rodker's in 1924 (see Bibliography) is, unfortunately, an archaic travesty, full of elementary errors and misreadings, not to mention misprints ("Satan" for "Sultan," and other gems), while Wernham's 1943 guerilla war on the text is even worse. (See also Bibliography.) Mr. Wernham is guilty of the crassest mistakes on every page (*la pâle voie lactée* becomes "the pale milky voice"; *les comédiens les plus extraordinaires*, "the most outlandish clowns"; *égorge*, "disembowels," etc. etc., *ad infinitum*) and, accuracy apart, even has difficulty with the English language: "prideful," "snuff up," "afflict upon me," etc., shamelessly litter his pages.

I do not wish to seem churlish towards my predecessors, but my main aim is the restoration of a previously mutilated and misrepresented text. As for my successors, the so-called Penguin Classics edition (trans. P.

Knight 1978, inexplicably reprinted in 1988) is a disgrace. Beginning with the author's name misspelt on the cover and with jacket-copy wording that remains suspiciously similar to that on the Allison & Busby 1970 edition, evidence of shoddy carelessness persists throughout. Generally dull, it is more often incorrect and certainly incomplete. Many phrases and sentences from both *Maldoror* and *Poésies* are simply omitted, along with all of the Letters and also the epigraph, dedication and postscript-cum-"announcement" to the *Poésies*. Arbitrary tense changes and switches from singular to plural abound; punctuation is wilfully ignored or reinvented; italics are changed to roman, and vice versa. Every section of *Maldoror*'s six *Chants* is numbered; not so in the original. This renumbering is especially pointless, if not disastrous, in Lautréamont's specifically roman-numeralled *petit roman* in *Chant* 6.

The sad enterprise lacks either bibliographical or textual notes, a bibliography or indeed any critical apparatus. Knight's own superfluous yet skimpy comments on *Maldoror* and *Poésies* unhelpfully rehash Marcelin Pleynet and others, and there is no indication as to the text used. This is clearly enough an unscholarly undertaking, in which float "Alexander" Dumas, *Confession of a Contemporary*, and "the preface by Mlle. Daupin." (The latter refers to the celebrated Preface to Gautier's controversial novel of 1835, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.) One is unsure whether the above absurdities stem from the translator's shaky view of French literary history, or are simply misprints and mistranslations. Certainly there are plenty of the latter. For instance, *la rugine* is a surgical instrument, an object nothing whatever to do with the "consumptive" person Knight suddenly introduces in *Chant* 5. And if Lautréamont specifies "four hundred banal pages" why should Knight reduce these to "eighty"? Why have half a dozen "strophes" become "half a dozen pages"? *Récits* are not "songs," and so on.

I am not alone in my view; possibly I am even being kind. Poet Frank Kuppner in his witty article in *The Edinburgh Review* details what Knight has done to "this incomparably great writer": how "cabin boys" turned

into "mosses" and how "a thesis on the curve" became dog turd on the curb! Translation both execrable and excremental; surrealism indeed, of the impurest kind. Finally, should further caveats be needed concerning the Knight-shrouded version, just check the most famous of all Surrealist touchstones: "*la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie!*" Knight's "the chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table!" shows how meaning, poetry and word-order can all be subtly subverted and misrepresented. It's thoroughly unfortunate: translation is difficult and perhaps impossible, but translation of classics (even Penguin ones) must be approached with love and care. Otherwise the reader will not even be cretinised, just bewildered. For the moment a single sentence (this time a strangely appropriate approximation from the *Poésies*), should suffice to cheer and sustain readers and translators alike, both as resonant reminder and typically Knightly invocation: "Oh maniacal howlers that you are!"



Les Chants de Maldoror is neither novel nor prose-poem. Its progression is not traditionally linear, as various critics, notably Blanchot and Pleynet, have pointed out.

Pleyne (see Bibliography) deals with the possible derivations of "Maldoror", so I will confine myself here to indicating that *chant* in French suggests not merely "song," but also "canto," "epic," and "lay." Nesselroth (op. cit. p. 118) has noted the Orphic elements implicit in the title, and it seems to me that Rodker, for once, is apt in selecting "lay." Contemporary readers, however, may be misled by the word's slang connotations, and thus my revised translation of 1970 simply (and chastely) invokes the name of its ubiquitous yet elusive protagonist.

As for the text of the *Poésies*, this volume follows the original edition. The only known copy of *Poésies* I and II is in the Bibliothèque Nationale,

NOTE ON THE TEXT & TRANSLATION

Paris. It was discovered in 1891 by Remy de Gourmont. In 1919 André Breton copied out the full text, which appeared in the magazine *Littérature* (issues 2 and 3), April and May 1919. *Poésies* first appeared in book form, under the imprint *Au Sans Pareil*, Paris 1920 with a Preface by Philippe Soupault.

A . L .

MALDOROR

FIRST CANTO

May it please heaven that the reader, emboldened, and become momentarily as fierce as what he reads, find without loss of bearings a wild and abrupt way across the desolate swamps of these sombre, poison-filled pages. For unless he bring to his reading a rigorous logic and mental application at least tough enough to balance his distrust, the deadly issues of this book will lap up his soul as water does sugar. It would not be good for everyone to read the pages which follow; only the few may relish this bitter fruit without danger. So, timid soul, before further penetration of such uncharted steppes, retrace your steps, do not advance. Hear my words well: retrace your steps, do not advance, resemble the eyes of a son who respectfully looks away when faced with an august maternal gaze; or, rather, a horizon chevron of chilly cranes which in winter with much meditation fly powerfully through the silence, full sail, toward a

specific spot on the skyline, whence springs a strange strong wind — sudden herald of the storm. The oldest crane, forming by herself the spearhead's tip, sees this, and shakes her head like a rational person, causing her beak to click, uneasy (as I would be in her place), while her old neck, denuded of feathers and contemporaneous with three generations of cranes, cranes in peevish waves which give warning of the ever-approaching tempest. Calmly, after surveying all sides several times with her experienced eyes, cautiously, the leader (for it's she who has the privilege of displaying her tail-plumage to her less intelligent companions), with the vigilant cry of a doleful sentry, to repel the common enemy, deftly swerves the apex of the geometric figure (perhaps a triangle, but impossible to see the third side traced in space by these curious birds of passage), now port, now starboard, like a clever captain; and manoeuvring with wings apparently no larger than a sparrow's, she takes then, being no booby, another — safer and more philosophic — course.



Perhaps, reader, you would have me invoke hatred at the opening of this work! How do you know you won't sniff it up, paddling in innumerable pleasures, as much of it as you wish, with your wide, thin, haughty nostrils, your belly uppermost like a shark in the dark fine air, as if you understood the importance of this action no less than the importance of your legitimate appetite, slow and majestic, for the ruby flux? I assure you that the latter will delight those twin hideous holes in your unspeakable snout, O monster, if first you set yourself to inhale three thousand times the accursed awareness of The Eternal! Your nostrils, vastly dilated with sublime content, with static ecstasy, will ask nothing better of space — now become embalmed as if in perfumes and incense — for they shall be sated with a perfect happiness, like angels living in the magnificence and peace of the pleasant heavens.



I shall set down in a few lines how upright Maldoror was during his early years, when he lived happy. There: done. He later perceived he was born wicked: strange mischance! For a great many years he concealed his character as best he could; but in the end, because this effort was not natural to him, each day the blood would rush to his head until, unable any longer to bear such a life, he hurled himself resolutely into a career of evil . . . sweet atmosphere! Who could guess whenever he hugged a rosycheeked young child, that he was longing to hack off those cheeks with a razor and would have done so often had not the idea of Justice and her long cortège of punishments restrained him on every occasion. No liar, he confessed the truth, admitting he was cruel. Mankind, did you hear? He dares repeat it with this quivering quill! A force, then, stronger than the will. . . . Curse it! Would a stone want to elude the law of gravity? Impossible. Impossible for evil to form alliance with good. As I was saying above.



There are some who write seeking the commendation of their fellows by means of noble sentiments which their imaginations invent or they possibly may possess. But *I* set my genius to portray the pleasures of cruelty! These are no fickle, artificial delights, they began with man and with him they will die. Cannot genius be cruelty's ally in the secret resolutions of Providence? Or, if cruel, can't one possess genius? My words will provide the proof: all you need do is listen to them, if you like. . . . Excuse me: I seemed to feel my hair stand on end, but it's nothing, for with my hand I easily manage to restore it to rest. He who sings here does not claim any novelty in his cavatinas. On the contrary, he con-

gratulates himself that the elevated and evil thoughts of his hero are in every man.



Throughout my life I have seen, without one exception, narrow-shouldered men performing innumerable idiotic acts, brutalising their fellows, and corrupting souls by every means. They call the motive for their actions: fame. Seeing these exhibitions I've longed to laugh, with the rest, but that strange imitation was impossible. Taking a penknife with a sharp-edged blade, I slit the flesh at the points joining the lips. For an instant I believed my aim was achieved. I saw in a mirror the mouth ruined at my own will! An error! Besides, the blood gushing freely from the two wounds prevented my distinguishing whether this really was the grin of others. But after some moments of comparison I saw quite clearly that my smile did not resemble that of humans: the fact is, I was not laughing. I have seen men, hideous men with terrible eyes sunk deep in their sockets, outmatch the hardness of rock, the rigidity of cast steel, the shark's cruelty, the insolence of youth, the insane fury of criminals, the hypocrite's treachery, the most extraordinary play-actors, priests' strength of character, and the most secretive, coldest creatures of heaven and earth. I have seen moralists weary of laying bare their hearts and bringing down on themselves the implacable wrath from on high. I have seen them all together — the most powerful first levelled at heaven like that of a child already wilful towards its mother — probably stimulated by some denizen of hell, their eyes brimful of remorse and yet smarting with hatred, in glacial silence, not daring to spill out the unfruitful and mighty meditations harboured in their hearts, meditations so crammed with injustice and horror, enough to sadden the God of mercy with compassion. Or I've seen them at every moment of the day from the start of infancy to the end of dotage, while disgorging incredible curses, insensate curses against all that breathes, against themselves and Providence, prostitute women and children and

thus dishonour those parts of the body consecrated to modesty. Then the seas swell their waters, swallow ships in their abysses; earth tremors and hurricanes topple houses; plagues and divers epidemics decimate praying families. Yet men are unaware of all this. I have seen them also blushing and blenching with shame at their behaviour on earth — but rarely. Tempests, sisters of cyclones; bluish firmament whose beauty I do not admit; hypocrite sea, image of my heart; earth with mysterious womb; inhabitants of the spheres; the whole universe; God who grandly created it, you I invoke: Show me one honest man! . . . May your grace multiply my natural strength tenfold, for at the sight of such a monster I might die of astonishment. One dies at less.



One should let one's fingernails grow for a fortnight. Oh! how sweet to snatch brutally from his bed a boy who has as yet nothing upon his upper lip, and, with eyes open wide, to feign to stroke his forehead softly, brushing back his beautiful locks! And all of a sudden, just when he least expects it, to sink your long nails into his tender breast, but not so that he dies, for if he died you would miss the sight of his subsequent sufferings. Then you drink his blood, sucking the wounds, and during this time, which should last an eternity, the child weeps. Nothing is as good as his blood, still warm, and extracted in the manner mentioned — except it be his tears, bitter as salt. Man, have you never tasted your blood when you've inadvertently cut a finger? Good, isn't it, for it has no taste. Besides, don't you recall how one day in your dismal reflections you raised a hand, palm cupped, to your sickly face moistened by the tears falling from your eyes? And then how the hand inevitably found its way to the mouth, and the mouth drained the tears in long draughts from this cup which faltered like the teeth of a schoolboy who glances sidelong at his born oppressor? How good they are: they taste of vinegar. The tears, one might say, of her who loves most of all; but the child's please the palate more. The

latter, not yet knowing evil, does not deceive, while the most loving of women will, sooner or later, betray. . . . This I surmise by analogy though I do not know what friendship and love are (it's unlikely that I shall ever accept them, and not, at any rate, from the human race). Feed then, since your blood and tears do not disgust you, feed confidently upon the adolescent's tears and blood. Blindfold his eyes while you rip his quivering flesh, and having listened for long hours to his sublime screams akin to the piercing death-rattles forced from the throats of the mortally injured in a battle, rush off like an avalanche, race back from the nextdoor room, and pretend to be coming to his aid. You'll untie his hands with their swollen nerves and veins, restore sight to his distraught eyes as you resume sucking his tears, his blood. Then how real repentance is! The divine spark within us, which so rarely appears, manifests itself—too late! How the heart overflows at being able to console the innocent whom one has harmed! "Child, you who have just suffered cruel pains: who could have perpetrated upon you a crime I do not know how to name! Unfortunate youth, how you must suffer! And even if your mother knew this she would be no nearer death (so abhorrent to the guilty) than I am now. Alas, what is good and what is evil? Are they both one single thing with which we furiously attest our impotence and passion to attain the infinite by even the maddest means? Or are they two different things? Yes . . . they had sooner be one and the same . . . for it not, what will become of me on Judgment Day? Forgive me, child: he who confronts your noble and holy countenance—he it is who broke your bones and tore the flesh that hangs from various parts of your body. Was it my sick mind's delirium? Was it a hidden instinct distinct from reason, like that of an eagle tearing at its prey, that drove me to commit this crime? And yet I suffered as much as my victim! Forgive me, child. I want us—once freed from this fleeting life—to be entwined throughout eternity, to form one being only, my mouth gummed to yours. Even in this way my punishment will not be complete, for you will rend me incessantly with both teeth and nails. I shall deck my body with scented garlands for this expiatory holocaust,

and together we shall suffer, you through tearing me, I through being torn . . . my mouth gummed to yours. O blond, soft-eyed child, will you now do what I counsel you? I want you to do it despite yourself, and you will gladden my conscience." This said, you will simultaneously wrong a human being and have that same human being love you: the greatest happiness one can conceive. Later, you could place him in hospital, since the cripple couldn't earn a living. They'll call you a good man: laurel wreaths and gold medals shall hide your bare feet, and be strewn over the great tomb with its ancient slab. O you whose name I do not wish to inscribe upon this page consecrated to the sanctity of crime: I know your forgiveness was as immense as the universe. But *I* exist still!



I have made a pact with prostitution so as to sow chaos among families. I remember the night preceding this dangerous liaison. Before me I saw a tomb. I heard a glowworm huge as a house say to me: "I shall enlighten you. Read the inscription. This supreme command comes not from me." A vast blood-red light—at the sight of which my jaws chattered and my arms fell limp—spread throughout the air to the horizon. Feeling I would fall, I leaned against a ruined wall, and read: "Here lies a youth who died of consumption. You know why. Do not pray for him." Many men would not, perhaps, have had as much courage as I. Meanwhile a beautiful woman, naked, came and lay down at my feet. I (sad-faced, to her): "You may rise." I held out to her that hand with which the fratricide slits his sister's throat. The glowworm (to me): "You, take a stone and kill her." "Why?" I asked him. He (to me): "Beware, you are the weaker, for I am the stronger. This woman's name is *Prostitution*." Tears in my eyes, rage in my heart, I felt an unknown strength born within me. I grasped a great rock, and after many attempts raised it, with difficulty, chest-high. My arms got it on to one shoulder. I clambered to the top of a mountain, and from there I crushed the glowworm. Its head sank underground to the

depth of a man; the boulder rebounded as high as six churches and toppled back, into a lake whose waters subsided a moment, swirling, hollowing out an immense inverted cone. Calm returned to the surface. The sanguine glow shone no more. "Alas! alas!" screamed the beautiful naked woman: "What have you done?" I (to her): "I prefer you to him because I pity the unfortunate. No fault of yours if eternal justice created you." She (to me): "One day men will do me justice. I'll tell you nothing more. Let me leave, so I can go and conceal my infinite sorrow at the bottom of the sea. Only you, and the loathsome monsters seething in those black abysses, do not despise me. You are good. Farewell, you who have loved me!" I (to her): "Farewell, again farewell! I shall always love you! . . . From today I abandon virtue." That is why, O earth-people, when you hear the winter wind howl on the sea and near its shores, or over great towns which have long worn mourning for me, or across cold polar regions — you must say: "It is not the spirit of God passing, only the piercing sigh of Prostitution united with the heavy groans of the Montevidean." Children, it is I who tell you this. So kneel down, filled with pity; and may men, more numerous than lice, say lengthy prayers.



By moonlight near the sea, in isolated country places, one sees (when sunk in bitter reflection) all things assume yellowish shapes, imprecise and fantastic. Tree shadows — now swift, now slow — race, chase, return in diverse forms, flattening themselves and sticking close to the ground. In days gone by, borne on the wings of youth, this made me dream, seemed strange to me: now I'm used to it. The wind groans its languorous tones through the leaves, and the owl intones his deep lament which makes the hair of those who hear stand on end. Then dogs, driven wild, snap their chains and escape from far-off farms. They run hither and thither through the countryside, in the throes of madness. Suddenly they stop, stare in every direction with a fierce unease, their eyes ablaze, and, as

elephants in the desert look up one last time at the sky before dying, desperately lifting their trunks, leaving their ears laid back, so the dogs lay back their ears, lift their heads, puff out their awful necks, and begin to bark in turn, sometimes like a child crying from hunger, or like a cat with wounded belly atop a roof, or a woman in labour, or a plague victim dying in hospital, or a young girl singing a sublime refrain. . . . They howl — at the northern stars, the eastern stars, the southern stars, and the stars in the west; at the moon; at mountains that resemble at a distance gigantic rocks looming from the darkness; at the cold air they inhale in deep lungfuls, that inflames and reddens the insides of their nostrils; at the silence of the night; at owls bearing rat or frog in their beaks (sweet, live food for fledglings) — whose oblique flight grazes the dogs' muzzles; at hares that vanish at the wink of an eye; at the highwayman who gallops off on his horse after committing a crime; at snakes rustling the heather, making the dogs' flesh creep and their teeth grind together; at their own barking, by which they scare themselves; at toads which they crunch with a crack of the jaw (why have they strayed far from the swamp?); at trees whose leaves, softly swayed, are so many mysteries they do not understand and want to seek out with their steady, intelligent eyes; at spiders suspended between their own long legs, who scuttle up trees to escape; at crows, that have found nothing to eat all day and return to the perch with weary wings; at the rocks on the shore; at the navigation lights to be seen on the masts of invisible vessels; at the dull sound of the waves; at the great fish, which while swimming show their black backs then sink into the depths; and at man, who makes them slaves. After which they resume their racing across the countryside, bounding with bleeding paws over ditches, paths, fields, grasses and steep rocks. One would think them rabid, seeking some vast pond in which to slake their thirst. Their continuing howls terrify nature. Beware, the tardy traveller! The frequenters of cemeteries will hurl themselves upon him, ripping, devouring him with bloody, dripping jaws — the dogs' teeth are not carious. Wild animals, not daring draw near to partake of this feast of flesh, flee from sight, quaking.

After several hours the dogs, worn out rushing to and fro, half-dead, tongues lolling from their mouths, spring at each other not knowing what they do, and with incredible rapidity rip themselves into a thousand shreds. They do not act thus out of cruelty. One day my mother, glassy-eyed, said to me: "Whenever you are in bed and hear the dogs' howling in the fields, hide under the bedclothes, don't deride what they do: they thirst insatiably for the infinite, like you, me, and the rest of us humans with our long, pale faces. I even allow you to stand at the window and gaze upon this quite exalted spectacle." Since that time I have respected the dead woman's wish. Like the dogs, I too feel the longing for the infinite . . . I cannot, can not satisfy this need! I am son of man and woman, so they tell me. That astounds me . . . I thought myself more! Moreover, what does it matter whence I come? If it had been up to *me*, I'd far rather have been the son of a female shark, whose hunger is the friend of tempests, and of the tiger, whose cruelty is well-known: I would not be so wicked. You who look on me, keep your distance, for my breath exhales poisoned air. No one has yet seen the green fissures on my forehead; nor the bones protruding from my spare features, akin to the spiky fins of some huge fish, or to rocks that cover the seashore, or to the steep Alpine mountains I often scaled when I had hair of a different hue on my head. And while through thundery nights I rove about the dwellings of men, fiery-eyed, hair whipped by storm-winds, alone, like a stone in the middle of the road—I cover my branded face with a scrap of velvet black as the soot that clogs chimney flues. No eyes must witness the ugliness which the Supreme Being, with a smile of mighty spite, has set upon me. Each morning when the sun rises for others, spreading joy and wholesome warmth throughout all nature, none of my features stirs as I stare fixedly at space (full of shadows): I am crouched near the back of my beloved cave, in a despair as intoxicant as wine, and with my strong hands tear my breast to tatters. Yet I do not feel rage-stricken! Nor do I feel that I alone suffer! But I do feel I am breathing! As a condemned man soon to mount the scaffold flexes his muscles, reflecting on their fate, so, upright

upon my straw pallet, my eyes shut, I turn my neck slowly, right to left, left to right, for whole hours on end. I do not fall stone dead. From time to time when my neck can no longer continue to turn in one direction, and stops so as to resume its turning the opposite way, I glance suddenly at the horizon, through the few chinks left in the thick brushwood that covers the cave's entrance: I see nothing! Nothing . . . except for the fields in a whirling dance with the trees and long trails of birds traversing the air. That disturbs my blood and brain. . . . So who deals those blows on my head with an iron bar, like a hammer hitting an anvil?



I propose, without my being upset, to declaim in loud tones the cold and sober stanza you are about to hear. Pay heed to what it contains, and beware of the painful impact it will not fail to leave like a blight on your disordered imaginations. Do not believe I am on the verge of death, for I am not yet a skeleton, and old age cleaves not to my brow. Let us consequently wave aside any idea of comparison with the swan at that moment when its life flies off, and before you, behold merely a monster whose face I am glad you cannot see: but the face is less horrible than the soul. I am not, however, a criminal. . . . Enough of this topic. Not long ago I saw the sea again and trod the decks of ships, and my memories are as green as if I'd left the sea only yesterday. Nevertheless, if you can, on reading what I already regret offering you, be as calm as I, and do not blush at the thought of what the human heart is. O octopus of the silken glance! you whose soul is inseparable from mine; you the most handsome inhabitant of the terrestrial globe, who govern a seraglio of four hundred suction-cups; you in whom are nobly enthroned as in their natural habitat, by common consent and an indestructible bond, the sweet virtue of communication and the divine graces—why are you not with me, your quicksilver belly against my breast of aluminium, both of us seated on some rock by the shore, to meditate upon this spectacle I adore!

Old ocean, with your crystal waves you resemble (by analogy) the parallel azure lines one sees upon the bruised backs of cabin-boys; you are an immense blue bruise slapped on the body of earth—I like this comparison. So, at first sight of you, a long-drawnout sigh of sadness that one might believe to be the murmur of your bland breeze passes over the deeply disturbed soul, leaving ineradicable scars, and you remind your lovers (though they don't always bear it in mind) of man's crude origins, when he became acquainted with the sorrow that is never to desert him. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, your harmoniously spherical form that rejoices the grave face of geometry reminds me overmuch of man's tiny eyes—akin to the peccary's in minuteness and to those of the nightbirds in their circular perfection of contour. Yet down the ages man has deemed himself beautiful. As for me, I prefer to assume that man believes in his own beauty only out of *amour-propre*, but is not really goodlooking, and guesses as much; why else does he gaze on the face of his fellow with so great a contempt? I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, you are the symbol of identity: always equal unto yourself. In essence, you never change, and if somewhere your waves are enraged, farther off in some other zone they are in the most complete calm. You are not like man—who stops in the street to see two bulldogs seize each other by the scruff of the neck, but does not stop when a funeral passes. Man who in the morning is affable and in the evening ill-humoured. Who laughs today and weeps tomorrow. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, it might not be impossible that you conceal in your breast future utilities for man. You have already given him the whale. You do not easily let the avid eyes of natural science divine the thousand secrets of your inmost oeconomy: you are modest. Man boasts incessantly—over trifles. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, the different species of fish that you nurture have not sworn brotherhood among themselves. Each species lives apart, on its own. The varying temperaments and conformations of each one satisfac-

torily explain what at first appears an anomaly. So it is with man, who has not the same motives as excuse. If a piece of land be occupied by thirty million human beings, *they* consider they have no obligation to concern themselves with the existence of their neighbours who are settled like roots in the adjacent patch of land. And descending from the general to the particular, each man lives like a savage in his den and rarely leaves it to visit his fellow—crouching alike in another lair. The great universal human family is a utopia worthy of the most paltry logic. Besides, from the spectacle of your fecund breasts emerges the notion of ingratitude, for one thinks immediately of those innumerable parents ungrateful enough towards the Creator to abandon the fruit of their sorry unions. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, your physical magnitude is only discernible if one can imagine the energy needed to beget your entire mass. A glance cannot encompass you. To envision you, the sight must turn its telescope in one continuous movement towards the four points of the horizon, the same way that a mathematician, in order to resolve an algebraic equation, has to examine the various possible solutions before settling the problem. Man consumes nutritious substances and makes other attempts—worthy of a better fate—to appear fat. Let this adorable frog puff itself up as much as it pleases. Be calm: it will never equal you in volume. At least I suppose not. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, your waters are bitter. They have the very same taste as the bile which criticism secretes upon the fine arts, the sciences, on everything. If someone has genius, one makes him out an idiot. If another has a handsome body, he becomes a hideous hunchback. Man must certainly feel his imperfections strongly indeed—threequarters of them, moreover, are his own fault—to criticise them thus! I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, men, despite the excellence of their methods, and their being aided by scientific means of investigation, have not yet managed to measure your dizzying unfathomed depths. You have some that the longest, heaviest plummets have recognised to be inaccessible. Fish have per-

mission, but not man. I've often wondered which was the easier to acknowledge: the depth of the ocean or the depths of the human heart! Often, standing aboard ship, my hand to my brow, while the moon balanced askew between the masts, I've astonished myself, disregarding all save the goal I pursued, striving to solve this difficult problem! Yes, which is the deeper, the more impenetrable of the two: the ocean or the human heart? If thirty years' experience of life can tilt the scale toward one or the other of these solutions, I may be permitted to state that, despite the depth of the ocean, it cannot, within the context of such a comparison, match the depth of the human heart. I have had dealings with men who were virtuous. They would die at sixty, and everyone never failed to exclaim: "They did good on earth—that's to say they were charitable—that's all, not difficult, anyone could do as much." Who can understand why two lovers who idolised one another the night before, because of one word misinterpreted, split up, eastward one, west the other, goaded by hate, revenge, love and remorse, and never see each other again, both cloaked in lonely pride. This is a miracle renewed every day and is none the less miraculous for that. Who can understand why we relish not only the general misfortunes of our fellow men but also the particular ones of our dearest friends, while at the same time grieved by them? One indisputable example to conclude the series: man hypocritically says yes and thinks no. That is why the wild boars of humanity trust each other so much and are not egoists. Psychology still has a great deal of progress to make. I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, you are so powerful that men have learned this to their own cost. Well may they employ all the resources of their genius . . . incapable of ruling you. They have found their master. I say they have found something stronger than themselves. This something has a name. This name is: the ocean! The fear you inspire in them is such that they respect you. In spite of that, you make their heaviest machines waltz with grace, elegance and ease. You make them leap gymnastically into the sky, and dive marvellously down into the depths of your domain: a

circus tumbler would be jealous. Happy are they whom you do not ultimately envelop in your foaming folds, so they can enter your aqueous entrails, railwayless, and see how the fish fare, and above all, how they themselves do. Man says: "I am more intelligent than the ocean." It's possible, even quite true; but the ocean is more formidable to him, than he to the ocean. No proof of this is necessary. That observant patriarch, contemporary of the first epochs of our suspended globe, smiles with pity when present at the naval encounters of nations. Here are a hundred leviathans sprung from human hands. The officers' bombastic orders, the shrieks of the wounded, the cannon blasts—all noise purposely made to annihilate a few seconds. The drama appears to be over, and the ocean has drawn everything into its belly. A formidable maw. It must be vast towards the bottom, in the direction of the unknown! Finally, to crown the foolish farce, which is not even interesting, one sees right there in the air some tired, straggling stork that, without its wingspan faltering, cries: "Look, that's not funny! There were black spots below. I shut my eyes and they'd gone." I hail you, old ocean!

Old ocean, great celibate—when you survey the solemn solitude of your stolid kingdoms, you rightly pride yourself on your innate magnificence and on the true eulogies that I hasten to attribute to you. Voluptuously swayed by the soft effluvia of your majestic deliberation—the grandest among those characteristics which the sovereign power has conferred upon you—in the midst of a sombre mystery, with the calm sense of your eternal strength, you unfurl all along your sublime surface your incomparable waves. Parallel, they follow each other, separated by short intervals. Hardly has one abated than another goes, growing, to meet it. They are accompanied by the melancholy sound of foam dissolving, to warn us that all is foam. (Thus humans, those living waves, die in a dreary way one after the other: but leave no frothy noise.) The bird of passage rests confidently on the waves, lets itself be borne by their motion, full of proud grace, until its wing-bones have regained customary vigour to continue the aerial pilgrimage. I wish that human majesty were but the em-

bodiment of the reflection of your own. I ask much, and this sincere wish casts glory on you. Your moral magnitude, image of the infinite, is vast as the philosopher's meditation, woman's love, the heavenly beauty of a bird, or the musings of the poet. You are more beautiful than the night. Answer me, ocean, do you want to be my brother? Stir yourself, impetuously . . . more . . . still more if you want me to compare you to the vengeance of God. Extend your livid claws, tearing out a pathway in your own breast . . . that's it. Unroll your frightful breakers, hideous ocean — understood by me alone — before whom, at whose knees, I fall prostrate. Man's majesty is borrowed; it shall not awe me: you, yes. Oh! when you advance, crest high and fearsome, surrounded by tortuous coils as by a royal court, mesmeric and savage, rolling your waves one on the other, conscious of what you are, while you force from the depths of your bosom as if overwhelmed by an intense remorse I cannot fathom, this perpetual muffled booming which men so much dread even when they contemplate you in safety, trembling on the shore: then I see that I do not possess the notable right of declaring myself your equal. That is why in the presence of your superiority I would give you all my love (and no one knows how much love my aspirations towards the beautiful contain) if you did not make me dwell sadly upon my fellow men who, in highly ironic contrast to you, form the most buffoonish antithesis ever seen in creation. I cannot love you, I loathe you. Why do I return to you for the thousandth time, to your friendly arms that open to caress my burning brow — which sees fever flee upon their contact! Your secret destiny I know not: all that concerns you interests me. Tell me whether you are the abode of the Prince of Darkness. . . . Tell me, ocean (me alone, so as not to sadden those who have as yet known only illusions); tell me if Satan's breath creates the storms that hurl your salty waters up to the clouds. This you must tell me because I would rejoice at knowing hell so close to man. I want this to be the last stanza of my invocation. Consequently, just once more I would hail you and bid you farewell! Old ocean, with waves of crystal. . . . My eyes well with copious tears, and I have not strength to

proceed, for I feel that the moment has come to return among men, with their brutal demeanour. But . . . take heart! Let us make a great effort, and with a sense of duty fulfil our destiny upon this earth. I hail you, old ocean!



I will not be seen, in my last hour (I write this on my deathbed) surrounded by priests. I want to die cradled on the waves of the stormy sea or standing on a mountain . . . my eyes aloft — no: I know my annihilation will be total. Besides, I would have no remission to hope for. Who is opening the door of my funeral chamber? I had said that none should enter. Whoever you are, keep away. But if you do discern some mark of sorrow or fear on my hyena's face (I use this metaphor although the hyena is handsomer than I, and more pleasant to look upon) — be undeceived. Approach, then. A winter night it is, with the elements clashing on all sides: man is afraid, and the adolescent contemplates some crime against one of his friends, if he is as I was during my youth. May the wind — whose whinings have saddened humanity since wind and humanity existed — bear me (a few moments before my death-throes) on the bones of his wings, across the world, eager for my death. Once again I shall secretly gloat over the numerous examples of human wickedness (a brother loves to watch unseen the deeds of his brothers). Eagle, crow, the immortal pelican, the wild duck, the wandering crane, waking, shaking with cold, will see me pass in the glow of lightning, a horrid and happy apparition. They won't know what it means. On earth, the viper, the toad's vast eye, tiger, elephant; in the sea, whale, shark, hammerhead shark, shapeless ray, the tooth of the polar seal — all will wonder at this deviation from the law of nature. Man, trembling, groaning, will glue his forehead to the ground. "Yes, I outdo you all in my innate cruelty — cruelty whose suppression does not lie with me. Is this the reason for your prostrating yourselves before me thus? Or else because you see me, new phenomenon, race like

an appalling comet across blood-stained space?" (A rain of blood falls from my vast body, akin to the blackish cloud that the hurricane thrusts ahead.) "Fear naught, my children, I do not wish to curse you. The evil you have done me, the wrong I have done you, is too great, too great to be spontaneous. You have gone your way, I mine, both alike, both perverse. Therefore through this character resemblance we must needs have met: the resultant shock has been mutually fatal." Then men, regaining courage, will lift their heads little by little, stretching out their necks like snails, to see who thus addresses them. Suddenly, their blazing distraught faces displaying the most frightful passions grimace fit for wolves to feel fear. All at once they rise upright like an immense spring. What curses! what rending voices! They have recognized me. Now the beasts of earth join together with men — make their weird hubbub heard. No more mutual hatred: the two hates are turned against the common foe, myself. Reconciliation by universal assent. Supporting winds, raise me higher: I fear perfidy. Yes, let's gradually disappear from their sight — once again completely satisfied witness to the consequences of passion. I thank you, O rhinolophus, you whose snout is topped by a horseshoe-shaped crest, for having woken me with the motion of your wings. Indeed, I perceive it was unfortunately but a fleeting sickness, and with disgust I feel myself restored to life. Some say you approached me to suck what little blood is to be found in my body: why is this hypothesis not reality!



A family, seated round a lamp set on the table.

- My son, hand me the scissors there on that chair.
- They are not there, mother.
- Then go and look for them in the other room. Do you recall the time, my dear master, when we prayed to have a child in whom we would be born again and who would be our support in old age?
- I remember, and God answered our prayers. We need not complain

of our lot on earth. Each day we bless Providence for her gifts. Our Edward possesses all his mother's graces.

— And his father's masculine qualities.

— Here are the scissors, mother. I found them at last.

He resumes his homework. . . . But someone has appeared at the front door and for a few moments observes the tableau before his eyes:

— What does this scene mean? There are many people less happy than these. What argument do they themselves advance for loving life? Be off, Maldoror, leave this peaceful hearth: you have no place here.

He has withdrawn!

— I don't know why it is, but I feel human faculties start warring within my heart. My soul is uneasy without knowing why. It's so close.

— Wife, I feel the same as you do. I dread to think that some misfortune might befall us. Let's trust in God; in Him is the supreme hope.

— Mother, I can hardly breathe: my head aches.

— You too, son! I shall moisten your brow and temples with vinegar.

— No, mother dear. . . .

See, he slumps against the back of the chair, exhausted.

— Something makes me queasy, I can't explain it. The merest trifle vexes me now.

— How pale you are! This evening will not end before some fatal incident plunges the three of us into the lake of despair!

I hear in the distance prolonged screams of the most poignant anguish.

— My son!

— Oh mother, I'm scared!

— Tell me quickly if you are in pain.

— No, mother, I'm not . . . I'm not telling the truth.

The father cannot overcome his astonishment:

— Those cries are sometimes to be heard in the silence of starless nights. Although we can hear the cries, he who utters them is not nearby, since the groans can be heard three leagues off, borne on the wind from one city to another. I have often heard tell of this phenomenon but I've

never had the chance myself to judge its truth. Wife, you mentioned misfortune. If truer misfortune existed within the long spiral of time, it is his misfortune who now disturbs the sleep of his fellow men.

I hear in the distance prolonged screams of the most poignant anguish.

— Heaven grant that his birth be not a calamity for his country, which has driven him from her breast. From land to land he goes, hated everywhere. Some say he has been stricken since childhood by a type of inherited madness. Others hold that he is of an extreme and instinctive cruelty of which he himself is ashamed, and that his parents died of grief because of it. There are those who maintain that he was branded with a nickname in his youth and that he has for the rest of his existence remained inconsolable, because his wounded pride saw in this a flagrant proof of men's wickedness, which shows itself from earliest years and increases thereafter. This nickname was *The vampire!*

I hear in the distance prolonged screams of the most poignant anguish.

— They add that night and day without respite or rest, horrible night-mares have him bleeding from ears and mouth, and that spectres squat at the head of his bed, and, impelled despite themselves by an unknown force, fling in his face, now softly, now with voices like warcries, and with implacable persistence, this ever enduring, always hideous epithet which will perish only with the universe itself. Some have even asserted that love reduced him to this state, or that his cries show remorse for some crime shrouded in the night of his mysterious past. But the majority think an immeasurable pride tortures him, as it once did Satan, and that he would like to be God's equal. . . .

I hear in the distance prolonged screams of the most poignant anguish.

— My son, these are exceptional confidences: I pity your hearing them at your age, and I hope you will never imitate that man.

— Speak, Edward mine; answer that you will never imitate that man.

— O beloved mother, to whom I owe the light of day, I promise, if a child's hallowed promise has any meaning, never to imitate that man.

— That's fine, my son. One's mother must be obeyed in everything.

The screams are heard no more.

— Wife, have you finished your work?

— A few stitches left to put in this shirt, although we have stayed up rather late.

— And *I've* not finished a chapter I began. Let us take advantage of the last glimmers of lamplight — for there is hardly any more oil — and each complete our work. . . .

The child cries out:

— If God lets us live!

— Radiant angel, come to me. You shall stroll in the meadow, morning till night. You shall not work at all. My magnificent palace is built of silver walls, golden columns and diamond doors. You shall go to bed when you will, to the strains of celestial music, without having to say your prayers. When in the morning the sun displays his resplendent rays and the joyous lark transports its song out of sight in the skies, you may still stay in bed — until that wearies you. You shall tread the most precious carpets; you shall be constantly embalmed in an atmosphere composed of the perfumed essences of the most fragrant flowers.

— It is time to rest body and soul. Arise, mother of my family, on your strong ankles. It is fitting that your stiffened fingers abandon the needle of needless toil. One shouldn't go to extremes.

— Oh! how sweet your existence will be! I shall give you an enchanted ring. When you twist its ruby you'll be invisible like the princes in fairy tales.

— Put away your day-to-day utensils in the safety of the cupboard, while I for my part clear away my things.

— When you turn it back to its original position, you will reappear as nature fashioned you, O young magician. This is because I love you and strive for your happiness.

— Whoever you are, go away — don't grip my shoulders.

— My son, don't fall asleep, cradled on childhood's dreams: our evening prayers have not begun and your clothes are not yet set tidily on a

chair . . . Kneel down! "Eternal Creator of the Universe, Thou showest Thine inexhaustible goodness even in the smallest things."

— Then do you not love limpid streams where thousands of little fish — red, blue, and silvery — are gliding? You shall catch them with a net so beautiful that it will of itself attract them until filled. From the surface you shall see shiny pebbles, more polished than marble.

— Mother, look at those claws: I distrust him. But my conscience is clear, for I've nothing with which to reproach myself.

— "Thou seest us prostrate at Thy feet, overwhelmed by the sense of Thy greatness. If any proud thought insinuate itself into our imagination, we reject it immediately with the spittle of disdain and surrender it irremissibly unto Thee."

— There you will bathe with little girls who will entwine you in their arms. Once out of the bath, they will deck you with wreaths of roses and carnations. They will have transparent butterfly wings, and long wavy hair that floats about the sweetness of their brows.

— Even though your palace were more beautiful than crystal, I would not leave this house to follow you. I think you only an impostor, since you talk to me so softly for fear of being overheard. Abandoning one's parents is an evil act. *I* shan't play the ungrateful son. As for your little girls, they are not so beautiful as my mother's eyes.

— "All our life is spent in praises of Thy glory. Such as we have been heretofore, so shall we be until that time when we receive from Thee the command to depart this earth."

— They will obey you at the slightest nod and have only your pleasure in mind. If you wish for the bird that never rests, they will bring it you. If you desire the coach of snow that in the twinkling of an eye bears one to the sun, they will bring it you. What will they not bring you! They will even bring you the kite, tall as a tower, that's hidden on the moon, and from whose tail birds of every species are suspended by silken threads. Heed yourself . . . take my advice.

— Do what you will. I don't want to interrupt prayers by calling for

help. Although your body vanishes when I would ward it off, know that I do not fear you.

— "Before Thee nothing is great unless it be the flame issuing forth from a pure heart."

— Think over what I have told you. If not, you will regret it.

— "Heavenly Father, exorcise, avert the misfortunes that can swoop down upon our family."

— You will not be off then, evil phantom?

— "Preserve this beloved wife who has consoled me in my despondency. . . ."

— Since you reject me I shall make you weep and gnash your teeth like a hanged man.

— "And this loving son, whose chaste lips have scarcely opened to the kisses of life's dawn."

— Mother, he's choking me. . . . Father, help me! . . . I can no longer breathe! . . . Your blessing!

A cry of boundless irony rises up into the skies. See how eagles fall stunned from the topmost clouds, tumbling over one another, literally struck down by the column of air.

— His heart beats no more. . . . And she too has died, at the same instant as the fruit of her womb — fruit I no longer recognise, so greatly is he disfigured. . . . My wife! My son! I recall a distant time when I was husband and father.

He told himself, faced with the scene presenting itself to his eyes, that he would not endure this injustice. If the power the infernal demons have granted him (or rather that he summons from within himself) be effective, then before the night slips by this child should be no more.



He who knows not how to weep (for he has always suppressed the suffering within) noted that he found himself in Norway. On the Faroe

Isles he participated in the search for seabirds' nests along sheer crevasses, and was amazed that the three-hundred metre rope which supports the explorer above the precipice was selected for its great strength. Whatever one says, he saw in this a striking example of human kindness, and could not believe his eyes. If *he* had had to prepare the rope, he would have slashed it at several spots so it would snap and plunge the hunter into the sea! One evening he headed for a cemetery, and those youths who find pleasure in raping the corpses of beautiful women recently dead could, had they wished, have overheard the following conversation frittered away within the context of a plot that is to unfold simultaneously.

— Sexton, do you not wish to converse with me? A spermwhale rises gradually from the seabed and shows its head above the waters so as to see the ship that passes by these solitary latitudes. Curiosity was born with the universe.

— Friend, it is impossible for me to exchange ideas with you. Long have the moonbeams made the tombs' marble gleam. It is the silent hour when more than one human being dreams he sees chained women appear, dragging their shrouds covered with bloodstains — as a black sky is with stars. The sleeper utters groans like those of one condemned to death, until he wakes and realises that reality is thrice worse than dream. I must finish digging this grave with my tireless spade so it be ready tomorrow morning. To perform serious work one must not do two things at once.

— He thinks digging a grave is serious work! You think grave digging is serious work!

— When the brutal pelican brings itself to offer its breast for its brood to devour — having as witness only He who knew how to create such a love as would shame men — although the sacrifice be great, the act is quite natural. When a young man sees a woman whom he worshipped in the arms of his friend, he takes to smoking a cigar; doesn't leave the house, and clings with indissoluble friendship to sorrow: again, quite natural. When a boarder at a *lycée* is ruled for years (which are centuries), from morning till night and night till morning, by an outcast of civilisation

whose eyes are constantly upon him, he feels tumultuous torrents of an undying hatred mount like heavy fumes to his head that seems about to burst. From the moment he was hurled into prison, until that time near to hand when he will leave it, a high fever yellows his face, knits his brows, and hollows his eyes. At night he muses, because he does not want to sleep. By day his thoughts vault over the walls of the abode of degradation, toward the moment when he escapes this perpetual cloister or they expel him from it like one stricken by plague. Quite natural too. Digging a grave is often beyond the forces of nature. Stranger, how would you like my pick to turn up this earth which first feeds us then gives us a comfortable bed sheltered from the winter wind furiously blowing about these freezing regions, when he who wields the pick with trembling hands, having all day long convulsively fingered the cheeks of those once living who return to his kingdom, sees before him in the evening, written in letters of flame on every wooden cross the terms of the fearful problem that mankind has not yet solved: the mortality or immortality of the soul. I have always preserved my love for the Creator of the universe, but were we to exist no more after death why, most nights, do I see each coffin open and its occupant softly lift the leaden lid so as to emerge and breathe the fresh air?

— Cease your work. Emotion saps your strength. To me you seem as feeble as a reed. It would be sheer madness to continue. I am strong, I'm going to take your place. You, stand aside. You shall advise me if I don't do well.

— How muscular his arms are, and what pleasure to watch him dig the soil with such ease!

— You must not let a useless doubt torment your thoughts. All these tombs that are scattered about the cemetery like flowers in a meadow (a simile lacking truth) are worthy of being measured by the serene orientation of the philosopher. Dangerous hallucinations may appear by day, but they come mainly at night. Do not, therefore, be amazed by fantastic visions your eyes seem to see. During the daytime when the mind is at

rest, question your conscience: it will assuredly tell you that the God who created man with a particle of His own intelligence is possessed of limitless benevolence and will, after its earthly death, receive this masterpiece into His bosom. Why do you weep, gravedigger? Why these womanish tears? Remember this well: we are aboard this dismasted vessel in order to suffer. It is a credit to man that God has judged him capable of overcoming his deepest sufferings. Speak, if your tongue is made like other men's, and since, according to your most cherished wishes, there should be no suffering, tell me then what virtue is, that ideal each one of us strives to achieve.

— Where am I? Have I not changed character? I feel a strong breath of consolation brush my unruffled brow, like the spring breeze reviving hope in old men. What kind of man is this, whose sublime speech has said things not everybody would have uttered? What beauty—as of music—in the incomparable melody of his voice! I had rather hear him talk than others sing. Yet the more I observe him, the less candid his face. The general cast of his features contrasts queerly with these words which the love of God alone could have inspired. Puckered by wrinkles, his brow is branded with an indelible stigma. Is this stigma, which has aged him before his time, honourable or infamous? Should his wrinkles be regarded with veneration? I do not know, and dread knowing. Though he says what he does not believe, I think nonetheless he has reasons for acting as he has done, roused by the tattered remnants of a charity destroyed within him. He is absorbed in meditations unknown to me, and redoubles his activity in difficult work he's not used to undertaking. Sweat moistens his skin, he does not notice it. He is sadder than feelings which the sight of a child in its cradle inspires. . . . Oh! how gloomy he is! . . . Whence do you come? Stranger, let me touch you, and let my hands, which seldom grasp those of the living, venture upon the nobility of your body. Come what may, I'd know where I stand. This hair is the finest I've touched in my life. Who would be bold enough to claim I could not judge the quality of hair?

— What do you want of me while I'm digging a grave? The lion does not wish to be provoked as he gorges his fill. If you don't know this, I shall teach you it. Come, hurry: perform what it is you yearn for.

— What shudders at my touch, making me shudder myself, is flesh and blood beyond doubt. It's true . . . I am not dreaming! Who are you then, you who stoop there digging a grave while I, like a sluggard who eats the bread of others, do nothing? It's the time for sleep, or for sacrificing rest to learning. In any case, no one strays from home, and men guard against leaving doors open, so as not to let in burglars. They lock themselves up in their rooms as best they can, while the embers in the old fireplace still manage to warm the chamber with a remnant of heat. *You* do not behave like other men. Your clothes suggest you are an inhabitant of some distant country.

— Although I am not tired, it's useless to dig any more. Undress me now, then place me inside it.

— Our conversation together these last few moments has been so odd I do not know how to answer you. . . . (I think he's joking.)

— Yes, yes, that's right, I was joking. Take no notice of what I said. He collapsed and the gravedigger was quick to support him!

— What's the matter?

— Yes, yes, it's true, I lied. . . . I was exhausted when I laid down the pick. . . . It's the first time I've tackled such work. . . . Take no notice of what I said.

— My opinion steadily gains ground: here is someone with appalling sorrows. Heaven forbid that I question him. I would rather remain in doubt, such is the pity he inspires in me. Besides, he would not want to reply, that's certain. To open one's heart when in such an abnormal state is to suffer doubly.

— Let me leave this cemetery. I shall continue on my way.

— Your legs would not carry you. You would lose the way as you trudged on. I'm duty bound to offer you a homely bed: I have no other. Trust me, for hospitality will not demand infringing your secrets.

— O venerable louse, whose body is bereft of elytra, one day you bitterly reproached me for not caring sufficiently for your sublime understanding, which is no open book. Perhaps you were right, since I do not even feel gratitude towards this man. Lantern of Maldoror, whither do you guide his footsteps?

— To my home. Whether you be a criminal who has not taken the precaution of scrubbing his right hand with soap after committing his crime and is easily recognised upon inspection of this hand; or a brother who has lost his sister; or some dethroned monarch fleeing his kingdom, my truly awe-inspiring palace is worthy to receive you. It was not constructed of diamonds and precious stones; it's only a poor hut, poorly built, but this famous hut has an historic past that the present renews and incessantly continues. If it could speak it would astound you, you who seem to be astounded by nothing. How often have that hut and I seen funeral biers wind before us, hearses containing bones soon to be more worm-eaten than the back of my door against which I leant. My innumerable subjects increase daily. I need no census on set dates to realise that. Here, it is as with the living: each one pays a tax proportionate to the richness of the residence chosen; and should some miser refuse to hand over his quota I am authorised in such instances to act as bailiffs do: there's no lack of jackals and vultures longing to have a good meal. I have seen arrayed in death's ranks those who had been handsome; those whom death had not disfigured; men, women, beggars and kings' sons; the illusions of youth, the skeletons of the aged; genius and madness; sloth and its opposite; those who were false, those who were true; the mask of the haughty, the modesty of the humble; vice crowned with flowers and innocence betrayed.

— No, I certainly shan't refuse your bed — which is worthy of me — until daybreak, which will not be long. Thank you for your kindness . . . Gravedigger, it is fine to contemplate the ruins of cities, but finer far to contemplate the ruins of men!



The brother to the leech paced slowly through the forest. Again and again he would stop and open his mouth to speak. But each time his throat would contract and choke back the abortive attempt. At last he cried out: "Man, when you come across a dog lying dead on its back, wedged against a sluiceway that prevents its being swept off, do not (like others) go and grasp a handful of maggots crawling from its bloated belly and gaze at them in astonishment, then open a claspknife and cut up a large number of them, telling yourself that you too will be no more than this dog. What mystery do you seek? Neither I nor the four flippers of the sea-bear of the Boreal ocean have been able to solve the riddle of life. Take care, night draws nigh and you have been there since morning. . . . What will your family, your little sister, say when they see you turn up so late? Wash your hands, take the road that leads to sleep. . . . Who is that being, there on the horizon, who dares approach me fearlessly with tormented, oblique leaps? And what majesty, mingled with serene mildness! His look, though soft, is profound. His enormous eyelids frolic in the breeze, and seem alive. He is beyond my ken. Meeting his monstrous eyes, my body quakes — for the first time since I sucked the dry dugs of what one calls a mother. There is a sort of halo of dazzling light about this being. When he spoke, all nature was stilled, and shared in a huge shudder. Since it pleases you to come to me, as if drawn by a magnet, I've no objection to that. How handsome he is! It pains me to say so. You must be strong, for you have a superhuman countenance, sad as the universe, beautiful as suicide. I abhor you to the utmost, and would rather see a serpent coiled round my neck from time immemorial than your eyes. . . . What! . . . It's you, toad! . . . Fat toad! . . . Ill fated toad! . . . Forgive me! . . . Forgive me! . . . Why are you on this earth where the accursed are? But what have you done to your viscous, foetid pustules that you

should have so sweet a look? When, by a higher command, you came down from above on a mission to comfort the various breeds of existing creatures, you swooped upon earth with the speed of a kite, wings unwearied by this long, splendid errand. I saw you! Poor toad! How I mused then on the infinite, as well as on my frailty. 'One more being,' I told myself, 'who is superior to those on earth; and that by divine will. Why not I too? What place has injustice in the supreme decrees? Is the Creator mad? He is, though, the strongest, and his wrath terrible!' Since you appeared to me, monarch of marshes and ponds, clad in a glory that belongs only to God, you have, in some measure, consoled me. But my wavering wits are engulfed by such majesty! Who are you? Stay . . . Oh! stay longer on this earth! Fold your white wings, and do not look upward with anxious eyes. . . . If you leave, let us leave together!" The toad sat down on his haunches (so like man's!) and while slugs, woodlice, and snails fled at the sight of their deadly enemy, thus uttered: "Hear me, Maldoror. Note my face, calm as a mirror. And I believe I have an intelligence equal to yours. One day you called me the mainstay of your life. Since then I have not belied the trust you placed in me. True, I'm only a common inhabitant of the reeds, but thanks to your own contact, and taking after only what was beautiful in you, my mind has grown and I can talk to you. I came to snatch you from the abyss. Those who call themselves your friends, smitten with consternation, stare at you whenever they meet your pale and stooping figure at the theatre, in public places, in churches, or squeezing between your two sinewy thighs that horse who gallops only by night, bearing his phantom master swathed in a long black cloak. Abandon these thoughts which make your heart empty as a desert: they are more scorching than fire. Your mind is so sick that you do not realise it, and think yourself normal every time crazy words (though filled with an infernal grandeur) gush from your mouth. Wretch! What have you said since the day of your birth? O sad relic of an immortal intellect, created by God with such love! You have begotten only maledictions more frightful than the sight of famished panthers! I would sooner have my

eyelids stuck together, my body armless and legless — or have murdered a man, than be *you*! Because I hate you. Why have this character which puzzles me? By what right do you come on earth to hold its inhabitants to ridicule, you rotting wreck buffeted by scepticism? If you don't like it here, you should go back to the spheres whence you came. A city-dweller ought not to live like a stranger in villages. We know that in space exist globes more precious than ours, and whose creatures have an intelligence we cannot even begin to understand. Very well, be off then! . . . Leave this fleeting earth! . . . At last display your divine nature, hitherto hidden. And as soon as possible steer your ascending flight towards your own globe, which we do not covet at all, proud one that you are! — I have not yet succeeded in identifying you as man or more-than-man! Farewell, then. Hope no longer to encounter the toad on your journey. You have been the cause of my death. I set out for eternity, that I may beg your forgiveness!"



If it is sometimes logical to put one's faith in the appearance of phenomena, this first canto ends here. Be not too harsh with one who still only tunes his lyre: it makes so strange a sound! If, however, you would be impartial, you will already discern a strong hand in the midst of the imperfections. As for me, I shall resume work to produce a second canto in not too long a time. The end of the nineteenth century shall see its poet (though at the outset he should not begin with a masterpiece, but follow the law of nature). He was born on South American shores, at the mouth of the River Plate, where two peoples once enemies now struggle to outdo each other in material and moral progress. Buenos Aires, queen of the south, and Montevideo, the coquette, extend friendly hands across the argentine waters of the great estuary. But everlasting war has imposed its destructive rule upon the fields, and joyfully reaps countless victims. Greybeard, farewell, and if you have read this, think of me. You, young

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man, do not despair, for despite your opinion to the contrary, you have a friend in the vampire. Counting the acarus sarcoptes that causes crabs, you have two!



END OF FIRST CANTO

SECOND CANTO

What became of Maldoror's first canto since his mouth, filled with leaves of belladonna, let it slip in a moment of meditation across the kingdoms of wrath? What happened to that canto? . . . We do not precisely know. Neither the trees nor the winds have retained it. And passing by this place, morality, not foreseeing that in these incandescent pages she had a staunch supporter, saw it with firm and steady tread head for the obscure recesses and secret fibres of consciousness. Science has at least gained this much from it: since that time, toad-face man no longer recognises himself, and often falls into fits of rage which make him resemble a baboon. It is not his fault. Through the ages he had believed (eyelids fluttering under the mignonettes of modesty) that he was compounded only of good and a minimal amount of evil. Sharply I showed him, by laying bare in broad daylight his heart and life's weave, that on the contrary, he is compounded only of evil and a minimal amount of good which