Romantic Formalism in Surrealist Poetics: Reworlding the Subject of Modernity

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Abstract

The surrealisms of Georges Bataille and André Breton have long been read as contestatory and more recently as exhibiting either a sublimatory or a desublimatory aesthetic respecitvely. In reexamining their relationship to "the prehensile tail of romanticism" I attempt to locate their proximal relationship to the first wave of German Romanticism. In so doing. I delineate the philosophical tensions that are shared by both the projects of the *Frühromantiker* and the surrealists alike, and in light of this go on to locate Breton's philosophical relationship to the original romantic movement, illustrating their aesthetic relationship to a Kantian "de-worlded subjectivity" to which both the German Romantics and the Idealists originally responded. I conclude that whereas the paradigmatic nature of Bretonian surrealism

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retains the original romantic ironist position, Bataille's eroticism and base materialism phenomenologically reinstalls the putative human subject back into the corporeal world through the play of material restriction and expenditure. In so doing, Bataille instantiates a materialistic response to the original position of romantic irony, postulated by Friedrich Schlegel in his essay "On Incomprehensibility."

Keywords: Surrealist Aesthetics, Romanticism, Modernism, Phenomenology

In what follows I attempt to re-read the contesting surrealisms of Georges Bataille and André Breton in terms of a reexamination of their relationship to "the prehensile tail of romanticism." [2] In so doing, I will situate their relationship in proximity to the first wave of German Romanticism, particularly in terms of its hermeneutics of fragmentation, discontinuity and difference. In proposing a number of philosophical tensions that are shared by both the projects of the Frühromantiker and Bretonian surrealism alike, I conclude that Bataille's materialist response to Breton's project is itself romantic: in that it interrogates the same Kantian *de-worlded subjectivity* [3] to which both the German Romantics and the Idealists responded. However, Bataille's eroticism responds to this de-worlded subjectivity by *both re-worlding* and reintegrating the putative human subject *back into* the corporeal world through the aesthetic *play* of material restriction and expenditure, whereas the paradigmatic nature of Bretonian surrealism *retains* the Kantian aporia and de-worlded subjectivity posited by the early Jena romantics.

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[2] The first wave of German romantics (*Frühromantiker*)are generally thought of as being F.W. and A.W. Schlegel, Tieck, Wackenroder, Novalis and in perhaps a more indirect sense, the idealist philosopher F.W. Schelling and his former classmate Hölderlin. The first wave are distinct in outlook from the second wave who include Hoffman, Brentano, Uhland, Heine and beyond to (arguably) Nietzsche.

[3] I use the term "de-worlded subjectivity" in the same sense that it has been used previously by J.M. Bernstein, in describing the crisis of modernity and the modern subject after the scientific and industrial revolutions and the "Copernican Revolution" as ushered in by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Bernstein writes: "Aesthetic reason could come to have this privileged position because it could be seen as responding to a profound crisis of reason brought on by the disenchantment and dematerialization of circumambient nature that was the consequence of the mechanization and mathematization of nature by the new science, on the one hand, and the de-worlding (and dematerialization or disembodiment) of freedom and subjectivity that arose as the necessary saving response to the loss of nature as habitat, on the other." (p. 143).

The philosophical tensions between the post-Kantian subjective limitations of our knowledge and the contemporary Idealist programme for epistemological certainty are examined and assessed in Schlegel's essay on romantic irony, "On Incomprehensibility" (1800) and my bald argument is that a number of these manifold tensions are shared by both Breton's early surrealist project and German Romanticism. In the latter part of this essay I finally examine the base materialist response of Bataille to the tensions within the surrealist—and by extension romantic—projects, by assessing a number of his texts, and by illustrating how his philosophy of economic expenditure and materialist continuity *re-worlds* the romantic (and ironic) subject of modernity. Bataille's oeuvre is thus read as a philosophical response to the romantic and Idealist tensions of early German Romantic thought and *a fortiori* to later avant-garde thought, such as that of Bretonian Surrealism.

On Incomprehensibility

Schlegel's acknowledgment, [4] of the limits and open-ended dialectical nature of our epistemic practices, is most clearly and paradoxically (or in his own terms *ironically*) assessed in his famous essay "On Incomprehensibility". In this essay, which is the culmination of the two years of *The Athenaeum*, Schlegel uses the paradoxical trope of darkness through which we garner understanding, whilst

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[4] The philosophical use of Acknowledgment was introduced by StanleyCavell as a romantic response to Hegel's notion of recognition— *Anerkennung*. In the analytic tradition of philosophy, Cavell uses the concept in order to deal with skepticism and the "problem of other minds." In Cavell's usage one can acknowledge an epistemic, or skeptical gap between agents' minds and by extension their "knowing" of one another, in much the same way the Jena romantics acknowledged a gap which would perennially exist between their subjectivity and the external (or *noumenal*) world. Cavell's theory was outlined in his essay "Knowing and Acknowledging" (pp. 46-71).

ac-knowledging the necessary limits to our understanding:

> Yes, even man's most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis, as anybody can easily verify, on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn't this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos? (p. 268).

The formative trope of light through an inherent darkness signifies that there is no recourse to rational enlightenment teleology in Schlegel's essay. He goes on to self-consciously use an allegory to make his point here, that of the German chemist Christoph Girtanner, and his idea that in the coming nineteenth century gold will be mass produced, which Schlegel implicitly compares to a new, critical-philosophical language-in which all will be enlightened and enriched. As Girtanner's pledge would never come to pass, so this *golden* age of the ur-language would equally not come to pass—this new golden age of the mass-reader, this new logocentric age in which incomprehensibility will be a thing of the 'past.' Schlegel ironically writes:

> The same age in which we too have the honor to live; the age that, to wrap it all up in a word, deserves the humble but highly suggestive name of the Critical Age, so that soon now everything is going to be criticized, except the age itself, and everything is going to become more and more critical, and artists can already begin to cherish the just hope that humanity will at last rise up in a mass and learn to read. (p. 261)

By the close of the essay, using an Apollonian metaphor, Schlegel speaks of a parallel 'golden' age where the gold will be symbolized by the lightening in the sky, which will finally erupt in a blinding (and hence incomprehensible whole), removing the Promethean nature of man's human (and incomplete) understanding:

> But soon it won't be simply a matter of one thunderstorm, the whole sky will burn with a single flame and then all your lightning rods won't help you. Then the nineteenth century will indeed make a beginning of it and then the little riddle of the incomprehensibility of the *Athenaeum* will also be solved. What a catastrophe! Then there will be readers who will know how to read. In the nineteenth century everyone will be able to savor the fragments with much gratification and pleasure in the after-dinner hours and not need a nut-cracker for even the hardest and most indigestible ones. In the nineteenth century every human being, every reader will find *Lucinde* innocent, *Genevoveva* Protestant, and A.W. Schlegel's didactic *Elegies* almost too simple and transparent. (p. 268-69)

Schlegel's concept of the age of paradigmatic "tendencies" *ad infinitum* is key to reading not only this essay but the *Fragments* as a whole, and the sense of history and futurity as a telos is mocked by the program of the *Frühromantiker*; indeed, Schlegel attacks this teleology by way of the analogy of a new 'golden age' that will usher in an absolute logos and pave the way with "gold letters on silver tablets. Who would wish to reject so beautifully printed a book with the vulgar remark that it doesn't make any sense?" (p. 262). The tensions of incomprehensibility are what inform human history for Schlegel and the sense of a new golden age as expounded by contemporaries such as Hölderlin and Hegel are doomed to failure. What Hegel thought of as "bad infinity" is for Schlegel a logical rejection of the telos of a new golden age [5]. The tensions of "the understanding" for Schlegel involve a dialectic that is open-ended and dynamic, as opposed to an Hegelian

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[5] For Hegel, an incorrect conceptualisation of infinity was one where theinfinite was viewed as unknowable and unattainable—this was the position of the ironist—*absolute infinite negativity*. Hegel associated this with the idea of an incomplete understanding of the Dialectic. Good infinity was for Hegel the full process of progressing through the dialectic to *Absolute Spirit* (or knowing). In this phenomenological experience, the subject has become entirely self-aware and has as such interiorized and sublated notionally alienating Gestalten, such as death, infinity and, in *The Philosophy of History*, evil.

dialectic that is static and closed.

The *acknowledgment* of the limits of the understanding in romantic aesthetics is however one that posits a paradoxically recognitive connection to the natural world in which we subsist. By recognising (acknowledging) our epistemic limitations we paradoxically acknowledge (imbibe-as-knowledge) the sense of the infinite as-knowledge, or the infinite *Sehnsucht* to which we as subjects are engaged with phenomenologically. Thus, in this sense we are going beyond the apparent limitations set by the Idealist project—whether by the apriority of the Kantian categories or the concrete universal conceptualization of reason in Hegel.[6] J.M. Bernstein notes of this paradox of romantic metaphysics:

> "Über die Unverständlichkeit," say, "On the Impossibility of Understanding," is in its own way a critique of pure reason; its defense of the incomprehensible just the contention that the limits of the understanding are equally its conditions of possibility. However, and *pace* Kant, it is not the case that we can *a priori* determine the limits of the understanding: our desire for understanding is boundless, and our power for rendering transparent knows no limit—since our unending, that is, transparent world is constructed from chaos (anticipating Nietzsche), then we can always render the world transparent, leaving the chaos behind—it is this leaving behind that requires correction. One cannot *know* the limits of reason, turning Hegel inside out, since to know the limit would be indeed to step beyond the limit. Hence, the limit of reason cannot be known, it can only, but equally must, be accepted, acknowledged, experienced." (p. 159).

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[6] In Hegel *the concrete universal* is the universal that precedes or makes its parts possible, whereas the abstract universal is the universal that is made possible by the formation of its parts. Alluding to note 4 above, the bad sense of infinity is associated with the abstract universal in that this (for Hegel) incomplete conceptualization of a universal is abstracted from experience. The two concepts respectively, refer to the scholastic principles of a *totum* and a *compositum*.

Therefore, what can be read in a sense as a limitation on our understanding, can also be turned on its head-providing a much more positive epistemological model; a model that recognizes the "tendencies" of the ages. Schlegel himself addresses the ironic limitations of the Kantian model and claims of its paradigmatic relationship to other philosophies, such as those of Reinhold and later Fichte "I consider the *Theory of Knowledge*, for example, to be merely a tendency, a temporary venture like Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* which I myself might perhaps have a mind to continue (only rather better) and then bring to completion;" (pp. 263-64). The continuation is of course necessary due to the boundless nature of the romantic project, as is the ironic romantic "completion" of the project, which is then immediately displaced by the list of philosophers who have "stood on the shoulders" (p. 264) of others before them; emphasizing the infinite (and paradigmatic) nature of what for Maurice Blanchot, (as outlined below), is the philosophical "discontinuity or difference as form"—a romantic formalism—an open-ended dialectic without a telos.

Romantic and surrealist formalism

The relationship of the *Avant Garde* and more precisely Surrealism to early German Romanticism in general has been explored at length most famously by works of Benjamin and Blanchot; however, more recently by Bernstein (2006) and Cunningham (2005). Cunningham has characterized this relationship in terms of contesting temporalities, forcing the reader and critic to reexamine the whole process and construction of historicism by reimagining Romanticism's relationship to Hegel and its relationship towards Surrealism, and by extension the whole notion of an historically encapsulated *avant-garde*. For Cunningham, the contestatory tensions within the Romanticism of the younger Friedrich Schlegel translate as the contestatory temporal tensions inherited by the surrealist project—tensions that enable us to reread the relationship of Bataille and Breton and their proximity to

Hegel—as well as characterising tensions within the surrealist oeuvre and current reception of the movement. Cunningham writes:

> Yet the tendency to read Hegel (knowingly or otherwise) back into Romanticism—by no means unique to Breton—might also be read in another way, and it is this, in the light of recent work on Romanticism, that I want to pursue below. At stake here would be the extent to which one reads Romanticism *itself* (as opposed to Idealism) as actually regarding it as "possible to restore unity to what the modern world increasingly separates" (Bowie). Now, a counter- reading of Schlegel that stresses the self-consciousness of an essential "incompletion" or "failure" figured by *irony* and *the fragment* is one that runs through the readings of Benjamin and Blanchot—readings that have in recent times produced a large body of secondary commentary. It is not my intention to add to this here. Nonetheless, I do want to draw attention to the fact that both Benjamin and Blanchot also wrote (affirmatively) on *surrealism*, and, in doing so, implied a rather different way of thinking the Romantic inheritance of this movement (as well as of the avant- garde in general), which I want to explore in the latter part of this essay. Of primary importance here will be the possible forms of non-utopian*ist* futurity that, against the grain of its conventional reception, both thinkers seek to uncover in Breton's surrealism. (p. 54).

Bowie's point, which is alluded to above, is in actual fact that the romantic programme reflects the diffuse nature of the tensions inherent in post-Kantian modernity— tensions that are not at all reducible to the sort of totalizing programme envisaged by the Idealists [7]. Bowie claims of the difference between the Idealist

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[7] The whole idea of a philosophical split between the Jena romantics and the Idealists which I have taken as given in this essay, has in fact been contested by Frederick Beiser. The position of a difference between the two schools is one that has recently been debated between Beiser and Manfred Frank. While thinkers such as Frank and Bowie have assumed this position (although in his later work Bowie follows Frank's line less closely), Beiser argues for

programme as outlined in the (*SP*) "Oldest System Programme of German Idealism" (1795/6?), Schelling's (*STI*) *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) and the romantic programme for aesthetics:

> The initial proximity of the Idealist and Romantic conception is apparent in the fact that Friedrich Schlegel's *Discourse on Mythology* (1800) seems to rely upon a similar relationship between art and mythology to that indicated in the *SP* and the *STI*. However, Schlegel begins to break with a central assumption of the SP. He thereby already suggests reasons for the emergence of the notion of aesthetic autonomy, the modern idea that art is subject to only to its own necessities. Aesthetic autonomy will become particularly significant in the light of the failure to synthesise the sensuous and the theoretical in an Idealist 'new mythology.' Karl Heinz Bohrer has claimed that: 'Schlegel's *Discourse on Mythology* is precisely "new" in that the "new mythology" which it announces, as opposed to the demand of the *System Programme* and to the aesthetics of the young Schelling is expressed not "in the service of the Ideas", i.e. not a "mythology of reason"' (Bohrer 1983 pp. 56-7). The reason for this claim is that Schlegel's argument moves away from the emphasis seen in the *SP* on revolutionary demands for new forms of communication in the political public sphere. The sense that human creativity is linked to a wider *purpose* in nature here already begins to give way to an ontology of spontaneous, non-teleological creativity of the kind later to be seen in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Schlegel therefore loosens the links between aesthetics

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an integration of the two movements *against* subjectivism, claiming that the romantics *were* philosophical idealists, combining Spinozism and Leibnizian entelechy. However, their idealism, metaphysics and methodology took on a different bent to that of absolute idealists such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (2002, 2014). Frank on the other hand, takes the position that I have developed here about converging views on the nature of subjectivity, aesthetics and freedom (2004, 2014). For Frank the romantics are anti-foundationalist (as opposed to the Idealists) in the rubric of their work. Frank's work is founded upon the more recent "constellation criticism" of Dieter Henrich et al.

> and ethical goals present in Idealism. (p. 63).

It is this "spontaneous, non-teleological creativity" that I wish to argue also punctuates the tensions of Bretonian surrealism, contrasting with any political implications that were influenced by Breton's flirtations with Hegelianism, and the Idealist project in general. Schlegel posits an existential mythology that "no longer points beyond itself, exists only in the present of the engagement with the work, and is irreducible to anything else." (Bowie: 64). This autonomous nature of the romantic aesthetic is key to the tensions between the self-legislating nature of the artwork and the fact that "the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself." (p. 175), and its inability to gain access to foundational philosophical principles such as an *intellectual intuition, incorrigible knowing or the Absolute*.

However, Cunningham is correct in outlining in the iconography and aesthetics of surrealism, different temporalisations and alternative futures that feed into for example, the differences between Breton's first *Manifesto* and the second, (more political and Hegelian) *Manifesto*. Maurice Blanchot famously outlines these same tensions, between the totalising, or teleological, and the structure of fragmentary difference—as found in the original romantic programme itself—teasing out the irony in his own reception of the romantics:

> …forgetting that this manner of writing does not tend to make a view of the whole more difficult nor to slacken relations of unity, but to make possible new relations that exempt themselves from unity, as they exceed the whole [*l'ensemble*]. Naturally, this "omission" cannot be explained by the simple failing of personalities too subjective or too impatient for the absolute. It can be explained as well, at least in the original sense of the word, and more decisively, by the orientation of history that, having become revolutionary, gives highest priority to work with a view toward the whole, and committed to the dialectical search for unity. Literature, nonetheless, beginning to manifest itself to itself thanks to the romantic declaration, will henceforth entail this question—discontinuity or difference as form—a question and a task that German Romanticism, particularly that of the *Athenaeum*, not only adum-

> brated but already clearly formulated before passing them on to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future. (p. 172)

Implicit in Blanchot's argument is a reference to the Hegelian-absolute idealist attitude towards ironism—or what Hegel would characterise as "bad infinity"—"personalities too subjective or too impatient for the absolute". While Blanchot acknowledges this element, he argues that there is more to the romantic argument than this assumed position. [8] He goes on to argue for the "dialectical search for unity" inherent in history itself—thus bringing an idealist bent to his discourse, before returning to the locus of the romantic position, "discontinuity or difference as form"—hence positing a *romantic formalism* in an open-ended dialectical process. For Blanchot therefore, Romanticism is still dialectical and hence unresolvable tensions inhere within the aesthetic itself.

This position of tension is also echoed by Paul de Man, who argues that the romantic irony of Schlegel encapsulates the dialectics of Fichte, which entail a play between the performativity of language and the positing of the "I", itself the intui-

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[8] It is important to point out here that although much attention has been paid to the quibbles that Hegel had with the romantics, Manfred Frank has also pointed out in recent correspondence with me that the assumption of "a debate" between Hegel and Schlegel on romantic irony was something that never actually took place. However, there was some awareness of Hegelian hostility towards Schlegelian irony, as Allen Speight points out, regarding the nature of 'The Beautiful Soul' in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It's also clear that the Schlegel brothers were at least aware of a philosophical rift between their school and Hegel's school, Speight writes: "The second advantage (of reading the section of *The Phenomenology* regarding 'The Beautiful Soul) is that it might help us to see Hegel not merely as a moralistic critic of the essentially aesthetic claims of Schlegelian irony—the dull end of the silly 'Hegel and Schlegel" poem that Friedrich's brother August wrote in later years—but as an opponent who took Schlegel more serious than is often thought." (p. 101).

tive starting point for the Fichtean dialectic. [9] In the poststructuralist work of de Man, as with Blanchot, there is a "difference as form" entailed—whereby the romantic ironist actually deconstructs the "tropology" of the Fichtean dialectical process—or in effect brings it to self-awareness through the process of the disjunctive romantic narrative; both of these normative accounts of romantic irony stress the open-ended dialectical nature of the enterprise as a whole, whilst contesting

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[9] The position regarding romantic ironism posited by de Man—and a host of other scholars— with regards to Fichte is, according to Manfred Frank, incorrect and based upon an incomplete understanding of the Jena reception of Fichte's lectures and his *Wissenschafslehre* (1794). Frank argues for a change in Anglophone scholarship in light of the more recent findings of the constellation critics. This has strong resonances when we reread de Man's "Concept of Irony" (1996), as de Man's technical description regarding the romantic appropriation of Fichtean idealism is based upon the positing of the Absolute Ego—and the *Frühromantikers*' supposedly complicit subjectivist methodological operation. Frank writes: "Consequently, subsuming early German romanticism under the project title of a so-called "Philosophy of the Subject" is inaccurate for a number of reasons. However, we have been able to recognize this only after a series of groundbreaking investigations and archival findings in the 1960s and 1970s, which include the publication of Hölderlin's "Judgment and Being" in 1961, the publication of parts of Schlegel's "Philosophical Apprenticeship" in 1963 and 1971, and, finally, the first complete and critical publication of Novalis' "Fichte Studies" in 1965. The contemporary critics of Hölderlin, Schlegel, and especially Hegel, did not know of those texts or of the letters commenting on them. Again, Dieter Henrich and his students were the first to realize the importance of these editions and findings. Thus, it became clear that although subjectivity remained a significant topic for the early romantics, this was only as a result of the critique of elementary philosophy, which convinced Fichte's students to deny the status of absoluteness to subjectivity. Instead, they considered subjectivity to be a derivative phenomenon that only becomes accessible to itself under a condition or presupposition (*Bedingung*, *Voraussetzung*), which is beyond its (subjectivity's) control. In turn, the elusiveness (*Unverfügbarkeit*) of this condition can only be clarified through the structure of self-consciousness. By choosing this path of reflection, early romanticism swiftly departed from a type of speculation that the history of ideas associates with the names of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel and is usually cataloged under the lemma 'German idealism.'" (*The Relevance of Romanticism* – 18).

the Hegelian positing of a teleological *Absolute*. More recently, Fred Rush, in explicitly comparing the Hegelian and Schlegelian dialectic, states the following:

> Romantic irony juxtaposes a definite content with the fact that it is not *defintive*, in this way obliquely indicating an unspecifiable total context forever beyond reach. While it is true that irony does not involve a contradiction involving the content of two claims, an ironic work does contrast the apparent completeness of a work or fragment with its "opposite," i.e. with its ultimate incompleteness. Ironic dialectic is historical, contextual and open-ended; Hegelian dialectic is historical, teleological and closed. (p. 189)

The aesthetic in Romanticism is autonomous—but it *formally* reflects the process of the *de-worlded* subject as it becomes phenomenologically *re-worlded*. The putative subject is forever (infinitely) in various historical contexts or situations in which, in a Heideggerian sense, he is already given over to, or *thrown*. Therefore, there are historical and contextual limits to what the subject *can actually know*. The romantic ironist *acknowledges* this through the very process of aesthetic creation, and rhetorical devices such as transcendental buffoonery, parabasis and anacoluthon.

A less normative but more descriptive analysis of the inherent tensions within the romantic surrealist "gaze" has also been outlined by Mary Ann Caws, who reads surrealist aesthetics as an inheritance and manifestation of the Baroque aesthetic. The Schlegelian paradox of "understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos" is perhaps most apposite when we examine the romantic and baroque implications of, and the tensions within, Bretonian surrealism. Caws writes of the inherent baroque tensions and their romantic precursors:

> In the baroque legacy to surrealism, there is a whiff of romanticism, the movement of which, as Andre Breton says, surrealism is the prehensile tail. In both this baroque merging of contraries and this surrealist absorption of the explosive energies of difference, the extremes of intensity reached by the passion of the poem or the painting are of romantic appeal, as is the fascina-

> tion with the ruin into which the explosion internal or external forces the art work. (p. 178)

The Bretonian concept of *convulsive beauty* is a key example of the romantic and baroque tensions found in surrealist iconography—Breton is acknowledging and by the same token attempting a transcendence of these oppositions—in a Barthesian sense creating a *punctum* that transgresses the barriers between the unconscious/ conscious, past/ future (in an arrested present): a *punctum* that supersedes the *studium* of our collective consciousness of temporality, historicity and the subject/object. [10] This aesthesis is achieved within the process through which *penetrating* vessels operate. In the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1930) Breton writes that:

> Everything tends to make us believe there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now search as we may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. (p. 273)

The semiotic points of culture are defamiliarised in the surrealist gaze, presented in an aesthetic *bricolage* that while it re-presents the *studium* of cultural discourse, opens an existential punctum for the viewing subject, dissecting binary intersections and presenting arresting, imagined futures and projected pasts into an existential present. The nature of the a-temporal, in terms of German Romantic-

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[10] Barthe's concepts of *studium* and *punctum* were first developed in his groundbreaking work on the photographic image, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981). Hal Foster also develops the usage of the term with regards surrealist imagery in his book *Compulsive Beauty* (1993) where he argues that the dialectical movement between desire and death produces an experience of *unheimlich* (the uncanny), which is a punctum of surrealism. (p. 17).

ism (in the second, less messianic sense, adumbrated by Benjamin and Blanchot), is here also encapsulated in the following fragment 22 of the *Athenaeum Fragments* of Schlegel:

> A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object. A perfect project should be at once completely subjective and completely objective, should be an indivisible and living individual. In its origin: completely subjective and original, only possible in precisely this sense; in its character: completely objective, physically and morally necessary. The feeling for projects — which one might call fragments of the future — is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction: progressive in the former, regressive in the latter. What is essential is to be able to idealize and realize objects immediately and simultaneously: to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself. Since transcendental is precisely whatever relates to the joining or separating of the ideal and the real, one might very well say that the feeling for fragments and projects is the transcendental element of the historical spirit. (p. 164)

Schlegel's fragment encapsulates the idea of projects of "fragments of the future" whilst also regressive "fragments of the past" and the essential aspect "is to be able to idealize and realize objects immediately and simultaneously." If the *studium* is the temporality of the past and future fragments, the *punctum* is immediate and simultaneous; while the verb phrase "complete them" is followed by the prepositional phrase "in part", illustrating the disjunctive nature of the experience. The final allusion to the transcendental idealism of Kant, only serves to reinforce the disjunctive conditions of existential experience and the dualistic ontology of the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*. In terms of the surrealist aesthetic, in this passage there is a sense of the immediate and simultaneous central to Bretonian surrealism. However, the almost Hegelian image of the "historical spirit" also serves to draw on imagery of the more messianic and absolute sense of futurity in Romanticism and Surrealism, clearly at play in Schlegel's philosophical aesthetic.

The tension between a historical dialectic and a frozen moment impinges upon the aesthesis of the experiential moment, reflecting Blanchot's "discontinuity or difference as form". The formalism of Romanticism that drives the tensions of the romantic, in both Schlegel's and Breton's work, is explicitly evident in this passage. The difference-as-form in Breton is evidenced by the fact that while employing psychoanalytical devices such as automatism, the found object, convulsive beauty, objective chance and the marvellous, he also developed a keen interest in the revolutionary politics of the period, and hence a fascination with dialecticians such as Hegel and Marx. As Matthew Gale notes "These goals are at once more urgent and abstract than those of the first *Manifesto*. Automatism and dream accounts had been overtaken by Breton's reading of Karl Marx and Friedrich Hegel, reflecting the socio-political circumstances of late 1929." (p. 273) In light of this political engagement, we can recognize the same tensions in the surrealist project as those in the *Frühromantiker*, who (at least explicitly in *The Athenaeum*) were dealing with the political project of the Idealists and challenging the unified subjectivity and telos of idealist thinkers such as Fichte.

Bataille's romantic materialism

As a number of theorists such as Bowie, Bernstein and Blanchot have already claimed, the direction of "discontinuity or difference as form" that I have termed 'romantic formalism' is often characterised as leading towards Nietzsche and the future. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche writes:

> Whenever Dionysiac excitements have reached a significant level, we may always sense how the Dionysiac release from the fetters of individuation is made tangible in diminution, to the point of indifference or even hostility, of political feelings; just as clearly, Apollo, the founder of states, is also the genius of the *prinicipium individuationis*… (p. 99)

Romantic formalism as inherited by the early Nietzsche takes on the form of the Dionysian rejection of the Apollonian conception of art and the phenomenological *principium individuationis*. However, as Nietzsche also writes in his final book, *Ecce Homo* (1908) this framework of Dionysus/ Apollo "smells offensively Hegelian". (p. 48) Thus, the tensions punctuating Jena Romanticism are also inherited by Nietzsche—the framework for a romantic formalism, as later outlined by Blanchot, still breathes the entelechy and movement of the dialectic. In addition, the requirement of a "release from the fetters of individuation" indicates a radical new bent for "political feelings". It is at this juncture that the work of Bataille may be brought into sharp focus and his relationship to romantic formalism can be best examined.

Bataille inherits Nietzsche's turn away from the *principium individuationis* and sets up a radically alternative surrealist practice as part of his overall materialism—through a philosophy of base materialism, economic expenditure and eroticism. This is a form of surrealism that Hal Foster has termed "de-sublimatory" as opposed to the "sublimatory" surrealism of Breton and his original group. [11]

In offering an alternative to Breton's surrealism, Bataille joined a number of dissident surrealists, such as Aragon, who split due to his continued affinity with Stalinism and Dali, (who was rejected by Breton because of his commercial links with the US). As Gale notes of Bataille's early alienation from Breton:

> He (Bataille) actively rejected what he saw as the aestheticism of Surrealism, colourfully refusing an invitation to the general meeting in March 1929 with

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[11] Foster's influential definition of both sublimatory and de-sublimatory surrealism was first outlined in *Compulsive Beauty*. Breton's more psychoanalytical form of surrealism was sublimatory, while dissident surrealists such as Bataille and Belmer would embrace heterogeneous matter as a reaction to the idealist and more oneiric aesthetic of the original group.

> the phrase 'too many fucking idealists!' Instead, in his writing of pornography (especially *Story of the Eye or L'Histoire de l'oeil*, 1928) and erudite texts he established a theory of 'heterogeneous matter', which focused on the repulsive, linking it to ritual and the communal experience of mankind. (p. 271)

Bataille also became editor of the periodical *Documents* in 1929, a journal that contrasted with the work of Breton's group, and was later joined by dissidents such as Desnos and Miro. Bataille's argument that any sense of the infinite could only be *acknowledged* through transgression and encroachment upon the liminal led to his concept of base materialist "continuity" as opposed to "discontinuity"—or the *principium individuationis*. He writes in *Eroticism*, (1957):

> It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means only continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is ultimately linked with death. (p. 13)

Bataille describes eroticism in terms of the religious, the physical and the emotional; each time the import is the same—a continuity of the necessarily embodied subject, or a de-individuation. The theory hinges on a dissolution of the self, in the form of erotic transgression and binding. For Bataille, *contra* Breton, this binding is in no way concerned with the metaphysical; his theory remains materialistic. Bataille in fact explicitly rails against idealist philosophers who partake in bourgeois politics (much as does Marx in *The German Ideology*), as he contests that they have no foundation in the "real world" of the proletariat. In his essay "The 'old mole' and the prefix *sur*", (1929-30) he invokes a sustained attack on Breton himself, while critiquing the failings of the idealist project, which he feels (in the spirit of Marx—"the old mole") must *literally* come down to earth. Bataille feels that Breton has appropriated materialist terms and concepts and given them a false elevation into the realm of the ethereal:

> The same tendency is found in contemporary surrealism, which maintains, of course, the predominance of higher ethereal values (clearly expressed by

> the addition of the prefix *sur*, the trap into which Nietzsche had already fallen with *superman*). More precisely, since surrealism is immediately distinguishable by the addition of low values (the unconscious, sexuality, filthy language, etc.), it invests these values with an elevated character by associating them with the most immaterial values. (p. 39)

Bataille grounds any foundationalist hopes in the corporeal and materialist, whereby historical revolution is determined and human nature arises. Philosophers and artists who follow idealist tendencies and recuperate the language of materiality suffer from "Icarian" pretensions. Bataille closely follows the Marxist narrative that recognises the appropriation of the idealist discourse as a perpetuation of bourgeois ideology. Further, his economics of expenditure—rooted in his materialism of base expenditure—acknowledges that as material entities we follow the same physical laws of expenditure of the natural world and this process of general economy is instanced in the true nature of our socio-political, economic and sacred world. For example, he bases the roots of our modern economic systems not on bartering, but on potlatch. [12] He also rejects the Enlightenment notions upon which (in the wake of Descartes), our modern rationalist philosophy is grounded:

> The eye, at the summit of the skull, opening on the incandescent sun in order to contemplate it in a sinister solitude, is not a product of the understanding, but instead an immediate existence; it opens and blinds itself like a conflagration, or like a fever that eats the being, or more exactly the head. And thus it plays the role of a fire in a house; the head, instead of locking up life as

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[12] In *Visions of Excess* Bataille writes: "Potlatch excludes all bargaining and, in general, it is constituted by a considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and *obligating* a rival." (121). The original requirement in exchange was not in fact bartering according to Bataille (following up on the work of Mauss) but was the need to expend; as a consequence of this, the rival would be under an obligation to do the same in the future. Potlatch was carried out in particular by the tribes of North American Indians, including the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimishian and Kwakiutl.

> money is locked in a safe, spends it all without counting, for, at the end of this erotic metamorphosis, the head has received the *electric power of points*. This great burning head is the image and the disagreeable light of the *notion of expenditure*, beyond the still empty notion as it is elaborated on the basis of methodical analysis. (p. 82)

The pineal gland is the root of consciousness in Cartesian philosophy and Bataille rejects this rationalism out of hand; he classifies the eye and consciousness as expending in unified fashion in much the same way the sun expends natural energy—an inversion of the traditional Enlightenment metaphor of the sun as the vehicle of rational knowledge.

Examining Bataille's base materialism in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the symbolic self is *necessarily* tied into bodily signification and is bounded by cultural values and expectations, which can be transgressed within the aesthetics of a discourse such as eroticism. Kristeva's theory similarly points towards a materialism and a post-dualistic conception of the self that silences the dualism of a contingent self (or soul). This instantly precludes any transcendental conception of the ego or self, which is necessarily embodied and can therefore only be "transcended" or *real-ised*, through the corporeal—or Bataille's notion of the dissolution of the *principium individuationis* through continuity. This in turn removes the post-Kantian romantic conception of the transcendental ego, which is central to romantic philosophy and feeds into the more sublimatory aesthetic of Bretonian surrealism. Elizabeth Gross writes of abjection in terms of Thanatos:

> Abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is what the symbolic must reject, cover and contain. The symbolic requires that a border separate or protect the subject from this abyss which beckons and haunts it: the abject entices and attracts the subject ever closer to its edge. It is an insistence on the subject's necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality, being the subject's recognition and refusal of its corporeality. The abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders, lines of demarcation, divisions between the clean and the unclean, the proper and improper, order and disorder. (p. 89)

Through the process of abjection, eroticism therefore transcends boundaries of the embodied self, pushing the subject into the "abyss". In *Story of the Eye* Bataille explores the transgression of boundaries through pornographic discourse and various symbols that inter-connect and cross each other. The novella centres on a boy and a girl, and their phantasmagorical erotic adventures, which involve wallowing in every base and abject material, and culminates in the sacrifice of a priest—the ultimate erotic confrontation with transgression and continuity. One instance of Bataille's incessant (and compulsive) erotic prose occurs when the young couple invoke an orgy at a party; the scene culminates thus:

> Half an hour later, when I was less drunk, it dawned on me that I ought to let Marcelle out of her wardrobe: the unhappy girl, naked now, was in a dreadful state. She was trembling and shivering feverishly. Upon seeing me, she displayed a sickly but violent terror. After all, I was pale, smeared with blood, my clothes askew. Behind me, in unspeakable disorder, brazenly stripped bodies were sprawled about. During the orgy, slinters of glass had left deep bleeding cuts in two of us. A young girl was throwing up, and all of us had exploded in such wild fits of laughter at some point or other that we had wet our clothes, an armchair, or the floor. The resulting stench of blood, sperm, urine and vomit made me almost recoil in horror, but the inhuman shriek from Marcelle's throat was far more terrifying. I must say, however, that Simone was sleeping tranquilly now, her belly up, her hand still on her pussy, her pacified face almost smiling. (p. 17)

The abject imagery transgresses the symbolic boundaries of the self and leads to discontinuity through dissolution of the self. Even the language used by Bataille is base: "A young girl was throwing up" and Simone sleeping with her "belly up, her hand still on her pussy, her pacified face almost smiling." If Bretonian surrealism had appropriated "filthy language" then Bataillean de-sublimatory surrealism was taking it back. When Breton writes of transgressive states such as that of the main heroine in *Nadja* (1928)—the narrator speaks from dramatic distance, as for example through the symbolic cage of the asylum. Bataille however de-sublimates these metaphors of distance or voyeurism—in his fantasy the young

lovers actually rescue Marcelle from a sanatorium, before Marcelle eventually commits suicide. The couple make love next to the corpse for the first time in the text—this represents the continuous in both instances—in death itself and the ensuing confrontation with and awareness of a transcendence of corporeal boundaries.

If one examines the sublimatory eroticism in Breton, one encounters extremes in the locus of desire, disembodied images and fetishised objects, whereas for Bataille these impulses are encountered more directly, in a less deictic discourse. In *Story of the Eye* images transgress, a dualistic trope is first set up and then crossed metonymically. As Roland Barthes suggests:

> The world becomes *blurred*; properties are no longer separate; spilling, sobbing, urinating, ejaculating form a *wavy* meaning, and the whole of *Story of the Eye* signifies in the manner of a vibration that always gives the same sound (but what sound?). In this way the transgression of values that is the avowed principle of eroticism is matched by—if not based on—a technical transgression of the forms of language, for the metonymy is nothing but a forced syntagma, the violation of a limit to a signifying space. It makes possible, at the very level of speech, a counter-division of objects, usages, meanings, spaces, and properties that is eroticism itself. And the thing that the play of metaphor and metonymy in *Story of the Eye* makes it possible ultimately to transgress is sex—which is not, of course, the same as sublimating it, rather the contrary. (pp. 125-6)

Bataille deploys recurrent images of the eye, eggs, the sun, etc., as a rounded phallicism; however, these paradigmatic figures work on a level of floating forms—each is associated with liquids: eggs, eyes—even the sun. As Barthes points out "the need only become a disc and then a globe for its light to flow like a liquid and join up, via the idea of a "soft lumonisity" or a "urinary liquefaction in the sky, with the eye, egg, and testicle theme". (p. 122) In the following example Bataille uses the metonymic images to transgress the normal boundaries of meaning with eggs, eyes and breasts:

> At last, one day at six, when the oblique sunshine was directly lighting the bathroom, a half-sucked egg was suddenly invaded with water, and after filling up with a bizarre noise, it was shipwrecked before our very eyes. This incident was so extraordinarily meaningful to Simone that her body tautened and she had a long climax, virtually drinking my left eye between her lips. Then, without leaving the eye, which was sucked as obstinately as a breast, she sat down, wrenching my head towards her on the seat, and she pissed noisily on the bobbing eggs with total vigour and satisfaction. (p. 34)

The meanings of the initial metaphoricity of eye/egg is given an accompanying meaning of liquidity, formlessness, continuity, liminality; then meanings are merged metonymically, giving the objects new fetishised signification in syntax such as "drinking my left eye."

In contrast, the proliferation of meaning encountered in Breton's fetishised objects is given free association—as desire, without a Bataillean grounding in corporeality—thus poems such as "Free Union" (1932) are limitless and open to the same *Sehnsucht* delineated in German Romanticism. Breton works within a series of paradigmatic images with no syntagmatic bind on the narrative; the language continually slides into new configurations. As in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the signified slides beneath the signifier. As the title of the poem suggests, there is an infinitely proliferating union, which tropes the convulsive beauty of the sliding images—the Bretonian sublime. In the poem Breton commences:

> My wife whose hair is a brush fire
> Whose thoughts are summer lightning
> Whose waist is an hourglass
> Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger
> Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first
>
> magnitude
>
> (pp. 1-5)

And the infinity of desire unravels in this fetishistic litany until the final lines that read:

> My wife with eyes full of tears
> With eyes that are purple armour and a magnetized needle
> With eyes of savannahs
> With eyes full of water to drink in prisons
> My wife with eyes that are forests forever under the axe
> My wife with eyes that are the equal of water and air and earth and fire
>
> (pp. 66-69)

The hallucinatory and oneiric imagery floods down the page, unfolding in the same fashion as Joseph Cornell's Boxes. The significations are open to infinite transformations, combining the natural with the man-made and cultural: "hair is a brush fire", "back of light", "eyes of water"; contrasted with "waist is an hourglass", "magentised needle" and "forests forever under the axe". The infinite play within these combinations echoes the open-ended dialectic of Schlegelian irony, while also encapsulating the punctum of *sublimatory* surrealist poetics.

On the other hand, for Bataille the images work within the realm of two metaphors that infect each other but are still constrained within signifying limitations. As Barthes claims "-since the narrative is enclosed within the metaphorical sphere, of which it can interchange the regions (which give it its breath) but not contravene the limits (which give it its meaning)." Bataille's de-sublimatory trope is grounded, whereas Breton's desire continually sublimates, refusing an encounter with a de-sublimatory point as the concretised point of surrealism. Hal Foster also describes the *Poupees* (1934) designed by Hans Bellmer as functioning in the same fashion as Bataille's imagery of abjection, while also working in a dissimilar fashion to Breton's trope:

> Breton approaches this transgressive eroticism only to swerve away from it, alien as it is to his sublimatory conceptions of love and art, of the integrity

> of object and subject alike. For his part, Bellmer seeks this eroticism: in his anagrammatic work he not only substitutes part-objects (the small ball may signify "breast," "head," or "leg") but also combines them in ways that render the body blurred. (His drawings further this process through complicated superimpositions.) In short, the dolls are not slipper spoons: they emerge out of a difficult dictionary of analogues-antagonisms pledged to a transgressive anatomy of desire. (p. 106)

As in Bataille, the theatre of the surreal is played out on the site of the corporeal—and is thus granted a continuity through the limits of the poetics of base materialism and eroticism—however this is not the same trope of open-ended desire expounded by Breton, which as the *prehensile tail of romanticism*, remains in an open-ended dialectical poetics. The eroticism of Bataille (and Bellmer) refuses this open-ended dialectical encounter and instead embraces what Derrida famously called a "general economy" [13] which in turn *restricts* itself in a material-

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[13] Derrida's famous essay on Bataille's reception of Hegel and his notion of negativity and *Aufhebung* adumbrates the Bataillean project of positing a subversive and un-restricted (general) economy remaining outside the confines of what Kojéve named the "Book of Hegel." Upon my reading of Bataille, his theory of heterogeneous base materialism acts as a significative (and un-restrictive) link to continuity, while also instantiating a restrictive inhibitor on the free play of symbolic signification as practiced by both the romantics and Bretonian surrealists. Derrida writes: "Pushing itself toward the nonbasis of negativity and of expenditure, the experience of the *continuum* is also the experience of absolute difference, of a difference which would no longer be the one that Hegel had conceived more profoundly than anyone else: the difference in the service of presence, at work for (the) history (of meaning). The difference between Hegel and Bataille is the difference between these two differences." (p. 333). Hegel's "difference in the service of presence, at work for (the) history (of meaning)" is a difference opposed to Bataille's "absolute difference." However, in true deconstructive fashion, Derrida also completes his own "discourse" by acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between these two "differences." At the conclusion of the essay he acknowledges that "It would be absurd for the transgression of the Book by writing to be legible only in a determined sense. It would be at once absurd, given the form of the *Aufhe-*

ism outside the infinite dialectics of romantic signification—a signification within which Bretonian surrealism and German Romanticism remain bound. In one important sense the subject-object distinction is embraced by the post-Kantian notions of Romanticism and Bretonian surrealism, whereas the Schopenhauerean *body-as rosetta* stone is embraced in the eroticism of Bataille and as such, the distinction no longer remains pertinent. Romantic irony is in Bataille superseded in what becomes, in contradistinction to Derrida's formulation, a *restricted economy* of materialist expenditure. However, this materialistic restriction on the infinitely significative play of German Romanticism and Bretonian surrealism, in turn embraces the general expenditure of corporeality and thus finds a literalised discourse within the encounters of eroticism. In Bataille's own formulation:

> Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea. (p. 25)

Romanticism, on the reading presented here, terminates in the literal blending of separate objects through the eroticised experience of the body. This is (ironically), an Hegelian conception of the *concrete universal*, as opposed to the abstract universal, or "bad infinity" of the *Frühromantiker*—or the infinitely sublimatory surrealism of André Breton.

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bung which is maintained in transgression, *and* too full of meaning for a transgression of meaning." (p. 350). Significative meaning ultimately inheres in both the negative transgressive movement of Bataille and in the Hegelian *Logic*.

Notes

1. One earlier reader of this paper argued that perhaps a comparison of Breton's work and Schlegel's experimental novel *Lucinde* (1799) would be fruitful in the overall discussion outlined here. Indeed, there would be a lot of aspects of *Lucinde* that would be germane to the discussion. However, his essay "On Incomprehensibility" and *The Fragments* give a much clearer picture of Schlegel's overall philosophical and literary-critical position. I acknowledge however, that as a literary-critical document the novel would be an interesting counterpart to analyse as an example of a self-conscious and fragmentary work that stands in relation to Bretonian surrealism—as opposed to Bataille's surrealist trope. In many respects a more formalist analysis of *Lucinde* and *Nadja* would also be useful but that would perhaps be for a different paper; this paper is an investigation of the philosophical issues raised in the aesthetics explicitly outlined by Schlegel, which also inform his literary criticism.

2. I would like to acknowledge the help of the (now retired) philosopher Manfred Frank who kindly spent time discussing a number of the complex issues adumbrated within this paper with me over a number of email exchanges.

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