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

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Breton’s celebration of Flora Tristan does not make him an advocate of women’s rights. Such an argument only shows a misunderstanding of Breton’s thought. He celebrated Tristan as a heterodox socialist thinker who wrote poetically, even almost automatically on occasion, and who happened furthermore to be a woman. The case for esotericism is the same. Mentioning Swedenborg’s or Paracelsus’s name does not make Breton a Swedenborgian, Paracelsian, occultist or esotericist in general. At the very most, in fact, it makes him a Romantic, as it is invariably in that context that such esoteric luminaries are mentioned. I take issue with all of those who have turned Breton into an adept of esotericism, and his movement into a celebration of esotericism; in my view, Breton was very adept at reading about, and referring to. His movement was a celebration of Romanticism and Symbolism, including its esoteric elements. The ‘traditional thought’ of esotericism, and of particular esotericists specifically, is celebrated as heterodox and therefore marginal, above all, while the symbolical and poetical language (both verbal and visual) clearly added to its appeal. The very fact that the Great Precursors were influenced by certain esotericists made it inevitable that Breton would turn to them too. Esotericism functions as the antidote to the thought of Breton’s time, and I would even go so far as to put it on par with tribal masks, children’s drawings, Smith’s invented languages, ‘primitive’ mythologies, medieval fairy tales, and Fourier’s harmonious passions: as far as the Surrealists are concerned, it is other, preferably from the past, and marginal.

In the 1920s, the concepts of automatism and artistic clairvoyance became defined in Bretonian Surrealism. Mediums proved instrumental in this regard, proving that allowing one’s unconscious free rein could lead to inventive poetic and artistic products, generated automatically. Being in an automatic state could be paramount to becoming a seer. Discarding the possibilities of communication with the dead or outside agents, as well as actually seeing the future or being otherwise clairvoyant, the Surrealists interpreted any and all actions by mediums, as well as those of madmen and women, as automatic and therefore inspirational.
After all, Surrealism was defined as ‘pure psychic automatism’.

In first instance, the Surrealists generated ‘othered’ material themselves, in automatic writing and the experiments of the sleeping sessions. While the last practice was discontinued, the former carried on, now with the addition of material from mediums, clairvoyants and other visionaries. What’s more, the Surrealist should try to be like the medium, discovering his art in tea-leaves. The experiments with automatism were followed in 1929 by the call for occultation, and the formation of the surrealist corresponding universe in the 1930s. The automatic material was slowly but surely replaced by myths, legends and fairy tales. The primitive, or magical, worldview, in which the links between disparate and seemingly unconnected events or objects become meaningful, became the dominant surrealist view. In the early 1940s, nineteenth century revolutionary thought and nineteenth century occult thought were added to this mix.

Essentially, the groundwork for a further alignment with esoteric thought was laid during Surrealism’s first two decades, and indeed around 1940 Bretonian Surrealism made a distinct turn towards the esoteric. This was part of a larger turn towards the heterodox, prompted by the rising political tensions and the eventual outbreak of the Second World War. In exile, the idea that the surrealist artist was a magician, which had been brewing for a while, came to full fruition. Notably, the surrealist magician retained the recourse to automatism as a valid avenue for generating knowledge and art. Still, this does not mean that love, poetry and revolution—the three essential surrealist concerns—became less important, on the contrary, their relevance only increased. Esotericism, in the fragmented form of selected publications, such as Lévi’s Dogme et rituel, or of objects, such as tarot cards, and further in the generic form of a current of a heterodox tradition suppressed by the mainstream, became intertwined with these concerns.

Desire, and primarily the love for Woman, remained the omnipotent force. Love works magically, that is to say, in mysterious ways, and in the 1930s desire became Surrealism’s prime mover, the motor behind every interaction with the world both inside and outside of one’s mind. The Other, Woman, should be fully subsumed into the Surrealist’s own personality, thereby turning him into an androgyne, a complete dual being, the magician who has ‘jealously’ made the automatic sorcerous powers of the witch his own. The Surrealist-magician effects change, for instance by means of his art. He strives to connect signs and signifiers, thereby creating the surrealist corresponding universe as such but also functioning within it. All surrealist correspondences operate irrationally, which is why they are valued, why they are magical, and also why it is the mind set of the primitive that foremost serves as an inspiration. It is, furthermore, why the magician is just like the primitive, but also just like the madman. Like those two,
the Surrealist can both decode and create suprarational connections, allowing him, besides other things, to become a prophet of objective chance.

The Surrealist-magician assumes a magical mind set at will, but should strive to share it with the world at large. After all, reason and rationalism have led to the total political failure of the war, and it is the magical mind and its (feminine) capacity for making irrational connections that will liberate mankind. To support this undertaking, one should look to nineteenth century and earlier heterodox thought, preferably of a religious and/or esoteric bent, but also radically utopian, and even just absurd in general. Texts will serve best, as the prime tool of the Surrealist-magician is, after all, language. Language is the prima materia, the capillary tissue of the universe of Surrealism. By means of the metaphor, and later analogy, the Surrealist uncovers irrational correspondences, and also covers them up again. Such phonetic cabalism, which touches upon the essential nature of things—a nature transcendent though secular in a way that is only possible in Surrealism—is not fit for the ‘common run of people’. In 1947 the attempt had been made to initiate this crowd into the secrets that Surrealism had to offer, but it had obviously failed. Possibly that was supposed to happen, as the initiatory trajectory was subverted from the outset.

The role of Western esotericism in the long history of Bretonian Surrealism is clear. Breton’s final position was recaptured in a 1950 interview.1 Surrealism ‘could not avoid rubbing shoulders with esotericism’, seeing how it ‘follows the historical determinations’ that pass through poets such as Hugo, de Nerval, and the whole list of esoteric Romantic Predecessors. Yet the intersection with ‘certain fundamental esoteric theses’ was only done because of ‘strictly poetic’ motives.2 The Great Work of the alchemists, Breton wrote, is similar to the ‘internal revolution’ the poet works towards on the basis of Rimbaud’s dictum to ‘change life’.3 History as it is written, he continues, ‘is a web of dangerous nonsense’. Only myth can offer response, but it had become difficult to unravel. Esotericism is in fact one of the research tools of unearthing myth(s):

As soon as we stand before the enigma of these myths, we are forced to realize that esotericism teaches us most about them.4

But, Breton added, ‘no need to tell you’, ‘“fideism” is to be avoided here just as much as anywhere else’.5 In the early days of Surrealism, Spiritualist and psychical research-practices were employed to investigate the mind and its creative possibilities, but, as Breton emphasised in ‘The Mediums Enter’, at no point did the Surrealists adhere to the Spiritualist viewpoint. Esotericism is employed, I argue, in a similar manner: as an investigative technique, a treasure
trove of interesting material, a patterning device, a means towards a rapport with
the world—but at no point did Breton or his Surrealists turn ‘fideist’ (believer); as
a system of belief, esotericism was categorically rejected.

The ‘occultation’ of Surrealism, therefore, has turned out to be a
process much more concerned with making Surrealism complex and generally
inaccessible, than with making it an occult, or esoteric, movement. In the end, the
public declaration of allegiance to myth, magic and esotericism in 1947 served
indeed to ‘occult’ Surrealism (once again) from its audience, alienating both
public and critics. Possibly we can consider this a success, in spite of everything,
and whatever others might say, Bretonian Surrealism was still avant-garde, and
it returned to occultation with a vengeance. Accompanied by their beloved
Precursors on one side, and various occultists, alchemists, primitives and other
deviants on the other, they sought the gold of time.6

I do not think they found it. But then again, I do not think they intended
it to be found.