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Breton, Bataille and Lacan's Notion of "Transgressive" Sublimation

Klemens E. James

University of Manchester, klem@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Surrealism has sometimes been characterised as a movement in flight from reality, attempting to evade the base and the material by immersing itself in oneiric realities and the "world-rubble of the unconscious" (Adorno). Indeed, Surrealism is frequently equated with an idealising "sublimatory" tendency within modernist art which contrasts with the deconstructive and "desublimatory" stance of George Bataille, a dissident surrealist known for his transgressive writings on eroticism. Even in their conceptualisation of love, the surrealists are frequently considered to be too idealising – and all the more so in the case of their leading spokesman, André Breton. In this paper I will attempt to present an alternative view of Surrealism which shows that its explorations of love do have a transgressive basis. Specifically I will use Lacan's theory on sublimation (which posits moral law as a regulator of desire) to show how regulation and interdiction (as promoted by restrictive social mores and religious repression) exacerbate desire. I will argue that it is precisely such interdiction that both Breton and Bataille revolt against in their writings and which inform their views of eroticism and love.

Keywords

transgressive, notion, lacan, sublimation, bataille, breton

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Breton, Bataille and Lacan's Notion of "Transgressive" Sublimation

KLEM JAMES
University of Manchester

Associating the phenomena of transgressive love and sublimation or considering the former an expression of the latter is not immediately obvious. In the seventh seminar of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* however, Lacan posits an alternative to the Freudian view of sublimation as a desexualising cathexis into creative or scientific works¹ of "a higher social or ethical valuation" (Freud, 2001 [1922-23], p.256). He characterises it not as a re-direction of the libido to a non-sexual object à la Freud,² but as a change in the position of the love object within the structure of the subject's fantasy life. For Lacan, this object (either a person or a thing) has the capacity to be raised up and transfigured metaphorically within the mind; furthermore, the subject's propensity to exalt the other in this way necessarily increases to a backdrop of prohibition. Sublimation therefore has the potential to defy those boundaries established by Christian conservative ethics.

Although such irreverent ideas might suggest more of an obvious kinship with the transgressive philosopher, Georges Bataille,³

¹ In "Civilisation and Its Discontents" Freud defined sublimation as that which "makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life" (2001 [1930], p.97).

² "The most important vicissitude which an instinct can undergo seems to be sublimation; here both object and aim are changed, so that what was originally a sexual instinct finds satisfaction in some achievement which is no longer sexual" (Freud, 2001 [1922-23], p.256).

³ Bataille who started his career as a peripheral figure within Surrealism, distanced himself from the movement in the late 1920s to create his own journal, *Documents*. He was subsequently followed by a number of important figures from within Surrealism (Dénos, Leiris, Masson) who had originally rallied around André Breton, though deserted him for both personal and ideological reasons. Later on in his career, Bataille did however state that he had always considered himself to be the "old enemy *from within*" Surrealism (Bataille, 1994 [1946], p.49).

generally considered the arch-nemesis of surrealist leader, André Breton, I now intend to show that, when applied to the writings of both men, the Lacanian model of sublimation reveals a common understanding of desire as predicated upon transgression. I hope therefore to cast a new light upon a relationship which has generally been characterised as antagonistic, with Breton being equated with a sublimatory, idealising modernism and Bataille as the antithetical desublimatory voice which took him to task for evading material concerns. Moreover, the case for using Lacanian theory to offer a new understanding of Surrealism seems particularly strong when we consider that Lacan himself collaborated with the surrealists on the journal *Minotaur* in the 1930s, in which time he became greatly influenced by their writings on psychoanalysis and paranoia; and that he later set about expounding his own theory of sublimation with reference to their works.

One of the key terms with which Lacan defined sublimation was “creation *ex nihilo*” (1992 [1959-60], p.115-27), meaning “creation from nothing” and which in his writings plays with the idea of creating meaning out of empty spaces, whether this is the conception of a painting on an empty canvas; the shaping of a vase on a potter’s wheel; the writing of poetry in the absence of love or the investment of meaning in a desired and/or poeticised woman (whose “empty space” is read by him as the vagina) (1992 [1959-60], p.162-63).

For Lacan, a striking example of creation *ex nihilo* was to be found in the works of the courtly love poets of medieval France, the *troubadours*, who frequently treated the exalted female love object not only as an intangible romantic ideal but also as the focus of intimate sensual (and sexual) contact which represented a transgression of boundaries; for their works of courtly poetry thematised all forms of absences and holes. Quoting one such poet, Arnaud Daniel, Lacan reveals the stipulations of one particular Lady to her courtier, which included “putting his mouth to her trumpet” (1992 [1959-60], p.162) – a reference which “breaches the boundaries of pornography to the point of scatology” (1992 [1959-60], p.161) – though above all shows the vagina as reflective of a desire with an emptiness at its core.

Within *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan also identifies a number of surrealist poets – Breton, Péret and Éluard – who belong to the same lineage as the troubadours and whose works are similarly cited as examples of creation *ex nihilo*. Like Arnaud Daniel, their interest was in writing about love not merely as a union of souls but also as

an erotic union of bodies.⁴ The prodigious value the surrealists attached to the experience of what might be termed free (or elective) “terrestrial” love, with its emphasis on the personal and the sexual, and unencumbered by the constraints of marriage, certainly placed them at the antipodes of the religious orthodoxy of French society during the interwar years, for whom the enticements of such love were taboo.

In opposition to such a view, these enticements were placed at the very cornerstone of the surrealist social revolution and provided one of the prime motives to denigrate the church for its repressive influence upon the collective psyche of society. In the two manifestoes of Surrealism, Breton exhorted readers to “kill, fly faster, love to your heart's content” (1969 [1953], p.13) vituperated against “family, country, religion” (1969 [1953], p.128), promised to restore meaning the notion of love in defiance of its detractors (1969 [1953], p.181) and came to the defence of the surrealist infatuation with Sade, the hero who sought to “make the mind get rid of its chains” (1969 [1953], p.186). Breton's manifestoes were in many respects a rallying cry for citizens to break the boundaries established by a pervasive Christian conservative ethos.

From a moral perspective, Breton and the surrealists might therefore not be so remote from George Bataille as might be presumed. Even so, many critics prefer to recall only the comparatively short-lived spat between both men in the late 1920s, when as an advocate of base materialism, Bataille famously arraigned Breton for being an “Icarian” idealist (1970 [1930], p.93-109) and thus an agent of his self-undoing. It is above all the *October* critics,⁵ such as Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Denis Hollier and Yve-Alain Bois (considered by many as the foremost authority on modern art) who have characterised the polemic between these two men (and their adherents) in purely

⁴ Breton affirms for example that “it is absolutely true that carnal love is at one with spiritual love. Their reciprocal attraction must be strong enough to bring about perfect unity at once organic and psychic through their being absolutely complementary” (1969 [1953], p.301). His view might be compared with Péret's conception of love: “the conjunction of all sublimations, regardless of the path that they have taken, the locus where the spirit, the flesh and the heart come to be merged in an imperishable diamond” (my translation) / “la conjonction de toutes les sublimations, quelque voie qu'elles aient empruntée, le lieu géométrique où viennent se fondre en un diamant inaltérable, l'esprit, la chair et le cœur” (1956, p.9).

⁵ *October* is the name of a major American art journal founded in 1976 specialising in contemporary art, theory and criticism. Its editors and contributors are amongst the most renowned art critics of the English-speaking world.

oppositional terms, resorting to the clichés of Breton, the romantic sublimator, and Bataille, the advocate of “desublimation” and base materialist:

it is at this point where sublimation confronts desublimation that Surrealism breaks down, and I mean this literally: such is the stake between official Bretonian and dissident Bataillean factions circa 1929 [...].

(Foster, 1993, p.110)

It is the binarism of this view which I hope to challenge within this article; in order to accomplish this, it will be necessary to give a cursory overview of Lacanian theory, firstly to show the mechanics of how sublimation operates as “creation *ex nihilo*” and secondly to elucidate its transgressive nature. I will then consider how this theory is germane to the positions of both Breton and Bataille.

According to Lacan, when the cherished love object is adulated and elevated in sublimation (as is in the case in troubadour and surrealist poetry), this serves, albeit temporarily, to complete the subject’s existence, to relocate what Lacan terms the ego’s “prehistoric Other” (1992 [1959-60], p.56) – commonly perceived as the subject’s ‘other half’ – without which the individual labours with a certain sense of existential vacuity. Lacan terms this unspecified sense of psychic lack “*das Ding*” (the German word for “the thing”). The exact formula for sublimation given by Lacan is the raising of the object “to the dignity of *das Ding*” (1992 [1959-60], p.112) implying an undue exaltation of and overinvestment in the Other. In other words, from identifying a desirable “something” in the external world, the subject mythologises and refashions it into the signifier of its complementary Other with the implications of dreamlike romance, false hopes and emotional self-deception this entails (all forms of a vain exaltation of the Other).⁶

For Lacan, sublimation is furthermore characterised by a circular quest or detour which consists of continually recuperating and refinding the lost love object or “*das Ding*”: “it is in its nature that the object as such is lost. It will never be found again. Something is there while one waits for something better, or worse, but which one wants” (1992 [1959-60], p.52) and again “[*das Ding*] is to be found at the most as something missed. One doesn’t find it, but only its pleasurable associations” (1992 [1959-60], p. 52). This principle also evokes Bataille’s statement in *The Solar Anus* that “movement is a figure of love, incapable of stopping at a particular being, and rapidly

⁶ This for Lacan is perhaps the ultimate expression of *creation ex nihilo*.

passing from one to another" (1985 [1931], p.7). This sense of perpetual movement to relocate the lost love object is quite apparent in a number of Breton's literary works, in particular *Nadja*, *Communicating Vessels* and *Mad Love*, all three of which bear testament to its elusiveness:

I was, I say, like a man who, thinking he has done everything to conjure the fates contrary to love, has had to yield to the evidence that the person most necessary for him for a long time had retreated, that the very object that had been for him *the keystone of the material world* was lost.

(Breton, 1997 [1932], p. 68)

Such a view of love, which implies that man is unable to content himself with one love object, automatically opens the door to controversy for it effectively questions the immutability of those boundaries posited by Christian doctrine for human relationships (in other words, a life-long, monogamous commitment to a romantic and sexual partnership as consecrated through marriage). At a time, when the commandment "thou shalt not commit adultery" still had great currency in society, Lacan and the surrealists were implying that (wo)man's basic nature urges him/her to do exactly the reverse.

In the seventh seminar Lacan is indeed quite explicit about this fact. He specifies that *das Ding* is predicated upon interdiction – the love object, raised up the level to the level of *das Ding*, frequently having a prohibitive or sinful quality attached to it and being forbidden by law. Citing those laws which form the very basis of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic religions, the Ten Commandments, he states:

Is the Law the Thing? Certainly not. Yet I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn't said: "Thou shalt not covet it".

(Lacan, 1992 [1959-1960], p. 83)

This then refers to the proverbial tenet that it is the prohibition of an act that makes it more seductive. The terms "*Das Ding*" and "sin" are for Lacan kindred terms.⁷

⁷ "I believe that for a little while now some of you at least have begun to suspect that it is no longer I who has been speaking. In fact, with one small change, namely 'Thing' for 'sin' this is the speech of Saint Paul on the subject of the relations between the law and sin in the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 7, paragraph 7" (Lacan, 1992 [1959-60], p.83).

He continues by explaining that laws such as the Ten Commandments underpin communication between human beings, regulating and offsetting desire in such a way as to increase man's sense of temptation. With increased temptation comes the potential for increased pleasure. Lacan terms this pleasure *jouissance* (the French word for "climax" or extreme "pleasure"), which in the seventh seminar is characterised as the excessive excitation which results from a forbidden desire and which Lacan in his later work will bring into closer proximity with sublimation.⁸

The interdiction of *jouissance* may according to Lacan even extend to a punishment of death. To illustrate the point, he quotes Kant's categorical imperative and his example of the man who must decide between renouncing a highly pleasurable yet illicit relationship, on the one hand, and, the penalty of death for pursuing the relationship, on the other. Kant states that the man would in accordance with the categorical imperative choose to renounce the relationship (the implication being that, the alternative would, if applied on a mass scale, terminate life and annul the rule of law). For Lacan, Kant is missing the point – the very reason for illicit relationship was based on a fear of a punitive measure such as death; or as Bataille puts it: "eroticism opens the way to death" (1986 [1957], p.24).

As Lacan's own references show, many of the surrealists' works on love exhibit the hallmarks of this transgressive sublimation – in particular, an overvaluation of the love object especially when contextualised by fear, instability or the threat of death. The apogee of Breton's semi-autobiographical novel, *Mad Love* (which also reads as a treatise on love), adumbrates the consummation of his relationship with a lady (Jacqueline Lamba), whom he encounters quite arbitrarily as a stranger on the streets of Paris (though who subsequently becomes his second wife). The moment is allegorised as an ascent into the mountains and the attainment of "the sublime point", the exalted vantage point of a bucolic and sublime landscape which represents the fulfilment of one's every desire. Such a metaphoric ascent is of course reflective of an exalted love though it is clear that the poignancy of the moment would be nullified if references to their sexual communion and attendant sense of danger

⁸ The formulation of *jouissance* will become increasingly elaborate throughout Lacan's career. In the seminar "D'un AUTRE à l'autre" (English title: "From One Other to the Other" though unpublished in English), Lacan will situate sublimation at the very centre of the experience of *jouissance* according to the formula: "Sublimation as a means of reaching *jouissance*" (my translation) / "La Sublimation pour atteindre la jouissance" (Lacan, 1968-69, p.225-26).

were altogether absent. Although the sexual detail of this experience is to a large degree poeticised, Breton is compelled to recognise, and even venerate, the erotic “delirium of absolute presence” (1987 [1937], p.76):

Love, the only love that you are, carnal love, I adore, I have never ceased to adore your lethal shadow, your mortal shadow. A day will come when man will be able to recognise you for his only master, honouring you in the mysterious perversions you surround him with.

(Breton, 1987 [1937], p.76)

Lacan remarks of Breton’s work that “it is once again in the place of the Thing that Breton had the madness of love emerge” (1992 [1959-60], p.154). Breton’s ascent into the mountain certainly evokes *das Ding* and with it *das Ding*’s transgressive foundation, showing us that as the love object is exalted, we are ineluctably lead to the potential deadliness of *jouissance*. Physical love is for example described by Breton as casting a poisonous, deadly shadow and rather strikingly he qualifies the beginning of this passage with these words of caution: “Nevertheless, they are there, all the interdictions, the alarm bells, all ready to be set off, the snowy bells of the *datura* in case we might decide to place this insuperable barrier between the others and ourselves” (1987 [1937], p.76). Here Breton specifically conjoins the notions of interdiction with lethality through the image of the *datura*, a literary motif for both deadly noxiousness and an inability to distinguish illusions from reality (both of these being implied also by Lacanian sublimation). Moreover, Breton refers to the “insuperable” boundaries, which would ordinarily keep the individual from embarking upon an arbitrary sexual adventure, but which in Breton’s case seem only to have increased the lethal pull of the erotic.

The historical context in which the events occur is not insignificant in exposing the potentially noxious consequences of such desire. Breton’s restless pursuit of love (both romantic and physical) will have appeared as an affront to many sections of society. At this time in France’s history – the interwar years – church and state had still programmed society in such a way as to prejudice its members against second marriages. When the surrealist film *L’Âge d’Or* – a cinematographic call to arms against the instruments of sexual repression – was screened in 1939, it depicted an upper-middle class woman fetishistically sucking on the toe of a statue. The response elicited by the film was so fierce that riots broke out in the cinema, surrealist paintings were slashed in the cinema vestibule, the surrealists were denounced by the press and the film was banned

from any further commercial showings. Breton's conception of *jouissance* is then like Lacan's regulated by law which is both religious and social in its foundation; at times seeming an insuperable boundary to self-expression.

This is also implied in what Breton then goes on to say about temptation. Speaking of the forbidden fruit, Breton claims that it does not exist and desire itself is contingent upon a sense of temptation:

Only temptation is divine. To feel the need to vary the object of this temptation, to replace it by others – this bears witness that one is about to be found unworthy, that one has already doubtless proved unworthy of *innocence* [/ that one already deserves to fall from grace].⁹

(Breton, 1987 [1937], p.92)

The statement's resemblances with Lacanian thought are striking. Breton is stating that temptation is absolutely integral to desire and, furthermore, that in order for this desire to be sustained and renewed the love object must be varied. The state of grace as Breton conceives it is to be consumed by the passion of love, "to find once more the lost grace of the first moment when one is in love" (Breton, 1987 [1937], p.44). As is the case with all states of grace then, when it is lost, there emerges a corresponding need to recuperate it, implying in Breton's case the kind of libidinal circularity which following Lacanian theory is so characteristic of human relationships.

Bretonian grace is also situated amid the throws of terrestrial love rather than issuing from a non-existent God (Breton, 1987 [1937], p.44 and 84). As such, Breton is actually proposing something rather subversive: in reclaiming the rights of the fallen man – and above all in his quest for earthly love and valorisation of temptation – he is taking an almost Luciferean stance. His intention is to usurp the cult of organised religion with the cult of (free) love and he achieves this with a good measure of profanity. Rather provocatively he proclaims for instance that it is an enduring fantasy of his to make love with a nun in the deepest recesses of the church (1992 [1928-32], p.14). Most remarkably of all, however, is that in making these statements, in pushing the boundaries of moral palatability almost to the level of indecency, he is identifying not with the ideal but with the material and the earthly, which has so frequently been considered to be the sole province of Batailleian philosophy.

⁹ The expression "démérité de l'innocence", which is contained within the French original, can also be translated as "deserving to fall from grace" – hence its inclusion by the author in square brackets.

Breton's conception of desire as predicated upon interdiction is one which will remain with him, and indeed ripen, throughout the remainder of his life. In 1959, toward the end of his career and by way of an introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition whose *leitmotif* was eroticism, Breton writes once again not only in support of transgressive desire but highlights philosophy's indebtedness to George Bataille for his insights into the subject:

[quoting Bataille] "*The inner experience of eroticism demands from the person involved an equal sensitivity towards the anguish which provides the basis for interdiction and the desire which tends to violate it*"

This interdiction, which has existed since time immemorial and continues to hold sway in every latitude over so-called "savage" and so-called "civilised" races alike, is the true target at which eroticism aims its arrow.

I have no doubt that it will become increasingly explicit to the extent that we succeed in disentangling it from the dense undergrowth of prejudices which cover it. However, it would be idle to hope to advance here in the full light of day. Anyone who flatters himself on having braved prejudice and interdiction simultaneously, without turning a hair, will find himself disqualified from dealing with eroticism, since his own consciousness has failed to realise eroticism's fundamental need for *transgression*.¹⁰

(Breton, 1972 [1959], p.378-89)

Breton is insistent that to confront the true nature of erotic desire an openness is required toward its transgressive nature as well as the overcoming of one's own prejudices (which stands perhaps in contrast to the young Breton's rather more judgemental attitude towards non-heteronormative forms of sexual behaviour).¹¹

As these are the carefully elaborated views of a seasoned Breton, I believe this makes them all the more definitive and complete; and that they detract from the commonly held view of Breton as an idealising romantic who disdains Bataillean thought for its defence of the erotic. For what also points to the maturation and increasing openness of Breton's attitude is his approbatory tone toward George Bataille to whom he pays homage at the very start of the text for having advanced the boundaries of humanity's knowledge of eroticism: "It is Georges Bataille, again who, in the course of an urgent and often moving investigation of the subject, has succeeded best in making us apprehend eroticism for what it is, that is to say an 'immediate aspect

¹⁰ Breton's italics.

¹¹ Examples of such attitudes are to be found in *Investigating Sex* where Breton famously inveighs against homosexuality (1992 [1928-32], p.5, p.27-28 and p.132) and unquestioning libertinism (1992 [1928-32], p. 32).

of inner experience, opposing itself to animal sexuality” (1972 [1959], p.377) and whom, as we can see in the quote above, he adduces in defence of transgression.

On the relationship between interdiction and desire, it is clear from Bataille’s own writings that he does not differ greatly from Breton on the matter. The fifth chapter of Bataille’s *Erotism*, entitled “transgression”, is peppered with variants on the axiom that “[t]he taboo [or “that which is forbidden”], is there in order to be violated”¹² (1986 [1957], p.64). Bataille also situates his view of erotic transgression in opposition to Christian orthodoxy, situating “the forbidden” with sin and sensuality¹³ and stating that the Luciferian fall represents an impoverishment of the divine rather a vital segregation:

the fact that there might have existed a devil meant that the divine separated into two parts which ignored and failed to recognise one another. The divine part became impoverished. Now I don’t believe that today one can represent a sense of the sacred if one does not at the same time take note of the totality of those aspects, which are the divine and the diabolical.¹⁴

(Bataille, 1979 [1951], p.188)

The thematics of his literary works, such as *Story of the Eye*, are also entirely blasphemous, pushing the boundaries of taste to new limits and covering such themes as scatology, humiliation, rape, torture, and necrophilia. Like Breton, Bataille also relishes the representation of sexual acts which are performed in churches (such as the sexual assault and asphyxiation of a priest in *Story of the Eye*). Both men

¹² The original does not make reference to taboo, but to “l’interdit”, which means literally “that which is forbidden” and hence its enclosure in square brackets – “L’interdit est là pour être violé” (Bataille, 1979 [1957], p.72). Variations of the same principle are to be found elsewhere in the chapter. For example: “The transgression does not deny the taboo [the forbidden] but transcends it and complements it” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p.63) / “religion is the moving force behind the breaking of taboos [transgression of what is forbidden]” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p.69).

¹³ “It is in such representations of crime and sensuality that I have sought to locate what I call sin” (my translation) / “C’est dans ces représentations de crime et de sensualité que j’ai cherché à situer ce que j’appelle le péché” (Bataille, 1979 [1944], p.341).

¹⁴ My translation. Original text reads: “le fait qu’il y eut le diable voulait dire que le divin se séparait en deux parties qui devait s’ignorer et se méconnaître l’une l’autre. La partie divine pure s’appauvrit. Or je ne crois pas que l’on puisse se représenter aujourd’hui le sentiment du sacré si l’on n’aperçoit en même temps la totalité de ces aspects, divin et diabolique” (Bataille, 1979 [1951], p.188).

show how the desire to represent and possess *das Ding* through a range of different signifiers is exacerbated in face of Christian moral imperatives, which threaten to repress rather than liberate the human subject. Lacan's theory of *das Ding* being regulated by the law (specifically moral law) seems therefore vindicated by both men.

In opposition to religious law, Breton posits the perverse, expressing a preference for "everything in physical love which pertains to perversity" (1992 [1928-32], p.29). In *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research*, he admits the practices of free love, sodomy, onanism, semi-exhibitionism, sadism and lesbianism, which far from being considered perverse by today's standards were certainly anathematised as such by the Christian orthodoxy of the day. Of all these practices it is sodomy he favours the most for its "moral non-conformity" (1992 [1928-32], p.151) – in other words because of the deviation it represents from sexual protocol in a Christian marriage. Here once again a hidden affinity emerges with Bataille as he too is opposed to all of the sexual conventions which accompany a Christian marriage (sex for the propagation of the human species, coital sex). As Geoffrey Roche explains:

for Bataille it is the very sinfulness of sexual activity that makes it significant. Without the sin of breaking taboos, according to Bataille, sex is not "erotic". Therefore, sex within marriage, where there are no traditional taboos against sex, is not erotic; marriage itself providing only a "narrow outlet for pent-up violence".

(Roche, 2006, p.167)

Bataille, then, viewed marriage as the very negation of the erotic, being merely a repository for frustrated or unsublimated aggression.

Further resistance to moral conformity is demonstrated by both men in their conceptualisations of women. For Breton, this is reflected by his rejection of chastity in women (translated in French as "pudeur") on account of its associations with Christianity. His conception of the woman is at least based as much on *la femme-sorcière* ("the woman-sorceress") as *la femme-enfant* ("the woman-child"), his ideal of womanhood, therefore, derived not from the Virgin Mary but from the ghostly vampire women (or succubae) of his dreams (1992 [1928-32], p.59-60) and the paintings of Gustave Moreau¹⁵ (1972 [1961], p.363). Similarly, Bataille's depictions of women frequently centre about their

¹⁵ One of Moreau's most famous paintings which provided literary inspiration for Breton as well as Moreau's contemporaries, such as Huysmans and Wilde, was *Salomé*, who despite her captivating beauty, infamously had John the Baptist's head served on a plate.

sinful aspect, claiming prostitutes to be “fallen beings” (1986 [1957], p.135; 1993 [1949], p.140) and the sight of a woman’s breasts “the pure incarnation of sin” (1988 [1954], p.127). The conceptions of women advanced by both Breton and Bataille are also spectral and empty in nature being oneiric, mythological, artistic or literary but seldom based entirely within the *real*.

Lacan comments that such depersonalising characterisations of the female love object are a frequent attribute of (courtly) love poetry, the woman being “emptied of all real substance”¹⁶ as she is elevated; then becoming “terrifying – an inhuman partner” (1992 [1959-60], p.150). All poets who can be aligned with this tradition (including the surrealists) are according to Lacan merely addressing the same lady “who is never characterised for any of her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence” (1992 [1959-60], p.150). For Lacan, this is, moreover, one of the defining features of artistic and literary sublimation, though paradoxically such sublimation also has the capacity to debase: “It is only when the person involved is transformed into a symbolic function that one is able to speak of her in the crudest terms” (1992 [1959-60], p.149).

When applied to Breton’s writings, Lacanian theory shows us once again that it is at the sight of *das Ding* that we are able to find both sublimation (a desire to exalt) and, coextensive with it, desublimation (a desire to reduce and simplify; and a corresponding desire to transgress). Lacan’s study underlines that the term “sublimation” is in itself problematic and perhaps even ambiguous if it contains the seed of desublimation within it. However, as has been stated in a recent study on the importance of sublimation within art: “sublimation is Janus-faced poised between the raw singularity of the drive and the polite decorum of the art gallery” (Thurston, 2003, p.30). Such a view of sublimation clearly diverges from Freud’s rather sanitising view of the phenomenon (in which both aim and object are made to serve non-sexual ends) – and is perhaps all the more disconcerting for it. In addition to the unexpected antinomy which sublimation opens out upon, we are faced with the moral contentiousness which surrounds the very representation of *das Ding* – its capacity to challenge the boundaries of convention – whether in art and literature or via the

¹⁶ Such sublimation has met with feminist criticism even within Surrealism itself. In an article entitled “Introduction à une érotique révolutionnaire”, René Passeron wrote that: “it is not in sublimating a being that one liberates them. Sublimation has always its inverse, oppression... It is not by celebrating Mélusine that we shall advance a step towards the reign of desire, but by subjecting to materialist method the myths by which woman is lulled the better to be exploited” (1948, p.39).

signifying chain of individuals encountered in life who take on function of our “absolute Other”. According to Lacan, such representations only come into relief when in collision with the boundaries established religious, social and moral precepts. Homologous to this principle, we find two factions of the same movement, whose meaning and purpose were established by Breton and Bataille in opposition to the social mores of their day. It is for this reason that, following the logic of the Lacanian *Ding*, it seems otiose to consider sublimation or desublimation the sole province of either writer.

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