

Lautréamont and the Haunting of Surrealism¹

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The surrealist discourse reverberates with references to Isidore Ducasse (1846–70), who wrote the highly influential Les Chants de Maldoror (1869) under the pseudonym ‘Comte de Lautréamont’. While surrealism was a space in which influences, precursors, and fellow travellers were obsessively appropriated, the specific legacy of Lautréamont was always considered an exceptional and uniquely haunting case. This was due both to the reception of Maldoror as revolutionary in nature, and to the biographical paucity surrounding the historical existence of Isidore Ducasse, who died under mysterious circumstances during the siege of Paris in November 1870. Leading surrealist André Breton in particular was haunted by the ‘strange case’ of Lautréamont, and used his ghostly absence as an exemplary exception within a personal framework of anti-heroes dead, missing, or expelled. Lautréamont therefore held a peculiar and decisive position within surrealism in which his proleptic authority and continued ‘presence’ relied upon the very lack of traces he left behind.

Preface

The reader opens *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869) by Isidore Ducasse – alias ‘Comte de Lautréamont’ – and abruptly comes up against a malevolent preface. There is something uncanny in this beginning; it produces in the reader a feeling that he has been expected and that he is being watched. Thus it is logical that the authorial disclaimer in *Les Chants de Maldoror* arrives immediately on the first page of the text: we are warned that unless the prospective reader brings to his reading-process,

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support and funding provided by the ‘Humanities Institute of Ireland Doctoral Scholarship’ in pursuing my research. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees who reviewed this paper. The author has paid DACS for the use of its artistic works.

une logique rigoureuse et une tension d'esprit égale au moins à sa défiance, les émanations mortelles de ce livre imbiberont son âme comme l'eau le sucre. Il n'est pas bon que tout le monde lise les pages qui vont suivre; quelques-uns seuls savoureront ce fruit amer sans danger (Ducasse 1990, 69).

This is more than a warning; it is an inherently moral disinclination also, for from the very beginning Lautréamont makes it clear that he does not merely write a fiction to be passively consumed, but warns that his artistic power stretches far beyond the limitations of the printed text. He therefore urges the wise reader to go back, not forward, and to shrink from investing his innocent soul in “les marécages désolés de ces pages sombres et pleines de poison” (Ducasse 1990, 69). Instead, he advises the reader to divert his route, rather like the venerable crane, and take a less precarious line of flight. The foreword functions as a blatant forewarning and an admission that the literature is an innately threatening and perilous craft. Yet the honest warning which Lautréamont displays for the reader is of a negative and assumed cast, a form of *humor noir* designed to trap and entrance, a strategy of horror fundamentally divorced from alternative performances of honesty, such as, for example, the cinematic type of disclaimer with its legalistic concerns. This precautionary textual strategy forges a compelling mind-connection, which will develop into a sophisticated and unnerving concept of the role of the reader-as-accomplice as the textual adventure develops. Lautréamont demands of his reader nothing less than a total subjective immersion in his text, and in this campaign the first strophe of *Maldoror* operates as a handle that grips the reader like a vice which is, necessarily, within Lautréamont's terroristic system, a poisonous vice.

Following Charles Baudelaire, Lautréamont addresses himself to a ‘Hypocrite lecteur’, an imaginary subject he knows will be unable to resist an honoured rank among the daring souls who have crossed the threshold into a textual domain designed to ensnare and deconstruct the naïve and unprepared reader in “one of the great unnatural resources in the history of literature” (Polizzotti 1996, 4). The preface serves as a point of departure in this essay for examining the influence and legacy of Lautréamont within the surrealist movement during the inter-war years, for to know who Lautréamont was it becomes necessary to know whom he haunted. Borges (1979, 236) once wrote, “The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors”: for the surrealists, an artistic and political movement chiefly led by the poet André Breton, Lautréamont was invoked as an iconic precursor in their project to revolutionise everyday life through the language and representations of the dream world and the much-heralded integration of art and life.

Born Isidore Ducasse in Montevideo in 1846, dying in Paris in 1870 at the age of twenty-four during the Siege of the city by Prussian forces, Lautréamont to this day constitutes an acute absence as a literary historical figure: apart from certain allusions in *Maldoror*, and the epigrammatic *Poésies* (1870), the only biographical

documentation which survives amounts to about half a dozen letters, a birth certificate, and a cruelly banal *Acte De Décès*. Furthermore, any photographic evidence of the poet is of a deeply ambiguous type, as we shall see below. Most of Lautréamont's biographers have despairingly commented upon this situation: Virasoro wrote that the poet "did not leave the testimony of even the most conventional confidant, as if he had been a visitor from another world, concealed among humans with the appearance of a body, who disappeared into empty space without leaving a trace" (Moffett 1975, 703–704). Yet rather than despairing, the surrealists seized upon this lacunac absence and revitalised the figure of Lautréamont as a decisive influence on their contemporary artistic efforts, a figure to be reverentially referred to in terms of shadow and luminosity. His name became an institutional reference point in the theoretical explorations of the movement and his presence was vigorously felt in the major literary and artistic works of the surrealists. Within both the poetic inner circle of the surrealist movement and the artistic fellow travellers of surrealism, the influence of Lautréamont was made known through a variety of what can be termed 'haunting interruptions': points of discursive intervention in which the ghost not only exerts an influence on a given project, but is itself reformatted as the 'determining influence', as a question to be answered or an enigma to be solved.

The juxtaposition inherent in Lautréamont's existence seemed destined to attract such a fearful regard toward his work: in contrast to the ferocity and hazardous philosophical speculations contained within *Maldoror*, and the powerful re-orientation and *détournement* of his thought in *Poésies*, Lautréamont died an anonymous death as a foreigner during momentous political and social upheaval, a situation which rendered his fame and influence a posthumous one, the type of legacy which Hannah Arendt once described as "the lot of the unclassifiable ones" (Arendt 1999, 9). Yet despite this amorphous identity various aesthetic groupings from the symbolists through to the situationists have associated themselves with the figure of Lautréamont through his reputation as a symbol of the existential extremity of poetic liberation. However, this paper traces Lautréamont's most resonant 'afterlife' within the avant-garde; his place as a disappeared precursor within surrealism, which from the early 1920s demonstrated a fascination with what was termed "Le Cas Lautréamont".² Through an examination of three haunting interruptions, namely Man Ray's fascination with the 'enigma of Isidore Ducasse'; the discovery and establishment of Lautréamont as a major precursor of surrealism in the 1920s; and the use of the invocation of Lautréamont as a touchstone of authenticity in intra-surrealist strife, this paper seeks to approach an understanding of Lautréamont which would be inseparable from the sense of haunting which his memory evoked.

² This was the title of a special issue of the journal *Le Disque Vert*, which published articles on Lautréamont by many of the surrealists in 1925.

In 'Réflexions sur le Surréalisme', Maurice Blanchot applied a 'hauntology' to surrealism. He imagined that the movement itself had performed a disappearing trick in which its spectral position in post-war France had finally come to signify itself, like some sort of white noise: "C'est qu'il n'est plus ici ou là: il est partout. C'est un fantôme, une brillante hantise. À son tour, métamorphose méritée, il est devenu surréel" (1949, 90). This spectralisation of surrealism, as it disappeared from the scene, in turn reflects the very conscious annexation of literary heroes as guiding spirits by the nascent surrealist movement in a discourse that emphasised the contemporary presence of haunting influences as anterior forerunners. Utilising Blanchot's suggestion of the auto-haunting of surrealism, which is a close cousin of the concept of literature as its own death, it becomes possible to explore how the time of surrealism was realised, out of joint, as it were, through the ranks of its disappeared, the *desaparecidos* of whom Gordon and Derrida have urged that we recognise out of a concern for justice (Gordon 1997, 64; Derrida 1994, 220).

Beau comme... 'L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse'

'L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse' (1920) (Figure 1), a photograph by the American artist-photographer Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky), portrayed a covered object or objects lashed haphazardly with a tight restrictive wire. Odd crevices and breathing forms were suggested beneath a thick cloth: the geometry of design employed by Man Ray in this piece attempted to reproduce the kind of resonant silence and lack of identificatory assurance associated with the work and cultural impact of Lautréamont. In order to solve the riddle posed by the photographer, the viewer was expected to be familiar with *Maldoror*, and in particular with the most famous of the "beau...comme" similes scattered throughout the text like charged encryptions:

Il est beau comme la rétractilité des serres des oiseaux rapaces; ou encore, comme l'incertitude des mouvements musculaires dans les plaies des parties molles de la région cervicale postérieure; ou plutôt, comme ce piège à rats perpétuel, toujours retendu par l'animal pris, qui peut prendre seul des rongeurs indéfiniment, et fonctionner même caché sous la paille; et surtout, comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie (Ducasse 1990, 289).

Man Ray took his inspiration for 'L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse' from this unearthly image of "la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie", for like the surrealists, he was deeply fascinated by the juxtaposition of unusual and bizarre objects and images, and was mesmerised by "the world of complete freedom" created in Lautréamont's iconoclastic work: "Lautréamont gave me the stimulus to do things I was not supposed to do" (Schwarz 1977, 161). Hidden beneath the layers of protection with which Man Ray surrounded his work (photographic, physical, and linguistic) were placed an umbrella, a sewing machine

and a dissecting table: artefacts and instruments of the *machine célibataire*. In this sense the photograph of the simile becomes erotic in the Barthesian sense of “la mise en scène d’une apparition-disparition” (Barthes 1973, 19), in contrast to the convulsive eroticism of Oscar Dominguez’s painting of the same scene, ‘Máquina de Coser Electrosexual’ (1934).

Lautréamont’s simile has since become one of the most famous and established icons of surrealism, appearing mantra-like in almost every website, newspaper article, and art catalogue vaguely touching upon the surrealist aesthetic: in its over-exposure and misuse by those unfamiliar with the rest of Lautréamont’s work it has become little more than a slogan advertising a sound-bite surrealism, an area already overcrowded with melting clocks, bowler hats, and sliced eyes (Virilio 1994, 16). Yet the legendary verbal-visual subtlety of Man Ray reached a sublime point in his very personal seizure of the simile, a chemical capture which emanates with at least some of the subversive silence and grandeur which commentators divined in the Comte de Lautréamont. After Lautréamont, only the Marquis de Sade ever exercised such a similar fascination over Man Ray, and in this context it becomes significant that the artist would make an imaginary portrait of de Sade for Maurice Heine in 1938 (Eluard 1958, 518). For ‘L’Enigme’ aimed to hint at the impossibility of ever accurately portraying Isidore Ducasse, and consequently the real necessity of imagining Lautréamont as a missing representation of his revolutionary textual presence. ‘L’Enigme’ represented an imaginary photographic portrait of Lautréamont-as-enigma, of Lautréamont as the metaphorical evacuation of standard aesthetic categories. In this case the simile referred to was already a surrealist appropriation and could be read both as a statement of the artist’s preferred trajectory and a reinforcement of the necessity for concealment and hiding: Man Ray visualised the impenetrability of Isidore Ducasse’s enigma with the personal addition of a horse blanket to Lautréamont’s simile. The photograph did not just attempt to compensate for the lack of a portrait of Isidore Ducasse, the figure who hid behind Lautréamont, but also implied an interrogation of the art of uncovering and discovering the enigma as an objectification of the marvellous. In this sense, the aesthetics of Man Ray suggest that ‘L’Enigme’ should not be considered as a photograph, as a trace seized, but as an object-painting, a sinister imitation of photography. He observed: “It has often amused me to make photographs that are mistaken for reproductions of paintings, and paintings that have been inspired by photographs” (Schwarz 1977, 14). Man Ray’s example in this regard found echo in Breton’s call for the fabrication and production of the objects that are perceived in dreams (Breton 1965, 277). Much like Man Ray’s photograph of Lautréamont’s simile, these ‘dream-objects’ in circulation would have a use-value that was intimately tied to their evidential ambiguity.



Figure 1. Man Ray, 'L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse', 1920. (© Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2006)

'L'Enigme' was created, photographed, and dismantled in New York before Man Ray's departure to Europe in the summer of 1921. He arrived in Paris during the death-throes of the dada movement, and was launched straight into the often bitter divisions between Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, and André Breton - the three would-be (non)ideologues of the dadaists. The recurring theme in the Breton circle at the time was that dada as a radical philosophical movement was in effect dead, and in the changing atmosphere, both political and artistic, the avant-garde needed to move on to a more progressive and conceptually vibrant network of thought. Despite this, it was Francis Picabia who had the dubious honour of first officially pronouncing the death of dada in May 1921: "Dada, voyez-vous, n'était pas sérieux, et c'est pour cela que, telle une traînée de poudre, il a gagné le monde; si quelques-uns maintenant le prennent au sérieux, c'est parce qu'il est mort!" (1978, 14–15). This was made certain only two days afterwards with the notorious Maurice Barrès Trial representing the funeral of Zurich-inspired dada, which had only officially arrived in Paris with Tzara in 1920. In a fragment (published posthumously), the dadaist Jacques Rigaut reflected on this period of judicial debate within the avant-garde group by writing an invented press cutting which read: "The corpse of Dada was discovered yesterday in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. Suicide was suspected (the victim had been threatening to put an end to itself since it's birth) when André Breton made a full confession" (Rigaut 1993, 26).

Through his outstanding photographic experimentations, versatile aesthetic, and aloofness from the frequent petty disputes of this artistic circle, Man Ray would become "the faithful chronicler of the surrealists" (Hubert 1988, 192), their photo-historian and visual memory. 'L'Enigme' was published as the preface to the first

issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1924, which represented the ceremonial media launch of the movement. The photograph was presented without title or caption, and without a credit to the artist. In this sense it acts as a theoretical preface to the surrealist movement and an acknowledgement that the fascinating case of Isidore Ducasse lies brooding at both beginnings of surrealism, 1870 and 1924.

Man Ray's first wife, the Belgian poetess Adon Lacroix, introduced him to *Maldoror* around 1914, an early date for a work which would have only been known to a select few among the avant-garde before World War I (Lottman 2003, 42).³ Other sources for his acquaintance with the work could have been his friend Marcel Duchamp, or the dada-orientated journal *Littérature* that began publishing in Paris from March 1919 (Shattuck 1989, 323). This had been founded by André Breton, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault – *les trois mousquetaires* André Gide called them – recent friends who were united in their common veneration of Lautréamont (Philip 1971, 36): indeed Breton referred to the formation of a “pact” for the Comte at this point (1999, 451). Man Ray was similarly obsessed by Isidore Ducasse, and compulsively returned to the figure throughout his artistic career. He continued to blend the mystery of Lautréamont with the image of the sewing machine and the umbrella, an identification approved by the surrealists who, in turn, remained intrigued by the lack of any photographic evidence for the historical existence of Isidore Ducasse. Man Ray went on to produce a literal illustration of the simile in collage format as ‘L'Image d'Isidore Ducasse’ (1933) - in this work an umbrella and a miniature sewing machine commune upon a surgical draining table with a hole in the centre and a bucket underneath, as if each participant was conjured to life from some prosaic sales catalogue or pulp novel. Man Ray also created a plain photograph of the simile, with the materials uncovered, in ‘Beautiful as the Meeting of an Umbrella and a Sewing Machine on a Dissecting Table’ (1935).

In his little known painting ‘La Rue Férou’ (1952) (Figure 2), a celebration of his return to Montparnasse from Hollywood, Man Ray demonstrated his debt to Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical period of the 1910s by applying the neoclassical shadows and sense of mystery that pervades de Chirico's piazzas to a Parisian side-street that obviously reverberates with personal meaning for the artist. In the image a beret-wearing man hauls a cart loaded with an odd assemblage that seems frozen halfway through a stilted action: the shrouded contraption on the back of the cart we recognise as the assemblage in ‘L'Enigme’, its still-breathing form returning yet again over thirty years after it was first photographed and dismantled when its creator had departed to Paris. As the cart slowly rambles by in suspended inertia it passes by a doorway along the wall, guarded from the midday shadows. This door was an entrance to the actual studio on the Rue Férou that Man Ray, now

³ Notable early aficionados of *Maldoror* included Joris-Karl Huysmans, Alfred Jarry, André Gide, and Amedeo Modigliani.

an established and multi-faceted artist, had just moved into the year before, and where he would work until his death.

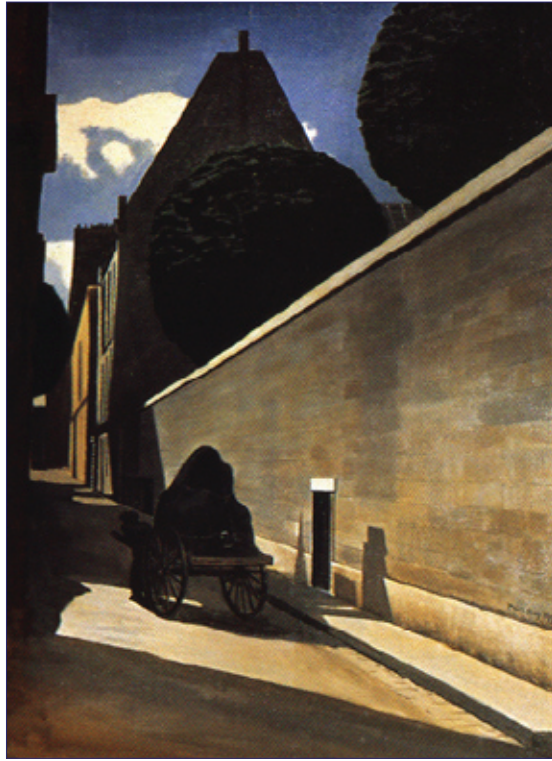


Figure 2. Man Ray, 'La Rue Férou', 1952. (© Man Ray Trust/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2006)

Haunting Surrealism

The ghost is a progenitor; its presumed existence depends upon the survival and will of the family: once the designated applicant has claimed the legacy of the ghost, then an afterlife can truly commence. Following the disappearance of Isidore Ducasse during the Siege of Paris in November 1870, *Maldoror* commenced its Pentecontætia, an interregnum during which the little-known work attracted the gauche labels of symbolism, decadence, and lunacy. In 1891 one of its earliest reviewers, Remy de Gourmont, described the author of *Maldoror* as “un jeune homme d’une originalité furieuse inattendue, un génie malade et même franchement fou” (Philip 1971, 30). The surrealists would reclaim *Maldoror* from fin-de-siècle diagnosticians such as de Gourmont and instead institute a poetic *prognostics* that would increasingly spectralise Lautréamont. Philippe Soupault first happened upon *Maldoror* by chance in the mathematics section of bookstore opposite the military hospital on the Boulevard Raspail, where he was recuperating for most of World War I after an experimental anti-typhoid injection went wrong. He fell into raptures upon reading the book, and the exact date of this discovery would be etched on his mind for the rest of his long life: “J’étais couché dans un lit d’hôpital lorsque je lus pour la première fois les *Chants de Maldoror*. C’était le 28 juin. Depuis ce jour-

là personne ne m'a reconnu. Je ne sais plus moi-même si j'ai du coeur" (Soupault 2002, 82). In a similar fashion Breton summed up the metaphysical brilliance that *Maldoror* provided him in his homily: "ils sont l'expression d'une révélation totale qui semble excéder les possibilités humaines" (Lautréamont 1997, 42). Lautréamont was to become the hidden agency, the silent partner who would shape the topography of the surrealist movement, to be ranked alongside the venerated honorary surrealists Guillaume Apollinaire and Giorgio de Chirico who, with their shadow, kept surrealism on "the straight line" (Breton 1965, 96).

Revelation, illumination, and epiphany were keywords in de Chirico's metaphysical aesthetics (De Chirico 1992), and these same poetic sensibilities featured strongly in the 'discovery' of Lautréamont, for both Soupault and Aragon independently encountered *Maldoror* quite 'by chance' on the Boulevard Raspail in 1917: Aragon came across the 'Chant Premier' quite by accident via an old copy of the symbolist review *Vers et Prose* published in 1913 (Aragon 1992, 13–14). What is certain is that Aragon, Breton, and Soupault quickly shared with each other their fascination with *Maldoror*, and Breton added its mysterious author to one of the early influence-lists that he would frequently compile throughout his career in surrealism (Aragon 1992, 45). This collective encounter of 'the three musketeers' with Lautréamont, and the "influence déterminante" (Soupault 1987) that his work provided, can be justifiably described as the beginning of the nascent surrealist movement (Aspley 2001, 23; Aragon 1992, 26). Indeed, the shadow of *Maldoror* can be discerned clearly in the four major novels of early surrealism: Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), Soupault's *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (1928), Breton's *Nadja* (1928), and de Chirico's *Hebdomeros* (1929).

The surrealists in their early researches were fascinated not only by *Maldoror* itself, but also by the seeming lack of any anecdotal biography behind it, of any fixed historicism in the figure of its author. This was due in no small part to the acute absence of any photographic representations of Isidore Ducasse. Apart from Man Ray's attempt at capturing the enigmatics of Ducasse, Félix Vallotton had created an imaginary portrait of Lautréamont for Remy de Gourmont's *Le Livre des Masques* (1896), while Salvador Dalí's 'Portrait Imaginaire de Lautréamont à 19 ans Obtenu Après la Méthode Paranoïaque-Critique' (1937) instead focused upon the spectrality of Lautréamont's face which emerges etherealised from a blank background, barely hinting at a full embodied personality. Jules Supervielle, also born in Montevideo, similarly explored the affective theme of Lautréamont's ghostly faciality in his poem of 1925, 'A Lautréamont', which ends:

Le jour même de ma mort je te vois venir à moi
Avec ton visage d'homme
Tu déambules favorablement les pieds nus dans de hautes mottes de ciel
Et à peine arrivé à une distance convenable

Tu m'en lances une au visage.
 Et te voilà parti
 Lautréamont. (Philip 1971, 171).

This lack of certainty or authenticity regarding Lautréamont's face merely accentuated the sense of mystery surrounding *Maldoror*, for in the absence of a designated portrait authorial presence assumes a haunting character, as the anti-positivistic trends in opposition to the violence of photography depend upon the organic and possessive connection between the participants of the page. "Qui ne se passionerait à l'idée de connaître enfin le visage du poète?" asked Jacques Lefrère in his book on Ducasse's youth in the south of France (Lefrère 1977, 7). Attempting to solve the mystery of the portrait, Lefrère published a photograph he had found uncaptioned in a photo-album of the Dazet family, Ducasse's guardians during his education in the south of France, which he claimed positively matches the handful of descriptions of Ducasse's appearance. It portrays a pensive young man in a frock coat leaning against a pillar, the typical prop of photography studios of the time. The discovery of the photo has not, however, eliminated speculation about photographic evidence of Ducasse, with Soupault for one questioning the presumed finality which Lefrère's portrait sought to provide (Soupault 1987, 95). And so, for Soupault at least, this photograph must be added to the category of imaginary portraits of Lautréamont-Ducasse, for the image of Ducasse can never have the authenticity that the photograph seeks to provide.

The feeling that Lautréamont haunts the reader remains at the heart of the surrealist captivation with the poet - as Edmond Jaloux put it in 1938: "Cet homme qui est notre contemporain nous est plus inconnu qu'Homère, que Socrate ou que Caligula" (Lautréamont 1997, 36–37). The unparalleled *Stimmung* of the period 1865–1875 in French poetics retained a special revolutionary allure in the minds of Breton and Soupault, chiefly due to the remarkable appearance and disappearance of Lautréamont and Arthur Rimbaud, one hot on the heels of the other, and both, on the face of it, comrades in "literaturicide" (Robb 1998). Breton described this decade: "*poétiquement* il nous impossible aujourd'hui d'apercevoir dans le passé une époque aussi riche, aussi victorieuse, aussi révolutionnaire, aussi chargée de sens lointain" (1992, 225–226), while Soupault went on to describe the stunning temporal and literary proximity of Rimbaud and Lautréamont: "Il est évident que là, il y a une constellation extraordinaire. Remarquez pourtant que, entre Rimbaud et Lautréamont d'une part, et le surréalisme une influence déterminante qui a duré ensuite" (1987, 95; Aragon 1992, 45; Benjamin 1978, 53). The disappearance of Lautréamont on the cusp of the Paris Commune and on the back of an oeuvre of immediate revolutionary and poetic potential seemed to herald some outstanding anteriority which in turn reflected the sensibility and endeavour of the new surrealist movement in the 1920s, eager to draw direct links between the appearance of revolutionary aesthetics on the one hand, and their concrete expression in

revolutionary politics on the other. Thus the surrealists championed the integration of art and life that Lautréamont and Rimbaud achieved in their poetry of absolute revolt, for it allowed them to both to enter the mythological discourse of the Paris Commune as spiritual forebears and honorary communards.

Once Soupault, Aragon, and Breton had (re)discovered *Maldoror*, they made certain that Lautréamont's period of absence in mainstream letters was over. Breton quickly copied by hand the only remaining copy of the *Poésies* (1870), signed Isidore Ducasse, from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and published it in issues two and three of *Littérature* in 1919, while Soupault edited and introduced the first re-edition of the *Poésies* for Au Sans Pareil in 1920. Breton and Soupault collaborated on *Vous M'Oublierez* (1920), a play that featured Breton as an umbrella, Soupault as a dressing gown, Paul Eluard in the female role as a sewing machine, and Theodore Fraenkel as an unknown man. Written in the wake of Breton's disappointment with Tzara, the play represented a transition from unsatisfying dadaist activities to the automatic imagery that would become characteristic of surrealism (Matthews 1974, 106). In this perceptible shift the figure of Lautréamont was utilised to reinforce the new in-group sensibility between Breton and Soupault which had already been in the air since the *Les Champs Magnétiques* writing-sessions had commenced the year before. Furthermore, the referencing of *Maldoror*, and its most famous simile in particular, pointed towards the simultaneous promotion of Lautréamont and his distancing from those who would seek to interpret a subject that was swiftly becoming surrealist property: in a significant exchange during the play the sewing machine asks, "Explique-moi Parapluie, et je partirai", but the dressing-gown interjects with "Pas d'explications" (Breton 1988, 142). Despite this occultation Breton, Soupault, and Aragon had soon stimulated a broad interest in Lautréamont studies, not only within the movement and its fringes, but also in traditional intellectual spheres, as may be verified by the number, quality, and eclecticism of the prefaces to *Maldoror* since 1920. It may be said that the early surrealists (quite independently of Apollinaire's guidance) resurrected Lautréamont and made his name a signature of avant-garde literature and French poetics. As Alex de Jonge succinctly put it: "Lautréamont was really born in 1920" (De Jonge 1973, 78).

Within the uncertain pantheon of surrealist precursors, Lautréamont would always be Breton's exception, a name never tarnished by political or artistic heresy. Even if we ignore the bitter recriminations against Breton's former comrades Soupault, Antonin Artaud, André Masson, and Robert Desnos in the darker and more virulent *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1930), his reactionary disparagement of Poe, Baudelaire, and most surprisingly, Rimbaud, casts a certain shadow over the viability and role of precursors in the Bretonian dynamics of the surrealist movement. Yet despite this general cull Lautréamont still maintained his unique place within Breton's philosophy. He wrote:

En matière de révolte, aucun de nous ne doit avoir besoin d'ancêtres. Je tiens à préciser que selon moi, il faut se défier du culte des hommes, si grands apparemment soient-ils. Un seul à part: Lautréamont, je n'en vois pas qui n'aient laissé quelque trace équivoque de leur passage (Breton 1988, 784).⁴

This recurrent exceptionalism with regard to Lautréamont was undoubtedly informed by the unique effect he has upon the, necessarily innocent, reader: the person who discovers Lautréamont would remain a perennially haunted reader as it were, and as a result of the ghostlike status bestowed upon the author, Lautréamont would become enshrined in that peculiar position within surrealism, as an untouchable precursor. This untouchable quality was vigorously propounded by Breton who emphasised that the unique literary disappearance of Lautréamont was the key to his revolution: "Certes, rien ne me subjugue tant que la disparition totale de Lautréamont derrière son œuvre et j'ai toujours présent à l'esprit son inexorable: "Tics, tics et tics"" (Breton 1928, 21).

Yet it soon became clear that Lautréamont was a contested legacy among the surrealist group, who, led by Breton's example, devised less a collective marriage than the establishment of a protection racket. This was made physically obvious when in 1930 a squadron of surrealists including Breton, Eluard, Aragon, and Yves Tanguy, ransacked a newly opened niteclub, the 'Bar Maldoror' in Montparnasse (Breton 1988, 813–814). Breton was inflamed not only by the heresy of the appropriation of the name of Maldoror for a petit-bourgeois cabaret, but also by the treachery of the recently excommunicated surrealist Robert Desnos for suggesting it as a name to the proprietor. Not for the last time would the spirit of Lautréamont be conjured up to feature in internal surrealist strife. On this occasion the surrealist vanguard

stormed the entrance to the Bar Maldoror, even as a private supper was being hosted inside by the Rumanian princess Agathe Paléologue. [René] Char lifted the bouncer and literally tossed him aside smashing several windows and the front door in the process. Breton then strode into the dining room, stamped the floor with his heavy cane and announced to the astonished diners, "We are the guests of Count Lautréamont!" (Polizzotti 1995, 336)

Breton opened his novel *Nadja* (1928) with the famous words: "Qui suis-je? Si par exception je m'en rapportais à un adage: en effet, pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je 'hante'?" (Breton 1928, 7). For Breton, haunting was a subterranean activity which could divine the hidden meanings of everyday life with the ghost as the discoverer of the "message unique" (Breton 1928, 10). As a form of anamnesis, surrealism became for Breton a spectralisation of those who he became enchanted with, those who he discovered as if by chance and lost as if by design. Breton's first example of the chance encounter in *Nadja* concerns a

4 It could be argued that after Lautréamont only Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, individualists and lifetime dadaists, enjoyed such a privileged status with Breton.

young man who interrupted him in conversation with Picasso at the theatre; he had mistaken Breton for a friend who died in the war. He later discovers the man again through a mutual acquaintance - he is Paul Eluard (Breton 1928, 24). Breton could surely appreciate Eluard's disconcerting disturbance, for he had also recently lost a dear friend, not to the war, but to an apparent opium overdose in a Nantes hotel. Jacques Vaché was surrealism in Breton, a dead prophet known intimately only by him, whose fragmentary work Vaché had sent only to him, and whose *surprising* death did not surprise.

Vaché would become a recurring spectre in Breton's work; he dedicated the first official literary text of surrealism - *Les Champs Magnétiques* (1920) - to him, and devoted four prefaces to his memory, including one named 'Trente Ans Après' (1948) where the shadow of Vaché tracks Breton to America, and Breton is once again forced to face "la brusque révélation que Jacques Vaché n'est pas mort" (1967, 156). After the loss of Vaché, Breton's tendency to idealise iconoclastic antiheroes whom he was close to and obsessed by, like Vaché and Apollinaire, depended upon their secure, and yet ambiguous, absence – the 'death of the author' thus initiating the birth of surrealism, a new skin fresh from the corpse of dada. Rimbaud's great flaw for Breton was that he could never disappear, he merely retired from active duty: Breton refers to his "voluntary senility" (Polizzotti 1995, 109). Unlike Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, and Tristan Tzara, of whom the latter committed the impertinence of sticking around the Parisian scene (Breton 1928, 21), Lautréamont was for Breton one of the 'posthumous people' Nietzsche wrote about (2001, 229), those who enter death in order to come out on the other side, into life as living-ghosts – for to be truly alive one must learn the skill of disappearing completely, a talent cultivated and refined during the heroic period of surrealism by figures such as Arthur Cravan and Julien Torma. Yet Breton (1928, 21) wrote "il reste pour moi quelque chose du surnaturel dans les circonstances d'un effacement humain aussi complet", and issued a warning to all pretenders who would seek to emulate absent friends such as Lautréamont, Apollinaire, and Vaché: he perceived the strategy of self-immolation not as an affirmation, but as an ambiguous gesture fraught with peril, which would be a vain and wasteful enterprise for the surrealist to attempt.

The Bachelor Stripped Bare by his Brides, Even

Studies of Lautréamont have become a by-word in biographical uncertainty and informational paucity with each successive interpretation pushing his outline further into the distance, rendering it all the more spectral. Julien Torma synthesised this disturbing situation: "And no key to Lautréamont; for Lautréamont is not a door (not even an exit-door): when the house is blown up, there's nothing to shut or open" (Conover 1995, 176). This dead-end outcome was less a posthumous behest than a textual credential, a metaphysical liberation encoded within the very possibilities of

Lautréamont's legacy. For instance, Maldoror seems to address the all-too curious reader when he says: "Qui ouvre la porte de ma chambre funéraire? J'avais dit que personne n'entrât" (Ducasse 1990, 83). The notion that Lautréamont was a literary figure who was essentially 'against interpretation' seemed inevitably reinforced by the bare facts known about his time in Paris: in the last year of his life Lautréamont moved apartment three times, as if he were fleeing something or someone. The reader is thus left with the inescapable premonition that something momentous happened to Lautréamont in November 1870; dying in a non-descript *appartement meublé* leaving behind two contradictory texts can never be enough, and this was not enough for the surrealists who jettisoned the diagnostics that had dominated readings of *Maldoror* since 1868 (the text as an example of degenerate atavism, a symptom of 'la Maladie du Siècle', its author as a madman) and liberated the book from moralistic exegesis, positing it as an archetypal 'open book'.

As mentioned above, the ghost of Lautréamont gave Man Ray and the surrealists the courage to do things they were not supposed to do and think things that they were not supposed to think. Yet this encounter with Lautréamont at a critical time in the formation of surrealism would result in an increasingly protective attitude towards Lautréamont's legacy, and an intolerance of rival and alternative interpretations of him from within and without the surrealist movement. In his *Traité du Style* (1928), a rather playful 'Maldororian' text, Aragon addressed the issue of the incorporation of Rimbaud and Lautréamont into mainstream, historicising narratives. He aimed his invective at the petit-bourgeois dilettantes who through the vulgar dissemination of the cultural market, found in Rimbaud's poetic adventure their raison d'être: "Tout ce qui attend un héritage parle de disparaître un jour" (Aragon 2004, 59). Responding to critics who viewed with distaste the cultural annexations of the surrealist movement Aragon wrote:

Mais je vous le répète le surréalisme se définit par ceux qu'il défend et par ceux qui l'attaquent. C'est à cet égard qu'il revendique...et n'a cessé de revendiquer l'ombre énorme, hantée et menaçante, de l'arbre qui porte le ciel dans ses branches et plonge son pied dans l'enfer, Isidore Ducasse, comte de Lautréamont (Aragon 2004, 200).

Furthermore, Aragon echoed the great fear of senior surrealists that a commentator would emerge and taint Lautréamont's legacy in the same way that Paul Claudel, the reactionary poet-diplomat had dramatically affected the surrealist's engagement with Rimbaud.

From the beginning of the surrealist's encounter with Lautréamont, it had been Philippe Soupault who demonstrated the most interesting engagement with the figure he called "mon cher ami Ducasse". Following a tribunal appearance with Breton in 1926, which led to his departure from the movement, Soupault wrote the first surrealist preface to Lautréamont's *Œuvres Complètes* (1927) where, after a tip-off from Robert Desnos, he mistook a certain Félix Ducasse, a minor

Blanquist known to Jules Vallès, for Isidore Ducasse and thus made a link between Lautréamont and the political revolution against Napoleon III. This triggered a major dispute involving all the main four figures of early surrealism in which the ghost of Lautréamont was employed as a trademark of truth and legitimacy amid the accusations and counter-accusations that ended many of the great surrealist friendships for good.

Despite their recent and rather tricky entrance into the Parti Communiste Français, Breton, Aragon, and Eluard quickly responded to Soupault with *Lautréamont Envers et Contre Tout* (1927), an angry pamphlet aimed at discrediting the new edition of Lautréamont's *Œuvres Complètes* and its claims about the political activity of Ducasse. This was an ironic development considering that Soupault, along with Antonin Artaud, had been recently alienated from the surrealist group due to Breton's increasing orientation towards a disciplined revolutionary militancy. Coming from a perspective which regarded any contemporary interpretation of Lautréamont as intellectual vanity (a flaw that Breton, Eluard, and Aragon believed Soupault was particularly guilty of) they attacked Soupault for even attempting to 'explain' the enigma of Lautréamont, cast doubt on his theory of political involvement, and claimed it was irrelevant whether Ducasse was a social revolutionary or not:

Nous nous opposons, nous continuons à nous opposer à ce que Lautréamont entre dans l'histoire, à ce qu'on lui assigne une place entre Un Tel et Un Tel. Sur terre, monsieur Soupault, si même la place de Lautréamont était au coin de la terre, du feu, de l'air et de l'eau, où pourrait bien être la vôtre, sinon entre le vin et l'eau qui le coupe? Mais, comme la place de Lautréamont est ailleurs, vous n'êtes plus (Breton 1988, 943).

The exquisite corpse of Lautréamont, it seems, still had the power to divide a movement and provoke the most affective moments of trans-literary identification, for Breton used the Lautréamont issue to definitively banish Soupault from surrealism, and Soupault, who had never got on with Eluard, claimed that the latter drew his lineage from François Coppée and not the Lautréamont-Rimbaud tradition so sacred within surrealist circles – a vicious insult if ever there was one (Bertozzi 1987, 90–91). Eluard himself also employed the ghost of Lautréamont to end his friendship with Aragon following the latter's full conversion to the PCF cause:

What was inconsistency has become intrigue. Aragon has become other, and his meaning henceforward cannot attach itself to me. To defend myself I have a sentence which between him and me can no longer have the exchange value I so long accorded it, a sentence which has never lost its meaning and effectively passes judgement on Aragon as on so many others: *All the water in the sea could not wash away a single intellectual bloodstain* (Lautréamont) (Vaneigem 1999, 25).

Finally, the use of the memory of Lautréamont as a reference point was resurrected once again in the 1960s, yet this time with the intention of reuniting

old friends. When an associate of Aragon's approached Breton to review a book on Lautréamont for *Les Lettres Françaises*, Breton rebuffed the gesture: "‘Tell your master’, he haughtily replied, ‘that there are too many corpses between us’" (Polizzotti 1995, 608).

Postface

‘Shishaldin’, a performance artist from Alaska whose previous works included selling her DNA on eBay, and running the New York City marathon dressed in salami, proved an unlikely figure to raise the ghost of Lautréamont in the twenty-first century, for in 2004 she released a report to the media and appeared on British television claiming that she was attempting to marry the Comte de Lautréamont by invoking an obscure article of the French Civil Code which allows for the marriage between a living citizen and a dead fiancée.⁵ Shishaldin wrote a letter to President Jacques Chirac requesting that he authorise this posthumous engagement:

En tant qu’artiste, je me sens compulsif pour faire un stand “bold” à la défense du mariage en tant qu’une union qui ne peut pas être définie, une union des âmes et des spirites, la sorte d’union célébrée par fait d’art et de littérature..., un mariage d’art et littérature (Shishaldin 2004a).

However, according to Shishaldin's press release, she was surprised to find out that the dead poet was already posthumously married to “a Surrealist film maker, painter and poetess” who had been joined in matrimony with Lautréamont following the centenary of his death in 1970: once again it seemed that the surrealists were extremely loath to give away the hand of their great precursor - a situation which a certain “Boy Ray” commented enigmatically upon (Shishaldin 2004b). While this rather necrophilic episode utilised a large dose of irony and sub-situationist posturing, it also demonstrated another attempt at an appropriation of Lautréamont's legacy. Yet this haunting interruption was not based upon the patented panegyrics and invocations of the surrealists of the 1920s and 30s, but on a limited amount of recycled information and a simplistic understanding of the circulation-possibilities inherent in Lautréamont's legacy: as expressed by Eluard above, the exchange value of the ghost of Lautréamont is of an adversarial type destined to re-generate itself and its usefulness. In this regard it becomes significant that Raoul Vaneigem published his obituary to surrealism – *Histoire Désinvolte du Surréalisme* (1977) –

5 This law was enacted by Charles de Gaulle in the aftermath of the Malpasset disaster of December 1959 on the back of Irène Jodard's request to marry her deceased fiancée André Capra. Article 171: Loi. N°59/1583 du 31/12/1959: “Le Président de la République peut, pour des motifs graves, autoriser la célébration du mariage si l’un des futurs époux est décédé après l’accomplissement de formalités officielles marquant sans équivoque son consentement. Dans ce cas, les effets du mariage remontent à la date du jour précédant celui du décès de l’époux. Toutefois, ce mariage n’entraîne aucun droit de succession *ab intestat* au profit de l’époux survivant et aucun régime matrimonial n’est réputé avoir existé entre les époux” (Anon. Article 171).

under the pseudonym 'Jules-François Dupuis', known to a few as the concierge of 7 Rue de Faubourg Montmartre, the man who in November 1870 witnessed the death certificate of Isidore Ducasse and was perhaps the last to see the poet alive: the passing away of the surrealist movement and the disappearance of Lautréamont are once again inextricably linked (Vaneigem 1999).

For Man Ray and the surrealists of the 1920s and 30s the enigma of Isidore Ducasse rested upon an enforced bachelor status, a neither/nor-ness which provoked that "perpétuelle interrogation des morts" which Breton (1988, 783) was so quick to criticise in the *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme*, and yet which constitutes to a great extent the triumph of surrealism as the *apophrades* (Bloom 1997, 15–16) of the twentieth century, doomed to haunt itself through those long disappeared and to return indefinitely.

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