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Dream-work: Surrealism and Revolutionary Subjectivity in André Breton and Georges Bataille

Abstract

*This paper explores a polemic between André Breton and Georges Bataille around the question of the politics of the avant-garde. Focussing on texts composed in the late 1920s, principally Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* and Bataille's "The "Old Mole" and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme and Surrealist", this paper argues that in examining this debate around matter and material, it is possible to extract two distinct conceptions of the places of subjectivity and revolution in avant-garde aesthetics. While Breton wishes to separately define the idealist aesthetic projects of Surrealism and the materialist project for revolution, Bataille argues that a commitment to that materialist project requires a similarly materialist aesthetics.*

Keywords: André Breton; Georges Bataille; Surrealism; Avant-Garde; Revolution

A Disputed Memory

In his 1964 introduction to Maurice Nadeau's semi-official *History of Surrealism*, Roger Shattuck tells a story that bookends the decade of Surrealism's most fervent creativity, and reveals something essential about its evolution.¹ Shattuck describes how

Around 1920 ... they gathered frequently in a café called the Certá near the Opéra. Towards the end of one meeting they discovered that the waiter had left his wallet ... on a bench close by ... [T]hey filched the wallet, carried it off to another café, and argued violently over whether they could practise their liberated morality at the expense of a poor hardworking waiter ... Paul Éluard was appointed to keep the wallet until a final decision could be reached the following day. On his own initiative Éluard returned it anonymously to the waiter. At the next meeting everyone attacked him bitterly for having acted without a collective decision and turned his back on the new morality. At least so Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes tells it. But the first appearance of his version ... provoked four excoriating replies: from Louis Aragon (who signed 'salutations communistes'), Giuseppe Ungaretti (who added the expletive 'fascist' after his signature), Tzara (who rejected the entire article as a distortion), and Éluard. He maintained that the facts were entirely different: he had originally stolen the wallet from a priest, brought his booty to the Certá so that the group could consider his action, and following the discussion presented

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

the priest's wallet to the waiter as a deserving beneficiary. Shattuck 1978, pp. 15-16)

This decade was decisive not only for Surrealism, but for the historical avant-garde as a whole, and this story encapsulates some of the reasons why that might be. One might perhaps start with the Ribemont-Dessaignes description of the theft. Whatever the truth of that description, it seems certain that in its pointless provocation and subsequent facile debate, this presentation of the facts is influenced by André Breton's far more famous provocation in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, published a year before this story was recounted, where he asserts that

The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level. (Breton 1972, p. 125)

Both the debate on the theft of the wallet, and Breton's *ukase*, along with Aragon's comradely greeting, are artefacts of a Surrealism now struggling to align itself with the dictates, laid down in 1928, of the Comintern's 'Third Period'. These dictates, produced in the aftermath of Stalin achieving definitive supremacy over the Party in Russia, stipulated that, given the imminence of a worldwide revolutionary upsurge, a position of uncompromising rigour was to be established in all communist parties, and any collaboration with reformists – now relabelled 'social fascists' – was to be violently rejected. More broadly, though, they are indicative of a Surrealist avant-garde struggling to resolve inherent contradictions .

Those contradictions, too, can be witnessed not only in the opposing radicalisations of Aragon and Ungaretti, but also in Éluard's different retelling. Here the Surrealists are reconfigured not as libertines of the imaginary, but as anticlerical Robin Hoods, experimenting with direct action and communist redistribution.

This marks a shift from an ethic of aristocratic detachment – Breton (1972, p. 47) ends the first manifesto with 'Existence is elsewhere' – to one of the engaged handmaiden and embroiderer of a larger revolutionary culture, and is of course partly determined by the external events alluded to above.

The shift Breton undergoes in these years – and the tensions that shift endeavours to resolve – can be vividly witnessed in the debate between Breton and Georges Bataille about the precise relationship between political commitment and revolutionary aesthetics.

In exploring this *contretemps*, I will argue that the debate represents – and this is why Surrealism remains central to conceptualising the trajectory of the avant-garde in the 20th century – a deepening (and unique) engagement with the foundational premises that united the historic avant-gardes; above all, that an aesthetic revolution must be grounded in, or authorised by, a mass revolutionary subject.

The Foundations of the Avant-Garde

To reconstruct this debate, it is useful firstly to sketch the rough outline of a heuristic model that allows us to grasp something of the specificity of the avant-garde and thus to see the lineaments of its historical trajectory in these years.

Firstly, there is an overarching concern with *politics*. What this means for the avant-garde in practice is an aesthetics overdetermined by a revolutionary conjuncture and consequent revolutionary commitment. In the case of Breton and a number of other Surrealists, this would take the form of joining Le Parti communiste français (PCF) in 1927, preceding the debates discussed in this essay. That revolutionary commitment is, more precisely, to a revolutionary programme, which was constituted by the allegiance to a type of universal subjectivity that embodies the social order to be instituted by the revolution. It is the movement – from revolution, to militant (universal) subject, to community – that grasps the specificity of the avant-garde, and allows us to isolate it from modernism more broadly, which might share some of the same political commitments (in some exponents) or aesthetic radicalism (in others) but which does not unite its aesthetics under these three priorities.

Additionally, these three structuring principles – revolution, subjectivity and community – allow us to grasp the central axes around which avant-garde aesthetic practice revolved. For what constituted a particular grouping as part of the avant-garde was their commitment to the unity of these three principles. That is, what finally constitutes an avant-garde is *theory itself*.

On one level, this is banal or unsurprising. In popular consciousness, the avant-garde formation precedes the individual artist. Futurism is more widely recognisable than Marinetti, Surrealism than Breton, Dada than Tzara and so on. This recognition of the self-described ‘movement’ over the individual artist indicates what might be seen as the theoretical priority of the movement; their founding moments are, almost universally, manifestos, or manifesto-like interventions.

But the priority of theoretical construction and unity over the individual production of aesthetic work lies not merely in this will to group uniformity. It is more significant than that. For these three axes of investigation can be said to constitute an answer to a question that is central to politics under capitalism: what does revolution look like? More broadly and schematically, we might describe this as the question of how vast, communal, self-conscious social change can be both *represented* and, necessarily following this, *enacted*.

Thus the three structuring principles elucidated above can be said to constitute a kind of general answer under which the avant-garde operates: this change occurs through *revolution*, which is brought about by self-conscious, militant *subjects*, who, in turn, both constitute and establish a new form of social organisation and *community*.

The avant-garde, then, is a theoretical and aesthetic formation that articulates a particular answer in *advance* of the answer’s (necessarily ‘universal’) historical appearance.

The Eagle, the Mole, and the Prefix 'Sur'

How then does this appear for Breton? In the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton (1972, p. 14) tells the story, 'according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by, used to have a notice posted on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: THE POET IS WORKING'. This, for Breton (1972, p. 14), was of course merely the jocular confirmation of the central thesis of the manifesto – he desires an avant-garde that would *work* towards 'the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*'. In relating this story, though, Breton reveals something of Surrealism's complicity in the affirmation of a programme that he broadly shares with Marinetti. Surrealism is both a concerted movement, but also an 'invisible ray', a detached, untrammelled, desirous unconsciousness, which Breton (1972, p. 47) detects in the art and works of the past: 'This world is only relatively in tune with thought, and incidents of this kind are only the most obvious episodes of a war in which I am proud to be participating'.² At the outset of Surrealism, then, is the assertion of a proud minority assured in its knowledge of its own future generalisation – an insurgent subjectivity, and with a clear understanding of the material through which the revolution will occur – the universal dream-life of 'mankind'. Breton's (1972, p. 26) basic tenet is what he will describe as the belief in 'the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected association, in the *omnipotence* of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving *all the principle problems of life*'.³ The blurring of different perceived ways of accessing the unconsciousness is authorised here by the universality, the *a priori* 'omnipotence' of the dream. This is the centrality of the story Breton has narrated – the Surrealist revolution will be for a workers' world, just as other revolutionary programmes of the time promised. With the self-management ('the disinterested play of thought') of our dream-work, 'all the principle problems of life' will see resolution (Breton 1972, p. 26).

Breton's materialism is a materialism of ideas and ideation, and it is one that would become clearer as the politics of Surrealism, somewhat muted in the initial manifesto, or at any rate residual, were enunciated more fully in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. Here, in 1929, we can see what is in retrospect the tombstone of the historic avant-garde, at once a confirmation of the inextricably linked projects of the revolution and the avant-garde, and their practical severance.

In this text Breton also attacks Georges Bataille over precisely the issue of materialism (Bataille (cited in Richardson 1994, p. 4) himself had already, and in only slightly more blunt terms, detected this as a point of difference, dissociating himself from the movement on the grounds that it contained 'too many fucking idealists'). In taking up this attack on Bataille, Breton was prolonging a polemic that had begun with Bataille's parting of ways and was continued in a 1929 debate about the significance of Salvador Dali's work.⁴ Breton (1972, p. 185) noted that 'when the "unmentionable brush" Jarry spoke of fell into his plate, Bataille declared he was enchanted' before commenting, 'In his *Différence de la Philosophie de la nature chez Démocrite et chez Epicure*, Marx tells us how, in every age, there thus come into being hair-philosophers, fingernail-

² Note the continued reliance on martial metaphors, an unsurprising and nigh-universal trope of the avant-garde.

³ Emphasis added.

⁴ For a valuable account of the debate around Dali, see Adamowicz 2003.

philosophers, *toenail*-philosophers, *excrement-philosophers*, etc.’⁵ Essentially, for Breton, Bataille’s work – of which there was at this point little⁶ – was guilty of a literally obscene vulgarity: his materialism was shit. Breton (1972, p. 156-60), in this manifesto, would instead definitively assert a cleavage between the commitment to a Marxist politics and the omnipotent dream-workers: ‘To be sure, Surrealism, which as we have seen deliberately opted for the Marxist doctrine in the realm of social problems, has no intention of minimizing Freudian doctrine as it applies to the evaluation of idea: on the contrary, Surrealism believes Freudian criticism to be the first and only one with a really solid basis’. It is this formal split – between an aesthetic project of inwardness and a politics of public concern with ‘social problems’ – that Bataille’s work challenged, grounded as it was not in unmediated ideation, axiomatically detached from sociality, but instead in a ‘base’ materialism, the materials of which emerge from what might best be described as *the abject*.⁷

What Breton does here is formalise an implicit contradiction in the historic avant-garde, and affirm an aesthetics of separation that resolves the contradiction by setting up the dichotomy aesthetics/politics and then asserting the compatibility of this duality. In a sense, this engenders an aesthetic not dissimilar to those previous ideologies of autonomy that Peter Bürger (1984) identified as the wellspring of the avant-garde; the autonomy here, however, is predicated tenuously on the ideas of two supposedly compatible theories of ‘revolution’ – Marxism as Breton conceived it, and psychoanalysis. The revolutionary claims of the avant-garde – their programmatic totalisation – were to be dissolved back to the separation against which they were originally set. In the context of Stalin’s political eminence, and the concomitant hegemony of what would come to be called ‘socialist realism’, this return to separation was an understandable retreat, given Breton’s commitments.⁸ Denis Hollier (1992, p. 108) has suggested that the differing approaches of Breton and Bataille to the question of psychoanalysis can be traced in part to their biographical encounters with it, Bataille initially as a patient, Breton a doctor with a professional interest and a (small) personal relationship with its founder. This might be seen in their relation to Marxism, too. At this point Breton was already associated with Leon Trotsky, now exiled, and, perhaps, for those somewhat to the left of the Third International, the most prominent and credible representative of the programmatic workers movement remaining (and with whom, alongside Diego Rivera, Breton would compose in 1938 *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*⁹). Bataille wanted little to do with this. It may be this different trajectory that explains in part the particular critique of Breton and Surrealism that Bataille develops – or, more accurately, that I believe can be located within his roughly contemporaneous work – and why, finally, Bataille chooses not to endorse the separation reconstructed by Breton, but to instead return to the contradiction or *aporia* of the historical avant-garde and attempt to trace its limits, and suggest other possible paths of exit. Thus, Bataille’s theoretical work of the late 1920s, in the wake of historic aesthetic and political defeats, can be read not merely as a local response to

⁵ See also Hollier 1992, p. 105.

⁶ That is, little work that was published under his own name and unrelated to his strictly academic concerns in numismatics. As the editor of the journal *Documents*, begun the year Breton published the *Second Manifesto*, Bataille was influential in other ways, of course. See Ades & Baker 2006.

⁷ My usage here should not be confused with the once-fashionable deployment of the term as conceptual decoration for *soi disant* ‘shocking’ art. For a brief discussion of that fate, see Noys 2000, p. 33–35.

⁸ For the argument that ‘socialist realism’ represented a continuation of the avant-garde project, see Groys 1992.

⁹ See Breton, Rivera & Trotsky 2011.

Surrealism's new formulation, but as an attempt to go beyond the contradictions now visible in the programmatism of the historic avant-garde.

Although it was unpublished at the time, Bataille's only extensive essay from this period that explicitly addresses Surrealism, 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealism*', makes clear, if in a polemical and largely negative fashion (although this negativity was, as we will see, central to Bataille's wider response), the essential points of difference Bataille discerns between himself and the Surrealism formulated in the *Second Manifesto*. He acknowledges the importance this work has for surrealism, calling the latest manifesto 'without any doubt the most consequential work, the most consistent declaration that the surrealists have attempted for a long time' and this importance is understood as a function of what Bataille believes this text reveals of the Surrealist project (Bataille 1985b, p. 40).¹⁰ In that text he quotes the final lines of the *Second Manifesto* (observing, also, that 'nothing can enter M. Breton's confused head except in poetic form') (Bataille 1985b, p. 41): 'Let him, in spite of any reservations, use the avenging arm of the idea against the bestiality of all beings and of all things, and let him one day, vanquished – *but vanquished only if the world is the world* – welcome the discharge of his sad rifles like a salvo fired in salute' (Breton 1972, p. 187).¹¹ Here, at the close of his manifesto, Breton attempts to resolve, or at least force a reconciliation between the previous duality he had set up. We should pause over this passage, as Bataille does, because the way in which Breton stages this reconciliation (the hieratic tone is appropriate) is highly interesting. Here, Breton is calling for a militant allegiance to the 'avenging arm of the idea' against materiality itself, an apparently doomed assault that, in spite of whatever allegiances ('reservations') one might have to the world as it is, must be conducted nonetheless, for that world as it is amounts to sheer, base animality, and will, *to the extent that it remains this world*, be victorious. There is space here to see Breton's argument not as a lament but as a warning, that the seemingly inevitable defeat is merely apparent, that the world need not remain the same. But the tone of premature obsequy remains difficult to shake. The vanquished surrealist needs to resign 'himself' to the beauty of a sad, a graveside salute. For Breton, the aporia of an unredeemed and unredeemable world and the art that would accompany it can only be resolved by a redoubled commitment to the partiality of the surrealist idea even though he acknowledges that this will ultimately be insufficient, even on its own terms. The distance from the programme of the historic avant-garde is clear.

Bataille's response to this reformulation takes as its starting point Marx's notion of social revolution as the 'old mole', developed in his reflections on the aftershocks of the 1848 revolutions, specifically, in the restoration of the French empire under the eponymous Napoleon III, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marx (2010, p. 237) writes that 'the revolution is thorough. It is still on its journey through purgatory. It goes about its business methodically . . . when it has completed this, the second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exultantly exclaim: "Well worked, old mole!"'¹² The metaphor is an attempt to grasp what might be called 'cycles of struggle', whereby waves of revolution seem to punctuate periods marked by stasis and retrenchment; the nature of the coming social revolution is such that any defeat or setback merely means a return to the underground (at the time, of

¹⁰ Of course, it is in the interests of Bataille's polemic to emphasise the importance and centrality of a text he would go on to attack.

¹¹ Italics in original.

¹² This is a paraphrase of *Hamlet*, I, v, 162: 'Well said, old mole, canst work I' th' ground so fast?'

course, this would be figuratively true for many activists), during which the vast geological, biological, and animal processes of recomposition continue their work, and the mole will emerge above ground once again to the exultation of Europe. For Bataille, the metaphor is more significant, as it represents for him an allegiance not merely to the *longue durée* of social revolution, but to the very materiality, the baseness, the 'low'-ness of the mole's progress. To this figure Bataille (1985b, p. 34) counterposes the 'more virile conception' of the eagle, resident in the heights 'with uncontested glamour'. If the old mole is the totem of a revolutionary proletariat, then the eagle is the ensign of 'the unconstrained development of individual authoritarian power'. But, Bataille (1985b, p. 34) suggests, '[r]evolutionary idealism tends to make of the revolution an eagle above eagles, a *supereagle* [suraigle] striking down authoritarian imperialism, an idea as radiant as an adolescent seizing power for the benefit of utopian enlightenment'. Thus the second portion of Bataille's title becomes clear. Revolutionary idealism is what links this figure of the 'supereagle', surrealism itself, and the Nietzschean overman. Juxtaposed to this trinity of height, then, is the 'old mole', the revolution that 'hollows out chambers in a decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of utopians': 'Marx's point of departure has nothing to do with the heavens, preferred station of the imperialist eagle as of Christian or revolutionary utopians. He begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians' (Bataille 1985b, p. 35). Bataille's critique, ostensibly developed through an exploration of the Nietzschean idealism he detects in Surrealism, is thus broadened to become a more general critique of revolutionary idealism – programmatism, we might say – equally discernable in the reactionary rebellion of Marinetti.

For Bataille, Nietzsche embodies the contradictions inherent in what might be called the aristocratic critique of bourgeois value. That critique is built upon a profound distaste for the 'senile idealism' of the established order, and a 'passionate revolt' against 'the hypocrisy and moral shabbiness that presides over current world exploitation' (Bataille 1985b, p. 36).¹³ This is – in what is a very early engagement with a thinker who would continue to preoccupy Bataille and who even here deeply informs his notion of revolution – the hard kernel of materialism upon which the idealist edifices of the supereagles will be constructed. But, even here, in his originary revolt, Nietzsche reveals the tendency that would later come to vitiate his notion of revolution, for the focus of this critique – and what makes it finally an idealist critique of idealism – is that it is founded on disgust not at the conditions that generate the endlessly proliferating nihilism that passes for ethical justification in this world, but at *the justification itself*. This resulted finally, from Nietzsche's class position; he had nothing 'whatsoever in common with the working proletariat', which meant that even if his diagnosis of decline was accurate, and even if his prescription of a transvaluation of all values was a useful depiction of revolution, what was needed was precisely a renunciation of all 'moral values associated with class superiority', a renunciation only possible through the dark vitality of the proletariat (Bataille 1985b, p. 37). Nietzsche was thus 'condemned by circumstance to imagine his break with conformist ideology as an Icarian adventure' (Bataille 1985b, p. 37). This, for a man of Nietzsche's class, was all that would be possible. Bataille (1985b, p. 37) asks, in explaining his Icarus metaphor, 'what can there be in the will to rise above social conditions, if one excludes the unconscious pathological desire to be struck down violently like Icarus'? It is in this curious metaphor that one can find Bataille's sympathy for both the Surrealists and

¹³ Bataille's opinion of Nietzsche – although still critically sympathetic here – would develop into a far closer, if still conflicted, engagement. See, firstly, Bataille 1985a; and, of course, Bataille 1994.

Nietzsche. For if they represented the Icarian desire for absolutely undetermined overcoming, what constitutes the sun at its zenith? In short, as we have seen, the sun is the totality of social conditions that one cannot hope to outfly with jerry-built ideas of transcendence; one will find oneself, inevitably, drowned in the icy waters of rationalising capital.¹⁴ Indeed, Nietzsche is a useful case study because, unlike the French romantics or Wagner, he had no time for ‘sentimental foolishness’ and ‘medieval awkwardness’ and was intimately aware of the dangers of a kind of objectless transvaluation, spurious rejection and archaic pedantry, and so was forced to finally make claims only for a ‘morality of the master’ (Bataille 1985b, p. 38). But, Bataille (1985b, p. 38) immediately suggests, ‘[i]t is not the masters who need such a morality: exploiters are not going to seek their values in unbalanced philosophy. When their values are given to them immediately by the economic conditions of exploitation, American bankers dispense with *The Will to Power*’. Here, the very struggle to avoid the backward-looking reaction of Wagnerian romanticism paradoxically results in a revival of precisely those archaic values whose use to the masters of this mode of production are not even of the ornamental kind. Although Bataille does not address this, Nietzsche’s concepts, stripped of their paradoxical circling around renunciation and affirmation, and retooled with the vulgarity of social Darwinism would indeed re-emerge as ideologies, as we have seen. But Marinetti’s proto-fascist Nietzsche is a product of the same broad period of crisis as Bataille’s, and the critique here of Nietzsche is all the more applicable to his epigones.

Surrealism falls into the same trap as Nietzsche – the clue is the prefix *sur*, as it denotes for both Nietzsche and Surrealism not merely a metaphysical overcoming, but a topological one: it is ‘higher’. What distinguishes Surrealism, and what makes its project both more conflicted and finally more objectionable is that as it ‘is immediately distinguishable by the addition of low values (the unconscious, sexuality, filthy language, etc.), it invests these values with an elevated character by associating them with the most immaterial values’ (Bataille 1985b, p. 39).

What Bataille sets in opposition to the tragic, ‘Icarian’ visions of Nietzsche and the Surrealists is, firstly, a political objection. That is, to the extent that Surrealism and Nietzscheanism either defer violent revolutionary politics for a time to come, or else insist on that revolution’s fundamental interiority, as a purely personal overcoming of the bestiality of the world, Bataille discerns that they reject all that is abject, or base. The abject, the part of the totality disavowed, violently rejected, and yet for those very reasons constitutive of the *world as world*, is that which all idealism must deny, but, in so denying, it must in turn destroy any revolutionary politics that idealism arrogates to itself: the abject is the place at which an avant-garde must situate itself *to be avant-garde at all*. In the extraordinary final paragraphs of his essay, Bataille (1985b, p. 43) responds directly to Breton’s previously quoted peroration:

The earth is base, *the world is world*, human agitation is only vulgar and perhaps not acknowledgeable: this is the shame of Icarian despair. But to the *loss of the head* there is no other reply: a crass sneer, vile grimaces. For it is human agitation, with *all* the vulgarity of needs small and great, with its flagrant disgust for the police who repress it, it is the agitation of *all* men (except for the police and the friends of the police), that alone determines revolutionary mental forms, in opposition to bourgeois mental forms. In human terms no baseness

¹⁴ For a delirious reverie on this theme, see Bataille 1985c.

values, at present, the rage of refined literati, lovers of an accursed poetry; what cannot move the heart of a ditchdigger already has the existence of shadows. There remains, it is true, the almost artificial lighting, which serves to display the ruins. And down with the denigrators of an immediate “human interest,” down with all the scribblers with their spiritual elevation and their sanctified disgust for material needs!

For those bourgeois who still exercise a certain mastery of their intellectual domain, there is no possibility of instituting a culture, or even, more generally, purely proletarian principles of *mental* action ... By excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture, perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man’s spirit.¹⁵

This passage marks both Bataille’s affirmation of the centrality of revolutionary politics to all thought and art, but also a definitive break with any sense of the programmatic overcoming that marked the historical avant-gardes that had just passed. The programmatic content of the historical avant-garde was predicated on, yes, the centrality of a revolutionary programme to production of art, but, more, as we have seen with the programmes of Zurich Dada and early Futurism, not to mention Surrealism, it was predicated too on the vision of a world remade in the image of man, art and life reconciled in a new reign of ideation and self-management.

Bataille, in this passage, moves beyond this vision to something more general: if the historical avant-gardes yearned for that Hegelian ‘determinant negation’, Bataille (1997, p. 296) would opt for what he would later describe, in ‘Letter to X’ (the addressee being Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel Bataille attended), as ‘unemployed negativity’. Subjectivity, as the *labour* of the negative, was fired. Revolutionary subjectivity would have to be something else entirely.

What that was to be, precisely, remained at the centre of Bataille’s work throughout the 1930s, even as he and Breton managed a fleeting reconciliation in the face of a rising fascism, founding together the short-lived *Contre-Attaque* in 1935. Above all, it would lead Bataille to found the College of Sociology, which could be seen as at once a recapitulation and critique of the models of preceding avant-gardes, including Surrealism. If the avant-gardes are always at some level theoreticians of revolution, even in their moments of aesthetic production, so with their passing in the darkness of mid-century Europe, the ground of those theories must – for those who hold to the alchemy of revolution, who would remain ‘sorcerer’s apprentices’¹⁶ – become objects of theoretical investigation. And as another participant in the college, Roger Caillois (1988, p. 11), argued, such an investigation of the immanent sociality of the reproduction of community cannot be conducted without the conductors themselves posing again the question of revolutionary subjectivity, and – hopefully – becoming its new embodiment. The question of the avant-garde is no longer how one might aid the revolution; instead, it is the question of revolution itself.

¹⁵ Italics in original.

¹⁶ See Bataille 1988.

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