

**Surrealism and its Discontents: Georges Bataille, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes,
and the 1929 Crisis of Surrealism**

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In the *Histoire du surréalisme*, Maurice Nadeau uses the phrase “the crisis of 1929” to describe the polarization of the French surrealist movement into antagonistic factions at the end of the 1920s.¹ Although the publication of André Breton’s *Second manifeste du surréalisme* in December 1929 was the most visible manifestation of this crisis, the primary factor motivating its emergence was surrealism’s political position, particularly the terse relationship between cultural endeavour and political action. In this context, the *Second manifeste* formalized the exclusion of dissident, and former surrealists who no longer adhered to the political position maintained by the faction gathered around the review *La Révolution surréaliste*.² The catalyst for the crisis, however, can be traced back to February and March 1929, to an attempt to find common ground among intellectuals close to surrealism, which culminated in a tumultuous meeting held on 11 March 1929 at the Bar du Château, a small café in Montparnasse. This meeting was divisive enough, but its effect was amplified in June by the publication of “A suivre: Petite contribution au dossier de certains intellectuels à tendances révolutionnaires,” a detailed account of events leading to the Bar du Château meeting and its immediate aftermath.³ This account appeared as a supplement to *Le Surréalisme en 1929*, the

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¹ Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth, 1973), 169.

² The *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* initially appeared as the “Second manifeste du surréalisme,” in *La révolution surréaliste* 12 (December 1929): 1-17. The tract *Un cadavre* was published in January 1930, and is reprinted in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives (1922/1969)*, José Pierre, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1980), 1:132-48. The *Second Manifesto* was published as a book in 1930, see *Second manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris, 1930), reprinted in Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (Paris, 1988), 1:775-837.

³ *Le Surréalisme en 1929* included “A suivre: Petite contribution au dossier de certains intellectuels à tendances révolutionnaires,” published as a supplement on pink paper, i-xxxii. See Bonnet’s commentary in Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, 1733-34.

special issue of the Belgian review *Variétés* edited by Breton and Paul Eluard, at a moment when the memory of the event was clearly being revised; thus its publication not only reopened the wounds of the Bar du Château meeting, but also contributed to the polarization of surrealism into antagonistic factions.

This article discusses two responses to the Bar du Château meeting included in “A suivre”: the first is by Georges Bataille, the second by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. While Bataille needs little introduction – anyone acquainted with avant-garde culture in France during the twentieth-century would at least have a passing familiarity with his reputation, perhaps best summed-up by Michel Foucault as “one of the most important writers of his century” – Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes does not have the same currency beyond specialists on dada and surrealism.⁴ However, Bataille and Ribemont-Dessaignes each occupied similar positions in the cultural avant-garde as editors of reviews with an affinity to surrealism. Ribemont-Dessaignes was the editor of *Bifur*, an avant-garde review regularly published from May 1929 to June 1931; Bataille was the editor of *Documents*, a review that appeared regularly from April 1929 to March 1931. Although neither editor was an active member of the surrealist movement, the editorial policies of *Documents* and *Bifur* were sympathetic to surrealism, and in the wake of the 1929 crisis both publications would attract former and dissident surrealists as contributors. If recent scholarship on surrealism has often turned on Bataille’s critique of surrealism – his significance has possibly eclipsed that of Breton – Ribemont-Dessaignes’s critique has not had the same resonance. This imbalance furnishes the pretext for the present argument, for at the time, circa 1929-30, Ribemont-Dessaignes’s comments better articulated the surrealists’ own understanding of the forces animating the crisis of 1929: the tension between poetry and politics, creative endeavour and political action. Bataille’s critique, by contrast, was far more provisional, and it would only gain traction in the late 1960s with the posthumous publication of his writings related to the Breton-Bataille polemic.

The prelude to the Bar du Château meeting came in the form of an unsigned letter, dated 12 February 1929, sent to seventy-three individuals associated with a number of avant-garde cultural and political reviews sympathetic to surrealism (*La Lutte des Classes*, *Le Grand Jeu*, *Distances*, *L’Esprit* and *La Révolution surréaliste*).⁵ The letter, which inquired into the possibility of pursuing some form of common action, was the latest in a series of initiatives since 1925 that sought to develop the political implications of the surrealist enterprise.⁶ The surrealists had attempted to establish a working relationship with the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) during 1926 and 1927. Breton joined the PCF in January 1927, but in the face of hostility from his fellow comrades and the internal bureaucracy of the PCF, he soon withdrew from active participation.⁷ These upheavals were considered necessary to preserve the integrity of surrealism, and although membership in the PCF became a matter of individual conscience after 1927, the question of surrealism’s political position was still an

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Présentation,” in Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1970), 1:5.

⁵ The text of the letter is included in “A suivre,” iii-iv, rpt., *Tracts surréalistes*, 1:98-99. A reproduction of the original printed letter is accessible at <www.andrebretton.fr/fr/item/?GCOI=56600100707360> (accessed 26 August 2010).

⁶ Notable here is the “Déclaration du 27 janvier 1925,” followed by the surrealists’ response to French military intervention in Morocco that culminates in “La Révolution d’abord et toujours!” See *Tracts surréalistes*, 1:34-35 and 51-64 and associated commentary; also noteworthy is *Vers l’action politique: juillet 1925 – avril 1926*, Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (Paris, 1988).

⁷ On Breton’s membership of the PCF see Polizzotti, 277-80.

important issue within the movement. In this context it is not surprising that the surrealists should have renewed attempts to define their political position in 1929.

The 12 February letter, which André Thirion would later describe as “a masterpiece of perfidy,”⁸ asked two questions:

1. Do you believe that, all things considered (importance of questions of persons, real lack of external determinations, passivity and impotence in organizing younger elements, inadequacy of any new contribution, and consequent accentuation of intellectual repression in every realm), your activity should or should not be definitively limited to an individual form?
2. If yes, will you undertake, on behalf of what might unite the majority of us, to set forth your motives? Define your position. If no, to what degree do you believe that a common activity can be continued; of what nature would it be, with whom would you choose or consent to conduct it?⁹

The goal was no longer to join the PCF, but simply to find out whether a common position could be established among groups sympathetic to surrealism. However, an affirmative answer to the first question necessarily implied that any form of collective political action was impossible; at best, surrealism would be no more than an aggregate of individual positions.

What gave this question urgency was surrealism’s growing success as an artistic and literary movement. Whereas the question of surrealism’s political position during 1926-27 had generated considerable tension within the movement, 1928 was a relatively tranquil and productive year, with major publications by Louis Aragon, Breton and Eluard, and successful exhibitions by Max Ernst and Joan Miró.¹⁰ Surrealism now risked being assimilated as another vanguard cultural movement, as the heir to Symbolism and Cubism. In this context the strategy behind the 12 February letter was to reinforce surrealism’s oppositional position, separating the aesthetic dilettantes from those committed to the movement’s political position. The group of young writers associated with *Le Grand Jeu* were of particular concern to the surrealists: although they were clearly influenced by surrealism, they considered themselves an autonomous group and did not adopt a clearly defined political position.

Le Grand Jeu was launched in June 1928 by a group of young writers around Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, René Daumal and Roger Vailland, who shared a common interest in Rimbaud’s “dérèglement de tous les sens.”¹¹ From the start, *Le Grand Jeu* was defined by surrealism: its editors were already aware of the movement and considered their own position an advance on it. The first issue opened with a “Foreword” by Gilbert-Lecomte, which outlined the “éthique nouvelle” to be discovered inside:

⁸ André Thirion, *Revolutionaries without Revolution*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York, 1975), 166.

⁹ “A suivre,” *Tracts surréalistes*, 1:98; trans., Nadeau, 190.

¹⁰ Nadeau described 1928 as “a calm year”: “In the evolution of surrealism, 1928 is a calm year.... This was the year of achievements; the publication by Breton of *Nadja* and *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, a general exhibition of surrealist works at the “Sacre du Printemps,” a Max Ernst show at Bernheim Georges. It seemed as though the era of pitched battles was over. Surrealism had finally gained *droit de cité*. It was admitted as an avant-garde movement, it had produced works which were read and seen, its audience was quite large, its influence particularly among the young was quite large.” Nadeau, 156.

¹¹ See the famous “Lettre du voyant à Paul Demeny,” 15 May 1871, in Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, Oliver Bernard, ed. (London, 1986), 10.

Le Grand Jeu is ir retrievable; it occurs only once. We want to play it at every moment of our lives. It is still “He who loses WINS.” Because winning is losing. We want to win. However, the Great game [*Grand jeu*] is a game of luck, that is to say, of dexterity, or better “grace”: the grace of God, and the grace of gestures.¹²

Le Grand Jeu would pursue a more transcendental direction than *La Révolution surréaliste*. Gilbert-Lecomte stated that it was necessary to assume “a state of complete readiness,” which could be attained by seeking “emptiness itself,” hence their “aspiration to question everything unceasingly.”¹³ This “éthique nouvelle” also led them to reject art and literature, which were now considered simply as means towards “a union of men linked by a common search.”¹⁴

Le Grand Jeu also differed from surrealism in its political ambitions. Whereas surrealism had moved from an initial anarchism towards Marxism, seeking to marry revolt to revolution, *Le Grand Jeu* was still at this earlier phase:

*We will always give all our strength to all new revolutions. Changing ministries or regimes matters little to us. It is to the act of rebellion itself that we attach a power capable of many miracles.*¹⁵

This attitude recalled Aragon’s comments in January 1925, when he described the 1917 Russian Revolution as a vague “ministerial crisis.”¹⁶ Yet whereas the surrealists soon abandoned this position to develop a more nuanced political position, Gilbert-Lecomte and the collaborators on *Le Grand Jeu* still maintained the earlier position. What they sought everywhere were “eternal instances,” and Gilbert-Lecomte concluded the “Foreword” with this claim: “It is in these moments that we will absorb all, that we will swallow God to make ourselves transparent to the point of disappearing.”¹⁷

After giving the responses to the 12 February letter due consideration, the surrealists convened a general meeting for 11 March at the “Bar du Château, 53, rue du Château (corner of rue Bourgeois).” A general letter was sent to fifty-three respondents to the 12 February letter, suggesting as a topic for discussion Trotsky’s recent expulsion from the Soviet Union.¹⁸ A number of individuals who had responded to the initial

¹² “*Le Grand Jeu* est irrémédiable; il ne se joue qu’une fois. Nous voulons le jouer à tous les instants de notre vie. C’est encore à ‘qui perd gagne.’ Car il s’agit de se perdre. Nous voulons gagner. Or, le Grand Jeu est un jeu de hasard, c’est-à-dire d’adresse, ou mieux de ‘grâce’: la grâce de Dieu, et la grâce des gestes.” Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-Propos,” *Le Grand Jeu* 1 (Summer 1928): 1.

¹³ Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-Propos,” 1. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-Propos,” 2.

¹⁵ “*Nous nous donnerons toujours de toutes nos forces à toutes les révolutions nouvelles. Les changements de ministère ou de régime nous importent peu. Nous, nous attachons à l’acte même de révolte une puissance capable de bien des miracles.*” Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-Propos,” 2. [Emphasis in original]

¹⁶ Aragon, “Communisme et Révolution,” *La révolution surréaliste* 2 (15 January 1925): 32.

¹⁷ “C’est en de tels instants que nous absorberons tout, que nous avalerons Dieu pour en devenir transparents jusqu’à disparaître.” Gilbert-Lecomte, “Avant-Propos,” 3.

¹⁸ The recipients of the first letter were Maxime Alexandre, Jean Arp, Pierre Audard, Jean Baldensperger, Jacques Baron, Pierre Bernard, Jean Bernier, Joë Bousquet, André Breton, Jean Carrive, Jean Caupenne, Victor Crastre, René Crevel, René Daumal, André Delons, Robert Desnos, Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Duhamel, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, Camille Fégy, Théodore Fraenkel, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Jean Genbach, Camille Gœmans, Arthur Harfaux, Maurice Henry, Paul Hooreman, Edouard Kasyade, Marcel Lecomte, René Magritte, Georges Malkine, Frédéric Mégret, Edouard Mesens, Joan Miró, Max Morise, Pierre Naville, René Nelli, Paul Nougé, Jacques Prévert, Man Ray, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Marco

letter “in a fashion that excluded them from participation in subsequent meetings” were not invited to the meeting.¹⁹

The meeting began calmly enough, with Raymond Queneau presenting the responses to the letter of 12 February. He classified the forty-four responses according to the respondent’s attitude towards common action – four “against,” four “for or against with reservations,” and thirty-six “for” – then proceeded to read out all the responses, beginning with those most opposed to collective action.²⁰

Breton took the floor after Queneau’s presentation. Before the issue of Trotsky’s expulsion could be discussed, Breton stated it was necessary to examine the degree of moral qualification of each person present at the meeting.²¹ At this point the real purpose of the meeting clearly emerged. The question of collective action presupposed an alliance of individuals who were not only politically committed but also possessed a sufficient degree of moral integrity. In effect Breton hijacked the meeting, diverting attention away from the issue of Trotsky’s expulsion and towards the conduct of contributors to *Le Grand Jeu*. They were accused of being anarchists (preferring the murderer Henri Landru to the political activists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti), making excessive use of the word “Dieu” in their writings, and for their inept handling of the “Ecole normalien” affair.²² To compound matters further, one of the editors, Roger Vailland, who worked as a journalist for *Paris-Midi*, had written two articles praising the actions of Jean Chiappe, the Paris Préfet de police.

The Ecole Normale Supérieure affair referred to a petition against military preparedness which had been circulated among students in 1928. Gilbert-Lecomte was criticized for his handling of the affair, particularly his failure to keep a copy of the petition:

That the students sign a text, and then disavow their signature; that they dare not risk publication of what they thought, nothing should surprise us there – are they not students of one of the great bourgeois colleges? What is serious, what is likely to make one doubt the sincerity of the feelings they express, is that these intellectuals, who seek to define themselves on the revolutionary level, like certain collaborators of *Le Grand Jeu*, had the said document in their hands, and without even taking a copy simply returned it to their *camarades* at the Normale.²³

Ristitch, Georges Sadoul, Emile Savitry, Josef Sima, Yves Tanguy, André Thirion, Tristan Tzara, Roger Vailland, Albert Valentin, and Pierre Vidal; the second letter was addressed to Pierre Audard, René Daumal, André Delons, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Arthur Harfaux, Maurice Henry, Josef Sima, and Roger Vailland. “A suivre,” 101-102.

¹⁹ The following individuals were excluded: Georges Altman, Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Jean-André Boiffard, Monny de Bouilly, Hubert Dubois, Francis Gérard, Paul Guitard, Norbert Gutermann, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Leiris, Georges Limbour, André Masson, Pierre de Massot, Pierre Morhange, Pascal Pia, Francis Picabia, Georges Politzer, André Souris, Roland Tual and Roger Vitrac. “A suivre,” 102.

²⁰ “A suivre,” 104.

²¹ “Plusieurs questions préalables sont à résoudre: il y va des droits que chacun peut avoir de prendre position en pareille matière. A l’assemblée de se prononcer d’abord sur le degré de qualification, morale ou autre, mais sans doute morale, de chacun. Ce degré de qualification de chacun est fonction de ce qu’on peut savoir, d’ores et déjà, de son activité. Il implique la stricte considération du rapport qui existe entre les manifestations objectives de l’activité de chacun et ce qu’on sait de chacun en dehors de ces manifestations.” “A suivre,” 117.

²² “A suivre,” 119-20.

²³ “Que des normaliens signent un texte et renient leur signature, qu’ils n’osent s’exposer au risque que comporte la publication de ce qu’ils ont pensé, il n’y a rien là pour nous surprendre – ne s’agit-il pas d’élèves d’une des grandes écoles bourgeoises? – mais, ce qui est grave, ce qui est de nature à faire douter

Gilbert-Lecomte acknowledged his failing in the situation, particularly how it undermined confidence in his actions. Breton then returned to the issue of the *Le Grand Jeu*'s collective response to the 12 February letter: although Gilbert-Lecomte claimed that *Le Grand Jeu* expressed a unanimous collective position, Breton did not share his confidence.²⁴ If the Ecole normale affair already demonstrated a lack of political acumen, Breton raised the ante by focusing on the activities on Roger Vailland, who worked as a journalist for *Paris-Midi*. In particular, he focused on two articles from September 1928, "Le Souvenir de Guynemer" and "L'Hymne 'Chiappe-Martia.'"²⁵ The second of these celebrated a musical tribute to Jean Chiappe, the Paris Préfet de police, sympathetic to Action Française and other extreme right-wing groups. Vailland had compared Chiappe to "a grandfather who showers his grandchildren with gifts," and unwisely defended him as "purifier of our capital." The latter expression raised vocal protestations from those present, since it appeared to support the activities of a notorious opponent of communism. At this point the meeting collapsed into disarray: Ribemont-Dessaignes objected to the inquisitorial tenor of the discussion and exited; André Thirion, one of the more politically engaged of the participants, then declared that he was unable to remain in the same room as an "apologist for Chiappe" and also left.²⁶

Both the "Ecole normalien" affair and Vailland's journalism undermined the surrealists' confidence in the collective position of *Le Grand Jeu*. Although Gilbert-Lecomte defended Vailland, noting the age of the articles in question, and indeed Vailland appeared ready to disown them, there were doubts about the possibility of collective action. Breton suggested that Vailland write a letter to be published in the next issue of *Le Grand Jeu* in which he would formally disavow "L'Hymne 'Chiappe-Martia.'"²⁷ Although Vailland initially acquiesced to Breton's criticism, the meeting disbanded before reaching any definite resolution; Vailland later decided to defend his actions, thus exacerbating the rift with the surrealists.²⁸

In the light of the above account of the meeting, I will now consider the reporting of Bataille's and Ribemont-Dessaignes's response to the 12 February letter and subsequent meeting in "A suivre." In many ways "A suivre" exemplifies the tension between memory and history in surrealism, transforming the memory of an actual event (the Bar du Château meeting) into a *prise de position* that would not only inscribe the meeting within the history of surrealism, but also further polarize the surrealist

du sérieux des sentiments même qu'ils expriment, c'est que des intellectuels, qui tendent à se définir sur le plan révolutionnaire, comme certains collaborateurs du *Grand Jeu*, aient eu entre les mains le document dont nous parlons sans en prendre même copie et qu'ils l'aient purement et simplement rendu à leurs camarades de Normale." "A suivre," 120.

²⁴ "Breton déplore à ce sujet que le désir de faire front des collaborateurs du *Grand Jeu* empêche d'apprécier diversement, comme cependant il convient, l'activité des individus. Il lui est impossible de faire une égale confiance à tous les membres de ce groupement sur une simple déclaration de solidarité de leur part." "A suivre," 122.

²⁵ "Le Souvenir de Guynemer," *Paris-Midi*, 11 September 1928; "L'Hymne 'Chiappe-Martia,'" *Paris-Midi*, 15 September 1928. Vailland would adopt a pseudonym in October 1928, henceforth signing his articles Georges Omer. See Roger Vailland, *Lettres à sa famille* (Paris, 1972), 148.

²⁶ "A suivre," 123-24.

²⁷ "A suivre," 124.

²⁸ See Vailland's letter to Breton, cited "A suivre," 124-25.

movement into antagonistic factions.²⁹ It performs a double function: first, it provides a detailed narrative of the circumstances leading up to the 12 February letter and the subsequent Bar du Château meeting; second, this narrative is embellished by primary source documentation, such as correspondence and statements exchanged between the participants, which contributes to the aura of objective, historical accuracy. However, “A suivre” was signed by Aragon and Breton, so inevitably its putative objectivity was considered partial, especially among those intellectuals whose “moral qualification” was in question.³⁰

Although Bataille was excluded from the 11 March meeting, his response to the 12 February letter was the first to be read out at the meeting, since it exemplified the “tone of the most vocal opponents” of collective action. As quoted in “A suivre,” Bataille’s response was “too many idealistic pains in the arse (*Beaucoup trop d’emmerdeurs idéalistes*).”³¹ Perhaps Bataille explained himself at greater length in his original letter, but if so, these comments were not included. What is significant here is that this comment could suffice to encapsulate his response; indeed, his recourse to invective was sufficient to dismiss his position. Admittedly Bataille was a minor figure within surrealism at this point: he was associated through friendship with André Masson and Michel Leiris and known as the author of *Histoire de l’oeil*, an erotic novel anonymously published in 1928 – the first issue of *Documents* would not be published until April 1929. Yet this response is also symptomatic of Bataille’s inability or unwillingness to articulate a cogent public critique of surrealism during the interwar years. The majority of his comments published during his life would exhibit a marked ambivalence towards surrealism; his more strident declarations would remain unpublished until after his death in 1962 – a point to which I will return.

Whereas Bataille’s response had been included among those opposed to any collective action, Ribemont-Dessaignes was placed among the four respondents who were classed “for or against, with reservations.” For Ribemont-Dessaignes the problem revolved around the relation between revolt and revolution. Although the creative imagination can nourish itself in the upheaval of social relations wrought by revolution, these relations rapidly coalesce into a new social order, inevitably hostile to the imagination. In this light Ribemont-Dessaignes was sceptical of the likely success of collective action:

Do I have confidence? No. There is nothing behind us, or, if you want, before us. The only open door is that of *Le Grand Jeu*. We are all anarchists. I don’t see why because of its past we should be scared of this word. All we would need is to give it a little more grandeur. What will a new meeting reveal? Even if it falls short, even if it results in us all falling on our backsides, the show is still worth the

²⁹ Subsequent historians, beginning with Maurice Nadeau, have drawn on the publications of the surrealists as a key primary source; indeed, many a memoir of surrealism had been written informed by this documentation.

³⁰ According to Thirion “A suivre,” was written by Aragon, yet since it was signed by both Aragon and Breton, they must be considered joint authors (*Revolutionaries Without Revolution*, 169). Further, this type of self-critique had a long history within surrealism, and indeed would be one issue that distanced the *Littérature* group from Tristan Tzara at the time of the Barrès trial in 1920. See Marguerite Bonnet, *André Breton: Naissance de l’aventure surréaliste* (Paris, 1975); and Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris, 1965).

³¹ In his translation of Nadeau’s *Histoire du surréalisme*, Richard Howard translated this phrase as “Too many fucking idealists,” a phrase that has stronger connotation than the original French, and which sacrifices the scatological connotation of Bataille’s comment (172). Howard’s translation is frequently preserved in subsequent English-language scholarship on surrealism.

effort – all this said with no intention of humour.³²

In supporting *Le Grand Jeu* Ribemont-Dessaignes was placing himself offside from the outset. Unlike the editors of *Le Grand Jeu*, however, Ribemont-Dessaignes had the benefit of age and experience. He was born in 1884, and his history within the Parisian avant-garde dated to the years before the First World War, when he was involved with the Puteaux Cubists and the Duchamp brothers, before participating in the postwar manifestation of dada in Paris.³³ Although he respected and admired Breton and Aragon, he was not intimidated by their methods and was prepared to confront them by defending *Le Grand Jeu* during the meeting. When Breton asked what each of the editors of *Le Grand Jeu* thought of Vailland's article on Chiappe, in effect isolating Vailland and undermining the unity of the *Grand Jeu* group, Ribemont-Dessaignes objected to this line of questioning and defended Vailland's right to earn a living, adding that even those who condemn Vailland would probably find something "reprehensible from a revolutionary point of view" in their own past conduct, should they truly search their conscience. He then stormed out of the meeting in frustration at the tenor of proceedings.

The next day Ribemont-Dessaignes, in response to his dissatisfaction with the outcome of the meeting, wrote a lengthy letter to Breton. The objections expressed the previous night only questioned the procedure, which left him with "a sad impression":

So this is what your mutual deliberation comes to: judgement, judgement, judgement, and of what nature! Indeed, have you ever done anything else? Has every collective attempt ever been anything but perpetual personal problems, and generally of schoolboy pettiness?... I strongly oppose the style you have adopted, the bad faith that prevailed during the meeting in the Rue du Château, and the badly organized (or efficient, if one adopts a '*commissariat de police*' viewpoint) ambush concealed under the Trotsky pretext.³⁴

Ribemont-Dessaignes then accused Breton of using counter-revolutionary tactics, which would only undermine surrealism, and demonstrate its political impotence:

I consider the goal of this so-called purification [sic], this so-called verification in which you engage is absolutely counter-revolutionary. It condemns you to the impotence that is the surrealist movement's trademark. Indeed, it justifies the PCF's opinion of the movement!... Rather than destroying counter-revolutionary beliefs, it is you yourself that you destroy, sadly and sterilely. It would certainly be better to compel Poincaré's suicide or to wipe the smile off M. Doumergue's face.³⁵

³² "Ai-je confiance? Non. Il ne vient rien derrière nous, ou si vous voulez devant nous. La seule porte ouverte est celle du *Grand Jeu*. Nous sommes tous des anarchistes. Je ne vois pas pourquoi à cause de son passé nous aurions peur de ce mot. Le tout serait de lui donner un peu plus de grandeur. Mais voilà: une nouvelle réunion de nous tous va-t-elle en révéler? Même si c'est le contraire, et si à sa suite nous devons nous retrouver tous le cul par terre, le spectacle vaut la peine qu'on l'organise, ceci dit sans intention de rire." "A suivre," 106.

³³ See Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*.

³⁴ "A suivre," 126; trans., Nadeau, 173.

³⁵ "Je considère que la besogne de soi-disant épuration [sic], de soi-disant mise au point [sic] à laquelle vous vous livrez, est absolument contre-révolutionnaire. Elle vous condamne à l'impuissance qui est la marque du mouvement surréaliste. Elle justifie l'opinion que l'on a de ce mouvement dans le parti communiste.... Au lieu de détruire les mentalités contre-révolutionnaires, c'est vous-même que vous

Ribemont-Dessaignes raises an important point here: the difference between politics and cultural endeavour. Whereas cultural endeavour is all about one's attitudes and beliefs, politics is a far more Machiavellian activity, based on strategic alliances and compromise. Within this world the attitudes of the surrealists count for little. All the Bar du Château meeting could achieve was the destruction of surrealism itself, while the figures who held real political power – Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré and President Gaston Doumergue – continued to exercise that power.

Indeed, Ribemont-Dessaignes accuses Breton of hypocrisy in condemning *Le Grand Jeu* on political grounds, since Breton's own achievements have been as a writer and poet. Breton's use of revolutionary rhetoric only masks his own commitment to literature. Ribemont-Dessaignes sees an irreparable gulf between surrealism and communism. Although he supports the proletarian revolution, intellectuals such as himself can only play an insignificant part, since it is the proletariat who will make the revolution. The prospect of collective action is not something that can be imposed on a group of individuals, but one that emerges spontaneously under the force of circumstances. In this context the condemnation of *Le Grand Jeu* is little more than an academic dispute pursued by "bureaucrats of purity and judgement," and he concludes by comparing the role Breton assumed to a petty dictator, a "Stalin of short stature."³⁶

Ribemont-Dessaignes would nuance this position in "Politique," an essay published in the second issue of *Le Grand Jeu*, which came out simultaneously with *Le Surréalisme en 1929*.³⁷ "Politique" would largely reiterate and refine the position he outlined in the letter he wrote after the 11 March meeting, and cited in "A suivre." While I do not intend to address "Politique" in the present article, I do want to conclude by commenting on Bataille's relation to surrealism during 1929, particularly in light of his subsequent reputation as the leading dissident surrealist. The review *Documents*, which was largely edited by Bataille, attracted a number of former and disaffected surrealists during 1929, and for this reason has long been seen as a forum for dissident surrealism.³⁸ Yet *Documents* did not advance an explicit critique of surrealism during 1929. Bataille's own writings were focused on the pervasive influence of idealism within western culture, a target far broader than surrealism, and essays like "The Language of Flowers," "Materialism," "Eye" or "The Big Toe" only questioned surrealism to the degree that it was complicit with idealism.³⁹ Bataille only felt compelled to address surrealism in December 1929, after Breton alluded to *Documents* in the preface he wrote for Salvador Dalí's first Paris exhibition and then explicitly attacked Bataille in the *Second Manifesto* – and while Bataille did not mention

détruisez, dans la stérilité la plus désolante. Il serait certainement plus drôle de rendre l'existence de Poincaré impossible et de l'obliger au suicide, ou de figer une fois pour toutes le sourire de M. Doumergue." "A suivre," 126.

³⁶ "A suivre," 128.

³⁷ Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, "Politique," *Le Grand Jeu* 2 (Spring 1929): 57-63.

³⁸ On *Documents* see Michel Leiris, "From the Impossible Bataille to the Impossible Documents," in *Brisées: Broken Branches*, trans. Lydia Davis (San Francisco, 1989), 237-47; Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London, 1978); Denis Hollier, "The Use-Value of the Impossible," trans. Liesl Ollman, *October* 60 (Spring 1992): 3-24; Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents* (Cambridge, 2006).

³⁹ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1983), 10-23.

surrealism by name, he did include a number of direct (if unacknowledged) citations from Breton's Dalí preface.⁴⁰

Although Bataille still addressed surrealism indirectly in "The Lugubrious Game," he introduced the theme of revolutionary violence as an alternative to the constraints of western culture. This theme represented the emergence of a stronger political stance in Bataille's writing. The revolution required acts of an unpremeditated and violent "bestiality," not poetic reverie.⁴¹ According to Bataille, the forms of creative endeavour encouraged by the avant-garde represented examples of procrastination and postponement, loopholes that allowed the surrealists to defend high ideals while deferring action. Rather than leading to revolution, surrealism merely pacified revolt, channelling discontent into the artistic and poetic practices that the bourgeoisie tolerated, despite the occasional scandal.⁴²

Bataille discovered a historical example of authentic revolutionary commitment in the life of the Marquis de Sade:

A few days before July 14, 1789, the Marquis de Sade, for years doomed to rage in his cell in the Bastille, excited the crowd around the prison by screaming insanely into the pipe that was used to carry off his filthy water – an insane cry that was doubtless the most far-reaching ever to strain a larynx. This scream is reported historically as follows: "People of Paris," shouted Sade, "they are killing the prisoners!" Practically the scream of an old *rentière* with her throat slashed at night in a suburb. It is known that Governor Launay, justifiably frightened by the riot that was starting to explode, had the frenzied prisoner transferred to another prison; this however did not prevent his head, only a few hours later, from terrifying the town on the end of a pike.⁴³

The figure of Sade represented a concrete example of the type of violence needed to catalyse a revolutionary situation. In the light of Sade's example, surrealism's limits became evident. Bataille was not advocating creative endeavour, but something akin to terrorist violence that would polarize society into antagonistic camps. Whereas Ribemont-Dessaignes was content to limit his activity to the cultural field, and Breton attempted to assume a position between politics and culture, Bataille emphasized the distance between the cultural milieu and that of revolutionaries erecting barricades.

⁴⁰ Bataille's reference to the "wonderland [*terre de trésors*]" of poetry and "mental windows opening wide [*s'ouvrir ... les fenêtres mentales toutes grandes*]" were direct allusions to phrases in Breton's preface. Bataille, "The Lugubrious Game," in *Visions of Excess*, 29-30. André Breton, "Première exposition Dalí," in *Œuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (Paris, 1992), 2:308.

⁴¹ "To halfheartedness, to loopholes and desires that reveal a great poetic impotence, one can only oppose a black rage and even an incontestable bestiality; it is impossible to get worked up other than as a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout – and whose repugnant voracity is unstoppable." Bataille, "The Lugubrious Game," 24.

⁴² There are two points to add here: first, it may be objected that some of these scandals were political in character, particularly the Saint Pol-Roux Banquet scandal and the *L'Age d'Or* scandal. However, in both cases the events only assumed a political character for the extreme right, who in many ways occupied a position as marginal as the surrealists. Second, Bataille was engaging with a longstanding debate on the relation between surrealism and revolutionary political action, advanced at great length by Pierre Naville in 1926-27. See Pierre Naville, *La révolution et les intellectuels: Que faire les surréalistes* (Paris, 1926) and "Mieux et moins bien," *La Révolution surréaliste*, nos 9-10 (October 1927): 54-61. Breton responded to the former in "Legitime défense," *La Révolution surréaliste* 8 (December 1926): 30-36, and the surrealists responded collectively to the latter in *Au grand jour*, reprinted in *Tracts surréalistes*, 1:67-77.

⁴³ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 28.

In the wake of the *Second Manifesto*, Bataille and Ribemont-Dessaignes would both contribute to *Un Cadavre*, the tract published by disaffected surrealists in response to Breton's *Second Manifesto*.⁴⁴ Bataille's most detailed response to surrealism, however, would remain unpublished during his life: "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *sur* in the Words *surhomme* and *Surrealist*" was written as a review of the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, intended for *Bifur*, the quarterly edited by Ribemont-Dessaignes.⁴⁵ The fact that it remained unpublished is significant, since it indicates his critique of surrealism never gained traction during the interwar years.⁴⁶

Although a caricature of the Breton-Bataille polemic has now become a staple of scholarship on surrealism, the familiarity of these writings has overshadowed the provisional – indeed private – character of Bataille's critique. Apart from his contribution to *Un Cadavre*, Bataille's published comments on surrealism assume a restrained, guarded tone; his disquiet is to be read between the lines of essays on other topics.⁴⁷ Whereas Ribemont-Dessaignes's critique coalesced into a set of identifiable positions, the precise terms of Bataille's critique were far more elusive. Its time would not come for another forty years, when the unpublished writings related to the Breton-Bataille polemic would find its audience among the readers of *Tel Quel*.⁴⁸

The writings of Ribemont-Dessaignes and Bataille on the crisis of 1929 indicate two different responses to the tension surrealism sought to maintain between cultural endeavour and political action. Although this tension was a distinctive feature of surrealism during the interwar years, it would repeatedly spur dissatisfaction within the movement; since the language of moral integrity framed this issue, it inevitably degenerated into a question of personal loyalty. The opposition of culture and politics was too broad to articulate the light and colour of the surrealist enterprise. Nonetheless, Ribemont-Dessaignes and Bataille both recognized an affinity in surrealism; and their criticism helps illuminate the contours of the movement. For Ribemont-Dessaignes what was valuable in surrealism was the manifestation of the creative imagination; this experience of freedom could only manifest itself through the avant-garde's internal opposition to cultural order, as a trace of the negativity and refusal of the individual. For Bataille, by contrast, it was not the trace but the lacerating immediacy of negativity itself that was valuable; this experience could only be domesticated when it assumed form as culture.⁴⁹ What was valuable in surrealism, meanwhile, was not the creative imagination, but the acute experience of freedom itself, an experience manifested on a

⁴⁴ See Ribemont-Dessaignes, "Papologie d'André Breton," and Bataille, "Le lion châtré," in *Tracts surréalistes*, 1: 133-34 and 145-46.

⁴⁵ Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *sur* in the Words *surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*," *Visions of Excess*, 32-44.

⁴⁶ Cf., Denis Hollier considers the non-publication of the essay as "effective even if indirect social censorship." *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, 1989), 104.

⁴⁷ Perhaps his most nuanced response to surrealism is to be found in "Base materialism and Gnosticism," an essay that nowhere names surrealism, but establishes an ironic counterpoint to Breton's call for the "veritable occultation of surrealism" in the *Second Manifesto*. In the deviations of Gnosticism, at the time known principally through the polemical writings of the Church fathers, Bataille perhaps recognized an echo of Breton's own comments in the *Second Manifesto*.

⁴⁸ See Philippe Forest, *Histoire de Tel Quel: 1960-1982* (Paris, 1995); Patrick ffrench, "Documents in the 1970s: Bataille, Barthes and 'Le gros orteil,'" *Papers of Surrealism* 7 (2007): 1-17. <www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/acrobat%20files/articles/ffrenchpdf.pdf> (accessed 31 August 2010).

⁴⁹ On Bataille's ambivalent relation to culture see Raymond Spiteri, "Georges Bataille and the Limits of Modernism," *E-maj* 4 (2009): 1-27. <www.melbournjournal.unimelb.edu.au/E-MAJ/pdf/issue4/spiteri.pdf> (accessed 31 August 2010).

political level in revolutionary violence. In effect, he discounted precisely the aspects of surrealism Ribemont-Dessaignes valorised. However, Bataille could not maintain this position with impunity, and he struggled to articulate a cogent or coherent public critique of surrealism within the terms available at the time. The instability of this position gave his comments on surrealism a provisional character, and during the interwar years his influence would be muted.