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

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Citation for published version (APA):
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The ‘Golden Age’ of the omnipotent mind, or Surrealism 2.0

Introduction: The unfortunate onset of the 1930s

By the end of the 1920s, life was turning sour for Breton. Financially, he was floundering. Amorously, he found himself in dire straits: his marriage with Simone Kahn was over, a love affair with Lise Meyer had ended badly, his involvement with Nadja had been tragic and the affair with Suzanne Muzard—introduced as ‘X’ at the end of Nadja—was not going well. Sociably things were looking bleak as well, as he was at odds with many of his (by now former) friends. The Second Manifesto (1929) is pungent, with an angry undertone, and many Surrealists from the early days—such as Naville, Soupault, Desnos—were publicly excommunicated in it. Some of the banished Surrealists gathered around Georges Bataille, and struck back at Breton with the pamphlet ‘Un Cadavre’. The group Grand Jeu broke away for good.

During the early years of the 1930s, things did not look up for Breton, either amorously or financially. Moreover, political trouble was also brewing. Despite the fact that Breton had given the second surrealist periodical the rather obvious name Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution, the French Communist Party (P.F.C.) had made it clear that they were not interested in any surrealist revolution—only communist party-line action was condoned, and the Party would not support the artistic freedom that Breton deemed essential. A decade earlier, Dada and Surrealism had been at the political forefront. Now, the surrealist revolution was being relegated to the sidelines of the political left rather than the vanguard, just at a time when Fascism was on the rise on the right and politics was becoming more urgent. Indeed, Aragon, one of Breton’s oldest friends, left the movement and Breton besides to pursue his communist career. The addition of new blood to the surrealist group—notably the two Spaniards Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali—did nothing to lessen the tensions and internal political strife.

Breton was also not satisfied with Surrealism itself, a discontent that was first expressed in the Second Manifesto and continued in the early years of the 1930s. Automatism and the dream, central pursuits of Surrealism, were
by no means as risqué as they had been at the time of *The Magnetic Fields* and the time of slumbers. The question Breton explored at length in ‘The Automatic Message’ (1933) is whether automatism could still be considered successful, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. After all, ‘the history of automatic writing’, at least, was ‘one of continual misfortune’ in Breton’s opinion, even though that of automatic drawing, painting and sculpting, by the hand of visionary mediums in particular, could be considered a resounding success. Still, was that the direction surrealist artists should take?

Breton’s dissatisfaction with Surrealism itself was also due to the increasing popularity and public profile of Surrealism. Surrealism was becoming gradually more known outside of its own direct circles, and less disputed too—a development rather contrary to its supposed radical avant-garde nature. Slowly, but no less surely, the *embourgeoisement* of Surrealism was under way. This development was already in the air before Surrealism’s second decade even began, and in his *Second Manifesto* of 1929 Breton demanded that Surrealism be occulted: ‘I ask for the profound… occultation of Surrealism’, which followed hard on the heels of the warning that ‘the approval of the public must be avoided like the plague’. While his demand obviously plays on the association with occultism, it should foremost be understood as an expression of the need for increased inaccessibility. This stands in stark contrast to the open and inclusive nature of early Surrealism in its ‘intuitive period’ (the first half of the 1920s), when numerous individuals who were not necessarily (proto-) Surrealists were invited to participate in the sleeping sessions, and when the Bureau of Surrealist Research was opened for all and sundry, to undertake an exploration of their unconscious together.

So all in all, in the first few years of the 1930s the political cause was not doing too well and a surrealist revolution was not in evidence. The movement needed to attain more ‘occultation’, more exclusivity, while at the same time its members were ready for new inspiration after the angry schisms. Breton himself could do with a new love in his life, while the methodological approaches of dream and automatism could use an overhaul. Obviously, even if the essential aims of Surrealism remained quite unchanged, a change in the means of accomplishing those aims was needed: a new course, a fresh method, a novel approach to the surrealist revolution. To put it in contemporary parlance: Surrealism 2.0 was due.

Accordingly, a number of novel approaches, new people, fresh ideas and significant course adjustments were introduced in the 1930s. I will not go into the political changes here, apart from mentioning that the already tense political alliance with the French Communist Party came to an end in 1935 and that as a political force Bretonian Surrealism, now oriented towards Trotskyism, became increasingly marginalised despite all efforts to the contrary. Nor will I discuss the personal additions and changes, or the complex dynamics with the Bataille-group, although
some mention of these things will be made here and there in this chapter. What I will explore is how Breton created an all-encompassing surrealist universe, something simultaneously marvellous, enchanted, secular and scientifically oriented, in a unity of paradoxes that only Surrealism would be able to pull off.

To start with, I shall discuss his demand for the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism. It is embedded in the Second Manifesto in a wide-ranging discussion that includes many esoteric references, and I will argue that these particular references show that Breton’s familiarity with esoteric topics was quite detailed in one instance, but rather superficial or non-existent in other instances. It will become clear that, at least at that moment in time, the call for an ‘occultation’ in the occult sense may have come from the heart but was hardly founded upon knowledge of esotericism or an overarching plan for how to achieve such an ‘occultation’.

Nevertheless, in the 1930s Breton did lay the groundwork for a more profound ‘occultation’ in later decades. This was done by creating what I will call a corresponding surrealist universe, a development discussed in the second part of this chapter. In various publications as well as on other occasions it was emphasised that the Surrealists were apparently making marvellous predictions and that in the life of the Surrealist incidents occurred that were more than coincidental and were perhaps providential. For this Breton created a new concept, namely ‘objective chance’. Prophecy, uncanny motifs and beings, and ‘preordained’ encounters made their appearance in surrealist literary and visual art, and slowly but surely the surrealist universe was turned into an almost magical place. Of course Surrealism retained both its fierce secular stance and its reliance upon the psyche as the key to everything; in the marvellous surrealist universe there are no miracles and supernatural interventions, there are only manifestations of the mind. No force or being is omnipotent, but the mind is. In Surrealism’s first decade the concern had primarily been the relationship between conscious and unconscious thought, as investigated from one’s study room. By the time of Nadja the Surrealists were taking to the streets to find evidence of the surreal, and in the second decade this solidified into a full-fledged investigation of the relationship between thought and the phenomenal world. One should not think this a neutral relation; rather, the insistence upon the omnipotence of the mind in the world shows that the Surrealist engages in a rapport with it. The Surrealist’s thought dominates and manifests itself, and all marvellous incidents, the correspondences appearing to be inherent in the surrealist universe, are driven by the surreal mind. As we are dealing with a movement itself motivated by an obsession with love (in all its forms), it is in the end desire that prompts the surrealist mind’s perception of correspondences: the surreal rapport with the world is erotic.

A surrealist all-encompassing worldview, both secular and enchanted, was created, to bring about surreality; at the same time, because of its seemingly
irrational and magical particularity, also to safeguard Surrealism from the common
public.\textsuperscript{13} Breton associated it with the worldview of ‘primitives’, or the pre-rational
experience of the world, also known as magical; but also with the western cultural
past, particularly as shaped and retained in myths, legends and fairy tales. He had
not forgotten the surrealist revolution, and high on his agenda was the belief that
the world was in need of a new collective myth. In the 1940s the aim of creating
a new myth for the world would be physically realised in an art exhibition, but it
was expressed already during the 1930s. As will be demonstrated, as the decade
progressed Surrealism became a world filled with marvellous incidents, fairy-like
women and uncanny things, with the Surrealists furthermore firmly committed to
the reality of dreams, objective incidents and the external manifestation of internal
desire. This meant that the alignment of Surrealism with myths and mythology and
the integration of mythological themes, motifs and characters within the discourse
of Surrealism occurred with hardly a hitch. The creation of new (surrealist) myths,
or \textit{mythopoeia}, was facilitated just as easily by the already existent marvellous
surrealist universe.

In the 1940s and 50s Breton would take his exploration of myth and
the magical worldview further and expand into the realm of esotericism. The
corresponding surrealist universe that was established in the 1930s, filled with
the marvellous and mythical, would form the essential basis and the grounds for
a rapprochement between Surrealism and esotericism. The essential groundwork
for an occultation of Surrealism in the occult sense was laid. Finally, canonically the
decade of the 1930s is known as Surrealism’s ‘Golden Age’, so one can rest assured
that all the negative developments of 1928-1931 turned out for the best.
I. ‘The profound, veritable occultation of Surrealism’

The ‘occultation’: to conceal, to distinguish, to occult

The Second Manifesto (1929) can be considered a first expression of the painful period of misery that characterised the turn of the decade for Breton. In it he questions where Surrealism is and where it should it go, while bitterly fulminating against some of his former partners who had left him for Bataille. Near the end of the Manifesto he arrives at the central point, his demand for the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism:

The approval of the public is to be avoided like the plague. It is absolutely essential to keep the public from entering if one wishes to avoid confusion. I must add that the public must be kept panting in expectation at the gate by a system of challenges and provocations.

I ASK FOR THE PROFOUND, THE VERITABLE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM.

I proclaim, in this matter, the right of absolute severity. No concessions to the world, and no grace.14

As other scholars have also argued,15 there are two sides to this demand. To start with, it is obvious that Breton is concerned about Surrealism’s apparent openness and its relation to the public. Essentially, the first three sentences boil down to this: the public must be kept out. Severely too: ‘no concessions’ and ‘no grace’. Within this context Breton demands that Surrealism be occulted. ‘Occultation’ is here used in its customary French meaning: a darkening or occluding, an ‘eclipsing’ of Surrealism that would make it less or inaccessible.16 Some Anglophone scholars have interpreted the term ‘occultation’ as relating to occultism only, but in fact ‘to conceal’ is the more prevalent meaning in French;17 this meaning also lies at the root of the very word ‘occultism’.18

The overt meaning of the demand to conceal does not detract from the association with occultism. This association is supported by the pages immediately preceding and following upon the demand wherein esotericism seems to be a predominant theme, which I will discuss at greater length below. The context strongly supports the suggestion that Breton’s demand is also a call for Surrealism to interact with occultism in one way or another. The double aspect of (to) occult—to conceal and to associate with occultism—is already present in the very term ‘occultation’, which Breton very probably derived from the Three Books Concerning Occult Philosophy by the Renaissance writer, theologian and eminent esotericist Heinrich Agrippa, the third book specifically.19 Agrippa used ‘occultation’ in the sense of concealing or hiding, an interpretation retained by Breton.20 What one
is dealing with here is first and foremost a typically surrealist wordplay of double entendres, a game requiring a certain amount of erudite knowledge and certainly proficiency in French to fathom. Meaning (to conceal) and context (occultism) form a web that encompasses the Renaissance author, his occultly titled books and chapter, Breton’s unaccredited citation, the origin of ‘occult’, ‘occultation’ and ‘occultism’ and the immediate context of his demand.

Now to the association with occultism and esotericism. Scholars have considered the demand for ‘occultation’ in various lights; typically the interpretations range from an expression of a ‘confrontation with the esoteric message’; or a sign that Breton wants to have ‘an “in” [sic] with the occult’ and an indication of ‘how necessary it is that surrealism comes to a serious recognition of the occult sciences’; to a move on Breton’s part to claim Surrealism as ‘heir to the secrets of [the] hermetic doctrine’. As will be shown in my discussion of the relevant passages of the Second Manifesto, all of these interpretations can generally be considered valid. One thing usually remains implicit in scholarly analyses, however, something I think is important: Breton’s double agenda in phrasing his demand so that associations with occultism seem a matter of course. His main aim is to employ that association as a strategy of distinction, regardless of esoteric content; a more in-depth engagement with occultism (esotericism) is only secondary to that. In the first instance the demand and its textual context are there to suggest that he has ‘an “in” with the occult’.

Breton plays upon the heterodox appeal of esotericism, practising the game of occult namedropping proficiently; he mentions for instance Agrippa, the alchemist Nicolas Flamel and the ‘manuscript of Abraham the Jew’, as well as ‘the alchemists’, ‘the cabalists’ and ‘the Magi’. One would almost expect Paracelsus to be mentioned as well, among this group of eminent names and mysterious but rather meaningless denominations. Yet in the few pages where esoteric matters are discussed, the names of Rimbaud and Lautréamont are just as prominent, if not more so; Breton is positioning his movement as an ‘heir’ to ‘hermeticism’ to show that he and Surrealism are heirs to the Great Predecessors of Romanticism and Symbolism. For example, while he writes of the alchemy of the alchemist Flamel, he interprets it as only another form of Rimbaudian Alchemy of the Word. Moreover, he had been pointed towards Agrippa and his Three Books Concerning Occult Philosophy by his hero Guillaume Apollinaire, and may well have browsed through them primarily to tread in Apollinaire’s footsteps. His unattributed and rather complicated references and citations testify to his desire to clothe his demand for ‘occultation’ in erudite and obscure terms.

Besides the posturing as a bona-fide avant-garde poet meddling in heterodox business, I do think that the demand also expresses, albeit more implicitly, a desire to ‘confront the esoteric message’; this is the secondary agenda. This confrontation
occurs on the poetic terms of Surrealism, however, instead of on the basis of a genuine interest in esotericism proper. Breton would embark on a rather more far-reaching exploration of esoteric thought and content only after 1940. In 1929, the question was primarily how to bend certain elements of esotericism to Surrealism’s end, be it creating boundaries to keep the public out, a strategy of distinction, or an exploration of methods or concepts useful for Surrealism. Below, I will offer a close reading of the nine pages that form the immediate context of the demand for ‘occultation’, which are filled with esoteric references. In this way, I hope to show how we should really understand Breton’s call for ‘occultation’.

Traces of esotericism: Agrippa, Flamel and Abraham the Jew

The passage leading up to the demand for ‘occultation’ starts with a brief discussion of Rimbaudian Alchemy of the Word, which ‘demands to be taken literally’—that is, words should be transformed. Then Flamel is considered, and his discovery of a manuscript written by a certain Abraham the Jew. Flamel, his work and a group of illustrations supposedly based upon originals by Abraham the Jew had been brought to the attention of Breton and other Surrealists by Grillot de Givry, who discussed them in his book Musée des Sorciers, published and reviewed just before the Second Manifesto came out, and certainly on Breton’s reading list. It is probable that Breton used Grillot de Givry as a starting point, then developing his ideas further using a nineteenth-century French historical study of alchemy and Flamel by Albert Poisson, who was himself also an alchemist. Independently the Bataille group also explored Flamel, the manuscript of Abraham the Jew and the alchemical illustrations, something Breton comments upon in a footnote in the Second Manifesto as a remarkable coincidence.

Breton continues,

I would appreciate your noting the remarkable analogy, insofar as their goals are concerned, between the Surrealist efforts and those of the alchemists: the philosopher’s stone is nothing more or less than that which was to enable man’s imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things, which brings us once again, after centuries of the mind’s domestication and insane resignation, to the attempt to liberate once and for all the imagination by the “long, immense, reasoned derangement of the senses”, and all the rest.

Here Breton compares the efforts of ‘the alchemists’ in creating the stone with the shaping of the mind into a tool by means of the celebrated recipe of Rimbaud, the derangement of the senses. His equation of the stone with the imagination is a very Romantic thing to do, and is a clear sign that he associated
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alchemy with a mental process of refinement.34 As José Pierre has pointed out, one should also read here (between the lines) a strategy of distinction where Breton associates his branch of Surrealism with the supposedly noble and clean mental pursuits of the alchemists, to distinguish himself from Bataille’s group and Bataille’s obsession with physical matter, preferably dirty, horrible and scatological.35 Only a few pages on Breton mentions the ‘impeccable state of cleanliness’ of ‘the Magi’ and relates it to ‘certain practices of mental alchemy’, which he juxtaposes with Bataille and ‘his absurd campaign’.36 This ‘mental alchemy’ should not be confused with spiritual alchemy, by the way; it is not so much a process of sublimation to become a better person, let alone a process of spiritual purification to become a better Christian, but the typical (Bretonian) surrealist process of breaking down the doors of rationalism through exercises in irrationalism and accessing the authentic mind for poetic ends.37

Breton’s tendency to treat everything out of the ordinary as poetry, as we have also seen in his treatment of the automatisms of patients in mental asylums or mediums, for instance, also comes into play in his discussion of esoteric matters. It emerges further in the various brief (and unaccredited) citations from Agrippa’s Books of Occult Philosophy, the third and (spurious) fourth book specifically, which follow immediately upon the demand for ‘occultation’.38 A phrase such as ‘baleful bread’ is served up without any context and seems to have been chosen for its strange phrasing, while the comment that ‘the book of evil’ should be written on white, even virgin, parchment seems to me a statement that appealed primarily to surrealist anti-bourgeois black humour.39 Just as when Agrippa’s name was first included in Erutarettil of 1923 [plate II], the reader is not given any information about the man, his works or his worldview in the Second Manifesto either—nor anywhere else, for that matter.40

The text goes on to cite descriptions of two alchemical illustrations, and develops Breton’s earlier comments about Flamel and Abraham the Jew. The illustrations are part of a group described by Flamel, allegedly deriving originally from the mysterious manuscript of the equally mysterious Abraham. The two illustrations Breton discusses were reproduced together with a third in Documents [fig 50].41 Breton includes the more evocative details about Sun and Moon bathing in a bath of blood and old men with clocks attached to their heads, but leaves out the mystical and religious part of the original as well as the actual alchemical interpretations, suppressing the phrases that would identify the old man as Death, for instance, and failing to mention that the blood in the bath was connected in the original text and images to the (Biblical) Massacre of the Innocents.42 Thus bypassing any alchemical, let alone religious, content, he moves on:

And let it be clearly understood that we are not talking about a simple
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regrouping of words or a capricious redistribution of visual images, but of the re-creation of a state which can only be fairly compared to that of madness...

Again, we come back to deranging the mind to make it into the perfect poet’s tool, a ‘state comparable to madness’. Also, the alchemical illustrations and captions are described as ‘words and visual images’, which is what they were for Breton. After thus having associated the illustrations, originally alchemical but totally stripped of that context, as images comparable or perhaps even germane to a particular state of madness, he continues with some comments on Rimbaud’s Alchemy of the Word and the importance of the word as \textit{Word}. He notes that the Word to ‘the cabalists’ is the ‘initial cause of all causes’, although again he bypasses the (rather profound) religious meaning of the Word as cause of all causes and discusses it only in a Rimbaudian and poetical sense. He moves on to an anecdote about Flamel, who was apparently seen at different places in different centuries; Flamel’s implied longevity leads Breton to the following comment:

Great things can come of the modern shunting of certain wills in the future: asserting themselves in the wake of ours, they will make themselves more implacable than ours. In any case, we shall in my opinion have done enough by having helped demonstrate the scandalous inanity of what, even when we arrived on the scene, \textit{was being thought}, and by having maintained—if only maintained—that it was necessary for what had been thought to give way at last to the \textit{thinkable}.

And so by the end of this passage, we have come to the essence: the interaction between what is \textit{thought} and what is \textit{thinkable}. This had been a preoccupation for Breton for a considerable time, it was one in 1929, and would continue to be so for a long time to come. In the previous chapter I have discussed Breton’s praise for the parlour clairvoyants for making him confuse what is and what might be, thus making both possibilities true on the basis of the premise that once something is thought, it is real. Clearly he refers to a similar principle here, and all his discussion of esoteric people and sources is only a prelude to this. Flamel’s longevity is not interpreted as a sign of his successful alchemical achievements, but rather provided as an interesting anecdote on the confusion of the possible and probable. Now even if his poetical reading of Agrippa, his equating of the alchemical pursuit with a honing of the mind by derangement, and his stripping of the alchemical images of any esoteric content, does not already point out that what is at stake here is poetry, Surrealism and priming the mind for psychic automatism (and not esotericism), this last discourse on thought and the thinkable does. What
it finally comes down to, is that the context of the demand for ‘occultation’ and the demand itself show a passing knowledge of a limited amount of esoteric sources, from which he picks and chooses a number of evocative details and citations that only serve poetical and surrealists ends, and not in any way esoteric or occult ends.47

Is Breton’s demand for ‘occultation’ then only a feigned allegiance to heterodox occultism and an improper use of source material for poetic ends? Not quite. As said above, I do think that underlying his motives there was also a genuine desire to engage with esotericism. Yet it’s fair to say that at this point in time, 1929, Breton’s understanding of esotericism was haphazard and not in any way comprehensive. It is apparent that he had studied the story of Flamel and the mysterious manuscript of Abraham the Jew thoroughly; to provide a final example, the enigmatic term ‘Maranatha’ occurs several times in the manuscript, and Breton uses it (once) as a mysterious malediction.48 I have been unable to discover whether Breton already had Poisson’s Histoire de l’alchimie: Nicolas Flamel in his possession before the end of the 1920s, or if he picked it up after his interest was piqued by Grillot de Givry’s Le Musée des Sorciers early in 1929.49 In any case, while he is familiar with the Flamel case, that seems to be more or less the extent of his background and interests in alchemical history and lore, let alone esotericism generally. There is one additional exception, a brief obsession with astrology which I shall discuss below. Taken together, it follows that an ‘occultation’ of Surrealism would never be an occultation in the sense of really joining forces with occultism or esotericism; at least at this point in time.

Bringing about the ‘occultation’

Breton seems cognisant of the fact that an ‘occultation’ in the occult sense was rather problematic, and he pondered how Surrealism should really engage esotericism in a rather long and rambling footnote that directly accompanies the demand for ‘occultation’:

But I expect people to ask me how one can bring about this occultation. … I think we would not be wasting our time by probing seriously into those sciences which for various reasons are today completely discredited. I am speaking of astrology, among the oldest of sciences, metaphysics (especially as it concerns the study of cryptesthesia) among the modern. … [W]e must also reckon with the gift of dissociation and clairvoyance …. I ask, once again, that we submit ourselves to the mediums who do exist, albeit no doubt in very small numbers, and that we subordinate our interest – which ought not to be overestimated – in what we are doing to the interest which the first of their messages offers.... More than ever – since what we are discussing here are the possibilities
of occultation of Surrealism – I turn toward those who are not afraid to conceive of love as the site of ideal occultation of all thought.50

I am not surprised that the demand for ‘occultation’ and the surrounding text filled with references to Flamel, alchemy and ‘Magi’, in combination with this particular footnote, have led many to an interpretation of Surrealism as allied to occultism or esotericism. Yet just as a second glance at the surrounding text has revealed that the ‘occultation’ is rather one-sided, the same is true for this footnote. Here Breton links ‘occultation’ in the first instance to ‘discredited’ sciences: again, something heterodox and rejected by bourgeois rationalism and thus worthy of surrealist interests, even more so because they are sciences—remember that among the many things that Surrealism was supposed to be, it was conceived of as a research project into the irrational. The occult science specifically mentioned is astrology, but not, curiously enough, alchemy or magic. Breton took a brief interest in his horoscope, but astrology had a rather minor career in Surrealism. Alchemy, on the other hand, was already relevant for Surrealism in the Second Manifesto, albeit in a rather one-sided and distorted form. As time went on, it would only become more important, and the same is true for magic, which would appear on the surrealist scene in the 1940s. Yet these ‘discredited sciences’ are not mentioned, showing once more how the occult context of the ‘occultation’ was fuelled more by Breton’s then current and perhaps spur-of-the-moment interests than a well thought-out and long prepared plan.

Still, in 1929 astrology appeared on the surrealist radar. Again in a footnote, Breton notes an ‘“Uranian” influence’ upon Surrealism, which might in part be another instance of surrealist black humour because, as he himself laments, no critical studies of the astrological influence of Uranus were as yet available.51 This means moreover, he continues, that the astrological chart of Baudelaire, born under the conjunction of Uranus and Neptune, ‘thereby remains as it were uninterpretable [sic]’. This may be a positive thing. Another Uranian conjunction, this time with Saturn, presided over the birth of Aragon and Éluard (his oldest friends), as well as, Breton writes, his own. This conjunction signifies, according to Influence Astrale by Paul Choisnard,

A deep attachment to the sciences, an inquisitive interest in the mysterious, and profound need to learn. Who knows [Breton continues citing Choisnard] whether [this] conjunction… may not give birth to a new school in the realm of science? This relative position of the planets, properly spaced in a horoscope, could correspond to the make-up of a man endowed with the qualities of reflection, sagacity, and independence, a man capable of becoming a first-class investigator.52
It is clear why Breton would have felt drawn to this description, as one assumes he related it to his movement (‘the school’) and its pseudo-scientific aspirations (‘in the realm of science’), and himself as a person too (the ‘sage man’). That Uranus also presided over the birth of such an esteemed predecessor as Baudelaire certainly added to his conviction that Surrealism could not be denied an ‘Uranian influence’. Around 1930 Breton decisively connected the Uranus-Saturn conjunction to his Surrealism: the logo of *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, reproduced on each cover, consist of a shield with the signs of the two planets intertwined [fig 51]. Still his apparent faith in this connection certainly did not alter his critical scientific attitude; the long citation of Choisnard quoted above is interrupted by the following: ‘Of course, Choisnard’s vocabulary is questionable’.53 For all his professed faith in chance and coincidence, which will be discussed at length below, Breton was not above a little tinkering with them. He changed his birth date by one day, from 19 to 18 February (1896), to move his horoscope from Pisces to Aquarius. There are apparently a number of personal reasons for this and most of them remain shrouded in mystery, unfortunately,54 but one thing that is clear is that he felt that a birthday on the 18th established even closer links between himself and beloved Precursors such as Rimbaud, de Nerval and (later) Fourier.55 Rimbaud’s horoscope was reproduced in *Minotaure* 3-4 (1933), while an unpublished horoscope of Baudelaire apparently circulated among the group.56 Breton’s new birth date numerologically yielded the number 17, a totemic number for him, particularly after the 1940s as he considered his initials (AB) to equal 17. It is not clear if that was already a concern for him in the 1930s.57 Let’s return to the footnote that accompanied the demand for ‘occultation’, cited above. After ‘the oldest of sciences’, Breton goes on to refer to mediums and clairvoyance, but true to form does so in direct psychodynamic context. He equates clairvoyance with the psychiatric concept of dissociation: one must ‘reckon with the gift of dissociation and clairvoyance’; and further introduces the term cryptesthesia, a term invented by dynamic psychiatrist Richet.58 Breton switches between the outsider perspective of the educated man, using scientific terms also including ‘metaphysics’, and the inside perspective of the surrealist poet who puts so much stock on the automatisms of the mediums. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the Surrealists admired mediums and clairvoyants for their literary expressions of what they—the Surrealists—considered to be their unconscious, and for the exciting literary and visual forms they gave to their visions; which is why Breton calls clairvoyance just such a ‘gift’ as dissociation.

The main esoteric content of the footnote seemingly explaining the call for ‘occultation’ consists of a combination of astrology and comments on Uranus and psychodynamic references to mediums, which means it is hardly an introduction to either a practice of occultation in the esoteric sense, or even to anything esoteric at
all. Barring the possibility that it is all so occult that I fail to read it in the text, I think it makes clear that while Breton was probably sincere in his desire to occult Surrealism also in an esoteric sense of the word, the moment for that to happen had just not arrived. Strategies of distinction were his more pressing concern; he does want to show that he may have ‘an “in” with the occult’; and even though he would not be aware of the extent to which the Romantic and Symbolist poets were indebted to the esotericism of their time until 1943, he was familiar enough with it to emulate it, more or less, with his references to alchemy, Flamel, the ‘Books of Magic’, etc., interspersed among references to Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Accordingly, while I would perhaps not go so far as Chadwick, who understands the demand for ‘occultation’ as a move on Breton’s part to claim Surrealism as ‘heir to the secrets of [the] hermetic doctrine’, I do think that he was claiming inheritance of a Romantic doctrine, including some superficially occult overtones.

Other scholars have considered the demand a ‘confrontation with the esoteric message’, as mentioned in the beginning of this part of the chapter. Yet a genuine confrontation cannot really be detected in the Second Manifesto, and would happen only a decade or more later; however, I do agree with Michel Carrouges (for once) that the demand should be seen as an indication that a ‘serious recognition’ of esotericism and ‘of the occult sciences’ was necessary.

Yet like Breton I have saved the best, or in this case most important, for last. At the end of the ‘occultation’-footnote love is in fact proclaimed the ‘site of ideal occultation of all thought’. As I have pointed out before, poetry, love and revolution are the essential concerns of Surrealism. This is also the case with the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism: revolution is its main motive (keeping remote from the public, associating with heterodoxy), poetry is its main process (alchemy of the word, instead of alchemy), and love is ‘the site of ideal occultation’. The most potent instrument of the surrealist was the deranged mind, and the most potent power was love.

In conclusion I have analysed above how the demand for ‘occultation’ was not so occult at all. In contrast to scholars who find in the demand and the few passages surrounding it definite evidence that Surrealism was occult or intended to be, I would say it did express an intention but is not indicative of profound knowledge of many aspects of esotericism (at this point). However, the demand is a very important first step towards an ‘occultation’ (in the esoteric sense) that would be achieved years later.

Breton issued his call at the dawn of the 1930s, and it resonated throughout that decade. By the end of it, a number of Surrealists were in fact deeply engrossed in esoteric study, and perhaps prompted by that as well, Breton would seriously pursue his own need for ‘occultation’ in the 1940s. During the 1930s, Bretonian
Surrealism took an important step in the process towards occultation: it established a corresponding universe, albeit one not based on divine or spiritual premises, but on thought. Steven Harris has determined the change between the 1920s and 1930s as a ‘fundamental shift’ from

a confidence in the self-sufficiency and superiority of an autonomous, unconscious though process (such as is expressed in automatic writing and other surrealist techniques), to an acknowledgement of the interdependence of thought and the phenomenal world.64

Breton anticipated this in the Second Manifesto by pointing out how the relation between thought and the thinkable is essential; as I will discuss below, during the ensuing decade he and the other Surrealists established the omnipotence of thought and its effects in the world, and took the first steps toward surrealist myth.
II. Undermining the tyranny of the real

Prophecies, premonitions, predictions

In 1931 Victor Brauner, in possession of both his eyes, painted Self-portrait with plucked eye [plate III]. It was prominently displayed at a one-man exhibition at Galerie Pierre in 1934. By that time Brauner had met the Surrealists and been made welcome in the group; Breton opened the exhibition and commented favourably on Brauner’s works. In 1938 Brauner was caught in the middle of a fight between two of his friends. One of them threw a broken glass, and Brauner lost his eye—the same one he had painted himself without years earlier. The marvellous though tragic nature of the 1931 painting, which had suddenly become a premonitory piece, was not lost on the surrealist group nor on Brauner himself. As I have shown in the previous chapter, having vision/being blind was already a very important theme in Surrealism. Brauner in particular had been painting eyes and including vision-related symbolism in his art for over a decade, something that after the incident in 1938 became even more significant. Surrealist and medical doctor Pierre Mabille immortalised Brauner, his lost eye, the incident, and above all the marvellous revelation of the prophetic content of Self-portrait with plucked eye (and all those other eyes Brauner had painted blind or seeing), in a psychoanalytically oriented article in the journal Minotaure 12-13 (1938), entitled, appropriately enough, ‘L’Oeil du peintre’. In the essay Mabille argues that all events in Brauner’s life, even if the artist himself had been unaware of it, had led to that fateful moment, the loss of his eye. That incident was nothing less than an event of objective chance: something that reveals the marvellous that is, and that is in, Surrealism.65

Brauner was not the only one to be caught up in a seemingly prophetic event. A number of them occurred, in fact; most, though not all, involving Breton. Surrealists and scholars have deemed them prophetic, premonitory, presaging, predictive, clairvoyant, precognisant, prognosticating, visionary—in the end, centred around the possibility of some sort of prediction of an event at another time. In the events I will discuss here all terms expressing some form or other of presentiment, whether spoken, written or otherwise, shall be subsumed under ‘prediction’. Two of such predicted events define Surrealism in the 1930s in particular: the Brauner incident, and Breton’s meeting with the woman who was to be his second wife. This is the Sunflower prediction, central premise of Breton’s novel Mad Love, published in 1937.

Breton met the woman in question, Jacqueline Lamba (1910-1993), in café Cyrano on the Place Blanche in Paris, 29 May 1934. He was awe-struck by her ‘scandalous’ beauty. At the time, Lamba worked as an ‘undine’, or underwater-dancer [fig 52]. They arranged to meet again later that night, and strolled through Paris until early morning, ending up in the district of les Halles at an auspicious
place, the Tour St. Jacques. Three months later, the couple were married. A few
days after first meeting Lamba, Breton—or so he tells the reader in *Mad Love*—
suddenly felt the need to look up an old poem he had written in 1923, and with
which he had always been dissatisfied:66 ‘Tournesol’ (or ‘Sunflower’).67 Rereading it,
he realised that the poem was nothing short of visionary, apparently describing all
that had just come to pass during their first meeting more than a decade after the
poem was written:

I say there isn’t anything in this poem of 1923 that did not announce the
most important things to happen to me in 1934.68

In *Mad Love* Breton provides a new reading, matching the poem line for
line to all the particulars of his encounter with Lamba. For instance, the first line
of ‘Sunflower’ mentions the neighbourhood of *les Halles*, where the two of them
finished their night’s stroll; near the end there is a reference to a woman swimming,
and swimming was, after all, Lamba’s profession. Clearly, the original poem presents
‘most striking prediction[s]’, and in his reinterpretation, Breton posits ‘Sunflower’ as
a ‘prophetic poem’.69 Manfred Hilke has devoted an extensive study to ‘Sunflower’
and its supposed prediction.70

Breton’s recognition of the Sunflower prediction turned out to be only the
beginning. A number of other predictive events occurred in Breton’s work and life,
and as in *Mad Love* he himself was the first to point them out.71 The earliest one
involves the short play ‘S’il vous plait’ (1920), which ostensibly includes a prediction
of a fire.72 Much more pertinent were predictions of the escalation of hostilities
across Europe in 1939 and the beginning of the Second World War. In his ‘Letter to
the Seers’ of 1925, Breton had stated towards the end:

There are people who claim that the war [the First World War] taught them
something; even so they aren’t as far along as I am, since I know what the
year 1939 has in store for me.73

In a 1929 essay, written with Aragon, a strikingly similar question was asked:
‘[w]hat does 1940 have in store for us?’74 What was in store was that Breton would
be called to report for medical duty near the end of 1939, when France declared
war on Germany, and that the whole Parisian surrealist group would disperse to
various ends of the earth in 1940, never to reunite in the same form again. The
gloomy and fear-inspiring set-up of the surrealist exhibition of 1938, which was unlit
and filled with oppressive coal dust, turned out to have been another prophecy of
the dark days to come.75

Predicted incidents that were less momentous occurred throughout the
1920s. Breton’s encounter with Nadja, for instance, is said to have been predicted during one of the sleeping sessions. A wood-coal sign seems also to have been a catalyst for strange predictive events, as is described in Nadja. One Sunday, Breton writes, he saw a sign that said ‘bois-charbons’, an inadvertent play of words translating as wood-coal (charcoal is charbons de bois in French). A photograph by Jacques-André Boiffard of the same sign illustrates the story [plate XII]. Bois-charbons is also the last word of The Magnetic Fields, and appears in other works by Breton from the 1920s as well. Clearly, it had been on Breton’s mind for a while, and that particular Sunday the sign suddenly enabled Breton to ‘exercise a bizarre talent for prospecting’ of the word: i.e., the ability to predict where to find that same term in other streets, on other shop-signs. He reports that both the ability to predict and his obsession with the term frightened him. Other Surrealists are also said to have made predictions. During a ‘game of truth’, one of the many games the surrealist group played in the 1920s, Jacques Baron jokingly claimed that René Crevel would be the first among them to commit suicide. To everybody’s horror, this prediction came true in 1935. ‘For ever after’, Baron would say later, he felt himself ‘haunted’ by Crevel. Another instance is the imaginary epitaph Soupault wrote for Éluard in 1920. The closing lines are: ‘Fluffy clouds are far in the distance / And you left without saying goodbye’. Later these words were interpreted to have been a prediction of the journey Éluard undertook very suddenly in 1924. Embroiled in a complicated ménage-à-trois with his wife Gala and his friend and fellow artist Ernst, he indeed ‘left without saying goodbye’ for somewhere ‘far in the distance’: he stood up from a table in a café, said he was going for matches, and ended up in Saigon. Fortunately Éluard returned to Paris and had no need of an epitaph. A third example of a surrealist prediction has a sadder end. Robert Desnos apparently made a number of predictions during his sleeping sessions, which as a rule were not taken seriously then (or today) as predictions—although they were taken very seriously as literary expressions, leading Breton to declare Desnos a prophet: ‘Surrealism has come of age and Desnos is its prophet.’ The one prediction that did seem to have come true was the separation between himself and Breton that Desnos had predicted for 1929, which did occur that very same year to their mutual resentment and regret. Sadly enough, the reunion which Desnos had foreseen for 1949 never came to pass, as he perished in a Nazi prison camp in 1944.

Secular prophecy

What should we make of all these predictions? Bretonian Surrealism was always outspokenly hostile towards concepts such as providence or supernatural agency. Yet by describing these incidents as ‘prophetic’, Breton and the other Surrealists were clearly claiming that something extra-normal, at least, if not necessarily super-natural, had taken place. Some historians and critics have struggled with an
apparent contradiction between atheism on the one hand and the validation of prophecy on the other. Often they have downplayed the incidents or denied their prophetic nature, replacing prediction with the (Freudian) concepts of doubling, repetition or re-enactment, for instance.84 Another approach completely has been to overemphasise the supposed prophecy so as to associate these incidents, and via them Surrealism in its entirety, with superstition, occult forces, or with the paranormal.85 A third approach is denial by avoidance, passing over the incidents entirely; something that does no justice to the history of Surrealism.86 The problem with the first approach is that it pays little or no heed to the fact that Breton et alia chose a terminology which they knew very well was not neutral, such as ‘prophecy’. The other extreme, associating the predictions entirely with the supernatural, is in my view unfounded: the Surrealists’ strong aversion to (Catholic) Christianity, their enmity towards spiritualist beliefs such as the possibility of communication with spirits of the dead and other spirits, and their secular worldview, are well known and have been discussed already.

I find these prophetic incidents to be important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they exemplify the form of secular mysticism that is so particular to Surrealism. An idea, thing or, in this case, an event that is usually associated with metaphysical and/or religious worldviews is incorporated into the surrealist universe and rigorously secularised in the process. The marvellous, as the overarching category, is always extra-normal, perhaps super-real, but never supernatural. Thus surrealist prophecy is marvellous, but it is also natural; i.e., it is only to be expected when living Surrealism. Part of the secularity of the surrealist predictions is that all events were proclaimed to have been prophetical only after the fact. Unlike popular fortune-telling practices, for instance, and perhaps usual popular expectations too, no surrealist prediction was ever expressly and seriously87 made as a prophecy beforehand. It may seem easy to proclaim years later, with hindsight, that things written or said in the past, or events that have occurred, turned out to be prophetic. Such identification after the fact has perhaps been the main reason that some scholars have dismissed the predictions as meaningless. Yet as a matter of fact hindsight is essential to the modus operandi of surrealist predictions:

Now, it may be that surrealism, by opening certain doors that rationalism boasted of having boarded up for good, had enabled us to make here and there an excursion into the future, on condition that we should not be aware at the time that it was the future we were entering, that we should become aware of this and be able to make it evident only a posteriori.88

The fact that surrealist predictions are only revealed as such a posteriori separates them from ‘ordinary’ fortune-telling, (supernatural) prophesying or
metaphysical foreseeing of the future. Surrealist future cognition was firmly anchored in the secular, although not, importantly enough, in rationality. It is the irrational side of the real that manifests when predictions seem to come true: the marvellous. And it is recognition that an incursion of the surreal into the real has come to pass that the identification of the predication is based upon.

*Surrealist correspondences and the paucity of reality*

The second reason I consider the surreal predictions to be important is that they exemplify how Breton stressed the point that Surrealism entails living in a world full of correspondences by pointing out marvellous incidents himself. Many of the incidents are rather minor or perhaps far-fetched, and there is a good chance they would have been forgotten or dismissed as coincidental if Breton had not elevated them to a position of importance. He sets out to show that the interaction of reality and surreality is constant, and the predictions, like surrealist clairvoyance in general (already touched upon in chapter three), emphasised the interconnection, as Breton envisioned it, both between things in the world and primarily between things in the mind and in the world. The world of Surrealism is not meaningless, the universe is not alien; rather, it is a ‘cryptogram’ waiting to be deciphered, with the Surrealist as the great solver of games who identifies, *a posteriori* and in a flash of irrational insight, the hidden connections that show that wo/man, mind and world are intimately connected. Even though those connections may not appear logical from a bourgeois point of view, they are still causal and answerable to a certain surreal logic. In Breton’s words:

‘[Surrealism facilitates] certain incandescent flashes linking two elements of reality belonging to categories that are so far removed from each other that reason would fail to connect them and that require a momentary suspension of the critical attitude in order for them to be brought together. … The mind … proves to itself, fragmentarily of course, but at least by itself, that “everything above is like everything below” and everything inside is like everything outside. The world thereupon seems to be like a cryptogram which remains indecipherable only so long as one is not thoroughly familiar with the gymnastics that permit one to pass at will from one piece of apparatus to another [that is, metaphor].’

The corresponding universe of Surrealism is one in which all things are potentially connected in meaningful ways. With ‘everything above is like everything below’, Breton paraphrased the famous Hermetic saying ‘as above, so below’. As eminent scholar of esotericism Antoine Faivre has argued, the notion of correspondences is an integral part of all esoteric worldviews (as I will discuss
further at the end of this chapter), and by emphasising that the surrealist universe is a corresponding one, Breton closely aligned his movement with esoteric thought. To be more specific, with esoteric Romantic thought, as it was the Romantic and Symbolist notions of prophetic dreams and vision, correspondences, associations and analogies, themselves inspired by esoteric currents, that served Breton as a model. For poets such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire, the world was ‘a forest of symbols’—and so Breton made it that too, for Surrealism.

In an essay in 1941 Breton attributed the saying ‘as above, so below’ (correctly) to The Emerald Tablet, allegedly authored by Hermes Trismegistus, giving the following version: ‘all that is below is as all that is above to accomplish the miracle of a single thing’. His use of this saying and Hermes’ name too, is sometimes provided as proof of Surrealism’s occult involvement. Yet one should note that in the surrealist context ‘above’ and ‘below’ are not in any sense metaphysical supra-lunar or subterranean locations, or divine and mundane realms. The phrase was shorn of all religious dimensions; Breton’s earliest paraphrase of it, in 1928, was: ‘there is neither high nor low’. In 1940 he noted the ‘invocation’ of (supposedly) Paracelsus: ‘often there is nothing above and everything below. Seek’. It is unclear from where Breton would derive his various versions of the aphorism. As he noted himself, it is a ‘famous occult saying’; he might have come across in a variety of sources, or been pointed to The Emerald Tablet by Apollinaire, by Grillot de Givry’s Le Musée, or even by Max Ernst.

In any case, in Surrealism all is rather in between; more importantly, all oscillates between the outside and the inside. In the essay cited above Breton follows up the occult aphorism with the phrase ‘everything inside is like everything outside’—another paraphrase, now of Goethe—which points towards the fact that as far as Breton was concerned the outside world corresponds primarily with the mind inside. This inside/outside connection probably goes back to Pietist thought. As Breton employs it, however, citing Goethe, it is stripped of any religious meaning and re-clothed in the psyche. The mind ‘proves to itself’ but also ‘by itself’ these theorems, and the mental ‘gymnastics’ required for it, furthermore, is the metaphor, a rhetorical and literary device par excellence.

For Breton, and in the Surrealism he espoused, sur/reality is one unified continuum, in which what goes on in the mind or the inside is as real as the outside. There is therefore no radical division between dream and reality, between unconscious and conscious, between mind and world, between automatism and rationalism, or between madness and sanity. Or rather, there should not be such a radical division, because Breton’s continuous insistence upon the unity of opposites and his construction of methods of correspondence to overcome such division is a clear pointer that in Surrealism, too, such things were experienced (at least initially) as oppositional. In this, Surrealism is only a child of its time; the post-Enlightenment
view that such a radical division does exists and is perhaps essential formed the basis of Modernism generally.103

For the Surrealists, building upon the unified and corresponding thought of the Romantics, dream and reality, unconscious and conscious, etc., were but locations on a spectrum, a sliding scale if you will, on which they could move both ways continuously. (Nadja, as we have seen, was not so lucky, incidentally—she slid over the edge into insanity.) The real and surreal are posited as one, in other words; sur/reality is unified. Such unity allows for prophecy, since event, prediction and a *posteriori* realisation merely occur at different moments on the same continuum.104

The unity of sur/reality also means that reality and appearances are the same. This ties in with Breton’s admiration of the automatic art of mediums and children, and his positive reaction towards the fortunes told to him by Mme Sacco. It is derived from his refusal to submit to the ‘absolute tyranny’ of the real, which he had already discussed in 1924 in the ‘Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality’. Breton argues that it is not relevant whether either A or B is the case—when he is capable of formulating A as well as B, both must be true.105 Thinking he might have gone China, as the clairvoyant predicted, meant he had already been there, and thus ‘elements of reality’, belonging to ‘categories so far removed from each other’ that reason fails to connect them, are linked.106 The ‘tyranny’ of the real is overthrown (note the political agenda here) by the surrealist logic of marvellous correspondences.

*Objective chance and the tissue of dreams*

Linking between distant realities occurs in ‘incandescent flashes’,107 and one category of such a flash was the *hasard objectif*, or ‘objective chance’. It was introduced by Breton in *Communicating Vessels* (1932), although the general idea must have been on his mind earlier.108 He investigated it throughout the 1930s, returning to it in *Mad Love* (1937), ‘The Political Position of Surrealism’ (1935), and even *Arcanum 17* of 1944. The early 1930s were the crucible in which the concept was forged, as Breton deduced from personal experiences that ‘all manner of subtle exchanges occurred between exterior determinism or chance and the inner workings of the mind.’109

Objective chance is the most blatant example of Surrealism’s particular secular extra-naturalism, as it designates incidents others would call fate, providence, or of supernatural origin. In the surreal(alist) universe where all is connected the connecting agent is not a supernatural superstructure, but rather the Freudian premise of the ‘omnipotence of thought’. Freud introduced this concept in *Totem and Taboo* (originally published in 1913), and it describes the belief that one’s thought influences the world; or in psychoanalytical parlance, projection of one’s inner mental life onto the external world. Freud connected it to ‘animistic’ belief systems, the worldview of ‘primitive’ people and of children, and to magical
thought; and as such it is beholden to the (distant) cultural past, to peoples considered marginal to the West, and to those considered marginal within Western society, namely the immature and those suffering from neuroses. It is obvious why the Surrealists would feel drawn to this concept invented by one of their heroes and ascribed to the marginalised they so championed.

Freudian omnipotence of thought is the template upon which surrealist objective chance is based, and so objective chance occurs at the moment an interior mode appears to have been realised in the external world—when ‘everything inside’ does appear to become like ‘everything outside’. For the Surrealists, that interior mode is usually desire (also euphemistically known as ‘love’), while in Freudianism fear and anxiety, besides desire, may lie at the basis of apparent omnipotence of thought as well. In his discussion of objective chance in Communicating Vessels Breton cites Friedrich Engels in the process, and indeed ‘objective chance’ carries overtones of rationalism, secularism and materialism. Yet the primary concern of the Bretonian objective chance is interiority, which is how Breton manages to combine belief in the omnipotence of thought with Surrealism’s secular stance. Objective chance is a marvellous occurrence: a find seems too coincidental, an encounter too providential, a walk too haunted, an event too prodigious, to be just ordinary chance, leading one to assume that unknown forces might be at work. The sculptor Giacometti, for instance, was struggling to finish a sculpture of a girl, and the face in particular. While he was wandering through the flea market with Breton, the two of them suddenly chanced upon a particular mask, and Giacometti, although usually not interested in such things, felt ‘obliged’ to purchase it. It turned out to be the inspirational catalyst that led to the completion of the statue’s face and thus the entire sculpture, known as Invisible Object [fig 53]. Was it just coincidence, finding the mask, or rather providence? It would seem as if ‘learned machinations on the part of powers which remain, until things change, highly obscure’ were in play behind the scenes. In fact, however, wo/man’s mind was the origin of it: objective chance makes ‘manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious...’ In the end, even though Breton embeds his idea in a semi-scientific theoretical discourse including Engels, Aristotle, Feuerbach and even the mathematician Henri Poincaré, besides Freud, it is the last who is most relevant here.

Breton presented objective chance as a rational and scientific phenomenon, albeit one operating by a particular inner and surreal logic. In 1933 he and Paul Éluard sent out a questionnaire on this very topic to a long list of people. It consisted of two questions: ‘What do you consider the most important encounter of your life? To what extend did this encounter strike you as being fortuitous, or preordained?’ To be clear about the secular nature of it all, they included a definition of objective chance that emphasised the inner-outer dynamic in the introduction to
the questions. Besides a whole array of more or less known Surrealists, intellectuals, artists, hangers-on and socialites, prominent psychical researchers such as Camille Flammarion, Eugène Osty, and Charles Richet were also approached; and all the replies were published in Minotaure 3-4 (1933). It is interesting to see the diversity of replies from so many prominent figures, but what is relevant here is that Breton and Éluard went about something extra-ordinary in a semi-scientific way, as had been the surrealist case during the 1920s as well: putting it to the experimental test and the quasi-objective inquiry. Just as the sleeping sessions had been employed to investigate lucid dreaming, automatism was presented as a method of researching the deepest recesses of the mind, and experiments with madness were carried out for purposes of automatism and deranging of the mind, objective chance was also connected to surrealist research. The long list of replies, many of them by scientists and intellectuals, is like a litany of evidence in favour of prophecy, objective chance and otherwise uncanny incidents, thus illustrating the mind’s omnipotence.

Objective chance is introduced in Communicating Vessels not as the main issue but as an example of and corollary to the book’s real concern: the relationship between the interior and exterior worlds. This relationship vexes Breton mightily, and he continually returns to and investigates how the Surrealist relates to the world and how surreality operates. Communicating Vessels is also about the surrealist rapport with the dual worlds of real and surreal—or exterior and interior, or sane and mad, etc.; the labels are many but the opposition remains the same. The two opposed worlds are the title’s two vessels, and the preeminent binding agent between them, the ‘capillary tissue’ as it were, is the dream. Dreams form a conduction wire between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness, the assurance of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, and so on.

Even though the sessions of lucid dreaming were over a decade in the past, and though the pages of surrealist journals were filled with polemical political pieces instead of dream-descriptions, the dream remained a surrealist concern. Throughout the 1930s Breton confirmed that he did not (want to) separate dream from life; rather his endeavour was to insert the dream into life, to live life as if a dream, to instigate the dreamed life. In fact, au fond one should not be able to distinguish between dreaming and being awake. One should take the dream at face value, as something just as real as the clairvoyant’s prediction, a surrealist prophecy or an incident of objective chance. In the previous chapter I have argued how Breton reproduced many mediumistic drawings as examples of the ‘state of grace’ where the duality of perception and representation is united into one. He undertook a similar project in 1937, editing the anthology of dreams Trajectoire du
rêve, published in 1938.125 It contains descriptions of dreams and brief reflections upon dreams or upon the dream as such by a great number of Surrealists and by such historical luminaries as Renaissance esotericist Paracelsus, German artist Albrecht Dürer and Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. It is another example of the surrealist, and typically Bretonian, way of (re)creating a canon of revered Precursors from history regardless of their time126 and appropriating them all as proto-Surrealists; again an esoteric luminary is included as well.127 Trajectoire du rêve provides ‘evidence’ of the literary potential of the dreams, of the relation between dream and reality; i.e., of the dreamed life.

For all the theory, objective chance was loosely used in surrealist practice (and can be identified) as referring to the majority of marvellous incidents and chance encounters in the Surrealist’s life, while prophetic incidents may also fall under its heading, and dreams (particularly those appearing to come true) are furthermore understood to be part of it as well.128 Not just any stray thought could lead to objective chance, it had to be an ‘interior necessity’; and in Surrealism such a pressing thought is usually related to desire.129 I would argue that, first, objective chance is the surrealist mechanism par excellence of the corresponding surrealist universe, seeing that it more or less incorporates all marvellous incidents. Secondly, I find that objective chance and surrealist correspondence are based upon the omnipotence of the mind, rather than just thought. Mind is a term Breton also prefers, and rather than (conscious) thought alone, it is also comprised of the thinkable, automatic and unconscious thought, the imagination and the imaginative, the rational as well as irrational, desires, dreams, visions, hallucinations, etc. As in Masson’s 1941 portrait of Breton, two opposite faces, one with closed and one with open eyes, share the same interior mind [plate I]. The women on Breton’s mind, at least if we relate this image to the 1930s, might all be Jacqueline Lamba, whom Breton met so fortuitously—or should we say by objective chance alone—one night.

Magical thinking and the primitive mind
The surrealist corresponding universe was partly based upon the magical worldview such as the ‘primitive mind’, supposedly, constructed, wherein the exterior world is experienced as a magical place where many things may be and are connected, and various forces, including of supernatural origin, may act in and upon it. In other words, belief in magic is characteristic of the primitive mind. As mentioned above, Freud wrote about such a worldview in Totem and Taboo in his discussion of the childish and primitive mind and its tendency for making (irrational) connections. Just as important are the British anthropologist and religious historian Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), and the French anthropologist and philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939). Both wrote at length about the magical worldview and manner of thought of the ‘primitive’, and both paid extensive attention to the religious
beliefs and mythological structures that were thought to be inherently part of it. Breton and other Surrealists, such as Ernst, Masson, Brauner and Wilfredo Lam, had read adapted (French) versions of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890).130 Lévy-Bruhl’s most relevant works are *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910) and *La mentalité primitive* (1922), which were certainly read by Breton, Tristan Tzara, Michel Leiris and Joan Miró.131 As others have argued, Lévy-Bruhl’s thought has probably left the most traces in Surrealism; not least because his works could be read in the original rather than translated and abridged versions.132

The issue of the primitive mind and its magical worldview may well have been brought to the Surrealists’ attention by a series of lectures given in 1933 at the Paris university of the Sorbonne on the topic of ‘pensée magique’. Organised by the French psychoanalyst René Allendy, a surrealist sympathiser, the lectures focused on ‘magical thought of the primitive’, ‘magical thought of the neurotic person’, ‘of the child’, and ‘in art’, ‘in daily life’, and ‘in the dream’; all of these are top surrealist priorities with the exception of ‘magical thought in religion’. Although it is unclear whether the Surrealists attended the lectures or read the published versions (though that is probable), it is obvious that surrealist and scientific concerns were, once again, closely aligned.133 Just as had been the case with automatism, scholarly studies formed the Surrealists’ main means of acquiring knowledge about a topic, although in the case of the magical worldview they relied on anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists as well, besides psychologists and psychoanalysts.

Across the board Surrealists, anthropologists and psychoanalysts shared the idea that the magical worldview of ‘primitive’ peoples was still part of the culture of contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples out in the colonies, but had become peripheral in the West after the triumph of the rational worldview, and was therefore primarily part of the West’s cultural past.134 Studies such as Frazer’s and Lévy-Bruhl’s reinforced and further gave shape to the dichotomy that had been developing since the Enlightenment, with the Western, civilised, rational worldview on the one hand, and the primitive irrational, i.e. magical, worldview on the other. Most scholars and Surrealists alike were deeply indebted to the Romantic notion that as civilisations develop, they irreversibly lose wisdom, primal knowledge, a purity of spirit and/or other insights together with their primitive mind-set.135 Such loss is deplored, as that primal purity is positively valued. The idea of the magical worldview and its attendant concepts such as correspondences and the loss of primal wisdom were particularly influential in modern esotericism as well.136 There is no evidence that the Bretonian Surrealists were interested in contemporary esoteric sources on this topic during the 1930s (although after the Second World War they were), but that notwithstanding it is obvious that the surrealist adaption of various ideas concerning magic, myth and the primitive mind of Frazer et al. would facilitate the later rapprochement between Surrealism and esotericism, as those same ideas had left their considerable mark in
esoteric thought too.

Lévy-Bruhl considered that primitive peoples thought in a fundamentally different way, whereas Frazer considered their thought to be more simple than or inferior to that of Western civilisation; for the one magic is ‘mystic’ rather than logical, for the other it is ‘a primitive aberration based on faulty logic’.¹³⁷ This also illustrates a difference between the English and the French anthropological approaches, wherein French scholars evaluated magic in a much more positive light than Frazer and other English scholars, or than Freud for that matter. As Clio Mitchell has shown, there is no doubt that the Surrealists’ positive view of magic (albeit divested of religion) can be related to the prevailing French scholarly attitude.¹³⁸ Both Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl painted a picture of a worldview of the primitive where supernatural powers reveal themselves through luck, magic, dreams and visions, and where things are connected not by causality or logic but because a thing could be itself and simultaneously something else as well, and where many actions and things turning out to be revelatory or fortuitous.¹³⁹ Anthropologists and sociologists across the board also pointed out the significant role that dreams and dreaming play(ed) in primitive societies. Obviously this resonated with the importance that Freud attached to it, again in Totem and Taboo.¹⁴⁰ All argued in one way or another that dreams formed an integral part of primitive man’s life, and that the dream functioned as an important meeting place of physical reality and the supernatural.¹⁴¹ In the universe of Bretonian Surrealism we find the dream in a similar role as well: the ‘capillary tissue’ between the two ‘communicating vessels’, that is, in constant communication with the real. The supernatural element in magical correspondences and dreams was removed in Surrealism and replaced by the Freudian psychoanalytical construct of the omnipotence of mind, desire specifically, which in turn was partly based upon Frazer.¹⁴²

For the Surrealists, desire breaks down the barriers between wo/men and the world, an idea inherited directly from Freud.¹⁴³ Whereas the latter associated it with neuroses, however, it was a positive choice and essential means of revolutionising life for the Surrealists. In Breton’s novel Mad Love, for instance, which revolves around his providential encounter with Jacqueline Lamba, desire is the all-powerful agent behind the marvellous encounter itself as well as the prophetic nature of the poem ‘Sunflower’. In line with Lévy-Bruhl and in contrast to both Frazer and Freud, the Surrealists considered the primitive worldview alternative to the dominant Western mind set, and not inferior. Typically surrealist, they went further than that, celebrating the alternative as superior. Prinzhorn’s impressive collection of asylum art, Artistry of the Mentally Ill, may have played a part in that as well, I think, showcasing as it does to what great artistic success a primitive mind may lead when applied to art.¹⁴⁴
Surrealism as a ‘method of creating collective myth’

One cannot discuss early anthropologists such as Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl and magical worldviews without also discussing myth, as it is integral to their theories. Myth is a complex and important concept in the context of Modernism. This is most prominent in the case of the arts, and it has been particularly important in literature, where studies such as Frazer’s have had an immense influence. Considering constructs such as objective chance that made Surrealism into a more marvellous place of correspondences, and the vested interest of Breton and his Surrealists in the ‘primitive mind’ and its magical worldview, it seems only logical that the Surrealists would also be increasingly invested in myth, deeply connected as it is to such worldviews and providing a source of stories wherein magical correspondences and marvellous incidents predominate. It is important to realise that the Surrealists associated myth (a term they used rather widely, including legends and fairy tales) with bygone times, a cultural past, and with marginal aspects of contemporary culture, in other words, with repressed, more primal, marginalised and therefore fascinating culture. Myths were treated mostly as a vast reservoir of stories and their various motifs and elements, primarily as stories that created an atmosphere very similar to the one the Bretonian surrealist was trying to create in life.

There is however a further reason, one that caused myth in general and that of and in Surrealism in particular to be placed very high on Breton’s agenda: politics. Exactly halfway through the 1930s Breton formulated that a ‘new collective myth’ was necessary to change the direction Western civilisation was going, and that Surrealism would be the vanguard movement creating and providing such a myth. In 1935 he gave two lectures in Prague, collected as ‘The Political Position of Surrealism’, wherein he touches upon this idea of surrealist collective myth. It is neither an easy text nor an easy concept, and I will include a number of comments so as to show the political concerns underlying this sudden ‘mythical turn’ (as it were) of Surrealism.

In the lectures, Breton discussed politics extensively, particularly communism and the rise of fascism. Surrealism had just broken for good with the French Communist Party, and Breton affirmed his alliance to communist thought while also arguing for the pre-eminent alliance to art and its important position. He expressed his concern about fascist developments and further addressed those who had criticised Surrealism, both politically and as an art movement. He summarised his own position as ‘digging out’ and ‘defending’ ‘whatever there may be that is common and inalienable in the aspirations of those whose role it is today to sharpen human sensibilities again, beyond all the differences that separate them’. The ‘systematic action’ of Surrealism had created

among young intellectuals … a current [Surrealism] that clearly opposed
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inertia in politics and the need for escape from the real that was almost the one distinguishing characteristic of the whole postwar psychosis.152

Breton asserts that society is in dire need of change, as it has become closed and inward looking and feels threatened, still has not been roused from the shock of the (First World) War, and has turned to escapism. In this era (the 1930s), ‘man belongs to himself less than ever’ and ‘the anguish of living has reached its peak’.153 Art should be the revolutionary remedy.

In these conditions, thus, art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather, with Surrealism, of the creation of a collective myth.154

... Hitler and his acolytes are, unfortunately, very well aware that it was necessary not only to persecute Marxists but also to forbid all avant-garde art in order to stifle leftist thought even for a short time. It is up to us to unite in opposing him though the invincible force of that which must be, of human becoming.155

Artists may have worked on creating personal myths, but the state of (Western) civilisation now primarily demands a collective myth; the artist should move beyond giving meaning to their own life to providing meaning and direction for society in general. Surrealism is politically called to answer this demand even as it is equipped to answer it as well, as it is centred around collective action and moreover because its members are artists who are already (proficient in) creating personal myths. If I understand Breton correctly, the new myth would be created by and for mankind eventually, although Surrealism would light the way for now; he insists that Surrealism is ‘a method of creating collective myth’, just as it was earlier a method for investigated the subliminal.156 This myth would ‘emancipate’ or ‘liberate’ mankind, thus enabling them to achieve their fullest potential and entertain an active and dynamic relation to the real. Mankind would neither continue to try to escape reality, nor be tyrannised by it.157 The Surrealists seemed to have been confident furthermore that myths are universal, an idea they might have absorbed from Romanticism, from Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl and the like, but also from Freud and others in dynamic psychiatry such as Pierre Janet as well.158 Myths being universal, a mythologisation of Surrealism was only the next stage in the project of the surrealist revolution, which was after all intended to revolutionize society as a whole.159 Man’s (and woman’s, of course) inherent capacity for mythopoeia—lyrical myth-creating—would be the instrument to set her/him free.160 In a certain sense, then, myth was also supposed to be a structure of meaning, not only a source of stories and literary
devices, although it is foremost in the last form that we encounter myth in Surrealism.

Myths in Surrealism

During the 1930s Breton and other Surrealists recognised the many similarities between Western myths and mythology and the manner in which they understood the surrealist universe to operate. As with so many things, Breton also viewed myth through a psychological lens; he considered myth (including legend) to be ‘the external projection of human desires’, in line with Freud’s opinion. On those grounds surrealist objectives (driven by desire) were easily aligned with mythical ones.161 As the decade progressed the affinity between myth and Surrealism was actively intensified. This happened in two ways: first, by incorporating mythical content, that is, by using existing and usually canonical mythical stories, characters, themes and motifs in surrealist literature and visual arts. Secondly, the Surrealists also engaged in mythopoeia: myth-making of their own. As I have argued above, during the 1930s Surrealism—and I mean the art, the literature, but the lived praxis too—had become rather marvellous, filled with predictions, objective chances, and uncanny beings and things, for instance. To this they added fairy-tale characters, dream-objects, surrealist objects, marvellous encounters, (un)fulfilled quests, and most of all, fabulous, bewitching, idealized and objectified women. Myth was continuously and simultaneously lived and created. The fact that dreams and extra-normal incidents (which the Surrealists would classify as objective chance) are ubiquitous in myths and legends made the mythopoeia of Surrealism quite self-evident.

During the 1920s one finds relatively few remarks concerning myth in the surrealist discourse; because of the association of myth with the academic tradition in literature and painting the Surrealists were initially negatively disposed towards myths and classical myths in particular.162 Dream and automatism sufficed as sources of inspiration and topics of surrealist research. With the onset of the 1930s this changed, not least because Lévy-Bruhl et al. made it clear that myth should be associated with magic and alternative ways of knowing. As magic and irrationalism were radically opposed to the worldview of the art academy and other bourgeois institutions, myth was thereby justified as a surrealist avenue of exploration. Slowly but surely a more serious engagement with myth began to appear in Surrealism.

To create myth one needs to start from established myths, and obviously the cultural legacy of the classics could not be passed by:

Insofar as surrealism aims at creating a collective myth, it must endeavour to bring together the scattered elements of that myth, beginning with those that proceed from the oldest and strongest tradition (it is indeed in this sense that we speak of a “cultural legacy”).163
Myths that appear as content in surrealist art and literature are in part classical in origin, including the mythological figures Dionysus, Theseus, the Minotaur, Narcissus and Daphne, and of course Oedipus, whom Freud had raised to an even higher mythical status. Chadwick has traced Oedipus, Echo and Narcissus, and Theseus and the Minotaur in the art of Masson, Ernst and Dali, for instance. Masson was the most prolific in exploring all elements of the mythological story in his drawings and paintings: figures such as the Minotaur, themes such as sacrifice and metamorphosis, and mythological locations such as the labyrinth appear prominently in his work from the 1930s. Important series in this respect are the Massacre series of the early years of 1930, the Sacrifices series (published in 1936 with a text by Bataille), Metamorphoses, 1939, and Mythology of Nature, published in 1938. It is clearly no coincidence that the journal that functioned as the most important mouthpiece of Bretonian Surrealism during the second half of the 1930s was called Minotaure. Each new issue was provided with an individual frontispiece, made to order by a surrealist (or nearly so) artist. The very first was by Picasso, while the covers of issues 7, 10 and 11, for instance, were by Miro, Magritte and Ernst respectively [fig 54-56]. As these frontispieces show, myth, here in the form of the Minotaur, also answered to the surrealist fascination with violence, desire, sexual aggression, the primitive and natural and man, and with sacrilege. There is no well-behaved retelling of classic stories in Surrealism, no reverence for myth; myths are used as a source and moulded to meet the demands of the surrealist principles of poetry (art), love (desire) and revolution. Obviously the Freudian motif of the Minotaur as the monstrous and sexually very aggressive double of the male pleased the Surrealists immensely.

We should understand ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’ to be very broad terms in Surrealism; not by any means limited to classical Greek stories but also including medieval and early modern legends, such as Arthurian stories, Grail Quests and other subjects of chansons de geste; and folklore and fairy-tales too. The genre of the Gothic novel was similarly embraced. Philippe Lavergne, for example, has discussed the ‘myth’ of the lost paradise, connecting it to that of the (bygone) Golden Age. In fact, I would characterise both the lost paradise and the golden age as topoi that are part of many myths, both ancient and modern, which are in turn incorporated into Surrealism, like that of the mysterious castle, for instance. In the context of the quest for the lost paradise, Lavergne also mentions ‘Celtic myths’ and the legends of the Quest for the Grail. The first to point out the association of Bretonian Surrealism with quests was Julien Gracq, who specified, besides the Grail Quest, also the Quest for the Golden Fleece and the Quest for the Philosopher’s Stone. For all the alchemical overtones, it is important to realise that a Quest for the Philosopher’s Stone, like that for Fleece or Grail, was primarily considered a literary quest undertaken by the surrealist poet, which had nothing in common
with a laboratory practice, let alone a religious process of spiritual transformation. In line with the practice of Romanticism, the surrealist quest was about discovering one’s own imagination. Its driving force is desire. Each revolved therefore around a mythical desired object, and as a rule beautiful, sorcerous and/or hybrid human-animal women were involved. However, the main desire is not to possess: on the contrary, on the basis of Breton’s assimilation of ‘the search for the philosophers’ stone to a freeing of the imagination’, the desire is to quest. 173 This is underlined by a statement by Breton in 1937:

I want to find and lose the Philosopher’s Stone. 174

For the Bretonian Surrealists, all quests are variants of the same thing. The stone or grail is like the surrealist point sublime, that point where surreality has become the only reality. This point is unattainable, or if one should attain it, one could not remain there, as that would lead one to ‘[cease] to be a person’. 175

As desire is the main motivator, not only of quests but of everything, it is no surprise that women, in the guise of fairies, sorceresses, clairvoyants or mannequins, often play an important part in surrealist myths. One ‘mythological’ character that was very important to Breton personally, for example, was the medieval fairy-tale figure Mélusine (or Melusina), a hybrid creature half woman, half fish or serpent, who was revived in Romantic literature. 176 She is one of the main characters in Breton’s Arcanum 17, for example, a book I shall discuss in chapter five, and she embodied the mystery of woman, the creature whom man will never truly understand. The Surrealists also created their own mythological figures, most importantly Gradiva, whom we find in literary as well as visual surrealist works. Gradiva appeared as the heroine in a 1903 story that was reinterpreted by Freud, who brought it to the Surrealists’ attention. Like the Minotaur and Melusina she is a hybrid creature, partly stone relief, partly real, and, very surrealistically, partly a figure of dream. 177 Chadwick has analysed many art works centred on Gradiva, most prominent among them Masson’s 1939 painting Gradiva [fig 57]. 178 In 1937 Breton owned a short-lived art gallery, which was called ‘Gradiva’ as well.

Jonathan Eburne has characterised the change that Surrealism underwent during its second decade as one from a ‘red’ to a ‘noir’ period: from the minimalist and radical La Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution to the lavish art magazine Minotaure, and from political (communist) activism to a renewed interest in dream, magic and the arts as political tools. 179 It is a period of interest in the roman noir and film noir, humour noir and irony, in violence, paranoia, dark recesses of the mind, in unexplainable correspondences, fairy tales and legends. In fact, Surrealism’s Golden Age embodies the tension between expansion and occultation. 180 With his complex political exposés, references to prophecy and objective chances,
creation of a corresponding universe only logical to the Surrealists themselves, and insistence that one should live a dreamed life, Breton was posing the ‘system of challenges and provocations’ for the public he had mentioned in his demand for occultation. In that sense the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism was an on-going project—but it was one that failed, as Surrealism’s increasing renown in France and abroad during the 1930s, its development into an international art movement, and Breton’s many travels abroad to lecture about Surrealism, belie such supposed concealment and exclusiveness. Minotaure was a glossy, high quality art periodical backed by influential art publishers that made Surrealism respectable as an art movement and so hastened its embourgeoisement. Politically, on the other hand, Surrealism was becoming just too ‘occulted’, losing relevance. Even while Breton stressed politics, on the French stage Surrealism had become rather marginal, and by the second half of the 1930s neither the left nor the right had any more time or patience for aesthetic concerns and revolutions by means of art—and least of all, at least on the left, for such things as prophecy, dream, myth and magic. From the point of view of the established parties, communist as well as fascist, Surrealism no longer mattered. Breton’s campaign for a new collective myth ostracised his movement in that sense; myth was ‘occulting’ Surrealism politically, but on the other hand, it was ‘de-occulting’ it publicly, as mythical characters and motifs were topics an audience could recognise—although not as instruments of political change.

**Paranoia, analogy and the uncanny**

Historian of modernity Jean-Michel Rabaté has put the difference between Surrealism’s first and second decade in psychoanalytical terms: ‘much as the first had been [dominated] by automatism and hysteria’, he finds the Golden Age to be ‘dominated by the concept of paranoia’. Paranoia is the learned establishment’s interpretation of the magical worldview: as a psychiatric affliction, paranoia may create a ‘world full of magical meaning’, wherein everything turns out to be meaningful and connected, and also to one’s self, furthermore; inner anxieties seem to influence the outside world constantly. Where some may see ‘occult forces’ and Breton sees objective chance, Rabaté supposes paranoia to be at work. It would seem hardly coincidental therefore that this was also the decade Jacques Lacan became connected with Surrealism, publishing two articles in Minotaure, and becoming on friendly terms with some Surrealists; although not with Breton. As Eburne has argued, Lacan may have gotten more out of Surrealism than the other way around (with the exception of Dali); it stimulated him to reject ‘naïve realism in favour of an understanding of psychiatric symptoms as viable forms of expression in themselves.’ Breton remained somewhat on the fence about paranoia and about Lacan too, but Dali and Crevel, for instance, actively investigated the concept as a way of systematically distorting reality. During this time Dali developed his famed
paranoiac-critical method, whereby through a hallucinatory process the painter would magnify particular elements or details of emotional importance (paranoia) and then use them as a departure point for and motif in his art (the critical part). Breton admired Dali’s method but did not adopt it. Yet as Laurant Jenny has argued, Dali’s emphasis on paranoia as a fruitful technique of systematic confusions between realities may well have inspired Breton’s investigation of irrational means of knowledge of the world in *Communicating Vessels*. Still, while paranoia may explain some of the methodology of the surrealist corresponding universe, and while the theory (and Lacan too) is very relevant to Dali’s work, it rarely featured in Breton’s writings and I will not pursue it further here.

Another way of designating surrealist correspondence, one mainly favoured by French scholars and intellectuals, is to describe the workings of the surrealist universe as analogical. Throughout the twentieth century intellectuals have likened magical thinking to analogical thinking, and this comparison is particularly prevalent in anthropology. Analogy and analogical thinking are also very important in alchemy. Alchemy was a recurring topic in the Bretonian surrealist discourse; and in addition during the 1930s Breton filled his Surrealism with correspondences, magical worldviews and relations between the inside and the outside. It is no wonder therefore that scholars sometimes implicitly assume that Surrealism was all about analogy. It was not, though; or at least, not yet. In the early 1950s esoteric scholar Robert Amadou would impart his definition of magic as analogy to Breton, who would often make use of it afterwards, as he had already been introduced to analogical thinking as magic by studies like Viatte’s. However, the term ‘analogy’ is hardly proper to pre-War Surrealism. Rather it should be metaphor. When discussing how the world is like a cryptogram where above is like below and inside is like outside, Breton also outlines what permits one to pass from one to the other, namely, metaphor.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the metaphor, which enjoys every freedom in Surrealism, leaves far behind the sort of (prefabricated) analogy that Charles Fourier and his disciple Alphonse Toussenel attempted to promote in France. Although both [analogy and metaphor] concur in honouring the system of “correspondences”, the same distance separates them as separates the high-flying from the earthbound. It should be understood that it is not a question of increasing one’s speed and agility in a vain spirit of improving one’s technique, but rather of becoming the master of the one and only conductive electricity so that the relationship that one wishes to establish may truly be of some consequence.

What is essentially at stake is the ‘relationship between the human mind
and the sensory world’, which I term Surrealism’s rapport with the world. This fits well with Breton’s emphasis that real and surreal form one continuum of surreality; within surreality something is not like something else (analogy), it is the same as the other (metaphor)—a rhetorical difference a literary man such as Breton would have been perfectly familiar with. There is no Frazerian primitive mistaking of one thing for another when they are not alike at all (a mistake of the inferior mind), on the contrary, things are the same although perhaps on different locations of the surrealist continuum, and recognised as such by the superior mind, which has moved beyond the mere causal and logical thinking of the bourgeois mind and operates in an entirely and Lévy-Bruhl-ian alternative manner.

One further theoretical concept deserves mention: the uncanny. In a 1919 essay Freud introduced his concept of the uncanny, or das unheimliche, basing it upon an idea first developed by Ernst Jentsch in 1906. Both related the uncanny to a story by Romantic author E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). The uncanny is foremost an aesthetic category, associated by Freud with anxiety issues of representation and sensory experience. Scholar of the uncanny Anneleen Masschelein has argued that as such it has been rather more influential in the arts and literature than in psychoanalysis; Surrealism is one example of an artistic movement incorporating the uncanny (in practice, rather than in theory).

An experience of the uncanny occurs when something (or someone) appears familiar and strange at the same time. A common example of the uncanny is the automaton or wax doll (which is in fact a key figure in Hoffmann’s story): seemingly human, perhaps even appearing to breathe or move, yet an unfathomable and lifeless machine. It is uncanny because inanimate and animate, human and machine, are confused, but furthermore because of the doubling of the body, something particularly striking in the case of mannequins. In this example, the anxieties underlying experiencing the uncanny are fear of death, fear of the machine, fear of the body and/or anxieties concerning identity. The term ‘the uncanny’ is hardly used as such in Surrealism, but the concept is still very much part of it; confusion between such opposites as being awake and dreaming, being real and imaginary, being animate and inanimate is a daily surrealist staple. Occurrences of objective chance, marvellous encounters and strange events are often predicated upon experiences or things that are classic instances of the uncanny. The uncanny being—automaton, mannequin and doll—is an essential part of surrealist art, particularly in the 1930s. Hans Bellmer, for instance, spurred on by a theatrical performance of Offenbach’s The Tales of Hoffman, decided to act on a lifelong obsession with a female cousin and created his, by now famous, doll. Subsequently he photographed it, and those images were reproduced in Minotaure 6 in 1934 [fig 58]. They followed upon a curious article by Péret devoted to automata, lavishly illustrated, which had appeared in Minotaure 3-4. The female mannequin/doll was a particular obsession for many
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(male) Surrealists, as an object of subliminal longing and of erotic objectification, but at the same time a source of anxiety, conflating fear of the artificial and the mechanical with fear of Woman and femininity.\textsuperscript{202} She embodied the idealised woman, always available, always remote and always scary.\textsuperscript{203} With desire being the main driving force behind the omnipotent thought, and Surrealism being the almost exclusive preserve of male artists, it is no surprise to find so many object-women in Surrealism’s Golden Age. The obsession with the mannequin reached its high point in 1938, at the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Beaux-Arts Gallery: before entering the main exhibition space, visitors had to proceed through a long hallway filled with mannequins (appropriately known as the ‘Rue des Mannequins’).\textsuperscript{204} Each had been decorated by a surrealist artist; Miró, Ernst, Duchamp, Seligmann and many others had participated, and all the mannequins were duly photographed by Man Ray and Denise Bellon [fig 59, 60]. Other uncanny motifs such as doubling, repetition, and the apparent omnipotence of thought itself are all scattered throughout the pages of many surrealist literary works.\textsuperscript{205}

I would highlight a very important difference between the Freudian concept of the uncanny and the surrealist predilection for the strange and marvellous (and sometimes identified as uncanny by scholars). Compare Freud:

\begin{quote}

an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.\textsuperscript{206}
\end{quote}

The dynamics repressed-revived and surmounted-confirmed show that one is dealing with remnants or survivals, unconscious desires, repressed memories, or primitive beliefs; things that are usually not considered in a positive light—because ‘infantile’ and ‘primitive’—and which should be recognised so as to be overcome. In Surrealism, on the other hand, the childish and primitive are positive qualities.\textsuperscript{207} For all their Freudianism, the Surrealists reject analysis. The experience of what others would call the uncanny is unearthed from the repressed, it is recognised, and subsequently placed in bright sunlight to be seen by all and flourish. The surrealist repressed is not curbed but rather allowed to manifest and thus to become something in its own right. Unconscious desires are made conscious so they can be celebrated. This is no mere shuffling of terminology, but illustrates a fundamental difference between Surrealism on the one hand, and psychoanalysis and dynamic psychiatry on the other. Even though numerous psycho-dynamic and psychoanalytic concepts and techniques were appropriated by Surrealism, as I have shown in this as well as in the previous two chapters, a fundamental difference remained. To put it briefly, it is one of analysis versus creativity. For instance, in
Communicating Vessels Breton included analyses of some of his own dreams to demonstrate how dream and waking reality relate. Breton interprets his own dreams surrealistically, not psychoanalytically, relating them to lived experiences in a very recent past. This has been called ‘weak’, but the point is that Surrealism is surrealistic and not Freudian; exposing the dream subverts bourgeois order and establishes the surrealist universe, by making the interior exterior and bringing into the light that which is usually kept hidden. At the same time, dream description as a literary product furthermore subverts literary traditions, circumventing literary pretensions as it does so. The opposite position is that of Freud, who, when asked to contribute to Breton’s anthology of dream descriptions, Trajectoire du rêve, replied that he considered the ‘superficial’ aspect of dreams (that is, their retelling and positioning as a literary product) uninteresting. Surrealism is subversive and geared towards revolutionising established mores; Freudian psychoanalysis is conservative and maintains the bourgeois structures of society. Therefore, while surrealist concepts such as the importance of dreams, objective chance and the omnipotence of thought may find their origin in Freud’s theories, they cannot and should not be taken for their Freudian counterparts. Similarly, the primitive mind, magic and myth are no longer anthropological categories, but tools to counter the tyranny of the real and as such are an essential part of the surrealist revolution.
In conclusion: esoteric correspondences and a sublime point

Lucid dreams, automatic writing and automatic art, objective chance and mythical stories, all have that ‘revelatory’, wondrous, marvellous quality that is experienced when an interior model, usually something or someone desired consciously or unconsciously, appears to become manifest in the exterior world. Mind, including all thoughts and desires, makes the surrealist universe into one filled with hidden connections, occult correspondences, and marvellous occurrences that are dictated by dream-logic, seeming to be perfectly logical when experienced, but strange and awkwardly illogical afterwards. Surrealist essays, novels, poems, objects and paintings, café sessions, games, inquiries and experiences documented and investigated this continuing incursion of the surreal into the real. Bretonian novels like Nadja, Mad Love and Arcanum 17 and Aragon’s Peasant of Paris, for instance, or the stories of Leonora Carrington and Giselle Prassinos, are characterised by recurring motifs such as highly charged encounters, dream-logic, sentiments of predestination, magical places, mysterious objects, the surprising find of a secret of secrets. Paintings such as Victor Brauner’s Self-portrait with Plucked Eye are repositioned as marvellous, prophetic and extremely surreal when the real does turn out to comply with the imaginary. The Surrealist’s continual and dynamic rapport with the world is confirmed. Surrealism was made into a magical world revolving around the intrusion of the marvellous in the quotidian, supported and reinforced by the investment in myth.

Without a doubt the corresponding nature of this marvellous surrealist universe makes it akin to the way many esoteric worlds function. In fact, the notion of ‘correspondences’ is the first of four fundamental elements of the ‘form of thought’ that esotericism is, or at least as Antoine Faivre would have it. The other three are: ‘living nature’, ‘imagination and mediations’, and ‘the experience of transmutation’, with two additional secondary, non-intrinsic, characteristics, ‘the practice of concordance’ and ‘transmission’. Faivre’s definition with its six characteristics has been and still is very influential, but it is not without its problems. As Wouter Hanegraaff has argued, it is a rather static construct, and while it may work well for discussing Renaissance esotericism, that is less the case for post-Enlightenment esoteric currents. The notion of correspondences is particularly problematic, and nineteenth and twentieth century understandings of what corresponds and how, were in the wake of the Enlightenment very much influenced by scientific materialism, a mechanical worldview and positivism. Interestingly enough, I find that the surrealist corresponding universe may be understood as a modern and secular interpretation of correspondence. There is no God, to begin with, neither personal nor universal. Breton’s embedding of his ideas about objective chance, prophecy and marvellous coincidence in a discourse including references to Freud,
other (dynamic) psychiatrists, philosophers such as Hegel, and scientists, creates a contemporary scientific sheen. Surrealism is a more or less scientific investigation, after all, and therefore there are principles to its universe. It is implicitly suggested that some sort of logical and causal relation underlies the workings of the surrealist universe, albeit surreal and therefore alien to many. Even though the surrealist universe is experienced as enchanted, it is totally secular and scientistic. This is underlined by the fact that the correspondences are understood to originate in the mind and are premised upon a psychoanalytical concept such as the manifestation of desire. Yet one should refrain from over-psychologising Surrealism and surrealist correspondence; although mind and experienced reality may overflow into one another, the experience of surreality in reality is what matters, not, as I have argued earlier, the analytical explanation for it.

Surrealist correspondence operates on the premise of a dichotomy between real and imaginary, reason and madness, outer and inner, etc., but even more importantly, on the possibility of resolution of those opposites. In 1924, in the first Manifesto, Breton had expressed his belief that surreality would come to pass:

I believe in the future resolution of [the] two states, dream and reality... into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality.\textsuperscript{217}

In the Second Manifesto the point of unified sur/ality was made once again:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.\textsuperscript{218}

The occultly attuned reader picks out a possible reference to the ‘as above, so below’-aphorism here, and taking the other esoteric references in the Second Manifesto into consideration, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the aphorism might well be referred to here. But the surrealist unification, perhaps because not limited by metaphysical rules, reaches beyond that, to unify even life and death, and time. The location of such unification is, no surprises there, the mind. In 1936 Breton would define the point of unification as the ‘sublime point’ in a letter ‘To Hazel of Squirrelnut’ (a letter to his new-born daughter).\textsuperscript{219} It is perhaps a point where the structure of things like space and time no longer matters and desire and reality truly become one. It has been associated with a transcendent deity, and the cabalistic idea of the primal point of origin, the primal act of creation, as understood to be proposed in the Zohar, for instance;\textsuperscript{220} as well as with Éliphas Lévi and his discussion of the Word and its role in creation.\textsuperscript{221} Breton himself always
denied any mysticism, situating it rigorously in the secular and linking it to Hegel.\textsuperscript{222} This has led others to interpret it as an ideal dialectical transcendence, situating surreality in a transcendent realm.\textsuperscript{223} But while the Bretonian sublime point is an absolute point, it is a psychological one.

In his letter, Breton points out that the sublime point is not somewhere one should aspire to \textit{be}; rather it should be kept in view as something to be attained at an unknown future date.

I have spoken of a certain “sublime point” on the mountain. It was never a question of establishing my dwelling on this point. It would, moreover, from then on, have ceased to be sublime and I should, myself, have ceased to be a person. Unable reasonably to dwell there, I have nevertheless never gone so far from it as to lose it from view, as to not be able to point it out.\textsuperscript{224}

This unity of the sur/real, fuelled by the refusal to submit to (the tyranny of the) real, provided the basis for the marvellous universe of Surrealism. It facilitates the making of, and \textit{a posteriori} identification of, predictions, and the existence of objective chances. It enables the omnipotence of the mind in its rapport with the world.