

Isidore Ducasse and the Count of Lautréamont in the *Poésies*

By Raoul Vaneigem¹

Lautréamont entered literary history by means of *Maldoror*, and, with the mastery of Isidore Ducasse, the author of the *Poésies*, he is almost indebted to it for not being excluded from that history.² Of the judgments made by critics, how many manage to prove their innocence – through embarrassment or the casualness with which they open the “Préface à un livre futur” with a tacit disavowal – an unconfessed disapproval of the *Poésies*? None, no doubt, as it is true that their disaffection still appears in their will to subject the delicate processes by which multiple aspects of a single being are differentiated by the mechanisms of a purely formal logic.

Must one recall the dilemma around which the majority of the explanations proposed until now have gravitated? The *Poésies* followed *Maldoror* like “merciless revolt” follows “nuanceless conformism” (Camus); the systematic nihilism of the *Chants* makes it way on a new route under a cynical mystification. In other terms, either Lautréamont renounced revolt or he dissimulated – one couldn’t uncouple the paradox of Rimbaud any better than that, at the cost of a better example. In both cases, such behavior betrays nothing, at least for someone who supposes that, at this ideal point, this is the situation of thinking preoccupied with its own reflections and unconcerned with concrete reality. Yet the problem of the *Poésies*, as complex as it is, doesn’t at all justify the absence of an objection solution.

No one has dreamed of denying the hold the biological, psychological and social “object” has on *Les Chants de Maldoror*. No one since the perspicacious study by Léon-Pierre Quint has refused to discern three determinations closely related to the life of Isidore Ducasse mixed into the work: sexual aggression; the increasingly obvious intervention of rational control; and an ethical-ideological content that is precisely centered on revolt. Of course, none of these characteristics manifest themselves in a pure state, with particularities that have been defined once and for all, but, on the contrary, each of them mixes together with the others, subject to the laws of interdependence, in a movement, a progression in which one is only transformed by modifying the others. At each moment, control couples and uncouples revolt and sexual aggression – in a similar process in Kafka, in analyses and syntheses, instinctive dread and conscious responsibility are coupled and uncoupled.

That said, *Maldoror* ends up in the *Poésies*. Let us be clear: the “Préface à un livre futur” doesn’t appear as the formal negation or the extension of the *Chants*, but affirms itself as a surpassing in which *Maldoror*, although denied, offers – by conserving itself – a synthesis of contradictions that become critical in “Canto VI” and, as a result, reveals itself – through a

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² Isidore Ducasse was born in Uruguay in 1846; he died in Paris in 1870. *Les Chants de Maldoror* was published in 1868-69 and the *Poésies* in 1870. For an English translation of both in a single volume, see *Les Chants de Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham (New Directions, 1943).

qualitative bond – as the end result of a transformation that, until disappearance of *Maldoror*, was purely *quantitative*.

To someone who reads *Maldoror*, then the *Poésies*, it is the disparity that is felt above all; it is a rupture of habituation in the sensations, not *a priori* in the judgment but, in a curious misunderstanding, it is as a function of this malaise, born from the transitionless passage from tornado to flat calm, that we agree to judge the posthumous work of Isidore Ducasse – it is in the effervescence, the boiling, the Maldororian frenzy that the once-neglected content and meaning of revolt persists – to prejudge the “Préface” and its cold determination according to the passionate intensity of *Les Chants*. The surprise born from the mastery with which rational control comes to the fore of the work, from the nimbleness in playing with the garrote around the neck of eroticism or the will of “Canto VI” to transform bloodstains into the ink stains that the *Poésies* will suffice to erase! Because the question is worth being asked: what causes presided over the elimination of all spontaneous, instinctive and uncontrolled elements from the heart of the last work by Isidore Ducasse?

Maybe Ducasse liquidated his sexual problems, the poetry of the pederasts, mid-way between confession and authentic provocation. No doubt he left to active conduct the care of normalizing his psychological state, of reestablishing in himself a balance that had been compromised for too long by the taboos of a society that he detested because it was all-powerful to him. Whatever was the case – and this idea, far from excluding the preceding hypothesis, is united with it in close interdependence – other preoccupations focused his faculties of analysis. As we have seen, the fall of *Maldoror* had to break the atrocious head-to-head between “me” and solitude, between an exacerbated sensibility and an ocean of hatred and passion. Ducasse discovers – beyond the “me” – the world, ideas and people, from whence comes his quest for a new truth, that of the *Poésies* and the Sircos-Damé group.

The *Poésies* materializes the triumph of lucidity over the confused forces of the unconscious – to use Nietzsche’s terms, it consecrates the victory of the Apollonian over the Dionysian. As for *Maldoror*, it bears the stigmata of the struggle. Never were traces of such a battle more apparent in a literary matter. The lucidity of Lautréamont is completely reflected in his work, it transforms it to the extent that it progresses, that it disengages from *Maldoror* in order to reconstruct it. If, at the beginning, it limits itself to transforming, to rationalizing the unconscious impulses at the level of consciousness, it rapidly acquires the power to empty them of their contents, to order them according to the premises of an already defined ideological world, that of Evil, that of *Maldodor*. Nothing marks the rhythm of the work more than the constant regression of the concrete in the face of the abstract. (One example among others: the struggle between Maldoror and the dragon in “Canto III” is translated by the opposition between Evil and Hope, and heralds the ironic commentaries of “Canto IV.”) This realization ceaselessly removes the instinctive, spontaneous elements in order to elevate itself to a discursive autonomy, which is absolute to the point of rejecting the recourse to a concrete experiment with which it was nevertheless in solidarity from the beginning. This is the stage in which Maldoror – the new Rocambole³ – commits himself to a novel in which, as Ducasse says, “every effect appears in its proper place.”

³ A fictional character created by Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail (circa 1858-1859) and associated with fantastic adventures. “To sing of Adamastor, Jocelyn, Rocambole, is puerile” (*Poésies*, included in *Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham, New Directions, 1943, p. 314).

The interest of “Canto VI” doesn’t mediocresly reside in this double movement, in the simultaneous exposition of a perceived reality, at the time of its impact on consciousness, under a symbolic form and (as a sign, as a concept) chosen as an object of idle speculation, on the one hand, and an increasingly penetrating analysis that leads Lautréamont beyond the “me,” towards the external world, towards the very reality whose echo weakens under the flourishes of the work, under the free play of fiction, on the other hand. A critical stage that is not at all foreign to the genius of Lautréamont and that he dominated with the quite particular talent of expressing (to the point of sarcasm) the troubles of a way of thinking that, under its own reflections, holds tight to the end of a contradictory movement. In fact, naturalistic descriptions and esoteric remarks – the death of Mervyn and the authentic rebus of “Canto VI” – are confined to the same extravagant precision, to the same irony in the details, but the ambiguous laughter of Lautréamont ceases to hide the basic disagreement. On the contrary, it accentuates it; it dilates it as far as antagonism; it serves as an ellipsis that, with the impossibility of ending a verse, marks the desire to begin the poem again. The *Poésies* responds to this desire. Ducasse surpasses the contradiction between realism and formalism by elevating it to the level of a philosophical system, no longer on an arbitrary, conventional and unacceptable basis, but through his will to allow objective structures and to treat them through critical observation. The facts, cleared of the lyricism that transforms them and inflates them like sails on the Maldororian sea, will in the *Poésies* be chosen according to their demonstrative or exemplary value. Touchstone: what bloody narrative, what infamy by Maldoror doesn’t engender, in the torment of *Les Chants*, the sinister evocation of Troppmann,⁴ whose very name – which illustrates the refusal of unbridled revolt – figures in an aphorism in the booklets.

There remains the third contradiction, the one at the level of ideas, on the plane of revolt. This is no longer Maldoror, the imaginary being, the man with jasper lips who is accused, but the entire philosophical system of which he simultaneously serves as illustration and spokesman. One must re-state the problem of Evil upon new information.

Of Evil considered as immanent to the world, Lautréamont kindled an acute, paroxysmal form, of an incredible violence, that he intended to turn against the universal false good conscience, against the drying up of a morality that, according to him, is responsible for maintaining the Supreme Good in a perpetual state of transcendence. Indeed, if Maldoror represents a step towards a better world, he is still excluded from this one. Isn’t it his curse, his torment of the damned, to straddle Mario’s sides without confusing himself with him, to destroy but without seeing the “re-beginning of everyone” so dear to Nechayev⁵ rise upon the ruins? Whatever it was, Maldoror, the destroyer of Evil, elevates himself to the level of God, the creator of Evil; he participates in the incessant regeneration of the world like an active supernatural force. Therefore, to the extent that Sublime Revolt lives, grows and develops over the course of the book, a double failure comes forth and makes itself clear. Disassociated from the real by the very character of the work in its decline, the efficaciousness of Maldoror and, consequently, the value of the principle that he represents, twisting vain phrases, manifesting the activity of a fly caught in a spider’s web before being immobilized in a confusion on which, with the aid of literary mastery, pure speculation floats, the acrobatics of formalism, an ersatz version of art-for-

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Troppmann was a French spree killer who was executed on 19 January 1870. He was a kind of hero to the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who refers to Troppmann in *God and the State*.

⁵ Sergey Nechayev (1847-1882) was a Russian revolutionary and nihilist.

art's-sake that – if it satisfies the vanity of literary men – enlists as false against the intention of the Revolt. Where this is concerned, whether one likes it or not, Ducasse remained a rebel all his life, a man for whom the world had to be changed, and who tried to do so.

Why did Lautréamont reject the puppet Maldoror, the Revolt of Laughter, the literary insurgent? This is easily explained. If Ducasse could hope for a reader who was close enough to his conceptions that he would lend an attentive ear to the words insidiously murmured by his hero to the child of the Tuileries (“Is it that you don’t want to dominate your fellows one day?” and “Virtuous and meek means lead to nothing”), then at least he surely thought otherwise when he let Maldoror get caught up in the role of nihilist buffoon. The scene of crazy Aghone is revealing on this point: “What was Maldoror’s aim? (...) To get a rock-solid friend, naïve enough to obey his smallest command,” Ducasse wrote and then added, “It was Aghone himself that he had to have.” Maldoror, reduced to seeking his audience among the crazy, allows us to presume a second reason for his rejection. The immobility of total revolt here joins up with the vanity of the violence unilaterally exercised against Evil.

Since Good, in the final analysis, can only be born through the self-destruction of Evil, “the premises are radically false.” It is only a step from this to the *Poésies*, to the acceptance of the good and the recognition of its appetite⁶ as the first principle in the future negation of Evil. As for the mythic aspect, deprived of power, it disappears in favor of direct language, a clear and concise way of thinking, which only retains from the unreal the sometimes-utopian content of the aphorisms and maxims, which are resolutely directed towards action.

Ducasse didn’t choose to enter into revolt or to renounce it, but passed from the thesis/antithesis opposition to a synthesis that forms the revolt in the *Poésies*. If this book proceeds along a route that is in conformity with the reality of the world in which it lives, we need not conclude that it praises to the skies or even that it accepts – due to some psychological mystery? – the state of affairs against which he unleashed *Maldoror*, against which (and with equal fervor) the anarchist Émile Henry⁷ would throw his hatred and his bomb twenty-five years later. It is certain that violence has lost its attraction, but without preventing the continuation of the will to oppose the forces of Evil with the desire to accede to (and to get humanity to accede to) a better life. It appears clearly that we have a right to speak of opposition here, to immediately reconsider the *Poésies* in the context of the era in which it was born. We too often forget, in addition to the fact that the aphorisms draw their meanings from the context and the system elaborated by Ducasse, that his refusal of war is contemporary with the warmongering press campaigns of 1870, that the ridicule of the “novelists of the court of assizes” points its finger at Houssaye, Augier, Dumas and others who closely followed the Troppmann trial (see the account in *La Marseillaise*, 28 December 1869).

Not only does good sense legitimate this recourse to the historical milieu, but the facts themselves demand it. As we have seen, if the internal causes constitute the basis for the changes, the condition(s) of these changes must be sought in external causes. Once you have analyzed the passage from a liquid to a gaseous state, the study of the temperature required for such a transformation is necessarily called for. Likewise, one must explain the external influences by which the *Poésies* differentiates itself qualitatively from *Maldoror*.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in which desire has two aspects: appetite and volition.

⁷ Émile Henry (1872-1894) was a French anarchist. On 12 February 1894, he set off a bomb at the Café Terminus in a Parisian train station. He was executed three months later.

Though it did not overwhelm Ducasse as much as one has claimed, the failure of *Les Chants de Maldoror* still plays a very important role in his determination. Not that one must imagine, dictated by a desire for glory, a complacent palinode, but because the refusal of the book by the public and by the censors renders concrete, proved in practice, the vanity of a Revolt that has already been denounced in the work and in the thinking of the author. “Everything has fallen into the water. This makes me open my eyes,” he wrote to Darasse. Why not let his pen disappear under the pelt of an anonymous intellectual? Because, at the same time as the failure of *Maldoror*, the success of the ideas developed in the *Poésies* were affirmed in the minds of Ducasse and his entourage. When he drafted his booklets, Lautréamont was no longer alone. His “philosophy of poetry,” he knew, had attracted the adhesion of a literary group, a movement of young people whose still-uncertain ideas were expressed in the journals *La jeunesse*, which became *L’Union des Jeunes*, and *L’Avenir littéraire, philosophique et scientifique*. The directors of these journals were none other than Alfred Sircos and Frédéric Damé, both mentioned in the dedication to the *Poésies*. The goal? An editorial in *La jeunesse* makes it clear: “We therefore work, brothers, to give to humanity its beautiful prerogative: love. I speak to you, soldiers of intelligence: writers, poets, publicists, artists . . . It is only today that progress in the moral order can begin.” Ten degrees more in the style and we are at the level of the *Poésies*. One could also compare the massacre of the “big soft heads of our century”⁸ to Damé’s advice: “The best means of fighting this moral decadence that invades us is to study the modern press that has so contributed to this sad result.” The *Poésies* tends to affirm itself as the manifesto of an innovative movement, and Ducasse appears to be the most lucid and consequential person in it. Doesn’t he proclaim his affiliation with the team of “moral improvement” when he writes the following in the famous exergue to the *Poésies*, “I replace melancholy with courage, doubt with certainty, despair with hope, maliciousness with goodness, complaints with duties, skepticism with faith, sophisms with the coldness of calm, and pride with modesty,” which echoes the preamble to one of the journals (“The future – that is to say, Evil giving way to Good, the Ugly giving way to the Beautiful, the Small giving way to the Big”)?

There’s nothing in this that should surprise us. More than once Ducasse had to entertain such questions with Alfred Sircos, the only sufficiently clairvoyant critic to praise the publication of the first Canto from *Maldoror* and who had written the following under the pseudonym of Epistémon: “This work will not be confused with the other publications of the day: its originality, little shared, is guaranteed to us.” Second testimony concerning the relationships that united the two men: the booklets were published at the librairie Gabrie, 25 Passage Verdeau, precisely where *L’Union des Jeunes* had its offices. Aware of the support and effectiveness that his system of thought had encountered, Ducasse no longer had any reason to postpone a complete elaboration of the new views that would overwhelm his contemporaries. The “Préface à un livre futur,” by joining up with the timid conceptions of the Sircos-Damé movement (still unorganized), surpasses that movement towards a more original solution to the problem, a solution received from *Maldoror* and determined to no longer set itself aside from the concrete, from the real struggle, namely a militant organization whose rules of action would be made precise in a subsequent development of the *Poésies*. This is why any subsequent study must be based upon, not only the *Maldoror-Poésies* dialectic, but also the historical context in which it was born, on the interactions of the epoch and the psychological and ideological evolution of Lautréamont. Thus, we must admit that the *Poésies* is above all addressed to the men of the

⁸ *Poésies*, included in *Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham, p. 318.

crumbling Second Empire, just as Fourier's *Théorie de l'Unité Universelle* demands, as a preliminary, the support of contemporary philanthropists, but on the condition that we understand how the fumbling work of Ducasse reflects the slow realization of the oppressed, how, alongside Maldoror, a monstrous individualism – a will to live for oneself in defiance of the others, a milieu of a world in which each person lives in fear of the others – gives birth to and develops the desire to live for all, to realize oneself in a society in which the general interest anticipates individual interests. Thus conceived, any analysis will ultimately end in making it clear that *Maldoror* and the *Poésies* appear, in the final analysis, as the reflection of a double tendency in the anarchist movement, its perpetual oscillation between pure violence and reformist utopia.