

## Chapter 14

# Failure and Community: Preliminary Questions on the Political in the Culture of Surrealism

M. Stone-Richards

### I

Our ambition is to unite, through an indestructible knot – a knot of which we shall have passionately sought the secret as to its indestructibility – this activity of transformation to this activity of interpretation [...]<sup>1</sup>

The facts of Surrealism's involvement with the politics of its day are only too well documented, if often neglected: the explicit and public politicization of Surrealism began with its denunciation of the French war against the native insurgents in Morocco in 1925, thus also making of this inaugural moment for Surrealism an intervention against European colonialism; to this we might add the internal dialogues from 1925 onwards on the nature of Surrealism as a movement: is Surrealism merely a movement in art or is it, indeed, a movement in culture, a movement that may properly be considered a social movement? In 1927 with the manifesto 'Au grand jour', five of the leading members committed themselves to the Parti communiste français (PCF), thereby beginning one of the most curious *pas de deux-as-danse macabre* in the history of the intersection of politics and culture.<sup>2</sup> The miserable and in many ways *pathetic* relationship between the Surrealists and the PCF not only bore out the accuracy of the radical anarchism of Antonin Artaud who, on the occasion of 'Au grand jour', without denying his inner relation to Surrealism, would take his distance from the movement in proclaiming the utter madness of Surrealism's involvement with any established political party, least of all the PCF. After the Aragon affair between 1931 and 1933, Surrealism

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1 André Breton, 'Position politique de l'art aujourd'hui' (1935), *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, eds, Marguerite Bonnet et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 430.

2 Amongst the most important work on Surrealism and politics are Jean-Pierre Morel, *Le Roman insupportable: L'Internationale littéraire et la France, 1920–1932* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), and the many incomparable essays of Robert Short, including 'The Politics of Surrealism, 1920–1936', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1:2 (1966), 'Contre-Attaque', in *Entretiens sur le surréalisme*, ed. Ferdinand Alquie (Paris: La Haye, 1968), pp. 144–76.



would begin to take its distance from the Party, though in identifying itself with an independent radical left – the *ultra-gauche* – it would also be the beginning of that particularly French constellation that sought to unite organically the thought of Marx and Freud through Hegel. André Breton's *Les Vases communicants* (1932), following on from his especially close reading of Freud's *Traumdeutung* in Meyerson's translation as *La Science des rêves*, is amongst the most telling evidence of this cultural possibility of Freud, Hegel and Marx as the means for re-thinking what most mattered to this generation, namely, the modalities of individual and collective experience as a means of grasping the possibilities of community under industrial capitalism.<sup>3</sup> In *La Communauté inavouable*, his response to Jean-Luc Nancy's *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Maurice Blanchot outlines the context in which his generation, that is, the generation of the interwar years, came upon the unavoidability of the question of community:

Why this appeal from or to 'community'? I'll outline in no particular order the elements of what was our history. The groups (of which the Surrealist group, loved or execrated, is the prototype); the many gatherings around ideas which did not yet exist and around dominant persons whose existence was larger than life: above all, the memory of the Soviets, the foreboding of what was already Fascism, but of which the sense, like the development, failed to fit the available concepts<sup>4</sup>

*Les Vases communicants* is in part a work of theoretical reflection in which Breton, responding to what escapes the texture and habits of concepts then available, seeks an internal rapprochement between Marxism and psychoanalysis through Hegelian thought by a profound thinking on desire in both personal and social dimensions – not the least significant aspect of Breton's thinking in this moving document is the manner in which he seeks to distinguish desire and pleasure – in a way that implicates his own sense of personal failure, the failure of desire to find its object from the personal disaster of his relations with Nadja in 1926 and apparently 'saved' from despair on that occasion by the encounter with X (Suzanne Muzard). The subsequent failure of X to fill the lack in the wake of Nadja – both the person and the récit *Nadja* – is as much the subject of *Les Vases communicants* as the relationship between politics and desire. Indeed, in the history of Surrealism between 1919 (from the composition of *Les Champs magnétiques* in the shadow of the Great War and the encounter with the tragedy of war trauma as captured in the proto-Surrealist récit 'Sujet' (1918), in the shadow of the death of Jacques Vaché to whom *Les Champs*

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3 Thus Maurice Blanchot on Bataille and Surrealism: 'Communauté idéale de la communication littéraire. Les circonstances y aidèrent (importance de l'aléa, du hasard, du caprice historique ou de la rencontre; les surréalistes, André Breton avant tous les autres, l'avaient pressentie et même théorisée prématurément)'. Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), p. 40.

4 Ibid., pp. 14–15.

*magnétiques* is dedicated) and the outbreak of World War II, at each occasion of significant self-definition in relation to the political realm, there would be a crisis and concomitant sense of failure in the movement as it would reconceive its interiority and thereby its space of difference and thus some would leave (Philippe Soupault and Artaud) or be 'expelled' (André Masson and Michel Leiris). The eventual split between Breton and Louis Aragon in 1931–32 after the debacle of the Congress of Kharkov can, certainly, be represented as the choice between a Stalinist Communism or moral independence, but it could equally be understood as a rupture in the integrity of the group thereby foregrounding an important aspect of the importance of the group in Surrealist experience, namely, the narcissistic dimension of group cohesion.

After the rupture with the PCF as recorded in the still magnificent document 'Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison' (1935), the Surrealists joined with Georges Bataille in 1935 to form a radical left non-party formation named Contre-Attaque: Union de luttes des intellectuels révolutionnaires, not only to challenge the Party but to explore 'the continuation of politics by other means' (Bataille). In so doing, both Bataille and Breton are clear that the creation of the Front Populaire in 1935 would not in itself be sufficient to bring about the kind of radical transformation of values that would alone suffice: it is not merely a rejection of capitalism and the bourgeoisie that would be required, but a fundamental change in the values and conceptions of reason that had informed Western and European self-understanding, the very values which, Nietzsche and Valéry had argued in a manner definitive for the Surrealist generation, that were also the basis of European nihilism. To this extent, though it might well be argued that the demands of working people for improvement in conditions and standards of work as embodied in the Popular Front government of Léon Blum could never be comprehensible to the emerging *ultra-gauche*, there is a certain methodological valence in the critique of the Popular Front as articulated by the ultra-left of Contre-Attaque. In the outline of a lecture 'Sur l'échec du front populaire', significantly on the return to power of Edouard Daladier in 1938 – the incumbent Prime Minister at the beginning of the Popular Front and so a powerful symbol of the failure of the Popular Front in France – Breton situates the failure of Blum and the whole Popular Front phenomenon in international terms: first, the Popular Front restricted itself to economic considerations narrowly conceived, and at the same time practised a politics of narrow national interest, thus failing to see how support of the vanguard forces in Spain would have been in its self-interests, when the 'dramatic European situation' demanded an international thinking.<sup>5</sup> For

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5 Cf. André Breton, 'Sur l'échec du Front populaire [On the failure of the Popular Front]', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, pp. 1259–60. For an account of the way in which Breton reads the history of the vicissitudes of Surrealism through the history of its times, cf. M. Stone-Richards, 'A Type of Prière d'insérer: André Breton's *Le Verre d'eau dans la tempête*', *Art History* 16:2 (June 1993).

Bataille, it was above all imperative that politics be kept out of the hands of the PCF, away from the institutional practice of politics. It remains, though, that nothing offered by either Bataille or Breton could conceivably be understood as a plausible contribution to the practical solution of the everyday political problems of their day in terms of politics as understood in their time, and yet, in light of the crisis of European political culture, of which the dominant forms of totalitarianism, Stalinism and Nazism, were but the most dramatic symptoms, it might well be argued that Surrealism is internally linked to the larger failure of European political culture and that the development of their thought can only make sense if it is understood as an attempt, internal to this larger historical experience of failure and crisis, to reconceive the question of the political. Bataille and Breton can, very reasonably in this light, be seen to share a common terrain with Martin Heidegger, for example, if it is understood that what is at issue is not merely this or that stance in terms of the practice of institutional politics, but, instead, the re-thinking of the conditions of the political in an attempt to go beyond the politics and impasse of a European culture self-consciously nearing its end.<sup>6</sup> To this extent, it might be argued that what is required is a thinking of the meaning of *the political* in Surrealist discourse, and not the least surprising turn might be the recognition of the role and time of mourning in Surrealist thinking as recognition of the presence and role of failure in their disposition – to what extent, indeed, might it be said that mourning is linked to a politics of anger and failure? – no less than a confrontation with vexing questions as to the role of group transference identification in the development of a new style of negation. The very title of one of the key works of transition to Surrealism proper from the period of the *mouvement flou*, the period, that is, of most intense group transference dynamics in the formulation of Surrealism, Max Ernst's painting *Pietà, ou la Révolution la nuit* (1923), is an allusion to the complexities embodied in the relationship between imagining otherness, group dynamics and the question of what 'revolution' could mean since, in part, title and work make iconographical allusion to the failure of hysteria as captured in the pose – and photograph – of Blanche Wittman in a 'Sommeil hypnotique' from the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* of 1879–80 (vol. III, plate XXX). How to navigate this terrain of transition will be not only the abiding problem but the abiding contribution of Surrealism.

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6 Cf. Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).





Fig. 58. Max Ernst, plate from *Une semaine de bonté ou les sept éléments capitaux* (Paris: Editions Jeanne Bucher, 1934). © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

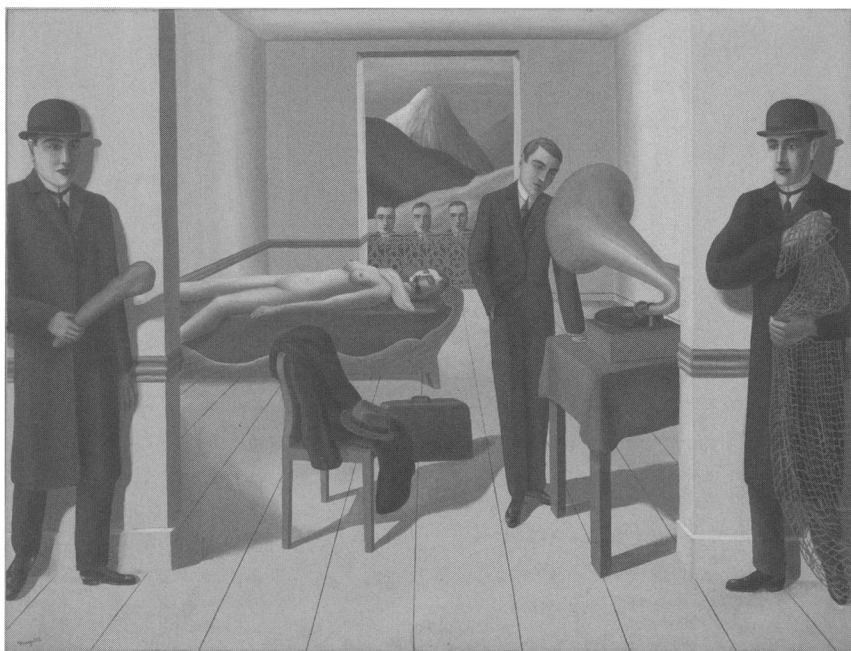


Fig. 59. René Magritte, *The Menaced Assassin* (*L'assassin menacé*), 1926. Oil on canvas, 152 × 195 cm. Museum of Modern Art, Kay Sage Tanguy Fund. © 2003 C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY



Fig. 60. Man Ray, André Breton in front of Giorgio de Chirico's painting, *The Enigma of Day*. © 2003 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



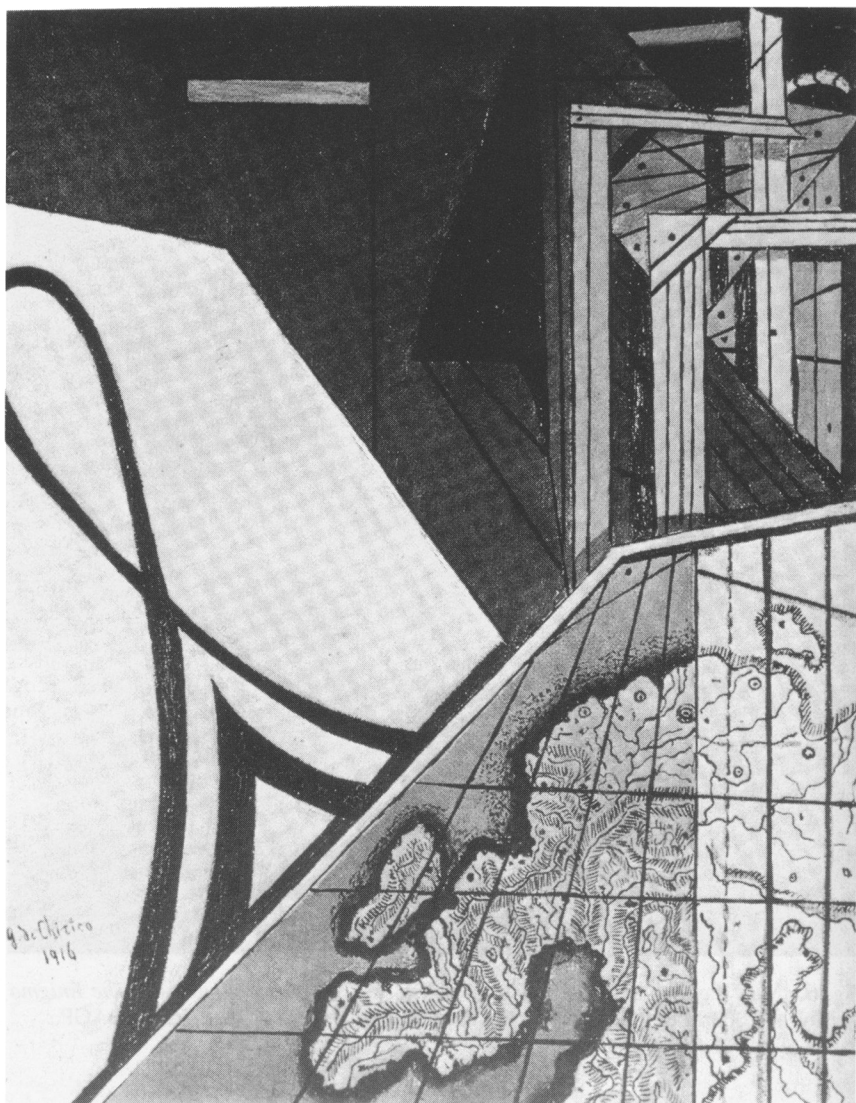


Fig. 61. Giorgio de Chirico, *La Politique*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 33 × 26 cm. Private collection. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome



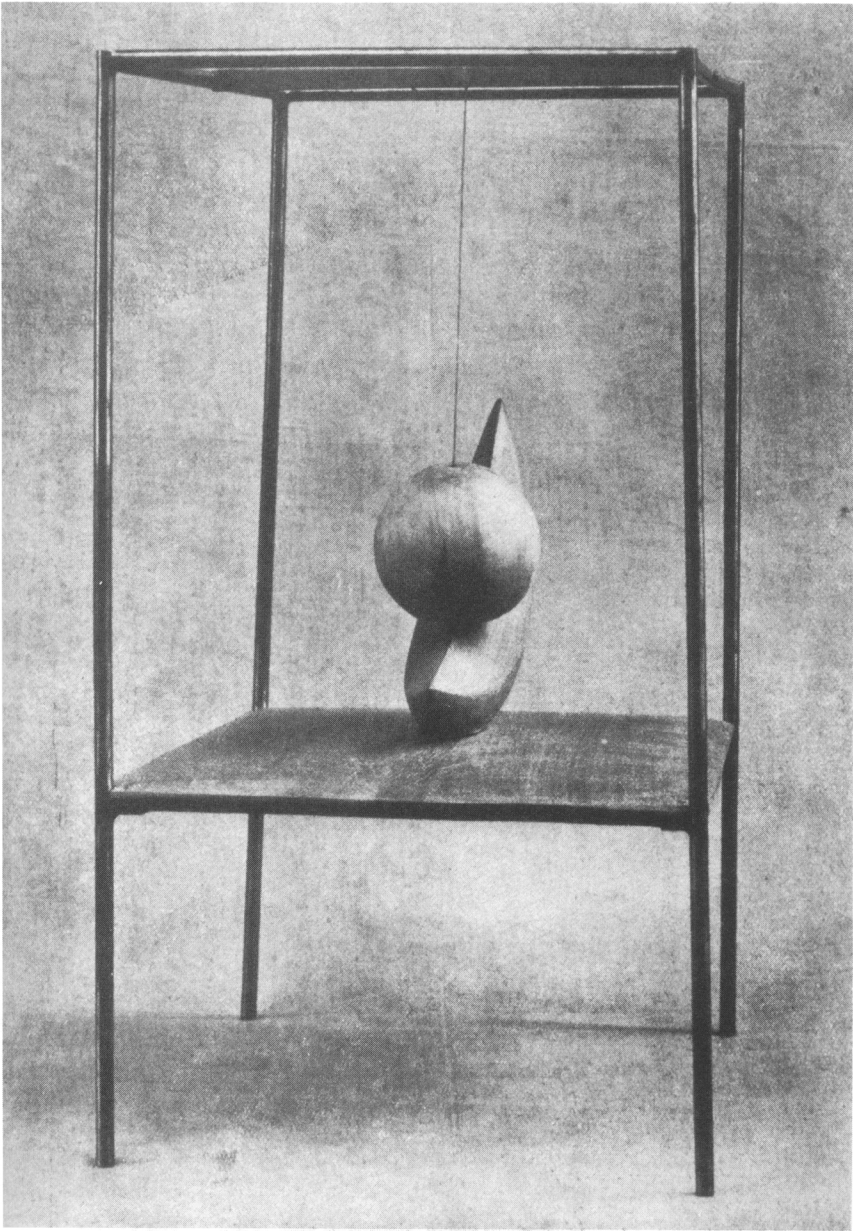


Fig. 62. Alberto Giacometti, *La Boule suspendue*, 1930–31. Plaster and metal, 61 × 36.2 × 34.3 cm. Illustration from *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 3 (1931). © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



Fig. 63. Man Ray, *Surrealist Group, Waking Dream Session*, 1924. Photograph.  
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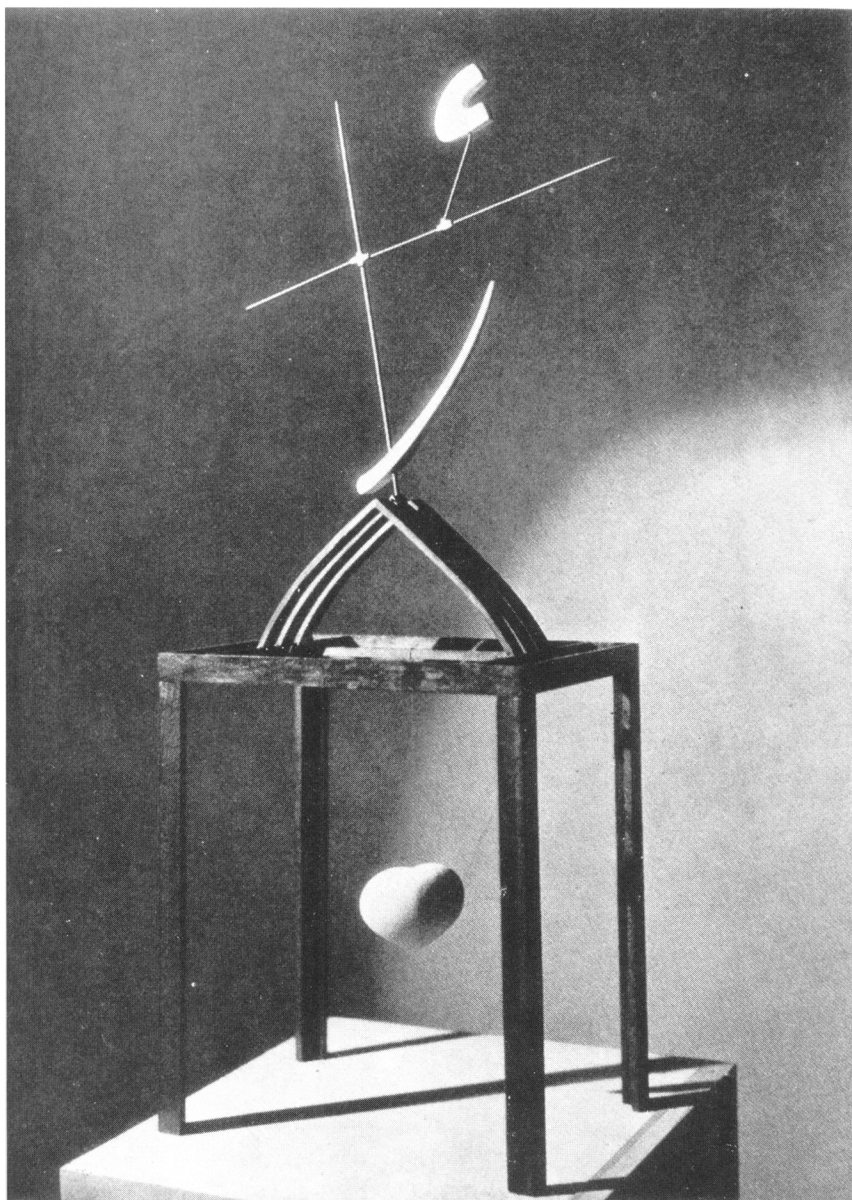


Fig. 64. Alberto Giacometti, *L'heure des traces*, 1930. Wood, plaster and metal. Whereabouts unknown. Illustration from *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 3 (1931). © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



# LA RÉVOLUTION SURREALISTE

ET  
GUERRE



AU  
TRAVAIL

## SOMMAIRE

Pourquoi je prends la direction de la R. S. :  
André Breton.

### POÈMES :

Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard.

### RÊVES :

Max Morise, Michel Leiris.

### TEXTES SURREALISTES :

Philippe Soupault, Marcel Noll, Georges Malkine.

Les parasites voyagent : Benjamin Péret.

La baie de la faim : Robert Desnos.

Glossaire (suite) : Michel Leiris.

Nomenclature : Jacques-André Boiffard.

## CHRONIQUES :

Fragments d'une conférence : Louis Aragon.

Le surréalisme et la peinture : André Breton.

Note sur la liberté : Louis Aragon.

Exposition Chirico : Max Morise.

Philosophies, L'étoile au front : Paul Éluard.

Correspondance.

## ILLUSTRATIONS :

Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson.

Joan Miro, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Pierre Roy, etc.

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Fig. 65. *Guerre au travail!* C'est le parfait mannequin de Giorgio de Chirico, descendant l'escalier de la Bourse. Front cover of *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4, 15 July 1925

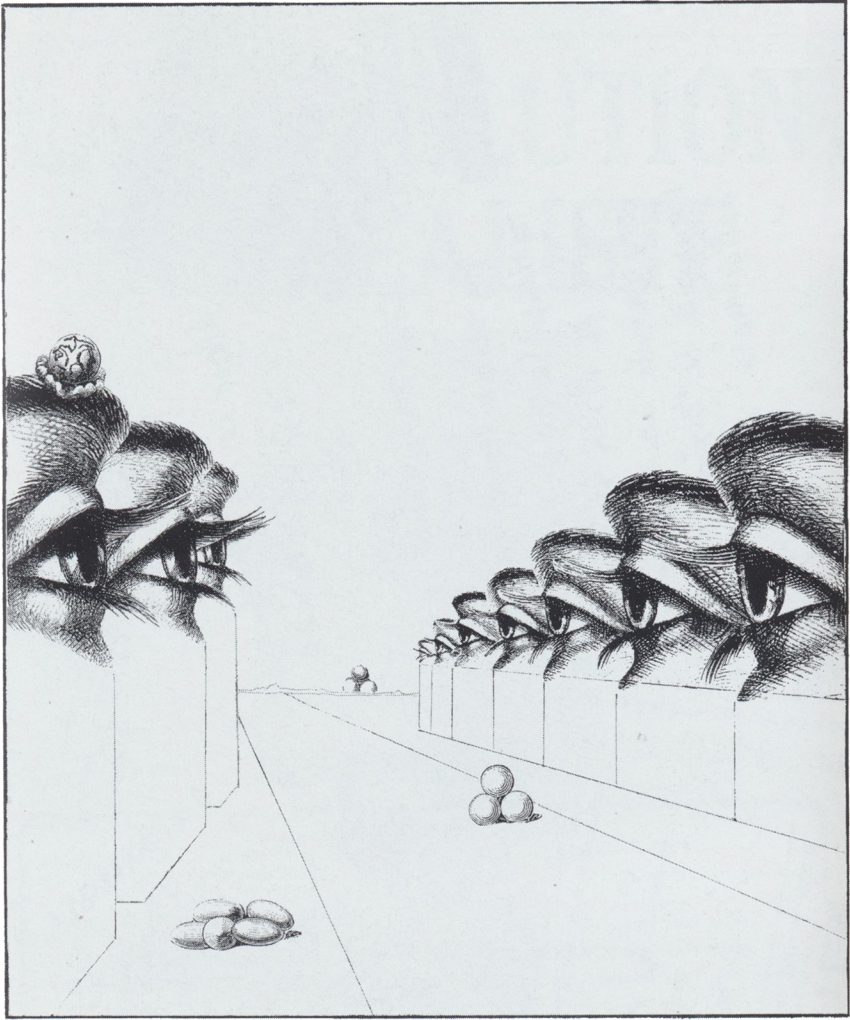


Fig. 67. *L'intérieur de la vue*. Max Ernst, plate from *Une semaine de bonté ou les sept éléments capitaux* (Paris: Editions Jeanne Bucher, 1934). © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

## II

A philosophy could not *succeed*. It is from the *grandeur* of its object that it derives its own *grandeur*; it conserves it in failure.<sup>7</sup>

Aragon

Consider a map of the world.

Paul Valéry, 'The Crisis of the Mind', 1919

Fig. 57. *Le Monde au temps des surréalistes* (*The Surrealist Map of the World*), *Variété*, 1929

That Surrealism has always been informed by the experience – but never the celebration – of failure, negativity and a sense of radical incompleteness is something that its ablest contemporaries recognized, a generation which once emphasized the aspects of contingency and fragility intrinsic to the Surrealist liberation and the related attempt to construct 'a new ethics and a new aesthetics'.<sup>8</sup> Jules Monnerot, Bataille, Julien Gracq and Maurice Blanchot, when placed within the context of the best critical response to Surrealism – I think of André Rolland de Rénneville, the *Cahiers du Sud*, for example – can be seen as amongst the most fascinating of a very distinguished generation.<sup>9</sup> It is rarely observed that for Breton – no less than Lacan and Guy Debord – the French tradition of moral scepticism was determinant. From the beginning of the formulation in 1922 of the new ethos that would be Surrealism, there is an explicit acknowledgment of the import of the moralist tradition, most famously in 'La confession dédaigneuse' (1923):

The moralists, I admire them all, particularly Vauvenargues and Sade. Ethics is the great conciliator. To attack it is still to render homage. It is there that I have always found my principal subjects of exaltation.<sup>10</sup>

7 Louis Aragon, 'Le songe du paysan', *Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1926/1979), p. 237.

8 Georges Bourget, quoted in Yves Bridel, *Miroirs du surréalisme* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1988), p. 90.

9 On Monnerot in relation to Surrealism and the political in the context of the interwar period, cf. Jean-Michel Heimonet, *Jules Monnerot ou la démission critique, 1932–1990* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1993); on Blanchot on the interpretation of Surrealism see the useful if rather coy study by Laurent Jenny, 'Mauvais rêve, Blanchot surréaliste', in *Critique*, nos 603–4 (August–September 1997).

10 André Breton, 'La confession dédaigneuse', *Les Pas perdus*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 195. For an account of the role of the French moralist tradition in the diction of pessimism in Debord, cf. M. Stone-Richards, 'A Reflexion on the French and American Perception of Guy Debord', *Parachute*, no. 93 (January 1999); on the import of the moralist tradition in Lacan, cf. Serge Dubrovsky, 'Vingt Propositions sur l'amour-propre: de Lacan à La Rochefoucauld', *Parcours critique* (Paris: Galilée, 1980), pp. 203–34; and Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). On the relationship between revolutionary politics and melancholy, of which Blanqui would clearly be the



In this famous essay which, though published in 1923, is placed intentionally at the opening of *Les Pas perdus* in order to introduce to a larger public the thinking that had come to achieve coherence and form, the question of so many *enquêtes*, *Pourquoi écrivez-vous?*, is replaced by the question, in the shadow of the suicide of Jacques Vaché, *Pourquoi vivre?* (a question extended into the life of the group in the first two issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* with the *enquête*: *Le suicide, est-il une solution?*).<sup>11</sup> The register of moral scepticism, when linked, through the import of Pierre Reverdy's poetry of anguish and immobility, to the views of temporality, negativity and loss developed in the writers, Aragon, Vitrac, Desnos<sup>12</sup> as also the artists, Magritte and Ernst, along with the pursuit of the *insolite* in the city goes hand-in-hand with the experience of negativity (anguish): the suffocating boredom of the bourgeois interior that leads to the inflation of melodramatic violence in Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté* (fig. 58) explores the same structural terrain as Magritte's *The Threatened Assassin*, 1927 (fig. 59) or *The Lovers*, 1928 in the shared deployment of a sustained sense of the interplay of the psychic mechanisms governing anguish, pleasure and limit-experience.<sup>13</sup> Such a recognition of the role of negativity and limit-experiences leads to an evaluation of Surrealism from the viewpoint of an ethics of experience which enjoins a political dimension but for which practice there is no available model, not least because Surrealism from its inception can be seen as involved in a process of mourning in a manner that belongs to the nature of group activity as a form of exemplary validity, made all the more heightened by

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type, cf. Michel Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Révolte et mélancholie: Le Romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité* (Paris: Payot, 1992).

11 That Vaché's letters are replete with the boredom and *désœuvrement* characteristic of soldiers at war – on which there is a very large literature in psychology and poetry, though the poetry of Wilfred Owen might suffice – is scarcely noted but would be far from negligible in the light of our study. On the question of tone of voice in the avant-garde, on the 'interiority' not permitted by the genre of the manifesto, see Breton's response to Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 118–20.

12 Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*, 1926; Roger Vitrac, *Connaissance de la mort*, 1926; Robert Desnos, *La Liberté ou l'amour*, 1927. The term *insolite* – a term taken from Symbolism – was the term which, for the Surrealists, translated *Unheimlich* before the accepted translation of *l'inquiétante étrangeté*. A fascinating account of negativity and the *insolite* is Jules Monnerot's phenomenologico-anthropological interpretation of Surrealism in his *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 121–33; on Surrealist automatism and the experience of finitude, cf. Maurice Blanchot, 'Réflexions sur le surréalisme', *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), and 'L'inspiration, le manque d'inspiration', *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955).

13 For an extended interpretation of Magritte along such lines, cf. Marcel Paquet, *Magritte, ou l'éclipse de l'être* (Paris: Editions de la différence, 1982); for a comparable interpretation of Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* in terms of finitude and death, cf. Jacques Leenhardt, 'Le passage comme forme d'expérience: Benjamin face à Aragon', in *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, ed. Heinz Wismann (Paris: Cerf, 1986), pp. 163–71.

the role of *amitié* in the affective life of the group as an instance of the Kantian maxim of enlarged thought (*sensus communis*): think from the standpoint of everyone, the other.<sup>14</sup> It is within this light that the representation and comprehension of collective experience within Surrealism must be understood, for the group, as conceived within Surrealism – no less than in the Internationale situationniste and *Tel Quel* – is not a democratic collectivity, but an association based upon *solidarity*, and election, thus anything that would threaten the movement of the experience of solidarity could only hope to re-define the group at the risk of loss, a loss that would leave a difference within the group.<sup>15</sup> After many years of Breton bashing, no less than Sollers and Kristeva, and Debord too, would come to realize this lesson of Surrealism as setting a limit to the historical experience of the avant-garde: freedom, within the industrial complex of modernity, is realizable only within the affective bonds of collective experience. The ethical space constituted by such a mode of exemplarity is a possible movement toward a possible political realm. It can only be a possible movement toward a possible political realm as the group is a form of community with a difference, not least because, within the affective bonds of the group, the

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14 It is thus, for Blanchot, in terms of the import of *amitié* to the group, that we might understand the significance of the violence in Surrealist exclusions, both the violence of the act of expulsion and the violence felt which is itself returned. 'Le surréalisme, tel qu'il faut en pressentir la destination, est et a toujours été une expérience collective. C'est le premier trait. Là, nous soupçonnons que le rôle de Breton fut différent de celui que, par admiration, affection ou rancune personnelle, on lui reconnaît. Il ne fut ni un maître, ni un guide, ni un président de parti, ni un chef religieux [...]. Peut-être, toutefois, eut-il ce pouvoir particulier, dans le surréalisme, non d'être plus l'un que ne le furent tous les autres, mais de faire du surréalisme l'Autre de chacun et, dans l'attrait de cet Autre tenu pour une présence-absence vivante (un *au-delà des jours* à l'horizon d'un espace inconnu sans un *au-delà*), de le vivre avec amitié au sens le plus rigoureux de ce terme exigeant, c'est-à-dire de faire de l'affirmation surréaliste une présence ou une œuvre d'amitié'. Maurice Blanchot, 'Le Demain joueur', in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 598–99. Sartre's critique of the 1947 Exposition internationale du surréalisme at the Galerie Maeght, the first such exhibition after the war, was the occasion of the most public realignment of Breton and Bataille. Cf. the manifesto produced on this occasion, 'Rupture inaugurale', in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives II: 1940–1969*, ed. José Pierre (Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1982), pp. 30–36.

15 Commenting on the reception of the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, Bridel records the response of the Swiss poet Gustave Roud: 'Roud est frappé, dans ce second manifeste, par l'atmosphère d'incertitude et de terreur qui y règne. Le château où Breton situait les surréalistes dans le Premier Manifeste s'est transformé en tribunal et nous assistons à une série de condamnations, après un réquisitoire impitoyable. Roud touche ici un point très important de la vie du groupe surréaliste, tel qu'elle apparaît parfois à travers les textes polémiques, mais qui n'a été vraiment vu et traité avec tout le sérieux qu'il mérite que beaucoup plus tard, en particulier par Jules Monnerot dans *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, en 1945. Cet aspect révèle bien d'ailleurs à quel point le surréalisme engage tout autre chose que la seule littérature'. Bridel, *Miroirs du surréalisme*, p. 142.



group permanently runs the danger of projecting its own narcissistic ideal as *the* ideal. Not only does this point to the manner in which Blanchot interpreted Bataille and Breton on the significance of community in the 1930s, it confirms the direction of Monnerot's great book *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* which, though published in 1945, goes back, in part, to 1933.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, from the occasion of his significant series of lectures in Haiti, Breton will frequently refer his readers to both Blanchot and Monnerot. Blanchot, declares Breton, author 'of two of the most remarkable works of recent times' – by which Breton must mean *Aminadab* (1942) and *Thomas l'Obscur* (1941) – whose interpretation of Surrealism, expressed through a review of Monnerot's *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, concentrates on the experience of anguish and being painfully torn (*déchiré*) not only as a function of alienation under Capitalism but as an expression of 'the sense and value of this *nothing*, a proper object of poetry and liberty', in no way distinct from the demand for revolution. Thus Breton quotes Blanchot: 'How could poetry not interest itself in the social revolution?'<sup>17</sup> On many occasions Breton will mention Monnerot's still extraordinary *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* (1945) – the work which more than any other enabled Julien Gracq, Blanchot and Bataille to articulate the cultural significance of Surrealism to a post-World War II generation. In his interview, for example, with the great Haitian poet René Bélance, he refers his audience to the *absolutely convincing* study of *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* for further details on the specificities between Surrealist experience and the experience uncovered by ethnologists and anthropologists – at the level of the group, community, values, role of myth, etc.<sup>18</sup>

Monnerot was the first to reflect systematically upon the status of the group to the self-understanding of Surrealism. In doing so, he characterized the group in terms of a meeting of individuals based upon elective affinities. He terms it, using a term of English sociology, a *set*:

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16 Cf. Jules Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*. Cf. also Jules Monnerot, 'Remarques sur le rapport de la poésie comme genre à la poésie comme fonction', *Inquisitions: Organe du groupe d'études pour la phénoménologie humaine* (June 1936), pp. 14–20. This unique issue of *Inquisitions* is available in facsimile with documentary material. Cf. Henri Béhar, *Du Surréalisme au front populaire: Inquisitions* (Paris: CNRS, 1990).

17 Maurice Blanchot, 'Réflexions sur le surréalisme' (1945), cited in André Breton, 'Le Surréalisme', lecture delivered in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, December 1945, published in *Conjonction* (Port-au-Prince), no. 1 (January 1946), rpd in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, pp. 166–67.

18 André Breton, 'Interview de René Bélance', in *Haiti-Journal* (Haiti; 12–13 December 1945), rpd in *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952/1969), p. 238. On the impact of Monnerot's book, especially its discussion of myth, cf. Antoine Compagnon, 'Evaluations du surréalisme: de l'"illisible" au "poncif"', *André Breton: Cahier de l'Herne*, no. 72 (Paris: L'Herne, 1998).

The Surrealist 'set' is but the unstable, missed, imperfect realization of an ideal Form, of a *Bund* (in the sense where *Bund* is opposed both to *Gesellschaft* (society of contract) and to *Gemeinschaft* (community)).<sup>19</sup>

In characterizing Surrealism as a *Bund* (a secret society or secondary community) in opposition to *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, Monnerot, like Bataille, understands Surrealism in terms of the more fundamental distinction between societies based upon affect (*Bund*) and societies based upon contract (which is implicitly a matter of representation) and thereby making of Surrealism a religious phenomenon as Bataille and Monnerot understand religion, that is, not as a necessarily theistic set of doctrines, but as a collective psychic phenomenon that is the necessary by-product of human affectively communal bonds. Monnerot and Bataille will identify the sacred and alterity (the heterogeneous) with the movement of affect against the homogeneous.<sup>20</sup> It is for this reason that Monnerot could identify the mobility of group dynamics in Surrealism as the elaboration of a project, yet a project drawing upon a mode of experience that could not permit achievement since from the opening chapter of *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* Monnerot identifies Surrealist experience with poetry understood as a function of affectivity and as such that which is not susceptible of and works against representation.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in situating the development of Surrealism in terms of an economy of the crisis of expression, Monnerot articulates Surrealist experience in relation to the negativity of affectivity that opens onto the problem of the other: 'Being searching for itself and thinking to have seized itself seizes only the *other*'.<sup>22</sup> And yet, from beginning to end, though Monnerot spoke of Surrealism in terms of group dynamics and *sensibility*, was the first to conceptualize the importance of the collective dimension of the group and to understand the extent to which its accomplishment was a necessary function of group action, he consistently established an internal connection between the conditions of possibility of the group to failure and incompleteness which, for Monnerot – as with Blanchot later on in his account of automatic writing – becomes, in essence, identified with the work of a generation, which has defined what poetry is. Thus he could write that

Authentic modern poetry [by which Monnerot meant art as experience], to the extent that it is completely independent of this *set* [= the Surrealist group in terms of the dynamics of inter-action characteristic of a *Bund*], or even precedes it chronologically, is Surrealist [... There are those whom one] can neither call Surrealists nor forget them when it is a

19 Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, p. 73.

20 For Bataille's response to Monnerot, cf. Georges Bataille, 'The Surrealist Revolution' and 'The Moral Meaning of Sociology', in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myths: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. Michael Richardson (London & New York: Verso, 1994).

21 Cf. Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, pp. 11 and 13.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

question of Surrealism [...]. Others who were not Surrealists but who must nevertheless be evoked if one speaks of Surrealism: such as these two very different men: Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and Georges Bataille.<sup>23</sup>

The common project elaborated by the interaction of these people characteristic of their generation, the kind of experience which preoccupied them required, argued Monnerot, a 'general phenomenology of the imagination'. In giving substance to this position, he said that 'The phenomenology of the feeling-of-other-presence [*sentiment-de-présence-autre*]' cannot fail to draw upon 'clinical descriptions produced by psychiatrists', for this is a kind of experience which empties, discharges [*debouchait*] *on the unlimited, the informe and the unknown*.<sup>24</sup> 'This poetry **gives onto** madness [*folie*], but also onto dialectic-lyric, the elaboration of a problematic of existence, impossible possibility, possible impossibility. It gives onto the tragic'.<sup>25</sup> For those who have lived the war (*la guerre 14-18*), says Monnerot, this sense of the tragic (and the final chapter of Monnerot's book, a chapter entitled 'La porte du tragique [The Gate of the Tragic]', contains a veritable lexicon of terms for failure, emptiness, the *informe*, incompleteness, the elsewhere) must not be reduced to an aesthetic conceived as a specialized activity separate from life, hence the ethical imperative to political action, however impossible of success this action may be, as a recognition that the struggle against a prevailing politicization of experience is not intended to replace this model by another politics of experience, but is intended to break the dangerous illusion that experience *is* political in the narrow sense of a particular prevailing nexus of power. Monnerot's articulation of a need for a general phenomenology of the imagination in Surrealism can here be explicated in terms of the Kantian formulation of *sensus communis*, for the communicability of sensation in the Kantian problematic makes recourse to imagination and aesthetic judgment in order to comprehend the possibility of a judgment having universal form which is not, however, a judgment of reason.

The question of judgment is at the heart of modernism and avant-garde experience, and inescapably so. Aesthetic judgment, says Kant, is autonomous, that is, free, and as such not rule-governed: aesthetic judgments are reflective judgments which 'derive' rules from the particular and not, as in judgments of reason, the particular from the universal. Though such judgments of taste are not rule-governed there is nevertheless a sense in which they are universal, and this must be so because the *ought* element in our judgments of taste point to and are presupposed by a common sense (*sensus communis*):

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23 Ibid., pp. 190-91, n. 38.

24 Ibid., p. 37. My emphasis.

25 Ibid., pp. 175-76. My emphasis.

[Judgments of taste] must have a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than by concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a *common sense*. [...] Only under the presupposition, therefore, that there is a common sense (by which, however, we [also] do not mean an outer sense, but mean the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers) – only under the presupposition of such a common sense, I maintain, can judgments of taste be made.<sup>26</sup>

In section 39 of the *Critique of Judgment*, 'On the Communicability of Sensation', Kant emphasizes the precariousness of the type of pleasure pertinent to the beautiful as a judgment of taste: pleasure in the beautiful is not enjoyment, nor a law-governed activity, it is 'a pleasure of mere reflection. Without being guided by any purpose or principle whatever, this pleasure accompanies our ordinary apprehension of an object by means of the imagination, our power of intuition, in relation to the understanding, our power of concepts'.<sup>27</sup>

Our problem, that of embodiment, that is, of the status of the phantasmatic object and fragmentation in collective representation, is clearly implicated in these lines from Kant when we consider that he speaks of a pleasure which accompanies yet is distinct from our ordinary apprehension of an object – yet, this non-linguistic affective experience is communicable: in other words, a form of non-rule-governed, radically formless experience necessarily implies a community of comprehension. This is elaborated in section 40 of the third *Critique*, 'On Taste as a Kind of *Sensus Communis*' in which Kant enunciates the maxim requiring the individual 'to think from the standpoint of everyone else'. The problem of what Breton characterizes as the universal murmur, of the *écoute automatique* in relation to the collectivity is none other than this problem: how can any claim of judgment be made without the availability of a decision procedure? The answer can only be, as Hannah Arendt argued following Kant, through exemplary validity. If a judgment of reason is the subsumption of the particular under the general or universal – that is, under rule-governed activity – aesthetic judgment, on the other hand, is always a matter of the assessment of the particular. The problem that this poses to any account of the nature of thinking as an activity of universalization is that a particular cannot be assessed in terms of another particular.<sup>28</sup> In addressing Kant's account of this problematic, Arendt argues for the role of exemplarity in imagination. To take an example from Arendt, it is not that one can *demonstrate* any judgment that is non-cognitive, which is not, that is to say, a matter of reflection. How, then, might we understand courage? Courage is *like* Achilles; the beautiful is like this,

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26 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), section 20, p. 238.

27 Ibid., p. 189.

28 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 76.

etc. No such 'judgment' can be of any value if it is not communicated or is not in principle communicable. The appeal of such a judgment is not *to* a *sensus communis* (a community of sense) but is, rather, an enactment of an implicit relatedness. It is almost like Wittgenstein saying, 'You don't understand? Then do this!' where the verb of action is always an invitation to comparative action. The mode of validity of any such perlocutionary exemplar derives from or is dependent upon its efficacy. To be courageous one must at least act like, be like .... In any case of exemplary validity there is clearly a question of identification. It is my argument that the transferential dynamic of group experience is the mechanism by which this mode of identification comes about and which cannot but be, in some sense, mimetic-affective and thus implicitly a question of the imaginary. Hence, in one sense, the language and tenor of appeal in much Surrealist writing, even when it is theoretical in nature, as it comes up against, time and again, the irreducible stratum of feeling. The appeal is to acknowledge, as though such acknowledgment would thereby open a path of action, indeed, a path to action. (Here we might consider the prevalence of the iconography of the pointed finger in Surrealist art from de Chirico onward.) Thus Breton in the mid-1930s in the Prague lectures on Surrealism and politics:

Our ambition is to unite, through an indestructible knot – a knot of which we shall have passionately sought the secret as to its indestructibility – this activity of transformation to this activity of interpretation [...] We wish that this knot be made, and that it elicit the desire to unmake it, and that one does not succeed. [...] If one wishes to avoid that in the new society private life, with its opportunities [*chances*] and deceptions remain the great distributor as well as the great usurper [*privatrice*] of energies, then it is only right that subjective existence be prepared for a stunning revenge on the terrain of knowledge, of knowledge without weakness and without shame.<sup>29</sup>

Aragon, in the *Paysan de Paris*, not only cites Hegel, but also Kant on the nature of failure. There he had said that no philosophy could succeed, that, moreover, its grandeur is in relation to its failure and the object that mediated that failure, whether the object be conceived in Hegelian or Freudian terms, we might add. Here we might consider the role of the intersubjectively constituted object in the context of the group understood as a transferential phenomenon since, as is clear, the Surrealist object emerges in a context of internal crisis in the Surrealist group.

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<sup>29</sup> André Breton, 'Position politique de l'art aujourd'hui' (1935), in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 430. In this extract, Breton quotes from his earlier work *Les Vases communicants* (1932). On exemplary validity and *sensus communis*, cf. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

*The emergence and functioning of the Surrealist object in the collective*

Though an exhibition of Surrealist objects was announced in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926 this was not to take place, and it would not be until 1931–32, in the midst of the internal rupture in the life of the group brought about by the concessions – betrayals? – made by Aragon and Sadoul on the occasion of the Congress of Kharkov in 1931, that there would begin a codification, which would also act as an impetus, of certain developments within Surrealism since the advent of Alberto Giacometti. The already anguishing problems entailed by the Surrealist attempt to join with the Parti communiste français were thus compounded by the Aragon affair and led to interminable internal discussions. Thus, as André Thirion, to whom most accounts of the origin of the Surrealist object in the specifically political dynamics internal to the group are indebted, comments that in relation to the *depression* caused by the Aragon affair the Surrealist group, in the Spring of 1931, subjected itself to critical examination. These discussions, reports Thirion, were endless – how could they be other than interminable? – and so in order to find a moment of conclusion as a means of exit, Breton delegated a commission, composed of Dalí and Thirion, whose responsibility was to ‘present immediately realizable concrete proposals which took into account all that had been said’.<sup>30</sup> Where Thirion proposed anticlerical activity, ‘Dalí proposed a program for the fabrication of objects with symbolic function “destined, wrote Breton in *Les Vases communicants*, to procure by indirect means a distinct sexual emotion”’.<sup>31</sup>

It is thus clear that not only was the rationale of the commission to formulate a plan of action which would involve the whole group in common activity, the accepted proposal would be one that would emphasize the affective dimension of collective experience. This aspect cannot be omitted from any comprehensive account of the origin and functioning of the Surrealist object, for as the Surrealists were being torn apart by the Aragon affair, Breton sought a means of communal, collective activity to re-enact the group transference moment necessary to the identity of the group *qua* group. As is known, if not always fully appreciated, the *experience*, if not the fabrication, of Surrealist objects was a collective phenomenon and the concern with and codification of interest in the object without doubt came in response to a profound sense of internal *crisis* in the life of the group as a result of the Aragon affair. Dalí’s proposal for the fabrication of objects with symbolic function destined to elicit by indirect means a distinct sexual movement became the means for this renewal of the ideal of the group. The elements of *crisis*, *movement* and *group* point to a discourse at once pathological (the source of the metaphoric usage of crisis) and phenomeno-

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30 André Thirion, *Révolutionnaires sans révolution* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1972), p. 315.

31 Ibid., p. 315.

logical-analytic: what is the nature of this movement, its source and what is its function in the economy of the group (the question of phantasmatic experience)? Our concern here is less with the theory of the object as formulated by Breton and Dalí than to make sense of the experience of the object and its functioning in the group.<sup>32</sup>

In 1933, there was published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, a collection of five reports of 'Recherches expérimentales [Experimental researches]' on various modes of irrational knowledge of which the first concerned 'Sur la connaissance irrationnelle de l'objet *Boule de cristal des voyantes* (5 février 1933), [On the irrational knowledge of the object: *Clairvoyants' crystal ball*]', and, undertaken a week later, the second 'Sur la connaissance irrationnelle de l'objet *Un morceau de velours rose* (11 février 1933) [*A Piece of pink velvet*].'<sup>33</sup> The commentary for these two sessions was written by Arthur Harfaux and Maurice Henry. There is a clear methodology: concerning what type of objects are admissible and the manner of proceeding in the group:

The method used to date consisted in this: an object, preferably simple, not too fabricated, was chosen, and posed on the table. [...] A list of questions was communally established, a list which afterwards served for experiences bearing on other objects. Then, one responded in writing to each of the questions: the responses were read, with summary comparison, before passing to the next question. [...] The responses will not be read and compared until the end of the game. They will be short, stripped down, and written immediately under the shock of a deep conviction.<sup>34</sup>

It is also made clear, that the response to the object by the members present can, and should, encompass the range of the senses 'for there is no reason that sight alone should be the generator of tactile, gustative, olfactive and auditive images'. Not only is the style of proceeding designed to enable the participants to respond 'under the shock of deep conviction' by taking only that 'amount of attention [...] necessary for contact with the object', it is recognized that certain images and association of ideas that may result from this experimental situation (encompassing the perceptual contact with the object) may be of a nature that is conducive to the construction of phantasmatically shared experiences: thus, in these 'Recherches expérimentales', there is considerable emphasis upon coincidences: 'formal coincidences, coincidences of atmosphere, symbolic coin-

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32 For a detailed examination of Dalí's conception of the object along these lines, see M. Stone-Richards, 'Du mouvement, de l'objet et la question du lieu', in *Equinoxe: Revue internationale d'études françaises*, XX-XXI (Fall 2002), pp. 34-52.

33 *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 6 (1933), pp. 10-13 and 20-24.

34 Arthur Harfaux and Maurice Henry, 'A propos de l'expérience portant sur la connaissance irrationnelle des objets', *ibid.*, p. 24.

cidences – two apparently different images being able to constitute two apparently different symbols of the same reality'. Harfaux and Henry, no less than Eluard in his summing up of the 'Possibilités irrationnelles de pénétration et d'orientation dans un tableau Giorgio de Chirico: *L'Enigme d'une journée*', make of such coincidence a possible expressive mark of a perceptual condition susceptible to psychic contagion (that is, the mobility of cathexes at the level of the group):

The lighting, the time, the temperature, the matter in contact with the object, the framework, the number of persons present and the network of their physical and mental states, etc., as many elements which tend to influence the thought of the experimenters, the phenomena of contagion, and, in consequence, the responses.

The resultant contagion being not only a function of the relations between the experimenters but, importantly, a function of 'the matter in contact with the object' – for which reason, the museum is not the place for a Surrealist object –

It's a question of knowing the objects in their life, in their movement, to make the account of their possibilities. It is by placing them, through collective experience [experiment], in every situation possible, that one will obtain concrete and complete definitions from them, only valid, let it be understood, at a given moment, in a given place, and in given circumstances.

The repeated use of de Chirico's *L'Enigme d'une journée*, (fig. 60) formerly in Breton's collection along with de Chirico's *La Politique*, 1914 (fig. 61), attests both to the Surrealists attempt to think collectively in terms of the restructuring of a shared imaginary – with de Chirico's work functioning as an object of mediation – and to do so in terms of a re-thinking of the role of the city and the mapping of experience and the grid of traditional map-making (figs 57 and 61). In other words, the developing intersubjectively generated phantasms go hand-in-hand with a subjectively generated '*forme d'une ville*' (Baudelaire). That there is present a clear question of illusion and temporality cannot be avoided. Indeed, no considered reflection on the status of experience in Surrealist thought (with its frequent recourse to theatrical imagery) could avoid the recognition that it attested (i) to the presence of illusion (which is produced at the same time as the *instant* of disavowal in the scene of fetishism which thus becomes the 'source' or model of all subsequent experiences of illusion and the sensation of disaggregating spatial frames<sup>35</sup>), as also (ii) to temporality as constitutive of the human subject and experience as part of a metapsychology

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35 Cf. Donald Winnicott for whom, whilst acknowledging that 'this matter of *illusion* is one which belongs inherently to human beings and which no individual finally solves for himself or herself', it is still necessary to distinguish the illusion due to fetishism (the delusion that is the denial of the maternal phallus) from the illusion due to



of movement, and, finally, (iii) to an understanding of the body as the form of a *transitional* conception of experience (here, not only Breton's automatism and *alea* in the city, but the paranoiac associations of Dalí become instances of the *béances de la représentation*). In this respect there is an implicit, indeed, obvious connection between the theory of the experience of the Surrealist object, whether Dalinian or Bretonian, and the concern with illusion and double-images in the painting of Dalí, for the conception of the object adumbrated by Dalí is predicated upon the facticity of illusion which, for Dalí, in addition to its reference to the maternal realm,<sup>36</sup> is also asserted metaphysically as marking a lack inherent in reality from and through which 'simulacra can easily assume the form of reality and reality in its turn can adapt itself to the forces [*violences*] of simulacra'.

The style of evolution of the category and discourse of the Surrealist object, namely, that it was never the result of an individual but a collective effort, has important methodological as well as philosophical implications, aspects of which bear, not only on the status of the object in Surrealist thought, but on the interpretation of particular constructions such as *La Boule suspendue* (fig. 62). First, it means that the separation of individuals apart from the dynamics of the group could only be at the price of historical accuracy, and thus the tendency to set artists and thinkers against each other (Breton *contre* Dalí, say) ignores the sociological factor of the culture of Surrealism in terms of which a common set of concerns was forged through experimentation and dialogue. There is a vast body of material in the various Surrealist journals, but it fell to few to regard this situation as material for reflective thinking to be organized, either conceptually, or into a coherent position. On the matter of the Surrealist object, this task fell to Dalí and Breton. We shall come to see how telling was the response of each to the question as to whether the crystal ball was 'suited to metamorphoses': for Breton, 'It is the very place of metamorphoses (C'en est le lieu même,)' whilst for Dalí, 'it only reflects them'.<sup>37</sup>

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transitional phenomena. D.W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' (1951), *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Institute of Psycho-Analysis and Karnac Books, 1992), p. 240.

36 In 'L'objet à travers l'expérimentation surréaliste', Dalí outlined four distinct phases in the development of the Surrealist object, the final stage of which is the 'tendance à la fusion avec l'objet, à l'unité avec l'objet (famine des objets, objets comestibles)' (Manuscript, Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida). Other than the presence of projective identification as a structuring function in this conception of the object, we should note that this reintegration is utterly of a piece with the pursuit of the maternal.

37 *LSASDLR*, no. 6 (1933), p. 20.

The question of place ('le lieu même') is here implicitly linked to the construction of a space of the imaginary that might be an intersubjectively posited spatiality. In 1916, the psychiatrist Georges Dwelshauvers, long admired by a post-Symbolist such as Tancrède de Visan, and who was amongst the first to recognize the potential of Bergson's philosophy of movement and *durée* for psychopathology, published *L'Inconscient*, much of which, in its early chapters, is devoted to the various registers of movement in human experience. In trying to distinguish the physiological from the psychological dimension of movement, Dwelshauvers considers the way in which the movement of a person is habitually in proportion to the anticipated task. In which case, observes Dwelshauvers, if one were confronted with a cardboard box so constructed as to appear like a metal box weighing five kilos, then in going to lift it the disproportion between one's mental and physical preparedness and the fact of what would be actually required to lift the box imitating metal would serve to bring to light the extent to which, ordinarily, movement 'is absolutely unconscious'.<sup>38</sup> This principle of disproportionality, which, moreover, is the phenomenological basis of the aesthetic effect of Duchamp's *Why not sneeze Rose Sélavy?* (1921), has long been known, of course; Dwelshauvers avails himself of the example as a way of showing how the failure of proportionality can make apparent what would otherwise lay hidden in habit, namely, the psychological dimension of movement.<sup>39</sup> (It is in this light that Dwelshauvers can point out that for the contemporaneous research in psychology the unconscious elements of movement are held to be indispensable to the recollection [*souvenir*] of objects.<sup>40</sup>) To show the degree to which the unconscious is implicated in movement, Dwelshauvers refers to a celebrated experiment carried out by Chevreul and reported by Chevreul in a letter to J.-J. Ampère in the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1833. The experiment concerned the holding in an outstretched hand of a pendulum with a weighted body on a flexible wire: does it move 'when one holds it in the hand above certain bodies, although the hand is immobile'?<sup>41</sup> We do not need to describe the experiment at length, what is most relevant to our argument on the common object and movement in the shared structure of phantasmatic experience in Surrealism, is that, without in any way questioning the good faith of the participants, Chevreul, after acknowledging himself amazed at the movement of the pendulum whilst the arm seemed immobile, soon established that the movement of the pendulum occurred at the unconscious level where, indeed, there was a 'disposition or tendency to movement, which, quite involuntary though it seemed to me, was thereby all the

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38 Georges Dwelshauvers, *L'Inconscient* (Paris: Flammarion, 1916), p. 25.

39 Cf. *ibid.*

40 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 34–42.

41 E. Chevreul, 'Lettre à M. Ampère: Sur une classe particulière de mouvements musculaires', *Revue des deux mondes* II:1 (May 1833), p. 249.

more satisfying'.<sup>42</sup> Once the eyes of the experimental subjects were blindfolded, the movements ceased. The inference is then made that the disposition to movement is no longer a merely physiological phenomenon, but a psychic, unconscious phenomenon by which 'a thought is translated outside by movement'<sup>43</sup> (the pendulum being only a means for registering such movement), and so this research into the psychology of movement could propose that precisely what takes place in seances – the knocks and turning tables – is the transferral of thought through the disposition to movement since 'every mental image and every feeling [sentiment] are bound to movements'.<sup>44</sup> It is this psychic dimension of movement that is being exploited in many Surrealist objects such as Giacometti's *La Boule suspendue* and *L'heure des traces* in the context of a group experience (figs 62, 63 and 64): not mysticism, not spiritism, but the economy of affect in movement as passage and transition. The Surrealists do not simply replicate spiritists' seances – hence the importance of the questionnaires that, after the event, make the experience subject to the group in language, in other words, the re-introduction of the register of the symbolic into the experience of phantasy – they create a situation for experimentation for the communication of sensation. 'I count much more', wrote Breton in 1922, 'on the communication of these sensations than on the persuasive capacity of ideas'.<sup>45</sup> In the performative context of Breton's thought in the 1920s, this statement on the communication of sensations – the communicability of affect – entails first a reference to the rapport between hypnotist and subject in the *communauté de sensation*;<sup>46</sup> it entails, too, another dimension of the communicability of sensation in the paralogical dimension of thought for which, on the Kantian model, as with others, the aesthetic was the *exemplary* case, namely, *sensus communis*. As the many responses to the group experience of objects make only too clear, the shared movement of thought was not that concerning a spiritist *au-delà*, but the embodiment of an economy of affect as not infrequently typified by the archaic, anguish and desire.

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42 Ibid., p. 251.

43 Ibid., p. 36.

44 Ibid., p. 38.

45 André Breton, 'Caractères de l'évolution moderne et ce qui en participe', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 292.

46 On this *communauté de sensations* in hypnotism and the study of telepathy, cf. Christine Moreau, 'Hypnose et télépathie', in Léon Chertok, ed., *Résurgence de l'hypnose: Une bataille de deux cents ans* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1984).

## III

*Surrealism and politics: exaltation, action and the space of power*

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows [...]. Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.<sup>47</sup>

Dante

From the construction of a common object through transference in the group, I should now like to move to a structurally comparable phenomenon, the construction of shared affective bonds in the creation of a space of exaltation necessary to the appearance of a space of power without which there might be, on Arendt's analysis, no sustainable political space. In other words, to see the manner in which, through the category of exemplary validity, the faculty of *sensus communis* links the aesthetic and the political in Surrealist experience but does so in a manner that reveals the indeterminateness, incompleteness and insufficiency that Blanchot, Monnerot and Bataille held to be definitive of Surrealist experience.

After the debacle of its relations with the PCF, Surrealism gradually defined for itself a more ethically-based notion of protest, a notion of protest which opposed itself to institutionalized forms of politics. The political had, in some measure, to be distanced from politics, and the category of refusal can be seen to be a working model of a position from which a critique of politics might be achieved. This refusal is ethical, but not absolutely separate from the historical ground of the experience of the political. It will be articulated through a conception of exaltation, that is, an affective space in which a common object of accomplishment is sought, though permanently deferred. This way of thinking was to lead to a reformed, though temporary, alliance with Georges Bataille in the form of Contre-Attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires.<sup>48</sup>

Contre-Attaque was part of the Surrealists' response to 'le 6 février 1934', the right-wing demonstration at the Place de la Concorde which led to the resignation of the government of Edouard Daladier and which the left construed as a failed

47 The closing sentence of this epigraph, in the Latin, reads: *Nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet*. Quoted with translation from the Latin by Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 175

48 Cf. Georges Bataille, 'Front Populaire dans la rue', *Cahiers de Contre-Attaque*, no. 1 (May 1936); originally given as a speech on 24 November 1935; rpd in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 402–12. For an account of *Contre-Attaque*, cf. Robert Short, 'Contre-Attaque'. Elyette Guiol-Benassaya's *La Presse face au surréalisme de 1925 à 1938* (Paris: CNRS, 1982) provides a useful summary of the political reporting of the period.

fascist putsch. The left, rallying around a call by the CGT union, responded with a general strike on 12 February. The success of this counter-demonstration led eventually to the official formation of the Front Populaire on 14 July 1935 at a mass meeting in Montrouge, in the suburbs of Paris. From June 1936 to June 1937, a Front Populaire government, headed by Léon Blum, held power.

The achievements, crises and arguments of this period are well documented and continue to this day. Our concern here is not wholly with this documentation. The customary view of the Surrealists' involvement in the politics of this period (even of those sympathetic to the movement) is that this represented both the crisis and failure of Surrealism.<sup>49</sup> Such a view is too simple, for a number of reasons: first, it does not take into account Breton's and Bataille's understanding of the possibility of success for any change worthy to be considered revolutionary, not to mention their sanguine view of the Front Populaire;<sup>50</sup> second, and more importantly, it does not address the question of the meaning of *action* and thereby what the political could be in Surrealist discourse, a question implicit in the opening of *Nadja* – '*Qui suis-je?*' – which announces the tacit relations between '*Qui suis-je?*' and action through the collective, for if 'I' am that which I '*haunt*', the inadequacy of the word '*hante*' nevertheless

gives me to understand that what I take to be the objective manifestations of my existence, manifestations more or less deliberated, is but that which crosses over, in the limits of this life, from an activity the true field of which is completely unknown to me.<sup>51</sup>

It is the nature of this field of activity in which the nature of the individual is fragmentarily revealed to itself that is at issue.

In 1937 Breton published '*Limites non frontières du surréalisme*';<sup>52</sup> he made declarations against the Moscow trials in, for example, '*La vérité sur les Procès de Moscou*' (3 September 1936), other agitatory material such as '*Camarades – les fascistes lynchent Léon Blum!*' (February 1936) on the beating up of Léon

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49 Cf. Robert Short, 'The Politics of Surrealism, 1920–1936', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1:2 (1966), pp. 3–25; Henri Lefebvre, '1925', in *André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste*, special issue of *Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 172 (April 1967); Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988).

50 Resolution 5 of Contre-Attaque was unambiguous: 'Nous disons actuellement que le programme du Front Populaire, dont les dirigeants, dans le cadre des institutions bourgeoises, accèderont vraisemblablement au pouvoir, est voué à la faillite'. Declaration of Contre-Attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires, 7 October 1935; rpd in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives, 1922–1969*, vol. 1: 1922–1939, ed. José Pierre (Paris: Eric Losfeldt, 1980), p. 282.

51 André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928/1964), pp. 9–10.

52 Breton's article was first published in English at the time of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Cf. *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Faber, 1936), pp. 95–116 and subsequently in its French form in *Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 281 (February 1937), pp. 200–15.

Blum by Action française members; 'A ceux qui n'ont pas oublié la guerre du droit et de la liberté' (March 1936, written by Georges Bataille though issued under Breton's signature).<sup>53</sup> These political tracts by Breton were being published side by side with works considering artistic matters, as well as, most importantly, *L'Amour fou*,<sup>54</sup> excerpts of which had been published (in 1934) as 'La Beauté sera convulsive'<sup>55</sup> and 'Equation de l'objet trouvé'.<sup>56</sup>

Let us return to 'Limites non frontières du surréalisme', where the conception of political space which we are developing, following Arendt, is clearly in evidence. Breton writes of the spontaneity of the workers' strikes,

inaugurating a totally unforeseen system of struggle on their part, proceeding to the forced occupation of the factories and, by the sole effect of the simultaneous adoption of such an attitude, came to realize triumphantly their leading demands. The spontaneity and the abruptness of this departure<sup>57</sup> (for which, quite rightly, none of the existing political parties has taken responsibility), the peculiar quality of action undertaken to spread like oil, the impression that it gave that nothing could stop it from achieving its immediate objectives [... these are such as] to make the most clairvoyant think that the French revolution has begun.<sup>58</sup>

Breton's emphasis on the spontaneous nature of the workers' strikes and insurrections was not idiosyncratic; he shared this with Bataille, and for similar reasons. For both Bataille and Breton, the success or failure of the Front Populaire was seen to depend on the extent to which it could remain *outside the institutional practice of politics*. Underlying this emphasis on a 'totally unforeseen system of struggle' on the part of the workers is the conviction held deeply by Breton and Bataille that the stage of capitalism reached in the form of bourgeois parliamentary democracy necessitated a new conception of political action. In the founding document of Contre-Attaque:

We affirm that the current regime must be attacked with a renovated tactic. The traditional tactic of revolutionary movements has never been valid save when applied to the liquidation of autocracies. Applied to the struggle against democratic regimes, it has twice led the workers' movement to disaster. Our essential, urgent task, is the constitution of a doctrine *resulting from immediate experiences*.<sup>59</sup>

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53 These works can be found conveniently collected in *Tracts surréalistes*, vol. 1.

54 In book-form, 2 February 1937.

55 *Minotaure*, no. 5 (1934), pp. 9-16.

56 *Intervention surréaliste*, special issue of *Documents* 34 (Brussels, June 1934).

57 On the suddenness of the workers' manifestation most historians and commentators are agreed.

58 André Breton, 'Limites non frontières du surréalisme', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, pp. 200-1. My emphases.

59 Resolution 3, Contre-attaque; rpd in *Tracts surréalistes*, vol. 1, p. 281.

Any such doctrine resulting from *des expériences immédiates* would be one which accorded a primacy of place to the affective bonds linking individuals in the moment of exaltation, in the moment of insurrection *in which a common object, a common goal was constituted* thereby instituting the conditions for a political space in which this commonality could be *accomplished*. This is what the political philosopher Hannah Arendt has termed the space of appearance:

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. *Its peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being*, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men [...] but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.<sup>60</sup>

Arendt's reference to the 'work of our hands' is crucial, here, for as Margaret Canovan points out, 'Wherever politics has been visualized in the image of making something – as in many revolutionary theories – the implications of the need for central direction, unified sovereignty, naturally follows'.<sup>61</sup> This need to eschew central control was not only motivated by a mistrust of the PCF but followed from Breton's theory of automatism and Bataille's conception of *informe* within a conception of accomplishment. But the reality of power, and particularly the power of the State, is something with which any theorist of the political domain within modernity has to reckon, for as Arendt observes, 'Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence'.<sup>62</sup> It is such a conception of public space as a space of freedom and exaltation that linked Bataille and Breton in 1935 in their

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60 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 199. My emphasis.

61 Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 69–70. Cf. Canovan's more recent *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Arendt herself wrote: 'Since all acting contains an element of virtuosity, and because virtuosity is the excellence we ascribe to the performing arts, politics has often been defined as an art. This, of course, is not a definition but a metaphor, and the metaphor becomes completely false if one falls into the common error of regarding the state or government as a work of art, as a kind of collective masterpiece. In the sense of the creative arts, which bring forth something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own, politics is the exact opposite of an art [...]. Political institutions, no matter how well or how badly designed, depend for continued existence upon acting men; their conservation is achieved by the same means that brought them into being. Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action'. Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1961/1968), p. 153.

62 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 200.

opposition to those concerned with seizing the power of the State. (Much later, in reflecting on May '68, Blanchot, no less than Foucault and Deleuze, would reject the very notion of the seizure of power as an implicitly totalitarian conception. Thus if there is question in Surrealist thought of utopia it is that of a negative utopia.) In 'Vers la révolution réelle', Bataille confronted this question directly:

The question of Revolution, of the seizure of power, must be posed in positive and precise terms, in relation to an immediate reality. [...] All of revolutionary politics is dominated by the schema of the proletarian seizure of power [...]. Practically, considerations of this order result in no application, not even in a simple plan of action, and the only real objective has become party propaganda, electoral struggle.<sup>63</sup>

Instead, argues Bataille, it is necessary to recognize the transition from a capitalism of autocracies to a capitalism of democracy in which the conditions of struggle are entirely new '[and which] in no way hold out the possibility of movements analogous to the Paris Commune or the October revolution'.<sup>64</sup>

It is here, though, that the reality of power understood as that which maintains the public realm as *the potential space of appearance* between acting and speaking beings in the context of accomplishment, encounters what Paul Ricoeur has called *l'énigme du pouvoir*,<sup>65</sup> and thereby the aporias of Surrealist thought on the political in relation to desire, for 'a reflection on force leads directly to the enigma constituted by the phenomenon of power'.<sup>66</sup> In this light, the need to maintain the public realm as the potential space of appearance led Bataille to a conception of exaltation which attempted to turn the affective manipulation of the mass to left revolutionary ends and the form of the institutionalization of which would be nearer the model of the Terror than the Commune of 1871. As early as his 1925 review of Trotsky's *Lénine*, in the very midst of the internal debate on the nature and scope of the Surrealist revolution, Breton had touched on this problem, saying how unfortunate, regrettable it would be if as a group the Surrealists continued to refer to the Conventions and yet 'we should be able to relive with exaltation only the two years after which everything starts all over again'. Indeed, argues Breton, if the prestige of Marat and Robespierre is not to be without value (a useless prestige, he writes), a clear-sighted recognition of the implications of their *desire* is required:

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63 Georges Bataille, 'Vers la révolution réelle: De la phraséologie révolutionnaire au réalisme', *Les cahiers de Contre-attaque*, 1936; rpd in Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 413.

64 Ibid., p. 414.

65 Cf. Paul Ricoeur, 'L'éthique et la politique', *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'hérmenéutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

66 Ibid.



But if, as I think, we are above all in search of *insurrectional means* [my emphasis], I wonder, outside of the emotion that [Marat and Robespierre] have given us once and for all, I wonder practically what we are waiting for.<sup>67</sup>

To demand the ends is also to demand the means, thus Breton argued, linking the Front Populaire manifestations and the Spanish Civil War, that whilst for certain *temporary* forms of social exploitation passive resistance could be a legitimate response, it is nevertheless necessary to be prepared through violence for the return of 'exploitation under forms still infinitely more bold and sinister', not least because

the entry onto the scene of the workers militia, to the horror of the government of the Popular Front, marks, as one has been able to say of the war, 'the continuation of politics by other means' [and which thereby brings forward] the time of the resolution of the social crisis in the *only place where it can take place* [my emphasis], which is to say, *in the street*.<sup>68</sup>

This 'automatism in the streets' is matched by Bataille who is equally clear, as we have shown, on the necessity of avoiding traditional politics:

first we must protest against everything that is created in the empoisoned atmosphere of congresses and professional committees, at the mercy of lobbying manoeuvres.<sup>69</sup>

Bataille continues:

If we speak of the Popular Front, what we wish to designate first in order to bind us strictly, in order to bind our origin to the emotion which composes it, is the existence of the Popular Front *in the street*.<sup>70</sup>

The question of violence, here, is intimately linked to the reality, the enigma of State power; it is, too, linked to the reality of failed revolutions.<sup>71</sup> In a sketch from *Les Cahiers de Contre-attaque* for a proposed study of 'L'autorité, les foules et les chefs', Bataille and Breton wrote:

*Without any exception*, every revolution to date has been followed by an individualization of power. For revolutionaries, this fact poses an essential question, without doubt the capital question, even. We think that such a question must be elucidated in the most open manner, without

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67 André Breton, 'Léon Trotsky: Lénine', *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 5 (July 1925), p. 29.

68 Breton, 'Limites non frontières du surréalisme', pp. 201–2.

69 Bataille, 'Front populaire dans la rue', p. 404.

70 Ibid. My emphasis.

71 This question, namely, Why do revolutions fail?, motivated much of the work of Arendt and also the work of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School. The status of the work of art as a site of imaginative possibility is intimately linked, for these thinkers, to the conditions for the success or failure of changes in the law.

blind optimism or shrinking back. [...] Constraint and refusal in front of authority, can it, yes or no, be much more than the principle of individual isolation, the basis of human community?<sup>72</sup>

In order to protect the revolution, a model of community would be required which could maintain the form of exaltation resultant from the affective bonds realized in commonality, and in this respect, the role of exaltation in the creation of a space of appearance – whether in the role of common action by the Surrealists or in the practice of *Acéphale* by Monnerot, Bataille and others – is structurally comparable to the role of affective identification in Blanquist's group dynamics, with this singular difference, that the withdrawal (*le retrait*) by the Surrealists and Bataille from any engagement with the politics of parties goes hand-in-hand with an acute sense of incompleteness, failure and difference that prevents the narcissistic aspects of the group transferential ideal from being taken as a model of community to be imposed on others, as if, says Blanchot, 'to renounce failing [*échouer*] were more grave than to renounce succeeding'.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Monnerot, in identifying before Sartre, the role of the instant in the temporality of Surrealist experience, could observe that in spite of the drive toward the absolute characteristic of Breton, Bataille and others within the culture of Surrealism, the specificity of the instant 'is that it offers no take to whomever would like to become fastened there. What is proper to time [...] is to be our death in action'.<sup>74</sup> The model of community thus slowly arrived at is one, then, unlike Communism or Fascism, which is based on a principle of incompleteness and insufficiency.<sup>75</sup> To speak of protecting the revolution, then, is not to speak of protecting the seizure of power, but of addressing how to leave open the modalities of encounter (*la rencontre*): chance and the movement of alterity in which, says Monnerot, 'The work's always uncompleted (it is at their peril and risk that they should become completed. The final trait risks to cross out everything that preceded) conceals a certain time of the powers of trial and shock'.<sup>76</sup> It is for this reason that Blanchot, from his 'Quelques réflexions sur le surréalisme' (1945) to *La Communauté inavouable*, (1983) refuses to place Bataille and Breton in opposition, even when one takes into account the very different role that Hegel plays in their thinking, *for nowhere is Bataille or Breton utopian* if by this one understands the presence, however heuristic, of a blueprint for the future. Thus could Blanchot quote Breton on the evident realization that the accomplishment of history could not possibly be taken to 'solve' the things that mattered:

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72 Georges Bataille and André Breton, 'L'autorité, les foules et les chefs'; rpd in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives*, pp. 288–89.

73 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 182.

74 Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, p. 167.

75 Cf. Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, pp. 15–17.

76 Monnerot, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, p. 166.

there are in us certain lacunae that all the hope that we place in the triumph of communism will not fill; has not man made himself irreducibly an enemy for man; and boredom, will it finish only with the world; every assurance as to life and honour, is it not vain, etc.<sup>77</sup>

It is thus significant that in *Les Vases communicants*, from which Blanchot's citation of Breton is taken, the *poète à venir* (the coming poet) as figure of the *communauté à venir* (the coming community) is a figure that remains within the power of the figure of night (Novalis), alongside *la fenêtre noire*.<sup>78</sup> No plan can be derived from its imagining. If this is a form of utopia, then it is an anarchist – or negative utopia – one without project, without design on the seizing of centralized power such as Blanchot holds was manifested in the events of May '68: *a community of lovers*:

'Without project': that was the mark, at one and the same time anguishing and fortunate, of a form of incomparable society which did not allow itself to be seized, which was not called upon to continue, to become installed, even if that would be through the multiple 'committees' through which there was stimulated a disordered-order, an imprecise specialization.<sup>79</sup>

In place of a traditional model of the revolutionary seizure of power, the negative utopia of May '68 – and here there is play upon utopia as *without place* – was instead characterized by a being-together (*d'être-ensemble*) in a time of the in-between (*entre-temps*) where the evidence of equality in fraternity was *explosive communication and the liberty of speech*.<sup>80</sup>

Bataille and Breton, during the Contre-Attaque phase, articulate a much under-appreciated aspect of a certain type of avant-garde thinking, that kind of non-technicist avant-garde thinking that is not bound to technology, namely, they begin to theorize *the failure of revolutions*, for all revolutions past have been betrayed, they argue, by the individualization of power arising from the 'need' to satisfy the mass (for example, through the redistribution of the goods of the ruling elite) which, need being in principle insatiable, has in its train necessitated a centralizing authority to control the mass. This centralized authority is the narcissistic ideal transposed to the realm of political sovereignty. Not surprisingly, Breton and Bataille's conception of political community alludes, but only in certain points, to a conciliar system of governance – the

77 André Breton, quoted in Maurice Blanchot, 'Réflexions sur le surréalisme', *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949/1993), p. 100.

78 Cf. André Breton, *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Gallimard 1932/1970), pp. 166–71.

79 Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, p. 52. On the community of lovers and Blanchot's anarchist 'utopia', cf. the excellent study by Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 244–51.

80 Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, p. 52.

nearest equivalent in modern times to the classical Greek conception of the *polis*. That such a system of governance would seem impracticable is not the criticism that some might think, for its impossibility points to the absence of any genuine political, that is, *public* space within the industrial complex of modernity in the form of the nation-state and the monopoly of power (that is, violence) which is part-and-parcel of its theory of sovereignty. We are instead given a *social* sphere, the sphere pre-eminently of violence and policing in the maintenance of normative practice. The conception of action and public space articulated by Breton and Bataille holds a paradigmatic significance in making clearer the nature of the reality of political power in modernity, not least by addressing the unacknowledged negativity of prevailing political power as also in addressing the question of the failure of revolutions of power and sensibility.

André Thirion, a former Surrealist and Communist who became a Gaullist in 1945, recognized the significance of *Contre-Attaque*<sup>81</sup> which he met with an intermingling of satisfaction and irritation, but nevertheless as 'one of the most significant texts of the period' precisely for its attempt to give a new and precise definition of revolution in a manner that freed the thinking of revolution from any relation to nationalism.<sup>82</sup> Quite rightly rejecting 'the myth of June 1936, that of the missed revolution',<sup>83</sup> Thirion points out that 'Nowhere did the workers on strike pass from the corporative to the political'.<sup>84</sup> An observation which cannot be gainsaid, but this same Thirion also pointed out that in 1939 these same workers had their gains significantly reduced under a new regime. Thus when he dismisses Trotsky's call à *l'époque* for the constitution of workers' councils as parody, he shows himself not to have grasped the significance of the counciliar system implied in *Contre-Attaque*, for at issue was a conception of the political which was first and foremost ethical. The conception of the political at issue is one which 'prolongs ethics [...] by giving it a sphere in which to operate. In addition, it prolongs the second constitutive requirement of ethical intention, the requirement of mutual recognition – the requirement that makes me say: your freedom is equal to my own. Indeed, the ethics of politics consists in nothing other than *the creation of spaces of freedom*'.<sup>85</sup> The absence of such spaces of freedom is part of the politics of melancholy.

There was never a capitulation on the part of the Surrealists to such conditions, for the integrity of the collective at the least secured itself in a state of grace, that state wherein the law of the social realm having been transcended,

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81 'En octobre 1935, un tract publia la résolution *Contre-Attaque* scellant l'accord temporaire des deux écrivains français dont la pensée est la plus riche du XXe siècle, Bataille et Breton'. Thirion, *Révolutionnaire sans révolution*, p. 430.

82 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 431.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 427.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 428.

85 Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*. My emphasis.

the group lives by its own contingency. In the manifesto published after the *Congrès pour la défense de la culture* in 1935, *Du temps que les surréalistes avaient raison*, the Surrealists recognized that

Unhappily today opportunism tends to annihilate these two essential components of the revolutionary spirit such as it has hitherto manifested itself: the – dynamic and creative – refractory nature of certain beings, their concern in common action to fulfil, to the utmost possible, their obligations to themselves and others.<sup>86</sup>

Though there are differences in the positions of Bataille and Breton, they were absolutely agreed on one thing: that the possibilities of truly significant change (that is, changes in the forms and sensibilities of life which could alone be adduced revolutionary) could not be controlled or *predicted*, and thereby, at all costs, the tempestuous events of the mid-1930s had to remain in the streets, outside, that is, the normal practice of politics – and for both, this meant above all outside the control of the PCF. Thus for both Breton and Bataille, the subsequent failure of the Front Populaire, though deeply disappointing, was not a surprise.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV

##### *Retracing beginnings*

... in mourning time is needed ...<sup>88</sup>

Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1917

The refusal of the Party by the principal participants in the culture of Surrealism was but part of a larger refusal of European political culture; that they groped for an alternative conception of values is not something that anyone would deny. For many, the example of Surrealism, and not its theory, is what is commendable. What, after all, could a group of intellectuals possibly hope to achieve amidst such political and moral disaster? The example of Surrealism, however, resides as much in its theories as in its intransigence, and in this concluding section I shall consider some of the ways in which its implicit reflection on failure is part-and-parcel of the manner in which it both engages the power of the imaginary and yet avoids some of the pitfalls of the imaginary

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<sup>86</sup> André Breton, *Position politiques du surréalisme* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1935), pp. 109–10.

<sup>87</sup> The degree to which Bataille anticipated and sought the rapprochement with Breton can now be more clearly appreciated with the publication of *Georges Bataille: Choix de lettres, 1917–1962*, ed. Michel Surya (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 109–10.

<sup>88</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Standard Edition*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1981), p. 252.

and the realization of the transferential dimension of the group ideal as a form of narcissism. Not only failure, but the sense that Surrealism is always confronted with its alterity is something that the generation of Monnerot, Rolland de Rénneville and Blanchot took for granted, hence Sartre, in his critique of Surrealism on the occasion of the 1947 *L'Exposition surréaliste*, could speak of its Hegelian anthropological dimension, its dimension of totality. As early as 1925, in 'Le bouquet sans fleurs', Breton declared that nothing would be beyond Surrealist commitment, and in so doing began that vertiginous openness to systems of knowledge whilst itself avoiding systematicity. This gives that distinctive tenor of *la connaissance surréaliste* (Breton's term) in which one encounters a plurality of voices. In his reflections on *Nadja*, Blanchot would go as far as to identify this plurality of voices as definitive of Surrealist experience – the necessary correlate of which is an incompleteness of experience – whereby through the affirmation of the collective dimension Surrealism is always experienced by its members as something always apart from them, as something always *in the third (en tiers)*:

The Surrealist affirmation affirms, thus, this multiple space which does not become unified, and which never coincides with the understanding that individuals, grouped around a faith, a work, can sustain in common.<sup>89</sup>

This plurality of voices and incompleteness is what distinguishes the Surrealist group from any other group as avant-garde, namely, 'to be several, not in order to realize something, but without any other reason (moreover hidden) than to bring plurality into existence in giving it a new sense'.<sup>90</sup> The understanding of Surrealism as an experience of alterity and negativity, of failure and limit-experience – and we note that not even a Thirion, still less a Monnerot or Blanchot, ever sets Bataille and Breton up as oppositions, however supposedly heuristically – should modify the way in which one might think the historical relationship between Surrealism and the PCF and by extension Surrealism and the political.

It has long been realized that the Surrealists' adherence to the PCF was less a mark of profound commitment to anti-capitalism as understood by traditional Communists than a mark of their profound *ethical* refusal of the world of the bourgeoisie, of the modern world as unremittingly bourgeois. To this extent, their anti-capitalism was contingent upon the perception that capitalism was the economic expression of the values of the bourgeois modern world, and parliamentary democracy its institutionalized political embodiment. Hence, Théodore Fraenkel, in the fascinating notes of a conversation with Léon Pierre-Quint in 1936, in the midst of the Front Populaire phenomenon, could dismiss the prevailing political options from a Surrealist point of view:

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<sup>89</sup> Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, p. 600.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

We are living on completely outdated political ideas. The reactionaries depend on the Monarchists of the 17th century – and Maurras has brought no innovation – the liberals on the ideas of the 19th century: St. Simon etc – the Socialists: Proudhon, 1848, L. Blanc – the Communists on Marx, end of 19th century. But after 1918, the 20th century really started. The war made the breach [*coupure*] – which is an abyss. Every old ideology is outdated.<sup>91</sup>

For this reason Fraenkel, as recorded by Pierre-Quint, considered what a Surrealist group in politics might have been:

For me, the autonomous group which needs to be created, would have for its essential aim less the overturning of capitalism – thus at least it would be Marxist – than the overturning of the bourgeoisie. Moreover it would be necessary to go deeper in order to see if capitalism and bourgeoisie are not indissolubly bound.

The refusal of the modern world as the symbolic representation of the values of the bourgeoisie was an ethical refusal entailing a political correlate, hence, too, Fraenkel's observation on the sense of political obligation which led the Surrealists to leave behind the '*anarchie Revue Blanche*' of their Symbolist filiations. The pathological term *crisis* that would seem so essential to any avant-garde's self-definition of itself *qua* avant-garde is a term that effects an intrinsic link to a contemporaneous world of political economy.<sup>92</sup> Thus at each stage of the self-definition which served to carry the Surrealists further into the relation between the ethical and the political, there is recourse to the language of crisis: 'Surrealist activity has just passed through a crisis which must come to an end',<sup>93</sup> it is said in 1927 in '*Au grand jour*' as five Surrealists publicly declare themselves for the PCF. In 1925, as represented in '*Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste*', there was an earlier definitional crisis as reported by Breton:

We are in 1925. I speak for those who have seen the peace insinuate itself, and not a few governments failing; for those who have seen the inexpressible purpose to which they held begin to fade, some men and even some women weaken. Their eyes have the colour of time.<sup>94</sup>

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91 Théodore Fraenkel, 'Notes in the hand of Léon Pierre-Quint, being the record of a conversation, November 1936', Naf 18360, Manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris. See Appendix I.

92 It is well known that the Surrealists' acceptance of the politics of the public domain began with supporting the Moroccan uprising against French colonial rule in 1925, the Riff incident as it is sometimes termed, but no less important is the state of the left in the Cartel des gauches, etc.

93 *Au grand jour* (Paris: Editions surréalistes, 1927); rpd in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives* I, p. 67.

94 André Breton, '*Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste*', *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4 (July 1925), p. 1.



The essential question posed in this reflection by Breton: are we, Surrealists, are we artists, merely artists? What implication, implicit in Breton's language, would the response to this question have for the development of Surrealism, for Surrealism in its desire to pursue its *struggle*, a situation in which 'the conditions of struggle remain to be defined' and this in spite of 'the risk of absolute *désœuvrement* that we [Surrealists] were running'. Breton records the internal crisis as a mark of dialogue (*le débat*) centring around the problem of embodiment under the form of the passage to action, that is, in Breton's terms, the objectivation of ideas:

From inside [our debate] it would be preferable to avoid the hardening of certain, more or less artificial opinions, which, in the nature of things, may one day paralyse us. [...] The problem of the objectivation of ideas which dominates the debate occupying us, is, naturally, that which has given occasion to the bitterest controversies amongst us.<sup>95</sup>

The struggle to be defined, at once linked to a *Guerre au travail!* – *C'est le parfait mannequin de Giorgio de Chirico, descendant l'escalier de la Bourse* (fig. 65) – is linked, too, in a serious if troubling way, to the problematic of violence as, in the next issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, Breton, as we saw, in his review of Trotsky's *Lénine*, evokes the period of the Terror, demanding that the means be found for what we are waiting. The need to articulate the passage between that for which one waits (*ce que nous attendons*) and the means of its realization or embodiment compels Breton to reflect upon the meaning of 'Révolution surréaliste':

If the words 'Révolution surréaliste' leave most people sceptical, at least, they do not deny us a certain ardour and the sense of certain possible devastations. It is for us not to misuse such a power.<sup>96</sup>

Whence the questions that would define the viability and exigencies of '*la cause surréaliste*'<sup>97</sup>:

But Surrealism, is it a force of absolute opposition or an ensemble of purely theoretical propositions, or a system based upon the confusion of all plans, or the first cornerstone of a new social edifice? According to the response that each appears to elicit a comparable question, each will force himself to give to *Surrealism* all that he can: *the contradiction is not there to frighten us*.<sup>98</sup>

The recognition of this contradiction as intrinsic to, constitutive of what is distinctive to Surrealism, to *la cause surréaliste*, has long been noted. Hence Henri Ey, in 'La Psychiatrie devant le surréalisme', quotes Blanchot stating with

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95 Ibid., p. 3.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid. My emphasis.

characteristic simplicity: 'the characteristic [*le propre*] of Breton's school is to have always solidly maintained together irreconcilable tendencies'.<sup>99</sup>

It cannot, therefore, be a surprise to find Joë Bousquet, in a letter written to Breton after receiving the issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* containing Breton's review of Trotsky's *Lénine*, taking as evident the political implications of the ethical position of Surrealism:

It's here that I have just read in *La Révolution surréaliste*, which I received some days ago, the article that you devoted to Lenin. I see that you consider the publication of [Trotsky's book] as an occasion to affirm that Surrealism as you have defined it [an ensemble of spiritual investigations, a state of mind, no longer an attitude of refusal, but, now, an attitude of combat] bears moreover its political application: which was obvious.<sup>100</sup>

*Ce qui était évident.* The question would remain, however, as to the mode, the style of this politics amidst 'irreconcilable tendencies', in the elaboration of a conception of experience as transitional, as passage, marked by radical contingency and fragility, and dissolutive modes such as anguish, *ennui*, the *informe*. Clearly, it could not be a question of a political party in the sense hypothesized by Fraenkel in his conversation with Léon Pierre-Quint, not least as Breton noted in 'Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste', because of '*le risque de désaveuement absolu que nous courions*', but also because, as Blanchot observed in 'Le Demain joueur', 'Surrealism is always in third'. Breton does not speak of *la cause freudienne*, still less *la cause bretonienne*, he speaks of *la cause surréaliste* in terms of which it is demanded that 'each will make himself render to Surrealism all that he can'.<sup>101</sup> This presence of Surrealism as always in a relation of thirdness has implications also for the temporality of group experience as a model, a type, indeed, of avant-garde experience as a temporality of delay, of the provisional, a temporality that is in no way distinct from the temporality of mourning, in which mourning, Freud observed, time is needed.

The keen awareness of failure, incompleteness and the impossibility of adequation between an ideal and its possible instantiation in the political sphere constantly tempered the rhetoric of assertiveness that the Surrealists used in their manifestos: the writings beyond the manifestos never separate ethical reflection from the possibility of failure at the societal level. Hence the implicit importance and role of mourning in Surrealism: from the encounter with the traumatic

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99 Maurice Blanchot, quoted in Henri Ey, 'La Psychiatrie devant le surréalisme', *Evolution psychiatrique* XIII:4 (1948), p. 44.

100 Joë Bousquet, letter to André Breton, 25 October 1925, in *Vers l'action politique: Juillet 1925-avril 1926*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 28.

101 Breton, 'Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste', p. 3. My emphasis.

neuroses in the Great War, from personal loss (Vaché, Nadja, Crevel) through the quest for purpose (the ruptures in deep friendship: Aragon, Eluard), there is a constant attempt to relate the movement of the group with the movement of the historical, but a historical defined in terms of the delayed recognition of personal, group and cultural loss: the time of Surrealism, from its inception, *à la veille d'une révolution*, is always *a time to come*: *il faut tout attendre de l'avenir* declares the frontispiece of *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1924; the poet evoked at the end of *Les Vases communicants* (1932) is the *poète à venir*, just as, in 'Rupture inaugurale' in 1947, marking the definitive break with Communism, now considered a form of moral extermination, '*Le surréalisme est ce qui SERA*'.<sup>102</sup> The temporality of Surrealism is inextricably linked to the movement of the loss of Europe (fig. 57), from the still-life collage letter that Breton made for Vaché, but which was never received by its addressee, to the still-life collage that he made to commemorate the death of Vaché at the end of the War in 1919 with the fragment 'Souvenez-vous de 1914 / Pas d'Allemands' creating in this circuitry a caesura of emptiness (fig. 66):

Let it be well understood, however, that we do not wish to take any active part in the outrage that men perpetuate against man. That we have no civic attachment [*préjugé*]. That, in the current state of society in Europe, we remain attached to the principle of all revolutionary action, even indeed when it should take as its point of departure the class struggle, provided that it leads far enough.<sup>103</sup>

The moment of clear situating of the ethical in relation to the political in 1925 carries, internal to the imago of the group, the weights and contradictions in *the idea* of Europe become object of Surrealist critical agency. By 1933, Breton and most of the Surrealists, including Bataille at the time of the Contre-Attaque alliance in 1935, knew that revolutionary action in the Stalinist framework would not lead far enough, that Stalinism would be fundamentally incompatible with the ethical requirements of beauty, truth and justice:

Let beauty, truth, justice incline their charming and spectral brows on our tomb, we are certain always to revive.<sup>104</sup>

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102 Some of the most remarkable contemporaneous studies of Surrealism and politics are to be found in the *Cahiers du Sud*.

103 Breton, 'Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste', p. 3. The excellent issue of *Mélusine* on 'L'Europe surréaliste', contains some very fine studies on Europe in the imaginary of Surrealism. The account that I develop here, though continuous with this anthology, is markedly different in its emphasis on the temporality of delay and its link to the temporality of mourning as a means of encompassing the complex ambiguities of the Surrealists' attitudes to the idea/object of Europe. Of particular value is the bracingly written study by Jeanne-Marie Baude, 'L'image de l'Europe dans la Révolution surréaliste', in *Mélusine*, no. 14, *L'Europe surréaliste* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1994), pp. 51–62.

104 Breton, 'Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste', p. 3.

The barbarism of Stalinism which led to the loss of faith in Communism on the part of the Surrealists – and the diction of faith is everywhere present in ‘Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste’ – still went hand-in-hand with a faith that, in Valéry’s famous phrase as reported by T. S. Eliot, *L’Europe est finie*. It was finished by the Great War, which, in Fraenkel’s words, opened up an abyss, and the only issue remaining for Valéry, in the still stunning reflections of ‘La Crise de l’esprit européen’, was the damning and telling question: ‘Will Europe become *what it is in reality* – that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia?’<sup>105</sup>

The Surrealists’ response to this loss was not the register of superior nostalgia of a Valéry. Having broken with Valéry in 1927 upon his accession to the Académie, in 1928, Breton and Eluard made a series of *détournements* of Valéryan sententia, of which the most famous is the sententious declaration: ‘A poem must be a debacle of the intellect. It cannot be anything else’;<sup>106</sup> but as telling is the diction of *collective* exposure in another *détournement* of Valéry:

Poetry, in a time of complication of the language, of conservation of forms, [...] of childishly meddling minds, is an exposed thing. We wish to say that one should invent verse today. And moreover the rites of all species.<sup>107</sup>

What in Eluard and Breton become the *débâcle de l’intellect*, the *chose exposée* – the articulation of which is *lyrisme* as ‘the development of a protestation’ – however ironic in relation to Valéry, are made part of an economy of traumatic penetration in a sleight *détournement* that makes the already proximal terms of Valéry’s thought consistent with Surrealist thinking on passivity, whose origination cannot be held separate from the trauma of war:

Lyricism is the genre of poetry which assumes the *inactive voice* – the voice indirectly returning to, or provoking – the things which one does not see and of which one experiences the absence.<sup>108</sup>

The ironic intention is to deflate the preciousity of Valéry. . . . Yet the language of penetration, inactivity and absence extends from the *impersonal* experience of ‘the things which one does not see’ to the level of ‘Europe’ as, also in 1929, the Surrealists produced *The World in the Time of the Surrealists / The Surrealist Map of the World* (fig. 57), a diminished Europe, which cannot but be seen as a

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105 Paul Valéry, ‘La Crise de l’esprit européen’ (1919), was first published in English in two parts as ‘The Crisis of the Mind’ in *The Athenaeum* (11 April and 2 May 1919); rpd in new translation in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. James R. Lawler (London: RKP, 1977), p. 102.

106 André Breton and Paul Eluard, ‘Notes sur la poésie’, *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 11 (March 1928), p. 53.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

response to Valéry's question, 'Will Europe become *what it is in reality* – that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia?' *The World in the time of the Surrealists, the Surrealist map of the world* indicates an emphatic yes, whence the beginning of a dialogue between Surrealism in Paris and Eastern Europe, extending to Japan, and to the black world of Northern Africa, Haiti and Martinique. It cannot be lost sight of that much that is most creative in Surrealism after World War II will be due to the great women – such as Joyce Mansour – and black intellectuals present in the movement from the early 1930s – Monnerot's and the Martiniquan students' *Légitime défense*.

And yet. . . . The analysis of the loss of Europe of Valéry, whose nihilism was appreciated by Breton, is not so different from that of Breton. Valéry makes technology and a restricted rationalism incapable of recognizing otherness within itself the engine for the self-destruction of Europe. The symbol of this decline – that is, the declination – of the idea of Europe is a *bored* Hamlet – '*he broods on the taedium [l'ennui] of rehearsing the past and the folly of always trying to innovate*'<sup>109</sup> – coming upon the place of the skull of Yorick, and finding there many skulls:

This one was *Lionardo*. He invented the flying man, but the flying man has not exactly served his inventor's purposes. [. . .] And that other skull was *Leibnitz*, who dreamed of universal peace. And this one was *Kant* . . . and *Kant* begat *Hegel*, and *Hegel* begat *Marx*, and *Marx* begat. . . .

Hamlet hardly knows what to make of so many skulls. But suppose he forgets them! Will he still be himself? . . .<sup>110</sup>

The limit of this declination is reached in the automatic, because necessary, actions of a supremely rationally organized system of murderousness, an all-encompassing totalitarianism as the fate of Europe:

By giving the name of progress to its own tendency to a fatal precision, the world is seeking to add to the benefits of life the advantages of death. A certain confusion still reigns; but in a little while all will be made clear, and we shall witness at last the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill [une parfaite et définitive fourmilière].<sup>111</sup>

This is the ethically driven political imagination of European modernism in its acutest form that is common to a Valéry, Eliot through to Guy Debord. Valéry's 'définitive fourmilière' would become, in Debord's diction inflected through his appropriation of the French moralist tradition, 'this spoilt earth [*cette terre gâtée*]' of the society of the spectacle. Since, unlike the Russian Constructivists or the Italian Futurists, there was never a celebration of technology, in no respect is this understanding of the critical thinking of European modernism an idea from

109 Valéry, 'The Crisis of the Mind', p. 100.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid., p. 101.

which we have said, or indeed to which we can say, farewell as it constitutes the horizon of the critical experience of modernity. No European modernist outside the Russian Constructivists or the Futurists believed in the idea of progress, either in their art or their thought.

The questions concerning the qualitative and psychic dimension of movement and motility, particularly where those movements are, under certain conditions, confounded with the apparently quantitative or mechanical encompassing the possibility of any distinction between animal life and its mechanical simulacra, achieve their fullest significance in the midst of Breton's reflection on *l'humour noir* and the self-destruction of the idea of Europe. In the 1938 *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, Breton, after the *succès de scandale* of the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, takes up again the iconography of the mannequin in a way that returns it to 'Pourquoi je prends la direction de la Révolution surréaliste' and the cover of issue no. 4 of *La Révolution surréaliste* (fig. 65), commenting on the centuries' held curiosity of the difficulty of distinguishing, from a certain distance, authentic automata from pseudo-automata.<sup>112</sup> The form that this inescapable ambiguity has taken in our period, says Breton,

is to have had it transposed by transferring the automata from the external world into the interior world. [...] Indeed, psychoanalysis has disclosed, in the depths of the mental attic, the presence of an anonymous mannequin 'without eyes, without nose and without ears', sufficiently akin to those that Giorgio de Chirico was painting towards 1916. This mannequin has revealed an extreme mobility [...] (it is from the need to give every licence to this mobility that Surrealism was born).<sup>113</sup>

And might we not say in the light of this passage, that *Europe, the idea* of Europe, had encountered the simulacra of its own unconscious wherein it found itself (like this anonymous being) 'driven by an engine of undoubted force which it obeys mathematically owing to an apparently cosmic movement which escapes it'?<sup>114</sup> The object of Europe. All the more so when Breton continues: 'The question which is posed, in relation to these automata as with others, is to know if there is a *conscious* being hidden in them – and to *what point conscious*?'

Given that at the metapsychological level of motility the coming into awareness of an ethical consciousness is inseparable from desire *in statu nascendi*, one could argue that the thinking of the limits of movement marks not only the limits of representation but the historical specificity and limits of

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112 Cf. André Breton, 'Raymond Roussel', in *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, rptd in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 1067.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid, p. 1068. On the idea of Europe in post-Heideggerian thinking, cf. Rodolphe Gasché, 'Alongside the Horizon', in Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas, eds, *The Sense of Philosophy: On Jean-Luc Nancy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

Surrealism whereby Surrealist experience, confronted with traumatic penetration and loss, becomes the fragmented configured body by means of which the tragic dimension of cultural experience is articulated through movement and immobility. Blanchot, in his interpretation of *Nadja*, understood the extent to which Surrealist experience enacted an understanding of negative infinity whereby its violence became intelligible in terms of its comprehension that it could not simply escape from the detested object by a simple act of negation, that, indeed, the object remains always present in some form, because the action of negation and object share the same medium, the imago, indeed. In the most Hegelian part of the *Paysan de Paris*, 'Le songe du paysan', Aragon goes so far as to establish a relation between failure and grandeur: 'A philosophy could not succeed. It is from the grandeur of its object that it derives its own grandeur; it conserves it in failure'. Blanchot long ago identified the nature of the movement of negation at work within the modes of Surrealist thinking that brings out the dimension of the imago no less than the relationship to (creative) violence:

Surrealist *experience* aims for (it seems to me) the point of divergence from which all knowledge, as with any limited affirmation of life, escapes from itself in order to expose itself to the neutral force of dismantling [*désarrangement*]. Surrealist *experience* is experience of experience, whether this be found under a theoretical or practical form: an experience which dismantles and dismantles itself, to the extent that it develops and, developing, interrupts itself.<sup>115</sup>

The form of such tragic movement and immobility, of exposure and dismantling, in developing the phenomenology of experience and failure in Surrealism, in bringing out the texture of what Monnerot called *les parages*, or Blanchot *la mort enfin vécue*, is the form under which the ethical texture of Surrealist experience (*the experience of experience*) seeks, belongs to, the possibly reparative dimension of the work of beauty, truth and justice inseparable from *le travail du négatif à l'intérieur de la vue d'une idée de l'Europe finie* ... (fig. 67).

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115 Blanchot, 'Le demain joueur', *L'Entretien infini*, p. 618.