

**The poetics of Hermeticism:
André Breton's shift towards the occult in the War Years.**

Victoria Clouston

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Oxford Brookes University

November 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go to Professor Nathalie Aubert, without whom this project would never have happened, and whose inspiration and encouragement, added to unsurpassed professionalism, have guided me throughout and resulted in a uniquely precious friendship.

I would also like to thank Professor Gavin Parkinson for his input and support from the moment of our surreal meeting – itself a perfect example of “le hasard objectif”.

My thanks, too, to the administrative staff and librarians at Oxford Brookes, especially to Jill Organ and Charmian Hearne, who have helped me throughout efficiently, kindly and unstintingly, despite their relentlessly busy workloads.

To the many friends who have given generously of their encouragement and understanding through the years, I give my thanks – especially, among many others, to Barbara, Christine and John, Elisabeth and Anthony, Jo, Marie and Naomi. Most of all, my thanks are for the memory of Lou, the best of friends, whose gift for friendship and whose inspiration in all things literary and artistic remain unique.

My family has been my rock, encouraging me with love and enthusiasm. I thank them all, especially my sister and two, in particular, of my many lovely cousins. My grown-up children, their partners and even the next generation, have all been stalwart – if at times bemused – in their love and support, for which I thank them all.

And last, but definitely not least, my great thanks and appreciation to Dane, who has survived with me the highs and lows of the entire project, ultimately coming full circle (I hope!) from his initial state of amazed incredulity at the whole undertaking. I thank him for his patience, his love and support and for his role as intellectual punch-bag in the occasional Surrealist debate.

Conventions

The MHRA style has been used in this PhD thesis.

Quotations from all primary sources are taken from the editions cited in the bibliography unless otherwise indicated.

ABSTRACT

André Breton, leader of the Surrealist movement, which he had founded with others in 1924 in the wake of the First World War, left Nazi-occupied France in 1941. Sailing from Marseilles, with an enforced three week stop in Martinique while waiting for onward passage, he chose to carry the spirit of Surrealism into ‘exile’ in the United States until 1946, rather than risk its extinction by remaining in war-torn Europe.

Following his journey into exile, this thesis traces the trajectory of Breton’s thought and poetic output of 1941–1948, studying the major works written during those years and following his ever deeper research into hermeticism, myth and the occult in his quest for “un mythe nouveau” for the post-war world. Having abandoned political action on leaving the Communist Party in 1935, he nonetheless remained preoccupied with political *thought*, searching to find a means of creating a better society for a shattered post-war world, while at the same time maintaining a close connection between art and life.

Realizing that any political system would inflect Surrealism to its own ends, Breton sought to find a means of achieving his aim through a return to the role of the ‘poet-mage’ of Romanticism. We follow the poet on his quest during these years, revealing his in-depth exploration of the tenets of Romanticism in which he discovers the roots of Surrealism, demonstrating also how he was affected by his re-reading of Victor Hugo, with whom he identifies to a certain extent during his time in exile. We study his poetic output of these years, in which we follow from their earliest stages indications of the shift in direction, away from political action towards hermeticism and the occult.

On his return to France in 1946, we see Breton come under sustained attack from his detractors for his journey into hermeticism. Undaunted, he holds to his course, apparently unaware of his misreading of the spirit of the time. Although Surrealism is far from dead, its leader seems from this time to lose his creative inspiration and while his writing continues, his poetic output dwindles to almost nothing. However, even some years after Breton’s death, Julien Gracq predicts that it is “no longer unreasonable to imagine [...] that one day Surrealism will have an heir, a movement whose form we cannot predict”.¹

¹ Julien Gracq, ‘Back to Breton’, excerpts, translated by Stamos Metzidakis, in *L’Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter 1996, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press), online version of *Criticism &c.*, <https://criticismetc.wordpress.com/2012/02/19/andre-breton-1968-1996-2012/>.

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INTRODUCTION

From the time of its inception, Surrealism was intent not only on protesting,¹ but also on transforming the society and those ideologies which had contributed to the destruction and chaos of the First World War. Indeed, it was the trauma of the Great War which in the first instance made Surrealism “one of the more historically conscious artistic and intellectual movements of the twentieth century”.² Defining themselves as “en insurrection contre l'Histoire”,³ the Surrealists were always finely attuned to historical events and the politics of the moment.⁴ Very early on in the history of the movement, and in order to move away from Dada’s perceived nihilism, Breton had declared that poetry must “mener quelque part”,⁵ with the aim, for the Surrealists, of achieving their own revolution:

Nous sommes la révolte de l’esprit [...]. Nous ne sommes pas des utopistes : cette Révolution nous ne la concevons que sous sa forme sociale.⁶

Thus, if Surrealism’s main goal was first of all the reconciliation of conscious and unconscious thought, the overcoming of the separation of art and life in a poetry which was to be made by all,⁷ it also meant that parallel with a confidence in the self-sufficiency of an autonomous, unconscious thought process which could unleash unprecedented surges of creativity, political action was needed in order to work on the kind of social revolution that was necessary to fully “changer la vie”:

¹ The Surrealists continued to be active in the wake of the Dada movement, which had presented perhaps an even more acute state of protest against society.

² Steven Harris, ‘Introduction’ to *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.1

³ *La Révolution d’abord et toujours !* (Surrealist tract published in 1925), *La Révolution surréaliste* (Paris: Gallimard (reproduction : Éditions Jean Michel Place), 1981) pp. 31–32.

⁴ The *La Révolution d’abord et toujours !* tract made reference to an earlier text, a “Manifeste”, written by a “Comité d’action contre la guerre du Maroc” which had declared against the 1925 colonial war in Morocco where both Spain and France were involved.

⁵ *Les Pas perdus, Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1988), p.233. All references are to this edition (1988–2008), (abbreviated *O.C.*) unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ *La Révolution d’abord et toujours !*, op. cit., p.32.

⁷ : “La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un”. Lautréamont, ‘Poésies II’, dans *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris : éd. Guy Lévis Mano, 1938) p. 327.

‘Transformer le monde’, a dit Marx ; ‘changer la vie’, a dit Rimbaud : ces deux mots d’ordre pour nous n’en font qu’un.⁸

Even if this alliance of Marx and Rimbaud, which was to characterise Breton’s theoretical thinking for years to come, was not without its problems,⁹ there is no doubt that Surrealism became associated with avant-garde art and politics,¹⁰ and this strong alliance between art and life – including life understood as political involvement – made it perhaps the only artistic movement ever to attract so many artists from all over the world. As Maurice Nadeau, the first historian of the movement noted:

Né à Paris d’une dizaine d’hommes, il ne s’est pas borné à la France, mais a étendu son champ aux antipodes. Loin d’être une petite chapelle artistique très parisienne, il a eu des adeptes et influencé des hommes en Angleterre, Belgique, Espagne, Suisse, Allemagne, Tchécoslovaquie, Yougoslavie, et même dans les autres continents : Afrique, Asie (Japon), Amérique (Mexique, Brésil, États-Unis). À l’Exposition internationale qui se tint à Paris (janvier–février 1938), quatorze pays étaient représentés. Le surréalisme avait brisé les cadres nationaux de l’art. Il survolait les frontières. Nul mouvement artistique avant lui, y compris le romantisme, n’a eu cette influence et cette audience internationale.¹¹

Yet, at this precise moment,¹² which seemed the climax of Surrealism’s influence on the art world, there were already voices predicting its demise.¹³ Born in the wake of the First World War, Surrealism found itself on the eve of the Second summoned to answer accusations of selling out (“bits and pieces constructed in an epoch of disgust... finish up at the decorators, the ad-man’s, the hairdresser’s and the fashion designer’s”)¹⁴ when it had been a movement with much higher ambitions, even “craving for purity”.¹⁵

⁸ André Breton, *Discours au Congrès des écrivains*, O.C., Vol. II, p.459

⁹ As witness his comment in the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* : “J’accepte qu’ [...] on m’ait pris dans le parti communiste pour un des intellectuels les plus indésirables”. O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.796.

¹⁰ Breton, Éluard, Aragon, Péret, Unik, joined the Communist Party in 1927.

¹¹ Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), p.23–24

¹² The 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris.

¹³ In their review of the exhibition for the newspaper *Temps présent* (January 1938), Jean Bazaine and Maurice Morel were exposing what they called the “Faillite du surréalisme”. Cf. Natalie Adamson, Review of Steven Harris’s *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche*, in *Papers of Surrealism Issue 4*, (Winter 2005), p.1

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In the chaos after the declaration of war in September 1939 and the ensuing French military defeat, followed by the Armistice signed in June 1940, Breton, as the leader of the movement, seemed to have very little indeed to offer. The same year, he had sent to the Belgian Raoul Ubac, (who had just created a new Surrealist review, *L'Invention collective*, meant to provide a collective response from the group to the German Occupation¹⁶) urging him to work alongside all other Surrealists to “trouve[r] du nouveau”, since, he warned: “Il ne s’agit de rien moins que de se survivre, ce serait là l’illusion périlleuse entre toutes”.¹⁷ Despite this sense of urgency and his call for Surrealism to renew itself, there was not much room for manoeuvre for the Surrealists, given their political involvement during the 1920s and 1930s. Breton in particular had become an obvious target for the Pétain government, with his engagement “in the unstable interdependence of anarchist, then Communist, and finally, Trotskyist thought”.¹⁸ After the Armistice, and the division of the country into two ‘zones’, Breton, who had left the Communist Party in 1935 and thus did not benefit from its support, had no other choice but to seek exile.¹⁹ In Marseilles, in December 1940, he was arrested as a preventive measure on the occasion of a visit to the city by Pétain. By then, the publication of the poet’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (printed in April 1940) and his

¹⁶ See Nathalie Aubert, *Christian Dotremont La conquête du monde par l’image* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012), p. 27–31.

¹⁷ Letter to Raoul Ubac in 1940, quoted in *Cinquante ans d’avant-garde* (Bruxelles: Bibliothèque Royale, 183), p.135.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Surrealists in Exile: Another Kind of Resistance’ in *Politics Today* 17:3, (Tel Aviv University: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1966), Note 1, p.440

¹⁹ In his *La Résistance et ses poètes France 1940-1945* (Paris : Seghers, 1974), Pierre Seghers simply writes : “André Breton, lui, a choisi de quitter la France le plus vite possible” (p.112). He also indicates that Breton was considered at the time – a few months after the start of the German occupation – to be part of the “équipe de malfaiteurs” (p.75) supported by the publisher Gallimard in its famous review, the *NRF*. While Breton was called “vendeur d’ectoplasmes”, Aragon was for his part dubbed as “archevêque de *Ce soir*” ; Naville “banquier anarchiste”, Eluard “fruit pourri” and Péret was “l’insulteur”. As Julien Gracq also acknowledged in interview with Michel Murat for the publication of the issue of “Cahiers de l’Herne” dedicated to Breton (Paris: L’Herne, 1998): “il s’était trouvé dans une impasse en 1939. La guerre était en vue: mais le surréalisme s’est constitué en insurrection contre la guerre, celle de 14-18, et il n’était pas question d’en entendre parler. [...] On ne voit pas très bien Breton brandissant un drapeau tricolore derrière Daladier ou Paul Reynaud, et il n’était pas possible non plus d’être neutre vis-à-vis du nazisme. Breton, qui était toujours en prise avec l’actualité, avait fait partie du comité de vigilance des intellectuels anti-fascistes [...] Mais d’un autre côté, on ne voit pas très bien comment il aurait pris la parole, et de fait, il ne l’a pas prise.” (p.17)

poem *Fata Morgana* (printed at the beginning of March 1941) had been censored and postponed indefinitely.²⁰

It is at this particular crossroads that this study begins, as relatively little critical attention has been paid to André Breton's production during the period of his American exile (1941-1946). Much of Surrealist scholarship²¹ has tended to focus on the early, effervescent moment of Surrealism in the early to mid-1920s,²² prior to its political involvement, or on its second period of the next decade. This second period encompassed the development of the movement's radical aesthetic project,²³ at a time when, in the wake of the *Second Manifeste*, the Surrealists were trying to "synthesize Hegelian aesthetics, psychoanalysis and Marxism".²⁴ Thus the primary object of this thesis is to understand the development of Breton's thought and activity at a moment when the movement enters its third period, *after* the "phase raisonnante" (1929–1939) and when, threatened by war, he felt obliged to leave France for the U.S. in March 1941. Some analyses have been dedicated to specific works,²⁵ but no overview has been

²⁰ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, 'Surrealists in Exile: Another Kind of Resistance', op.cit., p.440

²¹ This is evident starting from the landmark studies of Benjamin, Adorno, and Blanchot; cf. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Vol.2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.207–21; Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism" (1956), in *Notes to Literature*, Vol.1 (1974), ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp.86–90; and Maurice Blanchot, "Tomorrow at Stake" (1967), in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.407–21.

²² See for example Marguerite Bonnet, *André Breton: naissance de l'aventure surréaliste*, (Paris : José Corti, 1988); Anna Balakian, *Surrealism : the road to the absolute*, (London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972) ; Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination – A Study of Breton and Bachelard*, (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966) .

²³ The aesthetic project was in particular the focus of the *October* critics and historians, especially the books and essays by Rosaling Krauss, Hal Foster and Denis Hollier; cf. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp.71–76 ; H. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp.43–48; Denis Hollier, "The Use-Value of the Impossible", trans. Liesl Ollman, *October*, No. 60 (Spring 1992), pp.3–24, at pp.20–21.

²⁴ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, op.cit., p.2

²⁵ Cf: on *Pleine marge* see Micahel Riffaterre, *Méluşine I* (Paris, 1979), pp. 27–37; on *Pleine marge* and *Fata Morgana* see Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); on *Pleine marge*, *Fata Morgana*, *Les États Généraux*, *L'Ode à Charles Fourier*, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* and *Arcane 17* see Gérard Legrand, *Breton* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1977); on *L'Ode à Charles Fourier* see Gérald Schaeffer, 'Un petit matin de 1937' in *André Breton: Essais recueillis par Marc Eigeldinger* (Neuchatel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970), p.241; Michaël Spencer, 'A(na)logie de Fourier' in *Romantisme*, No.34 (1981), pp.31–46; Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and his World*, (University of California Press Ltd.: London, 1986); on

produced, contextualizing and analysing the texts *as a coherent corpus* tracing Breton's evolution, from his renewed proclamation that Surrealism chooses to be located in the margins²⁶ of a society that is embarking at the time on another world conflict, having apparently learned nothing from the lessons of the First World War, demonstrating throughout that he personally stands by "la révolte", with "la poésie, la liberté et l'amour"²⁷ as the means of achieving it. Central to this thesis therefore is an examination of how Breton, from his American exile, tried to ensure that art, and Surrealist art in particular, would continue to realize itself, to materialize or crystallize into something that would still make a real contribution to the present and the future in a post-war world.

During the years of World War II, it will be seen that Breton demonstrates a pronounced shift towards the occult in his poetic output. What we intend to show in this thesis is that this shift leads him to a new form of poetics – the poetics of hermeticism, which in turn amounts for him to a definition of poetry as a form of alchemy, by comparison with what Aragon and Éluard were creating with "poésie de circonstance", which was anathema to Breton. The thesis will trace the development of this shift, following its evolution through the study of an over-arching corpus of his work during these years, and, further, demonstrating its ties to certain aspects of the (German) Romantic tradition.

Post-war interest in Surrealism, and in Breton in particular, with his increasing preoccupation with hermeticism and the occult, came in succeeding waves, reflected in the critical literature of the times. Valuable critiques appeared soon after the end of World War

Arcane 17 see Michel Beaujour, 'André Breton Mythographe: *Arcane 17*' in *André Breton: Essais recueillis par Marc Eigeldinger* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970), p.221, and 'André Breton: *Arcane 17*' in *Terreur et Rhétorique: Breton, Bataille, Leiris, Paulhan, Barthes et Cie., Autour du Surréalisme*, (Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1999), p.97; Suzanne Lamy, *André Breton: Hermétisme et poésie dans Arcane 17*, (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1977); Pascaline Mourier-Casile, *André Breton: Explorateur de la mere-moire – Trois lectures d'Arcane 17*, (Paris: P.U.F., 1986).

²⁶ *Pleine marge* was his last text published in France, appearing in *Cahiers du Sud* in November 1940.

²⁷ "C'est la révolte même, la révolte seule qui est créatrice de la lumière. Et cette lumière ne peut se connaître que trois voies : la poésie, la liberté et l'amour qui doivent inspirer le même zèle et converger, à en faire la coupe même de la jeunesse éternelle, sur le point moins découvert et le plus illuminable du cœur humain." *Arcane 17* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, p.94–95.

II, amongst others from Anna Balakian and Michel Carrouges.²⁸ Carrouges was quick to recognize Breton's shift towards the occult, but, while providing a thought-provoking and interesting critique, he constantly tried to drag the reader towards a religious or metaphysical interpretation, which was definitely *not* Breton's direction or intention.

Anna Balakian was one of the first to analyse in any depth Breton's deep connection with German Romanticism.²⁹ This text, *Surrealism: the road to the absolute*, originally published in the late 1950s, was reprinted in the 1970s, when there was a renewed surge of interest in both subjects. In the same work, she also tried to define what "l'alchimie du verbe" meant for Breton's poetics. With a reference to "a misconception that often arises concerning the ambiguity of the surrealist style",³⁰ she goes on to deny any claim that this proved that "surrealists disdain grammar".³¹ Illustrating her theme with many examples, Balakian concludes that it is not the rejection of rhyme, metre or "disregard for grammatical structure":

It is, rather, in the use of words: an enrichment of the active vocabulary of poetry, a release from verbal inhibitions, a selection of word association beyond the barriers set up by logic, a new metaphor built upon these incongruous word groupings, and the images resulting from the association of one metaphor with another – which one might call the square of the metaphor. [...] Poetry was discovered to be a different type of intellectual activity, consisting of what one might call mental deviation and *linguistic alchemy*.³²

In this way, she claims, the Surrealists have demonstrated the "*mystique* of language" which has in turn initiated "the alchemy and bewitchment dreamed of by Baudelaire and Rimbaud",³³ and, in the French language at least, has succeeded in bringing about an aesthetic revolution out of a spiritual crisis.

²⁸ Cf. Anna Balakian, *Literary Origins of Surrealism – A New Mysticism in French Poetry* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947); Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* (Paris : Gallimard, c.1950).

²⁹ Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: the road to the absolute* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972. (First published 1959, reprinted 1970)

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.163

³¹ *Ibid*, p.164

³² *Ibid*, p.165 (The emphasis is my own)

³³ *Ibid*, p.169

Not all Surrealists went into exile,³⁴ thus for Breton, it meant being largely separated from his group,³⁵ and being cut off from collective activity which had been an integral part of the Surrealist radical experiment in the early years of the movement. As a starting point for his particular trajectory during the war years, Breton returns to his own *Second Manifeste* which, although written and published in 1929–30, was still used by him as a marker of the first ten years of the movement, to celebrate its development and to show how the original programme had evolved and continued to develop, envisaging future action. In this text, Breton was still in a position to advocate the inner “descente vertigineuse” and the “promenade perpétuelle en pleine zone interdite”³⁶ to explore the mind’s innermost workings, but he also exhorted, with a direct reference to Rimbaud: “Il faut absolument que nous fassions comme si nous étions réellement ‘au monde’ pour oser ensuite formuler quelques réserves”.³⁷ In practical terms, following both Hegel and Engels, he emphasized at the time that it meant their action must be “de donner comme nous la donnons, *totale*ment, sans réserve, notre adhésion au principe du matérialisme historique”.³⁸ However, there were already clear reservations as to the possibility of submitting Surrealism to the Communist ideology, given the disadvantages of becoming subject to such a system. But at the point of writing, dialectical materialism, however imperfect, still seemed to him the best option by which to achieve revolution. “Le problème de l’action sociale”³⁹ preoccupied the poet, moving him to call for “la Révolution prolétarienne” to achieve the liberation of mankind, with the emphasis on “*première condition de la libération de l’esprit*”.⁴⁰ However, as is well-known, following his falling out with the Communist party in 1935 and the failure of the FIARI⁴¹

³⁴ Breton, Ernst, Lam, Mabile, Masson, Paalen, Péret and Tanguy went into exile, but of those still calling themselves Surrealists, a good number stayed behind; in addition to this, as will be seen in Chapter 7, a number of young surrealists who gathered around the group *La Main à Plume* tried to maintain an activity centred around a review which they published clandestinely. See Michel Fauré *Histoire du surréalisme sous l’occupation* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1982).

³⁵ Even if some of the painters: Ernst, Masson, Tanguy also went to the U.S.

³⁶ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol. I, op.cit., p.791

³⁷ Ibid. Cf. “Nous ne sommes pas au monde” from Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*, “Délires I”, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p.103

³⁸ *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.795

³⁹ Ibid, p.802

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.803 The emphasis is Breton’s.

⁴¹ Fédération Internationale pour un Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant: this project was developed with Trotsky during Breton’s visit to Mexico in 1938, ultimately signed by Breton and Diego Rivera to avoid accusations of

in 1938, one of the most important shifts of the war years is, as will be seen, Breton's abandoning of politics and his adamant refusal ever to get involved again. Yet any study of the poet's output during these crucial years needs to take into account the fact that his texts were influenced by the cultural politics of the moment of their enunciation, as well as, if not by politics, then at least social concerns in the broader sense of the term. This remains a characteristic throughout his wartime output in texts such as *Pleine Marge* and the *Ode à Charles Fourier*, as well as *Arcane 17*.

The second point already present in the *Second Manifeste*, which was to lead to unforeseen expansion, is his acknowledgement that Surrealism was in many ways operating in the wake of Romanticism, describing it as “*la queue tellement préhensile du romantisme*”.⁴² In Chapters 4 and 5, in the context of Breton's exploration of the roots of Surrealism, we examine this link with Romanticism and Victor Hugo, leading to his further research into hermeticism and the occult, which, in turn, allowed him to delve into a wealth of imagery and analogy inherent in the tradition and use of myths. It is important here to stress the fact that Breton varied his interpretation of the understanding of ‘myth’, from its ancient role of metaphor (as with Mélusine and Isis in A.17, drawing on very different cultural traditions), to its relevance to the poetic creation and/or to life itself (what he would call the “*mythe nouveau*”). As will be seen, the poet sought to penetrate the veil of mystery portrayed by the use of myth, in order to reveal the hidden ‘truth’ latent in its imagery.

Finally, Breton followed a third thread already established in the *Second Manifeste*, one which was also to know considerable expansion and to which Chapter 5 of this thesis is specifically dedicated, that of “*L’alchimie du verbe*”.⁴³ In the *Second Manifeste*, having first determined the importance of language and freedom of expression in this revolution, above all the role played by words themselves,⁴⁴ Breton draws a comparison between the aims of alchemy and those of Surrealism, pointing out that “*la*

the project being ‘Trotskyist’. Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind – the life of André Breton*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 1995), pp.462–465

⁴² *Second Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.803

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.818

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.802

pierre philosophale” is simply the tool with which to attempt to free man’s imagination, once and for all, “après des siècles de domestication et de résignation folle”, and to do it by the “long, immense, raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens”.⁴⁵ He advocates, through reaching into the occult, achieving a state of “*furor*”.

As with his interpretation of the term ‘myth’, Breton has his own understanding of what is meant by both ‘hermeticism’ and ‘the occult’. While seeming broadly in sympathy with the dictionary definition of ‘hermetic’ as: “Pertaining to Hermes Trismegistus, and the writings ascribed to him”,⁴⁶ the poet leans more towards the subsidiary meaning of: “Relating to or dealing with occult science, especially alchemy; magical; alchemical”.⁴⁷ As to ‘the occult’, Breton seems to regard it as almost interchangeable with ‘hermeticism’, although first and foremost a science known only by – and communicated to – the initiated, and/or that relating to those sciences involving knowledge or use of the supernatural (i.e. alchemy, astrology, magic, theosophy etc.). Added to these meanings, it is clear that Breton regards both Surrealism and hermeticism as:

Deux grandes ‘aventures’ de l’esprit, réfutant l’une et l’autre la valeur des dogmes et systèmes issus du rationalisme au profit d’une ‘quête’ personnelle où la ‘révélation’ joue un plus grand rôle que la démonstration et vient couronner une expérience vécue plus que la connaissance d’une doctrine.⁴⁸

This expansion of the understanding of both hermeticism and the occult in connection with the experiment of Surrealism is central to the poet’s approach.

Therefore crucially, in 1941 his own trajectory began, following the injunction with which he ended the *Second Manifeste*: “JE DEMANDE L’OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURREALISME”.⁴⁹ So, although the turn towards hermeticism, which in many ways characterises Breton’s wartime output, was not a shift

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.819. The emphasis is Breton’s.

⁴⁶ Cf. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Françoise Bonardel, ‘Surréalisme et hermétisme’ in *Mélusine No. II : Occulte-Occultation*, op.cit., p.99

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.821

or a departure from his long-standing interests,⁵⁰ there was definitely a change in emphasis; it became central to his world view as well as his inner sense of what constituted poetry *as alchemy*. Thus it will be shown that from *Fata Morgana* to the *Jeu de Marseille*, and in many ways at the climax of his hermetic quest in *Arcane 17*, Breton seems to delve more and more into the roots of hermeticism. As will be shown in Chapter 7, this, allied with his refusal ever to be politically involved again, lay at the heart of the barrage of hostilities with which he was faced on his return to France – Tristan Tzara speaking for many of his “anciens amis” when he said:

L'ésotérisme, le désir d'évasion, la fuite devant l'histoire, le complexe d'intériorisation et ce qu'il comporte de mystique, sont des phénomènes passagers, des positions de refuge.⁵¹

The reason why this shift is particularly significant in Breton's wartime trajectory is precisely because he was pushed in this direction by historical circumstances. Even when he was a member of the Communist Party, he had always resisted any instrumentalization of the aesthetic sphere in the political struggle, and in 1941 (at the heart of the conflict therefore, when, with “l'entrée en guerre des Américains”, the war truly spread worldwide) he was more than ever convinced that he needed to re-assert his – and, indeed, the Surrealist – proposed alternative understanding of art as neither propaganda, nor as expression, nor as the mirror of nature, but as a form of research, a tool with which to explore and experiment.

In this process, he was helped by a new discovery: nature and the phenomenal world, in his travels first to Martinique and then to Canada. Indeed, it will be argued in this thesis that his journey to the U.S., and in particular his encounter with both Césaire and his island (La Martinique), are turning points in opening Breton's eyes to the beauty of the natural world and its poetical potential. He and other Surrealists had dreamed of

⁵⁰ “Nombreuses sont, dans le *Second Manifeste*, les références à l'astrologie, à l'alchimie, à la magie ; elles montrent assez que, contrairement à ce que soutiennent les actuels détracteurs du surréalisme, les préoccupations de cet ordre ne sont pas nouvelles et qu'il est tout à fait abusif de prétendre qu'elles marquent un tournant récent de ma pensée”. André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, XI, O.C. Vol.III*, op.cit., p.525.

⁵¹ Tristan Tzara, *Le Surréalisme et l'après-guerre*, (Paris : les Éditions Nagel, 1948), p.13–14

this, and had perhaps to a large extent “imagined” it early on from the paintings of le Douanier-Rousseau, but then saw it materialize in front of their eyes on arrival in Martinique. The combination of his hatred for both the Vichy Regime and the excesses of colonisation – all too obvious to him during his short stay in Martinique – also act as triggers to re-ignite Breton’s interest in the primitive: untamed nature and/or unprecedented beauty and scale, which brings him back to the core values of primitive art.⁵²

This thesis will therefore adopt predominantly a chronological line (following the poet’s footsteps on his journey from Marseilles to the North American continent, concentrating on the texts produced in New York, but also those written on trips made to the Gaspésie, in Canada, and the Hopi Indian reserves of Arizona and New Mexico) and, focusing on close textual analyses informed by Breton’s reading at the time, will seek to trace both changes and continuities in his work. These questions become more acute in the light of his American exile, which is nurtured by his contacts on the American continent – Paalen, Seligmann, Shapiro, the art galleries of Pierre Matisse, Marcel Duchamp and Peggy Guggenheim – who, together with Claude Lévi-Strauss, all contribute to the re-direction of his attention not only onto art, but also an alternative form of social organisation, a subject which had always fascinated him.⁵³ In her article

⁵² As will be seen in later chapters, the term ‘primitive’ carries a meaning additional to just ‘simple’ or ‘untrained’, originating from the surge of interest in this art in the late nineteenth century: “In the 1890s, a new fad, ‘primitive art’, swept Europe.” Its emergence demonstrates “the fundamental instability of easy distinctions between the ‘savage’ and the ‘civilized’ and suggest(s) the kind of ambiguous appropriation associated with modernism: a mixture of violence and aestheticism”. This meaning was in no way pejorative, as it might otherwise be construed. Cf. ‘Introduction’ to *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, edited by Elazar Barkan & Ronald Bush (Stamford, Calif.: Stamford University Press, 1995), p.1

⁵³ Examples of his earlier interest in primitive art and culture can be seen in the gallery he was given to manage in the rue de Seine in 1937, *Gradiva*, and indeed in his own flat in the rue Fontaine. In his text on the gallery, Breton answers the inevitable question: “*Gradiva*? Ce titre, emprunté au merveilleux ouvrage de Jensen, signifie avant tout: CELLE QUI AVANCE”. (Wilhelm Jensen’s novella *Gradiva* was famously analysed by Freud, translated by Marie Bonaparte (1931): *Délire et rêves dans un ouvrage littéraire, la Gradiva de Jensen*, published by Gallimard.) Listing his aims and objectives for the contents of the gallery, Breton demonstrates his dreams of creating “un lieu sans âge, n’importe où hors du monde *de la raison*” filled with a collection of “Objets naturels, Objets sauvages, Objets de fous, Objets perturbés, Objets trouvés”, to name but some of the categories envisaged. (Cf. André Breton, *Gradiva, Œuvres complètes*, Vol. III, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, (Paris : Éditions Gallimard., 1999), pp.672 & 674) Similarly, in his own flat – as can now be seen from the exhibit “Le Mur Breton” in the Centre Pompidou –

entitled *L'Autre métamorphose: les surréalistes exilés, les masques et les mythes nord-amérindiens*,⁵⁴ Sophie Leclercq gives great insight into the Surrealist preoccupation with metamorphosis in general, but more especially an interest in North American Indian tradition and culture, particularly with respect to the use (and role) of masks.

In addition to textual and contextual scrutiny, we will also look carefully at the intellectual sources of Surrealism, in order to try to understand the logic that informed Breton's decisions and subsequent actions and focus on the moment of the re-formulation of its projected aims at this particular time. Martica Sawin's *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School*⁵⁵ provides a wealth of valuable detail on the re-establishment of Surrealism in New York from the late 1930s, building up a lively picture of the situation into which Breton was catapulted in 1941. She shows clearly how much Breton owed to his association with Kurt Seligmann, himself greatly interested and well versed in texts of hermeticism and the occult – as will be seen – as were many others of his immediate circle and those with whom Breton mixed on arrival in the U.S.

Already in *Pleine marge* (Chapter 1 of the thesis), and more demonstrably in *Le Jeu de Marseille* (Chapter 2), with its collective designs for tarot-like replacements of the regular 'picture' cards of a pack, the poet had announced an interest in characters strongly linked with hermeticism. In *Fata Morgana* (Chapter 1), too, much of the imagery and analogy is based on myth, showing a pronounced preference for delving into "le mystérieux" rather than relating to historical fact. As the works which preceded Breton's departure from France, they demonstrate at least the start of his preoccupation with myth and hermeticism, and, in the wake of a summer spent with Pierre Mabille,⁵⁶ an evident interest in the occult. This thesis will show that the preoccupation was one

Breton amassed an impressive collection of examples of primitive art in the form of masks, paintings and ceramics.

⁵⁴ *Mélusine XXVI : Métamorphoses* (Lausanne : Éditions l'Âge d'Homme, 2006), pp.139–152

⁵⁵ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School* (London: The MIT Press, 1997).

⁵⁶ Pierre Mabille is recognized as having introduced Breton to studies of hermeticism and the occult with such texts as 'La conscience lumineuse' in *Minotaure, No. 10, Hiver 1937, Troisième série*, (Paris : Éditions Albert Skira), pp.22–25

Cf: Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind – the life of André Breton*, op.cit., p.428

which would remain at the heart of the poet's wartime output during his time in the U.S. and in the texts written on his return to France in 1946–1948.⁵⁷

Building, therefore, on his research into hermeticism and the occult, while also allowing growth in his new-found appreciation of nature to act as a trigger to his poetic imagination, it will be shown how Breton's wartime output demonstrates a definite development, affected necessarily by the new circumstances which awaited him in New York. His (relative) isolation from the Surrealist group, and from his country, together with the turmoil in his personal life,⁵⁸ and the transformation in his cultural and intellectual surroundings necessarily had an impact on his output. The fact that he refused to learn English meant that he spent his exile years meeting exclusively expatriates or Americans who spoke French and by and large were interested in Surrealism. Not speaking the language, and the fact that he had also promised himself to remain silent rather than antagonize his host country, to whom he felt he owed so much,⁵⁹ further contributed to his muted isolation – a very new experience for someone who had previously always reacted vocally to current affairs in France.⁶⁰ This situation resulted in a retreat into himself which, in turn, necessarily affected the way he wrote. It inflected perhaps not so much a radical shift, but certainly a subtle change – if not exactly in direction, at least in emphasis.

For example, Breton speaks less of “unconscious thought” in these years, and emphasizes more the work of “imagination”. This subtle change in formulation is noticeable – even though unconscious thought is, in his psychoanalytical understanding, the source of the imagination – and will be examined through close textual readings. It

⁵⁷ Although this study is mainly concerned with works produced on the eve of and during Breton's exile, we also delve into works either written or indeed published on his return when he was trying to re-position himself on the post-war literary scene in Paris.

⁵⁸ In particular, at this time, his devastation in the face of Jacqueline leaving him for David Hare (autumn, 1942).

⁵⁹ Cf. André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, XIV, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.556

⁶⁰ As Julien Gracq records: “Breton est un homme de contact immédiat avec la réalité. Il l'a toujours été ; si vous lisez *La Révolution surréaliste* et *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, il y est question de ce qui se passe, des faits divers : de Germaine Berton, de Sacco et Vanzetti, des sœurs Papin, de Violette Nozières, du 6 février ; il prenait chaque fois des positions.” Julien Gracq in interview with Michel Murat for the publication of the issue of “Cahiers de l'Herne” dedicated to Breton, op.cit., p.16

is also apparent that, while in exile, he also felt the need to set out a new direction for the movement. This explains the publication of his *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* in 1942, realizing that it was imperative for him to show leadership in the new circumstances, particularly in the face of the defection from Surrealism of Wolfgang Paalen, one of his oldest friends and allies.⁶¹ For Breton, this loss constituted a real threat to the survival of the Surrealist movement, diminished as it was at this time by the inevitable dispersal of its members around the globe in time of war, and brought increased urgency to the poet's realization of the need for him to write a new theoretical text. He therefore took the opportunity to emphasize the shift in his poetic direction, demonstrating a strong belief that the path to a « futur édénique » lies in the opening of the mind to the study of myth and hermeticism.

Thus it will be seen in Chapter 3 how Breton uses the text of *Prolégomènes* to establish the short-comings of any political “system”, from those of the Communist Party to those of the French Revolution, even admitting that the Surrealist movement itself is not proof against the intellectual vagaries of some of its members. Instead, Breton lays the emphasis on “la résistance individuelle”, which, he claims, is “la seule clé de la prison”,⁶² the means of achieving intellectual and personal freedom. With the introduction of “Les Grands Transparents”, we see a clear indication of this kind of freedom, finding also a direct intertextual reference to a similar concept in Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer*.⁶³ The seal is set on his determination to follow this new pathway to freedom from the strait-jacket of tradition and received wisdom with the rhetorical closing lines:

Un mythe nouveau? Ces êtres, faut-il les convaincre qu'ils procèdent du mirage ou leur donner l'occasion de se découvrir?⁶⁴

⁶¹ Writing to Péret from New York, Breton describes Paalen's defection as follows : **[Quotation removed pending authorisation]** Letter from André Breton to Benjamin Péret dated 4 January 1942 (Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Fondation André Breton).

⁶² André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.11

⁶³ “Il concluait que, puisque des transparences vivantes habitaient l'eau, d'autres transparences, également vivantes, pouvaient bien habiter l'air.” Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, (Paris : Flammarion, 1980), p.141

⁶⁴ André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.15

So, the most important adjustment in Breton's programme for Surrealism, from the *Second Manifeste* to the *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste*, is his move away from political action, or indeed politics of any kind. Instead he lays emphasis on the importance of an elusive "mythe nouveau",⁶⁵ while continuing the further opening up of the mind and imagination to all possible solutions to the quest for establishing poetry as the means by which to construct a route to social reform. Two further sources which must be mentioned in this connection are Annette Tamuly's *Le Surréalisme et le mythe*⁶⁶ and Alyce Mahon's *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros*.⁶⁷ Tamuly's study, with its illuminating preface by Henri Béhar, develops a clear path to the relationship of Surrealism to the myth, and, as Béhar suggests:

On ne peut que souscrire à sa conclusion : le surréalisme est lui-même
Un mythe, par sa structure interne.⁶⁸

Tamuly develops her theme with analysis of the myth and "sa dimension anthropologique".⁶⁹ She refers to the work of Philip Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*,⁷⁰ and his study in particular of "le double rapport de l'influence d'une mythologie traditionnelle et la volonté de formuler un mythe nouveau".⁷¹ It is on this basis, she states, that her own study proceeds. It is by using the myth as "instrument d'analyse"⁷² that she will reveal "la fonction heuristique du mythe [...]". Il représente, en effet, l'acte fondateur de la littérature et son passage à l'imaginaire."⁷³ Tamuly emphasizes the difficulty of picking any one myth as an example, not least because of the ambiguity of understanding in the reading of any myth – and with it "une volonté délibérée d'occultation du mythe"⁷⁴ from Breton parallel to that which he called for with regard to Surrealism itself. This is both good and bad, when it is clear that a misuse of myth has led, for example, to the rise of fascism on the one hand, and the 'mystification' around the Christian myth on the other. Indeed, it is this equivocal nature

⁶⁵ André Breton, *Arcane 17, Ajours I, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit, p.15

⁶⁶ Annette Tamuly, *Le Surréalisme et le mythe* (New York : Peter Lang, 1995).

⁶⁷ Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

⁶⁸ Henri Béhar, *Préface* to Annette Tamuly, *Le Surréalisme et le mythe*, op.cit., p.xvi

⁶⁹ Annette Tamuly, *Le Surréalisme et le mythe*, op.cit., p.4

⁷⁰ Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe* (Paris : Éditions José Corti, 1985)

⁷¹ Annette Tamuly, *Le Surréalisme et le mythe*, op.cit., p.5

⁷² *Ibid*, p.8

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.7

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.8

of the myth which makes it the ideal analytical tool for the purposes of Surrealism. As Tamuly concludes:

A vrai dire, nous ignorons ce qu'est le mythe, où il est et comment, par le jeu d'une récréation collective ou personnelle, sa réalité fuyante peut se transformer. Paradoxalement, c'est en acceptant d'épouser ces aspects contradictoires, ce jeu déroulant de vérité et d'erreur qui le caractérise, que nous pensons dégager sa véritable efficacité dans la saisie du surréalisme.⁷⁵

While we are not going to go in any depth into the theories of Freud in this thesis, Alyce Mahon's study provides essential reading for the understanding of Breton's evolving approach to myth – although, as so often, it is particularly relevant to the first phase of his career. By the war years, Breton has moved on to a different position in his interpretation of myth *because* he is no longer part of a collective experiment, but now necessarily more on his own. As has been seen, it is more relevant for this later period to look in greater depth at his connection with German Romanticism. Notwithstanding, the particular relevance of Alyce Mahon's study⁷⁶ lies in her scholarly investigation into the importance to the Surrealist movement of the work and psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and “his understanding of art as an activity liberated from the reality-principle”.⁷⁷ This liberation of repressed instincts, Freud recognized, could challenge both reason and repression – “the pillars of civilization” – and that art itself could “make the unconscious conscious”.⁷⁸ The Surrealists saw this as a possible lead towards a collective consciousness, which they strove to establish through the contact of artist and spectator through their writing, art and collective games. However, while finding in Freud's theories much with which they agreed, the Surrealists could not subscribe to his directive that sexuality/Eros/“the life force” must be controlled for the sake of preserving society, and “instead claimed that it should be deliberately unleashed for subversive, political ends”.⁷⁹

We will thus examine much of what Breton had to change in his aims and ambitions as laid out in the *Second Manifeste*, re-adjusted in the *Prolégomènes* with its

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968*, op.cit.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.14

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.15

shift towards social thought, and show how successful he has been in other ways. While the *Prolégomènes* was attacked in the review *Lettres françaises*⁸⁰ as showing “un côté presque entièrement négative”, the group of loyal Surrealists in New York felt re-energized by its attack and demonstration of leadership.⁸¹ At a time when he was himself encountering a period of doubt,⁸² the poet at least achieved, by the unusual means of introducing the possibility of a non-anthropocentric universe,⁸³ an energetic attempt to re-situate Surrealism in the circumstances then prevailing. Thus, as a result of his constant quest for an art which would still bear some relation to action, Breton adds to this another dimension – that of hermeticism, and, up to a point, magic.

Against the charges of negativity, at least one critic was notably enthusiastic about the poet’s new theoretical text. In his article “Revue des revues”,⁸⁴ René Étiemble, writing in *Le Monde libre*, refers to “(ce) très beau manifeste”, which led him to think that Surrealism had at last decided to « collaborer avec l’intelligence et la raison ».⁸⁵ However, in order to voice his coded disapprobation of the Vichy regime and all that it stands for, and to find a new myth for the *future*, Breton looks *back* in his *Prolégomènes* to the time of the Commune (1794), donning the ‘mask’ of the bluff, foul-mouthed “sans-culotte”, Père Duchesne.⁸⁶ This literary conceit serves well to conceal the evident butt of his criticism in this section, while subtly revealing his aims to those who choose to read them. The necessity to establish “un nouveau mythe” is left in no doubt. Nonetheless, speaking to the students at Yale just a few months later, Breton emphasizes that, for all his forays into the past, both historical and mythical, in the course of his search: “Pas un

⁸⁰ An unsigned article, probably by Émilie Noulet, *Lettres Françaises*, (No. 6, 1er novembre 1942), p.56. Cf. *Réception de l’œuvre to Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1139

⁸¹ Robert Lebel is reported as having claimed enthusiastically: “Je n’oublierai jamais l’effet électrisant que produisait sur nous ce manifeste” : Ibid, p.1140

⁸² Breton himself refers to “le point faillible”, as opposed to “le point sublime”, in this text. André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.5

⁸³ Ibid, p.14

⁸⁴ *Le Monde libre* (Montréal: No. 2, December 1942), pp.183–185)

⁸⁵ Cf. *Réception de l’œuvre to Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1139

⁸⁶ Le Père Duchesne, portrayed in a contemporary tract, was known to be the mouthpiece of the revolutionary Hébert who courageously defended the rights of the Commune de Paris until his execution in 1794. Cf. *Notice in Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1135

instant, croyez-le, je ne perds de vue *qu'il y a Hitler*".⁸⁷ He is, he insists, entirely grounded in the present and looking towards the future.

In Chapter 4 we will thus see that from 1943 onwards, Breton is especially concerned with the role of the poet as a "seer", adopting a prophetic stance (a position already held in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*)⁸⁸ which again, strangely, takes him back into the past, finding in the roots of Romanticism, and in Hugo in particular, inspiration for the future of his own movement as he sees it. Intent on working towards "un mythe nouveau" for the future, he looks towards the *past* "pour trouver du nouveau" which, for a writer who from the start had adopted a prophetic tone/stance, presented a very real problem.

Having already seen a connection with Hugo in the section entitled *au vent* in *Les États Généraux*,⁸⁹ Chapter 5 shows a further and stronger link from one poet to the other in the descriptive passages of *Arcane 17*. Here, Breton also reaches the apogee of his quest into hermeticism, employing the myths of Isis and Mélusine – both much used by the writers of occult texts – to provide the rich imagery of his prose-poem. He expands his previously acquired knowledge through his reading of texts by such as the utopian Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Court de Gébelin, Éliphas Lévi and even René Guénon.⁹⁰ We will show how it was the publication of Auguste Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (1942) which had a profound impact on Breton's work at that time, not only through its scholarship and the erudite presentation of many writers of the occult, but also by the fact that it is at this point that the poet turns again to Hugo, re-reading *Les Travailleurs de la mer*.⁹¹

The powerful impression of Viatte's work on Breton at this time, and the import of his research into utopians such as Saint-Yves d'Alveydre cannot be stressed too

⁸⁷ André Breton, *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.710

⁸⁸ "Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*" : André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I., op.cit., p.319

⁸⁹ *Les États Généraux*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.30

⁹⁰ Cf. *Notice to Arcane 17 enté d'AJours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., pp.1170–1171

⁹¹ This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

highly. Nonetheless, it is clear that the poet is not seeking a new dogma through hermeticism, but rather a means of maintaining and multiplying free thought processes by which to discover and establish a new relationship with the world/cosmos and a new way forward for mankind. Viatte is clearly responsible, too, for turning Breton's attention to the "grands visionnaires" of Romanticism in his quest into the roots of Surrealism. The shared enthusiasm of both movements for light and darkness, for finding in darkness the crucible for light and thought, rather than a dark and menacing space to be avoided, confirms the poet in his perception of night as the seat of reality, as well as of desire and love, when man is released from all constraint, his mind free to work at will. We are able to see that this preoccupation with light and darkness, in all its forms, creates the tension which runs through all of the poet's poetic output during these wartime years.

What we particularly feel with *Arcane 17*, however, is the energy of his belief in poetry as the agent for ultimate liberty, enabled through love: "La poésie et l'art garderont toujours un faible pour tout ce qui transfigure l'homme".⁹² It is in the same spirit of deep desire for renewal that Breton embarks on his *Ode à Charles Fourier* (1945), the study of Chapter 6. At this particular time in his exile, preoccupied as he was with the role of the poet as "seer", and knowing that the end of the war is imminent, he feels the need to pay homage to one of the great visionaries of the 19th Century:

Une grande réparation vous est due, les événements actuels la préparent, ils pourraient bien la rendre toute proche et cette réparation devra être d'autant plus éclatante qu'elle aura été plus tardive.⁹³

Intentionally using a much more structured form in the *Ode*, Breton shows evidence of his continuing reverie around Romanticism at the time, deliberately placing the text "au carrefour de la réalité et de l'utopie".⁹⁴ In his search for a new myth for the post-war world, he seeks out various of the "grands visionnaires" – Hugo and Fourier amongst them – from whom to learn for the future. As before, by entering Fourier's time space which he assumes as a mask, Breton is able to criticize what he sees as corrupt and/or in

⁹² André Breton, *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.43

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Gérald Schaeffer, *Un petit matin de 1937* in *André Breton – Essais recueillis par Marc Eigeldinger* (Neuchâtel : Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970), p.241

need of change within the current government of France,⁹⁵ and, to a degree, we see critical barbs directed towards the U.S., his host country, as he salutes Fourier from various specific places on his travels.⁹⁶ With this means of spanning time, calling to Fourier from the present, he emphasizes that connection with current imagery of the Hopi Indians,⁹⁷ performing their ritual dances or seated in an oval round their fires, while he projects into the future, looking towards “un futur édenique”⁹⁸ and quoting the utopian Fourier:

“Il n’y a pas de séparation, d’hétérogénéité entre le surnaturel et le naturel (le réel et le surréel). Aucun hiatus. C’est un ‘continuum’, on croit entendre André Breton : c’est un ethnographe qui nous parle au nom des Indiens Soulteaux.”⁹⁹

With the end of the war in sight, there is no doubt that Breton appears preoccupied with a determination to demonstrate a continuity of thought in his own trajectory, now linking the resolution of all antinomies (the quest for the “point sublime”) with the ultimate goal of harmony in social reform.

However, as is well-known, instead of harmony and a returning prophet’s welcome, Breton faced a hostile onslaught on his return to France in 1946, preceded by the pronouncement of Maurice Nadeau – amongst others – that Surrealism belonged to the past.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, it seemed appropriate for the last chapter of this thesis to concentrate on the reception of Breton’s texts written during his exile in the context of post-war France, after his return to Paris, as well as his introduction to the Surrealist exhibition of 1947. *Devant le Rideau*, the text of his preface to the catalogue for the exhibition *Le surréalisme en 1947*, shows Breton’s defiant response to the reaction of post-war Paris to his return to France. His attackers were mostly the Surréalistes-révolutionnaires, to whom Breton later referred as “les staliniens”.¹⁰¹ Tristan Tzara, too, in his *Le surréalisme et l’après-guerre*,¹⁰² together with Sartre (“Situation de l’écrivain

⁹⁵ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.353

⁹⁶ Ibid, pp.360–361

⁹⁷ As recorded in his *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*, O.C., Vol.III, p.193–196

⁹⁸ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.362

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ His *Histoire du surréalisme* was published in Paris (Le Seuil) in 1945.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Entretiens radiophoniques*, XV, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.562

¹⁰² Tristan Tzara, *Le Surréalisme et l’après-guerre*, (Paris : les Éditions Nagel, 1948)

en 1947”),¹⁰³ accused Breton of being out of touch with the realities of the war for those who had “remained”, forced to face the general trauma of hostilities and that of the German occupation in particular. These accusations are to a degree understandable, in view of the fact that the text gives little impression of fully understanding the hardships so recently endured by the people of Europe. However, the poet remains convinced that he will find the new myth in the sources of the old, and holds to his course. Indeed, Breton makes the connection from the present exhibition back to those of 1938 and 1942, describing it as being in “la même optique”,¹⁰⁴ and that his intentions in ‘staging’ the exhibition, as with the previous ones, “ne répondent à une claire volonté d’anticipation”,¹⁰⁵ but are rather the fruit of his on-going preoccupation with discovering a new myth to release mankind from current traditional constraints and the setting up of an improved society. His stance is perhaps best summarized by his insistence that “Un passé presque immémorial nous est ici garant de l’avenir”,¹⁰⁶ a determinedly backward-looking stance. The purpose of the exhibition, he emphasizes, is to reveal “le mythe d’aujourd’hui”,¹⁰⁷ but in order to do that, he deliberately reaches *back* into the depths of hermeticism, myth and the occult. However, this was precisely to misread the mood, as well as the needs, of a post-war generation looking for guidance for a new direction into the *future*. As Julien Gracq observes, during his time in the U.S., Breton had lived “dans une espèce de bulle française”,¹⁰⁸ as a result of which “cela a entraîné une sorte de décrochage. Il n’a pas retrouvé par la suite ce contact qu’il avait avec Paris, ce qui s’y passait, ce qui s’y disait”.¹⁰⁹

This strange position, looking towards the past to reveal the future, but thereby finding himself somehow out of tune with the times, was adopted again by the poet with the publication of *Martinique charmeuse de serpents* in 1948. Given his choice to return

¹⁰³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situation de l’écrivain en 1947* ; ultimately published in a collection of articles in : Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature ?*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1948), p.233

¹⁰⁴ André Breton, *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.742

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.746

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.749

¹⁰⁸ Julien Gracq, in interview with Michel Murat for the publication of “Cahiers de l’Herne” dedicated to Breton, op.cit., p.16

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

to this combination of texts, originally mostly written with André Masson in 1941, it is little wonder that it found an almost totally uncomprehending and unresponsive public. There was little common ground for understanding, perhaps especially in the light of the publication by Césaire in 1939 of his *Cahier du retour au pays natal* – much lauded by Breton in the text – which, while importantly it demonstrated to *him* “notre conception commune de la vie”,¹¹⁰ can have seemed of very little relevance to the post-war readership of 1948. Having just emerged from war in Europe, there was clearly little appetite from those who ‘remained’ to return to texts written early on in that war, and from a perspective far removed from their own. However, from Breton’s point of view, both his own texts, and those of Masson, reflect not only a commonality of purpose but a continuity of thought, demonstrating the poet’s tenacity to maintain his trajectory.

Indeed, Breton repeatedly insists on his attachment to the Surrealist project and the consistency of his thought. In 1952, replying to questions on “la défense du surréalisme”, he asserts : “Je suis assez content d’avoir pu maintenir, contre vents et marées, les postulats initiaux!”,¹¹¹ and emphasizes further “J’ai le sentiment de ne pas avoir déchu des aspirations de ma jeunesse”.¹¹² We do not necessarily have to accept the terms of Surrealism’s own discourse, but our aim is to try to comprehend the logic that informed Breton’s decisions, actions – insofar as they were possible for him in the U.S. – and, of course, writings. We thus give an overall sense in this thesis of the poet’s purpose during these years, while also using the study to shed new light on the texts of the period and to reveal the inflections of his poetic output.

¹¹⁰ André Breton, ‘Un grand poète noir’ in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.403

¹¹¹ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques*, XVI, (with André Parinaud) O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.568

¹¹² *Ibid*, p.569

CHAPTER 1: Breton's Poetic Quest For "Le Point Sublime"

In this opening chapter we will look at Breton's concept of "le point sublime" and examine what he meant by "mythe", establishing their origins in his early writing and their passage throughout his work, with particular reference to the two poems written immediately prior to his leaving France in 1941: *Pleine marge* and *Fata Morgana*. While tracing this thread, we will also show the shift represented by the *Second Manifeste*, together with the strong influence of Pierre Mabille on the course of Breton's work and his research into hermeticism thereafter. The *Second Manifeste* places "le point sublime" at the centre of a lifelong quest which leads Breton to penetrate ever more deeply into medieval hermeticism and subsequently early German Romanticism, from which he takes inspiration in his search for the reconciliation of the antinomies of existence.

1. André Breton: hermeticism, myth and "le point sublime":

Breton's intellectual pursuit of "le point sublime"¹ became all-absorbing, convinced as he was of its key importance to the ultimate reconciliation of those antinomies he deemed responsible for the politico-social failings of contemporary society. In the touching letter to his "Écusette de Noireuil"² (written in August 1936 when his daughter was eight months old), Breton in fact refers to "un certain 'point sublime' dans la montagne",³ obliquely referring back to his own words in the *Second Manifeste* and the analogous

¹ André Breton, *L'Amour fou*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.780 In fact, in the *Second Manifeste*, Breton talks simply of "un certain point", but later, in *L'Amour fou*, refers back to it as "le point sublime". It seems to be Michel Carrouges who translates this into "le point supreme". Cf. Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* (Paris : Gallimard, 1950), p.22

² Letter from André Breton to his daughter, Aube, then aged eight months, reproduced in *L'Amour fou*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p. 778

(Cf. also *Seconde manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, editorial Note 3 to p. 781, in which it is established that the "admirable site des Basses-Alpes" refers to the Gorges du Verdon, near Castellane, where Breton had stayed in 1931 and again in 1932, p.1594)

³ *Ibid*, p. 780

“certain point de l’esprit”⁴ where all antinomies will be resolved. With his “point sublime” on the mountain, Breton is bringing into play “le principe des analogies et des correspondances”.

For his part, Michel Carrouges asserts that the notion of “le point supreme” forms the corner-stone of Surrealist cosmology, constituting the “foyer vivant” of reality and sur-reality – he adds: “elle vient de l’ésotérisme”.⁵ In the opening lines of the *Second Manifeste* – “ces lignes triomphales”⁶ – Breton reveals his own belief:

Tout porte à croire qu’il existe un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement. Or c’est en vain qu’on chercherait à l’activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l’espoir de détermination de ce point.⁷

With this simple reference to “le point”, and through subtle use of the vocabulary of the occult, Breton makes clear the hermetic connection.⁸ His interest in the aspect of revelation sought by religious scholars through hermetic texts is evident – a principle of revelation which he goes on to make his own, with LOVE as the agent by which that revelation is to be achieved.⁹ This becomes the crucial point, when Breton realizes the importance of poetry as the tool by which to effect the changes which give form to his vision of a new direction for mankind – a poetic dialectic whose roots derive from texts of hermeticism and the occult, bringing together Magic¹⁰ and the Occult. The close connection between hermeticism and alchemy is manifest, and one which forms a continuing thread in Breton’s texts, in many ways from the beginning of the movement, but most evidently from the *Second Manifeste* onwards, together with the quest for “le

⁴ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p. 781

⁵ Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.22

⁶ Ibid, p.23

⁷ André Breton, O.C. Vol.I, op.cit., p.781 [First published: Paris : Simon Kra, 1930]

⁸ Cf. *Second Manifeste*, op.cit., p.818 ; *Situation du surréalisme* in O.C., Vol. III, op.cit. p.723

⁹ Cf. *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.71

¹⁰ For Breton, ‘magic’ is closely allied to alchemy or transformation/metamorphosis, as in “the magic moment, the moment of prestidigitation” (Quoted from Vincent Crapanzano’s *The Moment of Prestidigitation: Magic, Illusion and Mana in the Thought of Emil Durkheim & Marcel Mauss* in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, ‘Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures’ (1910) in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project & the Culture of Modernism*, op.cit., p.6

point sublime”, the point of reconciliation of all antinomies, as will be seen through the texts studied in this thesis.

In pursuit of this reconciliation, the movement under Breton’s leadership defines the human psyche, divided as it is between darkness and light, as a dynamic *whole*. Within that whole, the waking state together with its secondary (subconscious) states act as “des vases communicants”, reinforcing and feeding each other. The imagination becomes a power for synthesis, with the exercise of thought aiming to recover all psychic powers. Love is perceived, particularly by Breton, as the momentum towards the unity of a couple, the fusion into one being in the exaltation of desire and the attaining of happiness.¹¹ This is one definition of “le point sublime” for humanity, one that is defined in a moving letter of Breton to his little daughter Aube. At the time, he expresses the idea that this “point” is his humble perception of an unattainable mountain peak: it is a *horizon*, but: “Il ne fut jamais question de m’établir à demeure en ce point. Il eût d’ailleurs, à partir de là, cessé d’être sublime et j’eusse, moi, cessé d’être un homme”.¹²

Nevertheless, the question of the “point suprême/sublime” remains difficult to define philosophically since, in his effort to destroy the ancient dichotomy between the real and the unreal, Breton makes constant references to Hegel and Marx, emphasizing a strong link between Surrealism and dialectical ideology, and at the same time also turns to the Cabala and to the Zohar. It seems to us that Breton sets up the vision of a synthesized world, as opposed to an analytical philosophy of that world, and that since he will not accept conventional perceptions of opposites as irreconcilable, he does not find it incompatible to make connections between the innermost subjective impulses and extreme outer cosmic forces: to him, the meaning of the world’s unity is first and foremost an affective experience, the starting point of a philosophical thought, but only a starting point. In the years of the *rapprochement* between Surrealism and Revolutionary politics, Breton deliberately emphasized the link between Surrealist thought and Hegelian dialectics. At the time, the fact that Hegel presented History as made up of major

¹¹ Cf. André Breton, *L’Amour fou*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit, p.762–3

¹² Ibid, p. 780

dialectical stages which chart a progression from self-alienation to self-unification and realization seemed to fulfil some of the Surrealists' objectives. Also, Hegel's idea that the end of History should be a constitutional state of free and equal citizens appealed to Breton.

It is in this spirit that the *Second Manifeste* opens with the assessment of "old antinomies" as serving a repressive ideology:

[Il s'agit] de faire reconnaître à tout prix le caractère factice des vieilles antinomies destinées hypocritement à prévenir toute agitation insolite de la part de l'homme, ne serait-ce qu'en lui donnant une idée indigente de ses moyens, qu'en le défiant d'échapper dans une mesure valable à la contrainte universelle.¹³

Breton denounces what he sees in the images of heaven and hell, good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly, as a hypocritical vision of human misery, "l'épouvantail [...] de la catastrophe humaine". But, he affirms, "ces images trop saisissantes [...] ne sont peut-être que des images", and must be erased from the mind – the antinomies must be cancelled out, overcome.¹⁴ In this way, and only in this way, will it be possible to reach "le point supreme" which lies at the centre of the Surrealist quest.

So while Breton maintains that the concept of such a reconciliation of all antinomies is "hégélien",¹⁵ there is no doubt that his interpretation calls for certain reservations. The thinking by which Hegel analyzes the process is total: his thinking on History and the mind is absolute, whereas Breton holds to individual thought and prizes indomitable singularity as of the highest authenticity.¹⁶ On the other hand, Hegel affirms the equivalence of the real and the rational, while Surrealism emphasizes the powers of the irrational and the emotions, precisely abjuring discursive argument in favour of flights of the imagination and free association of thought. Thus Surrealism exhibits a philosophy founded on fleeting intuition, on the revelation of concrete irrationality, on

¹³ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p. 781

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Cf. *Entretiens radiophoniques*, XI, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p. 525

¹⁶ Claude Abastado, *Introduction au surréalisme*, (Paris : Bordas, 1971), pp. 161–162

the questioning of language structures. More importantly, Surrealism is based on an ethic of revolt against the collective order and against History which goes completely against Hegel's thought. Thus, Surrealist philosophy, "hégélienne dans ses termes, ne l'est pas dans son esprit".¹⁷

The *Second Manifeste* opens with an approach which can be taken as dialectic, but closes with the solemn proclamation (written in capital letters): "JE DEMANDE L'OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURREALISME", accompanied by a note which clarifies Breton's thinking:

Je pense qu'il y aurait tout intérêt à ce que nous poussions une reconnaissance sérieuse du côté de ces sciences à divers égards aujourd'hui complètement décriées que sont l'astrologie, entre toutes les anciennes, la métaphysique (spécialement en ce qui concerne l'étude de la cryptesthésie) parmi les modernes.¹⁸

Certain critics have not hesitated to emphasize the relationship Breton has with the esoteric tradition. For Michel Carrouges "le point suprême" comes not from Hegel, but from the esoteric tradition; it is "le moment de l'indétermination originelle et celui de la synthèse finale":

En lui il n'est plus possible de percevoir les diverses formes de l'être comme des réalités essentiellement hétérogènes. Ce n'est pas un point théorique, mais un champ surhumain qui ne sera pas toujours inaccessible à l'exploration par l'homme.¹⁹

In support of his thesis, Michel Carrouges goes back to various of Breton's texts covering the full range of his œuvre, revealing identical formulae in *Position politique du surréalisme* (1935), *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939), in *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres* (1945), and concluding with the notion of "le point suprême", which he represents as follows :

Cette idée essentielle du surréalisme vient de la tradition hermétique. Elle se trouve dans la Kabbale et joue un rôle essentiel dans le *Zohar*. Dans cette

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 162

¹⁸ André Breton, *Second Manifeste*, O.C., Vol. II, op.cit., p. 821

¹⁹ Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme*, op.cit., p. 23

métaphysique, c'est le point d'origine de la Création, le point d'action en lequel Dieu créa le monde et où tout est contenu ab ovo. C'est en quelque façon le trône du Créateur. C'est Dieu en acte vers l'extérieur.²⁰

However, as Richard Spiteri notes “Carrouges est fort attentif à ces moments où Breton frôle, mais non tout à fait, la transcendance”,²¹ and again that “[il] insiste à vouloir montrer l'existence dans la pensée surréaliste d'un soubassement religieux”.²² In other words, Carrouges may choose to dwell on these ‘revelations’ which he finds in Breton’s texts, but it is a personal reading, led by Carrouges’s own mystical thinking, and, as such, unconvincing and to be heard with caution.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the Surrealists, as a group, have all developed an interest in the occult and there are scarcely any of Breton’s texts which do not make mention of metapsychology, astrology or magic. In these sciences, the Surrealists see the means of widening knowledge, of explaining enigmatic phenomena, and exploring the reach of hermeticism. From 1922, in “Entrée des mediums”²³ and “L’Esprit nouveau”,²⁴ Breton records all the experiences which perturb him, registering all the details which cannot be interpreted by rational scientific means. *Nadja* (1928) and *L’Amour fou* (1937) lead the reader away from the logical pathways of rationality. In the *Lettre aux voyantes* (1925), *le Second Manifeste* (1928), *Arcane 17* (1944) and *Signe ascendant* (1948), Breton is looking for *signs*, and questing within himself for the means by which to decipher them. In fact, for Breton “l’idée d’une clef ‘hiéroglyphique’ du monde [...] préexiste plus ou moins consciemment à toute haute poésie”, and the only thing to trigger that is “le principe des analogies et des correspondances”. He goes on to add “Des poètes comme Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, des penseurs comme

²⁰ Ibid, p.26–27

²¹ Richard Spiteri, ‘Michel Carrouges : vers un surréalisme analogue’ in *Intellectuel surréaliste (après 1945)*, Actes du séminaire du Centre de Recherches sur le Surréalisme, directed by Nathalie Limat-Letellier and Maryse Vassevière, essays collected by Maryse Vassevière, (Association pour l’étude du Surréalisme, Collection des Pas perdus : 2008), p.144

²² Ibid, p.145

²³ André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p. 273

²⁴ Ibid, p.257

Fourier, partagent cette idée avec les occultistes, et aussi vraisemblablement avec la plupart des inventeurs scientifiques”.²⁵

Discussing Surrealist poetry with Francis Dumont in 1950, Breton expresses himself even more clearly:

C’est de son propre mouvement, je veux dire par des mobiles qui me semblaient alors strictement poétiques, que [le surréalisme] a été amené à « recouper » certaines thèses ésotériques fondamentales. [...] Observez que la poésie, depuis que Rimbaud lui a donné pour tâche de “changer la vie”, lui a assigné – comme on a pu dire – une mission “prométhéenne”, se trouver engagée sur les voies de cette “révolution intérieure” dont l’accomplissement parfait pourrait bien se confondre avec celui du Grand Œuvre, tel que l’entendent les alchimistes.²⁶

However, since Breton does not believe in an after-life, and for all his proclamations, he is always clear that “s’interroger sur des phénomènes que la science positive n’explique pas, chercher de nouvelles méthodes d’investigation, n’implique pas l’adhésion à une philosophie spiritualiste, la croyance à un monde transcendant”.²⁷ At the centre of reality, the only absolute for him is the human spirit. From the “Entrée des mediums” on, he affirms a way of thinking resolutely in line with his lay ideology, and every time he alludes to the occult sciences, he is careful to make all reservations on the ideology behind them. As he retorts on another occasion, in interview with André Parinaud: “Seule l’ignorance a pu induire que ce sont là des préoccupations d’ordre mystique [...] autant vouloir faire passer Engels, lui aussi, pour mystique”.²⁸

In the case of “le point sublime”, Breton gives his own meaning:

Il va sans dire que ce ‘point’, en quoi sont appelées à se résoudre toutes les antinomies qui nous rongent et nous désespèrent, et que, dans mon ouvrage *L’Amour fou* je nommerai le ‘point suprême’, en souvenir d’un admirable site des Basses-Alpes, ne saurait aucunement se situer sur le plan mystique.²⁹

²⁵ André Breton, in ‘Interview de Claudine Chonez’, *La Gazette des lettres* (31 July 1948), reprinted in *Entretiens 1913-1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p. 613

²⁶ André Breton, in ‘Interview de Francis Dumont’, *Combat* (16 May 1950), reprinted in *Entretiens 1913-1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp. 616–617

²⁷ Claude Abastado, *Introduction au surréalisme*, op.cit., p.164

²⁸ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, X, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p. 515

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 525

It is true therefore that although Surrealist philosophy cannot be tightly linked to either Hegelianism or the tradition of the Occult, Breton nevertheless was always adamant that Hegel in particular had been a significant philosophical influence on his thought. He remains unambiguous about it in the *Entretiens* :

C'est incontestablement Hegel – et nul autre – qui m'a mis dans les conditions voulues pour apercevoir ce point, pour tendre de toute mes forces vers lui et pour faire, de cette tension même, l'objet de ma vie. Il y a sans doute de bien plus grands connaisseurs que moi de l'ensemble de l'œuvre de Hegel : n'importe quel spécialiste m'en remontrerait en matière d'exégèse à son propos mais il n'en est pas moins vrai que, depuis que j'ai connu Hegel, voire depuis que je l'ai pressenti à travers les sarcasmes dont le poursuivait, vers 1912, mon professeur de philosophie, un positiviste, André Cresson, je me suis imprégné de ses vues et que pour moi sa méthode a frappé d'indigence toutes les autres. Où la dialectique hégélienne ne fonctionne pas, il n'y a pour moi pas de pensée, pas d'espoir de vérité.³⁰

However, to identify Hegel with the esoteric tradition is surely, on Breton's part, an act of rash metaphorical daring. In fact, it demonstrates well enough that Surrealism flows from neither one nor the other. Breton takes from each what suits his purpose, committing fully to neither, while his purpose remains to “jeter un fil conducteur entre les mondes trop dissociés de la veille et du sommeil, de la réalité extérieure et intérieure, de la raison et de la folie, du calme de la connaissance et de l'amour, de la vie pour la vie et de la Révolution”.³¹ He seeks not to establish causal chains, but to define equivalences, and to achieve this through poetry and the ensuing alchemy of the word.

The concept of literary alchemy brings to mind Rimbaud's work *L'Alchimie du verbe*.³² In *Une saison en enfer* the poet reveals in part his ambition to create poetic gold from allegorical base metal by contesting traditional conventions and language, inventing something new and stimulating. This ambition, coupled with that of breaking with universally accepted tradition, espousing visual beauty in all things, leads Rimbaud to a

³⁰ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, XI, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.525

³¹ *Les vases communicants*, quoted by Michel Carrouges in *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme*, op.cit., p. 24–25

³² *L'Alchimie du verbe* figures at the beginning of the second chapter of Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* (1873), a work much revered by the Surrealists.

greater freedom in his writing – a freedom which the Surrealists in general, and Breton in particular, seek to emulate. Indeed, Breton clearly states this in the *Second Manifeste*:

Alchimie du verbe: ces mots qu'on va répétant un peu au hasard aujourd'hui demandent à être pris au pied de la lettre. Si le chapitre d'*Une saison en enfer* qu'ils désignent ne justifie peut-être pas toute leur ambition, il n'en est pas moins vrai qu'il peut être tenu le plus authentiquement pour l'amorce de l'activité difficile qu'aujourd'hui seul le surréalisme poursuit.³³

There is nothing new in Breton's preoccupation with the importance of words themselves, or even groups of words, and/or the transposition of individual letters within those words. As early as 1918, in a letter to Aragon, Breton refers to his friendship with Jean Paulhan and "la grande question qui l'occupe", which is whether one should not read the "sens' des ensembles, des phrases" rather than just the meaning of the words themselves.³⁴ However, in an article entitled *Les Mots sans rides*,³⁵ Breton opens with a warning:

On commençait à se défier des mots, on venait tout à coup de s'apercevoir qu'ils demandaient à être traités autrement que ces petits auxiliaires pour lesquels on les avait toujours pris.³⁶

The concept of words as individual, creative 'beings' is followed up with a disturbing thought:

Toutefois on n'était pas certain que les mots vécussent déjà de leur vie propre, on n'osait trop voir en eux des créateurs d'énergie.³⁷

The preoccupation is widened and elaborated with reference to the "jeux de mots" of Robert Desnos and Marcel Duchamp, to the "déplacement de lettre à l'intérieur d'un mot, échange de syllable entre deux mots, etc."³⁸ The hermetic search for meaning is fundamental to the Surrealist quest from the movement's early years, and the systematic exploration of signs in order to try to decipher the mysterious connections between

³³ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C. Vol.I, op.cit., p.818

³⁴ André Breton, Cf: letter to Aragon dated 20 July 1918, in O.C. Vol.I. op.cit., p.1313

³⁵ Originally published in *Littérature*, nouvelle série, no. 7, (1 December 1922), p.12–14

³⁶ André Breton, *Les Mots sans rides*, O.C. Vol.I, op. cit., p.284

³⁷ Ibid, p.285

³⁸ Ibid

distant realities also crucially led to the exploration of objects which dealt with the concordance of chance and human desire and, in turn, led to a reflection on myths.

It is very clear from the original *Manifeste* that Surrealism will establish as one of the central goals of its quest the search for a previous state of perfection, “l’enfance retrouvée à volonté” as Baudelaire writes,³⁹ an element lost together with man’s earliest innocence. In his study *André Breton et le mythe*,⁴⁰ Philippe Lavergne talks of “Le mythe du Paradis perdu” as something “constant dans toutes les sociétés primitives”, continuing with a reference to:

[la] rupture originelle [...] entre l’homme et l’univers. C’est tout à fait dans cette perspective que s’inscrit le mythe du Paradis perdu chez Breton, toujours préoccupé de rendre l’homme à sa vraie vie.⁴¹

The stultifying effect of centuries of man’s acceptance of the yoke of tradition has had a fatally sclerotic end result, which is the butt of Breton’s attack, followed by the anticipated restoration of a previous state of grace. It is not so much a question of restoring for mankind “un paradis spatial et temporel où son champ d’action ne connaisse plus de frontières”,⁴² as retrieving a primitive faculty long since crushed by society, a faculty from some prehistoric age before ‘civilisation’ had established its rules and regulations, with the inevitable imposition of limitations to mind, spirit and action.⁴³ Breton himself sums up the current state of mankind, the goals of Surrealism and its aim

³⁹ Cf: Charles Baudelaire : "Remontons, s'il se peut, par un effort rétrospectif de l'imagination, vers nos plus jeunes, nos plus matinales impressions, et nous reconnâtrons qu'elles avaient une singulière parenté avec les impressions, si vivement colorées, que nous reçûmes plus tard à la suite d'une maladie physique, pourvu que cette maladie ait laissé pures et intactes nos facultés spirituelles. L'enfant voit tout *en nouveauté*; il est toujours *ivre*. Rien ne ressemble plus à ce qu'on appelle l'inspiration que la joie avec laquelle l'enfant absorbe la forme et la couleur. J'oserai pousser plus loin; j'affirme que l'inspiration a quelque rapport avec *la congestion*, et que toute pensée sublime est accompagnée d'une secousse nerveuse [...] L'homme de génie a les nerfs solides; l'enfant les a faibles. Chez l'un, la raison a pris une place considérable; chez l'autre, la sensibilité occupe presque tout l'être. Mais le génie n'est que *l'enfance retrouvée à volonté*..." *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, O.C, Pléiade, p.690, Vol.II. 1976.

⁴⁰ Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*, (Paris : Librairie José Corti, 1985)

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.30

⁴² *Ibid*, p.32

⁴³ *Ibid*

to retrieve that innocence from tradition still represented by the mind of “le primitif et l’enfant”.⁴⁴ He asserts with emphasis

Ces oppositions présentées à tort comme insurmontables, creusées déplorablement au cours des âges et qui sont les vrais alambics de la souffrance: opposition de la folie et de la prétendue ‘raison’ qui se refuse à faire la part de l’irrationnel, opposition du rêve et de ‘l’action’ qui croit pouvoir frapper le rêve d’inanité, opposition de la représentation mentale et de la perception physique, l’une et l’autre produits de dissociation d’une faculté unique, originelle dont le primitif et l’enfant gardent trace, qui lève la malédiction d’une barrière infranchissable entre le monde intérieur et le monde extérieur et qui serait le salut, de l’homme, de retrouver.⁴⁵

Referring to the “alambics de la souffrance”, underlining the essential aim of Surrealism, to reach that “point supreme” and to return humanity to its previous state of ‘innocence’, Breton reinforces Surrealism’s take on mad people and madness itself – all those uncontaminated by the traditions and expectations of society, those who have escaped and found freedom, of whatever sort.⁴⁶ It is not, he insists in this passage, simply a goal taken from the occultists, but the solid aim of Surrealism itself. With direct quotes firstly from the *Second Manifeste*⁴⁷ and then from *Les Vases communicants*,⁴⁸ he refers back to his own statements in earlier texts, emphasizing the consistency of his approach.

A contemporary Surrealist equivalent of the medieval search for the Holy Grail, Breton’s quest for “le point supreme”, together with the recovery of “les pouvoirs perdus”, is inextricably interwoven with Surrealist preoccupation with “le mythe” of the 20th century. What is also clearly happening here is the change from the old concept of ‘myth’ as an old-style traditional tale, passed down through the generations, into something akin to a fairy tale, incorporating a moral rule, created as a blue-print by which society should live. Complementing the search for “le point sublime”, Breton’s lengthy

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⁴⁵ André Breton, *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.723

⁴⁶ Cf. Breton’s interest in North American Indians (particularly, later, the Hopi Indians), all those marginalised by society: see also Charles Fourier’s plans for utopian phalansterianism in Chapter 6 below.

⁴⁷ O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.781

⁴⁸ O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.208

personal research into myth was in sympathy with the general intellectual trend of the time:

Vers 1920, la surdétermination du concept de mythe est à son apogée... [...] À l'aube des années 20, perdure encore la notion classique de mythe... [...] Sauf pour un petit nombre d'initiés, la mythologie n'est rien d'autre qu'un répertoire de récits fabuleux, où s'alimente la mémoire des peuples, mais aussi des poètes, des artistes et des philosophes, qui cherchent dans le mythe un mode d'expression symbolique plus qu'une inspiration.⁴⁹

The interest in myth and religion, or myth as a pattern of life, was in fact not restricted only to France and was one of the central preoccupations of Modernist thought. In England, James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), originally a twelve-volume work sub-titled *A Study in Magic and Religion*, was published in an abridged one-volume edition in 1922. As its title suggests, Frazer's work necessarily embraces the study of mythology, the root of and spur to religions through the ages. *The Golden Bough* became a seminal work for many, a fact acknowledged by T.S.Eliot in his *Notes on the Waste Land* (this poem also published co-incidentally in 1922). Speaking for himself and others, he writes:

To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*...⁵⁰

The Golden Bough in its more accessible abridged version, and now also in translation, became ever more widely known and read.⁵¹ Twelve volumes condensed into one necessarily renders it a challenge to read and absorb, but as a handbook of the history of magic and religion worldwide, it represents a unique work of reference of its time. Breton was thus able to access Frazer's work, finding in it confirmation of his own

⁴⁹ Anne-Marie Amiot, *Le Dire poétique – 1800–2000*, (Nice : Serre Éditeur, 2004), p.239–240

⁵⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London : Penguin Books, 1948), p.66.

⁵¹ Appearing in translation 1911–1915, its influence extended across the Channel to young writers and poets of the same generation in France, thanks to the dedication and scholarship of Frazer's French wife, Elisabeth, who made it her life's work to ensure the translation and dissemination of her husband's writings. Cf. R. Angus Downie, *James George Frazer – Portrait of a Scholar*, (London : Watts & Co., 1940), p.128

ideas on the importance of “la Magie” in the liberation of mankind, being as it was not only “la fille de l’Erreur”, but also “la mère de la Liberté et de la Vérité”.⁵²

A strong connection can be established between the work of Frazer on myth and religion and the work of Freud’s series of psycho-analytical essays on similar themes brought together in *Totem und Tabu* (1913), which appeared in translation in France in 1923.⁵³ In Chapter III of the English translation of the latter text (1919) – a chapter entitled ‘Animism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thought’ – Freud refers the reader to the work of J.G. Frazer (together with other “well-known works”) by the end of the first paragraph.⁵⁴ Thereafter, he makes several references to Frazer’s work on magic and its connection with early primitive religion, with dreams, myths and their psycho-analytical interpretation.⁵⁵ Freud himself lays out what he refers to as a “psychological theory” which “makes it possible to comprehend the totality of the world”:

Writers maintain that in the course of time three such systems of thought, three great world systems, came into being: the animistic (**mythological**), the religious, and the scientific. Of these animism, the first system, is perhaps the most consistent and the most exhaustive, and the one which explains the nature of the world in its entirety.⁵⁶

From this it is clear that Breton in his search for a new myth found an immediate connection with the development of Freud’s innovative psychological approach and was pleased to substantiate the credentials of Surrealism by claiming commonality with the ‘new’ science of psychology. Breton’s interest in the work of Freud is already well documented, and the fact that both Benjamin Péret⁵⁷ – always close to Breton – and

⁵² André Breton, *Devant le Rideau*, in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.748

⁵³ Translated by Dr. S. Jankélévitch

⁵⁴ Those of Herbert Spencer, A. Lang, E.B. Tylor and W.Wundt – all renowned in the fields of (social) anthropology, psychology and/or philosophy: cf. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, (London : Penguin Books Limited, 1938), Note 1, p.122

⁵⁵ Freud footnotes references to Frazer’s two volumes on myth and magic in *The Magic Art etc., Vols. I & II*, and *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul, Vol.III*: cf. *Totem and Taboo*, op.cit., pp.128, 130, 133, 134, 154, 155, 156

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, op.cit., p.125 (The emphasis is mine.)

⁵⁷ In *Candomblé et makumba* in the Brazilian journal *Diario da noite* (30 January 1931) Cf. Richard Spiteri ‘Péret, Freud et Frazer’ in *Mélusine, No. XVI – Cultures – Contres-cultures*, (Paris : L’Âge d’homme, 1997)

Wolfgang Paalen⁵⁸ are clearly conversant with the text bears witness to the popularity of its reception by the Surrealist movement. The study of dreams and primitive religion, the use of myth as a psychological tool, as discussed by both Frazer and Freud, is central to Breton's wartime quest.

In a section of their text on Breton and « *l'écriture surréaliste* » headed *Le mythe, l'utopie, l'inconscient collectif*, Durozoi and Lecherbonnier discuss this evolution at some length, with particular reference to Breton's own development of it after his arrival in the U.S. in the 1940s:

Par différentes références et activités, il s'agit globalement, ainsi que l'exprime J.B. Brunius, "de remplacer un mythe d'oppression par un mythe de libération... un mythe d'affranchissement moral et matériel où l'ordre et le désordre ne soient plus qu'une même activité".⁵⁹

The theme of liberation is closely connected with Breton's own concept of a modern myth. He is convinced that it is essential to destroy the traditional myth, which has so singularly failed contemporary society and civilization in Europe. Love, Poetry and Freedom gradually evolve as the key elements of his new myth.⁶⁰ The vital role of the poet and artist in this quest for freedom is increasingly emphasized by Breton, and now recurs as a constant theme. This stance is witnessed by more than one critic of his work:

Le poète et l'artiste se voient ici confier une mission libératrice et il semble que Breton n'ait jamais envisagé d'autre incarnation possible du mythe qu'à travers l'art. [...] ...Breton n'a pu que créer des mythes la [*l'Histoire*] dépassant de toutes parts, permettant certes le dialogue transparent de l'homme avec la Nature, mais le condamnant à chanter au milieu des tempêtes.⁶¹

Breton's concern remains the harmonious reconciliation of man with the world around him, as, embattled on all fronts, he searches for the "point supreme". More importantly,

⁵⁸ In "Totemic art" in *Dyn*, No.4–5, (1943), p.20: Cf. Richard Spiteri, 'Autour de *Dyn*: le dialogue entre Péret et Paalen' in *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* (Septembre–Octobre 2002, 102^e année – No.5), p.847

⁵⁹ G.Durozoi & B.Lecherbonnier, *André Breton: l'écriture surréaliste*, (Paris : Librairie Larousse, 1974), p.236

⁶⁰ Cf. *Arcane 17 enté d'ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.95, Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*, op.cit., p.112

⁶¹ Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*, op.cit., p.90

it appears that essentially Breton was only ever concerned with art – and through art, to ensure real action, whether political or other, by which to achieve his goal for mankind.

At this time, Breton stands out as “seul capable d’aimer et de fédérer des personnalités fortes autour d’un projet commun”,⁶² and that, having galvanised the Surrealist movement and given it direction, “il n’a jamais transigé avec les trois causes qu’il avait épousés depuis le début : la poésie, l’amour et la liberté”.⁶³ In the event, Breton successfully undertook to “libérer les énergies mythiques dans l’espoir de les charger de réalités temporelles”,⁶⁴ thus demonstrating that art and myth were the means by which to access man’s inner self and show him the three-way route to true happiness. The recurring theme of these three essential elements in Breton’s work – “la poésie, l’amour, la liberté” – will be illustrated by all the texts considered in this study.

With this in mind, when looking at the poems *Pleine marge* and *Fata Morgana* in this chapter, the role played by “transparence, lumière et liquidité tout à la fois”⁶⁵ will be seen to be a vital and revelatory element in Breton’s writing and one particularly relevant to the composition of these two poems. A recurrent theme in his work, – as, conversely, is opacity, “la grande ennemie de l’homme”⁶⁶ – it is perhaps through transparency that the essential core of Breton’s myth is best exposed. Light, in all its forms, (often represented by crystal), demonstrates for Breton the transparency necessary for man to open the perfect dialogue, either with himself or with the world. Whether from sun, crystal or water, clearly any aspect of light was an essential element for someone who said of himself:

Sans doute y a-t-il trop de *nord* en moi... [...] Ce nord, à mes yeux mêmes, comporte à la fois des fortifications naturelles de granit et de la brume.⁶⁷

⁶² Dominique Berthet, *André Breton, l'éloge de la rencontre: Antilles, Amérique, Océanie*, (Paris : HC Éditions, 2008), p.132

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*, op.cit., p.112

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.104

⁶⁶ André Breton, *Arcane 17 enté d'ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.53

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.5

Such imagery links with that of the myths of early German Romanticism in which Breton found inspiration – inspiration, it should be remembered, of *thought*, but not of style.⁶⁸ More importantly, it is symbolic of the Revelation sought by the Surrealist group – most particularly by their leader – through their quest for “le point supreme”, which would result from the consequent resolution of antinomies. In the *Second Manifeste*, Breton talks of the faith man should put not only in Revolution, “*mais encore dans l’amour*”, going on to emphasize “le grand jour de l’amour” and its links with “le langage de la revelation”.⁶⁹ Love and poetry enable revelation; together, these elements produce the catalyst for action, which in turn leads to freedom.

2. The new route to action: the role and influence of Pierre Mabille:

After the break with the Parti Communiste in 1935, the failure of the FIARI in 1938, and the consequent demise of political action for Surrealism brought about by the declaration of war in September 1939, beginning with the German invasion of Poland (on 1st September 1939), then Britain and France declaring war on Germany two days later, Breton had to seek out an alternative path to a means of action for the movement. The ambition to achieve a revolution in collective thinking, in large part in order to overcome this marginalization, greatly occupied Breton’s thoughts during the troubled times of the outbreak of war with Germany and the occupation of France in the wake of the defeat of 1940. He was not alone, but increasingly, poetry *as he conceived it* at the time became more and more connected with “myth”, no doubt as a way to fight the horrors of “history”:

Ce contenu latent de la vie [...] qui constitue la matière première de la poésie et de l’art. Le mythe est ce que ce contenu devient à travers eux.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cf. Claude Abastado, *Introduction au surréalisme*, op.cit., p. 164

⁶⁹ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., Footnote pp.822–823

⁷⁰ André Breton, *Entretiens*, (Coll. Idées, Gallimard, 1968), p.265 in Anne-Marie Amiot, *Le dire poétique*, p.254

Feelings of desperation and alienation were the crucible in which the creative spirit of poets, writers and painters of the time was fashioned. It was this sense of marginalization which drove the Surrealists, Breton above all, to find in their work a new myth by which to live and through which to achieve their revolution of the mind. While disillusioned, disappointed by and disenchanted with the failure of political involvement, Breton remained determinedly active at this time. His call for greater occultation showed his determination that a deeper knowledge of hermeticism and the occult would open up the collective imagination and provide the way forward.

In August 1940, after demobilization, Breton found sanctuary with Pierre Mabilie in Salon-de-Provence – appropriately enough, the burial place of Nostradamus, whose work, *Centuries*, was, amongst others, a subject for discussion by the two men during this time together. Writing of this period almost twenty years later (1962), Breton recalls the clarity of Mabilie’s mind, “prenant sa sève dans l’œuvre des chercheurs de l’époque médiévale”.⁷¹ Mabilie, well-tutored by a one-time patient, the hermeticist Pierre Piobb, had already been influential in mentoring Breton’s continuing journey into the occult.⁷² Evidence of this and of their close association is clearly reflected in Breton’s epic poem, *Pleine marge*, written at this time, as will be seen below from reference to the text.

Unlike Breton, Mabilie made lasting friendships with most of the members of the Surrealist group; even Breton himself never fell out with him, although their friendship was perhaps less warm in later years. It was this love of mankind as a whole which led Mabilie to reject society as he found it in the years leading up to World War II, with its dual strangle-hold of religion and the bourgeoisie, culminating in the rise of fascism.

Il fut un véritable amoureux de l’humain, et cette conception merveilleuse de la fraternité était un pas vers le nouveau monde qu’il attendait.⁷³

⁷¹ André Breton, *Pont-levis in Perspective cavalière, Œuvres complètes*, Vol. IV, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 2008), p.1003

⁷²Cf. Ibid, p.1003 ; Sarane Alexandrian also makes major claims as to Mabilie’s influence on Breton : “Occultiste compétent, disciple de Pierre Piobb, l’une des grandes figures de l’occultisme de notre siècle, c’est lui qui a initié Breton à la géomantique et à l’astrologie judiciaire.” in *Le Surréalisme et le rêve* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1974), p.444

⁷³ Ibid, p.17

For Mabile, fascism, the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, followed by apparent Nazi supremacy denoted the end of Western civilization as it had been known. For him, like Breton, it was time to establish a new civilization, well away from the corruption and disintegration of the old one. Was it to be the U.S. or Mexico which would provide the birthplace of this ‘brave new world’? In an undated letter to Breton written soon after his arrival in Haïti in 1941, Mabile is already emphasizing his ambition for their joint operation of this plan as soon as possible:

L’objectif fondamental me semble être de se rassembler le plus vite possible pour pouvoir continuer une activité réelle. Où pensez-vous que ce rassemblement puisse s’opérer dans les meilleures conditions – à N.Y. ou à Mexico?⁷⁴

While analysing the structure of civilizations in his work, he is at pains to explain his own interpretation of that most elusive of terms “égrégoré”, borrowed, as he owns, from hermeticism and used to portray the living collective spirit of human civilization. This collective spirit, Mabile asserts, is the life force of any civilization.⁷⁵ While it is not evident whether or not he influenced Breton, it is clear that they shared this belief in the importance of a collective force. Where Mabile’s concurrence with Breton is indeed clear is in his endorsement of Breton’s enthusiasm to plumb the depths and potentialities of hermeticism and the occult.

Cette volonté de réhabiliter l’hermétisme, en le tirant des ténèbres où l’ont plongé le catholicisme et l’esprit (trop) positiviste des temps modernes, est présente dans toute l’œuvre de Pierre Mabile.⁷⁶

Mabile himself announces with some pride and gratitude that it was through hermeticism that he managed to free himself from the constraints of his education and up-bringing:

Ayant reçu comme beaucoup, hélas, l’enseignement classique national, j’ai pu échapper à cette emprise par un long contact avec les hermétistes anciens...⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Undated letter from Pierre Mabile to André Breton, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris – Fonds Pierre Mabile

⁷⁵ Pierre Mabile, *Égrégores ou la vie des civilisations*, (Paris : Le Sagittaire, 1977), p.64

⁷⁶ Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabile: un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.26

⁷⁷ Pierre Mabile, *Égrégores ou la vie des civilisations*, op.cit p.44

This crucial importance of freedom from the constraints imposed by his education, together with the influence of the hermeticists, feeds exactly into Breton's vision at the time. Further, under the sub-heading *L'Importance des hermétistes*, Mabille advises with hindsight:

En réalité, on ne saurait rien comprendre, ni au mécanisme de la Renaissance, ni à l'évolution ultérieure de l'Église, si l'on ne fait pas intervenir ce courant d'idées si particulier. [...] Instruits par les savants juifs, par les lettres arabes, par les textes alexandrins retrouvés, ils tentèrent de reconstituer en marge de la religion officielle une science du monde.⁷⁸

Once released from the received wisdom of his formal education, Mabille patently demonstrates the importance of such freedom by aligning himself increasingly with the revolutionary avant-garde. From this position, he is soon talking of his future vision for the world:

Ma volonté de transformer le monde – base du sentiment révolutionnaire – demeure et s'accroît, mais elle s'est orientée vers des objectifs plus vastes et plus lointains.⁷⁹

It is important to grasp Mabille's sense of "révolutionnaire", in the context of his life's quest, which is at once both scientific and esoteric, as expressed by his biographer:

Pour [lui] être un révolutionnaire, c'est indiquer le chemin d'un nouveau monde hors du chaos, rendre palpables ou intelligibles de nouvelles formes sensibles ; c'est [...] poser les jalons d'une nouvelle réalité ; la civilisation post-chrétienne entrevue par Mabille naîtra de la fusion harmonique de l'art et la science, dissociés actuellement par la décadence de la chrétienté.⁸⁰

Rémy Laville asserts that, apart from his medical writings, in reality Mabille wrote only one work – *La Construction de l'Homme*⁸¹ – and that all his others are simply

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 152 & 187

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.45

⁸⁰ Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabille : un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.80

⁸¹ Pierre Mabille, *La Construction de l'Homme* (Paris : Éditions Jean Flory, 1936)

“le remaniement du même texte”⁸². There is indeed a strong connecting thread throughout his work, given his stated ambition to “faire la science de l’homme”.⁸³ His thoughts on the history of the domination of Christianity in Western civilization, where it came from, its birth, maturation and now disintegration into ‘decadence’, manifest in the corruption or stifling of freedom of thought in the individual, run in tandem with Breton’s. There is a note of optimism inherent in his view of man, as there is in Breton’s, and similarly in *Égrégories* he shows his determination that there will be a better world for mankind in the creation of a new civilization.

Towards the end of the first part of *Égrégories*, Mabille states realistically:

Je ne vois pas l’homme nouveau surgir spontanément de la transformation des conditions matérielles de la vie. Je crois à la nécessité pour le voir apparaître, de fournir un effort laborieux et constant.⁸⁴

But he remains adamant that freedom from the dogma and constraints of Christianity is paramount to the establishing of a new civilization, however tempting it may seem for tortured souls to turn to the ‘comfort’ of the Church and its pronouncements to ease their pain. He follows this with a long quote from Breton, illustrating this “permanence de l’inquiétude”⁸⁵ and man’s ability to deal with it, even in the midst of the current dislocation and unrest: “comme le pivot de ce tourbillon même, comme le médiateur par excellence”.⁸⁶

Again, in the sub-section of the second part of *Égrégories* entitled *L’Importance des Hermétistes*, Mabille makes it clear that he regards hermeticism – as did the “hermétistes anciens” – as a means of pushing the boundaries of religious teaching in order to pursue scientific knowledge. He, like Breton, delights in the revolutionary courage of these hermeticists – those who were brave and enquiring enough to wish to

⁸²Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabille: un compagnon du surréalisme* (Clermont-Ferrand : Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-Ferrand, 1983), p.21

⁸³ Ibid, p.4

⁸⁴ Pierre Mabille, *Égrégories*, op.cit., p.133

⁸⁵ Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabille : un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.81

⁸⁶ Quote from André Breton, *Les Vases communicants, III, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.201 in Pierre Mabille, *Égrégories*, op.cit., p.133

“reconstituer en marge de la religion officielle une science du monde”.⁸⁷ He goes on to point out that the modern world owes a great deal of its current wisdom to research into the occult carried out during that period:

Par l’astrologie se développera l’astronomie; par la géométrie cabalistique, la physique ; par l’alchimie, la chimie ; par les mathématiques magiques, les principes de la mathématique ordinaire.⁸⁸

This connection with medieval hermeticism brings with it the further projection into the close contemplation of natural phenomena, which Mabilie counted as of prime importance in any human civilization. This closeness to nature was shared by Breton, as becomes most evident in his poetry of the years of exile in the U.S. during the 1940s.

The shared connection with nature, together with a deep interest in medieval hermeticism, led both Breton and Mabilie to an over-arching preoccupation with myth, as has already been shown.⁸⁹ In his article entitled ‘Péret, disciple de Mabilie?’, Richard Spiteri refers the reader to Mabilie’s conclusion that “l’exploration du merveilleux doit passer par l’étude des contes parce que ceux-ci s’appuient sur des constantes universelles”.⁹⁰ The study shows not only the influence exerted by Mabilie, but his continuing preoccupation with myth in the form of the search for local myths and fables during his prolonged stays in Martinique and Guadeloupe during the war years.⁹¹ The connections between myth and magic, and further between magic and religion, are all important to the understanding of peoples and their traditions, as may be seen from the work of early anthropologists such as J.G. Frazer, and, later and more pertinently, Claude Lévi-Strauss. With his local knowledge and experience of voodoo in the West Indies, Mabilie was able to get a certain perspective on the extension of myth into traditions of magic, which he later shared with Breton.⁹² Investigation of ‘le merveilleux’, by way of

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.187

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.188

⁸⁹ E.g. Interest in the work of J.G. Frazer and Sigmund Freud, cf. p.40 above

⁹⁰ Richard Spiteri is referring to Mabilie’s conclusion reached in *Le Miroir du merveilleux* (1940), ‘Péret, disciple de Mabilie’ in *Les Cahiers Pleine Marge – No. 31*, June 2000, p.75

⁹¹ Spiteri attaches a selection of seven unpublished letters from Mabilie to Péret (1942–1947), from which it is evident that Mabilie has taken immense trouble to locate collections of local myths and folk tales, apparently for Péret’s use, with varying degrees of success. Ibid, pp.79 & 80

⁹² On Breton’s visit to Haïti in 1945–6

myth and magic, was, for Breton and Mabille, strongly rooted in hermeticism. As Spiteri further indicates, Mabille had already illustrated, in an article for *Minotaure* (No. 10, Winter 1937), the fact that the hermeticists (and similarly enthusiasts of other persuasions) had shown that matter had the ability to “faire jaillir la clarté des ténèbres”.⁹³

In his article for *Minotaure*, ‘La Conscience lumineuse’ (1937), written shortly after *Égrégores*, Mabille again aligns his own conclusions with those of the medieval hermeticists:

On rejoint la préoccupation constante des hermétistes du moyen âge, seuls hommes de ces siècles éloignés avec lesquels nous nous sentions encore en contact réel.⁹⁴

Their aim, according to him, was to trace the path of the elements and elemental fluids throughout the universe, which was difficult, given the lack of detailed information at their disposal, despite their prodigious knowledge. However, to him, of all these great cycles, one stands out as vitally important – “celui de la lumière”.⁹⁵

Mabille’s interest in the essential elements of myth, solar light, as well as light and reflection in any form, plus other natural phenomena, is strongly shared by Breton. In his preface to the second edition of Mabille’s *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, André Breton talks of Mabille as: “Un éclaireur au plein sens du terme...”.⁹⁶ There is a definite sense of Surrealist play on words with the term ‘éclaireur’. This double sense serves to confirm Breton’s ‘Hommage à Pierre Mabille’, written ten years earlier which contains many allusions to light – above all to the light Mabille brought to Breton’s life and the light shed on their shared knowledge:

⁹³ Pierre Mabille, ‘La Conscience lumineuse’ in *Conscience lumineuse, conscience picturale* (1938), edited by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Rémy Laville (Paris : J.Corti, 1989), p.42

⁹⁴ Pierre Mabille, *La Conscience lumineuse* in *Minotaure, No. 10, Hiver 1937, Troisième série*, (Paris : Éds. Albert Skira, 1937), p.22

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ *Pont Levis*, preface to Mabille’s *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1962) p.7

Vous, Pierre, dans les ombres? Je ne veux plus ouvrir ma porte où votre passage a fait si souvent une trouée de lumière. C'est encore trop près, tout se brouille dans le lustre. Je tiens votre main... [...] A jamais elle m'étoile le Salon de Nostradamus où vous avez tout partagé avec moi...⁹⁷

As will be seen in the textual analysis of his long poem *Fata Morgana* later in this chapter, Breton follows up this interest in his focus on the combined importance of energy and light, with the sun as their source, as a continually recurring theme.⁹⁸

3. *Pleine marge*:

The strong pull towards myth, towards all elements of light – particularly the sun, with its own ancient mythology – reflection, refraction and to phenomena of nature give form to Breton's poem *Pleine marge*, written while in daily communication with Mabile and under a shared roof during the summer of 1940. Much that has been written about Mabile's approach to life and to his writing is equally true of Breton. It is clear that they were well suited intellectually and that the time spent together, while politically and socially turbulent and difficult, was the spur to much creativity.

Breton's long poem, *Pleine marge*, is the product of both meditation and detailed research.

Dans le creux des mois qui suivent immédiatement l'armistice, l'Histoire semble à Breton se taire devant le mensonge, la confusion, la veulerie, l'autoritarisme absurde, et il prend avec elle [*Pleine marge*] la distance. [...] Le poème peut être lu comme la réémergence de ces échanges quotidiens entre les deux hommes durant l'été de 1940.⁹⁹

The importance of referring back to the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* is again stressed, confirming that Breton was by then already talking in terms of the occult, hermeticism and heterodox ideas. As can be seen, none of this had ever been far from his thoughts.

⁹⁷ In Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabile: un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.75–76

⁹⁸ See below p.56

⁹⁹ Marguerite Bonnet, Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Pleine Marge: Notice* in *O.C. Vol.II*, op.cit., p.1780

In a letter to Mabilille dated June 1939, from the Château de Chémilieu, Breton confirms that he has already been gathering material for what would ultimately result in this particular poem and establishes the trend of its content. He tells how by chance, during research into medieval thinkers, he became side-tracked by an article on the strange practices of the Fareinists. He followed this lead by visiting the cradle of the sect, the small town of Fareins-en-Dôle, from the Château de Chémilieu. He made detailed notes on this visit and the ensuing research, some of which is condensed into a few emotive lines towards the end of *Pleine marge*, as will be seen.¹⁰⁰

Initially, Breton hoped that his poem would be published in the resurgent copy of *La Nouvelle Revue française*, sending it with a covering letter to Jean Paulhan (dated 21 September 1940):

Je ne trouve à vous adresser, pour le numéro de réapparition de la revue s'il en est temps encore – et je le souhaite vivement tant je sens qu'il doit être attendu – qu'un poème que je viens de terminer et dont je ne suis pas mécontent. Il me semble témoigner indirectement mais de manière assez aiguë tout de même de ma position par rapport aux événements actuels : je le préfère à tout article qui devrait jouer avec les censures.¹⁰¹

Breton felt it imperative to make clear his attitude to what was happening, even writing to Roger Caillois later that year that he had felt impelled to write it as a “profession de foi”.¹⁰² He was determined not to be dismissed as a mere armchair revolutionary, emasculated by circumstances beyond his control. He remained positive, active: poetry was his weapon of choice, and through it he was still determined to activate revolution and achieve a new social order. However, the poetry Breton had in mind was very different from the “poésie de circonstance” increasingly favoured by both Aragon and Éluard. Breton took a directly opposing direction with his poetry, demanding the occultation of surface meaning and the search for an alternative way through hermeticism to a new myth for mankind.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.1778

¹⁰¹ Extract from a letter from the Archives Jean Paulhan, *Pleine marge*, Notice in André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1777

¹⁰² Marguerite Bonnet & Étienne-Alain Hubert, Notice in André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1778

In the event, this attempt at publication did not follow through, forcing Breton to turn instead to the editor of *Les Cahiers du Sud*, Jean Ballard (letter dated 7 October 1940)¹⁰³ in Marseilles. Pleading his cause with greater urgency, Breton repeats that he has not published anything for over a year and that there must be people awaiting new work from him with interest. He also states his wish to declare his “fidèle opposition à ce qui commence à s’écrire”,¹⁰⁴ with a sample quote from Aragon’s newly-published poem of circumstance, *Les lilas et les roses* (in *Le Figaro littéraire*, 28 September 1940). The conformity of “poésie de circonstance”, bowing to the expectations of society and the literary tradition, was naturally anathema to Breton. This conviction was later to surface strongly in Breton’s attack on Aragon and Éluard, particularly against their efforts to popularize poetry during the years of the Occupation.¹⁰⁵

Towards the end of the month, Ballard replied enthusiastically, welcoming the poem for inclusion in the next issue:

J’en aime le ton hétérodoxe et fier, le non-conformisme foncier, très en accord avec notre volonté de refus.

With the editor’s approval, *Pleine marge* duly appeared in the November edition of *Les Cahiers du Sud* (No.229, p.497-501).¹⁰⁶

As so often with Surrealist texts, even the title – *Pleine marge* – contains a play on words, the inferences to be taken or left by the reader at will. “Marge” here is a reference to the immediate geography – Breton was writing, at least latterly, while living on the shore of the Mediterranean at Martigues – and also to the marginalisation increasingly felt by poets, painters, writers and artists of all kinds in a hostile world. The third and more practical reference is to the margin of the printed page and its appearance to the reader – something of great importance to Breton, with his appreciation of image and visual effect. In his instructions to his editors he stresses the importance of spacing on the page. Urging them to keep to his apparently random lay-out, he insists

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.1777

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Cf. André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol. III, op.cit., p.87 and Chapter 5, p.199 below

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Pleine marge*, Notice in André Breton, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1777

further that “il faut beaucoup *aérer*”.¹⁰⁷ The use of blank spaces on the page, always important to Breton, is used by him to great effect to enhance a vocabulary already rich in imagery and expression.

The influence of Pierre Mabilie – to whom the poem is dedicated – is evident throughout. Breton wrote of him that he seemed to him at the time to be “le plus apte à sauvegarder, fût-ce en veillesse, ce qu’il peut y avoir de plus sacré dans les droits de l’esprit”.¹⁰⁸ Breton clearly felt an increasingly urgent need to state his position with regard to events in Europe. The material for this long and innovative poem had been gathered over the preceding year or more; the reunion and daily contact with Mabilie were the final catalyst to the creative process.

Although often compared with both *Fata Morgana* and *Les États généraux*, by Breton’s own admission *Pleine marge* is differently constructed from both. By contrast with the somewhat disconcerting lack of continuity of the other two poems, *Pleine marge* is much more structured and compact. As Breton himself states in his letter to Roger Caillois, it is “un poème par exception très ‘dirigé’, que j’ai voulu pouvoir justifier mot à mot”.¹⁰⁹ This is indeed a key differentiation, and one which marks out *Pleine marge* from the works which were to follow. While Breton was prepared to justify every word of his poem, it is nonetheless a challenge for the reader to penetrate the hermetic imagery and language he uses. That said, we find a wealth of imagery and mythical reference to explore in *Pleine marge*, and a richness of language to enhance and illustrate in every case. With its turn towards hermeticism and the occult, *Pleine marge* marks a definite turning point in Breton’s poetic output.

Paradoxically, in *Pleine marge* Breton uses the hermetic to ‘reveal’ – revelation being central to his poetics. The challenge of his poetry is to penetrate the “linguistic and cultural content”, which is “so extensive, allusive and elusive as to become

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.1781, note 2.

¹⁰⁸ André Breton, *Pont-levis, O.C.*, Vol.IV, op.cit., p.1003

¹⁰⁹ Marguerite Bonnet & Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notice* in André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1778

hermetic”,¹¹⁰ introducing, as it does, the marvelous and the surreal – “which are seldom immediately perceived, let alone understood”¹¹¹ – any more than the close relationship between the two. It is this kinship which explains the connection between Surrealism and hermeticism, demonstrated by the ‘magic’ powers vested in poetry. For Breton, it is this magic, created by a language imaginatively used to “faire arriver ce qui n’est pas et pourrait être”,¹¹² which constitutes the legacy of hermeticism and the source of the new myth to be established. His poems “can be luminous without being intelligible, magnetizing while not attractive in the ordinary sense”¹¹³ – indeed, these qualities seem to be the very essence of hermeticism. Breton is marking his ‘tournant’ towards hermeticism and the occult, embracing its essential qualities while dissociating himself from any hint of religious spirituality.

The text of *Pleine marge* opens with a clear rejection of ‘discipleship’: “Je ne suis pas pour les adeptes”. But is it a clear rejection – and if so, of what? The enigmatic style is established from the first line. Breton’s choice of language, as always, is at once elucidating and confusing. There is a deliberate choice of references, or even vocabulary, which bring with them definite associations – such as the reference to “La Grenouillère” in the second line, which at first reading might suggest the place of that name on the Île de France much frequented by the Impressionists, but is more likely to be a sardonic reference to those familiarly known as « grenouilles de bénitier » – a popular term for the followers of any religious cult.¹¹⁴ This is a constant throughout the poem and illustrates not only the Surrealist love of play on words, but also Breton’s aim – akin to that of automatic writing – to involve the reader in opening up his imagination to the words and imagery and “their irruption into our consciousness, however, fleeting, however flickering”.¹¹⁵ So, while in these opening lines Breton stands apart from

¹¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Cauvin, *Introduction: The Poethics of André Breton* in *Poems of André Breton: A Bilingual Anthology* [Translated and edited by Jean-Pierre Cauvin and Mary Ann Caws], (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1982), pxxxvii

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Philippe Audoin, *Breton* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1970), p.107

¹¹³ Mary Ann Caws, Preface to *Poems of André Breton: A Bilingual Anthology*, op.cit., p.ix

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Notes to Pleine marge* in *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., Note 1, p.1782

¹¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Cauvin, *Introduction : The Poethics of André Breton* in *Poems of André Breton : A Bilingual Anthology*, op.cit., p.xxxvii

religion and its accoutrements, he goes on nonetheless to recognize its power, above all its power to shut people out, keeping them from the centres of authority and effectiveness. At this time, Breton had himself felt increasingly marginalized – in his writing, his politics and his way of life.

Pleine marge shows a pronounced leaning towards myth and hermeticism to demonstrate his rejection of religion and anything with a religious connotation or connection. Preferring rather the ‘magic’ and ultimate revelation of the occult, he considers those he finds to have been as marginalized as himself. With layer upon layer of imagery, he justifies his position by the evocation of a procession of women through the ages who have been victimized by their religion or by society, or indeed by both. The references leap, with giddy speed and lack of apparent connection, from heroines of ancient mythology – “la joueuse de tympanon” – to those of the storming of the Bastille, “où leurs cheveux portaient la torche”. In each case, it is by association rather than description that the reference is made: the “joueuse de tympanon” featured strongly in the funeral cortèges of Cybele, as depicted in Greek and Roman sculpture, while the second reference cited may be read as implicitly recalling Théroigne de Méricourt, with her flowing hair, firing the blood of the rioters of the Revolution as she rebelled against society and class by taking her stand in the storming of the Bastille.¹¹⁶ What is consistent to both references is the note of rebellion, especially that of the Revolutionaries, and the fact that these were all women.

Evoking “la reine de Byzance aux yeux passant de si loin l’outre-mer”, followed apparently incongruously by a reference to “le quartier des Halles où elle m’apparut”, Breton introduces a double-layered meaning. He is referring not only to the Byzantine empress, but also, obliquely, to Jacqueline Lamba, with her exotic beauty, recalling too their romantic walk through ‘les Halles’, foretold by Breton in his poem *Tournesol*¹¹⁷ and narrated in *L’Amour fou*. While the images of his heroines continue to jostle one another with disturbing and tumultuous speed, Breton keeps to his line of purpose in revealing the

¹¹⁶ *Notes to Pleine marge, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., Notes 3 & 4, p.1782*

¹¹⁷ *In O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.187*

numbers and variety of women, both mythological and actual, who have been alienated and marginalized over the centuries. Sometimes the references are too hermetic to be penetrated, but the imagery is always there. Even the combined scholarship of Bonnet and Hubert is defeated by the lines:

Entre toutes l'enfant des cavernes son étreinte prolongeant
de toute la vie la nuit esquimau
Quand déjà le petit jour hors d'haleine grave son renne sur
la vitre.¹¹⁸

No one can deny the imagery, whether or not the allegory can be penetrated. It could just be imagery of the darkness of an Eskimo winter, with chill designs on frosted panes at the break of long-awaited dawn. It could also be a connecting image of mother and daughter, following so immediately after the reference to Jacqueline, with the favourite child “entre toutes”, child of the caves, and the reference to “le petit jour”, otherwise called “Aube” – his daughter’s name. The super-imposed images are finely drawn.

The almost hypnotic all-embracing repetition of “Entre toutes...” introducing each of these sections draws together the various categories of heroines, including the Breton nun on the bus from Crozon to Quimper, the vague image of a winged deity from Far Eastern mythology, interwoven with scenes from the banks of the Seine and oblique references to Breton’s wife, as well as their immediate surroundings in Martigues on the Étang de Berre. Another use of language, the play on words so favoured by Surrealists, is evident in the line: “Le bruit de ses cils dérange la mésange charbonnière”:¹¹⁹ surely no chance placing of “ses cils” – exact equivalent in speech to “Cécile”, patron saint of music – adjacent to the image of a song-bird, the great tit.¹²⁰ A different play on words, this time more to do with extra or diverse imagery, is the line: “En robe de bal des méduses qui tournoient dans le luster”.¹²¹ In this case there is some ambiguity as to the meaning of “des méduses”, which could be jellyfish in their floating “robes de bal”, or indeed Medusas of another sort, with the petrifying quality implicit from classical mythology. The ambiguity is surely intentional, providing another possibility of many-layered imagery for the reader to penetrate and explicitly counteracts the “claret” of poetry of circumstance. Breton seems to end this section with a final “Entre toutes”,

¹¹⁸ *Pleine marge*, in *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1180

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.1180

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, Note 2, p.1782

¹²¹ *Ibid*, p.1180

returning to his theme in ludic fashion by using the phrase: “Je reviens à mes loups...”, in place of the better known “Je reviens à mes moutons”. As ever, there is the possibility that this may be a fanciful interpretation, but the imaginative suggestion is there.

A glimpse of luxury in a passing reference to a white satin couch recalls visions of that of Madame Sabatier, Baudelaire’s ideal and muse, notoriously evoked by Jacques Prévert in his attack on Breton in the pamphlet *Un cadavre* in 1930. Breton’s rejection of such luxury and its evident destruction is clear from his image of “l’étoile de la laceration”, with which the description ends.¹²²

Breton achieves the transition from female heroines to heroes of the occult by stating his tolerance, even respect, for the beliefs of others, conjuring up the image of giant shells, possibly signifying the fossilized edifices of country churches, returning reflections from their lantern-lit windows and perhaps the music of the pedal-harmonium. Following on from the image of churches as great shells, symbols of a petrified institution, Breton describes a very maritime landscape to state his preference for a sort of universalism:

Je prends mon bien dans les failles du roc là où la mer
Précipite ses globes de chevaux montés de chiens qui hurlent.¹²³

Again, the multi-layered meaning includes his statement as to his own position on the margin as in “les failles du roc” rather than as part of the “systèmes tout érigés” of the church.¹²⁴

He continues with the admission that he is drawn, in spite of himself, by others – implicitly men in habits (“encadrés de bure”), in other words monks – into paths he would not otherwise follow. He is particularly drawn to doctrinal heresies and heretics, such as the passionate medieval scholar-monk Abelard and his illicit love for Héloïse. Breton describes how “ceux-là”:

M’entraînent, m’entraînent où je ne sais pas aller
Les yeux bandés tu brûles tu t’éloignes tu t’éloignes

¹²² The hermetic power of “l’étoile” is treated in depth in the best known of Breton’s works written in exile, *Arcane 17* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.37

¹²³ *Pleine marge*, op.cit., p.1181

¹²⁴ Cf. The Rocher Percé in *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp.37–38 & 51–52

De quelque manière qu'ils aient frappé leur couvert est mis chez moi.¹²⁵

With the description of a blindfold, Breton evokes at once the pleasurable disorientation and confusion of a children's game, together with the Surrealist approach to games as a means of psychological revelation.¹²⁶

Breton switches his attention to some of the great heretic hermeticists, starting with Pélage, a Celtic saint, monk and theologian of either Breton or Irish origin, sometimes portrayed as a Druid, given credence here by the image of a crown of mistletoe.¹²⁷ This is followed by evocations of Joachim de Flore, Maître Eckhardt, Hegel, Novalis, Jansénius and François de Pâris, each holding his particular position on the edge of an accepted society. Joachim de Flore, an intensely committed Franciscan monk of the 12th century, was nonetheless at odds with accepted teaching and carved his own way in mystical theology, coming dangerously close to heresy with his unusual and very personal beliefs. Maître Eckhardt, equally, ran the gauntlet of deep suspicion amongst the theologians of his time (13th century), with his unusual approach, advocating a mysterious 'third way', beyond the senses and reason, by which to reach the ultimate truth.¹²⁸ Hegel and Novalis are said to have been introduced to the writings of Eckhardt in the mid-19th century, though there is no evidence that the exchange – "Avec lui, nous avons tout ce qu'il nous faut"¹²⁹ – as recorded here by Breton ever took place. François de Pâris was a committed follower of Jansénius and his anti-Jesuit stance, living some century and a half later (1690-1727) a life of great austerity and self-effacement – truly a life "à l'ombre", a shadowy existence which had a mysterious appeal for Breton. He had long been fascinated by Jansenist opposition to the papal bull of *Unigenitus* of 1713, which date, when written, he found could be made to bear an uncanny resemblance to his initials: AB. Enough is known of all these figures to realize that Breton is here listing some of the heretics from as early as the 4th Century (Pélage) most interesting to him. He reaches back, via Hegel and Novalis, to medieval hermeticism – a route to interiority and self-questioning which he had followed from the earliest days of Surrealism.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ *Pleine marge*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1181

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, Notes 3 & 4, p.1783

¹²⁷ There are several saints of this name, dating from the 3rd to 9th centuries A.D.

¹²⁸ His theories came to the fore again and were much studied in the 1930s by, amongst others, Henri Michaux and Bernard Groethuysen, and passages were even translated by Madame Mayrisch de Saint-Hubert, friend of André Gide.

¹²⁹ *Pleine Marge*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1182

¹³⁰ Breton quotes Novalis in a note in *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.339; the quotation in turn has its origins in Breton's *Carnet* (O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.456) which was published in the final issue of the review *Littérature (Nouvelle série, No. 13)* in June 1924, pp.15–19. The full *Carnet* (not all of which

With almost violent abruptness, Breton returns to the theme of marginalized women:

“La belle la violée la soumise l'accablante La Cadière”¹³¹
Catherine Cadière gains Breton's sympathy as another victim of the Church and of society. By falling in love with a Jesuit priest, Girard, she rebelled against the accepted norms of both society and the Church. She was accused of seduction, witchcraft and sorcery, and although ultimately acquitted, she was punished by incarceration in a convent¹³² – an unreasonable sentence for the ‘crime’ of falling in love by any standards, while to Breton, a crime in itself. With extraordinary succinctness, Breton manages to convey his outrage in four fiery epithets.

Then, in the final half dozen lines, Breton condenses his detailed research from the previous summer (1939) into the modern heresy of the Fareinists and the “messieurs Bonjour”. He evokes the scandal of the crucifixion of two women by the brother priests, passed on to him by an old peasant in Fareins-en-Dôle. Again, women are the victims: society and the church have failed them. There is a sense, too, in these final lines that Breton is identifying in advance with the victims in the face of a more modern heresy still, that of fascism. In the same frame, he depicts the two portraits hanging on the old man's walls – one of the revolutionary journalist and politician, Jean-Paul Marat, and the other of Mère Angélique Arnauld, 17th century Jansenist abbess of Port-Royal-des-Champs. Breton's deliberate choice of these two extremes reaches back again to the essence of the ‘point suprême’ revealed in the *Second Manifeste*, where such opposites “cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement”.¹³³ The juxtaposition of the two portraits sums up symbolically the essence of the entire poem: to remain open to the ideas of all those who have risen up against existing authority in their time, while in no way becoming a ‘follower’, and whatever the content of their revolt.¹³⁴ Always willing to show the continuity of his own thought, the omnipresence of women in this poem allows Breton to reach back to *L'Amour fou* where he evoked “this eternal power of woman, the only one before which [he has] ever bowed”. Thus love, at a time marked by barbarism

was published in *Littérature*) covers the period from Autumn 1923 to end June 1924, and contains much material which was later used by Breton in the *Manifeste*. Cf. *Notes et variantes*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., pp.1432–3

¹³¹ *Pleine Marge*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1182

¹³² *Ibid*, Note 7, p.1785

¹³³ *Second Manifeste*, O.C., Vol. I, op.cit., p.781

¹³⁴ Cf. Note 10, *Pleine Marge*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1785

becomes the central pronouncement of the war years, the essential thread leading to *Arcane 17* “one of the most passionate love poems” of the 20th century.¹³⁵

4. *Fata Morgana*:

Having made his statement of resistance in *Pleine marge*, Breton immediately went on, during the winter of 1940/41, to immerse himself in the creation of another, still longer poem, *Fata Morgana*. In interview with Charles-Henri Ford in New York the following August Breton states:

Ce poème fixe ma position de résistance plus intransigeante que jamais aux entreprises masochistes qui tendent, en France, à restreindre **la liberté poétique*** ou à l’immoler sur le même autel que les autres.¹³⁶

[* The emphasis is my own.]

True to his principles, he was not going to follow where Éluard and Aragon had gone, returning to regular rhyming and scansion for the benefit of their readership and in recognition of the turbulence around them. The essence of Surrealism as far as Breton is concerned centres around “la liberté poétique”, and this freedom must be preserved at all costs. The result is challenging in its hermetic language and enigmatic thought, but this in itself gives a certain freedom of interpretation to the reader. It is however one of the many paradoxes of Breton’s life that his fight for poetic freedom – of form, language, verse – in fact makes him an exile within his own country and ultimately contributes to putting his very existence at risk. A further paradox is that Breton’s ever deeper delving into hermeticism is in itself a form of poetic manifesto against the very clarity produced by a return to the traditional forms advocated by Aragon and Éluard.

In interview with André Parinaud, some years after the end of the war, Breton answers the question as to his attitude in the face of defeat and his future departure to the U.S. with the following statement:

Tout ce qui me paraît alors incomber aux intellectuels c’est de ne pas laisser cette défaite purement militaire, qui n’est aucunement le fait des intellectuels, tenter d’entraîner avec elle la débâcle de l’esprit. Je n’ai pas besoin de dire que, fin

¹³⁵ Anna Balakian, *André Breton Today*, (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1989), p. 7

¹³⁶ André Breton’s Interview with Charles-Henri Ford, New York, Aug. 1941, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.582

1940, la situation des idées est extrêmement sombre.¹³⁷

Earlier in the same interview, Breton gives the key to the aims of Surrealist poets and artists during the years immediately prior to World War II :

Au cours des trois années qui précèdent la nouvelle guerre, le surréalisme réaffirme la volonté de non-composition avec tout le système de valeurs que met en avant la société bourgeoise. [...] La guerre, du jour au lendemain, va faire litière des aspirations qui ont été les nôtres. La libre expression est, une fois de plus, mise en retrait d'emploi.¹³⁸

Fata Morgana, while not otherwise directly comparable to *Pleine marge* in form and imagery, demonstrates the continuing of Breton's stand against the brutally fixed artistic boundaries of the Nazi machine, as will be seen from its deliberate refusal to conform.

Breton's increasing reference to hermetic texts and rejection of "poésie de circonstance" emphasizes his line of resistance, resulting in a form of poetry more difficult to penetrate than the meaning of automatic writing. The development of his style results in imagery whose meaning "can be glimpsed spasmodically as through the portholes of a bark tempestuously moving over an abyss".¹³⁹ However, his poetry is far from an "irrational juxtaposition of images",¹⁴⁰ but rather the result of a definite technique, using many-layered references to the terrible happenings in Europe, revealing them in a new light, "cast in limitless perspective and measureless time".¹⁴¹ This indication accentuates Breton's focus on the then current preoccupation of several of the Surrealist group with time, space and a new approach to the fourth dimension (referred to by some as "la solidification du temps").¹⁴² Breton will not be bound by accepted ties of historical context, any more than by any other traditional conventions. Rather, he will explore all dimensions and push at all boundaries, often using the myths of the occult, or historical anecdotes, to make hermetic reference to the war in Europe.

Whereas *Pleine marge* has a definite structure, and is, as we have seen from

¹³⁷ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, XIV* in *Entretiens 1913–1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.554

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.553–4

¹³⁹ Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.183

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.184

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*

¹⁴² Cf references to Matta and Onslow-Ford in particular, p.100 in Chapter 3 below, and Breton's article *Des tendances les plus récentes de la peinture surréaliste* in *Minotaure Nos.12–13* (Paris, May 1939), pp.16–17.

Breton's own words "un poème par exception très 'dirigé'",¹⁴³ *Fata Morgana* comprises an apparently riotous flow of images. Breton's choice of words, his "alchimie du verbe" wrought by those words, conjures for the reader what amounts to an inner automatism, creating a virtual cinematographic succession of apparently unconnected images, layer upon layer, pattern upon pattern. For each reader, the interpretation of the words used will be different – the implicit meaning as well as the actual, and one often with several images within a single word. Breton's use of the "verbal rebus"¹⁴⁴ creates his own form of hermeticism, fulfilling the Surrealist aim to "obscurcir" the poetry by conveying several meanings in one image, "as several sounds produce a musical chord".¹⁴⁵

The first of these rebus images is contained in the title itself – *Fata Morgana* being a dual reference to the 'Morgan le Faye' of Celtic mythology and also to the natural phenomenon of the same name. 'Fata morgana' is the name given to the hallucinatory effect produced by the rising sun reflecting off the sea, largely recorded off the coast of Sicily but also at other places along the Mediterranean coast.¹⁴⁶ The combination of light, reflection and water makes for extraordinary spangled optical illusions, sometimes creating apparent mythological apparitions of huge proportion. As will be seen in a following chapter, these great figures are later strongly evoked by Breton in his *Grands transparents* – possible mighty beings to whom, in the natural scale of things, man might appear as ants do to man – of whom he writes:

Un mythe nouveau? Ces êtres, faut-il les convaincre qu'ils procèdent du mirage ou leur donner l'occasion de se découvrir?¹⁴⁷

The boundaries of myth and reality become distinctly blurred. Breton's approach in this epic poem is very much one of symbol and mythology, rather than reality and circumstance.

¹⁴³ See passage from Breton's letter to Roger Caillois (from New York, 12 October 1941) quoted on page 52 above

¹⁴⁴ Anna Balakian, *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism*, op.cit., p.184

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Lisa Fittko illustrates the local awareness of this phenomenon in her description of guiding Walter Benjamin and two others across the Pyrenees, taking them to 'safety', out of France into Spain: "Then we reached the peak. [...] The view came on so sudden, for a moment it struck me like a *fata morgana*. Down there below, from where we had come, the Mediterranean reappeared. [...] I gasped: never had I seen *anything* so beautiful." *The Story of Old Benjamin* in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (translated by Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin) – (Cambridge, Mass., USA, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p.951

¹⁴⁷ *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* (1942), *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.15

At the very core of *Fata Morgana* is the evanescent nature of the poem, which makes it almost impossible to distil into any sort of summary. The atmospheric phenomenon of a 'Fata Morgana' has been described as "une succession d'illusions, un ensemble de séquences glissantes",¹⁴⁸ which could as well describe Breton's eponymous poem. He takes his inspiration from the phantasmagoria evoked by this strange natural phenomenon, the 'Fata Morgana', with its watery sun-starred optical illusions. So, as we have seen, there is no story-line to the poem, but rather a succession of fantastical images – blurred images at that, which may be brought into focus by the reader's imagination. Jean-Louis Bédouin reminds us forcibly that Surrealism provides a core thread to the expression of intellectual and artistic endeavour:

Le chemin qu'il permet de ne jamais perdre de vue, c'est celui qu'emprunte la communication humaine. Loin de la surface des eaux où la tempête menace d'engloutir tout esquif, de boucher tout horizon, c'est vers les grandes profondeurs que l'esprit a chance de retrouver son milieu originel: *le merveilleux*.¹⁴⁹

"Le merveilleux" does not turn its back on reality, but goes steadfastly *beyond* it – reaching the "au-delà". "Le merveilleux", for Breton, is the means by which we are to learn to open up our inner selves and make the journey into those interior depths which have been so effectively closed off by the constraints of 'education' and social tradition.

Le merveilleux n'est pas en effet une compensation illusoire à des maux trop réels. Il est à la fois le produit et l'excitateur de l'imagination qui, face aux pires situations, garde seul la force de se porter au-delà de l'obstacle, en le représentant à l'esprit comme surmonté, donc *surmontable*.¹⁵⁰

As before with his "*humour noir*" in the *Anthologie*, Breton now uses "*le merveilleux*" as a tool to implement his own particular form of intellectual resistance. In this way, he forges the link between hermeticism and "le merveilleux", using both as a means to go beyond the bounds of social convention, whether interior or exterior, opening man's thoughts and actions to a new freedom. Breaking the boundaries and barriers of tradition, Breton also casts off the weight of history and reaches through time to what lies beyond – precisely, the "new myth" he will try to delineate in the

¹⁴⁸ Notice to *Fata Morgana*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1787

¹⁴⁹ Jean-Louis Bédouin, *Vingt ans de surréalisme 1939–1959*, op.cit., p.25 (*The emphasis is Bédouin's)

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non a year later.

Fata Morgana, with its fluctuating stream of merging images, opens with the visual analogy of a young girl, at the dawn of a new day, with an accordion of white bats on her knee – a metaphor, in part at least, for the generous vertical folds of those limestone mountains flanking the inland view from Marseilles and the sea. Dedicated to “la femme, entre toutes magique”,¹⁵¹ the poem is clearly a declaration of the renewal of love, the analogy with the new dawn, the breaking of a new day, running throughout, supported by such hermetic references as: “Ce qu’à nous seuls nous sommes l’un à l’autre dans la grande algèbre”.¹⁵²

One of the important messages Breton wants to convey at this particular time is the idea that poetry and love are one, with the image of the bed (“Le lit fonce sur des rails de miel bleu”)¹⁵³ as the place where “Ses draps défaits sont l’aurore des choses”¹⁵⁴. But given the date when the poem was written, there are also hints of anxiety and anticipation of impending exile which extend beyond the intimacy and security of the bed:

Comment se défendre en voyage de l’arrière-pensée pernicieuse
Que l’on ne se rend pas où l’on voudrait¹⁵⁵

Danger is all around; discovery and even death are a constant threatening presence: “L’aigle est partout”,¹⁵⁶ symbolizing the German occupation. However, overall, it is the comforting mention of “L’amour”, “Tu viens à moi”, and even an enigmatic “Si j’échappais à mon destin”¹⁵⁷ which dominate the text. Love is the revivifying force, bringing them together and above all creating *hope*. With the sun, and the awakening of a new day/love, the fearful images are dispersed – just as the phenomenal illusions of a ‘Fata Morgana’ are ultimately dispersed – and, on the eve of his departure from France, the poem closes on a note of optimism and light.

¹⁵¹ *Notice*, Ibid, p.1788

¹⁵² *Fata Morgana*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1185

¹⁵³ *Fata Morgana*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1188 and 1189

¹⁵⁴ André Breton, ‘Sur la route de San Romano’ in *Poèmes*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.419

¹⁵⁵ *Fata Morgana*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1189

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.1195

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.1190

Although far from the sea coast of such natural phenomena, Breton's up-bringing near the sea in the Basse-Normandie, in combination with other factors in force at a time of such tension, was a powerful influence – although possibly the most recent influential factor had been his daily contact with Mabille. As already mentioned, Mabille wrote at length on the subject of light and its importance to creation in general, to man in particular. In his writing, Mabille echoes Breton's emphasis on the need for extensive social reform, through *revelation*, further acknowledging the importance of those best placed to carry it out – poets and painters:

Peu à peu, poètes et peintres, dont le destin est de révéler aux hommes le monde qu'ils contiennent et qu'ils font, sans en avoir conscience, acquerront des techniques susceptibles de faciliter la communication de leurs découvertes. Cela marquera le début d'un nouveau cycle humain.¹⁵⁸

From as early as 1937 therefore, Mabille is loud in his support for Breton's call for change. In *Pleine Marge* and *Fata Morgana*, written after the invasion and during the occupation of France, Breton continues to emphasize this need to escape from the strait jacket of conventional thought and to look with fresh eyes at the sorry state of contemporary society. Both poems are fine examples of breaking down the barriers of conventional poetry, of reaching beyond the immediate sensorial data of the eye, into the imagination and the world of interiority – but not this alone. Indeed, and for the first time in such unambiguous terms, both the world of interiority and the imagination are further revealed through a new opening onto Nature. This innovation in Breton's work will become ever more apparent in his work in exile, finding its apogee in *Arcane 17*.¹⁵⁹

In *Fata Morgana*, imagery of mountains, water and refracted light jostle with those using more enigmatic references to the prevailing situation – reference is made in the opening line to “des chauves-souris blanches”¹⁶⁰ (the name given to the White Russian émigrés who arrived in Paris in the 1920s) and the menacing phrase: “Mais l'aigle est partout”¹⁶¹ (more than a passing acknowledgment through image of the ubiquitous occupying force). One section reflects the Surrealist game of ‘SI’ and ‘QUAND’,¹⁶² while another makes veiled reference to their impending exile:

¹⁵⁸ Pierre Mabille, *La conscience lumineuse*, op.cit., p.56

¹⁵⁹ André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.37

¹⁶⁰ André Breton, *Fata Morgana*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1183

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.194

¹⁶² Ibid, p.181. Cf. *Jeux surréalistes*, O.C., Vol. I, op.cit., p.991

Comment se défendre en voyage de l'arrière-pensée pernicieuse
Que l'on ne se rend pas où l'on voudrait.¹⁶³

and contributes happier reflections on the relative comfort of their everyday life in the pleasure given by the anticipation of a cup of coffee.¹⁶⁴ Over all hangs the benign protective image of Morgana, synonymous perhaps in Breton's mind with the dominating figure of the statue of Notre Dame de la Garde in its elevated position rising above the city and harbour of Marseilles, with the protective ring of mountains behind. There is important imagery, too, in the repetition of 'momie d'Ibis':¹⁶⁵ Ibis was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians as the preserver of their country against plague and pestilence. Reference to the basilisk – a mythological creature whose glance or poisonous breath could kill – conjures up feelings of fear of discovery. The relief that the creature has passed by without discovering the narrator is palpable, the plan for future resistance courageous. This must surely be a reference to the daily fear of 'discovery' in which Breton, his friends and family were living and their determination to overcome it.¹⁶⁶

Fata Morgana is so full of imagery and mythology, superimposed time and again one upon the other, rather than juxtaposed, that it should be read as Breton's first deliberate attempt to seek in hermeticism an alternative to "poésie de circonstance". In other words, in his calculated effort to 'occult' the surface meaning,¹⁶⁷ Breton wants to show that what can save poetry in these troubled times, is the mystery of poetry itself. To him, this is the only possible form of *resistance*. While written at a moment of great crisis, both for Breton personally and for his country and the "free" world, it will also serve to readers of other generations who feel themselves threatened in any way. With his freedom from literary and poetic convention, Breton has achieved an epic poem for all time – a poem with a vocabulary of optimism, light and love: this is Breton's answer to war.

Thus, the aura and magical hope of the new day pervades the entire poem – the very last word stands essentially optimistic and alone: "soleil". *Fata Morgana* embodies

¹⁶³ *Fata Morgana*, in *Poèmes*, O.C., Vol. II, op.cit., p.1189

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.1188

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.1192

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.1193

¹⁶⁷ A Propos *Fata Morgana*, Michael Riffaterre speaks of "Intertextualité surréaliste", presenting the poem as perhaps the best example of a technique which gives the illusion of automatism but which is in fact tightly structured. *Mélusine I* (Paris, 1979), pp. 27–37

“a synthesis of all he believed in, of all he loved, of all he cherished in this earthly existence”.¹⁶⁸ Breton was in essence an optimist, a person with whom one felt more alive, as his contemporaries were quick to point out.¹⁶⁹ In this poem of optimism in a new dawn, he demonstrates that his particular brand of hermeticism is not a retreat from the reality of the world, but rather a concerted quest into the permanence of hope, love and beauty – despite the precarious and ‘temporary’ state of the world.

Inherent, too, in the optimism that comes with the new dawn, the new day, is the understanding of the opening of a new era in Breton’s relationship with his wife. Jacqueline had distanced herself from Breton, both physically and mentally, from time to time during the previous difficult months, so that their reunion after the armistice and during the months that followed before their departure for the U.S., must have sparked new hope for them both. Breton originally dedicated the poem to Jacqueline. Léon Pierre-Quint, the publisher to whom Breton submitted the manuscript, declared it to be “un poème d’une rare douceur”, and that he was himself “enchanté”.¹⁷⁰

The final part of *Fata Morgana* is in fact written as if for a film production, even including italicized ‘Stage directions’:

Ceci dit la représentation continue [...] Le cerf blanc à reflets
d’or sort du bois du Châtelet *Premier plan* de ses yeux qui
expriment le rêve des chants d’oiseaux du soir.¹⁷¹

Selecting scenes from the life of the mad king Charles VI, his wife Isabel of Bavaria, the Duc d’Orléans and his widow the tragic Valentine of Milan, Breton swings from the dawn setting of a new day to the inner mental screen of the reader/spectator, conjuring up images of rich medieval court life, with its love and brutality, luxury and pain. A blurring of characters between Isabel and Valentine – or is it an intentional ‘glissement’? – results in the portrayal of idealized womanhood, the perfect loving wife (which Valentine was, but Isabel reputedly was not).

The rebus play of image upon image is found again in these last lines, with the sudden enigmatic and ghostly appearance of “les beaux traits ambigus de Pierre de

¹⁶⁸ Anna Balakian, *André Breton – Magus of Surrealism*, op.cit., p.183

¹⁶⁹ e.g. Dina Vierny, Interview with the author, Jan. 2003

¹⁷⁰ André Breton, *Fata Morgana – Notice in O.C.*, Vol. II, op.cit., p.1786

¹⁷¹ *Fata Morgana in O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1194

Lune”.¹⁷² The counter word-image to that of the sun is startling. The contrasting image of the moon is followed by play on the word “souci”, evoking not only Valentine’s grief, but her choice of the marigold as her emblem – a flower which is said to turn its head to follow the course of the sun during the day. This is the final interwoven image of the poem. This ‘inner cinema’ is brusquely brought to a close with the image of the mourning queen, her grief, her symbolic marigold, and her heraldic motto, and the direction:

Finir sur l’emblème de la reine en pleurs
Un souci Plus ne m’est rien rien ne m’est plus
Oui sans toi
Le soleil¹⁷³

The sun, whose strengthening rays would dispel the ‘fata morgana’ with its constantly moving merging images, could be said to close the poem on a note of optimism and light. Conversely, it is possible to interpret this as Breton’s farewell to his native country and anticipation of his impending exile.

As has been seen, Breton’s originality stems from his use of words and syntax to create a sequence of multi-layered and startlingly vivid imagery. In this poem, Breton surpasses the general aim of Surrealism (to see “le merveilleux” in everyday objects), and, reaching beyond reason into the realms of dreams, myth and the occult, never to give up but by this means to deal with the extremes of war. *Fata Morgana* amply demonstrates this skill, combining samples of the oneiric – verging on mad – connections of the mind with the magic of myth and hermetic references to persecution and resistance. Further evidence of his interest in madness and deviation, is demonstrated with vignettes from the life of the mad Charles VI and, more subtly, the schismatic pope Pierre de Lune. With constant references to tales of medieval origin, Breton demonstrates a strong temptation to delve ever deeper into myth, rather than face up to the actual historic fact of war.

Most important to Breton’s work is the shock of his random connections, both in syntax and image, which by their strange structural shape re-orientate the reader, forcing

¹⁷² The Spanish cardinal, Pedro da luna was appointed schismatic pope in Avignon in the 14th century.

¹⁷³ *Fata Morgana, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1195

him/her to open up to all possible mental interpretations. What he achieves is an alchemical transformation wrought by quite ordinary words to create, by association, a freely flowing stream of images, representing Breton's own form of hermeticism. As early as 1922, Breton himself describes what is happening during the creative process. The closing lines of *Les mots sans rides* make a clear statement:

Et qu'on comprenne bien ce que nous disons : jeux de mots, quand ce sont nos plus sûres raisons d'être qui sont en jeu. Les mots du reste ont fini de jouer. Les mots font l'amour.¹⁷⁴

Breton is involving his reader in the work of creation by stirring the imagination with a succession of image-inducing words, requiring a freedom from the straight-jacket of conventional thought. Paradoxically, it is this hermetic style which forces the reader to open up the imagination and allow the imagery to flow freely. Here, as so often, the final statement stands alone on the printed line. Breton lays great emphasis on the importance of the actual words – both for their meaning and their position on the page. In *Fata Morgana*, Breton has used the paradox of an affirmed penetration of myth and the occult to demonstrate “le mystère” in the everyday, in direct opposition to the traditional values of “poésie de circonstance”.

In this significant turn towards hermeticism, Breton initiates his poetic resolve – a resolve he will be seen to pursue with customary tenacity throughout his years of exile in the U.S.

¹⁷⁴ André Breton, *Les mots sans rides* in *Les Pas perdus, O.C.*, Vol. I, op.cit., p.286

CHAPTER 2: Transit Marseilles: August 1940 – March 1941

In this chapter, we intend to put into context the period spent by Breton between demobilisation (in the wake of the Armistice between France and Germany in June 1940) and his departure for the United States in March of the following year. Turbulent months for Breton, both intellectually and actually, he found himself in straitened circumstances, homeless in his own war-torn country. Then came the offer of sanctuary for five of those months at the Villa Air-Bel, in a suburb of Marseilles, by this time the only port in the ‘Free’ zone. It came at an opportune moment, providing him not only with a home for his wife and child, but somewhere which made possible the organising of regular gatherings with other Surrealists and an attempt to maintain the collective activity which lay at the heart of the movement. In this way the spirit of Surrealism was kept alive in difficult circumstances, enabling Breton to pursue his aims and to head the production of collective projects – a tradition which lay at the heart of the Surrealist movement. The most important of these was the collective creation of the *Jeu de Marseille*, with which this chapter will also be concerned.

The Surrealist practice of collective creativity was all the more needed at this time “to make sense of self in a world filled with uncertainty and despair”.¹ Collective projects had been in regular practice by the Surrealist movement from its inception, and were to serve as salvation as well as diversion to those Surrealists who now found themselves in Marseilles in precarious circumstances. Not only did these projects bring together a group necessarily threatened with dispersal by the situation of war, but they also demonstrated “the power of the creative spirit to transcend the madness of a society thrown into turmoil” and “the capability of the creative spirit and human imagination to rise above all restrictive circumstances”.² Finding themselves in a sense marooned in Marseilles, waiting for the relevant papers either to remain or to move on, it is clear that collaboration brought with it a certain stability, bridging the gap between a

¹ Horace Brockington, ‘Creative Occupation : Collaborative Artistic Practices in Europe 1937–1943’, in *Artistic Bedfellows: Histories, Theories and Conversations in Collaborative Art Practices*, edited by Holly Crawford (Lanham, Maryland, U.S.A.: University Press of America, 2008), pp.27–59, p.27

² Ibid

stable past and an uncertain present. Collective creativity gave the artists and their group joint strength to face the forces of evil by which they were threatened, which they did by means of human will and the imagination.

However, the practice of the conservative values held by the Vichy Regime was often a barrier to cooperative ventures. Thus, for those artists other than Surrealists, the very fact of collaboration within the artistic framework gave a solidarity which was palpably missing from everyday life at the time, and made it a widespread practice throughout the lively art environment in France and other parts of Southern Europe. Not far from Marseilles, at the camp of Les Milles near to Aix-en-Provence, Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer were interned together as German nationals, and produced, during their internment, several collaborative works. As followers of the Surrealist movement, such collective/collaborative projects would have been a natural activity for them, and no doubt gave them a strengthened bond of joint creativity and lifted morale.

Foreign refugees, such as Ernst and Bellmer, were already struggling with the emotional issues of being forced to leave their homeland, and finding themselves obliged to assimilate another culture, another language and way of life. In so doing, there was an inevitable loss of identity for these refugees, who effectively became some sort of cultural hybrid, comprising elements from their original culture, blended with others assimilated from that of their adopted country. For some during the Occupation, particularly displaced French citizens – as was the case for André Breton, for example – this assimilation did not apply, and they attempted by contrast to recreate the Paris scene in their new situation.³

1. André Breton: “Le Grand Indésirable” :

Concerning André Breton, by the time he joins the community at the Villa Air-Bel – he has become “le grand indésirable” of his own self-assessment:

³ Ibid, p.27–28

Héraclite mourant, Pierre de Lune, Sade,
le cyclone à tête de grain de millet, le tamanoir:
son plus grand désir eût été d'appartenir à la
famille des grands indésirables.⁴

Indeed, in the years between the wars, Breton had been loud in his condemnation of the prolongation and overall handling of World War I. He had even predicted, as early as 1925,⁵ the inevitability of sliding into another war with Germany. The disappointment and disillusion he felt when that war came, to find that the country was to be led by one of the very Marshalls he had so criticised, fuelled his rejection of contemporary society and its values and his consequent determination to establish social change. As early as 1935 he had been calling for a revolutionary change in the social order:

“Transformer le monde”, a dit Marx ; “changer la vie”, a dit Rimbaud : ces deux mots d'ordre pour nous n'en font qu'un.⁶

Thus he found himself contesting the authority not only, firstly, of the out-going Government of the Third Republic, led by Paul Reynaud, and, secondly, the invading Nazi régime, but also, thirdly, that of the new French State, led by Marshal Pétain, with its increasingly collaborative character and totalitarian attitudes.

Breton, despite his criticisms of the maladministration of the Great War, had gone back into service in the 22nd Section of the Army Medical Corps. Stationed at various places, he finally found himself at the Noisy fortress in Romainville, a north-eastern suburb of Paris, which enabled him amongst other things, given the privileges of rank and veteran status, to sleep in his own bed in the rue Fontaine in Paris each night. His attitude was, at the very least, ambivalent:

So it was that he had re-donned his ill-fitting uniform in a riot of contradictory expectations and fears, tempering disdain with curiosity, anticipation with withdrawal.⁷

⁴ Taken from unpublished manuscript of the 1930s, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, cf. Henri Béhar, *André Breton: le grand indésirable*, op.cit., p.13.

⁵ André Breton, *Lettre aux voyantes*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p. 910; also Bédouin, Jean-Louis *Vingt ans de surréalisme 1939–1959* (Paris : Éditions Denoël, 1961), p.18

⁶ André Breton, *Discours au Congrès des écrivains in Position politique du surréalisme*, O.C. Vol.II, op.cit., p. 459

⁷ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind – The Life of André Breton* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 1995), p. 477

This comment could be said to sum up the feelings of a great number of those with whom Breton spent his time. While initially he managed to remain in Paris, it was not the Paris of peacetime. When the German occupying force entered Paris in June 1940, one of their priorities was to set up a branch of Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry, The Propaganda Abteilung, whose purpose was to keep a watching brief on the French press and art world. The art market had already collapsed and galleries closed down. From this time, Breton fought the *dépaysement*, both mental and physical, which were an inevitable part of the disruption of war, by trying to maintain or recreate his own cultural surroundings, whether in Paris or, later, in Marseilles, Martinique or New York.

From Romainville, Breton was transferred to Poitiers in January 1940 – about a hundred miles away from Royan on the Atlantic coast, where his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, and their four year old daughter, Aube, were then staying, at the invitation of the painter Picasso⁸ and his partner, Dora Maar. At least he was now able to spend any leave he had with them there, staying either with Picasso and Dora Maar or in some small hotel nearby. This also enabled him to renew contact with Picasso, whose generosity to both him and Jacqueline in terms of shelter and financial help at this difficult time greatly touched Breton.

Displaced from Paris, with his wife and child in another part of the country, Breton found himself now in a similar situation to the many refugees from other parts of Europe who had sought refuge in France. Although it was still his country, the Vichy government was in many ways as alien to Breton as the Nazi regime, giving him the impetus to seek out others of the Surrealist movement with whom to collaborate in artistic endeavour. Forced to face up to the reality of what was going on around him, and in order to deal with the disruptions in his life, Breton realized he was on the brink of something new.

During the military inaction of the 'Phoney War', Breton occupied himself by pursuing his publishers with regard to the *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, then with helping to bring about another International Exhibit of Surrealism in New Mexico, and publishing a text, "Carte postale", in the Belgian Surrealist magazine *L'Invention collective* (No. 2, April 1940). A very short poem, dedicated to Benjamin Péret, it nonetheless conjures up

⁸ For most of the war, however, Picasso remained in Paris, working and supporting financially various groups, including the Surrealist Main à Plume group.

images reflecting the current state of unease at the beginning of the war, and, importantly, indicates clearly the direction in which Breton intends to take the movement during the war years:

N'y aurait-il que la guerre
Rien de tel pour faire renaître
La vie hermétique
Je joue à cesser d'être
Je joue à qui gagne perd
Les alouettes polissent le miroir
Les barricades sont coupées par le milieu de l'air
C'est la saison des mouches de pique
Qui ravalent les maisons neuves
En leur tapant sur l'épaule
Voici les cachettes au blanc de baleine
Plus femmes que les maisons qui tournent
Dix doigts pour un homard évidemment c'est trop
Fini le temps des crises⁹

In a letter to Jacqueline,¹⁰ Breton describes it as a “petit écrit d'un ton désinvolte [...] qui réagit agréablement contre les ‘Poèmes’ pompeusement nuls” published in a small review edited by Lise Deharme and Georges Hugnet.¹¹ As he commented many years later, it seemed to him vital that this purely military defeat should in no way impinge on intellectuals, or be allowed to crush their spirit.¹² Evidently Breton remained determined, whatever happened, to keep alive the creative spirit of his movement at a time when both liberty and truth were threatened in a hitherto unprecedented manner.

By the summer of 1939, given varying accounts of the state of the relationship between Breton and his second wife, Jacqueline Lamba, the stability of the marriage was in question.¹³ Lamba, herself a painter, felt the need to guard her freedom, making trips alone to the Midi, leaving Breton with their small daughter. Later, after he had been called up, Breton was obliged to ask the four year old to persuade her mother to write to him, contact between them having become so infrequent.¹⁴

⁹ André Breton, *Carte Postale, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1248

¹⁰ Letter dated 15th March 1940.

¹¹ Cf. *Notes, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1822

¹² Cf. quotation on page 51 above. André Breton, *Entretiens 1913–1952 avec André Parinaud* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p. 554

¹³ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., pp.473–475

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.479

However, demobilised in August 1940 under the terms of Article 4 of the Armistice, Breton found himself homeless, and with no immediate means of supporting either himself or his wife and child. It is significant that at this time of crisis the friend to whom he turned, and who offered him both shelter and companionship, was Pierre Mabilille.¹⁵ At his invitation, Breton went with Jacqueline and Aube to join him in Salon-de-Provence. Friends since 1934, the two had much in common and Breton admired Mabilille's competence as a doctor, having himself set out on a career in medicine, as well as enjoying his interest in and knowledge of the occult. As he commented in a letter to Jacqueline soon after their meeting, Breton found in Mabilille "un personnage extrêmement particulier", with whom he shared "sur des points très spéciaux des affinités extraordinaires, comment dire, de posséder des lueurs complémentaires sur certaines choses très difficiles".¹⁶ In the course of the letter, he expands further:

C'est un ancien chef de clinique de la faculté de Paris, c'est-à-dire professionnellement quelqu'un de tout premier ordre et, de plus, il est extrêmement versé en occultisme. [...] Je suis tout à fait sûr que la rencontre que cet homme et moi avons fait l'un de l'autre est des plus magnétiques, et il en a la même conscience que moi.¹⁷

It was indeed a friendship which was to prove both lasting and mutually fruitful over many years, especially when his own interest in the occult, as an alternative world, grew, as it did during the war years.

Given their situation, both men soon came to realize that exile was their only option. Almost immediately after joining Mabilille, Breton was writing to Kurt Seligmann in New York to tell him:

Après en avoir longuement conféré avec Pierre Mabilille, nous sommes arrivés à cette conclusion que notre place serait actuellement où vous êtes vous-même et où les circonstances veulent que règne la plus grande effervescence des idées; c'est là indiscutablement que peut être poursuivie de la manière la plus efficace la lutte contre tous les facteurs de décomposition que nous n'avons cessé de dénoncer

¹⁵ Often described as Doctor to the Surrealists, Pierre Mabilille shared and encouraged Breton's interest in the occult (see above Chapter 1, pp.34–40).

¹⁶ Letter from André Breton to Jacqueline Lamba, dated 7th August 1934, published for the first time by Mary Ann Caws, before gifting the letter to the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet; Cf. Mary Ann Caws, 'Ondine et Paradis' in *The London Review of Books*, 8th September 2011, pp. 36 & 37

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 36

avant qu'il ne fût trop tard.¹⁸

Encouraged by his association with Mabille, Breton began work on his first epic poem of the war years, *Pleine Marge*. Described by Béhar as a poem concerning “Tous ceux qui, en pleine marginalité, se sont donné toute latitude pour agir”,¹⁹ this work was in train during the month of August, at the end of which came news of Trotsky’s assassination. As well as the political blow, this constituted a great personal loss for Breton, who, talking in interview in the 1950s, remembered from his meeting with Trotsky in Mexico in 1938, the fallen leader’s “très grande attraction personnelle”, which consisted not only of the prestige of his political role in the events of 1905 and 1917, but also “les dons intellectuels éminents” evidenced by such writings as his autobiography and his history of the Russian Revolution.²⁰ While admiring Trotsky’s intellectual ability, Breton also appreciated how, on other occasions

On pouvait assister au fonctionnement de cette pensée qui s’exprimait de la manière la plus vivante, sans jamais rien d’exagérément dogmatique, et savait se détendre dans une conversation à bâtons rompus à laquelle il donnait un ton enjoué, volontiers taquin, qui n’appartenait qu’à lui.²¹

While Breton was devastated, Pierre Mabille realized that all hope of countering Stalin was now gone and the two men, with their families, decided to move to Martigues, close to Marseilles, where they spent the remainder of the summer in a cabin about fifty metres from the sea. In the dire political situation, it was Mabille, perceived as a respectable doctor, who went to Vichy to obtain passports and visas as fast as possible. Breton was unpopular with both the new Vichy Government and also Hitler’s Nazi regime, representing as he did the so-called ‘decadence’ that was seen to have proliferated under the Third Republic. By the end of September Mabille had left to take up a medical post in Guadeloupe. It was to take Breton some time longer to leave France.

A letter from Kurt Seligmann dated 10 October 1940 indicated that he had applied to the Emergency Rescue Committee in New York for the resettlement of Breton and his family, and that Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, was willing to set up a lecture tour for Breton in the U.S.²² News came too from Wolfgang Paalen in

¹⁸ Georges Raillard, *Marseilles – Passage du surréalisme* in *La Planète affolée* (Marseille : Dir. des Musées de Marseilles – Éditions Flammarion, 1986), p.56

¹⁹ Henri Béhar, *Le Grand indésirable* (Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1990), p.335

²⁰ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, XIV*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p. 550

²¹ Ibid

²² Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.485

Mexico with similar suggestions.²³ Unwilling as he was to leave his country (an attitude which should be stressed in view of later criticism),²⁴ Breton had to face the fact that exile was really the only possibility now left open to him. With no money and, since the departure of Pierre Mabille, nowhere to live, Breton joined the mass of refugees in Marseilles. Geographically, he was now one step nearer his goal of leaving France for the United States, but it remained for him to find somewhere suitable to house his family, and some means of keeping them. Past connections and ‘le hasard objectif’ were to prove his salvation.

Marseilles may have been seen as a huge ‘keep net’ by some – a place where a great number of those most wanted by the Vichy government and/or the Gestapo were ultimately to foregather – it was also a place where

La culture n’apparaît plus ici comme une abstraction, un simple concept, une vue de l’esprit. Elle représente aussi pour les réfugiés, les repliés, une valeur morale, une planche de salut.²⁵

Like other places in Southern Europe and border regions of occupied zones, Marseilles became a “creative nexus”.²⁶ As such, it formed the backdrop to the five months’ activities of Breton and the group with whom he spent his time there. In the turbulent days following the invasion of France and the beginning of the Nazi Occupation, Breton found rich material to feed his preoccupation with arbitrary meetings – ‘la rencontre’ – and equally with the accompanying ‘hasard objectif’ and the random nature of the events which ensued.

2. The Villa Air-Bel community:

Once congregated in Marseilles, it did not take long to establish the connections which led to the future community at the Villa Air-Bel in the suburb of La Pomme. It might be argued that the American director of the Centre Américain de Secours (CAS),

²³ Paalen had arrived in New York in May 1939, embarking on a journey to the Northwest Coast shortly afterwards, and immigrating to Mexico the following September. Cf. Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (Westport, Connecticut, U.S.: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p.85

²⁴ Cf. Tristan Tzara, *Le Surréalisme et l’Après-guerre*, (Paris : Les Éditions Nagel, 1948), p.74

²⁵ Jean-Michel Guiraud, *Marseilles, cité-refuge des écrivains* in *La vie culturelle sous Vichy* – ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux, (Paris : Éditions Complexe, 1990), p.397

²⁶ Horace Brockington, ‘Creative Occupation : Collaborative Artistic Practices in Europe 1937–1943’, op.cit., p. 30

Varian Fry, was in fact the lynch pin of the whole operation, since it was ultimately through him and the CAS that the various elements were drawn together. As with a substantial number of other refugees, Fry was to play a defining role in Breton's escape from Nazi-occupied France.²⁷

The serendipity of the arrival of the members of the future Air-Bel community in Marseilles was, from a Surrealist view point, positive confirmation of their glorification of 'le hasard objectif'; the experience of living as a community at the villa provided a unique opportunity to live a collective Surrealist experiment. As Franklin Rosemont wrote many years later:

It cannot be emphasised too strongly: Surrealism, a unitary project of total revolution, is above all a method of knowledge and a way of life; it is *lived* far more than it is written, or written about, or drawn. Surrealism is the most exhilarating adventure of the mind, an unparalleled means of pursuing the fervent quest for freedom and true life beyond the veil of ideological appearances.²⁸

Thus a new and unexpected way of life emerged for the group at the Villa Air-Bel, which fortuitously provided a stage on which this living experiment was to be enacted. Part of this experiment, and certainly part of Surrealist activity, was artistic creative collaboration. The coming together of visual artists, performers and writers – whether as residents at the villa, or temporary visitors – served to feed creative exchanges and bring about the cross-fertilization of ideas, talents and skills. In the course of this collective activity, the concept of single signature artistic works was superseded by the collaborative creativity which had always been central to the movement.

The villa furnished an ideal venue for collaborative projects, where the modification of artistic authorship and the dynamics of collective groups led to the further development of hybrid results from the assimilation of varying artistic practices and identities. Art at Air-Bel was transformed from an individual to group identity. The Surrealists had long been striving to liberate society from the perceived stranglehold of family, church and state, and restore to the individual the values suppressed by those

²⁷ Cf. Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* (Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A. : Johnson Books, 1997) First published by Random House, 1945.

²⁸ Franklin Rosemont, *André Breton – What is Surrealism? Selected writings* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), p.5

institutions – intuition and emotion, personal freedom and autonomy, free rein of the imagination and pursuit of the irrational. In Marseilles, against a background of the daily threat of war and the presence of the occupying force, these values took on a new reality. Their expression was guaranteed for those who gathered at the Villa Air-Bel to share in the collaborative artistic ventures, the games and the personal interactions.

For those personal interactions to have any meaning, clearly the make-up of the community at the villa played a central role. An obvious choice of tenant for Danny Bénédite,²⁹ Fry's assistant at the CAS, was Victor Serge³⁰ – already one of the 'clients' of the CAS and known to him previously through his work in the Police Department in Paris before the war – together with his companion, Laurette Séjourné, and his seventeen-year-old son Vlady. Serge pointed out to Bénédite that Breton, his wife and daughter were in Marseilles, with no satisfactory accommodation and no means. Bénédite found that he in turn had reservations about asking a man with the reputation of Breton to join them, but evidently Serge was able to convince him that the reputation was unreliable and Bénédite was won over. Once convinced himself, he had little difficulty in persuading the others.³¹

It must have seemed providential for the Bretons to find themselves at the Villa Air-Bel, which was to offer them a haven for the next five months while waiting for visas and a boat-passage to the U.S.A. Breton was as captivated by the accommodation as the others had been. He marvelled at the interior, and at the splendid first editions in the library.³² Bearing in mind the conditions in which not only the Bretons, but all the members of the group had latterly been living, it is hardly surprising to find them elated by their accommodation. As Bénédite so aptly put it, describing his own feelings on first seeing round the villa: "Nous allons de surprise en stupéfaction et de stupéfaction en émerveillement".³³

²⁹ Having previously been employed by the Préfecture of Police in Paris, Daniel Bénédite had wide knowledge of its operation and experience of immigrants and their needs. While initially suspicious of him, Varian Fry came to depend on Bénédite, both for this knowledge and for his loyalty and friendship.

³⁰ Born in Belgium of Russian parents, Serge had been an active Communist dissident, frequently imprisoned for his actions. Although very different characters, Breton had been outspoken in his criticism of the Moscow show trials and had joined the campaign for the release of Serge by the Soviet authorities.

³¹ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise* (Paris: Éditions Clancier Guénaud, 1984), p.58

³² Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.487

³³ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.56

Varian Fry himself joined the residents of the Villa Air-bel, where – a long-time member of the Audubon Society³⁴ – he was now able again to indulge his interest in bird life.³⁵ While Breton, for relaxation, amused himself by studying the mating habits of frogs, toads and the praying mantis,³⁶ Fry would enjoy the freedom of the villa's 'parc' for the beauty of its trees and shrubs and, when the occasion offered, for bird-watching. The extensive grounds had much to give to the group during that extended 'St. Martin's summer' and on into the harsh winter that followed – shared interests and hobbies, as well as shared problems and even dangers. The Villa Air-Bel made a stark contrast to the narrow crowded streets of the centre of Marseilles itself.

Obviously the dynamics of the group were essential to its development. It was anyway a time of anxiety and fear for some, decision-making at the very least for the rest, with an uncertain future and an uneasy present. Given this overall element of tension it was still more important that the group dynamics should work. There had already been doubts in the minds of Daniel Bénédite and Mary-Jayne Gold; there were more obvious areas of potential conflict with two such strong and fiery characters as Breton and Serge under the same roof. Although Serge was inclined to regard Breton as a "café activist",³⁷ he knew that Breton had spoken out against the Moscow Trials and had campaigned for his release from a Soviet prison camp. Each was inclined to be contemptuous of the other's style of writing, but in the current circumstances they put aside their differences and devoted their energies to making communal life at the villa work.

3. The role of "le quotidien" at the Villa Air-Bel:

From an objective point of view, just as Marseilles played its part as port of exit for the emigrants, so the villa had its role within that context. It is clear that the villa fulfilled an important function in providing a safe-haven for its residents at a time of great need for them all. A daily routine was established which added to their stability and gave each member of the group a framework within which to work.

³⁴ Founded in 1898, to the memory of American ornithologist and painter John James Audubon (1785–1839), whose reputation was made by his illustrated study *Birds of America* (1839). The society is concerned with nature conservation in general, that of birds in particular.

³⁵ François Bazzoli, 'Un parcours en temps de guerre' in *Varian Fry Marseilles 1940–1941 et les candidats à l'exil* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1999), p. 46

³⁶ See below p. 87

³⁷ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.488

Varian Fry, Jean Gemähling and the Bénédictes – all inmates of the villa who worked at the CAS – made the half-hour journey daily in to the city centre. Jacqueline Breton-Lamba and Laurette Séjourné would take it in turns to go with Madame Nouguet, the housekeeper, to the market. Jacqueline would also take Aube to the local “*maternelle*” each morning, after which she would often join Breton in the warmth of the conservatory, where he would take himself to write – presumably later in the autumn and winter, once the prolonged Indian summer had given way to more seasonable weather and then the coldest winter for many years. While Breton was working on his epic poem *Fata Morgana*,³⁸ Victor Serge was continuing with his novel *L’Affaire Toulaev*, which would not be published until the end of the War. Vlady, when he was not being a morose adolescent, would paint in the grounds,³⁹ often shadowed by little Pierre Bénédite. Even Aube Breton, at almost five years old, was already recognised and encouraged as an artist of some potential.⁴⁰ Creative activity was mutually stimulating.

There were also the household chores, which were divided by rota amongst Breton, Serge and his son Vlady. Here too, Bénédite was impressed by the easy way Breton did his share, whether raking leaves on the terrace or collecting wood for the fire; he had expected resistance but met with nothing but courtesy and compliance.⁴¹ Breton took well to the community life of the villa. “Very quickly, the Bretons became the magnetic core of the Marseilles band”.⁴²

Of the wider circle of those who frequented the Villa Air-Bel, André Masson benefited from a reconciliation and reunion with Breton. Masson and his family had been housed by the Countess Lili Pastré on her estate at Montredon, about an hour’s tram ride distant from the villa. He became one of the group who designed the picture cards for the *Jeu de Marseille* and a contributor to the collective drawings and collages organised (and preserved) by Breton. The fact that it was with Masson that Breton collaborated on a new work during their stay in Martinique the following year⁴³ testifies

³⁸ Publication was refused by the censor until the end of the war, but a few copies were hand produced clandestinely in March 1941: see Chapter 1 above.

³⁹ Daniel Bénédite gives account of Breton’s encouragement of Vlady: “Il veut être peintre et André lui reconnaît déjà un appréciable talent (qui s’est largement confirmé).” *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.119

⁴⁰ Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, op.cit., p.117; Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.489

⁴¹ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.120

⁴² Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.488

⁴³ See below Chapter 7 : *Martinique: charmeuse de serpents*, (original publication : Nevers : Éditions Sagittaire, 1948), *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.365

to the renewed friendship established at this time.

A further paradox in Breton's character becomes apparent from contemporary witness – that of the contrast between the notoriety he achieved through the break-down of relationships with fellow Surrealists over the years, and the ease of good manners witnessed by others. We have already seen how Daniel Bénédite, initially anxious about including Breton in the community at Air-Bel, later testifies:

Or, dès le premier contact, André s'est montré un personnage parfaitement vivable, amène, plein d'entrain et pas le moins du monde pontifiant.⁴⁴

On one occasion, the maid, Rose, having drunk too freely, fell on the stairs and lay, unconscious, in a pool of her own vomit. While others looked on in horror, Breton checked that there was no lasting damage, and, sweeping her up, carried her upstairs to his own bed, where at his suggestion she was left to sleep it off. He had after all had a medical training. But beyond that he showed himself to be a man of great sympathy and empathy, with deep respect for the worth of the individual.

This was borne out by the recent witness of one of the wider circle of visitors to the villa, Dina Vierny, at that time the twenty-four year old model and muse of the sculptor, Aristide Maillol, in the Mediterranean border village of Banyuls. As she recalls, he was a man of vitality and optimism. After all, as she said, “Les pessimistes n'ont pas survécu.” She spoke warmly of the ‘life’ that Breton gave out through his personality.⁴⁵ Similarly, Charles Duits, writing of the early days of his meeting with Breton in New York in 1942, recalls: “On avait la sensation, inexplicable, quand on causait avec lui, de vivre davantage. De vivre en quelque sorte de la tête aux pieds”.⁴⁶

Breton took the lead role in many of the recreational activities. Quoting from an interview with Mary-Jayne Gold,⁴⁷ Breton is depicted as “always the most important person in the room... He wasn't a show-off. He was a fascinating man, not the least bit snobbish or superior”.⁴⁸ Bénédite describes how every Sunday afternoon at the villa, a

⁴⁴ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.118

⁴⁵ Dina Vierny in interview with the author in Paris, January 2003. Madame Vierny died 21 January 2009 at the age of 89.

⁴⁶ Charles Duits, *André Breton a-t-il dit passe* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1969), p.69

⁴⁷ Mary-Jayne Gold, a young American heiress, was another resident at the Villa Air-Bel; she also worked for Varian Fry at the CAS. Cf: Mary-Jayne Gold, *Marseille année 40* (Paris : Éditions Phébus, 2001).

⁴⁸ Ibid, from interview with Mary-Jayne Gold, p.488, note p.709

tramload of Surrealist painters, poets, writers, artists of all sorts would arrive – a band who, since the defeat, had moved their headquarters from the Deux Magots in Paris to the Brûleur de Loups in Marseilles.⁴⁹ The contention had been, shortly before the outbreak of war, that Breton was no longer the undisputed “pape du surréalisme”, but events seemed now to disprove this. Old disputes (for example, that with Masson) were laid to rest. Rediscovered companionship and joint endeavour served to fuel a new energy, and there seems little doubt from contemporary evidence that Breton was largely the inspiration behind it.

4. Collaborative projects at the Villa Air-Bel and Surrealist games:

Breton organised the making of group collages and encouraged individuals in their various pursuits,⁵⁰ he arranged exhibitions and auctions of his friends’ work, the terrace at the villa providing a perfect setting, even to the hanging of paintings in the three huge plane trees. He researched the history of playing cards at the library in Marseilles, and instigated a team effort to produce a deck of cards with up-dated ‘picture’ cards, depicting political, philosophical and literary figures who had inspired the Surrealist movement. The pack has come to be known as the *Jeu de Marseille*.⁵¹

As well as the Sunday gatherings, there was entertainment each evening for the residents. Again, Bénédite points to Breton as the catalyst: “Serge était notre conscience. Breton sera notre animateur”.⁵² There would be lively debate and repartee over the dinner table, then singing of well-known songs, and, after dinner, games would be played – often of a very Surrealist nature. One of the favourites was ‘Murder’, at which Breton showed himself adept as Prosecutor, with most professional interrogations. They revived the game of ‘Cadavre exquis’ – a form of ‘Heads and Bodies’, each player adding his contribution, folding the paper over before passing it to his neighbour, the final addition being a caption for the unseen whole. The name came from one of the early drawings, the caption of which had been thought particularly witty and apt: “Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau”.⁵³

⁴⁹ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.125

⁵⁰ For example Wifredo Lam, whom he asked to illustrate *Fata Morgana*, his work-in-progress. See below p.83

⁵¹ See below p.77

⁵² Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.118

⁵³ Mary-Jayne Gold, *Marseille année 40*, op.cit., p.302

There was almost always sexual innuendo in these games, as in the spirited dinner table conversation. Gold tells how she let out a shriek, as she realized that the hairs forming the moustachios on the “cadavers” passed her way by the Spaniard, Oscar Dominguez, were being furtively cut by him as he plunged the nail scissors in his hand down his trousers under the table.⁵⁴ Walter Meyerhof, during his brief stay at the villa under the wing of Varian Fry, found himself ill-equipped (at eighteen) to cope with the flirtatious repartee, and had to flee to the safety of his room as soon as the meal ended. Some sixty years on, he adds that, when asked nowadays if he ever met the famous artists living at the villa, he is obliged to add to his affirmative reply:

And I have to confess that I missed the chance of a lifetime.⁵⁵
What did [I] miss by closing [my] bedroom door and closing [my] mind to the artists housed in Villa Air-Bel?⁵⁶

Sometimes there would be after-dinner readings. Victor Serge would read from his work-in-progress, *L’Affaire Toulaev* – a movingly realistic novel based on the show trials and purges of Stalin’s Russia, “presented from a perspective of undimmed confidence in revolutionary socialism”.⁵⁷ Alternatively, Breton would read from his own hermetic writings – very different from the straightforward style of Serge, marking out a basic difference between the two men – or from texts and letters from other members of the Surrealist group, with ensuing discussion, literary or political.

The villa was undoubtedly a lively and liberated place to be – a living paradox in the far from lively and liberated country that was France in 1940–41. For those who remained, the ‘experiment’ in communal living was working in all its Surrealist glory.

The reader must bear in mind that Surrealism remains, as it began, a collective and international adventure.⁵⁸

There could not be a better illustration of the ‘collective and international adventure’ of Surrealism than this period of communal life and collective creativity at the villa.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.303.

⁵⁵ Walter Meyerhof, *In the Shadow of Love* (Santa Barbara, U.S.A.: Fithian Press, 2002), p.61–62

⁵⁶ Walter Meyerhof, email to the author – 14 May 2003

⁵⁷ Gareth Jenkins, *Introduction* to the English translation *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, (London: Bookmarks, 1993), p.2

⁵⁸ Franklin Rosemont, *André Breton – What is Surrealism?*, op.cit., p.7

Breton's own surge of productive creativity served as a catalyst to those around him, not least through the gatherings he organised at the Villa Air-Bel. With Breton at the centre of the group, the Surrealists gathered there recreated what they had known before, with discussion of world affairs, the organization of auctions and exhibitions of the artists' works, as well as collaborative creative output. Excursions to the Villa were organized on Sunday afternoons, when a dozen or so artists and writers would foregather for collective projects and the games-playing that were so much a part of Surrealist activity.⁵⁹ Jean-Louis Bédouin, himself a later Surrealist, writes of his older companions:

Beaucoup d'entre eux ont tôt fait de renouer avec l'activité collective qui, sous la forme de jeu qu'elle prend habituellement, demeure l'une des grandes constantes du surréalisme. [...] Il ne s'agit pas alors de chercher à se dissimuler la gravité de la situation. Il s'agit de garder coûte que coûte suffisamment de liberté par rapport à elle.⁶⁰

Thus, the collective games of the Surrealist group, became for them, like "l'humour noir", an important form of intellectual resistance to the fascist occupation of their country and the preservation of their intellectual liberty.

Breton had long advocated a return to a childlike mindset, with its freedom from the imposition of the straitjacket of both society and/or education, and, by extension, emphasized the value of children's games in the reconciliation of action and dreams. The enforced sojourn at the Villa Air-Bel for some, with the addition of visits from others, provided an ideal forum for the continuation of what had always been a Surrealist priority – the playing of games. These games for a large part reproduced the original injunction in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* that the child

Ne peut que se retourner alors vers son enfance [...]. Là, l'absence de toute rigueur connue lui laisse la perspective de plusieurs vies menées à la fois ; il s'enracine dans cette illusion ; il ne veut plus connaître que la facilité momentanée, extrême, de toutes choses. [...] Tout est près, les pires conditions matérielles sont excellentes.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.125; Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.490.

⁶⁰ Jean-Louis Bédouin, *Benjamin Péret* (Paris : Éditions Pierre Seghers, 1961), p.27

⁶¹ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p. 311

Even under these circumstances, through these games Breton was still seeking to arrive at the “dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale”,⁶² which had formed, since its inception, the basis of Surrealism. The belief that “certaines formes d’associations” would lead to a “réalité supérieure” was very much at the heart of these activities.⁶³ Deliberately favouring a state of total freedom of mind and imagination, it was imperative to conjure the spark vital to Surrealist creativity by the juxtaposition of unexpected words or images, for “les mots, les images ne s’offrent que comme tremplins à l’esprit de celui qui écoute”.⁶⁴ Hence the nature of the games most often played at the villa, the unusual combinations of images necessarily resulting from the drawing game of ‘Cadavre exquis’, or the mental images brought about by the unexpected placing side by side of words in either games or poems – for example, Breton’s famous image in his poem of that moment *Fata Morgana*: “Le lit fonce sur ses rails de miel bleu”.⁶⁵

New images were brought to the surface by the coming together of several heterogeneous minds in these games, as well as from the arbitrary placing of words and drawings, all of which seem to justify Breton’s theories about language in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*. Writing a piece on *Le Cadavre exquis* (1942), he recalls a critic talking contemptuously of “ces distractions puérides”,⁶⁶ which, for those who were involved in the collaborative production, created a very different reaction:

Ce qui nous a, en effet, exaltés dans ces productions, c’est la certitude que, vaille que vaille, elles portent la marque de ce qui ne peut être engendré par un seul cerveau et qu’elles sont douées, à un beaucoup plus haut degré, du pouvoir de *dérive* dont la poésie ne saurait faire trop de cas.

In addition, the games – in particular ‘le cadavre exquis’ – managed to achieve “d’un moyen infaillible de mettre l’esprit critique en vacance et de pleinement libérer l’activité métaphorique de l’esprit”. The combination of drawings which went into each ‘cadavre

⁶² André Breton, *Le cadavre exquis* in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, O.C.*, Vol. IV, op.cit., p. 701

⁶³ Breton’s definition of Surrealism in *Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p. 328

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 336

⁶⁵ André Breton, *Fata Morgana, O.C.*, Vol. II, op.cit., p.1188

⁶⁶ André Breton, *Le cadavre exquis* in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture, O.C.*, Vol. IV, op.cit., p. 701

exquis' had the effect of bringing "l'anthropomorphisme à son comble et d'accentuer prodigieusement la vie de relation qui unit le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur. Ils sont la négation éperdue de la dérisoire activité d'imitation".⁶⁷ The spontaneity and freedom of expression achieved by the game of "Le Cadavre exquis", together with the nature of its collective creativity, mirrored the element of automatism already established by word games and 'jeux de mots' created during the early years of Surrealism.

Bearing in mind these early texts, it is understandable that the Air-Bel community and its visitors should turn to collective collaboration on artistic projects, whether creative works or a resurgence of their love of playing games, at a time when it was essential to rise to the challenge, intellectual and artistic, of resisting the crushing might of the invading force of Nazism. Thus artistic endeavour at the villa was transformed from an individual to a group identity.

5. *Le Jeu de Marseille* – a Game of Magic :

Breton's leadership was the inspiration behind the creation of *Le Jeu de Marseille* – an up-dated pack of cards, substituting political and philosophical figures fundamentally important to Surrealism for the outmoded 'picture' cards of Kings, Queens and Knaves. As early as 1930 with *L'Immaculée Conception* (and *Ralentir travaux*), Breton had been involved in the practice of ludic provocation: the religious/anti-religious context of *L'Immaculée Conception* he wrote with Paul Eluard is in fact renewed with the *Jeu de Marseille*. Here, his research into the history of playing cards having revealed that they were created to represent essentially the battles and revolutions of history, Breton and his partners replace the various figures of the 'picture' cards with a cosmogony of Surrealist heroes which clearly demonstrate the new direction of the movement since the *Second Manifeste*, seeking to "occult" Surrealism.⁶⁸ One of the important links between the earlier text and the game of cards is, in particular, the section

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.701–702

⁶⁸ Cf. Breton's call for the « OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURREALISME » in the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol. I, op.cit., p.821

entitled “Médiations”, which, as Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron has shown,⁶⁹ is a reference to Hegel, whose *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* Breton had read in its new translation just after the publication of the *Second Manifeste*. In the same section, Breton and Éluard enumerate the initial possibilities of these “Médiations”, which they define as “Woman. Beauty. Knowledge. Justice”: these categories, as well as the names usually associated with the Surrealists in general (and Breton and Eluard in particular in the *Dictionnaire du Surréalisme*, for example) are to be found again in the game of cards. Here, however, given the emphasis of his research at the time into hermeticism and the occult, Breton decides that the conventional suits should be replaced by Keyholes (black – representing Knowledge), Wheels (red – Revolution), Stars (black – Dreams) and Flames (red – Love),⁷⁰ the cards themselves representing a type of symbolic portrait with an allegorical identity. It is worth pointing out that among the French occultists who had been influential in fashioning esoteric tarot (on which Breton based his research) were Eliphas Lévi and Papus, whom we know Breton was reading at the time.⁷¹ Even though the Tarot de Marseille decks are not 'occult' *per se*, the imagery used for these cards arguably shows hermetic influences (e.g., alchemy, astronomy, etc.), if nothing else, in their organization of the deck of cards into “minor arcana” (Arcanes Mineures) and “major arcana” (Arcanes Majeures).⁷² There is a sense of the infinite combinations voiced by evoking thought in all its variations, and the opportunity of calling on all possible conceptions of the human mind.⁷³

The ace, king and queen were replaced by *génie*, *mage* and *sirène*, the knave disappearing altogether. At Breton’s suggestion, the re-designing of the ‘picture’ cards was divided between eight artists, who, some individually, but more often collectively, produced one or two designs each.

⁶⁹ Cf. “Toward a New Definition of Automatism: *L’Immaculée Conception*” in *André Breton today*, Anna Balakian and Rudolph E. Kuenzli (editors), (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1989), pp.74–91

⁷⁰ Stephen A. Shain: www.52plusjoker.org/news/ctd9806, Feb.2003

⁷¹ These names will appear in *Devant le rideau*, one of the most important post-war texts written by Breton, where he clearly elaborates on the new direction he has taken during the war years. Cf. *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op. cit., p.747

⁷² Breton was to emphasize the importance he attached to the Tarot “arcanes” in the use of his title *Arcane 17* for his later text. See Chapter 5 below.

⁷³ Cf. Éliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic, its Doctrine and Ritual*, (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972), p. 3–4

Having drawn lots as to who was to design which card, the artists proceeded as follows: to André Breton fell the design of the Keyhole, both the ace and Paracelsus, portrayed as an octopus, as the ‘mage’ of Knowledge; Jacques Hérold drew Lamiel, the Stendhal heroine, and Sade, much revered by the Surrealists; Jacqueline represented the “roue sanglante” of Revolution, and Baudelaire; André Masson designed the ‘Religieuse portugaise’ and Novalis; Victor Brauner took on the designing of the 20th century seer, Hélène Smith, and Hegel; Wifredo Lam drew Alice in Wonderland and Lautréamont; Oscar Dominguez portrayed Freud and the black star of Dream; Max Ernst drew Pancho Villa and the *génie* of flame/Love. The joker was taken from the exact design made by Alfred Jarry of his Père Ubu.⁷⁴ The four replacement suits represent themes dear to the Surrealist movement, and, together with the characters portrayed, form a link to magic and the occult with esoteric symbols and polygenic elements which echo those of Tarot cards or the signs of the Zodiac. The *Jeu de Marseille* is described by François Bazzoli as “Le jeu le plus mémorable de ces dimanches d’Air-Bel”, the cards clearly having been created “avec un clin d’œil aux fameux ‘tarots de Marseille’”.⁷⁵

The significance of these images is multi-layered, of course, but what is interesting here (given the time and place when they were produced) is that, collectively realised, the game of cards is one of the most important collaborative outputs of the Villa Air Bel months, a way for Breton to reinforce creatively the Surrealist credo in love, revolutionary hope, and the still all important search for poetic surprise (given the random combinations that can be obtained by pairing cards haphazardly for example).

⁷⁴ Cf. Nicolas Cendo, ‘Marseille et le jeu de cartes surréaliste’ in *Le jeu de Marseille : Autour d’André Breton et des Surréalistes à Marseille en 1940–1941*, (Marseilles: Éditions Alors Hors du Temps, 2003), p.80

⁷⁵ François Bazzoli, ‘Un parcours en temps de guerre’, op.cit., p.48 Like other Tarot decks, the Tarot de Marseille contains fifty-six cards in the four standard Suits. In French language versions of the Tarot de Marseille, those suits are identified by their French names of *Bâtons* (Rods, Staves, Sceptres, or Wands), *Épées* (Swords), *Coupes* (Cups), and *Deniers* (Coins). These count from Ace to 10. As well, there are four court cards in each suit: a *Valet* (Knave or Page), *Chevalier* or *Cavalier* (Horse-rider or Knight), *Dame* (Queen) and *Roi* (King). Occultists call this series the Minor Arcana (or *Arcanes Mineures*). There are also the standard twenty-two trump cards. At times, the Fool, which is unnumbered in the Tarot de Marseille, is viewed as separate and additional to the other twenty-one numbered trumps. Occultists call these twenty-two cards the *Atouts* (trumps), *Les Lames Majeures de Figures* (The Major Figure Cards) or Major Arcana (arcanes majeurs)

The extreme flexibility of the game, with all the possibilities it embodies as a form of experimentation and as inventive efflorescence must be seen as an important output, created under extreme circumstances, in order to combat the forces of the various constraints imposed upon these artists. The *Jeu de Marseille* represents the playful production of a tiny initiatic society, reduced to a few members whose task it is to find a way to fight adversity as best they can: poeticizing reality.

The designs were kept together by Frédéric Delanglade (who participated in the Villa Air Bel activities) and were ultimately published in New York in 1943 in the review *VVV*, No.2. The crucial importance of the *Jeu de Marseille* was that :

Il sert de trait d'union entre le surréalisme européen essentiellement axé sur la puissance du mythe, ou de l'imagination [...] et la confrontation entre les artistes du groupe qui s'exilèrent aux Etats-Unis avec la jeune création américaine.⁷⁶

In the event, this was the last collective project put together by Breton, and as such marks a significant moment in the history of the movement, as well as in the personal life of the poet. An inevitable result of the 'dépaysement' of war and exile was the random dispersal of the Surrealist group, and, while there was an opportunity for Breton and Masson to collaborate to produce the text of *Martinique, charmeuse de serpents* while together on that island a short time later, awaiting further passage to New York, there was never again the possibility to engender the same collective spirit for a group project.

6. Wifredo Lam and the development of Surrealist influence:

Following that collective spirit, we have seen that Wifredo Lam was one of those involved in the designing and drawing of the cards for the *Jeu de Marseille*. According to Lowery Stokes Sims, there were

Stylistic changes [...] certainly midwived by Lam's participation in the collaborative artistic projects among the Surrealist group at the Villa Bel Air (*sic*), evidenced by collaborative drawings done with Jacques Hérold and André Breton⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Nicolas Cendo, 'Marseille et le jeu de cartes surréalistes', op.cit., p.80

⁷⁷ Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde 1923-1982* (Austin, Texas:

As for many others at this time, Breton had clearly acted as the trigger to his creative energy by drawing him into the project. Gathering Wifredo Lam in on the collective creation of the *Jeu de Marseille* was not the only opportunity he offered him. While writing his epic poem, *Fata Morgana*, at the villa that winter, he sought out Lam as the most promising candidate to illustrate the text. Breton's choice of the young Chinese-Cuban to make these illustrations was not fortuitous, and it is later recorded by Lam's partner that the decision marked a turning point in his work; Helena Benitez describes the collaboration with Breton as the opening through which Lam moved to a new realm of conceptualized images.⁷⁸

With his genesis covering four continents from a Chinese father and black Cuban mother of Spanish/African descent, Lam had knowledge of two great cultures to which he returned more markedly from this point, bringing together strains of European and African art.⁷⁹

Lam's very early years, spent in Sagua la Grande where he was born, were steeped in myth and magic. Mantonica Wilson, his *madrina*, was a sorceress and healer who saw to it that the boy was familiar with the voodoo and magic rites which were commonplace in Cuba at the time. As Max-Pol Fouchet records: "Thanks to his *madrina*, Wifredo entered a world peopled by invisible beings", while Lam himself remembers: "When I was a little boy, [...] I was afraid of my imagination".⁸⁰ His familiarity with the traditions of voodoo and the spirit world of Cuban culture made him an attractive candidate to Breton for the portrayal of the hermetic element in his

University of Texas Press, 2002), p.31

⁷⁸ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School* (London: The MIT Press, 1997), p.124, n.17 "Helena Benitez, interview with the author, March 1992."

⁷⁹ However, it is important to emphasize that from the beginning, Lam's artistic training had been classically European up to the time he was introduced to Picasso on his arrival in Paris in 1938 after the Spanish Civil War. Lam had left Cuba aged twenty-one, arriving in Madrid in 1923. He studied under F. Alvarez de Sotomayor, who had also taught Salvador Dalí, but felt constrained by the traditional training imposed on him. In the afternoons, as an antidote to his classes, he used to visit the Prado where he discovered Northern European painters such as Brueghel and Bosch, who were more to his taste than those introduced to him by Sotomayor. Cf. Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* – Second edition updated: translated by Kenneth Lyons and Richard-Lewis Rees, (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, S.A., 1989), p. 76

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.42

illustrations for *Fata Morgana* – “un jeune peintre [...] qui est, de tous les artistes que je connais, celui qui me paraît actuellement avoir le plus à dire”.⁸¹

Lam had arrived in Paris with a letter of introduction to Picasso.⁸² After fourteen years in Spain, and with no knowledge of the French language, Lam was grateful to find a Spanish-speaking fellow artist with whom he shared so much. Picasso had always defended the Republican cause, and Lam had seen his work at a travelling show which came to Madrid in 1936. “For him it was not just a revelation but, to use his own term, exaltation.”⁸³ Through Picasso, he was introduced to the Surrealist group, where, amongst the poets, writers and painters, he soon made close ties and

Took his place in a circle of people who not only constituted an incomparable avant-garde of French thought, but still represented, within the contemporary spirit, all that was most advanced, most generous and most capable of transforming the sensibility of the age.⁸⁴

Lam had come to Paris determined to reject all his previous traditional art training in the wake of a personal tragedy.⁸⁵ He proved the exception to Picasso’s rule never to take on apprentice students, and under the master’s aegis Lam returned to his art, freeing himself from convention. He was carrying through into painting what Breton was achieving in poetry and literature. Pierre Mabille was another who concurred with Breton’s appreciation of the effect of Picasso’s influence on Lam’s work:

C’est ainsi que Lam a redécouvert à travers Picasso le message qu’il avait en lui et qu’il n’aurait pu exprimer trente ans auparavant parce que l’ascendant de l’esthétique occidentale était trop puissant. Libéré de ces entraves, Lam pouvait approfondir son expression et la rendre plus authentique.⁸⁶

For Lam, this was a turning point in his artistic output. From this time, freed from the aesthetics of a classical training in Western art, he was able to turn to the liberated

⁸¹ André Breton, letter to Léon Pierre-Quint dated 4 February 1941, quoted in *Fata Morgana – Notice in O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1186

⁸² Hospitalized in Caldes de Montbui in 1937, after the defeat of the Republican regime, Lam met the Spanish sculptor Manuel Hugué (known as Manolo), who gave him an introduction to Picasso, if he were to carry out his plan to go to Paris. Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, op.cit., p.110

⁸³ Ibid, p.112

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 114

⁸⁵ His wife and baby had both died of tuberculosis in Madrid in 1931, two years after his marriage to Eva Piriz and a year after the birth of their baby.

⁸⁶ Pierre Mabille, *La peinture de Wifredo Lam (Mai, 1947) in Conscience lumineuse – conscience picturale* (Paris : José Corti, 1989), p.129

instincts of his cultural formation, reinforced by the revelation of ‘primitiveness’ in Picasso’s painting. 1940–41 was therefore for Lam, as well as for Breton, very much a new beginning: they clearly met at a time when both were in search of a new path – or, in the case of Breton, a renewed one.

Wifredo Lam “had caught the sharp eye of Breton”⁸⁷ for another project also – illustrations to complement the text of *Fata Morgana*, the poem created that winter while at the Villa Air-Bel. Described as “a child rocked to sleep with stories, enamoured of phantoms, ready to accept all things magic, surrounded by charms and spells”,⁸⁸ Lam responded naturally to Breton’s poetic imagery, poring over the text to extract its every meaning. As each section of Breton’s text was completed, it was translated into Spanish by Helena Benitez, Lam’s partner (later to become his wife). Lam would then pick a passage to illustrate, making in all about thirty-six drawings, of which eight were finally used.⁸⁹

All these drawings, inhabited by magic creatures and adorned with mysterious symbols, testify to Wifredo’s changing concept of art. His psyche suddenly seemed to burst and overflow with archetypal images he painted with candour and spontaneity. [...] [T]he illustrations for *Fata Morgana* [...] indicate a definite turning point in his development. From this midway station on, he was set for the rest of his life on the road to magic rituals and primitive images, so dear to the Surrealist vision of the unconscious. These images have an emotional fascination and hypnotic impact for the spectator.⁹⁰

The combination of re-connection with the magic rituals and primitive images of his cultural and geographical roots, as well as Picasso’s influence on him, made Lam the perfect candidate to bring out in his illustrations the magic conveyed by Breton’s text. Most likely, too, as well as recognising in Lam the combination of artistic talent and Surrealist understanding for which he was looking, it would have occurred to Breton that the young artist would himself benefit from such a project. There is no doubt that Breton, more than most, was eager to help the young painter to “se retourner vers son enfance”.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Anna Balakian, *André Breton – Magus of Surrealism*, op.cit., p.189, quotation from a letter from André Breton to Léon Pierre-Quint, Feb. 4, 1941

⁸⁸ Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, op.cit., pp. 49 & 52

⁸⁹ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School*, op.cit., p.125; see also Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde*, op.cit., p.29

⁹⁰ Helena H. Benitez, *Wifredo Lam – Interlude Marseilles*, op.cit., p.19

⁹¹ André Breton, *Manifeste de surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol. I, op.cit., p.311

Thus, as Picasso had done before with Lam who was his *protégé*, Breton encouraged the young painter to reconnect with his own cultural roots. Lam himself recognized that this connection had indeed been nurtured in him by Picasso and by familiarity with his work:

What made me feel such empathy with his painting, more than anything else, was the presence of African art and the African spirit that I discovered in it. When I was a little boy, I had seen African figures in Mantonica Wilson's house. And in Pablo's work I seemed to find a sort of *continuum*.⁹²

With his training in classical Western art up to the point of his encounter with Picasso, it was a revelation to Lam to 'discover' African art – a discovery which he really made in Paris, while finding in it confirmation of the spirit he had absorbed in childhood. The fashion for African art had shown its influence not only in Picasso's work, but also that of other painters and sculptors (among them, Braque, Derain, Matisse and Vlaminck) and was available to a wide public in Paris from as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. Michel Leiris emphasized the drawing together of the two cultures in Lam's painting from this time:

Far from presenting themselves as the results of an eclectic process, [...] his works seem to represent the confluence of two currents that mingle in him, one of them corresponding to his deliberate desire to excel (to rise above circumstances), the other to the almost immemorial fascination that *blackness* had held for him, even since before he became conscious of it.⁹³

Having long been attracted by native art (for instance that of Mexico), Breton was all the more drawn to Lam's newly developed 'primitive' style, particularly given his Chinese-Caribbean parentage, which the poet wanted to encourage the young painter to explore even more. Writing the following year in New York for a publication edited by Peggy Guggenheim, Breton concludes:

The primitive form of any entity is feeling. It is feeling that triumphs over everything, bursting the withered outer husk [...] and in the effort to overcome this resistance, feeling sweeps aside all rigid doctrinaire notions, and instils in succeeding generations of artists a boundless love of liberty.⁹⁴

⁹² In Max-Pol Fouchet., *Wifredo Lam*, op.cit., p. 124

⁹³ From *Lam*, Preface by Michel Leiris, (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1970), Cf. Note 8, p.220 in Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, op.cit., p.130

⁹⁴ *Art of this Century*, (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p.15

The association made by Breton between primitive form, the importance of feeling and the love of freedom were indeed the three main directions that his art was going to take during the war. It is clear that in choosing Lam as an illustrator, he was making a statement about the direction his creative output was to take. Furthermore, in November he was interviewed by a journalist from *Le Figaro* in Marseilles as part of a series of articles on writers who had sought refuge in the 'Free Zone', to whom he declared (of his work in progress, *Fata Morgana*): "pour témoigner de la sympathie que je porte aux conceptions racistes du maréchal, je confierai l'illustration à un peintre de grand talent, Wifredo Lam, né d'un Chinois et d'une Noire cubaine".⁹⁵ He was furious to discover later that this remark had been cut from the final copy. Breton's choice of Lam as illustrator confirms his desire to demonstrate his enthusiasm for primitive art – a trend which had gripped Europe from before the turn of the twentieth century.

This attachment to 'primitive art' was by extension linked to the equally strong trend towards all things 'African' in creative art at the time, a link which had been investigated by both Picasso and Stein, each in their different media.⁹⁶ North refers to "the shallow Negrophilia of this period" (the 1920s),⁹⁷ although Breton's interest in choosing Lam to illustrate his poem cannot surely be thus labelled. He did undoubtedly relish the fact that Lam's parentage made him *ipso facto* an object of 'resistance' to Pétain's racist legislation, but his own interest in the 'primitive' and in 'négritude' – exploring the art of Lam's racial roots – fulfilled for Breton an aim to reveal what is pure and un-'trained' in creative originality, confirming all that is "natural, primitive, life-affirming and impatient of restraint".⁹⁸

Helena Benitez outlines her part in the protracted process by which Lam created the illustrations for the poem:

While I translated the poem, Wifredo spent his time making drawings with China ink on parchment paper.⁹⁹

The spontaneity of the near simultaneous action of Lam's creation of illustrations

⁹⁵ Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise*, op.cit., p.124–125

⁹⁶ Michael North, 'Preface' to *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.63

⁹⁷ 'Preface' to *The Dialect of Modernism*, op.cit., opening page: no page numbers in 'Preface'.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.27

⁹⁹ Helena H. Benitez, *Wifredo Lam – Interlude Marseilles*, op.cit., p.16–17

immediately on hearing the translation of the lines is striking in its element of automatism. The spontaneity of response made this also a transformative experience for Lam, showing the authenticity of that response and the trigger action of *Fata Morgana* on the painter towards what was to become the new direction of his work. Benitez expands on her observation of the transformation in Lam's way of working and in the style of the finished drawings:

Some still exhibited the sculpturelike mono-lithic forms, but gradually little flowers, stars, and diamonds came to adorn the severe simple outlines. [...] After I had completed the translation, Wifredo read it several times over with great attention, choosing special sections to base his illustration on. [...] Concurrent with André's text, these drawings are particularly lyrical.¹⁰⁰

Lam's drawings are, as Benitez describes, "severe, simple outlines", softened with many little symbols, flowers and stars, and, like Breton's text, they leave the reader free to 'read' them at will. Given the cinematographic feel to the imagery of Breton's lines, illustrations from Lam's own 'inner cinema' provide a complementary balance to the text.

The thought and care that Lam put into the execution of his drawings has already been noted, and the translation of Breton's verse into line drawings evidences the understanding of that translation. The first illustration in the original publication¹⁰¹ is that of a young girl – Fata Morgana herself? Jacqueline, to whom the poem is dedicated? or simply an illustration of the repeated line on the facing page "*Comme c'est joli*"? In any event, the drawing is beautiful in its simplicity of line and primitiveness, both demure and flirtatious in its femininity, the mane of hair enhanced by the addition of little flowers and star-like decorations. The outlines are mostly gentle and curved, the only hard, straight lines being those delineating the forehead, with its strange antennae-like protuberances above the eyeline. Overall the drawing is of a more peaceful, passive figure.

In total contrast, the last of the eight illustrations is aggressively active, the bird-like creatures in full flight, direction-led in their purposeful advance. All is jagged

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ See Appendix I, p.329 below. Reproduced in the 2004 edition by La Bibliothèque des Introuvables, facing p.8. This edition, produced by La Bibliothèque surréaliste, is printed "strictement à l'identique, dans [son] format et [sa] typographie d'origine". (Cf. back cover of the above edition.)

movement, with scarcely a curved line, except for the spread wings of the largest, eagle-like creature, and the comet-like tail of the smallest. The pointed spearlike shapes, from the pinions of the largest bird, to the whole outline of the smaller, give an impression not only of speed, but also of anger and enmity. All in all, the image is more of an enemy air attack than of “le rêve des chants des oiseaux du soir”.¹⁰² Indeed, the atmosphere created conjures up rather visions of “l’aigle est partout”,¹⁰³ with all that that infers of the sinister symbol of German oppression and occupation, while at the same time echoing the mysterious designs and ritual traditions of primitive North American Indian masks.

Writing later about their time in Marseilles, Helena Bénitez “conveys an atmosphere at once tense and routine”,¹⁰⁴ while Breton himself “would write of the Villa Air-Bel as a place where, for a time, artists tried to carry on with their work as the world around them collapsed”.¹⁰⁵ In a short piece about the creation of *Le Jeu de Marseille*, Breton evokes this tension between the routine and the danger which gave form to their daily life: he writes of his observation of the toads and praying mantises at the Villa, and of their mating habits, which affirmed “de manière superfétatoire, que la vie, pour se poursuivre, a besoin de la mort”.¹⁰⁶ He goes on to comment on the reaction of those from the villa who were detained on board the SS. Sinaïa, as a preventive measure, before Pétain’s visit to Marseilles in December 1940:

Et là encore, parmi bien d’autres ‘suspects’ – si grande est la puissance de défi, de mépris et aussi d’espoir envers et contre tout – jamais peut-être les acteurs de cette scène ne s’étaient retrouvés plus enfants, n’avaient chanté, joué et ri de si bon cœur.¹⁰⁷

In his pursuit of liberty, both mental and physical, Breton was aware of the correlation between life and death in the catharsis necessary to creative achievement. His writing of *Fata Morgana* (1941) during this time of uncertainty and fear draws together his appreciation of life itself and of “le merveilleux” – and what Victor Serge found to be his rather trying flirtation with the “Au-delà”.¹⁰⁸ It was for Breton a reconciliation of the imagination with reality, and a vital vehicle not only for his own

¹⁰² See Appendix II, p.330 below. Ibid, p.26

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde 1923–1982*, op.cit., p.31

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Kessin Berman, ‘Moral triage or cultural salvage?’, op.cit., p.106

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Le Jeu de Marseille* in *La Clé des Champs*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.705

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p.706

¹⁰⁸ Mary-Jayne Gold, *Marseille année 40*, op.cit., p.305

ideas but for the inspiration he sought to impart to others.

In the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton had advocated the benefits of a return to the fresh approach to life that we experience in childhood:

L'esprit qui plonge dans le surréalisme revit avec exaltation la meilleure part de son enfance. [...] C'est peut-être l'enfance qui approche le plus de la "vraie vie"; l'enfance au-delà de laquelle l'homme ne dispose, en plus de son laissez-passer, que quelques billets de faveur; l'enfance où tout concourait cependant à la possession efficace, et sans aléas, de soi-même.¹⁰⁹

For, to paraphrase Breton, it is in childhood, before we have learnt the constraints imposed by adult social awareness, that effectively we learn self-identification. The order is unimportant, but the essential elements within the revolution of Surrealism are to maintain in life that childlike innocence, together with "l'optimisme", "l'humour" and perhaps most of all a recognition of "le merveilleux". For some, it was their introduction to – for others their adherence to – this principle that gave the five months at the Villa Air-Bel its unique quality.

In the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* (1929), he reiterated and confirmed much of what had been said in the *Manifeste*, but also went on to emphasize:

C'est que la fidélité sans défaillance aux engagements du surréalisme suppose un désintéressement, un mépris du risque, un refus de composition dont très peu d'hommes se révèlent, à la longue, capables.¹¹⁰

It was, it seems, not least this tenacity to the Surrealist principle which helped many to survive the rigours of the German defeat and occupation of France. In furnishing them with a valid approach to life, it armed them with the tools necessary to their survival in a world in which moral values seemed to have been turned upside-down.

When asked about the sort of refugees helped by Varian Fry, Edmonde Charles-Roux replied:

En fait, il y avait deux types de réfugiés. L'intelligentsia allemande [...] d'une part, les surréalistes de l'autre. Si les premiers avaient déjà un passif, une usure, une douleur, un chagrin, s'ils n'étaient déjà qu'à demi vivants, s'ils n'étaient plus

¹⁰⁹ André Breton, *Manifeste de surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.309

¹¹⁰ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, Ibid, p.775

que des errants, des exilés, les surréalistes portaient [...] leur malheur avec une insolence sans limite. Ils jouaient leur malheur alors que les autres l'enduraient.¹¹¹

It is a popular misconception that the Surrealists were *childish*, as opposed to *childlike*, with their near obsession with games and humour, but in this contribution from Edmonde Charles-Roux we have affirmation of the effectiveness and validity of the Surrealist approach to life – a life which to many of them at the time must have seemed under threat. Their existence at the Villa Air-Bel, in its beautiful grounds, was in its way a meeting of “le merveilleux” with reality. It would not have seemed so to a practical revolutionary like Victor Serge, who had little time for such fanciful ideas, but to Breton and his Surrealist friends, it was the outcome of ‘objective chance’, mirrored by the bright imagery of *Fata Morgana*.

It has been seen how the members of the community at the villa reacted in their several ways to the circumstances of war and to the experiment in communal living. From their own testimonies, particularly those of the three Americans,¹¹² it is clear that this was a memorable moment for them all, whatever the length of their actual stay there. It was, further, a time of renewed collective creative output by the Surrealist group, many of whom had reached a period of stagnation prior to the outbreak of war – such as to emphasize the contrasting brilliance of the work produced individually as well as collectively during the period. It was as though this was their particular act of resistance to the invading forces of Nazism.¹¹³ The success of the experiment in living communally was such that rather than being undermined by the prevailing circumstances, they felt secure in their friendships and in the community they had built up. This, together with strong leadership from Breton, produced for many in the group a new wave of optimism and creativity.

As well as the formation of strong bonds of friendship, evident from contemporary accounts of the ‘Marseilles Interlude’,¹¹⁴ there is a sense of this time marking the end of an era. Old friendships were renewed, new ones forged – there was, Helena Benitez recalls, something of a holiday atmosphere in Marseilles as they severally foregathered to put into practice their collaborative artistic creativity. With the setting

¹¹¹ Edmonde Charles-Roux, Interview with Philippe Piguet, *Cimaise no. 258, mars-avril 1999*, op.cit., p.82

¹¹² Varian Fry, Miriam Davenport-Ebel and Mary-Jayne Gold

¹¹³ Cf. Edmonde Charles-Roux, Interview with Philippe Piguet, *Cimaise no. 258, mar-avril 1999*, op.cit.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Helena Benitez-Lam, *Wifredo Lam – Interlude Marseilles* (Copenhagen: Edition Bløndel, 1993)

up of the Air-Bel community, the opportunity was created for Breton to become once more the catalyst to collective Surrealist energy and creativity. It was a time of renewal, both for Breton and the movement – as exemplified by his collaboration with Lam in *Fata Morgana*, where that renewal takes the form of an accent on primitivism, freedom and love, the three pivotal themes of Surrealism during the war years. His was a central role in those uncertain days, and one he played skilfully and effectively. His enthusiasm and hard work on his own account was an obvious source of inspiration to others, and the gatherings at the villa more widely so, with their congenial company, collective artistic ventures and mind-stretching games. After Breton's departure, those Surrealists who remained behind lacked the charisma and creative inspiration to hold the group together.¹¹⁵

Already in 1924 Breton had written: “Le seul mot de liberté est tout ce qui m'exalte encore”.¹¹⁶ It was this love of – and respect for – freedom which had brought him into conflict with authority, from parents to school, from school to college; but it was the same spirit which gave him the courage to hold to his principles in the face of difficulties in those months over the winter of 1940–1941, and the same spirit which inspired others to do likewise. For Breton, his self-imposed exile was arguably the most contentious decision of his life. There were some who decided to remain in France; Breton, together with other Surrealists, came to the unpalatable conclusion that there was too much at stake for him to risk remaining – not just for himself, but for the artistic and literary heritage of which he felt himself to be a guardian for future generations. It was a responsibility he took seriously. Intellectually, Breton had already been an exile for many years – exile was an inevitability for any Surrealist.

Exile, for the Surrealists, involves the retreat of a psychological subject into a past encountered in its violent tension, the retreat of a linguistic subject into the tension of writing, the retreat of political consciousness into a resistance to facile solutions.¹¹⁷

The fact of his physical removal from France was painful, but intellectually he could hardly have been better prepared. He took his particular gifts with him into an exile

¹¹⁵ It should however be remembered that as well as the Bretons, the Serge ménage, the Masson family, Wifredo Lam and Helena Benitez also left - quite a proportion of the regular circle at the villa.

¹¹⁶ 1924, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I., op.cit., p.14

¹¹⁷ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Surrealists in Exile: Another Kind of Resistance’ in *1979 Poetics Today* Vol. 1, Pt 1–2, pp. 437–451, p.450–1

which, unlike his German counterparts, he regarded as temporary.¹¹⁸ By removing himself from the Nazi threat of internment or worse,¹¹⁹ he was able to continue his work and, equally as important, his encouragement and inspiration of others.

As it was, in *Le Jeu de Marseille* he had the satisfaction of having created a collective work he knew to be of great worth during the months he spent in Marseilles. He had also recognized and harnessed Wifredo Lam's considerable talent to produce in *Fata Morgana* a joint work of lasting value, as Helena Benitez records:

Both men felt that they had accomplished something special and permanent. The poem and drawings, enhancing each other synergistically, represented the freedom of spirit in a world of war and destruction. As such, they were a true testimony to the interlude of Marseilles.¹²⁰

As Breton comments to André Parinaud, during his *Entretiens radiophoniques* (1952):

C'est de cette époque que date, en particulier, l'élaboration à plusieurs d'un jeu de cartes dessiné d'après des symboles nouveaux correspondant à l'amour, au rêve, à la révolution, à la connaissance et dont je ne parle que parce qu'il a l'intérêt de montrer ce par rapport à quoi, d'un commun accord, nous nous situons à ce moment.¹²¹

Clearly the use of the Tarot card as an expression of the Surrealist revolutionary stance had remained at the forefront of Breton's mind since the collective project of 1941. Breton had done methodical research into the ancient origins of the Marseilles Tarot before launching the initiative, finding that the "jeu de Naïb" appears to have come to Europe from the Orient as early as the 14th century.¹²² In the 17th century Marseilles became an important centre for the production of Tarot cards, and it was at this time that the iconography of the cards developed, adding astrological images to the Christian themes and those of Antiquity already represented. Towards the end of the 18th century, Antoine Court de Gébelin "commente les vingt-deux arcanes majeures et affirme la

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey Mehlman, *Émigré New York* (Baltimore, USA: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.2

¹¹⁹ Breton's outspoken criticism of the French Government (both Vichy and that of the Third Republic), as well as of Hitler and Nazism, quite apart from his 'decadent' art, placed him squarely on the 'wanted' list, were he to remain in France.

¹²⁰ Helena Benitez, *Wifredo Lam – Interlude Marseilles*, op.cit., p.19

¹²¹ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques XIV, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.555

¹²² Marie Aubert, *Le Jeu de Marseille – Autour d'André Breton et des Surréalistes à Marseille en 1940–1941* (Marseilles : Éditions Alors Hors du Temps, 2003), p.75

vocation divinatoire du Tarot de Marseille”.¹²³ In Marseilles, Breton had at his disposal possibly the richest archive for his research, a resource which he clearly used to good effect.

During the months of “the interlude of Marseilles”, as well as directing the collective project of *Le Jeu de Marseille*, Breton had written two major poems (*Pleine marge* and *Fata Morgana*), texts in which strong optimism and enthusiasm can be seen, together with signs of lively creativity – *Pleine marge* embodies his own response to the political/historical situation, while *Fata Morgana* becomes a collective creation with Wifredo Lam. Nonetheless, while faced with the difficult situation of having to leave his country, in his poem *Carte postale*, as seen, Breton has given a clear indication of the direction he considers the movement should take from this time.

¹²³ Marie Aubert, *Le Jeu de Marseille*, op.cit., p.75

CHAPTER 3: Arrival New York: The New Direction

While Breton's departure from France and laborious journey to the U.S. has been well documented,¹ it bears further scrutiny from the point of view of the ultimate effect on his personal and poetical development. 'The voyage' has a particular place at the centre of Surrealist endeavour, mostly as a form of initiation and/or regeneration, opening the mind literally and figuratively to new experiences, visual and actual. However, it is important to differentiate between voyages of initiation, emigration and those imposed by exile.² Recognized as "an interior experience",³ exile – and the voyage involved – is an altogether different experience from the voyage of initiation or emigration. From the premise that "any writer, as a poet, is exiled in language itself...",⁴ so "by definition, the situation of any artist is an interior exile".⁵ In this chapter we will argue that for Breton, the protracted voyage from Marseilles to Martinique, and on from Martinique to New York, was both a voyage of initiation and one into exile, giving him exposure to the regenerative power of new experiences, sights and sounds, as well as forcing him to reflect on the mirrored situation in occupied Europe.⁶

Breton left France in 1941, in search of a way forward, despite the brutal rise of fascism in Europe – some way to an optimistic future, for himself and for the Surrealist movement. His departure marked a turning point, as he set out on his voyage to the New World, leaving behind the old Europe and the Christian Western society he felt was finally dying.⁷ Having abandoned efforts at a political solution, from now on Breton would seek to provide a route through his writing, using poetry as his principal tool. In addition, myth was to take on an increasingly important role in the poet's approach.

¹ Cf: amongst others: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* in *Œuvres* (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2008), p.12 ; Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the beginning of the New York School*, op.cit., pp.136–9; Mark Polizzotti, *André Breton: Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., pp.494–8

² Cf : Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, 'Surrealists in Exile : Another Kind of Resistance', op.cit., p.439

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Cf : Pierre Mabile, *Égrégories ou la vie des civilisations*, op.cit. : as has been seen in the opening chapter, this was the main thrust of Mabile's thesis.

As it was, during the 1920s and 1930s the importance of myth in intellectual circles in Paris had grown steadily, in direct proportion to the expanding interest in anthropology, the newly-emerging science which fed into the gap left by the disillusion and deception felt in the wake of the Great War and the steep decline of the Christian myth in Western civilization. In the bewilderment of the post-war period, people in general and intellectuals in particular were seeking an identity in a strange new world. For centuries ancient classical myths had provided man with a key to this quest, and in what many saw as a post-rational world, their study took on a new importance. With the advent of anthropology in these years, and the consequent study of myths other than the classical myths of Greece and Rome, Breton was far from alone in arriving at the conclusion that:

Mythic activity [...] has a dual purpose, therapeutic and mind-expanding. Far from contributing to oppression, mythic activity can and must participate in the emancipation of the mind.⁸

Crucial to Breton's introduction to anthropology and the study of cultures other than European was his meeting with Claude Lévi-Strauss on the journey from Marseilles to New York.

1. 'La Rencontre' – Claude Lévi-Strauss:

Evidence of the struggle against interior exile for Breton is provided by Lévi-Strauss in his account of the first leg of this voyage, from Marseilles to Martinique. In *Tristes Tropiques*, his "autobiographie intellectuelle",⁹ he recalls how, as a young researcher whose work had been noticed by anthropologist Robert H. Lowie,¹⁰ he was invited to New York after the Armistice to work for the newly created New School for

⁸ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, op.cit., p.215

⁹ Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1651.

¹⁰ An expert on North American Indians, Lowie was instrumental in the development of modern anthropology.

Social Research.¹¹ Finding himself in Marseilles in search of a passage for America, he was able to book a berth on board the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle*.

On the voyage, Lévi-Strauss managed to secure a cabin for himself – one of only three on the entire ship – whereas Breton and Victor Serge were given berths with “la racaille” in a communal area below decks.¹² In his *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire*, the latter describes the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle* as “une sorte de camp de concentration flottant”.¹³ As for Breton, Lévi-Strauss portrays him as : “fort mal à l’aise sur cette galère” and “déambul[ant] de long en large sur les rares espaces vides du pont”.¹⁴

The French passengers, as a privilege, were allowed shore leave at various ports, and it was on arrival in Morocco that Lévi-Strauss, initially unaware of Breton’s identity, chanced to hear him give his name at passport control as they disembarked. Breton already enjoyed a certain reputation, and, as the younger man, Lévi-Strauss took the initiative: “[A]lors vous imaginez quel choc j’ai pu ressentir. Je me suis présenté à lui, et nous avons sympathisé”.¹⁵

There is no doubt that for Lévi-Strauss (twelve years younger than Breton, and then only at the very beginning of what was to become a very distinguished career), meeting someone like Breton was, to some degree, a life changing experience.¹⁶ While it is more difficult to assess fully whether Lévi-Strauss had a significant impact on

¹¹ This establishment had been set up largely to provide employment for European academics and intellectuals threatened by German laws on Jews, cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1735

¹² “La racaille” was the term used by the gendarmes to describe the general mass of passengers. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.12

¹³ Victor Serge, *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 1951), p.401.

¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, op. cit., p.12 With Breton on board the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle* were his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, his daughter, Aube; amongst others also on board were Victor Serge, his partner Laurette Séjourné, his son Vlady, Wifredo Lam, the novelist Anna Seghers. Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.494

¹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, Didier Éribon : *De près et de loin* (Paris : Éditions Odile Jacob, 1990), p.45

¹⁶ One of the central tenets of structuralist thought is the centrality of the unconscious and Lévi-Strauss acknowledged in *Une peinture méditative* in particular how he used Max Ernst’s formula advocating “a linking or rapprochement of two (or several) elements of apparently opposite nature against a backdrop whose nature is opposed to theirs in *Le regard éloigné* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1983), pp.328–331. Although this particular example is taken from Max Ernst (his partner in the search for antiques in wartime New York), it is not difficult to recognize Breton’s own definition of the image in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.324 and pp.337–8

Breton, we cannot agree that this was in any way a “rencontre sans réelle portée ni grand lendemain...”.¹⁷ We would therefore like to argue here that Breton, too, gained from the exchange with Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, by 1941, the young ethnologist had already undertaken several seminal trips for his research: to Brazil twice, where, between November 1935 and March 1936 he studied the Caduveo and Bororo groups; and again, between June and December 1938, when he studied the Nambikwara, Mundé and the Tupi-kawahib “Indians”. By the time he met Breton on the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle*, Lévi-Strauss had begun to develop an interest in the various art productions of the peoples he had lived with for months on end. It was therefore a meeting of minds – coming from very different perspectives, but each with a keen interest in “primitive art” – that took place during the month or so of the crossing from Marseilles to Martinique. All the more significant therefore, in our view, that the conditions of the crossing were atrocious (Lévi-Strauss evokes the poor hygiene and the desperation, expressed especially by women, for “Un bain ! enfin un bain!”),¹⁸ that they were fleeing their country, and that the arrival in Martinique was a sharp reminder that the world as they knew it was possessed by a kind of madness. Breton himself, outraged by the treatment Lévi-Strauss met with from the officials on arrival on the island, commented in *Martinique Charmeuse de serpents*: “À un jeune savant des plus distingués, appelé à poursuivre ses travaux à New York : “À la Pointe Rouge (c’est le nom d’un des camps de l’île)...Non. Vous n’êtes pas français, vous êtes juif, et les juifs dits français sont pires pour nous que les juifs étrangers”.”¹⁹ It no doubt came as a welcome relief to both men that the two of them were able to strike up a friendship, and that they initiated a discussion (in correspondence) of “des rapports entre beauté esthétique et originalité absolue”.²⁰

After their initial meeting, Lévi-Strauss took the first step on board the *Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle*, writing Breton a note²¹ in which he questioned Breton’s definition of the

¹⁷ Philippe Lavergne, *André Breton et le mythe*, op.cit., p.29

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, op. cit., p.14

¹⁹ André Breton, *Eaux troubles* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.387

²⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, op.cit., p.12

²¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, a text subsequently entitled: *Note sur les rapports de l’œuvre d’art et du document* in *Des sons et des couleurs – Chapitre XX* in *Regarder écouter lire, Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1581

aesthetics of “la création artistique”²² in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), and his subsequent apparent contradiction in the text *Situation surréaliste de l’objet* (1935).²³ Taking the *Manifeste* as his starting point, Lévi-Strauss finds three possible interpretations:

1) La valeur esthétique de l’œuvre dépend exclusivement de sa plus ou moins grande spontanéité ; l’œuvre d’art la plus valable [...] étant définie par la liberté absolue de sa production.²⁴

Anyone, therefore, can be sufficiently trained to achieve this complete freedom of spirit, thus opening the possibility of poetic production to all. The documentary worth of the work then becomes confused with its aesthetic value – if the yardstick is the degree of spontaneity in its production. At this point, the interpretation abolishes the concept of ‘talent’, if the effort and work put into the “création artistique” is not acknowledged, or is somehow displaced to a moment prior to the actual poetic creation.²⁵

Lévi-Strauss presents his second interpretation as one which builds on the first, stating that while it has been seen that anyone, once they have achieved a state of free thought, can write poetry, the results are far from universally the same – “certains d’entre eux procurant une jouissance, les autres pas”.²⁶ While defining any work of art as a “document” – “produit brut de l’activité mentale” – it must be recognized that some individuals are poets, others not; equally, that some documents are works of art and others simply documents. However, as the distinction between the two by its very nature defies all interpretation, “la spécificité de l’œuvre d’art sera reconnue sans qu’il soit possible d’en rendre compte. Elle constituera un “mystère”.²⁷

And finally, Lévi-Strauss offers a third interpretation, which, while maintaining the basic principal of the element of total irrationality and spontaneity of the “création

²² Ibid

²³ Originally presented at a conference in Prague, March 1935. Cf: *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.472

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Note sur les rapports de l’œuvre d’art et du document etc.*, in *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1581

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid, p.1582

²⁷ Ibid

artistique”, makes the distinction between the mere “document” and “l’œuvre d’art, qui consiste toujours en une élaboration secondaire”.²⁸ It is clear, he states, that his development cannot be the work of rational, critical thought, but there must be a point at which spontaneous, irrational thought becomes self-conscious, aware of what it is doing. From this point, a judgment is in operation, imposing certain conditions – “le choix, l’élection, l’exclusion, l’ordonnement en fonction de structures imperatives”²⁹ – so that the work is no longer “l’expression brute” of automatism, but the result of “une certaine élaboration du donné brut”. However, this “élaboration secondaire” is only secondary in relation to basic automatism, but, in relation to critical and rational thought “présente le même caractère d’irréductibilité et de primitivité que ces automatismes eux-mêmes”.³⁰

In summing up, Lévi-Strauss finds that the first interpretation does not accord with the facts, and the second subjects the problem of artistic creation to theoretical analysis. The third, on the other hand, seems the only one able to get round certain confusions which even Surrealism has not escaped, concerning what is aesthetically valid and what is not, to a greater or lesser degree. Not all documents are necessarily works of art, the essential point being the need to compare like with like, and to be able to distinguish between what is an “œuvre d’art” and what is not – “*il faut avoir le moyen dialectique de rendre compte de la différence*”.³¹ There must be a basic shift in the emphasis of the analysis away from the production.

Before presenting Breton’s reply, Lévi-Strauss acknowledges that he would have preferred not to have reproduced his note to Breton, regretting his own “gaucherie de la pensée” and “lourdeur de l’expression”,³² but without the initial note, Breton’s reply would make no sense. The reply he received was courteous and detailed. It is evident

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid, p.1583

³² Ibid

that Breton gave thought to his response, carefully crossing through words and replacing whole phrases – a care acknowledged by Lévi-Strauss in his accompanying text.³³

Breton acknowledges in this exchange his change of position, saying that it was this very fact of “le secret du mouvement en avant”³⁴ which had ensured the survival of Surrealism as a living *movement*. Breton recognizes the alteration in his stance: “Oui: naturellement mes positions ont sensiblement varié depuis le *1er manifeste*.”³⁵ and acknowledges that this contradiction which has struck Lévi-Strauss had elicited the same response from Roger Caillois.³⁶ He refers Lévi-Strauss to an article written in *Minotaure*, No. 5, subsequently reprinted in *L’Amour fou* (1937),³⁷ in which, he says, he has tried to present his case. For Breton, there are two distinct lines of approach: the first, as Lévi-Strauss has rightly established, concerns the element of “jouissance” – as he goes on to expand “c’est le seul mot juste, vous l’employez, car l’analyse de ce sentiment chez moi ne me livre que des éléments para-érotiques”.³⁸ The second, whether it appears independently of the element of the thrill of pleasure or not, takes him towards an interpretation based on a general need for knowledge – at times the two becoming impossible to separate. It goes without saying, he adds, that while all works of art can be considered as documents, the reverse cannot be said to be true.

Looking at the three interpretations put forward by Lévi-Strauss, Breton admits that he has no difficulty in agreeing with him that it is the third with which he feels most comfortable. Taking each of the three in order, he comments as follows:

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid, p.1583–4

³⁶ This seems an ironic comparison to make, given the gulf already established between the two men, despite their common field of interest. However, although Breton and Caillois had fallen out years earlier (1934), such was the nature of their variable relationship, that Breton respected Caillois’ opinion enough to consult him on the publication of both *Pleine marge* and *Fata Morgana*; Caillois, too, was able to rise above his personal feelings to recognize in Breton the great poet that he was. Cf. *Notice to Pleine marge*, *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1778, and *Notice to Fata Morgana*, *O.C.*, Vol. II, op.cit., p.1787

³⁷ “La beauté sera convulsive”, cf. André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.II, p.687

³⁸ André Breton, in *Des sons et des couleurs – Chapitre XX*, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Notes to Regarder écouter lire*, *Œuvres*, op.cit op.cit., p.1584

Firstly, he is not sure that the *aesthetic* value of the work depends on its greater or lesser spontaneity. He suggests rather that it is its authenticity and beauty which count, and he refers back to the *Manifeste* of 1924, quoting his emphasis on: “dictée de la pensée [...] en dehors de toute préoccupation *esthétique* ou morale”.³⁹ Without the second half of the sentence, he points out, the authors of automatic texts would be deprived of their essential freedom. It was important to protect them from just such constraint *a priori*, to avoid the result of a different attitude. Even so, this has not been entirely successful, leading to “minimum arrangement du texte automatique en poème”, which he deplores equally in his letter to Rolland de Renéville published in *Point du jour*.⁴⁰

Then he declares himself less sure that there are huge differences in the quality of the various completely spontaneous texts. For Breton, the greatest danger of mediocrity lies in the impossibility of many to even fulfil the conditions required to achieve the ‘experience’. Content to submit the most disconnected, rag-bag of a discourse, the illusion of a work is there, but it is easy to see through this to the fact that they have not really immersed themselves or thrown themselves into the project, which is therefore not authentic. Here Breton touches momentarily on the element of subjectivity – an essential linchpin of Surrealism – which has no part in the anthropological aesthetic of Lévi-Strauss.⁴¹ He also remains less sure than Lévi-Strauss of its equal distribution, or indeed how that inequality might be measured. So, he insists, only a very systematic investigation – one which “*laisse provisoirement de côté les artistes*”⁴² – is going to reveal this information. He dismisses the possibility of classifying Surrealist works, or, for that matter, Romantic or Symbolist works, referring again to the *Manifeste*, where his ‘classification’ is for a quite different purpose. He voices a strong objection to ranking such works in any kind of hierarchy, seeing such action as the risk of losing sight of the deep, historical significance of these movements.

³⁹ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I., op.cit., p.328

⁴⁰ André Breton, *Lettre à Rolland de Renéville* in *Point du jour*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.327

⁴¹ Cf. *Notes* to Lévi-Strauss’s *Regarder écouter lire*, *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1960

⁴² André Breton, *Des sons et des couleurs – Chapitre XX*, in *Notes* to Lévi-Strauss’s *Regarder écouter lire*, *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1585

“L’œuvre d’art exige-t-elle *toujours* cette élaboration secondaire ?”⁴³ Surprisingly, perhaps, Breton agrees – but only in the very broadest sense of the “prise de conscience irrationnelle” suggested by Lévi-Strauss, and even then on what scale does it operate? “Nous ne serions – Breton posits – que dans le préconscient.”⁴⁴ Are the productions of Hélène Smith⁴⁵ and/or Rimbaud not to be acknowledged because they were created in a trance or from “rêves éveillés”? Are they to be enjoyed less, or even relegated to the ‘document’ drawer because of this arbitrary decision? Insisting on the need to compare like with like, Breton cannot ultimately agree with Lévi-Strauss, as for him “c’est vraiment l’homme qui m’intéresse, et son interprétation poétique du monde”.⁴⁶ Breton’s reply ends in cryptic, almost note form – he even inserts in parenthesis at one point “c’est bien mal dit” – but emphasizes to the end the importance of “la synthèse du principe du plaisir et du principe de réalité”, ending ambiguously with the observation : “mise en accord à tout prix du comportement extra-artistique et de l’œuvre: anti-valéryisme”.⁴⁷ Breton is reiterating here that Surrealism is not to be approached as just another literary or artistic movement. For him, Surrealism equates to *life*, whereas Valéry, having vowed to dedicate his life to “la vie de l’esprit”, but a life which, for Breton, comprised too much rationality, too much thought. Indeed, he ultimately held several salaried positions – he was a professional writer. For Breton, Surrealism was a way of life – artistic creation demanded spontaneity, not a salary.

This was just one of the ‘conversations’ between Breton and Lévi-Strauss; it seems impossible that they did not engage in further exchanges regarding the “principe du plaisir et du principe de réalité” in ‘primitive’ societies. Indeed, there followed “une

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Catherine Élise Müller (1861–1929), a medium who was made famous as ‘Hélène Smith’ – her pseudonym – in a work by the psychologist Théodore Flournoy (*Des Indes à la planète Mars, étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie* [1900]) Cf., *Notes to Regarder écouter lire* Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1960

⁴⁶ André Breton, *Des sons et des couleurs – Chapitre XX*, in *Notes to Lévi-Strauss’s Regarder écouter lire*, *Œuvres*, op.cit., p.1585

⁴⁷ Ibid

série de conversations”⁴⁸ – allowing them thus to overcome “l’ennui et l’inconfort”⁴⁹ of their long sea voyage, and, more positively, thus supporting the claim that “les surréalistes tirent de leurs voyages matière à alimenter leur œuvre”.⁵⁰ There were to be many other meetings and reunions during the years of Breton’s exile, and while he was pleased to recognize in them an element of ‘hasard’, there is also an undeniable calculation on his part to make best use of them to his own advantage, as will be seen.

However, while it is clear that they shared the conviction of the place occupied by the myth in primitive society, and of the terrible depredations perpetrated on those civilizations by the West, there is no doubt that Lévi-Strauss differed substantially from Breton in his understanding of the myth. On the subject of myth and the study of primitive societies, Breton gives ample evidence of having read J.G. Frazer’s *Le Rameau d’or*,⁵¹ and the fact that Lévi-Strauss was in direct correspondence with him⁵² is evidence of his knowledge of “l’œuvre immense de Frazer”.⁵³

Having left France at such a dark period of its history, Breton was searching for an opening for optimism and a change of mind-set. His exchanges with ethnologist Lévi-Strauss during the voyage from Marseilles had in many ways served as preparation for their arrival in Martinique. As we have seen, the sea voyage was one of initiation as well as a journey into exile, the meeting with Lévi-Strauss having been intellectually stimulating in conditions which were otherwise mentally sterile. If hope was to come from somewhere new, looking deeply into the art, the rituals and social organization of

⁴⁸ Although, Bertholet insists, there was definitely no question of “bavarder à batons rompus”, bearing out Breton’s preference for more formal, even written, discussion. Denis Bertholet, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, (Paris: Plon, 2003), p.130

⁴⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Des sons et des couleurs – Chapitre XX*, op.cit., p.1580

⁵⁰ Dominique Berthet, *André Breton, l’éloge de la rencontre*, op.cit., p.42

⁵¹ As has been seen in Chapter 1, p.34 above. Also, André Breton, *Devant le Rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.748 ; *Autodidactes dits « naïfs »* in *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, IV, O.C., Vol.IV, (2008), p.705, the editorial note for which refers to the translation published in Paris by Schleicher in 1903-1911, Ibid, p.1354

⁵² Cf. Denis Bertholet’s quote from this correspondence, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, op.cit., p.412

⁵³ Ibid, p.412 They shared, too, a passion for the study of primitive society itself, added to which Breton had been interested in ethnic art since the 1920s. This dual interest was fed by his acquaintance with Martinique and the West Indies en route to New York, and, later, during his travels in the U.S., by his observation of the Hopi Indians in their reserve (June 1945) – see *Notes et variantes for Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit. p.1223

the ‘primitive’ tribes established on the ‘New’ continent, seemed to Breton to be a renewed possibility of finding that hope. As a result of these ‘conversations’, the ground was prepared for Breton’s imminent encounter with Aimé Césaire, one of the most important Caribbean poets. All the more so that for Breton, as chance would have it, while his meeting with Césaire revealed the appalling grip of Vichy on the island of Martinique, it did also demonstrate the attitude of refusal and rejection of this yoke by Césaire and other Martiniquan intellectuals⁵⁴ – an attitude which Breton saw as essential to his quest for social revolution.

2. Encounter with Aimé Césaire:

During his enforced stay in Martinique, Breton happened by chance on the work of Aimé Césaire, then little known beyond the island itself. On arrival there, Breton had been shocked to find himself sent to the “camp de concentration du Lazaret”,⁵⁵ just outside Fort-de-France, where the only ‘freedom’ was to pace up and down within a restricted area of the beach. After a few days of this frustration, having finally gained the relevant ‘permission’, Breton was anticipating with pleasure his first venture into the town to see what treasures of sight, sound and smell he might find there. His disappointment was palpable; he found a town which seemed “privée de ses organes essentiels”.⁵⁶ Nothing was quite as it should be, and he seemed to hear “dans l’air fin le tintement continu, lointain, d’une cloche d’alarme”.⁵⁷

All the more exciting, therefore, from this state of disappointment and disillusion, to find what he most sought and least expected, in the form of the first issue of the

⁵⁴ Eg. René Méné and Georges Gratiant, colleagues of Césaire’s on the review *Tropiques*, cf. the dedication to ‘La Lanterne sourde’ in *Des épingles tremblantes* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.382

⁵⁵ André Breton *Un grand poète noir* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.400

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

magazine, *Tropiques*.⁵⁸ Having gone to buy a hair ribbon for his daughter, Breton recounts his growing delight as he picked up a copy of the review from the shop counter, and started to thumb through it. After the previous few months spent in increasing isolation from the ideas current in France, and then the disillusion of his initial days in Martinique, he was all the more amazed to read the articles of Aimé Césaire and other poets, thinkers and writers, and to find such endorsement of all he had been working towards. In the event, it transpired that Césaire himself was not keen to be absorbed into the Surrealist movement, although he recognized that he shared much of their founding philosophy. As he stated later in interview:

J'avais lu les pères du surréalisme ; sans être vraiment surréaliste, j'avais les mêmes ancêtres qu'eux... [...] Ma poésie, par conséquent, ne sortait pas des *Manifestes du surréalisme* de Breton, mais des courants qui préparaient déjà le surréalisme.⁵⁹

Césaire wished at all costs to maintain the difference of « la négritude », remembering that Martinique remained a French colony, under the yoke of Pétain and before that the colonial power of the IIIe République. Whereas the Surrealists had cried “Nous, surréalistes, nous n’aimons pas notre patrie”,⁶⁰ Césaire loved his country passionately, determined through his poetry to find a voice for the Martiniquan people. While sharing the roots of Surrealism, and recognizing in Breton a great poet, he had no wish to lose his identity and/or that of his countrymen by merging with the Surrealists. By contrast, René Ménénil, friend of Césaire and co-founder of the review, had been an enthusiastic promoter of Surrealism from as early as 1932, and seemed not to share in any way Césaire’s reluctance to be taken over by the Surrealists.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Founded by Aimé Césaire and his colleagues to fill the cultural void they endured in Martinique during the war years, the review ran from April 1941 to Spring 1945, cf. *Notes et variants for Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1272

⁵⁹ Interview with J.Leiner, *Tropiques*, rééd. J.M.Place (1978), p.vi in Dominique Combe’s « La grande fleur énigmatique du balisier... » : Breton et Césaire’, *André Breton*, (Paris : L’Édition de l’Herne, 1998), p.366

⁶⁰ André Breton, *Discours au Congrès des écrivains in Position politique du surréalisme*, *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.454, quoted by Dominique Combe, ‘« La grande fleur énigmatique du balisier... » : Breton et Césaire’ in *André Breton*, op.cit., p.366

⁶¹ Cf. Dominique Combe, “« La grande fleur énigmatique du balisier... » : Breton et Césaire’ in *André Breton*, op.cit., p.366

Writing in 1943, Breton was to describe how he could hardly believe his eyes, as he read on, and that “c’était ce qu’il fallait dire, non seulement du mieux mais du plus haut qu’on pût le dire!”, as he recalled in *Un grand poète noir* (New York, 1943), his personal homage to Césaire.⁶² Breton felt a certain pride to find that none of what was written was new or strange to him, the names of the authors and poets cited were in themselves a guarantee as to the validity of the message – a clear call to all authors and poets that it was their duty to intervene “non seulement sur le plan esthétique, mais encore sur le plan moral et social”.⁶³ In marked contrast to what Breton had found published in France in recent months, which had the mark of masochism, if not of servility, the voice of Aimé Césaire was proclaiming: “Nous sommes [...] de ceux qui disent non à l’ombre!”⁶⁴

Breton relates how – “par une de ces chances accessoires qui accusent les heures fortunes”⁶⁵ – the Martiniquan behind the counter was in fact the sister of René Ménénil. Within the hour, the few words Breton had written there and then had reached Ménénil, and a meeting had been arranged. The following morning, Breton met Césaire himself. His immediate impression was simply confirmed over time:

C’est la cuve humaine portée à son point de plus grand bouillonnement. [...] Pour moi son apparition, je ne veux pas dire seulement ce jour-là, sous l’aspect qui est le sien, prend la valeur d’un *signe des temps*.⁶⁶

Breton emphasizes the extra thrill of his meeting with Césaire at a time when he found so much to depress the spirits, so much to crush any creative ambition, where even art itself was threatened by sclerosis from the continuing application of old and hardened methods. From Césaire, he felt “le premier souffle nouveau, revivifiant, apte à redonner toute confiance” and, to his delight, all this was “l’apport d’un Noir”.⁶⁷

It was a meeting that was also to mark Aimé Césaire, who recalls:

⁶² André Breton *Un grand poète noir*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.401

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.402 The emphasis is Breton’s.

⁶⁷ Ibid

[Je] dois dire que ça a été pour moi une époque tout à fait cruciale, déterminante. Si je suis ce que je suis, je crois que c'est en grande partie à cause de cette rencontre avec André Breton.⁶⁸

Césaire, too, was at a turning point in his life, and his meeting with Breton at this time confirmed for him also the direction he was to take. They saw each other every day during Breton's stay in Martinique, he recounts, and while he cannot positively say that Breton influenced his way of looking at things, Césaire recognizes that he did provide confirmation on certain things "que je sentais plus ou moins obscurément" and on which he felt that at that moment "le feu vert m'était donné".⁶⁹ By this time, Césaire had already joined the Communist Party, and while not necessarily agreeing with all Breton's ideas, always felt for him "un immense respect et une très grande affection".⁷⁰

With Aimé Césaire and his wife, Suzanne, as their guides, the Bretons discovered the island of Martinique in all its charm, "comme sur la matérialisation même du creuset où s'élaborent les images poétiques quand elles sont de force à secouer les mondes".⁷¹ Breton acknowledged then that there is a place, a real "lieu", outside the poet's mind, where poetry is born: poetic images seem to be born out of Martiniquan nature itself. Breton gives an account of their time spent together,⁷² on excursions exploring the island, with its "végétation forcenée".⁷³ It is nature which seems to "réenchanter" reality itself, as Césaire notes "l'éblouissement de Breton devant la nature tropicale. [...] De son émerveillement devant les palmiers, devant l'exubérance de la nature". This is indeed a turning point, as Breton's seemingly "new" appreciation of nature in its concreteness (as opposed to its purely mental representation) will continue during his American exile, preferring "la campagne autour de New York"⁷⁴ to the city itself, while later, in *Arcane 17*, lyrically describing the Canadian Gaspé Peninsula, as well as recalling the natural

⁶⁸ Aimé Césaire in Alain et Odette Virmaux, *André Breton – Qui êtes-vous ?*, (Lyon : La Manufacture, 1987), p.103–4

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.104

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ André Breton *Un grand poète noir*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.402

⁷² Whether that time was spent in a bar, on the terrace of Césaire's home, at the end of a school day, (Césaire was teaching at a lycée in his native Martinique at this time), or discovering the natural beauty of the island. cf. André Breton *Un grand poète noir*, O.C. , Vol.III, p.402

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ André Breton, *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.578

sites he had visited in Utah and Nevada in the *Ode à Charles Fourier*. In Martinique, this revelation is intertwined with an understanding of local folklore and myth : “pareillement ébloui devant le merveilleux, devant le folklore antillais – dont en très peu de temps il avait su saisir l’essence”.⁷⁵ His continuous reflection on “le mythe”, begun before the war, and expanded during the various exchanges he had with Lévi-Strauss (among others) during his exile, coupled with his new awareness of natural surroundings progressively feed into his need to find, through poetry, a new direction.

It was in these circumstances that Breton felt that he had finally found confirmation of his calling in life to convince mankind to “rompre violemment avec les modes de penser et de sentir qui l’ont mené à ne plus pouvoir supporter son existence”.⁷⁶ The shock of his meeting with Aimé Césaire, the closeness he felt to his fellow-poet and the realization that he was not alone in holding such views was almost overwhelming. Further confirmation, were any needed, of Césaire’s refusal of the *status quo* was provided by his *Cahier du retour au pays natal* (1939), a copy of which he had presented to Breton soon after their initial meeting. Published in a Paris review in 1939, this important poem – “rien de moins que le plus grand monument lyrique de ce temps”⁷⁷ – had somehow passed unnoticed by Breton and his companions at the time. It was this “mellifluent howl of protest against white cultural and political domination”⁷⁸ which confirmed Breton’s union with Aimé Césaire and consolidated his belief that he had found the new direction for which he had been searching. Refusal of all forms of political domination and oppression and the establishment of a new “social myth” were to be the tools of his new and alternative approach.⁷⁹

In this quest, Césaire presented Breton with a model of “true” poetry, since the Martiniquan poet embodied for him the fight against any return to the ossified traditions

⁷⁵ Aimé Césaire in Alain et Odette Virmaux, *André Breton – Qui êtes-vous ?*, op.cit., p.104

⁷⁶ André Breton *Un grand poète noir, etc.*, O.C. , Vol.III, op.cit., p.402

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.403

⁷⁸ Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.498

⁷⁹ This was to be seen later in the publication of *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, which was ultimately published in 1948. It took some years for Breton to fully realize the double impact of his encounter with both Césaire and the island itself and the effect of both on his poetical output. See below Chapter 7, p.295–296

of rhyme, scansion, and “autre pacotille”.⁸⁰ Poetry must, above all, *sing* – and more, it must cause that emotional upheaval Breton named in his correspondence with Lévi-Strauss, just such an exuberance and movement which he recognizes in Césaire’s poetry. As he confirms: “Aimé Césaire est avant tout celui qui chante”.⁸¹ Further, it is the element of “refus” in Césaire’s poetry, his rejection of poetical tradition, which marks out his work for Breton – a rejection which leads on to “le pouvoir de transmutation”⁸² which is the gift of great poetry. Breton deflects the possible charge of the *Cahier* being “poésie de circonstance”: it is a “song”, just as the last poem written during his American exile, the *Ode à Charles Fourier* (1945) is, for him, a “song” (a lyrical verse) of revolt, full of hope and belief in the building of a powerful Utopia, to which poetry will contribute.⁸³

Not only does Césaire’s poem transcend accusations of being poetry of circumstance, but also those of a plaintive cry against “négritude” – it goes much wider, and does in fact embrace “tout ce que celle-ci [la société moderne] peut avoir d’intolérable et aussi d’infiniment amendable la condition plus généralement faite à l’homme par cette société”.⁸⁴ Breton, with evident satisfaction, quotes from Césaire’s article in *Tropiques* – an article on Lautréamont, with the sub-title “La poésie de Lautréamont, belle comme un décret d’expropriation”⁸⁵ – closing his piece on *Un grand poète noir* with the accolade:

La parole d’Aimé Césaire, belle comme l’oxygène naissant.⁸⁶

Martinique became for Breton “un de ces lieux aimantés”⁸⁷, which inspired his creative spirit and eased his ‘inner exile’. As he wrote of his visit to the island:

⁸⁰ André Breton *Un grand poète noir*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.403

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid, p.405

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.407

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.408

⁸⁷ Dominique Berthet, *André Breton, l’éloge de la rencontre*, op.cit., p.30–31

Comment en particulier résister à l'appel de cette île, comment ne pas succomber à ses ciels, à son ondoisement de sirène, à son parler tout de cajolerie ?⁸⁸

His meeting with Aimé Césaire – and what flowed from it – was indeed “comme l’oxygène naissant”, and a welcome regeneration to his optimistic hope for a better future for mankind. Breton’s belief in the power of poetry from a mind determinedly untrammelled by Western ‘civilization’, ‘education’ and tradition was confirmed. In such a manifestly racist society as that of this outpost of Pétainist France, it was fundamental to Breton’s optimism to find untarnished and natural talent so freely expressed. Most importantly, Césaire’s poetry with its hybrid but original intertextual rhythm that merges the “kaleidoscopic milieus of the “Third World” and European civilization”⁸⁹ remains a point of departure for the revitalization of the Surrealist impulse at that decisive time for the movement.

3. “Le lieu”:

As with “la rencontre”, so “le lieu” played an increasingly important role in Breton’s writing during the war years, opening his mind and imagination to “ces zones ultra-sensibles de la terre”.⁹⁰ Having left the grim reality of war-torn France, Breton was all the more dazzled by the luxuriant, bordering on profligate, beauty of nature in Martinique. As will be seen, this response was shared by André Masson,⁹¹ who arrived

⁸⁸ *Un grand poète noir, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.406.*

⁸⁹ E.San Juan, Jr. “Antonio Gramsci on Surrealism and the Avantgarde”, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol.37, N°2, Summer 2003, p.40.

⁹⁰ André Breton, *L’Amour fou, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.739*

⁹¹ Breton had had enjoyable and fruitful reunions with Masson in Brittany during his annual holidays there in both 1938 and 1939. On each occasion Mabile, too, was present. In 1938, Breton had very recently returned from his visit to Mexico and his meeting with Trotsky. At this meeting, their talk was as much of the setting up of the FIARI (Fédération Internationale de l’Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant) by Breton and Trotsky, as it was about war in Europe, which, according to Mark Polizzotti’s account, was “already considered ‘inevitable’”. Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.465. The following May, Breton wrote an article for *Minotaure* manifesting his deep admiration for Masson and his work. Masson, strongly anti-Stalinist by this time, was a fervent supporter of FIARI, and their reunion again the following August served to strengthen their renewed friendship still further: “Leur rencontre d’août 1939 à La Baule avait renforcé sa conviction. Breton en fait part à Jacqueline dans une lettre du 9 août, soulignant que

in Martinique from Marseilles shortly after Breton and with whom he was to collaborate during their time in the U.S. to produce the illustrated text *Martinique, charmeuse de serpents* (1948).⁹² A dialogue later reproduced in this text demonstrates their enthusiasm for the “exotisme” of the vegetation of Martinique, so different from “l’indigence de la végétation européenne”, which they hold responsible for “la fuite de l’esprit vers une flore imaginaire”.⁹³ Again, they find confirmation that the imaginary landscapes they had so admired in Henri Rousseau’s work – based in his case on imaginative reveries triggered by trips to the glass-houses of the “Jardin des Plantes” – were *real*: the title of Rousseau’s *La Charmeuse de serpents* reveals, according to Masson, the magical discovered in the everyday. Breton’s use of the title, on the other hand, *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, cleverly accounts for the encounter of the real place with the imaginary one. The intense dream-like quality that gave Rousseau’s jungle paintings their power turned out to be real: here again, the “point sublime”, the “abolition des contradictions” that Breton had so called for seems to reveal itself in Martinique.

What is important here is the element of transformation, sometimes even metamorphosis, wrought by the artistic representation – an element recognized by Breton

Masson s’est révélé remarquable dans ses propos et ajoutant : “Personne n’avait été si près de moi depuis longtemps.”” Cf. *Notice to Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1257

(Although evidently they were very close at this particular point, it must be remembered that there was a serious rupture in their relationship some time later – one which was never totally repaired.)

Writing in *Minotaure* in May 1939, André Breton gives his warmest accolade yet to André Masson and his work: “C’est le guide le plus sûr, le plus lucide qu’il y ait vers l’aurore et les pays fabuleux. Avec lui, [...] nous touchons au mythe en construction de cette époque.” Cf. *Notice to Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1257 Breton thus endorses the observation that he had long been searching for – even encouraging the ‘construction’ of – this new myth arising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old. The final straw for André Masson came in the form of “le Statut des Juifs”, which aroused in him “un profond dégoût”. Emmanuelle Loyer summarizes the Surrealist position : “ ...On peut comprendre l’exil surréaliste comme la résultante de différentes forces: [...] une attitude de refus qui s’alimentait à l’ ‘imagination historique’ de ce qui risquait d’arriver dans un régime d’oppression et de turpitude ; la volonté de ne pas participer, de près comme de loin, à ce qui se préparait de sordide et de terrible.” Cf. Paris à New York – Intellectuels et artistes français en exil 1940–1947, (Paris : Éditions Grasset, 2005), p. 132–133

⁹² Cf. Chapter 7 below

⁹³ *Le Dialogue créole* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.372 It was clearly important to Breton, too, that Masson leave with him and exchange the dangers of occupied France for the promise of the New World where there was work to be done. He ultimately persuaded an unwilling Masson that his best course of action would be to leave France and to move his family to the U.S. He was active, too, in recommending Masson to Seligmann for an exhibition in New York, and in asking for his help with visas for the Massons. As will be seen, Breton’s initial groundwork was complemented by both Seligmann and Kay Sage, who worked hard on Masson’s behalf in New York.

in Masson's work. The shock of displacement from the familiarity of the landscapes of France to the exotic "mystère" of those of Martinique releases both men to the freedom of their own interior landscapes, whether literary or pictorial. Specific places would reveal this power:

Ce sont des lieux qui suscitent, éveillent les sens, les émotions et qui prennent une dimension poétique. Un sentiment qui dit la fascination, un sentiment esthétique porté à une haute intensité.⁹⁴

The "dépaysement" of their situation has awoken them to the novelty and beauty of their current natural surroundings, grounding them in a new relationship with nature – a relationship which was to become increasingly evident in the work of each of them.

As a result of this journey, Breton is revisiting familiar concepts and landscapes in his imagination, and now discovers that his earlier findings (and those of other artists he admires) are confirmed by the current reality of his surroundings. This past movement and its current confirmation – and the connection between the two – combine to form the basis of his new 'philosophy', creating a turning point in his life and creative out-put.

Crucially, this transformation was shared by André Masson, who, in interview with Georges Charbonnier, expanded on their state of mind at the time:

Ce n'était pas manquer de force que de préserver la vie et les valeurs qui lui donnent un sens et tout combat n'est pas de rue. Ce n'était pas manquer de force que de vous rendre à la Martinique en compagnie d'autres émigrés, dont André Breton. C'était réussir une évasion.⁹⁵

Masson recalls walking with Breton on the Atlantic shore of the island, "où les lianes en fleur se mêlent à l'écume des vagues",⁹⁶ and of Breton's eager talk of the possibility of creating Paradise here on earth:

Un véritable Paradis *ici-bas* ; il serait possible si... – Passant en revue les utopistes paradisiens, nous allâmes du fameux "dépérissement de l'État" à "la

⁹⁴ Dominique Berthet, *André Breton, l'éloge de la rencontre*, op.cit., p.31

⁹⁵ André Masson, *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier* (Paris : Julliard, 1958), p.185 in Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York*, op.cit., p.132

⁹⁶ André Masson, *La Mémoire du monde* (Paris : Albert Skira, 1974) coll. *Les Sentiers de la création*, p.166 – in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents: Notice, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1256

fin de l’Histoire” en nous arrêtant longuement à Charles Fourier que j’ai toujours surnommé le *douanier Rousseau du socialisme*. Oui, un paradis possible si les hommes avaient le pouvoir, ou le vouloir, d’être autre chose de ce qu’ils sont.⁹⁷

Breton had reached a turning point in his thinking: Marx (“le dépérissement de l’État”), Hegel (“la fin de l’Histoire”) are now considered as utopian thinkers alongside Fourier: this does not necessarily undermine the power of their thought for the two men, but they are now part of a wider vision and the hope for a better future for mankind. That Breton felt the need to return to collective work, with Masson, with whom he had shared the “shock” of the Martiniquan encounter, demonstrates how important it was for Breton. If New York, where he was about to arrive, was certainly the embodiment of the modern city – the megalopolis of modernity – it is significant that Breton in fact felt the “shock of the new” in a small island, surrounded by luxuriant nature and nearer to a society closer, for him, to a myth of origins, the incarnation of a paradise. Looking towards the future, Breton was in fact looking back.

From that point of view, it is worth mentioning briefly the next leg of the journey, which, by way of Guadeloupe and then the Dominican Republic, made it possible for him to meet both Pierre Mabilie (in Guadeloupe)⁹⁸ and, in Santo Domingo, the Spanish painter and critic, E.F.Granell.⁹⁹ Breton and his family stayed there for two or three weeks,¹⁰⁰ and the poet “montrait une grande curiosité pour tout ce qu’il voyait: la vie des gens de l’île, les activités de la population noire, les aspects de la vie culturelle, les conditions de vie des Espagnols et des Juifs qui étaient établis sur l’île, le paysage tropical qui nous fascinait tous”.¹⁰¹ Recalling one of the conversations he had with

⁹⁷ Ibid, pp.1256–7

⁹⁸ At the time, Pierre Mabilie was seeing out “un séjour de plus en plus pesant” in Guadeloupe, where he was uncomfortable under the colonial administration. Cf. *Chronologie* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.XXIII Breton maintained contact with Mabilie in an exchange of correspondence during the war years, which ultimately led (in 1945–6) to his prolonged lecture tour in Haïti, where Mabilie was by then Cultural Attaché, taking up this post on 24 June 1945. The correspondence between Mabilie and Breton at the time shows that they continued their exchanges on occultism and, more and more, on voodoo rituals and magic which interested them both greatly. Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabilie: un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.56

⁹⁹ See André Breton in *Entretien avec E.F. Granell*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp. 121–126. This interview was originally published in Spanish in *La Nacion*, Ciudad Trujillo, S.Domingo, 28 May 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. letter and document sent to Marguerite Bonnet by E.F. Granell, *Notes et variants*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1202

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.1201

Breton at the time, Granell explains how he was initially troubled by the fact that Breton was quite critical of Picasso's *Guernica* (which at that point he (Granell) had not yet seen):

“It didn't move me much. But it is deeply Spanish!” Granell continues: Years later, when I had seen the painting, I understood my friend's remarks. He was not interested in the aesthetic value of *Guernica*. What impressed him were its hidden connections with life itself and, above all, with man's continual yearning for freedom, by means of which he will achieve the supreme dignity of really becoming human.¹⁰²

While Breton owned to remaining unmoved by Picasso's *Guernica*, the fact that he found it “deeply Spanish” was evidence that he found that it had “hidden connections with life itself” – the highest accolade that he could bestow given that he had also explained in his *Entretien avec E.F. Granell*¹⁰³ that “l'artiste surréaliste travaille non plus à la creation d'un mythe personnel mais bien au mythe collectif propre à notre époque”.¹⁰⁴ He certainly also had in mind the shock of the discovery of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* when he spoke; for Breton, “hidden connections with life itself” and the “continual yearning for freedom” achieved through the highest engagement of the artist with expression was what these two great artists had achieved (even if he was more moved by one than the other). As Granell sums up:

We were both in exile in the Dominican Republic. He was there because of the war that was devouring Europe and threatening the whole world, and I was there because of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁰⁵

There is no doubt that Martinique was a turning point for Breton, but it is nonetheless clear that his thoughts continue to follow the line already taken in his poem *Pleine marge*, written a year earlier in the immediate wake of the defeat of France.¹⁰⁶ The importance of freedom is, as is already apparent, a core theme in Breton's work during the whole of his exile. This brief stop in the Dominican Republic gave Breton his first chance to

¹⁰² E.F. Granell, ‘Acknowledgments’ in *Picasso's Guernica – The End of a Spanish Era*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981 Originally pub. as Revision of Thesis (PhD) by New School for Social Research, 1967), p.xi

¹⁰³ André Breton, *Entretiens avec E.F. Granell, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp.121–125

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.122

¹⁰⁵ E.F. Granell, ‘Acknowledgments’ in *Picasso's Guernica – The End of a Spanish Era*, op.cit., p.xi.

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 1 above

express freely, in interview with Granell, his disgust at the muzzle effectively placed on France's literary output and thought by Pétain's Vichy government and the occupying Nazi force.¹⁰⁷ Breton's passion for freedom – both physical and intellectual, individual and collective – had been nurtured by his deep interest in and reading of those such as Hegel, Saint-Simon, Fourier and Victor Hugo, and it is precisely these writers that Breton was to summon up in the texts written during his American exile. His love of freedom motivated him to push through the limiting boundaries of tradition and convention to discover what lay beyond and, in his interview with Granell, he had expressed hopes that “New York [deviendrait] le Carrefour de toutes les routes de grande aventure artistique”, adding that he was impatient to “assister à cette interpénétration unique dans l’histoire et d’en connaître les fruits”.¹⁰⁸

4. New York – *un rendez-vous manqué* :

For Breton, the final destination of New York was reached in July 1941.¹⁰⁹ Lévi-Strauss had arrived in May.¹¹⁰ When renewed in New York, the relationship between the two men clearly prospered; as Lévi-Strauss notes: “Nos contacts étaient fréquents et chaleureux”.¹¹¹ It is evident that their common interests became ever stronger during their time living and working in New York. Mark Polizzotti shows how their shared pleasure in exploring New York's antique shops served to unite them further.¹¹² For Lévi-Strauss, this was work-related, rather than just a pastime, as their ‘finds’ were often masks or artefacts from Oceanic or North American Indian tribes. In this respect, the interests of the Surrealist overlapped with those of the ethnologist, each learning from the other. In interview with Polizzotti many years after the event, Lévi-Strauss expanded on the difference between his and Breton's approach to artworks:

¹⁰⁷ André Breton, *Entretien avec E.F. Granell, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.121

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.124

¹⁰⁹ André Breton, *Chronologies, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.XXIII

¹¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Regard éloigné*, (Paris : Librairie Plon, 1983), p.345

¹¹¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, No. 223, octobre 1985, p.22 in Denis Bertholet, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, (Paris : Plon, 2003), p.142

¹¹² Taken from an interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.505

Breton had an instinct about objects he loved, and he sometimes made me appreciate things I otherwise wouldn't have seen or appreciated. We once came upon an object that had obviously been made to be sold to whites; to my mind, it had no cultural function, and therefore was not interesting. But Breton stopped short in amazement, and after a while I, too, understood that it was nonetheless very beautiful. He wasn't a purist, or trained; but because of this he saw things that I didn't.¹¹³

This is substantial confirmation of the value of Breton's ambition to promote the virtue of an untrained mind, and vision unimpaired by 'education'. However, it is evident that here also lay the seeds of their future falling-out: Lévi-Strauss was scientifically trained to look for 'function', as he was trying to analyze "les structures élémentaires de la parenté", whereas Breton was seeking other connections – deep connections, but less systematic and certainly not analytical. Breton was looking for analogical connections, which is not a scientific approach.¹¹⁴

Denis Bertholet emphasizes the close contact of Lévi-Strauss with the Surrealist group as a whole in New York: "Tout ce monde est en contact quotidien ou presque. On se réunit chez les uns ou les autres."¹¹⁵ In interview with Didier Éribon, Lévi-Strauss himself pays tribute to what he gained from this time spent with the group:

J'ajouterai que régnait dans ce groupe un climat d'exaltation intellectuelle qui m'a beaucoup profité. Au contact des surréalistes, mes goûts esthétiques se sont enrichis et affinés. Beaucoup d'objets, que j'aurais eu tendance à rejeter comme indignes, me sont apparus sous un autre jour grâce à Breton et à ses amis.¹¹⁶

Most significant amongst these artefacts were the North American Indian masks, of interest to both Lévi-Strauss and to the Surrealists, but clearly for different reasons.

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ It was this unscientific approach which finally led to the rift between the two men during the course of Breton's research for *L'Art magique* in the 1950s. Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.596–7

¹¹⁵ Denis Bertholet, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, op.cit., p.142

¹¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, Didier Éribon, *De près et de loin*, op.cit., p.54

The Surrealists had long been interested in masks,¹¹⁷ originally as “curiosités exotiques”, but later as objects more akin to Breton’s notion of “le poème-objet” with all that that implied of magic, myth and narrative. The more complicated, articulated masks represented, for the Surrealists, the narration of sequences within a myth – for them, mask and myth became inseparable.¹¹⁸ While for Lévi-Strauss the ethnological interest lay in his theory of ‘transformation’ provided to the Indian peoples by the mask, for the Surrealists it was rather a question of complete ‘metamorphosis’. Lévi-Strauss’s theory of transformation necessarily implies change, but radical change, maintaining some connection with what has gone before, whereas the ‘metamorphosis’ of the Surrealist view – “qui comprend le merveilleux et la magie”¹¹⁹ – indicates a complete break with an earlier state, achieving total change and their aim to “changer la vie”. In this way, the Surrealists discovered through the masks the revelation of an alternative to the Western Judeo-Christian/Greco-Latin civilization they had come to despise and reject. Their quest for a ‘new myth’ found an alternative direction, one which they were urgently seeking on their arrival in the U.S.

By the time of the arrival of Lévi-Strauss and Breton in New York, there were already quite a number of younger Surrealists from Europe establishing themselves there. In January and February of 1941, Gordon Onslow Ford, having obtained leave from the Royal Navy, had delivered a course of four lectures on Surrealism, thus laying the foundations for better understanding of the movement in the host country and in some way preparing for the arrival of Breton himself. Martica Sawin demonstrates the receptive mood into which these lectures tapped:

The desire for a new unifying myth accompanied by meaningful visual symbols was to be a leitmotif during the next few years for the deracinated Europeans, as well as for some of the younger American artists who had outgrown the styles and subjects of the 1930s.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Cf. Reference to exhibition entitled *Les Arts anciens de l’Amérique* (1928) in Sophie Leclercq: ‘L’Autre métamorphose: les surréalistes exilés, les masques et les mythes nord-amérindiens’ in *Mélusine No. XXVI – Métamorphoses* (Lausanne : Éditions l’Âge d’Homme, 2006), p.140

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.142

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.140

¹²⁰ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.150

Artists, both European and American, were searching for legends and/or symbols which had some validity in times of war, and which bridged the gap between the old world and the new, the classical civilization of Europe and that of pre-Columbian Native America. Myth held as important and influential a place in New York in the 1940s and it had in the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s.

Onslow Ford's lectures attracted a certain amount of attention, although just how much is a matter of contention amongst contemporary witnesses.¹²¹ Amongst those who did attend were Matta, Tanguy, Kay Sage, Hayter, Gorky and Seligmann, together with a number of young Americans – Jimmy Ernst, Baziotes, Kamrowski, Hare, Motherwell, Rothko and Pollock, to name but some.¹²² Sawin provides ample evidence of the exchange of ideas that flourished between artists in New York at this time, although until the U.S. was drawn into the war, there was a certain resentment on the part of the American artists (and Americans as a whole) at the influx of Europeans. In the meantime, Onslow Ford vocalised his belief in what could be achieved by artists, poets and writers together, and the union of the old world with the new:

We are just a crowd of painters and as such only limited action is possible until we have contracted poets and writers moving in a direction similar to our own. But I am overjoyed to tell you that I hope soon André Breton will be with us [...] I think I can speak for all my friends when I say that we are completely confident in our work and slowly but surely with the collaboration of the young Americans we hope to make a vital contribution to the transformation of the world.¹²³

There was at the same time an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of 'Indian Art of the United States', which was of equal interest to both European and American artists. With huge replica paintings of sandstone walls from Utah and those of a kiva mural, "with feathers, spirals, and birds, painted by four Hopi artists whose ancestors had painted the original",¹²⁴ the interest of artists from both continents was secured, feeding into their research into culture and myth.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.158

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Quotation from hand-written notes for his lectures shown to Martica Sawin by Gordon Onslow Ford, in *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.166

¹²⁴ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.169

The duality of mask and myth in the North American Indian culture informed their outlook on the New World, thus providing them with the new opening they were seeking, just as “les métamorphoses amérindiennes prolongent leur tentative de proposer une culture ‘sauvage’ alternative à la sauvagerie occidentale”.¹²⁵ The New York exhibition of 1942, *First Papers of Surrealism*, demonstrated the Surrealists’ preoccupation with myth and their determination to find an alternative to established Western thinking. The exhibition, mounted by Marcel Duchamp, with its complicated “fil d’Ariane”, designed to put distance between the viewers and the works they had come to see, demonstrated the disconnect of the public from the world of art, while making direct reference to the state of the refugees from Europe and their dependence on having the correct ‘papers’. In myth, Breton in particular was not only looking back to some lost paradise, but also looking forward to a future solution. For the exhibition, he wrote a text entitled *De la survivance de certains mythes et de quelques autres mythes en croissance ou en formation* (1942).¹²⁶ With its cryptic entry “Mise en scène d’André Breton”,¹²⁷ the promise of the visual representation of what follows is made clear. The exhibition, like so many others, is to be a ‘production’, and the illustrated text is in similar vein. Far from making a random selection, Breton chooses images which trace a distinct path through the history of myth, from ancient times to the present day, giving a sense of the direction he wished Surrealism to take, from “L’Âge d’Or” to “Superman” and “Les Grands Transparents” of David Hare¹²⁸ – this last of particular interest, as will be seen, in Breton’s next important text, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* (1942).¹²⁹

Lévi-Strauss, like Kurt Seligmann, found the transition from France to New York much easier than Breton, notably because of his grasp of the language. On arrival in

¹²⁵ Sophie Leclercq: ‘L’Autre métamorphose: les surréalistes exilés, les masques et les mythes nord-amérindiens’, op.cit., p.140

¹²⁶ *O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.127

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Hare’s work was in fact entitled *Hidden fundamental*, but Breton gave this page of the text the heading: *LES GRANDS TRANSPARENTS*. Ibid, p.142

¹²⁹ See below p. 129

New York, he devoted himself to furthering his studies in ethnology, using the New York Public Library¹³⁰ and, unlike Breton, forcing himself to achieve a working understanding of English. Using his English, he found employment both in the New School and in the École Libre des Hautes Études, as well as working in his own language with Breton on Voice of America.¹³¹ Emmanuelle Loyer draws on interviews with Lévi-Strauss to tell us that, unlike Breton, he found New York an endless source of inspiration:

Lévi-Strauss employa l'expression de 'caverne d'Ali Baba' ou évoqua *Alice au pays des merveilles* pour décrire ces portes sur l'ailleurs, ces échappées belles sur le passé que New York prodiguait en 1941 à qui savait les faire surgir. Enchâssée entre une culture de masse prête à l'ensevelir et des cultures populaires dont la grande ville cosmopolite était l'improbable conservatoire – par les vagues de populations immigrées qui s'y étaient installées –, New York apparaît dans la vision qu'il en donne comme une ville très 'surréaliste', même si, paradoxalement, elle ne fut nullement inspirante pour Breton.¹³²

Dispersed as the Surrealists had been by the outbreak of war in Europe, Breton was eager to maintain a close-knit group of those who came to New York, with many common aims and ambitions. They in turn did not want to be part of the 'petits bourgeois' they found in their adoptive country and were grateful for the opportunity to re-form as a group.

On his arrival in New York, Breton and his family were met by Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage,¹³³ who installed them in an apartment in Greenwich Village for six months.¹³⁴ This is an indication in itself of how things were to be for Breton in New York. Several old friends were already there, – some of them well-established – so that despite his unwillingness to learn English,¹³⁵ he nonetheless had the material help, support (financial and other) and friendship of these Surrealist friends. Initially, Breton was supported by

¹³⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Regard éloigné*, op.cit., p.355

¹³¹ Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York, Intellectuels et artistes fr. en exil*, op.cit., p.135

Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in exile*, op.cit., p.220

¹³² Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York*, op.cit., p.135–6

¹³³ Kay Sage had previously been married to an Italian count, but had met Tanguy at a creative house-party organised by Gordon Onslow Ford at the Château de Chemilieu, near Lyons, in the summer of 1939. Breton had been a fellow house-guest, following up various local leads on hermeticists in the area. (See M.Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind – The Life of André Breton*, op.cit., p.473.

¹³⁴ Cf. Anton Gill, *Peggy Guggenheim, The Life of an Art Addict*, (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.279

¹³⁵ e.g. in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), p.185; and also Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York: Intellectuels et artistes français en exil 1940–1947* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), p.135

Peggy Guggenheim, who, in the wake of Sage's generosity to Breton, "complemented the gesture" by giving him an allowance of \$200 a month for a year.¹³⁶ There was a definite culture of reciprocal action between the newly arrived European refugees, Breton amongst them. While he had a certain prestige in American circles within the art/literary world in his own right, there is no doubt that Peggy Guggenheim was materially extremely useful to him.

Like many of Breton's friends, Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy¹³⁷ moved out of New York to Connecticut later in 1941, ultimately buying a farmhouse which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. They were among various friends whom Breton visited frequently in Connecticut, where, as he turned perceptibly more towards nature and the concrete, he was introduced to the flora and fauna which were to inspire certain of his descriptions in *La Clé des champs*. Tanguy himself, a native of Brittany, was very susceptible to and aware of his surroundings, as can be seen from his paintings. He was deeply interested in rock formation, plants, shrubs, trees and all forms of natural life. His exotic representation of geological and life forms, as well as the fantastical shapes and veiled forms created by his fertile imagination, were directly representative of Breton's own intellectual vision and evolution at the time.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ At the time, Guggenheim was married to Max Ernst, who "had long been the jewel in Breton's crown" and with whom Breton was keen to maintain contact. Cf. Anton Gill, *Peggy Guggenheim, The Life of an Art Addict*, op.cit., p.279

¹³⁷ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.176. Breton clearly appreciated not only Tanguy's great talent, but the influence he had on younger painters, noting in an article in *Minotaure* in 1939: "Il est remarquable que sur les peintres apparus le plus récemment [...] l'influence moderne qui s'exerce d'une manière déterminante est celle de Tanguy."

Breton had great admiration for Tanguy, of whom he wrote in 1938: "Yves Tanguy, le peintre des épouvantables élégances aériennes, souterraines et maritimes, l'homme en qui je vois la parure morale de ce temps : mon adorable ami." Cf. *Le Surréalisme et la peinture, O.C.*, Vol. IV, op.cit., p.562

The title of his essay on Tanguy in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture – "Yves Tanguy – Ce que Tanguy voile et révèle"* indicates the reason for Breton's affection and admiration for his friend's work. Cf. Ibid, p.563

¹³⁸ Henri Béhar, *André Breton – Le grand indésirable*, op.cit., p.13 ; M.Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit. pp.8 & 9

Although he was in fact born in Normandy, Breton spent periods of his early childhood in Brittany with his maternal grandparents, in the coastal towns of either Lorient or Saint Brieu. His grandfather, a born story-teller, inculcated in him a love of "Celtic legends and horror stories [...] filled with witches, death chariots, and Breton goblins." (M. Polizzotti, op.cit., p.9). This was complemented by the legacy of a "love of language and mystery; [an] interest in plants and insects, [a] fascination with forests." (M.Polizzotti, op.cit., p.8)

Tanguy's partner, Kay Sage, although American by birth, had spent much of her youth in Europe, where she trained as a painter. While she is often said to have stood in the shadow of her talented lover (and ultimately husband), it is also evident that her work takes as much from de Chirico as from Tanguy.¹³⁹ Both Sage and Tanguy seemed to find new inspiration in the rocky landscape and light of Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico during their travels to Reno in 1940.¹⁴⁰ In 1941, Breton writes of Sage's work: "C'est également l'automatisme qui préside à la vision dépouillée et tendre de Kay Sage".¹⁴¹ Talking of her in the same paragraph as Matta, Francès and Onslow Ford, he discusses their progression through "la conquête d'une morphologie nouvelle qui épuise dans le langage le plus concret tout le processus de retentissement du psychique sur le physique".¹⁴²

Thus Breton shows his appreciation of the reconciliation of the physical with the psychic, and the development of a new morphology. With the "dépaysement" of leaving Europe and having to put down roots in the New World, Breton and his fellow Surrealists are suddenly more aware of their surroundings and of the impact of the natural world. As he explains in interview to Charles-Henri Ford¹⁴³ soon after his arrival in New York, he prefers, "plutôt que de New York [...] parler de la campagne autour de New York", which he demonstrates by describing the "cours de l'Hudson et de ses îlots de verdure". He also evokes, close to where Masson lives, a "petit bois" that attracted his attention and

¹³⁹ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.107. Less 'dépaycée' than her European friends, Kay Sage obviously felt responsible for their well-being once arrived in America. Nonetheless, she is very much part of the group experimenting with the new wave of "morphologie psychologique" (the term coined by Matta Echaurren) in their work. With her sound connections and substantial wealth, she had worked hard on behalf of her friends to obtain the requisite visas and funding for their refugee status to come to the U.S., and even on their arrival (for the Bretons at least) helped to secure their accommodation. David Hare was her cousin, whose first wife, Susanna Wilson, was daughter of Frances Perkins, U.S. Sec. of Labor, 1940, who was able to help expedite visas etc. Cf. Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.139-140; Anton Gill, *Peggy Guggenheim – The Life of an Art Addict*, op.cit., p.279

¹⁴⁰ The purpose of the trip in 1940 was to obtain divorce and re-marriage – a trip which Breton was to take for the same purpose a few years later.

¹⁴¹ André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* etc., O.C., Vol.IV, op.cit., p.447

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Breton gave the interview in August 1941, barely a month after his arrival in New York, the transcript of which was published in the October/November 1941 Issue No. 7-8 of the monthly periodical *View*. At the time Charles-Henri Ford was Director of the monthly review; the issue was entitled "Surrealist Number", sub-titled "Through the eyes of poets", published in English under the editorship of Nicolas Calas; the article, was also printed in French, although there were significant omissions from the later French version published in *Entretiens*, as will be seen. (Cf. *Notes – André Breton O.C., Vol.III*, op.cit., p.1316)

where he found “la petite ‘pipe d’Indien’”,¹⁴⁴ able, more than any other plant, to reflect the 5 o’clock light, described by him as “lumière unique d’apparition”.¹⁴⁵ Breton is intent on making clear the importance he attaches to man’s relationship with nature, which he deliberately links with the need, in a period of great crisis and change, to look at the world through “les yeux d’Éros”.¹⁴⁶

Comme toujours à de telles époques où socialement la vie humaine n’a presque plus de prix, je crois qu’il faut savoir lire et regarder par les yeux d’Éros.¹⁴⁷

For him, Éros offers a way to fight death, and as always with Breton, in this carefully constructed interview, the next point he makes, having started by praising nature, establishes a connection with art – painting in particular. In a direct homage to American art, he evokes two paintings, “choisis à aussi grande distance que possible l’un de l’autre hors du surréalisme”: Edward Hopper’s *New York Movie* and Hirschfield’s portrait of his daughter.¹⁴⁸ Neither painter is a surrealist, but Breton is keen to establish links especially through the evocative detail of the “curtain”. Present in both, the image is evocative for him of mystery, and one to which he will return in the important text *Devant le Rideau*, first statement made on his return to France on the new direction he wants Surrealism to take. For him, the “curtain” is a potent symbol of what the world is experiencing at the time, on the threshold of a new era:

Il me semble qu’en période de crise extérieure grave, visible ou non, ce rideau qui exprime la nécessité du passage d’une époque à une autre, dans toute œuvre en mesure d’affronter l’optique de demain, doit marquer sa présence de quelque manière.¹⁴⁹

The interview thus provided Breton with an ideal platform from which to deliver what constitutes a comprehensive survey of his position in relation to various questions central to Surrealism and its survival internationally in a post-war world. Given so soon

¹⁴⁴ André Breton, *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.578

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.579

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ This last reproduced in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, éd. 1965, p.292 in an article entitled ‘Autodidactes dits naïfs’ under the general title of “American Art”.

¹⁴⁹ André Breton, *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.580

after his arrival in the U.S., Breton's answers to Ford's questions furnish pointers to a definite direction for Surrealism and indications of future important projects and texts. Invited by Ford to foretell the future of art against the setting of "(l)es événements qui se déroulent aujourd'hui", and whether changes are to be expected, Breton states with conviction: "Un esprit nouveau naîtra de cette guerre", and points to the revelatory texts produced in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war (1870) – works such as *The Hunting of the Snark* (Lewis Carroll, 1874), *Les Chants de Maldoror* (Lautréamont, 1868–9), *Une Saison en enfer* (Rimbaud, 1873), *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche, 1888). In his words, "l'arbre 1914" brought to fruition the work of de Chirico, Picasso, Duchamp, Apollinaire, Raymond Roussel – to say nothing of Freud, whose work was to influence the entire modern movement on an international scale. As yet, he rightly claims, it is too early to see what is "vivant et riche de promesses sur l'arbre 1940", and what will be left dead in its wake.

What Breton fears most is the attitude some will adopt, trying to continue as if nothing has changed, artificially maintaining their stance and attracting the attention – or fascination – inevitably afforded to "des cadavres embaumés".¹⁵⁰ Thus he reiterates his contempt for the ossified state of contemporary society. What is necessary is a fundamental re-evaluation "sur le plan le plus vaste".¹⁵¹ This is the time for total change, and it should not be wasted. In an approximation of a quote from Lautréamont, he emphasizes: "Seuls importent les 'nouveaux frissons intellectuels'".¹⁵² All in all, Breton insists, an entirely new approach is imperative, the overturning of accepted norms and ways of thinking. In so doing, he emphasizes again the influence of Lautréamont in the wake of the 1914–18 War, and his conviction of "la nécessité du passage d'une époque à une autre, dans toute œuvre en mesure d'affronter l'optique de demain".¹⁵³ Although Breton is bound to make the connection with World War I (and even the Franco-Prussian War), one cannot help but feel that he is very much describing a movement that has run

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.579

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Ibid The exact quote is supplied in the *Notes*, p.1317: "À l'heure que j'écris, de nouveaux frissons parcourent l'atmosphère intellectuelle." Cf: Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, chant cinquième, strophe 1, *Œuvres complètes*, p.189

¹⁵³ *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford etc., O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.580*

its course, a movement that brought a new and radical response to the World War I, but when Nostradamus and his arithmological predictions (as laid out in *Centuries*)¹⁵⁴ are brought in, his words must have been read with a certain amount of disbelief by the American reader at the time. Nevertheless, Breton attempts here to explain how in Surrealism, the spheres of thought, action and dream – categories that had been the hallmark of modernist art and literature since the time of Baudelaire, but which had hitherto been perceived as separate categories – must be related. Given the date of the statement – just a few months into his American exile – Breton is unable to predict whether the collective activity, on which the radicalism of the Surrealist had rested until then, would be maintained.

Since Surrealism, from its inception, had been a response to the aesthetic limitations of the traditional categories of art, it comes as no surprise that when provoked by a question relating to a recent article written by Aragon in the Hollywood magazine *The Clipper*, Breton gives vent to a general sense of disgust at the contradiction of Aragon's current attitude. Showing his disbelief and annoyance, he refers to “cette maladie spécifiquement moderne [...] qui porte ces intellectuels à se déjuger radicalement, à renier d'une façon masochiste et exhibitionniste leur propre témoignage”. Using the term “maladie” twice more, he finishes by emphasizing his point with the term “maladie mentale”, demonstrating his scorn for those conventionally regarded as “des intellectuels”.¹⁵⁵ Breton's meaning here is that he no longer regards Aragon as a *poet* – one who *lives* his poetry rather than takes an intellectual stand, remaining ossified in tradition.

When asked to describe the “orientation présente du surréalisme”,¹⁵⁶ Breton begins by stating that the outcome will depend totally on the influence of the events currently unfolding in Europe on both his own work and that of his friends (including his new friends). That said, there can be no doubt that the consequences – whether to the good or bad – will be radical. Surrealism, he claims, has always tried to respond to

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.577

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.580

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.581

concerns both eternal and immediate; the fundamental tenet of the movement, “*dans la réalité comme dans le rêve*”,¹⁵⁷ is that the intellect must pass beyond the “contenu manifeste” of a situation to arrive at an understanding of the “contenu latent”. This leads him to the point where he identifies three categories which will be affected by the present crisis: that which is coming to an end, that which continues, and that which is beginning.

“CE QUI PREND FIN”:¹⁵⁸ Breton announces the end of the illusion of the independence of a work of art – he even goes so far as to call it “*la transcendance de l’œuvre d’art*” (my emphasis). From the context, what Breton means by “l’indépendance [...] de l’œuvre d’art” is its autonomy and the consecration of authorship which marked 19th Century art so strongly. Breton points out that it has ultimately proved impossible to guard against the intrusion of the self-interest of the individual in the creative arts, despite Lautréamont’s famous injunction: “*La poésie doit être faite par tous, non par un*”. This remains, Breton reiterates, the cornerstone on which Surrealism rests: it is, above all, a collective movement in which there is no place for the individual *ego*, and, more importantly, that for its followers, Surrealism is emphatically not art, but rather a way of life. Surrealism, as a collective movement, claimed at the same time both to supersede art and realize it in general activity; thus any individual who gives himself ‘Olympian’ status, above his fellows, is dismissed by Breton showing that he is likely to exhaust his own individual resources, reducing him to a state from which all he can do is to imitate, producing nothing but variations on a well-worn theme. Stagnation, rather than creativity, must surely follow any such self-appointed status.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ The original text was published in English (*View*, No. 7–8, “Surrealist Number”, Oct.–Nov. 1941). Certain passages were omitted in the subsequent French translation of the text, but one such omission is supplied in the *Notes* of the Pléiade edition. This passage illustrates Breton’s stance, with criticism of Éluard’s collaboration with the *Nouvelle Revue française* (under German direction) in the form of a poem written to appeal to all tastes, a poem written in “un langage creux de fruits et de fleurs qui n’aurait pas été déplacé dans un vieux numéro de Keepsake”. He also lambasts ‘Avida Dollars’ (Salvador Dalí) for his sensation-seeking creations, and closes his attack with the disclaimer that “Il est clair que ni l’un ni l’autre [...] n’a plus rien de commun avec le surréalisme”. (Cf. *Notes*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1317–8)

“CE QUI CONTINUE”:¹⁶⁰ However, what is on-going remains the Surrealist activity in the three fields to which it had been so deeply committed before the current war, which are: *le dépaysement de la sensation* – (re-thinking the use of the senses); the in-depth exploration of *le hasard objectif* – (which has proved to be where natural necessity and human necessity are reconciled, as well as the point of revelation and the pivotal point of freedom); research into *l’humour noir* – (the ultimate way by which to overcome the traumas of the exterior world, and the Freudian means of finding the answer to the unease of the “moi” by tapping into the “soi”). Breton announces his personal contribution to “l’œuvre surréaliste ainsi définie”, with what he hopes will be the imminent publication of the *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (1940), from Swift to the present day, and the poem *Fata Morgana* (1941), both refused by the censor in France, as has been seen. This last text, he emphasizes, best demonstrates his current position of resistance, both to the crisis in Europe and to the attempts of Aragon and his kind to return to a traditional poetic form.¹⁶¹ In his refusal to succumb to what he sees as a masochistic attempt to stifle poetic freedom, Breton draws on the poetic tradition of Baudelaire to support his position:

Ce qui continue, ce qui doit être maintenu en poésie vivante, c’est la grande tradition moderne héritée de Baudelaire :

*Plonger au sein du gouffre – enfer ou ciel, qu’importe!
Au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau.*¹⁶²

This clear statement of direction from Breton demonstrates his commitment to the Surrealist movement, past and present, with a projection of that commitment into the future. However, it is interesting here that Breton chooses so deliberately to quote from Baudelaire whose definition of modernity as “l’éternel dans le transitoire”¹⁶³ becomes from then on one of the cornerstones of Breton’s argumentation:

Le surréalisme, comme vous savez, s’est toujours efforcé de répondre à deux ordres de soucis: les premiers de ces soucis ressortissent à l’éternel (l’esprit aux

¹⁶⁰ *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford etc., O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., pp.581–2*

¹⁶¹ Cf: Chapter 2, p. 61

¹⁶² *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford etc., O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.582*

¹⁶³ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne, O.C., Vol.II, (Paris, Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade : 1997), p. 694* Baudelaire expands the thought: "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable." *Ibid, p.695*

prises avec la condition humaine), les autres ressortissent à l'*actuel* (l'esprit témoin de son propre mouvement : [...])¹⁶⁴

Through a combination of action and interpretation, art would not be instrumentalized, but as interpretation would still bear a relation to action, art would not be an end in itself (which was, precisely, the hallmark of modernist art since Baudelaire), but would be a poetic research coordinated to the ends of social transformation. The art this produced would not be transcendent, but entirely contingent, and whose contingency would be realized in the works produced, by nature temporary and fragmentary. This explains the presence, in Breton's list, of sensation, as an acknowledgement of the interdependence of thought and the phenomenal world: this is why, at the beginning of the interview, he had mentioned the importance of nature which was to be such an important characteristic of his poetic output during the war years.

In the original transcript of the interview, at this point there followed a paragraph detailing those involved in current and future projects of Surrealism, writers, poets and painters.¹⁶⁵ In this paragraph Breton further defines his concept of "Ce qui continue" and those by whom "cette conception est soutenue et illustrée", giving a broad view of those involved in the Surrealist adventure in the U.S. and of their roles.¹⁶⁶ At the core of this programme is a renewed commitment to "[l]'activité collective, telle qu'elle a toujours été pratiquée dans le surréalisme" and the promise that this practice will soon reappear. Breton calls to mind the *Jeu de cartes* invented in Marseilles (1941): he

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p.581

¹⁶⁵ This paragraph is omitted from the French version reproduced in the Gallimard Pléiade edition of Breton's works, but is supplied in the *Notes*. It gives the names of all those involved, in various categories, whether French or British, European or American. The complete combined list is as follows: Benjamin Péret, Pierre Mabille, Nicolas Calas, Julien Gracq, E.L.T. Mesens, René Char, Alice Paalen, Valentine Penrose, Aimé Césaire, Rnené Ménil, Bernard Brunius, Maurice Blanchard, Max Ernst, André Masson, Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, Wolfgang Paalen, Kurt Seligmann, Victor Brauner, Leonora Carrington, Kay Sage, S.W. Hayter, Oscar Dominguez, Wifredo Lam, Matta Echaurren Gordon Onslow Ford, Esteban Francès, Joseph Cornell, David Hare. Breton's correspondence of the time bears witness to the fact that he was emphatically trying to re-ignite the spirit of Surrealism and find a new direction for the movement. The work done by Seligmann on behalf of Breton and several others of the group of refugees arriving in New York at this time should not be underestimated. Both he and Kay Sage worked tirelessly to obtain the necessary visas, and, on the arrival of refugees, in the case of Seligmann in particular, to make introductions wherever he could, furthering careers where possible, and acting as facilitator in setting up lecture tours and future exhibitions. Cf. *Notes to the Interview de Charles-Henri Ford, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1318

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

discloses that a second version is currently in preparation in New York. Not only does the projected *Jeu de cartes* throw an ideological bridge, Breton suggests, between the two worlds, old and new, but also “compte tenu des contingences très différentes qui président à son élaboration, il montre pleinement *l’unité* d’aspiration qui existe entre le surréalisme ici et là-bas”.¹⁶⁷ In the event, the project for the *Jeu de New York* was never realized, but it is impossible to over-estimate its importance as potentially the first collective activity planned by the Surrealist group newly gathered in the U.S..

The final category in Breton’s summary, “CE QUI COMMENCE”,¹⁶⁸ demonstrates his view of “les événements actuels” and what he sees as their cause and the possible Surrealist solution. Breton imputes “la faillite des modes de pensée”¹⁶⁹ as the prime cause of the crisis – “comme si les communications entre le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur étaient coupées”.¹⁷⁰ He is struck by the paucity of written accounts of the French defeat, referring to “la brièveté, pour ne pas dire la stérilité de leurs vues”,¹⁷¹ the cause of the whole situation being, as he sees it, “d’ordre idéologique”.¹⁷² “C’est de rationalisme, *rationalisme fermé* qu’est en train de mourir le monde.”¹⁷³ He gathers in his American sympathisers when he posits :

Certains se demandent – on m’a assuré qu’il existe en ce sens un fort courant en Amérique – si le sauvetage de l’homme n’exige pas sa « désintellectualisation » au profit d’une remise en valeur de ses instincts fondamentaux.¹⁷⁴

He points out that there will never be a better time for Surrealism to put into action its ambition to “rendre à l’homme l’empire concret de ses fonctions”¹⁷⁵ – an ambition which Breton reiterates in his work throughout his time in exile in the U.S. The tenets of Surrealism – research into automatism, pursuit of the irrational, the calculation of probability – are far from having run their course. The present crisis absolves these

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ *Interview de Charles-Henri Ford, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.582

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.583

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Ibid The emphasis is Breton’s.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

ambitions of “tout aspect utopique”, and lends them “un intérêt *vital* au même titre que les recherches de laboratoire”.¹⁷⁶ For Breton, there is a quasi scientific basis to the Surrealist approach, lending it authority and authenticity. In his first public statement on arrival in America, Breton is keen to reiterate that Surrealism proposed (and in his view still offers) an alternative understanding of art neither as propaganda nor as expression, nor as autonomy of form, nor as a mirror of nature, but as a form of research into the workings of thought, which would make a contribution to knowledge. However, the terms in which this activity was conceived – and which had evolved since the beginnings of the movement in the 1920s – were about to shift, largely because of the circumstances of the war, the difficulties Breton would encounter during his exile, and the split between those who had stayed behind and those who had gone into exile, necessarily impacting on what had been at the heart of the movement: collective activity.

When he arrived in New York, Breton was not alone, as has been seen, and he was able to regroup with some of his friends as well as some sympathizers who, like Kurt Seligmann had been instrumental in his removal from Europe, together with his family. Seligmann was himself a visual artist, Swiss by origin, but already established in the U.S. for some three years.¹⁷⁷ Once in New York, he continued to be a source of support and material help to Breton.

Seligmann’s love of magic had also given rise to a great connection with Pierre Mabile, for whom he had tried, without success, to obtain entry to the U.S., and with whom he long continued to correspond on the subject of early writings on magic.¹⁷⁸ Seligmann also shared his passion for magic and the occult with both Meyer Schapiro¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid The emphasis is Breton’s.

¹⁷⁷ Mastering the language on arrival in the U.S. had helped Seligmann to deal more easily than some with the transition into his new situation, opening up the possibility of teaching and lecturing, as well as continuing a steady artistic output.

¹⁷⁸ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., P.115

¹⁷⁹ Marxist art historian, Schapiro was born in Lithuania (1904), whence he emigrated to the U.S. with his family at the age of three. He was responsible for sending Breton’s major works to Trotsky before the former’s visit to Mexico in 1938. He met Breton through Seligmann, and was the first person in the U.S. to “give serious attention to Surrealist writing and thought, both in his courses at Columbia University in the 1930s and in well-informed articles for *The Nation*”. Schapiro also brought Breton up short on his use of the term “dialectical materialism”, organising a debate as to its correct use. Breton suffered a

and Matta, to name but two, writing “erudite articles on magic”, and organizing “popular evenings of magic demonstrations [...] held in his studio”.¹⁸⁰ As early as May 1940, Seligmann had been approached by Charles Henri-Ford with a view to launching a new poetry review, *View* and it was “due to his [Seligmann’s] participation [that] the review came to include a number of short pieces on magic and the occult, which were a Seligmann speciality”.¹⁸¹

With his fluent English (as well as French) and established library, Seligmann was able to provide Breton with access to books and documents, with direct information and even, in case of need, with translation, all of which was invaluable to Breton, separated as he was from his own rich library. However, he seems to have strongly resented being beholden to him, as he was after his arrival in the U.S., but in the event, Seligmann’s support remained vital to him.

As demonstrated, another of Breton’s close circle on his arrival in New York was Roberto Matta Echaurren.¹⁸² Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford were able to renew their discussions on new ways of portraying space and time, together with other technical methods of drawing and painting.¹⁸³ It was the desire to express more than an image of simple ‘retinal retention’ which Onslow Ford and Matta were determined to pursue, reaching out towards a more conceptual approach to their artistic creation. The image of simple retinal retention was to them just one dimension of an object caught in space and time, an over-simplification of the object portrayed.

“resounding defeat” in the debate, and, although he said nothing at the time, seldom used the term again. Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., pp.456 &504–5

¹⁸⁰ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.197

¹⁸¹ In addition to this role, Seligmann was also very important to Breton’s deepening interest in hermeticism and the occult, for as well as his copious output of fine etchings and paintings, he complemented his artistic creation with a strong interest in and knowledge of this field. Ibid, p.151

¹⁸² Chilean by birth, Matta had arrived in Paris in 1935, trained in academic figure drawing, going on to specialize in interior design. Initially, he worked as a draftsman in Le Corbusier’s studio, but there was little work for him, and, having seen reproductions of the work of Marcel Duchamp, he realized that there was potential for his innovative concept of spatial rendering. In this respect, Tanguy’s work greatly influenced his younger admirers Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford.

¹⁸³ For further development on “psychological morphology” see Gordon Onslow Ford, *The Painter Looks Within Himself* in the *London Bulletin* (18–20), June 1940, p.31, and Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.29 and p.427, Note 25.

However, it is clear that the dialogue on sensory perception and the space-time continuum went much wider than simply between Matta and Onslow Ford. There had been “an interest in higher mathematics and space-time that had begun in Surrealists (*sic*) circles around 1936”,¹⁸⁴ in which both Paalen and Breton had actively participated. When Paalen left for Mexico in 1939, his art “paralleled the creations of a second generation of Surrealists that included Matta and Onslow Ford, Seligmann, Oscar Dominguez and Esteban Francés”.¹⁸⁵ It is clear that within this there was a preoccupation that was common to this group – at the time all still trusted friends of Breton – whether in Mexico or New York. Nevertheless, as it turned out, the closeness to Matta lasted until after the *Prolégomènes*; when he fell out with both Seligmann and Paalen (temporarily). Breton’s correspondence during the years of his exile shows how he regularly loses trust in one or the other of his companions. In the event, very little collective activity was undertaken during the war (if we except his work with Duchamp on the 1942 exhibition, his rapprochement with Matta on the subject of “Les Grands Transparents”). Progressively, Breton’s activity took a more and more personal direction, even if he aimed to maintain flexibility and attempted to give the movement a new direction in *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* in 1942.

5. *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* : New beginnings ? :

Writing to Breton from Mexico in January 1942, Benjamin Péret had already suggested that a radical overhaul, or even a re-launch, of Surrealism was needed.¹⁸⁶ In his response,¹⁸⁷ Breton expands at length on his ideas for the launch of a new review, *VVV*, in English, Spanish and French, but makes clear the limited parameters within which they will have to work:

¹⁸⁴ Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen – Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*, (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p.134

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

¹⁸⁶ Letter dated 1st January 1942, quoted in *Notice to Prolégomènes etc.*, OC, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1134

¹⁸⁷ Letter from André Breton to Benjamin Péret, dated 4th January 1942, (Fonds Breton, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris)

[Quotation removed pending autorisation]¹⁸⁸

Breton sees the review as drawing on a network of contributors from “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”,¹⁸⁹ and goes on to demonstrate his thoughts on possible participants and their present situation. He touches on the position taken by Paalen: “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”.¹⁹⁰ Staying with those in Mexico, he professes himself tired of Serge, and to have “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**” on their account: “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”.¹⁹¹ Mabile, in Haïti, he pronounces “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”, and is clearly shocked that “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”.¹⁹² The list is comprehensive and detailed, some faring better than others in Breton’s opinion as to their value as contributors. Two in particular stand out:

[Quotation removed pending autorisation]¹⁹³

He lists Masson as “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**” and goes on to tell Péret of their collaboration on “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”.¹⁹⁴ Apart from this, he says, he has written little of interest, but has “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”.¹⁹⁵ The path of both his reading and his thought are revealing as to Breton’s determined direction.

Breton’s closing plea to Péret reflects his keen desire for the endorsement of his plan for the launch of *VVV* in acknowledgment of the revival necessary to stimulate Surrealism’s flagging appeal:

[Quotation removed pending autorisation]¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Ibid

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. Later in the same letter, Breton talks of his current contributions to “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”, but which allows him a certain freedom of speech, “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”. He announces therefore : “**[Quotation removed pending autorisation]**”. Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Ibid

He has total faith in this, his most esteemed friend and companion, for his courage, his horror of repeating what has already been undertaken, and for his revolutionary spirit. In addition, Breton can see that Péret has the courage to know instinctively that nothing will be the same after this war, “[Quotation removed pending autorisation]”. The moment has come for “[Quotation removed pending autorisation]”.¹⁹⁷ It was clear that some new directive was necessary, and Breton, made aware of this need, produced in the first issue of *VVV*, with his outlined *Prolégomènes*, the new beginnings and the cohesion that some at least of his fellow exiles were looking for.¹⁹⁸

The French translation of Charles-Henri Ford’s interview of Breton published later in *Entretiens*¹⁹⁹ omitted the final question from the interviewer and Breton’s response, which lie at the heart of the matter:

Do you think that a Third Manifesto of Surrealism is in order? –
Absolutely.²⁰⁰

Although this third manifesto was never written, it is clear that at the time of the interview Breton was definite that he had it in mind. In the event, its ‘draft’ was to appear some months later in an alternative form as *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*.

Breton wrote the text while working with Lévi-Strauss at Voice of America, at the height of their friendship.²⁰¹ He gained greatly from their daily contact, which provided ample opportunity to continue the pursuit of common interests, both inside and outside work hours. The *Prolégomènes* emphasizes the call for a new myth, moving towards a

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

¹⁹⁸ Robert Lebel remembers enthusiastically: “Je n’oublierai jamais l’effet électrisant que produisait sur nous ce manifeste qui marquait la fin d’une longue période de prudence et de marasme. Ce fut pour tous les exilés le plus grisant appel à la *résistance* et à la *libération*, ces deux termes étant dépouillés par Breton de leurs implications restrictives.” “Surréalisme années américaines” in *Opus international, No. 19–20 (Surrealism International)*, October 1970, p.44

¹⁹⁹ Cf. *Réponses à d’autres questions (1941-1952), Interview de Charles-Henri Ford etc., O.C. Vol.III*, op.cit., pp.576–584

²⁰⁰ In *View*, vol. I, No. 7–8, October–November 1941

²⁰¹ “The broadcasts, produced by the Office of War Information (OWI), were a multilingual series of programs aimed at spurring resistance to Nazism throughout the Occupied world.” Breton worked from 5.30–8.0 each evening, “alternating with Lévi-Strauss and several others in reading propaganda over which he had no editorial jurisdiction”. M. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind – the Life of André Breton*, op.cit., p.509–510

utopian “Âge d’or” in the future, rather than looking back to a “paradis perdu”. Sought principally by Breton, but more widely by the Surrealists as a whole, this resolution was to counter the collapse of the moribund “civilisation” of Europe. It was not by chance that Breton was searching for an alternative way forward and the regeneration of society at this time.

In June 1942, the first issue of the review *VVV* was published in New York. It contained Breton’s contribution with its ambiguous title: *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, teasing the reader into looking to the future. The text was intended as a revitalizing catalyst to the waning cohesion of Surrealism in exile. It was written at least in part as a response to Wolfgang Paalen’s *Farewell au surréalisme*, which appeared in the first copy of his review *Dyn* published in April-May 1942. Paalen’s ‘farewell’ turned out to be temporary, but brought to Breton’s attention the strong argument concerning the tired and precarious nature of some of the basic theories of Surrealism and the need to address the situation. Paalen had been actively enthusiastic about automatism and Surrealism’s effort to bring art and life closer together, but the irrational approach of the movement had finally alienated him. He was looking now for a fusion of art and science, presenting in *Dyn* his own proposition for the future with his “Philosophy of the Possible”:

It must be understood that art and science are indispensable complementaries, that only their cooperation will be able to create a new ethics. We do not want any myths any more, neither ancient nor new ones, because myths always fossilize into churches, even materialistic myths. [...] ...between the abyss of the incommensurably great and the incommensurably small which science has opened, we are lost, if we do not succeed in finding the true dimension of man.²⁰²

Unimpressed by Breton’s talk of a new myth, Paalen could no longer stomach what he saw as “Surrealism’s use of the unconscious, madness, criminality, and esoteric traditions, however polemic”, which, for him, “constituted a form of irrationalism”.²⁰³ With some regret, he decided that for him Surrealism had run its course.

²⁰² Quoted from Gustav Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen*, (New York: Nierendorf Editions, 1946), p.44, in Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen, etc.*, op.cit., p.142

²⁰³ Ibid, p.140

It is not as if Breton, for his part, was not himself encountering a period of doubt. This is evident at the beginning of the *Prolégomènes* where, in direct contrast to his long-held aspiration for the attainment of “le point sublime”,²⁰⁴ he alludes to the presence of a “point faillible”.²⁰⁵ It is man himself who constitutes this “point faillible” – even the most accomplished – held back from achieving his full potential by his own inertia and lassitude, resulting from the adulation of others. In the face of “les systèmes”, Breton himself feels an insidious sapping of his sense of direction for the future of the movement.

Pointing out the precariousness of man’s situation at the present time, he intones a warning against inaction, with a familiar pattern of repetition, beginning each warning with “Tant que...”, stating finally, as he closes the list: “...il y a plusieurs autres *tant que*, énumérables”.²⁰⁶ However, after these warnings, he moves to a different mode, using the introductory phrase “Il y a...”, which he refers to as “cette belle formule optimiste de reconnaissance qui revient dans les derniers poèmes d’Apollinaire”.²⁰⁷ Significantly though, having managed to summon up reasons for hope in a better future, the first name that springs to his mind is that of the Martiniquan poet, “[son] ami Aimé Césaire, magnétique et noir”, who, he emphasizes, rejecting the well-trodden paths of traditional style, “écrit les poèmes qu’il nous faut aujourd’hui, à la Martinique”.²⁰⁸ With this intertextual reference, linking again with *Martinique charmeuse des serpents*, Breton reiterates his emphasis on the importance of his meeting with Césaire, providing him with an awakening to the richness of his natural surroundings, the means by which his new poetics would be triggered. The emphasis on « noir » in the context of a world conflict based so intensely on racism is also deliberate on Breton’s part, since he is keen to show that, contrary to the brutality of dominant thinking at the time, the future can be “magnétique et noir”.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Chapter 1 above.

²⁰⁵ *Prolégomènes etc.*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.5

²⁰⁶ Ibid, pp.6 & 7

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.7

²⁰⁸ Ibid

The prophetic dimension of this text is plain, even if Breton's own pleading of a 'scientific' approach is somewhat undermined by the pronounced lack of rationality evidenced by his interest in the writings and research of Pierre-Camille Revel and his *Théorie du hasard*.²⁰⁹ Writing at the end of the 19th century, Pierre-Camille Revel concentrated, in a number of publications, on the theme of 'chance', in which he gave notice of his interest in dream, crystallography, and – most pertinent of all, given what was to follow in Breton's concept of "les Grands Transparents"²¹⁰ – the first hypotheses on the possibilities of the existence of 'diaphanous' beings. While showing an interest in Revel, Breton admits that he has failed to provoke any definitive opinion on the man or his ideas from either Lévi-Strauss or Jean Wahl, both of whom, he claims, are better placed than he to pass such a judgment.²¹¹

This is not entirely surprising given the tenor of Breton's theory of "les Grands Transparents" which he developed at the time. There is no doubt that one of the most important sources of inspiration for Breton in these years – as will be demonstrated in Chapter 4 – is Romantic thought and literature, and in particular that of Victor Hugo. As has been noted by some of Breton's fellow exiles the "Grands Transparents" theory owes a lot to Victor Hugo, and in particular *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866). The fact that Hugo's framework in writing this novel was a distinct focus on "les aspects nocturnes de l'existence et de la création, sur les états seconds: l'onirisme, les phénomènes du songe et du sommeil, les visions et les phantasmes, les hallucinations et les cauchemars"²¹² certainly explains its appeal for Breton, especially at the time. The central character, Gilliatt, combines the elements of primitive 'innocence' with the intuition of the mage or seer, from a position where "la voyance participe du songe et de l'intuition, de cette

²⁰⁹ Cf. P-C. Revel : *Le Hasard : ses lois et ses conséquences dans les sciences et en philosophie* (1890), referred to by Breton in a letter to Roger Caillois (4 February 1943), where he owns to having been much taken with the work and its ideas. A native of Lyons, Pierre-Camille Revel wrote a number of publications on the theme of 'chance', in which he indicated his interest in dream, magnetism, hallucination, telepathy, etc. In his work, Breton could read pages on the ability of bodies to pass from visible to invisible by reason of their molecular structure. *Notice for Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., Note 5, p.1137*

²¹⁰ Cf. *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.14*

²¹¹ *Notes to the Interview de Charles-Henri Ford etc., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1319*

²¹² Marc Eigeldinger, *Introduction to Victor Hugo's Les Travailleurs de la mer, op.cit., p.27*

intuition qui s'accompagne de l'ignorance et entre en communication avec la nature".²¹³ Indeed, Eigeldinger sees in Gilliat a character whose actions "annonce à certains égards le surréalisme".²¹⁴

Hugo himself describes Gilliat as one whose solitary character combined "de l'halluciné et de l'illuminé",²¹⁵ in whom "la solitude dégage une certaine quantité d'égarement sublime".²¹⁶ Despite this, Hugo is at pains to present Gilliat as 'ordinary' – "C'était un pensif. Rien de plus."²¹⁷ – but all the same someone who "voyait la nature un peu étrangement".²¹⁸ Finding in the water, on several occasions, creatures not unlike jellyfish – totally transparent and invisible in the water, but which, when taken out, "ressemblaient à du cristal mou" – Gilliat's imagination leads him to the thought that "puisque des transparence vivantes habitaient l'eau, d'autres transparences, également vivantes, pouvaient bien habiter l'air".²¹⁹ The 'logic' of this thought is, on the face of it, faultless: indeed, why should there not be these diaphanous "poissons de l'air" all around us, but of which we remain in total ignorance? The young man's state of "rêverie" is summed up thus :

La rêverie, qui est la pensée à l'état de nébuleuse, confine au sommeil, et s'en préoccupe comme de sa frontière. L'air habité par des transparences vivantes, ce serait le commencement de l'inconnu ; mais au-delà s'offre la vaste ouverture du possible.²²⁰

Evidential acknowledgment of Hugo's influence is provided by Gérard Legrand,²²¹ who recounts how, when he suggested to Breton that there was a similarity between Hugo's "poissons de l'air diaphanes" and his own "Grands Transparents", Breton agreed: "C'est exactement cela!"²²²

²¹³ Ibid, p.26

²¹⁴ Ibid, p.28

²¹⁵ Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, op.cit., Première partie, VII, p.140

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Ibid, p.141

²¹⁹ Ibid

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Gérard Legrand, *André Breton en son temps*, (Paris : Le Soleil noir, 1976), p.169

²²² Étienne-Alain Hubert, José Pierre, *Notes to Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1136

In the circumstances, “il fallait prendre acte de la vie mythique et lui donner une existence”.²²³ As Loyer points out, Breton was not alone in postulating the possibility of alternative worlds, other existences in his “mythe-rébus”;²²⁴ Matta, Duchamp and Paalen had all already experimented picturally with the concept of “Les grands transparents”, which led Breton to extend “l’invite à la découverte, la proposition d’une forme ouverte qui diffère de l’histoire-récit que le mythe traditionnel mettait en scène”.²²⁵ Breton’s text, with an illustration of Matta’s work of the same name, invites us to “déchiffrer une correspondance visuelle entre ce titre et ces croisements de lignes suggérant des organisations cellulaires sans échelle, flottant dans un espace immatériel comme de vagues fantômes”.²²⁶

While some saw the text as a rallying cry to resistance and the path to liberation, others were surprised by its “côté presque entièrement négatif”.²²⁷ The title itself carries a strangely negative twist, closing with the words “ou non”, introducing both a ludic irony and the suggestion of the text itself being a ‘fragment’ rather than a whole. It is possible that Breton is here deliberately introducing a connecting thread with Novalis, who, in his philosophical writings on the fragment, postulates such thoughts as: “Only what is incomplete can be comprehended – can take us further”.²²⁸ An ‘Introduction’ (or ‘Prolegomena’) can hardly be construed as negative, when it is in fact opening a new line of thought about the future.

In the opening lines, Breton associates himself strongly with the North (ie: northern Europe/Germany), rather than with the Greco-Roman Mediterranean culture of the South, as has already been seen. He begins:

²²³ Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York : Intellectuels et artistes français en exil 1940–1947*, op.cit., p.156

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Ibid, p.157

²²⁶ Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre in *Prologomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non – Notice*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p. 1134

²²⁷ Émilie Noulet, *Lettres françaises* (No. 6, 1^{er} novembre 1942, p.56), cited in *Réception de l’œuvre*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1139

²²⁸ Margaret Mahony Stoljar, (translator & editor), *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p.65

Sans doute y a-t-il trop de nord en moi pour que je sois jamais l'homme de la pleine adhésion.²²⁹

The lines mirror the opening statement of *Pleine marge*, in which Breton rejects 'discipleship': "Je ne suis pas pour les adeptes".²³⁰ Whereas this is a multi-layered rejection of religious belief, in *Prolégomènes* Breton is distancing himself from "*ces constructions abstraites qu'on nomme les systèmes*".²³¹ Besides the rejection of religion, the implication of the rejection of political allegiance is suggested by the use of the word "adhesion" – a word largely used to describe political following. Breton takes the opportunity to denounce the gradual 'slipping' of systems – including Surrealism – as even the best systems of thought inevitably become altered over time by the mass of those operating them. Movements must remain just that – systems which are allowed room to move and grow, while remaining vigilantly true to their original tenets. Outlooks must remain open, prepared to be refreshed and renewed.

Further, keeping in mind Péret's challenge in their correspondence, Breton acknowledges his suggestion for 'le merveilleux' in all its forms as a new point of departure, confirming his own thoughts and tendencies. While talking of « la tourmente actuelle, [...] la gravité sans précédent de la crise sociale aussi bien que religieuse et économique », he poses the question :

Que penser du postulat "pas de société sans mythe social" ; dans quelle mesure pouvons-nous choisir ou adopter, et *imposer* un mythe en rapport avec la société que nous jugeons désirable?²³²

To which he offers the answer that he would make the case for:

Un certain retour qui s'opère au cours de cette guerre à l'étude de la philosophie du Moyen Âge aussi bien que des sciences 'maudites' (avec lesquelles un contact tacite a toujours été maintenu par l'intermédiaire de la poésie 'maudite').²³³

²²⁹ André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* in OC, Vol. III, op.cit., p.5

²³⁰ Cf. *Pleine marge*, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.1179. See above, Chapter 1, p.40

²³¹ *Prolégomènes etc.*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.5

²³² Ibid, p.10

²³³ Ibid

He is, however, perfectly aware with this reference to renewed interest in medieval sciences (eg: astronomy, astrology, geometry, natural philosophy, etc.) he is laying himself open to “[les] accusations de mysticisme dont on ne me fera pas grâce”.²³⁴

It is precisely this “study” of medieval philosophy that allows Breton to use the *Prolégomènes* as a vehicle by which to reach back into the occult. This explains the numerous references to figures and writers of the occult, not least in the list – a device clearly used here to establish an alternative history of thought²³⁵ – of those he finds of particular influence, which he refers to as “ma propre ligne, fort sinueuse”.²³⁶

Héraclite, Abélard, Eckhardt, Retz, Rousseau, Swift, Sade, Lewis, Arnim, Lautréamont, Engels, Jarry et quelques autres.²³⁷

Divided into parts using alternate italic and Roman type-face, the text of *Prolégomènes* builds towards a final section entitled *Les Grands Transparents*, in which Breton gives free rein to his imagination with his “êtres hypothétiques”. He suggests that perhaps there exist other worlds, attainable by such journeys as portrayed in Cyrano de Bergerac’s *Voyage dans la lune*²³⁸ and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*²³⁹ – worlds infinitely preferable to that presently inhabited by man, and, to Breton’s way of thinking, so manifestly failing him. Reflecting further and wider on the place of man in the cosmos, Breton questions the anthropo-centric stance of mankind:

*L’Homme n’est peut-être pas le centre, le point de mire de l’univers.*²⁴⁰

He takes quotations from the poet and thinker, Novalis, (1772-1801), American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) and French micro-biologist and chemist Émile Duclaux (1840-1904) to point up the possibility of the existence of

²³⁴ Ibid, p.13

²³⁵ In *Devant le Rideau*, written as an introductory text for the exhibition catalogue for *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Breton demonstrates again the “lignes de force” through which he traces the origins of Surrealism from Medieval philosophers to the recent past. Cf. *O.C.*, Vol.III, p.747

²³⁶ *Prolégomènes etc.*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.8

²³⁷ Ibid, p.8

²³⁸ Cyrano de Bergerac, *Voyage dans la lune (L’Autre Monde ou Les États et Empires de la Lune)* written in 1638, amended 1650, general publication not allowed until the 20th century. Text published in its entirety in Paris in 1921.

²³⁹ Written in 1726, amended 1735.

²⁴⁰ *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.14

other worlds on a different scale, and/or the possibility of our ignorance of other ‘bodies’ existing in the atmosphere without our detection.²⁴¹

Pushing at the boundaries of mythical imagery in his efforts to open up the imagination to the full, Breton closes his piece on *Les Grands Transparents* with the reflection:

Un mythe nouveau? Ces êtres, faut-il les convaincre qu’ils procèdent du mirage ou leur donner l’occasion de se découvrir?²⁴²

The preoccupation with “le mythe” had already been in play in the *Second Manifeste*, but the emphasis on it at such a critical moment in *history* shocked some people. On the other hand, this particular “mythe” will turn out to be more grounded – in nature, in love, in *real* myths within the rituals and traditions of the Hopi Indians – than some might have thought, given all the references to the thinkers of the Occult.

Given the close ties which bound the Surrealist exiles in New York, and the interest of, and cooperation with, a number of young American artists (as mentioned above), it is surely implicit that Breton pursued the dialogue on myth with both artists and critics at this time. The exhibition of Native American Indian art at the Museum of Modern Art together with the Onslow Ford lectures at the beginning of 1941 had already shown a pronounced interest in myth, and the frequent meetings of both refugees and American artists²⁴³ gave ample opportunity for discussion of topics which were of interest to them all. It is thought “by most accounts”²⁴⁴ to have been Matta who introduced Breton to the idea of ‘Les Grands Transparents’ – beings whose presence around us remained undetected by the human eye – as a result of his and Onslow Ford’s reading of Ouspensky on “transparent worlds”.²⁴⁵ Duchamp explored the world of

²⁴¹ Given the reference to Hugo in *Les États généraux* (*O.C.*, Vol.III, p.30), together with the known fact that Breton had enjoyed re-reading Hugo in the U.S. (cf. *Notice* in *O.C.*, Vol.III. op.cit., p.1136), these facts, together with testimony from Gérard Legrand (cf. p.136 above), give credence to evidence of his influence. Further, in a later drawing by Breton to illustrate his poem *Premiers transparents* (1943), (*O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.21), Breton clothes his ‘transparents’ at least in part with distinctly fish-like scales. (Cf. *André Breton: Je vois, j’imagine – poèmes-objets*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), p.109

²⁴² *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.15

²⁴³ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., pp.155 & 185

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.199

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*

transparency with his ‘Grand Verre’, Breton had introduced the “maison de verre” in his novel *Nadja* years before, and in the text written for the exhibition of 1942, *De la survivance de certains mythes et de quelques autres mythes en croissance ou en formation* (1942),²⁴⁶ where, as has been seen, he headed the page showing David Hare’s *Hidden fundamental* with the same striking title ‘*LES GRANDS TRANSPARENTS*’²⁴⁷ – the dialogue was on-going. For Breton, its culmination duly appeared, as has been seen, in the first edition of the new Surrealist review *VVV*, with its editorial team of Breton and Ernst, and Breton’s bi-lingual publication of *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*.²⁴⁸

Underlying this sharing of the dialogue on myth, certainly on the part of the younger Surrealists and the American artists who had joined them, came a shift towards a more Jungian approach. Martica Sawin attributes this influence in large proportion to one John Graham, “the eccentric White Russian who served for a time as secretary of the Museum of Non-Objective Art”²⁴⁹ and whose “interest in Jung and [...] belief in the unconscious as the driving force in creativity had a profound impact on many New York artists during the interwar years”.²⁵⁰ The introduction of the whole concept of myth and its incorporation into art – the Americans attempting to some extent to recycle Greek myths, while the Surrealists incorporated into their work their reading of the hermetic writings of Éliphas Lévy and Paracelsus – together with the publication in 1939 of a French volume of his collected works, (and its translation into English by Jolande Jacobi soon afterwards), meant that Jung’s theories on collective consciousness and the “transcultural validity of symbols” were gaining ground.²⁵¹

The core thread binding Breton to his immediate circle of friends during the voyage to the U.S. and in the initial period of his ‘exile’ was principally that of the search

²⁴⁶ *O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.127

²⁴⁷ Cf. Note 128, p.126 above

²⁴⁸ Cf. Robert Lebel’s comment “everybody met everybody. The influence was collective and this is how it spread.” In Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, op.cit., p.197

²⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.95

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp.95–96

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.150 While this was true of the younger Surrealists, it was a move which marked them out from the Freudian concept of the individual psyche more favoured by Breton.

for a new myth, an alternative life pattern, a new “*égrégoré*”.²⁵² The rise of Fascism in Europe signaled, to the Surrealists at least, the death of Western civilization as it had been known. Breton and his close circle had searched for appropriately fertile ground on which to found their new society. Turning their backs on Europe, the choice seemed to be between Mexico and the U.S. Almost fortuitously, it was in New York that Breton had re-grouped with those he most trusted, those on whom he thought he might depend to carry the Surrealist movement forward on its newly focused quest to change society. Through force of circumstance their choice had been made – the United States appeared to be the most receptive continent for the birth of a new civilization and the creation of a new myth. It is impossible to disagree with the concept put forward by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron that “however painful exile may have been for the surrealists, it was experienced nevertheless as a voyage of initiation”.²⁵³ For Breton, the experiences to which he opened himself up on the journey of initiation from Marseilles to New York confirmed the direction in which he chose to lead the movement during the years of exile.

²⁵² See Chapter 1 above, p.36

²⁵³ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealists in Exile : Another Kind of Resistance*, op.cit., p.439

CHAPTER 4 : Looking Back to the Future: Breton, Hugo, and the Poet as “Seer”

This chapter will show Breton’s further research into hermeticism and the occult, as a result of his renewed interest in certain aspects of Romanticism and, through this interest and his consequent reading, his awareness of Victor Hugo as a presence during his research. As has already been seen, it becomes clear through his writing that Breton feels this presence, manifested by a tendency to identify himself with Hugo in his situation of exile and, as he perceives it, marginalization. While drawing this parallel, Breton looks again at various aspects of Romanticism, and, delving further back, rediscovers the roots of 19th century Romanticism in the occult of the Middle Ages. As will be seen, Breton takes this path not only by re-reading Hugo, but also by reading an important new text published in Montreal in 1942: Auguste Viatte’s *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*.¹ Through his reading, Breton discovers the theories and writing of the Utopian Saint-Yves d’Alveydre, whose influence is clearly seen in Breton’s poem *Les États Généraux*, the main text to be examined in this chapter, and who forms the link between Breton’s interest in Romanticism and the occult. The attraction of hermeticism for Breton is the quality of impenetrable magic implicit in the name, paradoxically creating a lever with which to prise open the mind, to dislocate it from its normal function, and encourage mental exploration into areas of the unknown.

Concurrently with his return to the study of strands of Romanticism, Breton is also preoccupied with the responsibility of his position as a poet at a time of crisis. As will be seen, he is well aware of the stance taken by Aragon and Éluard in occupied France, particularly since the publication of Aragon’s essay *La rime en 1940*.² Whereas Aragon decides to make poetry accessible to all, in easily assimilated form, Breton cannot and will not follow this route, but determinedly preserves the perspective of the poet as ‘mage’ or prophet, purveyor of myth and mystery, at the same time looking

¹ Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, (Montreal : Les Éditions de l’Arbre, 1942).

² Essay published originally in *P.C. [Poètes casqués]* 40, no.3 (20 April 1940), and subsequently with *Le Crève-Cœur* in Gallimard’s *Collection Métamorphoses* (Paris – April, 1941)

forward into the future. Aragon and Éluard, remaining in occupied France, see their role as poets to be that of bringing poetry to the people, becoming “poètes engagés”, offering poetry as a means of resistance to the occupying Nazi force. Breton, on the other hand, remains convinced that the enigma of poetic utterance must be preserved, the poet maintaining his position of interpreter of events, looking forward into the future as well as back at the past.

In his continuing search, Breton is essentially trying to uncover what is ‘underneath’, going ever deeper into the latent workings of the mind. His quest is divided into three distinct categories: firstly, into the influences of Romanticism, through hermeticism and the occult; secondly, into “la mentalité primitive” through primitive art; and thirdly, through the poetry of Love. The commonality of the three categories lies in their freedom from the imposition of social traditions and ‘education’.

Undeterred by the failure of his venture into politics, Breton is still searching – looking to Romantic thought and literature for the means by which to construct some kind of new social organization. Through Romanticism, equally, Breton hopes to find the route via which to examine other worlds, and to find a connection with the Cosmos itself. Writing of Tanguy’s art in his preface to the catalogue *Art of this Century* for the opening of Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery of the same name in October 1942, Breton states:

La faculté de déploiement de l’imagination artistique est en relation intime avec la variété des phénomènes du Cosmos. [...] ...l’esprit de Tanguy se tient en communication permanente avec le magnétisme terrestre. Les êtres-objets strictement inventés qui peuplent ses toiles jouissent de leurs affinités propres qui traduisent de la seule heureuse manière – la manière non littérale – tout ce qui peut être objet d’émotion dans l’univers. Ils demandent à être regardés comme les résultantes des propriétés les plus diverses de tout ce qui existe. [...] Sans aucune concession au monde des perceptions, on peut dire qu’ils réalisent avec ce monde un accord parfait.³

³ André Breton, *Genèse et perspective artistiques* in *O.C.*, Vol.IV, op.cit., p.434

The allusions to the Cosmos and “magnétisme terrestre” bear witness to Breton’s renewed interest in Romanticism – and, by extension, the occult – not for its own sake, but rather as a means to an end, the essential route for his quest. Equally, the primitive mentality and the state of Love are also representative of that of freedom from the social mores regarded by Breton as mental sclerosis, inhibiting the development of the individual, and, by extension, of society – a state of freedom to which all should aspire.

1. Breton’s re-discovery of Victor Hugo:

In his research into trends of magnetism, somnambulance, and even the more unlikely pursuits of “spiritisme” and “tables tournantes”,⁴ Breton is seeking to refine access to that part of the mind beyond the reach of the traditional constraints imposed by society and its norms of ‘education’. From as early as 1924, in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, he refers the reader to the freedom of a child’s mind, as yet untouched by adult values. Talking of the imagination, he expands:

Le seul mot de liberté est tout ce qui m’exalte encore. [...] Il répond sans doute à ma seule aspiration légitime. Parmi tant de disgrâces dont nous héritons, il faut bien reconnaître que la *plus grande liberté* d’esprit nous est laissée. À nous de ne pas en mésuser gravement. [...] Reste la folie, ‘la folie qu’on enferme’ a-t-on bien dit. [...] Ce n’est pas la crainte de la folie qui nous forcera à laisser en berne le drapeau de l’imagination.⁵

To the state of child-like innocence and freedom from social constraint, Breton adds the state of “la folie qu’on enferme” – surely a reference to *Nadja* (1928), a work in which Breton makes clear both his interest in minds on the edge of madness and his rage at their treatment.⁶ In these first, founding years of the movement, Breton returns time and again to the importance of that state of innocence from tradition, education or any social

⁴ Cf. examples such as that of descriptions of his visits to the seer, Madame Sacco, (*Nadja* in *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.693), the importance of listening to “l’oreille intérieure”, (*Le Message automatique* in *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.375), and his warning against the attendant pitfalls of such activities as “les tables tournantes de Guernesey” as experienced by Victor Hugo and his family (Ibid, p.385: the episode in fact took place in Jersey, not Guernsey)

⁵ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, *O.C.* Vol. I, op.cit., p.312–313 (The emphasis is Breton’s.)

⁶ André Breton, *Nadja*, *O.C.* Vol. I, op.cit., p.739–740

imprint found in the primitive mind or that of a child, which he refers to as “Cet état de grace”:

Toute l’expérimentation en cours serait de nature à démontrer que la perception et la représentation – qui semblent à l’adulte ordinaire s’opposer d’une manière si radicale – ne sont à tenir que pour les produits de dissociation d’une *faculté unique, originelle*, dont l’image eidétique rend compte et dont on retrouve trace chez le primitif et l’enfant. Cet état de grâce, tous ceux qui ont souci de définir la véritable condition humaine, plus ou moins confusément aspirent à le retrouver.⁷

Although he may not have been actively involved for a long time in such activities as “spiritisme” and “tables tournantes”, Breton’s reading during the early 1940s shows a continuing interest in such themes. Equally, his early enthusiasm for automatic writing had run its course by this time (1943), although he returns to other elements of the *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme*, holding above all to his cry for “occultation”.⁸

In his own footnote to this demand (the importance of which is emphasized by the use of capital letters), Breton recommends the reader to return to:

Une reconnaissance sérieuse du côté de ces sciences à divers égards aujourd’hui complètement décriées que sont l’astrologie, entre toutes les anciennes, la métapsychique (spécialement en ce qui concerne l’étude de la cryptesthésie) parmi les modernes.⁹

This footnote is of cardinal importance to the course of Breton’s thought and creative process during his time of exile in the U.S., demonstrating his determination to hold to his original course and to follow his own directions. He goes on to repeat his assertion as to the importance of the role of woman, and the attendant element of love:

Le problème de la femme est, au monde, tout ce qu’il y a de merveilleux et de trouble. Et cela dans la mesure même où nous y ramène la foi qu’un homme non

⁷ André Breton, *Le Message automatique* in *O.C.* Vol. II, op.cit., p.391

⁸ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme*, *O.C.* Vol. I, op.cit., p.821

⁹ *Ibid*, p.821 : note the reference to « la cryptesthésie », its meaning literally ‘hidden sensation’, with the added expectation that this hidden sensation will ultimately emerge in some other form, for instance as the waking awareness of fractured phrases such as those which form the structure of *Les États Généraux*.

corrompu doit être capable de mettre, non seulement dans la Révolution, *mais encore dans l'amour*.¹⁰

Love, he asserts, here restored to its true meaning, and removed from the corruption of its misuse by others, becomes the ideal tool with which to reveal “la vérité, *notre vérité*”:

Plus que jamais, puisqu’il s’agit ici des possibilités d’occultation du surréalisme, je me tourne vers ceux qui ne craignent pas de concevoir l’amour comme le lieu d’occultation idéale de toute pensée. Je leur dis : il y a des apparitions réelles mais il est un miroir dans l’esprit sur lequel l’immense majorité des hommes pourrait se pencher sans se voir. Le contrôle odieux ne fonctionne pas si bien.¹¹

Breton deliberately uses the word “occultation” from the vocabulary of the field of astronomy, in conjunction with his several references to the work of Corneille Agrippa, to promote his recommendation of a return to the examination of the scholarship and literature of hermeticism and the occult. It should also be noted that in a later interview Breton reiterates the mission of Surrealism set out in the *Second Manifeste*, summarizing it as follows:

Pour ce qui est la demande d’occultation du surréalisme, on a affaire à une expression à dessein ambiguë et le contexte le dit bien : défense de s’exhiber, de ‘se produire sur les tréteaux’ d’une part et, d’autre part, invitation à confronter dans son devenir le message surréaliste avec le message ésotérique.¹²

In the same interview, Breton goes on to defend his work of the war years as having simply followed his own directions:

Nombreuses sont, dans le *Second Manifeste*, les références à l’astrologie, à l’alchimie, à la magie ; elles montrent assez que, contrairement à ce que soutiennent les actuels détracteurs du surréalisme, les préoccupations de cet ordre ne sont pas nouvelles et qu’il est tout à fait abusif de prétendre qu’elles marquent un tournant récent de ma pensée.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid, p.822

¹¹ Ibid, p.823

¹² *Entretiens radiophoniques XI, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.525*

¹³ Ibid

Breton's call for "occultation" brings with it the connotation of esotericism to be employed to poetic ends. As will be seen, these currents of thought will be developed in both *Arcane 17* and *L'Ode à Charles Fourier*.

The origins of these hermetic tendencies are immediately discernible in the poetry of Romanticism. In his book *Le Sacre de l'écrivain*,¹⁴ Paul Bénichou traces the history of the poet's development and that of his 'mission' through the centuries, coming at length to a close study of Victor Hugo and his work, deeply rooted in Romanticism. In the chapter concerned, entitled *Les débuts de la grande génération*, Bénichou outlines Hugo's aims and the gradual shift in importance and influence of the poet:

L'ambition de Hugo, ayant horreur du vide, chercha à reprendre prise sur les choses, à se pénétrer avec intensité du visible et de l'imaginable, perçus librement. Il s'agissait non pas de renoncer au sacerdoce poétique, mais plus que jamais de le rendre actuel. [...] Les recherches qui occupèrent ces années ne portèrent pas en vain sur la sensation et l'expression ; [...] elles commençaient, et en esprit même, la métamorphose du sacerdoce poétique, l'alliance jusque-là irréalisée de la poésie missionnaire et du monde moderne.¹⁵

At the same time, Bénichou emphasizes Hugo's refusal to accept the control, even suppression, of the imagination found in classical representation, preferring the antidote of that of Romanticism and a return to the rich veins of artistic possibility to be plumbed in mythology:

La conviction de représenter le vrai tient, chez les classiques, à un usage modéré et contrôlé de l'imagination ; dans le romantisme, au contraire, elle naît d'une imagination qui n'accepte pas de limite et prétend embrasser la totalité de l'univers et de l'homme. Cette différence est celle de deux sociétés ; mais elle marque aussi, d'une société à l'autre, l'éclatante promotion du type de l'écrivain créateur.¹⁶

Hugo, having elevated the position of the poet to that of creator, regarded him(self) as on a par with the Creator/God – a position of sacred trust, with a social mission to accomplish through creation. Liberation from any literary constraints was what Breton

¹⁴ Paul Bénichou, *Le Sacre de l'écrivain* (Paris : Librairie José Corti, 1973)

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.394–395

¹⁶ Ibid, p.405

was seeking. His attitude was pre-empted by that of Hugo by many decades, giving him (Breton) a lead in elevating the position of both art and the poet, and causing him to look again at mythological and, by extension, hermetic sources:

Hugo et ses amis ne renoncent pas, en magnifiant l'art, à la puissance d'édification et d'illumination de la poésie ; bien au contraire, ils affranchissent ainsi cette puissance de toute suzeraineté étrangère, théologique ou sociale ; ils donnent enfin au Poète, en tant que poète, une prérogative propre dans le monde des esprits.¹⁷

Having abandoned the cause of revolution per se, Breton's focus had become the revolution of the mind and the freeing of mankind from the constraints of society, religion and 'education'.

In his biography, Graham Robb writes of Hugo's goal as that of aiming "to engage in a mysterious collaboration, to invent a new reality".¹⁸ The comments chime with Breton's own position with a view to the infinite possibilities created by the juxtaposition of words, expressed in similar style in the opening and closing lines of *Les mots sans rides* (1922) in the early years of Surrealism, as already noted.¹⁹ In *Les États Généraux*, as will be seen, Breton again emphasizes the utilitarian but essential quality of words, which he here likens to the nails in a horse's shoe; words are the materials of the poet's trade.

As one example of his reading on hermeticism and the occult in the early 1940s, Breton makes various references to Auguste Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*.²⁰ Published in Montreal in 1942, this work was greatly to inform and influence

¹⁷ Ibid, p.407

¹⁸ Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo etc.* (1997), p.538

¹⁹ See above Chapter 1, p.31–32. André Breton, *Les mots sans rides* in *Les Pas perdus*, OC, Vol. I, op.cit., pp.284 & 286

²⁰ Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, op.cit. Uncharacteristically, in interview with Aimé Patri in 1948, Breton mis-remembers Viatte as "Georges", rather than "Auguste": cf. the monthly review *Paru* – Paris, March 1948 in OC, Vol.III, op.cit., p.608. Nonetheless, Breton makes direct reference to Viatte's work on both the 'illuminés' of the 19th century and on Hugo, and, as has been seen, is clearly aware of Viatte's work in Haïti. In fact, during one of his series of *Les Conférences d'Haïti*, discoursing on Victor Hugo, Breton goes so far as to say:

Breton's writing. (It also serves as a major source for Bénichou's work referred to above.) Viatte had already produced a detailed academic study in two volumes entitled *Les Sources occultes du romantisme* (1927), a work originating from his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne. A Swiss national by birth, Viatte obtained French nationality at the beginning of the 1930s. He was appointed to the chair in French Literature at Laval University, Quebec, in 1934 (where he spent the war years, retaining the position until 1949), together with some early teaching at Hunter College, New York. His scholarship in hermeticism and the occult was widely recognized and respected.

Viatte's literary study of 19th century hermeticism, heresies and spiritualist trends, with its particular interest in Victor Hugo, runs in close parallel to Breton's own preoccupations at the time. Added to this, Viatte was to make frequent visits to Haïti on cultural missions, as Breton did himself in 1945–6; Breton makes specific mention of Viatte's visits in his *Conférences d'Haïti, II*.²¹ Reference to Viatte is made again in a later interview with Aimé Patri (1948),²² but there is no evidence that the two men ever met; taking as they did very different standpoints, it is unlikely that any such meeting did take place. This has been confirmed in correspondence between the author and Viatte's son, Germain Viatte, who states:

C'est en effet curieux, mon père a toujours croisé Breton, à New York, en Haïti et au Québec sans le rencontrer. [...] Il le regrettait mais se considérait comme un universitaire et désirait visiblement conserver une distance critique tout en s'intéressant au surréalisme.²³

Further weight is given to this supposition by Étienne-Alain Hubert, who expands as follows on the difference between the political position of the two and their consequent distance socially:

“Pour faire apparaître le fond de la pensée de Hugo, je crois pouvoir m'appuyer sur le témoignage de M. Auguste Viatte, que vous avez entendu en Haïti et qui, au terme de recherches actives sur l'évolution des esprits dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle, a publié deux ouvrages faisant à cet égard autorité : *Les Sources occultes du romantisme* en 1927 et *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* en 1942.”

Following this tribute, Breton goes on to refer closely and at length to Viatte's work, particularly that on Hugo, from which he quotes in support of his own comments on Hugo's knowledge of both *cabbalistes* and *occultistes*. [Cf. André Breton, *Conférences d'Haïti, II* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.228.]

²¹ André Breton, *Conférences d'Haïti, II* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.228

²² André Breton, *Interview d'Aimé Patri*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.608

²³ Letter from Germain Viatte to the author, dated 23.04.2009

Je n'ai jamais entendu que Breton, grand admirateur du *Victor Hugo et les Illuminés de son temps*, ait rencontré Auguste Viatte. L'exemplaire qu'il possédait ne portait aucun envoi d'auteur... [...] Il me semble que la chère Elisa Breton, qui aimait évoquer le voyage au Canada, m'aurait parlé de lui. [...] Viatte et Breton appartenaient alors à des univers différents : Auguste Viatte était un gaulliste ardent, dont le rôle a été considérable, alors que Breton gardait certaines distances avec les personnalités de la France libre. En outre, [...] j'imagine mal des échanges poussés avec Viatte.²⁴

Whereas Viatte was an important player in the Gaullist camp, Breton had abandoned politics years before, and kept a marked distance from the operations of the Free French during the war years. This accounts for the fact that he refused contact with the École Libre des Hautes Études (the 'University in Exile' in New York), determined to find an alternative and original solution to the problems of the time, hence his exploration of hermeticism and the occult.²⁵

Further evidence of the poet's interest in Romanticism at the time can be found in the lectures mentioned above.²⁶ The first lecture of the series is the most important in this context, as may be seen from its title: *Sources étrangères et occultes du romantisme français – Victor Hugo méconnu (poésie)*. In his programme, Breton's plan was to alternate the lectures between poetry and painting. This title gives the clue to the thread of Breton's research at the time, which weaves through the lectures, tracing the roots of Surrealism back to the earliest hermeticism, and then to its revival in the 19th century, with particular reference to Victor Hugo. As may be seen, having followed the course of Breton's re-reading of Hugo through Viatte, the references in Breton's *Conférences*

²⁴ Email received by the author from Étienne-Alain Hubert, 7 April 2009

²⁵ Cf. On-line article from the Bibliothèque Nationale: Aristide R. Zolberg: 'The École Libre at the New School 1941-1946' in *Social Research*, Winter, 1998.)

²⁶ In December 1945, Breton and Elisa left the U.S. for Haïti for a lecture tour which was to include a brief return to Martinique. In his role as founder-director of Haïti's newly-established Institut français, it was Pierre Mabile who was at least in part responsible for Breton's mandate from the French Government to deliver a course of lectures in Haïti and the French West Indies, and to foster intellectual and cultural relations there. Cf. *Notes et variantes*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1214

*d'Haïti II*²⁷ trace a clear continuation of a path of thought greatly developed during his time in the U.S. during the war years.

Unsurprisingly, Breton begins his lecture with a scarcely veiled reference to the diplomatic impossibility for him of commenting on the current political upheaval in Haïti. However, he goes on to praise the courage of the Haïtian hero Toussaint Louverture and his stand against the English in 1798, with the protagonist's defiant statement: “*Je suis incapable d'être l'instrument et le jouet des hommes*”.²⁸

Following this with a lengthy reference to Marat, his hero of the Revolution of 1789, Breton manages to incorporate an exhortation to his audience on the vital importance of freedom in democracy. To his praise for Toussaint Louverture and Marat – “l'un des rares hommes d'action que j'honore sans réserves” – Breton adds Victor Hugo's name. He quotes from Hugo's letter to the editor of *Le Progrès* (31 March 1860), fulsome in its praise of the island and its people. The poet's letter was in response to one from the editor, thanking Hugo for his public support of the actions of John Brown, condemned by the U.S. government to be hanged for his attempts to bring about the freeing of slaves.²⁹ At a time when world freedom – both actual physical freedom *and* freedom of thought – had so recently been challenged, Breton emphasizes the value he places on this democratic right. Thus it may be seen how the “*lignes de force [...] génératrices*”³⁰ of his preoccupation carry through into his later poetic output of the war years of exile in both *Arcane 17* and *L'Ode à Charles Fourier*.

In addition to the elements of hermeticism and the occult, various other factors motivated Breton's thinking at this time (1942) – to wit: his increasing alienation from Marxism; personal and ideological differences with various of his fellow Surrealists,³¹

²⁷ *Conférences d'Haïti, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp.227–232

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.212

²⁹ *Notes et variantes, O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.1229

³⁰ *Conférences d'Haïti, II, O.C.*, Voll. III, op.cit., p.214 (The emphases are Breton's.)

³¹ Although these numbered particularly several long-time contributors to the review *Acéphale* – with which Breton had his differences – amongst them were Masson, Duthuit, Rollin, Patrick and Isabelle Waldberg, who had previously been close to Breton, there were others – such as Benjamin Péret and Pierre Mabille – to whom he remained close over the years, in spite of the geographical distances involved. Cf. *Notice – Les États Généraux* in OC, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1154

despite their shared tribulation of exile from France; although he was always aware of his position as a refugee and was careful to mask his true feelings, Breton was not much at ease in American society. These circumstances, together with a re-reading of Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer* – evident from references in both *Prolegomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* (June, 1942) and *Les États Généraux* (1944) – led Breton to a wider study of utopians and hermeticists in 19th century France. The over-riding value to Breton, therefore, of Viatte's work was not only its study of Victor Hugo himself, but further its scholarly research into the context of those hermeticists from whom Hugo had gained insight and influence, as well as those whom he inspired and influenced in his turn. The utopian Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1840-1909) is an example of the latter, recommended by Viatte as “un des maîtres de l'occultisme entre 1870 et 1900”, who wrote a funeral ode to the poet.³² Viatte continues, incorporating a quotation from the ode:

Il le [Hugo] canonisera, de la façon qu'il eût aimé; il le dépeindra « au ciel des prophètes »,

Comète dont les flux vont éclairer peut-être
D'autres astres berçant sur l'Océan de l'Être
Une autre humanité !

Et Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, comme Éliphas Lévi, est de ces juges qu'en pareille manière on ne récuse pas.³³

2. Hermeticism and the occult:

Breton discovered the writing of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre quite soon after his arrival in the U.S. (1941), very possibly as a result of Viatte's work referred to above and also discussions with Seligman. However, there is also the possibility that Breton was made aware of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre through the writing of René Guénon. While much of Guénon's canon was not at all in line with Breton's, they did share an interest in certain aspects of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre's ideology, notably his preoccupation with Oriental beliefs, the importance of gaining access to the Self at the deepest level, and, as will be seen below, most of all in d'Alveydre's aim to bring about social reform through

³² August Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, op.cit., p.266

³³ Ibid, p.267

“la synarchie”. Guénon’s deep religious faith – he passed through Catholicism, trying without success to convert to Hinduism, before eventually embracing the Muslim faith – was the ultimate point of divergence in the ideology of the two men. While Guénon wrote of Saint-Yves d’Alveydre from the viewpoint of his own religious stance, Breton followed d’Alveydre into the realms of social reorganisation. In his study *René Guénon et le surréalisme*, Eddy Batache sums up their basic difference:

Il est donc évident que le Point suprême, que le surréalisme met en honneur, procède d’une notion traditionnelle, et coïncide, au moins en ce qui concerne les antinomies, avec l’idée que nous en donne Guénon. [...] Le surréalisme bute sur la notion de transcendance qu’il ne peut se résoudre à accepter, et Breton, que les doctrines ésotériques fascinent, se voit forcé de les ‘adapter’ en fonction de son athéisme.³⁴

Guénon’s belief in the redemption of society lay in the inherent importance of Tradition, whereas for Breton change for the better could only be brought about by overturning and replacing all accepted norms, whether social, intellectual or artistic.

Again, Batache emphasizes the extent to which Guénon and Breton follow the same ideological path, but indicates the point at which Breton’s thinking diverges:

D’autre part, le surréalisme rejoint Guénon en admettant que, dans un passé lointain, l’homme jouissait de pouvoirs qu’il a perdus ; mais si Breton refuse l’idée de ‘chute’, c’est parce qu’il ne saurait accepter l’aspect moral – punitif – que lui associe la religion.³⁵

Breton refused any idea of an element of punishment or fall from grace in the concept of a lost Golden Age.

Perhaps their greatest divergence of all lay in Guénon’s rebuttal of the theories of Freud relating to the sub-conscious and the imagination. Indeed, as Batache points out, Guénon never tired of warning disciples of Surrealism against the dangers of following

³⁴ Eddy Batache, *René Guénon et le surréalisme* in *Le Cahier de l’Herne* special edition consecrated to René Guénon (Paris, 1999), p.389

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.380

this path “aussi séduisante qu’incertaine qui s’ouvrait à leur curiosité”.³⁶ But above all Guénon warned against being seduced by anything to do with the imagination and feelings.

In his series of radio interviews with André Parinaud in 1952, Breton refers to the fact that it was he, Michel Leiris and Antonin Artaud who were most drawn to “la pensée dite ‘traditionnelle’”, and therefore to the work of René Guénon.³⁷ As co-editor with Benjamin Péret, Pierre Naville had taken it upon himself to approach Guénon to contribute to the review *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924). Guénon refused; firstly, he was hostile to psychoanalysis – Freud’s innovative theories in particular – and, perhaps more importantly, he feared that Surrealism was veering towards:

Quelque variété de spiritisme, miné de préoccupations expérimentales, qui lui paraissaient le comble du ridicule, pacotille pseudo-orientale à l’usage de gens qui refusaient l’initiation fondamentale, forme d’adhésion qui récuse par principe toute théorie de la preuve.³⁸

There appears to have been a fundamental difference of approach between him and Breton, reinforced by mutual distrust, as expressed in an article on Guénon published in 1953 in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, where Breton sums up Guénon’s position in relation to his own:

Sollicitant toujours l’esprit, jamais le cœur, René Guénon emporte notre très grande déférence et rien d’autre. Le surréalisme, tout en s’associant à ce qu’il y a d’essentiel dans sa critique du monde moderne, en faisant fond comme lui sur l’intuition supra-rationnelle (retrouvée par d’autres voies), voire en subissant fortement l’attrait de cette pensée dite traditionnelle que, de main de maître, il a débarrassée de ses parasites, s’écarte autant du réactionnaire qu’il fut sur le plan social que de l’aveugle contempteur de Freud, par exemple, qu’il se montra. Il n’en honore pas moins le grand aventurier solitaire qui repoussa la foi par la connaissance, opposa la délivrance au SALUT et dégagea la métaphysique des ruines de la religion qui la recouvraient.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid, p.385

³⁷ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, VIII, O.C. Vol. III*, op.cit., p.495 (Breton deliberately uses the word “traditionnelle” here, with its connotation of implied esotericism.)

³⁸ Pierre Naville, *Le Temps du surréel*, (Paris : Éditions Galilée, 1977), p.289–290

³⁹ André Breton, ‘René Guénon jugé par le surréalisme’ in N.R.F., 1953.

As always, Breton's criticism is precise: while he dismisses the « contempteur de Freud », he is nonetheless able to acknowledge Guénon's input, having freed metaphysics from the wreckage of religion. At all events, Guénon was well versed in the writings and work of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, following closely the latter's preoccupation with the Orient and making use of his ideas and research. Whether or not it was through this that Saint-Yves d'Alveydre first came to his notice, it is clear that Breton was familiar with Guénon's writing. Each was attracted by different strands of d'Alveydre's ideas, interpreting them to his own ends, and, if only to a certain extent, finding through the occult, as d'Alveydre had himself, an alternative system by which to achieve resolution to his individual quest.⁴⁰

Breton thought sufficiently highly of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre to include four titles from his œuvre in his response many years later to Raymond Queneau's questionnaire seeking suggestions *Pour une bibliothèque idéale*.⁴¹ Although the vein of devout Christianity which underpins d'Alveydre's work sits ill with Breton's own contempt for religion, it is clear he endorses, and himself expresses as essential, the message of social reform, as will be seen in certain lines of *Les États Généraux*.⁴²

By this time, Saint-Yves had found much intellectual common ground in the work of Victor Hugo, and, partly to recuperate from his recent illness, partly in the hope of meeting Hugo, he took himself to Jersey in his turn. Jean Saunier records this move as follows:

⁴⁰ From his earliest years, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre appears to have chosen marginalization. (This in itself was enough to make him interesting to Breton, who had been far from happy with his own upbringing and school years.) Saint-Yves d'Alveydre was a rebel from childhood, spending some time in a juvenile penitentiary near Tours under the aegis of a Monsieur Demetz. The deeply Christian foundation to Demetz's method was later acknowledged by d'Alveydre to have made a lasting impression on him, providing him with his own basis for life. Demetz intervened again when Saint-Yves, having returned to his family and again come up against parental authority, was refusing his father's order that he join the military. Saint-Yves and his father compromised, following Demetz's suggestion that he enter the naval medical college in Brest. However, this course had to be abandoned after three years, when the young man became ill and was invalidated out on indefinite leave.

⁴¹ Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1956, p.70 Cf. *Notice for Les États généraux, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., Note 5, p.1154

⁴² Cf. the work of Maître Eckhardt – devout Dominican, although considered heretical by the Catholic church – Victor Hugo – self-appointed missionary and direct representative of God – and Michel Carrouges – dedicated Catholic – to take just three examples, where Breton is able to appreciate and separate out other qualities in their writing from those of their religious tendencies.

Pour des raisons demeurées obscures, il décide à vingt-deux ans, de s'installer chez les proscrits de Jersey, n'ayant pour survivre que les ressources modestes d'un jeune répétiteur de lettres et de musique. Son biographe, Barlet, indique seulement qu'il était attiré "par les œuvres et la gloire de Victor Hugo"; de fait, toute sa vie, Saint-Yves demeurera un hugolâtre fervent et consacrera à son idole des poèmes redondants.⁴³

While there is no account of a meeting with Hugo, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre made other important contacts in Jersey. Amongst the "proscrits", Saint-Yves met Adolphe Pelleport, grandson of Virginie Faure, friend and confidante of the hermeticist, Fabre d'Olivet. Pelleport became a close friend, introducing Saint-Yves to his grandmother, with whom Saint-Yves spent many evenings, listening to her reminiscences of "cet homme extraordinaire" and being introduced to his work.⁴⁴ These close-knit ties with hermeticists and occultists fed into d'Alveydre's writing, as they had into Hugo's, as revealed in the quotation from Viatte's work given above.⁴⁵

The most important expression of these esoteric influences was manifested by d'Alveydre's development of the Martinist quest "for a new age of peace and harmony [to be] established in France and throughout the world".⁴⁶ Clearly Breton found this idea attractive, chiming as it did with his own ambition to establish a new model of society, connection and co-operation around the world, taking the route offered by occultism. As has been seen, evidence of this is to be found in Breton's correspondence with Benjamin Péret (January 1942),⁴⁷ where Breton urges Péret to find an alternative solution to the political, giving a résumé of his recent reading which indicates the direction of his own developing ideas. The letter expands on Breton's plan to establish a review with worldwide contributors, adding a list of such contributors and the request for suggestions of others. With confidence, he makes the point:

⁴³ Jean Saunier, *La Synarchie – ou le vieux rêve d'une nouvelle société*, (Paris : Grasset, 1971), p.83

⁴⁴ Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notice pour Les États généraux* in OC. Vol.III, op.cit., p.1155

⁴⁵ See above p.122–123

⁴⁶ David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment – Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), p.216

⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 3 above, pp. 136–138

[Quotation removed pending autorisation]⁴⁸

Suddenly Breton is, after all, interested in “le monde sensible”. This represents a shift in his approach, which up to this point had been resolutely to avoid use of the senses. In the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), Breton had warned against using the senses in literary creation, determined that it led inevitably to description rather than invention or use of the imagination. In his text *Paysage et poésie: du romantisme à nos jours*, quoting in part from the *Manifeste*, Collot remarks:

Dans le ‘procès’ qu’il [Breton] intente à ‘l’attitude réaliste’,⁴⁹ le surréalisme naissant tend à récuser le témoignage de l’expérience sensible : selon Breton, ‘nos sens, le caractère tout juste passable de leurs données, poétiquement parlant, nous ne pouvons nous contenter de cette référence’.⁵⁰

However, this attitude has now changed, as Collot points out :

La guerre et l’exil marquent un tournant décisif dans la pensée de Breton, confrontée à une réalité ‘rugueuse à étreindre’ et simultanément attirée par les merveilles du monde.⁵¹

Collot demonstrates the swing in Breton’s approach, showing the effect of his renewed interest in Romanticism with its preoccupation with “le paysage” as a literary analogy and the subsequent reversal of his early judgment with regard to the senses. This will be further explored in relation to the poems to be discussed.

In his correspondence with Péret, Breton insists that there is no future in allowing Surrealism to stand still and simply survive; there must be development and movement with new initiatives to avoid at the end of the current conflict, a repetition of the void of disappointment which awaited them as young men emerging from the War of 1914–18:

[Quotation removed pending autorisation]⁵²

⁴⁸ André Breton to Benjamin Péret, Letter dated 4 January 1942, op.cit.

⁴⁹ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* in OC, Vol.I, op.cit., p.313

⁵⁰ André Breton, *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* in *Point du jour*, OC, Vol.II, op.cit., p.275 quoted in Michel Collot, *Paysage et poésie – du romantisme à nos jours* (Paris : José Corti, 2005), p.101

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.110–111

⁵² André Breton to Benjamin Péret, Letter dated 4 January 1942, op.cit.

Breton's aim was to carry forward Surrealist principles into new territory, encouraging the development and evolution of ideas from contacts and contributors around the world.

Similarly, Breton comments to Raoul Ubac in an undated letter reacting to the first issue of the Belgian journal *L'Invention collective* (February, 1940), emphasizing the importance of crisis as the catalyst to Surrealist thought and creation. In this case, clearly, the crisis is that of the war in Europe. Breton also underlines the necessity for change in each individual to effect the revelation of something new:

Rien ne pourra se poursuivre véritablement sans crise : crise de l'expression pour commencer – le surréalisme lui-même se targuerait en vain de vouloir y échapper... Il faut que chacun change, trouve du nouveau. Il ne s'agit de rien moins que de se survivre, ce serait là l'illusion périlleuse entre toutes.⁵³

In his efforts to find a solution to the current crisis, Breton was attracted to hermeticism and the occult as an alternative route. To this end, he found d'Alveydre's wide-ranging ideas an inspiration. D'Alveydre's model of "la synarchie" drew not only on Martinist political thought of the 19th century, but also sought to revive what he considered to be the strengths of earlier political thought in France, not least those of "les États généraux" of the Revolutionary period.⁵⁴ In his study of "Occultism and politics in modern France", Harvey defines the Martinist model of synarchy, on which Saint-Yves d'Alveydre's own model was based, as follows:

This model, which envisioned a sort of world government under three councils of sages, representing the domains of education, justice and economics, would, in the Martinist view, eliminate the causes of conflict between peoples, avoid the dangers of the abuse of power by ambitious tyrants, and usher in a new age of global harmony, guided throughout by the benevolent hand of divine providence.⁵⁵

⁵³ André Breton, undated letter to Raoul Ubac in *Cinquante ans d'avant-garde 1917–1967*, catalogue of exhibition of the same name, (Brussels : Archives et Musées de la littérature, Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1^{er}, 19 mars – 30 avril 1983), p.135

⁵⁴ Saint-Yves d'Alveydre himself wrote a book entitled *Les États-généraux du suffrage universel* in 1888.

⁵⁵ David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment.*, op.cit., p.218

In this pursuit of the utopian ideal for society, there is an echo of the concept of “égrégores” – the power of the combined will to change the world for the better – already discussed in relation to Pierre Mabile.⁵⁶ Mabile’s concept of civilizations having a life-cycle comparable to our own – conception, birth, youth, maturity, decline and death – is mirrored by others, most notably in this context by the philosophy of Charles Fourier. As will be seen in a later chapter, Fourier’s concept of ‘Harmony’ was based on similar development and growth by the combined will of the people.

Contemporaneously, elements of synarchy were appropriated by the financial sector of the Vichy régime, tarnishing it with its fascist connection. Given the restrictions of communication, as well as the geographical distance, little information of this would have reached the outside world. While Breton almost certainly knew nothing of this at the time of writing *Les États Généraux*, it could account for the fact that he did not pursue the theory further on his return to France in the years after the war.⁵⁷

In the course of his study, Harvey further observes that there is a constant theme of the supernatural running through the literature of 19th century France, a fascination which itself owed a great deal to Martinist doctrine. Unsurprisingly, Victor Hugo heads the list of his examples of this literary preoccupation. Indeed, Saint-Yves d’Alveydre showed himself to be a committed life-long admirer of Hugo, following *his* lead into the occult.

3. The poet as “voyant”:

For like reasons, and following the shift of his interest back to certain tenets of Romanticism, Breton too immersed himself in Hugo’s writing and ideas. There are certainly a number of parallel points which can be made concerning the lives and

⁵⁶ See Chapter 1 above.

⁵⁷ In his editorial notes to *Les États Généraux*, Étienne Alain Hubert refers to synarchy as: “...ce système – dont Breton ne pouvait savoir qu’il connaissait des résurgences ambiguës et inspirait vaguement un des clans qui se combattaient auprès du gouvernement de Vichy...” Cf: *Notice to Les États Généraux* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1154

attitudes of the two poets, starting with the fact that each was the great poet of his generation, if not century. The immediate important differences between them should perhaps be examined first.

Similarly to Saint-Yves d'Alveydre later in the century, Hugo considered himself, as a poet in the Classical – and subsequent Romantic – tradition, to be a divine messenger with a 'mission' to accomplish. Without the strongly defined system later developed by d'Alveydre, Hugo had already shown that his concern was to implement some of the tenets of the Romantic movement. Added to this was his belief that, as a poet, he was a « mage » sent by God, to redeem humanity, as Denis Saurat demonstrates:

La théorie des mages, qui tireront l'humanité du mal, de l'ignorance et du doute, qui sont les instruments de Dieu pour ramener l'homme, une fois sa tâche faite, jusqu'à Dieu lui-même, cette théorie si chère à Hugo, parce qu'il se réservait le premier rang parmi ces mages.⁵⁸

Use of the title “mage” immediately indicates the connection with the occult – above all with the Cabal, and, by extension, with the *Zohar*, sacred text of the Cabal. In a later chapter, Saurat spells out the criterion for the title of “mage”:

Seuls ceux à qui peuvent légitimement s'appliquer ces noms: poète, penseur, sont les mages, les voix de Dieu.⁵⁹

It is clear that Hugo's convictions, religious and spiritual (in all senses of the word), are at odds with Breton's scepticism and refusal, while at the same time there is a sharing of the perception of the poet as playing a major role in resolving discord and disharmony in the condition of mankind. Despite their differences, Breton evidently also found much in the occult that was of interest to his own quest, in particular that of “le point sublime”. Most important of all, Hugo was a poet.

Another divergence of opinion comes with Hugo's belief, described by Saurat as “La caractéristique la plus importante de la mentalité primitive...”,⁶⁰ that all can be

⁵⁸ Denis Saurat, *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple* (Paris : Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1948), pp. 29–30

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.154

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.14

explained by “l’intervention d’un agent ‘spirituel’: esprit, pouvoir magique, sorcellerie, etc.”⁶¹ – a belief explored at length by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, as Saurat himself points out.⁶² As well as Frazer, Saurat also draws on Lévy-Brühl’s work on *La Mentalité primitive* (1922).⁶³ He enlarges on the workings of Hugo’s creative mind:

Il est à peine besoin d’insister sur le fait que c’est la tendance fondamentale de l’imagination de Victor Hugo. Ses plus beaux effets poétiques sont obtenus par la révélation de la présence d’un esprit là où l’œil ordinaire ne voit qu’un objet... Ce ne sont pas là de purs effets poétiques. Victor Hugo croit qu’il y a des esprits dans les rochers et les astres.⁶⁴

While Breton does not in any way share this belief in spirits inhabiting inanimate objects, there is a considerable area of common agreement and interest revealed in this quotation. What must equally be emphasized is that Breton was in no way trying to produce “de purs effets poétiques”, but was rather following his interest and investigation into “l’objet”, discovering within it “le premier stade de l’énergie poétique que l’on trouve un peu partout à l’état latent mais qu’il s’agissait [...] de reveller”.⁶⁵

In this last quotation from Saurat given above, he gathers together three other elements equally fundamental to Breton’s *modus operandi*: “l’imagination”, “la révélation”, and “l’œil”. These form the most important common ground in Hugo’s and Breton’s work, and are obviously closely connected. The imagination is the tool with which to access the inner mind, where social constraints no longer apply, and where the ‘révélation’ can be both made and received. Saurat sums up the importance of the imagination to Victor Hugo:

Pour Hugo, [...] l’imagination est révélatrice de la réalité. Les images, les métaphores même tendent à être, non pas des ornements appliqués extérieurement à un objet, mais l’expression de son essence.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² As already discussed, it is known that Breton had also been reading Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, from which he goes on to quote in a later text. See above Chapter 1, p.30

⁶³ Denis Saurat, *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple*, op.cit., p.13

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.14

⁶⁵ André Breton, *Objets surréalistes (1936)* in *Alentours II, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.1200

⁶⁶ Denis Saurat, *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple*, op.cit., p.16

For Breton, too, the eye, both physical and metaphorical, feeds the mind with material from which to make the revelation. Michel Collot, writing of the Surrealists and imagination, recalls as illustration the attraction of Tanguy's 'landscapes' for Breton, with their escape from mimesis and consequent opening up to latent possibility. Collot outlines Tanguy's approach, which is to encourage the mind to explore the unknown:

L'espace transitionnel par excellence, où le réel et l'imaginaire, l'intérieur et l'extérieur, le sujet et l'objet se rencontrent et s'échangent. C'est cette zone mouvante que n'a cessé d'interroger Tanguy, dont les paysages presque abstraits ont d'emblée fasciné Breton: ils se réduisent souvent à un horizon désert où se profilent des formes indécises qui semblent flotter dans le vide, entre sol et ciel. Le paysage n'y est ni figuré ni configuré: il apparaît plutôt comme un espace potentiel, la condition de possibilité des figures, le fond indéterminé d'où elles émergent et dans lequel aussi bien elles se résorbent.⁶⁷

This is the mind released from traditional social constraints, the mind rediscovering the freedom of "la mentalité primitive". The concept of "la mentalité primitive" is one in which Breton became interested during the Great War, when he was deployed at a mental hospital in Nantes as a young medical officer. In those early days, it was the exploration of the mind to the edge of madness which held his interest. There is a sequential path from the simplicity of a child's uncluttered mind, comparable in many ways to the simplicity of a mind left untouched by constraints of society and 'education', which is "la mentalité primitive", to the edge of madness and the imbalance of a thoroughly disturbed mind.

Later, possibly after reading Frazer's *Golden Bough*, he actively pursued research into "la mentalité primitive" on his travels to Mexico in 1938, and again later, during his time in the native American reserves in New Mexico in 1945. This research, while essentially into primitive mentality, was largely triggered by his interest in primitive art, which had always been evident.⁶⁸ As will be seen in one section of *Les États Généraux*,

⁶⁷ Michel Collot, *Paysage et poésie*, op.cit., p.108

⁶⁸ In the *Notes et variants* to the *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopis*, as proof of Breton's early interest in primitive art, Étienne-Alain Hubert cites a letter from Éluard to Gala dated June 1927: "Ici, nous

Breton combined his interest in mythology, the primitive mentality and primitive art to create colourful and powerful imagery. This path is of the utmost importance to Breton in his quest and forms a key part of his research into the role of poetry and the poet.

Like Hugo, Breton feels strongly the duty to find some resolution to what he perceives to be the end of an era in Western civilization. Taking his lead from the occultists and Romantics who form the core of his research, Breton is seeking an answer to the conflict at the heart of this “civilization”. Like them, too, – and again like Hugo – he finds partial answers in the Cabal and above all in its text, the *Zohar*.

Implicit in the importance of the eye is the most fundamental element of all, important not just to Hugo and Breton as poets, but to mankind from all time, as source of light, heat and life itself – the sun. Saurat devotes an entire chapter to the importance of light to the science of the occult, which he heads: *L’Occultation: la lumière, substance divine*. In it, he identifies the long history attaching to the divine status awarded to the sun, referring back to the Cabalist Robert Fludd and his disciples writing in the 17th century, as well as to the importance given to the sun and light in the biblical account of creation:

Mais je veux insister d’abord ici sur l’organisation de cette matière divine, la lumière. Elle n’est visible que *grâce à la forme matérielle qu’elle a prise*. La lumière elle-même est une première occultation de Dieu... [...] Mais la première forme de Dieu est la lumière, et en particulier le soleil. [...] Le soleil est plein de divinité essentielle. [...] Si l’on considère l’identification de Christ au Verbe qui a créé le monde, le soleil prend la première place dans ce système cosmogonique ; il devient la source de la création.⁶⁹

Both Hugo and Breton give ample evidence of their adherence to this stance in their poetry – Breton, as we have seen in this study, in his poem *Fata Morgana* in particular, with its many references to the sun and to the new day, while Hugo’s work might be said to be so light-sensitive and heliocentric as to make it impossible to pick out

avons trouvés, moi et Breton des poupées du Nouveau-Mexique (Pueblo). C’est merveilleux.” (Éluard, *Lettres à Gala*, Gallimard, 1984, p.23 [juin 1927]). Cf. *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1224

⁶⁹ Denis Saurat, *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple*, op.cit., p.82–83 The italics are the author’s.

a single suitable example. In the case of Breton's use of light, there is a duality or play on the use of light which emerges. In *Fata Morgana*, written during some of the darkest days during the outbreak of the war, the accent is very much on light. By contrast, in *Devant le Rideau*, as will be seen in Chapter 7, although written after Breton's return to France after the end of the war, the emphasis is on darkness. Saurat chooses lines from Hugo's *Dieu, La Lumière* to quote in his chapter, of which these are the closing couplet:

La matière n'est pas et l'âme seule existe,
Dieu n'a qu'un fruit, lumière, et n'a qu'un nom. Amour.⁷⁰

Setting aside the reference to God, there is evident common ground in the image of the (divine) fruit of light being Love. There is no doubt that for the author of *L'Amour Fou* (1937), and bearing in mind that his production during his exile was going to give light to *Arcane 17* (1944), there is for Breton, as a lyrical poet, a deep understanding of and agreement with Hugo's poetical aims (notwithstanding the transfer from God to Woman in Breton's case).

Indeed, Breton's canvassing of the occult as it appears in the *Prolégomènes*,⁷¹ strengthened by his re-reading of Hugo, is carried through and developed in *Les États Généraux*, written the same year as *Arcane 17* (1944). Breton is delving ever deeper into the roots of Romanticism, concentrating on its element of esotericism and its origins in hermetic and occultist texts and finding through them a poetic means of expression.

4. *Les États Généraux*:

Since his arrival in New York Breton had written several short poems,⁷² but *Les États Généraux* was the first of any length. This is one of several similarities the poem shares with both *Fata Morgana* and *Pleine marge*. Breton seemed to have rediscovered

⁷⁰ Victor Hugo, *Dieu, La lumière* in Denis Saurat's *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple*, op.cit., p.82

⁷¹ Cf. above Chapter 3, p.138

⁷² Published first in the review *VVV* and later (1948) as a collection, prosaically entitled *Poèmes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), *Notice* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1145

a lyricism indicative of his pleasure in writing, as well as a hermetic style through which again his aim was to hide in order to reveal. As Octavio Paz comments, Breton's prevailing rule is: "*Cacher pour reveller*".⁷³ While Paz is referring here directly to Breton's "poèmes-objets", the observation is equally true of his longer poems, as has already been seen, and is one of the similarities referred to above.

Two contemporary accounts of the creation and reception of *Les États Généraux* illustrate the power of Breton's work and its impact on the readership. Charles Duits, at the time still a young student and dazzled by Breton's attention, describes a glimpse of Breton at work. To Duits' mind, he must not be disturbed; he is composing. Duits preserves a clear memory of Breton's introduction to his fellow weekend guests of the fractured phrases of his waking moments – phrases which come vividly and unbidden into the mind just prior to waking from sleep. These moments, which belong more to the subconscious than to the fully conscious workings of the mind, are of prime importance to Breton. Since abandoning the experiment of automatic writing, this is the closest he can get to unfettered mental action. As Duits reports, the scraps of sentences, apparently random groups of words, are defined as much by the gaps as by the groups themselves.

From his window, Duits can see the poet marching to and fro, "extraordinairement concentré",⁷⁴ stooping every now and then to scoop up a pebble which he scrutinizes for a moment. Duits describes his abstracted air: "... l'inspiration faisait de lui un absent. Il flottait comme une ombre sur la terre...".⁷⁵ It was not until some time later, Duits records, that he realized that this spectacle, which at the time he took so much for granted, was a unique opportunity to watch the poet in the act of composing. Some weeks later, Breton read aloud *Les États Généraux*.

The second contemporary witness, writer and critic Robert Lebel, recalls the strength of the emotion he felt on receiving a telephone call from Breton in October 1943. Breton had just finished the poem, and asked Lebel, "avec l'humilité grandiose dont il

⁷³ Octavio Paz, *Préface to André Breton – Je vois, j'imagine : poèmes-objets*, op.cit., p.VI

⁷⁴ Charles Duits, *André Breton, a-t-il dit passe?*, op.cit., p.117

⁷⁵ Ibid

était coutumier en pareil cas”, if he might read it to him. As the reading progresses, Lebel describes his feelings:

Fasciné, je retenais mon souffle, de crainte d’interrompre le rythme de son extraordinaire diction et, tout en veillant à ne perdre aucune nuance, je ne pus faire taire en moi l’idée que je vivais un moment unique et que, de ce banal récepteur appuyé à mon oreille, me parvenaient non seulement un poème immense, mais également un oracle, semblable par le ton à ceux que prononçaient autrefois les augures et les chresmologues.⁷⁶

He comments on the feelings aroused by Breton’s writing, of Breton’s “alternance de l’espoir fou et du pessimisme irremédiable”, of his mixing past and future, but above all of his great gift to those other refugees in New York at the time:

Ainsi m’apparaîtra toujours André Breton, illuminant brusquement notre exil du don inouï de sa communication bouleversante.⁷⁷

The witness of these two – the young poet-student and the literary critic – give an indication of the degree of expectation which awaited Breton’s writing at this time. Georges Bataille’s article in *Critique* (November, 1947) is confirmation of the role of “mage” in which he was cast, and to which he himself aspired as poet.

In *Les États Généraux*, as in some of his other texts, the disposition of the text on the page is as important as the text itself. In its original publication in the review *VVV*,⁷⁸ the title, author’s name and, at the end of the text, the date of composition, were all in miniscule print, while the reader’s eye was inevitably drawn immediately to the six broken phrases, in large, bold italic print, forming sub-titles in the poem. Together, with intimations of past and future, suggestion and dream, they form the fractured sentence:

Il y aura / toujours / une pelle / au vent / dans les sables / du rêve.

Many years later, in his introduction to *Le, la*, Breton emphasizes the importance these fragments of sentences have always held for him:

⁷⁶ Robert Lebel in Alain et Odette Virmaux, *André Breton – Qui êtes-vous ?*, op.cit., p.111; also quoted by Étienne-Alain Hubert in *Notice to Les États Généraux*, André Breton, *O.C.* Vol.III, op.cit., p.1152

⁷⁷ Robert Lebel, in Alain et Odette Virmaux, *André Breton – Qui êtes-vous ?*, op.cit., p.112

⁷⁸ *VVV*, No. 4, February 1944, pp.2–7

D'un immense prix [...] m'ont toujours été ces phrases ou tronçons de phrases, bribes de monologue ou de dialogue extraits du sommeil et retenus sans erreur possible tant leur articulation et leur intonation demeurent nettes au réveil – réveil qu'ils semblent produire car on dirait qu'ils viennent tout juste d'être proférés. Pour sibyllins qu'ils soient, chaque fois que je l'ai pu je les ai recueillis avec tous les égards dus aux pierres précieuses.⁷⁹

The combination of interrupted thoughts and fractured sentences is a recurring constant in Breton's surrealist texts. His description of these fragments as « sibylline » indicates his own feelings as to their mysterious, even oracular, nature. They illustrate perfectly his instinct that: “Il se peut que la vie demande à être déchiffrée comme un cryptogramme”.⁸⁰ As early as 1928, therefore, in this quotation from *Nadja* Breton postulates that possibly life is a succession of mysterious cyphers which it is the poet's role to 'translate'. It remains to tease out the meaning of the fragmented sentences. In trying to penetrate the thought processes that occur between waking and sleeping, consciousness and sub-consciousness, Breton is attempting to access the mind at its most free, unconstrained by self-awareness or the traditional mores of society or education. The reading of fractured half-waking thoughts and 'dream moments' became a safer replacement of the experience of automatic writing, which had ultimately proved damaging to the subject and was therefore discontinued.

The role of the fragments of waking sentences is to act as something akin to an inductor in electromagnetism; they trigger the flow of images, memories, thoughts of each section, much as a trip switch governs the flow of an electric current.⁸¹ The opening section has no such inductor, leaving the reader to receive the 'impulses' as best he or she may. In this section, there is ambiguity as to whether the temporal setting is morning or evening – perhaps it is immaterial. What is certain is that the electrical analogy is carried through into the vocabulary, not just of this section, but also at later points in the poem, giving not least a passing reference to the frequent power cuts

⁷⁹ André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.IV, op.cit., p.341

⁸⁰ André Breton, *Nadja* in *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.716

⁸¹ See Étienne-Alain Hubert's *Notice* to Breton's *Les États Généraux* in *O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.1153

prevalent in New York at the time. Gérard Legrand goes as far as to say: “Le poème a été écrit comme pendant une des nombreuses pannes d’électricité que le poète eut à connaître à New York.”⁸²

The opening section of the poem plunges immediately into a flow of directives and images which yields more with each reading. There is a sense of reaching into the depths to release what is submerged:

Dis ce qui est dessous parle
Dis ce qui commence⁸³

Then begins the stark refrain “Polis mes yeux...”. It is not clear whether this is a command or a description. Word play is one of Breton’s most favoured techniques, and one he uses several times in this poem. One feels the effort of peering into the half-light – is it dawn or dusk? Whether “polis” is descriptive or imperative, the effect on the reader is much the same, the effort emphasized by the verb “scrute” in the following line:

Comme un fourré que scrute un chasseur somnambule

The phrase “Polis mes yeux” is repeated in all three more times, once reinforced unambiguously by “polis-les”, repetition being another fundamental tool in Breton’s creative approach.

The seemingly obscure reference to “cette capsule de marjolaine” is perhaps a further comment on thoughts and desires otherwise suppressed – marjoram has aphrodisiac qualities – continuing the image of reaching deep into areas of uninhibited thought and desire.

Light is dawning or fading, – “l’heure de traire” could be either morning or evening milking – its meagre quality put to shame by the sparks flying between one milkmaid and another, as if from the tips of their fingers – a magical scene. A repetition of the refrain introduces a vague reference to the interruption of power:

⁸² Gérard Legrand, *Breton* (Paris : Pierre Belfond, 1977), p.146

⁸³ André Breton, *Les États Généraux* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.27

Polis mes yeux à ce fil superbe sans cesse renaissant de sa rupture
Ne laisse que lui écarte ce qui est tavelé⁸⁴

with vivid images of dappled light and sparkling fish ejected from the nets, the evening catch thrown out “sous le spasme”. The images, reminiscent of those flowing through his previous long poems, *Pleine Marge* and *Fata Morgana*, are legion and open to many different interpretations. That is possibly a great part of their charm. Does the line:

Y compris au loin la grande rosace des batailles⁸⁵

indicate a brief nostalgic glance back to the days of the Revolution with cockades and rosettes, or rather, with more immediate relevance, a distant glimpse of the war raging in Europe? Breton will revisit the subject of the Revolution later in the poem.

The ambiguity of morning and evening is repeated, as is the concept of revealing what is ‘underneath’:

Dis ce qui est sous le matin sous le soir
Que j’aie enfin l’aperçu topographique de ces poches extérieures
aux éléments et aux règnes
Dont le système enfreint la distribution naïve des êtres et des choses⁸⁶

Breton rehearses again his own leaning towards what is considered out of the ordinary, beyond the pale – the concept and vocabulary are repeated, in some instances word for word, in *Fragrant délit*:

Il se peut aussi qu’il existe dans l’inconscient humain une tendance à honorer les êtres et les choses en raison inverse de la proximité où [...] nous nous sentons par rapport à eux...[...]...ainsi le bestiaire surréaliste [...] accorde la préminence à des types hors série, d’aspect aberrant ou fin de règne comme l’ornithorynque, la mante religieuse ou le tamanoir.⁸⁷

Running alongside the direct, if haphazard, imagery, Breton uses such words as “elements” and “règnes”, “distribution” and “courants”, which again chime with the theme of electricity, its supply and the interruption to that supply. A further suggestion

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ André Breton, *Fragrant délit* in *O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.794

of “le règne animal” adds a biological/zoological theme, together with that of ‘animal magnetism’. There is also the constant possibility of ambiguity and word play, as he connects the “courants” with “les cartes maritimes”.⁸⁸

Breton continues with an abrupt observation that it is time to put aside one’s individuality of former times. This is a clear indication of his on-going interest in Mabile’s concept of “égrégores”, an attempt to raise a collective perception of establishing a new and better society, a harmonious world order. However, there is nothing definite in the lines, which lead obliquely into a colourful possible description of fist fighting and a resultant black eye. Images follow of the legions of departing troops, ready to lay down their lives, exchanging a last nostalgic glance with girls on the nearby bridge as they march away. This must surely be a direct reference to the immediate crisis of World War II, and perhaps even a memory of World War I.

The last haunting refrain: “Mais polis mes yeux” seems this time to emphasize again the lack of light, the encircling gloom – whether metaphorical or actual. Breton feels unable to look ahead into the future, his vision obscured. Also repeated is the image of plunging deep into some far-away, inaccessible place where a firey forge is flaring up, followed by the enigmatic injunction:

Que rien n’inquiète l’oiseau qui chante entre les 8
De l’arbre des coups de fouet⁸⁹

The number ‘8’ has a magic all of its own: as the mathematical cube of ‘2’; for the Chinese as a sign of prosperity or wealth; but perhaps most importantly of all in this context as its role in the Tarot pack. Arcane ‘8’ shows a woman with a sword in one hand, either contemplating the Balance of Justice, or actually holding it in the other hand. This is the portrayal of the absolute necessity of balancing forces, of balancing the strengths of man and woman, the balance of Love and Wisdom. Given that Breton was already preoccupied with his project to write a book on Tarot (which culminated in the text *Arcane 17*), it is more than likely that the significance of the number ‘8’ was its Tarot

⁸⁸ *Les États Généraux, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.28

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

value. As has been seen, before leaving France, Breton had already been instrumental in putting together a co-operative of artists to create a re-designed deck of cards, *Le jeu de Marseille*,⁹⁰ in which the picture cards were replaced by Surrealist heroes and heroines, many of whom reflected a deep preoccupation and renewed connection with hermeticism and the occult. At its simplest, there is direct symbolism here: Justice is obscured in times of oppression and raw violence.

4.1 *Il y aura*

The first of the inductor fragments introduces a section which initially appears full of hope and anticipation, the future tense indicating a looking forward, even optimistic expectation. In this section alone there are four more italicized phrases which seem to have a minor inductor role of their own, one of almost lyrical re-awakening to the beauty of nature in the first three:

D'où vient ce bruit de source

The key word in this opening line is “*source*”, with its connotation of hope in a new beginning. However, the direction immediately turns back on itself, searching for the well-spring, then turns once more to the door, where there is no key. Again there is a feeling of being blocked from going forward, the momentary optimism thwarted, which is confirmed by the next line, with its image of huge dark rocks blocking the way.

An obtruse reference to the city of Lyons reveals the hermetic connections Breton had himself discovered during his research in the area in the summer of 1939, some of which he had used in writing *Pleine Marge* the following year.⁹¹ Further confirmation of Lyon’s reputation for esotericism is to be found in Jean Gaulmier’s publication of *L’Ode à Charles Fourier* (1961), in which, before presenting an annotated edition of the poem, he gives details of its genesis, together with biographical and literary background on Fourier himself. Gaulmier refers in passing to “les emprunts possibles de Fourier aux illuminés Lyonnais”,⁹² later quoting from Michelet’s *Histoire de la*

⁹⁰ See above Chapter 2, p.77

⁹¹ See above Chapter 1, p.40

⁹² Jean Gaulmier, *L’Ode à Charles Fourier*, (Paris : Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1961), p.41

Révolution as to what Fourier owed to the moral and social climate of Lyons, where he spent prolonged visits :

Nulle part plus que dans Lyon, il n’y eut plus de rêveurs utopiques. Nulle part le cœur blessé, brisé, ne chercha plus inquiètement des solutions nouvelles au problème des destinées humaines.⁹³

The deep seam of Romanticism, with its esoteric roots, together with its strong Masonic history, so much a part of Lyons and its intellectual society, is evidently an element of the attraction the city holds for Breton.

With “*Une bouffée de menthe*”, Breton recalls the country lanes of his youth and the idealized innocence of female company. The evocation of “*Une libellule*” intentionally carries forward this picture of fragile feminine beauty. A damozel fly is, after all, another name for a dragonfly, and either or both conjure up the picture of female followers enthusiastically clustering round to hear him speak at some time in the future.

From the future, another swift return to the past with a very precise reference to Delescluze, hero of the rising at the time of the Commune, shot as he approached the barricades in the Place du Château d’Eau on 25 May 1871. Breton had been on a pacifist march in 1913 to commemorate the execution of Delescluze, and may well have heard veterans from the Commune speak in his memory.⁹⁴ At all events, Breton is returning to an ideal of the Revolution, a hero unjustly struck down.

The enigmatic closing italicized phrase of this section is perhaps mirroring this heroic act in some way – it may even be another occluded reference to Tarot cards.

4.2 *toujours*

As the future tense of *Il y aura* introduced a temporal optimism, so this inductor phrase is followed by the folding of wings, a sense of dropping back to earth. The idea

⁹³ Henri Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution*, VI, p.290 quoted in Jean Gaulmier, *L’Ode à Charles Fourier*, op.cit., p.50

⁹⁴ Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notes sur Les États Généraux*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1158–9

of eternity in any form is anathema to Breton, and in this section there is a sense of stasis bordering on stagnation. The word play on “poulie rouillée” and “poule mouillée” already introduces the idea of an image of rust, damp and decay, which is carried through into the line: “Qui ronge le dessin de l’orgue de Barbarie”. According to Gérard Legrand, the assonated syllables have a further significance for Breton:

Ce mot ‘poulie rouillée et poule mouillée’ évoque ici pour le poète quelque chose d’affreux, la monotonie répétitive.⁹⁵

This comment is confirmation of Breton’s dislike of repetition of thought or action, which might lead to paralysis or ossification of an idea or of creativity. Against this, repetition is a device which Breton frequently uses in his poetry, as has been seen.⁹⁶

Breton appears to exhort us that it is not too early to recognize from mythology the ephemeral quality of life. What most inspires fellow-feeling in him is the generally accepted thought that one can actually hit out at this anachronism, and, still more so in the quest for liberty, contrary to popular opinion, there is no room for memory or anything intense, which might be considered just the by-products of the imagination. Breton significantly uses the phrase “la quête de la liberté” – an important phrase which links him with Hugo’s self-imposed exile after Napoléon III’s coup d’État (1851). Furthermore, it evokes Éluard’s poem “*Liberté*” (1942) – real “poésie de circonstance” – to which Breton is responding in a very different form. Breton wants to show that this is a quest for freedom – a true quest, not just an ephemeral illusion, nor simply a political slogan. The lines are redolent with reaction against the stifling of memory and the imagination and the stagnation this induces.

4.3 *une pelle*

This fragment introduces a complete change, with its vigorous imagery of a young workman, with his shovel, working amid the dust of brick and chalk. There is more than a hint of love and desire woven into the imagery, together with the life-giving

⁹⁵ Gérard Legrand, *Breton*, op.cit., p.146

⁹⁶ Cf. the repetition of “Polis mes yeux” in the first section of the poem. André Breton, *Les États Généraux*, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.27

energy of the sun. Tension is built into the sharp beat of the short powerful lines, and an urgency in the choice of vocabulary:

Montre montre encore
Conjuguant leurs tourbillons
Volcans et rapides

In his critique of the poem, Gérard Legrand sums up this section in parenthesis in two words: “le travail, le socialisme”.⁹⁷ In the build-up to the introduction of Saint-Yves d’Alveydre in the next section, there are recognizable aspects of d’Alveydre’s theory of synarchy, as in the lines:

Et le manœuvre
N’est pas moins grand que le savant aux yeux du poète

In the eyes of the poet, each member of society, whether manual worker or intellectual, is of equal importance. Universal harmony is the ultimate goal, a harmony achieved by appreciation of what each race, whatever its colour, and each individual, whether male or female, has to contribute in his or her own right and with equal freedom.

4.4 *au vent*

There can be no doubt as to the setting of the next section, with the opening words “Jersey Guernesey...” following the evocative inductor phrase. The reference to two couples – Étienne-Alain Hubert suggests that the word “coupes” here is being played with in its likeness to the word “couple”⁹⁸ – leads from what can only be a veiled reference to Hugo and Juliette Drouot, to the specific mention of Saint-Yves d’Alveydre and “l’amie de Fabre d’Olivet”. Both couples had, separately, spent time in the Islands; Saint-Yves, particularly, records the importance for him, as a young man, of his meeting with Virginie Faure, and of learning more from her of the hermeticist, Fabre d’Olivet, who was so influential on his thinking and the development of his ideas.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Gérard Legrand, *Breton*, op.cit., p.146

⁹⁸ Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notes sur Les États Généraux*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1159

⁹⁹ Saint-Yves d’Alveydre, *La France vraie*, p.89-90, quoted in *Notes*, as above, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1155

Direct reference to the giant squid of Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* reveals Breton's recent re-reading of the novel, confirming again his renewed interest in Hugo and, to a certain extent, his identification with him during this period of exile. Coincidentally, in 1942 André Masson was producing a series of illustrations for *La Pieuvre* (published in 1944) at the request of Roger Caillois from Buenos Aires; Breton was not only aware of this project, but quite possibly discussed it with Masson. This, with his re-awakened interest in Hugo's novel, together weave a strong image of the sea monster.

The imagery and references are so dense at this point that it is hard to read all of Breton's meaning. He passes swiftly from the giant squid to the whorls and squirls of the Hebraic alphabet, even writing a note in verse to develop this reference. The note seems to refer directly to Hugo, quoting from the chapter in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* at the end of which the hero is caught by the tentacles of the monster octopus from a crevice within his cave.¹⁰⁰ Breton is, at the same time, endorsing Hugo's condemnation of "bon gout", before passing on to condemn in turn the traditions and conventions of the poetry of the past.

This attack on traditional poetics can be clearly read as one personally directed at Aragon, who had recently written *La Rime en 1940*, arousing Breton's sarcasm and scorn with his conventional approach. Both Aragon and Éluard were published week after week in reviews circulated by France Libre in the U.S. Further, Aragon's *Cantique à Elsa* was published in both *Fontaine* (1942) – available in the U.S. – and, partially, in *Lettres françaises* from Buenos Aires in February 1943; thereafter it was incorporated in *Les yeux d'Elsa*. Breton would have had access to both. Aragon had also published *Brocéliande* (Albert Béguin, 1942), which would have further irritated Breton with its connections with the Forest of Paimpont and therefore its links to Arthurian legend and Christian myth. Breton, by contrast, takes here Esclarmonde as his heroine – a heroine in the mould of a distinctive individual, like Nadja herself, in search of liberty and truth.

¹⁰⁰ Victor Hugo, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, op.cit., p.492

If, as seems likely, given his reading of Aegerter's *Les Hérésies du Moyen Âge* (1939),¹⁰¹ Breton's heroine is Esclarmonde de Foix, then she is indeed a heroine of courage, prepared to stand with those who defied the Cathars in the 13th Century, described as:

Cette belle et grave Esclarmonde de Foix que les malheurs de sa cause
allaient rendre immortelle.¹⁰²

Breton hammers home his point with the repetition of "Esclarmonde" to end each of the next five lines. It can be no coincidence, either, that the name itself – "Esclar-monde" – has a significance relevant to Breton's quest and his ambition to enlighten the world.

Into the double significance of Esclarmonde as the fearless 13th century heroine and also the figurehead of Breton's fight against traditional poetics is woven the importance to Breton of words themselves. There has already been the reference to the Hebraic alphabet, to its form and doubtless its significance through the Zohar; now Breton moves to words. They are as important in a practical sense as the nails in a horse's shoe. Into the story of Esclarmonde, the poet weaves imagery from popular myth surrounding the edelweiss, portraying love and freedom.

Breton's interest in Tarot surfaces again, with an apparent description of a dagger, but the evident double-meaning of "lame" as both 'blade' and 'card' (in a Tarot pack). This could also link with the Arcane 8 referred to in the introductory section of the poem, with its imagery of a figure reaching out for a dagger, in an action faster than players competing in the game of "la mourre" – a game of chance which would appeal to Surrealists, in which one player guesses the number of fingers held up simultaneously by the other player. The game of Mora (or Morra) was especially popular in Italy, and, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, also known in the 18th Century as the game of Love. As in the previous section, Breton ends with wordplay in his imagery, carrying through with it the dimension of Love:

¹⁰¹ Cf. letter from André Breton to Jacqueline Lamba dated 14 January 1940, quoted in *Notice to Pleine marge, O.C.*, Vol.II, p.1780

¹⁰² Emmanuel Aegerter, *Les Hérésies du Moyen Âge* (Paris : Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1939), p.49

La main dans l'acte de prendre en même temps que de lâcher
Plus preste qu'au jeu de la mourre
Et de l'amour

The pleasing sonic repetition of “la mourre” in “l'amour” closes the section with teasing emphasis.

4.5 *dans les sables*

The obvious imagery of veiled Nomads plodding by, heads down, mutates into a reference to the area by the Pont-au-Change, linking the Île de la Cité with the right bank of the Seine, which had, since the reign of Louis VIII, been the domain of the money-changers. Breton makes reference to the well-known painting from the Louvre, *Le Changeur et sa femme*, by the Belgian-born painter Quentin Metsys. Not only does the painting carry a moral message in its allegorical portrayal of the couple, but Metsys makes use of a mirror in the foreground, its glimpse of exterior daylight complementing the lack of light signified by the snuffed-out candle. Further, Breton was almost certainly aware of a recent article by the critic René Étiemble¹⁰³ (with whom he worked on the Voice of America), in which he contrasts the painting of Metsys with that of Marinus van Roymerswal on the same subject. Entitled “*Mystery is redeemed by light*”, Étiemble’s article praises the honesty of Metsys’ painting, to the detriment of that of van Roymerswal. He sums up Metsys’ skill in appealing to the intelligence of those viewing his work:

How can one refuse [...] to recognize a knowing and intentional stylization...? How ignore, either, that this exercise of critical and poetical intelligence aims to present an enigma, and to fix on the lowered lids of the money-changer the attention, the curiosity, the intelligence and the imagination of the spectator? So much precision, so much dryness, are present only to liberate the daydream; so much intelligence is on hand only to recreate the mystery of life.¹⁰⁴

The closing comments continue to reflect on the same line of thought, combining the importance of intelligence as a trigger to the imagination, with the complementary importance of light, actual or metaphorical, to shine onto the subject:

¹⁰³ René Étiemble, *View, III, No.2* – (New York : June, 1943), pp.57,58,66

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.58

For Matsys knew that a perfect use of what is called “intelligence” implies the putting to work of the imaginative powers, thus fusing the gratifying practise [*sic*] of the former with the free play of the latter. Whereas half-light dulls the mind to the point where it perceives only what has been formulated as an equation, great lucidity [...] recreates mystery through its own strength.¹⁰⁵

Some of Breton’s lines are reminiscent of Hugo’s *La Bouche d’Ombre*:

Je ne suis pas comme tant de vivants qui prennent les devants pour revenir
Je suis celui qui va.

He dwells for a moment on death and memorials of death, foretelling his own tombstone and commenting on that of Sade, in a passage that passes from the individual and the particular to the general, transcending the “moi” to merge with the surrounding world. As he has quoted from Hugo, so here he quotes directly from Sade, taking a brief comment from the section devoted to Sade in his own *Anthologie de l’humour noir*: “Comme je me flatte que ma mémoire s’effacera de l’esprit des hommes”.¹⁰⁶

As Breton returns to imagery connected with both the art of the native Americans, in which he has long been interested, and that of designs emanating from the hermetic ideology of such as Corneille Agrippa (1486-1535), descriptions recall intricate designs in sand which could be associated with either. In this design, Breton sees the oval of a light bulb, with its incandescent filaments – before the current fails again and the lamp goes out – and also the shape of a tobacco flower, as he had seen it in a book illustration, likening the shape to that of the female uterus – the book found fortuitously on a stall on the banks of the Seine.

Interest in the American Indian continues, possibly recording the patterns incorporated in a picture in (or on) sand, such as were carried out for public audiences at the Natural History Museum in New York. The four bulls’ heads represented in the design symbolize the past, present, future and eternal: each has its particular colour and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.66

¹⁰⁶ André Breton, *L’Anthologie de l’humour noir*, O.C. Vol.II, op.cit., p.892

its bird symbol – at the base, comes black, colour of night and the North, representing the past, with crow feathers as its symbol; to the left, white for the present, East and daylight, with symbolic feathers of the wild goose; at the top, yellow for the future, West and sunset, flamingo feathers its symbol; to the right, blue for the eternal, with symbolic feathers from the bird of paradise. The design seems to portray man caught in an everlasting tangle of past, present, future and eternity.

The brilliant colours of the design are complemented by other tints – kingfisher blue and a field of yellow – but are as quickly veiled by a misty arc from which only one bull’s head is left wholly visible. The theme of obscured vision is repeated, and finally Breton introduces the image of the skin of a condylure (star-nosed mole, much associated with hermeticism and the occult)¹⁰⁷ stretched out and pinned to the ground, as was the habit of some Indian tribes to ‘protect’ the entrance of their tents. Again, the section ends with a type of wordplay:

C’est par là qu’on entre
On entre on sort
On entre
on ne sort pas

The placing of the line is significant for Breton, as is the next fragmented phrase and its position on the page:

du rêve

For Gérard Legrand, Breton’s meaning is determined by the singular position of the phrase, as if it is a continuum of the previous fragmented line, which would therefore read: “On entre on ne sort pas *du rêve*”.¹⁰⁸ The interpretation is left open to the individual reader.

4.6 *du rêve*

Whether or not man can escape from the world of dream, Breton states clearly:

Mais la lumière revient

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Projet initial* in *Notes to Devant le Rideau, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1368

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Gérard Legrand, *Breton*, op.cit., p.146

But immediately the ambiguity returns with imagery of a hazy, smoke-laden atmosphere, conjuring up the “maisons de Mozart” of Victorien Sardou’s automatic engravings – fantastical drawings of buildings, directions for their creation dictated to the artist by some mysterious ‘voice’, later identified by him as that of Mozart.¹⁰⁹ Out of this misty scene there is a gradual sense of awakening; movement of a face, of its eyelids and lips; the stage set empties, until all that is left is a single star, lost in the ‘fur’ of the night.

In *Les États Généraux*, written at a time when the news from Europe was dark indeed, Breton is nonetheless sounding a note of optimism, of belief in a point of light in the darkness. Having left active politics behind, Breton has turned to certain aspects of Romanticism to find resolution to his search for a means of fulfilling his role of “poète-mage”, creating poetry appropriate to this time of crisis. In his determination to differentiate himself from both Aragon and Éluard and their return to poetical tradition as a means of resistance to the Nazi oppression, he looks deep into the literary roots of Romanticism in hermeticism and the occult to find another way. As has been shown, this is no new route, but the pursuit of a continuing line of long-held questioning, one which will be followed further in both *Arcane 17*, written the same year as *Les États généraux*, and *L’Ode à Charles Fourier* (1945).

¹⁰⁹ See Breton’s article on Joseph Crépin in *Le surréalisme et la peinture, IV, O.C. Vol.IV, op.cit.*, pp.710–713

CHAPTER 5: *Arcane 17* – Towards mythical harmony

This chapter will show the height of Breton's quest into hermeticism and the occult in a text which is essentially the lyrical expression of his love for his companion and future wife, Elisa Claro, set against the ever-present crisis of the war in Europe, of which Breton shows he is constantly aware. Written while he was away from New York with Elisa in the Gaspé Peninsula, Canada, in 1944, *Arcane 17* represents the culmination of Breton's hermetic interest, the expansion of which has already been traced in the texts examined in earlier chapters of this thesis. This progression can be charted from the emergence of hermetic references in *Pleine Marge* and *Fata Morgana*, continued in *Les États Généraux*, now finding its apogee in *Arcane 17*. At the centre of this text lies Breton's attempt to use poetic language as "an effective agent of transmutation",¹ able to transform conflicts, separation and anxieties which are very much at the heart of what is being experienced at the time by the whole world, into a new "vision". The subtext is that of the political and ideological dimension of myth as a means of resistance to the threat of totalitarianism in Europe. Breton's poetical message – always the most important element for him – is accompanied by a clear political and moral point, demonstrating his faithfulness to his pre-war principles and his rejection of fascism and the Vichy regime. Indeed, Breton's conception of myth by then is clearly that the "mythe nouveau" has to become a collective conscience of the possibility of using poetry to transform the world.² Already, in 1942, while addressing the students of Yale, the poet had made reference to the lead given by Apollinaire:

C'est qu'il a été beaucoup plus près que quiconque de penser que pour améliorer le monde il ne suffisait pas de le rétablir sur des bases sociales plus justes, mais qu'il fallait encore toucher à l'essence du Verbe.³

¹ Anna Balakian, 'Metaphor and metamorphosis in André Breton's poetics', *French Studies*, XIX, (I), 1965, p.34.

² While *Arcane 17* can hardly be called a work of political or ideological resistance per se, it does follow up Breton's exhortation to the students of Yale (December, 1942), in which he inveighs against Hitler and the other Fascist leaders, slating "la reviviscence de certains mythes, d'origine il semble bien germanique, incompatible...s avec le développement harmonieux de l'humanité". Cf *Situation du surréalisme* in *La Clé des champs*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.710.

³ Ibid, p.716

In the same address, while acknowledging that Surrealism is born of “une affirmation de foi sans limites dans le *génie* de la jeunesse”,⁴ the poet goes on to point out that “la liberté est à la fois follement désirable et toute fragile”.⁵ Indeed, he emphasizes that “D’une guerre à l’autre, on peut dire que c’est la quête passionnée de la liberté qui a été constamment le mobile de l’action surréaliste”.⁶ If, for Surrealism, the quest for freedom/liberty is “le mobile”, then “le Verbe” is the means of achieving it – a guiding principle which is amply demonstrated by the poetics of *Arcane 17*.

The whole is expressed here in the two overarching myths (Isis/Méline) which preside over the elaboration of a universal harmony defined by the poet in his role as “seer”. Using his recent re-reading of Victor Hugo, Breton is also engaging with a re-assessment of much wider elements of European Romanticism (in particular its German component),⁷ emphasizing the spirit of Surrealism as one which “a toujours tenu à témoigner au romantisme un sentiment de libre dépendance”.⁸

With its rejection of Rationalism, its preoccupation with the imagination and dream, Romanticism was a movement of rebellion against the constraints not only of

⁴ Ibid, p.714 (The emphasis is Breton’s.)

⁵ Ibid, p.720

⁶ Ibid, p.719

⁷ Given his interest in the recent publication of Auguste Viatte’s *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* in the final paragraphs of *Arcane 17* (O.C., Vol.III, op. cit., p.94), it is evident that Breton was not only re-reading Hugo, but also following the links of Romanticism back to earlier poets and philosophers, both French and German. As will be seen, these threads are further developed in the *enté d’Ajours* (ibid, pp.97–113), when Breton is randomly presented with a copy of Jean Richer’s *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (1947), which prompts him to return to Viatte’s work and the literary legacy of Romanticism. Breton’s interest in Romanticism and the German influence on the movement in France is well documented (Cf, among others: Ferdinand Alquie, *Philosophie du surréalisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1955), p.200–201; Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.508; Martica Sawin, “Aux Etats-Unis” in *Planète affolée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), p.110; Gérard Legrand, *Breton*, op.cit., p.136; Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Breton’s post-Hegelian Modernism’ in *Extreme Beauty: aesthetics, politics, death*, Ed. James E. Swearingen & Joanne Cutting-Gray (London/Norfolk: Continuum, 2002), pp.17–28). Already in *Les Vases Communicants* (1932), he is (mis)quoting Novalis (André Breton, *Les Vase communicants, I, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.115 – Breton’s original quote of “imagination déchainée” is corrected to “imagination enchainée” Cf. Note 4, p.1383 of same volume). A year later, in his *Introduction aux ‘Contes bizarres’ d’Achim d’Arnim* (1933), he is delving into the writings of those such as Goethe, Schelling and Fichte, Gautier and Nerval. (André Breton, *Introduction aux ‘Contes bizarres’ d’Achim d’Arnim, O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., pp. 341–360). In 1937, *Cahiers du Sud* had produced a special edition dedicated entirely to *Le Romantisme Allemand*, which Breton is known to have read (Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, art and modern science*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008) pp.194–5).

⁸ André Breton, *Conférences d’Haïti, II, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.219–20

reason, but also of society and the church; thus it comes as no surprise that in 1930 Breton declared Surrealism to be “la queue tellement prehensile”⁹ of the earlier movement. Breton was responding here to the celebrations of the centenary of the play *Hernani* (1830) by Victor Hugo. The play had caused an uproar when it was first performed, and had been seen subsequently as marking the triumph of Romanticism in France. Breton, however, declared that the true essence of Romanticism lay in the “negation” of what the French authorities were celebrating: Romanticism was neither a nationalist phenomenon, nor had it come to an end. In fact there seems to be a general consensus about the deep links uniting Romanticism and Surrealism and in his 1947 conference on “Le surréalisme et l’après-guerre”, Tristan Tzara sums up the situation: “En dehors de la tradition idéologique révolutionnaire, il existe chez les poètes d’aujourd’hui une tradition révolutionnaire spécifiquement poétique”; to him, this “tradition” goes back to Romanticism which is “foncièrement révolutionnaire, non seulement parce qu’il exalte les idées de liberté, mais aussi parce qu’il propose un nouveau mode de vivre et de sentir, en conformité avec sa vision dramatique du monde, faite de contrastes, de nostalgies et d’anticipations”.¹⁰

These shared desires – certain aspects of which (notably the ideas of the fantastic and the marvellous) Breton found better illustrated by German Romantic writers such as Achim von Arnim or Friedrich Hölderlin than by French or English authors – can be described as a search for untrammelled freedom and a belief in the value of the human imagination, unfettered by convention or social obligations. Romanticism and Surrealism emphasized the subjective, the spontaneous and the visionary, and shared a predilection for the exotic, the mysterious and the occult. Restoring the ancient role of the poet as “mage”, literary Romanticism also recognized the importance of language and the written word. Most important of all for Breton, the connecting link between these elements is that of the imagination, perceived by some as something akin to magic, thus rendering the poet a magician in his ability to perform a form of alchemy through the word.

⁹ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op. cit., p.803

¹⁰ Tristan Tzara, *Le surréalisme et l’après-guerre* (Paris: Nagel, 1966), p.12

Although the main focus of this chapter is *Arcane 17*, it is important to reflect first on Breton's preoccupation with the “*lignes de forces [...] génératrices*”¹¹ of Surrealism, as he delineates them in the first lecture of his *Conférences d'Haïti* of 1945–6,¹² in order to contextualize our reading of the poem. Indeed, in his exposition of the roots of Surrealism, Breton reaches back to Romanticism and he is keen to assert that the detractors of Romanticism are – politically, at least – almost always reactionaries. Perhaps for this reason, the image of Romanticism in most text books

[e]st entachée d'un vice de structure fondamentale: elle laisse systématiquement dans l'ombre ou éclaire mal les forces génératrices du mouvement romantique, en particulier lorsqu'il lui faudrait les découvrir hors de France.¹³

Thus, in Breton's opinion many French Romantics, without being set in the context of their German and English contemporaries, are given more prominence than they merit – apart, possibly, from Victor Hugo.

This skewed vision of Romanticism is also brought about by looking at Romanticism as a purely artistic movement, rather than one which is at once also philosophical and social. Be that as it may, Breton acknowledges the close ties between Romanticism and Surrealism:

Qu'il s'agisse du romantisme, qu'il s'agisse du surréalisme qui, nous le verrons par la suite, a toujours tenu à témoigner au romantisme un sentiment de libre dépendance, n'a pas craint de marquer par rapport à lui sa filiation.¹⁴

Rather unusually for a French writer – especially at the time – he is particularly keen to underline the importance of the “*influences étrangères, très spécialement des influences anglaise et allemande*”. As he goes on to say:

Refuser de faire la part de ces influences, c'est se condamner à n'apercevoir que le côté superficiel de ces mouvements, c'est se priver délibérément de comprendre le processus de *fermentation* intellectuelle et sensible qui s'est opéré ou s'opère encore à travers eux.¹⁵

¹¹ *Conférences d'Haïti, II, O.C.*, Voll. III, op.cit., p.214 (The emphases are Breton's.)

¹² See above Chapter 4, p.149

¹³ *Conférences d'Haïti, II, O.C.*, Voll. III, op.cit., p.218–9

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.219–220

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.220

While the English influence on French Romanticism may be said to be largely “sur le cadre extérieur”, it also worked deeply “par le moyen de la *sensation*”.¹⁶ The German influence, on the other hand, manifested itself by a response from poets and philosophers to world-shaking events resulting in “une tentative d’accession à un état de conscience ou à un état d’âme exceptionnel”.¹⁷ Breton is moving away therefore from the importance of the sub-conscious, so prominent in his early texts. From these dual aims follow two different *modi operandi*: the first, based on the advances in scientific logic and criticism, is accessed via the philosophy of Hegel and Fichte, and via the literature of Achim d’Arnim; the second, based on natural mysticism, positions “l’*extase*” as the foundation of its system, using the philosophy of Schelling and the poetics of Novalis and Hölderlin. Breton sums up:

Toujours est-il que le *projet* allemand, au début du XIXe siècle, est d’agir non pas par la *sensation* en ce qu’elle a surtout d’extérieur mais de donner tout à espérer de la poursuite d’une certaine *quête* de l’esprit.¹⁸

Breton finds a theme common to three of his literary figures – a theme he follows up more closely in his study of Victor Hugo – that of the poet as *seer/prophet*. In all three cases, he puts the quotes in parenthesis, even claiming in at least one case:

Je cite les propres paroles de Novalis : ‘L’homme entièrement conscient s’appelle le *voyant*’.

He comments on the fact that, despite a considerable difference in approach, both Novalis and Achim d’Arnim are in accord on this, with d’Arnim’s words: “Les saints poètes, nommons-les aussi *voyants*”. A very similar quotation, he suggests, is also frequently ascribed to Rimbaud: “Je dis qu’il faut être *voyant*, *se faire voyant*”.¹⁹ Breton is again expressing a very deep desire to find common threads, a form of macro-synthesis, that he perhaps found – or at least looked for – in hermeticism.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.221

¹⁷ Ibid, p.222

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ All three quotes carry the author’s own emphasis: cf. *Conférences d’Haïti, II, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.223*

Novalis's return to the literature of the Middle Ages was, Breton postulates, a reaction against the dry, enervated state of contemporary German poetry – “l'appauvrissement en sève de la poésie”²⁰ – as a result of long exposure to the study of the Classics on the one hand, and the dessicating effect of Protestantism on the other. The liveliness, colour and spontaneity of medieval legends make a welcome contrast to the stern form of classical texts.

Breton largely recapitulates here what he had written in his *Introduction aux “Contes bizarres” d’Achim d’Arnim* (1933), in which he had already explored in depth the contributions to German Romanticism made not only by Achim d’Arnim himself, but also by Hegel, Schelling and Novalis. However, Breton is careful to avoid mention of any sign of possible transcendence which “is achieved through moral purification in the case of many of the romanticists”:²¹ rather, he concentrates on the fusion of essence and substance, “transcendence is replaced by metamorphosis”.²² The poet’s mission, as a “seer”, is not to discover the signs that are a reflection of another world, but to penetrate and decipher the obscure « cryptogramme » of this world.

1. Novalis and Nerval – towards the myth of Isis:

For the purpose of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the Romantic omnipresence in Breton’s readings at the time, alongside that of Hugo (we will see how Hugo’s presence is felt in the text later on) is translated in *Arcane 17* by the discreet but persistent presence of both Novalis and Nerval whose interest in Medieval alchemical texts familiarized them with the myth of Isis. The Romantic tradition of the Isiac myth with its representation of the truth hidden in and by the earth is well-known,²³ and both

²⁰ Ibid, p.222

²¹ Anna Balakian ‘Metaphor and metamorphosis in André Breton’s poetics’, op. cit., p.34

²² Ibid.

²³ Lionel Trilling also remarked in his essay ‘Freud and literature’ how much the theme of opposition between the hidden and the visible became a common characteristic of both Freud and the Romantics, and that the idea of “the hidden thing went forward to become one of the most dominant notions of the age”. *20th Century Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972). Importantly, for Novalis, the hidden was sometimes “light” and sometimes “dark”, but always good – an important point for Breton in *Arcane*

Novalis and Nerval were particularly well-acquainted with this myth. Indeed, in Freiburg, where he studied Rosicrucian and Medieval alchemical texts as well as the Classics, Novalis discovered references to Isis, and, in addition, others to an idea of nature founded in and derived from ancient fertility religions.²⁴ While for Nerval, his *Voyage en Orient* alone has been described as a voyage “vers Isis”,²⁵ and if “la prééminence d’Isis dans l’œuvre de Nerval demeure un fait indiscuté”,²⁶ critics have also followed his interest in the myth back to German sources.²⁷ This alone could explain why Breton, at such a historically critical time (the war with Germany is not yet over when he writes *Arcane 17*) is quite discreet about Novalis in his text – although he is happy to mention him in his *Conférences* in Haïti to a very different audience – while altogether more open about Nerval’s presence. Nevertheless, it remains that in both cases the Isiac myth can be traced back to German alchemical texts, and how they have been used by Romantic poets such as Novalis (and also Schiller, whom Breton mentions in his *Conférences*).

1.1 Novalis’s path:

The concentration of Surrealism on love/desire as the positive creative element springing from night/darkness can be identified as stemming directly from the influence of Novalis and his *Hymnes à la nuit* (1800). For Breton, Novalis exactly represents the essential quality of Night, a Surrealist quality quite different from the accepted norm, recognized and appreciated by Breton:

J’ai fermé les yeux pour rappeler de tous mes vœux la vraie nuit, débarrassée de son masque d’épouvantements, elle la suprême régulatrice et consolatrice, la grande nuit vierge des *Hymnes à la nuit*. [...] C’est toute la nuit magique dans le cadre, toute la nuit des enchantements.²⁸

17 as we shall see. See Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: A Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p.278

²⁴ Cf Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: A Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry*, op.cit., p.116.

²⁵ Aristide Marie, *Gérard de Nerval, le poète, l’homme : d’après des manuscrits et documents inédits*, (Paris : Librairie Hachette, 1955) – Chapter IX is entitled : ‘L’Orient ; vers Isis’.

²⁶ Camille Aubade *Nerval et le mythe d’Isis* (Paris : Kimé, 1997), p.17.

²⁷ Nicolas Popa “Les sources allemandes de deux ‘Filles du Feu’ : *Jemmy* et *Isis*”, RLC, juillet–septembre 1930, ref. in Camille Aubade’s *Nerval et le mythe d’Isis*, op.cit., p.17

²⁸ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.69–70

His interest in Novalis can be traced back to the very beginnings of the movement, as evidenced by a quotation of his “formule” in the *Manifeste*.²⁹ This, together with his newly rekindled interest in Romanticism through his re-reading of Hugo, indicates the genesis of Breton’s continuing intellectual preoccupation.

Novalis embodies in his work various essential elements of German Romanticism, several of which are reflected in Breton’s writing.³⁰ His training as a geologist ran parallel to his studies of classical mythology, so that he appears to have had little difficulty in moving from stones/earth as allegory to stones as physical objects.³¹ Indeed, his ability to interpret the symbolism of nature, earth and stone is very much his own, but while much of this quality stems from the alchemical tradition in which he was steeped, his thinking – particularly with reference to the Isiac myth – also owes much to the work of Schiller, “a source nearer in time if not in spirit”³² than that of alchemical texts. For Novalis, earth is “a symbol of man, an analogical trinity [...] in which man, language, and earth [...] are conjoined in one interwoven universe of symbolic signification”,³³ thus reconciling in himself the miner and the poet.

As mentioned above, Novalis’s conception of language is not restricted to spoken or written verbal expression, since for him:

Everything, each natural and each artificial object and also each subject, is understood [...] as a communication and therefore as a form of language. [...] ...language, then, is not merely a vehicle for carrying meaning or a tool for expressing ideas of beauty, truth, love, and faith, but is itself, in the very being of its various components, the beauty, truth, love and faith that is expressed.³⁴

²⁹ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol.I., op.cit., p.339

³⁰ Novalis (1772–1801): his work was discovered by Breton in the French translation of 1927 *Journal intime, suivi des Hymnes à la nuit et de fragments inédits*, trans. Germaine Claretie & S.Joachim-Chaigneau (Paris: Éds. Stock, 1927). Cf. *Notes to Arcane 17* in *O.C.*, Vol.III,op.cit., p.1187

³¹ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic’s Theory of Language and Poetry*, op.cit., p.87

³² *Ibid*, p.118–9

³³ *Ibid*, p.118

³⁴ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic’s Theory of Language*, op.cit., p.4

This use of language to embrace and communicate universally is a bold step away from rationalism and may be seen as Novalis's own "alchimie du verbe". Its influence on succeeding generations of poets is evident, whether in Hugo's efforts to re-instate the poet as "mage", Rimbaud's coining of the phrase "L'alchimie du verbe",³⁵ or even Breton's own preoccupation with language and words.³⁶ Pfefferkorn further supports the view that Novalis's reflections on poetry are more rewarding than his actual poetry, revealing his view of the poet as 'magician' and that poetry springs from the impulse of language itself, rather than following a contrived or preconceived path.³⁷

Similarly to his contemporary, Schiller, Novalis finds a rich seam of poetical analogy in the myth of Isis, as will be seen, using images of the Protean form of the goddess/earth-mother, her garments and above all her veil, employing a similar language to that of nature, who "speaks in just such a secret language of riddles and tropes".³⁸ A close observation of all natural phenomena is essential, Novalis suggests, in order to read the double character both of an object for itself and its representation as the sign or symbol of something other than itself. With his geological training, coupled with his love of both earth and nature, Novalis emphasizes "that the poet brings the earth into the openness of our awareness, that he speaks its truth".³⁹ It is the poet, with his use of hieroglyph and imagery, riddle and trope, who, through his imaginative creativity, thus fulfils the alchemical role of manipulator of metamorphosis and transformation.

Novalis's perception of the poet as having 'magic' qualities is further evidence of his rejection of rationalism. Indeed, he embraces the poet's use of the imagination, looking within himself for creative inspiration rather than relying on his outer senses alone, stating that:

The imagination is that wonderful sense which can *replace* for us all other senses – and which already answers so much to our willfulness. When the outer senses

³⁵ Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer* (1873)

³⁶ Cf. André Breton, *Les Mots sans rides* in *Les Pas perdus*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., pp.284–6

³⁷ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic's Theory of Language*, op.cit., p.24

³⁸ Ibid, p.122

³⁹ Ibid, p.143

seem to be subject entirely to mechanical laws – the imagination apparently is not bound to the presence and contact of outer stimuli.⁴⁰

This resonates with Breton's endorsement of imagination in the first *Manifeste* and his personal mistrust of senses expressed in the *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*, written immediately prior to the *Manifeste*, although not published until the following year (1925). In this text, Breton had again emphasized his doubts about sensory perception:

Nos sens, le caractère tout juste passable de leurs données, poétiquement parlant nous ne pouvons nous contenter de cette référence.⁴¹

This revelation of the imagination as *the* creative source, surpassing the use of the senses as simple receivers – and indeed replacing them – is therefore key to the influence of Novalis on succeeding generations, through Symbolism to Surrealism. Breton himself recognizes the central role of the imagination from the beginning, rejoicing in the freedom of the imagination, and adding to it the creative freedom to reject conventional language and literary construction, thus linking also to the world of dream and fairy-tale.

In the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton expands his search into the imagination, advocating “la descente vertigineuse en nous”⁴² as the route by which to seek out the most obscure depths of our innermost selves, fulfilling the Delphic command to “Know thyself!”⁴³ This inner journey was an intrinsic part of Novalis's literary output, its trajectory – again in direct comparison with Schiller – indissolubly interwoven with the core message of the Isiac myth, as discussed later in this chapter. Isis, the earth-mother, stands as a symbolic representation of nature, and as such, by revealing her spirit to man, (he being a part of the natural world), also reveals man to himself. At a certain point, then, the inner journey of man and his self discovery is analogous to raising the veil of Isis. Whether precisely influenced by Novalis or not, for Breton, this search into

⁴⁰ Paul Kluckhohn & Richard Samuel, eds., *Novalis Schriften, Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, Vol.II, (Stuttgart: W.Kohlhammer, 1977), p.650 in Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic's Theory of Language*, op.cit., p.23

⁴¹ André Breton, *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* in *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.275

⁴² André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, *O.C.*, Vol. I, op.cit., p.791

⁴³ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic's Theory of Language*, op.cit, p.127

himself was of long-standing, forming not only an important exhortation in the *Second Manifeste*, but also the searching first phrase of his text *Nadja* (1928), with its opening thrust: “Qui suis-je?”⁴⁴

The fact remains that, like Novalis, it is the essential use of the imagination and the release from rationalism which led them both to the myth. For Novalis, the mysteries of myth and dream were a medium by which to further his quest for self revelation. There is no doubt, in my view, that during his American exile, Breton is on a similar path. This interest in mythology encouraged Novalis to explore the then current literary genre of the fairy or folk tale,⁴⁵ not in the oral tradition, but in the style of suspended disbelief. The imagination was given free rein, so that the creative energy, thus liberated, was able to explore random possibilities and connections. The study of myth – particularly that of Isis – and dreams led Novalis to a new assessment of the power of night and the hours of darkness. Darkness and night did not for him have the negative elements hitherto ascribed to them, but were, on the contrary, rich in renewal and potential energy. In this way, dreams became a source of regenerative power, providing innovative imagery and material with which to work. This analysis also opened up a self-awareness and the route of exploration deep into the inner self, which had been closed off during the Age of Reason. For Novalis, “dreams [...] play the same role as poetry”⁴⁶ and just as for Breton they interrupt the ordinary flow of everyday life and are the tear in the curtain of consciousness behind which lies concealed our innermost self, as behind the veil of Isis lies hidden the truth. As Lionel Trilling points out, “the hidden thing” demonstrates a commonality between the Romantics and Freud, the opposition of the latent to the visible becoming “one of the most dominant notions of the age”.⁴⁷ This link, the research and revelation of what is hidden, emphasizes the relevance of Freudian thought to the ‘hermetic style’ adopted by Breton during these years, and the importance of Baudelaire’s injunction to “plonger au sein du gouffre”.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ André Breton, *Nadja*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.647

⁴⁵ Cf. E.T.A.Hoffman, the brothers Grimm.

⁴⁶ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic’s Theory of Language*, op.cit, p.173

⁴⁷ Lionel Trilling, *20th Century Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), p. Cf. Note 18, p.196 above.

⁴⁸ Cf. Note 162 , p.134 above.

However if, in the (first) *Manifeste du surréalisme* Breton is more interested in anchoring the newly created movement in the wake of Freud's discoveries,⁴⁹ it is because it is important for him at the time to try to establish Surrealism as a radically new *method*⁵⁰ by which to approach reality. The reference to Freud offers scientific credentials to the new movement – in particular because Freud recognized that dreams are not expressed in everyday language. Breton saw an opportunity to promote an entirely new domain of expression. The release from conscious awareness induced by sleep allows the free flow of thoughts and images in dream, rejecting the conventions and logical connections of ideas, time and space. This release from, not to say rejection of, literary norms results in language that is far from everyday, but is compared to the “message poétique” which triggers unconscious connections (or ‘free association’). These in turn, rejecting traditional constraints of scansion and rhyme, find their own path in the creation of associated images. There is no doubt that some Romantic writers, Novalis among them, did believe in the power of dreams, but the Surrealists essentially regarded the unconscious glimpsed in dreams and fantasies as “the repository of utopian possibilities”.⁵¹ Subverting utilitarian language, the purpose of writing became for them “not communication but illumination”,⁵² with the emphasis on experience itself rather than on any *form*. Automatic texts and paintings produced at the beginning of the movement were meant to express a-logical dream visions and dissonant images in a way that would synthesize conscious and unconscious materials. The idea of the « point sublime » expressed in the *Second Manifeste* and in *L'Amour fou* was precisely the resolution of the contradictions between action and dream, reason and madness, psychic trace and primal myth in the dialectic of Surrealist experience.

⁴⁹ “C’est à juste titre que Freud a fait porter sa critique sur le rêve. Il est inadmissible, en effet, que cette part considérable de l’activité psychique [...] ait encore si peu retenu l’attention”. *Manifeste du surréalisme*, OC, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 316. Also, as Anna Balakian emphasizes, there is “ample proof that Breton’s knowledge of psychiatry predated Freudian extravaganzas”. Cf. ‘Introduction’ to *André Breton today*, edited by Anna Balakian and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1989), p.2

⁵⁰ Cf. Definition of “Surréalisme”, *Ibid*, p.328

⁵¹ Cf. E. San Juan, Jr., ‘Antonio Gramsci on Surrealism and the Avant garde’ in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 37, N°2, 2003, p.34

⁵² *Ibid*

In the war years, having moved on from his experience of political engagement (and concomitant aesthetic mutations),⁵³ Breton is in search of a poetic language which seeks to grasp the totality of artistic expression within society and history. It is no surprise that he turns once again to Romanticism which had been, in its time, first and foremost an aesthetic, philosophical and political project. Equally, Surrealism always premised changes in society on changes in the consciousness of mankind, and in this context, Breton has always made important future claims for poets and their work:

C'est des poètes, malgré tout, dans la suite des siècles, qu'il est possible de recevoir et permis d'attendre les impulsions susceptibles de replacer l'homme au cœur de l'univers.⁵⁴

Such possibilities for him needed to be articulated through a new grammar and syntax of art that would subvert the corrupting control of the rational logocentric mind and for this, projecting his vision of the role of the poet as “seer”, able to connect an invisible universe beyond the visible world, he saw the role of the poet as:

Le poète à venir surmontera l'idée déprimante du divorce irréparable de l'action et du rêve.⁵⁵

Thus the concentration of Surrealism on love/desire as the positive, creative element springing from night/darkness can be traced back directly to the influence of Novalis and his *Hymnes à la Nuit* (1800). For Breton, Novalis exactly represents the essential quality of night, a Surrealist quality quite different from the accepted norm, recognized and appreciated by Breton. Far from appearing a dark space of sinister omen, in Novalis's writing night takes on a magic quality and becomes the crucible in which dreams are created and man's true self is revealed. In tandem with that of Novalis, the presence of Nerval, particularly with regard to the myth of Isis and the treatment of dreams and night, is felt here in Breton's text.

⁵³ The mode of pure automatism evolved and was assimilated into a “paranoiac method” (as defined by Dalí) in which “estrangement” was simulated in the poem or painting. The notion of “hasard objectif” was developed alongside “humour noir”, all valid new avenues for the Surrealists in the 1930s.

⁵⁴ André Breton, *Les Vases communicants, III*, O.C. Vol.II, op.cit., p.208

⁵⁵ Ibid

1.2 The connection with Gérard de Nerval, poet of dreams:

In his goal to establish unity between active reality and dreams, Breton is led directly to *the* poet of dreams, Gérard de Nerval who himself can be placed in the constellation of Romantic thinkers and poets exploring the depths of the human psyche, and, as such, of great interest to Breton in *Arcane 17*.

Indeed, it is telling that, following his re-reading of Hugo, he also felt the need, in the context of “les illuminés”, to refer back to Nerval, for whom he had shown admiration from an early stage. In the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton had already recognized the essential similarity between Surrealism and Nerval’s work and thought:

Il semble, en effet, que Nerval possède à merveille *l’esprit* dont nous nous réclamons.⁵⁶

In *Arcane 17*, Breton is once again placing himself in a direct line with the great poets to whom he makes reference.⁵⁷ Although it is not until the very last page of the extended text that Breton openly recognizes his debt to Nerval, it is clear, on a close reading of the work as a whole – not just the *Ajours* – that there is a close connection with the preoccupations and tradition of the earlier poet. There is no doubt that Nerval, who admitted to a deep interest in dreams and their analysis, spending much of his own time in a state bordering on trance-like (recognized as such by his friends), has always been one of Breton’s favourite poetical references.⁵⁸ The fact that he was deeply interested and well-versed in cabalistic texts, arithmosophy, the occult, hermeticism, symbolism; had travelled widely, spending some years in Egypt, studying Eastern religions and languages was of added interest to Breton at the time.⁵⁹ As a result of his fragile psychological state, Nerval had spent lengthy periods in two well-known clinics in

⁵⁶ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, OC, Vol.I, op.cit., p.327

⁵⁷ Cf. p.198 below.

⁵⁸ “ Sur l’état de rêve éveillé qui était naturel à Gérard, les témoignages abondent. Th. (*sic*) Gautier rapporte que ses amis évitaient de l’aborder trop brusquement, de peur de le replonger brutalement dans l’univers concret.” Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (Paris : Éditions du Griffon d’Or, 1947), p.6

⁵⁹ Cf. Gérard de Nerval’s account of these travels, *Voyage en Orient* (1851)

Paris, and his attitude of outrage towards the haphazard incarceration of the insane, due to inadequate and/or biased diagnoses, coincided largely with Breton's own.⁶⁰ Although he was relatively young when he took his own life,⁶¹ Nerval had by then achieved a body of work which revealed his gifts as well as the complicated nature of his psychological make-up. His several biographers agree that his principal quest in life was to find his own identity.⁶² While these factors would all have been interesting to Breton, it was the direction taken towards hermeticism, with a pronounced interest in Tarot and alchemy, as expressed by writers such as Court de Gébelin, Éliphas Lévi, Fabre d'Olivet, Swedenborg, Martines de Pasqually and Saint Martin, which most obviously shows the way to the path subsequently followed by Breton. The focus on the alchemy of transformation or metamorphosis in many of these texts, with its element of implied magic, is created by giving free rein to the imagination, whether in dream or in the interpretation of reality. This last "actually consists of transforming it", demonstrating that "the power of metamorphosis is [...] dependent [...] upon the keenness of the senses and through the senses on the power of imagery".⁶³

Even the note Nerval left for his aunt (with whom he lodged) on the night of his suicide demonstrates a link with the way Breton had chosen to go:

Ne m'attends pas ce soir, la nuit sera blanche et noire.⁶⁴

But Corinne Bayle writes that for Nerval this was « Le noir de la nuit la plus obscure », a darkness with "Nulle étoile au ciel", which drained all colour from his lyrical descriptive writing, leaving him desperate and alone, seeking escape in suicide.⁶⁵ For Breton, as evidenced in *Arcane 17*, the darkness of night had other connotations, as already noted.

⁶⁰ Cf. André Breton, *Nadja*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.739

⁶¹ Nerval committed suicide at the age of forty-seven.

⁶² Cf. the first sentences of Breton's *Nadja*: "Qui suis-je?" etc., O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.647 Identity had long been a preoccupation of Breton's, which deepened with the years.

⁶³ Anna Balakian, 'Metaphor & Metamorphosis in André Breton's Poetics' in *French Studies (1965) XIX (1)*, pp.34-41, p.35

⁶⁴ Letter to Madame Alexandre Labrunie dated 24 January 1855, reproduced by Corinne Hubner-Bayle in *Gérard de Nerval: la marche à l'étoile* (Seyssel: Éditions Champ Vallon, 2001), p.236

⁶⁵ Corinne Bayle, *Gérard de Nerval, etc.*, op.cit, p.236

A further connection to Nerval may be made through a common interest in cabalistic signs and writings. As stated, Breton chooses in *Arcane 17* to elicit a cabalistic sign or hieroglyph from the random markings on the buoys at sea on the initial boat trip made by him and Elisa to the Île Bonaventure.⁶⁶ From the very start, therefore, Breton is marking up his interest in hermeticism; this reference is separated in the text by a single page from his first mention of Nerval. This reference is in fact one to Nerval's writings on his native Valois and the interest he showed in regional music and song, in this instance the well-known song "Alouette, gentille alouette –", which Breton connects tenuously with 'tobacco smoke' vapour (which sometimes veils the view to the island and horizon in the early morning), having chanced on a discarded tobacco packet bearing the label: "Alouette, tabac à fumer naturel"⁶⁷ – word-play and thought connections of an essentially Surrealist kind.

Although mentioned directly only two or three times before the final revelation, Nerval's presence imbues the entire text – not least in its title, for Nerval's life was ruled by signs and "correspondances", most importantly those of Tarot cards (as will be seen).⁶⁸ The alternative title of the arcane XVII is "L'étoile", and its image and legend a confusion of the Isis/Méluſine/Venus myth, with all the elements of optimism, regeneration and eternal youth that these contain, as will be seen. As Breton states: "C'est l'étoile qui fait oublier la boue"⁶⁹ – a condition to which both poets aspire, and the metaphor is extended even into the *enté d'AJours*, the sinuous thread of the Isiac myth and hermeticism winding its way through all three sections like a connecting web.

The function of the *Ajourns*, implicit in the word connection of their title, is to shed more light on the main text of *Arcane 17*, while significantly, the continuing influence most evident in the *Ajourns* is that of Nerval, who writes in the opening verse of his poem *El Desdichado* :

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.37

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.39

⁶⁸ However, it is important not to confuse "les correspondances", which tend to lead to transcendence, with the metamorphosis/alchemical *change* of hermeticism and the occult. Cf. Anna Balakian, 'Metaphor & Metamorphosis in André Breton's Poetics' in *French Studies (1965) XIX (1)*, op.cit., p.34

⁶⁹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.45

Je suis le ténébreux, – le veuf, – l’inconsolé,
Le prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule étoile est morte*, – et mon luth constellé
Porte le *soleil* noir de la Mélancolie.⁷⁰

(* The emphasis is my own)

Breton takes Nerval’s sad lines and reverses the emotional tension, ending with the enigmatic parody: “*Ma seule étoile vit...*”⁷¹ To him, decidedly, the act of creating images and making dreams become reality – the key with which man may attain whatever degree of freedom is possible here on earth.

Nerval’s influence is evident throughout *Arcane 17*, in Breton’s preoccupation with light and dark, his close following of Tarot, “l’étoile” and the Isiac mythology, references to the Apuleian fable of Isis and the golden ass, even the form of a “récit de voyage”, but all of this is crystallised in the closing *Ajours* by Breton’s direct reference to Jean Richer’s immediately contemporaneous publication *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques* (March, 1947). As Breton comments: “...sur le plan symbolique pur, j’avais cheminé avec Nerval le long du sillon doré.”⁷² Richer himself, writing in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* twenty years later, recalls Breton’s reference to his work, and the dedication Breton wrote in his copy of *Arcane 17*:

À Jean Richer
qui m’a dévoilé et revoilé
celui de ces ajours
qui était de nuit

André Breton⁷³

In his study of Nerval and esotericism, Richer makes a detailed exposition of possible and actual sources used by the poet, contextualizing his writing and its sources with the bouts of depression and madness. Some of the detail is itself so hermetic as to be of little

⁷⁰ Gérard de Nerval, *El Desdichado* in *Les Chimères*, (Paris : Classiques Larousse/Librairie Larousse, 1973), p.92

⁷¹ André Breton, *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol III, op.cit., p.113

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Cf: *Notes to Arcane 17enté d’Ajours, O.C.*, Vo.III, op.cit., p.1199

use to the layman, but it is possible to see how Breton appreciated the book as a means of further insight into Nerval's work and thinking, as acknowledged by him in the dedication to Richer reproduced above. Richer states the aim of his work in his *Avant-propos*:

Dans le présent essai, je me propose de mettre en évidence ce sens de l'ésotérisme qui fut au centre de l'œuvre de Nerval. [...] ...j'espère avoir montré au moyen de quelques exemples la nature et l'orientation d'un esprit tourné vers certaines formes fondamentales du raisonnement : l'analogie et l'anagogie, la quête de l'essence à travers les symboles et les correspondances.⁷⁴

These 'connections' – "correspondances" – also played a strong part in Breton's life, as is seen from his account of how he came to hear about Richer's recent publication from his friend Jacques Hérold, who had co-incidentally bought a copy of the book the previous day. Hérold describes the frontispiece to Breton, with its portrait of Nerval and, in the surrounding margins, various cryptic, apparently unconnected words, plus a small diagram of a caged bird in one corner, and in another a six-pointed star (two triangles super-imposed one on the other). Breton notes that the portrait is one he knows, also reproduced, without the marginal additions, in Aristide Marie's biography of Nerval.⁷⁵ This volume, for a long time recognised as the definitive work on Nerval, is known to have been in Breton's library.⁷⁶ He expands on the portrait, with an extract from a letter of Nerval's revealing the poet's own horror of what appears to him to be "un portrait ressemblant mais posthume", the whole somewhat akin to a "biographie nécrologique". After offering his interpretation of the cabalistic signs surrounding the frontispiece portrait, Breton acknowledges all he has gained from Richer's work on Nerval, not least the revelation as to how closely he has himself followed Nerval's chosen path. The list of their common heroines serves to emphasize his point: "Mélusine, Esclarmonde de Foix, la reine de Saba, Isis, la Verseuse du Matin, les très belles dans leur ordre et leur unité m'en resteront les plus sûres garantes."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, op.cit., p.x

⁷⁵ Aristide Marie, *Gérard de Nerval* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1914

⁷⁶ Cf. *Notes to Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1198

⁷⁷ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.113

Breton now acknowledges an awareness of his closeness to Nerval, where Hugo had acted as his ‘poet-mage’ hitherto, and a new insight into the world of esotericism – a world to which he was to return in his first published text on his return to Europe in 1947, *Devant le Rideau*. With the predominant theme of night/darkness, Romantic thought and poetry found in Nerval a representative in whom the Surrealists recognized a kindred spirit, one to whom, similarly to Novalis, myth provided the essential creative path.

2. The role of the myth:

Breton’s path into esotericism and the occult followed the recognised route of both Novalis and Nerval, its essential direction being via the reading and interpretation of the myth. For all three, beyond the connection between poetry and dreams, remains the further link to myth – particularly that of Isis, with all its symbolic imagery and inference. In Breton’s use of this myth, he emphasizes that, as in the analogy of the veil of Isis, what is hidden is as important as what is revealed.

The suspension of disbelief is as essential to the reading of *Arcane 17* as it is to the reading of the ancient myth of Isis, which itself becomes an integral part of the text. Breton moves from one to another of the many myths used to underpin the framework of *Arcane 17*, in some instances coming close to merging extended metaphors, with each other. In her detailed study of the text, Suzanne Lamy demonstrates this, with Bretonian-like lists of possible extended metaphors and links from one myth or image to another, the metaphors often covering several pages of text.⁷⁸ Demonstrating Breton’s many-layered approach to the use of myth and image, she emphasizes that polysemia is precisely what he considers to be “(la) condition même de viabilité d’un mythe”.⁷⁹

Mythical references abound in *Arcane 17* with attendant imagery, to be deciphered as maybe by the reader. Breton is consistent in his wish to encourage his readers to remain open to new ways of thinking. He emphasizes his desire to reach away

⁷⁸ Suzanne Lamy, *André Breton: hermétisme et poésie dans Arcane 17*, (Montreal, Canada : Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1977), p.216–217

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.173

from and beyond the constraints of the dogma which has grown like a hard shell around the Christian myth, concentrating all thought on its 'monolithic' religious concept. How much better for the mind to open up to the multiple themes and choices presented in ancient classical myths:

Autrement entraînant et dignifiant pour l'esprit est d'adopter le point de vue des véritables mythographes qui fait valoir que la condition même de viabilité d'un mythe est de satisfaire à la fois à plusieurs sens, parmi lesquels on a voulu distinguer le sens poétique, le sens historique, le sens uranographique et le sens cosmologique.⁸⁰

This reference to the importance of the role of the myth in feeding the various senses seems to come from a text by Pierre Piobb, whose work Breton had revisited during his stay with Pierre Mabille in the summer of 1940, before leaving France for the U.S. While Breton had always been drawn to mythology, Piobb was convinced of the importance of accepting what appear to us as the complicated and improbable relationships within mythology, citing in his turn the deleterious effect of centuries of restrictive Christian dogma on the freedom of thought:

Habitué, par des siècles de christianisme exotérique, à ne considérer les vérités de la religion que sous la forme précise des dogmes élaborés par les conciles, nous comprenons mal comment un dieu peut avoir plusieurs parents. [...] Dans un mythe, une pluralité de faits ou de versions de faits n'implique pas l'incertitude.⁸¹

Well versed in mythology, Piobb is encouraging the suspension of disbelief and the ability to remain open to thinking beyond regular or accepted boundaries, such as those of Christianity or any organized religion. While there is evidence of Breton's interest in myth from the *Second Manifeste* onwards, it is the significant deepening of this preoccupation which is evident in *Arcane 17*. Like Piobb, Breton has become more aware, during the war years, of the importance of the connection between man and the cosmos, and of nurturing that link.

⁸⁰ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.86

⁸¹ Pierre Piobb, quoted by Pierre Mabille in Rémy Laville, *Pierre Mabille: un compagnon du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.11–12

In its separation from nature, in Breton's view, the Christian myth has become preserved as it were in stone, unable to move forward and develop in step with man himself. Hide-bound by dogma, it is this petrification of the Christian myth which renders those of hermeticism and the occult the only viable alternative for Breton, leaving the mind free to expand as it will in a dynamic which demands lasting freedom in order to develop and grow:

L'ésotérisme, toutes réserves faites sur son principe même, offre au moins l'immense intérêt de maintenir à l'état dynamique le système de comparaison, de champ illimité, dont dispose l'homme, qui lui livre les rapports susceptibles de relier les objets en apparence les plus éloignés et lui découvre partiellement la mécanique du symbolisme universel. Les grands poètes de ce dernier siècle l'ont admirablement compris.⁸²

Taking Hugo as his starting point, Breton shows how these "grands poètes de ce dernier siècle" each took his chosen path back into ancient hermetic texts in his search for "la haute magie" – a phrase immediately evocative of Éliphas Lévi and his *Dogme et ritual de la haute magie* (1856). Breton refers to Hugo's connection with Fabre d'Olivet as facts "[qui] viennent d'être révélées" – almost certainly a reference to his relatively recent reading of Auguste Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (1943), to which he refers again in more detail at the very end of his text.⁸³ Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Apollinaire – all poets who feature regularly in Breton's reference lists – each finds his mentor of the occult, from Pythagorus to Swedenborg, from the Jewish Kabalah to the Arthurian legends. Breton affirms that this is the only possible route to the making of true poetry:

Consciemment ou non, le processus de découverte artistique, s'il demeure étranger à l'ensemble de ses ambitions métaphysiques, n'en est pas moins inféodé à la forme et aux moyens de progression mêmes de la haute magie. Tout le reste est indigence et platitude insupportable, révoltante : panneaux-réclames et bouts-rimés.⁸⁴

With this scornful dismissal, Breton makes a direct attack on the efforts of Aragon and Éluard to write simple, accessible, rhyming poetry – what he sees as a return to "poésie

⁸² *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.86

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.94

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.87

de circonstance”, a style systematically resurrected in France by the two poets as a tool of resistance during the years of the German occupation. In Breton’s opinion, the role of poet as “mage”, a role recognized and revered by earlier generations (as seen in Chapter 4 above), had been severely compromised by the recent poetry of Aragon and Éluard. In practical support of his opinion, Breton bases his text to a large extent on various myths, the most important of which in this context is that of Isis.

2.1 The myth of Isis:

By using the myth of Isis, Breton introduces, together with the concept of metamorphosis and/or alchemical change, that of the quest for harmony, to be found in the bringing together and re-assembling of the constituent parts – in the case of Isis, those of her murdered, dismembered husband, perhaps to be read here as an allegory for the rebuilding of peace between individuals and, more widely, between nations. The further mankind departs from the natural harmony or order of things, the more his basic discontent grows, and the greater the ensuing danger of recurring patterns of war. Breton discourses at length on the importance of liberty, that quest for liberty which was the cause of the Revolution of 1789, and which was in danger of being eclipsed in the years separating the two World Wars. He expresses a fervent wish:

Puissent les événements récents avoir appris à la France et au monde que la liberté ne peut subsister qu’à l’état dynamique, qu’elle se dénature et se nie de l’instant où l’on croit pouvoir faire d’elle un objet de musée.⁸⁵

This wish echoes Breton’s fundamental aim for the mind and spirit of mankind – that it should be in a constant process of development, never in a ‘state’, which implies the stasis of boundaries or the achieving of a fixed goal. As in the Isiac myth, with its theme of constant regeneration, resulting in transformation and metamorphosis, so with man’s inner spirit, Breton demonstrates that liberty must always be a living force, constantly regenerating itself from within:

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.91

Les aspirations de l'homme à la liberté doivent être maintenues en pouvoir de se recréer sans cesse ; c'est pourquoi elle doit être conçue non comme état mais comme *force vive*, entraînant une progression continue. C'est d'ailleurs la seule manière dont elle puisse continuer à s'opposer à la contrainte et à la servitude, qui, elles, se recréent continuellement et de la manière la plus ingénieuse.⁸⁶

Liberty is not a 'given' in our lives: there are many ways in which it is eroded on a daily basis, by the constraints and demands of society, which are themselves relentlessly renewed as they attack and undermine our liberty. We must maintain a constant state of readiness, fanning the small spark of liberty to ensure its own regeneration.

Staying with his imagery of the potency of the initial spark, Breton links myth with present reality, making reference to the courage of those currently facing the crisis in Europe: "...ils ont admis une commune mesure qui est le courage, le *vrai* courage, qui exige la *libre* acceptation du danger".⁸⁷ Each and every person who finds this courage in the fight for liberty will find something more precious still:

Il découvrira alors l'étincelle même de cette liberté qui ne demande qu'à grandir et à devenir *pour tous* une étoile.⁸⁸

As with Nerval's preoccupation with "l'étoile" and the representative complex figure of Isis in his writing,⁸⁹ Breton returns to the myth and to its imagery throughout his text. What makes analysis of this work particularly difficult is its kaleidoscopic nature, sliding from the myth of Isis to that of Mélusine, from Venus as the Morning Star, to Venus as the Evening Star, the whole represented by the imagery of the Tarot card, Arcane 17. All of this is consistent with Breton's approach, bearing in mind the "rebus imagery" of *Fata Morgana*, with succeeding images restlessly moving, one on top of another, creating a constantly changing scene.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.91–92

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.93 (The emphasis is Breton's.)

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ "Tout dans la vie et l'œuvre de Nerval nous ramène à cette Mère Isis–Artémis qui est aussi la Nature." Cf. Jean Richer : *Gérard deNerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, op.cit., p.157

The star, lying at the heart of Breton's *Arcane 17*, is clearly also central to the myth of Isis/Venus/the Morning or Evening Star. Indeed, the Tarot card, Arcane 17, as has been seen, bears the alternative title of "L'Étoile", portraying a detailed image of a naked maiden – is it Isis? or that other mythical maiden, Mélusine? or a combination of both? – kneeling at the edge of a pond; in her right hand a golden urn; in her left, a silver urn; from each, she waters the parched earth. For Breton's purpose, it is convenient to maintain the ambiguity of identity, thus incorporating into the imagery characteristics from both mythical characters, as will be seen. Whatever her identity, the maiden represents the spirit of nature, its goddess/protector/earth-mother, regenerating and renewing. From both Novalis and Nerval, Breton has absorbed the concept of the essential importance of man's relationship with nature, coupled with his need to make that inner journey, for "truth is found in the descent into the earth, into the self, and away from the light of reason to the imaginative accounts of fables and wonder tales".⁹⁰

Expanding in greater detail later in the text on his description of the image of the Tarot Arcane 17, Breton calls up the star already seen through the window-frame, the morning star of the myth, and in its radiance the unity of love and liberty:

L'étoile ici retrouvée est celle du grand matin, qui tendait à éclipser les autres astres de la fenêtre. [...] Elle est faite de l'unité même de ces deux mystères : l'amour... [...]: la liberté.⁹¹

This coming together of two stars accounts, in his thinking, for the extra size and strength of the eight-pointed star of the Tarot image, and the mingling of their red and yellow light. The stars of love and liberty are closely linked with the other imagery on the Tarot card: they come together under the protection of the acacia, tree of "la sagesse morte", their union mirrored again in the connection between the butterfly and the flower, whose "expansion ininterrompue des fluids" symbolizes eternal renewal and regeneration. The power of such a fusion, of liberty enabled through love, in conjunction with wisdom, lies at the very centre of the poet's new myth for the post-war world. This union, he emphasizes, is further reflected in the Hebrew letter *phé*, the hieroglyphic representation

⁹⁰ Kristin Pfefferkorn, *Novalis: a Romantic's Theory of Language*, op.cit., p.147

⁹¹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.93

of which resembles the tongue in the mouth, or, by extension of that image, “au sens le plus haut la parole meme”.⁹² There is strong evidence that Breton is here relying on the hermeticist Papus (Gérard Encausse), who links the hebraic character with representation of not only “la parole” but “l’ étoile” of the Tarot card.⁹³ In this double illustration, the penetrating illumination of man’s darkness is achieved by the bright light of the star and by the word together.

However, Breton points out, the truth of this allegory is only revealed if it is extended through an adventitious myth. In this case, the route to the relevant myth is a double one, as demonstrated by Auguste Viatte in his *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (1943). For his purposes, Breton quotes Viatte on both Éliphas Lévi and Victor Hugo, the individual presentation of both the myth of the fall of Lucifer, “l’ ange rebelle” and “l’ intelligence proscrite”, and his importance as the creator of the sisters, Liberty and Poetry. The allegory is complete. Breton has joined the points of the star-shaped design of his extended metaphor, bringing together the roles of poetry, liberty and love in the creation of light and inspiration to the maintenance of eternal youth. Breton’s use of the extended metaphor is central to the construction of the text of *Arcane 17*, uniting the Isiac myth with the legend of Mélusine and, further, with the pictorial Tarot representation of “l’ étoile”, and making the whole his tribute of love to Elisa Claro.

Furthermore, using the myth of Isis as his metaphor, the poet maintains the irresolution that is inherent in finding the meaning of dreams:

Une lacune dans le rêve. Est-ce à dire que rien n’ est jamais retrouvé? mais cette certitude désolante en appelle aussitôt une autre qui la compense, mieux même, qui est capable de concilier l’ esprit avec la première, et cette certitude seconde c’ est que rien n’ est jamais perdu.⁹⁴

Thus Breton works on the text: the randomness of the dream is now compensated by a certainty that “nothing is lost”. Just as Isis reconstructs the scattered body parts of her dismembered lover/husband/brother, so our dream thoughts can be reconstituted.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notice to Arcane 17enté d’ Ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1162

⁹⁴ *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., op.cit., p.84

Although he is not allowed to witness the sacred rite by which Isis achieves her goal, Breton, in his dream world, is there, partaking in the detailed ceremony: “les yeux bandés, je me tiens au cœur de l'étoile avec le compas.”⁹⁵ Significantly, Breton stands, defiant, at the centre of the star, apparently offering himself to some initiatory rite of the Morning Star, Venus, represented by Isis, with her regenerative powers, elements of resurrection and eternal youth.

With a certain ambiguity, Breton continues:

À mon tour j'ouvre les yeux. L'acacia reverdi a réintégré la figure primitive tandis qu'en moi le mythe splendide démêle peu à peu les courbes de sa signification d'abord si complexe sur les divers plans. Qu'il me paraît, à cet égard, plus riche, plus ambitieux et aussi plus propice à l'esprit que le mythe chrétien!⁹⁶

From within the context of his dreamlike state, he postulates nonetheless that there is more to the myth of Isis than there is to be found in the Christian myth, which has – according to him – become increasingly restrictive over time, losing its ability to evolve and expand with man's own development. Furthermore, Christian beliefs have somehow become separated from nature, and the poet makes unfavourable comparison with the ceremonies of the Hopi Indians, which remain in essence so close to nature, and, are soon to be more closely observed by him and Elisa on their travels in the reserves of New Mexico, being of long-standing interest to him.⁹⁷ Conversely, the Isiac myth remains rooted in nature, with the elements of rebirth and renewal as essential components. In her many guises, Isis is seen not only as crucial to the nourishing of her little son, Horus, but metonymically as essential to the nourishing of the people of Egypt, with her power to release the eagerly-awaited floodwaters of the Nile each year to irrigate the fertile alluvial plain. These floods coincide annually with the appearance of the 'Dog Star', Sirius, regarded by the Egyptians as closely connected with Isis and Osiris –

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.85

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ André Breton, *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi* (1945), O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.183

confirmation, if such were needed, of the power of the love of Isis and her pairing with Osiris as the perfect couple, to renew and regenerate, in nature and in man.⁹⁸

Breton has chosen to use the device of the Tarot image for several reasons: importantly, the image itself encapsulates the Isiac myth of renewal and regeneration, the essential nurturing of the soil, representative of the spirit of mankind, as well as his physical being; the image is one which above all represents nature in its fullest and yet simplest form, as well as its goddess/protector/earth-mother. For Breton, as for Novalis and Nerval, Tarot held a certain fascination, which is clearly demonstrated not only by the creation of the *Jeu de Marseille* (1940–41) but by this and other texts. It is a preoccupation which ultimately results in the creation of *Arcane 17*. Preparation for the writing of this text had included reading the work of many hermetic writers relevant to the study of Tarot, most particularly that of Antoine Court de Gébelin, who, regarding it as a repository of esoteric wisdom, first initiated the reading and interpretation of Tarot in France.⁹⁹

In a letter to his friend, the American critic Patrick Waldberg, then in London (8 March 1944), Breton states his objective to write a book on Tarot, both the game and the cards, and about the ‘Arcane 17’ in particular:

Est-ce qu’on ne pourrait pas me trouver à Londres *un* ou *deux* jeux de Tarot ? Des cartes de vieux modèle, naturellement (type de la couverture 3-4 de *Minotaure*). Je songe à écrire un livre autour de l’arcane 17 (l’Étoile, la Jeunesse éternelle, Isis, le mythe de résurrection, etc.) en prenant pour modèle une dame que j’aime et qui, hélas, en ce moment est à Santiago.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notes – Arcane 17 enté d’Ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1192

Hubert suggests that Breton took his information on the Isiac myth from J.G. Frazer’s French text *Atys et Osiris*. Seligmann appears to have copied the text for Breton from his own edition onto two sheets, in the margins of which are notes/rough translations in another hand, possibly Breton’s. Ibid, p.1190

⁹⁹ Cf. Antoine Court de Gébelin, *Le Monde primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne*, Vol.VIII (1781) Writer, scholar and former Protestant pastor, Antoine Court de Gébelin (c.1719–1784) was well versed in ancient mythology, and the interpretation of the Tarot as key to the understanding of Egyptian civilization. Gébelin had earlier conducted research into the origin of language and grammar, ultimately producing his *Histoire naturelle de la parole, ou Précis de l’origine du langage & de la grammaire universelle* (Paris, 1776). He was also involved with Franz Mesmer and his experiments in ‘animal magnetism’ – in the course of one of which, the two men died in 1784. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911)

¹⁰⁰ André Breton, extract reproduced in *Notice to Arcane 17 enté d’Ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1164

As in previous texts, Breton gives notice of his subject matter in the title. In this extract, Breton has also given a clear indication of the fields he intends to cover in his text: taking the Tarot card, Arcane 17, as visual artistic representation, he will analyse its constituent parts – “l’Étoile, la Jeunesse éternelle, Isis, le mythe de resurrection...” – uniting the whole under the overall canopy of his love for Elisa.¹⁰¹ Liberty and love are to be united in this text, a re-statement of the classical Isiac myth with its theme of regeneration for a post-war world, under-pinned by the kaleidoscopic insertion of the myth of Mélusine, adding a further strand of affirmation to demonstrate the positive fruits of liberty and love. As has been written of Nerval, so Breton too uses a light touch to interweave the myths, “glissant de l’un à l’autre dans un système d’échos”.¹⁰²

2.2 The merging myth of Mélusine:

In Breton’s evocation of the legend of Mélusine, used in conjunction with that of Isis, several layers of meaning are in play simultaneously, from her earliest appearance in medieval literature/mythology, revisited in Romantic literature with the notion of tragic love, to the image of woman as the exploited victim of man’s rigid rationality and lack of understanding, together with the power of her mediation ultimately to rebuild an even stronger unity. The mythological figure of Mélusine has been a recurring theme in Breton’s work, notably from as early as 1928 in his novel *Nadja*, in which the ‘heroine’ is shown to take the medieval character as her role model.¹⁰³ Further, it presents the image of woman re-establishing an affinity with nature in her flight from man’s harsh refusal and rejection, this closeness to nature representing the ultimate harmony to which

¹⁰¹ Bearing in mind Breton’s initiative (during the winter of 1940–41) to create – with fellow Surrealists – a new Tarot pack, the *Jeu de Marseille*, replacing all picture cards with Surrealist heroes and heroines, and the four suits with Surrealist concepts (Love, Revolution, Dream and Knowledge), it is clear from this correspondence that he had been preoccupied with this theme for the intervening years. Created collectively in France, the designs for the *Jeu de Marseille* were brought together by Frédéric Delanglade in New York and ultimately published in the second issue of the review *VVV* in 1943, as noted, thus forming a link between the Surrealism of the war years in Europe and that of those Surrealists who chose exile in the United States at that period (1941–46). Cf. Above, Chapter 2, p. 79–80

¹⁰² Camille Aubade, *Nerval et le mythe d’Isis*, op.cit., p. 241

¹⁰³ *Nadja*, in *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.727

mankind should aspire. It is an age-old legend of the occult, employed by the Romantics and equally apt for Breton's use in this context.

His gift as poet and guide projects us "parmi les éléments naturels", leads us on into "les labyrinthes de l'analogie", where "de notre nuit, [il] fait une transparence".¹⁰⁴ Further, as poet and seer, with the interweaving of myth and reality in this, his most 'magical' text, "il instaure la vie rêvée, la vie vécue comme en rêve, et le rêve inséré dans la vie".¹⁰⁵ By bringing together the two myths, Breton guides us into "l'espace mythique", which is "l'espace de la poésie, du langage informé par le désir".¹⁰⁶ In his poetry, we enter "l'espace où la terre se prolonge dans l'imaginaire, où les choses se métamorphosent en images, et où les images elles-mêmes se nouent et se substituent les unes aux autres selon le jeu infini de la métaphore et de la métonymie où, par conséquent, le rêve ne s'oppose plus à la veille".¹⁰⁷

By this use of myth, Breton establishes "l'immense métaphore"¹⁰⁸ driven by love and desire, moving from actual description to his stance as "peintre aux fenêtres mentales".¹⁰⁹ At the heart of the legend of Mélusine lies the demonstration of metamorphosis, brought about by the power of enduring love to overcome adversity/loss – a loss which in fact at the same time enables the retrieval of liberty, through which catastrophe can be turned into victory with the recovery of initial (lost) love and, finally, a stronger unity with the beloved. Betrayed by her husband's jealousy and weakness, discovered in her serpent/mermaid form – the moment of "le premier cri" and then "Mélusine après le cri"¹¹⁰ – Mélusine nonetheless finds the strength to go into 'exile', to rebuild her closeness to nature and to preserve and nurture her love, while maintaining her independence from the human who has rejected her. From this position, she is able to rebuild a unity between them which is still stronger than it had been originally – "une

¹⁰⁴ Michel Beaujour, 'André Breton mythographe: "Arcane 17"', in *Études françaises*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1967), p.215

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.216

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.63

¹¹⁰ Ibid, and also Ibid, p.66

unité où la différence jouera dans une féconde dialectique, une unité délivrée du mensonge, de l'ignorance et de la jalousie"¹¹¹ – this is “Mélusine à l’instant du second cri”.¹¹²

The allegory with Breton’s own love and loss (of Jacqueline), his subsequent ‘rebuilding’ with Elisa, is finely drawn and relays his optimism in the future, both personally and cosmically. Further, in *Arcane 17* the legend of Mélusine is complemented by the Isiac myth with a parallel demonstration of the power of woman’s love and endurance. In this instance, after the death of her beloved Osiris, Isis, through the strength and purpose of her love for him, discovers and reassembles his scattered body parts, using powers of metamorphosis to achieve her ends. In both myths, the element of *discovery* and *revelation* is central to the demonstration of the power of love and liberty.

As Michel Beaujour emphasizes in his article ‘André Breton mythographe – *Arcane 17*’ (1967), “Breton est de ceux qui vivent le mythe”.¹¹³ He suggests, too, that Breton is a leader and innovator, rather than a disciple – one in whose work that of his predecessors finds “une convergence”, and one who has reintroduced the myth into our lives, sending us back to the necessity of interpreting the signs in life, “en restituant au langage sa valeur oraculaire”.¹¹⁴ As he goes on to demonstrate, it is in *Arcane 17* that Breton finds the ultimate expression of his lifelong quest – a text in preparation for which “tous les autres ne sont que des fragments”.¹¹⁵

With kaleidoscopic dexterity, Breton weaves and dives, opposing myth and reality, using present topography to illustrate his current preoccupation with the war in Europe. The constantly changing images flow like a flickering ‘moving picture’, running from reverie concerning the great age of the Rocher Percé to the conjuring up of the grand rose window of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Breton makes the

¹¹¹ Michel Beaujour, ‘André Breton mythographe’, op.cit., p.226

¹¹² André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.67

¹¹³ Michel Beaujour, ‘André Breton mythographe’, op.cit. p.217

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.217–8

analogy here between nature and a work of art, which is significant, as it seems to him that nature can only be validated when transformed into art. The magical image of the window gyrates in the whirling light and waters around the rock, the crashing waves recalling the sound of gun shots¹¹⁶ which seem to Breton to serve, as in French theatre, as the prelude to the raising of the curtain on a new scene:

Sans nul doute ces coups marquaient un signal convenu car *le rideau se lève*.¹¹⁷

In the weaving of his text, Breton is continuing to throw a bridge between the very ancient and the modern day, at the same time playing out the drama through a constant stream of merging images to which light is all-important.

Developing the theme of the curtain¹¹⁸ – created by an image of light and spray – Breton continues the theatrical analogy, revealing a scene on several levels, with the opening act, as it were, a child’s fable “qui n’a d’autre portée que de régler les lumières”.¹¹⁹ He takes the simple tale, which he uses as a further metaphor, this time for the power of light, its origin and its revelatory purpose. With this, he combines other elements essential to his theme: the innocent simplicity of a (female) child; that child kept prisoner by a cruel witch, in the person of “la dure gelée à cheveux blancs”; the child’s saviour, the witch’s great white owl, who wins her confidence and reveals to her the magic gift she possesses. The witch having locked the door behind her whenever she goes out, the child is taught by the bird of the power of her own fervent gaze, by means of which she can penetrate the smallest orifice and through it create light. Breton’s interpretation of the tale presents the elements he considers essential to life: those of the approach of a child’s unfettered mind, liberty and/or its loss, revelation and the power of light. In his article, Beaujour refers to the legendary Mélusine as both “la femme-fée”

¹¹⁶ A reference to shots fired from the upper gallery of the cathedral at the entrance of General de Gaulle on 26th August 1944. See Note 2 to page 60, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1184

¹¹⁷ *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.60

¹¹⁸ Cf. Breton’s later text *Devant le Rideau*, preface to the catalogue for the exhibition in Paris *Le Surréalisme en 1947* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.740

¹¹⁹ *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.60

and “la femme-enfant”;¹²⁰ the connection to this myth-within-a-myth seems evident. In all events, the metaphor of the tale is clear, expressed in these lines;

Et tout cela se met, non seulement à regarder, mais à faire de la lumière, et toutes les lumières s’apprêtent à communiquer, tout en gardant les aspects distinctifs de leurs sources.¹²¹

Revelation and communication – two important elements in Breton’s new poetics, connecting his inner feelings with the natural world around him – are offset by the distinct mark of the individual. The tale is constructed as a fairy story, its characters comprising a wicked witch, a defenceless child, the witch’s pet owl. The unconsciously innocent yet magic power of the “femme-fée/femme-enfant”, bringing illumination to the dark corners of the cavern in which she is imprisoned, is a strong image and powerful metaphor, emphasizing further the role Breton sees for women in the future of the post-war world.

Sliding, as it were, from frame to frame in his film-like montage, Breton makes repeated use of the “cadre”, whether as window- or picture-frame, in this case in a style reminiscent of Gérard de Nerval, to move from the image and legend of Mélusine to that of Isis, via the representation of the card Arcane 17.¹²² Initially the frame is schematically filled by Mélusine « redevenue femme », but the image fades :

Mais peu à peu le mur dans les limites du cadre se creuse, s’efface. Il n’est plus d’autre cadre que celui d’une fenêtre qui donne sur la nuit. Cette nuit est totale, on dirait celle de notre temps. La splendide Mélusine à peine retrouvée, on tremble à la crainte qu’elle s’y soit fondue tout entière. [...] Le cadre est désespérément vide.¹²³

As might be expected, the darkening empty frame leads Breton to black thoughts and images of the conditions of war in Europe, which translate as bleak visions and vistas from the window.

¹²⁰ Michel Beaujour, ‘André Breton mythographe’, op.cit., p.226

¹²¹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.61

¹²² See Gavin Parkinson’s expansion on the use of the analogy of the ‘frame’ in relation to time and space, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science*, op.cit., p.183–185

¹²³ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.69

The evocation of night, filling the frame with its presence of magic, warmth and love,¹²⁴ together with the hermetic context and imagery of Novalis's writing, prepares the way for the introduction of the framed image of Mélusine, interchangeable with the Morning Star – another representation of Isis – and the imagery of the eponymous Tarot card, Arcane 17. The recurring figure of Mélusine is a familiar theme in Breton's work, as has been seen, emphasizing the importance to him of this significant myth.

By delicate degrees, Breton describes the shifting image inside the frame, which is gradually suffused with light, and, increasingly, with decipherable objects. As the objects take shape, connections with the occult are revealed: seven flowers become seven stars, one far brighter than the others, the Dog Star, otherwise known as Sirius, if not Lucifer, or the Morning Star. With the brightening light, the rest of the scene becomes clear: the image, as we have seen, that of a young woman, naked, kneeling by a stream. The identity of the young woman is not clear – Breton moves from the myth of Mélusine, to that of Eve, and/or the whole of womankind:

L'image se précise graduellement... [...] De part et d'autre de cette femme qui, par-delà Mélusine, est Ève et est maintenant toute la femme, frémit à droite un feuillage d'acacias, tandis qu'à gauche un papillon oscille sur une fleur.¹²⁵

The configuration of the Tarot card, Arcane 17, is evoked in all its detail. Breton has made full use of the hermetic properties of the image, faithfully portraying the pattern of the stars in the upper part of the card, the figure of the naked maiden pouring from her precious urns in the centre, to right and left the acacia and the trembling butterfly – both images much associated with hermetic imagery.

At the same time, these feminine evocations are all related to Elisa, love for whom constitutes firmly the focus of the text. Breton again reiterates the power of his love as the trigger to a further opening of his mind:

¹²⁴ In this, his love poem to Elisa, Breton is surely here revisiting *L'Amour fou* and "la nuit magique" conjured up in his great love poem to Jacqueline, 'Tournesol': cf. *O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.187

¹²⁵ *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.70–71

Quand le sort t'a portée à ma rencontre, la plus grande ombre était en moi et je puis dire que c'est en moi que cette fenêtre s'est ouverte. La révélation que tu m'apportais, avant de savoir même en quoi elle pouvait consister, j'ai su que c'était une révélation.¹²⁶

The imagery is consistent: the references to darkness and light, to the opening of a window, ultimately to revelation, follow a well-marked path. Love, provoking the “état de grace”, is the catalyst to creative energy. Therefore, we follow an organic thread between senses and feelings, Breton constantly weaving a connection between the outside and the inner world in the rich intertextuality of his poem.

The device of a frame or window has served Breton well to contain the constantly evolving images. Now its use is stretched further to encompass and portray Breton's dream world. The acacia – shown on the Tarot card Arcane 17 to the right of the maiden, its evergreen foliage the hermetic symbol of hope and eternity – threatens to burst out of the frame and overwhelm Breton:

Mais imperceptiblement la scène tourne... que se passe-t-il ? l'acacia se rapproche jusqu'à occuper tout le champ, ne dirait-on pas qu'il écarte de ses bras les montants de la fenêtre ? Prodige ! il marche sur moi, il va me renverser : je fais un rêve.¹²⁷

From objective description, Breton has passed to subjective involvement. He has become part of the scene, and it a part of him. The imagery continues in a more immediate form, as if Breton is himself watching from nearby, recounting an unfolding drama. The sudden irruption of the dream reminds us of some of his earlier love narratives, the dream providing him with a sense, as always, that he stands on the threshold of a revelation (comparable to the dream portrayed in *Nadja* before Breton actually meets the 'heroine' herself).¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Ibid, p.71

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.82

¹²⁸ *Nadja*, O.C. Vol.I, op.cit., p.675

The same sense of reality and concreteness of the evocations presented before him in the dream inhabits this dream. As with all dreams, it triggers a questioning of the reminiscence, and requires a deciphering effort on his part:

Cette femme, où l'ai-je déjà vue ? Elle n'est pas sans une vive ressemblance avec celle qui, agenouillée, tenait les urnes, mais son admirable corps est maintenant recouvert d'un voile tissé d'étoiles et retenu par une lune.¹²⁹

Breton merges the image of Mélusine/"l'Étoile du matin" of the Tarot Arcane 17 with that of Isis, commenting on the likeness between the two young women, before going on to describe the star-spangled veil with its moon-shaped clasp – properties signaling that, despite the similarities to Mélusine, this is in fact Isis. However, as Beaujour agrees: "Elle correspond à Mélusine, et elle apparaît couronnée par l'étoile de l'espoir".¹³⁰ For Breton, the girl's identity is irrelevant; what is important is the representation of future hope which she embodies.

By employing the myth of Isis, Breton is as surely introducing Osiris, without whom the Isiac myth loses half of its potency. Michel Beaujour insists: "Isis et Osiris forment le couple inséparable qui assure la régénération, qui garantit le cycle des saisons et l'alternance des nuits et des jours",¹³¹ while for Breton it is the connection made between Osiris and the regenerative power of night/darkness which is key to his interpretation of the second half of the Isiac myth. The myth comes close to reaching the "résolution des contradictions" that Breton assigns to the "point sublime" as its essential quality: Osiris is the sun of darkness, protector of shadows as well as the father of Horus, the rising sun. In the historical context of *Arcane 17*, Breton uses Osiris as a symbol of hope, "préservé au fond de la nuit et [...] [qui] la transmue".¹³²

3. Darkness – the crucible for metamorphosis:

¹²⁹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.84

¹³⁰ Michel Beaujour, 'André Breton mythographe', op.cit., p.227

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p.229–230

¹³² *Ibid*, p.229

In his construction of *Arcane 17* Breton allows the tension between light and darkness to dominate the text, treating it in several different ways. Firstly, the tension is used literally, in descriptions of the physical land- or sea-scape. Alternatively, he treats it sometimes purely metaphorically, sometimes through hermeticism or the occult, relying heavily on intertextual references. In some instances, he slides from description into allegory, blurring the dividing line between actual and allegorical.

As we have seen, with its dark preoccupations and representation of night as the seat of the irrational in love and dreams, and with its closeness to nature, the occult was sought out by the Romantics in their reaction against the stark light of the rationality of the Enlightenment. For the same reason, as he goes on to show, Breton is prepared to follow the lead of the Romantics into the dark depths of the occult and its mythology, shaking off the strait jacket of rational thought and making the inner journey into the depths of self-knowledge.

Pursuing this path, Breton asserts that it is from his reading of Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875) that he finds the most important catalyst to his spiritual quest, the enigmatic phrase: “Osiris est un dieu noir”.¹³³ It is not known whether the phrase is Lévi’s own, or whether he took it from some earlier hermetic text, but to Breton it represents a revelation:

Mots obscurs et plus brillants que le jais! Ce sont eux qui, au terme de l’interrogation humaine, me semblent les plus riches, les plus chargés de sens. Dans cette quête de l’esprit où toute porte qu’on réussit à ouvrir mène à une autre porte qu’à nouveau il faut s’ingénier à ouvrir, eux seuls à l’entrée d’une des dernières pièces prennent vraiment figure de passe-partout.¹³⁴

For Breton, these words embody the concept of depth, which is obviously linked to the subconscious. To open one’s mind to the Surrealist idea of night as a positive element, the crucible from which dreams and creative thoughts emerge, already demands an unusual effort of will. To accept Osiris as a *black* god is to go one step further. It is at once to accept the Surrealist concept of the positive creativity of darkness/night, and to

¹³³ Éliphas Lévi, *Histoire de la Magie* (1892), p.28–29

¹³⁴ *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.87

couple that with the greatness of the myth of Osiris, powerful spouse/partner of Isis, joined with her in the regenerative power of nature and love. In many religions, deities are traditionally perceived as purveyors of light, often represented pictorially as surrounded by their own radiant aura. For Breton, Osiris has plummeted to the depths of darkness *from which the light originates*, giving him the extra strength of starting from the very source, of finding the origins of “la haute magie”. This is the core of the ubiquitous theme of light and darkness, to which Breton returns in the *enté d’Ajours*, reproducing an article entitled *Lumière noire*,¹³⁵ consciously playing on the oxymoron established by Nerval in his poem *El desdichado* with the phrase “le soleil noir de la Mélancolie”.¹³⁶ While not in fact dealing directly with the subject of light and dark, this article follows Breton’s earlier metaphor of the necessity of plunging to the inner depths to find the source or well-spring of, in this case, what he sees as the basic discontent which leads to war, and the crucial importance of eliminating any elements of nascent nationalism. Man will not face that challenge until desperation and despair leave him no alternative, if there is ever to be an end to the return to war:

Provisoirement les circonstances veulent qu’il ne soit guère permis que d’en rêver: le mal est trop grand, nous serre de bien trop près, nous ne pouvons qu’y faire face de l’instant où tout espoir de cure préventive s’est retiré.¹³⁷

Breton has already expressed a similar thought in the main text of *Arcane 17*, giving an idea of the depth of sensitivity to pain to be reached by an individual before being able then to measure what is valuable in life:

Il faut être allé au fond de la douleur humaine, en avoir découvert les étranges capacités, pour pouvoir saluer du même don sans limites de soi-même ce qui vaut la peine de vivre.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ ‘Lumière noire’, *Ibid*, p.100. The article had appeared in the December 1943 edition of the periodical *Monde Libre* (vol.I, no. 2), pp.165-168, together with pages from such as Benda, Gide, de Gaulle and Étienne. It appeared again in the review *L’Arche* (Alger), 2nd year, vol.2, no. 7, Dec. 1944 – Jan./Feb. 1944. According to an article by E.L.T. Mesens in *Message from Nowhere, Message de nulle part* published in London in Dec. 1944, there was a projected bi-lingual publication with illustrations by Ernst, Magritte, Masson and others, but no evidence of its appearance has ever come to light. This would therefore have been the first time the article had been received in France. *Arcane 17 – Notes* in *O.C.* Vol.III, op.cit., p.1195

¹³⁶ Gérard de Nerval, *El Desdichado* in *Les Chimères*, op.cit., p.92 Cf. page 195 above.

¹³⁷ *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.100

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p.87–88

He creates here an echo of both the legend of Mélusine and the Isiac myth, where in either case the central figure suffers the ultimate pain of lost love, a broken life and the ensuing review of priorities in her life. For each, black despair is the trigger to action; out of the darkness is forged the future optimism born of enduring love. In each case, too, the alchemy wrought by love is the transformation/metamorphosis which results from the fusion of two elements/beings into a single still stronger unity.

3.1 “L’alchimie du verbe” :

Looking at “the alchemistic notion of life and its corresponding translation into poetry”, where “essence and substance become one”,¹³⁹ Breton reveals a poetics supported by metaphor and metamorphosis. As already seen in the myth of the young “femme-enfant/femme-fée”,¹⁴⁰ the poet makes use of both in the portrayal of the alchemical gift of “la petite fille” and its triumphant result where “toutes les lumières communiquent”.¹⁴¹ Light is created from the crucible of darkness, enabled by the magical harfang “en échange de la liberté”¹⁴² – liberty again an essential element in the alchemical process.

The potential of darkness to be the progenitor of light is a recurring theme – perhaps the main recurring theme – in *Arcane 17*, emphasizing Breton’s defiant optimism at the time in “a poetic credo of transfiguration”.¹⁴³ In the closing lines of the main text of *Arcane 17*, with their intricate references to the myth of the rebellion and fall of Lucifer, Breton draws together the main threads of his dialectic, holding true to his analogy between liberty and light, and the necessity for rebellion as the initial spark which will create the fire. As has been seen, he makes a further link between the two “mages”, Victor Hugo and Éliphas Lévi, each of whom exploits the myth of Lucifer. The brightness of the falling star, the exiled Lucifer, penetrates the unremitting darkness,

¹³⁹ Anna Balakian, ‘Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton’s Poetics’, op.cit., p.34

¹⁴⁰ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.60–61

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.61

¹⁴² Ibid, p.60

¹⁴³ Anna Balakian, ‘Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton’s Poetics’, op.cit., p.35

and from that rebellious spark its illuminating power is released through any and all of three ways – poetry, liberty and love:

C'est la révolte même, la révolte seule qui est créatrice de la lumière. Et cette lumière ne peut se connaître que trois voies : la poésie, la liberté et l'amour qui doivent inspirer le même zèle et converger, à en faire la coupe même de la jeunesse éternelle, sur le point moins découvert et le plus illuminable du cœur humain.¹⁴⁴

The link is evident, too, with the myth of Isis, goddess of eternal youth, the radiant light of the Morning Star. The spark of rebellion which creates that light is also the catalyst to creativity for the poet, having first initiated the struggle for love and liberty. Throughout the text, Breton maintains a constant tension between the actuality of the crisis in Europe and the venture into myth and “le merveilleux”.

This tension is further maintained by a constant opposing of the concrete and the metaphorical. From descriptions of the Rocher Percé and its surrounding sea-scape, to that of the rolling foothills of the Laurentian Mountains, Breton slides from reality to myth, when “the distinct divisions separating the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds are broken down and a fluid passage occurs from one to the other as the barriers are dissolved”.¹⁴⁵ The poet is effecting his own « alchimie du verbe », creating a parallel world through logically unrelated images, which ultimately fuse and mutate in alchemical imitation. In alchemy proper, fire is “the most basic agent of transformation”,¹⁴⁶ causing not destruction, but rather a refining and/or forging of newly mutated form. In Breton's poetics, a vocabulary rich in fire-related value creates a similar effect of metamorphosis/transformation. Unsurprisingly, in *Arcane 17* the dominant associated image used is that of “l'étoile”, whether in connection with the myth of Isis, in her guise as Venus, the Morning or Evening Star, or else metaphorically as “l'étoile qui fait oublier la boue”.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.94–95

¹⁴⁵ Anna Balakian, ‘Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton's Poetics’, op.cit., p.36

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.45

Further associated with the image of fire and star, and in metaphor the most important, is that overall of light, the agent by which opacity, “la grande ennemie de l’homme”,¹⁴⁸ may be overcome. The strength of unity in love is portrayed as “un seul bloc de lumière”,¹⁴⁹ while in more concrete terms of present reality, the morning and evening light around the Rocher Percé is described as possessing a magical quality of transformation, an alchemy by which the great mass of rock can metamorphose into weird and wonderful semblances of unrelated objects and beings.¹⁵⁰ “La lumière de l’amour”¹⁵¹ shines eternally through the myth of Isis, and the poet finds that in the eye of his beloved “cette clé rayonne d’une telle lumière qu’on se prend à adorer le feu même dans lequel elle a été forge”,¹⁵² and that he venerates the “feu sombre” that he finds in those same eyes.¹⁵³ A more obviously hermetic form of “l’alchimie du verbe” may be seen in such images as that of “Mélusine après le cri”, where she appears bathed in a golden light “de tous les reflets du soleil sur le feuillage d’automne”.¹⁵⁴ This peaceful image is shattered by that of Mélusine “à l’instant du second cri”, where her breasts are as if fired by their own cry, portrayed as snarling ermines, “aveuglantes à force de s’éclairer du charbon ardent de leur bouche hurlante”.¹⁵⁵ In his representation of “la nuit magique [...], la nuit des enchantements”, the poet uses a more gentle and bucolic fusion of images, calling up “une clarté diffuse en guirlande” and “un liseron de lumière”,¹⁵⁶ one image blossoming into another. The alchemy is evident, the crucible of darkness and night forging the transformation of light, love and hope.

What is particularly interesting in *Arcane 17* is that, in addition to the wealth of images linked with myth and intertextual references, Breton manages too to evoke the transparent light and laciness of both air and sea “en constante ebullition” with images from childhood memories. He makes analogies with the movements of both small

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p.53

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.48

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.59

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.77

¹⁵² Ibid, p.81

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.88

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.66

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.67

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.70

children and shy animals, and of a fearful longing to make contact, a rhythmic movement forward and subsequent withdrawal akin to that of the sea. The emphasis on rhythm as well as image builds to a crescendo which reaches its conclusion: “La pensée poétique, bien sûr, se reconnaît une grande affinité avec cette façon d’agir”.¹⁵⁷ Poetic thought, itself a “conductrice d’électricité mentale” finds its essential element in the isolation of such places as the Rocher Percé.¹⁵⁸

Breton appears to see life as “an ever restless aspiration toward transformation”,¹⁵⁹ and while his imagery emphasizes the element of metamorphosis, he is not introducing us to a new world, but rather “a fuller possession and a more concrete apprehension of the already familiar one”.¹⁶⁰ The drawing together of certain aspects of Romanticism – notably the preoccupation with light and darkness, and a retrieved closeness to nature – form the core tensions of the text.

The connection with nature, already seen in the poem *Fata Morgana*, is again omnipresent in the text of *Arcane 17*: Breton’s preoccupation with the importance of light is interwoven with seascape, landscape and myth as one of the major threads making up the whole. Unlike his fellow Surrealists in France, Breton is *not* surrounded by darkness, but he is nonetheless determined to avoid the use of cheap symbolism. However, distance makes it possible for him to use imagery of light as the harbinger of hope, also as a focus on a brighter future where minds are more open to understanding what needs to be achieved. Expressions such as “tremplin à la vie en ce qu’elle a de plus invitant”, followed directly by “l’essor, l’approche frôlante et la dérive luxueuse des oiseaux de mer”¹⁶¹ conjure up vivid images of soaring optimism. They further achieve close association with Baudelaire – a constant point of reference for Breton, especially more recently, as has been seen in *Les Prolégomènes* – and his poem *L’Albatros*, in which the poet “est semblable au prince des nuées”, and, more significantly still, finds himself in a situation of prophetic leadership:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.38

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

¹⁵⁹ Anna Balakian, ‘Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton’s Poetics’, op.cit, p.37

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.38

¹⁶¹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.38

Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.¹⁶²

This provides another example of the poet, in his “état de grâce”, who occupies the privileged position of ‘mage’ from which to deliver his poetic vision, in which “la beauté est le prisme où se jouent toute possibilité de la lumière”.¹⁶³

It is especially in the last section of *Arcane 17* written against the backdrop of le Rocher Perché that Breton uses imagery of light to the full. The opening lines echo the mysterious mix of light playing on and through water, again already familiar from the imagery of *Fata Morgana*, suggesting the writing up of a cycle, with love at its centre, together with liberty and poetry. In this instance, it is the element of water which acts as the transforming agent, “turning the opaque translucent”.¹⁶⁴ With this combination in mind, Breton plays on the double meaning of “découvrir” as both a physical phenomenon and a device to unveil truth:

Tel qu'à certaines heures il se découvre pour moi. C'est quand, à la tombée du jour ou certains matins de brouillard, se voilent les détails de sa structure, que s'épure en lui l'image d'une nef toujours impérieusement commandée.¹⁶⁵

The imagery evolves, the pictures flowing into each other with ease and speed, but also with the element of revelation through the changing light.

Indeed, Breton's new-found appreciation of his senses and physical surroundings acting as the catalyst to the exploration of his inner feelings comes with the change of location to the Laurentian Mountains. It is a brief passage, but the pictural description is there, with wooded hills, snowy slopes and deep, hard frosts giving a blue-ish tinge to the light.¹⁶⁶ With dream- or film-like continuity, the pictures keep rolling, slipping from concrete to mythical, reminiscent of Aragon's *Vague de rêves* (1924), one of the

¹⁶² Charles Baudelaire, *L'Albatros* in *Les Fleurs du Mal : Spleen et idéal*, (Paris : Flammarion, 1991), p.61

¹⁶³ Georges Bataille, *Le surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme* in *Critique*, Numéro 2 (Paris, juillet 1946), p.104

¹⁶⁴ Anna Balakian, 'Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton's Poetics', op.cit., p.36

¹⁶⁵ *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.59

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p.63

founding texts of Surrealism. It is not by chance, it seems to me, that Breton establishes this intertextual continuity with the beginnings of Surrealism. Also, it would explain why, in a poem which is so dedicated to light, he does nevertheless come back to the endless potential of darkness, which has always been at the core of Surrealist poetry.

3.2 Romanticism in *Géographie nocturne*:

Indeed, the crucial correlation between Surrealism and certain elements of Romanticism, the theme of light and dark, night and day, is emphasized by Jean-François Chabrun in his *Introduction to Géographie nocturne*, an early issue of the review produced by the group *La Main à Plume* (9 September 1941),¹⁶⁷ some months after Breton's departure to the U.S. Chabrun's article takes as exegesis a line from Novalis:

Nous sommes plus étroitement liés à l'invisible qu'au visible

Beneath this, he introduces a fragment from Breton: "*Il y aura une fois*".¹⁶⁸ The two quotations taken together summarize the essence of what, in the wake of Breton, Chabrun has to say: that we are drawn in spite of ourselves by the challenge of discovering what we do not know (*l'invisible*), and that, in order to do that, we must step outside the recognized routes of rational thought. Add to this, the visible qualities of day and night, light and dark, white and black, and his dialectic takes a clear direction:

La nuit nous apparaît comme le grand inconnu, l'usine souterraine et mystérieuse où se forgent les pièces détachées de rêve qu'au petit matin nous manipulons avec des gestes embarrassés de journalistes anxieux.¹⁶⁹

Accepting that night remains for us this "grand inconnu", man nonetheless wishes to penetrate the darkness of the mysteries of night, exposing them, as it were, to the light of

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Michel Fauré, *Histoire du surréalisme sous l'Occupation : les Réverbères, la Main à Plume*, (Paris : La Table Ronde, 1982), pp.29–31 : "Le groupe [la Main à Plume] évoluera, introduira, presque malgré lui, certaines innovations intéressantes par rapport au surréalisme d'avant-guerre, mais, dans l'immédiat, se veut essentiellement le mainteneur du surréalisme dans la France occupée.", p.31

¹⁶⁸ André Breton, *Le revolver à cheveux blancs*, (1932), *O.C.*, Vol.II, op.cit., p.49

¹⁶⁹ Jean-François Chabrun, *Introduction à un voyage nocturne in Géographie nocturne* (Paris – 9 septembre 1941), p.37–38

day. Further, there is a developing thought that this understanding will lead to the revelation of the means by which to find freedom:

Tournant le dos au jour dont il sait que, dans les meilleures conditions, il pourrait être maître, il se penche vers la nuit pour y rechercher non seulement les possibilités de ces meilleures conditions, mais encore pour savoir dans quelle mesure il pourrait aussi la soumettre à sa maîtrise. [...] Or c'est justement au cours d'une telle expédition de reconnaissance que l'humanité révèle sa nature essentielle, son goût, qui pour être parfois clandestin n'en subit pas moins une courbe ascendante et continue, pour l'exploration, pour la recherche d'une pierre philosophale qui ressemble étrangement à l'idée que nous pouvons nous faire de la liberté.¹⁷⁰

This perceptive description of man's apparent need to overcome, master or understand night, shows a distinct similarity of approach to Breton's own, at least, in the pre-war years. Indeed, the essence of Chabrun's dialectic is that night and day are inseparable and cannot be considered except as two halves of a single entity. Following what is in effect Breton's own argument, Chabrun's discourse reaches into the realms of man's understanding, which, while mostly operational during the waking hours of daylight, nonetheless springs from the total freedom from constraint which is the norm during hours of sleep at night.

Focusing on Night as the seat of desire and love, the locus of reality born of liberation from all rational constraints, it is clear that Surrealism took up the baton passed to it from Romanticism in this respect.

Although written earlier than Breton's *Arcane 17*, Chabrun's article faithfully expounds a Bretonian dialectic, highlighting the similarities between Romanticism and Surrealism, while at the same time demonstrating the necessary added element of Surrealism: "une sur-réalité qui sera la réalité de demain".¹⁷¹ Despite the fact that they were living on opposite sides of the ocean, experiencing very different circumstances during those years of war, Breton's preoccupation with the equal importance of night and day, darkness and light, is closely reflected again in Chabrun's essay.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.38

¹⁷¹ Jean-François Chabrun, *Introduction à un voyage nocturne*, op.cit., p.42

In exile Breton was more than ever focused in his writing on the importance of light, whether figurative or actual, mental or visual. This preoccupation with light and, by extension, darkness, forms the tension at the centre of his work during the war years, both immediately before and during his exile to the United States. As has been seen, while Surrealism is predominantly concerned with the darkness of the subconscious, its ultimate concern is conversely with revelation or a state of enlightenment. The hatred of rationality being the very essence of Surrealism, the rejection of Reason is here coupled with the contradictory anticipation of illumination/revelation.

4. Reception of the text:

Published initially in New York by Brentano's in 1945, *Arcane 17* passed almost unnoticed in the press and literary world. It was not until Breton's return to France, and the republication of the text in mid-1947 that the critics were activated.¹⁷² In the atmosphere of post-war literary Paris, where Sartre was already posing serious opposition to Breton's stance and credibility, it was hardly surprising that the reception of *Arcane 17*, with its later addition of the *enté d'AJours*, received cool if not actually hostile reviews. The very fact of Breton's absence during the war years, added to the preoccupation with myth at a time of huge historical import and moment, were not propitious to the reception of the poet's last text from his self-imposed 'exile'.

However, writing in *Critique* in July 1946, Georges Bataille gives *Arcane 17* a favourable review, as it seems essential at a time when Sartre is attacking Surrealism in general and Breton in particular to show that, far from retreating into hermeticism, Breton

¹⁷² The initial publication had been passed over in almost total silence by the critics, but there were one or two who rose to the occasion, notably Maurice Nadeau, 'Message d'André Breton' in the weekly *Terre des homes* (2 February 1946), who spoke of Breton taking "une position restée incomprise", and André Rolland de Renéville, 'Le Renouveau surréaliste' in *La Nef*, (July 1946), who wrote with "l'attention réservée qu'il montrait dans ses articles d'avant la guerre". Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Arcane 17 enté d'AJours – Réception de l'œuvre*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1174

is, in concrete fashion, taking into account the natural landscape around him, using it as a trigger for his imagination:

Lentement son imagination se joue dans la transparente étrangeté des formes naturelles, à travers lesquelles est infinie la possibilité de la vision. « La grande ennemie de l'homme, nous est-il dit, est l'opacité » [...] Loin des enchaînements convenus, terre à terre, chaque aspect des choses est sollicité de livrer un peu plus l'immense, le merveilleux possible que cache le monde. [...] André Breton laisse parler en lui le rocher et l'oiseau comme autrefois le fit l'humanité créatrice de mythes.¹⁷³

Bataille gives the text a generous reception, citing poetry as the means by which to redirect the human race in the wake of the cataclysm of World War II, and Breton as the obvious – indeed the only – living poet appropriate to the task. He describes Breton as possessing “un pouvoir d'agiter et d'entraîner qu'aucun écrivain vivant n'eut au même point”, and emphasizes that :

En la personne d'André Breton, le possible de l'homme s'est mis jusqu'au bout en cause en vue d'une décision et d'un choix entièrement neufs (comme en une sorte de réélection). Et personne en fait n'a choisi pour les autres aussi conséquemment que lui.¹⁷⁴

The consequence of Breton's continuing quest for a new direction is to demonstrate that there *is* a future to anticipate, at a time when the war in Europe comes close to obliterating any such optimistic thoughts. Hand in hand with the element of optimism, Breton continues to play on his theme of 'light' – essential to his vision of the role of “mage” during the dark years of the war.

Bataille expands on the subject of the poet as « mage » in his article, establishing that:

Le prêtre, le prophète, le saint avaient autrefois, avec la prérogative du choix, le monopole de l'appel pathétique. [...] Mais qu'un écrivain parle au nom du destin

¹⁷³ Georges Bataille, *Le surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme*, in *Critique* No. 2 (Paris – July 1946), p.104

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.99

positif de l'homme, s'en soucie du fond du cœur, avec rage, comme le fanatique de la gloire de Dieu, c'est ce qui paraissait suspendu.¹⁷⁵

However, for all his enthusiasm for Breton's text in general, and given his understanding of "cette séduction"¹⁷⁶ which lies at the heart of the poet's motivation, Bataille is nonetheless sceptical about the introduction of "la femme-enfant", which he regards as "le caprice même".¹⁷⁷ Indeed, he is doubtful also that Breton's increasing interest in "la magie" can sustain "la même valeur brûlante qu'en général eut sa position", foreseeing "une prévention défavorable"¹⁷⁸ in store for the strong thesis of seduction running through the text of *Arcane 17*. However, the overall tone of the article remains supportive of Breton and his stance.

The same cannot be said of Tristan Tzara, writing in 1948,¹⁷⁹ who, while protesting that he in no way condemns those who left Nazi-occupied France, nonetheless points to "l'absence du surréalisme"¹⁸⁰ during this time. Further, he does not see how Surrealism, apparently untouched by any of the horrors of war and having offered no support or counsel to those left to face the invader, can seek justification for its "demi-sommeil béat", nor how it can expect to take up its previous role in the world of ideas, "comme si cette guerre et ce qui s'ensuivit ne fût qu'un rêve vite oublié".¹⁸¹ Breton's journey into the world of myth and magic was not understood by those whose lives had been a shattered reality during the war years in Europe. It was an understandable argument from those who had 'remained', and one hard to refute. After his return, Breton was to find himself targeted for this by others also, as will be seen.

5. Conclusion:

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.102

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.107

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.106

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.107

¹⁷⁹ Tristan Tzara, *Le Surréalisme et l'après-guerre*, op. cit.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p.73

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.74

The direction of Breton's quest for the "point sublime", the resolution of the antinomies (of which light and darkness certainly form one) which beset our daily lives, pushed to its extreme has evolved into an esoteric one – a path, which has become his during these years, involving a re-assessment of Romanticism and the ensuing research into hermetic documents of past centuries. As has been seen, a still closer intertextuality is identifiable between *Arcane 17* and Victor Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, with its vivid portrayals of the craggy granite rocks and surging seas around the island of Guernsey. In the final pages of *Arcane 17* Breton quotes verbatim from Auguste Viatte "dans son récent ouvrage: *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*",¹⁸² showing the latter's revelations of the close connections in intertextuality between Victor Hugo and l'Abbé Constant (later known as Éliphas Lévi). Having traced if not a direct influence of one on the other, Viatte goes as far as to say that he finds "des exemples où il semble que Victor Hugo s'est alimenté dans le chaos de l'abbé Constant".¹⁸³

Arcane 17 is a celebration of Breton's love, dedicated to the object of that love, and in Nervalian tradition,¹⁸⁴ as also that of his own in *L'Amour fou*, he centres his text on Elisa, personified as "l'Étoile" – Isis/Venus/the Morning Star. Nerval appreciated the many guises of Isis, and frequently merged or conflated one into another, using the mythological figures as the poetical focus for writing of his love for the actress, Jenny Colon, and his quest for "l'Éternel Féminin".¹⁸⁵ Breton, equally, compiles a 'list' to introduce his fantasy of the "femme-enfant",¹⁸⁶ again as Nerval does with his concept of Isis as "la Mère, la Sœur et l'Épouse".¹⁸⁷ However, while there is a connection with Nerval's evocation of both Tarot and the Isiac myth, Breton reaches beyond a simple focus on Elisa, setting his love for her against the constant awareness of the crisis of the

¹⁸² *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.94

¹⁸³ Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, op.cit., p.171

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia* (1853)

¹⁸⁵ Jean Richer refers to a chapter in *Voyage en Orient* entitled "Les Trois Vénus" where Nerval uses thirteen different names for Venus/Isis, apparently imitating the inscription on a plate from Kircher's *Œdipus Ægyptiacus Vol.I* (1652), *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, op.cit., facing p.124 & p.128 and p.143. As Corinne Bayle remarks: "Les attributs de la femme aimée et de la déesse se confondent.", *Gérard de Nerval: la marche à l'étoile*, op.cit., p.151

¹⁸⁶ "Balkis [...], Cléopâtre [...], la jeune sorcière de Michelet [...], Bettina [...], la fée au griffon de Gustave Moreau, et c'est toi", *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.67

¹⁸⁷ Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, op.cit., p.157

war in Europe. By contrast with Nerval's terminal despair, Breton demonstrates hope and vision for the future of the post-war era. His poetic allegory is encouraging mankind to follow the example of the landscape about it, to build a future on the base it has, layer upon layer – just as Nature, for instance, builds up the layers of silicone sediment ultimately to achieve beautiful agates.¹⁸⁸ The shift towards a new, more concrete form of poetics demonstrated by Breton in the text of *Arcane 17* was to give the lead to a new generation of poets during the post-war years.¹⁸⁹

As has been shown, Breton reaches a new degree of representation of hermeticism and the occult in the text of *Arcane 17* and its *enté d'AJours*. The text demonstrates an expansion of style, as the poet allows a closer awareness of his natural surroundings to trigger sense responses, something hitherto rejected by him as leading merely to description. In *Arcane 17*, Breton demonstrates a new willingness to look at material objects and find in *them* the beauty which reveals « le merveilleux », rather than relying on an interior or mental model to trigger such responses. The beauty of the images used in *Arcane 17* begins in the concreteness of their material quality, as opposed to the power of the mental imagery used in, say, the *Manifeste du surréalisme* – the mental image evoked by the remnant of a hypnopompic phrase “Il y a un homme coupé en deux par la fenêtre”.¹⁹⁰ The reason for Breton's extra sensitivity to Nature and his surroundings at this time is the state produced in him by his love for Elisa. Breton establishes the growth of his revitalized approach by returning to the need for a spark of rebellion to fire the explosion:

Elle (*la Rebellion*) est l'étincelle dans le vent, mais l'étincelle qui cherche la poudrière.

Acknowledging his heightened state of awareness, he continues :

¹⁸⁸ Cf. *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.61

¹⁸⁹ Poets who themselves had started as Surrealists, and, transformed by war, became increasingly conscious of nature and their environment; the names of Yves Bonnefoy and Christian Dotremont spring to mind.

¹⁹⁰ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.325

Et je sais que l'amour qui ne compte plus à ce point que sur lui-même ne se reprend pas et que mon amour pour toi renaît des cendres du soleil.¹⁹¹

Chronologically, the writing of *Arcane 17 enté d'AJours* spans the years of the final throes of the war in Europe and the first year of the liberation of France from the occupying Nazi force (1944–1947).¹⁹² In the intervening years, Breton continued to pursue his quest into hermeticism and the occult to find in them the roots of Surrealism in alchemy and the imagination. Already, in the text of *Arcane 17*, he evokes the spirit of Charles Fourier (1772–1837), whose ideological 'systems' had been received with derision by the majority of his contemporaries. As poet and "mage", he laments shades from the past:

Chères ombres longtemps prises entre des feux contraires, vous hier repliées,
ombre frénétique de Charles Fourier, ombre toujours frémissante de Flora
Tristan, ombre délicieuse du Père Enfantin.¹⁹³

Breton emphasizes that Fourier, together with Flora Tristan, protégée of Éliphas Lévi, and Père Enfantin, should be re-assessed, their ideas defended and their reputations restored – and that it is the duty of the poet/mage to right this wrong perpetrated by past generations.

Later the same year, in August 1945, Breton began to work on his *Ode à Charles Fourier* in recognition of the idealist and phalansterian, as will be seen in the following chapter.

¹⁹¹ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.88

¹⁹² The main text of *Arcane 17* went to the printers in December 1944, and was published by Brentano's in March of the following year, 1945.

¹⁹³ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.58

CHAPTER 6: *L'Ode à Charles Fourier* – A new social perspective in the wake of the “grands visionnaires”

If *Arcane 17* represents the apogee of Breton's hermetic quest, the *Ode à Charles Fourier* is a demonstration of his research into Fourier's form of social utopianism in a practical attempt to find a new post-war myth by which to live and to maintain a connection between politics and art. Read together with *Arcane 17*, the *Ode* constitutes a general statement in preparation for the poet's return to his native Europe. Breton demonstrates his ambition that the poetic and mythical impact of these two texts will “secouer désespérément l'inertie générale”¹ of a post-war world and awaken the collective conscience to the need for society to be reformed.² As in *Arcane 17*, Breton's poetical message is accompanied by a political and moral one – but only in the most general sense, a message in no way connected to Communist ideology or to that of any political party. Throughout the text, Breton also bridges the span of past and present, projecting into the future as he moves from the past of Charles Fourier to the present of wartime Europe and his own exile in the U.S., and looks forward into the future of a post-war world. It was on his arrival in New York in 1941 that Breton had the opportunity to access Fourier's work in any depth. Indeed, he indicates that it was after his arrival in New York that he chanced upon Fourier's “œuvres complètes”, the 1846 edition, through which he got to know “le grand poète de la vie harmonienne”, as Gaulmier had styled him – a description which clearly chimed with Breton's aspirations to resolve the antinomies in man's existence.³

¹ André Breton, *Situation du surréalisme*, op.cit., O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.721

² In summing up “les mots d'ordre du surréalisme” at the end of his address to the students of Yale in December 1942, Breton had again emphasized the importance of the “préparation d'ordre pratique à une intervention sur la vie mythique qui prenne d'abord, sur la plus grande échelle, figure de nettoyage”. (Cf. *Situation du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.725. The emphasis is Breton's.) As he had further exhorted the students: “Ce qui, dans les thèses du surréalisme, peut aller *au-delà* de cette guerre, c'est plus à vous qu'à moi, messieurs, d'en décider”. (Ibid, p.721) In these later texts, Breton is definitely calling again for a poetics which will save the world – *real* poetry which he associates with life (and youth) itself.

³ Letter from André Breton, dated 21 January 1958, to Jean Gaulmier, *Ode à Charles Fourier, commentée par Jean Gaulmier*, (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1961), p.9 Gaulmier also indicates that Breton's assertion that he acquired Fourier's “œuvres complètes dans l'édition de 1846” cannot be entirely correct,

In the same letter, Breton indicates that these five volumes went with him on the prolonged trip he made in the summer of 1945 on a journey which was to take him initially to Reno, Nevada, and then on to Arizona and New Mexico, during which his interest was particularly caught by what he saw in the Hopi Indian reserve in Arizona. While observing the way of life of the Hopi Indians, he was prompted to take detailed notes, on which he drew while writing his ode to Charles Fourier. He had also already revealed his interest in the Hopi Indians in the section of *Les États Généraux* sub-titled *dans les sables*, where he wrote in some detail of the traditions and art of the North American Indians.⁴ Thus we are given the combination of the essential elements of influence on Breton at the time of writing: the reading of Fourier, and the concurrent observation of the Hopi Indians and their customs. Breton's recent re-reading of Hugo, and, crucially, of Auguste Viatte, who brought critical attention back to Fourier's cosmogony and classified him among the "illuminés", explain why Breton, still in search of a "new myth", found in the phalansterian doctrine a powerful model:

Je ne saurais trop insister, dit-il à Jean Duché, sur le fait que dans l'établissement éventuel d'un mythe nouveau sur quoi fonder une cohésion durable, Fourier ne saurait manquer d'être interrogé des tout premiers, sinon largement mis à contribution (je pense à sa merveilleuse cosmogonie en devenir, à sa conception de la 'coque aromale' résidence des transmondains, etc.).⁵

It is also worth reminding ourselves, in the general context of Breton's re-reading and reflection around Romanticism in general, that it was a movement described as:

Époque des prodiges de la volonté [...] recherche passionnée d'un système permettant la conciliation des doctrines ennemies, des idéologies et des mystiques, dans une science totale. Les idées forces romantiques sont essentiellement les idées d'Unité, d'Analogie, de Devenir, d'Harmonie⁶

as the edition produced by the Librairie Phalanstérienne consisted of six volumes, dating variously from 1841 to re-editions as late as 1858. Also, Breton refers to only five volumes. The element of "hasard objectif" in his finding the volumes of Fourier's work was also a source of pleasure to Breton.

⁴ See above Chapter 4, pp.177–8

⁵ André Breton, *Entretiens – Interview de Jean Duché*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.598–599

⁶ Léon Cellier, *Fabre d'Olivet*, Paris, 1953, p.18 quoted by Émile Lehouck, *Fourier aujourd'hui* (Paris: Denoël, 1966), p.154.

It seems to us that at this particular time (the end of the war), in his desire to try to find a new conception of the world and of human relationships, Breton is placing in the wake of these thinkers, various “grands visionnaires”⁷ – amongst whom, during his American exile, both Hugo and Fourier feature strongly.

The *Ode à Charles Fourier* is described as being “Au carrefour de la réalité et de l’utopie”,⁸ and again “À l’intersection du temps et de l’espace”.⁹ This demonstrates the breadth and depth of Breton’s text which succeeds in confronting reality with the imagination and stretching the dimensions of time and space. Using the *Ode* form to highlight the thinker’s ideas for social reform, Breton reveals Fourier’s work as the prism through which he views contemporary society. In the text, as the poet states, he reveals: “Fourier tranchant sur la grisaille des idées et des aspirations d’aujourd’hui ta lumière”.¹⁰ What he is celebrating above all is Fourier’s ability to think with *originality*, and in so doing to bring a new light to bear on old problems. Observing the traditions and rituals of the Hopi Indians while staying amongst them, and reading Fourier at the same time, may have convinced Breton that his new direction, based on a genealogy of “lignes de force”, was entirely justified, and indeed *proved* by the very existence of these ‘pueblos’.

As Breton expressed, in particular at the end of *Arcane 17*, he still very much harboured the hope that there would be a place for a future poetic activity which would not simply be another way of making art, but rather another way of life. It was the combination of the ‘alchemical’ power of transformation of language *and* a perhaps more recently acquired sense of the connection between thought and the phenomenal world (as opposed to an intense focus on the unconscious thought process) which was to capture his imagination and interest during his visit to the Hopi Indian reserves in 1945, recorded in note form in his *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*,¹¹ while at the same time he was immersing himself in the writings of Charles Fourier. These two texts together

⁷ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.354

⁸ Gérald Schaeffer, *Un petit matin de 1937* in *André Breton – Essais recueillis par Marc Eigeldinger* (Neuchâtel : Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970), p.241

⁹ *Ibid*, p.244

¹⁰ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.362

¹¹ André Breton, *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopis*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., pp.183–209

demonstrate Breton's development of the idea of a more utopian future society, drawing on the structures of both that of the Hopi Indians and those proposed by Fourier in his social reforms, with a strong emphasis on 'harmony' as the central element.

The coherence of this late project therefore comes from Breton's ultimate attempt to keep art together with, if not political thought, at least some element of *social* thought. What distinguishes this attempt from its earlier incarnations – when joining the Parti Communiste and later when creating the FIARI¹² with Trotsky – is that the social thought in question is deliberately utopian. Abandoning purely political action, Breton nonetheless searches for a means of allying poetry to action in order to achieve the revolution of social structure. There is a shift – a move away from *politics*, but not from political thought. Breton still hopes to find a form of art where art would be action. He thinks he has found this transformative dimension partly in hermeticism, as we have seen with *Arcane 17*, but it is also very important to him that the magic of primitive ritual he was keen to record in the Hopi Indians was proof to him that there is an alternative to Western civilization and thought. This is the reason he moves from history to myth and 'utopian' thought, which, in his view still has a relevance in terms of social transformation. In Fourier's works, Breton is looking for proof that a "space of possibility"¹³ can be found, and in the culture and traditions of the Hopi Indians he seems to think that he has found this space. Not only does he feel that he has found such space, but that it seems "entirely contingent"¹⁴ – that contingency realized in the magical productions (objects) and rituals performed in front of his eyes.

Having worked at length on the "sources de l'imagination poétique"¹⁵ before writing *Arcane 17*, Breton now experiences, when observing the Hopi Indians, the rawness of human creativity. By studying the *Ode à Charles Fourier*, together with the notes made by him during the trip to the 'pueblos', we hope to underline the tension between idealism and materialism which between them form one element of the constant

¹² Fédération Internationale de l'Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant, 1938.

¹³ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, op.cit., p.5

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.323

preoccupation of the poet throughout his years in exile. Furthermore, as the *Ode* form indicates, this is a more controlled text for Breton, which he might himself have described as “Un poème à *sujet*, sinon à *thèse*”.¹⁶ This in itself shows a not insignificant shift, given all he had said against « poésie de circonstance » over the years, and the contempt he had expressed for the poetry of Aragon and Éluard on this account.

1. The route to Charles Fourier and the *Ode*:

Breton began to write *L'Ode à Charles Fourier* during the summer of 1945, three months after the initial publication of *Arcane 17* by Brentano's in New York.¹⁷ The timing was absolutely deliberate. The poet intended the two texts to be taken together as a diptych, forming the advance basis of his post-war statement. While initially not obviously linked, Breton uses the combination in an attempt to maintain the connection between art/hermeticism and myth/social utopianism. In his reading of Fourier and his observation of the Hopi Indians,¹⁸ he finds the theoretical and social complement to the quest into myth expressed in *Arcane 17*.

The text of the *Ode* documents Breton's focus on Fourier's writing as that of a visionary, establishing connections within the text between Fourier (whom he invokes anaphorically: “Je te salue..”) and the Hopi Indians whose complex rituals seem to chime with the social thinker's evocative cosmogony:

Je te salue du bas de l'échelle qui plonge en grand mystère dans la *kiwa* hopi
la chambre souterraine et sacrée ce 22 août 1945 à Mishongnovi à l'heure
où les serpents d'un nœud ultime marquent qu'ils sont prêts à opérer leur

¹⁶ Breton's description of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*; cf. ‘Un grand poète noir’ in *Martinique charmeuse des serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.405 Cf. Chapter 3, p.111 above.

¹⁷ Cf. *Arcane 17 – Notice* in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1161 The complete text, with the additional *enté d'AJours*, was published in Paris by Sagittaire in mid-1947, to coincide with the opening of the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* at the Galerie Maeght: Ibid, p.1163

¹⁸ While on a journey which was to take him initially to Reno, Nevada, and then on to Arizona and New Mexico, his interest was particularly caught by what he saw in the Hopi Indian reserve in Arizona. Observing the way of life of the Hopi Indians, he was prompted to take detailed notes, on which he drew while writing his ode to Charles Fourier.

conjonction avec la bouche humaine
Du fond du pacte millénaire qui dans l'angoisse a pour objet de maintenir
l'intégrité du verbe
Des plus lointaines ondes de l'écho qu'éveille le pied frappant impérieusement
le sol pour sceller l'alliance avec les puissances qui font lever la graine¹⁹

In interview with André Parinaud seven years later, Breton talks of his mood of optimism at this time, after the Liberation of Paris, and his hopes for the rejection of 'received wisdom' and of age-old divisive tradition in favour of minds open to the creation of future world harmony:

À l'issue de cette dernière guerre, par bien des côtés démoralisante entre toutes, j'ai cru – je ne dois pas être le seul – que le monde allait être capable d'un sursaut qui le rétablît dans son orbite, une orbite dont des siècles de prétendue 'civilisation' semblent l'avoir fait s'écarter de plus en plus.²⁰

It is thus worth remembering that Breton read Fourier in a world at war, and that one of the obvious points of connection between them was a common hatred of conflict. Fourier considered with scorn the propensity of humankind constantly to go to war, and in his *Théorie de l'Unité universelle* he denounced: "l'attirail d'hommes et de machines qu'on appelle armée [...] employé à ne rien produire en attendant qu'on l'emploie".²¹ Knowing that he would be expected to provide a new sense of direction for Surrealism on his return, and having been made aware of the esteem in which the Communist Party ("aux mains des Staliniens"²² according to Sartre) was held in France during and immediately after World War II, he appreciated that he would be unwise, as one who had 'abandoned' his country, to make any attack the "parti des fusillés". And yet, he was convinced – indeed he had long been convinced, as we have seen – that Communism was not the way forward, and that if society were ever to be changed, the "utopian

¹⁹ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.362

²⁰ André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques*, XV in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.559: these interviews with André Parinaud were broadcast from March to June 1952.

²¹ *Théorie de l'Unité universelle* 1841, III, p.175, quoted by Émile Lehouck, *Fourier, aujourd'hui*, op.cit. p.32

²² André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques*, XV with André Parinaud, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.562

socialism”²³ of Fourier was probably more radical and wide-ranging than the policies of any political party could ever be.

One of the main points of attraction for Breton was Fourier’s definition of “Universal analogy” as a science, and one where “the material world and the inner or passionate world constituted a unified system”.²⁴ For Fourier, any development in one sphere was necessarily accompanied by an analogous development in the other and this conception was precisely that of Breton in *Les vases communicants*.²⁵ Fourier’s cosmogony, where the use of analogies helped him establish surprising links between human passions, plants and animals in a projection of a future and harmonious society based on passions, clearly seduced Breton who closes his *Ode* by quoting a passage directly from *Le Nouveau Monde industriel*.²⁶ It evokes the meeting of the “cerisistes” who, after meeting different representatives of the various sections of the Phalanx (with very poetical names such as “Série des mille fleurs”, “jouvencelles fraisistes” etc..) share work, food and help each other in perfect harmony and then “se dispersant après avoir formé des liens amicaux et négocié des réunions industrielles ou autres pour les jours suivants”.²⁷ There is no doubt that Breton was taken by this edenistic vision of the future, by and large because of the extraordinary freedom of imagination that Fourier expressed in his texts. At that time, it is likely that Breton was especially sensitive to a cosmogony which was offering principles, pre-requisites to the discovery of a vaster analogy, truly universal, transforming flowers, animals and minerals into an immense network of hieroglyphs and enigmas.

²³ Frederick Engels identified Fourier as one of the “utopian socialists”, but Émile Lehouck contests this appellation: “Le dernier coup sera porté par Marx dans le *Manifeste du parti communiste*. Affublé de la terrible qualification de ‘socialiste utopique’, Fourier perdra alors jusqu’à sa dignité de grand économiste et devra se contenter désormais du titre douteux de précurseur un peu brouillon”. op. cit., p.263

²⁴ Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier : The Visionary and His World*, (London: University of California Press Ltd., 1986), p.66

²⁵ In *Les Vases communicants* (published in 1932), Breton is trying to demonstrate that the real world and the world of dreams are one and the same. Importantly for what we are trying to show here, this unity of reality and dream can only be realised in his view through *social* transformation. His involvement with political thought and action led him in this early text to write about the relations between nations and individuals in a mode that moves from the quotidian to the lyrical. This partly explains why he eventually found in Fourier a kindred spirit.

²⁶ *Le Nouveau Monde industriel*, section “Disposition de la phalange d’essai” (Œuvres complètes, t.VI, p.120–121) Cf. *Notes for Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., Note 1 to page 363, p.1254

²⁷ *Ibid*, quoted directly by André Breton in *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.363

Given that the core values of Surrealism were rooted in analogy²⁸ and the resultant creative spark, Breton was bound to be seduced by a theory going beyond mere Swedenborgian “correspondances” which were purely “une synthèse du néo-platonisme, de l’harmonie chrétienne et des traditions empruntées à la cabale et l’alchimie”²⁹ and towards a *science* “qui nous aide à démêler la complexité des phénomènes naturels”.³⁰ As Viatte stated:

L’analogie universelle du phalanstérien a une signification très différente des ‘correspondances’ de Swedenborg. Ce dernier, reprenant la théorie des Idées de Platon, fait du monde matériel un pâle reflet du monde spirituel. [...] Fourier, au contraire, ne remonte pas jusqu’à Dieu, ni même jusqu’au monde spirituel, mais s’arrête à l’homme, à ses passions. La faune et la flore évoquent pour lui des tableaux de mœurs ou des portraits familiers, tandis que Swedenborg n’y voit que des vertus théologiques, différence de point de vue qui explique la grande supériorité poétique de l’auteur des *Quatre mouvements*. Chez lui, l’apport des passions humaines vivifie la nature alors que les correspondances de son prédécesseur suédois la dessèchent, vont du concret à l’abstrait.³¹

Fourier never uses the term “correspondances” in the *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* where he speaks of “hiéroglyphes”:

La Nature n’est pas pour lui un prétexte à de belles descriptions ou à des confessions autobiographiques, un bain d’oxygène et de verdure qui nous repose de la sèche raison, mais un réseau d’énigmes qu’il faut s’efforcer de déchiffrer pour retrouver la clé des destinées. Le poète doit être un Voyant, ‘détecteur des sources et des ondes’, une espèce de thaumaturge, grâce à qui les animaux familiers, les plantes triviales prennent soudain une signification des plus insolites.³²

Fourier uses imagination which allows him, by illuminations and sudden short-cuts, to find new truths that reason alone cannot access and thus Breton saw in him a “révélateur”³³ of Nature, and the mysterious side of his books was what attracted him the

²⁸ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C.*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.337

²⁹ Cf. Émile Lehouck, *Fourier aujourd’hui*, op.cit., p.203

³⁰ Ibid, p.204

³¹ Auguste Viatte, *Les sources occultes du romantisme*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.78

³² Émile Lehouck, *Fourier aujourd’hui*, op.cit., p.227

³³ Ibid, p.137

most. In fact, with the “phalanstère” Fourier was not aiming to propose a new *practical* method for work division or the distribution of income; he was convinced, and again, this was perhaps the reason why Breton became particularly attracted to his thought, that he had exposed “le secret des destinées de l’univers”.³⁴ However, while Fourier judged that a world without supreme causality would be incomprehensible, he did not believe in a traditional form of religion based on sacred texts and moral imperatives. This, apart from anything else attracted Breton, as did Fourier’s derogatory remarks about Christianity and the notions of “Hell” and “Paradise”.³⁵

In his commented edition of the *Ode à Charles Fourier*, produced with Breton’s close co-operation, Jean Gaulmier reveals further details of the poet’s aims and reflections at the time of writing, which contribute to a wider understanding and appreciation of the text. It is clear that the *Ode* appears initially “en violent contraste” to Breton’s previous work, particularly given his preoccupation hitherto with “le dynamisme de l’image libre et le jaillissement de l’écriture automatique”.³⁶ While he continues to gather irrupting images, Breton has returned to a traditional poetic construct in the *Ode*, even to the classical title, which gives notice of the general tenor of the poem. In a letter addressed to Gaulmier, Breton explains his approach:

Il s’agit d’un texte passablement surveillé (débarrassé autant que possible des scories qui encombrant les textes automatiques)... Son élaboration a été pour une part *critique* : je me suis donné là le luxe d’une infraction à mes propres principes (affranchir à tout prix la poésie des contrôles qui la parasitent) et j’ai voulu donner à cette infraction à mes propres principes le sens d’un sacrifice volontaire, électif, à la mémoire de Fourier, la dernière en date qui m’en parût digne.³⁷

Breton argues the case for contradicting his own ground rules on the composition of poetry, while holding to the line that poetry must be free from all constraints – and it is indeed a *real* contradiction. However, Breton deems Fourier to be one of a small number worthy of celebration by such an ode, having himself been a great advocate of

³⁴ Jean Gaulmier, *Commentaire de l’Ode à Charles Fourier* (Paris : Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1961), p.34

³⁵ Émile Lehouck, *Fourier aujourd’hui*, op.cit., p.138

³⁶ Jean Gaulmier, *L’Ode à Charles Fourier commentée*, op.cit., p.7

³⁷ André Breton, letter to Jean Gaulmier dated 5 November 1957, Ibid, p.7–8

escape from the strait-jacket of tradition, placing great emphasis on the importance of personal liberty, reiterated at the end of the text:

Au grand scandale des uns sous l'œil à peine moins sévère
des autres soulevant son poids d'ailes ta liberté³⁸

In fact, for all Breton's advocacy of breaking with all constraints, he finds himself, as he says, writing a text "passablement surveillé" – and for two reasons. Firstly, as he openly admits, he has edited out as far as possible the mediocre or even inferior parts which inevitably accompany automatic writing. Secondly, as he also says, the text is in part critical – but, feeling himself to be under a duty of silence, and being unwilling to criticize openly his host country, the U.S., in the wake of the asylum offered to him and his family during the war years, he makes the capitalist society of France in Fourier's time the major butt of his criticism. This said, there are nonetheless veiled barbs aimed at the capitalism he sees around him in the consumer-led society of the New World.

However, it is first of all important to recognize that Breton *chose* to create his tribute to Fourier in the ode genre, and, while he may not have kept strictly to that form, he does nonetheless, by its very title, invite the reader to consider the work in a certain way. While Breton "tackled the epic genre", he "gave it a modern adaptation",³⁹ but the fact remains that he was consciously infringing his own 'rules' in so doing, with the result that "in this dense, esoteric, erotic, semantically compact poetry one has to realize that its automatism is very partial".⁴⁰ Be that as it may, Michel Beaujour emphasizes the sense and value of accepting "the scandalous realization"⁴¹ that Breton does indeed mean us to read this poem as an ode, "since the title invites us to do so".⁴²

³⁸ Andre Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.363

³⁹ Anna Balakian, 'Introduction' to *André Breton Today*, op.cit., p.4

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Michel Beaujour, 'Breton's *Ode à Charles Fourier* and the Poetics of Genre' in *André Breton Today*, op.cit., p.123

⁴² Ibid, p.122. Given the sustained intertextual references to Victor Hugo in *Arcane 17*, it is no surprise to find further evidence of a connection to the poet in the form of the *Ode*. Looking more closely at the genesis of the ode form used by Breton in this instance, it is noteworthy that as early as 1822 Victor Hugo

Breton was clearly sensitive to criticisms of succumbing to the temptation of writing “poésie de circonstance” in order to make his point at the time, but he refutes such accusations:

Il est vrai que j’ai feint ici de me plier à la poésie de circonstance, mais vous ne douterez pas que c’était pour la tuer.⁴³

This statement is demonstrably not convincing. Indeed, it is clear that in the *Ode* Breton is writing “poésie de circonstance”; what could provide clearer evidence of this than the line: “Que l’Europe prête à voler en poudre n’a trouvé rien de plus expédient que de prendre des mesures de défense contre les confetti”.⁴⁴ In my view, he is deliberately placing himself centrally on “cette courbe que la vie nous a imposée”,⁴⁵ between the poetry of Aragon and Éluard, committed Communists, on the one hand, and that of the deeply Catholic Claudel on the other.⁴⁶ He claims that the *Ode* “admet l’automatisme pour point de départ”, but that it nonetheless “ne me dérobe pas en cours de trajet à certaines obligations contingentes”.⁴⁷ Breton is aware that on his eventual return to France, he will be expected to make some sort of statement. Whatever his denials, the use of the ode as a poetical construct in this instance forms a fundamental part of that statement, which must be read in conjunction with *Arcane 17* to be properly understood, as it is likely that the *Ode* also serves as a way to counterbalance accusations of hermetic drift into occultism. Breton was particularly sensitive to Fourier’s attempt to envisage the whole of human activity, rather than as an escape into the realm of obscure ideas, away from the world of human needs.

had produced his first collection of *Odes*, thereafter adding to and editing the collection to produce four further publications in the following six years. This sustained creativity culminated in 1868 in an edition entitled *Odes et Ballades*, which comprised his entire poetic creation up to that time, showing an evolving form which moved progressively away from classical towards Romantic. Taking into account Breton’s re-reading of Hugo at the time, this element of influence on Breton’s choice of the ode genre should not be overlooked.

⁴³ André Breton, *Interview d’Aimé Patri* in *Entretiens 1913–1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.605

⁴⁴ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.361

⁴⁵ André Breton, *Interview d’Aimé Patri* in *Entretiens 1913–1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.605

⁴⁶ While Breton’s criticism of the “poésie de circonstance” of Aragon and Éluard has already been cited, it would certainly not have escaped his notice that in the wake of the defeat of France in 1941, Claudel had written his *Paroles au Maréchal*, familiarly known as the *Ode à Pétain*.

⁴⁷ André Breton, *Interview d’Aimé Patri* in *Entretiens 1913–1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.605

Defending his choice of subject, the works of Fourier, he insists, are “la plus grande œuvre constructive qui ait jamais été élaborée à partir du désir sans contrainte”.⁴⁸ He appreciates that it was not simply Fourier’s criticism of capitalism, nor his radical proposal for the organization of labour which was central to his thinking, but rather his “celebration of desire and his affirmation [...] of the world’s hidden unity”.⁴⁹ Breton’s eulogy of the poet-philosopher is itself a celebration of a degree of automatism, placing the *Ode* somewhere along the curve of the graph he describes in the same interview, as has been seen. What he is doing with this poem is to emphasize the accessibility to any and all of a form of automatism which

a été inventé de mieux pour confondre à jamais la vanité littéraire et artistique, dont il ne se passe pas de jour que nous ne lui voyons prendre un tour plus révoltant.⁵⁰

Times have changed, Breton points out, since the Surrealists first engaged with automatic writing. He sees this modified form of automatism as an effective way of achieving a return to genuine creation, as opposed to the subjective writing imbued with the authorial presence so often produced at that time.⁵¹

While conceding a certain amount of his personal and literary freedom in the choice of a more structured form for the *Ode*, liberty remains of prime importance to Breton. The fact remains that the *Ode* is the product of a time of world crisis, but nonetheless demonstrates, as was already obvious at the end of *Arcane 17*, that Breton had not given up all hope of the type of future for humanity predicted by utopian writers of the 19th century. Claimed by some as “the nineteenth century’s complete utopian”,⁵² Fourier “surpassed Rousseau in the intransigence of his rejection of the society in which he lived”.⁵³ His aim to reform the structure of society included not only the reorganization of labour, but the release of women from what he perceived as the

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Jonathan Beecher, ‘Introduction’ to *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, op.cit., p.3

⁵⁰ André Breton, *Interview d’Aimé Patri* in *Entretiens 1913–1952, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.605

⁵¹ The interview appeared in the Paris edition of *Paru*, March 1948. Cf: *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.603

⁵² Jonathan Beecher, ‘Introduction’ to *Charles Fourier : The Visionary and his World*, (University of California Press Ltd.: London, 1986), p.1

⁵³ Ibid.

drudgery of their domestic round within marriage, and the recognition of their intellectual ability, as well as their qualities of compassion and understanding. In the wake of *Arcane 17* – a celebration of womanhood and his love for Elisa – Breton follows up with an ode to this great utopian architect of social reform, whose aim was as much for the liberation of women as of men, ensuring that important jobs were open to women as well as to men, on the basis of their skills, rather than closed to them on account of their gender. This emancipation, however, was to be delayed until the world had been made a gentler place, better suited to the open reception of woman’s more sensitive disposition: in short, she was to be protected from what appeared to be man’s insatiable thirst for violence and war. Harmony was thus central to the liberation of Fourier’s new society. “La vie humaine est à *repassionner*”,⁵⁴ Breton insists, playing with Fourier’s emphasis on the importance of the passions as fundamental to the release of desire, the driving force to action.

1.1 In praise of marginality:

The way the *Ode* is structurally organised allows Breton, in the first section, to delve deep into his memory and imagination, turning his back on his present situation in the U.S., as he looks away from the New World towards the Old. From the past, he conjures up imagery of Charles Fourier, his statue, historical landmarks and the Paris he has known, with an echo of – and strong intertextual reference to – his famous walk through Paris landmarks significant to him, as portrayed in his poem ‘Tournesol’ (1923).⁵⁵ There is, however, a tension between Breton’s nostalgic vision of Paris from his place of exile, and Fourier’s overt loathing for the capital city and centre of the commercial greed and enterprise he so despised. The second section of the *Ode*, written in prose, deals exclusively with the work of Charles Fourier and makes close reference to his œuvre in the form of direct quotations. This is in itself unusual in Breton’s work, indicating that he feels it is important to evidence Fourier’s own presentation of the subjects at issue, placing him in a kind of perpetual present, appropriating his strangely

⁵⁴ André Breton, *Arcane 17*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.104

⁵⁵ André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol. I, op.cit., p.187

imaginative prose into the great chain of Surrealist texts. The third section focuses on the present and future, while at the same time saluting Fourier in the past, thus bridging present and future, while simultaneously reaching back into the past.⁵⁶ Breton's call comes to Fourier from the solitude of his exile, at a time when the world was in a state far removed from the phalansterian's vision of harmony, and "can also be taken for the marginal comments of a reader who is still dizzy from the shock of recognizing in the works of an overlooked forerunner the very ideas towards which he had been forever groping".⁵⁷

Breton's images follow his own journey of discovery, initially evoking the Paris of Charles Fourier with its "boues diamantifères",⁵⁸ representing his contempt for the city and what he sees as its commercial evils, which he fears are contaminating the whole country.⁵⁹ For Breton, however, Paris rides the turbulent tossing of the present catastrophe, and other intervening crises, like some great ship, with the statue of Fourier as its proud figurehead. He ironically congratulates the wisdom of the authorities who have sited his statue where they have:

De t'avoir fait surgir à la proue des boulevards extérieurs
C'est ta place aux heures de fort tangage
Quand la ville se soulève
Et que de proche en proche la fureur de la mer gagne ces coteaux tout spirituels⁶⁰

This last being a reference to the slopes of Montmartre, which in this instance represent for Breton the site of the stand taken by the "fédérés" resisters of the 1871 Commune.

In contrast to Fourier's view of Paris, Breton describes the fresh violets he notices – "un très frais bouquet de violettes à tes pieds"⁶¹ – a rare tribute in Paris, he claims, and rarer still to find it replaced by another dewy bunch in the days that followed:

⁵⁶ As he had done in *Fata Morgana*, *Les États généraux* and *Arcane 17*.

⁵⁷ Michel Beaujour, 'Breton's *Ode à Charles Fourier* and the Poetics of Genre' in *André Breton Today*, op.cit., p.124

⁵⁸ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.352

⁵⁹ Cf. Jean Gaulmier's note on Fourier's dislike of Paris, which he sees as "un foyer de gangrène politique" etc., *Ode à Charles Fourier commentée*, op.cit., p.78

⁶⁰ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.351

⁶¹ Ibid

Sans trop y prendre garde aux jours qui suivirent j'observai que le bouquet
était renouvelé
La rosée et lui ne faisaient qu'un⁶²

He marvels at the discreet sign of recognition that the thought of Fourier is kept alive, though time and place, as a bearer of hope. Breton's preoccupation with those marginalized by society has already been observed in *Fata Morgana* and *Pleine marge*, and we are reminded of the passage in *Arcane 17*, when the poet describes his emotion as "cette mer flamboyante", the sea of red flags at a workers' demonstration on the eve of World War I, "s'est trouée de l'envol de drapeaux noirs"⁶³ – the black flags of the anarchists alongside those of the socialists.⁶⁴ Breton thus evokes those on the margins (politically, socially, historically) who are brave enough to think and act against the general current. They are those whom he salutes again in the Ode:

Et le vent du souvenir et de l'avenir
Dans les plumes de ses [the eagle escaping from Fourier's head] ailes fait passer
les visages de mes amis
Parmi lesquels nombreux sont ceux qui n'ont plus ou
n'ont pas encore de visage⁶⁵

Building on his preoccupation with marginals (he names "Spartacus"⁶⁶, but also the "peuple juif"⁶⁷), Breton also evokes places (in the U.S.) which society seems to have abandoned:

Pour toujours par-delà cette enseigne de bar qui
continue à battre la rue d'une ville morte –
Virginia City – 'Au vieux baquet de sang'⁶⁸

⁶² Ibid, p.351–352

⁶³ André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.41–42

⁶⁴ It is worth remembering that towards the end of his life Breton established close connections with the anarchists, contributing articles to their periodical *Le Monde Libertaire* during the 1950s. (Cf. Mark Polizotti: *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.575). When he died in 1966, they paid tribute to him in the same publication, with the headline: "André Breton est mort. Aragon est vivant... C'est un double malheur pour la pensée honnête". (Cf. *Le Monde Libertaire*, n°126, novembre 1966, quoted by Fabrice Magnone in: 'André Breton et le groupe surréaliste', *What's new* – 2 (11 November 2005).)

⁶⁵ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.360

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.355

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.361

From the Paris of Fourier's time and then more recently of his own, Breton returns to the present day, spanning past and present, calling to Fourier from key places in the Western states of Colorado, Arizona and Nevada. The memory of Jacques Vaché, another 'marginal', haunts the list of place names – the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, Virginia City – as if nature had become a living monument to these essentially rebellious and free minds and appropriate sites, where nature and “civilization” meet, perpetual reminders of the place of man in the world:

Fourier je te salue du Grand Cañon du Colorado
Je vois l'aigle qui s'échappe de ta tête
Il tient dans ses serres le mouton de Panurge⁶⁹

Blending the imagery of the reality of the Grand Canyon with that of a mythical reference, Breton describes the eagle – a symbol used by Fourier to portray authority exceeding a reasonable level of power, but which is perhaps representative here of the eagle of Germany, or alternatively that of the United States, and in its grasp the first of those who, sheep-like, will follow each other unthinkingly to whatever disaster awaits, whether in Europe or the New World. This is, in fact, a rather obvious image, perhaps displaying the difficulty Breton is finding in attempting to bring together concepts and poetical expression.

In the same way, the “Forêt Pétrifiée”, where “plus rien n'est debout”,⁷⁰ summons up comparisons between the New and the Old world, in a barely veiled reference to the destruction of the war raging in Europe, but also to the general destruction caused by Man when, abandoning a place where gold and greed have both dried up, entire towns are deserted, as is the case of Virginia City with its “enseigne de bar qui continue à battre la rue d'une ville morte”.⁷¹ This image if not of petrification, then this time of the futility of seeking after gold, together with that of an erstwhile thriving city living off its riches, long since exhausted, its promise turned to dust, are potent reminders of a civilization

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.360

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid, p.361

which, ossified by greed and tradition, has finally succumbed and is in the process of withering away. The initial warning came from Fourier; it is reiterated here by Breton.

The essential difference in Breton's approach in the *Ode* from that of *Les États Généraux* is that through it he creates a dialogue with Fourier, which not only gives shape to the poem but, as in *Arcane 17*, bridges past and present, and, going further, projects into the future. If *Arcane 17* represented the climax of Breton's poetical foray into hermeticism, in the *Ode*, he presents a revised look at Fourier's solution to world problems and a suggested programmatic move towards cosmological harmony.

Having accepted the indication that Breton is indeed writing an ode, we should recognize that within the given shape there are three "mouvements", following the form of the Pindaric ode: *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, with the rhythm of surge and return that that implies. The very fact that he has chosen to celebrate Fourier in the form of an ode prepares the reader for the demonstration of an altogether more structured text with a recognized form.

In the first "movement" – the *strophe* – appears the strange coincidence of Breton's introduction to Fourier, via his writing, which did not occur until after arriving in New York, whereas Fourier's statue had stood in the Place Clichy, quite near to Breton's home in the rue Fontaine in Paris, since 1899, three years after the poet's birth – "En ce temps-là je ne te connaissais que de vue"⁷² – aware of the statue from before the war, he had not yet come across Fourier's writing. From the perspective of the present, the poet rages against the horrors and privations of war, the lies and false patriotism of the military, the greed of the black-marketeers – "les cynocéphales de l'épicerie / Comblés d'égards en ces jours de disette et de marché noir"⁷³ – all of which leaves him wondering whether Fourier's belief in the human race is misplaced.

⁷² Ibid, p.351

⁷³ Ibid, p.353

As Beaujour points out, we should further take note of the “segment that the reader is manifestly invited to call the *antistrophe* by the odd but explicit markers that frame it”.⁷⁴ At the end of the *strophe*, Breton uses a printer’s symbol, the ‘transposition mark’,⁷⁵ intertwined with the words “j’ai renversé la vapeur poétique”,⁷⁶ to lead into the prose of the second “movement” – the *antistrophe* – in which he examines various aspects of Fourierism. “Fourier qu’a-t-on fait de ton clavier?”, Breton asks plaintively. Linked to the musical keyboard, Fourier’s system, with its promises of the harmony of an improved society, appears to have been overcome by the counter-weight of current ‘civilization’. Breton is also likely to have been playing on the further witticism of the wider meaning of “clavier” as the whole compass or cosmogonic range of harmony.

Then follows the third and final “movement” – the *epode* – with its rythmical insistence: “Parce que...”, repeated six times, in conjunction with Breton’s cry: “Je te salue...” from the various places he has visited on his prolonged tour around the Hopi and other Indian reserves. Emphasizing his preoccupation with the visual impact of the printed page,⁷⁷ the *epode* is introduced with a horizontal ‘S’, echoing the transposition mark at the opening of the *antistrophe*, creating a whole where “these two reversals of the poetic energy evoke the alternation of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* in the Pindaric ode”.⁷⁸

The analogy with Fourier’s theories appears to Breton all the more convincing as he observes at first hand the customs and traditions of the Hopi Indians, some of which resemble in their way the phalansterian structure and way of life. It is thus quite deliberately that on his trip to visit the Hopi ‘pueblos’ he is looking into their traditions and lifestyle for commonalities with Fourier’s ‘system’. Like the great Phalansterian,

⁷⁴ Michel Beaujour, ‘Breton’s *Ode à Charles Fourier* and the Poetics of Genre’ in *André Breton Today*, op.cit., p.123

⁷⁵ The transposition mark – like an ‘S’ lying on its side – is used to denote a reversal of the word order.

⁷⁶ Andre Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.356

⁷⁷ Breton instructed that the *Ode* was to be printed “dans le sens de la largeur”, in order that the lines “avaient les meilleures chances de conserver l’intégralité de leur élan pour l’œil du lecteur”. Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert in *Notice*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1245

⁷⁸ Michel Beaujour, ‘Breton’s *Ode à Charles Fourier* and the Poetics of Genre’ in *André Breton Today*, op.cit., p.123

the Hopis believe that all things are connected, that every incident in life has a further cosmic effect, thus making general harmony man's most important aim:

Pour un Hopi, tout est lié : un désordre social, un incident domestique, mettent en cause le système de l'univers, dont les niveaux sont unis par de multiples correspondances ; un bouleversement sur un plan n'est intelligible, et moralement tolérable, que comme projection d'autres bouleversements, affectant les autres niveaux.⁷⁹

Breton is looking for 'proof' that the traditions and way of life of the Hopi Indians run in direct parallel to Fourier's theories of analogy.

Having established from his reading of Fourier that "affirmation of the correspondence between the passions and the material universe"⁸⁰ lies at the heart of his theory of universal analogy, Breton duly finds his own confirmation of commonality of beliefs among the Hopi Indians in his study of their customs and way of life.

2. The Hopi Indian culture – a real utopia?:

As we have seen, Breton's re-connection with Romanticism and research into the roots of Surrealism intensified his preoccupation with the writings of Charles Fourier – which, he claims, provided almost his sole reading matter on the trip to Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico during that summer of 1945. In a letter to Jean Gaulmier (21 January 1958), Breton confirms this and gives the chronology of the writing of the *Ode*, stating that between the beginning and end of that process, he made the prolonged trip "mû essentiellement par l'intense intérêt que je porte aux Indiens – pueblos en particulier".⁸¹

First, it is clear that it is not by chance that Breton chose to go to the Indian reservations in New Mexico. Many of his friends in New York had already made this

⁷⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Préface* to Don Talayesva's *Soleil Hopi : L'autobiographie d'un Indien Hopi*. (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1959), p.11

⁸⁰ Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier : The Visionary and His World*, op.cit., p.341

⁸¹ In *Ode à Charles Fourier commentée par Jean Gaulmier*, op.cit., p.10

journey – Seligmann and Lévi-Strauss, to name but two amongst those who were close to him at the time.⁸² There was generally great interest in the Hopi Indians in particular at this time, not least in the wake of the publication of the autobiography of the Hopi ‘chief’ Don Talayesva,⁸³ which, while not translated into French until 1959, had possibly been brought to Breton’s attention at the time of its publication in 1942. It is clear that there was already widespread interest from ethnologists and social anthropologists in the traditions and life-style of the Hopi Indians, an interest which dated from as early as Aby Warburg’s observations made in 1895, but not written up until 1923.⁸⁴ Others, such as ethnologists J.G. Frazer, Marcel Mauss and, most recently, Lévi-Strauss, had all made studies of North American Indians, whose art had equally fired the interest of Surrealist painters such as Paalen, Ernst and Matta.⁸⁵ Lévi-Strauss in particular was interested in the study of the Hopi Indians, as witness his preface to the French translation of the autobiography *Soleil Hopi* referred to above.⁸⁶ Given the tenor of the conversations that followed their initial meeting on board ship, it is certain that these conversations continued, and that, as a result, Breton’s interest in the ethnologist’s work deepened as it chimed with his lifelong interest in “primitive” art and culture. Throughout the *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*, Breton makes references to texts on the Hopi Indians, citing their traditions, rituals and the sites of their reservations.⁸⁷

The timing of Breton’s visit to the Hopi reservation in Northern Arizona meant that he was there at the right time of year to witness the ritual of the Snake Dance, possibly the most important and sacred of all Hopi traditions. Invoking the rains, and therefore also the maturing of the crops, the Snake Dance, with its panoply of masked,

⁸² Breton’s ex-wife, Jacqueline Lamba, made a similar journey in 1946, and again with David Hare in 1950. Cf. Alba Romano Pace, *Jacqueline Lamba – Peintre rebelle: Muse de L’Amour fou*, (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 2010), pp. 206 & 233 ; Wolfgang Paalen also travelled extensively in the Western states of the U.S., where he was “seduced by the spirit of the Indians”. Cf. Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*, op.cit., p.87

⁸³ Don C. Talayesva, *Sun Chief – The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1942)

⁸⁴ Cf. Aby Warburg, *Le Rituel du Serpent* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2003) While there is no direct evidence that Breton read Warburg’s text, the observations provide an early record of traditions and ritual from a respected ethnological source which would have been accessible to interested parties at the time.

⁸⁵ Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notes et variantes du Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*, O.C. Vol. III, op.cit., p.1225

⁸⁶ Don. C. Talayesva, *Soleil Hopi: l’autobiographie d’un Indian Hopi* (Paris : Librairie Plon, 1959)

⁸⁷ Cf. O.C., Vol. III, op.cit., pp.183–209

costumed and feathered dancers, its sinister ‘clowns’ and complicated choreography, was fundamental to the survival of the tribe. With minimal annual rainfall – and the added risk of destructive downpours when the rains did come – the Hopis knew to their cost the importance of wooing benevolent spirits who would ensure gentle nourishing rain, rather than cloudbursts of such force as to sweep away their tenuous efforts to grow their own crops. As Warburg notes:

La sécheresse et le désir d’avoir de l’eau suscitaient des pratiques magiques [...] afin de maîtriser les forces naturelles hostiles. La sécheresse enseigne magie et prière.⁸⁸

With their strange mixture of ancient Indian tradition and super-imposed Spanish religion, the Hopis did indeed practice forms of both magic and prayer.

Linking his reading of Fourier and the absorption of his ideas with his observation of the Hopi Indians, Breton calls across time to Fourier from the Indian reserve, in arguably the most beautiful lines of the *Ode*:

Je te salue de l’instant où viennent de prendre fin les danses indiennes
Au cœur de l’orage
Et les participants se groupent en amande autour des brasiers à la
prenante odeur de pin-pignon contre la pluie bien aimée
Une amande qui est une opale
Exaltant au possible ses feux rouges dans la nuit⁸⁹

The almond shape of the disposition of the Hopis round their fires is reflected by the poet in his use of the image of an opal with its inner flames of colour as he describes the Indian fires in the darkness of night. Further to this very specific reference to the Hopis, Breton reinforces his point by using the image of “le serpent à sonnettes” – the snake used by the Indians in their ritual dance – which, as he says, was one of Fourier’s “bêtes noires”, but also nonetheless representative of “un cryptogramme indivisible que l’homme est appelé à déchiffrer”.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Aby Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op. cit., p.60

⁸⁹ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.361

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.362

In Hopi art, serpents had long been portrayed as synonymous with lightning, and vice versa, in both cases drawing a close parallel to Surrealism. Warburg shows a Hopi drawing, in which lightning, the herald of rain, is shown with a serpent's head.⁹¹ The similarity of these serpent drawings to that of Nadja's drawing of "la Fleur des amants", reproduced in Breton's eponymous novel of 1928,⁹² is striking – as is the analogy to lightning used by Man Ray in his photographic contributions to *Minotaure No.5* (1934) entitled *Explosante fixe*.⁹³ Not only did the significance of such references not escape Breton's attention, but they confirmed to him how right his views were on the deep connections linking the kind of art towards which he was working with universal and ancient human practices.

The underlying belief of the Hopi tradition is that "le serpent en forme d'éclair est lié à l'éclair par une causalité magique".⁹⁴ This endorses the spirit of the Snake Dance ritual, which is largely based on the suspension of disbelief and on the strength of mind over matter. It is a move away from earlier, more primitive rituals, where the animal would have already been sacrificed, as the dancers at no time make aggressive moves towards the reptiles. Going into the desert at the start of the ceremony, the dancers scatter to the four points of the compass to collect the snakes, which are brought back to the *kiva* – a type of underground temple room – where they are tended and washed prior to the ritual dance. During the dance itself, the snakes are held in the mouths of the dancers, but seldom seem to strike or inflict serious hurt.

The strange paradoxical power of the snake to hurt and/or heal, and then to bring about the ensuing state of sublimation, is described by Joseph Leo Koerner in his introduction to Warburg's text:

⁹¹ Aby Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op. cit., pp.69–70

⁹² André Breton, *Nadja*, O.C. Vol. I, op.cit., p.720

⁹³ Man Ray, *Explosante fixe*, 1934 : Photograph originally published in *Minotaure* n°5, 1934, reproduced in *L'Amour fou* (André Breton, O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.683: concept used by André Breton in *L'Amour fou*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1937): "La beauté convulsive sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circunstancielle ou ne sera pas." (Ibid, p.687), taken in turn from the final sentence in *Nadja*: "La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas !" Cf. O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.753

⁹⁴ Aby Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op. cit., p.70–71

À la fois poison et remède, maladie et thérapie, le serpent montre comment l'angoisse fait naître des symboles qui, à leur tour, engendrent la pensée, et comment la pensée rend possible l'état de clarté, de sérénité et de détachement que les Grecs louaient sous le nom de *sophrosyne*.⁹⁵

This apparent abdication of responsibility, or sublimation into a state of near trance, in the dancers clearly struck a chord with Breton, and evoked memories of the early days of experimentation with “l'écriture automatique”, together with “les sommeils” of Desnos and Crevel, in the 1920s⁹⁶ but abandoned as too dangerous by the end of the first few months of 1923.⁹⁷ The trance-like state achieved by the dancers in the ritual is analogous to that of the Surrealist poets who, once visited by the ‘marvellous’, succumbed to forces greater than their conscious will or control.⁹⁸ It is perhaps this abdication of the will to control that leaves the dancers in accord with nature (in the form of the snakes), rather than seeking simply to “maîtriser les forces naturelles hostiles”.⁹⁹ While admitting to not having seen the snake dance for himself, his visit having been at the wrong time of year, Warburg nonetheless gives a feeling description of the ritual, matching its magic with the animal and religious content:

Cette danse est à la fois une danse animale et une danse cultuelle des saisons. [...] Ici les danseurs et l'animal vivant forment une unité magique.¹⁰⁰

Breton's account, while more lively because resulting from personal experience, is very much in note-form rather than in substantial literary style, and therefore never intended for publication. However, even in note-form the tension building up in the hours prior to the ceremony is inescapable and the minimal description captivating. Breton here describes the ambiance before the “danse de l'antilope”:

Atmosphère *initiation*. Très solennel, très grave, les participants ne portant aucune attention à l'entourage.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Introduction to Aby Warburg's Le Rituel du Serpent etc.*, op. cit., p. 19

⁹⁶ Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.19

⁹⁷ Cf. André Breton, *Entretiens radiophoniques, VII* in *O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit. pp.483–5

⁹⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes – The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994), p.241

⁹⁹ Aby Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op.cit., p.60

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 103–4

¹⁰¹ André Breton, *Carnet de voyage chez les indiens Hopi, O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.196. The emphasis is Breton's.

It is clear that, for the dancers in the ritual, the audience is *per se* a potential distraction, rather than a gathering of appreciative observers.

From his own position as observer, Breton is sensitive to the invasive nature of the tourists' presence in the Hopi villages. He comments frequently on the difficulty of taking photographs and/or purchasing katchinas,¹⁰² in one instance noting the insensitivity of a group of "jeunes filles américaines" who pushed their way into every house in the village, one asking if there were any katchinas for sale, while another dangled one previously purchased on a string in a way which would have seemed disrespectful, almost blasphemous, to the 'pueblos'.¹⁰³ This concentration on the clumsy behaviour of the commercially driven youth of American society is about as far as Breton allows himself to go in criticism of his host country at the time, his comments reflecting as they do Fourier's overt dislike of the commercialism of his own society.¹⁰⁴

Breton's admiration and respect for Hopi art is tightly connected to their unwillingness to expose the secrets of their traditions to outside eyes.¹⁰⁵ He is not defending their *religion*, however, whose proscriptions he feels no more obliged to observe than those of any other. That being said, the element of *magic* in the religious

¹⁰² Ibid, pp. 185, 186, 189, 197

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.197: Hopi children were brought up in the belief that there was no difference between the Katchina dancers, their katchina masks and the little katchina dolls, all of which were to them deities without distinction – all boundaries between real and spiritual worlds were blurred, if not dissolved. The Katchinas were believed to be ancestral spirits, themselves lesser deities, acting as messengers conveying the prayers of the people to more important gods. (Cf. Leo W. Simmons, *Introduction – The Hopi in Oraibi* in *Sun Chief – The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, Don C. Talayesva, op.cit., p.18) In his autobiography, Don Talayesva records his disillusion, during his ceremony of initiation into adulthood, at the discovery that the Katchina dancers were in fact none other than his relations and fellow-clansmen: "Cette nuit-là, tout le monde est allé voir danser les Katchina [*sic*] dans les kiva. [...] Quand les Katchina sont entrés dans la kiva sans masques, j'ai eu un grand choc: ce n'étaient pas des esprits, mais des êtres humains. Je les reconnaissais presque tous et je me sentais bien malheureux, puisque toute ma vie on m'avait dit que les Katchina étaient des dieux; j'étais surtout choqué et furieux de voir tous mes oncles, pères et frères de clan, danser en Katchina, mais c'était pire encore de voir mon propre père: chaque fois qu'il me regardait, je détournais la figure." Don C. Talayesva, *Soleil Hopi*, op.cit. p.108

¹⁰⁴ However, it is important to remember that the *Carnet* is in *note* form, as stated above, and, having never been intended for publication, can in no way carry the same weight as other texts.

¹⁰⁵ Breton relates his own experience of having his notebook confiscated by a Hopi standing behind him, the few lines he had written torn from the notebook and a severe warning given as to what might happen if he were caught in such a situation again. Breton excuses himself, explaining through his companion Jeanne Reynal his lack of English, but appears to have taken the incident to heart, fearing that his action might prevent them from attending the serpent dance the following day.

ritual and myth of the Hopi Indians is particularly interesting to Breton at the time – an element which recurs throughout their traditions, uniting for him the concept of magic with the fantasy aspect of a utopian society. He does, nonetheless, despite his recognition of their peace-loving character, and his undoubted admiration for their ultimate goal of a harmonious society, note the underlying troubled nature of the Hopi existence, which permeates their traditions:

Détresse de ces populations. C'est elle qui passe dans leurs cérémonies et leur confère cette gravité unique, sans doute.¹⁰⁶

In view of his reading of Fourier at the time, there is a definite link in Breton's mind between the situation of the Hopi Indians corralled in their reservations and Fourier's criticism of 19th century French capitalist society at the mercy of greedy merchants. That Breton already makes reference in *Arcane 17* to the importance to Hopi ceremonies of “[le] plus grand nombre d'êtres surnaturels que l'imagination ait pourvus d'un visage et d'attributs distincts”,¹⁰⁷ showed early on a profound desire to connect imagination and reality, which is so much at stake in these two texts. We have already seen Breton's readiness to accept the alterity of possible “Grands transparents”;¹⁰⁸ in the “êtres surnaturels” of the Hopi Indian culture and tradition he clearly found a cogent analogy. It also urges him on in his attempt to think of an alternative society peopled by an imaginary world of “hosts of supernatural agents”,¹⁰⁹ and one where this would not be dismissed as pure fantasy or as an indicator of a “primitive” mentality.

These, largely in the form of katchinas, hold an important position in the lives of the Hopis, and indeed are regarded by Hopi children as “des êtres surnaturels, terribles” right up to the point of their Initiation Ceremony into the adult community of dancers, at which time the extent of the myth is revealed.¹¹⁰ The rhythm of Hopi life and ceremony is ordained by the seasons and a deep relationship with Nature. This connection too is in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.197

¹⁰⁷ *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.85

¹⁰⁸ André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.14

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.17

¹¹⁰ A.Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op.cit., p.83. This ceremony marks the passing of childhood and the initiation into adulthood, obviously a turning point in the life of a Hopi, and a manifestation of the close meshing of religion and tradition in the ceremonies which mark that life.

direct parallel with Fourier's richly imaginative proposals for a phalansterian society, based on the organization of labour in harmonious groups for the common production of foodstuffs. His theory of analogy suggests a vision of a universe in which "nature lost its strangeness".¹¹¹ Man's connection with or closeness to nature was central to Fourier's thinking, and even in the extract that Breton gives at the end of his *Ode* it is possible to see how these "Scènes de la vie harmonienne" constitute an unprecedented attempt to maintain a close connection with nature (a connection which is not purely utilitarian, but also aesthetic):

Un groupe de dames fleuristes du canton, venant cultiver une ligne de cent toises de Mauves et Dahlias qui forment une perspective pour la route voisine, et bordure en équerre pour un champ de légumes contigu au verger¹¹²

His understanding of the need for harmony in the working groups and of the consequent reflection in heightened production was predicated upon the satisfaction of the workers. This, understandably, seemed more possible in the context of agricultural labour than factory work, which for him embodied the epitome of human degradation as is indeed underlined by Breton at the end of the *Ode*:

En haine irréductible de la frustration en tous genres qui découvre à la honte des sociétés les plus arrogantes le visage noirci d'un enfant près d'un four d'usine.¹¹³

Equally, the co-operative or group nature of many of the occupations of the Hopi Indians, from outdoor work on the land to produce and harvest essential food crops to the maintenance of buildings, the making of pots, weaving and sewing, and the enthusiasm for such collective work, corresponds to the detailed conception of Fourier's utopian vision of labour with, as suggested by Breton, the various "phalanges"¹¹⁴ and "série" coming to help each other out.¹¹⁵ Together with lives led very much in synchronization with the seasons and near to nature, further projected into a close connection with the cosmos, this must have added to Breton's awareness of similarities with the systems

¹¹¹ Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, op.cit., p.342

¹¹² André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit, p.363

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

proposed by Charles Fourier. The thinker aimed to introduce a system within which the ‘passions’ would be sublimated into practical work, for which groups would be formed, with to each his/her appropriate task; while with the satisfaction of a job well done, would follow the sublimation of the ‘passions’, which, if left unchannelled would conflict with a harmonious society, the aspiration to which lay at the heart of Fourier’s proposed reforms. As in Hopi Indian society, there was to be no hierarchy in the phalansterian society, each citizen valued according to his/her own particular ‘gift’. A happy, industrious society, engaged in essential production, but with no financial gain, was the structure common to both societies. Add to this the evident suspicion, even dislike, of the Hopis also for any form of commercialization, and there is a strong case to be made for the similarity of their way of life to that proposed by Fourier in his utopian society.

In further support of this supposition, the theme of cosmology is fundamentally important to Fourier, who, in his *Quatre mouvements* describes “a vast intellectual system seeking to encompass, or replace, all scientific disciplines and permitting a total and organic explanation of the world based on a few simple laws [...] a comprehensive description of the created universe that would link everything to a providential plan, an overall divine scheme of purposes”.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, this importance of the cosmos is mirrored in the Hopi culture. At one with their environment in the following of the seasons with their traditional ceremonies, the Hopis extend their efforts to harmonize with the entire cosmos. As in the case of the serpent, so the cosmos is represented by symbolic illustration, which is frequently used as ornamentation. In his role of art historian, Warburg appreciates the form and importance of these designs:

Il faut interpréter des ornements en apparence purement décoratifs dans un sens symbolique et cosmologique. C’est ce que va nous montrer un dessin que je tiens moi-même d’un Indien et où, à côté d’un élément fondamental de la représentation cosmologique – le cosmos en forme de maison –, on voit une force animale irrationnelle, un démon mystérieux et redouté : le serpent.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ However, Fourier appears to have been ambivalent as to his wish to have his ideas on cosmology taken seriously, “regarding them as aspects of his doctrine that should be judged independently of his theory of association”. Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, op.cit., pp.332–333

¹¹⁷ A. Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent*, op.cit., p.60

The “maison cosmique au toit en escalier” and the “serpent-flèche”, like the serpent itself, are basic elements of a language of symbolism, as he explains.

Le mouvement ascendant est l'*excelsior* de l'homme, qui cherche à s'élever de la terre vers le ciel, l'acte véritablement symbolique qui donne à l'homme qui marche la noblesse de la tête dressée, tournée vers le haut. La contemplation du ciel est la grâce et la malédiction de l'humanité.¹¹⁸

In his eagerness to use his observations of the Hopi Indian way of life, combined with his reading of Fourier, to illustrate his vision for a post-war world, Breton is tempted to demonstrate connections which simply do not exist. In his attempts to bring together the Hopi Indian tradition with Fourier's theoretical phalansterianism, far from creating the 'magical' spark of creativity for a new Surrealist 'myth', he lays himself open to the inevitable cynical criticism which ensues on his return to Europe.

Nevertheless, when back in Paris, and organising the Surrealist exhibition of 1947, Breton returned to this idea of the 'ascent' of man, his passage from earth to a symbolic 'heaven' or some higher place, illustrating his concept with allusions to thinkers and writers from medieval times to a more recent past. The lay-out of the exhibition, as will be seen, took the visitor/audience (for the whole exhibition, as its predecessors, takes the form of a quasi theatrical representation) on a journey of initiation. From the ground floor, the route left a room named 'RÉTROSPECTIVE' – “*Les surréalistes malgré eux*” – and, by means of a staircase comprising twenty-one steps, gains the first floor “SALLE DES SUPERSTITIONS”.¹¹⁹ The twenty-one steps were formed by the spines of twenty-one book titles, each corresponding to one of the twenty-one “arcanes majeurs du tarot”. Amongst the thinkers and writers represented were Baudelaire, Maître Eckhart, Apollinaire, Swedenborg, and Charles Fourier himself.¹²⁰ The concept of man's 'ascension' was mirrored in this case by the physical ascent of stairs, representing his acquisition of deeper knowledge as he progressed through the 'initiation'.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.73

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Notes for Projet initial*, André Breton *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1367

¹²⁰ See below Chapter 7, p.260 Cf. André Breton, *Notes to Projet initial*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, p.1368

Breton was to repeat this analogy a year later in his essay ‘Signe ascendant’ (1948),¹²¹ which, from the intended message of its title, concentrates on the importance of the poetic image, as represented by analogy. He summarizes the role of the poet and artist in his use of analogy thus:

La méthode analogique, tenue en honneur dans l’antiquité et au Moyen Âge, depuis lors grossièrement supplantée par la méthode ‘logique’ qui nous a conduits à l’impasse qu’on sait, le premier devoir des poètes, des artistes est de la rétablir dans toutes ses prérogatives, à charge de l’arracher aux arrière-pensées spiritualistes qui, s’étant toujours comportées vis-à-vis d’elle en parasites, vicient ou paralysent son fonctionnement.¹²²

Quoting from Fourier’s *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales*, Breton chooses the line: “Le diamant et le cochon sont hiéroglyphes de la 13e passion (harmonisme) que les civilisés n’éprouvent pas”¹²³ to illustrate his point. He emphasizes the importance of “l’analogie poétique” as the instrument with which to break “le fil de la pensée discursive”, thus releasing the imagination “qui [...] part soudain en fusée illuminant une vie de relations autrement féconde, dont le tout indique que les hommes des premiers âges eurent le secret.”¹²⁴ recreating the image of man’s upward trajectory. In the language of mathematics, itself an indication of his appreciation of Fourier’s own predilection for “le calcul”, Breton concentrates on “la topique verticale” and the notion of “(une) réalité supérieure”.¹²⁵

The image of a vertical ascent, the route to this “réalité supérieure”, is one which is basic to the earliest forms of worship. Looking for a link with the uncluttered minds of “les hommes des premiers âges”¹²⁶ in his attempt to connect art with everyday life, Breton finds it in the creative art work of the Hopis. The representation of the “toit en

¹²¹ Originally published in the first issue of *Néon*, January 1948, this essay was later reproduced in the collection *La Clé des champs*. Cf. André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.766

¹²² André Breton, ‘Signe ascendant’ in *La Clé des champs*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.768

¹²³ Charles Fourier, *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales*, 3^e éd., Librairie sociétaire, 1846, p.288 in *Notes* for ‘Signe ascendant’ in *La Clé des champs*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1378

¹²⁴ André Breton, ‘Signe Ascendant’ in *La Clé des champs*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.766

¹²⁵ Étienne-Alain Hubert, in *Notes* for ‘Signe ascendant’ in *La Clé des champs*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1376–7

¹²⁶ André Breton, ‘Signe Ascendant’ in *La Clé des champs*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.766

escalier” is used decoratively on pottery, as well as for ritual masks and symbolic decoration on the walls of the *kivas* or subterranean temple rooms. As in Fourier’s edenistic world, the Hopi Indians are eager to maintain a conscious connection with nature and the cosmos. They also seem to aspire to concentrate their energies on creating a harmonious community, and thus Breton is fascinated by the very possibility of the concrete realization of Fourier’s utopia in real life.

There is no doubt that the closing lines of the *Ode*, surely written after Breton’s trip to Arizona, show the proximity to the thought and way of life of the Hopi Indians. Here there is direct reference to the rattle-snakes used symbolically in the ritual of the snake dance, which, as has been seen, Breton refers to as elements of “un cryptogramme indivisible que l’homme est appelé à déchiffrer”.¹²⁷ The use of the term “cryptogramme”, which first appeared in 1928 in *Nadja*¹²⁸ is deliberate. However, the reference to rattle-snakes, or indeed any snakes, marks up a divergence in beliefs between Fourier and the Hopi Indians, again highlighting Breton’s problem in attempting to connect the Indians’ way of life with Fourier’s utopian plan. For Fourier – who did not share the view of his contemporaries that all of creation was a part of God’s plan, to be accepted without question – “snakes, insects, disease and sorrow”¹²⁹ were part of his reason for *reforming* the existing order of things, rather than simply working with the pre-ordained divine concept of creation as it stood. This clearly chimed with Breton’s own plans for reform, looking to provide an improved society for a post-war world. For Fourier, as for the Surrealist leader, the universe could be read as a “cryptogramme”, for, like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, he “regarded the natural world as a “forest of symbols” that could, if rightly understood, point beyond given realities to a new mode of existence”.¹³⁰

3. For a “futur édénique”:

¹²⁷ *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.362

¹²⁸ *Nadja, O.C.* Vol. I, op.cit., p.716

¹²⁹ Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier : The Visionary and His World*, op.cit., p.348

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.349. Cf. also André Breton’s reference to “signes d’apparence cabalistiques” painted on “des flotteurs faits d’un barril [...] surmonté d’une haute tige au sommet de laquelle flottait un drapeau noir”. *Arcane 17, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.37

In the *Ode*, Breton takes up Fourier's remarks about commercialism and uses his argument in order to articulate the different forms of individual and social dysfunction: the alienation of industrial labour, the desperate compensatory quality of intellectual work and the imaginative and ideological work of poetry in this context. Reflecting on Fourier's contempt for merchants and their occupation, Breton refers to "la libre rapine parée du nom de commerce",¹³¹ a position he is quite happy to endorse before returning to his praise of the thinker who does not preach "revolution", but, on the contrary – and Breton has become convinced that it is the only way forward – a very slow "amélioration du sort humain":

Filtrant la soif de mieux-être et la maintenant à l'abri de tout ce qui pourrait la rendre moins pure quand bien même et c'est le cas je tiendrais pour avéré que l'amélioration du sort humain ne s'opère que très lentement par à-coups au prix de revendications terre à terre et de croyance irraisonnée à l'acheminement vers un futur édénique et après tout c'est elle aussi le seul levain des générations ta jeunesse¹³²

In Fourier's system, harmony with and throughout the cosmos was to reflect harmony on earth, as well as being one which takes time to implement. Breton allows himself a moment of "croyance irraisonnée" in a glimpse of "un futur édénique" as he uses a fleeting reference to Pol de Limbourg to conjure up visions of the scenes of perfect harmony portrayed by this skilled miniaturist in *Les très riches heures du duc Jean de Berry*. The poet talks to Fourier of "ton tact suprême dans la démesure" in the face of the "haine irréductible de la frustration en tous genres qui découvre à la honte des sociétés les plus arrogantes le visage noirci d'un enfant près d'un four d'usine et s'abîme dans la douceur des coups frappés par l'horloge de Pol de Limbourg".¹³³ These idyllic scenes, Breton suggests, should replace the reality of child workers, their faces blackened by the smoke and grime of the factories in which they are forced to work. Breton thus confirms that he has not given up himself on the kind of social liberation he had called for since the 1920s, but reading Fourier severed all his links with socialist thought:

¹³¹ *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol. III, op.cit., p.355

¹³² *Ibid*, p.362

¹³³ *Ibid*, p.363

Mais ce qui me débuche à jamais la pensée socialiste
C'est que tu aies éprouvé le besoin de *différencier au moins en*
quadruple forme la virgule
Et de faire passer la clé de sol de seconde en première
ligne dans la notation musicale¹³⁴

These enigmatic lines are a tribute to the fantasy of Fourier's integral keyboard where he ranks human passions;¹³⁵ the emphasis on the comma, the very poetical thought of quadrupling punctuation seems to charm Breton and reassure him, presumably freeing him from the cold economics of socialist thought.

Similarly carried away by Fourier's depictions of a harmonious society, Breton assesses the "ressorts affectueux"¹³⁶ and examines "friendship" and "love" to show how much they suffer in today's world: "une des malédictions d'aujourd'hui".¹³⁷ He addresses him in person: "Toi qui ne parlais que de lier vois tout s'est délié".¹³⁸ The deliberate use in the same sentence of "lier" and "délié" may be a direct reference to Fourier's text "*Tout est lié dans le système de la Nature*",¹³⁹ but essentially, Breton is trying to demonstrate that there is a dire need of such a thought at this particular time :

Tu as embrassé l'unité tu l'as montrée non comme perdue
mais comme intégralement réalisable¹⁴⁰

Breton's understanding of Fourier is integral: while some, like Engels and Marx only considered his thought from the standpoint of its contribution to the development of socialist ideology, discarding some of his wilder speculations, calling him a "utopian" socialist as has been seen, Breton prefers to call him: "Toi tout debout parmi les grands

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.359

¹³⁵ Ibid, p.358; cf. also *Notes to Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1252-3*

¹³⁶ Ibid, p.357

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Ibid, p.352

¹³⁹ *Publications des Ms., 1851*, p.340 in Jean Gaulmier, *Notes to Ode à Charles Fourier commentée*, op.cit., p.79

¹⁴⁰ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.359*

visionnaires”¹⁴¹ and fully endorses him as “Orphée”, father of all poet-seers, attracting in his wake all trees and rocks:¹⁴²

On a beau dire que tu t’es fait de graves illusions
Sur les chances de résoudre le litige à l’amiable
À toi le roseau d’Orphée¹⁴³

He understands him from the standpoint of the theory of “Universal analogy”. This is because to him, analogy was nothing arbitrary or purely verbal and thus, like Fourier, he believed – as has been seen with the “Grands transparents” – that universal analogy reveals that creatures are not merely things, but *signs*. Fourier’s belief in universal analogy and cosmic affinities makes his approach to the world richly metaphorical and symbolic. Breton was bound to be extremely sensitive to this since, just like Fourier, he was never going to be satisfied with an abstract statement; he, as poet, sought instead the concrete expression of an idea – often, since the *Second Manifeste* and even more so since the *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste* by means of myths.¹⁴⁴

Breton’s acceptance of analogies as an end to an enquiry, and his constant search for them, has made him progressively more aware of an almost animistic identity of man with the world of nature (as we have seen in *Arcane 17*). The constant dismissal of rationality and its corollary, the reliance on intuition, made Breton express himself largely in rich images, initiating a new poetics of correspondences. His criterion of the truth and falsity of statements in Fourier’s system seems to have been its degree of richness in essentially “poetic” elements. For Breton, who, as we have seen, tends to identify with the poet as a “seer” at the time, it is clear that it is not only the thinker and investigator of nature that he sees in Fourier, but the poet as well, who, by universal analogy was to discover and express the unity of experience.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.354

¹⁴² See Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notes to Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., Note 4, p.1250*

¹⁴³ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.354*

¹⁴⁴ Cf. the last line of *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste* : “Un mythe nouveau ? Ces êtres, faut-il les convaincre qu’ils procèdent du mirage ou leur donner l’occasion de se découvrir?” : *O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.15*

He seems to apply the same approach when he observes in his *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi* scenes of the snake dance in the Indian reservation:

Je te salue du bas de l'échelle qui plonge en grand mystère dans la *kiwa* hopi
la chambre souterraine et sacrée ce 22 août 1945 à Mishongnovi à l'heure
où les serpents d'un nœud ultime marquent qu'ils sont prêts à opérer leur
conjonction avec la bouche humaine
Du fond du pacte millénaire qui dans l'angoisse a pour objet de maintenir
l'intégrité du verbe
Des plus lointaines ondes de l'écho qu'éveille le pied frappant impérieusement
le sol pour sceller l'alliance avec les puissances qui font lever la graine¹⁴⁵

Taken from the notes made in his *Carnet*, the exact date of Breton's experience of the snake dance at Mishongnovi is inserted into the poem, together with oblique reference to the symbolic language of the dance, and its purpose in calling for rain to ensure the germination of the crops. The reference to "la bouche humaine" and the aim to "maintenir l'intégrité du verbe"¹⁴⁶ is made all the more significant by the fact that the Hopi people had no written language, and were therefore forced to use English (as a result of American intervention in their affairs) – a language also foreign to Breton. Furthermore, Breton's use of "la bouche humaine" brings to the reader an echo of Hugo's "la bouche d'ombre", with its aura of magic and prophetic power.

Through Fourier, Breton reflects on the Hopi Indians' closeness to and imitation of nature in their way of life and traditions. After accepting that change will only ever be brought about slowly, we have seen that Breton nonetheless owns to a "croyance irraisonnée à l'acheminement vers un futur édénique" before introducing Fourier's idyll of group industry on the land.¹⁴⁷ In this quotation from Fourier's own work, the poet leads directly on from the phalansterian references to Hopi traditions, and the implied enthusiasm of the 'pueblos' for working in groups mirrored by Fourier's utopian dream. However, Breton himself is careful to avoid the use of the word 'utopia' (preferring the

¹⁴⁵ *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.362

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.362–3

phrase “un futur édénique”), for which he knows he will be mocked, and which will detract from the political ‘message’ inherent in the *Ode*.

Nevertheless, it is both on Fourier’s edenistic vision and the Hopi philosophy that Breton draws as he closes the *Ode* with a sweeping summary of the importance of cosmological connection. For Fourier, cosmogony and close connection with the planets were essential to his system, the planets being ascribed a similar range of ‘passions’ to those on earth. Further study of Fourier’s *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel, 1848* enlightens the reader on Fourier’s perspective on the cosmos.¹⁴⁸ Our problem in understanding the planets and their passions is, he states, because the system is “infiniment grand” and for man “cela est trop vaste pour leurs petits esprits”.¹⁴⁹ If we think of the planets – described more vividly by Fourier as “notre tourbillon” – as represented by a single bee in a hive, then the further planets out there constitute the rest of the hive – indeed our universe itself counts for just one bee

Dans une ruche formée d’environ cent mille univers sidéraux, dont l’ensemble est un *Binivers* ; qu’ensuite viennent les *Trinivers*, formés de plusieurs milliers de binivers, et ainsi de suite.¹⁵⁰

Fourier was writing in the mid-19th century, using his extraordinary powers of imagination. Astronomical research was to prove him right, but not for at least another century. In the meantime he had to endure intellectual suspicion and even ridicule. Fourier was adamant in his belief that man should remain closely connected with the cosmos, a fact acknowledged by Breton in the *Ode* in relation to that connection as he addresses the thinker in person:

Qui répondait à tout par un accord
Réglant au cours des étoiles jusqu’au grand écart du plus fier trois-mâts
depuis les entrechats de la plus petite barque sur la mer
Tu as embrassé l’unité tu l’as montrée non comme perdue mais comme
intégralement réalisable¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ In Jean Gaulmier, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, op.cit., p.96

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.359

This was an element of belief which Breton could also see as essential also for the Hopi Indians. While portraying the Hopi ceremonies, the rattle snakes and “l’échelle qui plonge en grand mystère dans la *kiwa hopi*”,¹⁵² he recognizes Fourier’s own principle as “tenant pour hors de question que la nature et l’âme humaine répondent au même modèle”.¹⁵³ Breton, too, was aware that man had become separated from nature, and, following the path of Romanticism, that that separation should be bridged.

Breton’s evocation of his experiences at the Hopi Indian reservation, observing the colour and tradition of their dance and ceremony, hinting at the importance of choreography and ritual, has an immediacy which is arresting and effective for his use of its analogy with Fourierism. He touches on the closeness of the Indians to the spirit world and Fourier’s sympathy with that state of mind – “qu’il ne s’agit plus de reporter à l’autre monde mais de promouvoir dans celui-ci”.¹⁵⁴ This final section of the *Ode* thus interweaves Hopi tradition with Fourier’s own, “tranchant sur la grisaille des idées et des aspirations d’aujourd’hui ta lumière”.¹⁵⁵

4. Conclusion :

In the wake of his most recent text, *Arcane 17*, Breton is poised to continue the trajectory of his preoccupation. The discovery of the Fourier texts, in conjunction with his observation in practice of the traditions of the Hopi Indians, provides him with the material for a more programmatic, follow-up text, at the same time focusing his readers on the remarkable character he finds in Charles Fourier – one who, despite the frequent disbelief and even ridicule of others, was prepared to think for himself in an original way.

¹⁵² Ibid, p.362

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.361

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.362

While his notes on the Hopi Indians, which form the text of the *Carnet*, were never published, they clearly indicate that in their civilization Breton saw a model, which, together with Fourier's utopian schemes, might provide a blueprint for his 'new myth' for mankind. An anonymous article in 1959 greeted the publication of the French translation of the autobiography of Don Talayesva, *Soleil Hopi*, with a warm accolade:

Depuis longtemps nous tenons en grand honneur l'art Hopi et ce que les travaux des ethnologues avaient pu nous révéler de la pensée qui l'inspire. [...] Grâce à toi, ces lieux, cette pensée, cet art nous deviennent infiniment plus proches. Du récit de ta vie, tous les hommes sont appelés à tirer une leçon de santé mentale et de noblesse.¹⁵⁶

Although unascrbed, the article is an important acknowledgment that one of the Surrealist number had had the opportunity to visit several Hopi villages, to witness their ceremonies and "s'est efforcé de nous imprégner de leur climat, qui nous est cher".¹⁵⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that this observer was Breton. This article provides clear confirmation that not only does he see a future model in their way of life, but one from which "une leçon" should be drawn to contribute to the "santé mentale et [...] noblesse" of mankind. In the same way, this confirms too the importance of the *Ode*, despite its limitations (for it is perhaps not one of his best texts), written as an attempt to pre-empt the criticism Breton knew would be addressed to him in response to his endorsement of hermeticism in *Arcane 17*.

Despite his claims to the contrary, there is also confirmation that Breton's text *is* – at least to some extent – an example of "poésie de circonstance". Étienne-Alain Hubert reveals the existence of a copy of the *Ode* on which Breton has written: "Entre le mirage atomique et l'image de Fourier",¹⁵⁸ which calls to mind the ominous lines in the text:

Un savant bien que muni de lunettes noires perd la vue pour avoir assisté à
plusieurs milles de distance aux premiers essais de la bombe
atomique (Les journaux)¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *BIEF – Jonction Surréaliste No. 7 – 1er Juin 1959*, (Paris : Le Terrain Vague), p.2

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁸ *In Notice to Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1247*

¹⁵⁹ *André Breton, Ode à Charles Fourier, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.360*

The comment is a chilling reminder of the terrible things that were still happening in what was ostensibly a post-war world. While careful to hold back from overt criticism of his host country, Breton leaves the reader in little doubt as to his disillusion with certain aspects of nationalism and commercial profiteering during the war years, in the U.S. as much as in Europe, and, in the parallel text of the *Carnet*, the discomfort he feels at the situation of the Hopi (and other) Indians herded into their reservations. His horror at the barbarism of the destruction wrought by the atomic bomb is palpable: Fourier's utopian aspirations must have provided a certain relief from what Breton saw taking place around him at the time, but, more importantly, fed into his own optimistic quest to find a better way forward for mankind in the future and gave him material with which to fashion the statement he felt compelled to make at this point. It also further explains the form of the *Ode*, which is possibly also in some way a response to Claudel's 1941 patriotic lament, "Paroles au Maréchal", later to be known as his *Ode à Pétain*.

In a letter to Gaulmier during his editing of the *Ode* in 1958, Breton writes of his intense interest in the pueblos Indians, adding:

Le destin qui a été celui de ces hommes et leur impressionnante dignité constituaient pour ma rêverie une toile de fond sur laquelle était appelé à s'empreindre dans tout son relief la personnalité de Charles Fourier – du Fourier que je chéris très spécialement.¹⁶⁰

Gaulmier closes his text introducing the *Ode* with a summary of the reactions of other 19th century literary figures to Charles Fourier and his ideas. As a final comment, he finds an apt quotation from Hugo's *Les Misérables*:

En 1817, il y avait à l'Académie des Sciences un Fourier célèbre que la postérité a oublié et dans je ne sais quel grenier un Fourier obscur dont l'avenir se souviendra.¹⁶¹

It is exactly this dusting off of Fourier's reputation that Breton aims to achieve with his *Ode*, rescuing from near oblivion the ideas of the "grand visionnaire" at a time when he

¹⁶⁰ Jean Gaulmier, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, op.cit., p.10

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.59

feels the world is most in need of a new myth following the crisis of world war. It is of course particularly appropriate that Gaullier should find a positive reference from Hugo with which to mark Breton's ode of recognition and recommendation – Hugo, the re-reading of whose work had contributed so clearly to the turning point in both the poet's own creative output and in Surrealism brought about during the course of the war years.

While many dismiss Fourier as a man whose speculations on cosmology and cosmogony are little short of “madness”, there is, as Jonathan Beecher suggests, “a close connection between the “madness” of his cosmogony and the insight of his social criticism”.¹⁶² Both are clear affirmations of man's ability to form both himself and his world. Both are anchored in the conviction “that the only limit to our possibilities is our desire”.¹⁶³ As Beecher concludes: “Fourier's “madness” [...] is of a piece with his radical utopian optimism”.¹⁶⁴ Breton's own state of mind at the time might be similarly described.

Thus the *Ode* confirms and builds on his marked change of direction in *Arcane 17*, taking a historical perspective on man's position in the cosmos, linking that to his current situation and bridging both with a view of the future. Both texts are presented in the form of an ‘alternative’ history – a re-writing of history as that of *ideas* and *systems* rather than of facts, with the forces of love and friendship creating a path to harmony and liberty. This trend leads directly away from the Avant-Garde, with its tradition of mass « rupture » or breaking with tradition, towards a concentration on the individual and/or the community (as in the pueblos Indians) and the importance of a closeness to nature and the wider cosmos, with marked emphasis on an element of magic in a future ‘edenistic’ society.

¹⁶² Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and his World*, op.cit., p.12

¹⁶³ Ibid

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

CHAPTER 7: Breton's situation at "the eye of a storm"¹

In this chapter, we will follow the reception of Breton's late work on his return to France on 25th May 1946. *Arcane 17* and *L'Ode à Charles Fourier* were published in the capital in 1947,² and for this reason, we will also return in this chapter to *Martinique charmeuse de serpents* which, although conceived as early as 1941 – as has been seen in Chapter 3 – was ultimately only published in 1948. At the heart of this chapter therefore is the recurring question of the end of Surrealism, and even its failure, and, at the centre, the role of its founder. Thus the texts examined in this chapter, varied in their literary status, represent a renewed statement on Breton's part, of his conviction that his quest into hermeticism and the occult, delving into the very roots of Surrealism in his search for a 'new myth' for the post-war world, forms the last word about his position in the wake of World War II and where he thinks the future of the movement lies. Indicating a pronounced shift away from political action, and taking instead a positive turn towards poetry and nature as the mediums by which to achieve a new social harmony in the world, Breton now faces those who had stayed behind³ and the emergence of a new philosophy, Existentialism, promulgated by Jean-Paul Sartre, which in a post-Holocaust era advocates a new Humanism⁴ based on individual freedom and the *engagement* of the writer.

¹ Having met Breton by chance on holiday in Brittany with his family, the young Alain Jouffroy described Breton's room, where he sat, with the rock crystals he had collected, Elisa smoking on the bed, as "the eye of a storm". Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.540

² *L'Ode à Charles Fourier* in the February edition of the review "L'Âge d'or", and *Arcane 17* *enté d'ajours* on 5th June by Sagittaire. Cf. *Chronologie, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., pp.XXXI & XXXII

³ During the war, some Surrealist writers/poets (or those who had been connected with the Surrealist movement, such as Éluard and Aragon) often contributed to the Resistance, either by their writing or their actions (or both: René Char, for example, was leading a Resistance network under the pseudonym "Capitaine Alexandre"); Robert Desnos entered the Resistance at the beginning of the war and was arrested on 22nd February 1944: he died in deportation... Of the younger generation, as we have seen, Jean-François Chabrun and the "Main à Plume" group was created by its members as an act of resistance against the Vichy Regime and the moral order. Cf. Nathalie Aubert, 'La Main à Plume: poetry in the time of the German occupation' in *Framing narratives of the Second World War and Occupation in France*, Margaret Attak and Christopher Lloyd eds. (Manchester: MUP, 2012).

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme' (1946)

The France to which Breton returned in 1946 was necessarily a very different place from the country he had left in 1941, exemplified particularly by its capital, Paris. The Parti Communiste Français (PCF) had gained in popularity and influence in the wake of its role in the Resistance, and capitalized on its popular title of “le parti des fusillés”, marking its heroic losses during the years of occupation. Because of this, Breton’s increasing realization that his vision of the role of Surrealism in a post-war world was in direct conflict with Communism, and his efforts to take the movement away from political engagement and into the realms of hermeticism and the occult, made him an obvious target for criticism from those who had ‘remained’ during the conflict.

In this chapter, building on the previous two, we will examine the position Breton took on his return to France in May 1946, the poetic direction in which he decided to lead the movement and the opposition he encountered. In the wake of his return, there came a decided push for new leadership, or, failing that, the founding of a break-away movement maintaining close ties with the PCF and Moscow – notably from Christian Dotremont and the Belgian Surrealists, whose provocative tactics were largely responsible for the creation of the Surrealist tract *Rupture inaugurale* in June, 1947. The need became ever more urgent for Breton to move right away from political activity and to find a viable alternative to such engagement by which to achieve something more than mere ‘revolution of the mind’. This delicate manoeuvre had to be achieved against the turbulent background of post-war jostling for position, both political and literary.

While *Devant le Rideau* (1947) was technically the first text to be presented by Breton after his return to France, he was in fact called upon to speak publicly a matter of days after his arrival. The organizers of an event to greet the return of Antonin Artaud, freed after many years’ internment (1941–1946) in a mental institution in Rodez, called on Breton to pay homage to his old friend. Despite emphasizing his reluctance to speak publicly so soon after his arrival, and, further, putting aside his past differences with Artaud, Breton nonetheless spoke warmly on his behalf,⁵ losing no time also to state the

⁵ *Hommage à Antonin Artaud* : while originally delivered as a speech on 7 June 1946, the *Hommage* was later reproduced with other texts in *La Clé des champs*, (1953), *O.C.* Vol. III, op.cit., p.736

importance of strong Surrealist principles in the turbulence of post-war politics. So, no more than a week after his arrival, Breton makes the most of the chance to put his case, echoing the closing maxim of his *Discours au Congrès des écrivains*⁶ of June 1935 with his exhortation to hold fast to “cet objectif triple et indivisible : transformer le monde, changer la vie, refaire de toutes pièces l’entendement humain”.⁷ The triple goal, its aims taken from Marx and Rimbaud, and this time with the important addition of that of Charles Fourier, manifests his continuing preoccupation with the phalansterian thinker and the necessity for a new social myth in the aftermath of war, a necessity which the international exhibition the following year sought to satisfy.

A year later, in July 1947 – published therefore more than a year after his return⁸ – *Devant le Rideau* was not only the introduction to the catalogue for the Surrealist exhibition, *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, but also part of Breton’s response to attacks directed at him, as well as a calculated assault on the recent literary and painterly output in Paris. As the main text to be studied in this chapter, it is important, therefore, to look at it in the context of other short texts of the time, together with various contemporary critiques of Breton’s approach and thinking both during and after the war years. The publication in Paris of the *Ode à Charles Fourier* in February 1947,⁹ and the re-publication of *Arcane 17 enté d’Ajours* in early June,¹⁰ simply served to confirm to his critics that Breton had replaced political involvement with a determined quest into hermetic texts by which to seek out his ‘new myth’, rather than serving, as the poet had hoped, as significant component parts of the building of that myth.

1. Breton’s “lumière noire” versus Magritte’s “Le Surréalisme en plein soleil” :

⁶ Cf. *Position politique de surréalisme, O.C.* Vol. II, op.cit., p.459

⁷ *Hommage à Antonin Artaud*, op.cit, p.737

⁸ Breton arrived in Le Havre on May 25, 1946. Cf. *Chronologie, O.C.*, Vol.III, op. cit., p.XXX

⁹ In the collection “L’Âge d’Or” of the review *Fontaine*, 1st February 1947.

¹⁰ Éditions du Sagittaire, June 1947. *Arcane 17* itself had already appeared in New York, published at Brentano’s in 1945 : cf. Georges Bataille’s article *Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l’existentialisme* in the second issue of his review *Critique*, July 1946, op.cit., p.99–110

During the year since his return, Breton had been provoked by a series of letters and articles to clarify the position of Surrealism in post-war France. In October 1946, the Groupe de Bruxelles – one of the two Belgian Surrealist groups – headed by Magritte and Paul Nougé, produced a tract entitled *Le Surréalisme en plein soleil*. While it appears that Magritte had difficulty in persuading many to co-sign the publication, he nonetheless used it to attack Breton's apparent journey into "un système de croyances cristallisées en des 'êtres' et des 'forces' mystérieux", together with an "amour de l'art quand ce n'est pas celui de la patrie, en attendant sans doute de se convertir bientôt à quelque religion".¹¹ Magritte's offensive was directed at Breton's determined route into the shades of interiority and mysticism, while claiming that:

Nous ne connaissons pas d'ombres irréductibles, car une vision attentive révèle que dans toute ombre physique ou spirituelle il y a des lumières, des couleurs qui l'animent.¹²

The attack was not supported by all those solicited by Magritte,¹³ as witnessed by a letter from Jacques B. Brunius.¹⁴ Then in London with E.L.T. Mesens, Brunius claims that, having read the tract several times, "avec de plus en plus d'angoisse",¹⁵ he remains disappointed. He had hoped, he states, to find "une attaque précise, nominale, motivée, contre divers profiteurs du surréalisme", an attack which he ultimately sums up as follows:

Je comptais en outre vous voir arriver à des propositions concrètes en vue de 'repassionner la vie', ainsi que le suggère Breton dans *Lumière Noire*.¹⁶ Mais

¹¹ *Le Surréalisme en plein soleil* in Marcel Mariën, *L'Activité Surréaliste en Belgique (1924–1950)*, (Brussels : Éditions Lebeer Hossmann, 1979), p.393

¹² Ibid

¹³ In the final analysis, the other signatories of the manifest were: Joë Bousquet, Marcel Mariën, Jacques Michel, Paul Nougé, Louis Scutenaire and Jacques Wergifosse, 'Le Surréalisme en plein soleil' in *L'Activité Surréaliste en Belgique 1924–1950*, op.cit., p.393

¹⁴ Jacques B. Brunius, 1906–1967, French actor/director/writer ; Assistant Director to Luis Buñuel on *L'Âge d'or*, he also acted in many films of Jean Renoir's, using many pseudonyms – Jacques Borel, J.B. Brunius, etc.; joined the Surrealists first in France and then in England; friend and colleague of E.T.Mesens

¹⁵ Letter dated 10 October 1946, in *L'Activité Surréaliste en Belgique*, op.cit., p.393

¹⁶ Originally published in December 1943 in the review *Le Monde libre* in Montreal, then prepared for publication in London in November 1944 as a bi-lingual edition by E.T. Mesens in *Message from Nowhere*, *Message de nulle part*, this article was subsequently published in 1947 in Paris with *Arcane 17* (cf. Note 6 above), as one of the 'Ajours', *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.100

autant je dois de clarté à ce dernier texte de Breton, autant votre plein soleil m'a paru s'assombrir après très peu de lignes.¹⁷

For Brunius, Breton had obviously managed to strike exactly the right note with his article *Lumière noire*, reflecting on the horrors of war and man's apparent *appetite* for it. Combining imagery of sacrifice to the Beast (of war) with clear references to both Marx¹⁸ and Freud,¹⁹ Breton calls firstly for an end to the glorification of war,²⁰ before turning to the nub of the problem: "La vie humaine est à *repassionner*, à faire revaloir".²¹ It is no coincidence that Breton chose to include this article – demonstrating his preoccupation with the horrors of war, man's involvement and strategies to avoid war in the future – as an addendum to the re-publication of *Arcane 17* in post-war France. He clearly saw a way thus to negate the accusations of having ignored the years of conflict, and, as in the case of Brunius, to win approval of his stance on the inevitability of war unless some radical changes were achieved. With a late reference to "l'apparente utopie", Breton suggests that:

Devant la carence totale des idées toutes faites, il y aurait avantage à ce que toute licence de s'exprimer, publiquement ou non, fût laissée à cette dernière.²²

Minds should be open to all possible solutions, in the wake of such obvious failure of "l'imagination si honteusement canalisée"²³ to produce effective change. The re-publication of *Arcane 17* with the addition of *enté d'ajours*, together with the publication of the *Ode à Charles Fourier*, indicate the possibility of a utopian future. This serves to confirm the idea of utopian "projection" encapsulated by David Cunningham's discussion of "the *temporal* implications of the fragmentary" (the emphasis is his) which "can obviously be extended into a utopianist position in which the future is positioned as the site of a projected wholeness beyond present fragmentation".²⁴

¹⁷ Letter dated 10 October 1946, in *L'Activité Surréaliste en Belgique*, op.cit., p.393

¹⁸ Cf. *Arcane 17 enté d'ajours – Ajours I, Lumière noire* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.105

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.102

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.101

²¹ *Ibid*, p.104

²² *Ibid*, p.106

²³ *Ibid*, p.105

²⁴ David Cunningham, 'The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde' in *SubStance*, Vol. 34, No.2, Issue 107, (University of Wisconsin Press, Journals Division: 2005), p. 56

However, while Brunius appears appreciative of Breton's stance in *Lumière noire*, there were others who found little to celebrate in what seemed to them to be taking Surrealism in a new direction on his return to France. For some of those who had spent the war years under Nazi occupation, it was impossible *not* to seek a situation “en plein soleil” after the dark times of clandestinity, just as it was difficult to contemplate breaking with the PCF who had played such a major role in the organization of the Resistance during those difficult years. However, as has been seen, Magritte in fact failed to convince many beyond the Groupe Surréaliste de Bruxelles of the importance, as he perceived it, of working “en plein soleil”.

The relationship of the Belgian Surrealists with those of the French group was complicated, as has been noted. In 1947, Christian Dotremont capitalized on the situation by launching a call for the setting up of a new movement – le Surréalisme-révolutionnaire – with the express purpose of re-establishing strong links with the Communist party. By this time, Dotremont had distanced himself from Magritte and the ‘old guard’ of Belgian Surrealists, not least by virtue of his age – in 1947 he was twenty-five, and therefore of a different generation from that of both Breton and Magritte. His intention of re-linking the avant-garde with dialectic materialism ran directly counter to Breton's Surrealism, nor did it receive unreserved support from Magritte and the Belgian Surrealists. By the end of the war, it was clearer than ever to Breton that the route of political engagement was irreconcilable with the tenets of Surrealism and its aims of ‘revolution’.²⁵ The Communist party in Belgium (PCB) however was less closely allied to their Russian headquarters than the PCF, which gave Dotremont a better chance of launching his new movement, but even so, opinion was divided, as was the original Surrealist movement.

²⁵ Cf. Steven Harris, Chapter 2 – ‘En-deçà de la politique’ in *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, op.cit., pp.49–83

In a reversal of roles, the Belgian Surrealists who had derided the French in 1927 for joining the PC²⁶ themselves became members of the “parti des fusillés” in 1947, and Breton had to face various attacks coming from, in particular, those who “had stayed behind” and had faced the harsh realities of War and the Occupation.

In April 1947, Tristan Tzara presented a conference at the Sorbonne, *Le Surréalisme et l'Après-guerre*, in which he lambasted the Surrealists, not least for their absence during the struggles of the war with Germany:

Loin de moi l'intention de reprocher à qui que ce soit d'avoir quitté la France au moment de l'occupation. Mais on doit constater que le Surréalisme a été absent des préoccupations de ceux qui sont restés, parce qu'il ne leur fut d'aucun secours ni sur le plan affectif du comportement devant les nazis, ni sur celui, pratique, de la lutte entreprise contre eux.²⁷

Breton tried repeatedly to interrupt Tzara, in an attempt to bring the lecture to a premature close, but in vain.²⁸ In the event, Tzara succeeded in making his points and Breton had to endure the indignity of hearing what amounted to another death knell for, or obituary of, the Surrealist movement:

Après ces événements récents dont l'incontestable portée n'a pas atteint le Surréalisme, qui hors de ce monde cherchait une justification à son demi-sommeil béat, je ne vois pas sur quoi celui-ci serait fondé pour reprendre son rôle dans le circuit des idées, au point où il le laissa, comme si cette guerre et ce qui s'ensuivit ne fût qu'un rêve vite oublié.²⁹

Tzara's attack amounted not only to a dismissal of any future role for Surrealism in the post-war world, but to further condemnation of Breton's path into hermeticism in his quest for a 'new myth'.

²⁶ Surrealism had turned to political activity in an attempt to close the gap between 'art' and 'life', and, despite Nougé's repeated warnings, in 1927 Breton, Éluard, Aragon, Péret and Unik had all joined the PCF, thereafter contributing regularly (if only for a short time) to the journal *Clarté*, with its sizeable circulation. To Nougé it was already clear in 1927 that the dialectical materialism of Communism would inevitably clash with the aims and ambitions of the Surrealist movement, but to Breton it provided a political solution – one which put art (and Surrealism) to the service of the Revolution. However, as has been seen, Breton had broken with the PCF in 1935, in the wake of the *Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture*.

²⁷ Tristan Tzara, *Le Surréalisme et l'Après-guerre*, op.cit., p.74

²⁸ For a fuller account of the event, see Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit, p.544

²⁹ Ibid, p.74

In 1944, Maurice Nadeau had already written his *Histoire du surréalisme*,³⁰ and in so doing necessarily pronounced the movement's demise. However, in his opening *Avertissement*, Nadeau faces this accusation head-on:

Une histoire du surréalisme ! Le surréalisme est donc mort ! Telle n'est pas notre pensée. L'état d'esprit surréaliste, il vaudrait mieux dire : le comportement surréaliste, est éternel.³¹

Despite this caveat, Nadeau goes on to make a second declaration that there *had been* a “*mouvement surréaliste*, dont la naissance coïncide, en gros, avec la fin de la Première Guerre mondiale, la fin avec le déclenchement de la deuxième”.³² In his opinion, Surrealism had reached a “cul-de-sac idéologique”.³³

In May 1947, it was the turn of Jean-Paul Sartre to target Breton. In *Les Temps modernes*,³⁴ he followed up on the publication of “Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?”³⁵ with an article entitled “Situation de l'écrivain en 1947”, attacking the Surrealists in general, and Breton in particular, for his role as an “écrivain bourgeois”.³⁶ Sartre was arguing from a strong position, having remained in France during the Nazi occupation (albeit as a prisoner of war for a brief period), and having kept faith with the PCF. Breton, on the other hand, had absented himself from the conflict and had made it clear, since his return, that he had serious differences with the Communist Party which were expressed in the fourteen-page pamphlet *Rupture inaugurale* collectively adopted on 21 June 1947, in which the signatories were defining their “attitude préjudicielle à l'égard de toute politique partisane”,³⁷ as will be seen. Existentialism on the other hand, with Sartre as its spokesman and the review *Les Temps modernes* as its outlet, seemed to have provided much-needed direction for the younger generation trying to make their way after the war,

³⁰ Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, op.cit.

³¹ Ibid, p.5

³² Ibid, p.5 (The emphasis is Nadeau's)

³³ Ibid, p.6

³⁴ Paris – May, 1947

³⁵ Ultimately published as a collection of articles in : Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p.233

³⁶ Ibid, p.233

³⁷ Cf: *Rupture inaugurale* in *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives 1922–1969* [Tome II 1940–1969], (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1982), p.30

and from whom Sartre had gained a certain popular reputation which made Breton seem reactionary by comparison.³⁸ Sartre's notion of the "écrivain engagé" was in fact making a two-pronged attack: firstly, on poetry as a genre, and secondly, on Breton's leadership as an intellectual.

While Sartre's attack on Breton and the French Surrealists was fierce, it made an important point. Sartre's persistent accusations of bourgeois attitudes were hard to refute by writers who were certainly "bourgeois" by birth, but had seldom earned their own living after abandoning their original careers. Although they did not like to admit it, the French Surrealists were largely "artistes de profession", whereas almost all their Belgian counterparts had professional careers – for example, Nougé was a biochemist, Scutenaire a civil servant in the Ministry of the Interior.³⁹ Sartre's ploy was particularly efficient: the war was over, Europe was in ruins, his philosophy was an inspiration to many who felt that they must and could, make out of all that misery and chaos a better world. In this context, one of the advantages Sartre certainly had over Breton was that his philosophy readily carried a political message: "the enemy was the past, the old bourgeois world with its clumsy mechanism and its illusions and its fatal mistakes".⁴⁰ What Breton had clearly abandoned *was* the political message of Surrealism, and in doing so, for the new generation emerging from the war, he had simply abandoned the "*révolution surréaliste*".

2. Post-war politics and the fight for symbolic domination:

The French Surrealists, with Breton at their head, responded in June with their tract entitled *Rupture inaugurale*, manifest for the newly-formed group *Cause*.⁴¹

³⁸ Cf. Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., pp.537–8

³⁹ Cf. Nathalie Aubert, *Christian Dotremont: La conquête du monde par l'image*, op.cit., p.59

⁴⁰ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre*, (London : Chatto & Windus, 1953–87), p.10

⁴¹ The list of signatories was as follows : Adolphe Acker, Sarane Alexandrian, Maurice Baskine, Hans Belmer, Joë Bousquet, Francis Bouvet, Victor Brauner, André Breton, Serge Bricianer, Roger Brielle, Jean Brun, Gaston Criel, Antonio Da Costa, Pierre Curillier, Frédéric Deglangade, Pierre Demarne, Matta Echaurren, Marcelle & Jean Ferry, Guy Gillequin, Henry Goetz, Arthur Harfaux, Heisler, Georges Henein, Maurice Heney, Jacques Hérold, Marcel Jean, Nadine Kraïnik, Jerzy Kujawski, Robert Lebel, Pierre Mabille, Jehan Mayoux, Francis Meunier, Robert Michelet, Nora Mitrani, Henri Parisot, Henri Pastoureau,

Provocation from both Sartre and Dotremont contributed to Breton's reactive response in the form of the article, signed collectively by the group of Surrealists in France to demonstrate their interlocutory attitude to politics of any colour.⁴² This declaration provided concrete confirmation, were more needed, of Breton's change of direction. As has been seen, his relationship with the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) had collapsed in the wake of the failure of FIARI (1938),⁴³ as it became more and more obvious that his ideology was irreconcilable with that of dialectical materialism. This pamphlet emphasizes Breton's total rejection of Communism in its current form, while remaining close to the revolutionary aims of the working class.

With sharp references to “des ressortissants staliniens”, the tract is quick to state:

Nous n'avons jamais cessé [...] de protester de notre attachement indéfectible à la tradition révolutionnaire du mouvement ouvrier, tradition dont le Parti Communiste s'écarte chaque jour davantage.⁴⁴

After making a strong case to illustrate the divergence of the Communist Party under Stalin, the text emphasizes the imperative nature of the separation of Surrealism from the PCF, and indicates the direction to be taken:

Nous proclamerons donc que nous sommes séparés du Parti Communiste par toute la distance qui sépare la morale à l'édification de laquelle nous œuvrons révolutionnairement d'un art politique réactionnaire et périmé.⁴⁵

Anticipating further attack in response to criticism of the moral stance of the Communist Party, the tract states a willingness to accept “de transgresser la loi morale actuelle, mais seulement dans le sens du progrès”.⁴⁶

In response to Sartre's article of the previous month, Breton retaliates by rejecting the accusations of bourgeois mind-set, stating that were Sartre to propose combining

Guy Péchenard, Candido Costa Pinto, Gaston Puel, René Renne, Jean-Paul Riopelle Stanislas Rodanski, N. & H. Seigle, Claude Tarnand, Toyen, Isabelle & Patrick Warburg, Ramsès Younane.

⁴² In *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives 1922–1969, [Tome II 1940–1969]*, op.cit., p.30

⁴³ Fédération Internationale de l'Art Révolutionnaire Indépendant

⁴⁴ *Rupture inaugurale*, op.cit., p.30

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.31

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.32

Existentialism with the Communist Party, “ce serait pour mieux nous prouver que deux idéologies déviées ne font pas une idée juste”.⁴⁷ Picking up on Sartre’s implication that Surrealism failed to cover all aspects of man’s liberation in its approach to revolution, Breton takes the opportunity to reiterate his conviction of the future importance of incorporating “le merveilleux”:

Le Surréalisme se déclare seul qualifié pour jeter dans la balance les forces dont il s’est fait le prospecteur, puis le *conducteur merveilleusement magnétique*, – de la femme-enfant à l’humour noir, du hasard objectif à la volonté du mythe. Ces forces ont pour lieu électif l’amour inconditionné, bouleversant et fou qui seul permet à l’homme de vivre à compas ouvert, d’évoluer selon des dimensions psychologiques nouvelles.⁴⁸

Breton’s determined defence of his vision of the future path for mankind is summed up by the ringing exhortation:

Il est l’heure de promouvoir un mythe nouveau propre à entraîner l’homme vers l’étape ultérieure de sa destination finale. [...] LE SURREALISME EST CE QUI SERA.⁴⁹

As ever, Breton emphasizes the evolving nature of Surrealism, of its continuing focus on the future. From the beginning, he had called on the *future* resolution of dream and reality “en une sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*”.⁵⁰ For Breton, the movement is entering a new phase of its development, moving away from political action. More than two decades later, he continues to point to Surrealist aspirations and goals of the future.

However, for some, simply looking to the future was far from enough. Having called for the creation of a new movement in March 1947, Dotremont issued several tracts and articles attacking the direction in which Breton was leading post-war Surrealism. Breton’s response with *Rupture inaugurale*, triggered a further tract from Dotremont and his followers, wittily entitled *La Cause est entendue*,⁵¹ which pointed with

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.35

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.35 (The emphasis is Breton’s.)

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.36

⁵⁰ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C. Vol.I, p.319

⁵¹ Published in Paris, 1st July 1947.

unerring aim to the short-comings, as they were seen, of the current Surrealist movement and its break with Communism, or indeed alliance to any political party. With a blend of acerbic wit and trenchant insight, Dotremont sets out the six main elements of the new proposal and their points of difference with those of the old enduring Surrealist movement. Emphasizing an enthusiasm for the dialectic materialism of Stalinist Communism, he digs at the “dogmes clos des ésotérismes”.⁵² Enumerating the stages to be reached in order to effect the necessary revolution, he sums up the final phase, employing the same argument as that used by Pierre Naville in 1926, in what Maurice Nadeau referred to as “La crise Naville”,⁵³ when he put forward the case for a clear choice, and, given that the world had not yet been transformed, recommended political action as the first and only goal:

Alors seulement, quand le monde aura été transformé, quand la vie aura été changée, quand l’humanité sera passée du règne de la nécessité à celui de la liberté selon un processus dans lequel le surréalisme, pour autant qu’il agisse dans le sens de l’efficacité révolutionnaire, s’inscrira *réellement*, alors seulement surgira cette morale unitive dont les lois, inutilement exprimables, seront celle-même de la vie, d’une vie impunément, glorieusement, libre.⁵⁴

With a final jibe at Breton and his colleagues, the tract closes with an emphatic claim to have set out “l’essentiel du surréalisme”, core values to which any who professed themselves *true* Surrealists – and only they – would adhere. Scorn for current lack of revolutionary *action* by the Surrealists is matched by a satisfaction “d’avoir engagé la poésie dans la voie matérialiste pour la faire servir à la libération effective de l’homme [...] tout en poursuivant l’extermination des résidus mythiques”.⁵⁵ Breton’s persistent preoccupation with “les apparences magiques” is as much of a stumbling block as his rejection of Communism. Finally, a witty inversion of the closing line of *Rupture inaugurale* trumpets an ultimate taunt:

⁵² Christian Dotremont, ‘La Cause est entendue’ in *L’Activité surréaliste en Belgique*, op.cit., p.412

⁵³ “La crise Naville” was instrumental in persuading Breton to join the Communist Party (1927), when he thereafter famously linked Rimbaud with Marx. Cf. Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, op.cit., pp.93–98

⁵⁴ Christian Dotremont, ‘La Cause est entendue’, op.cit., p.412

⁵⁵ Ibid

3. The future of Surrealism: a new myth?:

It was in the tension of this turbulent year that the plastic response to the sustained attack on Breton and post-war Surrealism came with the opening of the exhibition entitled *Le Surréalisme en 1947* at the beginning of July. The exhibition, Breton states in the preface to the catalogue, is to follow in the same “optique” as its two predecessors, those of 1938 in Paris and 1942 in New York. As before, it in no way claims to predict the future, and can only dimly foresee what will happen in, say, the years 1950–1955. He stresses the importance of finding the right orientation in the void of the post-war period, and the danger of letting power fall into the wrong hands. The choices and decisions are as difficult as they are numerous – the sensation of paralysis similar to that felt by the writer faced with a blank page. Breton takes this opportunity to point out the flaws in the optimistic attitude displayed by Magritte and the group gathered around him – reference to an on-going polemic already touched upon.

In January, Breton had sent out letters to possible participants, inviting the submission of “un choix des œuvres plastiques surréalistes les plus typiques de ces dernières années”.⁵⁷ As guidance to the prospective exhibitors, Breton stressed the importance of reaffirming “une COHÉSION véritable et, par rapport aux précédentes manifestations de groupe, de marquer un certain DÉPASSEMENT”.⁵⁸ He expanded further :

Les aspirations surréalistes, aussi bien poétiques que plastiques, doivent, dans l'exposition de 1947, pouvoir s'exprimer simultanément, leur commune mesure

⁵⁶ Ibid : Dotremont has inverted the closing flourish of *Rupture inaugurale* quoted above – LE SURREALISME EST CE QUI SERA

⁵⁷ The letter of invitation was reproduced at the end of the exhibition catalogue under the title of *Projet initial*, serving as guide to the exhibition and an explanation of the thinking behind it. André Breton, *Projet initial* in *Notes*, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.1367

⁵⁸ Ibid

étant cherchée du côté d'un MYTHE NOUVEAU à traduire, dont on peut d'ailleurs considérer qu'il existe aujourd'hui à l'état embryonnaire ou latent.⁵⁹

With its vision of the future lay-out of the exhibition, the letter of invitation gave a clear indication as to the nature of the scheme, leading from the retrospective feel of the works exhibited in the first room to the shock of those offered on the 'altars' of the final grouping. The passage from one floor to the next was to be effected by a staircase of twenty-one steps, each tread taking the form of the spine of a book of esoteric importance, each title paired with one of twenty-one of the major arcane cards of a tarot pack. A table in the text showed the twenty-one cards represented, and their corresponding book titles, each one – both Tarot titles and books/authors – richly significant to Breton's quest into hermeticism of the years of exile spent in the U.S..

At the top of the stairs, the visitor/participant passed through "la Salle des Superstitions", and then had to negotiate "plusieurs rideaux de pluie multicolores" in order, without disturbing a game of billiards, to reach the last room, "la salle divisée en octagons".⁶⁰ Each room had its role in Breton's theatrical creation, the staircase perhaps most obviously. From the "Rétrospective" of the ground floor, one progressed up the staircase – taken, allegorically, to a higher plane by familiarizing oneself with greater esoteric knowledge – to pass through "la Salle des Superstitions", find one's way through the curtains of multi-coloured rain to the "au-delà" of the final goal, a room with twelve 'altars', each one dedicated to a being, a category of beings, or an object "susceptible d'être doué de vie mythique".⁶¹ The whole "manifestation" was an allegorical spectacle, representing the history of Surrealism from its beginnings with early artists – "Bosch, Archimboldo, Blake, Rousseau, Carroll, etc."⁶² – and contemporary artists who had, for one reason or another, ceased to number amongst the Surrealists – "Chirico, Picasso, Masson, Dalí, Paalen, Magritte, Dominguez, etc."⁶³ The route then took the spectator through the various stages of Surrealism's evolution, via the "rideaux de pluie multicolores" to the then current dilemma facing them all, that of seeking out the

⁵⁹ Ibid (The emphasis is Breton's.)

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.1368

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid, p.1367

⁶³ Ibid

embryonic ‘new myth’ latent in a post-conflictual world – a myth “qu’il ne dépend que de nous de définir et de coordonner”.⁶⁴

The letter of invitation, the *Projet initial*, was ultimately printed at the back of the exhibition catalogue, which, as in previously established form, was prefaced by Breton, and also contained texts from thirty-six of the eighty-five named participants of the exhibition. The opening pages of the catalogue also placed much emphasis on the international character of the exhibition, listing the twenty-five countries represented.⁶⁵

As with the two previous international exhibitions of Surrealism, Breton chose a deliberately theatrical approach to the mounting of that of 1947, transforming the “exposition” into “manifestation”. The ‘visitor’ to the exhibition was forced into the mindset of ‘audience’ of a spectacle, rather than ‘critic’ of an art exhibition, and in this way was distanced from pre-conceived ideas of what he or she was about to observe. The title of the preface to the exhibition catalogue gave a hint of the esoteric theme, the curtain having always played an important role in Surrealist writing, whether as the veil to be penetrated in order to access greater knowledge or vision, or, as in the exhibition, as an object – “les rideaux de pluie” – to be negotiated, to reach beyond to the final place of esoteric knowledge and understanding – in this case the place of devotion with its twelve altars. Breton himself refers to the spectator of the exhibition as “le visiteur”,⁶⁶ and the aim of the “cadre initiatique” of the exhibition to lead the visitor to

Laisser errer son esprit sur ce qu’à travers les temps ont pu avoir de troublant et d’insolite certaines conduites individuelles et collectives.⁶⁷

He acknowledges the likelihood of attracting further disapproval by reaching back into esotericism, but calls in his defence the “précieux témoignage” of J.G. Frazer,⁶⁸ whom he quotes and who asserts:

⁶⁴ André Breton, *Devant le Rideau*, in *Le Clé des champs*, O.C. Vol.III, op.cit., p.749

⁶⁵ Cf. *Notes* in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1365

⁶⁶ *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol III, op.cit., p.748

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

Nous serons forcés d'admettre que si l'Art Noir a fait beaucoup de mal, il a été aussi la source de beaucoup de bien; que si la Magie est la fille de l'Erreur, elle est cependant la mère de la Liberté et de la Vérité.⁶⁹

Such a statement, within the specific setting and moment of collective crisis which 1947 represented, emphasising the idea of a renewed collective effort to re-energise the group *via* Magic, was bound to be coldly received. Even if from the opening lines of *Devant le rideau*, Breton draws together the threads which connect the Surrealist exhibition of 1947 with its predecessors of 1938 and 1942,⁷⁰ there is no doubt that his attempt to draw comparisons between the current exhibition and that of 1938⁷¹ – widely considered at the time as a sign of the “failure of Surrealism”⁷² – is perhaps not entirely convincing. He suggests that if, after an interval of almost a decade, their detractors still harbour memories of their perception of the Surrealist ‘ritual’ and the “caractère offensant – voire outrageant d’une telle manifestation”, in this instance, if they expect more of the same, they will be disappointed.⁷³ He does, nonetheless, stress the success of the 1938 exhibition in terms of numbers of visitors, emphasizing further the almost uncanny glimpse into the future cataclysmic crisis given even by the names of the fictitious streets mounted in the exhibition – rue Faible, rue de Tous-les-Diables, rue de la Transfusion-de-Sang, etc.:

Tout cela depuis lors ne s’est chargé que de trop de sens, ne s’est, hélas, révélé que trop annonciateur, que trop prophétique, ne s’est que trop justifié sous l’angle du sombre, de l’étouffant et du louche.⁷⁴

Maintaining the accent on the forward-looking stance of the Surrealist movement, Breton refutes accusations that he and his friends were somehow complicit in the horrors of war, adding: “Nous étions restés fort en deçà du noir et de la sournoise cruauté des

⁶⁹ J.G. Frazer, *Le Rameau d’or* quoted in *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.748

⁷⁰ Cf. *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Paris, January 1938; *First Papers of Surrealism*, New York, October 1942

⁷¹ *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* which took place at the Maeght gallery, Paris, in January 1938.

⁷² See for example Jean Bazaine and Maurice Morel’s review of the 1938 exhibition for the newspaper *Temps présent* entitled “Faillite du surréalisme”: “bits and pieces constructed in an epoch of disgust... finish up at the decorators, the ad-man’s, the hairdresser’s and the fashion designer’s. When one thinks of what they’ve done with all that they touched, with such a craving for purity, such indignation, one wants to cry: À d’autres!”. (28 January 1938)

⁷³ André Breton, *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.740

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.741

jours qui allaient venir”.⁷⁵ He postulates that it is perhaps true that, by means of opening certain doors slammed shut by rational thought, Surrealism may have given them added powers of perception into the future, but “à condition d’ignorer sur le moment que c’est dans l’avenir que nous pénétrons, de ne nous en apercevoir et de ne pouvoir le rendre patent qu’*a posteriori*”.⁷⁶ The fractured focus of Surrealism remains the future, while the powerful, quasi-magical powers of the seer are acknowledged. Far from abandoning the challenge by rejecting political action as the means of revolution, Breton is demonstrating the influence of the Romantic concept of the ‘fragment’ – something unfinished, which necessarily contains the implication of future completion.⁷⁷ Blanchot, writing of the fragment as “one of romanticism’s boldest presentiments”,⁷⁸ presents it as the catalyst to “the search for a new form of completion that mobilizes – renders mobile – the whole through its interruption and through interruption’s various modes”.⁷⁹ David Cunningham expands this thought with the comment that “while the fragment may present itself as a certain kind of ‘spatial’ form, its character is always fundamentally temporal. This is why, for Blanchot, as for Benjamin, the fragment is distinctly ‘modern’ as a *question*.”⁸⁰ Cunningham chooses to illustrate the temporal modality of the fragment with a reference to “Breton’s famous assertion that: ‘The work of art is valuable only insofar as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future’”.⁸¹

Accentuating the need to escape received thought and ideas, Breton cites George du Maurier’s novel *Peter Ibbetson* – tale of the exaltation of true love, in which the poet

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.741–2

⁷⁷ In her introduction to *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, Margaret Mahony Stoljar writes of Novalis’s “adoption of the Romantic fragment, a self-conscious and self-contained short prose form” introduced in particular by Friedrich Schlegel – “to allow maximum flexibility in working out new and developing ideas”. *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Albany, New York : State University of New York Press, 1997), p.2

⁷⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson, *Theory and History of Literature, Volume 82*, (Mineapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.358

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ David Cunningham, ‘A Question of Tomorrow : Blanchot, Surrealism and the Time of the Fragment’, in *Papers of Surrealism, Issue 1*, Winter 2003, p.4

⁸¹ Ibid, p.2 Cunningham simply ascribes the quotation as follows : “André Breton, cited in Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohan, Fontana, London, 1992, p.242.” Ibid, p.15

refers to “le ‘rêve vrai’ du merveilleux”.⁸² The importance of dream is further reinforced by a quotation from Thomas de Quincey, ending with the firm assertion that:

La machinerie du rêve plantée dans notre cerveau a sa raison d’être. Cette faculté, qui possède des accointances avec le mystère des ténèbres, est comme l’unique conduit par quoi l’homme communique avec l’obscur.⁸³

To him, for the reasons we have explained,⁸⁴ the “mystère des ténèbres” will always be richer than Magritte’s “plein soleil”. So it is he, as well as a number of other Belgian Surrealists who joined the Communist Party at the end of World War II, as has been seen, who are targeted by his attack on the Communist newspaper *L’Humanité*:

[Journal] qui prétend incarner la cause de la libération de l’homme, espérer de la science (soviétique) qu’elle réussirait bientôt à bannir de la vie humaine le sommeil et le rêve ‘improductifs’ et que ce journal poussait l’aberration jusqu’à dénoncer comme un ‘luxé inutile’.⁸⁵

Indeed, as Nathalie Aubert has pointed out, Magritte (and Nougé who defended him) made an irreparable mistake when he decided, with his “Surréalisme en plein soleil” to “ne plus laisser passer dans [ses] œuvres que ce qui était charme, plaisir, soleil, objets de désir”⁸⁶ excluant tout ce qui pouvait être “tristesse, ennui, objets menaçants”.⁸⁷ Breton’s irony does not spare Magritte’s new art, which is described as “art de circonstance” aiming merely to “se mettre en règle avec les résolutions du Comité des écrivains de Léninegrad prescrivant l’optimisme à tous crins”.⁸⁸

Devant le Rideau est au contraire un panégyrique de l’obscur qu’il oppose aussi bien au ‘plein soleil’ de Magritte qu’à la foi fallacieuse placée selon lui en la ‘science soviétique’.⁸⁹ Il rappelle au lecteur que le surréalisme avait toujours été synonyme d’ouverture, une fenêtre pour regarder vers ce qui, pour les surréalistes français au moins, avait toujours eu beaucoup d’importance: le merveilleux.

⁸² André Breton, *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.745

⁸³ Quotation from translation of de Quincey by Alexis Pernau, (*L’Âge d’or*, Dec. 1945) in *Devant le rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.745

⁸⁴ Cf: For example, links with Romanticism and Jean François Chabrun. See Chapter 3, p.220 above.

⁸⁵ *Devant le Rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.745

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.744

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

⁸⁸ *Ibid*

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.745.

C'était Pierre Mabilly qui, dans un livre intitulé *Le merveilleux*, avait exprimé le besoin d'aller au-delà des limites imposées par notre structure, le besoin d'atteindre une beauté supérieure ainsi qu'un plaisir supérieur s'éloignant de l'esthétique traditionnelle, vers 'le merveilleux' défini comme mystère indéfiniment renaissant. C'est pourquoi, d'après Breton, le choix délibéré du charme et d'objets dont le but est de plaire, détruit l'idée même du mystère sur laquelle le mouvement a évolué depuis le *Second Manifeste* et qui est réaffirmé dans les *Prolegomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non* (écrit en 1942), où il annonçait qu'il visait à créer une nouvelle pensée mythique.⁹⁰

Breton also accentuates the imperative need to keep an open mind at all times, ever receptive to new ideas. This, he maintains, Surrealism has always done, giving it the permanent possibility of throwing a bridge from the present to the future, as well as connecting with an almost immeasurable past: "Un passé presque immémorial nous est ici garant de l'avenir".⁹¹ The strategy for maintaining this receptivity of mind is always present, Breton emphasizes, demonstrating that the Surrealists remain at all times aware of and receptive to new trends:

Je parle des courants d'intérêt, de curiosité, d'émotion qui déterminent pour nous des zones attractives toujours nouvelles, à l'écart des chemins de grande communication et surtout de ceux qui ont été les plus récemment ouverts au public.⁹²

This same combination of interest, curiosity and emotion, he insists, is what leads to the further study of "certaines œuvres d'un abord plus ou moins secret, entre toutes exaltantes"⁹³ – in other words the esoteric works so much in evidence at this exhibition, and which have influenced his recent re-publications of *Arcane 17 enté d'AJours* and *Ode à Charles Fourier*. It is not by chance, he asserts, that recent research has revealed in the history of poetic thought and anticipation of social reform "la persistante vitalité d'une conception ésotérique du monde"⁹⁴ – and he points again to the influence of Martinès, Saint-Martin, Fabre d'Olivet and l'Abbé Constant on Hugo, Nerval and Fourier.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Nathalie Aubert, *Christian Dotremont : La conquête du monde par l'image*, op.cit., pp.62–63

⁹¹ *Devant le Rideau*, op.cit., p.746

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.747

⁹⁵ Again, this shows how influential his reading of Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* was soon after his arrival in New York.

Breton notes the same tenacity of spirit in Duchamp's mounting of the international exhibition of Surrealism in New York in 1942. Four years earlier, in Paris, he had had to overcome the doubts of the insurance company concerning the installation of twelve hundred sacks of coke, suspended from the ceiling, constituting – for the insurers – too great a fire hazard to be a risk worth taking. In 1942 it was the doubts of the exhibitors which had to be overcome, when Duchamp proposed a web of string to be woven between the visitors and the exhibits. Again, the spirit of the exhibition was ultimately honoured and Duchamp's design prevailed. The precedent of mounting the exhibition as a spectacle had been established; in both previous exhibitions, as in the present case, the “malaise” of the time was implicit in the manner of its presentation to the public. In this most basic way, in the very layout of the exhibitions, elements of continuity are carried on.

Breton maintains the continuity, too, of his bold determination to drive home his conviction that it is through esoteric works and delving back into the occult that the ‘new myth’ for future generations will be found. There is a definite shift in approach, away from political action, into the power of poetry itself, but the elements remain the same. Let the works speak for themselves, he suggests, let us see if their power is such as to “dotent l'esprit de nouvelles clés, l'investissent d'un nouveau pouvoir de compréhension et d'action”.⁹⁶ He makes clear reference to Bataille's article on “l'absence de mythe”,⁹⁷ but refutes the idea that there is no myth, holding to the thought that one will be revealed, most probably through the esoteric works by which he sets such store: “C'est bien, en effet, comme si ces œuvres étaient marquées du sceau de la révélation”.⁹⁸ With the potent imagery of such revelation expanding understanding like the widening ripples on a pond into which a stone has been flung, Breton makes clear his belief in these sources:

Le caractère *soulevant* de ces œuvres, aussi bien que l'interrogation, la sollicitation toujours plus ardentes dont elles sont l'objet, la résistance qu'elles

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.748

⁹⁷ Georges Bataille's text *L'Absence de mythe* appeared in the exhibition catalogue (p.65), cf. *Notes on Devant le rideau* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., Note 2 to p.749, p.1371

⁹⁸ *Devant le Rideau*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.749

opposent aux moyens d'appréhension que confère, en son état actuel, l'entendement humain – et qui commanderait à elle seule de « refaire » cet entendement [...] – sont pour accréditer l'idée qu'un *mythe* part d'elles, qu'il ne dépend que de nous de le définir et de le coordonner.⁹⁹

Here, as he was wont to do, the poet is revisiting earlier texts and building on his preoccupation with Fourier to emphasize his case. Twice in *Arcane 17*, he refers to “l'entendement” – initially in very general terms, but with a defined link to man's instruction from “les philosophes” (unspecified, but it refers to the philosophers of the Enlightenment era),¹⁰⁰ and again later, in the first of the *Ajours*, where he makes clear reference to Bacon, Condillac and Fourier who have realized the essential obligation to “refaire l'entendement humain”.¹⁰¹ While citing Bacon and Condillac as well as Fourier, Breton has in fact taken the quotation directly from the philansterian, who, as one of his twelve principles of philosophy exhorts: “Oublier ce qu'on a appris et refaire l'entendement humain”.¹⁰²

In 1935, Breton was already making similar proposals, which he referred to then as:

La préoccupation qui est depuis dix ans la mienne de concilier le surréalisme comme *mode de création d'un mythe collectif* avec le mouvement beaucoup plus général de libération de l'homme.¹⁰³

Another ten years on, having abandoned political action, but with a new tension between spatial and temporal positions, Breton maintains his belief that a new myth is at the centre of the resolution he seeks.¹⁰⁴ The exhibition is staged as a glimpse from without into what such a myth might be – “à la façon d'une ‘parade’ spirituelle” –

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.749 (The emphasis is Breton's.)

¹⁰⁰ André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.53

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.98

¹⁰² Charles Fourier, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol.III, (Paris, 1841), p.184. Cf. Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notice to Arcane 17 enté d'Ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1162

¹⁰³ André Breton, *Préface to Position politique du surréalisme* O.C., Vol.II, op.cit., p.414 (The emphasis is Breton's.)

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Nathalie Aubert, ‘Twenty Years On’ in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: Belgian Modernity in the Making*, edited by Nathalie Aubert, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Patrick McGuinness, (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), p.183

bearing in mind that the Latin word ‘parada’ means curtain: the *material* curtain must be drawn back, in order to reach the “parade spirituelle”.¹⁰⁵

While the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* opened in July 1947, the preface to the catalogue, *Devant le Rideau*, was written in early April.¹⁰⁶ All the more enigmatic, therefore, is the discovery of Breton’s later text *Comète surréaliste*, which seems to double as a preface to the catalogue, while not in fact reaching publication until 1949 in a collection of essays in homage to Breton,¹⁰⁷ together with others of his unpublished texts.¹⁰⁸ It is probable that this text was written in June 1947, no doubt provoked by a further exchange of tracts and articles between Breton and his detractors.¹⁰⁹ It is in no way a repetition of *Devant le rideau*, but is certainly complementary when read in tandem, reinforcing many of the points made in the official preface, with an emphasis on pictorial arts especially, given the general contextual debate around “socialist realism” in the arts at the time.¹¹⁰

Initially, the article bears little relation to the exhibition, but is rather a condemnation of the lack of originality in the plastic arts and a warning as to where this may lead. After an attack on the banality of the collective images portrayed in a recent album published by *Cahiers d’art* – particular scorn reserved for the humble “pichet de cuisine” as subject matter¹¹¹ – Breton, from the silhouette of a one-handed or two-handed jug, conjures the image of Man standing around: “La main sur la hanche: le

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Note 1, *Notes for Devant le Rideau* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1366

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1364

¹⁰⁷ *Essais et témoignages*, collected by Max Eigeldinger, op.cit., p.13–24

¹⁰⁸ André Breton, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1371

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Various collective articles written by Dotremont and others, such as ‘Les Grands transparents’, ‘Pas de quartiers dans la révolution!’, ‘La Cause est entendue’, and a pastiche of the exhibition catalogue for *Le Surréalisme en 1947* sub-titled ‘Patalogue Officiel de l’Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme’, with a central article entitled ‘En plein Rideau’, in *L’Activité Surréaliste en Belgique*, op.cit., pp.403–416

¹¹⁰ It was inspired by the Zhdanov Doctrine, a Soviet cultural doctrine developed by the Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. It proposed that the world was divided into two camps: the “imperialistic”, headed by the United States; and “democratic”, headed by the Soviet Union. Zhdanovism soon became a Soviet cultural policy, meaning that Soviet artists, writers and intelligentsia in general had to conform to the party line in their creative works. Under this policy, artists who failed to comply with the government’s wishes risked persecution.

¹¹¹ *Comète surréaliste*, *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.750

peintre. Les mains sur les hanches : la marchande de quatre-saisons. ».¹¹² This image – redolent of Fougeron and the style of the “peintres réalistes socialistes” so despised by Breton – leads him straight into his warning argument, that, in the wake of “la nuit noire des camps”, this is a time for action rather than fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable repetition of war:

N’empêche que ces temps sont révolus, que tout est à faire pour en écarter le retour, que le principal ennemi est aujourd’hui le fatalisme (la main sur la hanche) et que le moment est venu de dire : *Assez d’hommes-pichets*.¹¹³

Breton is consistent with his original rejection of “réalisme”, in the Manifeste of 1924, but he also perceives a wider need, for artists who, after World War II seem subjugated by the PC, to become aware that if their art slavishly serves the political aims of an essentially dictatorial doctrine not only will they lose their freedom as artists, but they will fail in their role as seers, daring to put into practice new experimental ventures. Their art becomes nothing less than an “*art académique dirigé*”.¹¹⁴

If he regrets that “l’art de ces dernières années donne l’impression de piétiner, de végéter”,¹¹⁵ he is perhaps less eloquent in his own writing, repeating what he had written himself in *Lumière noire*¹¹⁶ that, in the wake of the war, “La vie humaine est à *repassionner*”.¹¹⁷ He underlines the importance of “la vision neuve”,¹¹⁸ but one feels a certain amount of unease on Breton’s part, as this text seems to offer a half-hearted *justification* of the whole of the Surrealist experiment:

Le compte à régler du surréalisme avec son temps, sur le plan plastique comme ailleurs, était d’abord d’ordre social. [...] Je pense que le surréalisme n’a pas failli au premier article de son programme qui est de maintenir l’expression

¹¹² Ibid, p.750–1

¹¹³ Ibid, p.751

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.753

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.751

¹¹⁶ Noted by Jacques B. Brunius in his letter to Magritte of 10th October 1946, cf. p.270 above.

¹¹⁷ *Arcane 17 enté d’Ajours*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.104

¹¹⁸ *Comète surréaliste*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.753

plastique en puissance de se récréer sans cesse pour traduire dans sa continuelle fluctuation le désir humain.¹¹⁹

But again here, Breton cannot help trying to find a way of reconciling the contingency of “le désir humain” with the necessity of the essential as expressed in the need to re-unify the fragmentary into the discourse of the myth:

Les formes fragmentaires et éparses du désir collectif, qui reste un secret pour chaque être humain, tendent à un point de convergence unique et qu’à leur carrefour un mythe nouveau nous attend.¹²⁰

In 1930 in the *Second manifeste du surréalisme*, as he was already re-assessing how Surrealism had evolved since the first manifesto, Breton was writing:

Il est normal que le surréalisme se manifeste au milieu et peut-être *au prix* d’une suite ininterrompue de défaillances, de zigzags et de défections qui exigent à tout instant la remise en question de ses données originelles, c’est-à-dire le rappel au principe initial de son activité joint à l’interrogation du *demain joueur* qui veut que les cœurs ‘s’éprennent’ et se déprennent.¹²¹

There is no sense in treating Surrealism as a purely historical phenomenon – which would be finished and belong to the past – and thus, re-tracing the line of preoccupation of previous international exhibitions of Surrealism – Tokyo (1933), Copenhagen and Tenerife (1935), London (1936), Paris (1938), Mexico (1940), New York (1942) – Breton attempts to locate the 1947 exhibition as part of this “suite ininterrompue”. In the face of the cataclysmic events of the war years, it is important to establish how Surrealism has responded, whether it has been enfeebled by events and whether its unity and vigour have been affected. The confrontation is further designed to make people look anew at the future and to plan a new myth, in answer to the question: “*Comment sauver l’homme?*”¹²² Breton is not providing an answer,¹²³ but is “trying to find [...] a

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.754

¹²¹ *Second Manifeste du surréalisme, O.C., Vol.I, op.cit., p.801*

¹²² *Comète surréaliste, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.756*

¹²³ There is no doubt that he refuses to follow Sartre’s path in redefining a new “humanisme” (cf *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* published in 1946).

new compromise between real and imaginary worlds, a utopia”.¹²⁴ With the lack of temporal and spatial boundaries that this implies, he is searching for a “new dimension, in a new quest towards a finality without end”.¹²⁵ He clearly follows the trail of his reflection during his exile years, but the radical contingency of a still future event – inseparable from the risk of an encounter with the unknown, which had been what had made Surrealism in the 1920s and 30s such a radical and uncompromising experiment – seems here to be abandoned by Breton, who has fallen victim to an inherited belief in the priority of continuity over discontinuity, which again he thinks he can find in the illusive “mythe nouveau”:

Ce dépassement a été cherché dans la direction d’un mythe nouveau, dont j’ai dit qu’il restait encore indistinct mais que la conjugaison de plus en plus parfaite des deux démarches poétique et plastique en faisait attendre pour un jour moins lointain la caractérisation.¹²⁶

As far as Breton is concerned, Surrealism continues to be an evolving movement, the coming together of poetry and art, Breton suggests, has been brought about as a result of studies of “l’ensemble du cadre ‘initiatique’”¹²⁷ of what he refers to as the “manifestation”, rather than ‘exhibition’. The word “initiation”, he suggests, is not to be taken as more than an “*indication*”, but nonetheless an element subsequently required of the work submitted by participants in the exhibition. Finally, Breton returns to his theme of the triple nature of this “pacte”:

Ce pacte, je le rappelle, *est triple*: [...] aider, dans toute la mesure du possible, à la libération sociale de l’homme, travailler sans répit au désencroûtement *intégral* des mœurs, refaire l’entendement humain.¹²⁸

Varying slightly the format, Breton reiterates the exhortation delivered by him, just days after his return to France, to meet “cet objectif triple et indivisible: transformer le monde, changer la vie, refaire de toutes pièces l’entendement humain”.¹²⁹ Although the references are more veiled, he makes clear that in his view any form of “engagement”

¹²⁴ Nathalie Aubert, ‘Twenty Years On’ in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: Belgian Modernity in the Making*, op.cit., p.183

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ *Comète surréaliste, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.757

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.758

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.759

¹²⁹ *Hommage à Antonin Artaud, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.737

short of this would seem to him to be “frappée de dérision”.¹³⁰ However, as we have seen, the formula is one he has used before,¹³¹ but in this instance there is a significant shift in the presence of the caveat represented by the phrase “dans la mesure du possible”, acknowledging the limits of the power of art.

In the wake of the 1947 exhibition, there was much criticism of Breton for what was seen by many as the inappropriate use of reference to texts stemming from hermeticism and the occult in this latest international exhibition of Surrealism. His absence from France during the years of Nazi occupation was viewed at best with resentment, and more often with contempt, by those who had previously been his fellow travellers – although, as has been seen, over the years, Breton’s rift with the Parti Communiste had caused many to separate themselves from his immediate group, if not the movement as a whole. It was felt by some that reference to myths, whether classical or modern, was insensitive to those who were just emerging from the horrors of very present history.¹³²

However, while there were those who were fiercely critical, others were more amenable to the reception of Breton’s definite move towards myth and the occult – amongst them, Jacques Kober¹³³ and Pierre Guerre.¹³⁴ Still in his early twenties, Kober finds himself “partagé [...] entre ses affinités de génération et son admiration pour Breton”,¹³⁵ but nonetheless writes “avec une passion que cinquante ans de distance n’ont

¹³⁰ Ibid

¹³¹ Cf. *Discours au Congrès des écrivains (1935)*, in *Position politique de surréalisme*, O.C. Vol. II, op.cit., p.459.

¹³² Various articles in the press demonstrate the general feeling against Breton and his part in the latest Surrealist exhibition: Paul Guyot in *France-soir* (3rd July 1947) ‘André Breton, aidé de Zigotto, réunit à Paris l’O.N.U. du surréalisme (25 nations)’; Jean Bouret in *Ce soir* (9th July) ‘Vieille grenade désamorcée: le ‘surréalisme’ jette ses derniers feux dans la grandiose mise en scène de son exposition’; René Barotta in *Libération* (11th July) ‘L’Exposition surréaliste. Trop d’‘attractions’; pas assez d’œuvres’; Marie-Louise Barron in *Les Lettres françaises* (18th July) ‘Surréalisme 1947, en retard d’une guerre, comme l’État-Major’. Cf. *Notes de Marie-Claire Dumas*, O.C., Vol.III., op.cit., p.1367

¹³³ Cf. Jacques Kober, ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947: Retour d’André Breton à Paris’ in *André Breton : Les Cahiers de l’Herne* (Éditions de l’Herne, 1998), pp.77–89

¹³⁴ Cf. Pierre Guerre, ‘L’Exposition internationale du surréalisme’ in *André Breton : Les Cahiers de l’Herne* (Éditions de l’Herne, 1998), pp.91–95

¹³⁵ Editorial note by Marie-Claire Dumas prefacing Jacques Kober, ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947: Retour d’André Breton à Paris’, op.cit., p.77

pas émoussée”.¹³⁶ Caught as he was between “les surréalistes révolutionnaires”¹³⁷ and his enthusiasm for the poet himself, Kober could not tolerate the thought of Breton being dubbed “réactionnaire”, and, while sad to have to admit defeat eventually in his attempts to bring about a reconciliation between the poet and his detractors, he determinedly maintained his own position:

Quant à moi, ne suis-je pas conforté malgré tout de l’avoir continué dans le rêve à nature brisante, dans l’imaginaire à foudre quotidienne, dans la flagrance de la poésie ?¹³⁸

Drawn as he was by youthful idealism towards dialectical materialism, Kober could not deny the magic of Breton’s poetics, nor remain unmoved by the poet’s flattering attentions and the courtesy of his approach. However, if Kober’s article is enthusiastic, that of Pierre Guerre is little short of adulatory.¹³⁹ To claim, in the first sentence of the article, that, far from being a thing of the past, even dead, the Surrealist movement, during the war, “acquérait son importante vraie”¹⁴⁰ is startling hyperbole. With admirable loyalty, Guerre warms to his theme, and is surely right in his conclusion that Breton’s reappearance in Paris “embarrassai[en]t pas mal de monde” – notably those who had been keen to pronounce the Surrealist movement dead and quick to “procéder à son embaumement”.¹⁴¹ He is correct, too, in his claim that the occasion of the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme at the Galerie Maeght called for each and every Surrealist openly to take his position with regard to the movement. Surrealism is, he proposes, “le plus grand mouvement qu’aient connu, non seulement les lettres, mais la pensée depuis le romantisme”.¹⁴² True both to the poet and to the Bretonian myth, he continues:

C’est à lui que doit aller l’adhésion de ceux qui, avec Breton, croient à la liberté, à l’amour et à la poésie.¹⁴³

Writing for the *Cahiers du Sud* in 1947, in the heat of the moment, his own loyalty is not in question as he concludes: “Nous avons devant nous une grande plateforme d’envol.

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Dotremont, Arnaud, Sartre, Nougé, etc.

¹³⁸ Jacques Kober, ‘Le Surréalisme en 1947: Retour d’André Breton à Paris’, op.cit., p.87

¹³⁹ Pierre Guerre, ‘L’Exposition internationale du surréalisme’, op.cit.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.91

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Ibid, p.93

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.94

Que les écrivains ne la laissent pas leur échapper, ou devenir inutilisable”.¹⁴⁴ Despite the volume of criticism and scorn which greeted Breton’s returning revelation of the Surrealist myth, this display of total conviction demonstrated the presence of the opposite view.

Having looked in some depth at the reaction of some of the ‘heavyweight’ critics to Breton’s returning texts – namely, Tzara, Sartre and, of the younger rebels, Dotremont – it is also clear to see that there are other voices more loyal, indeed verging on sychophantic, in their attitudes to the poet. Breton did appear old to many of the second generation (including Dotremont), creating a generational divide, while others, if of less standing within the group, who remained convinced by his leadership and the vibrant future of the movement. The real position, surely, lay somewhere in between – while Surrealism was far from dead, in this instance the movement’s returning leader had largely misread his waiting public.

4. Georges Bataille: in defence of poetry *as* myth:

While coming under attack, amongst others, from Sartre and Dotremont, Magritte and Nougé, for his pronounced use of esoteric texts, Breton [also](#) received support from an unexpected quarter, in the form of Georges Bataille. In the second issue of his review *Critique*, (Paris – July, 1946), Bataille reviewed the New York publication of *Arcane 17*¹⁴⁵ in an article entitled ‘Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l’existentialisme’,¹⁴⁶ showing clearly what is at stake after World War II: the cultural fight for domination in a country obviously in need of intellectual and ethical leadership. Breton never felt comfortable about having left France while she languished under the Occupation (unlike some Surrealists who, as we have seen, joined the Resistance and took risks) and although on his return there were still plenty of young people who were hoping to see him take the lead in a new experimental adventure, there were also numerous people who

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.95

¹⁴⁵ Published by Brentano’s, New York (1945)

¹⁴⁶ *Critique – Numéro deux* (juillet 1946), op.cit., pp.99–110

thought that Sartre's concept of "l'écrivain engagé" was in fact the path artists should take in the post-Holocaust world.

There is no doubt that in siding with Breton, Bataille first and foremost defends poetry, and what Bataille admires in Surrealism is the original element of "la poésie déchaînée" that is automatic writing, which had for him "l'importance pour lui d'un bouleversement".¹⁴⁷ Even if automatic writing has long since been abandoned, Breton embraces the possibility – even shock – of escaping the constraints of reason, thereby fulfilling as he should his role of poet/mage. Bataille recalls the part played in former times by "le prêtre, le prophète, le saint",¹⁴⁸ comparing "la force de conviction" of such seers, enabling their vision, with that of Breton:

Ceci fut donné en propre à André Breton de comprendre qu'un poète, un peintre, n'avaient pas le pouvoir de dire ce que lui-même avait à cœur mais qu'une organisation, qu'une instance collective le pouvait. L'« instance » peut parler autrement que l'individu. Si des peintres, des poètes, prennent ensemble conscience de ce qui pèse sur la poésie ou la peinture, quiconque parle en leur nom doit alléguer qu'il est le véhicule d'une nécessité impersonnelle.¹⁴⁹

Bataille emphasizes, on Breton's behalf, the importance of *collective* action, added to the essential element of "cette invasion du principe dans toute la vie".¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the originality of the movement lies in "the collective aspect of surrealist activity, in its attempt to accomplish something as a group that could not be achieved individually".¹⁵¹ He reminds the reader that Surrealism was in fact the only movement which had shown how to be *several*, not in order to accomplish something, but with no other reason than to make plurality exist by giving it new meaning:

Le surréalisme est ce qui *malgré* l'ensemble – en somme décevant – des œuvres et des hommes vit et s'impose authentiquement. L'insistance d'André Breton à créer, maintenir et à développer le mouvement auquel est lié sa vie vaut qu'on y insiste.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.103

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p.102

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.103

¹⁵¹ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, op.cit., p.4

¹⁵² 'Le Surréalisme et sa différence avec l'existentialisme' in *Critique*, op.cit., p.99

With two lengthy quotations from the *Second Manifeste*,¹⁵³ Bataille demonstrates the validity of Breton's claim that he has held to principles set out in the text of 1929, adding his own endorsement of Breton's continued search into esotericism: "Breton a raison de voir la nécessité dans le fait que la poésie moderne est souvent tributaire de l'ésotérisme", citing Breton's own list – Nerval, Hugo, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Rimbaud – and the revelation of their research into hermeticism and the occult.¹⁵⁴

He further supports Breton's preoccupation with myth and its connection with "le libre déchaînement poétique":¹⁵⁵

La liberté poétique n'est pas nouvelle. Les mythes et les rites qui leur sont liés [...] rendent assez clair ce fait : que 'la pensée' humaine a partout et toujours été prêt à se déchaîner.¹⁵⁶

Myth and ritual, even religion, are key to this freedom. Without the irrational element that they bring, man's imagination continues to be fettered by rationality. As Bataille points out, where the poetic and the rational remain intertwined, it is impossible for the mind to reach a state of "liberté poétique", and a kind of servitude ensues. He adds further: "C'est le privilège du surréalisme de dégager l'activité libre de l'esprit de ces servitudes."¹⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Bataille's admiration is not blind. He tempers his praise for Breton with criticism, and makes clear his unease with certain of Breton's ideas. He cites, for example, Breton's preoccupation with "la *femme-enfant*",¹⁵⁸ with which he is clearly not comfortable. Without going into it in detail he questions its function:

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.110

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.107

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p.108

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p.106

La *femme-enfant* d'ailleurs n'est-ce pas le caprice même ? Érigé en principe, le caprice devrait-il cesser – d'être capricieux ?¹⁵⁹

He also appears a little uneasy with Breton's marked trend towards "la magie",¹⁶⁰ which Bataille seems to class with the idea of the *femme-enfant*. This said, he recognizes that magic could be said to lie at the heart of ancient religions, and, as seen, he acknowledges the validity of Breton's search into this form of esotericism in his quest for the new myth. However, there is a caveat:

Comment n'avoir pas quelque nostalgie de toute une sagesse perdue ? [...] ...nous n'oublions pas ce qui nous incombe – qui n'est pas de retrouver ce qui sans remède est perdu.¹⁶¹

Bataille will have nothing to do with nostalgia for a 'Golden Age' which has long-since disappeared, nor anything construed as its reconstitution. He refuses the lure of the essential attraction of the origin.

However, reviewing the publication in France of *L'Ode à Charles Fourier*,¹⁶² in November 1947, it is again to salute Breton's courage in at least offering to *lead* in his uncompromising affirmation of the power of poetry that Bataille writes, since for him, too, poetry is no longer the expression of myth, but the myth itself (or its absence),¹⁶³ which creates a new situation:

C'est là un divorce achevé de la poésie et du monde de l'activité, auquel les mythes les plus étranges demeuraient liés par des références positives. Or il ne nous suffit pas, par quelque méthode imprévue, d'atteindre un monde de passion et d'intensité poétique, il nous faut maintenir, plus exactement établir entre l'une et l'autre sphère un passage : sans contrepartie, la négation du monde de la production ne serait que suicide ou mensonge. À ce problème, André Breton n'a pas cessé de chercher une solution qui ne soit pas un compromis. Il s'efforça, non sans obstination, de trouver le passage du marxisme au surréalisme.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.107

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² In *Éd. de la Revue « Fontaine »*, 1947, (Collection « L'Âge d'Or », ed. Henri Parisot), reviewed by Georges Bataille in *Critique, Tome III – No. 8*, November 1947, pp.468–470

¹⁶³ Bataille contributed an article to the catalogue for the Surrealist exhibition of July 1947 entitled 'L'Absence du mythe'.

¹⁶⁴ Review *ANDRÉ BRETON – Ode à Charles Fourier* in *Critique, Tome III – No. 8*, p.468

It is not an easy task, but Breton is the poet with sufficient stature to achieve such an undertaking, and the best placed to *live* poetry in the most rigorous sense of this demanding term:

Il s'agit de l'accord de l'homme avec lui-même, de la poésie avec l'utile, des passions avec le besoin. André Breton n'exprime que *poétiquement* l'espoir qu'a suscité en lui le grand utopiste. Mais s'il est possible de regretter des conséquences plus positives, comment ne pas apercevoir que la poésie seule en pouvait être l'initiation.¹⁶⁵

While praised as a poet by Bataille, Breton still had to publish a post-war poetical text of significance and in order to do so, he chose the account of his brief but hugely significant stay in Martinique in the early summer of 1941.

5. *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*: a justification of the exile years:

Although *Martinique charmeuse de serpents* had been written in New York in collaboration with André Masson on the arrival of both men the same year, it was only eventually published by Sagittaire in the summer of 1948,¹⁶⁶ with the addition of an important *Avant-dire*. There is no doubt that, although Breton and Masson both tried to get this text published soon after it had been written (in 1941) and that, as the painter described it in his correspondence, it was a “un livre de circonstance [...] composé de textes, dessins et ‘collages’”,¹⁶⁷ (a label with which Breton might have taken issue), it is certainly worth considering it in the context of its late publication. In many ways, with

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.470

¹⁶⁶ Letters from Masson to Sadie A. May, American friend and benefactor, and, some months later, to Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, collector, promoter and friend, illustrate the evolving nature of the text. Masson's letter to May is dated 4th August 1941: “Je viens de mettre au point, avec André Breton, un petit livre sur la Martinique [...] Nous espérons qu'il sera imprimé cet automne.” cf. Françoise Levailant, *André Masson: les années surréalistes: Correspondance 1916–1942* (Paris : La Manufacture, 1990), p.462 ; and to Kahnweiler (who remained in France during the Occupation) : (8th November 1941: “J'ai écrit aussi avec André Breton un petit livre sur notre séjour à la Martinique (avec dessins et collages) mais nous n'avons pas encore trouvé d'éditeurs.” cf. *André Masson etc.*, op.cit., p.471. They did not manage to get their collection published before 1948.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. *André Masson, les années surréalistes etc.*, op.cit., p.462, but no collages appeared in the final publication. Cf : *Martinique charmeuse de serpents – Notice* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1258

the shock of the encounter with Martinique – as has been argued in Chapter 3 – Breton had discerned the possibility of a new direction. A militant text in its denunciation of the abhorred Vichy Regime with its stranglehold on the island (a colony until 1946), it is also a hymn to the beauty of nature and a celebration of its greatest poet, Aimé Césaire, the “grand poète noir”.

In the darkness of post-war Europe, that Breton was able to point to a new direction, a new source of hope of inspiration towards (and coming from) the Caribbean was meaningful. The text was the result of close collaboration between Breton and Masson, and illustrates throughout the duality both of the reaction of these two poet-artists to Martinique and to the dual nature of the island itself.¹⁶⁸ The whole is illustrated by several drawings by André Masson, emphasizing and complementing the two-tiered approach of the texts, and further demonstrating the collaboration in true Surrealist tradition of the authors with both text and image.

Recalling his own memory of their few weeks in Martinique, Masson writes of one particular occasion as he and Breton were walking together along the beach, “sur la côte Atlantique de l’Île, où les lianes en fleur se mêlent à l’écume des vagues”,¹⁶⁹ when, to his great surprise, the poet began to talk about Paradise: “Pas celui des théologiens [...]. Non, un véritable paradis *ici-bas*”. Trying to find, between the “utopistes paradisiens” and the thinkers of “la fin de l’Histoire” (Hegel, Marx), the inspiration for an alternative future, Masson brought up the name of Charles Fourier whom, he writes, he had always called “le *douanier Rousseau du socialisme*”. That they could have been looking for “un paradis possible si les hommes avaient le pouvoir, ou le vouloir, d’être autre chose que ce qu’ils sont”¹⁷⁰ in the natural surroundings of an island whose landscapes had been dreamed of by one of the Surrealists’ iconic painters was truly significant for Breton who, as has been seen in Chapter 6, went on to read Fourier’s

¹⁶⁸ By the time of publication, the work comprised six texts, headed by an *Avant-dire* by André Breton, which, it is assumed, was written at this time. All other texts had been published prior to the ultimate appearance of the collection, some of them more than once. Ibid, p.1262

¹⁶⁹ André Masson, *La Mémoire du monde* (Albert Skira, coll. « Les Sentiers de la création », 1974) in *Notice* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1256

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

writings extensively in New York. It was also particularly telling, for Breton especially that Rousseau's jungle dreams heightened the pristine beauty of the landscapes he painted while intimating some hidden terrors. This very duality, present in Rousseau's paintings, corresponded quite closely to his/their own experience of Martinique.

Linking the need, as Breton had stated in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* to look, in painting, as in life, for “ce qui s'étend devant [lui] à perte de vue”¹⁷¹ and towards the future, his encounter with Martinique afforded him, through his discovery of Césaire's review *Tropiques*, (as has been seen in Chapter 3) and subsequent meeting with the Martiniquan poet, an opportunity to find confirmation of values he had always rated especially highly: “un grand pouvoir de refus uni à un pouvoir d'exaltation”.¹⁷² Again, both in 1941 and in 1948, it was significant that in *Un grand poète noir*, he celebrated the author of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), “le plus grand monument lyrique de ce temps”.¹⁷³ Indeed, during the war as in the post-war era, at a time when the colonial powers were holding on to their territorial possessions (and Martinique had only just changed status from colony to Département d'outre-mer in 1946) ignoring as much as they could the claims for independence that followed the conflict in the colonies, Breton's celebration of a poet, “un grand poète noir”, was a point worth making. Yet again, the close connection that Breton was making between *poetry* and life itself was a way for him to remain true to his beliefs and objectives. To him, “La parole d'Aimé Césaire, belle comme l'oxygène naissant”,¹⁷⁴ was all the more justified because it emanated from “la revendication hautement lancée pour l'homme noir [que] dans la volonté de changer, pour tous, la marche du monde : poésie *vitale*”.¹⁷⁵

In the collection as a whole, the texts reveal both the situation – social and political – in Martinique in 1941, and the feelings of Breton and Masson faced with that

¹⁷¹ “C'est ainsi qu'il m'est impossible de considérer un tableau autrement que comme une fenêtre dont mon premier souci est de savoir sur quoi elle donne, autrement dit, si, d'où je suis, la vie est belle, et je n'aime rien tant que ce qui s'étend devant moi à perte de vue.” Cf. *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture*, O.C., Vol.IV, op.cit., p.351

¹⁷² Notice in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1260

¹⁷³ *Un grand poète noir* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.403

¹⁷⁴ The closing line of *Un grand poète noir*, Ibid, p.408

¹⁷⁵ Marguerite Bonnet, Notice in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1260

same situation, together with the physical as well as the ‘inner’ experience of getting to know the island. Recognition of this duality – whether in the physical beauty of the island and its people, or in the undercurrent of darkly threatening poison in plants or the imposed colonisation – runs through each of the texts, and is emphasized by Breton in the *Avant-dire*, trying to link 1941 with the situation in 1948.

The duality is further emphasized by Breton in the opening phrase, where he claims that at the time: “notre œil se divise”.¹⁷⁶ Motivated by « une thèse captivante » – Breton is referring here, he indicates in a footnote, to an article in *La Nouvelle Revue française*, (March/April, 1934) by Pierre Abraham¹⁷⁷ – which, all in all, sums up the duality of his own reaction and that of André Masson on their arrival, evoking both “une expression de malaise intolérable” and “une expression rayonnante”, which in turn demanded on the one hand “[un] langage lyrique” and on the other “[un] langage de simple information”.¹⁷⁸ Faced with such a paradox, they choose to deal with it in this dual way, alternating the style of each separate text between lyrical and brutally factual, trusting that “l’unité de voix met à l’abri de la discordance” any opposing issues, leaving them free to enjoy the seductive beauty of the island through artists’ eyes, while remaining alive to the humanitarian problems around them.¹⁷⁹

Masson’s prose-poem *Antille* follows Breton’s *Avant-dire*, deliberately using the singular form in order to portray the island as a woman. There are echoes here of the texts and drawings of his *Mythologie de la nature* (1938),¹⁸⁰ in which he follows his own

¹⁷⁶ *Avant-dire* in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.367

¹⁷⁷ The article was entitled “Une figure, deux visages”, extending the study Abraham had made on classical statues, comparing the two sides of the face, noting the differences – the left half appearing to be “tourné vers l’extérieur” and the right “tourné vers l’intérieur” – in this instance, the study being applied to photographic portraits. *La Nouvelle Revue française*, issues of 1st March (p.409–429) and 1st April 1934 (p.585–614) Cf. *Notes et variantes* to *Avant-dire*, *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.1263

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.367

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.367–8

¹⁸⁰ Published in *Cahiers d’Art* (May–June, 1938) Cf. *Notes* to *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit, p.1258

brand of “l’imaginaire [...] qui place l’être humain au centre de la nature” and which opens with the telling phrase: “À la source, la femme aimée”.¹⁸¹

Similarly, the closing poem maintains the two-tiered approach adopted in the entirety of the collected texts, blending an appreciation of the situation of the Martiniquan people under the menacing rule of colonial France with a degree of wonder at the natural beauty of the place. The title – *Anciennement rue de la liberté* – gives a flavour of the cynical understanding of the *lack* of freedom endured by the islanders in the present situation. While perhaps not one of Breton’s finest poems, with its rather rhetorical comparison of the island to an imprisoned girl, it serves the purpose of balancing the overall text, which therefore opens and closes with a poem. In his portrayal, the poet emphasizes the island’s awe-inspiring beauty, demonstrating again how it belies the sinister underlying corruption, whether of nature or society. Breton brings to each text an understanding of this situation, and with it his realization, post facto, of the confirmation for him of the turning point in both his life and his poetic output.

Reception of Breton’s latest publication was muted, to say the least. Already in 1946, Breton had written to a friend: “[...] mes ennemis – c’est-à-dire, vous ne l’ignorez pas, la plupart de mes anciens amis – ont tissé autour de mon *Anthologie de l’humour noir* la plus épaisse trame de silence qui se puisse rêver.”¹⁸² Clearly this marked disinterest was largely set to continue, with the exception of a notice in *Combat* (7 October 1948), and more lengthy reviews in both *Paru* (No. 49, p.76–77: December, 1948) and *Les Temps modernes* (No. 41, p.363–364: March, 1949). Writing in *Paru*, Aimé Patri salutes Breton’s new publication, emphasizing the duality of approach which demonstrates the poet’s “émerveillement [...] devant la nature et l’humanité tropicales, et l’inquiétude que lui fait subir le contact avec une situation morale et sociale, aggravée encore à l’époque par les autorités de Vichy”.¹⁸³ He closes the densely comprehensive review with some pertinent comments on the relationship for Breton between the imagination and reality, as demonstrated in *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*:

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² Letter to Jacques-Henri Lèvesque, 15 May 1946, quoted in *Notes, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1260

¹⁸³ Aimé Patri, quoted in *Réception de l’œuvre, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1260–1261

Dans leur diversité même, les textes [...] illustrent la véritable signification que Breton donne au mot ‘surréalisme’. Il ne s’agit nullement de substituer la primauté de l’imaginaire à celle du réel, mais de déterminer ‘le point’ où leur divergence s’abolit. Le surréalisme, ainsi compris, n’est pas exclusif d’un certain réalisme comme en témoigne une inspiration qui puise ici constamment sa source dans les ‘réalités’.¹⁸⁴

Although it was a positive review, there is no doubt that, in 1948, referring back to the “point sublime” as one of the main objectives of Surrealism seemed strangely out of time.

As Breton had written to Jacques-Henri Lévêque, the most ambivalent appraisal was to come from one of his “anciens amis”. Michel Leiris, who had become a member of the Surrealist movement under the mentorship of André Masson in 1925, had fallen out with Breton in 1929. At the time when *Martinique* was published, Leiris was not only writing in *Les temps modernes* (he was involved in a series of political struggles, including what was to become the Algerian War) but he was a member of the editorial committee of Sartre’s review. In his review, there was thus an understanding of what it meant for Breton and Masson to have experienced “la double expérience du miracle des tropiques et de l’horreur coloniale”,¹⁸⁵ but there was also recognition that the means of expression employed by the two artists were more “efficient” than the descriptive way usually adopted by travel writers.

Pour exprimer les traits essentiels d’un pays, la poésie, le discours comme à bâtons rompus et le dessin tracé en toute liberté, sans intention naturaliste, s’avèrent ici plus efficaces que la manière descriptive commune à la plupart des spécialistes du récit de voyage.¹⁸⁶

It was hardly an enthusiastic endorsement of Breton’s ambitions for the future of poetry. Given that Leiris was himself a noted ethnographer, Masson’s unfortunate description of the book as “Le seul livre ‘exotique’ que les Surréalistes aient composé.”¹⁸⁷ The mention of “récit de voyage” in the same sentence as “la poésie” (even if it was to

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p.1261

¹⁸⁵ Michel Leiris, quoted in *Réception de l’œuvre, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1261

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

¹⁸⁷ André Masson, *La Mémoire du monde*, op.cit., p.166

differentiate them) could not have resonated as praise for Breton who was aware that the ‘climate’ “ne lui était guère favorable”.¹⁸⁸

It is also true that, for all his vocal support for the power of poetry, Breton’s own poetic output in the years immediately after the war was not significant. As the poet Yves Bonnefoy, once a surrealist himself explained:

In 1944 Breton and a few other surrealists were still in America where they had spent the war years. Victor Brauner, one of the movement’s painters was in Paris, and he introduced me to Breton when he came back from the United States in 1946. [...]. After the war I was disappointed that Breton had no longer any grand projects, nor perhaps real convictions. He was content to preside twice a week over an assembly of two dozen very young admirers. I was among them, but I didn’t like it—these long café conversations that lead nowhere.

In fact Breton had a guilty conscience for having left France while she languished under the Occupation, unlike certain surrealists who joined the Resistance and took risks. But he was wrong, because the young who had read the poems of the Resistance felt sympathy for their emotions but thought them insufficiently adventurous as poetry. They felt that the great alchemical, daring experiment of poetry could not be reduced to the immediate concerns of society. In other words they were waiting for the arrival of a poet who had preserved the freedom of poetic writing, and they were ready to see Breton take the lead in a new experimental venture. Instead he returned anxious, locked himself in with a new group of admirers, and even almost ceased to write. For twenty years until his death he wrote nothing poetically important. Yet he was still young – only fifty!¹⁸⁹

Breton having initiated in 1945 (from New York) the idea of a publication soon after his return to France,¹⁹⁰ it was Gaston Gallimard who reminded him of his suggestion the following year.¹⁹¹ His reply to Gallimard (8th August 1946) gave an outline of what he would like included in the publication, but no more, as he wrote from Brittany, where he did not have to hand all the material to be included:

¹⁸⁸ Michel Leiris, quoted in *Réception de l’œuvre, O.C.*, Vol.III, p.1260

¹⁸⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, interviewed by Shusha Guppy in ‘The Paris Review – The Art of Poetry, No. 69’, (June, 1992)

¹⁹⁰ Letter to Gaston Gallimard dated 15th September 1945. Cf. *Notice to Poèmes, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1276

¹⁹¹ Letter from Gallimard to Breton, dated 26th July 1946: Ibid

Je devrais attendre mon retour à Paris, au début de septembre, pour vous remettre le recueil de poèmes, car j'ai omis d'apporter avec moi certains d'entre eux. J'hésite, d'ailleurs, encore sur le contenu de l'ouvrage : entre des poésies 'complètes' et un choix mais de toute manière il comprendra *L'Air de l'eau*, *Pleine marge*, *Fata Morgana*, *Les États généraux* et l'*Ode à Charles Fourier*, c'est-à-dire les longs poèmes, très peu connus, auxquels je tiens particulièrement.¹⁹²

Significantly, it can be seen that the poems listed are those written during the war years spent in exile overseas, poems which Breton was no doubt anxious to have published in his own country to establish his poetic position on his return. Having thereafter talked about giving himself time to write "un nouveau poème de quelque importance",¹⁹³ the contract for *Poèmes* was finally set up in June 1948 and signed in August. For whatever reason, the long poem never materialized, and in the end, with a few additions to the list cited above, the contents of the new publication traced the creative output of almost thirty years of the poet's life, from *Clair de terre* (1923) to some half dozen more recent and newly written poems under the title *Xénophiles*.

This collection had already been published in a special number of the review *Les Quatre Vents* in 1947.¹⁹⁴ One or two of the poems had already appeared, or were subsequently to do so, in other collected works,¹⁹⁵ the exceptions being *La Moindre rançon*, a lyrical tribute 'Au pays d'Elisa', and the five short poems described by Gérard Legrand as "actes de dévotion amusés à l'égard des dieux océaniens"¹⁹⁶ which had been written for the catalogue *Océanie*, produced for an exhibition at the Andrée Olive gallery in June 1948.¹⁹⁷ A further three poems of a more disparate nature, added under the possibly self-explanatory title *Oubliés*, completed the collection. In 1949 Gallimard published the various works, prosaically entitled *Poèmes*.

¹⁹² Letter from Breton to Gallimard dated 8th August 1946: Ibid

¹⁹³ Letter from Breton to Gallimard dated 26th March 1948: Ibid

¹⁹⁴ "Le Langage surréaliste", *Les Quatre Vents*, No. 8 – March, 1947

¹⁹⁵ *La Lanterne sourde* had appeared in *Martinique charmeuse des serpents* (O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.382) before being added to this collection ; *La Nuit en Haïti* first appeared in a publication which accompanied an exhibition of Wifredo Lam's work in Port-au-Prince in January 1946, subsequently placed by Breton in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (O.C., Vol. IV, op.cit., p.557), cf. O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.413

¹⁹⁶ Gérard Legrand, *André Breton et son temps*, (Paris : Le Soleil noir, 1976), p.131

¹⁹⁷ Cf. *Notes et variantes* for *Xénophiles*, in O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1279

Like *Martinique charmeuse de serpents*, the poems provoked little interested reaction. Maurice Nadeau wrote a review for *Combat*, which he headed “Un nouveau précieux: André Breton”,¹⁹⁸ in which he criticised Breton for his representation of “un univers qui serait systématiquement édénique”.¹⁹⁹ Three years had passed since Breton’s scornful attack on Magritte’s “Surréalisme en plein soleil”. It seems that he had reached a similar point himself, but for the quest for this endlessly delayed edenic future, others had found alternative ways. In the mid to late forties, “existentialism was the new religion, the new salvation” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s appearances in European capitals was fêted as “a pop star”;²⁰⁰ others, as Bonnefoy indicated²⁰¹ were beginning to find new poetical paths...

6. Conclusion :

Writing in 1948 however, Julien Gracq²⁰² endorsed Breton’s approach:

On s’est plaint parfois de l’incapacité de notre époque à renouveler le trésor des mythes que nous ont légués les âges passés, et il n’est guère de jour où les critiques ne soupirent après la naissance de ce *mythe moderne* que notre temps mérite et que ses écrivains, ses poètes ne paraissent pas jusqu’ici en mesure de lui donner.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ *Combat*, 10th February 1949: cf. *Réception de l’œuvre of Poèmes Notice to Poèmes* in *O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.1277

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

²⁰⁰ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre*, op.cit., p.10

²⁰¹ Cf. Yves Bonnefoy in interview with Shusha Guppy, op.cit.

²⁰² Gracq himself, significantly younger than Breton, first attracted the poet’s attention with his novel *Le château d’Argol* (1939), written when he was a twenty-nine-year-old *lycée* teacher. In the language of symbolism, even the word “château” in the title gives a clue to the mutual attraction symbolism held for both men, and the importance to each of “le verbe”. In Breton’s own writing, and in Surrealist literature in general, “le château” is a recurrent and important image. Polizzotti records Gracq’s meeting with Breton as follows: “In august [1939], the two men met for the first time, inaugurating a friendship and an intellectual complicity that would last the rest of Breton’s life. Gracq later described the meeting, stressing the aura of objective chance that, as with so many of Breton’s important encounters, hovered over their first conversation.” Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, op.cit., p.475–6

²⁰³ Julien Gracq, *André Breton*, (Paris : Librairie José Corti, 1948), p.125–6 (The emphasis is Gracq’s.)

However, two years after Breton's return to France, Gracq described with great accuracy the development of the group:

Le groupe ne s'y présente jamais sous l'image d'une communauté ouverte, grosse d'une contagion illimitée: au contraire, c'est plutôt l'idée d'un *ordre* [sic] clos et séparé, d'un compagnonnage exclusif, d'un phalanstère que tendent à enclore on ne sait trop quelles murailles magiques (l'idée significative de "château" rôde aux alentours) qui paraît s'imposer dès le début à Breton. Beaucoup plus proche, par ses contours surtout exclusifs, de la Table Ronde ou de la chevalerie en quête du Graal que de la communauté chrétienne initiale (par exemple).²⁰⁴

Gracq is at pains to point out the constant in Breton's preoccupation with hermeticism and its air of esotericism throughout, referring in his summing up, *Pour prendre congé*, to Breton's "idée-clef de *société secrète*":

Elle flotte aussi comme un halo autour de lui, cette atmosphère d'amitié fraîche, mais haussée déjà elle aussi jusqu'au ton de gravité insolite par lequel la prose de Breton avertit, cette atmosphère éleusiniennne d'agape partagée, de serment dans le mystère, de révélation sans retour, à la fois hétéairie amicale et chevalerie de la Table Ronde, à l'écart de laquelle on devine qu'il est toujours obscurément interdit de vouloir penser le surréalisme.²⁰⁵

Nadeau for his part, as has already been seen, had long joined those critical of Breton's move towards hermeticism, condemning him for his failure to connect with post-war society. It seemed to him that Breton had not succeeded in renewing contact since his return, but had instead taken the movement in a direction which had always represented a temptation, one to which he had now succumbed: the exploration of the roots of poetic activity, the research of its metaphysical foundations "dont avaient [...] relevé dans l'histoire les grands inspirés : alchimistes, occultistes, mages et quelques poètes parmi les plus chargés de mystère".²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p.34

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p.203

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p.185

Like Gracq, Nadeau described Breton's work in terms of an Arthurian quest, but one which ultimately failed. The mission of modern poetry was indeed to continue the quest "vers ce fameux point où se résolvent les contradictions",²⁰⁷ but Breton had somehow failed to engage with the post-war world, or to take account of the changes that had already taken place.

²⁰⁷ Ibid

CONCLUSION

“ ... le pacte surréaliste. Ce pacte, je le rappelle, *est triple* ; j’estime que la situation actuelle du monde ne permet plus d’établir de hiérarchie entre les impératifs qui le composent et qui doivent être menés de front : aider, dans toute la mesure du possible, à la libération sociale de l’homme, travailler sans répit au désencroûtement *intégral* des mœurs, refaire l’entendement humain.”

André Breton, 1947¹

In the post-war France to which Breton returned in 1946 at the end of World War II, he struggled to regain his position as the leader of a movement which had changed considerably during his five year exile. The tensions between those who had left and those who had stayed, the rise of a new generation of Surrealists, meant that there was anticipation that he would find some way to respond to people’s expectations. When he was invited to talk about Antonin Artaud² on 7th June 1946 (three weeks after his return to Paris), his *Hommage à Antonin Artaud* was immediately received with reservations. He knew that he was in an uneasy position : “Je suis [...] depuis trop peu de jours à Paris et j’ai contre moi une trop longue absence pour pouvoir m’assurer que je me suis déjà remis au diapason de cette ville”.³ Nevertheless, he positioned himself clearly against Sartre’s pronouncements as to the need for the writer to be committed: “En fonction même des événements de ces dernières années, j’ajoute que me paraît frappée de dérision toute forme d’ ‘engagement’”,⁴ unless this commitment was to the triple objective of “Transformer le monde, changer la vie, refaire de toutes pièces l’entendement humain”.⁵ This was, as was to be expected from him, a renewed pledge to texts and pronouncements of the past. His speech, touching in its expression of his affection for Artaud, (and his renewed rejection of psychiatric institutions), was peppered with expressions such as

¹ André Breton, *Comète surréaliste, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.759

² When France was occupied by the Nazis, friends of Artaud had him transferred to the psychiatric hospital in Rodez in the South of France, where he was put under the charge of Dr Gaston Ferdière.

³ André Breton, *Hommage à Antonin Artaud, O.C.*, Vol.III, op.cit., p.736

⁴ *Ibid*, p.737

⁵ *Ibid*

“nostalgie”⁶ and “dans notre jeunesse”⁷ which made him appear something he really was not: a man of the past.⁸ In the last paragraph of his text, he alluded to the “madness” of Artaud, which would have made him a visionary among the “populations indiennes” Breton had visited,⁹ and it was as a “seer” that he wished to place Artaud, in a long line of other visionaries (Rimbaud, Novalis, Arnim), together with Nerval and Lewis Carroll, whom he wanted to recall. This was entirely in tune with the subject of his concentration during the years of his self-imposed exile in the U.S. However, it was very clear that his move away from political action, and his more specific evolution towards hermeticism and the occult, searching into the roots of Surrealism in Romanticism, were not what “cette ville” (Paris) was expecting. Thus it is possible that when he finished his “hommage” with these words:

Au nom de ce qui me tient plus que jamais à cœur, j’acclame le retour à la liberté d’Antonin Artaud, dans un monde où la liberté même est à refaire ; par-delà toutes les dénégations prosaïques je donne toute ma foi à Antonin Artaud la négation éperdue, héroïque, de tout ce que nous mourrons de vivre ¹⁰

he was anticipating the fight ahead for himself: a heroic struggle for poetry and love, in a country desperate to find a way forward with an ideology which was in direct opposition to that of the abhorred Nazism (and which most people thought they found in Communism at the end of the war), and/or a philosophy which would reinstate human freedom at its heart, such as Existentialism. In direct opposition to these immediate needs, in his text dedicated to Artaud, Breton was celebrating individuals (as he had done with Charles Fourier) whose lives had been sacrificed for better, authentically worthy aims in his view – “seers”, whose words needed to be (but probably would not be) heard.

What we have tried to show is how, during his years of exile in the U.S., he frequently revisited his *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, and that, while there were shifts in position during the war years, there were also continuities of thought throughout

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, p.738

⁸ In 1946, he was fifty. Sartre, for example, was only eleven years younger than him, but appeared to be much younger.

⁹ *Hommage à Antonin Artaud*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.738

¹⁰ Ibid, p.739

the poet's later development. In this thesis, we have traced the trajectory of Breton's quest throughout the years of the war (1941–1946) and beyond, into the years following his return to France, to find a new myth by which mankind might live in a post-war world, and in so doing to maintain the strong connection between art and life, a long-term aim throughout his leadership of Surrealism. In the course of this quest, Breton maintained “an alchemical relation to transformation”, which had long been “an occulted goal of Surrealism”,¹¹ pursuing his search into myth and Romanticism in his ambition to “arracher la pensée à un servage toujours plus dur, la remettre sur la voie de la compréhension totale, la rendre à sa pureté originelle”.¹²

From the chaos of his surroundings in Marseilles after demobilization in Nazi-occupied France, the thesis has shown how Breton began his search in 1941 for a new direction in which to lead the Surrealist movement. One of his main preoccupations throughout was that he still stood by the majority of the original tenets of Surrealism, on which he meant to build for a more optimistic and socially improved future for mankind. At the heart of his quest therefore lie two essential goals: the reconciliation of the interior with the exterior, attaining “le point sublime” and revealing the ‘new myth’ by which to live. The poet remained determined to find the elusive point, where all the antinomies of existence are reconciled and where harmony prevails, and in order to achieve this goal, he recognized that he must search out a new myth by which a better society might be created and maintained.

As Breton moved away from his earlier commitment to political action to achieve this end, we have observed that the role of the myth became central to the realization of his vision of a new post-war society. Once he had broken with the Parti Communiste in 1935 and after the failure of the FIARI in 1938, Breton shifted his position, ultimately rejecting the constraints of dialectical materialism and turning instead towards freedom and the use of poetry to realize his goal. In his search for a new myth, he restated that

¹¹ Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s*, op.cit., p.18

¹² André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.III, p.782

the old (Christian) myth had failed mankind. Love and poetry, he thus emphasized, enable revelation, through which liberty, both personal and collective, might be achieved.

This revelation Breton partly found in his research into texts of the occult. Initially, as evidenced in *Pleine Marge*, the effect of the occult on the poet's thought was to provide a source of mythical analogy by which to develop his own poetics as a comment on the marginalisation of those in society courageous enough to think beyond the confines of tradition and 'education'. In esotericism, hermeticism and the occult Breton found "une catégorie, essentiellement opposée au rationnel, et dans laquelle le magique, le secret, le fantastique, le mystérieux se côtoient sans distinction", and, furthermore, a term "le plus apte [...] à donner une idée du surréel".¹³ During the years in question, the poet's use of the occult went deeper and wider, as he developed his poetic approach to shock society into a new way of thinking, using the hermetic to *reveal* through its power to liberate the mind. From a preoccupation with the individual, Breton moved to a wider compass in his later poems (*Arcane 17* and *L'Ode à Charles Fourier*), seeking a new myth for *mankind*. Added to this, the occult became increasingly important to the poet as a tool to fashion the allegory by which he disguised the political content of his texts, in order not to embarrass his host country.¹⁴ We have seen, too, that it is by looking back, delving into the occult, that, paradoxically, he tried to find new ways of envisaging the future. As has been seen, in the *Second Manifeste* Breton had already emphasized the importance of studying the medieval arts of astrology, metaphysics and especially cryptesthesia, recognizing their basis in *science*, and their subsequent influence on modern day sciences and the exploration of the mind and the subconscious.¹⁵

This new quest, as has been seen, started initially in *Pleine marge*, and then again in the composition of *Fata Morgana*, both written in the months before leaving France from Marseilles in March 1941. Both long poems are seen as acts of resistance in

¹³ Françoise Bonardel, 'Surréalisme et hermétisme' in *Mélusine No.II : Occulte-Occultation*, op.cit., p.100

¹⁴ Cf. André Breton, *Situation du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.711

¹⁵ Cf. p.144 above; quotation from the *Second Manifeste* already cited. André Breton, *Second Manifeste du surréalisme*, O.C., Vol.III, p.821 (Breton's own note at the foot of the page.)

themselves, with the addition of the cooperative creation of the *Jeu de Marseille* during the same period by the Surrealist group gathered at the Villa Air-Bel in a suburb of Marseilles – significantly, the last communal collaborative work to be created under Breton’s leadership.¹⁶ The cooperative element of the *Jeu de Marseille* was not only an act of resistance, but also a means of combating fear and dealing with the daily trials of living under the Nazi occupation. In all three of these works, his research into hermeticism and the occult are ever present, with numerous references to hermetic characters and myths. With them emerges the first evidence of a shift in the poet’s emphasis, from political to hermetic/poetical.

In addition to the metaphorical journey into hermeticism and the occult, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron has emphasized the importance to the Surrealists of ‘the voyage’ – either as a voyage of initiation or one into exile, but in both cases an opportunity to open up the mind to new experiences, new sights and sounds.¹⁷ For Breton, his journey into exile gave him just such exposure, together with the important additions derived from various encounters with significant people and places. His correspondence, and then meeting, with the young ethnologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, on the sea voyage from Marseilles came as an unlooked for fillip to what was otherwise a dreary episode in trying conditions, and an important contribution to the debate on aesthetics. Their exchanges on this subject gave them both some mental stimulation and led to a friendship which was to endure for many years and be fruitful to both men. His enforced stay on the island of Martinique led to another remarkable encounter, this time with Aimé Césaire, the “grand poète noir”, whose text *Cahier du retour au pays natal* (1939) presented Breton with confirmation that there were others who shared his strong sense of “le refus” towards tradition, both social and poetical, giving him the impetus to carry forward his quest for a new direction.

¹⁶ As discussed in Chapter 2 of the thesis, a second project for the collaborative creation of another tarot-like deck of cards was planned for execution in New York, but the scheme was never realized – a practical demonstration of Breton’s relative isolation during this period, and in itself a verdict on the movement ‘in exile’.

¹⁷ Cf: Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Surrealists in Exile : Another Kind of Resistance’, op.cit., p.439

Strengthened in his conviction of the need for a new myth, the poet's arrival in New York was a moment of confirmation of his shift in direction. The year following his arrival saw the publication of Auguste Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*¹⁸ which, in tandem with his re-reading of Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, served to inform his writing of the moment, taking him ever deeper into his research of the roots of Surrealism in Romanticism. His *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non* (1942) was thus a turning point of sorts where Breton openly admitted that "rien ne me retenait plus de laisser mon esprit vagabonder",¹⁹ he allowed himself the observation that perhaps man is not the centre of the universe, adding: "Du moins, cette idée m'ouvre-t-elle certaines perspectives qui valent sur le plateau *poétique*" – a preparation for the introduction of "Les Grands Transparents",²⁰ where, freed from any political pronouncements, he decided to head deeper into the unknown. This, he was aware, meant he was almost certainly laying himself open to "des accusations de mysticisme"²¹ just at the moment when history was making pressing demands on him.²²

We have tried to show how he was not entirely detached from the real world however, and how evidence of a Hugolian inflection to his work (particularly perceptible in the *Prolégomènes*, *Les États Généraux*, and *Arcane 17*) led him to a new awareness of nature, most noticeably in the maritime, sea-bird and coastal descriptions of *Arcane 17*. Thus through his re-reading of Hugo, Breton was led to a deeper appreciation of Romanticism and its connection with Surrealism, one element of which was indeed the importance to man's development of maintaining a close relationship to natural phenomena. It is noticeable that from this time the poet allows an awareness of nature to evolve as the trigger to his creative imagination, ranging from his observation of the overpowering richness of nature's display and presence in Martinique, to the distinct comparison he finds in the sinuous shapes of the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains

¹⁸ Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, (Montreal : Les Éditions de l'Arbre, 1942), op.cit.

¹⁹ André Breton, *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste ou non*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.13

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² This point is borne out by Étienne-Alain Hubert, who confirms in the *Notice* that such accusations "n'étaient point imaginaires à l'époque et qu'un Étiemble n'épargne pas au surréalisme". Étienne-Alain Hubert, *Notice to Prolégomènes*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.1136

with the feminine bodily curves of the mythical Mélusine, as recorded in *Arcane 17*.²³ In a way, if nature was to provide a positive stimulation to his creativity, it cannot have escaped his critics that the isolation of the Gaspé peninsular of Eastern Canada existed “sur un statut particulier et malgré tout un peu en marge de l’histoire”.²⁴ It was a world apart, precisely removed from the horrors of the war in Europe, much as he was himself, as well as being far distant from the stifling atmosphere of New York.

While *Arcane 17* proposed a solution to world problems through love and poetry by which freedom would be found,²⁵ in *l’Ode à Charles Fourier* the poet presented the outline of a practical suggestion for the reform of society and the re-establishment of a closer connection with nature and the cosmos, based on Fourier’s phalansterian principles. In both, references to the turmoil and atrocities being enacted in Europe are evident, but Breton was not wrong in realizing that he was laying himself open to accusations of having led “ce repliement du surréalisme sur ses minima poétiques, sa transformation en école d’ésotérisme”²⁶ – all in all, as far as Nadeau is concerned, “l’aveu d’une défaite”.²⁷

However, like Fourier, and rather against the odds, Breton himself remained optimistic in his “croyance irraisonnée à l’acheminement vers un futur édénique”,²⁸ saluting the phalansterian as one of the “grands visionnaires”.²⁹ He presented history in an alternative form, a history of ideas and systems rather than purely of facts, demonstrating the power of love and friendship in the creation of a harmonious society – a trend which leads away from the avant-garde with its history of mass “rupture” towards a concentration on the individual and/or community, observing a closeness to nature and the cosmos. This move towards the collective consciousness *as well as* concern for the

²³ André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p.63

²⁴ Ibid, p.38

²⁵ “Cette lumière ne peut se connaître que trois voies : la poésie, la liberté et l’amour qui doivent inspirer le même zèle et converger, à en faire la coupe même de la jeunesse éternelle, sur le point moins découvert et le plus illuminable du cœur humain.” André Breton, *Arcane 17*, O.C., Vo.III, op.cit., p.94–95

²⁶ Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, op.cit., p.185

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*, O.C., Vol. III, op.cit., p.362

²⁹ Ibid, p.354

individual, demonstrates the tension which is central to Breton's texts: the tension between interior and exterior, between what is hidden and what is revealed, between historical reality and myth, forms the backbone of his poetics through his preoccupation with hermeticism and the occult, leading him onwards in his quest for resolution of harmony in a post-war world. As Jean Bruno opines:

Beaucoup plus que le mythe social qu'il souhaitait à la fin de la dernière guerre voir se former, Breton a réussi à renforcer durablement celui de la recherche intérieure.³⁰

By his exploration of texts of the occult, the poet succeeded in opening minds to the possibility of thought hitherto excluded by a rationality favoured by society and implemented as a form of mental strait jacket to achieve a tidy uniformity – a form of 'thought' which the Surrealist leader held responsible for the inevitable slide back into a second world war.

Nonetheless, it is clear that on his return Breton was not attuned to the mood of post-war Paris. His attempt to make the case for a greater study of the roots of Surrealism in the myth of Romanticism and medieval hermetic texts sounded an unnatural note in the ears of those who had just emerged from the reality of the horrors of war in Europe, and could hardly be said to provide a practical solution to the quest for a new myth (if that was what was needed) for the post-war world. By comparison with Sartre's forward-looking existentialist self-questioning, Breton's quest into Romanticism, and further back into hermetic myth and the occult, must have appeared to the post-war generation to be facing in the wrong direction.

Thus with the publication in Paris of *Arcane 17 enté d'AJours* in June 1947, and the mounting of the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947* the following month, it became clear that Breton's "mythe nouveau" was anchored in a realm of myth and hermeticism, rather than the reality of the hard-won world of the Liberation, with its lingering privations and political turmoil:

³⁰ Jean Bruno, 'André Breton et l'expérience de l'illumination' in *Mélusine No.II : Occulte-Occultation*, op.cit., p.66

Amid a war-devastated humanity, Breton, the incorrigible dreamer, called upon poetry to rise from the ruins and bring about the most significant metamorphosis of all: the transformation of the world.³¹

Nonetheless, Breton himself questioned the staying power of the new movement, observing that only history would tell whether or not “les figures que l’existentialisme a fait récemment apparaître en premier plan”³² would be capable of checking “les tentatives de corruption et d’enfouissement”³³ which threatened the poetic output of this (as every) generation, or if “leur étoile n’éclaire qu’une courte période de transition”.³⁴ Whatever his opinion, his journey into hermeticism came under sustained attack from those who had ‘remained’. As well as presenting the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, Breton’s accompanying text, *Devant le Rideau*, is his defiant response to his attackers. In it, he confirms and emphasizes his belief in the importance of the hermetic myth and the occult in opening man’s mind to the endless possibilities which lie within his grasp, and which, for him, constitute the tool with which to fashion “le mythe nouveau”. A contemporary witness recalls that : “Après la guerre cette idée de mythe obsédait Breton, et il a cherché à accrocher le surréalisme à des mythes en formation ou déjà existants”.³⁵ While declaring his loyalty to Breton and to Surrealism, the same commentator nonetheless voices his scepticism concerning “l’idée de construction d’un mythe moderne. Le mythe est quelque chose qui apparaît: qui est fait tout d’un coup, mais sans qu’on voie comment il se faisait”.³⁶ However, alongside this unquestionable loyalty to Surrealism and to its leader, there is also an awareness of the power of existentialism at the time, a force which “occupait absolument toute la vie littéraire – et politique, puisque les deux se joignaient”.³⁷ This was a situation which Breton himself either could not see, or chose deliberately to ignore. He fought, not exactly to maintain his position, but to carry the flame of what the Surrealists had fought for “dans [leur] jeunesse”: poetry, love and freedom.

³¹ Anna Balakian, ‘Metaphor and Metamorphosis in André Breton’s Poetics’, op.cit., p.41

³² André Breton, *Devant le Rideau*, O.C., Vol.III, op.cit., p747

³³ Ibid, p.746

³⁴ Ibid, p.747

³⁵ Julien Gracq in interview with Michel Murat for the publication of the issue of “Cahiers de l’Herne” dedicated to Breton, op.cit., p24

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid, p.18

However, although he never ceased to write and remain actively engaged in Surrealist debate, from this point his poetic output slowed down to almost nothing. He wrote no more long poems after his return to France, and thus we cannot help but be left wondering if Nadja's prophetic comment was not after all coming to fruition:

“Prends garde: tout s'affaiblit, tout disparaît”.³⁸

³⁸ Cf. *Nadja, O.C.*, Vol. I, p.708

APPENDIX I

Illustration by Wifredo Lam for André Breton's *Fata Morgana*

Cf. André Breton, *Fata Morgana* (Buenos Aires: Éditions des Lettres Françaises, 1942 : reprinted Paris : La Bibliothèque des Introuvables, 2004), illustration facing page 8.

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APPENDIX II

Illustration by Wifredo Lam for André Breton's *Fata Morgana*

Cf. André Breton, *Fata Morgana* (Buenos Aires: Éditions des Lettres Françaises, 1942 : reprinted Paris : La Bibliothèque des Introuvables, 2004), illustration facing page 26.

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