Chapter Four

The Edition as Exhibition:
A Surrealist Retrospective, 1938

Thirteen years before Breton prefaced the 1938 GLM edition of Lautréamont’s *Œuvres complètes*, he began an essay on surrealism and painting to refute Pierre Naville’s comment that there is no such thing as surrealist painting.¹ In this essay, Breton confirms his status as spokesperson and polemicist of surrealism, arguing that there is, in fact, a visual language, and he is best fit to evaluate its present state or to recall it “s’il est nécessaire à sa raison d’être” [if necessary, to its true principles].² According to Breton, visual language is no more artificial than discursive language, and it allows him to exercise control over the real or what is understood “vulgairement par le réel” [vulgarly by the real].³ For Breton, what is evoked and what is have no perceptible difference, and both are equally real. The great error of art up to the modern era, as he sees it, is a narrow concept of imitation: to reproduce models from an external world when they would be better left to exist there on their own. Instead, he calls for a revision of “real” values in poetry, art, and life, insisting that the plastic work of art will either refer to a “modèle purement intérieur, ou ne sera pas” [purely internal model or will cease to exist].⁴ Breton’s plea for a revolution in art raises two issues: first, about revolution; and second, about what is understood by an internal model. To tackle both of these problems, and thus to define surrealist painting, Breton promptly returns to the constant and loyal Lautréamont.

Breton’s vision of a purely internal model for art and poetry is manifested in the illustrated editions of Lautréamont’s work. Two

² Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, 4: 350 [SP, 2]
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., 4: 352 [SP, 4].
editions, in particular—Salvador Dalí’s 1934 Skira edition of Les Chants de Maldoror and the surrealists’ 1938 GLM edition of Lautréamont’s Œuvres complètes, prefaced by Breton—serve as canvases on which the surrealists display individual styles and aesthetic motives of the group. Far more than an inspiration to artists, Lautréamont’s work legitimizes their cause, a cause which alternately aims to upstage their creative rivals, gain renown, or publicize an upcoming event. Dalí’s edition, for instance, exhibits his own paranoiac-critical method (creation of new images by evoking subconscious associations with existing objects) while neglecting Lautréamont. The 1938 GLM edition subsequently excludes Dalí, whom Breton debarred from surrealism, showcasing instead twelve renowned surrealist artists as well as the remaining surrealist poets. This GLM edition testifies to final endorsements of surrealism. It displays within one volume surrealism’s internal polemics, relationship to visual language, possessive appropriation of Lautréamont, and perpetuation of Lautréamont as the forefather of automatic writing and similar techniques in literature.

Breton argues that, in poetry, both the concept of the purely internal model and of revolution originated with Lautréamont. Lautréamont was one of the first poets to concentrate on the isolation and exploration of the mind in and for itself, and to find freedom of expression as a result. The liberation of the word and the elasticity between what is permitted and what is forbidden had reached a point where, he writes, “les mots famille, patrie, société, nous font l’effet de plaisanteries macabres” [the words family, fatherland, society, for instance, seem to us now to be so many macabre jests]. Poets like Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé initiated a reliance on the self for redemption; any future poetry is then a desperate attempt to pursue their footsteps, he writes, “que nos yeux, nos chers yeux reflétassent ce qui, n’étant pas, est pourtant aussi intense que ce qui est, et que ce fussent à nouveau des images optiques réelles…” [so that our eyes, our precious eyes, have to reflect that which, while not existing, is yet as intense as that which does exist, and which has once more to consist of real visual images…] Thus the poetic image is a virtual

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5 Ibid., 4: 353 [SP 4].
6 Ibid. [SP, 5].