Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton

Tessel M. Bauduin

SURREALISM AND THE OCCULT
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- For my parents -
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Introduction: The Occultation of Surrealism

Nothing can make [certain] people [...] understand the true nature of reality, that it is just an experience like any other, that the essence of things is not at all linked to their reality, that there are other experiences that the mind can embrace which are equally fundamental such as chance, illusion, the fantastic, dreams. These different types of experience are brought together and reconciled in one genre, Surreality.

Louis Aragon, ‘A Wave of Dreams.’

Prelude

Late in the summer of 1924 a small book was published in Paris. Although it garnered little attention at the time, this Manifesto of Surrealism heralded the existence of an avant-garde movement that would prove to be one of the most influential of the twentieth century. 1

A tiny movement of dissident writers at the time, Surrealism would grow quickly and expansively into an international force to be reckoned with, counting painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers and performers as well as writers and poets among its ranks. In 1924, however, hardly anyone had heard of Surrealism outside of a small group of fledgling surrealists themselves and André Breton (1896-1966), the Manifesto’s author, could only have dreamt of the way the adjective ‘surreal’ would pass into everyday speech today. Possibly that would have been a nightmare – for all that he intended Surrealism to be a revolution liberating mankind, and womankind too, it was emphatically not meant for all and sundry. Even though Surrealism celebrated elements of pop and mass culture, it was always positioned in the vanguard of society. Indeed, in his Second Manifesto of 1929, Breton insisted that ‘the approval of the public must be avoided like the plague.’ After describing further concerns about Surrealism’s openness, he made it clear that access to Surrealism should be limited: ‘I call for the profound, the veritable occultation of Surrealism.’ While ‘occultation’ can refer to concealing or hiding something, it may also be interpreted as indicating an alliance with the occult or engaging occultism. This book is concerned with the nature of Surrealism’s ‘occultation’ in that sense: the presence of occultism in Surrealism. It offers a history of Breton’s relationship with
occultism and his integration of it into his own work as well as in the Surrealism under his leadership. Covering five decades of Surrealism, it is my aim to provide an overview of the particular occultisms that were relevant to Bretonian Surrealism, offering insight into the way in which Breton and his surrealists related to occultism and to what extent one can say Surrealism was really ‘occulted.’

André Breton and other surrealists provided several definitions of Surrealism and the surreal throughout their career, and central to most of them is a concept of mind, or psyche, in combination with the notion that Surrealism acts through or in the mind. For instance, Breton provided the following definition of Surrealism in his *Manifesto*:

ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.3

As ‘dreams’ and ‘thought’ indicate, mental processes form the heart of Surrealism. Surrealism should be understood foremost as a certain state of mind, hence Breton’s insistence that Surrealism was a *psychic mechanism*. In the direct wake of the first French translations of Freud’s works, as well as in response to continued developments in psychiatry arising from the discovery of the unconscious in the nineteenth century, the surrealists made the mind a seat of literary and artistic wonders. As veritable ‘Marco Polos of the mind’ or ‘speleologists of the psyche,’4 they set out to explore the mind and especially its subliminal states. In first instance, subliminal states were explored as a means towards a more imaginative approach to literature, but quickly also to the visual arts. Eventually, despite Surrealism being currently known predominantly as a visual arts movement, it transcended the arts and was intended to be a philosophy of life, or life style as it would perhaps be expressed today, informed by a political agenda and geared towards revolution. Being a surrealist is a choice about how to interact mentally with the experienced world, be it inner or outer, real or sur-real, and how to interpret it.5 ‘[Surrealism] is a means of total liberation of the mind and of all that resembles it.’6

The mind could be liberated by various means, including by engaging the irrational rather than the rational, which was considered restrictive and bourgeois. Surrealism, Breton stated later, ‘[had opened] certain doors that rationalism boasted of having boarded up for good,’7 those doors being a
variety of rejected mental states such as the dream, fantasy, hallucination or insanity, opening upon subliminal vistas of the wonderful, irrational, marvellous, mad and fantastic. Occultism and related disciplines could provide the means of opening such doors too. One can think of parapsychology, known at the time as psychical research, which sought to explore hidden and lucid powers of the mind. One can think of magic, which was thought to operate upon the same principles as the ‘primitive’ mind; namely, that of correspondences between things in the (phenomenal) world and between things in the mind and in the world. Or, too, of alchemy, which, according to surrealist interpretation going back to Romanticism, was primarily concerned with complex linguistic games, secret languages and metaphors. Mysticism, occultism and Western esotericism, therefore, be it in the form of tropes, images, books, ideas or worldviews, or in the form of a coherent current of thought – generally termed ‘the hermetic tradition,’ and later ‘esotericism’ – found a place in Bretonian Surrealism as well.

As the title already indicates, my primary concern is with Breton and the Surrealism as espoused and directed by him. This results in an almost exclusive focus upon French Surrealism, at the expense of the Surrealisms that arose in other countries. It further leads to a marginalisation of surrealists other than Breton, and to a near exclusion of the French Surrealisms under different leadership, such as Georges Bataille (1897-1962) or the group Grand Jeu. My choice is partly guided by the fact that there is no denying that the current perception of the discourse of Surrealism is defined for a significant part by Breton’s writings. The particularly close-knit character of the surrealist group made them a true collective, practically as well as ideologically. Their intense contact, excellently analysed by Bandier, means I feel confident positing that (at least for his group) Breton functioned as the ‘gatekeeper’ controlling the group’s composition, activities, source material, input, output and ideology to a considerable extent.

Moreover, my focus upon Breton and ‘his’ Surrealism is particularly relevant in the context of occultism, in which some scholars have accorded Breton a central role. I have set out here to both define that role and question that which other authors have ascribed to him. Other artists whose interest in occultism was just as avid as that of Breton, or even surpassed it, such as Max Ernst (1891-1967) and Victor Brauner (1903-1966), have recently been recipients of thorough and excellent scholarly studies. In Breton’s case, however, scholars have, as a rule, either resorted to vague and generalising statements that beg for specification, or have argued in favour of a very occult Breton with which I disagree. I propose, therefore, to write an alternative history of Bretonian Surrealism; specifically, a history that not
only diverges from the view that the Surrealism of Breton had little to do with occultism, or esotericism, but also from the view that it had everything to do with it.

**Staking out positions**

By providing a certain view of the occultation of Bretonian Surrealism, I am locating myself in a field of study in which several positions have already been staked out. For instance, by Michel Carrouges (1910-1988) and Anna Balakian (1915-1997), whose respective studies *André Breton et les données fondamentales de surrealism* (1950, English translation *André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism*, 1974) and *André Breton: Magus of Surrealism* (1971) can be considered classics within this small field. *Basic Concepts* was the first French book-length study that advanced the concept of an intense investment by Breton (and his Surrealism) in esotericism. *André Breton: Magus* was the first English study to do the same. Both insist on the far-reaching involvement and investment of Breton in what is variously called hermeticism, the hermetic tradition, esotericism, and, in Balakian’s case, also magic.

Carrouges joined the surrealist group in 1949 on Breton’s invitation, until his Catholicism caused such controversy in surrealist circles that he was ousted in 1951, during a very painful affair that damaged Breton’s leadership position almost beyond repair. He was (and is) considered controversial or downright suspect by Surrealism scholars too, not least because his work aims at squaring essential surrealist ideas with a specifically Christian understanding of esotericism. His discussion includes the Zohar, Christian kabala, Paracelsus, alchemy and Rosicrucianism as well as such concepts as the fall of mankind and grace. He wrote: ‘It would be a [...] serious omission, however, to pass over in silence the influence of esoterism [sic] on Breton’s thought. [...] For, as one penetrates more and more profoundly into surrealism, one realises that hermeticism is the cornerstone that inspires its basic concepts.’ Carrouges’ choice of books, authors and currents is determined by his personal Catholic convictions, and his classification of the occult science of magic as evil reveals his identification with clerical positions. Coldly received by surrealists and French scholars in the 1960s and 70s, Anglophone scholars seemed hardly aware of his book – with the exception of Roger Shattuck, who counted Carrouges among ‘the most perceptive French critics,’ together with Jules Monnerot and Philippe Audoin. One thing these three authors have in common is that they moved
in surrealist circles for a certain amount of time and can thus boast an insider's knowledge of what was \textit{then} considered important by Breton and others. Monnerot's (1909-1995) study \textit{La Poésie moderne et le sacré} (1945) proceeded from earlier investigations, together with Bataille and others, into concepts of the sacred, secret societies, and forms of primitive and Antique spirituality, Christian Gnosticism in particular. Well received in Bataille’s circle, \textit{La Poesie} was also commented upon favourably by Breton.\footnote{Audoin's comprehensive book \textit{Breton} (1970) discusses several essential philosophies of life of Bretonian Surrealism, the centrality of the concept of the marvellous to it, and the pervasive presence and importance of themes such as ghosts and spectres, castles, quests and grails within the surrealist discourse.\footnote{In doing so, he shows how much Surrealism was committed to something intangible that may be described as a re-enchanted world, albeit without religion.}}

Balakian, in her turn, was not a surrealist but met and interviewed Breton at the end of his life.\footnote{Balakian, in her turn, was not a surrealist but met and interviewed Breton at the end of his life.} In \textit{André Breton: Magus}, as elsewhere, she pays significant attention to positioning Breton within what she terms the ‘hermetic tradition,’ a tradition also encompassing such literary luminaries as ‘Shakespeare, Blake, Goethe, Novalis, Mallarmé, [and] Yeats.’\footnote{Balakian's \textit{Breton: Magus} is a pivotal study because the author constructs a literary ‘hermetic’ pedigree, consisting of canonical, predominantly romantic, poets whose works show traces of occultism, culminating in Surrealism. She establishes a direct relation between Breton and historical occultism, specifically positing and elaborating upon a connection between his thought and that of Éliphas Lévi, the occultist author whose \textit{Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie} (1854-56), \textit{Histoire de la Magie} (1860) and \textit{La Clef des Grands Mystères} (1861) kick-started nineteenth-century French occultism.\footnote{Balakian argues that Breton first encountered Lévi's ideas in the works of symbolist poet Rimbaud, subsequently turning directly to \textit{Dogme et Rituel}. She also contends that Breton modelled his ‘surrealist coterie’ on the structure of occult societies as described by Lévi – by implication, Bretonian Surrealism is just such a society, even if not necessarily secret.\footnote{Interestingly, Monnerot had earlier implied the opposite: that Surrealism was a secret(ive) society, even if not necessarily occult.\footnote{After naming Breton heir to the magical tradition of nineteenth-century occultism, Balakian subsequently extends that tradition backwards in time, all the way to fifteenth-century physician, astrologer and alchemist Paracelsus and fourteenth-century alchemist Nicolas Flamel. At the same time, Balakian brings her tradition closer to Breton's present and the twentieth century, by claiming the mysterious modern alchemist Fulcanelli as another precursor}}
of Breton. In other words, she constructs a long, eminent and still living tradition with Breton at its apex.

Besides the topic of their study, Carrouges, Monnerot, Audoin and Balakian are further linked by the fact that they knew Breton personally. Their familiarity with him later in his life and, therefore, with what he considered important to his work and movement at that time, must surely have influenced the focus of their works. Indeed, when they knew him in the late 1940s and 1950s, Breton wrote and talked about his interest in a current he occasionally called ‘esotericism’, and his aim to align Surrealism with ‘the hermetic tradition’ so as to tread in the footsteps of Romanticism. Carrouges and Balakian are no exceptions in their appraisal of Bretonian Surrealism; rather, they are the rule, as is also shown by Sarane Alexandrian and Patrick Waldberg. Alexandrian (1927-2009) and Waldberg (1913-1985) had been part of the surrealist group around the 1950s. They also knew Breton personally and wrote books about him, both making a point of mentioning occult currents and figures in their discussions of Breton’s thought and his Surrealism. Clearly, something was occurring in this period – a sentiment confirmed by authors from the other end of the spectrum, who find confirmation of their understanding that, by the 1940s, Surrealism had undoubtedly ceased to be avant-garde precisely because of Breton’s interest in the occult. The first historian of the movement, Maurice Nadeau (1911-2013), had canonised Surrealism as a movement and the 1930s as its ‘Golden Age’ by publishing his *Histoire du surréalisme* in 1944. He and others considered the 1940s and after to be Surrealism’s ‘Hellenism’ or waning, as it were, evidenced by the increasing prominence of esotericism, occultism and mysticism in Breton’s later works, starting with *Arcanum 17* (1944). When Breton started ‘treading in the waters of occultism’ in earnest, decline set in – or so it is thought. Such an opinion provides insight into how some scholars view(ed) occultism, even as it also reveals the underlying assumption that still cutting-edge avant-garde movements would not ‘dabble’ in it.

Judgements about occultism aside for the moment, it is indeed the case that Breton’s engagement with it changed dramatically in the 1940s. In fact, the Second World War formed the catalyst for Breton’s fascination for, deepening investment in, and literary and artistic employment of, esotericism (as he calls it at that time – as will be discussed below, I prefer ‘occultism’). This development reached a climax in 1947, at precisely the moment when many critics were writing the movement off, and continued during the 1950s; developments that will be explored in Chapters Four and Five. Yet, I would point out that well before the 1940s Breton and other surrealists were familiar with occult figures, works and ideas. Below, I
Introduction: the Occultation of Surrealism

I will discuss the occult sources that Bretonian Surrealism had, or may well have had, at its disposal throughout its long life under Breton's leadership. I argue that written sources – rather than, for instance, ritual practice – formed the main vehicle for the majority of information about the occult available to and appropriated in Surrealism. Breton in particular evinced a clear preference for (semi-)scholarly and French studies, such as histories and works of comparative religion. At the same time, knowledge about the occult, in particular occult tropes and concepts, was also available to Bretonian Surrealism by means of another, perhaps more implicit avenue: the literature of Romanticism and Symbolism, some of which is certainly indebted to the occultism of its time. As will become clear, in the 1940s these two avenues merged, at least for Breton, when he encountered a new wave of French scholarly studies focusing specifically on the relationships between occultism and romantic-symbolist literature.

Occult traces in romantic and symbolist precursors

Throughout its existence, canons of great writers, painters and thinkers who were considered forerunners of, or otherwise directly relevant to Surrealism,
were (re)defined in its discourse. Such a canon was first established in 1923 with the publication of the text-collage ‘Erutarettil’ in the proto-surrealist periodical *Littérature* 11-12 (1923) [pl. 1]. Four occult names are included in this word-cloud *avant la lettre*: Hermes Trismegistus, Flamel, Agrippa and Péladan. This last, Joséphin ‘Sa’ Péladan, is the most surprising, as Breton hardly ever referred to him again – although this has not stopped some from granting him the status of an occult inspiration for Surrealism. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) is known within an esoteric context as a Renaissance magician, and Nicolas Flamel (1330-1480) as a great alchemist and one of the few who – allegedly – succeeded in creating both the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. Hermes Trismegistus is supposedly the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the core text of what is called the hermetic tradition, in turn central to esotericism. Still, the majority of those listed in ‘Erutarettil’ are poets and writers, mostly (but not exclusively) French, male and modern. In the end, of a total of 71 names, only four can be squarely placed within the fields of esotericism and occultism – and Hermes, Agrippa and Flamel are so famous that they would be known to anyone just grazing the surface of occult history. Péladan, meanwhile, made quite an impact in the Parisian symbolist art scene only thirty years before the dawn of Surrealism and may well be mentioned here for that reason. In other words, the group Hermes-Agrippa-Flamel-Péladan is not necessarily very meaningful in the context of determining Surrealism’s commitment to occultism.

At the same time, several of the remaining 67 names can, in fact, be found meaningful within that context and ‘Erutarettil,’ therefore, does highlight another possible avenue for the surrealists to encounter occult ideas: Romanticism and Symbolism. Surrealist heroes such as Rimbaud, Nerval, Hugo and Baudelaire, among others, were interested in the occult currents and movements of their time, incorporating elements of it in their work in one form or other. Their works served the surrealists as a continuing source of inspiration, and it stands to reason that some, or perhaps much, of their occultism – such as it was – was absorbed by them. I will discuss them very briefly here.

Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) were characterised by Breton as being ‘the only ones still able to hear Swedenborg’s voice,’ and, in fact, Swedenborgian themes permeate the works of both men. Balzac’s *Séraphita* (1834), a story about an androgynous character full of Swedenborgian references, was certainly read by Breton and probably by many other surrealists. As Marguerite Bonnet has shown, Breton’s citations of Swedenborg in his own work derive directly from *Séraphita*. 
In fact, Breton never turned to the original books by Swedenborg, although other novels by Balzac, such as *Louis Lambert* (1832), may have been a further source of knowledge about Swedenborg’s ideas. Breton was very probably alerted to the occult undercurrents in Balzac’s story by an article by Albert Béguin in *Minotaure* (1938), which discusses the androgyne from Plato and Gnosticism to Boehme, another Christian mystic, to the Swedenborgians and thence to *Séraphita*. Baudelaire, in turn, was influenced by Balzac’s ideas, including those derived from Swedenborg, and subsequently turned to Swedenborg’s original writing. Baudelaire’s writings, and specifically the occultly inclined *Correspondences* (1857), made an impact upon the surrealists.

Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) both also engaged the occultism of their time in their own way. Rimbaud’s poem ‘Voyelles’ (1873), for instance, is filled with alchemical references. Nerval’s most occult work is *Les Chimères* (1877), a collection of poems. His autobiographical *Aurélia* (1855) has also been the subject of many esoteric interpretations; the surrealists must have appreciated it at least for its emphasis upon inner discourse, dreams and fantasy. Rimbaud’s work and ideas had a vigorous afterlife in Surrealism, as has been pointed out primarily by the surrealists themselves (and confirmed by scholars), and although it is less well known, the appropriation of many of Nerval’s ideas certainly took place as well.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) read widely on the occult and one can find echoes of Swedenborgianism, Pythagoreanism, Saint-Simonism and even the occultism of the disciples of Fourier in his work. Breton read much of Hugo’s oeuvre, particularly those poems, plays or novels that were critical of society, state and/or church, and recommended it to other surrealists. Most controversial, however, during Hugo’s lifetime as well as during his subsequent canonisation, was his involvement with Spiritualism while in exile. As will be explored in Chapter Two, the surrealists knew Hugo’s spiritualist diary, choosing to read it as a work of poetry rather than metaphysics. Yet, Breton was only really introduced to Hugo’s wide-ranging occult interests by Auguste Viatte’s *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (1942). This book was a turning point in his perception of occultism in Romanticism and Symbolism, and in general.

Viatte’s study became the first of many; very probably, to start with, Breton turned to Viatte’s earlier seminal work *Les sources occultes du romantisme* (1928). Breton also familiarised himself with the studies of Denis Saurat, who had touched upon Hugo’s occultism in earlier books before devoting an article and two entire volumes to the topic just after the war. In *Apertures*,
the 1947 addition to his *Arcanum 17*, as in the later *Conversations*, Breton listed further sources: *Nerval, poète alchimique* by G. LeBreton, Jean Richer’s studies on Nerval and occultism, Albert Béguin’s book on Nerval and his article ‘Poetry and Occultism’, and studies by George Blin on Baudelaire and Jacques Gengou on Rimbaud, both elaborating on the occult in their respective poetry.46

During the 1940s and later, Breton depended rather heavily upon these studies, referring other surrealists to them as well, as Cellier has shown.47 Clearly, romantic literature came to be seen in a new light. Viatte’s *Victor Hugo* in particular was very influential: it alerted Breton to the interconnections between occultism, poetry, and radical social thought during the second half of the nineteenth century. He wrote in 1947:

[S]cholarly research [i.e. Viatte cum suis] has recently come to discover, at the junctions where the ideas of poets and those of visionary social thinkers meet ([... H]ugo, Nerval, Fourier), the enduring vitality of an esoteric view of the world (Martinès, Saint-Martin, Fabre d’Olivet, l’abbé Constant [Lévi]). [Soon it will become known] that this worldview more or less directly influenced the major poets of the second half of the nineteenth century (Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Jarry).48

Clearly, as these ‘major poets’ were Surrealism’s guiding lights, the worldview that ‘directly influenced’ them became a major point of interest for Breton, as in his *Surrealism*. After Viatte, Breton wrote *Ode to Fourier* (1945) and added a chapter with extracts of Fourier’s writings to the *Anthology of Black Humour*.49 He also started to refer to Fabre d’Olivet and Éliphas Lévi in his work.50 After his understanding of Hugo’s debt to Lévi, premised upon Viatte, Breton started to use Lévi’s term the ‘Word’ (*Verbe*) in the occult sense, referring to the word that is an action.51 Similarly, Martinès and Saint-Martin – founders of Martinism and Illuminism – are mentioned for the first time.52 Finally, whereas previously Breton had connected symbolist poets such as Rimbaud to modernist poets such as Jarry solely because of their shared precursor-ship to Surrealism, after Viatte he did so primarily because of the influence of (what he termed) esotericism upon their thought or work. Clearly, after having read Viatte, Breton’s view of the romantic poets and of occultism changed significantly, and that view was subsequently further enhanced by the other sources he read.

Another important source is *Anthologie littéraire de l’occultisme* by Robert Amadou and Robert Kanters (1950). This literary collection reads as a who’s who of important Western authors from Antiquity to the twentieth
century, including Apuleius, Chrétien de Troyes, da Vinci, Goethe, Blake, Fabre d’Olivet, Novalis, Balzac, Hugo, de Nerval, Poe, Baudelaire, Huysmans and Rimbaud – in other words, the cherished precursors of Surrealism and for good measure many other famous writers too, all of which were here considered occult writers in one way or other. The anthology is indicative of an appropriation of (High) literature by occultists and occult sympathisers. The last entry was by none other than Breton himself. Leaving aside for the moment whether Breton considered himself an occult writer, by this time others certainly placed him in that category. This illustrates the fact that by the early 1950s, at least in the French discourse, literary and religious scholars, occultists and surrealists shared a view of an occult literary tradition to which Surrealism was, if not the direct successor, at least indebted to. Also at this time, Breton corresponded and became acquainted with practicing alchemists (to which I will return below); where previously occultism had perhaps been kept at something of a theoretical distance, it was now becoming integrated in the life of, at least, Breton.

Some scholars have stated that Breton’s ‘real’ interest in esotericism or occultism dates only from after the Second World War. Indeed, only from Viatte onwards does one find references to occultism in the works of Breton that show broad knowledge of the field, and understanding of the reach and form of the influence of various esoteric and occult currents upon Romanticism and Symbolism. We can say that Breton, and through him other surrealists, were only really catching on to Romanticism’s debt to occultism when they encountered contemporary French scholarship on the matter. As indicated above, during the 1950s, the gap between occultism and French literature generally and Bretonian Surrealism specifically was bridged from many sides.

However, I find that the fact that Viatte’s book was such a watershed does not mean that there was no occultism in Surrealism at all before that time; it was simply of a different kind. First, while Breton may well have read his favourite poets with fresh eyes having read Viatte et al., the presence of occult and esoteric ideas, tropes and terminology in the works of the canonised precursors, as detailed above, would still have been latent in Surrealism. Let me provide an example: even though Breton may only have learned of the specifically Swedenborgian influence precipitating Balzac’s construction of his main character as an androgyne through the publications of Béguin of 1938 and later, the Bretonian surrealists still appreciated and used the trope of the androgyne before that time. Not least because this (sexual) union of man and woman in one body fitted their own ideas of love, but also, because it is a recurring trope in romantic literature,
which frequently contains an occult and/or alchemical subtext to it too. That subtext may have been (again) latent in Surrealism, or even explicit in the case of alchemical illustrations, which were quite appreciated.\textsuperscript{58}

Secondly, three compendia of information about the occult were known to the surrealists since the movement’s early days. Thirdly, we also need to look beyond (historical) occultism and the well-trodden paths of determining the influence of Lévi or other occult high flyers; namely, to early anthropology and the comparative religion-view of tribal magic and similar practices, to parapsychology and to popular culture, for instance in the form of stage mediumism. Finally, and running on a parallel track to the paper trail, particular individuals who may have been knowledgeable about occult matters, moved in and may have shared that information within surrealist circles. All of these aspects will be discussed below.

Further sources

While Viatte et al. would have provided a scholarly perspective upon the interrelations between historical occultism and romantic and symbolist literature, two authors providing ‘inside information’ as it were – as they belonged to late-nineteenth century French literature and wrote about the occultism of their day – were available to Surrealism from the outset: Jules Michelet and Jules Bois. \textit{La Sorcière} by French historian Michelet (1789-1874) had been published in 1862.\textsuperscript{59} This book was particularly influential in the surrealist formulation of the notion of woman as a witch and sorceress, as was its fundamental premise that medieval witchcraft and magic were, in fact, revolutionary movements against the oppression of the (Catholic) church.\textsuperscript{60} The Bataille camp was familiar with it too.\textsuperscript{61} The Danish film \textit{Häxan} (1922), directly based on Michelet’s book, played in Parisian theatres under the name \textit{La Sorcellerie à travers les âges}.\textsuperscript{62} Breton and Aragon commented positively on this film in an article that celebrated hysteria, showing their adherence to the film’s thesis (going back to Michelet) that there have never been witches, merely misunderstood hysterics suffering from delusions who were cruelly repressed by the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{63}

\textit{Le Satanisme et la magie} (1895) by Jules Bois (1868-1943), illustrated by Henry de Malvost, had already provided the surrealists with visual information before \textit{Häxan}. Breton reproduced an illustration of succubi in a 1933 article.\textsuperscript{64} In the book, Bois discusses many occult currents under the heading of ‘Satanism,’ and would have familiarised the surrealists with the names and publications of Hermes Trismegistus, Agrippa and Flamel, for instance.
Bois popularised the connection between Black Mass altars and woman – that is, a woman’s body serves as, or is at least laid upon, the altar – which may possibly have contributed to the later surrealist association of woman with altars and sacred places. The preface to *Le Satanisme* was written by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), whose novel *là-bas* (1891) was based upon extensive research into the occultism and Satanism of his time. Set in a former convent, it describes the main character’s growing involvement in Satanist Black Masses, and as the surrealists were avid fans of the Gothic genre, one can be sure they read *là-bas* as well.

Both *La Sorcière* and *Le Satanisme* were trumped at the end of the 1920s by *Le Musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes* (1929) by Émile Grillot de Givry (1870-1929). It was enthusiastically received by surrealists from both the Breton and Bataille camps. Michel Leiris (1901-1990) immediately published a positive review of it in the surrealist periodical *Documents*. *Le Musée* discusses topics ranging from witches and demon worship to tarot cards, other means of divination and alchemy, as well as Agrippa, Paracelsus, Flamel and Fludd. Excerpts of works by these esoteric luminaries had already been published by Grillot de Givry in an edited volume in 1922, the *Anthologie de l’occultisme*. Leiris refers to it in his review and it seems probable others besides him read it; Breton certainly did. An important part of *Le Musée* are the images: lavishly illustrated, it would have familiarised the surrealists with the visual canon of Western esotericism, ranging from the diagrams of Agrippa, Paracelsus, Fludd and Boehme, to the alchemical illustrations of Michael Maier, Heinrich Kunrath and Abraham the Jew; and from paintings and woodcuts by Brueghel the Elder, Dürer, Holbein and Goya, appropriated as occult somehow, to Early Modern tarot cards. It certainly served as the preeminent source of alchemical information for all the surrealists; but, in fact, I think it served as the handbook of everything occult. Why consult another book when one had this monumental compendium at hand? Traces of it, or rather of its illustrations, are, for instance, the sudden vogue for chiromancy or palm-reading, which overtook the surrealists in 1935. *Minotaure* 6 contained an article by a Dr. Wolff on ‘chirognomie,’ including handprints of various surrealists and others. Very similar illustrations can be found in Givry’s chapter on ‘La chiromancie.’

These three sources alone provided the surrealists with a wealth of – more or less historicising – visual, textual and referential information about nineteenth-century occultism, including Satanism, as well as overviews of the history of witchcraft and esoteric history ranging back to the late Middle Ages. They construct a roughly similar lineage of important esoteric actors, i.e. Hermes Trismegistus, Agrippa and Flamel (as in ‘Erutarettil’).
The political subtexts on revolution, historical dissent, feminine hysteria as revolt and repression by institutions such as state and church, but also the gothic atmosphere of satanic rituals involving beautiful women taking place in haunted locations, would have fitted well the surrealist worldview and interests. Moreover, both Bois and Michelet could be read too as literature, sharing with the poetry and prose of revered predecessors such as Hugo or Rimbaud a milieu, a style and similar responses to French culture of the second half of the nineteenth century, in which occultism was very much a tangible presence. Givry’s book, in turn, combines two tendencies: the interest for the occult that formed the basis of the occult revival, and the early twentieth-century interest in comparative religion, particularly of the West’s own religious and spiritual historical cultural past. This leads to one of the additional groups of sources I have highlighted above, early anthropology.

Primitivism had been a central concern of Surrealism from the very outset. As the 1930s progressed, this developed into a genuine interest in cultures of non-Western peoples, in particular an increasing fascination with tribal myths, magic and rituals. From the studies of their day, Surrealism adopted the idea that magic is a structure of thinking, of perceiving and interacting with the world. The (deep) past was treated as a foreign country too, and a comparative religion of the West’s own ‘primitive’ culture and its myths and magical worldview in particular was bound up with Surrealism’s preoccupation with ‘primitive magic’ in general. For instance, Leiris devoted another positive review to *L’Île magique*, a book on Haitian voodoo by occultist and adventurer William Seabrook (1884-1945). Later, Breton would travel to Haiti and personally witness voodoo rituals, elements of which he introduced in the 1947 surrealist exhibition. Early in the 1930s, Seabrook became friendly with Leiris and Man Ray, and moved in surrealist circles for a while. It is impossible to pin down if he shared deep insights about occultism, rather than stories of his adventures – probably both – but it should be mentioned that he strongly leaned towards scientific, psychological and even occasionally pathological interpretations of occultism, witchcraft, voodoo and similar practices. Such a view (partly akin to Michelet’s) was also current among the surrealists.

Another important source in this regard is without a doubt *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer (1854-1941). Bretonian and Bataillian surrealists alike both read and enjoyed it, turning also to other works by Frazer such as *Totemism and Exogamy*. In Chapter Three we will further explore the surrealist fascination with myth, the overarching category under which religious practices of the past and of tribal cultures, including magic, were
understood. Suffice it to say here that the borders between ethnography, mythology and occultism were rather blurred, and in selected articles in *Documents* and *Minotaure* anthropologist Marcel Griaule (1898-1965) and, predominantly, the intellectual Roger Caillois (1913-1978), referenced a number of sources about magic, usually scholarly and historic in nature.  

Even though reading was Breton’s favourite method of appropriating occult pasts, and even though it is hard to find any evidence of interpersonal exchanges concerning occultism (as the Seabrook case shows), I will still mention others who were knowledgeable about occult matters, as their presence and possible willingness to share their knowledge may well have played a role in forming, focusing or directing the occult interests of Bretonian Surrealism. As cases in point, Leiris and Caillois were, in fact, surrealists, partaking in Bataille’s and Breton’s groups (although primarily the former); both published in surrealist journals. Leiris had a lifelong fascination with historical occultism, initiation and magic and fetishist practices in non-Western cultures. His reviews, of Givry’s *Le Musée* but also of key texts of esoterism such as the *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) by John Dee, offered surrealists across the board valuable information about the histories of occultism and esotericism. The investigations of the sacred and secrecy that Leiris and Caillois undertook together with Bataille and Monnerot are well known, and although we can safely assume that the Bretonian camp would have read their articles and other works, it is impossible to say if they would have contributed in any other way to the Bretonian side of Surrealism in this respect. Leiris, Caillois and Bataille founded the *Collège de Sociologie*, a group of intellectuals organised around a series of lectures (1937-1939), where topics included the sacred, secrecy and occult eroticism. They also established a secret society, ‘Acéphale,’ named after the already existing journal *Acéphale*; it had a political and revolutionary, rather than occult, agenda. Breton in any case never joined Acéphale.

An important figure in Breton’s direct circle is Max Ernst. Scholars now assume that alchemy informed much of Ernst’s work in a very idiosyncratic manner. He may have consulted alchemical manuscripts and his alchemically informed auto-psychoanalysis perhaps influenced others in the early 1920s. Yet, Ernst’s alchemy is so personal that it is not necessarily easily shared or transmitted. This is even more the case with Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), who was certainly not a surrealist, despite Breton’s continuing attempts to co-opt him for Surrealism; his occultism (alchemy in particular) is not undisputed and was in any case as highly idiosyncratic as anything else about him and so not easily transmissible – if he would have wanted to share it anyway. If Breton were affected by personal influences, he would
have been most open to Ernst, Duchamp or to Pierre Mabille (1904-1952),
doctor, anthropologist, writer and part-time surrealist. Mabille, who was
on excellent terms with Breton, published in surrealist journals in the
1930s. His primary interest was mythology, which he traced in religion
and occultism alike, and a profound interest in and knowledge of occultism
formed a considerable part of his mythological studies. In an article on
luminous consciousness in *Minotaure* (1937), for instance, he discusses
transcendental knowledge and contacting cosmic energies, referring to
both ancient and medieval ‘hermetists’ in the process. He links luminous
consciousness to painting, and a reproduction of an illustration from Fludd's
*Philosophie Musique* precedes numerous paintings and objects by surrealist
artists, including Dali, Tanguy, Ernst, Magritte and Remedios Varo, among
many others. Thus, Mabille explicitly connected occultism, a lineage of
historical ‘hermetists,’ contemporary thought about consciousness and
Renaissance esoteric diagrams to contemporary surrealist art, suggesting at
the least shared views on consciousness (in art) among them. His 1940 book
*Mirror of the Marvellous* was prefaced by Breton, who was much impressed
with it, as were many other surrealists. This rather unique book celebrates
the surrealist concept of the marvellous in a long reflection that is akin to
comparative mythology, including certain occult elements and motifs. It
is very hard to identify precisely how Mabille shared his occult knowledge
with the Bretonian surrealists in the 1930s, other than by means of his
written work. Sarane Alexandrian, however, is convinced that Mabille ‘initi-
ated’ Breton into the secrets of geomancy and prophetical astrology, which
seems probable. In the 1930s, the Bretonian surrealists were increasingly
concerned with the theme of initiation – which continued well into the
1950s – and it is quite probable that Mabille played an influential part in
this, as initiation was one of his major mythological interests.

A similar case, to a certain extent, is Kurt Seligmann (1900-1962). He
associated with the surrealists only for a brief period in Paris from 1938
to 1940, and then occasionally in the United States until 1942. He wrote
several books and articles on magic and occultism, among them one on
the evil eye referenced by Caillois. One can assume that he shared his
occult knowledge with some surrealists; it is known, for instance, that he
exchanged letters about such matters with Leonora Carrington, who also
read his book, and that he compiled a folder with documentation about the
tarot for Breton. In any case, as there are hardly any studies of him available,
the manner and extent of such sharing or more remains a mystery for now.

A last, late – but certainly not least – group of individuals should be
mentioned: the intellectual alchemists with whom Breton came into con-
tact in the 1950s: Eugène Canseliet (1899-1982), writer, alchemist and the only disciple of the famed and mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli;91 occultist Claude d’Ygé (1912-1964); and historian, alchemist and writer René Alleau (1917).92 Alleau was a regular in surrealist circles, while in their turn the surrealists, at the instigation of Breton, attended his lectures on alchemy.93 Alleau organised a few philosophical dinner parties in 1950, which included Canseliet, d’Ygé and Breton.94 Alleau, Canseliet and d’Ygé contributed to the occult journal *La Tour Saint-Jacques* (1955-63), founded by another occult specialist, Robert Amadou (1924-2006) – whose *Literary Anthology of Occultism* has been mentioned above.95 Amadou attended surrealist gatherings occasionally and was acquainted with Breton. It seems quite probable that these men imparted occult and alchemical knowledge to Breton in person. Furthermore, they all published about alchemy and occultism, publications we can safely assume Breton would have read. Nonetheless, all of this occurred after 1947.

There is, moreover, an area of expertise in which Breton himself was the expert: parapsychology, or rather psychical research. Breton’s original training was in medicine, and he always retained a fervent interest in (dynamic) psychiatry. He read many para-psychological journals, particularly in the 1920s and early 1930s, such as *La revue spiritiste; La revue métapsychique; Annales des sciences psychiques*; and *Aesculape*, which are all referred to in the 1933 essay ‘The Automatic Message’.96 In many instances, he demonstrated his familiarity with medical studies involving mediums, particularly the studies written by Théodore Flournoy about the medium Hélène Smith, who was to become Breton’s favourite medium.97 Remarkably enough, psychical research is one area in which the interest moved beyond reading about the subject to actively experimenting. As will be discussed in Chapters One and Two, Breton attended experimental mediumistic sessions at the Institut de Métapsychique in Paris, and visited the parlour of a clairvoyant in the 1920s, together with other surrealists. He publicly debunked stage hypnotisers. He appropriated automatic writing, originally a mediumistic practice and, under his leadership, the surrealist collective experimented with trance states in séance-like sessions during the early 1920s.

**Some final comments on Bretonian Surrealism’s occult sources**

After Breton’s death his library was investigated by Marguerite Bonnet and Étienne-Alain Hubert, who compiled, among other lists, a list of works concerning the ‘traditional sciences,’ which roughly covers Western esoteri-
cism and occultism. René Alleau was consulted in compiling this list. He suggested three categories to classify the material: the ‘hermetical tradition,’ ‘history of religions’ and ‘occultism.’ It is a rather small list, totalling only forty titles. The romantic works are not on this list, neither are those of Viatte and company, books like Frazer’s, or (para-)psychological studies. As Breton’s love for these works and his possession of them at one point or other are known from other sources (such as his own writings), it is clear that they must have been included on other lists, or no longer present at the time of list-making, which is, after all, only one moment in time. In compensation, a number of other titles from the category ‘history of religions’ are part of the list, such as Gnostiques et gnosticisme by de Faye (1925) and Dom Pernety’s Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique of 1787. The list further yields the following sources: Grillot de Givry’s French translation of Dee’s Monas Hieroglyphica, a French 1902 translation of the Zohar, a French translation of The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz (1928) and all of Lévi’s works. Above, I have discussed mainly secondary sources, but the inclusion of these titles shows that by the end of his life Breton had finally turned to primary sources as well, albeit a small selection. Three more books stand out: first, a French translation of Dion Fortune, remarkable because Breton never referred to British magic or Fortune herself, at all. Then, there are two books by Lotus de Païni: La Magie et le mystère de la femme, and Les trois totémisations. The magical mystery of woman was, of course, something that must have greatly appealed to Breton, who entitled a 1962 collage for his daughter Aubé, ‘Lotus de Païni.’ It is notable that Fortune and Païni are the only female authors in the collection. Just as remarkable, finally, is the presence of one book by Stanislas de Guaita, and one about him. Some (more speculative) authors have assumed that Guaita’s thought must have influenced that of Breton. However, one specific image of water and fire united, which Breton took from the illustrations of Guaita’s Le Serpent de la Genèse by Oswald Wirth and used in the 1942 catalogue of First Papers of Surrealism, is the only evidence of possible influence; any appropriation of Guaita’s ideas can only be inferred from the presence of these books in Breton’s library.

We can draw a number of conclusions on the basis of this discussion of sources. Breton had a strong preference for secondary studies written by historians of literature, of occultism or of comparative religion. Surrealists and surrealist sympathisers such as Mabille and Seligmann wrote these types of books. This predominance of reference books, compendia and literary histories exemplifies, firstly, that Breton preferred his occultism (mainly) mediated. He spent a lot of time reading books about books. Although late in life Breton sought the company of practising occultists such as Canseliet,
they were just as erudite as the books he preferred. The difference with, for instance, a surrealist artist like Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988), who was a practicing occultist, is therefore not only immense but also unbridgeable. Breton’s occultism was an intellectual pursuit, premised upon written sources, preferably in French. His reluctance to read other languages led to a limited body of available sources, many of which were focused on French developments anyway. It also led to an identification with French (academic) positions regarding the history of esotericism, including a positive standpoint towards the ‘hermetic tradition’ as proper and intellectual, and a negative valuation of ‘occultist hodgepodge’ or ‘metaphysics of the music hall’ (Spiritualism). Thirdly, these sources are, in the main, scholarly and it is clear he had a strong preference for a learned, rational and (semi-) scientific approach. He relied upon scholars like Viatte to inform him about Illuminism and its influence upon Romanticism. When taken by a fancy for astrology, for example, he relied upon *Influence astrale* (1899-1900, 1926) by Paul Choisnard, a complex and technical book that advocates an experimental research-directed approach to astrology with the help of statistics. However, I would also point out that – considering the breadth and depth of Breton’s voracious reading – the sources discussed here form rather a small corpus. The relative scarcity of occult references in the first two decades of Surrealism and Breton’s reliance on a small corpus of sources after the war show that occultism as such was never his main concern, certainly not before the 1940s; even then, his interest was subordinate to, on the one hand, the project of re-introducing myth into the world, and on the other, his all-encompassing fascination with Romanticism and Symbolism.

**Occultism and brief outline of this study**

Finally, we come to the question of what is meant by ‘occultism’, with regards to Breton’s ‘occultation.’ Terms that have passed review include ‘hermeticism,’ ‘the hermetic tradition,’ ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism,’ but also magic, for instance.

First, I will draw out a few lines from the sources discussed above. To begin with, a central idea is that of a ‘hermetic tradition’ that is essentially timeless and homogenous, and in which the usual suspects, such as Hermes, Agrippa and Flamel, make their appearance. As others have shown, concepts such as timelessness, universalism, original wisdom and perpetual truths are core ingredients of the entire notion of a ‘hermetic’ (esoteric) tradition (or ‘Tradition’) as employed in many, if not nearly all, esoteric
currents, as well as in occultism just as in contemporary New Age. There is also a considerable intermingling of the ‘hermetic tradition’ with an idea of poetic lineage. Balakian, for one, succeeds quite well in painting a picture of a tradition that is home to magicians, alchemists and ‘great poets’ alike and which exists over vast oceans of time. The literary occult anthology of Amadou & Kanters exemplifies this conflation of the idea of a ‘hermetic tradition’, nineteenth-century occultism and nineteenth-century poetry, and it would have cemented this notion, which had been forming in Breton’s mind since Viatte. There apparently exists a tradition, therefore, extending backwards in time, which Breton would refer to as ‘esotericism’ in 1947 and later. The romantic and symbolists poets employed, or even belonged to, this tradition, but so too did various revolutionary thinkers. Note this identification of said ‘esotericism’ with political heterodoxy and revolution, which also goes back to Micheletian ideas about magic and witchcraft as revolt. Furthermore, pursuits such as alchemy apparently belong to this tradition as well.

Next, the issue of magic. Within Bretonian Surrealism, occultism was associated with irrationalism and marginality, which reflects a view that was widespread at the time (and in some cases still is today). Briefly, many intellectuals in the twentieth century considered magic (and therefore occultism, which was seen as premised upon magic as worldview and practice) erroneous: a mistaken view of relations within the phenomenal world as well as one’s own relation to it. It is irrational, illogical and, basically, just primitive, a mistake of the inferior or childish mind and, therefore, as I will explore at length in Chapter Five, that is exactly why magic and occult ideas were so relevant for Breton and why he aimed to incorporate them in his Surrealism. The very fact that it was perceived as anti-modern – made magic so attractive to Surrealism. Irrationality, pre-rationality and an illogically working mind; that was the answer to the political situation of the day, the means of the surrealist revolution, the magical psychic mechanism by way of which the surreal could be discovered and manifested in the real.

Thirdly, as discussed, late Bretonian Surrealism and roughly contemporary scholarship (including such authors as Carrouges, Balakian, Alexandrian and Waldberg) were rather closely connected, and not only did they adhere to similar views of a ‘hermetic tradition,’ they also shared a blind spot: Anglo-American historical occultism. The only people belonging to historical occultism we find in the relevant sources are nineteenth-century Frenchmen, such as Lévi or Papus and Eteilla (the last two rarely mentioned in Surrealism). Historical occultism encompassed much more than developments in France after the 1850s, and includes developments such as modern
In the Introduction of Surrealism, British magical initiatory societies such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and modern witchcraft are mentioned. Yet, this remains entirely obscured in Surrealism, as in French scholarship of the time and works with a decidedly French orientation, such as those by Balakian. Theosophy and Anthroposophy, to name two important movements that attracted many artists during Breton's early lifetime, make no appearance at all in Surrealism. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the Bretonian surrealists gained most of their initial knowledge of occultism, as well as of earlier esotericism, from *La Sorcière* and *Le Satanisme*, nineteenth-century works deeply informed by the historical occultism of their time. Also, from twentieth-century compendia, such as Givry's *Le Musée* – that presents a long and inclusive extra-temporal magical tradition, strongly influenced by historical occultism – on the one hand; and scholarly studies of romantic poets and their involvement in occultism on the other. Nineteenth-century occultism, and scholarly perceptions of it, therefore strongly influenced the Bretonian surrealistic view. Occult Romanticism was the golden standard against which every surrealistic step in their process of occultation became measured. Nevertheless, after 1940 and the blossoming of Breton's more profound interest in occultism, one might perhaps have expected him to show an interest in fin-de-siècle and twentieth-century occultism. Certainly, some information on such movements was available, not least because of connections with the British surrealist group, where a few artists were actively engaging contemporary occultism. But Breton remained focused upon the established French hermetic tradition alone; his only concession to twentieth-century developments was his inclusion of the mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli among the canon of ‘hermetists.’

Several shared characteristics among the movements that do not make their appearance in Bretonian Surrealism are quite telling: they are not French, often practice-based, include women very prominently, are frequently concerned with progressive or liberal issues (although usually not those close to the heart of Surrealism), and/or are focused upon wisdom-traditions from the East. The occultism relevant to Surrealism, in contrast, was something intellectually stimulating, book-based, informed by earlier esoteric movements, based upon thought considered heterodox, propelled by white male Europeans positioned as geniuses, heteronormative, strictly Western, of the past, and sanctioned – even rather exclusively mediated – by the *poètes maudites*.

Current scholarly research focuses upon the constructed scholarly category of Western esotericism as a whole and its characteristics, as well as upon currents that are placed under its overall heading, such as Neo-
Platonism, Swedenborgianism, Christian theosophy and Illuminism, for instance. Reception, appropriation and invention of tradition are recurring processes in this construct that is esotericism, from the Renaissance reception of neo-platonic ideas, as well as scholastic and Islamic thought and Gnosticism, to the historically related currents in turn developing out of that. Scholarship usually extends ‘Western esotericism’ into modernity and even the present day, meaning that movements such as Spiritualism, modern Theosophy, occultism, New Age and Neo-Paganism, to mention only the more prominent ones, are also included under its heading. For the purposes of this study, however, I understand ‘esotericism’ to refer primarily to early modern developments; and ‘occultism’ to modern developments beginning in the nineteenth-century, which were significantly informed by such forces as modernity, secularisation, globalisation and the invention of the unconscious, and should therefore be distinguished from earlier movements. Occultism is a modern cultural phenomenon that found its origin in what has been called the occult revival, starting in France but quickly spreading to other (Western) countries. Developments within occultism include the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and similar movements, and modern witchcraft. As I hope to make clear in this study, historical occultism – the developments in France from the mid-nineteenth century onwards – became the most important reference point for Bretonian Surrealism, the lens through which other periods and currents were viewed. Occultism was not a contained, inward-looking development divorced from other cultural developments. Indeed, it pervaded, for instance, psychiatry and popular culture as well, even as it was in turn informed by it. As the first few chapters will show, if taken rather broadly there are clear traces of an occultation of Surrealism in its first decade as well.

This brings us, finally, to the structure of this book. Each chapter covers a particular period, starting with the ‘time of slumbers,’ the early years of the 1920s; followed by the ‘period of reason,’ or the late 1920s and the early 1930s; the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1930s; the period of exile, covering the late 1930s and war years; and finally, in Chapter Five, the late 1940s, with 1947 as its climax and some additional comments about the 1950s. In line with my understanding of Surrealism as a revolution of the mind, each chapter discusses a mental process or state. Each chapter also covers a stage within the surrealist trajectory of ‘occultation’ – or ‘occult process’ as Breton would refer to it later in life. Allow me to point out, however, that a recourse to the occult and esoteric was only one of several avenues that were explored to find total freedom of mind and thought, albeit the avenue in focus here.
Breton made his demand for a ‘profound, veritable occultation’ in 1929. While it found its effect in the 1930s and particularly in the 1940s, it is important to realise that the stage for an occultation was already set in the early 1920s. One concept that lies at the absolute basis of Surrealism is the practice of automatism. As I will show in Chapter One, Bretonian Surrealism adopted automatism from psychology and psychiatry, particularly from these disciplines’ own, now marginalised, occult histories of psychical (or parapsychological) research and experimental research involving mediums. Closely associated with psychical research is Spiritualism, which left clear traces in early Surrealism. Relevant too is popular somnambulism because, around the turn of the twentieth century, displays of mediumism were not only limited to environments of medical or psychical research or the spiritualist séance, but also present in popular culture in the form of novels, plays, stage performances and plays. Underlying all these different areas is the shared paradigm of somnambulism, going back to mesmerism, a development with its own esoteric history.

Around 1925, it became clear that pure verbal automatism was not sufficient as a means of surrealist expression, as I will argue in Chapter Two. A growing emphasis upon the visual arts, among other things, led the Bretonian surrealists to further explore other faculties of the mind, such as the imagination. This was linked closely to ideas about clairvoyance, on the one hand, and the romantic understanding of the artist as a seer or prophet, on the other. Female clairvoyants and mediums were served up as ‘seers’ whose example the surrealists should follow. Becoming a seer was important, because after the experiments with automatism – a surreality existing solely within the mind – the new issue now was how to ‘see’ the surreality that is immanent within the world experienced outside of the mind; that is to say, surreality within reality. Ideas about mediums and mediumism, therefore, continued to remain relevant. Breton eventually positioned mediumistic artists as outsider artists, precipitated entirely upon the understanding of mediums as automatists, possibly mad and hysterical too. There is no metaphysical element to the communications of the mediumistic; on the contrary, all that is communicated is the subliminal mind. This illustrates the rigorous secularising of ideas and elements appropriated from occultism that occurred in Surrealism, where each and everything was furthermore reconceived within the format of the mind and its psychic mechanisms. At the same time, it illustrates how romantic ideas about artists being seers and clairvoyance, with its attendant but perhaps latent occultism, were reconfigured and repurposed in Surrealism.
For Surrealism’s next decade, the 1930s, I have maintained the classical designation ‘Golden Age’. Rather than designating it a ‘golden age’ of the arts or literature (although it was that, too), I discuss the period here primarily as a golden age of the mind, as it was in that decade that Breton firmly established the surrealist mind as the ‘psychic mechanism’ par excellence. The overriding concern for the interaction of mind with surreality in reality – or sur/reality – defined this decade. It raised the question of which meta-structure would allow for creative interaction between mind and world. To facilitate this interaction, Breton constructed a surrealist universe based upon principles of correspondence, in which everything is related and various acts and things can be symbolic and meaningful. Desires within the mind can merge with signs in the outside world. Preferably, the established connections are illogical, irrational and primitive, or ‘magical.’ Hence, the magical worldview became firmly associated with the surrealist worldview in this decade. The anthropological studies of the magical worldviews of primitive societies, as well as the primitive past of the West, played a significant role here.

Close to the turn of the decade several developments converged. Several artists other than Breton turned to, or deepened their study of, occultisms, including twentieth-century developments such as the occult fourth dimension and Gurdjieffian thought. This did not influence Breton at that time; he, for his part, was delving into Christian mysticism and heresy, as part of his decisive turn towards the heterodox that was prompted by rising political tensions and the eventual outbreak of the Second World War. The war forced him into exile, but also towards a more serious consideration of occultism. He studied the tarot, for instance, which was invented as occult during the height of the occult revival in France during the second half of the nineteenth century. He also encountered the – already oft-mentioned – book by Viatte. Lévi, whose publications kick-started occultism in France, suddenly appeared on Breton’s radar and stayed. I would argue, therefore, that an ‘occultation’ of Surrealism, in the sense of a direct confrontation with and deep interest in the developments of historical occultism in France, occurred around this time. The developments discussed in Chapters One, Two and Three, in turn, deal with movements that belong to the category of occultism in a broader sense, such as Spiritualism, popular somnambulism and psychical research. All of these developed in parallel, proceeding from a new understanding of the mind and the new paradigm of the existence of the unconscious, upon which historical occultism itself was also based.

During the war, Breton came to appreciate the important role of a current of thought, frequently called ‘the hermetic tradition’ or ‘traditional
thought,’ but also ‘esotericism,’ in romantic and symbolist literature. He was strengthened in his view that esotericism could offer valuable ideas and symbols for his own movement. Meanwhile, proceeding along paths taken already during the 1930s, the surrealist artist had become a magician during the war, someone who effects changes that are desired mentally in the world through her/his art.

By 1947, Breton thought it necessary to share the magical surrealist world-view with the public in general by means of an exhibition, constructed as an initiatory trajectory. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, this exhibition and the way in which various occult elements were positioned and employed in it, showcases his appropriation of the heterodox current ‘esotericism’ (occultism, in my view) within an overarching politically motivated plan; such irrational, primitive, magical and also feminine thought will prove the antidote to the masculine rationalism of the day and the crisis it had caused. Interestingly – and ironically – at the same time, Breton turned more decisively and overtly towards the occult to reinvigorate Surrealism’s avant-gardism; his occult investment was the one element that convinced many critics, scholars and other intellectuals that the avant-garde days were finally over. An entrenching in existing positions took place during the 1950s, as I will discuss at the end of Chapter Five.

I have two closing comments. A lengthier and more detailed treatment of several of my arguments and sources is to be found in the dissertation that forms the basis for the present book. Finally, all emphasis is mine unless otherwise mentioned.