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

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greeted old friends and enemies as well as new members. The addition of new blood was imperative, as there were few first and second generation Surrealists in Paris; Ernst and Tanguy, for instance, had remained in America, Carrington had settled in Mexico, while Brauner travelled extensively and did not stay in Paris for long. Aragon of course had already deserted Surrealism for communism well before the Second World War. Éluard had become a Stalinist during it while Desnos had been killed. Masson had returned to Paris but remained estranged from Breton, which made him the only one of the old guard in Paris until Péret’s return from South America.²

From the moment Breton returned the French press was panting expectantly on his doorstep: what new exciting scandals could they expect from Surrealism? Meanwhile the new intellectuals on the political left, the existentialists, together with the communists, were loudly declaring Surrealism out of touch, passé and even—because of the absence of nearly all the Surrealists during the war—suspect. During his time in exile Breton had, among a few other things, written a novel, Arcanum 17, and a long epic poem, Ode to Fourier, which were both published in 1947.³ Arcanum 17 put forward a convoluted discussion of love in a discourse full of myths, nineteenth century occult figures, tarot cards and fairy characters. The Ode celebrated a little known eccentric nineteenth century utopian. Critics and intellectuals were stymied and outraged; was this what the
leader of Surrealism had to offer, in this time of stark post-bellum realities, where
the dominant art form was communist poetry hearkening back to the days of the
resistance? Myths, fairies, occultists and utopians? Many agreed that Breton and
his Surrealism were indeed passé.

But Breton was undaunted. He organised a grand exhibition in 1947 and
confronted his critics head on:

Hardly a day goes by without surrealism being enjoined to make way
for something new, when it is not graciously invited to “turn over a new
leaf”. Without a doubt, the public manifestation of 1947 can only dash
the hopes of those who have a vested interest in that disappearance or
in that sweeping transformation. The surrealist undertaking, which, as we
pointed out without encountering any significant refutation, had been
in existence long before it became codified, could not without inviting
ridicule be declared a thing of the past nor be permitted to proceed only
in ways that would have nothing in common with the previous ones. In
this respect, an almost immemorial past warrants our confidence in the
future: consequently, it is with a light heart that we turn a deaf ear to
those objurgations [sic].4

Besides ‘turning a deaf ear’ to this criticism, Breton and his Surrealists
continued in the direction he had taken decisively with Arcanum 17 and Ode to
Fourier, that of myths, esoteric themes and utopian thinkers. Breton emphatically
made the point that one should look to the past for improvement for the future,
and wondered how existentialism would fare in that regard. Furthermore, he
pointed out that for true emotional guidance one should rely upon an esoteric
view of the world, a ‘hidden tradition’ no less, not least because of its influence
upon important poets:

[E]ach new era… should find in the past specific guarantors and guides,
different from those of the earlier era. Only history will tell if the figures
that existentialism has recently brought to the fore are able to assume
such a role or if their star is merely shining on a short transition period.
We are told these days that the aesthetic concerns by which people’s
minds were willy-nilly dominated between 1920 and 1940 are going
to give precedence to ethical concerns. But that may be nothing but
wishful thinking. Of far greater significance is the revived interest in works
belonging to the fantastic genre as well as to what is commonly called
“utopia”. Nor must it be a coincidence that scholarly research has recently
come to discover, at the junctions where the ideas of poets and those of visionary social thinkers meet (the great figures of Convention, Hugo, Nerval, Fourier), the enduring vitality of an esoteric view of the world (Martinès, Saint-Martin, Fabre d’Olivet, l’abbé Constant [= Éliphas Lévi]). By neglecting until now to take this into account, academic criticism has purely and simply sunk into futility. In the light of that research, it seems probable, and the future will no doubt soon tell, that this worldview more or less directly influenced the major poets of the second half of the nineteenth century (Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Jarry), while it crystallized once again in Saint-Yves d’Alveydre’s writings. Thus the great movements of sensibility by which we are still affected, the emotional charter by which we are governed, seem to originate, whether we like it or not, in a tradition entirely different from the one that is taught: that tradition has been kept buried under the most disgraceful, the most vindictive silence.5

For Breton, the answer to everything, the state of the world and the human condition specifically, could be found in a combination of Romanticism, utopianism, mythology and esotericism. This view was present in Arcanum 17, and he would continue to hold on to it in the 1950s, even though its strongest expression can be found in the 1947 International Exhibition of Surrealism. In this chapter, I will focus upon the construction of that view. As will become clear, the political reality of the day contributed strongly to his opinion of an ‘enduringly vital’ worldview located partly in a past, partly in the cultural margins, and entirely in the domain of irrationality and deviance. A nostalgic yearning for times gone by began to play an increasingly important role, and as I will show, eventually Breton aimed at turning his Surrealism into a neo-Romanticism, including the esotericism so strongly present in Romanticism and Symbolism. Important for my argument is that poetry, love, and revolution (now rephrased as ‘liberty’), continued to remain the overarching surrealist concerns to which everything, be it myth, primitivism, magic, or nineteenth century utopians and occultists, was subservient.

Still, at a time when the various levels of government were dominated by nationalism and realism, and intellectual milieus by communism and the worldview of the Frankfurt Schule, while society in general expressed a strong preference for looking forward and a strong distaste for mythologies and occultism, the surrealist turn to the irrational was not well received. Many lambasted the 1947 exhibition and its messages that a ‘new myth’ would restore the world and that hope could be found in nineteenth century heterodox thought. Several critics and intellectuals
thought that Nadeau had been right when he wrote in 1940 that Surrealism had come to an end, and scholars did too—notwithstanding Surrealism’s continuation at least until Breton’s death in 1966, and possibly beyond that point. In a sense this chapter therefore also tells the story of the increasing marginalisation of Bretonian Surrealism. As its occultation truly set in, it not only confounded the public but also alienated critics, intellectuals and scholars for good.

But every end has a beginning, and to start with I will discuss the few years before the Second World War and the time spent in Marseille. Esotericism did not grow to such importance in Breton’s work and his Surrealism overnight. A number of Surrealists had actively begun to pursue their esoteric interests just before the War. While Breton must have been aware of that, he only started his own serious study of esoteric subjects in 1942, but I will briefly touch upon the esotericism of the other Surrealists nonetheless, as I think that did play a part in pushing Breton in that direction, while it is furthermore evidence of the fact that even though he was the gatekeeper of Surrealism, many others were interested in esotericism too. Indeed, as will become clear, the study of esotericism led several Surrealists on personal trajectories that took them away from Surrealism proper.

In 1940 the Surrealists created a deck of cards, often called the ‘Marseille Tarots’. It is in fact a regular deck of cards, but still relevant, not least because it may have inspired Breton’s perusal of the occult tarot in 1942. This will be discussed in the second part of the chapter, which deals with the period of exile. In Arcanum 17, which he started writing in 1943, the tarot’s seventeenth card, the Star, forms the centre point of his narrative. Many references in this book show that Breton was reading Éliphas Lévi, on the instigation of Viatte, whose study of Victor Hugo and esotericism had made a lasting impression upon Breton. Arcanum 17 makes it clear that by that point esotericism, and historical occultism in particular, occupied an important position in his frame of reference. Arcanum 17 could not have been written without an internalisation of irrational powers that took place just before it, in New York. There the idea that the (surrealist) artists are magicians, and that their poetry/art is magic, came to full flower. The ideas of the German Romantic poet Novalis, whose works circulated among the group in Marseille, played a considerable part in that development, as I will argue. His equation of magic with poetry, and of love with magic, paved the way not only for the realisation of the Surrealist-magician but furthermore, and most importantly in the case of Breton, for the understanding that it is desire for Woman, and the ensuing redemption by way of Woman, which works magically.

In the third part of this chapter I will focus upon the 1947 exhibition. By discussing the exhibition room by room it will become clear how Breton,
who designed the show and moreover to a large extent controlled its eventual outlook and contents, viewed esotericism within the overarching context of myth, as well as its relation to utopianism and Romanticism. This part forms the heart of this chapter, as the 1947 exhibition can be seen as the public climax of Breton’s interest in esotericism. As will become clear the political reality of the day formed the impetus for his reliance upon deviancy in general, myth, primitivism and magic in particular. He offered the general public recourse to the deviant by way of the exhibition itself, which was constructed as an initiatory course that would take one from a visualised past and cerebral celebration of Romanticism to a visceral superstitious present.

As we will see, 1947 was a success as a visual manifestation of Breton’s complex views. It was, however, a failure politically and with regards to Surrealism’s standing as an avant-garde movement. After that point Breton’s opinions would remain more or less the same. I will argue that in fact a repetition of moves and even entrenching of positions took place in the 1950s, and that nostalgia for a golden past of Surrealism became dominant. Breton’s position with regards to esotericism remained essentially unaltered, although on three fronts I still find an intensifying of ideas: magic, now in the form of art magic, irrational correspondences, and the decoding and encoding of those by means of analogies and the language of alchemy. These three developments will be touched upon briefly in the final part of this chapter, the ‘postscript’.
I. Prelude

Esotericism in Surrealism on the eve of the Second World War: some observations

By the end of the 1930s, Surrealism was taking a distinct turn towards the esoteric. This coincided roughly with the addition of new members to the group, but even though it seems probable that there must be a relationship between these developments, I can offer only circumstantial evidence and speculation. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the emphasis upon correspondences, myth and the magical worldview during the 1930s created the conditions for an alignment of Surrealism with esoteric thought. This may have attracted new members who had been interested in esotericism anyway; alternatively, it may have provided the perfect climate to fully pursue an interest in esoteric matters that had perhaps been only latently present earlier—possibly both. Another remarkable development is that the personal esoteric trajectories of the second generation Surrealists, who will be discussed below, often differed considerably from that of the first generation Surrealists. Obviously Ernst, for one, had been exploring alchemy in his work since the early 1920s, and books such as Michelet’s La Sorcière and Grillot de Givry’s Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy circulated widely in the group during the 1930s; still, those who joined in that decade often showed additional (or more) interest in contemporary esoteric theories. Their esoteric template was not only the past but also the present, whereas for first generation Surrealists—Breton first and foremost—the only contemporary template was tribal (‘primitive’) culture, and esotericism was located in the past, something the popularity of La Sorcière, which was first published in 1862 after all, attests to.

Another remarkable development is that the majority of second generation artists who were integrating esoteric themes and study into their work moved away in the 1940s to pursue individual careers outside Surrealism. As a result, at the very moment that Breton was fully embracing esotericism, that is 1943-1950, esoterically interested artists such as Matta, Brauner, Carrington, Varo and Seligmann were distancing themselves from him and Surrealism. 6 Surrealism’s objectives of love, poetry and revolution were apparently not sufficient, nor its thorough grounding in the literature and thought of the (pre-eminently Romantic) past. Many of these artists moved on to a form of magical realism, whereas Bretonian Surrealism always remained resolutely analytically realist, even cerebral, in its obsession with the unconscious and irrational. Steeped in the French tradition of intellectual and scholarly engagement with the ‘hermetic tradition’, magic remained a theoretical exercise for Breton (and in his Surrealism), and...
something always located in a historical past and cultural margin, as I will argue in the second part of this chapter. The second generation Surrealists discussed here, on the other hand, none of whom were originally French, located magic in their practising present. Perhaps they felt less bound to Breton’s traditionally French erudition and therefore more free to experiment with esotericism on their own terms.

**Esotericism in Surrealism on the eve of the War: the Surrealists despite Breton**

The esoterically galvanising incident for Victor Brauner was the loss of his eye in 1938, discussed in the previous chapter, which was an incident of great surrealist prophetic value that also served as a turning point in his life [plate III]. While Brauner had been interested in spiritualist phenomena, mediumship and some elements of alchemy since the early 1930s, his attitude had been permeated by irony; but the accident, in combination with the very swift canonisation of it as prophetic objective chance by Mabille in ‘L’Œil du peintre’, changed his attitude drastically to one of complete sympathy. Brauner considered that now indeed he had gained the capacity to become a visionary of other realms.

Brauner’s self-perception as a seer can be seen as a culmination of the surrealist fascination with inner and/or alternative sight, which started with the celebration of the dream and inner landscapes viewed with closed eyes in the early 1920s, and continued and expanded in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the emphasis upon seers and clairvoyants. However, whereas becoming blind had been used metaphorically, it had become reality for Brauner, whereby he also really became a seer, he felt.

Brauner’s obsession with the incident’s symbolic role in his life intensified in the early 1940s. He explored the notion of the somnambulist-medium as the female unconscious of the (male) painter, and in 1942 assumed all magic powers, originally associated with the feminine, into himself, thenceforth considering himself a magician. He continued to expand his esoteric studies, often supported by Mabille (by post, as Mabille was living in Haiti by that time), studying alchemy and magic, and (Romanian) folklore as well. These subjects, in combination with a fascination with transformation, such as he himself had undergone, led him to begin a series of werewolf-related art works in 1944, reaching a high point with the *Loup table* (*Wolf Table, 1939-1947*) [fig 61].

The Swiss artist Kurt Seligmann had joined the group around 1937. He already had a considerable knowledge of esotericism, and magic in particular, and was now conducting further research into mythology, folklore and comparative religion as well, in preparation for a book. *The Mirror of Magic* eventually came
out in 1948. As an artist Seligman is considered rather peripheral to Surrealism, but he did play an important role as knowledgeable advisor to various Surrealists about esoteric and occult matters, as will be touched upon later.

By the end of the 1930s two other new additions to the Paris group, Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford, were studying particle physics and n-dimensionality, including the occult fourth dimension as expounded in Tertium Organum by the Russian philosopher-cum-occultist Piotr Ouspensky (1878-1947). Ouspensky’s theories had had a considerable impact upon various artists two decades earlier; by the late 1930s his ideas were going through a revival in certain circles, usually in combination with those of George Gurdjieff (1877?-1949), of whom Ouspensky had been a disciple. Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959) had also made a very serious study of the fourth dimension, including its (alleged) occult side. Paalen left for Mexico in 1939, pursuing a career that took him outside of Surrealism and towards science, quantum mechanics in particular. Matta and Ford also moved away from Surrealism. Although Breton and other older Surrealists continued to appreciate Matta’s paintings, from 1943 onwards, Matta pursued an interest in contemporary physics as a way of distinguishing himself from Breton’s generation, and chose his own artistic trajectory.

Matta and Ford were occasionally joined in their studies by Remedios Varo, another new Surrealist. Many women joined the surrealist group during the 1930s, including Claude Cahun, Meret Oppenheim, Dora Maar, Leonor Fini, and Leonora Carrington. There are as many rationales for the influx of women artists in the 1930s as there are scholarly opinions; but it is clear that the broadening of many of Surrealism’s horizons during its Golden Age offered many possibilities to women artists too. Relevant here is the fact that Fini, Varo and Carrington specifically were interested in esotericism. It has been argued that Surrealism’s validation in the 1930s of the dream, the marvellous, myths and fairy tales, intuition, the irrational, magic, etc., opened the door for women artists. While I certainly do not want to discount this possibility, one should be wary of gender stereotyping in this regard. For all that such concepts, associated with the feminine since the Enlightenment, were indeed positively valued in Surrealism, woman herself remained an objectified being, and at that time few of the female Surrealists were valued as individual artists. (What’s more, such an argument raises the question of why so many male artists also joined in the 1930s.) The women were idealised as muses and seers, and gained an esoteric dimensions as they were turned into witches and/or fairies.

One of the very few women artists Breton wrote about was Carrington, whom he included in his Anthology of Black Humour. Even as he writes about her in glowing terms, she is idealised and identified as the witch from Michelet:
possessed of the womanly gifts of ‘the illuminism of lucid madness’ and ‘the sublime power of solitary conception’, and furthermore young and beautiful too—a quality he couldn’t care less about with respect to male artists. The resonances with Nadja, also a young and beautiful woman whose ‘madness’ Breton idealised, are obvious. One other woman is included in the Anthology, the young poet Gisèle Prassinos (1920): a ‘Queen Mab’, a ‘fairy’s midwife’, and a ‘young chimera’ according to Breton. Such descriptions prefigure the climax of Breton’s obsession with woman as fairy or sorceress in Arcanum 17 in 1943.

It has been suggested that the male partners of Varo and Carrington (Péret and Ernst respectively) introduced them to esoteric thought. While this is possible, both Varo and Carrington quickly took their esoteric studies into their own hands and developed them along uniquely personal lines. Fini, for her part, had arrived from Italy in 1937 without any (male) partner but with Michelet’s La Sorcière and Givry’s Witchcraft in hand, and seems to have developed a fascination with the occult and particularly witchcraft on her own; not exactly impressed with Breton’s autocratic style, she quickly moved beyond surrealist circles and followed her own trajectory. In the process of freeing themselves from their role as muse and developing their own artistic personality and style these artists appropriated the surrealist concept of woman as a mythical and sorcerous being for themselves. Combining Michelet’s identification of woman-as-witch with nature, the magical and irrational, they emancipated the witch from the fairy-like ideal into a powerful woman in control of her own magical and transformative powers.

After the Second World War, Varo resumed her occult studies in Mexico, where she had settled with a few other (former) Surrealists. She frequented a circle of followers of Gurdjieff, with Carrington and Ford occasionally joining them. Although Varo was influenced by Ouspenskian-Gurdjieffian theories on the evolution of consciousness and the occult fourth dimension, she and Carrington were not much impressed with the Mexican circle of Gurdjieffians. Carrington included barely hidden and quite unflattering descriptions of the group-leader and his followers in her literary works, such as The Hearing Trumpet. Both artists followed an individual path of esoteric (self-)study. This makes their esoteric interests less easily charted. Carrington’s work in particular became increasingly more esoteric in the 1950s and later, as has been demonstrated by a number of scholars. She became deeply interested in Goddess mythology after reading The White Goddess by Robert Graves (1948), while also being influenced by The Mirror of Magic by, and letters from, Seligmann. Obviously she had been introduced by the Surrealists to Grillot de Givry’s Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy in the 1930s, with which she became very familiar. Possibly inspired by Ernst to
pursue alchemy, she turned it into her own unique form of ‘alchemy in the kitchen’ or alchemical culinary inventiveness. Finally, her resettling in Mexico prompted a thorough study of Mexican folklore, and Aztec and Mayan symbolism and myths. Carrington combined all of this into a rather unique blend of magical mythology with a strong esoteric basis.

Both Carrington and Varo moved towards a form of magical realism that was in a small but essential way different from Surrealism. As Hille puts it, while the Surrealists looked with one eye upon the external world, and with the other eye, the closed one, upon the inner (viz. Brauner), Carrington and Varo had both eyes open. One eye looked through a telescope, or so Carrington stated, and the other through a microscope. For both artists the magical and marvellous was an unhidden part of the real, and they did not experience such a contradiction between the real and sur-real—and therefore the Bretonian urge to unite them—as the (male) Surrealists did, in particular those of the first generation. This might provide us with a possible insight into the question of why the esoterically inclined Surrealists of the second generation left Bretonian Surrealism behind: it would seem that for them the magical had become seamlessly part of the real to such an extent that they were now (magical) realists. Breton, on the other hand, continued to devise means to perceive the seams of the sur-real and overcome them—but not entirely, as that sublime point had to remain unattainable of course—which means that his surrealist yearning for the irrational and deviant remained rationalist at heart.

What about Breton?
The question is of course what effect, if any, these esoteric exploits of other Surrealists had on Breton, and secondarily, upon others in the group. Firstly, the artists discussed above by no means represented the whole group. Obviously Grillot de Givry’s Witchcraft and Michelet’s La Sorcière circulated among and were avidly read by almost the entire group, but these are lavishly illustrated, more or less readily accessible and generalising, and also a bit sensational, works, not really comparable to spiritual-philosophical treatises such as Tertium Organum. The theories of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, for instance, remained limited to Ford, Matta and Varo, which illustrates my second point, namely that specific esoteric study remained a private rather than collective matter. The overarching interest, under Breton’s direction and by the end of the decade roughly in concordance with the interest of the Bataillian group, was directed towards the magical primitive worldview and mythology.

Still, Breton was always very sensitive to what was going in his group, and we can be certain that he picked up on the interests of individuals. It is sometimes
mistakenly stated that Breton included a story by Gurdjieff in his Anthology of Black Humour, namely ‘Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson’. While he did indeed consider it, he chose in the end not to include it for ‘obvious reasons’; I assume those to be the spiritual/religious content of Gurdjieff’s teachings. The fact that Breton only ever considered that one story, and furthermore for an anthology of the absurd, bizarre and intractable, shows the light in which he viewed Gurdjieff. Still, it seems probable that the interest that Varo and others showed in Gurdjieff’s ideas led him to consider the story. Their relocation to Mexico, alongside their theoretical distancing from the movement, spelt the end of any possible influence, if there had ever been one. After the War Gurdjieff and his theories made one other appearance in the discourse of Bretonian Surrealism, in a critical piece full of scorn for these ‘spurious forms of spiritual revelation’. 

Perhaps the question should be rephrased so as to ask to what extent Breton was even interested in the particular esoteric exploits of these artists. Let me provide an example. In ‘The Most Recent Tendencies in Surrealist Painting’ (1939), he discussed Matta, Ford, Paalen and Seligmann, besides Dominguez and Brauner. He mentions that Matta and Ford were exploring the fourth dimension in painting and appears to more or less co-opt it for Surrealism. There is no reference at all to anything esoteric, or even spiritual or mythical, however; instead Breton considers the fourth dimension in the context of contemporary physics and quantum mechanics, further linking it to Cubism and the cubist distortion of space. He praises Brauner for undertaking a ‘transition to the fourth dimension’ on the ‘psychic’ plane, even, by confronting ‘secondary’ (trance) states. As the rest of the essay discusses automatism and its revival by means of the new techniques of these artists, it seems to me that Breton was still viewing these artist and their work through the lens of the late 1920s/early 1930s, validating new work and new theories by embedding them in the essential framework of Surrealism, built of automatism and clairvoyance.

In general the esoteric studies of others affected Breton very little at that time, just before 1940. This does not mean that he was not concerned with the ‘occultation’ of Surrealism; on the contrary, he was, but still in the sense of a darkening of and restricting access to Surrealism. During the late 1930s he worked first on the Trajectory of the Dreams (1938) and then on the Anthology of Black Humour (1940). As mentioned earlier, a few esoteric names are among those included in these anthologies, such as Paracelsus, but overall esotericism is not the focus of these anthologies at all. Still, only a couple of years later Breton would take up the study of esotericism, and I find it quite probable that the explorations of the subject by the others in 1938-39 did inspire him in one way or another, at least enough for him to discuss esoteric matters with Seligmann in
1941-2 and embrace Viatte’s books in 1943. The first steps on the road to a full endorsement of esotericism that he would be travelling after 1943 were taken in the early days of the Second World War, when he found himself in Marseille—home of playing cards as well as a famous deck of tarots—reading Novalis, the inventor of art magic.
II. In exile

The Marseille Game

In 1940 various intellectuals and artists, including Breton and his family, were staying at the Villa ‘Air-Bel’ in Marseille while trying to obtain safe passage out of Europe. Many Surrealists were staying nearby and visited, and to pass the time they played games, wrote poems, and made art works together. Among the things created was a deck of cards, often called the ‘surrealist Tarot’ or even ‘Breton Tarot’, or simply the ‘Jeu (game) de Marseille’, as I will refer to it too. The deck’s four suits are love, dream, revolution, and knowledge, symbolised by a red flame, a black star, a red (bloody) wheel, and a black lock. The Marseille group designed aces and court cards. The court consists of genius, mermaid, and magician, who are identified as heroes from the surrealist Pantheon; for instance, the German poet Novalis is the magician of love, in a design by Masson [plate XVI]. The mermaid of dreams is (Lewis Carroll’s) Alice, designed by Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982) [fig 62]. Surrealism’s favourite medium Hélène Smith is the mermaid of knowledge, by Victor Brauner, while Breton himself designed the magician of the same suit, Paracelsus [plate VII, fig 63]. Jacques Hérold (1910-1987) designed the marquis de Sade as the genius of revolution [fig 64].

The original Tarot de Marseille is a famous format of tarot deck often considered of ‘ancient’ origin in occult sources. The tarot differs from an ordinary deck in that, besides the four suits of swords, cups, batons and coins, it incorporates a fifth suit of twenty-one trump cards, known as the ‘Major Arcana’, as well as an unaligned card, ‘the Fool’. The Frenchman Antoine Court de Gébelin (1719-1784) first described the cards as repositories of age-old esoteric wisdom, specifically of ancient Egyptian origin, in Le Monde Primitif (1781). Etteila (Jean-Baptiste Alliette, 1738-1791) further explored the idea that they were a synthesis of all primal knowledge and provided an esoteric interpretation of the tarot in Etteilla, ou Maniere de se Récréer avec le Jeu de Cartes Nommées Tarots (1770, 1783-85). They were finally popularised as esoteric repositories of ancient wisdom by Éliphas Lévi in Dogme et Rituel (1855). Their popularity was further bolstered by Tarot of the Bohemians (1889) by the French occultist Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916). In the twentieth century, Marseille was a centre of card production and home to the by now famous Marseille Tarot. While he was stranded there, Breton became interested in cards, including but not limited to tarot. He researched the origin of card games at the city library, and obviously was inspired to suggest creating a surrealist game.

The surrealist Marseille Game is recurrently called a tarot game. One can assume that many Surrealists had some basic familiarity with the tarot, primarily
because tarots were discussed in Grillot de Givry’s *Witchcraft*, the surrealist handbook to any- and everything esoteric. Furthermore the cover of *Minotaure* 3-4 (1933), designed by André Derain, featured four Major Arcana cards, while a very brief piece by him discussing the four aces and suits of the tarot was included in the same issue. Scholars associate the Marseille Game with the interest in occult cartomancy on the part of Surrealists such as Brauner, Carrington, Varo, and Breton; in Breton’s case based primarily on his later publication *Arcanum 17*. To some, the game’s very name ‘Marseille’ seems to allude to an occult character too, as does the fact that one of the court cards is a magician, and it is even argued that the four suits point to an occult origin. But, as Constantini has shown, the surrealist game is no occult tarot, as it was based upon the Marseille tradition of games of chance with ordinary playing cards, not on any divinatory or occult games. To start with, it lacks the Major Arcana, essential to any tarot. Also, in a brief description of the deck Breton related it explicitly to regular cards, stating that it should be suitable for ‘all the traditional games’. The fact that the traditional suit colours of red and black had been retained also points to this; at the same time the associations generated by the court cards of surrealist heroes would add additional depth to the games and make for a distinctly surrealist element to them. Furthermore, Henri Béhar has shown that Breton acted upon his interest in the occult tarot—which was kindled in Marseille, it would seem—only after his arrival in New York in 1941, when he turned to Seligmann with a request to procure some notes for him on the topic of tarot cards. This sudden interest in the tarot was reflected in *Arcanum 17* and the 1947 exhibition, as I will discuss below; after that his interest in the tarot rather waned, although Breton would return to the topic (briefly) in *L’Art magique* (1957). Moreover, the Marseille Game stands in a long tradition of art works involving cards (and dice too), a tradition evident in Surrealism as well as, for instance, in Cubism.

Finally, I would argue that the game may have been a subversive attempt to respond to, or even influence, the events of the time. ‘Historiographers of the playing card are agreed that the modifications it has undergone over the centuries have always been linked with great military setbacks’, Breton wrote around that time. The Surrealists considerably modified not only the most important cards but also the suits, possibly to reflect France’s recent ‘great military setback’, but perhaps even to effect such a ‘setback’ for the German occupying forces. This remains speculative, obviously, but it would be a logical extension of the surrealist notion of the corresponding universe of the 1930s, as well as a means to address the feelings of powerlessness that haunted many in Marseille.
Magus of love: Novalis

One of the most important cards in the Marseille Game, in my opinion, is that of Novalis, the magician of love [plate XVI]. It testifies to the important role to which Breton had elevated Novalis rather suddenly, and which would prove to be far-reaching. The fascination with Novalis as well as the reappraisal of German Romanticism generally in the second half of the 1930s, paved the way for the surrealist identification of poetry (and art) with magic, and of magic with love, together with a growing interest in esoteric matters generally, during the Second World War.

Novalis (Georg von Hardenberg, 1772-1801) was an early Romantic poet whose oeuvre consists primarily of aphorisms (or fragments), as well as poetry, two novels, and essays. He was familiar with numerous esoteric texts concerning alchemy, hermeticism and theosophy, and while his esoteric views permeate his entire body of work, the aphorisms are the most overtly esoteric; they have also left the to deepest marks on later (French) Romanticism and Symbolism.61 Novalis had already been on Breton’s radar in the first Manifesto, no doubt by way of Baudelaire’s references to him,62 but references to Novalis are quite rare until the end of the 1930s. Breton may have been pointed more decisively towards German Romanticism generally by a 1937 essay by Albert Béguin (1901-1957), and by his book L’Ame romantique (1937, 2nd edition 1939), both dealing with the unconscious, dreams and German Romanticism.63 Béguin was known in surrealist circles and published in Minotaure, for instance in 1938 on the androgyne and Balzac, the first discussion of the androgyne and the perfect soul mate within the discourse of Surrealism.64 In fact the entry on Novalis in the Surrealist Dictionary (1938) directly quotes several sentences from Béguin’s 1937 article.65 Béguin’s detailed discussion of Novalis and the considerable impact of his ideas upon Baudelaire and Rimbaud surely prompted Breton to make a beeline for the poet’s collected fragments, Das Algemeine Brouillon.66 Obviously the very fact that Novalis and his peers were German acted as an extra incentive to Breton, who gladly went against the prevailing French political tide of the time and included a number of Germans in the Anthology of Black Humour as well as in the Trajectoire du rêve, a work that in itself already reflects the growing surrealist interest in (German and French) Romanticism and Symbolism.67

In my opinion it was inevitable that the Surrealists would find their way eventually to Novalis, who is considered ‘the epitome of a seer poet’ after all.68 A radical concept of universal correspondences is essential to Novalis’ worldview, ensuring that Breton and his fellows must have felt at home with it. The Surrealists found further literary support for their developing corresponding surrealist universe in the works of Baudelaire and de Nerval, for instance, who in turn were
deeply indebted to Novalis. These and several other French Romantics and Symbolists were furthermore partly inspired by Swedenborg.\textsuperscript{69} Even though there is hardly any direct Swedenborgianism in Bretonian Surrealism, its latent presence is felt all the more, and was mediated through these poets.\textsuperscript{70} One should note that Breton’s interest in Swedenborg was sparked only at this relatively late stage, at which point the surrealist corresponding universe had already been constructed. His interest would find some brief expression in 1947, as will be discussed later, but even that is one-sided and only within the larger context of Romantic poetry. Therefore, where others see an influence of Swedenborg,\textsuperscript{71} I discern an influence of the Romantic and Symbolist poets and their Swedenborgian ideas—an influence that consisted, first and foremost, of references to the man and his ideas. As a result, surrealist Swedenborgianism consists only of references to and quotations from and about Swedenborg.\textsuperscript{72}

Novalis considered poetry to be a magical art. Of course the Bretonian Surrealists had experienced poetry as a transformative art from the outset, as Alchemy of the Word, and in line with rather standard Romantic practice they considered the poet, or artist, to be a seer, as I have argued in chapter three. Still, the notion that the poet was really a sort of magus\textsuperscript{73} had always remained somewhat in the surrealist background. Now with Novalis, whose works in fact lie at the very basis of the Romantic idea that the poet-seer is a magician,\textsuperscript{74} and keeping further in mind that magic was already very high on the surrealist agenda in the 1930s, this notion came to be quite prominent and would lead to a full-blown self-identification of the surrealist as a magician only a few years later. Breton certainly fulfilled his function of gatekeeper in this regard, introducing many Surrealists to Novalis’ thought and particularly to his idea of poetry (or art) as magic.\textsuperscript{75} Brauner, for instance, increasingly began to identify with Novalis, and was prompted to reframe his visual art as magical too.\textsuperscript{76}

Further similarities between the views of Novalis and that of the Surrealists are striking. As far as Novalis was concerned, will and thought are the same—will is ‘the magical, powerful faculty of thought’—and will/thought is the artist-magician’s instrument specifically.\textsuperscript{77} One can see how tiny a step it is to the surrealist aphorism that ‘once something is thought, it is real’. Last but certainly not least, Novalis considered love to be ‘the basis for the possibility of magic’. ‘Love works magically’.\textsuperscript{78} What’s more, love ‘is the final goal of world history—the One of the Universe’;\textsuperscript{79} one can hardly cut any closer to the love-obsessed heart of Surrealism. Fittingly enough Novalis was accorded the position of magus of love in the Marseille Game, accompanied by Baudelaire as genius and the Portuguese Nun (reputed author of five passionate seventeenth century
love-letters) as mermaid. Love is the game’s principal suit, desire after all being the omnipotent force that operates the surrealist corresponding universe. In Masson’s design Novalis looks upwards to a breast, below which we see the sign of the half moon, also referring to femininity. The poet holds a five-pointed star in his hand, symbolising the unity of male and female as well as the role of man within the cycle of the universe, while the flame- and leaf-symbols may also carry gendered meanings. If poetry is a magical art, love for Woman and the feminine part of the world, of nature and of one’s self is its functioning mechanism. Simplified, poetry = magic, while magic = love (or desire). It is my argument in this entire chapter that this simple equation, which is a condensation of Romantic thought and goes back directly to Novalis, formed the basis for all engagements of Bretonian Surrealism with esotericism during the War and for the rest of the movement’s existence after.

In exile abroad: the artist as magician

Many Surrealists spent time in the United States in the early 1940s, and an interest in esotericism permeated the New York group. This paralleled the Mexico group (Varo, Péret, Paalen and later Carrington), and also the interests of Brauner, who had remained in France. An important role may have been played by Seligmann, whose already extensive and constantly growing knowledge of the history of magic in particular and esotericism generally may have been crucial to the blossoming esoteric interests of many Surrealists, and other artists too. Besides advising Breton on the tarot and other esoteric matters, he seems to have discussed magic with Ernst, and certainly corresponded about such things with Carrington and possibly other Surrealists. He also kept up a correspondence with Pierre Mabille, another knowledgeable authority on magic, in Haiti. Seligmann serialised material from his history of magic in View, an American avant-garde art journal (1940-1947) closely related to the French Surrealists. His essays in View touched upon a range of esoteric topics and may have introduced other artists, not necessarily surrealist, to such subjects. In ‘Heritage of the Accursed’, for instance, Seligmann discussed among other things the Gnostics’ rehabilitation of the serpent as an emblem of knowledge, the symbol of the Ouroboros and its importance to the alchemists (Flamel and Basil Valentine are named), as well as some other alchemical lore, including the notion that the philosopher’s stone is born from the union of the opposites Sun and Moon, or day and night, etc. Three alchemical illustrations and an illustration of the Gnostic emblem of the Ouroboros including the mystical term ‘abraxas’ accompany the essay.

In another essay Seligmann looked at Jung’s alchemical theories, drawing parallels between spiritual alchemy and the labour of the artist. This is one of the
few references to Jung and Jungian alchemy in a surrealist context. As a rule the Bretonian Surrealists rejected Jung as a reactionary and fascist sympathiser; the fact that they never abandoned their (Freudian) position that sexuality forms the basis of all action also obstructed adherence to later Jungian theory. Carrington is an exception; after she had moved to Mexico Jungian alchemical symbolism became very important for her. Connections have also been made between the extensive alchemical work of Ernst and Jung’s ideas, but the basis for Ernst’s psychological alchemy was mainly Probleme der Mystik und Ihre Symbolik by Herbert Silberer (1914); his exploration of Silberer’s and later Freudian ideas far outweighed any engagement with Jungian theory.

Still, even though it is clear that Seligmann was a source of information on esoteric matters, nothing suggests he gave direction to anyone’s interests and we should not overestimate his role. As shown above, many Surrealists already held particular fascinations before coming to the US, and a general interest in tarot, magic and alchemy permeated the group, while artists such as Matta and Ford would continue to explore their ideas in a direction of their own. Also, many Surrealists were in contact with Mabille, another source of esoteric information, and there were some exchanges too with the Mexico group, where magic and primitivism were also a topic of interest.

View published an interview with Breton in which he referred to the European vogue for Nostradamus on the eve of the War, and the ‘laughable interpretations’ his work gave rise to—without mentioning that he himself had also been reading Nostradamus recently and under the same external pressure of war, albeit briefly. Undertaking some Nostradamus-inspired numerological prophecy of his own, Breton predicted the end of the war for April 11, 1946. Even though the tone of the piece suggests that this prediction was made in a spirit of black humour, there might be a serious undertone present nevertheless; had Breton not (correctly, in his own opinion) predicted the escalation of hostilities in 1939? As we know, surrealist predictions can only be recognised as such a posteriori, and for obvious reasons this prediction was not included.

The refugee Surrealists’ own journal was VVV (1942-1944). Its subtitle read ‘poetry, plastic arts, anthropology, sociology, psychology’, making it clear that VVV continued where Minotaure had left off, taking further the 1930s fascination with tribal peoples, the ‘primitive’ mind, and that mind’s heterodox and magical worldview(s). Of course the crisis and the surrealist diaspora introduced some subtle but important changes into surrealist primitivism. For instance, the tribal art of Native Americans, Hopi Indians in particular, came to replace that of French Polynesia and the African colonies. Breton’s friendly relationship with the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), whom he had met on the
crossing from Marseille to Martinique, certainly sustained his fascination with ethnological matters.\footnote{94}

More important is the fact that the notion of magic and its role in the life of the artist and the world generally underwent a significant change. Based on the Romantic idea of the poet-magician, now at the forefront of the surrealist mind because of the influence of Novalis, and fuelled further by the concept that the poet/artist should work towards effecting change in the world—a central surrealist concern, encapsulated by the mottos ‘change life’ and ‘transform the world’), both now more urgent than ever—the surrealist artists had by now become full-blown magicians, effecting change through their art by way of their magical worldview. The development of the notion of the artist-magician in Surrealism has been explored extensively by Clio Mitchell; here I will keep to the essentials.\footnote{95}

The personal view of oneself as artist-as-magician was expressed most strongly by Ernst and Brauner.\footnote{96} In an excerpt from his autobiography published in View (1942), Ernst explicitly assigned himself the role of artist-magician.\footnote{97} He refers to various magical events during his childhood, and places himself in a tradition of magicians from Cologne, ranging all the way back to ‘that splendid magician Cornelius Agrippa’, and including ‘Albert the Great’ and ‘three other magi: Jasper, Melchior and Balthasar’.\footnote{98} He continues,

\begin{quote}
(1914) Max Ernst dies the 1\textsuperscript{st} of August 1914. He resuscitated the 11\textsuperscript{th} of November 1918 as a young man aspiring to become a magician and to find the myth of his time.\footnote{99}
\end{quote}

It is telling that in this autobiographical piece, published during the Second World War, Ernst related his magical aspirations so clearly to the First World War. Wars are times an artist feels perhaps most ineffective (or is proven to be so), while such crises are simultaneously the moment the change an artist-magician would effect is most needed, as I mentioned above. The second important thing to note is myth; Ernst clearly held to the surrealist party line that myth and magic are indivisibly connected. As we will see, that idea was not shared by the American artists.

In a text contributed to VVV Brauner argued for locating his art within the domains of magic, hermeticism, alchemy, the fantastic, the enchanting, the mysterious, the prophetical, the mythical and the primitive too (among other things!), thereby emphasising the interrelatedness of all these domains and essentially recapturing the nineteenth century discourse that related all these more or less marginal domains collectively to the side of the irrational and
deviant. He too positioned himself as an artist-magician, reasoning that the artist-magician would use the unconscious impact of their art to change the general public’s worldview to a magical one.100

It was not only the Surrealists who identified art with magic and magic with a particular, irrational, intuitive and/or subconscious means of change. An editorial from one of View’s editors, poet and film critic Parker Tyler (1904-1974), can be taken as representative of the position of the American artists. Contemporary artists are seers, Tyler contents, who are ‘for the magic view of life’. ‘The artist should be understood as a contemporary magician’, while magic is furthermore positioned as something that unites and simultaneously supersedes the disciplines of science and art. The relevant question for artists is not whether one is ‘a poet or scientist’, but how one should ‘wield power’ and ‘influence’.101 It would seem that American and French Surrealist avant-garde are in agreement, yet there is one very important element where the opinion of the View-crowd differed from that of the Surrealists: myth. Specifically, the issue ‘that the role of the artist consists in creating new myths’—which is the quintessential core of Breton’s opinion of the artist’s role.102 Myths, Tyler argues, are not progressive, firstly because they are ‘of unquestionable historic significance’ (already a bad thing), but secondly and importantly because of the unsavoury political overtones: ‘the forces of reaction [Hitler, among others], not we, … cling to the mythical explanation of the world!’103 Very much in keeping with the spirit of the period, myths are equated with escapism, to which View opposes ‘imagination and insight’.

Surrealist myth—primitives, magicians, fools
Yet for the Bretonian Surrealists magic hardly functioned without myth. In the midst of exile and war Breton wrote ‘Prolegomena to the Third Manifesto, or Not’ (1942), the tentative title of which reflects the uncertainty of the period. ‘Man must flee the ridiculous web that has been spun around him’, Breton states, ‘so-called present reality with the prospect of a future reality that is hardly better.’104 To escape this web, he offers myth. Myth provides, or even is a collection of, modes of knowledge by which to manipulate reality; a definition which clearly harks back to myth’s function as it was formulated in the 1930s.105 Perhaps to expand the construct of surrealist myth, he introduced mythical beings, the ‘Great Transparent Ones’.106 Breton provides citations of Novalis, William James and the microbiologist Emile Ducleaux that are all abstract philosophical speculations on the possibility of certain beings to whom mankind would be parasites, or like pets, or like bacteria.107 In other words, the Great Transparent Ones are suspiciously unfathomable and beyond mankind’s ken; therefore whether they even exist or
How myth and magic worked together was explained by Benjamin Péret—one of the staunchest Surrealists anyway and by 1943, besides Breton and Ernst, the only other first generation Surrealist remaining—in the abridged version of the introduction to his anthology of Latin-American folklore, *Anthologie des mythes, légendes et contes populaires d’Amérique*. Magic is proclaimed to be the essence of poetry, while religion and science are renounced for having destroyed the magical worldview. The marvellous is everywhere, Péret insists, and poetry, myth and liberation are all of the same kind. Indeed he expresses a fundamental surrealist view, identical to Breton’s: poetry and revolution are inseparably connected, the state of the world and the human condition demand a new myth, and recourse to the irrational and its ‘primitive’ magical worldview is the preferred, perhaps the only, means to that end. Myth, magic and primitivism are emancipatory and liberating, exactly because of their antithetical (read: rebellious) status vis-à-vis rationalism, which had, after all, caused the current crisis. While this identification of magic with liberation and revolution had been latent in Surrealism before, it became explicit now and would remain so for the following decades. Péret’s uncompromising stance was lauded in a very brief note signed by Breton, Ernst, Brauner, Mabille and many other Surrealists from across the globe, and Breton, at least, would never deviate from it.

Péret was certainly aware of the appropriation of myth by Hitler and other dictatorial leaders in Europe, and it is clear that he chose to maintain his allegiance to it despite that. The View-crowd, however, considered Bretonian Surrealism’s ‘desire for a new myth… reactionary’; a view of myth and of Surrealism’s support for it that foreshadows the critical reactions to Surrealism of leftist intellectuals in the European post-war climate.

If myth is a structured form of the primitive worldview, magic is a form of knowing and thereby of affecting the world, which supersedes previous forms of knowledge. Those were art and science in the opinion of the View-crowd, but in the view of the Surrealists, science and religion. As a side note, this is a clear reflection of the discussion on the nature of science and religion and the role of magic in (n)either or both that had been ongoing since early Modernism. As Ernst, phrased it, magic ‘is the means of approaching the unknown by other ways than those of science and religion.’ ‘Approaching the unknown’ clearly harkens back to the early days of Surrealism, when they all gazed into the abyss and crossed ‘dangerous territories’ in long sessions of automatic writing, lucid dreaming, or *fugues automatiques*. As I have argued in the previous chapters, during the late 1920s and throughout the 30s the Surrealists developed their own particular rapport with the world; by 1943 this alternative way of knowing and
thereby influencing (sur)realities had come to be called ‘magic’ for good. What do the ‘arch-sorcerer’ Agrippa and the artist-magician Max Ernst share?, Breton asked in his introduction to Ernst’s autobiography. The answer: ‘omniscience’.117

That this perception of magic was based upon a continuation of earlier surrealist thought also becomes clear if we take another look at Péret’s text. Péret likens the magician first to the poet, a standard Romantic and avant-garde move, but furthermore to the madman, a move that frequently remains unmentioned but one I deem very important, as it testifies to the uniquely surrealist view of magic and the artist-magician.118 Péret was a great believer in automatism and retained automatic poetry as a subversive practice throughout his career.119 I think it is safe to say that Breton agreed completely with Péret’s equation of magician with poet with mad person, and we should bear in mind that the first definition of Surrealism—pure psychic automatism—was never superseded. His two great works written in exile, Arcanum 17 and the Ode to Fourier, both incorporated elements of automatic writing; Arcanum in particular was written in a trance state, a ‘state of grace’ no less: a state where outside and inside coincided.120 He had celebrated this state, an ‘original faculty present in primitives and children’, already in 1933 in ‘The Automatic Message’, making the point emphatically that ‘automatism is the only path that leads there.’121 In 1944 Breton cited this passage in its entirety and stated that ‘it is this faculty that today we should strive to re-create’. Even more, ‘the painter will fail in his human mission if he continues to widen the gulf between representation and perception instead of working toward their reconciliation, their synthesis.’122 Pure psychic automatism in poetry and painting, where inner and outer coincide, was therefore still his main objective. Finally, Breton’s devotion to the Compagnie d’Art Brut by the end of the decade, and celebration of naive artists and asylum art until the end of his life, testifies to the fact that he would never budge from his earlier standpoint that the expressions of marginal and naturally automatic groups such as ‘fools and clairvoyants’ should be considered authentically original poetry, true to the surrealist spirit.123 Clearly, therefore, for Breton too the Surrealist equalled the magician, the magician the primitive, and the primitive the mad person, and what they shared was magic.

What this means, I argue, is that in contrast to the practices of many others, Bretonian Surrealism retained the surrendering of self as a valid avenue of exploration, besides the magician’s avenue of conscious direction through will. Yes, thought-will was the magician’s instrument, as Novalis had decreed, but true to the surrealist spirit thought was not only intellectual, educated and rational, but unconscious too. As argued in chapter two, the Surrealists (ideally, of course) embody both subject and object in and for themselves: they are medium and
hypnotiser, aliéné and doctor, perhaps even Spiritualist and occultist, in one. The difference from the American art practice but also from contemporary practice in occultism, indeed perhaps in esotericism since the Enlightenment, is apparent.

If artist-magicians are omniscient, one wonders whether they were possibly omnipotent too. The one omnipotent force in Surrealism, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is desire. Of course, the motivating agent behind the magical worldview is love/desire, and in the end, desire is the motor of magic, (possibly) effecting change. As a Freudian primal urge, it is furthermore the agent in which the Surrealists happily dissolves their selves. And, again as per Novalis, all-powerful love/desire is furthermore the catalyst of poetry. Its redemptive power was the key-ingredient of Breton’s war-time poetical novel Arcanum 17, his most esoteric work.

Arcanum 17: magical woman to the rescue
Among the oeuvre of Breton, Arcanum 17 is one of his least studied works, even though (or probably rather, because) it holds a pivotal position in Breton’s development towards a deeper investment in esotericism. It has been called Breton’s most esoteric or occult work; some critics have interpreted it as the final sign of Breton’s ‘conversion’ to esotericism, while it has even been termed his ‘Great Work’ in the alchemical sense of the word. In my opinion, based partly on that of contemporary Surrealist Michael Löwy, this novel is Breton’s most mythological work.

The book’s manifold nature may also have added to the scholarly unwillingness to engage it. Narrative elements and autobiography are combined with reflections on poetry and politics; and myths, fairy tales, personal ruminations, mythical thought, esoteric references and polemical disclaimers are constantly intermingled. Yet for all its complexity, Arcanum 17 is essentially a poetic novel about the redeeming power of love. Breton had been quite adrift in 1942 and 43: deeply depressed by the Second World War, stranded in a foreign country the language of which he did not (and refused to) speak, estranged from wife and child, financially in dire straits and deprived of the comfort of a large company of Surrealists. He was ‘saved’ by love in the form of Chilean-born writer and artist Elisa Bindorff-Claro (1906-2000). They met in New York in 1943; by 1944 they were travelling in the Canadian province of Québec together, where Breton wrote Arcanum 17. In 1945, by now married, they visited reserves of the Native American Hopi, Pueblo and Zuni tribes in Nevada, where Breton wrote Ode to Fourier. Breton’s idea that Bindorff rescued him from his dark despairing days is mirrored in Arcanum 17 and its female protagonists, who all function as stand-ins for his new love.
That love takes centre stage in this novel is nothing new; throughout his life—as represented in his books, that is—all Breton’s encounters were driven by desire. The marvellous encounter with and desire for Woman, who for a time becomes Breton’s woman, forms the red thread in Nadja, Communicating Vessels, Mad Love, and Arcanum 17; and even though Delcourt, Muzard, Hugo, Lamba, and lastly Bindorff were all real women, they were always depicted as idealised beings performing idealised roles. In every case the ideal woman had something magical about her: she was enchanting, fairy-like, a sorceress, a witch. Such identification with magical creatures in fact reaches its apex in Arcanum 17. Bindorff assumes all the roles of surrealist Woman, such as the muse, the femme fatale and the child-woman, but also the ‘femme-voyant’ or seer, ‘femme-fée’ or fairy, and ‘femme-sorcière’, the witch or sorceress.129 Where more generic spiritual themes such as clairvoyance and predestination (objective chance) can be found in Nadja and Mad Love respectively, the esoteric side of woman and her occult powers are much more prominently present in A17, even emphatically so.

Deeply convinced that the ideas of man had led to the war, Breton proclaimed those of womankind as the only alternative:

the time has come to value the ideas of woman at the expense of those of man, whose bankruptcy is coming to pass fairly tumultuously today. It is artists, in particular, who must take the responsibility, ... to maximize the importance of everything that stands out in the feminine world view in contrast to the masculine.... 130

While this might seem quite a change from the surrealist misogynist attitude of the first two decades, the sudden validation of Woman and her world view is premised upon an understanding of her as Other; for the very same reason that ‘primitives’ and ‘fools’ experience a different world because of their magical worldview, woman with her irrational mind perceives the world in a deviant way too, and one that the male artist should aspire to. The majority of things, persons, and creatures discussed in A17 are Other and belong therefore to the irrational, feminine side of things which counterbalances the narrow-minded (masculine) rationalist realism that caused the crisis. There is a considerable esoteric dimension to this: as deviant, the feminine is not only identified with the irrational but also with the mystical and occult. The two powers most exclusively associated with the feminine in Surrealism are mediumistic clairvoyance and witchcraft. This reflects the nineteenth century identification of the feminine with occult powers, particularly passive ones, but also, indeed, the centuries old identification of woman as witch.131 The (male) Surrealist, with Michelet’s La Sorcière in one hand,
and the publications about psychodynamic research with (women) mediums and patients in the other hand, considered any and all women instinctive clairvoyants and sorceresses, ‘automatic witches’ as it were, who could not but perform acts of sorcery from their (unconscious) nature. The male surrealist seer had appropriated woman’s clairvoyant powers in the early 1930s, and by the 1940s the male artist-magician had further assumed all feminine magical powers into himself as well. The same should happen with the ideas of womankind, Breton argued; as the feminine worldview offered such a valuable and viable alternative, the Surrealist should appropriate it ‘to the point of jealously making it one’s own’. Most important is that woman is powerful. The novel’s overarching theme is Woman’s mysterious powers of creation, salvation and resurrection, and her role as harbinger of hope and even redeemer of the world. The three major characters in A17, the alter-egos of Bindorff, are the fairy Melusina, the Egyptian goddess Isis (accompanied by her husband, Osiris), and the figure of the Star, the tarot’s seventeenth ‘arcanum’ or seventeenth card of the Major Arcana.

Melusina, to start with, is a hybrid fey creature who every Saturday turns into a serpent or fish below the waist, according to the legend as told by French court writer Jean d’Arras in 1392. She exemplifies the woman as Other: she may look like a woman, but she is in fact Nature embodied, an undine or elemental spirit of water. She is the enticing woman whom man cannot do without but of whose secretive mysterious powers he will ever remain in awe. Breton may have picked up Melusina from Romantic German and Romantic and decadent French literature; for instance from Zola’s novel Nana (1880). In contrast to Zola’s demonic and destructive Melusina-figure, however, Breton’s Melusina is a good fairy: innocent, beautiful, and forever young, the child-woman. Breton further inverts the traditional ending of the fairy tale by allowing Melusina—usually exiled to the fay realm—to be healed, redeemed and active in the human world.

We should note her identification as water-spirit or undine. Lamba had been identified with an undine too (in Mad Love; see also [fig 52]), whereas Breton had made of Nadja a ‘spirit of the air’ (or sylph). There are very strong resonances with German Romanticism here, in which the type of the undine, a female spirit, had been a distinct aspect. In turn, this reflected an interest in Paracelsian ideas, specifically as propounded in Comte de Gabalis (1670) by Nicolas Pierre Henri Montfaucon de Villars (1635-1673). Villars drew upon various esoteric sources for his novel, foremost the pseudo-Paracelsian Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus (1591), and propounded the notion that the elemental beings—nymphs or undines, sylphs, gnomes and salamanders—needed to ‘marry’ a human being to become immortal. Several novels by later
authors were more or less directly inspired by Comte de Gabalis.\textsuperscript{143} Tragic love stories of beautiful elemental beings, including undines such as Melusina, who depended upon a human man to ‘love and marry’ them (i.e., have intercourse) to attain eternal life, set the tone in Romantic literature.\textsuperscript{144} Breton picked up on the tone and upon love as the theme of these stories, but again inverted an essential element, in this case the dependency. It is now he who is dependent upon Melusina (Bindorff) to transform him and thereby save him from annihilation.

The emphasis upon fairy tales and fairy-figures not only exemplifies the deeper investment of Breton in German Romanticism, but also the internalisation of its themes, including those with (latent as well as explicit) esoteric overtones. At the Villa ‘Air-Bel’ Breton had composed a long poem the title of which, Fata Morgana, points to another figure who is also a fairy, water-spirit, and woman, namely Morgan le Fay.\textsuperscript{145} Bearing in mind that the one female court card of the surrealist Marseille Game was the siren, it becomes clear that water-connected females who lure men with their wiles were much on Breton’s mind. Yet they are not the traditional agents of doom but rather of rescue, and as such represent the overarching view that recourse to the irrational was the only means forward for the Surrealists and possibly the world at large.

A17’s second female character symbolises the role of woman as agent in the creative process of man, she who resurrects man (as a poet, in Breton’s case—note that it is not physical but intellectual salvation he is concerned with).\textsuperscript{146} She is described as ‘the queen’ ‘covered by a veil woven from stars and fastened with a moon at the junction of her thighs’,\textsuperscript{147} and it becomes clear that this is Isis when Breton very briefly retells the legend of Isis reuniting her slain husband Osiris with his body parts.\textsuperscript{148} The dichotomy between light and dark plays a gendered role in A17, with woman being identified with the light and man with the dark, another inversion of tradition. Breton, who would be the Osiris character reunited with his creativity as Bindorff is identified as Isis, quotes Éliphas Lévi: ‘Osiris is a black god’.\textsuperscript{149} He would have welcomed this identification with someone ‘noir’: not only because of his dark personal circumstances, but also, and possibly mainly, because of his admiration for things ‘noir’, such as the ‘roman noir’ (Gothic novels) and ‘humour noir’. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this interest in and admiration for ‘dark’ things had started in the 1930s, and may well have been part of the on-going effort to ‘occult’ Surrealism.\textsuperscript{150}

The Star, finally, is the harbinger of hope. Continuing the light vs. dark/woman vs. man dichotomy, she is the light-bearing woman, the beautiful idealised creature who lights man’s dark path—after all, woman ‘casts the strongest light in [man’s] dreams’ [plate XIV].\textsuperscript{151} The Star, too, is identified as the beautiful child-woman that Melusina and Bindorff also are, indeed, all women: she is ‘Eve and
now all of womankind’, the ultimate femme-enfant,¹⁵² ‘the young sorceress of a Michelet with the eyes of heath’.¹⁵³ Breton initially provides a description of a card of the Star based on the Marseille-model [fig 65]. Against a backdrop of eight stars, a nude girl holds two urns, one silver and one golden, from which issue two streams; on one side of her, a rose and butterfly, on the other a tree.¹⁵⁴ Breton gives a personal symbolical interpretation of such iconographical motifs as the two streams of water, the rose, butterfly and the tree.¹⁵⁵ He interprets the bright middle star as the hope-bringing stars Sirius (the Dog star), Lucifer the Light Bearer, and Venus the Morning Star all in one.¹⁵⁶ According to common interpretation the Star already symbolises hope and regeneration, but Breton intensifies that to mean physical and spiritual rebirth as well. The Star is ‘Eternal Youth, Isis, the Myth of Resurrection, etc.’¹⁵⁷

In keeping with the prominent theme of the tarot in the novel, the first edition of it was accompanied by four hors-textes in the form of tarot cards designed by Matta: the Lovers, the Chariot, the Stars and the Moon (1945).¹⁵⁸ I have not found any reliable sources explaining the choice of these particular cards, so allow me some interpretation of my own. The moon is a traditionally feminine symbol, pointing to womankind’s redeeming qualities in general, while the child-woman Star symbolises all women (hence the plural stars) who are stars and Bindorff in particular [fig 66]. The Chariot is a masculine card related to strife, and may refer to Breton, his personal struggles, the current European conflict caused by the predominance of masculine ideas, even to men generally, and possibly all of those things combined. The Lovers, finally, doubtlessly symbolise the happy and redeeming union of woman and man, Bindorff and Breton, as lovers.

**Arcane esotericisms**

The esoteric elements referred to in A17 include the tarot card of the Star, the occultist Éliphas Lévi, Satan and Lucifer, the undine, and Isis and Osiris, while Paracelsus is mentioned once, as are Swedenborg and the Kabbalah.¹⁵⁹ Many of these characters would fit under the more general heading of mythology, and do not need to be related to esotericism specifically. I would argue that we should relate all these topics first and foremost to Romanticism both French and German, like the conceptualisation of Woman as a fairy with enchanting powers. Esoteric Romanticism is clearly an important template. One finds references to Isis in Novalis and de Nerval, for instance; undines such as Melusina in Hoffman, Zola and many others; Paracelsianism, Swedenborgianism and generic mentions of the Kabbalah in many a Romantic; and Lévi, tarots and fallen angels in many French Romantics, not least Victor Hugo.¹⁶⁰ It is the latter, or more precisely,
Auguste Viatte’s book about him, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps*, that forms the basis for Breton’s engagement with esotericism in A17.

*Victor Hugo* was first published in Montreal, Canada, and as it happens Breton was travelling there in 1944, which is surely where he encountered a book that saw only a very limited distribution until its European reprint of 1973. Breton’s interest in Viatte’s *Victor Hugo* was probably primarily piqued by his interest in Hugo, and the parallels between Hugo’s exile to Guernsey and his own exile to the United States would have impressed themselves upon his mind. The simple fact that Breton refers in several places to ‘Monsieur Auguste Viatte’ makes it obvious that the book was his first source. As Hubert has pointed out in his analysis of A17, Viatte’s *Victor Hugo* certainly pointed Breton towards Éliphas Lévi, as Viatte argues in favour of a considerable influence of the latter upon Hugo. This was not Breton’s first encounter with Lévi, but as I have argued in chapter four the references in his *Second Manifesto* are rather vague, and one may question how familiar he really was with the ideas of ‘l’abbé Constant’ at that time. In A17, Breton cites mainly from *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (1856) and *Histoire de la magie* (1860). He must have reread Hugo’s works alongside both Viatte’s and Lévi’s, and without a doubt Viatte’s discussion of Satan as Lucifer and of Satan-Lucifer as something of a revolutionary (in the context of Hugo’s work), combined with Levi’s engaging description of Lucifer as the archetypical Romantic rebellious loner, indeed as a beautiful ‘wildly wandering’ comet with ‘fiery hair’, lie at the basis of Breton’s scattered references to Lucifer and Satan in A17 and later. While Breton did refer to Satan on a few—though not many—earlier occasions, obviously in his role as rebel against the Christian God, he hardly referred to Lucifer at all before 1943. But in A17, Lucifer is posited as an ‘outlaw intellect’ and the father of ‘Poetry and Liberty’:

[I]t’s rebellion itself, rebellion alone is the creator of light. And this light can only be known by way of three paths: poetry, liberty, and love.

Poetry. Liberty. Love. These are not only the core values of Surrealism, by now it has also become clear that these are the defining characteristics of surrealist esotericisms too—and obviously they originate in Romanticism. Magic is emancipatory and revolutionary (= liberty) as we have seen. True poetry is magical already, and of course love is too, as Novalis had proclaimed. He had further stated that ‘All novels in which true love plays a part, are fairy tales—magical events.’ It’s no surprise then that Breton would make this story of his salvation by his true love into a fairy tale. Woman is the agent of love as well as of liberty, and inspires man(kind) to poetry. In this novel woman is the light-bringer,
she is here conflated with Lucifer and rebellion. This squares with the links Breton establishes between the card figure of the Star, and the stars depicted behind her, the Morningstar Venus—goddess of love and pinnacle of womanhood—and Sirius, a star related in ancient Egypt to Isis and Osiris. The third star is Lucifer the light-bringer, and it is clear that in this case Lucifer is possibly female or at least feminised, what with the ‘ideas of woman’ being postulated as the rebellious alternative to the current crisis.

Lévi’s most important contribution to Arcanum 17 is that very Arcanum, the tarot. In *Dogme et rituel* Lévi discusses the tarot at length, and provides it with a mystical interpretation and history. Breton’s studies of card games in Marseille had put the tarot on his radar, and as mentioned, he acted upon his interest in New York, when at his request Seligmann provided him with a *feuilleton* of documents concerning the tarot, and about Isis and Osiris and number symbolism besides. His growing interest in the tarot combined with his encounter with Lévi’s *Dogme et rituel* inspired him to make the one card most relevant to his personal situation, the hope-bringing card of the Star, the book’s central image. It is important to realise that this card appears totally isolated; none of the other cards of the Major Arcana, let alone the tarot deck generally, play any role in A17. Breton further interprets the card and its symbolism in idiosyncratic ways, divorcing it in essence from the standard interpretations one might find in occult sources and identifying the child-woman Star with his true love and the other female characters in the novel. This shows clearly, I find, that even though he broadened his interest in esoteric matters, he picked and chose eclectically and for his own personal purposes, making a single element, a tarot card in this instance, entirely subservient to his personal poetical ruminations on the mystery of love. This is a far cry from any interaction with the tarot on its own terms as an occult tool of divination, consisting of an entire pack; and supports my general thesis that the interest of the Bretonian Surrealists never became more than just an interest.

Breton scholar Hubert suggests that Breton was familiar by this time with the studies of the tarot by Court de Gébelin, Papus, Oswald Wirth and Marc Haven, but that he didn’t refer to names or titles as he was ‘embarrassed’ by their ‘diffuse spiritualism’ and the ‘accent’ they put on the notion of initiation. That Breton was more or less familiar with these authors I find probable, and we can possibly attribute that to Seligmann. I wonder, however, how much he truly was ‘embarrassed’ and how much that is Hubert’s projection; we will see in the next part of this chapter that Breton did engage the esoteric concept of initiation for the 1947 exhibition, and accorded the tarot an important role in it.

Melusina is representative of Breton’s neo-Romanticisms and growing
interest in medieval French literature, but there is an esoteric side to her too. Interestingly enough, Breton draws a parallel between the seventeenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the fairy-like guiding figure in his life Melusina/the Star via the homophonic resemblance of the pronunciation of pe with fée (fairy). This homophonic game was probably inspired by Lévi, or possibly by the references in Viatte and similar authors to the ‘phonetic cabala’, or language of alchemy and esoteric language in general in Romanticism. The ‘allegorical truth’ is that it ‘resembles the tongue in the mouth’ and ‘means the word itself in the highest sense’, and I think symbolised literature for Breton. Like the Star this letter is taken completely out of any specific context, be it occult, cabalistic, Romantic or even just Hebrew, and picked apparently for its personal associations alone.

Melusina is not only an undine but also a hybrid, part woman, part serpent (or fish). The Surrealists had a preference for hybrids; on the one hand the male’s double of the Minotaur, and on the other female hybrids such as Gradiwa, or Max Ernst’s multiple-breasted animal-headed brides. The female hybrid creatures are all fay; that is to say, sorceresses connected to the fairy world, which in turn means they embody Woman, she who is—as per Michelet—a witch by nature. The most obvious hybrid, which combines feminine and masculine characteristics, is the androgyne; a being with distinctly esoteric overtones. This association of the androgyne with alchemy in particular is strengthened by the alchemical illustrations the Surrealists had access to, such as the seventeenth century Hermetic Androgyne in Grillot de Givry’s Witchcraft [fig 67]. If one further takes the relatively frequent comments about Alchemy of the Word, the philosopher’s stone and Nicolas Flamel into account, it is easy to see why so many scholars and writers have argued for the important role of alchemy in Surrealism. However, I would argue that the androgyne should be connected to its esoteric heritage only as a secondary consideration; first and foremost we should connect it to its prevalence as a motif in, again, French and German Romantic and Symbolist literature, and then primarily as the symbol of the soul mate, one’s true love. Albert Béguin’s article on the androgyne in Minotaure 11 (1938), wherein he discussed the androgynous character of Séraphita in Balzac, had put the figure once and for all on the surrealist map. The associations between Great Surrealist (Romantic) Precursors, love, and the androgyne was present in Surrealism from the outset. In 1942 Breton created a small collage-novel on myth, in which the androgyne was explicitly identified with Balzac’s Séràphita and the Romantic concept of the âme-soeur or soul mate [fig 68]. Considering it in the light of the overarching obsession with (heterosexual) love on the part of the male Surrealist, for whom desire is the prime mover in his rapport with the world, I would perhaps even go so far as to say that the androgyne symbolises the male Surrealist in his perfect
state: reunited with his Other in the two-fold form of his true love-soul mate, and his feminine, magical and automatic Other whose powers he has ‘jealously made his own’. As Breton explains:

I state today with complete certainty that this state of grace [the pure state of automatism discussed earlier] results from the reconciliation in one single being of everything that can be expected from without and from within, that it exists at that one instant in the act of love when exaltation at the peak of senses’ pleasure is no longer distinguishable from the lightning realization of all the mind’s aspirations.¹⁸²

So did Breton ‘convert’ to esotericism, as one critic alleged? The answer is, in my opinion, squarely no. For all his references to Lévi, to the seventeenth Arcanum and to the current of esotericism generally, one should not confuse Breton’s interest in esoteric figures and thought with a thorough investment in esotericism. Even if it were possible to ‘convert’ to esotericism, that would have been out of the question for Breton. Surrealism’s anchoring in the secular here and now and antipathy to religion in general prevented such ‘conversion’ in any case, but just to be clear Breton mentioned his ‘reservations’ about the ‘basic principle’ of esotericism, by which he very probably refers to the religious or spiritual aspects of the various currents he considered part of ‘esotericism’.¹⁸³ Rather, his interest is in esotericism’s system of correspondences:

Esotericism, with all due reservation about its basic principle, at least has the immense advantage of maintaining in a dynamic state the system of comparison, boundless in scope, available to man, which allows him to make connections linking objects that appear to be the farthest apart and partially unveils to him the mechanism of universal symbolism.¹⁸⁴

This is one of the few occasions where Breton explicitly links ‘esotericism’, as a current, with the idea of correspondences. Doubtless his study of scholarly literature on Romantic esotericism introduced him to the term, as it was not his wont before then to refer to the current by that name—or even as one movement at all. Just as important is the fact that he treats ‘esotericism’ as one generic current with one basic principle. Finally, he touches here upon one of the two reasons why esotericism was relevant to him. The overarching structure of esotericism provided him with an immense body of lore about possible hidden connections in the world, an almost inexhaustible source of new rapports with the world.¹⁸⁵ The other reason is its very heterodoxy, its political side: magic,
revolution, liberation and general tendency to be (considered as) deviant.

In A17 Breton had already paid homage to the radical utopian socialist Charles Fourier, and the next year he wrote the _Ode to Fourier_. Viatte’s work did more than point Breton to Hugo’s esoteric interests and to Lévi; it made him keenly aware of the dynamic nineteenth-century relations between poets, occultists, and revolutionary thinkers. In particular Fourier, but also the French-Peruvian socialist and proto-feminist Flora Tristan (Flore Tristan y Moscoso, 1803-1844), and the poet, musician and author Antoine Fabre d’Olivet as well. The remarkable thing is that Breton had already made some comments about these people—a very few, admittedly—before Viatte, but they moved from the periphery to the centre stage of his views during the early 1940s. What this means, I argue, is that Viatte did not push Breton in entirely new esoteric directions; rather Breton used Viatte to gain more knowledge about figures he was already more or less interested in and this increased knowledge about their esoteric exploits seems to have confirmed to him that they were all heterodox and therefore revolutionary thinkers.

Breton’s interest in Fourier and his theories are a logical consequence of the fact that poetry, love and revolution remained Breton’s foremost concerns. To start with, he read Fourier’s works as if they were poetry. Fourier’s notion of ‘passional attraction’ (as a motivational power in every social and organic system) impressed Breton, who paid him the highest surrealist honour by calling him an ‘an emancipator of desire’, together with Marquis de Sade and Sigmund Freud. Fourier’s idea of a socially revolutionary utopia based on universal harmony certainly attracted Breton, who further praised him for ‘his attitude of absolute doubt toward traditional modes of knowledge and action’, clearly an attitude the Surrealists in general identified with. Finally Breton thought of Fourier as something of an esotericist as well; indeed, based on Viatte Breton was by now convinced that ‘an esoteric view of the world’ formed the ‘junction’ where ‘the ideas of poets and those of visionary social thinkers (i.e. Fourier) meet’. Breton was confirmed in his understanding of esoteric thought as heterodox, political, and, most importantly in his view, associated with poetry and with love. He admired the language of Tristan and Fourier, he admired their radical socialist ideas even more, but what he admired most was the role they accorded ‘love’ (or the passions). He was astounded by Fourier’s ‘imagination’, and made a point of mentioning Fourier’s influence upon Hugo and Baudelaire and in the same context refers to Swedenborg and Saint-Martin too, creating one web of Romantic esotericism.
Some concluding remarks (on poetry, liberty and love)

Arcanum 17, particularly when taken in combination with the *Ode to Fourier*, showcases Breton’s understanding of esotericism: heterodox thought of the past. They also show his employment of it: a treasure trove of heterodoxies and interesting themes and elements which serve to revolutionise life in a poetical manner. It is relevant precisely because it is quaint, marginal, bizarre, primitive, magical and marvellous—and above all because of its positive associations with Romanticism and Symbolism. Breton is primarily and rather exclusively interested in it because it is different. The definitive identification of the Surrealist as a magician, the explorations of radical thinkers and their heterodox (religious) thought, and finally the conviction that womankind’s ideas would save the day are all signs that deviancy—any deviance from the bourgeois norm, in fact—was increasingly becoming institutionalised in Surrealism as the only viable alternative to the current (political) state of the world. In the end, all the various forms of myth, fairy tales and heterodox thought in *Arcanum 17* band together into one message of hope and regeneration. Esotericism is therefore constructed as a more or less homogenous Other, and that otherness makes it relevant to Bretonian Surrealism. The fact that it is not only other in thought, but also in time would have added to its appeal. Even though Breton was concerned with a revolution to create a better world of tomorrow, he looked resolutely to the past. As will be argued further in the following two parts of this chapter, to change life, as Rimbaud had decreed, had come to imply for Breton a reinstating of the Romantic nineteenth century, including its esoteric dimensions.
III. The 1947 International Exposition of Surrealism

Introduction: turning the page?

After his return to Paris in 1946 Breton was invited ‘almost daily’ to ‘turn over a new leaf’. Such invitations were extended by critics, intellectuals and other artists, but furthermore by some of the old surrealist guard who had chosen to remain in the United States or Mexico rather than return to Paris, and by aspiring new Surrealists as well. Many intellectuals also wondered about Surrealism’s political position, as all Surrealists—with the exception of Éluard, who had joined the resistance—had been absent during the War. Post-bellum Paris was defined by those who had been part of the resistance, which made Surrealism at best irrelevant and at worse suspect. French intellectual circles celebrated littérature engagée or politically engaged writing, which was based upon the poetry written by those in the resistance during the War. Both the engaged writers and the French Communist Party (PCF), which sponsored an important league of writers, had emerged from the war as moral victors, and although relations between these two groups were strained, they were still united by their anti-fascism and pro-communism. The general opinion among intellectuals was that Surrealism had become peripheral; even though it still seemed to situate itself on the left side of the political spectrum it was certainly losing ground to the existentialists on the one side, and the PCF communists on the other. The most famous existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), considered Surrealism’s revolutionary aims merely a theoretical exercise, accompanied by a nihilism and frivolity that offered nothing to post-bellum reality. The communist side, represented by Tristan Tzara, former Dadaist and former Surrealist, proclaimed Surrealism a political and revolutionary failure, ill-suited to the current situation and something history ‘had passed by’. Breton, for his part, had already broken with the PCF in the early thirties and had lost Aragon and later Éluard to Stalinism, and had also been writing about the danger he considered Stalinism to be since 1940, which meant he stood at distinct odds with the party dominating intellectual Parisian milieu. In the 1938 essay co-authored with Trotsky—an enemy of the Stalinist state, by now assassinated—he had argued strongly against any close association between the (literary) arts and political ideals, which, however, was just what was happening in Paris. Lastly, the state celebrated French culture and promoted a return to French tradition, a ‘retour a l’ordre’ just as after the First World War, and just as they had then the Surrealists did not take it well. The fact that they immediately meddled in state policy to reinstate the old empire in Indochina (Vietnam, particularly) meant that they were hardly popular with the French establishment either. Breton had not only returned to old hostilities, therefore,
but also found himself (as did the new group with him) faced with a whole host of new ones. And as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, his literary works written during the war raised a considerable number of (disapproving) eyebrows. Many were very disappointed and considered that the recent conflict ‘should [have led] to a rigorously political point of view’ within the framework of either communism or existentialism, and not to discussions of tarot cards, fairies, and seemingly crazy utopians. What did Breton have to say for himself and his movement?

Breton responded to the pressure of the public, critical intellectuals, ‘frenemies’, and new and old Surrealists alike with the 1947 ‘Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme’, held at the posh Parisian Galerie Maeght. Below I will provide a room-by-room description of this rather unique show, touching upon the esoteric elements that were prominently present in it, before finally discussing the overarching theme of myth and its political connotations and ramifications. Breton, Duchamp and Ukrainian-American artist and architect Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965) were the show’s art directors. The catalogue was an impressive production, just like the exhibition, and consisted of a number of essays, including Breton’s pivotal introduction ‘Before the Curtain’, and 24 hors-textes (original graphical works). Myth and mythopoeia formed the foundation of the entire exhibition, informing the structural set-up and providing content. As I have stated before, the importance of myth in Breton’s vision can hardly be overestimated, and is supported by the detailed invitation to participate he wrote early in 1947, which outlines both the structure and contents of the exhibition. Already in 1935 Breton had stated emphatically that the world was in need of a ‘new myth’, a sentiment he had repeated in the Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto, or Not. After the surrealist internalisation of all Others that occurred during the war, myth was understood by 1947 to be essential to Surrealism. The show was therefore designed as a manifestation of it for the benefit of the public at large, in whose worldview myth was only latently or embryonically present, or so the Surrealists assumed. Surrealist new myth formed the ‘spirit’ of the exhibition, Breton wrote, and its ‘cadre’ was to be an initiatory trajectory, through which the visitor would be familiarised with the ‘new myth’. Thus his response to those criticizing Surrealism. The finer points of how myth was to be imparted remain vague—something that in itself would seem only proper to an initiatory course, perhaps. Breton envisioned esotericism as an important ally to myth and the primitive mind-set, something more prominent in his original design than in the finalised show; therefore I will discuss both.
The first stage: basement and stairs
On entering the Galerie Maeght, one would first enter the basement, which doubled as a sort of grotto. This subterranean location was to host a retrospective show, entitled ‘Surrealists despite themselves’. In Breton’s plan it featured surrealist precursors such as Jerome Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, William Blake, Henri Rousseau, Francisco Goya, Odilon Redon and Lewis Carroll, among many others. Once again the canon of Great Precursors of Surrealism was re-established, now with a significant number of painters included. The next room was to be a show of ‘Momentary Surrealists’, which featured works by Giorgio de Chirico, André Masson and Salvador Dali, among others.209 It testifies to Breton’s efforts to create a second canon, namely of those who had been disavowed at one point or who had left Surrealism of their own accord but whose names and oeuvres (or parts of those) he still wanted to retain for Surrealism. The basement as a whole represented the solid base of Surrealism, its greatness and cultural gravitas across time, reaching from the past into the present and showing it to be a distinguished and living alternative tradition.210 Note that this part of the show was never realised, but only existed on paper.

Therefore the show’s second part functioned as the starting point in practice. The visitor ascended to the second level by climbing a staircase, consisting of twenty-one books; or rather, their painted spines. Each book-step was assigned a card from the tarot’s Major Arcana, in the cards’ usual counting order.211 The first step was assigned the Magician and painted with the spine of Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). The second step combined the ‘Popess’ (also known as the High Priestess) with *La vie et l’oeuvre du facteur Cheval*, an imaginary biography of the admired ‘mediumistic sculptor’ Cheval.212 The fourth step combined the Emperor with a French abridged edition of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*; Justice and Meister Eckhart’s *Sermons* (in a French selected edition) formed the eighth; and the ninth, the Hermit, was combined with a French edition of *The Chemical Wedding of Simon [sic] Rosenkreuz* (1616) by Johann Valentin Andreae. The fourteenth step consisted of Temperance and Swedenborg’s *Mémorables* (a French version of *Diarum spirituale*, 1766) and the seventeenth of the Star and *Theory of the Four Movements and the General Destinies* by Fourier (1808).213 Fourier had become even more important for Breton since 1945, and it is no accident he is combined with the card that holds the most personal meaning for Breton, one that symbolised (intellectual) salvation through love, as he interpreted Fourier as a revolutionary whose utopia would be one of the mind, premised upon a liberation of the passions.

Other stairs were made out of works by such great authors as Baudelaire.
(combined with the Pope, no less), de Sade, Kafka, Apollinaire (Death), Jarry and Goethe; as well as typical Breton discoveries such as Jean-Pierre Brisset, Xavier Forneret and of course Isidore Ducasse, the comte de Lautréamont. Breton also included a little known book by the early oneirologist Marie-Jean-Léon Lecoq marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys, Les rêves et les moyen de les diriger; Observations pratiques (1867). In an illustration of surrealist black humour, this book on dreams was combined with the card of the Sun. The Bible book Revelations and the card Judgement formed the twentieth stair.\(^{214}\) The stairs were swept from above by the revolving light of a small lighthouse, giving an extra dramatic effect to it all and symbolising the ‘illumination’ provided by Surrealism generally, and by these books in particular, all by authors or about people we can consider Surrealists despite themselves too.\(^{215}\)

This staircase shows that by this time esotericism had become an integral part of Surrealism’s mythopoeia, alongside other movements and influences such as Romanticism and Symbolism, Frazerian anthropology, psychical research, creative mediums, and the unclassifiable genre of more or less contemporary speculative and absurd works.\(^{216}\) Still, the collection of esoteric sources is not large, and I wonder which books Breton himself considered under the sole rubric of esotericism, if any at all. Eckhart’s Sermons, for instance, should not necessarily be classified as esoteric as such, as becomes clear if we take a look at Breton’s long poem Full Margin (1940). Written just before he went to Marseille, it testifies to Breton’s research into heterodox thought, particularly ‘the margins of spirituality’.\(^{217}\) It pays homage to Breton’s intellectual guides, including Hegel and Novalis and a few radical political dissenters, but further celebrates a slew of Christian thinkers: Joachim de Fiore (1135-1202), twelfth century mystic and apocalyptic thinker, the theological dissenter Jansenius (Cornelius Jansen, 1585-1638), his fervent follower François de Pâris (1690-1727), and the eighteenth century Bonjour brothers, who started a Jansenist sect.\(^{218}\) ‘Meister’ Eckhart (1260?-1327?) is mentioned in this poem too, and I would argue that Breton considered him a mystical thinker within a tradition of Christian heterodoxy and not necessarily, let alone exclusively, as esoteric. An offhand comment made in 1942 showed that Breton had been reading the apocalyptic Bible books of John and Daniel as well, not least because of the ‘obscurity of their language’.\(^{219}\)

The lines referring to Eckhart reveal the agents who introduced Breton to him:

Meister Eckhart my master at the inn of reason
Where Hegel told Novalis With him we have everything we need and off they went
With them and the wind I have everything I need.  

In the dark days of the early part of the war Breton had turned to Hegel and Novalis, and then to their sources. Faced with a harsh political reality he found succour in historical radicalism and dissent, with a distinctly mystical and remarkably Christian bent. It is clear that the crisis led him to take up (canonised) heterodox thinkers whose works combine a unique view of terrestrial matters with transpersonal transcendent experiences, captured in particular language that seems absurd or poetical or a combination of the two; this is the mystical ‘reason’ of Eckhart Breton refers to. This turn to Christian heterodoxy can be related to the Second Manifesto and its call for occultation and validation of historical heterodox forms of thought, including esotericism; after all, esotericism was also something religious or at least spiritual, as far as Breton was concerned, and probably occupied a similar position in his mind as Christian mysticism—possibly even the same. Indeed there is a reference to esotericism in Full Margin, although lost in translation; the first line reads ‘I am not one for followers’, but the French original is ‘Je ne suis pas pour les adeptes’. These ‘adepts’ could well refer to esotericists, which is why some scholars have interpreted this line as a rejection of esotericism. In any case, Breton associates himself with the outliers and the loners, which is somewhat ironic as he had been dealing with followers and group politics since the day his first Manifesto was published and certainly since the moment he began excommunicating people.

The connections between Romanticism, radical heterodoxy and revolutionary thought, and esotericism are legion. Fourier, for one, should be located at the crossroads of these domains, as is also the case for Breton. However, the role Fourier serves here is primarily that of heterodox visionary, who moreover attributed revolutionary potential to the passions in interestingly worded books—again a case of poetry, love and revolution, with his association with esotericism being an additional bonus.

Just as Novalis and Hegel were instrumental in introducing Breton to Eckhart, others pointed him towards Swedenborg and to Rosicrucianism’s founding document, the Chemical Wedding. The tarot staircase is the first occasion that work is mentioned by Breton. Duchamp had already been familiar with The Chemical Wedding for a long time, as had Max Ernst; and we might discern the influence of both or either of these artists in the inclusion of the book here. At the same time, several Romantic poets had been familiar with it too, and I find it very probable that the renewed obsession with Romanticism, and with Romantic esotericism specifically, prompted Breton to include The Chemical Wedding, and Swedenborg’s Mémorables as well. One wonders how familiar he really was
with these books and their contents; judging by the mistaken title of ‘Simon’ Rosenkreutz he may have added this title from memory as something relevant to the Precursors. His one direct citation of Swedenborg in another essay in 1947—‘I saw a gathering of spirits. They wore hats on their heads.’—is not only funny and, from Breton’s point of view, absurd in the manner of Brisset and Fourier, but also directly copied from Balzac’s Séraphita, where one of the characters recites it in Chapter III. Other mentions of Swedenborg are without exception embedded within a discussion of a Romantic hero, such as Baudelaire. Breton’s erudition is well known, as is his tendency to cite others citing others, usually without specific references; this he applied to esotericism too, and I am therefore convinced that he read only a few esoteric sources directly. This is corroborated by the inventory made of his library after his death. Esotericism was not the touchstone, esoteric Romanticism was. After all, if the stairs together with the basement of the planned exhibition make one thing clear, it is that Romanticism was higher on the surrealist priority list than ever before. If the movement had been Romanticism’s ‘prehensile tail’ until then, Breton certainly turned it into ‘Romanticism 2.0’ now. Indeed, his obsession with the very themes, things and people that had so fascinated the Romantics made his Surrealism something of a neo-Romanticism, dominated by nostalgic motives. What’s more, as ‘tail’ Surrealism had modelled itself upon a rather vaguely defined mystical and symbolist Romanticism; now, post-Viatte, neo-Romantic Surrealism was looking directly into the mirror of esoteric Romanticism. Maturin, Fourier, Baudelaire, Hölderlin, Apollinaire, Jarry and Goethe... all are poets and writers whose work often, if not necessarily directly inspired by esotericism, was at least showing traces of it—traces that were furthermore all being teased out by scholars such as Viatte. Even though there is no direct mention in Breton’s writings of Viatte’s other ground-breaking study, Les sources occultes du romantisme, as mentioned, I think Breton was clearly in agreement with the spirit, if not necessarily the letter, of it.

The same can be said for the visual artists who were considered Surrealists despite themselves, gathered in the basement (in the original plan). Obviously painters such as Goya and Redon were known for their interest in, and exploration of themes related to, esotericism, such as witches, hauntings, dreamscapes, inner visions. Hieronymus Bosch evidently deserved a place there for his visual style alone, but the fact that in 1946 two publications had come out that discussed alchemical symbolism in Bosch’s work may well have contributed to Breton’s decision to include him, I would think. William Blake’s interest in theosophy and Swedenborg in particular, while known already, was the topic of a study published in 1947. On all sides, to sum up, the evidence was piling up that the Surrealist
Precursors, whether they were poets or painters, had integrated some form of esoteric lore into their (body of) work. The surrealist canon seemed comprised of those I would term ‘esotericists despite themselves’—and I am hardly surprised that Breton was turning his Surrealism towards esotericism too.

By now, I think it has become clear that surrealist esotericism was mostly mediated. This is supported by the fact that the primary esoteric sources in the tarot-stairs are only a minority in respect to the other, mainly Romantic, sources. One can further wonder to what extent Breton actually even read those sources—and, also, how much other Surrealists (besides Ernst) were even familiar with them.

In contrast the tarot’s Major Arcana can be considered the most direct, that is the least mediated, esoteric presence. Importantly, the cards were employed here in an occult manner, namely as aides to initiation. This is certainly at a remove from his earlier focus upon the Star alone, which was embedded fully in a typically Bretonian personal context of love and Woman. The chances are that Breton considered that the Major Arcana symbolised stages of initiation; in ‘Before the Curtain’ he refers to the occult author Robert Ambelain, who had just made that connection in a publication. By this time Breton was also more or less familiar with the books of Swiss occultist Oswald Wirth where the theme of tarot and initiation was also discussed.

Still, I want to emphasise that esotericism was certainly not Breton’s only concern. His taste for little-known radical passionate thinkers found an outlet too (Lefebvre de Noëttes, Brisset, Fourier), while it is furthermore clear that the staircase combinations between tarot card and book were made in a spirit of black humour.

The second stage: superstition and rain

Having climbed that staircase, the visitor entered the theatrically lit ‘Hall of Superstitions’, designed by Kiesler. Black drapes, mirrors and feathers hung from the walls and Ernst’s Black Lake was painted on the floor. If things had been intellectual, even cerebral, before, this level should be understood as visceral. The room itself was shaped as an oval and reminiscent of an egg or womb; soft, wet and natural, it was intended to suggest primeval and feminine surroundings, confronting modern urban man with a natural environment he had, supposedly, become estranged from. Various uncanny objects and art works were placed in it, which were supposed to further inspire the primitive, that is magical and pre-scientific, mind-set. In fact the object of this room was to stress that the primitive magical worldview is an essential part of the way the human mind functions. Religious (and bourgeois) superstitions should certainly be overcome, but the superstitiously functioning (primitive) mind is the necessary requirement for true
Partly recapturing his earlier argument in the introduction to his *Anthologie*, Péret argued in his essay in the catalogue that a primitive mind-set is essential to the surrealist *rapport* with the world, and the room was accordingly intended to inspire such a mind-set. The art works in this room served either to overcome superstition or inspire it, or both, being mainly taboo-figures and totemic objects. Installation views show *Anguished Man* (1947) by American artist David Hare, referring to the War but also to the constraints superstitions can place on the mind, and the *Cascade of Superstitions* (1947), painted with invented superstitious signs by Miró [plate XVII]. Religion’s totemic character was highlighted by two sculptures by Kiesler, the *Totem for All Religions*, and, in similar Freudian vein, the *Anti-Taboo Figure* (both 1947) [fig 67, 70]. Science, antithesis not only of religion but also of the primitive mind-set, was also represented in this room, in the persona of Euclid, a portrait by Ernst (1945).

The visitor would then pass through the ‘Rain Room’, a design by Duchamp that symbolised purification and rebirth. It was hung with curtains of artificial rain; Duchamp’s original design had required real water to drip from the ceiling, which would fall not only on the visitors but the artworks too. Artificial grass covered the floor, in the middle of which stood a billiard table. The original concept had also demanded that visitors should wend their way between billiard players, another Duchampian joke, but as many visitors pocketed the billiard balls there was not much playing going on. Surrealist paintings were hung on the walls. Again, we can note that for all the elements proper to an initiatory *parcours*—such as intellectual illumination, the dark superstitious recesses of the mind, purification, rebirth—(black) humour also played an essential part in the exhibition. Humour is not usually associated with esotericism, or occultism, which are often considered very serious businesses, and while humour does have a place in myth, that is hardly the case in abstract intellectual considerations of it. Creating an initiatory trajectory and simultaneously subverting it is a uniquely surrealist thing to do. For all the reverence for the tradition of esotericism (or myth for that matter), it was not immune to subversion. One should further keep in mind that it would be unforgiveable to take the word “initiation” literally; in our [i.e., Breton’s] minds, of course, it is only intended as a guideline.

A double joke is played on the visitor, therefore.

In similar vein, I find it rather typically surrealist and blackly humorous to start off in the past (the Surrealists despite themselves), and proceed via erudition and literary credentials (the staircase), to primitivism and superstition,
those domains rationalism thought it had vanquished. If nothing else, it was a commentary on the times just past.

The third stage: labyrinth

Finally, one arrived at the ‘Labyrinth of Initiation’, another suggestion from Duchamp. The visitor was guided through it by an ‘Ariadne’s thread’, a seemingly small detail that is of great importance, as it reveals that the labyrinth was first and foremost considered mythical, rather than esoteric. Clearly classical myth, already explored in the 1930s, still functioned as the basis for the ‘new myth’. Duchamp even made the point explicitly that the labyrinth had no occult meaning. Still we can expect such a well-read man as Breton to be aware of the many symbolic meanings labyrinths carry in many religions, and in combination with the theme of initiation, which was prominent at least in his design and realised in an occult sense in the tarot staircase, for instance, I assume that he did consider the labyrinth in part within the context of esoteric initiation too; although that, in turn, should not be taken too seriously, for the reasons outlined above.

The doorway to the labyrinth was guarded by Hérold’s large statue of The Great Transparent One, based on Breton’s concept of the Great Transparent Ones [fig 71]. The hard and pointed forms of the sculpture reflect the war, as does the cavernous face, with its facial features displaced, half of them lost and the other half scattered to the belly, where furthermore a shattered mirror shows us our broken selves. But there are also signs of hope, and these are probably alchemical in nature: the creature carries coals and eggs in its hand, which represent the fiery furnaces of purification and rebirth. The crystalline forms in the head may refer to the philosopher’s stone, at least according to Mitchell; I find that speculative, as Hérold was fascinated by crystalline forms throughout his career and did not usually connect that with alchemy.246

The labyrinth, where a bell continuously rang, was divided into twelve octagonal recesses (although in practice some corners were cut). In each stood an altar created by a major artist of the movement, and Breton not only solicited the particular artists but frequently stipulated exactly how their altar should look, too; another instance of the breadth of Breton’s influence. The altars were dedicated to a mythical character, being, or thing created by a Surrealist or Precursors. On or around each altar a representation of its subject and suitable relics were to be placed. Breton also attributed to each mythical being/altar a sign from the zodiac, symbolised by a coloured band in the colour of the (semi-) precious stone belonging to that sign, and an hour from Apollonius of Tyana’s Nuctemeron. There’s no doubt Breton that knew of the Nuctemeron only by way of Lévi’s Dogme et rituel, and his citations of it are in fact paraphrases of Lévi.247
The hours were related in turn by Lévi to initiation, which is doubtless why Breton picked them and the number twelve besides, as Mitchell has pointed out. In practice, these colours and hours were not always depicted in a straightforward visible form, or even included in any way at all.

The altars were foremost a celebration of surrealist heroes. For example, Wilfredo Lam created the altar for ‘Falmer’s Hair’, a phrase from the *Chants du Maldoror* by Lautréamont. Roberto Matta’s altar was dedicated to the ‘juggler of gravity’, an (unrealised) figure from Duchamp’s masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23). Another altar was dedicated to Brauner's *Wolf-table* [fig 61]. Further altars were dedicated to literary characters (mostly women, notably) from the works of Jean Ferry, Jarry, Rimbaud, and George du Maurier; and Breton’s literary invention, the Great Transparent Ones. One real person received an altar: the writer Raymond Roussel. Three animals were allotted altars too: the secretary Bird or ‘Bird Superior’, identified as Ernst’s alter-ego Loplop; the Gila monster or ‘the suspicious Heloderm’, in Breton’s terms; and the Condylure or star-nosed mole. The last two creatures appealed greatly to the surrealist sense of humour and had been on Breton’s mind since 1945.
One of the more overtly esoteric altars was the sixth altar, dedicated to the Secretary Bird/Loplop. Its sign was Virgo. The centrepiece was Brauner’s painting *The Lovers* (1947), those being the Major Arcana’s Magician and the High Priestess [plate XVIII]. Brauner was perfectly at home with tarot imagery. The Magician is identified as the surrealist magician—as Brauner himself also was—and the High Priestess, who has a bird’s head representing the altar’s dedication, as universal woman, the spiritual counterpart to the Magician. She stands on a plinth painted with ‘1713’, which is an homage to Breton, who considered these numbers as anagrams of his initials and of personal totemic value. Brauner included this homage not only because Breton was curator of the show, but also because the notion of the man as magician and woman as witch/sorceress and the two of them united as a fruitful magical couple, something Brauner sincerely believed in, had just been celebrated by Breton in *Arcanum 17*. If ‘1713’ symbolised Breton, the ‘17’ in it refers to his Star, Bindorff, which means he himself would be Death, 13. The lovers are in fact comparable to the androgyne, another successfully unified couple. Obviously the entire altar, dedicated as it is to the Bird Superior, is an homage to Ernst, that other Surrealist who, just like Brauner, had become a magician in the early 1940s. On the altar itself stood a hawk-like sculpture holding a woman in its claws—bird-man catches and possibly consumes Woman—as well as a statue of the virgin and child, perhaps symbolising Woman’s nurturing powers.

The altar of the star-nosed mole was designed by some newly joined artists under the collective name of ‘Seigle’. It is extremely particular, not least because an entire cult was invented around it, complete with mythical symbolism, which has been described by Mitchell. Still, the only recognisably occult part in it was a reference to the Arcana of the Star, another clear homage to Breton. The exhibition also included a thirteenth altar, by outsider artist Maurice Baskine (1901-1968), but as the altar for the Gila monster was never realised, it was in practice the twelfth. Baskine, who moved in the surrealist periphery from 1946 to 1951, had been profoundly interested in alchemy since the early 1930s, and he named his altar ‘l’athanor’, after the alchemical furnace. It is unclear what his exact intentions were with this altar, nor is there any insight into the question of whether Breton had been part of the creation of it in any way.

Clearly, esoteric elements were part of some altars, and certainly of attributions such as the hours of Apollonius/Lévi. Yet I would emphasise that there was nothing esoteric about the altars themselves. The beings to which they were dedicated were either already mythical, mainly within a literary context, or were ‘capable of being endowed with a mythical life’, such as the star-nosed mole. In his outline of the project Breton expressly stated that the altars should be
modelling upon those of ‘pagan cults’, ‘for instance Indian [Native American] and voodoo’. He also requested particular offerings as well as designs for drawings to invoke certain beings, which are voodoo practices. Breton had spent some time in Haiti at the invitation of Pierre Mabille in 1945, together with Bindorff and Wilfredo Lam. He had been impressed by its people and culture, and fascinated by the practices of voodoo; something shared with Mabille, sustained by his interaction with Lam, and akin to Péret’s interest in South American folklore. He witnessed a voodoo ritual, and bought paintings by the Haitian artist Hector Hippolyte (1894-1948), third-generation voodoo priest, about whom Breton would also write an essay in 1947. Just before Haiti, Breton and Bindorff had travelled through Hopi territory in New Mexico where they had witnessed Hopi ceremonies, something Ernst would later do too. As I have argued in the previous part of this chapter, the triad myth-primitivism-magic was a major theme for founder-member Surrealists such as Breton, Péret (in Mexico), and Ernst at that time, and it is clear that this was unchanged in 1947; probably it was even intensified because of their first-hand experience of tribal cultures. After all, in the 1930s their veneration of primitive peoples remained a theoretical exercise, based on ethnological sources, but now they had personally experienced the primitive’s magical rapport with the world. Even as the superstition of (Christian) institutionalised religion should be battled and overcome—by means of heterodox thought (the tarot-stairs) and the Hall of Superstitions—the rituals and superstitions of ‘primitive’ religion were to replace them, so as to return myth and magic to the world.

In Breton’s original design the trajectory continued; one was supposed to exit through a kitchen, where a surrealist meal was to have been served. This was never actually realised. The initiation lacked both beginning and end, therefore; something that testifies primarily to the difficulty of realising ambitious exhibition projects, and yet also seems in line with the show’s intended subversion.

The beginning of the end? Or initiation into… liberty

Generally the show was not well received; many press reviews were critical or even outrightly negative. Critics found it to be, for instance, a ‘deviant synthesis of the Musée Grevin, the Musée Dupuytren, the Grand Guignol and a Luna Park’—a wax museum, an anatomical museum, a theatre of horrors and an amusement park—cheap thrills, therefore. So soon after the war darkened rooms, tolling bells and taboo-figures were not well received, let alone myth, primitivism and esotericism, and even those who were less critical were still baffled by what was perceived as the escapism inherent in this yearning for myth. Not only outsiders were disenchanted; a parallel surrealist group, the ‘Surréalistes Révolutionnaires’,
wrote that the show dated from the year 947, rather than 1947.

The problem for Surrealism was that its consistent investment in myth, primitivism and magic paralleled an increasing hostility to those subjects in other intellectual and political circles; an attitude the ‘Theses Against Occultism’ by Adorno (1946-7), for instance, alongside his and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1947), formed a cornerstone of. It had already been expressed by various intellectuals in and around *View* during the Surrealists’ sojourn in the US, as discussed above. Myth was considered limiting, nostalgic, conservative or even regressive, and was burdened with unsavoury political overtones.

Therefore Breton’s move to devote the first surrealist exhibition after the Second World War to myth was considered by many the beginning of Surrealism’s end if not already the final nail in its coffin. One could make the argument that Breton’s continuing occultation of the movement by means of myth, primitivism and esotericism only served to marginalise it further and alienate it from the public for good. For the communist intellectuals who dominated the political left it confirmed that Surrealism had become peripheral and irrelevant, a sentiment further shared by those adhering to state-supported realism. Breton had totally misunderstood the cultural Zeitgeist, was the opinion.

But then again, had he?

In my opinion Adorno’s view of irrationalism, embodied by myth, magic and occultism, as set forth in the ‘Theses Against Occultism’, is actually rather close to Breton’s; and I think it hardly accidental that both the ‘Theses’ and Breton’s design for the exhibition were written at exactly the same time. While Breton did not use a term such as ‘regression’ at this point (he would later), both men related myth to irrationalism and that in turn to primitivism, to magic, and to a worldview located in the past; a bad thing for Adorno, but something positive for Breton. In Adorno’s view, magic is based upon erroneous connections, whereby occultism connects the unconnected, creating significance between meaningless things. Obviously these are the correspondences Breton was after, and the very fact that there are no meaningful connections between sign and signifier except absurd ones, while raising Adorno’s ire, was exactly what Breton found so valuable in it. ‘Occultists rightly feel drawn towards childishly monstrous scientific fantasies’, Adorno states. Surrealists do too, I might add. He continues, in occultism ‘superstition is knowledge’. Of course it is, Breton would have said. From where the Surrealists were standing, true knowledge is generated irrationally, and what better irrational mind than the superstitious one?
We have arrived at what I think is the crux of the matter: that contrary to popular opinion, Breton’s view was indeed very much in line with that of his time. However, where he valued magic and the irrational positively, other intellectuals of the left regarded it with distaste, and by extension the position of Surrealism became increasingly marginalised. In fact, it became more or less untenable because of a further development, which is that certain intellectuals of
the right were rather well disposed towards myth and magic. As I have explored in connection with the Carrouges Affair in chapter one, the right’s connections with Catholicism did not go down well with Surrealism. This left the Bretonian Surrealists, impossibly enough, situated on the left socio-politically with an intellectual worldview considered right wing.

Breton’s intention with the exhibition, and furthermore the role of magic and of esotericism in general in it, show how utopian socialism and a mytho-magical worldview could be complementary. One of the few critics who reviewed the show positively recognised that the magic proposed in it was ‘emancipatory’, that it was intended to offer a certain reprieve, and concluded further that Surrealism had ‘resorted to its essential doctrine of realism and black magic’.274 I agree fully with the assessment that Surrealism had resorted to its essential doctrines, as well as with the opinion of magic as emancipatory. As I have argued, for Breton, Péret, and such artist-magicians as Ernst and Brauner, magic was a revolutionary, liberating force. As Breton says:

Let me just refer... to the invaluable observation made by no less a rationalist than Frazer: “[Magic]”, he tells us in The Golden Bough, “has contributed to emancipate mankind from thraldom of tradition and to elevate them into a larger, freer life, with a broader outlook on the world... We are forced to admit that if the black art has done much evil, it has also been the source of much good; that is if it is the child of error, it has yet been the mother of freedom and truth.”275

Breton rallies the ‘rationalist’ Frazer to his cause here, a cause that is without doubt political. The very fact that the Surrealists would present such a difficult, disorienting, perplexing structure as this labyrinthine initiatory course—wet, noisy and badly lit, with a distinctly non-Western character, and furthermore filled with objects with a distinctly superstitious, spiritual, even sacred and religious character—should be understood as a conscious offensive against, firstly, the state-sponsored return to rational order, and secondly, against communist denouncements of anything smacking of religion or other ‘opiums’. Indeed, Breton judged that the bleak attitude of realism and rationalism of the post-war era was only another illusion, possibly a continuation of the misguided opinions that had led to the war in the first place. In my opinion it is clear that the 1947 exhibition offered ‘initiation’ into myth and its essential magical worldview to a politically progressive and revolutionary end: liberty. Namely, liberty of the mind, which would naturally create a state of liberty in the world.

The show was furthermore a deliberate attack, I argue, on the rationalist
consciousness-affirming here-and-now policies of both state and leftist intellectuals. It emphasised intellectual knowledge from the past on the one hand, and visceral, even automatic, experiences of the present on the other. Instead of answering the post-war reality of the time with only more rational realism, Surrealism offered the realism of the irrational: marvellous literature, absurd utopias and heterodox thought of the past, and automatic superstitious experiences of the present. Rather than a proponent of escapism or of mysticism, as he was accused of being, I find Breton instead to be a realist, who offered society the alternative (sur)reality he felt it desperately needed to move beyond quotidian concerns.

This view permeated the show, and I think we can safely say that fellow old-guard Surrealists were in full agreement with him. Brauner’s painting The Lovers [plate XVIII] not only captured the essential combination of the intellectual and active powers of the male magician with the female passive powers of automatic sorcery, but further paraphrases the entire structure of the exhibition as a whole with the word-combinations ‘destiny’-‘past’, ‘magic’-‘present’ and ‘liberty’-‘future’. Surrealist heritage lies in the past, symbolised by the (art in the) basement, and its greatness points towards destiny. The Hall of Superstition and the labyrinth represented the present, evoking the deluded state of mind of the general public as well as the magical mind-set that the Surrealist has already attained. Magic is the Surrealist’s present and it was intended to be that of others too, who would be liberated by it in the future.

In further support of my argument, I would point to Mitchell, who argues convincingly that Breton’s choice of an initiatory trajectory may well have been motivated by a desire to prevent and respond to accusations of mysticism; rather than based on dogmatic acceptance of an idea on faith, the show’s trajectory represented ‘the non-rationalist assimilation of (spiritual) knowledge, resting on a body of ideas and concepts’ that is understood intellectually. Insights are not simply provided, they need to be gained. That this setup might not please everybody is self-evident, and something Breton counted on from the start; after all, I would say that initiation implies by necessity selection and not all or perhaps not even most candidates will make it to the final stage. By its very nature occultation cannot be for everyone, but that does not impede the creation of the new myth for the common good nonetheless.

Finally, the preponderance of feminine themes in the show—ranging from the womb-like room of superstition, to the many female heroines celebrated in the altars, to such generic superstructures identified with the feminine as primitivism, magic, superstition, irrationalism in general—support the political, even redemptive, agenda of the show. After all, as Breton had argued already
in *Arcanum* 17, it would be the ideas of womankind that would lead man(kind) out of ‘spiritual ruination’. Once again, love will save the day: in love with the feminine irrational, the male surrealist magician will assume feminine ideas and powers into himself and become supra-rational. And what else to lead man ‘through the perilous labyrinth of the mind’ than poetry?\(^{279}\) As usual and—as always—at all costs, Surrealism ‘intends to keep on pursuing’ ‘initiation by means of poetry and art’.\(^{280}\)

Now to the role of esotericism in all this. Initiation ‘by means of poetry and art’ is

an initiation to which the latest research on Hugo, Nerval, Rimbaud and others [Viatte et al., obviously] gives us sound reason to adapt the patterns inherited from the esoteric tradition.\(^{281}\)

It becomes clear that Breton did plan the initiation of his show to be an initiation in an esoteric sense too. He chose the esoteric patterning device he had become most familiar with, the tarot, for the most prominent position.

Throughout the relevant essays and in the exhibition, Breton made the point that an esoteric tradition, or possibly an esoteric viewpoint, permeated Romanticism and Symbolism, and nineteenth century social utopianism of the Fourierist school. Surrealism, by this time, was a combination of those things and therefore esotericism was an essential part of it too. Esotericism is the capillary tissue that was thought to bind the two vessels of nineteenth century poetry and revolutionary thought together. Esotericism’s primary relevance for Surrealism, even only relevance, I would argue, is to be found in its relevance for Romanticism and Fourierism. The very fact that for Breton the esoteric tradition was something beholden to the past, and not connected to anything in the twentieth century, shows, I think, that he hardly considered it a living tradition valuable on its own terms; hence my point that esotericism’s only relevance is its Romanticism. For Breton, any esotericism outside of those currents that contributed to Romanticism and Symbolism hardly existed.\(^{282}\)

*In conclusion*

When addressing allegations that he was turning Surrealism into a religion, what with all the altars and related esoteric or religious paraphernalia, Breton drew a parallel with *The Immaculate Conception*. Even as he and Éluard assumed states of madness as the means to a creative end, they were not mad; similarly, the Surrealists may assume cultic or religionist behaviour and a search for sacredness, but that does not make them religious.\(^{283}\) I would extend that parallel
to esotericism: they may dabble in esotericisms to their heart’s content, I argue, but that does not make them esotericists. In fact, one of the things that the 1947 exhibition makes abundantly clear, in my view, is that even though esotericism had become an important domain of interest for Breton, it was always subservient to the overarching concerns love, poetry and revolution, as well as to his particular concern in this case with the initiation into ‘new myth’ and establishing the magical worldview. Various elements of esotericism never became more than a means to a non-esoteric end. Note that Breton explicitly wrote of the ‘patterns inherited from the esoteric tradition’ (cited above); the technique but not the belief was used. The same goes for the ‘trappings’ of religion:

[I]t must remain clear that toward the beings and objects to which we have agreed to pay tribute, this time, by granting them some of the trappings of the sacred, we assuredly intend to keep an attitude of enlightened doubt.284

In the appropriation of esotericisms for the 1947 exhibition I see above all a repetition of earlier moves. As I have argued, when appropriating the ‘necessary conditions’ of Spiritualism for the sleeping sessions in the early 1920s, Breton pointed out that ‘at no time’ did the Surrealists incorporate the belief in communication with the dead as well. When modelling the practice of Surrealism upon mediums and clairvoyants in the late 1920s, he made it clear that there could be no other realms than the terrestrial. When turning Surrealism into a corresponding cryptogram in the 1930s, he emphasised that all connections existed only in the mind. When the active potency of the Surrealist to effect change in the world by means of his alternative worldview became an issue during the war, the Surrealist turned into a magician, and the magical worldview, already introduced in the 1930s in direct connection with myth and primarily primitivism, now came to dominate. Post-Viatte esotericism had become Breton’s ally. It offered him interesting material (the tarot, foremost, but also Lévi’s works including Apollonius’s hours, for instance). Most of all, however, it cemented his Surrealism as neo-Romanticism. As I hope I have made clear in, for instance, my discussion of the tarot staircase, esotericism for Breton was fully embedded in Romanticism. Indeed, there is no mention ever of esotericism as a current without a direct link to Romantic poets and/or visionaries such as Fourier. I think contemporary esotericism hardly existed for Breton; he connected it primarily with the nineteenth century. Such is esotericism’s role: to present a nostalgic alternative to mainstream realism of the present.
IV. Postscript: art magic, analogy and alchemy

**Going backwards**

Despite the constant tolling of Surrealism’s death knell by its critics, after 1947 Bretonian Surrealism continued for two decades, arguably longer. As Alice Mahon has recently shown, the movement continued to be vibrant and controversial during that entire period.\(^{285}\) In 1959 the Surrealists organised another grand international exhibition, *E.R.O.S.*, which was, as usual, blasted by critics and a commercial succès scandale.\(^{286}\) The show’s title is representative of its content and focus, and for all that Breton was the only founder-member Surrealist left by this time, in many respects he still functioned more or less as the gatekeeper for, at least, Parisian Surrealism. Love/desire was Breton’s prime mover and therefore still that of his movement too.

With its celebration of Freudian obsessions and faith in desire as the omnipotent force, *E.R.O.S.* was symptomatic of an entrenching of existing positions that set in after 1947. Even as its members changed, Surrealism retreated to its core points. Breton once again turned the table on his critics by proclaiming in 1952 that the way forward lay backward: regression should be the deliberately chosen path of the (dissident) artist.\(^{287}\) The Surrealists had blazed all trails already, he made clear: one should be inspired by enigmas (as de Chirico had been), metaphysics (Kandinsky), chance (Duchamp), timeless fantasy and myth (Ernst), embryogenesis (Arp), “the "Mother Realm" in the Faustian sense’ (Tanguy), the symbolic (Brauner), voodoo (Lam), heraldry and alchemy (Seligmann), magic (Carrington), marvels (Tanning), and for ‘Indian totemism’, one could look to Paalen.\(^{288}\) Clearly, esotericisms were still relevant, and just as clearly they were still embedded within the larger domain of the irrational.

Notably, these trailblazing artists all are from Surrealism’s first two decades. For an *avant-gardiste*, Breton was always markedly obsessed with the past, I find, and he was not the only one. Afterlives of selected pasts in the present fascinated the Surrealists, as is evinced not only by their constant recourse to great heroes of the past (whether real or imagined), but also by their preference for Parisian structures with great historical significance such as the Tour Saint Jacques or Porte Saint-Denis, relics of a time gone by.\(^{289}\) By 1952 Breton’s touchstone had become the Golden Age of his own Surrealism. Nostalgia reigned and from a neo-Romanticism and neo-Symbolism the movement was now turning into a neo-Surrealism. I find it hardly surprising, therefore, that this period (the 1950s) is characterised by a further investment in various esoteric elements too.\(^{290}\) These elements are three: magic, alchemy and correspondences. None is new to Surrealism, as all of them were first investigated and employed during
Surrealism’s Golden Age. They are already nostalgic in that sense, therefore. But I consider these esotericisms furthermore nostalgic because Breton still, as he had done without exception before, related them to the cultural past of the west, and primarily to the nineteenth century and Romanticism. Even his celebration of the twentieth century alchemist Fulcanelli, as we will see below, took place within a discussion of language that is essentially Romantic. Breton was indeed going backwards, in time certainly, but his concepts have a pastness about them too. Magic, alchemy, etcetera, were all explicitly related to peoples, art works, cultures, artists and poets from a bygone age. Esotericism had always been related to a (suppressed) past, but now this theme was intensified. That cultural past was bound inextricably to the domain of the marginal—all things irrational, outsider and blackly humorous—which is only another repetition of early surrealist moves. Finally, the opinion that the primitive’s irrationalism would still save the day was by this time a rather old-fashioned and certainly out-dated (and even slightly colonialist) position.

I think it is clear by now why this part of the chapter has been entitled ‘postscript’. As far as esoteric Surrealism is concerned, there was hardly anything new under the sun. Even though alchemy and magic, for instance, became more prominent in the surrealist discourse, the essential things had been said by 1947. Afterwards, and certainly after the Carrouges Affair, Breton would re-establish old positions in writing but refrain from such public expositions as the 1947 show. But things were not static; even though the essential positions may have been old news, a deeper investment in and more extended investigation of magic, alchemy and correspondences still occurred. Below I will discuss the development of these three elements, focusing first on art magic, subsequently on correspondences in the form of analogy, and finally on alchemy.

But before moving on, I would point out the one element that was entirely original to late Surrealism, and in keeping with the focus upon eros: sexual magic. While references to it are few and incidental, I mention it nonetheless, as this reference to sexual magic is one of only a very few connections to twentieth century occultism, and an important and controversial part of it too. The first brief appearance of sexual magic on the surrealist radar occurred in 1948, when an excerpt from *Magia Sexualis* was published in the surrealist journal *Néon*. *Magia Sexualis* is a translation by the occultist Maria de Naglowska (1883-1936), who resided in Paris, from original documents by American medium, Spiritualist, Occultist and sexual magical pioneer P.B. Randolph (1825-1875). The excerpt deals with magic mirrors, however, not with sexual magic or rites as such. It is very probable that Sarane Alexandrian, who would write a study of de Naglowska later and who edited *Néon*, introduced this element. The second instance was
a very brief profile of Randolph, written by Gérard Legrand (1927-1999), Breton’s last protégé, which appeared in the E.R.O.S. catalogue. Possibly Alexandrian introduced Legrand and other younger Surrealists to de Naglowska and Randolph, but even while some of them might have been taken with de Naglowska’s sexual magic, it remained a particular topic involving a few people and hardly touched either Breton or the group at large.

L’Art magique—magic art

The Bretonian view that the primitive mind and its resulting magical worldview are essential to Surrealism, indeed to a properly functioning art, remained unaltered, and underlies L’Art magique, which came out in a limited edition in 1957. This book was for a large part written by Gérard Legrand (1927-1999) on Breton’s suggestions. One thing that was altered was the concept of myth, importantly enough; it had been Breton’s umbrella term of choice since the 1930s and the central theme of the 1947 show, but receded almost entirely to the background in this period and certainly in this book.

L’Art magique offers a broad art historical overview, proceeding from the idea that certain forms of art are magical. Art can be a ‘vehicle’ of magic, the authors contend, and here I would differentiate between the more generic surrealist view of magic as an emancipatory and irrational force, and the more specific functioning of art magic. Magic implies a rapport, with an audience, and/or with the world at large, in which the magician, solitary or in a group, wants to effect some sort of change. Obviously ‘art magic’ is predicated upon such a rapport: the understanding that art affects those who perceive it, and thereby (possibly) effects change. Breton and Legrand locate ‘art magic’ in specific objects from particular cultures and selected oeuvres, and the book is therefore copiously illustrated. In image and text the history of magic art is traced from its origins in prehistory, to Antiquity, to the Middle Ages, to the modern period, characterised as the ‘crisis of magic’. Subsequently, it then appears in Romanticism which allegedly played a ‘messianic’ role, and continues to Moreau and Gauguin, who are presented as the two great synthesising artists of art magic. Magic art finds its final culmination in ‘la magie retrouvée’: Surrealism. As I see it, L’Art magique presents an art history of Surrealism whereby it is defined by way of what came before, the Surrealists despite themselves. As might be expected, favourites such Pierro di Cosimo, Arcimboldo, and Bosch are among the artists included, while the authors also use the opportunity to refer to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and the like in the text. But even while this seems to echo the basement section of the 1947 exhibition, I would point out that by this time Breton extended magic art—and therefore Surrealism, its apex—all the way
into the deep cultural past of the West, represented by prehistoric and ancient artefacts, and furthermore into the West’s furthest margins, as besides the more standard Polynesian ancestor figurines, Khmer sculpture and the great heads of Easter Island, for instance, are included too. This is an entrenching of position in two ways. Firstly by looking ever further into the past and the margins for Surrealists despite themselves, thereby disconnecting Surrealism entirely from the present, let alone the future. Secondly, by locating the magical worldview so much in objects as visible manifestations of it. The initial steps in this direction were taken with the invention of objective chance, which could also act through objects, and of course the 1947 exhibition was the most public exposition of Surrealism—its theory, its art, its exhibiting practice—as artistically magical/magically artistic.

Creating a category of art that incorporates tribal, outsider, and canonised western ‘high’ art from all around the globe, from 4000 years of history, and in any medium too, all connected by a certain magic property, is bound to be problematic. Just as problematic was Breton’s definition: magic art is art that somehow ‘re-engenders the magic that engendered it.’ If all authentic art is magical, as is implied, one ends up with a very broad definition—not to mention the difficulty of establishing what exactly ‘authentic art’ would be. If the benchmark is a work of art that has truly transformed (the life of) its artist, or even the world at large, one is faced with similarly imposing problems of subjectivity. Many of these problems are pointed out in the book itself, in the collection of over 100 responses to Breton’s inquiry concerning art magic that forms its heart. Sending out questionnaires and printing the responses was of course an established surrealist practice, one used in the 1930s as well to ‘empirically’ verify the existence of objective chance. This survey involved many questions, ranging from how one would examine an art object that is (or contains) magic; to how the magician, who sees the real, and the modern artist, who sees the imaginary, relate to each other (as magicians) and by what means they both enchant the real; to placing a number of art objects in a decreasing order of magical potential. Responses were received from old and new Surrealists, art historians, anthropologists, prominent intellectuals such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, as well as a smattering of occultists: Traditionalist Julius Evola, Eugène Canseliet, René Alleau, Pierre Klossowski, historian of alchemy, and historians of esotericism Robert Ambelain and Denis Saurat. Many respondents were critical of the questions, of the assumptions underlying them, of the theme itself and/or of the art selected, and while many are more or less positive that some sort of relationship between magic and art, whatever those categories may be, could well exist, few endorse Breton’s
‘art magic’. Those who do are mainly his inner circle, making it painfully clear how isolated Breton had become in his obsession with (art) magic. It would seem Breton himself struggled with the same issues from the outset, as he suffered from writer's block during the writing and compilation of *L’Art magique*—something he, tongue in cheek, attributed to the ‘evil occult influence’ of a particular voodoo doll in his collection.308

While it remains vague how art magic operates, it does become clear in *L’Art magique* that Lévi, his *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* in particular, is Breton’s most important magical source.309 Lévi is mentioned and cited in a passage discussing Viatte and his study of Hugo, a phrasing so strongly reminiscent of *Arcanum 17* one thinks hardly anything had changed since 1943. Undoubtedly the Romantic connection was still Breton’s preeminent touchstone; his remarks that Starkie’s study *Artur Rimbaud* and *La pensée poétique de Rimbaud* by Jacques Gengoux have shown that Lévi influenced Rimbaud too, and de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Mallarmé as well, reveal that Breton had continued reading (French) scholarly studies of esoteric Romanticism and Symbolism.310 Seeing how Breton was confirmed in his opinion that Lévi was the preeminent esoteric source for all his beloved poets, we can be sure he granted him that same status in his own life as well. Breton repeats Lévi’s definition of the central ‘dogma of magic’: ‘the visible is a manifestation of the invisible, or the perfect word, in things visible and appreciable, is exactly proportionate to things invisible and unrecognisable by the senses.’311 Obviously, Breton states, this is close to the view of the poets. I think he must have chosen this particular passage from *Dogme et rituel* as it vindicates his own movement as the true heir to esoteric Romanticism: both the correspondences between visible and invisible, and the crucial importance of the word as expression of the imagination and the real are quintessential parts of Surrealism and directly derived from Romanticism.

Another essential surrealist concern, love, was similarly incorporated into Bretonian magic. In 1953, in a letter to occult scholar Robert Amadou, Breton commented favourably upon his definition of magic. Incidentally, this letter is one example of an interesting interchange of ideas between Amadou and Breton.312 It is obvious why Breton would approve of the definition by Amadou and his co-author Kanters, and indeed their book in general: the authors have included many of his Romantic and Symbolist heroes in their *Anthologie littéraire de l’occultisme* and discuss in their introduction how fruitful the interchanges between Romanticism and esotericism were, and how important a role the Romantics have played in the transmission of esoteric thought.313 Furthermore they praise and paraphrase Breton, and the very fact that these scholars hailed him as an occult thinker must have cemented that notion too in Breton’s mind.314 Most important
is that Amadou’s magic strikes so close to Breton’s heart. Magic is the practice that furnishes the means of acting upon the universe while making use of the analogical correspondences which that element has in common with all other elements of the universe, or so Breton paraphrases Amadou; and we should note this identification of magic with analogy. His most personal experience of this, he continues, was when seeing The Child’s Brain by de Chirico for the first time — whereby Breton directly relates magic to art and to the act of seeing, too. He implies that magic, defined as acting upon irrational correspondences, was already a part of Surrealism in its early days, and even though I think that was not the case in the 1920s, it was in the 1930s. It is even as if Breton’s ideas about the corresponding surrealist universe prefigure the definitions of magic that were current in the French milieu of scholarship of esotericism in the 1950s. Possibly they did, by means of the esoteric Romanticism assimilated and emulated by Breton in the 1930s, and, more deliberately, in the 1940s. As the same esoteric Romanticism was also the subject of scholars such as Amadou, a feedback loop is created with Bretonian Surrealism located in the middle (although this remains speculative).

One in the other: analogical metaphors and other games

Like so many things in Surrealism, art magic depends on irrational correspondences. During his study of the history of playing cards, Breton had come to the conclusion that ‘signs outlast the things they signify’, and this insight underlies, I think, his emphasis on signs and the very fact that they are irrational. Breton’s concern therefore is the magic of absurd metaphors, which, as he asserts, one can detect in many art works (of Bosch, di Cosimo, Goya) through ‘uniquely “alchemical” or “cabalistic” exegesis’. We should understand ‘alchemical’ or ‘cabalistic’ exegesis as the practice of recognising irrational signs as signs, or signs as signs of the irrational, thereby knowing them as manifestations of the unconscious and of the omnipotence of desire. Such irrational decoding is what Surrealism and esotericism share:

Poetic analogy [= surrealist poetry] has this in common with mystical [=esoteric] analogy: it transgresses the rules of deduction to let the mind apprehend the interdependence of two objects of thought located on different planes. Logical thinking is incapable of establishing such a connection, which it deems a priori impossible.

In a move that is familiar by now, Surrealism is immediately distanced from the religious or metaphysical elements of the practice it has been likened to:
Poetic analogy is fundamentally different from mystical analogy in that it in no way presupposes the existence of an invisible universe that, from beyond the veil of the visible world, is trying to reveal itself. The process of poetic analogy is entirely empirical ... it remains without any effort within the sensible (even the sensual) realm and it shows no propensity to lapse into the supernatural. Poetic analogy lets us catch a glimpse of what Rimbaud named “true life” and points toward its “absence”, but it does not draw its substance from metaphysics nor does it ever consider surrendering its treasures on the altar of any kind of “beyond”.\footnote{320}

Even though Breton had expressed a preference for ‘metaphor’ in the 1930s, he now switched mainly (though not exclusively) to ‘analogy’; I consider this another sign of his familiarity with more or less scholarly writings on esoteric Romanticism, as the concept of analogy as an explanation of magic is heavily used in many of such sources, not least Amadou & Kanters’ Anthologie.\footnote{321}

The insatiable surrealist hunger for irrational correspondences was expressed in more than writing; in the 1950s Breton and Péret took it to new heights with the freshly invented game of ‘l’un dans l’autre’ (one in another), a game of metaphors.\footnote{322} Proceeding from the idea that things can be contained in one another, an object would be described in the terms of the other object.\footnote{323} A spin-off game was ‘analogy cards’, in which passport-like attributes (place of birth, nationality, height) would be expressed in fixed categories resulting in absurd-seeming descriptions.\footnote{324} Although both games seem to play on allegorical identities, they are based upon the fundamental assumption that things (also beings) can share an irrationally operating essential quality that facilitates the identification of the one as the other. In L’Art magique ‘one in another’ is associated with a category of games described by no less a luminary than the historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945): the ‘enigmatic game’, a revelatory game that espouses the supralogical character of the cosmos and man’s situation in it.\footnote{325} In Surrealism the revelations are of a secular though surreal nature, similar to objective chance, but the correspondences exposed by means of the games all revealed, supposedly, the inner irrational workings of the surrealist cosmos and the Surrealist’s place in it. With all this emphasis upon suprarational analogic relations, fundamental correspondences, and essential qualities, it is not hard to see why many French occultists and occult scholars in the 1950s felt such an affinity for Bretonian Surrealism, nor why many of the Surrealists of that time, including Breton, felt that what they were doing was so closely related to occultism or esotericism.

Incidentally, Breton was so inspired by Huizinga’s Homo Ludens: A Study
of the Play-Element in Culture (originally 1938) that he retroactively interpreted all surrealist activity as a game, claiming furthermore that the Surrealists had reinvented the practice of making art as well as the workings of language and even of knowledge—because language and knowledge are fundamentally the same. No doubt Breton worked on the magical theory championed by Lévi and repeated by the Romantics that to know the Word is to know its essence, as the Word is magical. The consequences of this for authors and poets, particularly those who considered themselves more or less magicians anyway, are obvious.

The language of birds and phonetic cabala; alchemy’s prime matter
Decoding irrational signs requires ‘alchemical exegesis’, as we have seen above. To decrypt, however, also supposes the facility to encrypt, and therefore in the 1950s alchemy, or to be more precise the language of alchemy, became codified as a marvellously poetical language that enlightens and mystifies at the same time. Obviously the interest in Alchemy of the Word had been present in Surrealism from the outset, but where it had been something of a generic trope before, it became defined and specific now. The first important development was that Breton read Les demeures philosophales (1930), the second book by the mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli, from which he cited extensively in ‘Fronton Virage’ (1948, 1953). This is the first direct reference by Breton to Fulcanelli. Although Breton cites Fulcanelli at length, all citations derive from the same section on the ‘hermetic cabala’, or the secret language of the alchemists, which is clearly Breton’s main and perhaps even only focus. The secret language of alchemy, also known as the ‘language of the birds’, is ‘a phonetic idiom based only on assonance’. ‘It is important to note’, Breton continues, ‘that this language is primarily used for cabalistic purposes: to send secret messages to others while befuddling the common run of people’. Therefore, for the avant-gardiste who must hang on to their elitist position and continue the occultation of their work,

[t]he poetic resources of that [alchemical] language are invaluable (see, for instance, Valentin Andrée, Les Noces Chimiques de Simon [sic] Rosenkreuz…).

In Surrealism, references to alchemy had always been embedded within a discourse on Rimbaud’s Alchemy of the Word, or Ernst’s Alchemy of the Visual Image. By the 1950s, Breton and his Surrealists were actively appropriating alchemical language as a rhetorical device, and Chemical Wedding is considered a textbook of mystifying language. To start with, Breton’s growing insight into esoteric Romanticism is to blame, once again. From Novalis to Baudelaire, they
all integrated several alchemical tropes, themes and references into their work. Note that for many Romantic authors, magic and alchemy were, while fascinating topics and fruitful themes, overall a sign of a (lost) past as well; a nostalgic undercurrent that paralleled Breton’s yearning for the past in general and his own identification of esotericism with the past in particular.

The ‘language of the birds’ is already a concept with a long and complex history in the west, having its origin partly in a secretive language developed by medieval troubadours, but having been applied since then to many secretive languages, including those related to alchemy, magic and divination. As with so many things, the concept was also embraced by the artistic and literary avant-gardes, who, continuing the practice of the Romantics and many earlier literati, loved to play complex language games. I would argue that the element of play, particularly the association of complicated language games with the practice of literary elites, is the second and perhaps even the most important reason for the increasing surrealist emphasis upon alchemical language. This is supported by the fact that Breton’s references to Fulcanelli’s hermetic cabala and secret languages are embedded in an essay on dandy and prolific author Raymond Roussel, specifically about his quasi-mechanical literary method of homophonically rhetorical devices with whom the Surrealists were much impressed. Roussel’s works fuelled the surrealist obsession with language games, which in turn stoked the fire of alchemy of the word as well, certainly after the second half of the 1940s. Generally speaking, the language of alchemy is a semi-secretive language often consisting almost entirely of metaphors, wherein vitriol dissolving gold is described as the Green Lion devouring the Sun, for instance, a metaphor that could come straight from a session of ‘one in the other’. Phonetic properties of language are often very important, and in the twentieth century played a considerable role in the (constructed) history of alchemy; which in turn influenced Breton’s opinion of it by way of Fulcanelli, or his disciple Canseliet or his circle.

In my opinion, the increased emphasis in Surrealism upon language, and in particular upon language games predicated upon metaphors and analogies, and/or upon phonetic qualities, is directly responsible for the seemingly sudden emphasis upon alchemy and the language of the birds. Already in 1947 Breton had asked whether ‘the key to the passionate interest generated successively within surrealism itself by the “word games”’, could not be found in the ‘extraordinary spread… of the activity known as “phonetic cabalism”’? After all, Breton quotes esoteric scholar Ambelain, ‘it is in the tradition of the Cabala… to assert that…words or… sounds with related resonances… are indisputably related in the “world of images”’. If we consider that the image is a foundation stone of French poetry—as per Rimbaud’s ‘visual hallucinations’ that lead him to
poetry, as discussed in chapter three\textsuperscript{343}—it becomes clear that we are concerned here with the very essentials of language.

What was it all about then [Breton asked in 1953]? Nothing less than the rediscovery of the secret of language whose elements would then cease to float like jetsam on the surface of a dead sea.

... The whole point, for Surrealism, was to convince ourselves that we had got our hands on the “prime matter” (in the alchemical sense) of language.\textsuperscript{344}

The ‘prime matter’ in question is without doubt automatic writing.\textsuperscript{345} Here Breton comes full circle to the original and most surrealist of surrealist practices, indeed, to the practice that kick-started the entire movement and was enshrined forever as the quintessential definition of Surrealism. True automatism is the ‘state of grace’, so tragically lost, and causing a ‘ruthless’ ‘depreciation of language’.\textsuperscript{346} Correspondences between inner and outer need to be restored, and in my opinion underlying all these concerns with language and language games is the obsession with the irrational relations between signs and signifiers, a resolution of which would pave the way for perfect automatism and therefore perfectly authentic poetry. Occultists therefore may be of interest because their practices and language run parallel to the objectives of the Surrealists, and because they have hailed the Word as magical, but they have hardly been the trailblazers. On the contrary, the real trailblazers of ‘phonetic cabala’ or alchemical language are ‘Marcel Duchamp, Robert Desnos, Jean-Paul [sic] Brisset, and Raymond Roussel’; artists of language all.\textsuperscript{347} Surrealist poetry was aimed at ‘changing life’, as per Rimbaud, and to that end had been

following the path of that “internal revolution” whose perfect accomplishment could well merge with that of the Great Work, as alchemists understand it.\textsuperscript{348}

Carrouges, for all his failings, grasped the surrealist understanding of alchemy completely when he concluded that

Alchemy ... is poetry [surrealist poetry, it is implied] in the strongest sense of the word, and surrealism is truly an alchemic transmutation.\textsuperscript{349}

Surrealism was indeed an alchemical transmutation. In fact, it was a
boiling cauldron wherein concepts from esotericism, but also psychoanalysis and anthropology, for instance, were dissolved only to be reshaped into essentially surrealist ideas. Everything that caught the attention of the Surrealists was added to this cauldron, the result of which was a solution wherein everything is connected and combined. And what, then, is the binding agent? Desire. Because to attain the ‘prime matter of language’,

it is essential… to undertake the reconstruction of the primordial Androgyne that all traditions tells us of, and its supremely desirable, and tangible incarnation within ourselves.350

Desire (or love)—for the Other, for the irrational, for the marvellous, but mostly sexual desire for Woman351—is the most magical force of all and only when the Surrealist has fully integrated that other into himself has he attained true surreality.