Chapter Two

Perish then Publish:
Partial Truth in the 1890 Edition of *Maldoror*

Next to the person of a distinguished man-of-letters, we desire to see his portrait—next to his portrait, his autograph. In the latter, especially, there is something which seems to bring him before us in his true idiosyncrasy—in his character of *scribe*.

— Edgar Allan Poe,
*A Chapter on Autography*, 1846.

By 1890, the rediscovery of Lautréamont had led to a demand for a new edition of *Les Chants de Maldoror* because, even though it had been printed before 1890, it had still never been sold.¹ This project for a new edition was undertaken by Léon Genonceaux. Historians are as uncertain about Genonceaux’s discovery of Lautréamont’s work as they are about this enigmatic publisher’s biography. Literary critics have traditionally granted Genonceaux varying degrees of honor as Ducasse’s first biographer. For this reason, Genonceaux’s preface has been included in many editions of Lautréamont’s work, including both the 1970 and 2009 Bibliothèque de la Pléiade volumes. Maurice Saillet suggested that Genonceaux best contributed to demystifying Lautréamont through his “patientes recherches” [in-depth research].² Jean-Jacques Lefrère, though careful to draw attention to certain dubious elements in Genonceaux’s preface, nonetheless qualified it as a primary source for subsequent research:

Tout ce qui a pu être vérifié dans son étude l’a toujours été à son honneur, et si certains éléments ont été mis en doute, ce fut par

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¹ With the exception of a couple of copies for sale in a Belgian “rare and curious” bookstore in 1882 and 1889 that seem to have gone unnoticed. See Lefrère, *Isidore Ducasse*, 642.
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celx-là même qui n’hésitaient pas à inventer de toutes pièces des chapitres entiers de la vie de Ducasse.

[Anything that could be verified has always been taken at his word for his study, and if certain parts were doubtful, it is precisely those parts that have led to inventing all kinds of pieces in the book of Ducasse’s life.]³

Genonceaux may well have been the first critic to show that Lautréamont had an identity. This identity, however, is inaccurate and largely imagined.

A preface, a facsimile letter written by Ducasse, and a frontispiece all bedeck Genonceaux’s edition. These ornaments testify to the various means by which what Gérard Genette terms “paratext” can alter the reception of a literary work. Paratextual accessories, which Genette argues serve to present the work and bring it up to date, are “ce par quoi un texte se fait livre” [that through which a text becomes a book].⁴ Genonceaux, Lautréamont’s first publisher in the sense that he was the first to market and distribute Lautréamont’s poem, whereas Albert Lacroix had not, provides these paratextual ornaments to ordain Ducasse as an Author. Genonceaux argues that Lautréamont should not only be considered eccentric, but a genius as well: a skillful artist of his own transgression. He spins his preface largely to prove Lautréamont’s mental stability, showing that he had a real name and a real death caused not by lunacy, but by unknown causes. He exhibits several autographed documents and employs an anonymous graphologist who doubles as an alienist to confirm that the young Ducasse was less a madman than an artist, a logician, and even a musician. Weaving a strategic web of pseudoscientific proofs, he claims there is method to Lautréamont’s madness. Such claims of authenticity are misleading and in most cases false, indicating a calculated effort to subvert Lautréamont’s image to marketable ends. A review of the publishing situation in France and Belgium during and immediately after Lautréamont’s life reveals why creating the maudit image in 1890 could be both dicey and advantageous.

³ Lefrère and Goujon, Deux malchanceux, 61.