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Chimères is a literary journal published each academic semester (Fall and Spring numbers) by the graduate students of the Department of French and Italian at The University of Kansas. The editors welcome the submission of papers written by non-tenured Ph. D's and advanced graduate students which deal with any aspect of French or Italian language, literature, or culture. We shall consider any critical study, essay, bibliography, or book review. Such material may be submitted in English, French, or Italian. In addition, we encourage the submission of poems and short stories written in French or Italian; our language request here applies only to creative works.

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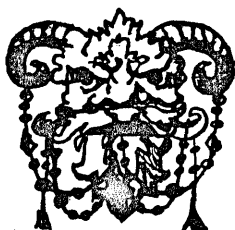
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Lautréamont's Outrageous Text: Language as
Weapon and Victim in the Chants de Maldoror

Published in 1869, Lautréamont's Chants de Maldoror enjoyed little success until resurrected by the Surrealists and hailed as an exemplary surrealist text. But this revival was brief, and the Chants fell back into obscurity until recently proclaimed by "textualist" critics (Kristeva, Sollers, etc.) as exemplary of modernist écriture. Why such short bursts of popularity? Why is this work still omitted from most anthologies of French literature?

The Chants de Maldoror has long been considered an inaccessible and even unreadable text for reasons of structure as well as of content. The work is composed of six Chants, or cantos, containing five to sixteen "strophes" each and recounting seemingly unrelated incidents of violence and perversions. While our response to a literary text is always colored by our personal experiences, our social, economic, and political context--"the reader brings to the text certain expectations which are the result of his culture"¹--the nearly universal response to the Chants de Maldoror is outrage, disgust, and horror. For, indeed, who would not be offended and outraged by the violence and perversity of Lautréamont's subjects: incest, rape, seduction of innocents, torture, mutilation, blasphemy, etc. Our cultural grid, which includes our system of values and our understanding of a logical order, is turned upside down and shattered by Lautréamont. None of our experiences--literary, cultural or otherwise--can provide any stable point of reference to help us overcome the feelings of revulsion and disorientation provoked by this work. The litany of taboos and horrors, the perversely fantastic characters and events which make of the Chants a