

### 'To be matter'

Claudine Frank, ed., *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003. 416 pp., £17.95 pb., 0 82233 068 7.

In 1934 two men in Paris contemplated something new and wonderful. They had obtained a pair of Mexican jumping beans. The younger of the two wanted to cut open one of the beans to test his theory that it contained an insect or larva. Surrealist magus André Breton would have none of Roger Caillois's suggestion: dissecting the bean would destroy its mystery.

Caillois was right. A Mexican jumping 'bean' is the woody seed pod of the shrub *Sebastiania pavonivia*. If he had cut open his specimen, Caillois would have found that it was lined with silk and contained the caterpillar of the moth *Laspeyresia salitans*. It is the movement of the caterpillar, which, left to its own devices, will eventually emerge to complete its metamorphosis, that causes the 'bean' to jump. Caillois would have liked to know that, but he would not have been completely satisfied. No one knows why the caterpillar moves in this way, or why it can go on doing so for months.

At the time of the jumping bean incident, which, according to some versions of the tale, may also have been witnessed by Jacques Lacan, Roger Caillois was twenty-one and already a precocious veteran of several of the small avant-garde groups that were in revolt against both society and literature. He had been attracted to Breton's surrealism because he believed that it would destroy Literature. The quarrel over the beans led to a cooling of relations between the two men, but Caillois became truly disenchanted with surrealism, its automatic writing, and its subjectivism when he realized that it *was* Literature. He had little time for subjective introspection. Writing in 1938 (the text is included in this book), Caillois disdainfully describes Literature as what happens to myth when it loses its moral authority or collective force and becomes a source of 'mere aesthetic pleasure'. 'Literature' is a 'humiliated myth' and it can thrive only in a society that has lost its cohesive force and its sense of the sacred.

Caillois is probably best known as the co-founder, with Georges Bataille, of the short-lived Collège de sociologie, which functioned for only two years (1937–39). The Collège de sociologie was not in fact a 'college' but a small group of avant-garde writers

and intellectuals. And its concern with sociology was restricted to the sociology of 'the sacred'. The sacred is not synonymous with 'the religious'. For both Caillois and Bataille, the concept refers, rather, to the experience of all that inspires fear and wonder: eroticism, death, and everything relating to the *tremendum et fascinans*. Caillois had already written extensively on the sacred and on the related themes of mythology. For Caillois, a classicist who was well versed in the comparative mythology and religion of Georges Dumézil, a myth is not, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, a model for understanding the world but an elemental force with the emotional power to mobilize social forces. There is something of Sorel about this, though Caillois did not share his politics and was certainly not interested in fomenting general strikes. Much of his early work, such as *Le mythe et l'homme* (1937) and the important *L'homme et le sacré* (1939; translated as *Man and the Sacred*, 1960) attempts to rediscover a mythical era that existed before the historical era. Both Caillois and Bataille were greatly influenced by the French school of sociology and the nostalgic vision of a lost collective effervescence and an organic society that haunts the final sections of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. The other major influence was Marcel Mauss's theorization of the gift relationship. Mauss's sociology, and especially his description of the conspicuous destruction of enormous wealth during the *potlatch* ritual, provides the basis for Bataille's 'economic of excess and expenditure'. A lot of Caillois's early work discusses similar themes, but concentrates more on the theme of festival/carnival. Caillois does not seem to have read Bakhtin, and Bakhtin appears not to have read Caillois, but the similarities are there.

The Collège was a closed group that aspired to being a secret society of higher intellectuals who would eventually resacralize society. A number of such groups flourished in the interwar period. The group of young Catholics who gathered around the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit* from 1932 onwards shared a not dissimilar vision of the need for spiritual–social renewal. The surrealist group had some of the features of what we would probably

now describe as a cult. Shortly before the foundation of the Collège, Bataille was active in the secretive *Acéphale* ('Headless') group. Caillois appears to have kept his distance, even though he always said that he and Bataille (whom he met through Lacan) existed in a state of 'intellectual osmosis'. He was probably wise not to become too closely involved. *Acéphale's* tiny membership was half-convinced that an act of human sacrifice would create an indissoluble bond between them. The details still remain obscure, but the legend has it that, whilst volunteer sacrifices were not in short supply, no sacrificer could be found. Claudine Frank suggests quite persuasively that Caillois was one of those who turned down the position.

Although these small groups, which are hard to locate in conventional political terms of 'right' and 'left', may look like the fantasies of underemployed intellectuals, they did reflect a widespread disenchantment with the tepid party politics of the period. Many saw the defeat of France in 1940 as the final revelation of the country's intellectual, political and spiritual bankruptcy. One Pierre-Dominique Dunoyer de Segonzac believed he had the remedy: a cadre school to be based in Uriage near Grenoble. This was a private initiative, but it quickly found state support. The school was founded in 1940 and its stated aim was to produce a chivalrous cadre of intellectuals or even an order of knights who would steer Vichy's National Revolution to victory. Mounier and his personalists were well represented in Uriage's ranks. The experiment went somewhat awry when most of Uriage's knights in shining armour went over to the Resistance in 1942. Many of them made significant contributions to postwar intellectual-political life.

In retrospect, Caillois's involvement with the Collège de sociologie was no more than one episode in a complicated career. Stranded in Argentina by the outbreak of the Second World War, he worked for the Free French Press. He travelled widely, usually in bleak and remote places. He became fascinated with Latin American literature and subsequently translated Borges. Most of his postwar career was with UNESCO and in 1952 he became the founding editor of its interdisciplinary journal *Diogène/Diogenes*, for which he worked until his death in 1978. A member of Gallimard's powerful editorial committee, he was elected to the Académie Française in 1971. The Académie's main task, which will probably never be completed, is the compilation of the definitive dictionary of the French language. During the working sessions, Caillois relieved his own boredom by suggesting non-existent words and then supplying highly convincing etymolo-

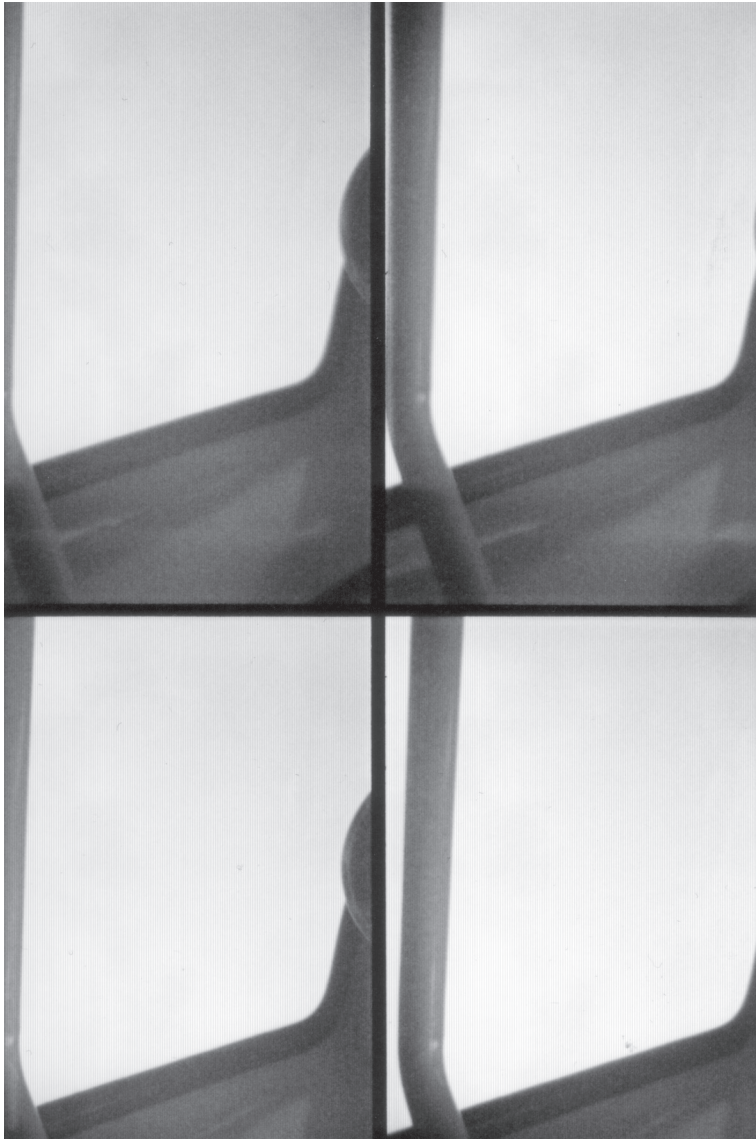
gies to go with them. It would be nice to think that some did find their way into the Académie's dictionary. Caillois's own vocabulary is so refined – recondite to the point of being exquisitely precious – that one could be forgiven for thinking that some of it must be invented. It is not.

Caillois wrote extensively, and on a bewildering variety of topics; *Le Nouvel Observateur* once described him as 'the last encyclopaedist'. It is impossible to categorize him in terms of genre. Whether he is a philosopher, a sociologist, a mythologist or a theorist of the imaginary and play is almost impossible to say with any certainty. In this richly representative collection, essays on the sacred and the sociology of the intellectual, and on the literary mythologies of Paris, are juxtaposed with a description of a bleak shoreline in Patagonia that rivals anything by Bruce Chatwin. He wrote perceptively on detective fiction (a genre offering a pleasing combination of passive enjoyment and active research) and fantastic literature. Speaking of the latter he borrows from a truly obscure source a witticism that says more about the appeal of fantasy and horror than many a fully fledged theory: 'Do you believe in ghosts?' 'No, but I'm afraid of them.' Shortly before he died, he published a lyrically beautiful autobiography that contrives to say almost nothing about his life. He ventured into fiction with a counterfactual in which Pontius Pilate spares the life of Christ. The result is that two thousand years of history cannot and did not take place. That history was only a possibility, and it was described long in advance by one of Pilate's advisers. It was not for nothing that Caillois admired Borges.

Caillois is not, I think, widely read in France. In most histories of the French Intellectual, he appears only in a minor role – usually as a signatory to a petition. Although much of his work has been translated by the American university presses to which we owe so many translations, he does not appear to have found many readers in the English-speaking world either. Claudine Frank's *Reader* is the first of its kind and it is wonderful. The translations, the general introduction, the brief presentations of each of the thirty-two pieces, the annotations and the bibliography are of outstanding quality. This is scholarship of a standard that is encountered all too rarely in the contemporary intellectual world, and it is a delight to savour it. It ranks alongside Denis Hollier's classic account of the Collège (published in French in 1979 and in English translation in 1988). This *Reader* is a major contribution to our knowledge of the complexities of French avant-gardism from the 1930s onwards.

A taste for Caillois is probably not something that is easily acquired, and he is unlikely to take on the iconic status of a Bataille. His style is enigmatic almost to the point of obscurity. As Frank so nicely puts it, his work can often seem 'lucid but meaningless'. He rarely deigns to explain either himself or his works in interviews, prefaces or overviews. He can be very contradictory. Fascinated by other cultures, and especially classical Chinese culture, he nonetheless clung to a strictly Eurocentric defence of culture against Nazi barbarism. The question of colonialism in Vietnam or Algeria, which so divided French intellectuals from the 1950s onwards, was of no interest to him.

Although Caillois constantly changed tack, there were themes to which he returned again and again. His emblematic figure of the sacred was the female praying mantis, who devours her mate during the act of copulation. Caillois discusses her nasty habits at considerable length in his early work, and relates them to romantic literature's perennial concern with the *femme fatale* or *Giftmadchen* who lures men to their death. For a



psychoanalyst, the fearful fascination with the mantis is, like Salvador Dalí's grasshopper phobia, a classic expression of the castration complex. Caillois insists that this is not the case: the castration complex is an expression of the male fear of being devoured, and of consenting to being devoured alive. The psychical is grounded in, or at least paralleled with, the biological. The terrified fascination with the mantis, and all the fantasies that go with it, is of course a very male obsession. Caillois does not appear to have been greatly interested in the female psyche. Had he been, he might have become fascinated by those species of spider in which, no sooner hatched, the young begin to devour their mother. She is their best source of protein.

There are, Caillois speculates, parallels between the life of the psyche and biology and much of his work consists in the attempt to trace them. This is also the theme of his writings on mimetism in the animal kingdom (which, for Caillois, consists of insects and reptiles rather than mammals) that were not without their influence on Lacan's first accounts of the mirror

phase. Mimetism is usually a defence mechanism: the creature mimics or merges into its environment so as to escape predators. As the creature merges into its environment, it loses some of the more obvious characteristics of life – visibility, mobility – and seems to retreat to some earlier stage. For Caillois, this is symptomatic of a desire to revert to an inorganic state that is characteristic of all living things. There is an obvious parallel here with Freud's death drive and all that lies 'beyond the pleasure principle', but Caillois is much more 'mineral' than Freud. Such speculations indicate the distance that separates Caillois from so many of his contemporaries. Lacan and Lévi-Strauss broadly follow Hegel – or at least Alexandre Kojève – in emphasizing the distinction between animal societies and human societies and grounding it in the differential structures of real/imaginary, need/demand/desire, and raw/cooked. In its own way, much of the Marxist tradition is grounded in a similar duality. Caillois argues, in contrast, for the existence of continuities, or at least parallels, between the two.

It is not easy to detect any continuity in Caillois's extensive body of work, but his 'autobiography' suggests that he

at least believed that it did have its unity. The title of *Le Fleuve Alphée* (which has never been translated) alludes to the mythical river Alpha. The freshwater river flowed through the salt sea, emerged untainted on the further shore and then flowed inland. The image of the river seems to represent some rebellious or perverse instinct that exists within parentheses: the surrounding sea is bracketed out in an almost phenomenological sense. By bracketing it out, Caillois can concentrate on his deepest obsessions. The unity appears to exist at the level of thematics and imagery. From the 1960s onwards, Caillois regularly published short texts describing stones and gems. They are, perhaps, best (if quite inadequately) described as prose poems. Here, his prose is as enigmatically beautiful as the totally inhuman objects it describes. A boy who regularly dismantled his toys to see 'what made them work' grew into a young man who wanted to cut open a Mexican jumping bean, and then a much older man who describes what happens when an agate is split in two and when its inner surfaces are polished. The ugly grey lump of stone is found to contain surfaces of shimmering colour that display regular patterns. They resemble the ocelli to be observed on the wings of certain moths and butterflies. The stones resemble ocelli, which resemble patterns found in plants and animals alike, and those patterns resemble the shimmering of an agate. There is something Baudelairean about these searches for 'correspondences', but, unlike Baudelaire, Caillois was no romantic symbolist. His search for analogies and correspondences between the human and the animal worlds, and between the animal and mineral worlds, sometimes suggest that he is what might be termed a materialist pantheist, and he did describe his studies of stones as a 'materialist mysticism'. When combined with the earlier psycho-biological stress on the desire to revert to the inorganic, Caillois's search for analogies (which he described as a 'science of diagonals') looks uncannily like the resurgence of a current which, like the River Alpha, flowed deep and constant in a sea of change.

One of the stranger features of nineteenth-century utopian thought was Pierre Leroux's theory (elaborated in 1834) of the 'circulus': the individual is both a producer and a consumer, and the 'waste' generated by individuals can be used to produce the food that keeps them alive. Three decades later, sewage farms on the outskirts of Paris were producing fine crops of vegetables, using treated human excrement as fertilizer. Similar experiments were successfully carried out near Edinburgh. The theme of the circulus had considerable impact of writers such as Victor Hugo

(the unforgettable descriptions of the sewers in *Les Misérables*) and Gustave Flaubert (and especially the Flaubert of the unfinished *Bouvard and Pécuchet*). Caillois never discusses sewage farms or the theory of the circulus, but there are times when his analogies are remarkably similar to nineteenth-century views on the continuity of the organic and the inorganic. The last temptation (or desire) to assail Flaubert's Saint Antony is simple (I cite Kitty Mrosovsky's Penguin translation of *The Temptation of Saint Antony*): 'To be matter.' He has already seen, he says, the 'birth of life'. He now wishes to 'flow like water, vibrate like sound, gleam like light, to curl myself up into every shape, to penetrate each atom, to get down to the depth of matter – to be matter!' And so, it would seem, did Roger Caillois.

**David Macey**