The occultation of Surrealism: a study of the relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and western esotericism

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Citation for published version (APA):
Hermeticism as ‘the cornerstone’ of surrealist thought: a study of sources

Introduction: the Carrouges affair

On the night of March 19, 1951, a nasty scene erupted in the back room of the Parisian Café de la Place Blanche. The Surrealists often met at the Café to play surrealist games or discuss surrealist matters, but that night a struggle was played out that was both political and religious. At the centre of the dissension was Michel Carrouges (1910-1988), Catholic philosopher and writer.

Just the year before a book by Carrouges had been published, entitled André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme (André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism). While Breton apparently enjoyed it, it rubbed many of the Surrealists raw. The reason is obvious, as the book aims at synthesising Surrealism with Christian, even Catholic, concepts such as the fall of mankind and the concept of grace. Breton had accepted Carrouges into the surrealist group in 1949, which had already raised some critical eyebrows among the other members—after all, the movement’s orientation had been and remained left-wing, sympathetic to certain forms of communism and definitely antipathetic towards institutionalised religion. Things came to a head when Carrouges lectured about Surrealism at the Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français—a bulwark of conservative Catholic thinkers—on 12th February 1951. A few young Surrealists decided to sabotage the lecture, showing up to read a declaration of their own, and then repeatedly interrupting the speaker. A crisis within the group ensued, reaching a climax at that fated night at the café. Tempers flared and Breton’s leadership was challenged; in the end Carrouges had to leave the group while Breton was forced to terminate his acquaintance with him. The affair would become known as the ‘Carrouges affair’. It left bad feelings all round.

One may wonder why Breton would have allowed a right-wing Catholic to become a member of Surrealism in the first place, and why he would he have enjoyed a book that, essentially, attempts to reconcile surrealist concepts with Christian beliefs. There is one reason for that: esotericism. Carrouges wrote:
It would be a ... serious omission, however, to pass over in silence the influence of esoterism [sic] on Breton's thought. [...] or, as one penetrates more and more profoundly into surrealism, one realizes that hermeticism is the cornerstone that inspires its basic concepts.  

Carrouges made hermeticism (esotericism) the 'cornerstone' of Bretonian thought, here equated with Surrealism; and not any hermeticism, but Christian hermeticism and furthermore of a specifically Catholic bent. In 1947 Carrouges had published 'Surrealism and occultism', partly a prelude to Basic Principles (1950) but with a less prominent religious agenda. Breton commented favourably on that article and invited the young author to join;  

primarily, in my opinion, because Carrouges's attempt at aligning esoteric thought with Surrealism was similar to a project close to Breton's heart at that point. As I shall discuss in chapter five, after the Second World War Breton worked with increasing vigour on the 'occultation' of Surrealism, on engaging Surrealism with esoteric sources and currents. His esoteric agenda was, apparently, so pressing that it enabled him to overlook certain important differences with Carrouges and enlist him in his project. But the other Surrealists could not brush away Carrouges's Catholicism so easily, something the whole subsequent affair testified to. 

The Second World War intensified Breton's interest in esotericism and provided both a new impetus and a new direction. Yet it could hardly be said to give rise to it. Well before that Breton and his Surrealists were already aware of certain esoteric figures, works and/or currents. In the first part of this chapter, we shall discuss the esoteric sources that Bretonian Surrealism had, or may well have had, at its disposal in the 1920s and 30s, and in the post-War period. These can be divided into two types: sources of esotericism and works about esotericism. Unfortunately for my narrative, perhaps, but in keeping with the scholarly approach of this dissertation, this story does not feature initiations in hidden temples filled with ancient learning, angels on mountains, or learned wo/men passing on knowledge from beyond the grave; rather my thesis is that whatever esotericisms Bretonian Surrealism may have known of were encountered via primarily written, and occasionally living, sources. I will first discuss sources from the nineteenth century, primarily Romanticism; then scholarly sources from the twentieth century; and finally contemporary popular and living sources. Interestingly many of the scholarly studies the Surrealists read in the 1950s and 60s dealt with the esotericism of the Romantic poets, which may have inspired them to reread their cherished poems of Rimbaud or Baudelaire with fresh eyes. 

In the first part of this chapter I will discuss the sources of (knowledge about) esotericism Surrealism may have had at its disposal. In the second part, on
the other hand, the focus will lie on secondary sources discussing the esotericism of Bretonian Surrealism. Carrouges's *Basic Principles* is one of the first examples of such a source, this study one of the most recent. Between the two of us a modest number of other authors, many of them scholars, have tackled the topic; both in sympathy and in antipathy to Carrouges's fundamental premise that esotericism is the ‘cornerstone’ of Bretonian Surrealism. I will examine a selection of secondary sources from the late 1940s until today, ranging across the entire spectrum of possible attitudes towards esoteric Surrealism: from denial and rejection via containment and acknowledgment to full endorsement. The selected sources include works that are fundamental to, or influential on, other works, and/or works that can be considered typical of a certain approach to the topic of esoteric Surrealism. Many of the secondary sources share similarities in their approaches, as we will see later; for instance, some want to turn Breton into an esotericist, while there is also a group of authors who aim at creating clear boundaries between him and esotericism. Finally, I want to point out three leitmotifs that can be found in most of the sources discussed here: tradition, erudition, and politics. I shall call these ‘basic concepts’, in line with Carrouges’ terminology.

The ‘basic concepts’ are not always obvious at first sight, and may sometimes be latently present as an author's agenda rather than explicitly in the content of her/his book. Note that all three are certainly not present in all sources, only in a majority of them and not necessarily in equal measure. Still, they will all appear at different points throughout this chapter, and I will return to these concepts at the end of this chapter. As we will see, the first two concepts, tradition and erudition, are very relevant for Breton’s construction of esotericism and the place of his movement vis-à-vis an esoteric tradition. As he placed his movement in the Romantic tradition, he also placed it in a relation to the esoteric tradition. Furthermore, erudition—by which is meant learned books by learned men—seems to have been one of his guiding principles in the esoteric sources that he read and commented upon. His esotericism was neither ground breaking nor experienced within popular cultural practices; it was learned and traditional. Later scholars construct their arguments about Breton's esotericism along very similar lines: Breton, as they see it, was hardly interested in ‘music hall metaphysics’, but rather steeped in a longstanding and revered tradition.

The third concept is politics. It is usually not overtly present, but rather revealed in the subtext of scholarly arguments about reasons why Breton was interested in esotericism, or why he rejected it. These arguments can be explicitly politicised too. Furthermore, as politics were fundamental to Surrealism, there are hardly any discussions of Surrealism without some reference to politics. And
as we have seen with the Carrouges affair, politics, specifically religious politics, could be an important factor in determining the direction of the movement.

Finally, I acknowledge that reading books is not necessarily the same as being influenced by or an appropriation of, an ideology, an idea, a motif, etc. The other chapters of this thesis will explore the many ways in which esotericism may have found expression and served a purpose in Bretonian Surrealism. Yet books did form a very important, if not the most important, channel by which esotericism reached Bretonian Surrealism. In this chapter we shall lay the groundwork, and as it is made out of a significant amount of books we can rest assured it is a solid foundation. The stacks of books we shall turn to now are the sources Surrealism had at its disposal: say, your average library at the home of one of the Bretonian Surrealists, an image to which I will return in more detail later on in this chapter.
I. Arm-chair esotericism: the sources of Bretonian Surrealism

*Romantic sources*

As I have said, Breton and his fellow Surrealists derived most of their knowledge of esotericism and occultism from books. This is not as self-evident as it may seem; in the past two centuries (as today) experimental practice, inter-personal transmission and/or transmission through other means have also been ways of gaining esoteric knowledge. But the Bretonian Surrealists came into contact with esotericism predominantly by way of reading. These were not always obviously esoteric sources—such as handbooks or grimoires, for example—but rather, in the first instance, via literary masterpieces by Romantic and Symbolist poets and novelists. The esoteric ideas and motifs gleaned from these works were contextualised and augmented by reading books about those books: more or less scholarly studies focusing on the Romantic and Symbolist poets and their involvement with esotericism or occultism. Finally, they turned to historical overviews of esotericism, sometimes fairly sensational, for additional information. Accordingly, one can distinguish three tendencies within Surrealism’s knowledge of esotericism: firstly, it was primarily book-based; secondly, it was mediated, often through two or more sources, while thirdly, it was strongly rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism. It was studious and even erudite, and is a fine example of arm-chair esotericism.

Plate II.
Throughout its existence Surrealism depended upon a canon of great writers, painters and thinkers. While this canon was redefined in every decade, a central core of revered precursors to whom Surrealism was (or was assumed to be) the natural heir remained the same. In 1923 a small group of proto-Surrealists had published what we would today call a word-cloud, but was known then as a text-collage: ‘Erutarettil’, in Littérature 11-12 (1923) [plate II]. One can find the names of the precursors of Surrealism in it, and as such this word-cloud establishes the position of Surrealism as the heir of a (literary) tradition or lineage. Four occult names are included: Hermes Trismegistus, Flamel, Agrippa, and Péladan. This last, Joséphin ‘Sar’ Péladan, is the most surprising; Breton hardly ever referred to him again—although this has not stopped some authors from granting him a place as an esoteric inspiration for Surrealism. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) is usually known within esotericism as an all-round Renaissance magician, and Nicolas Flamel (1330-1480) as a great alchemist and one of the few who succeeded in creating both the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. Hermes Trismegistus, finally, is supposedly the author of the Corpus Hermeticum, the core text of the hermetic tradition. Hermes, Agrippa and Flamel are arguably the most famous esoteric figures, whose names crop up in every source and whose works (often in fact written by others) are frequently referred to in esoteric studies generally.

The majority of those listed in ‘Erutarettil’ are poets and writers, mostly (but not exclusively) French, male, and Modern. Some are famous (Rimbaud), others slightly less so (Lautréamont), and others infamous (de Sade). In the end, amongst a total of seventy-one names, only four can be squarely placed within the field of esotericism—and among them three would be known to everyone even if only grazing the surface of the history of esotericism, while the fourth, Péladan, made quite an impact in the Parisian art scene only thirty years before the dawn of Surrealism and may well be mentioned here for that reason. In other words, the group Hermes-Agrippa-Flamel-Péladan is not necessarily very meaningful in the context of determining the early Surrealists’ commitment to esotericism. Still ‘Erutarettil’ highlights another possible avenue by means of which the Surrealists might have come into contact with esoteric ideas: the Romantics.

Many of the Romantic poets, writers and thinkers, such as Rimbaud, Nerval, Hugo and Baudelaire, were interested in the esoteric currents and movements of their time, incorporating them in their poems or stories in one form or other. As the works of these (invariably) men served the Surrealists as never-ending source of inspiration, ideas and rebellion, it stands to reason that they functioned as a conduit and that some, or much, of their esotericism was absorbed by the Surrealists. In the second part of this chapter I will come back
to this assumption. Here I will briefly touch upon the more relevant of the Romantics and the esotericism Breton and his Surrealists might have picked up from them. This is not a study of esotericism in Romantic literature—others have done that already, many of whom will be mentioned throughout this book and chapter—and the section below will read as crash-course in that topic.

Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) were characterised by Breton as being ‘the only ones still able to hear Swedenborg’s voice’, and in fact Swedenborgian themes permeate the works of both of them. Balzac’s Séraphita (1834), a story about an androgynous character full of Swedenborgian references, was certainly read by Breton, and probably by many other Surrealists. As eminent Breton scholar Marguerite Bonnet has shown, Breton’s citations of Swedenborg in his own work derive directly from Séraphita—not from Swedenborg. Breton never turned to the original source, although other novels by Balzac, such as Louis Lambert (1832) may have been a further source of knowledge about Swedenborg’s ideas. In fact the chances are that Breton was alerted to the esoteric undercurrents in Balzac’s story by an article by Albert Béguin that appeared in Minotaure in 1938. Béguin discusses the androgyne in Séraphita, along the way tracing the myth from Plato and Gnosticism to Boehme, another Christian mystic, and to the Swedenborgians.

The poet Baudelaire was influenced by Balzac’s ideas, including those derived from Swedenborg, and subsequently turned to the original writing of Swedenborg himself. The Surrealists, in turn, took Baudelaire’s writings, specifically the esoterically inclined Correspondences (1857), to heart.

Just as admired as Baudelaire were the poets Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Both engaged the esotericism of their time in their own ways; Rimbaud’s poem ‘Voyelles’ (1873), for instance, is filled with alchemical references. Nerval’s most esoteric work is Les Chimères (1877), a collection of poems. The autobiographical Aurélia (1855) has also been the subject of many esoteric interpretations; if the Surrealists did not appreciate its esoteric undercurrent already, they must surely have enjoyed its emphasis upon inner discourse, dreams and fantasy. That Rimbaud’s work and ideas had a vigorous afterlife in Surrealism has been pointed out primarily by the Surrealists themselves (and confirmed by scholars), and although it is less well known, the appropriation of many of Nerval’s ideas certainly took place as well.

Romantic writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885) read widely on the occult, and one can find echoes of Swedenborgianism, Pythagoreanism, Saint-Simonism and even the occultism of the disciples of Fourier in his work. Breton and the Surrealists, in turn, read much of Hugo’s œuvre, particularly those poems, plays or novels that were critical of society, state and/or church. Most controversial,
however, during Hugo’s lifetime as well as during his subsequent canonisation, was his involvement with Spiritualism while in exile on the island of Jersey. As will be explored in chapter two, the Surrealists knew Hugo’s spiritualist diary, choosing to read it as a work of poetry rather than metaphysics. Breton was only really introduced to Hugo’s wide-ranging esoteric interests by a secondary source: Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps by Auguste Viatte. It was published in Canada during the Second World War, in 1942, and Breton read it when he travelled there. This book was a turning point in his perception of esotericism in Romanticism and in general. It ushered in a new frenzy of reading—of Hugo and other Romantics, but predominantly and most importantly of a different group of sources altogether: scholarly works that dealt with esoteric Romanticism.

Scholarly works of the 1940s and 50s
This brings us to the next group of sources underlying the esoteric thought of Bretonian Surrealism: sources about the esotericism of these ‘Great Precursors’. Viatte’s book was only the first of many; it is very probable that to start with, Breton turned to Viatte’s earlier seminal two-volume work Les sources occultes du romantisme (1928). As others have shown, Les sources occultes can be considered the starting point of a new wave of French scholarship wherein esotericism was studied not as something limited to the Renaissance, but rather living on and flourishing during the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Many of the books that Breton came to rely upon were prompted by Viatte’s Les sources occultes; and by 1940s when Breton caught on to it, the relationship between Romanticism and esotericism had already been a matter of scholarly debate for over a decade. After Viatte Breton delved into the various works of the Anglo-French scholar Denis Saurat, who touched upon Hugo’s esotericism in earlier books, and then devoted an article and two entire volumes to the topic just after the War. Breton was certainly familiar with Saurat’s early work, and it is very probable that he read Saurat’s later books as well. In Apertures, the 1947 addition to Arcanum 17, and the later Conversations Breton listed further sources: Nerval, poète alchimique by G. LeBreton, Jean Richer’s studies on Nerval and esotericism, Albert Béguin’s book on Nerval and his article ‘Poetry and Occultism’, Le Sadisme chez Baudelaire by George Blin and La Symbolique de Rimbaud by Jacques Gengoux. Another very important source was the Anthologie littéraire de l’occultisme by Robert Amadou and Robert Kanters, a literary collection that reads as a who’s-who of important western authors from Antiquity to the twentieth century, including Apuleius, Chrétien de Troyes, Dante, da Vinci, Rabelais, Goethe, Blake, Fabre d’Olivet, Novalis, Balzac, Hugo, de Nerval, Poe, Baudelaire, Huysmans and Rimbaud—in other words, all the Great Precursors of Surrealism and for good
measure many famous writers of earlier times too. The last entry, in fact, was by none other than Breton himself.\textsuperscript{36} Leaving aside for the moment whether Breton considered himself an occult writer, others certainly placed him in that category.

Breton depended rather heavily upon the studies of Viatte and others, referring other Surrealists to those works as well, as Cellier has shown.\textsuperscript{37} Viatte’s Victor Hugo in particular was very influential: it alerted him firstly to the interconnections between esotericism, poetry, and social utopianism; and secondly to the influence of the esoteric current of Illuminism in particular upon Romanticism:

[S]cholarly research [that is, Viatte] has recently come to discover, at the junctions where the ideas of poets and those of visionary social thinkers meet (… Hugo, Nerval, Fourier), the enduring vitality of an esoteric view of the world (Martinès, Saint-Martin, Fabre d’Olivet, l’abbé Constant [Lévi]).

[Soon it will become known] that this worldview more or less directly influenced the major poets of the second half of the nineteenth century (Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Jarry).\textsuperscript{38}

After Viatte, Breton wrote an Ode to Fourier (1945) and added a chapter with extracts of his writings to the Anthology of Black Humour,\textsuperscript{39} while he also started to refer to Fabre d’Olivet and Éliphas Lévi in his writings.\textsuperscript{40} After Viatte and his understanding of Hugo’s debt to Lévi, he started to use Lévi’s term the ‘Word’ (Verbe) in the Romantic occult sense, referring to the word that is an action.\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, Martinès and Saint-Martin—founders of Martinism and Illuminism—are mentioned for the first time.\textsuperscript{42} Whereas Breton had previously linked poets such as Rimbaud to twentieth century poets such as Jarry only because they were both Great Precursors, after Viatte he connected them primarily because of the influence of esotericism upon their thought or work.

Clearly, after having read Viatte Breton’s view of the Romantic poets and of esotericism changed significantly, and that view was subsequently further enhanced by the other sources he read. Some scholars have stated that Breton’s real interest in esotericism dates from after the Second World War,\textsuperscript{43} and I agree with this view in part. Only from Viatte onwards does one find references to esotericism in the works of Breton that show broad knowledge of the field, understanding of the reach and form of the influence of various esoteric currents upon Romanticism and Symbolism, and the establishing of a certain esoteric agenda for Surrealism. We can say that Breton, and through him the Surrealists,
were only really catching on to Romanticism’s debt to esotericism when (French) scholars were, i.e. from the 1940s onwards. It resulted in increasing references to esotericism, to esoteric thinkers, to esotericism in Romanticism, and finally led to Breton’s involvement with a group of erudite alchemists, discussed below.

Still, the fact that Viatte’s book was such a watershed does not mean, in my opinion, that there was no esotericism in Surrealism at all before that time; it was simply of a different kind. In the view of Léon Cellier, Viatte only confirmed for Breton what he had already ‘intuitively perceived’: the considerable influence of esotericism upon the Romantic poets.44 I find Cellier’s phrasing (‘intuitive perception’) problematic, but agree with his point that Breton and the Surrealists would have been somewhat familiar, at the least, with esoteric ideas, tropes and terminology before 1940, simply because of their presence in the works of the canonised precursors. Esoteric ideas are often implicit in Romantic and Symbolist poems and stories, and although Breton might well have read his favourite poets with fresh eyes only after he had read Viatte at al., it is still reasonable to suppose that some aspects of esotericism filtered through. Pre-1942 the grounding of Surrealism in the Romantics did not really lead to a collaboration of Surrealism with esotericism, yet it did offer many opportunities for intuitive recreation and perhaps derivation. Obviously the Romantic works would have supplied a wealth of themes and tropes. Let me provide an example: even though Breton might have learned of the Swedenborgian influence precipitating Balzac’s construction of his main character as an androgyne only through the publications of Béguin of 1938 and later,45 the Bretonian Surrealists still appreciated and used the trope of the androgyne before that time—not least because this union of man and woman in one body must surely have attracted him, given that love and woman were pre-eminent concerns of Surrealism.46

There is a further reason why esotericism was already present in Surrealism in its first two decades. Throughout the existence of the movement Romantic works were of preeminent importance, and after 1942 the Bretonian Surrealists had access to scholarly works concerning esoteric Romanticism. But this was not the limit of their sources of and about esotericism. In fact, already during the 1920s and 30s the Surrealists had access to three additional kinds of sources, which often remain unmentioned: (quasi-)histories of esotericism and early anthropological works, particular individuals, and popular culture. The last is too complex to be discussed here; rather the presence of various esotericisms in popular culture and their repercussions in Surrealism is discussed in the other chapters in this book, particularly in chapter two. The other two kinds of sources will be discussed in the other chapters as well, but they will also be reviewed below, albeit briefly.
Histories of esotericism and early anthropology
Viatte’s writings were the first of a steady stream of scholarly works regarding esoteric Romanticism, but I do not think those books were the first the Surrealists consulted that dealt with esotericism in a more or less historical context. As a matter of fact Viatte et al. were preceded by three important authors: Jules Michelet, Jules Bois, and Émile Grillot de Givry.

In 1862 La Sorcière by French historian and man of letters Jules Michelet (1789-1874) was published.\(^{47}\) La Sorcière was particularly influential in the surrealist formulation of the notion of woman as a witch and sorceress.\(^{48}\) Its fundamental premise that medieval witchcraft and magic were in fact revolutionary movements against the oppression of the (Catholic) church must surely have found fertile surrealist soil.\(^{49}\) The Bataille camp was familiar with it too.\(^{50}\) The Danish film Häxan (1922) was directly based upon the book, and played in Parisian theatres under the name La Sorcellerie à travers les âges.\(^{51}\) Breton and Aragon commented positively on this film (‘très beau’) in an article that celebrated hysteria, showing their adherence to the film’s thesis (going back to Michelet) that there have never been witches, merely misunderstood hysterics suffering from delusions who were cruelly repressed by the Inquisition.\(^{52}\) Obviously the Surrealists appreciated the film’s lurid enactment of medieval witch-scenes, including horror scenes of burning and torture, naked crones dancing around fires and beautiful ladies being visited in the bedroom by the devil.\(^{53}\)

Le Satanisme et la magie by French writer Jules Bois (1868-1943), published in 1895, had already provided the Surrealists with visual information before Häxan, some of its illustrations being rather sensational and most of them quite weird and uncanny, all by the hand of Henry de Malvost. Breton reproduced an illustration of a succubus in a 1933 article [fig 2].\(^{54}\) In the book Bois discusses many currents of esotericism under the heading of ‘Satanism’, and would have familiarised the Surrealists with the names and publications of Hermes Trismegistus, Agrippa and Flamel, for instance. Bois popularised the connection between the altars of the Black Mass and woman—that is, a woman’s body serves as the altar or is at least laid upon the altar—which may possibly have contributed to the surrealist association of woman with altars and sacred places.\(^{55}\) The preface to Le Satanisme is written by Romantic author Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907). His novel Là-bas (1891) was based upon extensive research into the occultism and Satanism of his time, is set in a former convent and describes the main character’s growing involvement in Satanist Black Masses. As the Surrealists were avid fans of the Gothic genre, one can be sure they read Là-bas as well.\(^{56}\)

Both La Sorcière and Le Satanisme were trumped at the end of the 1920s by a new publication: Le Musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes (1929) by
French writer Émile Grillot de Givry (1870-1929). It was enthusiastically received by Surrealists from both the Breton and Bataille camps. Ethnographer and writer Michel Leiris (1901-1990) immediately published a review of it in Documents 2.\(^{57}\) He is quite positive about Le Musée, which discusses esoteric topics ranging from witches and demon-worship to tarot cards, other means of divination and alchemy. A range of esoteric heroes from, again, Agrippa and Flamel to Paracelsus and Fludd, and from Savoranola to Court de Gébelin are also reviewed.\(^{58}\) Excerpts of works by these esoteric luminaries had already been published by Grillot de Givry in an edited volume in 1922, the Anthologie de l’occultisme. Leiris refers to it in his review and it seems probable others besides him read it as well; Breton for one certainly did.\(^{59}\) However, the most important element of Le Musée is not necessarily its text but rather the images: it is very lavishly illustrated and would have familiarised all Surrealists in one go with the visual canon of western esotericism, ranging from the diagrams of Agrippa, Paracelsus, Fludd and Boehme to the alchemical illustrations of Michael Maier, Heinrich Kunrath and Abraham the Jew, and from paintings and woodcuts by Breughel the Elder, Dürer, Holbein and Goya to sixteenth and seventeenth-century tarot cards.\(^{60}\) It certainly served as the preeminent source of alchemical information for all the Surrealists;\(^{61}\) but in fact I think it served as the handbook of everything esoteric. Why consult any other book when one had this monumental compendium at hand? Traces of it, or rather of its illustrations, are everywhere. One example is the sudden vogue for chiromancy, or palm-reading, that overtook the Surrealists in 1935. Minotaure 6 included an article by Dr. Wolff on ‘chirognomie’, including handprints of various Surrealists as well as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Aldous Huxley (interestingly enough) [fig 3a-c].\(^{62}\) Very similar illustrations can be found in Grillot de Givry’s chapter on ‘La chiromancie’ [fig 4-6].\(^{63}\)

Generally speaking these three sources focused upon Satanism, nineteenth century occultism and/or the highlights of the esoteric tradition, in a more or less historicizing, sometimes rather sensational manner (Bois, Givry), and sometimes in a quite poetical form (Michelet). Even with the lurid illustrations of naked witches these are erudite tomes, filled with massive amounts of both visual and textual information and many references. Furthermore all three books present more or less the same lineage of important esoteric figures, such as Flamel, Agrippa and Boehme, in which the outlines of an esoteric tradition are already clear.

But the interest of the Surrealists extended beyond home-grown erudite esotericism. Primitivism had been a central concern of Surrealism from the outset, and as the 1930s progressed the interest in cultures of non-Western peoples and of the (distant) past continued to grow, leading in particular to an increasing
fascination with tribal and/or ancient myths, magic and rituals. Although today generally classified as ethnology or anthropology, the esoteric association, if not content, of certain books and articles makes them relevant here. For instance, Leiris devoted a positive review to L’Île magique, a book on Haitian voodoo by the occultist William Seabrook (again a rather sensational work). The most important source in this regard is without a doubt The Golden Bough by James Frazer (1854-1941). Bretonian and Bataillian Surrealists alike both read and enjoyed it, turning also to other works by Frazer such as Totemism and Exogamy.

In chapter four we will further explore the surrealist fascination with myth, the overarching category under which religious practices of the past and of tribal cultures, including magic, were understood. Suffice it to say here that the borders between ethnography, mythology and esotericism were rather blurred, and in selected articles in Documents and Minotaure the anthropologist Marcel Griaule (1898-1965) and, predominantly, the intellectual Roger Caillois (1913-1978), referenced a number of sources connected to western esotericism, usually scholarly and historic in nature.

Early anthropology is not the only discipline aligned with western esotericism; another one is parapsychology. Breton’s original training was in medicine, and he always retained a fervent interest in (dynamic) psychiatry. He read many para-psychological journals, particularly in the 1920s and early 1930s, such as La revue spiritiste; La revue métapsychique; Annales des sciences psychiques; and Aesculape, which are all referred to in the 1933 essay ‘The Automatic Message’. In many instances he demonstrated his familiarity with medical studies of mediums, particularly the studies written by Théodore Flournoy about the medium Hélène Smith, who was to become Breton’s favourite medium. I will explore this topic at greater length in chapter three, but two things should be noted here: parapsychology was an interest of Breton not necessarily shared by many other Surrealists, and—as with all topics—he again chose scientific and erudite publications as his main sources.

Living sources
Unlike most of the authors we have discussed above, someone such as Leiris (who reviewed Le Musée) and Caillois (who referenced so many religio-historical books) were alive and well during the time of Surrealism, interacting with Surrealists from Bataille’s and Breton’s camps (although primarily with the former) and writing in surrealist journals. One can imagine that they discussed their interest in and knowledge of tribal magic or the sacred with one another, but perhaps with Breton or other Surrealists as well. Even though reading was Breton’s favourite method of appropriating esoteric pasts, and even though there is hardly any
evidence of interpersonal exchanges concerning esotericism, I feel I should still mention the flesh-and-blood people who were knowledgeable about esoteric matters, as their presence and their willingness to share their knowledge may well have played a role in forming, focusing or directing the esoteric interests of Bretonian Surrealism.

Michel Leiris was obviously well read, as was Roger Caillois, but while their investigations of the sacred and secrecy together with Bataille are well known, and although we can safely assume that the Bretonian camp would have read their articles and other works, it is impossible to say if they would have contributed in any other way to the Bretonian side of Surrealism in this respect. Leiris had a lifelong fascination with historical occultism, initiation and magic and fetishist practices in non-western cultures. Together with Caillois and Bataille he founded the ‘Collège de Sociologie’, a group of intellectuals organised around a series of lectures (1937-1939). Topics such as the sacred, secrecy and esoteric eroticism were discussed during the lectures. The three also established a secret society, ‘Acéphale’, named after the already existing journal Acéphale; it had a political and revolutionary rather than esoteric agenda. Breton in any case never joined Acéphale.

The ethnographer, traveller, writer and occultist William Seabrook (1884-1954), author of L’Île magique, became friends with Leiris and Man Ray after his book was well received by the Surrealists. He moved in (both) surrealist circles for a while but it is impossible to pin down if he might have had any esoteric influence.

An important figure in Breton’s direct circle was Max Ernst. Scholars now assume that alchemy informed much of Ernst’s work in a very idiosyncratic manner. He may have consulted alchemical manuscripts and his alchemically informed auto-psychoanalysis may have influenced others in the early 1920s. The second ‘may have’ is particularly important: it is simply not known whether it really happened and Ernst’s alchemy is so personal that it is not necessarily easily shared or transmitted. This is even more the case with Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), who was certainly not a Surrealist but, rather, more of a living Great Precursor; his esotericism (alchemy, particularly) is not undisputed and was in any case as highly idiosyncratic as anything else about him and so not easily transmissible—if he would have wanted to share it anyway.

If Breton was affected by personal influences, he would have been most open to Ernst, Duchamp, or to Pierre Mabille (1904-1952), the doctor who was also an anthropologist, writer and Surrealist, and was published in surrealist journals in the 1930s. He was good friends with Breton, who held him in great esteem. Mabille’s primary interest was mythology, which he traced...
in religion and esotericism alike, and a profound interest in and knowledge of occultism was a considerable part of his mythological studies. In an article on luminous consciousness in *Minotaure*, for instance, he discusses transcendental knowledge and contacting cosmic energies, referring to both ancient and medieval ‘hermetists’ in the process. He links luminous consciousness to painting, and a reproduction of an illustration from Fludd’s *Philosophie Moaique* precedes numerous paintings and objects by surrealist artists, including Dali, Tanguy, Ernst, Magritte and Remedios Varo, among many others. Thus Mabille explicitly connected historical esotericism to contemporary surrealist art. Another instance where he connected an esoteric past to the surrealist present was in an essay on Brauner’s painting *Self-portrait with plucked eye* (1931), where he linked the artist and his art to premonition of the future and clairvoyance [plate III]. His 1940 book *Mirror of the Marvellous* was prefaced by Breton, who was much impressed with it, as were many other Surrealists. This rather unique book celebrates the surrealist concept of the marvellous in a long reflection that is akin to comparative mythology, including certain esoteric elements and motifs. As will become clear in chapter four, it is the mythological element (to which esotericism is considered subservient) that became most relevant to Breton. It is very hard to identify precisely how Mabille shared his esoteric knowledge with the Bretonian Surrealists in the 1930s, other than by means of his written work. Sarane Alexandrian, however, is convinced that Mabille ‘initiated’ Breton into the secrets of geomancy and prophetical astrology, which seems probable. In the 1930s the Bretonian Surrealists were increasingly concerned with the theme of initiation—something that continued into the 1950s—and it is quite probable that Mabille played an influential part in this, as initiation was one of his major mythological interests.

A somewhat similar case is Kurt Seligmann (1900-1962). He associated with the Surrealists only for a brief period in Paris from 1938 to 1940, and then occasionally in the United States from 1940 to 1942. He made an extensive study of esotericism, writing several books and articles on magic and occultism, and possibly using it in his artwork too. One can assume that he shared his esoteric knowledge with some Surrealists; it is known for instance that he exchanged letters about esoteric matters with Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), who also read his book, and that he compiled a folder with documentation about the tarot for Breton. In any case, as there are hardly any studies of him available the manner and extent of such sharing or even influencing is still a mystery for now.

Not too much is known concerning the esoteric pursuits of other Surrealists besides Ernst, and it is questionable whether Breton would have allowed them to influence him and his Surrealism. Let me provide an example: at
the end of the 1930s Roberto Matta (1911-2002) and Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982) became interested in the occult fourth dimension theorised by the Russian P.D. Ouspensky, and eventually Gurdjieff. While Carrington and Varo (1908-1963), for instance, began to pursue these interests as well, it made no impression at all upon Breton, who only commented upon a work by Gurdjieff once, rather sparingly, and in a totally different (namely, literary) context. Furthermore, little is known about the esoteric exploits of Matta and Lam, nor are there any comprehensive studies detailing the (possibly) esoteric iconography and/or interests of André Masson (1896-1987), Salvador Dali (1904-1989), Joan Miró (1893-1983) or Hans (Jean) Arp (1886-1966), all of whom are assumed to have incorporated certain esoteric motifs into their works.

The Romanian artist Victor Brauner joined the Surrealists in the 1930s. His art, particularly his paintings from after the Second World War, is peppered with esoteric symbols and iconography, but few sources really document or analyse his explorations of magic, alchemy and the tarot specifically, among other esotericisms. Brauner is a case similar to Duchamp: his esoteric worldview and symbolism were so idiosyncratic that it is debatable whether his views influenced other Surrealists or Breton specifically. This exemplifies how hard it is to really derive something meaningful from the fact that some artists who investigated esotericism on their own interacted with Breton. Even if Brauner’s esotericism was not considered too idiosyncratic, time and distance may have been a further factor. After the Second World War Brauner occasionally exhibited his paintings with the Parisian group around Breton, but was rarely present in person. Carrington and Remedios Varo both engaged contemporary esotericism extensively—but only when out of the (mutual) sphere of influence of Breton, when they had both relocated to Mexico after the War. A last, but certainly not least, group of individuals should be mentioned: the intellectual alchemists with whom Breton came into contact in the 1950s. They were Eugène Canseliet (1899-1982), a writer, alchemist and the only disciple of the famed and mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli; the occultist Claude d’Ygé (pseudonym of Claude Labatinière, 1912-1964); and the historian, alchemist and writer René Alleau (1917). Alleau was a regular in surrealist circles, while the Surrealists, at the instigation of Breton, attended his lectures on alchemy. Alleau organised a few philosophical dinner parties in 1950, which included Canseliet, d’Ygé and Breton. Alleau, Canseliet and d’Ygé contributed to the occult journal *La Tour Saint-Jacques* (1955-63), founded by another occult specialist, Robert Amadou (1924-2006)—whose *Literary Anthology of Occultism* included an essay by Breton. Amadou attended surrealist gatherings occasionally and was acquainted with Breton. It seems quite probable that these men imparted occult and alchemical knowledge to Breton.
in person. Furthermore, they all published books and articles about esotericism, and it is a safe assumption that Breton would have read them.

By the end of the 1950s something significant happened: the different groups of sources I have delineated above, written as well as living, became increasingly entangled. Breton read studies of historical esotericism and simultaneously even knew some of their authors, whom he mentioned in his own writings. That interest was in turn reciprocated; Amadou, for instance, not only turned Breton into an ‘occult poet’ by including him in his Anthology, but referred to him in the introduction, in addition to mentioning him L’Occultisme. Canseliet meanwhile contributed to Breton’s L’Art Magique (although so did over a hundred other artists and intellectuals). In a further intertwining of sources, these living authorities turned alchemical heroes such as Flamel and Michel Maier into modern poets, and Romantic heroes such as Rimbaud into alchemists. Obviously such an endorsement of alchemy as poetry and poetry as alchemy was a final confirmation that Breton’s project of esotericising Surrealism, which had been initiated by Viatte, was on the right track. Finally in the late 1950s Bretonian Surrealism was at its most esoteric. Everything had come, and was coming, full circle: esotericism, Romanticism and Symbolism, Surrealism. Perhaps it is fitting that this happened only near the end of Breton’s life; he passed away in 1966.

In conclusion: Breton’s library

If one were to reconstruct Breton’s esoteric library, it would perhaps look something like this. At eye-level, we would find the collected works of all the great poets and novelists of Romanticism and Symbolism, many of them implicitly indebted to esotericism. In a small cabinet to the side, we would see the historical overviews of esotericism written by Bois, Michelet and Grillot de Givry. To really be able to appreciate the esotericism in Romantic poems and novels, we would climb a ladder to the first gallery, to find the serious academic analyses by writers such as Viatte, Saurat, Richer and Béguin. In their discussion of esoteric Romanticism, these authors also provide a wealth of information about esotericism generally (particularly currents such as Illuminism). There’s another gallery on the other side of the room, holding cabinets with books by Amadou and Canseliet. As these were not only intellectuals but practising occultists, and acquaintances of Breton, they are located away from Viatte et al.; their take on esotericism might have been different, and their influence upon Breton, whom they met, of an entirely different kind as well. There are two further separate bookcases—separate in part because librarians might want to remove them from the vicinity of esotericism all together. There we find, on the one hand, early anthropological works and compendia of comparative religion, such as the books of Frazer; and on the other
hand, a large cabinet filled with journals and books that would be labelled as parapsychological today, dealing with, for instance, mediums.

Did Breton’s library look like this?

After Breton’s death his library was investigated by Marguerite Bonnet and Etienne-Alain Hubert, who compiled, among other lists, a list of works concerning the ‘traditional sciences’; in other words what we would refer to now as western esotericism. René Alleau, in fact, was consulted in compiling the list, which has been reproduced in the catalogue André Breton. Alleau suggested three categories to classify the material: the ‘hermetical tradition’, ‘history of religions’ and ‘occultism’. It’s a rather small list, totalling only forty titles. The Romantic works are not on this list, nor are Viatte and company, books like Frazer’s, or (para-)psychological work. As Breton’s love for these works and his possession of them at one point or other are known from other sources (such as his own writings), it is obvious that they must have been included on other lists, or no longer present at the time of list-making, which is after all only one moment in time and a very late one at that. In compensation, a number of other titles from the category ‘history of religions’ are part of the list, such as Gnostiques et gnosticime by de Faye, 1925, and Dom Pernety’s two-volume Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique of 1787.

Still, based on the list we can add a small table to Breton’s imaginary library, with a scattering of primary sources upon it: Grillot de Givry’s French translation of Dee’s Monas Hieroglyphica, a French translation of the Zohar from 1902, a French translation of The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz (1928) and all of Lévi’s works. Above we have discussed mainly secondary sources, but the inclusion of these titles shows that by the end of his life (if not before) Breton had finally turned to primary esoteric sources as well, albeit a small selection. Three more books stand out: a French translation of Dion Fortune, remarkable because Breton never referred to British magic or Fortune herself, at all. Then there are two books by Lotus de Païni: La Magie et le mystère de la femme, and Les trois totémisations. The magical mystery of woman was of course something that must have greatly appealed to Breton, who in fact entitled a collage from 1962, for his daughter Aube, ‘Lotus de Païni’. Fortune and de Païni are in fact also the only female authors in the collection. Just as remarkable, finally, is the presence of one book by Stanislas de Guaiïta, and one about him. Some (more speculative) authors have assumed that de Guaiïta’s thought must have influenced Breton’s, but one specific image of water and fire united, which he took from the illustrations of de Guaiïta’s Le Serpent de la Genèse by Oswald Wirth and used in the 1942 catalogue of First Papers of Surrealism, is the only evidence of possible influence; any appropriation of de Guaiïta’s ideas can only
be inferred from the presence of these books in Breton’s library. In my discussions of various sources above, I have constructed an imaginary library that exceeds the physical one inventoried after his death. We can draw a number of conclusions on the basis of this paper-trail library. To start with, Breton very strongly preferred secondary sources, and mainly those written by historians: historians of literature, of esotericism and of comparative religion besides. In other words, he favoured erudite sources. In fact this preference was shared among the Surrealists, at least to the extent that persons such as Seligmann and Mabille wrote those types of books themselves. The predominance of reference books and literary histories exemplifies the fact that Breton preferred his esotericism (mainly) mediated. He relied upon scholars like Viatte to inform him about Illuminism, and its influence upon the Romantics. He spent a lot of time reading books about books. Late in life Breton sought the company of practising esotericists such as Canseliet, but they were just as erudite as the books he preferred. All of this shows that for a large part Breton’s esotericism was an intellectual pursuit, that he relied on written sources and that erudition was his touchstone. The fact that he refers to these erudite works in his own writings shows that he made no bones about broadcasting his own studiousness.

Moreover, his reliance on secondary works demonstrates his distrust of ‘believers’, his preference for a rational and (semi-)scientific approach and his reliance upon learned intellectuals. For example, when taken by a fancy for astrology, he relied upon Influence astrale by Paul Choisnard (1899-1900, 1926), a complex and technical book that advocates an experimental research-directed approach to astrology with the help of statistics.

With Givry in hand, Breton could pick and choose at will from the vast esoteric tradition. With Viatte et al. in hand, Breton could pick and choose from esoteric Romanticism, and steer his movement in a new, rather more esoteric, direction, down the path that his beloved Great Precursors (he now knew) had also taken. At the same time, the relative scarcity of esoteric references in the first two decades of Surrealism and Breton’s reliance on a small corpus of sources after the War furthermore show that esotericism was not his main concern, certainly not before the 1940s, and even then his interest was subordinate to, on the one hand, the project of re-introducing myth into the world, and on the other, his all-encompassing fascination with Romanticism and Symbolism.

The question is, does the imaginary library I have compiled and the scattered references to it I have collected provide enough material to consider esotericism to be the cornerstone of Breton’s thought? Scholars and authors have answered this question with ‘yes’ as well as ‘no’, with ‘perhaps’ and ‘possibly’ in between. I shall discuss their responses in the next part of this chapter, below.
II. Secondary sources, part A: the classics

Introduction

Even such a comparatively young and narrow sub-field as the study of esoteric Bretonian Surrealism certainly has its classics. I will start off my discussion of the relevant scholarly and popular sources that have tackled this topic before me with a discussion of a few of these classics: André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism by Michel Carrouges (1950, 1974), André Breton: Magus of Surrealism by Anne Balakian (1971), and Surréalisme et tradition: la pensée d’André Breton jugée selon l’oeuvre de René Guénon by Eddy Batache (1978), although a couple of others will be mentioned as well. Basic Concepts was the first French book-length study that advanced the thesis of an intense investment by Breton (and his Surrealism) in esotericism; André Breton: Magus the first English study to do the same; and Surréalisme et tradition the first study—and still one of only a few—to explicitly make a connection between Surrealism and Guénonian Traditionalism.

The similarities between these books are striking: they all focus upon André Breton (in the title, even), and they all assume not simply an interest on Breton’s part in esotericism but rather a far-reaching involvement and investment, to such a degree that he could even be termed a ‘magus’. As we will see later, this contrasts sharply with other, later, studies that downplay or just plainly deny any interest whatsoever in esotericism.

These attitudes exemplify two of the three general approaches I have distilled from the scholarly and popular material: authors set out to assimilate Breton (or Bretonian Surrealism) into esotericism; or, conversely, to subsume all esoteric elements into Surrealism, perhaps into an aesthetic or psychoanalytical discourse. Roughly speaking, the first approach turns Breton into an esotericist, while the second marginalises all esotericisms by subordinating them to Surrealism. The third approach is to recognise the esotericism in Bretonian Surrealism without subsuming or assimilating either one into the other. In this book, I attempt this last approach. Obviously these approaches are over-simplifications, and there are certainly more ways to go about treating this material than just these three. Yet they will provide some sort of handle on the diverse material that will be discussed below.

Another handle is provided by the three ‘basic concepts’ introduced in Part I of this chapter: tradition, erudition and politics. For Breton, adherence to the Romantic tradition and erudition of the sources consulted were important factors in his interaction with esotericism. As we shall see, this is in line with the arguments of many scholars and authors, who often follow Breton’s criteria as well as applying their own—frequently remarkably similar—standards to the
material as well. Politics has remained somewhat implicit in Part I; its role will be a bit more visible below but remains behind the scenes compared to tradition and erudition which often take centre stage. In part III of this chapter I will return to the three basic concepts and their role in esoteric Surrealism, as seen through my lens of course, and esoteric Surrealism as seen through the many lenses of other authors and scholars.

The basic concepts of Surrealism according to Carrouges... and others

We have already touched upon the Carrouges affair and the book that caused it at the beginning of this chapter, but as this was the first book of its kind and such a controversial one too, it deserves further discussion. Carrouges effectively paints Surrealism as a movement fundamentally concerned with sacred notions. He interprets Breton’s ‘supreme point’—a concept Breton introduced halfway through his career and which refers to the point where seemingly irreducible opposites, such as the quotidian and the marvellous, real and surreal, life and death, are united—as a deistic concept of a transcendent being. Christian themes such as revelation, redemption, and grace are posited as having their part in Surrealism. Carrouges recognises that Surrealism ‘battles’ ‘against religion’, which is why esotericism is the vehicle of deeper religious truth:

The notion of the supreme point is the cornerstone of the surrealist cosmology, the living focal point of real and surreal; it comes from [esotericism].

Carrouges made esotericism essential to Surrealism, that is, a solely Christian esotericism. Rather randomly on occasion, and even incoherently at times, his discussion ranges across time and discipline, including the Zohar, Christian kabala, Paracelsus, alchemy and Rosicrucianism in one breath, in often mystifying language. His choice of esoteric books, authors and currents is obviously determined by his personal Catholic convictions, and his classification of occultism and the occult science of magic as evil reveals his identification with clerical positions. His religious agenda guaranteed a cold reception among the Surrealists (Breton excepted), and also in French scholarship of the 1950s to ‘70s; the book was considered ‘suspect’ probably because of its Catholic overtones and the emphasis on esotericism, which was after all associated with fascism by many after the War (as I will explore below). That suspicion was shared by Anglophone scholars—that is, if they knew of the book at all.

Yet suspicion was not universal; on the contrary, the influential American
avant-garde scholar Roger Shattuck (1923-2005) counted Carrouges among ‘the most perceptive French critics’, together with Jules Monnerot and Philippe Audoin. These three authors have two important things in common. Firstly, they all moved in surrealist circles for a certain amount of time and can thus boast an insider’s knowledge of what was considered important by Breton, and others. Secondly, they all published a book about Breton or Surrealism that emphasised in some way the spirituality of Breton’s thought and/or of surrealist precepts. At a time when spirituality, religion and the sacred were still anathema among (particularly Anglophone) art critics and historians of the avant-garde, and when traditional esotericism was still under suspicion of fascism among many intellectuals, Shattuck recognised the role of spirituality and esotericism in Surrealism, and paid tribute to the authors pointing it out.

Monnerot (1909-1995) was co-founder of the College of Sociology in Paris, with Bataille, Leiris and Caillois, in 1938. His study La Poésie moderne et le sacré was published in 1945, but proceeded from the pre-War investigations by Bataille, Caillois and others into concepts of the sacred, secret societies and forms of primitive and Antique spirituality, something we have already touched upon above. ‘Modern poetry’, in the title, refers to Surrealism, mainly though not exclusively of the Bataillian kind. Touchstone for the title’s ‘sacred’ was Christian Gnosticism, and in the book Monnerot compares this movement to Surrealism. La Poésie was well received in Bataille’s circle, and also by Breton, who commented favourably upon it in writing and in interviews. It subsequently fell into disrepute, only to be rehabilitated recently.

Philippe Audoin (1924-1985) hardly had a religious agenda and his comprehensive book Breton (1970) differs in tone from both Carrouges and Monnerot. Still there is a reason Shattuck included him and I will too. Audoin discusses the essential philosophies of life of Bretonian Surrealism, the centrality of the concept of the marvellous to it, and the pervasive presence and importance of themes such as ghosts and spectres, castles, quests and grails within the surrealist discourse. In doing so he shows how much Surrealism was committed to something intangible that can be described as a re-enchanted world without religion. In Les Surréalistes of 1973—in which he comments upon both Carrouges and Monnerot—Audoin writes of the ‘spiritual experience’ the Surrealists share, an experience of the descent into the ‘unexplored recesses of the imagination’, and even while the results of it were made public (in texts and paintings), the change it effected upon the individuals, the ‘revelation’, even, remained inexplicable and unsaid. As I will explore in chapter four, Breton did introduce a number of concepts that, while perhaps not explaining those indescribable revelatory experiences, still demarcate them: ‘the marvellous’
for the realm of such experiences, for instance, and ‘objective chance’ for the moment an experience occurs.\textsuperscript{125}

Balakian’s hermetic tradition

At least one other American (besides Shattuck, above) read Carrouges’s French book: Anna Balakian (1915-1997), who based her 1971 unequivocally titled publication \textit{André Breton: Magus of Surrealism} partly upon it.\textsuperscript{126} \textit{AB: Magus} sprang in part from Balakian’s 1947 dissertation, \textit{Literary Origins of Surrealism}, but explored the esoteric angle in greater depth, something already outlined in an article.\textsuperscript{127} Balakian had actually met Breton and interviewed him at length.\textsuperscript{128} In \textit{AB: Magus}, as in other publications, Balakian pays a significant amount of attention to positioning Breton within the ‘hermetic [esoteric] tradition’. As we have seen already it is intimately bound up with another tradition, Romanticism, something that is Balakian’s central argument. When discussing a poem by Breton, she states:

One sees [in it], as one will see in later poems, that the poet [Breton] bases himself to a great extent upon the hermetic tradition, \textit{following the example of the greatest poets of history}, such as Shakespeare, Blake, Goethe, Novalis, Mallarmé, Yeats. He has drunk at the same well.\textsuperscript{129}

Poetic lineage is considered here as very closely connected with the ‘hermetic’ tradition. ‘Tradition’ is one of esotericism’s key concepts;\textsuperscript{130} while ‘the hermetic tradition’ is well on its way to becoming a cliché in Western esoteric scholarship. In 1964 \textit{Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition} by Frances Yates was published, a book that was to prove very important for the study of Western esotericism as well as for the academic discussion of esotericism in history.\textsuperscript{131} Although Balakian does not mention Yates, it is possible, perhaps probable, that her ideas about the ‘hermetic tradition’ were prompted by \textit{Giordano Bruno}. To continue the discussion of poetic tradition, the rejection of tradition is just as great a cliché within the avant-garde. Bretonian Surrealism dutifully fulminated against traditional norms, and it might strike one as a bit odd to find ‘tradition’ so easily combined with Breton.\textsuperscript{132} Then again, maybe not: the hermetic tradition was not associated with mainstream behaviour but rather with heterodox culture (and thus attractive for an avant-garde), while the Romantic tradition and the established lineage of Great Precursors were central to surrealist thought. Balakian’s selection of names partly reflects Breton’s standard list,\textsuperscript{133} while including further English authorities such as Blake and Yeats who were just as esoterically inclined as the French Romantics and Symbolists, if not more.\textsuperscript{134}
With her continuing emphasis upon the close relations between the hermetic and the (predominantly) Romantic tradition of ‘greatest poets’, Balakian hits two birds with one stone: giving extra cachet to the hermetic tradition through its association with those ‘greatest poets’ and simultaneously providing extra credentials for Breton’s indebtedness to esotericism via his reverence for those poets.

Balakian’s *André Breton: Magus* is a pivotal study because the author constructs a convincing literary esoteric tradition culminating in Surrealism, but also because of the direct relation that is established between André Breton and nineteenth century occultism. In bringing out the ‘occult’ notions permeating Breton’s thinking, Balakian posits a connection between him and Éliphas Lévi, the occultist author whose *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1854-56), *Histoire de la Magie* (1860) and *La Clef des Grands Mystères* (1861) played a key role in nineteenth century French occultism. Balakian argues that Breton first encountered Lévi’s ideas in the works of Rimbaud, and subsequently turned to *Dogme et Rituel* directly himself. Balakian also contends that Breton modelled his ‘surrealist coterie’ on the structure of occult societies as described by Lévi—by implication, Bretonian Surrealism is just such a society, even if not necessarily secret. Interestingly enough Monnerot had, years earlier, implied the opposite: that Surrealism was a secret(ive) society, even if not necessarily occult.

Generally speaking Balakian and Carrouges have the same aim: to turn Breton into an esotericist. Their approach is to bring the esotericism in someone’s or many people’s worldview into the limelight and so show how much it has shaped a person or a movement—in their case, Breton and Surrealism. But the strategies they use to further that approach are not the same: Carrouges opts for a strategy of similarity, while Balakian rather chooses the strategy of emphasising tradition.

The similarity strategy Carrouges employs consists of correlating two (or more) concepts, statements, iconographical symbols or signs, etc., the one esoteric and the other surrealist, to demonstrate the similarity between the two. The apparent resemblance is subsequently interpreted as indicating kinship, influence and/or appropriation, usually presented as the far-reaching influence of esotericism upon Breton’s thought. Simply put, it’s a strategy of ‘the sources speak for themselves’ based upon the premise that where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

Balakian uses another strategy, namely tradition: emphasising forebears and lineage, highlighting important sources mentioned and influential people referred to in Breton’s writings, accentuating reception and continuity, and generally stressing the place of Breton within a long and vibrant tradition. The
implication is that if X (Breton) reveres and emulates the poetry of Y (say, Rimbaud),
they would also follow in their esoteric footsteps. Moreover, by explicitly bringing
Lévi into the picture, Balakian links Breton directly to historical occultism and to
an explicitly magical tradition. She constructs in the first instance an immediate
timeline ranging back less than a century, while, after naming Breton heir to the
magical tradition of nineteenth-century occultism, she subsequently extends that
tradition further backwards in time, drawing it all the way to fifteenth-century
physician, astrologer and alchemist Paracelsus and fourteenth-century alchemist
Nicolas Flamel. These names occasionally appeared in surrealist sources, as
we have seen; now they become meaningful as influential esoteric Precursors
of Surrealism. At the same time Balakian brings her tradition closer to Breton’s
present, into the twentieth century, by claiming the mysterious modern alchemist
Fulcanelli as another precursor of Breton, something he himself never did. In
other words, Balakian constructs a long, eminent and still living tradition with
Breton at its apex. Essentially her premise is that reading, even writing about
esotericism, equals being influenced.

The esoteric currents and figures mentioned in Balakian’s and Carrouges’s
books are in effect the same. They all go back to the esotericisms mentioned in
Breton’s writings. Balakian succeeds much better in painting a picture of an esoteric
tradition that is home to magicians, alchemists and ‘great poets’ alike existing
over vast oceans of time, than Carrouges, who needs to keep his underlying
agenda (Christianity) a secret; but both reify ‘hermeticism’ as essentially
timeless, hardly changing and homogenous. Incidentally, this is hardly unique
to either of these authors, but rather central to the way esotericism has been
constructed by practitioners for a long time, and often by scholars too. As various
academic experts have shown, concepts such as timelessness, universalism,
original wisdom and perpetual truths are core-ingredients of the entire notion of
the hermetic (esoteric) tradition (or ‘Tradition’) as employed in many if not nearly
all esoteric currents, ranging from Renaissance Neo-Platonism to Theosophy to
contemporary New Age. The universal character of such an essentialist esoteric
tradition enables the claims of many esotericists to be heirs to, for instance, an
age-old wisdom. At the same time it enables Carrouges and Balakian to adapt
it to their own agenda, legitimising their approach to ‘esotericise’, as it were,
Breton as an individual and Surrealism as a movement. It enables other writers
too—particularly one who associates Bretonian Surrealism with a recent example
of universalising esotericism, Traditionalism.

*Traditional Batache and the politics of occultism*
Tradition and traditionalism are not neutral terms in any case and certainly not in
the context of twentieth-century heterodox French thought, where René Guénon’s concept of a perennial metaphysical/esoteric tradition or ‘tradition primordiale’, usually known as Traditionalism, has left deep tracks. Vague or ambivalent scholarly references to a hermetic or occult tradition as ‘traditional thought’, which many French readers would associate with Guénon’s Traditionalism, easily lead to misconceptions.

Much concerning the relationship between Surrealism and Traditionalism has been said by Eddy Batache in *Surréalisme et tradition: la pensée d’André Breton jugée selon l’œuvre de René Guénon* of 1978. The title puns on an essay Breton devoted to Guénon in 1953, ‘René Guénon jugé par le Surréalisme.’ The two never actually met, and while Breton does praise Guénon and some of his works in this essay, his interest in the latter’s views was rather limited, short-lived, and most importantly dates exclusively from the post-War period. Nonetheless a certain exchange of ideas—usually, Guénon influencing Breton and Surrealism—is often tacitly assumed. Sometimes Breton’s post-War interest is projected backwards in time and related to the formative early years of both movements, the 1920s. By the end of that decade Surrealism’s sister-group Grand Jeu had in fact come under the sway of Guénon, René Daumal in particular, which is sometimes assumed to have rubbed off on Bretonian Surrealism as well. Both scenarios are unlikely. René Guénon, in turn, was hardly interested in Surrealism and considered essential surrealist concerns such as the dream and the unconscious totally irrelevant. In fact, he had already dismissed Surrealism in 1932 as ‘a little group of young men who amuse themselves with jokes of dubious taste.’

The limited interaction between Breton and Guénon has not impeded Batache from creating a comparison between certain essential points of Breton’s Surrealism and Guénon’s Traditionalism, predominantly through correlation, in the same strategy Carrouges used: similarity. As with Carrouges esotericism is the binding factor: for Carrouges it links Christianity to avant-garde poetry, for Batache Surrealism to Traditionalism. For example, Batache discusses Guénon’s concept of a certain supreme spiritual point where all opposition will be reconciled, and compares that to a passage by Breton from the Second Manifesto on the particular surrealist point where opposites are united (which would later be known as the sublime point, central to Carrouges’ argument as well). Many other comparisons of this kind are arranged so as to show how much the two men apparently thought alike, which, it is implicitly argued, must be evidence of some sort of appropriating relationship. Batache’s agenda is, simply put, to link Breton’s name to Guénon and Traditionalism no matter what—it is a variation on the approach that makes Breton into an esotericist; here he is made into a
Traditionalist. In fact there is hardly any real relationship between Surrealism and Traditionalism. Batache’s book exposes the downside of the similarity-strategy: that it can be used to suggest direct relations where there are none and entirely bypasses any historical context. At the same time *Surréalisme et tradition* also testifies to the success of the similarity strategy, as the suggestion that Breton must have been influenced by Guénon has stuck, and many recent authors take it for granted that such influence must have occurred. What such assumptions do not take into account, however—besides a superficial reading of the relevant sources—is politics.

Without a doubt there are a number of striking coincidences, or similarities, between Surrealism and Traditionalism. Both emerged in the early 1920s, in Paris, under the direction of a charismatic leader, and were concerned with non-mainstream systems of meaning and an overthrow of the status quo of bourgeois society, while looking for inspiration in exotic locations. They arose from comparable backgrounds and searched for answers to similar questions. But, as I’ve argued, the approaches of Bretonian Surrealism and Guénonian Traditionalism are not equivalent and should not be mistaken for one another. Breton, while acknowledging the similar stance of Surrealism and Guénon with regards to institutionalised religion and paying Guénon a compliment, pointed out the differences himself in 1953:

> Always soliciting the mind, never the heart, René Guénon receives our very great deference and nothing else. Surrealism, while associating itself with what is essential in his criticism of the modern world, basing itself as he does on supra-rational intuition (also found through other avenues), even submitting to the attraction of this so-called traditional thought, which he has rid of its parasites with a master’s hand, *Surrealism does avoid him, just as much for the reactionary that he is on the social plane as for the blind deprecator of Freud that he is proving to be*. Surrealism honours nonetheless this great solitary adventurer who rejects faith for knowledge, opposes deliverance to salvation, and salvages metaphysical thought from the ruins of religion that cover it over.

Politically, the right-wing conservative position of Guénon and the left-wing (sometimes quite extreme) position of Breton were worlds apart. Breton considered Guénon a (heartless) reactionary; Guénon had dismissed the Surrealists as silly dreamers early in his career. Batache’s similarity principle enables him to still align the two, and transcend political differences through leaving them out.
altogether. But the politics of esotericism should not be ignored.

At that time the hermetic tradition, as it was known in France, was predominantly monopolised by intellectuals who were conservative, usually politically oriented towards the right, and who were (more or less) practising Catholics (which is obviously also the milieu Carrouges belonged to).157 This interest of French political conservatives in esotericism had deep roots in the nineteenth century, as has been shown by Jean-Pierre Laurant.158 In the English-speaking world, on the other hand, esoteric movements were predominantly concerned with causes on the political left and often hostile towards traditional Christianity, in the late nineteenth as well as in the twentieth century.159 In the years following the Second World War, many prominent left-wing intellectuals throughout Europe (including France as well) and also in the US trod in the footsteps of Theodor Adorno, rejecting esotericism altogether, because it was associated with fascism and/or other movements considered dangerous, ‘regressive’ (or just reactionary), and thought to be irrational.160 Obviously the politics of esotericism and its geographical specificity are much more complicated than I can present here, and esoteric thought has been employed by those of any political orientation for any more or less politically motivated ends.161 Yet this stark division between occultism of the left and of the right,162 and the opposite position of intellectuals in France and in the UK and US, did permeate academic and intellectual culture in the post-War years, and is very relevant for the reception of Surrealism in general and esoteric Surrealism in particular. The point is that Surrealism’s progressive left-wing orientation in combination with a profound interest in esotericism and myth is quite untypical and goes against the grain as described above.

On the surface, it may make sense to associate Surrealism, with its references to esoteric sources as well as emphasis upon tradition and Great Precursors of the past, with Guénon’s Traditionalism as Batache does. Yet it is contrary to any political agenda that Surrealism stood for and shows a misunderstanding of the politically revolutionary aims of esotericism (and all related concepts) within the discourse of Bretonian Surrealism; Surrealism was left-wing and Breton was a Trotskyist with utopian inclination. For this reason, as well as Surrealism’s testified hostility to Catholicism, French conservative intellectuals who were interested in esotericism remained silent on Surrealism, despite its esoteric agenda in the 1950s. In their view, esotericism did not mix with utopian socialism. The book that had attempted to bridge the divide between Surrealism and the Catholic right, Carrouges’sBasic Concepts, was also ignored. At the same time, Carrouges’ book was also discarded by left-wing intellectuals, French as well as English, who were often Marxists in outlook. They viewed esotericism as outmoded at best, and had
no time for Carrouges’ crypto-Catholicism, nor for Surrealism (which had already been discarded by the Communist Party in the 1930s) and its obsession with esotericism, myth and magic.

Monnerot’s study, furthermore, was forgotten by both left and right, suspect as it was because of its discussion of Christian Gnosticism and of ‘the sacred’. Anglophone scholars were hardly interested in (or even aware of) Traditionalism, and so Batache’s book remained consigned to French readership, a milieu where Traditionalism was a complicated issue that many tried to avoid. Balakian was either unaware of, or chose to ignore, the French politics associated with esotericism, and bypasses them completely in her book. André Breton: Magus found a small audience, although not necessarily in France. Nor were prominent Anglophone art critics interested in its argument; as far as they were concerned Breton was hardly a ‘magus’ and Surrealism had ended by 1940 anyway; all that came after was a waning, a Hellenism of Surrealism that could safely be ignored or dismissed.

Or could it?

Carrouges, Monnerot, Audoin and Balakian are linked through their focus on esotericism and/or spirituality, and the fact that they all personally knew Breton. Their personal knowledge of him and of what he considered important to his life, work and movement must surely have influenced their books. When they knew him in the late 1940s and/or 1950s Breton wrote and talked about his interest in esotericism and his alignment of Surrealism with the esoteric tradition just as the Romantics had done. Carrouges, Balakian and the others are no exceptions in their appraisal of Bretonian Surrealism; rather they are the rule, as is also shown by Sarane Alexandrian and Patrick Waldberg. Alexandrian (1927-2009) and Waldberg (1913-1985) wrote books about Breton, had been Surrealists and had known Breton, and both make a point of mentioning particular esoteric currents and figures in their discussions of Breton and of Surrealism.

As I have hopefully made clear already in Part I but will explore further in the other chapters in this thesis, Breton really started discussing esotericism more prominently and urgently after 1942; before that time esotericism was, while present, much more latent. The many critics and historians who limited themselves to Surrealism’s origins and Golden Age, the 1920s and 30s, thus hardly recognised the Breton Carrrrouges, Balakian or Alexandrian were describing. Moreover, Breton was canonised relatively quickly and Surrealism (of the first two decades) was similarly elevated as the ‘last of the avant-gardes’ in the 1950s. Particularly within English academia the association of Surrealism with esotericism, ‘tainted’ as it was thought to be, was considered undesirable. Perhaps many critics and intellectuals assumed, or hoped, that all these authors, some of whom did not
come from within academia in any case, and whose personal ties to a failing Breton and a waning movement might have clouded their judgement, would just go away along with the idea of esoteric Surrealism. However, they did not, and neither did the complex issue of esoteric Surrealism.

II. Secondary sources, part B: responses

French academia: the response

In the late 1970s in France a scholarly re-evaluation of Surrealism—which had been totally eclipsed by Existentialism, among other things—set in. Discussion arose about the esotericism of Breton and of Surrealism, based in part upon the persistent publications mentioned above. There was concern that Breton and/or Surrealism were being misrepresented as much more involved with the esoteric or occult than was the case. Psychoanalyst René Held condemned the publications by Surrealist Sarane Alexandrian, discussed above, who made a point of mentioning Breton’s interest in esotericism:

*In our opinion, such proselytising of the occult [by Alexandrian] has been something quite far-reaching, [and] entirely contrary to the movement of history, [that is] to Breton’s tumultuous involvements—whether lasting or transient—in politics or elsewhere’.166*

Such ‘proselytising’, it was felt, required a scholarly answer. While Carrouges could still be safely dismissed (a Catholic, after all), a new wave of English-language works were also linking Surrealism to esotericism, such as *The Hidden Art* by Fred Gettings, Stanislas Klossowski de Rola’s *Alchemy: The Secret Art* (1973), and *Art and the Occult* by Paul Waldo Schwartz (1975).167 While these three books focus on occultism and art in general and include only a few specific comments on Surrealism, still they pointed in a certain direction—a path that had already been followed through to the end by Balakian in any case. Sixten Ringbom’s monumental classic *The Sounding Cosmos* had been published in 1970, and had begun to forcefully chip away at the old Greenbergian notion that modern art and spirituality (let alone esoteric spirituality) were worlds apart.168 *The Spiritual in Art*, the 1986 exhibition that would squarely and irreversibly put Modern art’s spirituality on the scholarly map, was already in the air.169 In other words, French scholarship could not but address the issue of esotericism and Modern art too in both general terms, and those specifically related to Surrealism. The prestigious French *Centre de Recherches sur le Surréalisme*, just established in 1980, devoted the second issue of its book series to the issue of esotericism,
or rather occultism, as it is entitled *Occulte-Occultation*.\textsuperscript{170}

The main and introductory article is by Robert Kanters, who was also co-editor of the *Anthologie littéraire de l’occultisme*, together with Amadou.\textsuperscript{171} The approach of Carrouges, Balakian and Batache was geared towards showing how esoteric Breton was, that is to assimilate Breton/Surrealism to esotericism either partly or entirely. Kanters’s approach can be characterised as the opposite: to contain—almost as in a *cordon sanitaire*—the esoteric elements, and to sublimate these into the aesthetic discourse of Surrealism. Esotericism is not necessarily denied, but rather qualified and subsequently subsumed; this is quite typical of the scholarly approach to this topic from the 1970s to the 90s and can even be found today.

The first move within this *cordon sanitaire* approach is to create a considerable distance between Surrealism and esotericism, particularly occultism. Although Breton had always shown curiosity towards the occult sciences, Kanters states, this interest was ‘naturally’ coupled with a ‘rigorously critical spirit’ and he rejected the ‘occultism of the bazaar’ and the ‘trash of Spiritualism’. Breton, Kanters continues, crossed the boundary into such ‘metaphysics of the music-hall’ only to study objective coincidence and automatic writing.\textsuperscript{172} The French academic attitude here is the qualification of Breton’s interest in esotericism: if he did explore esoteric currents, it was done with good reason, a distinct goal in mind and a critical attitude. This serves to show that he was never involved in or ideologically committed to any esotericisms; his ‘rigorously critical spirit’ protected him from that. It is another way of saying that Breton remained true to his Surrealism as well as to his atheism.

In the (exceptional) case that Bretonian explorations of esotericism were not goal-oriented, they were still merely a temporary diversion; hence should not be taken seriously. The psychoanalyst Held—who, as discussed above, accused Alexandrian of ‘proselytising’—puts it as follows:

\[T\]here are obvious links between hysteria, hypnotism, … yoga, and esotericism or occultism. [Knowing Breton, it was perhaps only to be expected that he would] gleefully stray into the basement of lucid consciousness, clothing what little he knew of psychoanalysis … with the rags of hermetism, alchemy, seership, metaphysics or parapsychology.\textsuperscript{173}

The ‘basement of lucid consciousness’—who else can you expect to ‘gleefully stray’ there but the Surrealists?

Occultism, Spiritualism and parapsychology often come in for severe academic criticism or ridicule and are apparently judged as vulgar.\textsuperscript{174} Held places
hermetism (esotericism) and alchemy in that ‘basement’ as well, but it should be noted that from the 1950s onwards alchemy and the esoteric tradition both were increasingly positively appreciated in France, considered valuable and scholarly in the wake of publications by Viatte and others—although, it must be said, mainly in right-wing conservative and more or less Catholic or otherwise religious circles. Moreover, they were set apart from parapsychology and Spiritualism. Compare for instance Massoni:

... the Surrealists follow in the footsteps of the alchemist Eugène Canseliet and the esoteric tradition, clearing their art of the occultist hodgepodge that often had the place of honour in romantic works.

Note also the respect paid to Canseliet, who was respected and admired by French intellectuals. Kanters hails esotericism as a ‘royal road’ to be taken, and, contrary to Massoni, holds the Romantic poets in great veneration. Two venerated groups have gone down that road before in his view, making it ‘royal’ by their presence: the ‘poètes voyants’ and the ‘hermetistes’. With the seer-poets Kanters refers to Romantic poets such Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Novalis, while among the ‘hermetists’ he seems to include Paracelsus, Agrippa, Boehme, Swedenborg, and Fabre d’Olivet. Obviously Kanters is in agreement with Balakian here, who mentioned the same names. Both in turn relied upon the writings of Breton, who in his turn relied upon historical studies, as explored above. The one important ‘hermetist’ over whom Balakian and Kanters disagree is Eliphas Lévi. Balakian makes his works central to Breton’s esoteric thought, while Kanters wonders why Breton would even be interested in him.

The ‘royal road’ is beset with dangers, however, and one should be wary of following esotericism too far, as Kanters makes clear. The members of Grand Jeu, he remarks, travelled at Guénon’s instigation down that road, all the way towards ‘traditional metaphysics’. The ‘intellectual rigour’ of Breton reined him in before he could follow, but Guénon, for his part, was ‘clearly duped’ by the ‘outward signs’ of hermeticism.

Kanters’ piece is fairly typical for Occulte-Occultation, although most other articles discuss a single esoteric current or motif in Breton’s thought. Marc Eigeldinger, for example, points out alchemical metaphors in Breton’s prose, Jeanne-Marie Baude in his poetry. They all emphasise the presence of analogical (correspondence-based) thinking in Breton’s oeuvre. While this is certainly correct, it is implicit in the essays that they favour an academically accepted term such as ‘analogical’ so as to escape having to use ‘esoteric’ or ‘spiritual’, for instance. The authors accord alchemy and alchemically-inspired
language high praise, again a result of alchemy becoming quite respected in French intellectual and literary circles in the 1970s, not least because of the efforts of Eugène Canseliet.\textsuperscript{185} In an ironic move, an essay by Carrouges is also included in *Occulte-Occultation*, detailing ‘[t]he dynamics of occultation’; it primarily shows that his clarity of style did not improve over time.\textsuperscript{186}

**Arcanum 17 and approaches**

Kanters’s article is important because it embodies so well the attitude of acknowledging-yet-containing the esotericism in Bretonian Surrealism. The other most important contributor to the volume, in my opinion, is Suzanne Lamy, with a good article on Breton’s most overtly esoteric book, *Arcanum 17*.\textsuperscript{187} *Arcanum 17* received very little recognition at the time of its publication (New York 1945, extended version Paris 1947) or afterwards. Lamy’s book was not only the first scholarly study of it but remains one of only a few to this day.\textsuperscript{188} *Arcanum 17* is one of Breton’s least studied works, together with the anthology *L’Art magique* (1957), and one gets the impression that scholars and art critics have felt so uncomfortable with the overt esoteric content of the first and the magic of art discussed in the second that it was—and is—deemed easier all around just to let it be. Additionally, both works date from after the War—the rather irrelevant afterlife of the movement, as far as many were concerned. The focus was limited to the heroic period; books that came after were not considered important enough to study, whereas Breton’s increasing investment in esotericism was taken as further confirmation of the downhill trajectory of Surrealism.

Lamy, thankfully, is not of this conviction. *Arcanum 17* is not an easily accessible book, and in the article (as in her book) Lamy pays particular attention to the on-going inter-textual discourse with esoteric sources, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit. She makes clear, first of all, how *Arcanum 17* shows Breton’s evolving and deepening understanding of the role esotericism played in the work and views of those Precursors he so cherished, such as Rimbaud, de Nerval and Baudelaire; after all, it was written when Breton was just reading Viatte’s *Victor Hugo* and possibly *Les sources occultes du romantisme* as well. Lamy furthermore analyses how Breton integrated his version of esoteric truths into the salvation-narrative, where the main character André, emotionally and politically adrift, is saved through the love of his new lover Elisa, characterised as the tarot’s seventeenth card of the Major Arcana, the Star, as the fairy Méliusine, and as the Egyptian goddess Isis besides.\textsuperscript{189} *Arcanum 17* shows how Breton subordinated esotericism to his own needs; how he, secondly, integrated it into his all-encompassing discourse upon love and woman as he did everything; and thirdly his broad, time- and current-defying use of esoteric tropes and themes, easily
associating Egyptian lore with medieval fairytales and modern tarot cards.\textsuperscript{190}

Besides the fact that Lamy devoted well researched studies to an important novel, there’s another reason I discuss her work here: her approach. As we have seen, the approach of Carrouges and Balakian is to esotericise Breton, whereas that of Kanters is to contain esotericism and subsume it into the larger aesthetic or literary discourse of Surrealism. These two, rather opposed, approaches can be taken as typical of many studies relevant to this topic. Lamy, however, has chosen another approach entirely, one I consider more prevalent today. Her position vis-à-vis esotericism is relatively neutral; she does not need to vindicate or uncover, nor to contain or downplay it. Rather she analyses its presence and role in \textit{Arcanum 17}. She approaches esotericism as both a source and a topic, within the larger framework that is Bretonian Surrealism. This is also the approach that I aim at in this book. Other proponents of it are, for instance, Clio Mitchell and Celia Rabinovitch, who have both written excellent studies of the spiritual in Surrealism, the first focusing on the surrealist concept of ‘magical art/art magic’, and the second upon the sacred.\textsuperscript{191}

There are certainly more approaches than the three mentioned here, although I consider these the most widespread. For instance, there’s a tendency among popular works (including digital sources) to use the esotericism of Surrealism and/or individual Surrealists as legitimising strategies for (elements of) esotericism or occultism. Nadia Choucha’s \textit{Surrealism and the Occult} (1992) exemplifies that position.\textsuperscript{192} This is the approach of esotericising the surrealistic with an overtly esoteric agenda. A rather well researched and argued example of a somewhat similar position is to be found in Manfred Hilke’s \textit{L’Écriture automatique: Das Verhältnis von Surrealismus und Parapsychologie in der Lyrik von André Breton}.\textsuperscript{193} It focuses mainly upon the supposed visionary powers Breton ascribed to himself in the poem ‘Sunflower’ (something to which we will return in chapter four). The title shows that for scholars today, in stark contrast to Occulte-Occultation, terms like ‘paranormal’ and ‘parapsychology’ have become points from which to tackle the topic of esotericism in/and Bretonian Surrealism.\textsuperscript{194}

\textbf{Surrealism despite Breton: Ernst and others}

We have been discussing Breton almost exclusively, firstly because his work is my main point of departure, and furthermore because until the 1990s few publications dealing with esotericism and Surrealism focused upon anyone else. In that decade however, the results of intensive research into another surrealist artist saw the light of day: \textit{Max Ernst: The Psychoanalytical Sources} (1989) by Elizabeth Legge and \textit{Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth} (2001) by M.E. Warlick, focusing on Ernst alone, and \textit{Marcel Duchamp and Max
Ernst: The Bride Shared (1998) by David Hopkins, which compares Ernst with Duchamp. These book have a common point of departure: Geoffrey Hinton’s rather groundbreaking 1975 article ‘Max Ernst’s “Les hommes n’en sauront rien”’, a study of one of Ernst’s most famous and also most alchemical paintings, Men shall know nothing of this [plate IV]. Hinton was one of the first art historians to broach this topic in the English-speaking world, besides works like those of Gettings and Klossowski de Rola. He sets out to interpret the iconography of the painting psychoanalytically, alchemically, and finally even astrologically. In his footsteps Legge, Hopkins and Warlick in particular have traced, with varying success, alchemical motifs in much of Ernst’s art. Suffice it here to say the following: these studies have put Max Ernst on the map as a man who was very well read in alchemical books, and so much at home with alchemy that his depth of alchemical knowledge and insight probably surpassed that of all the Surrealists including Breton—particularly in the early decades of Surrealism. Grillot de Givry’s Le Musée obviously offered Ernst a wealth of textual as well as visual information and inspiration, and perhaps this book prompted him to seek out alchemical manuscripts in libraries. Another important source is a psychoanalytical analysis of alchemy by Herbert Silberer, Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik. It is however unlikely that other Surrealists encountered this (German) book.

The studies of Warlick et al. are primarily concerned with Ernst, but in the process they also shed some light upon the presence and role of alchemy in Surrealism in general, referring to other Surrealists and Breton. Obviously Breton’s alchemy had been the subject matter of earlier works already, such as the articles in Occulte-Occultation. Those are primarily concerned with alchemical language, that is, alchemical tropes in poetry and, unfortunately, favour an approach that reduces alchemy to a static tradition of word-games. Jacques van Lennep has treated alchemical Surrealism rather better, in a number of brief pieces that deserve to be better known than they are. Van Lennep, an artist and alchemist himself, shows remarkable depth (in only a few pages, too) in his understanding of the role alchemy played in surrealist art. He sketches the alchemical sources of Surrealism in general and of Breton in particular, and in doing so makes an important threefold demarcation between, firstly, the fascination of Romantic and Symbolist literary and visual artists with alchemy; secondly, early twentieth century sources on alchemy that may be relevant for Surrealism (i.e. Givry); and finally, the written and living sources of the 1950s. In the first part of this chapter we have briefly touched upon these categories. Most important is that van Lennep points out that Breton’s interest in alchemy before the Second World War is hardly comparable with that of the post-War period: in the 1920s and 30s, he only followed in the footsteps of the Great Precursors (and not too fervently,
either); while his acquaintance with practising alchemists in the 1950s and 60s may well have inspired his increasing identification of Surrealism with alchemical processes.203

The flurry of Max Ernst studies is but one example of a wider trend in the art history of Surrealism in which focus was shifted from Breton (in France) and Bataille (in the US)204 to other individual Surrealists. In 1971 Xavière Gauthier’s pioneering study *Surréalisme et sexualité* put woman in Surrealism on the map of scholarly topics, and furthermore paved the way for a whole new category of study: the female surrealist artist.205 Important scholars in this respect are Whitney Chadwick, Georgiana Colville, Katherine Conley, Karoline Hille, Renée Riese Hubert and Penelope Rosemont.206 Generally speaking, their studies of surrealist women artist, and/or of the concept of woman versus actual women in Surrealism, touch upon esotericism-related issues only briefly, usually by way of a discussion of the surrealist construction of woman as a witch or a sorceress.207 Incidentally, such constructions invariably go back to Michelet’s *La Sorcière*, of course. Only rarely do such sources spend more than a few words, if any, on the role esotericism or occultism have played in the work and/or personal lives of particular artists. Thankfully there are two exceptions to the rule; for one, Robert Belton’s excellent but sadly rather neglected study *The Beribboned Bomb* (1994), which explores the relationships between surrealist women, constructions of femininity in Surrealism, and esotericism in the artists’ life on multiple levels.208 A recent unpublished PhD study highlights the three women artists who are most frequently associated with esotericism: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Ithell Colquhoun.209 Carrington seems the most esoterically involved, and her esoteric ideas and alchemical concepts in particular are examined by Susan Aberth in *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art* (2001), as well as in a recent article by Teresa Arcq.210 In the end all these studies of individuals other than Breton have shown that there were many personal esoteric trajectories, which did not necessarily coincide with Breton’s, or even with Surrealism. The esoteric paths of some were too personal to be shared (Ernst), of others too removed from Surrealism’s centre in time and space to have been really influential (Carrington and others in Mexico). But while they may not have had a decisive influence upon Breton or Bretonian Surrealism, they do highlight the fact that esotericism was a theme in the life and work of many surrealist artists. How they were given shape in group-expressions, under the guidance of Breton, is explored in the next chapters.
Plate IV.

[IMAGE COPYRIGHT PROTECTED]
In conclusion: the ‘basic concepts’

In the introduction to this chapter I have outlined three ‘basic concepts’: tradition, erudition and politics. Throughout the chapter they have remained more or less implicit; here I would like to return to them briefly. I will discuss the first two together in the following section, and the final one will be discussed separately in the closing section of this chapter.

Erudite traditions

Within the context of esoteric Surrealism, the notion of ‘tradition’ is something of a many-headed hybrid. I would distinguish four traditions: the surrealist tradition, the Romantic tradition, the hermetic tradition and the esoteric tradition. These traditions often overlap, intertwine, and/or are considered to be different aspects of the same thing; untangling them will help in obtaining an overview of how Breton shaped esoteric Surrealism, how others have perceived it, and what esoteric Surrealism actually consisted of.

As has been said before, Surrealism continuously positioned itself as the direct heir of a long tradition that consists mainly of individuals, rather than philosophies or movements. This tradition encompasses poets and novelists primarily, while philosophers and visual artists come in a good second; I will subsume all under the heading of ‘intellectuals’ for the moment. The Surrealists treated the past rather capriciously, and as their fluctuating tradition of Great Precursors confirms, they appropriated historical figures always to their own (surrealist) ends. The construction of this tradition began publicly with the publication in 1923 of ‘Erutarettel’ (discussed above, [plate II]), and throughout the long life of Bretonian Surrealism similar sorts of lists would be provided, ranging from a ‘Read/Don’t Read’ list published in 1931, a room with art works from artistic predecessors in the 1947 surrealist exhibition, to a literary chart of great novelists and legendary characters included in the catalogue of the 1960 exhibition ‘Surrealist Intrusion into the Enchanter’s Domain’. Many of the Precursors were mentioned in surrealist writings, while excerpts of their works were included in anthologies such as Breton’s Trajectoire du rêve. Taken together, the many intellectuals that are hailed as Great Precursors form the surrealist tradition. Irrespective of their own historical time, whether the Renaissance or Romanticism, for instance, or of their profession, whether poet, artist or philosopher, the one thread that binds all the particular individuals together is the very fact that they are positioned as Precursors of Surrealism. They are all considered to have been surrealist in one way or another. Clearly the surrealist tradition is an invented one, although not along the usual lines that define the ‘invented tradition’.

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For one thing, it is not so much static as dynamic: since Surrealism itself is the touchstone, the canon of Great Precursors changes as Surrealism changes, and thus names are dropped, added, relegated to the ‘Don’t Read’ list and reinstated as heroes later.\textsuperscript{215} As late as the 1960s new names were added to the canonical list of ‘Surrealists despite themselves’.\textsuperscript{216} Moreover, the surrealist tradition is not based upon particular (ritual) practices or the employment of material objects, but rather upon what is today termed ‘intellectual property’, and above all with the particular individuals who created those intellectual works, and the status of those intellectuals as geniuses. Sometimes the poems of a Rimbaud, or the paintings of a Hieronymus Bosch, or the philosophical writings of a Hegel—in other words, content—matters, but just as frequently it is the supposed status of the person involved as a rebellious poet, inventive artist or original thinker that is the main reason he (hardly ever a she) is considered a Surrealist avant-la-lettre. The surrealist tradition is comprised of trailblazing intellectuals, who wrote or painted masterpieces; most of whom were hailed as pioneers, but other intellectuals (besides the Surrealists themselves) as well. A significant amount of erudition can be said to be present in the surrealists tradition, as it combines original avant-garde thinkers unappreciated by many, learned intellectuals, unique individuals only known to a select few (such as the poet Lautréamont), and numerous literary works, essays and studious books written by and about them. It should be noted that for all the surrealist preference for heterodoxy and marginal figures, there were still limits; just as women were excluded, non-Westerners certainly were too. The overwhelming majority of Precursors are male, and French, with a substantial minority of intellectual Precursors of German descent. Only occasionally a person from another European country is included (and none, as far as I have been able to discern, from the US).

Even though the Surrealists could be fickle in the constant reinvention of their tradition, it revolves around an essential and more or less unchanging heart: the Romantic and Symbolist poets such as Hugo, de Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Lautréamont. They in turn are part of the tradition of Romanticism, which is habitually subsumed in the greater tradition of Great Precursors in Surrealism; after all, Surrealism often appears as a neo-Romanticism—or as Breton would have it, Surrealism is the ‘amazingly prehensile tail’ of Romanticism.\textsuperscript{217} Yet for scholarly purposes, the Romantic tradition should be distinguished from the surrealist tradition.\textsuperscript{218}

Among the Great Precursors we also find a small group of esotericists. Central figures are Nicolas Flamel and Agrippa, discussed above; both were already on the surrealists radar in the 1920s, appearing on ‘Erutarettil’ and in the \textit{Second Manifesto} of 1929.\textsuperscript{219} Hermes Trismegistus and Paracelsus also make
their appearance by 1929. In later years Lévi, Swedenborg, Boehme and Fabre d’Olivet are mentioned in the surrealist discourse, and although they are not so often celebrated as Precursors as the Romantic poets were, for instance, I think they should still be considered as examples of inspirational proto-surrealist figures. Taken together, these men form the heart of a tradition Breton, other Surrealists, scholars such as Viatte, and many contemporary scholars too, call the ‘hermetic tradition’. Sometimes it is also known as the ‘Great’ tradition, or ‘traditional thought’ (particularly in France); while the esotericists themselves are called ‘hermetists’, ‘Grand Initiates’ or ‘the Illuminated’. What is particularly important is that Surrealists, contemporary authors and scholars, and many later scholars have more or less the same tradition in mind, the tradition described by Carrouges and Balakian, but also by Viatte and Amadou, as well as by Kanters: a static construct that ranges from fourteenth-century Flamel and Renaissance Agrippa, via Swedenborg and Illuminism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to Lévi in the nineteenth century. As discussed earlier, the notion of a perennial and timeless tradition in which key figures hand down unchanging secret truths is itself an essential part of the history of esotericism, and many currents (not necessarily esoteric) reinvent this hermetic tradition—with the great Hermes as arch-father— anew. The Bretonian Surrealists also adhered to this idea of the hermetic tradition; after all, their understanding of it was rooted in Bois, Michelet and Grillot de Givry, and shaped by Viatte et al.

I would highlight two particularities of this shared hermetic tradition. First of all, it incorporates many Frenchmen. Secondly, it is a tradition of learned men and their books (rather than practice, let alone popular practice), about whom other learned men have written further books. For the Surrealists, the esoteric Precursors belonged to a tradition of book-based erudition, and this was no different for scholars such as Viatte. The two most important twentieth century additions to the canon of the hermetic tradition embody this: Fulcanelli and Canseliet, both respected, learned, published and French intellectuals.

As has been discussed above, some authors consider Surrealism to have been influenced by the constructed hermetic tradition, while others rather argue that the Surrealists appropriated it, partly or entirely. Whatever the nature of that relationship, all authors and scholars agree that the Romantic tradition functioned as the link between the two. The Romantic poets were heavily indebted to the esotericism of their time, as has briefly been touched upon above; in fact in the understanding of some authors the hermetic and Romantic traditions are so much intertwined that the Romantics are considered exponents of the hermetic tradition, as in the Literary Anthology of Occultism, for instance. Here I will not go into the discussion of how esoteric Romanticism was or how Romantic
esotericism was; what is important is that the Romantic and Symbolist poets the Surrealists so revered, and their literary masterpieces introduced the Surrealists to esotericism. Following in the Romantics’ footsteps they subsequently engaged the hermetic tradition on their own—or at least, that is the picture painted in many of the sources I have discussed above. Later in life Breton did explicitly mould the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism after the involvement of his cherished Romantic forebears with esotericism, that much is true; and it would seem that the surrealist tradition of Great Precursors, Romantic and esoteric, the Romantic tradition, and the hermetic tradition therefore found their final unification in Surrealism. The inclusion of Breton as the last entry in the Literary Anthology of Occultism confirms the apparently happy marriage of all these traditions and the position of esoteric Bretonian Surrealism as the ultimate unified outcome.

I find it questionable, however, whether esoteric Surrealism was really the inevitable result of the intertwining of these traditions. I would argue that the trajectory constructed in Literary Anthology, among other sources, of hermeticism > hermetic Romanticism > hermetic Surrealism, primarily shows that by the late 1950s a conflation between Romanticism, the Romantic Great Precursors of Surrealism, Surrealism itself, and the concept of the hermetic tradition had occurred in the minds of French Surrealists, scholars and occultists alike. Breton’s close association with scholars and occultists in the 1950s significantly muddied the waters even further, and the appearance was created that esotericism, Romanticism and Surrealism had been in bed together since Surrealism began. Yet that is certainly not the case, and I think it important to keep the various traditions separate, and to distinguish the different periods within Surrealism when these traditions became prevalent. Therefore I would distinguish between a hermetic tradition on the one hand, and western esotericism on the other: the former is a static construct shared among Surrealists, occultists and scholars in the 1940s to 60s (mainly in France, moreover), the latter no less a construct but one I consider to be much more inclusive, and also much more dynamic.

Let me exemplify. Late Bretonian Surrealism and roughly contemporary scholarship (including such authors as Carrouges, Balakian, Alexandrian and Waldberg) were rather closely connected, perhaps too much so. Not only did they adhere to the same definition of a hermetic tradition but they also shared the same blind spot: Anglo-American historical occultism. The only people belonging to historical occultism we find in the relevant sources are nineteenth century Frenchmen, such as Lévi, and Papus and Eteilla (the last two rarely mentioned in Surrealism). Historical occultism is a movement that encompassed much more than developments in France after the 1850s, but this is obscured entirely in Surrealism, contemporary French scholarship and works with a
decidedly French orientation, such as Balakian’s. Theosophy and Anthroposophy, to name two very important occult movements that were alive and well during Breton’s early lifetime, make no appearance at all in either Surrealism or the secondary sources of the 1950s to early 80s. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, both the Surrealists themselves and their preferred experts on esotericism such as Viatte were focused upon the nineteenth century (and earlier). Esoteric Romanticism was the golden standard against which every surrealist exploration of esotericism was measured. Historical occultism of the late nineteenth century took place only after Bois and Michelet had written their books, and was furthermore not included in Grillot de Givry’s Le Musée either; in other words, as far as the three sources upon which Surrealism’s initial historical knowledge of esotericism was largely built, in the 1920s and 30s, Theosophy and other occult movements simply did not exist. Secondly, they are also absent from the works of the Romantic poets for obvious chronological reasons. After 1940 and the blossoming of Breton’s more profound interest in esotericism, one might perhaps have expected him to show an interest in fin-de-siècle and twentieth century occultism; certainly some information on such movements was available, not least because of connections with the British surrealist group, where a few artists were investigating contemporary occultism. Breton also admired the painter Kandinsky, an artist who had expressed his alliance to Theosophy and Anthroposophy in several of his written works. But Breton remained focused upon the established French hermetic tradition alone, and his only concession to twentieth century developments was his inclusion of the mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli among the canon of ‘hermetists’.

This brings us to the third reason later occultism is absent. I find it probable that Breton, in line with the prevalent conservative French academic attitudes which were his departure point after all, considered those forms of occultism more or less ‘hodgepodge’ or otherwise irrelevant. It was not French, it lacked the established and erudite chic-ness of the revered hermetic tradition of Great Initiates, it was often practice-based, it included women very prominently, it was frequently concerned with progressive or liberal issues (but usually not those close to the heart of Surrealism), and/or focused upon wisdom-traditions from the East; all in all it may well have been perceived as lacking the conservative erudition that is the touchstone of the constructed hermetic tradition. The hermetic tradition, as employed by Surrealists and French scholars alike, excludes non-French later occultism. On the other hand, Western esotericism as I understand it does include it. In practice I will hardly refer to Theosophy or other late-nineteenth century occult movements, seeing how my focus lies upon esoteric Surrealism. Nevertheless it should be understood that the twentieth
century French hermetic tradition of the Surrealists covers only a limited number of the currents that come under the larger umbrella that is esotericism.

That the Surrealists and roughly contemporary scholars and authors share the same notion of a hermetic tradition also shows itself in further ways. Whereas the majority of historical occultism is absent, two other esoteric currents are conspicuously present, because of the scathing remarks they have received: Spiritualism and the esoteric side of dynamic psychiatry, the predecessor of modern psychoanalysis. Mesmerism, hypnotism and parapsychology have frequently been relegated to the margins of psychiatry and psychoanalysis by scholars, as if unfortunate by-products of a wild youth; yet in fact they were integral parts of dynamic psychiatry, as a number of excellent studies have shown. The rather tangled relations of psychodynamic research with Spiritualism, the one discipline that is derided across the board by Surrealists, scholars and intellectual occultists alike, have made for complex attitudes with regards to psychical research. There is a considerable divergence with respect to the latter discipline: whereas scholars after the Second World War (and also sometimes today) try to minimise its presence in Surrealism, the early Surrealists themselves were much impressed by it. As I will explore in chapters two and three, Bretonian Surrealism had a profound intellectual investment in dynamic psychiatry, and I will argue that French psychical research should be considered an influential example upon which Breton modelled certain early surrealist experiments. Even though the religious beliefs of Spiritualism were disavowed by Breton again and again, his obsession with mediums and their supposed visionary powers reached considerable heights around 1930, as we will see. The surrealist celebration of mediums has led some scholars and thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin no less, to deplore the Surrealists’ apparent need to have their futures foretold by ‘down-at-heel dowagers, retired majors and émigré profiteers’ in ‘humid backrooms of spiritualism’. As it happens, the Surrealists had their futures foretold for decidedly poetical reasons rather than religious or esoteric considerations, but this does not detract from the fact that early Surrealism was quite indebted to dynamic psychiatry and more specifically to its esoteric mesmerist prehistory. This aspect is missing from many studies of Surrealism, even while it is simultaneously emphasised how much Breton and his Surrealism were influenced by (straight laced) psychiatry. French academic scholars seem to prefer to distance psychoanalysis and psychiatry from mesmerism and related practices, while other scholars are possibly not familiar enough with the prehistory of dynamic psychiatry to make this connection.

The esoteric early history of dynamic psychiatry entered Surrealism partly by way of popular culture—which is another notable absentee from scholarly sources. The obsession of scholars and critics with the Romantic tradition, the
hermetic tradition and the book-based erudition of both as the touchstone for esoteric Surrealism has blinded many to the fact that Surrealism also absorbed certain esoteric undercurrents present in popular culture, by which it was deeply fascinated. Even though historical studies and literary masterpieces were the main esoteric fare of the Surrealists, they were not immune to the ‘occulture’ surrounding them. They thoroughly enjoyed gothic fiction, ghost stories, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance, as well as folkloristic fairy tales, and legends about the Grail-quest and King Arthur—all of which, as Victoria Nelson has shown, carry esoteric undertones. The film *Häxan* has been mentioned above, while other films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* further familiarised the Surrealists with mesmeric and hypnotic practices. One should realise that in the first two decades of the movement—that is, before Viatte and companions changed Breton’s plan for the occultation of Surrealism by revealing the Romantic poets’ debt to the esotericism of their time—popular culture served as an additional source of esoteric themes for Surrealism, besides books by Bois, Michelet and Grillot de Givry. Focused as many scholars have been upon the hermetic tradition, French and book-based as it is, they have overlooked certain parts of Western esotericism; parts that the Surrealists may not have known to be esoteric either, because of their dependence upon the scholars, but which nevertheless may well have left some significant traces in Surrealism, as I will argue in the next three chapters.

*(Religious) Politics*

The third ‘basic principle’ I have delineated is politics, and particularly relevant here are the politics of religion, or perhaps religious politics. The Carrouges affair for instance, with which we started this chapter, exemplifies the complex internal politics of Surrealism and the position of religion within it. Even when Breton personally considered Carrouges’ Catholicism surmountable because of their shared esoteric agenda, the other Surrealists did not agree; Catholicism is apparently a failing even esotericism cannot overcome. Another example I have discussed concerns the political differences between Breton and Guénon, which (among other things) obstructed a close alliance. Again esotericism was employed to cross the divide, here by the author Batache, and again it proved insufficient.

Political religious agendas did not only play a considerable part in certain studies, but also in the reception of those works, as well as of late esoteric Surrealism generally. In the 1950s many French intellectuals who were keenly interested in esotericism also adhered to a rather conservative outlook, which meant that they were not interested at all in such left-wing revolutionaries as the
For centuries Western esotericism (and the study of it) has been, and sometimes still is, a very controversial subject in intellectual milieus, as has been shown by Wouter Hanegraaff, and this is partly for reasons that have to do with politics. In the nineteenth century esotericism became greatly politicized, and esoteric societies, many of which adopted practices of secrecy, and esoteric individuals yoked their esotericism to politics of all sides and flavours, and to all manner of (plotted) revolutions. Generally speaking, the result has been that esotericism, historical occultism in particular but also the ‘occult sciences’ in general, have tended to be considered heterodox, countercultural, subversive, or revolutionary; at the very least they have been seen as politically undermining, dissident and dangerous. The association of occultism with elitism and with opposition to mainstream Christianity added to this perception. Conspiracy theories abounded on all sides, and political elites suspected esoteric groups of causing havoc and even revolution, while esotericists suspected ruling religious elites of conspiracies to impede progress. The perception of occultism as a kind of elite heterodoxy opposed to the religion of the established churches made various esoteric currents quite attractive to Romantic poets, artists and intellectuals. Esoteric motifs, worldviews or practices, or association with an esoteric group or individual, could function as signs of resistance towards the assumed hegemony of reason and mainstream culture. They could further be employed as a strategy of distinction, by associating with something heterodox and possibly dangerous; and lastly, as a source of inspiring material to support the Romantic artist’s belief in, and creative engagement with, human instinct, the irrational, the powers of the imagination, and visionary revelation. In this, as in many other matters, Surrealism followed the lead of (French and German) Romanticism:

From Baudelaire to Verlaine, Lautréamont and Rimbaud, to our own contemporaries, André Breton and his disciples, all these artists utilized the occult as a powerful weapon in their rebellion against the bourgeois surrealists (who were at the time leaning towards anarchism, even), nor in their surrealistic outlook on esotericism. At the same time left-oriented intellectuals in Europe (including France) and the US associated esotericism with fascism and regression, as discussed earlier, which fostered resistance towards recognition of the fact that esotericism was at a certain (late) point very relevant to Bretonian Surrealism. Moreover, until The Spiritual in Art exhibition put the religious and spiritual interests of modern art on the map in 1986, many art historians and critics hardly discussed anything religious, including esoteric, in relation to avant-garde movements such as Surrealism.
establishment and its ideology.

It would seem that esotericism can be a weapon to wield against the rationalist ideology of the establishment and its emphasis on accepted knowledge. Often, though not always, the bourgeois establishment is further identified with (Catholic) religion, one of Surrealism’s primary adversaries. Hence, if one considers esotericism to be ‘historically inseparable from each subversive group determined to turn on religion its own weapons’, as some scholars and authors have done, esotericism seems the weapon of choice for Surrealism. In general many authors of secondary sources do in fact consider esotericism to have functioned in Surrealism in this manner: as a weapon against established religion and a source of the irrational for the rebelliously inclined Surrealists. Underlying this opinion is the notion that esotericism generally, and occultism specifically, functioned as a sort of repository—a ‘waste-basket category’, as Hanegraaff has called it—of all that had become marginal over time with the progress of reason: pre-modern, primitive, irrational, folkloristic and otherwise irrelevant religions, worldviews, systems of knowledge and mythologies. Romantic artists and poets relied on this ‘repository’ for subject matter and as a worldview.

While some may consider esotericism as a retirement-home for ‘vanquished religions and philosophies’, and others as the enemy of religion, others again find it to be a living religion itself. Carrouges, for one, did not consider esotericism the antagonist of religion; on the contrary, he used (Christian) esotericism as the cover under which to unite Surrealism with Christianity, ultimately Catholicism, and throughout Basic Concepts he implies that esotericism is a religion itself. Robert Kanters, for his part, argues something similar in his essay in Occulte-Occultation, yet he does so with an entirely different objective: in the end he bases his argument that there can be no full identification of Surrealism with esotericism on the reasoning that Surrealism is essentially anti-religious and therefore also anti-esoteric.

As will be explored throughout the other chapters of this dissertation, esotericism was not necessarily employed as either a religion or an anti-religion by Breton and the Surrealists. It may have had a political connection in Breton’s mind in the 1920s and 30s, based upon the traditional association of the Romantics with it, partly for political reasons. It is questionable how much this went beyond the rather standard positioning of an avant-garde movement against the (perceived) ideologies of the bourgeois establishment by flirting with esotericism. By the end of the 1930s esotericism’s political dimension might have risen to more prominence, although, as we shall see, it is in the first instance the function of esotericism as a repository of all that is marginal, irrational, archaic, imaginary and
heterodox that made it relevant and interesting to the Surrealists. Esotericism became really politicised for Breton from the moment he read Viatte in 1942, that watershed-moment of real understanding of esotericism’s place in Romanticism. Then, Breton located ‘an esoteric view of the world’ at ‘the junctions where the ideas of poets and those of visionary social thinkers meet’. Immediately the utopian socialist Fourier became a relevant figure for Breton, as an esoterically inclined visionary social thinker, and he accordingly devoted a book to him.

Yet this Ode to Fourier remained something of an isolated case. While esotericism was positioned as a political tool, in line with the attitude of the late 1930s this tool was integrated into Breton's overarching mythological project to re-enchant the world after the Second World War; something we will explore at greater length in chapter five. First, however, I will turn to Surrealism’s own experiments with Spiritualism and psychical research.