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ROGER CAILLOIS: SEARCHES FOR WHOLENESS

by

Gerardine Montgomery

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Trinity College
Dublin, 1999

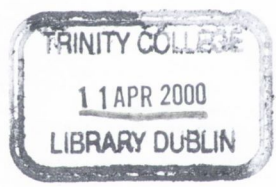
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by

(Gerardine Sheehan)

This is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Trinity College

Dublin 1999



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DECLARATION

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Gerardine Montgomery

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Gerardine Montgomery
Trinity College Dublin
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SUMMARY

ROGER CAILLOIS: SEARCHES FOR WHOLENESS

This thesis argues that the primordial concern in Roger Caillois's *œuvre* is his search for wholeness. It follows this search through Caillois's often controversial and always challenging involvement in a wide range of disciplines, from mythology to mineralogy. From the start Caillois explored and expressed an inter-disciplinary approach to knowledge, and this consistency is traced in this thesis. His personal approach to his various fields of interest is considered, and his work is set against the wider cultural and political context. Caillois's involvement with Surrealism and the Collège de Sociologie is an important focus in this work. His role as stimulator of the imagination is stressed, as are the conflicts and contrasts in his writing between rationality and boldness of vision. The subjective, the lyrical had no place in his search and he would combat them in all areas, particularly the poetic. The many paradoxes running through Caillois's output are examined. Not the least of these is his rejection of the written word towards the end of his writing career (expressed in writing) in favour of the more physical world of stones (an evolution also expressed in writing). His search for wholeness was to find satisfaction in the mineral meditations which express his mystical materialism; stones, complete worlds in themselves, gave him that elusive sense of oneness with the universe. Caillois's own internal coherence is emphasised: Paul Valéry's characterisation of Rimbaud's 'incohérence harmonique' might be considered an apt analogy. His theories extending poetic and aesthetic capacities to all constituent parts of the universe are a logical extension of his earliest beliefs. Caillois's singular approach to his search for wholeness, and the rich and complex work that this produced, are the constant areas of study in this thesis, which attempts a full-scale presentation of Caillois for the first time in English.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

For publication details, see bibliography

<i>ACF</i>	<i>Au cœur du fantastique</i>
<i>AF</i>	<i>Anthologie du fantastique</i>
<i>AI</i>	<i>Approches de l'imaginaire</i>
<i>AP</i>	<i>Approches de la poésie</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Bellone</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Cohérences aventureuses</i>
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cases d'un échiquier</i>
<i>CPT</i>	<i>Cahiers pour un temps/Roger Caillois</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Le Champ des signes</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>La Dissymétrie</i>
<i>EG</i>	<i>Esthétique généralisée</i>
<i>EP</i>	<i>L'Écriture des pierres</i>
<i>FA</i>	<i>Le Fleuve Alphée</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>L'Homme et le Sacré</i>
<i>IP</i>	<i>Impostures de la poésie</i>
<i>IR</i>	<i>L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves</i>
<i>IU</i>	<i>Images de l'univers</i>
<i>JH</i>	<i>Les Jeux et les Hommes</i>
<i>LP</i>	<i>La Pieuvre</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>La Lumière des songes</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Méduse & Cie</i>
<i>MH</i>	<i>Le Mythe et l'Homme</i>
<i>NE</i>	<i>La Nécessité d'esprit</i>
<i>NRF</i>	<i>La Nouvelle Revue Française</i>
<i>NNRF</i>	<i>La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française</i>

P

PR

PUF

R

RS

TLS

VE

Pierres

Pierres réfléchies

Presses Universitaires de France

Rencontres

Le Rocher de Sisyphe

Times Literary Supplement

Vocabulaire esthétique

INTRODUCTION

Roger Caillois (1913-1978) defined himself as an ‘écrivain français du milieu du vingtième siècle sans doute un peu particulier’.¹ While in some ways reflecting his times (his career spanned over forty years, from the 1930s to the late 1970s), his contribution to French culture remains highly distinctive. The immense variety of his areas of interest and expertise, which range from mythology, anthropology, and sociology, to aesthetics, poetics, the fantastic, and mineralogy, makes him stand out in an increasingly specialised era. It can just as easily distort the focus brought to bear on him. His world-view was holistic and only by considering the totality of his work can a full understanding of this complex thinker be achieved.

Some lines from his only known poem, ‘Brouillon pour une confidence’,² written between 1974 and 1978 and published posthumously, provide an insight into some central issues and concerns for Caillois:

Ne me demande pas toutes choses que j’ai sues
qui étaient simples alors et qui ne le sont plus
ramifiées lentement dans l’écheveau des songes
et qui m’étouffent aujourd’hui
inextricables et nombreuses,
comme une chevelure et comme la mémoire

[...]

Mais pour moi, ceux qui ont anticipé de redevenir personne,
Ils avaient leur raison d’effacer leur histoire
Sous un pseudonyme ingénieux et propice
Je n’en ai pas besoin, je m’efface de moi-même sans en pouvoir mais
Par dissipation ou dessiccation naturelle
Comme nuée dans le vent ou flache au soleil

¹ *Rencontres* (Paris: PUF, 1978), p.6.

² Reproduced in *Les Cahiers de Chronos/Roger Caillois*, ed. by Jean-Clarence Lambert (Paris: La Différence, 1991), pp.13-14.

The 'brouillon' (a similar word to a term favoured by Caillois, 'approches') takes on its full resonance for a reader familiar with Caillois's work but functions as a self-contained unit of meaning too. Caillois, little given to personal revelations, unburdens himself obliquely in this poem, evoking some of his central conflicts and dilemmas. The weight of knowledge, in the past uncomplicated, now perceived as stifling; alienation from his self, suggested in 'je m'efface de moi-même', and the final aim of losing the burden of consciousness by submitting to the unstoppable laws governing all matter.

Reading through Caillois's vast and varied output, many reactions and impressions come to mind: the lasting if ambiguous influence of Surrealism, the competing demands of rigour and imagination, his participation in and curiosity about so many of the intellectual trends marking his time, his own poetic voice, present from the early days of his career but not fully indulged until towards the end. Above and beyond these concerns, however, and looking for the most coherent approach to this diverse and complex writer, I believe that his deepest concern was his awareness of his human condition. Conscious of the over-riding unity of which he too was a part, he felt himself to be an infinitesimal fragment of a much larger whole, frustratingly unable ever to do more than record glimpses of this perception. He was primarily motivated therefore by his desire to uncover the syntax of the universe, a pre-condition of his achieving the wholeness he sought. For most of his career, he sought to accomplish this by the enthusiastic acquisition of knowledge, drawing on many different fields and rejecting a narrowly specialised or partial approach. Later, his encounter with the mineral world induced in him that feeling of peace and oneness for which he spent much of his life searching. Through the word, through his poetic writings on stones, he successfully attained his goal. His ambitious undertaking was certainly an 'entreprise totalisante',³ aimed at finding unity through breaking down traditional barriers between disciplines and phenomena of differing kinds and was perhaps one of the last great synthesising efforts undertaken in the twentieth century by a single person.

His concern for unity on a cosmic scale sets him apart in our times:

³ Marie-Claire Bancquart and Pierre Cahné, *Littérature française du XXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1992), p.326.

Cette unité, cosmique, l'époque s'en est détournée. Elle n'a de goût que pour les spécificités [...]; il lui est indifférent que le Tout soit fragmenté, l'homme vit en l'homme, et de cela se fait gloire. [...] L'époque n'a que *des* regards. Face au Tout de l'univers, Caillois n'a qu'*un* regard.⁴

The acuity of Caillois's synthesising, essentially poetic vision led him to observe what he saw as the unity that underlies seeming diversity. The cosmos does not present this in a systematic fashion, however, and these perceptions of unity can never be more than random. In that sense Caillois's life-work is necessarily open-ended. A small number of structures generate the various forms and phenomena whose superficial diversity hides from us their relatedness.

For Adolfo Castañon, Caillois's diversity of interests is a badge of his modernity, 'la modernité de l'entreprise de Roger Caillois, sa richesse et sa nouveauté, nous sont suggérés par la variété des disciplines dont il est le précurseur: il est un des plus dynamiques rénovateurs de la sociologie moderne'.⁵ What some may see as dynamism and modernity, others may view more harshly:

[l'étourdissante variété de ses curiosités] n'est-elle pas connue comme celle même du fou [...]. Aujourd'hui semblable dispersion alarme. Et, dans les chaires et séminaires, l'on tient bien vite cet itinéraire aux obliques multiples pour inconséquente promenade de rêveur solitaire, quand ce n'est pour coupable divagation. C'est pourquoi [...] il semble que l'on soit loin encore en France tout au moins, de prêter à sa pensée l'attention qu'elle mérite.⁶

Because he defies expectations and, as I shall be suggesting, does not lend himself to easy categorisation, it is possible to understand how such harshly dismissive views may arise. From an orthodox perspective, it is of course easier simply not to deal with a maverick. Caillois believed in logic, but would come to admit that logic must be flexible, and did indeed play around with it in a highly inventive but richly illuminating way. Reading and appreciating Caillois calls for the abandonment of set ways of thinking.

⁴ Henri Raynal, 'Le sévère rapatriement de l'art', in *Cahiers pour un temps/Roger Caillois* (Paris: Centre Georges-Pompidou/Pandora, 1981), pp.131-35 (pp.132-33).

⁵ Adolfo Castañon, 'Un médecin qui soigne avec la vérité', in *Les Cahiers de Chronos*, pp.277-82 (p.277).

⁶ Gérard Barrière, 'Reconnaissance', *NRF*, 320 (1979), 96-106 (p.96).

If Caillois's concerns and opinions in some matters set him aside from dominant trends in the twentieth century, it cannot be denied that in many ways he reflects his era. His educational background was pivotal in shaping his future interests. Alexandre Pajón refers to him as 'un bon exemple de la promotion par l'école'.⁷ Caillois was an 'agrégé de grammaire' who also followed the lectures of Marcel Mauss and Georges Dumézil in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. His academic background was impeccable and he could have seemed destined for a traditional university career at one point. His eclecticism and unconventional theories closed that door for him but this also liberated Caillois and enabled him to follow his interests more freely. It is a requirement of the statutes of the University of Paris that its scholars work to found a 'comprehensive theory of the world'⁸ and this duty is clearly something Caillois took seriously. The particular nature of the Parisian community of intellectuals cannot be overlooked either as a formative influence. Tony Judt ascribes to its effect both the 'all-embracing meta-theories of earlier decades and the antiholism of recent years':⁹

In spite of the changing media of communication and notwithstanding deep transformations of the educational system, the forms of intellectual intercourse in Paris, the fashions that dictate how an idea should be crafted and what sorts of ideas merit publication, have survived curiously untouched.¹⁰

Before coming to Paris Caillois had mixed with the members of the Grand Jeu in Rheims and, in Paris, the relative ease with which he was able to establish and pursue a relationship with André Breton and other leading intellectual figures was clearly significant in his development. Caillois's early independence is evidenced by the fact that he was the only student at the Ecole Normale to be a Surrealist. Looking back at that time in 1972, he declared, 'j'étais considéré comme fou'.¹¹

Caillois was fearless in the contributions he made as a non-specialist to the large number of different fields that held his attention. Judt writes of how the intellectual climate has changed in France.¹² The current era has seen the rise in importance of

⁷ Alexandre Pajón, 'L'intrépidité politique de Roger Caillois avant-guerre', in *Les Cahiers de Chronos*, pp.373-87 (p.377).

⁸ Quoted by Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p.308.

⁹ Judt, p.308.

¹⁰ Judt, p.309.

¹¹ Quoted by Jean Sirinelli, *Génération intellectuelle. Khâgneux et Normaliens dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), p.524.

¹² See Judt, p.296.

professors, of specialists in their area of expertise. In past decades, the well-educated non-specialist would dare to think that he too had a contribution to make. University teachers, thanks to the development of higher education, have recovered some of the status they lost to philosophers and novelists in the years from 1930 to 1970. Judt makes the point that when experts are writing on a topic, they will be conscious that it is their fellow academics in the field that they must convince, rather than the general public. He cites the critical reactions of people like Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Annie Kriegel and Pierre Bourdieu to the more traditional work of Régis Debray, Bernard-Henri Lévy and others. As regards the latter, 'their casual, amateurish ventures into history, philosophy, aesthetics, or social theory seem superficial and pretentious by contrast'.¹³ Earlier decades accepted the writings of Malraux, Camus, Sartre, Mounier and others, 'often half-informed, frequently lazy and ignorant. [...] Like the state, the major figures of French intellectual life were the natural source of authority and legitimacy; with the decline of the state-as-provider has come the fall of its intellectual *doppelgänger*'.¹⁴ Although Caillois is certainly neither lazy nor ignorant, it is possible to see how a specialist in the particular disciplines embraced by Caillois might find him irregular, at times a little disturbing. He made free use of the research of others for his own purposes, on occasion, and, for example, his approach to history would not be that of a specialist in that area. But as I shall be arguing, to take an orthodox, academic approach to Caillois would be to miss the great richness of what he does have to offer. He certainly departs from traditional academic values but gives his readers instead the multi-layered product of his highly cultured, controlled imagination and vision.

Caillois was pitted against his times on some very major issues. He rejected Marxism and psychoanalysis, for instance. Psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, sought to help patients by unblocking their awareness of psychic conflicts. The 'superego' blocks such awareness, punishing the guilty 'ego' for breaking a social taboo. These feelings of guilt were connected by Freud with sexuality, understood broadly, or 'libido'. His ideas took some time to find a receptive audience in France, but were warmly welcomed by the Surrealists. Psychoanalysis is almost too easy for Caillois to question, as he sees it, and he disposes of it in a five-page essay, 'Infaillible psychanalyse'.

¹³ Judt, p.296.

Marxism, which he dealt with in 'Description du Marxisme', he will allow to be more complex.¹⁵ Marx, in *Das Kapital* and his other works, developed a theory of history in which economic factors were decisive, and in which social and cultural phenomena were explained in terms of class struggle for the control of the means of production, distribution and exchange. For very many French intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s, Marxism was a powerfully attractive mixture of a political programme and a system of explanation. For Caillois, however, focusing on single factors, whether economic as in Marxism or sexual, as in psychoanalysis, could not ultimately produce any valid insights (and this attitude testifies again to his own unitary approach). He could not accept their claims to infallibility; no science can claim that, in his view. They have given rise to 'des sortes d'Eglises' (*AI*, p.97) which the iconoclastic Caillois could not tolerate. In his writings on the subject, he wished to highlight the way in which both movements, as he saw it, were based on:

Une pétition de principe qui donne d'avance leurs solutions aux problèmes, l'assurance qu'*au fond des choses*, qu'*en dernière analyse* ne pourront qu'apparaître les mécanismes annoncés et que tout le reste était nécessairement rideau de fumée, apparence trompeuse ou subterfuge. (*AI*, p.97)

Nor could he support the existentialists. Jean-Paul Sartre, along with Simone de Beauvoir, was central in promoting and popularising the philosophy of existentialism in France from 1945. For a number of decades, it was the most influential intellectual movement in France. Existentialism, which focuses on existence conceived of in an active sense, derives from the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Existentialists hold that 'existence' precedes 'essence', that it is man's conscious choices that shape, or give essence to, his existence. In *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), Sartre had argued that 'engagement', committing oneself to participating in political and social matters, can be a means of conferring essence on an otherwise bleak and shapeless existence. Sartre also wrote 'existentialist' novels and plays and these focus rather more than his philosophical treatises on the bleaker aspects of life, the existentialist 'néant', and man's despair at the seeming futility of life. Caillois's reading of the existentialist position is critical. Rather than engage in facile laments at the futility of the human condition, he saw it as more noble to

¹⁴ Judt, pp.296-97.

participate in the human lot, to try and improve it. He rejected too the fashionable view of writers as 'committed', regretting that 'engagement' was seen as purely political.¹⁶ These viewpoints, allied with his interest in the sacred and his involvement with the Collège de Sociologie, not forgetting what many considered to be his intolerant views of modern poetry, led to his being considered, in some quarters at least, as a right-wing reactionary. This would be too hasty an analysis, however, and part of my endeavour will be to offer a more nuanced and I believe fairer view.

As might be expected from such an omnivorous reader, many intellectual influences can be detected in Caillois. He bore testament himself in *Rencontres* to some of these influences. His choices span cultures and centuries, including for example Corneille, Valéry, Montesquieu, Borges and Tacitus. It would not be possible to deal with all significant influences in detail; I propose to mention just a few. His world view was certainly shaped by his familiarity with the work of Plato. In Caillois's writings on aesthetics, for example, his particular view of the acknowledgement of beauty by man as an act of recognition between two manifestations of nature, both submitting to its laws, is strongly Platonic. For Plato, aesthetic pleasure reminds man of the original Beauty his soul dimly remembers and in awaking this memory also brings evidence of the harmony between him and the object of his contemplation. Caillois is also influenced by the Platonic idea that under a multiplicity of different forms, there can be one fundamental underlying structure. These words of J. M. Cocking on Neoplatonism seem particularly apt in connection with Caillois: 'among the mental functionings associated with imagination in the Neoplatonist tradition, the creation of order, "knowledge" of structure and form, appear. "Comprendre", wrote Camus, "c'est avant tout unifier"'.¹⁷

Hélène Tuzet, in her book *Le Cosmos et l'Imagination*,¹⁸ identifies two opposing visions of the cosmos which she sees as influenced by Parmenides and Heraclitus respectively. These two viewpoints are present in all ages, one usually predominating

¹⁵ 'Infaillible psychanalyse' and 'Description du marxisme' are both reproduced in *Approches de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp.99-103 and pp.104-45 respectively.

¹⁶ See, for example, 'Au-delà de l'existentialisme' and 'Engagement' in *Chroniques de Babel* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1981).

¹⁷ J. M. Cocking, 'Imagination as Order and as Adventure', in *Order and Adventure in Post-Romantic French Poetry. Essays presented to C.A. Hackett*, ed. by E.M. Beaumont, J.M. Cocking and J. Cruickshank (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp.257-69 (p.265).

¹⁸ Hélène Tuzet, *Le Cosmos et l'Imagination* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1965).

over the other. The followers of Heraclitus (more numerous in modern times) are attracted to the concept of an infinite universe, the inexhaustible richness and variety of the world. Caillois cannot be numbered among these. He is more obviously in the camp of Parmenides, ‘les Parménidiens sont les amants de l’Immuable. [...] Ils ont le goût du Parfait, aussi répugnent-ils à l’infini. [...] L’esthétique parméniennienne est [...] une esthétique classique’.¹⁹ This idea of a finite universe also satisfies a need for security, order and harmony.²⁰ For Caillois, a finite world was the condition of useful thought in all areas, including poetry. If the unexpected could happen, then all human effort is futile. Caillois had an intense dislike of anything that apparently proliferated without control, be it vegetation or poetry. His affinity with Parmenides is relevant too in considering his attitude towards stones. They are certainly ‘immuable’, mini-worlds, compact and enclosed. His aesthetic tastes, as will be apparent in discussing more fully his views on poetry, are certainly in the classical mode. In *Le Fleuve Alphée*, Caillois confesses his enthusiasm for Parmenides, ‘dont je sais encore par cœur plus d’un passage du fragment 8’ (*FA*, p.60).²¹

Caillois’s indebtedness to the Stoics has been noted by some of his critics, ‘le stoïcien est celui qui a une vision complète et organisée du monde, qui se sent solidaire de ce monde et entend assumer avec conscience et responsabilité un tel destin. Ainsi Caillois’.²² Lambert also brings out the extent to which matter matters to Caillois, describing him as ‘un esprit religieux, non pas au sens de croyant, mais en tant que *relié*. Relié non pas à une transcendance, mais, comme le Stoïcien, à cette totalité qu’est l’univers’.²³ This urge to achieve oneness with the cosmos, which is at the heart of the ‘mystical materialism’ he would develop towards the end of his career, is fundamental to Caillois. It explains the adventurous *rapprochements* I will be discussing, his promotion of ‘sciences diagonales’, the importance he attributed to the image as a means of acquiring knowledge through analogy and the peace and tranquillity contemplation of stones gave him.

Caillois was also influenced by the German Romantics. Early in his career he devoted an essay to them entitled ‘L’Alternative’, first published in 1937 and reprinted in

¹⁹ Tuzet, pp.18-19.

²⁰ See Tuzet, pp.19-21.

²¹ *Le Fleuve Alphée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

²² Jean-Clarence Lambert, ‘Présentation’, in *Les Cahiers de Chronos*, pp.7-9 (p.7).

²³ Lambert, p.8.

Approches de l'imaginaire (pp.25-34). In it he is quite critical of their conception of science, finding it to be more 'celle des salons et des cénacles' (p.26). Encountering the same tendency again he writes that 'il est urgent de prendre les devants car la partie est trop importante pour qu'on permette de gaieté de cœur qu'on gâche les données scientifiques actuelles comme les Romantiques ont fait de celles de leur temps' (p.32). Notwithstanding this, Novalis clearly had a considerable impact on Caillois. The world view of the German Romantics also had its roots in Plato and Plotinus. The Romantics saw nature as a *Chifferschrift*, and Novalis's *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* 'is a treatise on the proposition that reality is a vast poem, a panoply of signs which the poetic sensibility can train itself to notice and to construe'.²⁴ This brings immediately to mind Caillois's views on the syntax of the universe being written on the surface of things, also the 'writings' on stones. He shared too with the Romantics the view that it was the task of poets and poetry to reveal this reality to others. Roger Cardinal's description of Novalis immediately suggests parallels with Caillois.²⁵ Novalis, like Caillois, used an interdisciplinary approach in his attempt to draw up a universal Encyclopedia. Cardinal acknowledges the impossibility of Novalis's ever completing this task but hails 'the sheer immensity of vision which could project this ultimate encyclopedia, the ambition of a single thinker to possess all Creation in one vast work'.²⁶ The broadness and boldness of Novalis's and Caillois's cosmic vision led them to engage in an enterprise which could never be concluded but which nonetheless engaged all their effort and attention. The importance they both attributed to interdisciplinary thinking is a striking similarity.

In any discussion of Caillois's searches for wholeness, certain encounters stand out as central and I would mention in particular Dmitry Mendeleyev (to be counted also in the camp of Parmenides), Saint-John Perse and a country, Argentina. The vastness of South America opened Caillois's eyes to the full potential of humanity and, for a while at least, helped him to feel an enthusiastic part of that ongoing human endeavour, civilisation. Mendeleyev's Periodic Table classified the elements according to their chemical properties, leaving gaps for elements not yet known. When three predicted elements, gallium, germanium and scandium were discovered,

²⁴ Roger Cardinal, *Figures of Reality. A Perspective on the Poetic Imagination* (London: Croom Helm and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981), p.156.

²⁵ Roger Cardinal, *German Romantics in Context* (London: Cassell and Collier Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1975).

²⁶ Cardinal, *German Romantics in Context*, p.65.

this gave retrospectively even greater credibility to his periodic law. The Table is a microcosmic version of what Caillois would try to do and gave him confidence that it was possible, theoretically at least. Saint-John Perse undertook poetically a synthesising task, creating a ‘table des sensations’, in poetry whose magical appeal is based rigorously in the real. He enabled Caillois to accept that poetry could be a worthy activity; if Caillois’s science has poetic elements, poetry, for him, became acceptable only when he could think of it as the science of the concrete. It is significant that the titles of two of Caillois’s articles on these key influences mention the word ‘reconnaissance’, also the word used by Plato for knowledge as *recognition*. In a very profound way he felt grateful to Saint-John Perse and Mendeleyev, since both in their different ways gave him hope in his own enterprise. Some of his descriptions of Mendeleyev could surely be applied to Caillois himself:

Il connut certainement des joies qui comptent parmi les plus intenses que puisse ressentir un esprit puissant et désintéressé: recevoir confirmation qu’il a deviné un peu plus avant les lois cachées du monde. [...] Particule insignifiante de l’univers, être accordé à l’univers entier et parvenir à le concevoir dans sa rigueur numérique. (CE, p.78).

Caillois’s involvement with Surrealism will be dealt with more fully in later chapters. Despite its brevity, it had a life-long impact on him. Surrealism, whose origins lay in Dadaism, emerged as an important literary and artistic movement in Paris in approximately 1924. Its leader was André Breton, and other prominent figures included Louis Aragon, Benjamin Péret, Philippe Soupault and Paul Eluard. Freudian psychoanalytic theories were a major influence on the movement. Practices such as ‘automatic writing’ were promoted, in a bid to enable the unimpeded expression of the subconscious. Later literary writing favoured the use of arresting if arbitrary images. Believing that Surrealism would assist him in the scientific study of the imagination, and that it would help to hasten the end of literature, Caillois joined in 1932 and was initially an enthusiastic and assiduous member. Caillois would come to see its practices as demonstrating its lack of rigour, and could not tolerate its complacency with regard to the mysterious. He finally broke with the group in late 1934 over the much-recounted episode involving Mexican jumping beans. His Surrealist companions were content to enjoy the spectacle of the jumping beans, without discovering how such a wonder was possible. Caillois wished to open the beans and

investigate the phenomenon. The incident nicely symbolises the contrasting attitudes. Caillois had to break away and move on from Surrealism, never managing entirely to break its hold, which he would reveal through repeated criticisms of their practices, or analytical exploration of the areas that fascinated the Surrealists so much.

Caillois is generally thought by his critics to be an essayist. This fate is not without its own problems. Gilbert Durand attributes Caillois's 'marginalisation tenace' to his having been 'avec mépris rejeté dans l'enfer des "essayistes"'.²⁷ Others are less hostile to the essay form, and consider that Caillois did a lot to restore its status. Alejo Carpentier, for example, wrote to Caillois, 'usted devuelve al ensayo su verdadero sentido, remontándose acaso a una óptica que era muy precisamente la de Montaigne'.²⁸ Even reaching the conclusion that Caillois is an essayist is not easy for critics and Robert Bréchon's thought processes are perhaps typical:

Comment classer Caillois? Malgré ses références à la méthode expérimentale, il n'est évidemment pas un scientifique. Est-il un philosophe? Assurément, non. Le travail du philosophe suppose une longue patience, un esprit de système, une argumentation serrée, à quoi s'opposent l'éclectisme de Caillois, son instabilité, qui lui fait changer sans cesse de sujet. Son œuvre est en miettes. Enfin, bien que la poésie ait occupé sa vie, il n'a guère, à proprement parler, fait œuvre de poète. Si un écrivain a jamais mérité le nom d'essayiste, c'est bien lui. On sait que Lukacs oppose l'essayiste à la fois au poète et au philosophe. Le poète crée des images, l'essayiste pose des significations, mais alors que le philosophe apporte des réponses, l'essayiste ne fait que poser des questions.²⁹

This quotation exemplifies the common desire to classify neatly, according to pre-established definitions and criteria. In this scheme of things, a philosopher could not create an image, nor could a poet ask questions. There are other difficulties too with Bréchon's attitude. His desire that writers conform to agreed conventions leads him to miss deeper aspects of Caillois's work, such as its poetic dimension, in both expression and vision. Caillois's interests certainly are eclectic, but citing instability is not the fullest, nor the deepest explanation. In fact their variety reflects his call for unity, for bringing together the seemingly disparate. Different sciences, different

²⁷ Gilbert Durand, 'Roger Caillois et les approches de l'imaginaire', in *Cahiers de l'imaginaire/Roger Caillois et les approches de l'imaginaire*, ed. by Gilbert Durand and Michel Maffesoli (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 9-19 (p.9).

²⁸ Unpublished letter, dated 22 avril (no year given); consulted in the Fonds Roger Caillois, Bibliothèque Valéry Larbaud, Vichy.

²⁹ Robert Bréchon, 'Le double "jeu" de Roger Caillois', *Critique*, 391 (1979), 1057-62 (pp.1061-62).

approaches merely bring out more forcefully for him the recurring truth: in ways that differ only superficially, the same cosmic patterns constantly emerge. The ‘miettes’ of his work, when put together in this light, take on form and consistency.

It is certainly true that Caillois functions best as a writer when composing short, or relatively short pieces. Many of his works are in fact collections of shorter pieces. As it is often ideas themselves that attract his attention, rather than the detailed exposition of these ideas, some longer pieces can on occasion lack the rigour and cohesiveness so championed by Caillois. His most successful compositions, his writings on stones, are made up of a series of short, intense meditations. In the 1940s, and following on the success of *Puissances du roman*, René Etiemble expressed the following wish for Caillois, ‘je souhaite qu’à l’avenir il s’impose de traiter en discours cohérent les thèmes principaux de sa pensée. Il y gagnera en rigueur ainsi qu’en force persuasive’.³⁰ Etiemble’s wish would not be granted in the way he intended. That would not be Caillois’s vocation. The intensity and coherence displayed in Caillois’s writings on stones, however, show where his strongest talents lay: poetic evocation and re-creation of stones through his assured, measured and highly distinctive use of language.

Adolfo Castañón also sees Caillois as an essayist, seeing in the essay the instrument best suited to Caillois’s approach:

Roger Caillois appartient à cette famille d’esprits qui assurent la grammaire comme discipline spirituelle supérieure et qui considèrent le langage comme une méthode privilégiée d’acquisition de connaissance: chemin et boussole. [...] Cela serait une raison de penser que, entre tous les genres littéraires, l’essai est celui qui exprime le mieux le caractère de la littérature comme méthode d’acquisition de connaissance: l’essai comme une des variétés de la pédagogie.³¹

Castañón is choosing to emphasise the didactic aspect of Caillois’s work. Acquiring knowledge was certainly an aim but never an end in itself. Caillois’s more over-riding and urgent imperative was piecing together the cosmic puzzle, an approximate and less easily defined task. Caillois himself towards the end of his life preferred above all the label ‘poet’. Moving away from the lure of ‘objective’ facts and ‘objective’

³⁰ René Etiemble, ‘Sur *La Communion des forts*’, in *L’Arche*, 6 (1944), 146-57 (p.147).

³¹ Castañón, p.277.

knowledge, he became more appreciative of and confident in his personal lyrical vein and vision. Ultimately, the title ‘poet’ seems the most appropriate and all-encompassing. René Huyghe, welcoming Caillois into the Académie Française, acknowledges the difficulties he posed for those with ‘la faiblesse du classement’.³² While aware that, for convenience more than anything else, Caillois has been classified as an essayist, he realises that ‘il y a en vous tout autant du poète que du savant’.³³ Huyghe notes here a central point in Caillois and one that it is essential to understand to appreciate fully his work, ‘fuyant l’exposé dogmatique, vous lui avez toujours préféré la force incantatoire d’évoquer, qui dépend des rythmes du verbe et de la suggestion des images’.³⁴ Understanding the term broadly, Caillois can be considered to be a poet in all his different forms of written expression. He can claim this role because of the perfection of his writings on stones, the strength of his intuition of cosmic unity, best expressed and understood on a metaphorical level, his careful and deliberate use of language and the way in which description in his work is not just to do with relaying information; knowledge cannot go further or deeper than description.

This thesis is divided into nine chapters, not including the introduction and the conclusion, and deals almost exclusively with Caillois’s output in book form. The division is thematic, rather than strictly chronological, as this gives a better idea of Caillois’s contribution to each area. Within the various major thematic divisions, there are subdivisions, inspired as much by a concern for readability as by anything else.

Chapter One deals with *La Nécessité d’esprit*,³⁵ written between 1933 and 1935. It is Caillois’s first book, although it was only published posthumously in 1981. It is full of interest for the insights it gives into a world view that would remain remarkably consistent over the decades. Caillois’s concern in *La Nécessité d’esprit* to find an objective justification for poetry is one that would remain with him, underpinning his

³² René Huyghe, *Discours prononcés dans la séance publique tenue par l’Académie Française pour la réception de Roger Caillois* (Paris: Institut de France, 1972), p.27.

³³ Huyghe, p.27.

³⁴ Huyghe, p.41.

³⁵ *La Nécessité d’esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

admiration for Saint-John Perse and foreshadowing the importance of stones in liberating his own poetic expression. At the time of writing *La Nécessité d'esprit*, Caillois was still involved with Surrealism but already the book shows signs of the strains that would lead to his breaking from that movement. He has not yet found his mature voice in this book, which mixes personal revelation and a heavy dependence on scientific jargon. Uncovering the secrets of the imagination has a further goal for Caillois, of the utmost relevance in considering his lifelong quest for wholeness. To do so would also provide a key to a real understanding of the cosmos. Already we see his desire for cosmic oneness.

Chapter Two deals primarily with *Le Mythe et l'Homme*.³⁶ Caillois's interest in myths stems from his Jungian preoccupation with the collective unconscious, a richer vein to tap than the purely individual. The personal, the lyrical, mean little to Caillois from an early stage because they can give only partial, subjective truths. Mythology enables Caillois to bring together many different disciplines ('sciences diagonales' already in all but name). His aim is to demonstrate that imagination is biologically conditioned, that man is an integral part of nature, subject to its laws as is all matter. Man can claim no special talent, or superiority; he is just another manifestation of nature. In *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, Caillois pursues oneness with nature to its extreme conclusion, mimicry, an important and recurring concern. Alexandre Pajón is correct in observing that

Les nombreux articles de Roger Caillois entre 1936 et 1939 pourraient faire l'objet d'un traitement statistique et l'on verrait apparaître des mots fétiches à la fréquence élevée, très significatifs de ses conceptions: ordre, orthodoxie, rigueur, sévérité, aridité. Les titres de ses écrits sont eux-mêmes instructifs: mythe, sacré, Lucifer, démons reviennent aussi souvent que les termes précédents.³⁷

While calling for rigour and severity, though, Caillois does not shrink from advancing outrageous and unprovable theories. This is just as well. If he had always scrupulously observed his own criteria, his work would be a great deal less interesting. The reader must be aware of the importance of metaphor in his work, which is certainly more than the transmission of facts.

³⁶ *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, 2nd edn (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Idées", 1972).

³⁷ Pajón, p.381.

The sociology section is divided into three chapters, its length reflecting the extent of Caillois's contribution in this area. It documents Caillois's involvement with the Collège de Sociologie in the late 1930s, but reaches into the 1960s too, to cover his writing on more secular matters such as war, for example. Caillois's involvement with sociology was pioneering. Tony Judt writes, 'with the important exception of history, the social sciences in France suffered from chronic underdevelopment. [...]

[A]nthropology and sociology lacked institutional roots in French academic life and often operated, until the fifties, as little more than aspects of applied philosophy'.³⁸ Caillois was well-versed in the anthropological and sociological research available at the time he was writing. He did no such first-hand work himself, and certainly edits the material he wished to use in a personal way. This is something to bear in mind when reading *L'Homme et le Sacré*,³⁹ for example. His early writings, such as *Le Vent d'hiver*,⁴⁰ have given rise to controversy. Caillois has been accused of fascism, and this charge is investigated in the relevant chapter. The thirties were generally a time of searching in French society, with intellectuals on Left and Right engaged in looking for a better way forward than that which had been offered by the Third Republic. Judt describes how the plethora of books, pamphlets, clubs, plans, journals and circles that emerged all bear witness to the need people felt to find a better way forward:

The nation was in a parlous condition and only wholesale change could save it. This condition of France was taken to include, and in part to derive from, its republican and democratic forms, its emphasis on the rights of the individual at the expense of the duties and interests of the community. Hence the ease of communication across traditional political barriers and hence, too, a certain ambivalence in the face of antidemocratic challenges, at home and abroad.⁴¹

Caillois looked to the sacred as a cohesive force in society, a way to harness productively the energy of the people. Caillois's writing can at times seem offensive and ill-advised, but it is important to see it in the context of unstable government, mediocrity, corruption, paralysis domestically and in foreign affairs.

Caillois did not shrink from controversy. If he offended some with views they considered fascist, others took him to be racist. His article⁴² on Claude Lévi-Strauss's

³⁸ Judt, pp. 253-54.

³⁹ *L'Homme et le Sacré*, 3rd edn (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Idées", 1963; 1983 printing consulted).

⁴⁰ Reprinted in *AI*, pp.73-84.

⁴¹ Judt, pp. 19-20.

⁴² 'Illusions à rebours', *NRF*, 24 (1954), 1010-24 and *NRF*, 25 (1955), 58-70.

*Race et Histoire*⁴³ incensed Aimé Césaire, so much so that he devotes a number of pages to him in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*.⁴⁴ I deal with this in a sub-section of Chapter Four.

Caillois's later involvement in sociology sees him move away from the sacred towards more secular themes. He writes about subjects that were popular at the time and indeed remain so, composing, for example, a theory on games, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*.⁴⁵ He refers in *L'Homme et le Sacré* (p.199) to having read Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in a Spanish translation, published in 1943, and this work undoubtedly acted as a stimulus on him (*Homo Ludens* was published in French by Gallimard in 1951). Caillois not only analyses games themselves, but also tries to develop a sociological theory based on them; an ambitious project. In *Bellone ou La Pente de la guerre*,⁴⁶ he turned his attention to war, in which he is interested as a 'total' phenomenon, harnessing the collective energies of the society engaging in battle (again, his interest in phenomena from which maximum significance can be extracted can be seen). New subject matter does not mean that old preoccupations disappear, and concerns evident in his work on the sacred will be seen to reappear in Caillois's later work.

Chapter Six deals with Caillois's work on dreams and the fantastic. He analyses dreams in a playful and not entirely successful way, suggesting that they undermine our very conception of reality. Great importance was attached by the Surrealists to dreams and part of Caillois's agenda was surely also undermining their credibility. *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*,⁴⁷ one of the books considered here, also affords Caillois an important opportunity to reflect on his career, and is a good example in this respect of how Caillois can mix abstract analysis with intimate meditation on the direction of his writing.

Caillois, like the Surrealists, was intensely attracted by mystery. Unlike the Surrealists, however, he would indulge this interest only if his role were an active, not a passive one. Caillois drew on an impressive range of sources in the world of art and

⁴³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952; edn consulted Paris: Denoël, 1987).

⁴⁴ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, 2nd edn (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955). [First published 1950.]

⁴⁵ *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, rev. edn (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Idées", 1967).

⁴⁶ *Bellone ou La Pente de la guerre* (Brussels: La Renaissance du livre, 1963).

natural science in the elaboration of his theory. He sought to explain the irrational, to penetrate to the heart of the fantastic. He compiled an anthology of the fantastic,⁴⁸ which draws on stories from around the world, demonstrating a cultural openness that was unfortunately not always characteristic. His definition, analysis and tracking of the fantastic is examined in this chapter. The concept of a finite world underpins his work on the fantastic.

Much of Caillois's work could be summed up as 'cohérences aventureuses', but he reserved this title for a book that brought together three fairly short pieces on aesthetics, the fantastic and dissymmetry.⁴⁹ Caillois's work on the fantastic having been considered in the previous chapter, Chapter Seven concentrates on aesthetics and dissymmetry.

In the section on aesthetics, I show how Caillois's view of a unitary universe, in which man's role is in no way special, inevitably influenced his opinions on aesthetics. While Caillois's thinking shows indebtedness to Plato and Kant, his distinctive world view orientates him effectively in the direction of an anti-aesthetics, which he expounds with an implacable, almost disturbing deductive logic. The second section of Chapter Seven deals with what is undoubtedly Caillois's boldest attempt in his search for wholeness; his presentation of the play between symmetry and dissymmetry as the key to understanding the dynamics of the Universe. In a little under one hundred pages, Caillois demonstrates some scientific erudition and manages to put forward his case succinctly. His theory on dissymmetry also manages to justify retrospectively earlier theories on festivals, or war, for example, as forces for renewal in society. He is persuasive, as ever, but has given himself an immense task, requiring correspondingly immense research. It is an intuition, an insight, and a good example of how Caillois will simply not engage in detailed, truly academic exposition. Nor will this unwillingness make him abandon a fruitful idea.

If modern intellectual trends such as Marxism and existentialism failed to impress Caillois, modern poetry too disappointed him. His opinions on poetry (many of which

⁴⁷ *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956).

⁴⁸ *Anthologie du fantastique*, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

⁴⁹ *Cohérences aventureuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

have been brought together in *Approches de la poésie*),⁵⁰ form the substance of Chapter Eight. Caillois would come to see poetry and science as engaged in a parallel adventure of discovery; he attributed a high importance to poetry. Correspondingly, what he saw as Surrealist poetic malpractice attracted his relentless ire; it could not fulfil the key role of poetry in the search for wholeness. Much of his writing on poetry concerns his opinions on what he sees as unacceptable innovations. This negativity in the face of modern poetry must be seen in the light of his work on behalf of literature. His role in introducing (and translating) the work of Jorge Luis Borges into Europe, is one outstanding example of this. He also, while in South America, published the work of a number of major writers. The author of many sensitive appreciations of widely differing writers, his work on Saint-John Perse stands out in particular. Saint-John Perse's poetry is central in reconciling Caillois to poetry. The concepts of a finite universe, of the necessity for objectivity and 'l'imagination juste', are cornerstones in Caillois's poetics. My chapter on this topic deals with these contrasting aspects.

In Chapter Nine, Caillois's search for wholeness ends with his finding expressed in stones the totality for which he has been looking. These are miniature worlds, archives of all we know, and can be held, contemplated and controlled in the palm of one's hand. Caillois develops his mineral meditations principally in *Pierres*,⁵¹ *Pierres réfléchies*⁵² and *L'Ecriture des pierres*.⁵³ Always provocative, he develops a mystical materialism, whereby contemplation of his stones gives him a sense of union with the cosmos. The aridity of the stones paradoxically makes his own poetic voice flow forth. As his writing is anchored in the real, he can feel entitled finally to express himself, the paradox being that objectivity is actually never attainable, not even by Caillois. While Caillois's relationship with the objects of his contemplation is of a very particular and personal kind, it also fits into a larger trend at this time. Marie-Claire Bancquart and Pierre Cahné refer to the move away from the personal, replaced now by 'la technique de l'inventaire, de la minutie extrême et ingénieuse'; in their own individual ways, the works of Roger Caillois, Georges Pérec, Francis Ponge, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and in the sociological arena, Jean Baudrillard exemplify this

⁵⁰ *Approches de la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

⁵¹ *Pierres*, suivi d'autres textes (Paris: Gallimard, collection "Poésie", 1970).

⁵² *Pierres réfléchies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

⁵³ *L'Ecriture des pierres* (Genève: Albert Skira, collection "Les sentiers de la création", 1970).

trend.⁵⁴ In modern literature, new techniques which reflect man's sense of alienation have replaced the traditional psychological analysis to be found in novels:

L'œuvre d'art voudrait suggérer ce nouveau visage de l'aliénation que commence de nommer l'expression "société de consommation". La méthode structuraliste participe de cette sensibilité qui oublie la personne comme agent nécessaire de l'action et agent ultime, au profit des rapports mécaniques entre des forces non maîtrisables.⁵⁵

Caillois's work ends on a new departure, but it is a theory towards which he has been inexorably progressing: the development of a 'poétique généralisée', which he uses all his persuasive powers to put across. In a finite world, in which man is effectively on the same level as, say, insects or stones, it is inevitable that Caillois would move towards a fluid, undifferentiated mysticism. In *Le Champ des signes*,⁵⁶ he confesses he can no longer distinguish between images on stones and images in poetry. I have already referred to his view of reality as essentially poetic: proper attention to the cosmos reveals its underlying unity. Restricting artistic potential to man, interpreting aesthetics as confined solely to literature or art, could make no sense in Caillois's unitary world. This theory may alarm, disturb or outrage; for Caillois, it is simply and literally natural.

⁵⁴ *Littérature française du XXe siècle*, p.384.

⁵⁵ *Littérature française du XXe siècle*, p.384.

⁵⁶ *Le Champ des signes. Récurrences dérobées: aperçu sur l'unité et la continuité du monde physique intellectuel et imaginaire ou premiers éléments d'une poétique généralisée*, illustrations d'Estève (Paris: Hermann, 1978).

CHAPTER ONE

‘OBJECTIVE’ POETRY AND POETRY’S OBJECTIVE

la prise de conscience de la systématisation n'[est] pas autre chose que la connaissance (NE, p.154)

Acquiring, synthesizing and transmitting knowledge were key tools in the early stages of Roger Caillois's search for wholeness. Knowledge that was partial or isolated was of no interest to him, did not serve his central purpose of explaining the totality in which he found himself. Instead, he would draw on the wisdom of a wide variety of branches of learning to account for the phenomena that puzzled him, and that seemed to point the way to patterns of parallels and repetitions. His observations provided clues for Caillois to what he saw as the unitary nature of the universe.

His was a very particular view of knowledge. It was for him ‘une partie de la mémoire totale’.¹ This suggests that his philosophy was not a man-centred one and of course it did embrace the whole of nature, making no substantive distinction between man and other matter, living or inert. Man participates in nature on an equal basis with all other parts of it. This was to prove a major frustrating factor in Caillois's search for wholeness. As part of the whole, man can never hope to achieve full understanding.

For most of his career, however, Caillois applied the full weight of his personal insights and knowledge to the vast task of filling in as many of the blank spaces as he could in the cosmic puzzle. The originality of his vision makes him ‘le fondateur non d'un style, non d'une science, mais d'un regard’.² Communicating his insights was clearly as central to Caillois as acquiring them, stimulating further reflections in his readers. He cast a fresh look on the world surrounding him, incorporating into his theory the revelations suggested to him by his contemplation of the surface of things.

¹ Severo Sarduy, ‘Et si le réel était signé?’, in *CPT*, pp. 137-39 (p.138).

² Sarduy, p.138.

The trust he placed in the objective for most of his writing career is mirrored by his distrust of the subjective: for how, as Caillois saw it, can the personal and the lyrical ever lead to a deeper understanding of the totality that surrounds us? This is very much Caillois's mindset when we encounter him at the beginning of his career, and it lies behind his attraction to Surrealism, which would, he hoped, substitute analysis for literature. He was to emerge disillusioned from his short contact with Surrealism, and would never subsequently miss an opportunity to criticise its practices, a measure of his disappointment. *La Nécessité d'esprit*, the first of Caillois's books to be considered, is all about finding an objective justification for poetry, drawing heavily on psychoanalysis, not yet rejected by Caillois. The form of analysis to which he subjects himself in *La Nécessité d'esprit* is very similar to the kind of psychoanalysis practised by Surrealists. It seems a clumsy approach to poetry, but its very naivety reveals all the more keenly Caillois's preoccupations. Caillois would come to see poetry, in particular the image in poetry, as essential in his quest to uncover the secrets of the universe. For Caillois, 'l'investigazione sull'immagine lirica può essere integrata alla problematica generale della conoscenza ed essere quindi posta negli stessi termini'.³ At the outset of his career, Caillois is relying on the academic research of others to interpret the surrounding cosmos (even if his use of this material is highly personal). Later, the image would become the defining characteristic of poetry for him, and, because of the insights achieved by linking the apparently disparate, an important tool in reading the wholeness of the world.

To understand fully the first book Caillois wrote, *La Nécessité d'esprit*, it is important to acknowledge that exploring poetry, attacking it and practising it, are activities that mark all stages of Caillois's career. Of equal importance is his involvement with the Surrealist movement, which was brief but was to have a lasting impact on his work and thought. To situate Caillois properly at the outset of his intellectual trajectory, his output needs to be seen against the backdrop of Surrealism.

Surrealism evolved as a movement between 1920 and 1924, in conjunction firstly with Dadaism. It was properly launched with the publication in 1924 of the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*, and the review *La Révolution surréaliste*. Breton, Aragon and Soupault were the main figures associated with the genesis of Surrealism. They did

³ Annamaria Laserra, *Materia e immaginario. Il nesso analogico nell'opera di Roger Caillois* (Rome:

not view poetry as a separate activity from other forms of writing, nor as an exclusively literary one. Any form of expression that helped them achieve their objectives (changing the world, transforming life) was regarded as poetic. For Surrealism, poetry included the outpourings of the unconscious, dreams, messages received in trance-like states, the results of any of the many methods they used for soliciting the marvellous. The various Surrealist manifestos are characterised by passion rather than reason, and indeed reason was seen as the enemy of poetry. Their belief in the vitality of language led them to believe that it could play a dominant role in re-defining reality. Technical restraints were seen as obstacles to the affirmation of freedom.

The Surrealists emphasised the distinction between ‘literature’ and ‘poetry’. They saw form as incompatible with poetic expansion and therefore wished to liberate poetry from literature. Only a totally free poetry, and free imagination, could devote itself to the work of discovery and exploration which they assigned to it. The acquisition of knowledge, which they understood as affective experience, via poetry, is central in Surrealism. In *La Nécessité d'esprit*, in particular, we will see Caillois rely quite heavily on his own affective experience to prove a point. This knowledge was to be acquired using techniques such as automatic writing, arbitrary images and the re-instatement of inspiration. There was a purpose behind the unrestricted creation of images. Surrealism attributed major importance to the image, in that it provided glimpses of a new and, in their eyes, better world. I have mentioned that Caillois too would place the image at the centre of poetry, but for very different reasons. Images of the marvellous were treasured and cultivated by the Surrealists as the bridge to achieving a higher perception of reality, ‘surréalité’. Poetry was viewed as a source of possible solutions to life’s problems.

Robert Short describes the intellectual climate that favoured the rise of Surrealism. Previously held certainties had been undermined:

Relativity and quantum theories, the insights of Bergson and Nietzsche, recognition of the role of chance in causation, and the psycho-analytical discoveries of Freud had all helped to shatter the idea of a familiar and dependable Nature and of a wholly self-conscious and rational Man [...]. The

discredit of the old order of verities was carried a stage further by the débâcle of bourgeois values in practice during the first World War. As science put itself at the service of the holocaust, art at that of hysterical propaganda, reason at that of sophistry, and language at that of mystification, the war made even the excesses of Jarry's *Père Ubu* look like innocent games [...]. A sickness had touched both poetic and discursive language. Surrealism was born in the last spasms of what had become a pathological condition of language dating back to Rimbaud through Mallarmé, Apollinaire, the futurists, and dadaism, a condition in which poetry oscillated between esotericism and delirium.⁴

It is easy to see how Caillois, with a distrust of literature and a desire to uncover the workings of the imagination, was attracted to Surrealism. The bulk of his writings on literature are a reaction to that movement. These works, which will be examined in a later chapter, were published from the 1940s on, at a time when the impact of Surrealism was certainly less than that of phenomenology and existentialism. Caillois's outrage at their various practices, however, remained undimmed. Odile Felgine writes perceptively, 'c'est une évidence que le surréalisme a énormément marqué ce monolithe. Pour tant le rejeter, n'a-t-il pas fallu qu'il y succombe avec délices?'.⁵

Caillois was 'recruited' by André Breton in 1932, having come to the latter's attention through his answers to a questionnaire on the literary tastes of students in *terminale* organised by *Paris-Soir*. His membership was brief but intense. Caillois, while interested like the Surrealists in dreams and the fantastic, desired to analyse these phenomena rather than passively wonder. In an interview with Hector Bianciotti and Jean-Paul Enthoven he admitted, 'je fus un membre fidèle, fanatique, du groupe surréaliste, connaissant les mots d'ordre de la secte et les textes sacrés. Or mon intention était de discréditer si possible la littérature tout entière et de lui substituer l'étude des pulsions et des instincts'.⁶ He would go on to undertake these studies on his own.

In *Approches de l'imaginaire*, Caillois gathered together some of his writings from his Surrealist period, in a section whose title 'L'équivoque surréaliste' clearly shows what, retrospectively, he thinks of that moment in his life. Already in 'Spécification de

⁴ R. Short, 'Surrealism', in *French Literature and its Background, 6: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by John Cruickshank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp.111-28 (pp.110-11).

⁵ Odile Felgine, *Roger Caillois* (Paris: Stock, 1994), p.333.

⁶ *CPT*, p.18.

la poésie', while he defends automatic writing, it is possible to discern differences between his 'pensée sévère' (*AI*, p.15) and Surrealism. He cannot accept the view of poetry as 'le droit donné à n'importe qui de dire n'importe quoi, et cela sans garantie, sans obligation de rendre des comptes' (p.15). He wishes to '*organiser la poésie*' (p.16), scarcely a typical Surrealist objective. In 'Systématisation et détermination', he sums up his attitude to lyricism as follows, 'si la pensée lyrique n'a pas l'intérêt de systématisation que j'attends d'elle, elle n'en a aucun, – aucun de valable, s'entend' (p.21). This foreshadows his insistence on 'connaissance totalitaire' (*MH*, p.36), and fits in too with his call for an 'orthodoxie militante' (*MH*, p.178). From his earliest writings, Caillois is concerned with understanding *totality*.

While the differences in opinion between Caillois and the Surrealists were obviously building up over time, he actually broke from the group over the much-recounted Mexican jumping-beans episode. The polarised reactions of Caillois and Breton, Caillois wishing to open the beans to see why they were jumping, and Breton preferring to marvel at the phenomenon, neatly symbolise their differences. In the letter Caillois wrote to Breton outlining his motives for leaving the movement, he highlights his need for reason, 'que m'importent en fin de compte des illuminations dispersées, instables, mal garanties, qui ne sont rien sans un acte de foi préalable, qui ne sont même plaisantes que par le crédit qu'on y ajoute? L'irrationnel, soit; mais j'y veux d'abord la cohérence' (*AI*, p.36). Later chapters will further develop Caillois's choice of coherence, over reason. It is interesting to note here that he does not reject an irrational element; but the whole must make sense. He makes a similar point about verification in his conclusion to *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, entitled 'Pour une activité unitaire de l'esprit' which takes up almost word for word the point made here (pp.177-78). Insights which are not anchored in the real have no resonance for him, are 'mal garanties' (p.178). It is centrally important for Caillois that 'illuminations' be vouched for by what he would consider to be objective reality. Only then can they contribute to the sum of knowledge he is interested in establishing. His need for these flashes of insight to lead the way to an overall view is underpinned by his demand for coherence.

For Caillois then, clarity and rigour, but above all coherence, were essential qualities. While finding inspiration in Freud and Marx, as did his fellow surrealists, his approach and objectives were not theirs. His attitude to knowledge was unitary, and

Jean Starobinski brings out the importance of metaphor in Caillois's search for wholeness:

Caillois, sur un point capital, restait indocile à l'injonction de l'esprit scientifique qui demande de renoncer à l'ambition de la totalité. Comme l'a rappelé Bachelard, l'ascèse première par quoi se définit l'esprit scientifique consiste à "s'instruire sur des systèmes isolés". Pour qui ne consent pas à ce sacrifice, la seule ressource consiste à choisir la voie esthétique, le chemin des images, qui développent la figure du *tout* sans autre garantie que la puissance séductrice de la métaphore.⁷

This is a key insight into Caillois's working method. The richness of his interdisciplinary method in no way impedes his recourse to metaphor in argumentation. The interesting contradiction in Caillois is that while he may clamour for rigour and severity, in practice his writing will include brilliant, but unprovable *rapprochements*.

La Nécessité d'esprit was Caillois's first book, written between 1933 and 1935, although not published until 1981, three years after his death. As for why it was not published during his lifetime, 'après 1936, la plupart des idées esquissées dans ce texte lui ont paru insuffisantes du moins quant à la manière de les présenter. Le *Procès intellectuel de l'art*, publié au début de 1935, montre déjà d'autres soucis et d'autres méthodes' (from the preface to *La Nécessité d'esprit*, p.7, written by 'P.M.'). Caillois was very possibly uncomfortable with the personal revelations and the unformed style. He would, however, retain the concepts of 'idéogramme lyrique' and 'surdétermination' in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*.

In *La Nécessité d'esprit*, Caillois seeks to uncover the workings of the imagination, in an attempt to establish an objective validation of poetry. His distrust of the purely subjective is already apparent, and lies beneath his being able to accept poetry only many decades later when it seemed to him justified by the objective reality of stones. Jean Blot is right in emphasising the importance of poetry to Caillois in realising his objectives, but takes Caillois a little too literally as regards his unqualified love for logic, 'singulier poète surréaliste que celui-ci qui n'aime que la logique et ne croit qu'en sa clarté et en sa rigueur [...]. Sans doute [la poésie] lui aura-t-elle promis en secret la réalisation d'un projet intime auquel le présent essai, aussi scientifique que

⁷ Jean Starobinski, 'Saturne au ciel des pierres', in *CPT*, pp.87-102 (p.100).

soit son intention et hautain son style, demeure consacré: la cohérence intime'.⁸ This search for wholeness is the dynamic running through his entire *œuvre*.

Caillois believed that becoming aware of the signals revealing the systematisation of the universe would confer 'la connaissance' (*NE*, p.154), the lack of specification suggesting it is the only knowledge worth having. The ways in which the imagination is determined are no different from the overdetermination of the universe, he argues, so that 'la nécessité d'esprit' is one and the same as 'la nécessité de l'univers' (p.154). There is no meaningful distinction between the two for Caillois, who would in later writings posit a complete continuity between organic and inorganic forms. A desire for fusion, for oneness with the surrounding cosmos – a desire that would be a constant all his life – is evident here, 'qui ne voit que le salut est au-delà de la distinction ou nulle part?' (p.154). This interest in fusion is linked too to his writing on mimicry, which I shall be considering in the next chapter.

I have mentioned the awkward style of *La Nécessité d'esprit*, so untypical of Caillois's later work. A rather lengthy sentence will suffice to illustrate this point:

Il est clair que l'indépendance affective du concept vis-à-vis du mot qui le supporte est déterminée à la fois – par l'objet, c'est-à-dire par son potentiel de représentations ou d'excitations collectives (ainsi la psychanalyse et la Gestalt-théorie révèlent dans des domaines différents l'existence de symboles et de formes attractives de valeur universelle) – par le sujet, c'est-à-dire par la systématisation consciente et inconsciente de ses souvenirs et tendances, d'un mot [*sic*], par sa vie – et enfin, par leurs précédents rapports, c'est-à-dire par le "décor" des occasions où ils se sont déjà trouvés en présence: les toiles d'araignées, détruites en avançant dans l'ombre [...]. (*NE*, pp.25-26)

His recent readings are clearly still freshly imprinted on his mind.

I shall deal briefly with *La Nécessité d'esprit* by itself, as it has some relevance in seeing his later writings in context. I have mentioned how Caillois wished to justify poetry by showing that imagination, far from being mysterious, free-floating, was rigorously determined. In this his views diverged also from those of Valéry, with whom he generally has much in common as regards poetry, 'alors que l'auteur de *Variété* y voyait une "scintillation incohérente" régie par le "hasard" (*Cahiers*,

⁸ Jean Blot, 'L'entrée en poésie de Roger Caillois', *Commentaire*, 22 (1983), 449-52 (p.450).

Pléiade, tome II, p.267), Caillois croit y déceler certains “idéogrammes surdéterminants”, c’est-à-dire d’une signification et d’une puissance évocatrice objectivement supérieures, dépassant l’imagerie de chacun’.⁹ This view of imagination would remain central. Baudelaire’s description of imagination as ‘la plus scientifique des facultés’ comes to mind. Caillois, while still involved with the Surrealist movement at the time of writing *La Nécessité d’esprit*, was very evidently not wholly in agreement with Breton and other group members on matters such as automatic writing, inspiration and images. His desire to ‘organiser la poésie’ would run very clearly counter to the very essence of Surrealism. He identified the ‘idéogramme lyrique’ (a concept, along with the affective aspects associated with it) as the ‘élément dynamique de la vie mentale’ (p.33). This term was coined by Apollinaire in respect of what became best known as his *calligrammes* and it is obviously necessary to distinguish between his use of the expression and Caillois’s. In explaining the formation of the ‘idéogramme lyrique’, Caillois has recourse to some of the discoveries of psychoanalysis, in particular ‘overdetermination’, a term used by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. It is explained as follows in *Freud and the Post-Freudians*:

The Freudian concept of psychic determinism does not postulate a simple one-to-one relationship of cause and effect in all mental events, and it is recognized that a single event may be *overdetermined*, being the final common path of many forces, whether constitutional, developmental, or environmental. According to this view the personality is most clearly revealed when the intellect is exercising least control, and it follows that a patient’s dreams, his behaviour when under the influence of drugs or alcohol, the odd *lapsus linguae*, the events he unaccountably forgets, tell more about him than his socially-controlled behaviour.¹⁰

Caillois’s reliance on psycho-analysis, a new science not yet on any University curricula, was bold and shows his openness to new ideas, and his willingness to take from them what he found useful. Laurent Jenny remarks on Caillois’s efforts throughout *La Nécessité d’esprit* to ‘donner une consistance théorique à son intuition’.¹¹ The ‘idéogramme lyrique’ is ‘une représentation particulièrement surdéterminée’ (p.34). Caillois’s proof of all this is not particularly scientific or

⁹ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, ‘Caillois ou la cohérence dérobée’, *Le Monde*, 6 November 1981, 11,13 (p.11).

¹⁰ J.A.C. Brown, *Freud and the Post-Freudians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961; 1974 reprinting consulted), p.4.

¹¹ Jenny, ‘Préface’, *La Pensée aventurée*, ed. by Laurent Jenny (Paris: Belin, 1992), pp.3-11 (p.9).

systematic, and therefore not definitively convincing. He is trying to undermine the subjective – with reference to the subjective. He recounts a dream he had and refers too to certain writings of Dali. Strindberg is quoted to substantiate the case for objective ideogrammes. The praying mantis, to which I shall be returning later in greater detail, is cited as a prime example of an objective ideogramme. The latter, for Caillois, ‘*réalisent matériellement dans le monde extérieur les virtualités lyriques et passionnelles de la conscience*’ (p.119, Caillois’s italics). Caillois has a vast role for them to play in his attempt to account for the totality around him, ‘on voit [...] à quelle ambitieuse théorie interprétative de tout l’univers aboutissait ma conception primitive de l’idéogramme lyrique’ (p.39).

In place of Breton’s automatic writing, which assumed a complete correspondence between mental processes and writing, Caillois proposed the ‘pensée automatique’ which, borrowing from the Freudian notion of overdetermination, challenges Breton’s assumptions about the unconscious association of ideas. The ‘pensée automatique’ is ‘une chaîne associative spontanée, déclenchée à partir de l’intervention d’un idéogramme lyrique et laissée à sa propre capacité de développement’ (p.45). While Caillois is very dismissive in *La Nécessité d’esprit* of the values of automatic writing, his theory of the ‘pensée automatique’ shows nonetheless his links with Surrealism. By studying a spontaneous chain of thoughts, Caillois argued, one could best uncover ‘les éléments déterminatifs de cet idéogramme’ (p.45). Again, rather unscientifically, he analyses the various associations for him of the game of chess – Antinéa playing Captain Morhange in Pabst’s *Atlantide*, for example, or Caillois himself playing against the husband of his mistress. In a Darwinian way, some images are stronger and enjoy a greater hold on the imagination. Each association is determined by something particular to Caillois’s history and is also of some common relevance. From this random evidence he concludes, ‘la pensée automatique n’est possible que par la surdétermination générale des éléments. Mais c’est seulement là, en quelque sorte, un plasma qui exige une activité systématisante: celle précisément de l’idéogramme lyrique’ (p.72).

A poem written by Caillois – again, suspiciously convenient – is analysed to show the synthesising qualities of ‘la pensée lyrique’, these qualities conferring on it its value. He argues that in the seemingly unrelated elements that make up his poem, can be

revealed affective unity and continuity. In this too he reveals links with other Surrealist writers. His account of the train of thoughts sparked off by seeing a capital M in a station 'se rapproche singulièrement des visions hypnagogiques enregistrées par Tristan Tzara dans ses *Grains et issues*'.¹² Psychoanalysis was interested in dreams for their synthesising qualities: Caillois tracks 'la pensée lyrique' with a similar motivation.

The existence of ideogrammes provides an explanation for the communicative powers of poetry, 'il est nécessairement fort rare qu'[un texte poétique] ne comporte pas un ou plusieurs de ces idéogrammes prégnants où chacun peut trouver son compte' (pp.87-88). Poetry is not merely about aesthetic pleasure in this world-view, it can also, Caillois claims, bring about 'une plus parfaite *systématisation de la conscience*' (p.98). Constantly his desire for wholeness is evident. His theory is linked to critical analysis of poetry, too. It is meaningless, he argues, to talk of the 'beauty' of a poem:

Au contraire, on connaîtra valablement la puissance ou l'objectivité lyrique d'une représentation ou d'une association donnée à partir de la force, de la stabilité et de la généralité de son utilisation et particulièrement, par rapport à chacun, à partir de la plus ou moins grande nécessité de son intégration dans le développement affectif personnel. (NE, p.131)

A good poem, according to this definition, is one with resonance for large numbers of readers.

Becoming aware of the systematisation of the universe, confers, as I have mentioned, 'la connaissance':

Il faut supposer [...] qu'un être ayant accédé à la connaissance totale de sa nécessité d'esprit ne pourrait douter qu'elle ne coïncide avec celle de l'univers. Faisant parfaitement corps avec l'une, il serait du même coup résorbé dans l'autre. On aperçoit mal quelle extériorité, quelle antinomie subsisterait pour un tel être. Et qui ne voit que le salut est au-delà de la distinction ou nulle part? (NE, p.154)

This is an unattainable vision of wholeness, but nonetheless the one towards which Caillois would spend many years working. At the end of the book Caillois reveals

¹² Henri Béhar, 'Roger Caillois, "boussole mentale" du surréalisme', in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.15-31 (p.21).

fully his double aim, not just to justify poetry but to achieve that state of wholeness for which his fragmented self was yearning. It is not uncharacteristic of Caillois to introduce a new, metaphysical idea at the end of a work, and to throw it out for the reader's further consideration.

Critical opinion of *La Nécessité d'esprit* varies. Jean Blot seems to be subtly suggesting that it is useful, but overly autobiographical:

Sa publication tardive vient combler une lacune, parce qu'elle permet de compléter l'histoire d'une pensée en en restituant la première étape, les premiers instants, ceux si rares chez cet écrivain à la pudeur farouche où elle se trouve encore prise dans l'expérience personnelle, voire intime, et ne se libère que lentement des pièges autobiographiques.¹³

Michel Panoff is surely Caillois's harshest critic. In his work he compares Caillois with Claude Lévi-Strauss, consistently to Caillois's disadvantage. Attacking Caillois for not being Lévi-Strauss, which is what Panoff is essentially doing, is to deprive both writers of a fair assessment. Lévi-Strauss was an academic, orthodox anthropologist, whose reputation is established. Caillois was involved in something quite different, using various branches of knowledge in an attempt to see the whole picture. Different criteria are called for in examining the work of either writer. Panoff's tone in referring to *La Nécessité d'esprit* is one of sarcastic outrage:

On voit mal quels intérêts sa publication entendait servir – en tout cas ni la mémoire de l'auteur ni le progrès des sciences humaines! S'agirait-il, pour son éditeur et ses amis, "d'occuper le terrain" [...] ou bien de fournir des matériaux à des étudiants en mal de thèse?¹⁴

It is striking how regularly Panoff in his comments will assume the worst and lowest motives, either on the part of Caillois or, as here, of his publisher. Caillois's approach, Panoff exclaims, was typical of his time, 'quand on se reporte aujourd'hui à ces bric-à-brac pluridisciplinaires dont l'époque avait le secret et qui permettaient à n'importe qui, entre deux dîners en ville, de pontifier sur les sauvages à partir de quelques lectures dévergondées, on se dit que l'ethnologie revient de loin!'¹⁵

¹³ Blot, p.449.

¹⁴ Michel Panoff, *Les Frères ennemis. Roger Caillois et Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Payot & Rivage, 1993), p.72.

¹⁵ Panoff, p.73.

Caillois's efforts, looked at from the vista of ever-growing specialisation and uniformity of approach, may appear irregular, and certainly his choice of material to illustrate and prove his theories is not, as I have said, 'scientific', in the sense of rigorously objective. Caillois was neither an ethnologist nor a psychoanalyst, nor did he claim to be either, but all but the most superficial of readings will make it quite clear that he was not 'pontificating about savages'. He approached these sciences with enthusiasm (and an academic background in them himself, having taken courses in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes) for his own very particular purposes. While it is by no means a perfect and accomplished work, *La Nécessité d'esprit* is, for any reader of Caillois, fascinating since Caillois reveals a great deal more of himself and his preoccupations than in later works. Its overall value lies in the major assistance it gives in studying Caillois's work as a whole. Its relative naivety allows themes and trends of thought to be seen more clearly and it sets down markers for later reflections, which will be more subtle and more complex.

We see how from his first unpublished work onwards, oneness with the universe was a goal and a preoccupation. The underlying oneness *in* the universe is the focus of attention in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*.

CHAPTER TWO

MYTHOLOGY, MIMICRY AND IMAGINATION

la connaissance [...] est totalitaire ou n'est pas (MH, p.31)

Of myths and men

In *Le Mythe et l'Homme* Caillois's preoccupation with imagination continues, but his motivations are different. He is no longer concerned with providing an objective justification for poetry. His hostility to it is complete at this stage. His concern with and belief in oneness lead him to posit that imagination is biologically determined, and that there is a continuum in nature from the insect world to man.

In terms of Caillois's intellectual trajectory, *Le Mythe et l'Homme* still retains traces of his Surrealist past, while also including new interests and focuses relating to his involvement with the Collège de Sociologie, a period that will be investigated in the next chapter. The praying mantis, for example, was an insect which, by its strange and alarming behaviour, had aroused the interest of a number of Surrealists and Caillois had written an essay on it published in 1934 in *Minotaure*. As his later writings also suggest, Caillois was not afraid to shock. Caillois retains from *La Nécessité d'esprit* the concepts of the ideogramme and overdetermination. His theory on imagination highlights the unity of the cosmos and remains important in his later writings on aesthetics, for instance, where it has implications both for creative and for analytical activities.

While Caillois is obeying personal imperatives, in his desire to transcend the material he is also representative of his time. Jean-Michel Heimonet writes of what *Le Mythe et l'Homme* owes to the period in which it was written:

Ce livre resterait à peu près illisible si on ne le replaçait dans le contexte politique et culturel des années trente. Face à la cohésion populaire et au dynamisme des mouvements nationaux, communisme et fascisme, la troisième République de Blum puis de Lebrun représente pour la plupart des intellectuels de l'époque une image de la décadence. Dans une société où le principe de l'utile tient lieu de lien social, les "virtualités instinctives du mythe", apparaissent un facteur de régénération.¹

Because Caillois's purpose and vision are so strong and so personal, it is excessive, however, to say that the book is virtually unreadable without reference to its time.

Caillois's approach to his writing is an interdisciplinary one, and *Le Mythe et l'Homme* is a fine early example of 'diagonalismo analogico'.² He is interested in myths as a source of insight into the workings of the human mind, their 'plurivocité' makes them an excellent basis for studying the imagination. Myths exist and survive, Caillois will argue, because they are *overdetermined*. Laurent Jenny comments that 'l'objet des sciences humaines ou des sciences naturelles ne ressort jamais tout à fait intact du traitement qui lui est appliqué par Caillois'.³ To consider Caillois, then, as a straight ethnologist (as Panoff does, for example), is missing the point. He takes what he can from various sciences with a view to constructing a total system, 'la connaissance [...] est totalitaire ou n'est pas' (p.31). The idea of continuity is central, and cosmic oneness owes more to the finite nature of the universe than any overriding harmony: 'avec Caillois nous ne sommes nullement dans un monde d'analogie universelle et de "correspondances" à la Swedenborg. L'analogie n'est pas la traduction d'une harmonie pré-établie. Elle est plutôt la conséquence simultanée de l'indigence du monde en formes élémentaires et de sa richesse combinatoire'.⁴ We can only get glimpses of this unity, we can never see the whole. But the glimpses Caillois argued he experienced would be motivation enough to consider this impossible task for many more years. Appearances take on their full importance in Caillois's work when seen in connection with uncovering patterns. The poetry of Saint-John Perse would later attract Caillois greatly, because here was a poet concerned with describing the world he saw, and with drawing unexpected yet verifiable (and therefore truly 'illuminating') analogies. Caillois himself saw *Le Mythe et l'Homme* as the basis of all

¹ Jean-Michel Heimonet, 'Des "mythes humiliés" aux "mythes triomphants"', *La Pensée aventurée*, pp. 91-111 (pp.96-97).

² Laserra, p.21.

³ Jenny, p.3.

⁴ Jenny, p.5.

his future works, writing in the 1972 preface that the latter ‘ne font, la plupart du temps, qu’en exécuter le programme ou en développer tel ou tel chapitre, sinon une simple phrase’ (pages unnumbered).

In Caillois’s study of myths, ‘il s’agit de considérer un vaste ensemble de phénomènes comme une totalité organique dont les multiples éléments sont interdépendants.

L’effort se dessine ainsi tout entier comme une tentative de synthèse’ (p.10). *La Nécessité d’esprit* saw him interested in the synthesising qualities of poetry, a trait he wishes for his own work. Again, in the *avertissement* to *Le Mythe et l’Homme* (pages unnumbered) he emphasised the wholeness – the holistic nature – of his approach:

Il est digne de remarque que ce soit justement dans la mesure où la méthode qui a dirigé ces investigations a voulu les inscrire dans un système *total*, qui ne laissât rien au-dehors de son édifice, que ces mêmes investigations peuvent, dès qu’elles touchent aux questions à résoudre par l’action, apporter des éléments de réponse aussi exempts que possible d’ambiguïté, de timidité et d’arbitraire. (MH)

Caillois is striking a very confident and positive note here. Nobody should doubt his research because it is all-embracing (a reader might well wonder how this is humanly possible, however). For Caillois, this should be enough to silence any challenge.

Caillois wants to establish the *objective* interest of the praying mantis before proceeding to develop his argument. Just as in poetry the purely personal has no place for Caillois, so too in other areas arguments must be substantiated with reference to data:

Tout se passe en effet comme si certains objets et certaines images bénéficiaient, par suite d’une forme ou d’un contenu particulièrement significatifs, d’une *capacité lyrique* plus nettement marquée qu’à l’ordinaire. Valable très communément, sinon universellement, cette capacité, dans certains cas du moins, semble faire essentiellement partie de l’élément considéré et pouvoir, par conséquent, prétendre autant que lui à l’objectivité. (MH, p.35)

What Caillois goes on to infer from the ‘overdetermination’ of such objects or images may not be so universally acknowledged. And the objectivity of even this first stage is doubtful, given the capacity of the individual mind to invest value in something. Jean

Blot reminds us that ‘il n’est aucun phénomène que l’homme puisse observer sans émotion et sans lui prêter quelques “franges irrationnelles” ou bien, et nous sommes alors dans le délire surréaliste, que le monde se plie à la loi de nos complexes et fonctionne sur la base des données de l’inconscient humain’.⁵ Man’s inability to be objective is a great obstacle in establishing the credibility of this theory. Caillois’s assumptions marginalised him from the more orthodox academic community:

Les recherches sur le mythe n’avaient pas, dans l’école classique, aussi bien chez Frazer que chez Durkheim, dépassé l’étude des croyances collectives, faisant reposer les formes de classifications sur la conscience collective. Mais au-delà de cette conscience collective, que trouver, si l’on voulait éviter le recours métapsychologique et quelque peu naïf à un “inconscient collectif” qui n’explique rien sinon lui-même? En suggérant qu’une même logique, pour ainsi dire matérielle ou cosmique, se développe dans l’inerte et dans le vivant, dans les formes du rêve ou de l’esthétique, Caillois proposait une interprétation nouvelle. Interprétation irritante pour les spécialistes de disciplines particulières et dont le caractère alors paradoxal n’a pas été sans lui fermer les portes de l’Université [...].⁶

Mauss, on reading *Le Mythe et l’Homme*, had warned Caillois of the risk of ‘déraillement général’.⁷ From the beginning of his writing career, there was nothing orthodox or mainstream about Caillois’s highly personal world view. Specialists such as Mauss were nervous about his treatment of ‘their’ disciplines. Yet Caillois was not poaching on their territory. He was seeking the means to put across his own intuitions about man and the cosmos.

Choosing an insect as a point of comparison to man can only have shocked those (the majority, presumably) who unquestioningly accepted man’s superior place in the universe. For Caillois, these two worlds are not opposed, but complementary. He is quick to reject centuries of established thinking, where such thinking is, in his eyes, based on a false premise. Caillois is here developing Bergson’s theory in *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*. Bergson was looking for the origin of man’s story-telling ability, ‘pour lui, celle-ci tient la place qu’occupent les instincts chez les insectes, la fiction n’est possible que pour des êtres intelligents [...]’. D’un côté, instinct réel, de l’autre, instinct virtuel, dit M. Bergson pour différencier la condition de

⁵ Blot, p.452.

⁶ Jean Duvignaud, ‘Roger Caillois et l’imaginaire’, *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, LXVI (1979), 91-96 (p.93).

⁷ Quoted by Jenny, p.3.

l'insecte agissant et celle de l'homme mythologisant' (pp.69-70). If Caillois did not originate this bold theory, he certainly expanded it and extended it in his later writings to include not just links between things, but between the inanimate and the animate. This parallelism is central to him. André Chastel sums up his boldness:

Par un mouvement stupéfiant et d'apparence absurde, c'était déclarer pratiquement sans validité la distinction qui a engendré, entretenu, pendant des millénaires le problème philosophique. Les deux registres opposés: la conscience et l'être, l'intériorité et la nature, le psychologique et l'objectif, le vécu personnel et l'anonyme muet, sont tels, affirme-t-il soudain, que leur interrogation *simultanée*, en principe inconcevable, peut seule être digne d'intérêt et capable de jeter un jour furtif, oblique, sur l'énigme du monde qui les enveloppe l'un et l'autre.⁸

Chastel describes Caillois's theory as 'd'apparence absurde'. This is ambiguous; he is not saying openly that he lends the *rapprochement* any credence, or that he does not. The adverb 'soudain' may contain an implicit reproach, suggesting perhaps that Caillois has not fully made his case. Panoff makes this charge a lot more brutally.

Caillois cites a true 'labyrinthe des faits' (p.10) to back up his claim as to the praying mantis's 'capacité lyrique' (p.35). The myths he recounts come from all over the world and reveal a real fascination with the insect. For instance, in certain areas, the insect is associated with teeth, not surprising considering its mating habits. Teeth have great significance in sexual symbolism, 'un rêve de dents arrachées renvoie soit à l'onanisme, soit à la castration, soit à l'accouchement, selon la psychanalyse, soit à la mort selon les *Clefs des Songes* populaires' (p.45). Caillois argues that the insect's behaviour finds a parallel in man either in pathological fears or mythological expression (*la pensée obsessionnelle/lyrique*):

Il ne paraît pas impossible de considérer la peur de la castration comme une spécification plus particulièrement humaine de la crainte du mâle d'être dévoré par la femelle pendant ou après l'accouplement, représentation fournie objectivement par les mœurs nuptiales des mantidés, tant va loin la symétrie, ou, pour mieux dire, la continuité de la nature et de la conscience. (MH, p.59)

⁸ André Chastel, 'La loyauté de l'intelligence', in *CPT*, pp.29-59 (p.34).

Caillois's persuasion strategies are always interesting to watch and here 'il ne paraît pas impossible' makes the link seem like a logical conclusion, while striking a detached and scholarly tone.

Not even scientists are immune to the fascination aroused by the praying mantis, as certain of their names for it reveal, 'ces qualificatifs renvoient purement et simplement à l'imagination' (p.49). Caillois shares too in this interest. The insect was part of his own personal mythology, bringing together the themes of castration/*femme fatale* and his psychasthenic tendencies at the time. This perfect matching with his own personal phantasms surely undermined his ability to be 'objective'. Danielle Chaperon makes the interesting point that, if a creature like the praying mantis did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it:

Caillois n'envisage pas dans la *Nécessité d'esprit* (ni dans *Le Mythe et l'homme*) que la mante puisse, en dépit de tous les mythes cités et de sa silhouette inquiétante, avoir des mœurs tout à fait respectables. Dans ce cas, l'homme se révélerait parfaitement capable de "bricoler", dans la langue et dans le mythe, un objet qui corresponde à des tendances affectives. Il y reviendra en revanche beaucoup plus tard à propos de la pieuvre. Sera faite alors la part du faux [...].⁹

Michel Panoff is not convinced by *Le Mythe et l'Homme*. He sees in Caillois's work 'une démission de l'esprit de recherche'.¹⁰ His unprovable conclusion makes Caillois, for Panoff, 'un auteur paresseux et superficiel'.¹¹ Caillois's classification of what is bizarre does not take account of cultural differences. Societies react differently: 'ce n'est ni toujours ni partout la même émotion, non plus que la même spéculation alambiquée, qui est provoquée automatiquement par l'animal étiqueté "fantastique"'.¹² Panoff judges Caillois's work to be inadequate, 'il est indispensable de connaître et d'analyser tout le système de représentations que s'est donné chaque culture particulière. Ce qui suppose du travail, encore du travail, toujours du travail...'¹³ The dots suggest Panoff thinks Caillois not a little work-shy, as regards painstaking research. Panoff's assessment reveals again that his perspective is flawed. He is judging Caillois as though he were a fellow academic. It is true to say that Caillois's

⁹ Danielle Chaperon, 'Sémantique de la mante', in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.33-50 (p.41).

¹⁰ Panoff, p.36.

¹¹ Panoff, p.37.

¹² Panoff, p.37.

¹³ Panoff, pp.37-38.

cultural outlook was that of a Western twentieth-century intellectual and that therefore he may have been fascinated by what someone in another culture would find quite banal (though interestingly some of the cultures referred to in recounting myths of the praying mantis are very remote, from the Western perspective). But that still does not undermine the symbolic nature and extension of his point. If not a mantis, then a reader can imagine other links and parallels, once the basic idea has been planted. And it is really about planting an idea, rather than incontrovertibly making a point – not that science can ever do that, anyway. Caillois has manifestly done considerable research, and he has been partial and selective in the use he has made of it, which is not at all the same as being lazy. For Caillois, the implications of the research he has quoted seem clear to him, and he writes decisively and confidently:

On le voit: le cycle est bien fermé. Il suffit de résumer la dialectique de la recherche pour en apercevoir la signification: les mantes sont peut-être les insectes qui impressionnent le plus la sensibilité humaine; leurs mœurs nuptiales correspondent à une appréhension fort commune chez l'homme et capable de solliciter éminemment son imagination. *Ici une conduite, là, une mythologie.* (MH, p.68, Caillois's italics.)

All this proves for Caillois that 'les hommes et les insectes font partie de la même nature. A quelque degré, les mêmes lois les régissent. La biologie comparée a prise sur les uns et les autres. Leurs conduites respectives peuvent s'expliquer mutuellement' (p.69). Man enjoys no special status in the cosmos, 'l'homme n'est pas isolé dans la nature, il n'est un cas particulier que pour lui-même' (p.80). This will be a constant theme in all of Caillois's work. Not even imagination, a faculty that had been revered as special to man, is free. There is 'une sorte de conditionnement biologique de l'imagination' (p.81). Caillois will expand on this point in *Méduse & Cie*. All is one:

De la réalité extérieure au monde de l'imagination, de l'orthoptère à l'homme, de l'activité réflexe à l'image, la route est peut-être longue, mais elle est sans coupure. Partout les mêmes fils tissent les mêmes dessins. Il n'est rien d'autonome, rien d'isolable, rien de gratuit, sans cause et sans fin: le mythe même est l'équivalent d'un acte. (MH, p.83)

These are all statements, however lyrically expressed, rather than proofs. Their extreme confidence suggests that they can only be right and they seem to pre-empt all possible criticism. It is as though there is nothing more to be said, the case is closed.

The case has been suggested though, in reality, not demonstrated scientifically. The reader will accept Caillois's insights – or not – based, not on absolute scientific reasoning but on something more intangible, if no less persuasive ultimately. Caillois is conveying a vision, of a possible and desired unity, and is opening the reader's eyes to ways in which he may participate in that wholeness. This is where some internal contradictions appear in Caillois, contradictions that make his work all the more interesting, and it is worth exploring these more fully in dealing with the 'mission statement' that closes *Le Mythe et l'Homme*.

Before turning to that, however, some mention must be made of how, in *La Pieuvre*,¹⁴ Caillois allows for falsifications in people's imaginings. As *La Pieuvre*, published decades after *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, confirms a trend in Caillois to favour examples, and much reference to research and reading over detailed, analytical reasoning, I shall deal briefly with it here. In fact, in 'Paris, mythe moderne', published in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, Caillois had already dealt with mythology having evolved independently from reality, and in this essay accounts for and describes this. His predilection for the fantastic in nature led him back to this topic, and the octopus is a privileged member of his personal bestiary.

Drawing from Denys-Montfort, Michelet, Hugo, Lautréamont and Verne, Caillois tracks literary representations of the octopus, to continue his exploration of imagination and to draw attention to the unity of the world. He wishes to show that fantasy too is subject to the laws of the universe. Tracking this fantasy will enable him to 'déceler les pentes naturelles de l'imaginaire' (p.15). The genesis of ideas is not an easy process to describe, and Caillois resorts to very metaphorical language. Ideas, phantasms, start as 'd'innombrables bulles' (p.226) and move around 'telles [*sic*] un ballet d'atomes' (p.226). Those finding a storing place in the memory finally take on some permanence, a 'sursis' for 'ces ombres, ces vapeurs mentales' (p.226). Now no longer 'écume évanescence et turbulence vaine' (p.226), they become subject to the laws of the universe in a very literal way, become 'pourvues de pesanteur, d'influence, de fécondité' (p.226). Lasting ideas 'font boule de neige' (pp.226-27) and become ideas, myths, beliefs, poems. Caillois focuses on the process from 'bulles' to 'boules' in *La Pieuvre*. His language is metaphorical, but these are complex ideas, and difficult

¹⁴ *La Pieuvre. Essai sur la logique de l'imaginaire* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1973).

to account for in the precise, scientific vocabulary he might, in theory, prefer. His study of the misconceptions surrounding the octopus is in fact grounded in literature rather than science.

Factors such as the influence of other writers, Romanticism, the rise of the *roman noir*, led the authors studied by Caillois to concoct a version of the octopus that ignored many of its actually frightening aspects, and focused instead on areas that were in reality less threatening:

La construction superstitieuse se nourrit, au niveau des apparences, de connexions qui obéissent à une logique obscure, quoique répondant à une cohérence d'une étrange, constante et universelle solidité. [...] Le poulpe est chaste, mais une fatalité insurmontable le fait passer pour libidineux. Ses ventouses sont uniquement adhésives: chacun est convaincu que c'est par elles que l'animal boit sa nourriture. On attribue libéralement à la pieuvre des dimensions colossales, mais celles des calmars, qui sont réellement gigantesques, restent ignorées. (LP, p.209)

The reasons for these misconceptions remain obscure, therefore, but their universal nature is established. At the end of *La Pieuvre*, Caillois argues that certain objects, such as the octopus, draw the attention of the *imagination juste* to the 'continuité latente du tissu du monde' (p.229):

Alors, l'objet fait signe, devient signe. Il attire sur lui l'imagination juste, qui le découvre plus qu'elle ne l'invente. Elle pressent la relation dont il témoigne. Elle l'identifie et l'explicite avec plus ou moins de bonheur, de perspicacité. Elle provoque aussi dans l'âme une émotion et comme une rumeur que le partage rend plus persuasive et plus insistante. Un relevé de ces circuits magnétiques se dégage petit à petit des repères imprévus, des voies qui les joignent. Le réseau qui les compose se laisse confusément deviner. Il affleure dans les rêves, les métaphores, les mythologies stables. (LP, p.229)

More metaphorical language here, to convey the existence, and gradual perception of that wholeness for which Caillois is so persistently seeking. His focus in *La Pieuvre* has been on fantasy, however, not on *l'imagination juste*. Caillois does not fully bring out why these representations of the octopus highlight the hidden unity of the world. The ratio of exposition to analysis is not satisfactory, and it is a tendency of his to throw out an interesting idea, often at the end of a book, and leave it to the reader to tease it out, or develop it further. The perhaps more pedestrian side of writing holds

little appeal for him. He is again acting as stimulator of his reader's imagination, conveyer of cosmic insights. It could not of course be otherwise, since none of these points can be proved, or disproved. An integral part of his writing is the metaphorical level at which it operates.

Mimicry

Mimicry was a topic of intense interest to Caillois from the early 1930s:

Beaucoup, depuis les anachorètes scrutateurs du vide jusqu'aux actuels herméneutes du rêve, persuadés d'une probable résonance de cet éclat dans *l'être humain*, ou de l'existence dans la *pensée* d'une dernière image de l'illisible initial, ont cherché dans le discours, ou dans les récurrentes versions de l'imaginaire, le chiffre oublié, le texte pulvérisé du Livre; Caillois, lui, maître d'une autre *manteia* et lecteur radiographe du réel, plus attentif aux réseaux invisibles et aux symétries qui aimantent *la totalité du manifeste* qu'à son apparente dispersion, chercha d'abord le chiffre dans le triangle mobile des oiseaux migrants, dans le travestissement minutieux des chenilles arpeuteuses, dans le camouflage défensif et l'excès de précautions d'un papillon indonésien, hypertélique par le faste inutile de sa dépense ornementale; plus tard, dans les paysages cendreaux et l'écriture des pierres.¹⁵

Caillois joins in with a tradition of seeking the whole picture, turning his acute gaze on reality in the search for clues. Caillois was fascinated by mimicry and it was richly suggestive to him. In *Le Mythe et l'Homme* Caillois links mimicry with psychasthenia. He himself had psychasthenic tendencies and, as Jenny points out, the ambitious nature of Caillois's project, seeking to explain the cosmos and its structures, had certain consequences for him:

Il semble que toute l'ambition du projet de Caillois le laisse inconsolable d'un deuil; et peut-être même l'aggrave secrètement. Cette mélancolie, qui rappelle l'*acedia* médiévale, est directement liée à l'effort pour embrasser *indifféremment* tout le réel. Effectivement, Caillois dénie toute transcendance au sujet poétique qu'il est, ce sujet dont le travail établit l'unité diagonale du monde. Pris dans la trame du monde, traversé par ses lois, il ne saurait s'en distinguer. Le prix à payer pour ce regard de plein jour, c'est la dissolution du sujet dans la lumière du monde.¹⁶

¹⁵ Severo Sarduy, pp.137-38.

¹⁶ Jenny, *La Pensée aventuree*, p.9.

It would never be totally possible for Caillois to lose himself in this way, of course, and this would ultimately spell out the impossibility of the task he gave himself. But the effort, the consciousness that to do so was necessary for success, was enough to induce the troubles of which Caillois writes. As Caillois's project remained consistent, this would continue to be something that perturbed him.

In *Le Mythe et l'Homme* Caillois is more reserved about his psychasthenic experiences than in *La Nécessité d'esprit*. He mentions them when seeking to explain Carnot's principle that 'le monde tend vers l'uniformité' (p.115). He supplies 'notes introspectives prises pendant une crise de "psychasthénie légendaire", volontairement aggravée à des fins d'ascèse et d'interprétation' (p.109). He recounts problems in spatial perception, space seemed to him to be devouring, 'l'espace semble à ces esprits dépossédés une puissance dévoratrice. L'espace les poursuit, les cerne, les digère en une phagocytose géante' (pp.108-09). Space finally seems to replace these troubled individuals, body and soul become separate, and the individual tries to see himself from a point in space. He feels he is turning into space himself, 'il est semblable, non pas semblable à quelque chose, mais simplement *semblable*. Et il invente des espaces dont il est "la possession convulsive"' (p.109). This all points towards the same process, 'la dépersonnalisation par assimilation à l'espace' (p.109), a parallel to the morphological changes that occur in certain animals through mimicry.

Claude-Pierre Pérez sees similarities between the image of being devoured and the myth Caillois chose to symbolise his intellectual trajectory in *Le Fleuve Alphée*, 'on est frappé de la lumière qu'un tel texte jette sur le mythe qu'il a choisi comme emblème de son destin: ce patient qui "digéré en une phagocytose géante" franchit "la frontière de sa peau" pour se dissoudre dans l'espace n'est-il pas déjà pareil au fleuve Alphée que la mer environne et menace d'engloutir?'¹⁷ Pérez also points out how in many of Caillois's books, the fear of being devoured recurs – in *La Pieuvre*, his writing on the praying mantis, on insects who practise mimicry, on the sacred, even his accounts of vertigo.¹⁸ These are striking insights, but when the river flows into the sea finally in the myth referred to in *Le Fleuve Alphée*, it is more a question of finding again a true destiny. Caillois is returning to his true vocation, after the 'parenthesis'.

¹⁷ Claude-Pierre Pérez, 'Vertiges de Roger Caillois II', *NRF*, 430 (1988), 99-106 (p.103).

¹⁸ Pérez, p.103.

In that sense, the fear of being devoured has finally been overcome by merging with his beginning and his ending. Personal experiences, fears or obsessions can again be seen to be important in the choice of Caillois's material.

Caillois's theory of mimicry changes quite substantially between *Le Mythe et l'Homme* and *Méduse & Cie*. In the former book, Caillois writes that 'une méthode sévère est de rigueur' (p.85). He is again concerned with objectivity, a trait he implicitly claims for his analysis, different therefore from that of other researchers into this area. He refers extensively to existing scientific research on the topic. All too often, he laments, the temptation is to interpret facts, rather than to consider them objectively and let them speak for themselves. This might seem to suggest that Caillois's theory will be rigorously scientific, which will not be the case. No existing theories satisfy Caillois and he proffers his own explanation. Insects at one time might have possessed a mechanism permitting them to imitate other forms. This mechanism disappeared, once the resemblance was obtained, 'le mimétisme morphologique pourrait être alors, à l'instar du mimétisme chromatique, une véritable photographie, mais de la forme et du relief, une photographie sur le plan de l'objet et non sur celui de l'image, reproduction dans l'espace tridimensionnel avec le plein et la profondeur: photographie-sculpture ou mieux *téléplastie* si l'on dépouille le mot de tout contenu métapsychiste' (p.100). Caillois calls this explanation 'la seule vraisemblable' (p.100). This confidence is not merited, however, because his argument is singularly vague. He offers no proof at all. His theory seems less the product of 'une méthode sévère' than a visionary leap of the imagination.

Mimicry, in the main, does not seem to protect the animal which adopts this practice. Caillois goes on to establish a link between it and the area of mimetic magic, where 'le semblable produit le semblable' (p.104). Primitive man believed in this also, and indeed the belief lingers on in modern man. This could have been the determining force behind mimicry, back in that era Caillois imagines when insects were more plastic than they are today, 'la recherche du semblable apparaît comme un moyen, sinon comme un intermédiaire. La fin semble bien être *l'assimilation au milieu*. [...] On dirait qu'il s'exerce une véritable *tentation de l'espace*' (p.106). Caillois's language is tentative here, 'apparaît comme', 'semble bien être', 'on dirait qu'il

s'exerce'. This is not surprising, since this theory cannot be proven either. These are approaches to the truth, rather than solid fact.

Caillois links the insect's assimilation into its surroundings with psychasthenic tendencies in man, '*la psychasthénie légendaire*, si l'on consent à nommer ainsi le trouble des rapports [...] de la personnalité et de l'espace' (p.108). This is the schizophrenic's problem, '*la dépersonnalisation par assimilation à l'espace*, c'est-à-dire ce que le mimétisme réalise morphologiquement dans certaines espèces animales' (p.109). Assimilation into one's surroundings is achieved necessarily at the expense of personality and awareness of being alive, '*la vie recule d'un degré*' (p.110). Sometimes an insect goes so far as to imitate rotting vegetation, providing a fine demonstration of '*le retour à l'inorganique*' (p.113), which for Caillois sums up mimicry.

Caillois totally rejects Vignon's suggestion that mimicry has an aesthetic justification. He sees space as exerting a powerful attraction on man '*toujours prêt à le ramener en arrière pour combler la différence de niveau qui isole l'organique dans l'inorganique. [...] [L]e monde tend vers l'uniformité*' (p.115). This tendency towards becoming one with one's surroundings has resonances in literature and art. Caillois refers, for example, to some of Salvador Dali's work. He does acknowledge, '*il est hors de doute que certains des développements précédents sont loin d'offrir toutes garanties du point de vue de la certitude*' (p.117). This is not at all a sincere statement, as he hastily dissociates himself from any criticism of his theories, '*cependant de telles confrontations me semblent non seulement légitimes [...] mais presque indispensables*' (p.118). Man's preservation instinct is accompanied by a darker force, its opposite tendency, in its extreme form representing '*l'inertie de l'élan vital*' (p.118), a phrase Caillois owes to Bergson. This state is very close to the Freudian death wish, described as a '*force which is constantly working towards death and ultimately towards a return to the original inorganic state of complete freedom from tension or striving*'.¹⁹

Mimicry, in Caillois's view, is an extreme example of wholeness, of oneness with nature, the very condition towards which he was striving, '*on voit visiblement*

¹⁹ *Freud and the Post-Freudians*, p.27.

manifesté à quel point l'organisme vivant fait corps avec le milieu où il vit. Autour de lui et en lui, on constate la présence des mêmes structures et l'action des mêmes lois. Si bien qu'à vrai dire, il n'est pas *dans* un "milieu", il *est* encore ce "milieu" ' (p.119).

Referring to Caillois's theories on mimicry, Laserra writes, 'formalizzati per la prima volta nel 1938, questi argomenti non saranno mai rinnegati da Caillois tanto che, nel '60, essi saranno ripresi in *Méduse & Cie*, arricchiti e verificati alla luce di nuovi esempi'.²⁰ This is in fact not the case. Readers of *Méduse & Cie* will be surprised to find a quite different set of theories, which make no reference to Caillois's earlier ones. A short footnote in *Les Jeux et les Hommes* is the closest Caillois comes to explaining this change, '[*Le Mythe et l'Homme*] traite malheureusement du problème dans une perspective qui m'apparaît aujourd'hui des plus fantaisistes. Je ne ferai plus, en effet, du mimétisme, un trouble de la perception de l'espace et une tendance à retourner à l'inanimé, mais, comme je le propose ici, l'équivalent, chez l'insecte, des jeux de simulacre chez l'homme' (pp.62-63).

Twenty-two years later in *Méduse & Cie*, Caillois's urge to classify has become established. Mimicry is now divided into three categories, according to the nature of the result sought by the animal. These three kinds of mimicry find parallels in human behaviour, according to Caillois:

travesti, camouflage et intimidation définissent très exactement les différentes activités qui sont celles de l'homme en ce domaine, soit qu'il essaie, revêtant un déguisement, de se donner l'apparence d'un autre individu, d'un autre vivant, soit qu'il veuille se dissimuler lui-même ou dissimuler quelque chose, soit qu'au moyen d'un masque il s'applique à répandre autour de lui une terreur spécifique mi-consentie, mi-éperdue. (MC, p.82)

The classification and the argumentation is new and will surprise anyone who has read *Le Mythe et l'Homme*. The second category presented by Caillois – camouflage – corresponds most closely to the kind of mimicry considered in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*. New research has become available and Caillois's interpretation has certainly changed. Those complex arguments involving long-vanished mechanisms permitting morphological change, mimetic magic, are not even referred to, '*camouflage*, c'est assimilation au décor, au milieu, recherche de l'invisibilité' (p.102). As regards

²⁰ Laserra, p.134.

offering any detailed explanation of this tendency, while it is presented as having no purpose, 'le phénomène demeure mystérieux' (p.114).

Abandoning his previous arguments without explaining why weakens Caillois's credibility (a brief footnote in another book is not really enough). This can only be negative as he is asking his readers to accept extremely innovative visions. It necessarily gives the arguments presented in *Méduse & Cie* a certain arbitrariness too. Gone are the symptoms of *psychasthénie légendaire*, those schizophrenic feelings of depersonalisation that, Caillois argued, are the human expression of the rationale behind mimicry. The focus is now on an outward-looking explanation, although Caillois is still concerned with oneness. While the parallels Caillois draws may be examples of 'les folies raisonnantes' (p.31), he would consider such a verdict unfounded, '[la convergence des divers développements] conseille de généraliser l'enquête et d'entreprendre une confrontation générale du monde des insectes et de celui de l'homme. Je ne me lasserai pas de le dire: l'un et l'autre font partie du même univers' (p.31). So the idea of continuity and unity remains, but finding different expression. Highlighting the search for invisibility, 'l'essentiel est la poursuite, comme vertigineuse, de l'invisibilité pour elle-même' (p.115), he links this with similar urges in man. Man too values invisibility at certain times, for example, during war. As certain insects do, he may use an external mechanism to hide himself, be it foliage or paint. As an argument, it is a good deal more prosaic than earlier efforts. Caillois does attempt a further parallel at a deeper level, in the human imagination:

Tous les folklores du monde connaissent des manteaux ou des chapeaux qui rendent invisibles. [...] L'invisibilité [...] morale, n'est pas moins appréciée. Dans les contes, immanquablement le héros est celui auquel personne ne faisait attention et la lampe merveilleuse est celle qui n'a pas d'apparence. La littérature romanesque [...] rend hommage [...] à la même obsession de l'invisibilité, quand elle se plaît à mettre en scène des personnages dont la toute-puissance secrète agit dans l'ombre. (MC, p.116)

The contrast with the reference in *Le Mythe et l'Homme* to mimicry and literature could not be greater:

Le désir de l'assimilation à l'espace, de l'identification à la matière apparaît fréquemment dans la littérature lyrique: c'est le thème

panthéiste de la fusion de l'individu dans le tout, thème où précisément la psychanalyse voit l'expression d'une sorte de regret de l'inconscience prénatale. (MH, pp.116-17)

Caillois is of course quite entitled to change his theories, as scientists occasionally have to in the light of new evidence. A more open statement would have dealt more satisfactorily with the situation, and harmed his credibility less.

Caillois writes in the section on *travesti*, 'mon but est avant tout d'orienter la recherche dans une direction neuve' (p.98) – away from what he sees as the pointless obsession with usefulness as an explanation for mimicry. There is an implicit admission in this sentence that his theories are not necessarily – even in his own opinion – correct, but they may open up the field, and people's minds, to more fruitful possibilities.

Caillois writes of polymorphous butterflies and their efforts to disguise themselves. These do not save them from their predators. Existing theories can be shown to contain flaws, thus opening the way for Caillois's explanation, 'tout se passe comme s'il s'agissait d'une *mode*, à laquelle chaque espèce adapte sa parure par les moyens de son choix. [...] Mais la mode chez les hommes est aussi phénomène de mimétisme [...] de fascination d'un modèle imité sans cause' (pp.97-98). He well foresees the possible criticism of this *rapprochement*. His argument is based on a metaphor, almost a pun. He will allow that 'rien ne saurait être admis sans dossier constitué et étude approfondie' (p.98). This is certainly so, for those seeking a factual truth – Caillois is not offering either of these two criteria. What is put forward by him is an appealing parallel, as acceptable and true as a daring image in a poem. He wishes to put an end to the 'préjugés vivaces et dissocier l'alliance néfaste et stérilisante qui, dans l'esprit des spécialisés, unit si étroitement mimétisme et utilité biologique' (p.98). A harsh dismissal of potential critics.

When introducing an explanation, Caillois frequently uses the expression, 'tout se passe comme si', thus automatically designating whatever follows as a speculation. He does not offer his reader hard facts, at least as regards proving his various theories. His tone is authoritative, but the sheer scale of the task he has set himself means that it cannot succeed on a factual level. Reading Caillois is stimulating: rather than seeing

his work as a scientific demonstration of fact, his reader will remember the poetic flashes of insight into the oneness of the cosmos.

Rigour vs. imagination

Caillois ends *Le Mythe et l'Homme* with a short and stern piece entitled, 'Pour une activité unitaire de l'esprit', in which he advocates an 'orthodoxie militante' (p.179). This closing chapter reveals more about Caillois's inner struggles than he might ever have intended. There has been nothing orthodox about his procedures in previous chapters, the visionary links he has made (and certainly not proven, stimulating and intriguing as they may be), the pleasure he may have taken in putting mankind in its place in the universe. For so long, until finally liberated by his encounter with the mineral world, Caillois would encase himself in demands for rigour, severity, orthodoxy, while all the time slipping through in his work daring metaphors of cosmic unity, bearing no relation to traditional academic argument, despite his many references to the research of others.

Behind the vigour and confidence of the tone of this closing piece, lies a depression induced by what Caillois considered to be the mediocrity and slackness of the modern world; even science offers no guarantees, exceeding even 'la fantaisie poétique' (p.174) in its fancifulness. It is interesting to read this after seeing the use Caillois makes of objective facts. He has had enough of 'illuminations, que [...] je décrivais comme dispersées, instables, mal garanties, de nulle valeur sans un acte de foi préalable et plaisantes seulement par le crédit qu'on veut bien y ajouter' (pp.177-78). The links Caillois makes are not drawn frivolously, or without the serious intention to alert the reader to the unitary nature of the universe – and to guide Caillois himself along his path to wholeness. But they are not solid facts.

At this stage, Caillois's confidence in his ability to accomplish the daunting task he has set himself is complete. The oneness of the cosmos is in itself a guarantee of success, as there can be no '*hétérogénéité insurmontable entre l'aperçu et les formes de l'aperception*' (p.177). This confidence doubtless accounts for the militant, not to say arrogant tone of some of his statements which foreshadow *Le Vent d'hiver* in their peremptory dismissal of those not sharing Caillois's perspective. He writes, for

example, 'il n'y a pas de raison de ne pas être brutal, car c'est la négation même de l'ordre que l'ivraie jouisse des mêmes droits que le bon grain' (p.179). When Caillois writes of the necessity to 'se distinguer avec éclat de la médiocrité et de la contrefaçon' (p.179), he has not yet realised that the opposite of mediocrity is not necessarily *rigour* – creativity, for example, which observes high standards, is not mediocrity. For now what Caillois wants is:

une cohérence plus rigoureuse et une systématisation plus serrée. [...]. Ce procédé de la *généralisation* par lequel la géométrie de Riemann a résorbé celle d'Euclide et la physique relativiste celle de Newton en les admettant comme cas particuliers d'une synthèse plus compréhensive, indique la voie véritable. (MH, p.178)

It is clear how Caillois wishes to wrap his approach in the utmost academic credibility and precedence. Again his concern with synthesis, seeing the whole through the sum of its parts, is important to notice. Caillois's urgency is reinforced by his awareness that not only is he embarked on a quest for wholeness, this request demands the whole of him, 'l'espoir d'une *orthodoxie* n'est pas autre chose que la *présomption de l'entreprise unitaire idéale*, celle qui se propose pour tâche de mettre en œuvre la *totalité de l'être*' (p.182).

Intellectual and moral laxity have no place in Caillois's scheme of things. Hostilities have been declared, the stakes could not be higher. Caillois is embarked on

l'édification lente et sûre d'une doctrine dont l'exactitude se situe aussi bien sur le plan de la vérité philosophique que sur celui des satisfactions affectives et qui, en même temps qu'elle donne à chacun la certitude de son destin, lui soit concurremment un impératif moral pour tous les conflits et la solution technique de toutes les difficultés. (MH, p.183)

It is doubtful if any doctrine could ever accomplish that much. Only someone feeling very keenly the imperfections, the vulnerability of the human condition, could desire and insist on such certainty.

In his search for the total solution, Caillois does reflect certain tendencies of his time. Laserra writes there was considerable debate about 'la scelta di una metodologia di indagine sulla realtà *totale*, capace cioè di tener conto dell'inconscio, del subliminale,

e in una parola, di tutto ciò che tradizionalmente lo spirito positivo ha mutilato come superfluo'.²¹

Caillois's work continues, after *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, to be a mixture of rigour and imagination, a rich testimony to his struggle between the two. He is far from being as straightforward or as straitjacketed as some of his writing might suggest – his imagination calls for the same quality in response from his reader. Drawing analogies is a central process for him in visualising and achieving wholeness. Metaphors – and very daring ones – are at the heart of his working method. Despite his highly personal vision, Caillois still looked to groups at this point in his writing career, seeking a congenial community of thought. His activities in the Collège de Sociologie, which will be analysed in the following chapter, were destined to be as short-lived as his participation in Surrealism. World War Two intervened, bringing major changes to his life and attitudes.

²¹ Laserra, p. 57.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIETY AND THE SACRED: THE SEARCH FOR COHESION

Caillois's writings on sociology span several decades and cover a range of topics, from the sacred to the secular. *Le Vent d'hiver*,¹ an early and controversial text, reflecting great disgust at French society in the thirties, marks the beginning of his sociological writing. *Instincts et Société*,² the last 'sociological' text, is a great deal more detached. The passionate, revolutionary tone of the earlier work has abated. In using the term 'sociology' to describe this period in Caillois's career, it must be pointed out that his approach is in no way a traditional one. His own very definite agenda, his own preoccupations, break through, making his work very different from that of, say, Lévi-Strauss. While, particularly in his earlier books, he may draw heavily on the research of orthodox anthropologists and ethnologists, he has quite a different end in mind from that envisaged by the original researchers. His later works in this period are more independent. They include, in part at least, either a reaction to prior research carried out by someone else (*Les Jeux et les Hommes*, for instance) or start off quite independently.

Caillois's interest in sociology can be linked to his desire for objective analysis and his capacity for observation of phenomena (his later talent at describing stones comes to mind here). The subjective does tend to break through, however. In *Apprentissages de Paris*³ Caillois describes a figure who appeared widely on posters in Paris at the time, and who incarnated for him 'l'intelligence anonyme et glacée, s'efforçant de pénétrer les énigmes de la société et de la nature' (p.21). This is certainly Caillois's own ideal and objective, but not one – happily – he would always reach. Caillois was always willing to try a new science, a new approach, at this period. He stayed longer with sociology than with psychoanalysis, for example, perhaps because the results

¹ All page references are from *Approches de l'imaginaire*.

² *Instincts et Société. Essais de sociologie contemporaine* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1964).

³ *Apprentissages de Paris* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978).

seemed capable of objective verification. His widespread use of available research is an implicit admission of trust. Sociology preserves the illusion of objectivity, is a science that tries not to be partial, in either sense of the word.

Caillois's preoccupation with wholeness is very evident in his sociological writings. For a period from the thirties onwards, he was looking for a cohesive principle in society. With this in mind, he explored various areas, the two main ones being very topical at the time, namely the sacred and, later on, games theory. His interest in the sacred had nothing in common with Catholic writers of this time. His was a secular approach and French history at this time provides an insight into why a cohesive principle appeared to be particularly necessary to Caillois.

French politics in the 1930s were turbulent and divisive. The country, weakened by the terrible sacrifices of 1914-18 and by the Great Depression, would, even if united, have found it difficult to resolve the problems posed by the resurgence of German power under Hitler. But increasingly sharp internal divisions between right and left – with each camp itself represented by an increasingly diverse range of parties and ideologies, from the fascist Croix du Feu and Action Française to the Parti Communiste – were matched by indecisiveness in the face of growing international threats. France, along with Britain, failed to intervene in the Rhineland, Abyssinian and Spanish crises. When France finally did go to war with Germany in 1939, its government and parliament were so divided, so tempted by the attractions of peace at all costs, that the French armed forces, indeed the state itself, collapsed in the face of the onslaught. Equally, in domestic affairs, the bold adventure of the Front Populaire was to be followed a few years later by the deep conservatism of Vichy. These are some of the factors that must be borne in mind in analysing Caillois's work of this period.

In their different ways, *Le Vent d'hiver* and *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*⁴ have their roots in the political realities of the time. Caillois was still a young man, confident he could account for the troubling and turbulent world around him:

⁴ *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

En 1937, Roger Caillois avait vingt-quatre ans, il était à la recherche de clefs pour comprendre le monde, mais aussi pour le transformer. Il était convaincu de l'existence d'un passe universel, et ce ne pouvait être le marxisme, qui se révélait incapable de prendre en compte des déterminations non-économiques. Sa pensée se cherchait encore, parfois confondant les registres; elle restait cependant ouverte à tous les concepts novateurs. Le Cercle de Vienne, tout autant que les textes de G. Bachelard, les traités de sociologie ou d'ethnologie furent mis indifféremment à contribution. D'autre part, il restait révolutionnaire.⁵

This period in Caillois's life corresponds to a desire not simply to understand but to change, to transform the world around him. Caillois rejected Marxism because it focused solely on economic factors. The anthropology of Durkheim and Mauss orientated him in a different direction: creating new myths, discovering new sources of the sacred. Caillois, along with Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Jules Monnerot, became a founder-member of the Collège de Sociologie. First conceived in early 1937, it held its first meeting in November 1937 and lasted until July 1939. For this group of people, setting up the Collège satisfied their revolutionary desire to attempt to change society at a particular socio-historical moment:

le communisme, dans sa forme stalinienne, a déçu les protagonistes du Collège, plus proches de toute façon de Nietzsche que de Marx; le fascisme et le nazisme s'appuient sur des mythes, recourent à un sacré, nationalistes et racistes, inventent des rites, qui galvanisent les foules. A ces mythes, à ce sacré, à ces rites, le Collège va tenter d'en opposer d'autres, conformes ceux-là, selon lui, aux exigences de la science comme de la plus haute morale...⁶

Marxism had emphasised social dissolution as a result of class warfare. The Collège would seek to study the formation of social bonds through its research into the sacred: 'against democracy's limitations, the College's lectures [...] raised the question of human wholeness and communal vitality often in its darkest forms'.⁷ Caillois was particularly well suited to the work of the Collège, having been a student of Mauss and Durkheim at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 'agrégé de grammaire, fêru de sociologie et d'anthropologie, notamment religieuse, il est parmi les fondateurs du Collège le plus compétent sans doute, sinon le plus érudit, en ces domaines'.⁸

⁵ Alexandre Pajón, 'L'intrépidité politique de Roger Caillois avant-guerre', in *Les Cahiers de Chronos*, pp.373-87 (p.379).

⁶ Georges Auclair, 'Le sacré comme jeu?', in *Cahiers de l'imaginaire*, pp.35-45 (pp.36-37).

⁷ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, eds, *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.6.

At the start of his intellectual career, Caillois sought to put across his world view in association with other, like-minded people. His participation in the Collège de Sociologie came two years after the failure of his experience in Surrealism. Annamaria Laserra describes how this desire for a community was typical of Caillois's time, in which the euphoria of the twenties had given way to the need to examine political and social issues. These are 'anni caratterizzati dall'esigenza dei gruppi intellettuali di evitare l'isolamento organizzandosi in comunità e in cui, dietro l'insegna di ideali di destra o sinistra, i giovani manifestano un impellente bisogno di riunirsi in gruppi generalmente organizzati intorno a rivisti'.⁹ Both Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois reflected this trend, Bataille launching *Acéphale* in June 1936, the same month in which *Inquisitions*, in which Caillois was involved, appeared. *Inquisitions* was not a success, and when it folded, Caillois collaborated on *Acéphale*. Bataille also founded a secret society called 'Acéphale', but Caillois had no connection with this. Caillois had earlier had the idea of an 'Union des Intellectuels Révolutionnaires', whose manifesto was entitled 'Contre-Attaque'. The idea was to organise intellectuals in the fight against fascism. In October 1935, however, he moved away from this group, believing that Bataille and others involved (including Breton), were giving the undertaking too political a flavour. Caillois's revolutionary urges (important to remember in considering *Le Vent d'hiver*) never had an overtly political bias.

Caillois's and Bataille's interests did not entirely overlap, as is evident in, for example, Jean Wahl's comparison of their two journals, quoted by Denis Hollier, 'Caillois cherche la rigueur, Bataille fait appel au cœur, à l'enthousiasme, à l'extase, à la terre, au feu, aux entrailles'.¹⁰ Allan Stoekl summarises as follows the differing approaches of the members of the Collège, sufficiently serious surely to have threatened the long-term survival of the enterprise, even if war had not broken out in September 1939:

Bataille's uncompromising commitment to an irrational sacred divided the members of the Collège. Leiris always kept his distance [...]. [He] objected also to what he perceived as Bataille's lack of rigor — which was in fact a deliberate straying from the principles of sociological method as laid down by

⁸ Gérard Fabre, 'Caillois et l'imaginaire du secret', in *Cahiers de l'imaginaire*, pp.73-86 (p.78).

⁹ Laserra, p.52.

¹⁰ Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p.22.

Durkheim and Mauss. Others, such as Jean Paulhan, objected to Bataille's emphasis on the "negative" (lefthand) elements of the sacred. Finally, for Caillois, the sacred implied hierarchy and an elitist model of the secret society, whereas Bataille conceived of a tragic "headless" (acephalic) model of the social group, without a dictator or any other "righthand" principle of organization.¹¹

Bataille and Caillois, then, if familiar with each other's work, favoured quite different remedies to society's ills. Both of them held opinions that were unfashionable in the France of the late 1930s, finding dialectical materialism too limited and instincts a richer source of insight. Despite some differences of interpretation, they were agreed on the importance of the sacred for society's structure, and both desired to play an active role in its re-instatement in society. Seeking to re-activate the sacred that gave primitive societies their cohesion – as outlined by Durkheim in *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* – makes the Collège 'plus royaliste que le roi'.¹² This had never been Durkheim's intention.

Jean Paulhan offered the group a useful platform for their philosophy by inviting them to express their views in the July 1938 issue of the *NRF*. Three of the founder-members contributed articles, Caillois's being *Le Vent d'hiver*, in tone surely the most extreme of the three. Caillois also wrote an introduction (reprinted in *Approches de l'imaginaire*) explaining the objective of the group:

L'objet précis de l'activité envisagée peut recevoir le nom de *sociologie sacrée*, en tant qu'il implique l'étude de l'existence sociale dans toutes celles de ses manifestations où se fait jour la présence active du sacré. Elle se propose ainsi d'établir les points de coïncidence entre les tendances obsédantes fondamentales de la psychologie individuelle et les structures directrices qui président à l'organisation sociale et commandent ses révolutions. (*AI*, p.72)

Caillois's concept of a 'sociologie sacrée' is an interesting one. It implies at once a very definite agenda on his part and that of his collaborators. Their work will be strictly focused, as is very evident in *L'Homme et le Sacré*, for example.

¹¹ Allan Stoekl, '1937, March: The Avant-Garde embraces science', in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.934.

¹² Jean-François Fourny, 'Roger Caillois au Collège de sociologie: la politique et ses masques', *The French Review*, LVIII, 4 (1985), 533-39 (p.534).

The Collège was interested in setting up, for those committed to pursuing its objectives, ‘une communauté morale, en partie différente de celle qui unit d’ordinaire les savants et liée précisément au caractère virulent du domaine étudié et des déterminations qui s’y révèlent peu à peu’ (*AI*, p.72). The members were interested in a kind of spiritual power, to which their moral superiority entitled them. This ‘communauté morale’, this alternative society, was judged necessary by Caillois in view of the serious flaws in the post-industrial age.

Reading *Le Vent d’hiver* it is not possible to forget that ‘ces années furent celles de l’invective, de l’outrance verbale, telles que les surréalistes en avaient fait un art’.¹³ *Le Vent d’hiver* is not a direct political tract and cannot be considered as such. Its referents are literary, and despite its vehemence, it is rather abstract. Caillois, in a juvenile way, is trying to stir up reaction, judging anything to be better than apathy. It is important not to take him at his word. He refers to those dissatisfied with contemporary society as variously ‘réfractaires’ (*AI*, p.73), ‘disciples des grands individualistes du siècle passé’ (p.73), ‘l’intellectuel’ (p.74), ‘l’individualiste’ (p.75) and ‘l’écrivain’ (p.75). Caillois is essentially describing himself here, his own circumstances and attitudes, and putting forward a possible solution. These people are set to form a new élite. They are slow to come together, however, lest this involve any compromise of their ideals. Caillois is perhaps remembering here his experience with Surrealism. There is now a ‘crise de l’individualisme’ (p.74). Developments in sociology and, more especially, the massive political and social events rocking French society in the late thirties have made an ivory tower existence impossible. How to react to such circumstances without undue concessions? These people feel alienated from the values of mainstream society, ‘famille, Etat, nation, morale, religion, à quoi [l’individualiste] ajoute parfois la raison, la vérité et la science’ (p.75). All create ties for man and all carry, to some extent, traces of the sacred. This does not leave a lot that is meaningful and Caillois argues that the only recourse of this alienated elite is ‘la profanation, la destruction acharnée du sacré, seule activité capable de donner à l’anarchiste le sentiment d’une liberté effective’ (p.75). Even this destruction is illusory, though, and Caillois creates a sorry picture of, for instance, Sade in his prison cell, imagining all kinds of debauchery, or Stirner, an orderly civil servant, defending crime. Society breaks the individual, so these like-minded people should fight it on its

¹³ Alexandre Pajón, p.384.

own terms, 'en se constituant eux-mêmes en communauté, plus encore, en cessant de faire des valeurs qu'ils défendent l'apanage des rebelles et des insurgés, en les regardant à l'inverse comme les valeurs premières de la société qu'ils veulent voir s'instaurer et comme les plus sociales de toutes, fussent-elles quelque peu implacables' (p.76). Those who want to rebel in this way must be ready to accept discipline, and develop a 'luciférien' (p.76) outlook; a desire for power, with intelligence playing a major role. The 'individualiste' must change his attitude to power and the sacred, and in view of the way in which society has become profane, must seek to 'sacraliser' it (p.77). The earlier disgust for modern society that Caillois expressed in 'Pour une activité unitaire de l'esprit' (MH), and his calls for rigour and discipline in this piece should be remembered, and prepared the way for the sentiments of *Le Vent d'hiver*.

The community envisaged would be founded on 'des affinités électives capables de présider seules à l'agrégation en communauté et d'en constituer la raison nécessaire et suffisante en fournissant à chacun vis-à-vis des êtres une double série d'expériences complémentaires d'attractions et de répulsions' (p.77). The relationship envisaged here sounds much like that inspired by the sacred. There would be two classes of people, the élite and those from whom 'on est invinciblement conduit à s'écarter comme d'une étrangeté nocive' (p.78). The right sort of people are self-affirming, they behave 'comme il semble qu'on se conduit soi-même dans les meilleurs moments et comme précisément on désirait qu'ils se conduisissent' (p.78). Caillois, it should be noted, seems effortlessly to be one of the chosen few. There are 'ses *semblables* et les autres' (the italics are Caillois's, p.78). He cannot establish the superiority of the élite without thoroughly debasing 'outsiders'. Outside the circle of this élite group lives 'la multitude des misérables avec qui rien n'est commun, à l'égard de qui il est juste et fondé d'éprouver du mépris et dont on s'éloigne d'instinct comme de choses impures' (p.78). A tone of lofty condescension is adopted towards the 'misérables', 'aucun n'est responsable de la place qu'il occupe dans cette hiérarchie des qualités d'âme: le défaillant n'est pas condamné par jugement, mais tenu à l'écart par mesure sanitaire, pour la sauvegarde d'une intégrité' (p.78). Caillois then goes on to write, 'une société comme un organisme doit savoir éliminer ses déchets' (p.78). Caillois cannot have been unaware of his shocking inhumanity here, and such assertions make it easy to understand the misconceptions created by this work.

Models of such societies can be found among the individualists of past centuries, Balzac, Baudelaire, Ignatius Loyola. In 'Pour une activité...', Caillois also referred to Baudelaire and his 'force d'attraction' (*MH*, p.180). There are no overtly political statements in *Le Vent d'hiver*, and I have referred to the predominantly literary nature of Caillois's referents. The most effective group would be 'une association militante et fermée tenant de l'ordre monastique pour l'état d'esprit, de la formation paramilitaire pour la discipline, de la société secrète, au besoin, pour les modes d'existence et d'action' (p.79). It will be remembered that in 'Pour une activité...' Caillois had called for an 'orthodoxie militante', and had written of 'la déclaration des hostilités' and 'les buts de guerre' (p.183). This is an overtly hostile situation. Caillois has obviously been extremely impressed by Nietzsche, and characterises the relationship between the élite and the 'misérables' as a Master/Slave one. He does update the terminology to 'producer' and 'consumer', but the 'us/them' concept he borrowed from Nietzsche (and beyond him from Hegel) remains. An unflattering portrait is painted of consumers, 'un type d'hommes tournés vers la jouissance, improductifs par eux-mêmes, digérant seulement, parasites d'autrui, ne jugeant qu'en deçà du principe de l'agréable, incapables de générosité' (p.80). It is much better to be a producer, creative, trend-setting, leader of the flock, knowing he enjoys an 'imprescriptible supériorité que les consommateurs eux-mêmes, triomphants et repus, n'arrivent pas à bannir de leur propre conscience, sachant trop qu'en eux ne réside aucun principe actif, efficace et fécond' (p.80).

Caillois's definition of morality is not a traditional one. For him, it is based on honesty, contempt of lesser beings, desire for power and, surprisingly, politeness. Politeness, for Caillois, is not a virtue that seeks to make the common lot more bearable, but rather another way of distancing oneself from people judged to be inferior to oneself. The 'common good' finds little room here. This idea of morality is centred round ways of differentiating oneself from lesser beings. Even if it is not someone's fault that he is contemptible, 'il ne doit pas être moins méprisé' (p.82). The lines must be drawn very clearly, the divide maintained. Power is good, and wanting it should be guilt-free, 'il est sain de désirer le pouvoir, que ce soit sur les âmes ou les corps, prestige ou tyrannie' (p.82). The kind of power envisaged is a very absolute one, with no pretensions towards democracy. Caillois slips in 'tyrannie', with no

comment. But then consumers could not think for themselves, so this is the only possible arrangement.

Caillois ends on a threatening note, especially if you are a ‘consumer’:

Le temps n’est plus à la clémence. Il s’élève présentement dans le monde un grand vent de subversion, un vent froid, rigoureux, arctique, de ces vents meurtriers et si salubres, qui tuent les délicats, les malades et les oiseaux, *qui ne les laissent pas passer l’hiver*. Il se fait alors dans la nature un nettoyage muet, lent, sans recours, comme une marée de mort montant insensiblement. (AI, pp.83-84, Caillois’s italics.)

There has been too much suffering wrought by ‘ethnic cleansing’ for a contemporary reader to confront these lines without experiencing some horror at the sentiments expressed. Lindenberg writes of *Le Vent d’hiver* that ‘effectivement, relu un demi-siècle après, [il donne] froid dans le dos’.¹⁴ This is true, but should not be an excuse for abandoning a properly detached analytical approach to the work.

The outlook is not good for ‘cette société démantelée, sénile, à demi croulante’ (p.84). Those failing the ‘sélection vraiment rasante’ (p.84), ‘se contractent, se recroquevillent, se blottissent dans les trous’ (p.84). Caillois is disturbingly lyrical here. These very vivid images bring to mind, for instance, many Holocaust scenes captured on film. Nothing can now deter ‘les plus aptes’ (p.84):

nul encombrement des chemins pour gêner leur marche, nul gazouillis mélodieux et innombrable pour couvrir leur voix. Qu’ils se comptent et se reconnaissent dans l’air raréfié, que l’hiver les quitte unis, compacts, au coude à coude, avec la conscience de leur force, et le nouveau printemps consacra leur destin. (AI, p.84)

The style of *Le Vent d’hiver* is cold, controlled and classical, with an underlying tension that conveys a great deal of hatred and contempt. What is the reader to make of this text, which seems at times so shocking and repellent? It is not surprising that the *NRF*, in which it first appeared, was accused of becoming fascist, based on the tone of Caillois’s piece. In ‘La Hiérarchie des êtres’, written in 1939, Caillois wrote, surely with feeling, of the ease with which the adjective ‘fascist’ was used: ‘ceux qui

¹⁴ Daniel Lindenberg, *Les Années souterraines 1937-1947* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990), p.62.

se sont prononcés contre le fait ou les idéaux des fascismes appliquent indistinctement par une logique toute effective, le mot fasciste à tout ce qui, en quelque manière, offense leur sensibilité'.¹⁵ He himself did not escape this label in certain quarters. While it cannot properly be called a fascist work, it must nonetheless be acknowledged that *Le Vent d'hiver* is an extremely unattractive and ungenerous one.

It is interesting to survey a range of critical opinions, as Caillois's critics are not unanimous in their verdict on this work. Laserra sees in the Collège generally 'uno dei più grossi tentativi antifascisti della storia del Novecento [...]. Impresa forse anti-storica [...] nella quale bisognerà una volta per tutte riconoscere un'esperienza-limite: quella della messa in gioco del linguaggio al fine di una desemantizzazione e risemantizzazione ideologica'.¹⁶ It cannot be proven conclusively, though, that this was Caillois's intention with *Le Vent d'hiver*. His later, rather embarrassed references to this period would, as we shall shortly see, seem to disprove this possible exculpation.

Daniel Lindenberg argues that any attempt to situate the Collège ideologically must bring out that it belongs to 'une "nouvelle droite" en formation'¹⁷ and that 'ses références, en dehors de Mauss, Durkheim ou Bergson qui appartiennent à l'héritage [...] de la république des professeurs, sont Montherlant, A. de Châteaubriant, et surtout Georges Dumézil [...]. Autant dire que le Collège appartient de plein droit au courant culturel à la fois réactionnaire et germanophile qui ne cesse d'enfler depuis 1930'.¹⁸ Lindenberg proceeds, however, by examining a series of quotations, all cut off from their wider context, and this undermines his case. A deeper consideration of Caillois's work shows that such an accusation cannot be justified.

Jean-François Fourny's opinions are similar to Lindenberg's and he is a harsh critic of Caillois on this point, 'les choix politiques du "collège de sociologie sacrée" ne sont guère différents de ceux de l'extrême-droite française de l'époque'.¹⁹ He accuses the members of the Collège of cloaking their political choices as 'sociologie sacrée'.²⁰

¹⁵ Republished in *Naissance de Lucifer* (Montpekkier: Fata Morgana, 1992), pp.71-88 (p.71).

¹⁶ Laserra, pp.66-67.

¹⁷ Lindenberg, p.78.

¹⁸ Lindenberg, p.79.

¹⁹ Fourny, p.534.

²⁰ Fourny, p.534.

Felgine, of all Caillois's critics, perhaps best understands the different and opposing influences operating in Caillois at this time, although she does admit that he is not completely free from blame, 'dans certains exposés du Collège ou certains articles, Caillois manipule des idées dangereuses sans se rendre compte de leur potentiel de nocivité, et emploie PARFOIS une rhétorique qui peut prêter à confusion et amener ses lecteurs pressés à des conclusions erronées'.²¹ Capitalising 'parfois' suggests a certain exasperation at having to re-visit this point, to explain away Caillois yet again on this matter. Felgine's attempt at damage-limitation is only partially successful. It is hard to believe Caillois was so completely unaware of what he was doing. Felgine's defence of lack of awareness crumbles somewhat when she goes on to write, 'on est certainement en droit de lui reprocher de n'avoir ni maîtrisé sa fougue nietzschéenne ni mesuré l'ambivalence (ou les conséquences de l'ambiguïté voulue) de certains de ses écrits, que lui-même a reconnue'.²² In a general way, if Caillois's statements were interpreted literally – and not just those in this work – they would be open to misunderstanding. Felgine is very perceptive in pointing out that his position combines many opposing viewpoints:

Anticlérical, athée, – quoique captivé par le sacré –, antimarxiste (c'est-à-dire opposé à la sociologie de Marx) – quoique sympathisant communiste –, révolutionnaire, à la recherche d'une méthode pour appréhender le monde, Caillois est oligarque, luciférien, il accorde à l'intellectuel une mission capitale.²³

Felgine summarises here the contradictions that make Caillois the complex thinker he was. While it does not minimise the unattractiveness and possible harm of a text like *Le Vent d'hiver*, it seems likely that political innocence and ignorance lie behind the desire to shake up society expressed so trenchantly in his work. There is no evidence that Caillois entertained racist or anti-semitic views, for example. Pajón makes this point, 'les antisémites n'étaient-ils pas voués aux gémonies, eux auxquels tous les membres du Collège, en guise de signe de reconnaissance, s'étaient engagés à ne pas serrer la main? Le nietzschéisme à l'œuvre dans ce texte, aussi bien dans la forme que

²¹ Felgine, p. 156.

²² Felgine, p. 156.

²³ Felgine, p. 158.

dans le fond, était commun alors'.²⁴ In Pajón's view, as regards Caillois's adoption of Nietzsche's division of beings into Masters and Slaves, 'le débat est tout autant esthétique que moral et politique'.²⁵ Indeed there is no significant political debate in *Le Vent d'hiver*. It is a text of youth, revealing high standards which go some way to explaining his deep disappointment. Caillois is striking poses inspired by his readings, as much perhaps to protect his own vulnerability as to attack others. There is certainly a reactionary element, but not for the usual reasons:

La sacralisation de la vie sociale, qui est l'objectif de la sociologie active du Collège, implique la restauration de différences hiérarchiques. Et Caillois, au cours des années trente et quarante, a dénoncé régulièrement l'égalitarisme généralisé des démocraties, contre lequel il réaffirme la hiérarchie des êtres, la division des individus en maîtres et en esclaves.²⁶

It is an ontological hierarchy, according to Hollier, rather than a social one, a moral rather than an economic division, 'dans ce tableau, il n'y a aucune raison de plaindre l'esclave'.²⁷ That is if you assume that, addicted to pleasure, he has no higher aspirations. It may be that the division is not along traditional social or economic lines, but it is intended nonetheless to be exclusive and cutting.

Caillois himself in 'Paradoxe d'une sociologie active' (*AI*, pp.57-60) refers to 'le ton outrecuidant et faussement pathétique de certains passages des études qui suivent et où, quelque envie que j'en eusse, je n'ai pas cru devoir faire de coupures' (p.59). Caillois had the honesty not to try and show himself in a better light by changing this text (he did after all change a text in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* in the light of events). In this essay he refers to 'Etres de crépuscule' (*RS*, pp.159-76), and he says of it, 'j'avoue la défaite intime qui fut alors la mienne. C'est exprès qu'elle conclut *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*, dont l'écriture comme la pensée mettent fin pour moi à de juvéniles et arrogantes chimères' (p.60). It has to be said that the tone of 'Etres de crépuscule' is not devoid of self-pity and some complacency, for example:

nous étions trop faibles, trop amoureux de choses très vieilles et très frêles, auxquelles nous tenions plus qu'il ne nous semblait: la beauté, la vérité, la justice, toute délicatesse. Nous n'avons pas su en faire le sacrifice. Et quand

²⁴ Pajón, p.384.

²⁵ Pajón, p.386.

²⁶ Denis Hollier, 'Mimétisme et castration 1937' in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.71-89 (pp.74-75).

²⁷ Hollier, pp.75-76.

nous avons compris que c'était celui-là justement qu'il fallait consentir, nous avons reculé et nous nous sommes retrouvés à notre place, de l'autre côté, dans ce monde ancien et gâté, qui a fait son temps et qu'il est l'heure de liquider.
(RS, pp.175-76)

Caillois is still casting himself here in a noble, now tragic role. This is no apology, and Caillois himself in his 'Notes pour un itinéraire de Roger Caillois' calls it 'un acte de contrition ambigu, qui était inspiré par le regret beaucoup plus que par le remords.'²⁸

To track the evolution in Caillois's thought, it is interesting to compare *Le Vent d'hiver* with *Esprit des sectes*.²⁹ Both the tone and the views expressed are different.

Felgine writes that at the time of his journey to Argentina Caillois was still:

Un réfractaire imbu de son savoir et trop habitué aux certitudes, aux exclusions et aux élans intellectuels parfois inconscients.
De son propre aveu, ce séjour argentin, auprès d'une libérale farouche, ennemie sans faille des totalitarismes, va véritablement transformer Roger Caillois. Plus que d'une évolution, il s'agira d'un virage, le virage américain, où seront levés bien des équivoques et prouvée la profonde répulsion qui lui inspirent fascisme et nazisme.³⁰

While *Le Vent d'hiver* reads like a propagandist piece for a sect, in *Esprit des sectes* Caillois seeks to analyse why sects are formed, their dynamics and ultimate objective. The extreme cohesiveness of sects must of course have been an attraction and a temptation for Caillois, seeking wholeness in so many diverse ways. A certain type of person, 'des natures entières, anxieuses de s'engager sans réserve ni retour, avides à la fois de sacrifice et de puissance' (pp.69-70), will always react against 'un monde qui éparpille ses ressources en une agitation privée d'efficace' (p.69). Caillois was such a person at one point, seeking an outlet for his *soif d'absolu*. Sects are characterised by solidarity, discipline and obedience. Everything is sacrificed to the cohesion of such groups, unlike in the broader society, where dishonesty and expediency reign. A sect is in itself a whole. As befits an analysis, his tone here is dispassionate. He recalls his own period of fascination with closed groups, his period of involvement with the Collège de Sociologie, 'on était passionné par la décision des hommes qui de temps en temps, au cours de l'histoire, semblent vouloir donner des lois fermes à la société sans

²⁸ CPT, p.175. The 'libérale farouche' in question is Victoria Ocampo.

²⁹ Reprinted in *Instincts et Société*, pp.246-60.

³⁰ Felgine, p.195.

discipline qui ne sut pas contenter leur désir de rigueur. On suivait avec sympathie les démarches de ceux qui, s'écartant d'elle avec dégoût, allaient vivre ailleurs sous des institutions plus rudes' (p.66). It all seems now so impersonal and remote.

He still writes with feeling though on the defects of society, 'l'imposture installée au faite des honneurs, la complaisance tenue pour mérite, et l'hypocrisie regardée comme excuse au mal plutôt que comme un masque qui l'avilit encore, voilà plus qu'il n'en faut pour lui présenter le spectacle d'un scandale intolérable et pourtant incessant' (p.92). These are the faults that drive some to the excesses of sects. Caillois's own aspirations, perhaps not quite dead yet, surely come through in the following line, 'mais qui n'a rêvé d'abord d'une règle inflexible? On se prend à concevoir un climat rude et sain, dont l'air pur est mortel à tout germe corrupteur' (pp.92-93). Unlike in *Le Vent d'hiver*, however, there is no sign of approbation for the formation of élite groups. The moral view based on contempt of those outside such formations is gone too, 'leur moralité sévère ne vaut que pour eux-mêmes' (p.89). This is a more mature stance on severity, finally taking into account the rights of others. Once in power, Caillois points out now, the sect deprives the individual of his rights. He acknowledges the dissatisfaction 'bons esprits' (p.63) feel with the world (it has after all been his position), and their attraction to secret societies. Their dreams of dominance, however, now appal him. But he does devote considerably more space to the condemnation of a weak and corrupt society than to an attack on the dominant mentality of sects.

Le Vent d'hiver calls for the re-instatement of the sacred in society, as the only way of stemming its increasingly profane and fragmented nature. In *L'Homme et le Sacré*, Caillois, by portraying the functioning of primitive societies in which the sacred is the central, cohesive factor, continues making his case for the sacred, albeit more indirectly and impersonally. The societies portrayed are a good deal more attractive than the divided, divisive one contemplated in *Le Vent d'hiver*; co-operation is the important principle, not dominance. Caillois's search is still for wholeness:

Si je résume les "inactualités" du grand essayiste des années 30, 40 et 60, je dirais qu'il s'agit non plus d'un humanisme mais d'une gnose cosmique de l'*Unus Mundus*, sous-tendue par une rigoureuse méthode "diagonale" extrayant la quintessence de tous les savoirs régionaux, revalorisant le sacré et

sa narration (le mythe) c'est à dire plaçant les "approches" (c'est un titre de Caillois!) de l'imaginaire au point focal tant rêvé par les surréalistes, point focal qui n'existe que par les intersections de lignes diverses et contradictoires.³¹

Caillois's yearning for an *unus mundus*, a cohesive, structured society, is satisfied by going far back in time, 'jamais le bond hors du cercle de la pensée chrétienne n'a été plus facilement accomplie'.³² Post-industrial society is deeply flawed, as Caillois sees it. Rapid changes have created a fragmented outlook and lifestyle. People no longer think as a group, and do not consider the consequences of their actions. They see themselves as isolated. Society, in this condition, needs something to hold it together, a strong, unifying principle – for Caillois, the sacred. The societies he depicts in *L'Homme et le Sacré* are preternaturally ordered and cohesive, with the sacred acting as the 'glue' that holds them together. No other factors are considered, which is surely a distortion. This is a failing (deliberate of course on Caillois's part) to which Panoff rightly draws attention. For Caillois, 'que [la chose sociale] soit pétrie par des forces antagonistes, qu'elle soit animée par des luttes, il n'en a cure. Pour lui, les classes sociales, les factions, les cliques, les mouvements messianiques ou les aléas démographiques n'existent pas'.³³

In this work Caillois depends primarily on the French School of Sociology for the material he uses to illustrate his point. In the *avant-propos*, he acknowledges his indebtedness to these scholars, allowing 'tout ce que doit cet ouvrage aux recherches et aux synthèses qui ont illustré les noms de Durkheim, de Hubert et de Hertz, comme à celles que MM. Mauss, Granet, et Dumézil continuent à mener à bien' (p.13). Caillois here is both acknowledging a debt and establishing his credibility. He confesses the book's preoccupation with *ordo rerum* stems from Mauss's work. Panoff is critical of this aspect of Caillois's writing. For him, *L'Homme et le Sacré* is a typical example of the 'sociologie primitive' of the time, 'avec l'utilisation intensive des observations ethnographiques alors disponibles, observations souvent vieilles déjà, comme il était de règle pour cette littérature de seconde ou troisième main'.³⁴ It should certainly be borne in mind that in synthesising the research of these

³¹ Durand, p.17.

³² André Chastel, p.35.

³³ Panoff, p.69.

³⁴ Panoff, pp.65-66.

sociologists, a vast undertaking, Caillois will inevitably select and distort – leaving out, for instance, as I have already mentioned, the existence of any other unifying factor than the sacred. The work of these sociologists is included in a bibliography at the end of the book, rather than being specifically referred to throughout it.

Caillois's intentions in *L'Homme et le Sacré* are both revolutionary and scholarly, the book stems from 'le besoin de restituer à la société un sacré actif, indiscuté, impérieux, dévorant avec le goût d'interpréter froidement, correctement, scientifiquement ce que nous appelions les ressorts profonds de l'existence collective' (preface to the third edition of *L'Homme et le Sacré*, pages unnumbered). At the time of writing *L'Homme et le Sacré*, he believed, with the writer's absolute belief in the word, that presenting such a scholarly study could effect a far-reaching change in society: 'j'imaginai pouvoir transformer un ardent savoir en un levier tout-puissant en son propre domaine' (preface, third edition). Promoting the 'sacré actif' or 'activiste' might lead to some kind of a chemical reaction, 'c'est à la chimie que nous nous référons et au caractère soudain, fusant, irrésistible de certaines réactions' (preface). Rudolph Otto, a noted author on the sacred, approaches the topic from a quite different perspective. He is more favorable to Christianity, and credits feeling and intuition with much importance. His is a personal experience of the sacred, so much so that early on in his book devoted to this topic he writes:

Nous invitons le lecteur à fixer son attention sur un moment où il a ressenti une émotion religieuse profonde et, autant qu'il est possible, exclusivement religieuse. S'il en est capable ou s'il ne connaît même pas de tels moments, nous le prions d'arrêter ici sa lecture. [...] Avec un tel homme, il est difficile de traiter de la religion.³⁵

Such a man might consider religion to be 'une fonction des instincts sociaux et une valeur sociale'.³⁶ The role of the sacred in creating an orderly society is certainly Caillois's perspective. Mircea Eliade's *Le Sacré et le Profane*³⁷ must also come to mind here. Its bibliography lists Caillois's work on myths and the sacred (as well as Otto's), although Eliade's approach is quite different to that of Caillois. Unlike Caillois, throughout his book he scrupulously provides, in footnote form, references to

³⁵ Rudolph Otto, *Le Sacré*, trans. by André Jundt, 3rd edn (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1995), p.22.

³⁶ Otto, p.22.

³⁷ *Le Sacré et le Profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

works dealing with the various issues he raises. This will be appreciated by his more scholarly reader and the general reader will not find the flow of the book constantly interrupted by academic references. Eliade has no desire to return to the kind of society he describes and he states explicitly in his *avant-propos*, ‘cette disposition d’ouverture accueillante risque de passer pour l’expression d’une nostalgie secrète pour la condition même de l’*homo religiosus* archaïque, ce qui était étranger à l’auteur’.³⁸ Eliade’s interest is to show the way in which a believer experiences the cosmos:

Comment l’homme religieux s’efforce-t-il de se maintenir le plus de temps possible dans un univers sacré; comment se présente son expérience totale de la vie par rapport à l’expérience de l’homme privé de sentiment religieux [...]: tel est le thème qui dominera les pages suivantes.³⁹

Eliade’s ‘diagonal’ approach to his subject is worth mentioning. He is not just writing as an historian of religions. He recognises that the behaviour of *homo religiosus* is part of general human behaviour, and that therefore it will be relevant to consult the fields of philosophical anthropology, phenomenology and psychology.

L’Homme et le Sacré concentrates on demonstrating the syntax of the sacred. For Caillois, the sacred is best understood in opposition to the profane. The sacred and the profane hold the key to the functioning of society, ‘l’un comme le milieu où [la vie] se déploie, l’autre comme la source inépuisable qui la crée, qui la maintient, qui la renouvelle’ (p.20). The general reader must take it on trust that society was as he describes. Religious life amounts to ‘la somme des rapports de l’homme et du sacré’ (p.18). The regulation of this relationship, the rigid system of ‘prestations’, is at the basis of the organisation of the societies Caillois describes. Order and balance being the desired objectives, the ancestors of the primitive societies depicted by Caillois devised a network of rites and taboos aimed at preserving stability, ‘ils ont déterminé une fois pour toutes les rapports des êtres et des choses, des hommes et des dieux. Ils ont tracé les parts du sacré et du profane, défini les limites du permis et du défendu’ (p.24). Such a system would reduce the anxiety and uncertainty often associated with life and one’s role in it.

³⁸ Eliade, p.10.

Caillois's work on the 'sacré de respect' and the 'sacré de transgression' highlight this point especially. In studying the 'sacré de respect' Caillois demonstrates 'à quoi correspond dans la société la distinction de ces deux domaines complémentaires et antithétiques que constituent le monde du sacré et le monde du profane' (p.73). The 'sacré de respect' is linked with the regulation of society, the 'sacré de transgression' with its renewal, via festivals. Of the distinction between these two forms of the sacred, Gilbert Durand writes that it is a 'distinction qui suit la fameuse opposition bergsonienne entre le "clos" et "l'ouvert" mais ici sans hiérarchie valorisante. Le "sacré de cohésion" est bien la "clôture" bergsonienne, le respect du rite, de l'institution, de la "lettre", mais ici sa permanence est positive: elle garantit la stabilité du profane, elle modélise une socialité non sacrale. Tout aussi indispensable est le "sacré de dissolution", la tentation de l'abîme chère à Leiris, à Bataille et à bien des mystiques'.⁴⁰ Caillois only refers to the conflict created by these opposing forces towards the end of *L'Homme et le Sacré*, when he writes about Saint Teresa of Avila, the Spanish mystic, whose work documents her intense longing for union with the divine. I shall be returning to this point, but it is interesting that Caillois should have been familiar with her work, and should have included it quite unexpectedly here. The 'mystic materialism' he would later develop is a secular equivalent of Saint Teresa's spiritual mysticism.

In the section entitled 'Sacré de respect: théorie des interdits', Caillois examines phratries and a society ruled by a prince. World order is maintained when the balance is kept between the two groups, and taboos help guarantee this balance. In totemic societies, tribes tend to be divided into phratries, which constitute the basic social unit. It is a bi-partite division, and a series of taboos determine what is sacred and what profane:

chaque moitié de la société correspond à l'une des deux séries complémentaires dont l'union permet et maintient l'existence de l'univers organisé. Elle doit veiller à la conservation et à l'intégrité de la série qu'elle représente et la tenir toujours à la disposition de la fraction sociale où l'autre est incarnée et qui, pour cette raison, a besoin pour subsister du concours de la première. (HS, p.89)

³⁹ Eliade, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁰ Durand, pp. 15-16.

This inter-dependency is complete, and ensures co-operation. World order is linked directly to the sacred and the profane, ‘tout ce qui appartient à une phratrie est *sacré et réservé* pour ses membres, *profane et libre* pour les membres de l’autre [...]’. Le sacré se trouve donc lié de la façon la plus étroite à l’ordre du monde: il en est l’expression immédiate et la conséquence directe’ (p.91). The two phratries stand in opposition to each other, as do the sacred and the profane, and need each other to function. It is truly a ‘*système des prestations sociales*’ (p.91): ‘à charge de réciprocité chacun fournit à l’autre les vivres nécessaires à sa subsistance, les femmes nécessaires à sa reproduction, les victimes humaines nécessaires à ses sacrifices, les services cérémoniels ou funéraires nécessaires à son bon fonctionnement et qu’elle ne pourrait assumer elle-même sans souillure ou sans danger’ (p.91). This solidarity makes tribal unity even more apparent. It is interesting to contrast this mutual support with the kind of self-interest Caillois saw as so typical of those living in modern democracies. Strength is drawn from the union of the two phratries. The unity and order of such a society, as presented by Caillois, is striking and is certainly in sharp contrast to modern society where, as I shall be discussing, Caillois acknowledges the sharp decline in the role of the sacred.

It is scarcely surprising that such an extraordinarily regulated society needs periodically to be shaken up. Such stasis could eventually be deadly for society and this leads Caillois to his consideration of the ‘sacré de transgression’ and the rejuvenating role of festivals, ‘on a besoin qu’un simulacre de création remette à neuf la nature et la société. C’est à quoi pourvoit la fête’ (p.119). Festivals stand in stark contrast to the cautious, orderly unfolding of everyday life. In modern times they have become much diminished but in primitive societies they still enjoyed all their glorious excess, were a ‘paroxysme de vie’ (p.125). As compliance with the rules will not renew society, certain ‘sacred’ times are allocated for defying the taboo system, ‘la fête [...] assume la fonction de régénérer le monde réel’ (p.137). Festivals recreate the time of chaos, of creativity and licence, before order and taboos were fixed. They represent ‘la durée de la suspension de l’ordre du monde’ (p.145). The various sacrileges – eating the totem animal, violating the laws of exogamy – are in themselves as sacred as the taboos they violate.

Caillois sums up the world vision behind primitive societies as he sees it. The sacred embodies respect/stability and transgression/renewal, 's'il fallait mettre en formules abstraites la conception du monde que semble suggérer la polarité du sacré, son rôle alternativement inhibant et stimulant, il faudrait décrire l'univers (et tout dans l'univers) comme la composition de résistances et d'efforts' (p.166).

Caillois traces briefly the evolution of the sacred over time. With the development of society, a more hierarchical system came into place where superiority, rather than balance, became the driving motivation. He devotes little time in *L'Homme et le Sacré* to modern times, as the religious conception of the world with which he is concerned no longer dominates. Considering that his objective was to restore the sacred to the current age, it is strange he in no way attempted to show it might still have a place. In fact he convincingly argues the opposite. Society can no longer tolerate phases of 'atonie et de paroxysme' (p.169). Life has become increasingly uniform, the importance of the sacred has receded. Religion is now a personal matter. The sacred has become 'abstrait, intérieur, subjectif, s'attachant moins à la manifestation extérieure qu'aux dispositions spirituelles' (pp.172-73). People have become more independent intellectually and morally, and science, the enemy of mystery, is becoming ever more important. In these conditions, the sacred has 'invaded' ethics, making absolute goods of honesty, for example, or justice. The sacred is still however 'ce qui provoque respect, crainte et confiance' (p.194). It is still what takes man away from petty, everyday concerns, whatever its form. But its strong, over-riding role as a regulatory principle no longer holds. The reader must conclude for himself whether this is a positive or a negative development. Georges Bataille, in a review of the 1950 edition of *L'Homme et le Sacré*, expresses some reservations about Caillois's views on the sacred in the modern world. The examples Caillois chooses may be in some aspects comparable to the sacred, but they are not *tremendum* and *fascinans*, 'le sacré veut la violation de ce qui est d'ordinaire objet d'un respect terrifié. Son domaine est celui de la destruction et de la mort'.⁴¹ Bataille will not allow any lessening of the prestige of the sacred.

⁴¹ Georges Bataille, 'La guerre et la philosophie du sacré', *Œuvres Complètes*, vol.12 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp.47-57 (p.52).

Caillois's study of the bi-partite nature of the structure of the sacred (Otto's *tremendum* and *fascinans*) leads him to see parallels between this and cosmic structure, 'il n'est rien qui, dans l'univers, ne soit susceptible de former une opposition bipartite et qui ne puisse alors symboliser les différentes manifestations couplées et antagonistes du pur et de l'impur' (p.49). Analysis of the nature of the sacred leads him to a deeper understanding of the cosmos itself, and an awareness of the patterns and similarities that indicate the wholeness of the universe. Society functions thanks to the opposition between the sacred and the profane, they are 'groupes ou [...] principes également complémentaires et antithétiques dont l'opposition et la collaboration (la *concordia discors*) permet le fonctionnement même du groupe social' (pp.73-74). Caillois emphasises the importance of the bi-partite perception and understanding of the world in the human mind. Durkheim and Mauss, he points out, had long advanced the notion that the Heaven/Earth grouping is the root one, corresponding to all the others (male/female, light/darkness, prince/people etc.). The opposing principles may change, the bi-partite vision remains a constant:

il faut retenir de cette analyse que l'ordre des choses et des hommes est fréquemment caractérisé par la composition de deux principes, de nature, à la fois et en proportion variable, sociale, sexuelle et cosmique. Il convient donc de se représenter les emblèmes totémiques des phratries et, par dérivation, des clans, comme des *signatures*, manifestant des vertus mystiques dont la rivalité et la collaboration conservent le monde et entretiennent la société: dès lors le fonctionnement des phratries prend tout son sens, de même que les divers interdits totémiques [...]. (HS, pp.88-89)

Towards the end of *L'Homme et le Sacré* Caillois takes the topic on to a metaphysical level. It is a sudden breaking away from a more neutral discussion of the cohesion of primitive societies. Here his own concerns, and his own dilemma – all or nothing – break through.

The opposition of the sacred and the profane mirrors the structure of the universe, Caillois argues, pointing to opposing pairs such as inertia and movement, matter and energy. The solidarity between these contrasting pairs is the important thing, 'à travers la diversité des représentations, la continuité du monde semble alors résulter de la combinaison d'un pôle de l'effort qu'on ne peut jamais isoler parfaitement. Impossible de durer sans usure, sans déperdition; impossible de s'immobiliser dans son être. [...] Impossible non plus de n'être que métamorphose, pure dépense, totale activité'

(p.176). Parallels of such solidarity between opposing pairs can be found in biology, chemistry and physics, 'il est remarquable dans ces conditions qu'on puisse l'utiliser comme une véritable clé pour la compréhension des principaux problèmes concernant la statique et la dynamique du sacré, tels qu'ils ont été formulés et examinés au cours de cet ouvrage' (p.176). This diagonal approach is a reminder of how at this time Caillois was looking for that key to the universe.

Caillois explores the terrible dilemma facing everyone, the pointless conservation of energy or the loss of self: 'tout ce qui ne se consume pas, pourrit. Aussi la vérité permanente du sacré réside-t-elle simultanément dans la fascination du brasier et l'horreur de la pourriture' (p.178). The profane is the search for the 'juste milieu' (p.179), settling for the 'médiocrité dorée qui manifeste la conciliation précaire des deux forces antithétiques qui n'assurent la durée de l'univers qu'en se neutralisant réciproquement' (p.177). Outside this 'bonace' (p.177) lies the domain of the sacred, 'l'homme est alors abandonné à l'une seulement des composantes tyranniques dont toute vie implique l'action concertée, c'est dire que d'ores et déjà, il a consenti à sa perte, qu'il emprunte la voie théopathique du renoncement ou la voie théurgique de la conquête' (p.177). It is not easy to get close to the sacred, and Caillois refers to the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, to illustrate his point. She documents 'comment le contact du sacré institue un douloureux débat entre une espérance enivrante de s'abîmer définitivement dans une plénitude vide et cette sorte de pesanteur par quoi le profane alourdit tout mouvement vers le sacré et que Thérèse elle-même attribue à l'instinct de conservation' (p.177). The sacred may give life and take it away, but it cannot be possessed simultaneously with life, which is 'usure et déperdition' (p.178).

Caillois himself acknowledged that these final pages devoted to a 'metaphysics' of the sacred are inadequate, given the scope of the subject. In the preface to the third edition of the book, he simultaneously and very deftly tries to both criticise and praise himself on this score by referring to 'la fécondité de l'insuffisant'. Panoff has little good to say about this section:

[Ces pages] sont [...] l'écho des extravagances mitonnées au Collège de sociologie et elles mettent entre parenthèses l'histoire, tout bonnement, c'est-à-dire l'évolution qui a conduit l'homme moderne à interioriser le sacré. Au lieu de pétrissage historique et de dynamique sociale, Caillois nous offre une

psychologie assez courte et assez creuse qui évoque les tourments de Sainte Thérèse sans grande nécessité. Avec leurs métaphores un peu recherchées et leurs formules paradoxales, ces pages étonnent après toutes celles qui les précèdent et qui déployaient une interprétation positiviste dans l'habituel style de Mauss.⁴²

Caillois certainly changes his brief towards the end of the book, as he does in *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* which also ends with a metaphysical speculation. But, probing a little more deeply than Panoff, it is actually extremely relevant to an understanding of Caillois to consider his reference to the Spanish mystic. Her life's search was complete union with God – as impossible and all-embracing as Caillois's search for wholeness, oneness with, in his case, the cosmos. A form of mystic materialism would be Caillois's end-point, a concept I shall discuss when dealing with his writings on stones. That is his attempt to solve the dilemma occasioned by 'la fascination du brasier et l'horreur de la pourriture'.

Bataille's approach is, needless to say, quite different from that of Panoff's. In his review of *L'Homme et le Sacré*, he expressed some concern at seeing the domain of the sacred opened to sociological analysis, fearing the effects such objective treatment would have on man's perception of the sacred. He is therefore in favour of Caillois's metaphysical speculations, because they confer a personal relevance on the sacred. In these pages, Bataille writes, 'il [...] manifeste – implicitement – la conscience d'une valeur *pour nous* du sacré, qui excède la connaissance savante que nous en pouvons avoir. Il lui faut à la fin laisser entrevoir cette vérité fondamentale que l'homme a toujours à choisir entre deux voies'.⁴³

The window into Caillois's personal preoccupations, while perhaps breaking away from the academic, detached nature of the preceding pages, also deepens the reader's perspective on the topic of the sacred and provides an insight into what may be a more deeply felt motive for writing the book than the avowed one. A parallel may be drawn with Camus, who, at the end of *L'Homme révolté*, a serious historical study, lets his emotions show in 'Mediterranean lyricism'. *L'Homme et le Sacré* is more than an undoubtedly distorted account of primitive societies, picking and choosing from the

⁴² Panoff, p. 70.

⁴³ Bataille, p. 52.

work of the French Sociologists. It operates on a deeper level, showing us exactly how profound was Caillois's need for completeness.

Caillois's time in the Collège de Sociologie represents his last attempt to find a like-minded community. Clearly influenced by the political background of turmoil and disillusionment, Caillois's writings from this period can, as we have seen, betray a youthful extremism from which he would later distance himself (stopping short, though, of disowning any controversial text). The Collège de Sociologie may only have enjoyed a comparatively short existence, and not seen its aims implemented. But it was still a 'perhaps unique attempt to engage with an active scholarship, that would give such scholarship a collective form, and this is something that is not at all negligible'.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.57.

CHAPTER FOUR

CAILLOIS AND CIVILISATION: FROM INCLUSIVENESS TO EXCLUSIVENESS

If in earlier works we have seen Caillois seeking to explain the world around him, in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* and *Circonstanciellles*,¹ two ‘sister’ books, his efforts are now directed at defending civilisation. The disgust aroused in him by society and which he expressed in earlier books has given way now to a new feeling of solidarity. Caillois feels himself very strongly to be part of the wider group, the ‘whole’ that is civilisation. We have seen him before express solidarity with a small élite group, now his feeling of oneness extends to include everybody. His former exclusiveness has ceded to inclusiveness. This inclusiveness, as his reaction to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Race et Histoire* will show later in this chapter, loses something of its impressive nobility when it becomes apparent it does not extend beyond the Western world.

In *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* and *Circonstanciellles* Caillois recognises the need for all to work together in pursuit of the common good. World War Two made the future of society uncertain for a period and, while Caillois was writing at this time in South America, and was consequently far removed from the conflict, ‘je ne me trouvais pas neutre dans le conflit qui mettait aux prises à la fois tant de nations et tant de principes’ (preface to *Circonstanciellles*, p.9). Writing in his ‘Notes pour un itinéraire’, he describes the change that took place in him in South America:

Je sus qu’il n’y avait que mirages en tout ce que j’avais jusqu’alors inconsidérément encensé. Dans mes aspirations de la veille, je ne vis plus que caprices, ennui et dégoût coupables de milliardaire clandestin et nostalgie morbide d’un privilégié de la culture. De cette culture, j’avais souhaité me débarrasser comme d’un fardeau et d’un esclavage. Je la connaissais maintenant de conquête difficile et de nature précaire. En outre, je comprenais qu’il n’était rien en dehors d’elle qui justifîât l’aventure humaine. Même si par

¹ *Circonstanciellles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

désespoir ou par nihilisme, on en vient à la juger absurde, révoltante ou désastreuse, c'est à partir d'une idée de la raison, de la justice et du bonheur qui est issue d'elle, qui en fait partie, au même titre que toutes sortes de valeurs qui ne sont pas tombées du ciel, qu'un effort séculaire a tirées du néant et dont chacun doit s'estimer comptable devant l'espèce entière.²

This is a mature, stock-taking statement, finally free of the various poses Caillois had struck in previous writings. A capacity for humility and real courage comes through, as does a broader view of the human condition. Laserra charts this evolution, 'all'idea di una *virtus* intesa come *energia* succede l'idea di un *virtus* intesa come *eccellenza*'.³ This will have effects too on the tone and style of his writing.

Circonstanciellles, as its title suggests, is linked more directly to the political events of the time. *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* deals more indirectly with the same issues. Caillois would not deprive *Circonstanciellles* completely of any more transcendent value, 'je m'acharnais [...] à estimer la véritable valeur, s'il en était une, de la civilisation, de la liberté, de la justice [...]. C'est [cette angoisse], selon moi, qui [...] donne la valeur incertaine que [ces pages] peuvent garder' (p.13).

Gaëtan Picon emphasises the importance of the concept of continuity in Caillois's concept of civilisation:

les vertus de la civilisation actuelle ne sont pas des valeurs surgies du présent, mais des valeurs éternelles – la définition constante de la civilisation. C'est par cette notion de permanence que la pensée esthétique et la pensée historique se peuvent joindre. L'avenir ne sera pas une création inédite, elle-même inspirée de cette création inédite qu'est le présent, mais la restauration de valeurs éternelles [...]. Telle est la thèse centrale du *Rocher de Sisyphe*.⁴

This sense of unity with the past is conveyed even in the classical style of *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*.

Civilisation is not a 'given', and needs to be constantly recreated. Caillois's interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus is quite different from that of Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), where Sisyphus's task symbolised the futility of human existence. As far as Caillois is concerned, even the effort of pushing the boulder up

² *CPT*, p.168.

³ Laserra, p.73.

has merit, 'il n'y a pas de travail inutile: Sisyphe se faisait les muscles' (Caillois's epigraph to the book). Marie-Louise Audin links Caillois's vision of Sisyphus to other preferred role models of his, 'il se réalise [...] historiquement en Démosthène, en Yu Chen; mais il sera aussi le pâtre grec, le berger émigrant de Patagonie, le pilote de ligne. C'est-à-dire ces prédestinés qui répondent à un "appel", qui répondent à l'élan d'une volonté active de dépassement de soi, puisque "appel" au cours du texte s'actualise dans "pionniers" et "vocation"'.⁵ It is not surprising that Caillois should be interested in this type of essentially solitary pioneer and leader.

We have seen that Caillois's writings in 1938-39 'trahissent une fâcheuse propension à la *surchauffe*'.⁶ Caillois himself acknowledged that 'les nuances [...] ne sont pas mon fort'.⁷ This would be a problem for him for a long time when writing on topics close to his heart, as will be evident in his different texts dealing with poetry, for example. In correspondence with Jean Paulhan who reproached him for the 'bravade à vide' of *Le Vent d'hiver*, Caillois replied that the 'expression très forte' was to compensate for 'la faiblesse du fond'. The writing then was to accomplish some kind of 'prestidigitation'.⁸ Caillois had to make an effort to 'substituer à l'éloquence excessive de jadis, le laconisme épris de réserve et de justesse, usant de l'euphémisme (ou prétendant le faire) et de toutes les figures de la concision'.⁹ Caillois certainly does achieve major changes in style and tone, writing in a more neutral and more majestic vein. *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* contains no footnotes, no bibliography. Caillois does not draw from his extensive reading to offer his reader the countless erudite and unusual references that pepper his earlier work. Caillois's analytical inclination is no longer so apparent, his scope and tone are larger now. For André Chastel, 'certaines pages recueillies dans *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* font penser aux Lettres de Sénèque, aux discours de stoïciens français comme Guez de Balzac, voire à Pascal, à Montesquieu'.¹⁰ Chastel is broadly favourable, but not all of Caillois's critics would

⁴ Gaëtan Picon, 'Les essais de Roger Caillois', *Fontaine*, X, 54 (1946), 265-79 (p.276).

⁵ Marie-Louise Audin, 'Métamorphose d'un mythe de châtement en mythe initiatique: *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* de Roger Caillois', in *L'Initiation. L'Acquisition d'un savoir ou d'un pouvoir. Le lieu initiatique. Parodies et perspectives. Actes du Colloque International de Montpellier, 11-14 Avril 1991*, tome II, ed. by Alain Moreau (Montpellier: Publications de la recherche, 1992), pp. 87-100 (p.92).

⁶ Jean-Pierre Duso, 'Rhétorique de la surchauffe et rhétorique sévère: à la recherche du lieu commun', in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.175-194 (p.176).

⁷ From a letter to Jean Paulhan, quoted by Duso, p.175.

⁸ All references are from a letter to Paulhan, quoted by Duso, p.177.

⁹ Duso, p.177.

¹⁰ Chastel, p.39.

agree that the evolution in his style is entirely positive. Picking up on the many lofty generalities that run through *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*, Picon argues that '[Caillois] affirme, il répète inlassablement ses affirmations – mais il ne livre guère ses expériences ou ses motifs. *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* proclame la pérennité de l'homme, la permanence de la civilisation: il ne nous donne aucune arme précise pour écarter de nous les interprétations qu'il récuse'.¹¹ The book is a declaration of hope and trust, however, carrying with it the desire to secure the assent of the reader, to move him, as Caillois feels moved, by the contemplation of what now appears to Caillois too self-evident to require proof: the glory of civilisation.

To fight against this 'surchauffe', Caillois uses various techniques in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*. Firstly, a cultural distancing, focusing his attention on countries remote in time or space, Ancient Greece, Ancient China and Patagonia. He then employs various literary forms to distance himself further, be it an historical account or describing a journey. The distancing is not all it seems, however:

ces textes présentent un double fonctionnement articulant distance et effacement de cette distance. Le récit historique se dédouble en fable allégorique de l'actualité (les Démocraties contre Hitler); l'étude ethnographique du matériau légendaire de la Chine ancienne se recourbe en figure symbolique de la crise mondiale; le récit de voyage se hausse au plan du mythe et tente de répondre à la brûlante question portant sur la valeur de l'humanisme.¹²

Caillois, then, despite the new detached air and seeming distance, is closely involved with and cares deeply about what is happening in the world around him.

'Athènes devant Philippe' expresses eloquently Caillois's sense of disappointment at the failure of democratic régimes to react adequately and in a timely fashion to the threat posed by Hitler. An earlier, more optimistic ending was removed from the text by Caillois in the light of events and replaced by the current, darker ending. Philip of Macedonia here represents Hitler, Athens, the weak democracies. The cultural richness of Athens did not suffice to make it strong. It would be no match for the cunning of Philip. Caillois, in crisply contrasting sentences, deals well with Athens' dithering, 'Athènes se demandait toujours si elle ferait de Philippe son allié contre

¹¹ Picon, p.271.

Thèbes ou de Thèbes son alliée contre Philippe. Philippe cependant s'assurait l'alliance de Thèbes contre Athènes' (pp.37-38). It is an opportunity for Caillois to lay bare everything he finds so inferior in democracies. The paralysis of the Athenians, knowing their lack of action was fatal and yet unable to remedy this, is mercilessly exposed. All the synonyms for talking in the following sentence sum up their ineffectiveness: 'les Athéniens s'apercevaient qu'ils ne faisaient qu'attendre et discuter, bâtir des théories, proposer des hypothèses, et expliquer et étudier et commenter' (p.45). In *Circonstancielle*, in 'Défense de la République' and 'Le manque d'esprit civique cause de la défaite' (pp.17-24 and pp.27-34 respectively), for example, Caillois writes of the role of the indifference towards public morality shown by the French during critical points in the war. Caillois's depiction of the Athenians mirrors this flaw. Athens succumbed, a victim of its own civilisation. Caillois's vision is not wholly bleak, however. Something positive remained from the values that gave it its glory and brought about its ruin: the accomplishments of its artists. That glory, 'les ennemis de la Grèce ne peuvent la lui ravir et ne savent ni l'obtenir ni la convoiter pour eux-mêmes', p.62). It is interesting that Caillois endorses art here, having started his career with putting it on trial. He is more compassionate towards people too, allowing that while the Athenians were weak, they also had the virtues of their defects. It is a more balanced view of the good and bad in his fellow man. It is not just his use of allegory that helps him avoid bombast; it is the strength of his new maturity too.

Patagonie, included in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*, continues Caillois's reflections on civilisation and the importance of human solidarity. It is evident that Caillois here feels completely part of the wider group. It is a sense of connection born of reflection, rather than meaningful contact with any other being. Caillois's Patagonia is a quiet place. In this sense it is very different from the Patagonia described by Bruce Chatwin. *In Patagonia*¹³ is full of chatty stories about the various representatives of the multi-cultural society whom Chatwin meets on his travels. There is a passing reference to Darwin's fascination with its arid landscapes, and a quotation from W. H. Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia* on the peace found by desert wanderers,¹⁴ but Chatwin is looking firmly outwards, unlike Caillois.

¹² Duso, p.184.

¹³ Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977).

¹⁴ Chatwin, p.15.

*Espace américain*¹⁵ covers similar ground to *Patagonie*, Caillois's new enthusiasm for society and civilisation is fittingly conveyed by the lyricism with which he transforms even the most banal aspects of everyday life. The cataclysm of war is responsible for bringing about this change in perspective; the urgent sense of belonging expressed did not last significantly after the horrors of the war receded. This new dimension in his work, and the unrestrained lyrical nature of his writing, make *Patagonie* a milestone in Caillois's career. He is conscious now of the duty he has to contribute to the ongoing task of civilisation. The book may be called *Patagonie* but its essential subject is humanity and the importance of collective effort. The barrenness of Patagonia exposes the necessity of human input and effort; nothing is already in place, everything must be created and worked for. A challenge of this kind brings out the best in man and the best in Caillois. As he writes also in 'Sources de la morale', 'c'est de tous les hommes qu'il importe de se sentir solidaire' (RS, p.140). The closing lines, reaching out to the aridity of the landscape, prefigure the satisfaction stones would bring him, 'contrée toute d'espace et d'appel qui compose sur le sol un site comme il faudrait avoir l'âme' (p.117). *Patagonie* is a very effective antidote to the bile of *Le Vent d'hiver*, 'Patagonie [...] se propose de renverser le mouvement du *Vent d'hiver*; à la parabole de l'ère quaternaire, portée par le discours lyrique froidement exalté, répond un récit de voyage qui a la vocation et la force tranquille du mythe'.¹⁶

The surreal description of the approach to Patagonia gives the work a mythical quality that projects onto a universal level its scope and relevance; this is not simply travel writing:

De hautes falaises lumineuses barrent sa route et ne laissent devant lui qu'un étroit goulot que rend obscur leur blancheur éclatante. Les murailles qu'elles élèvent semblent enclore un paradis mystérieux. Mais s'écartant avec hâte, elles s'effacent dans le lointain, se confondent avec l'horizon et se rapprochent enfin derrière le bateau comme pour l'enfermer dans un lac immense et sans issue. (RS, pp.92-93)

The absorption of the boat – not unlike the fate of the children in the Pied Piper of Hamelin, a later interest of Caillois's – paradoxically opens out the work, helping to

¹⁵ *Espace américain* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1983).

¹⁶ Duso, p.193.

confer on it its legendary dimension. The rest of the world is left behind, and here man is truly on his own. Caillois stresses the bleakness of the landscape, the beach strewn with the corpses of animals, described in images that inevitably bring to mind a battlefield after a bloody encounter. He stresses too its aridity, which even gets the better of stones, ‘jusqu’aux pierres s’usent ici et se trouvent impuissantes à conserver leur forme et leur dureté’ (p.97). The emigrant must recommence the effort of civilisation. In his conclusion to *Circonstanciellles* Caillois writes ‘je me persuade ainsi que la civilisation est faite de bonnes habitudes communément partagées plutôt que de réussites exceptionnelles’ (p.146). These ‘good habits’ are just the kind of small but important traditions described in *Patagonie*. By looking after his dead, for instance, by burying them respectfully in adequate places, man ‘fonde ses prétentions sur l’avenir. [...] Il établit une continuité’ (p.112). In this hostile region, this is ‘la première victoire de l’homme’ (p.114).

Alone, man can do nothing, ‘il ne continue ni n’ouvre rien’ (p.110). Caillois has been made conscious of his heritage and tradition in the course of his visit to Patagonia, ‘comblé de richesses et né dans l’entrepôt même où l’histoire les amassa, je suis trop redevable aux hommes pour mépriser leurs travaux et m’abstenir d’y prendre part’ (p.116). The reader cannot help recalling how in *Le Vent d’hiver* contempt of ‘les misérables’ was elevated to the status of a virtue. In that text too Caillois was effortlessly and automatically part of the élite. Now he knows that he too must contribute something to the common good, ‘alors seulement, je ne me sentirai plus parasite ou imposteur, mais me tiendrai bien droit à ma place et dans mon rang. Je pourrai traiter toutes les œuvres de l’homme d’égal à égal’ (pp.106-07). There is none of the juvenile posturing that characterises *Le Vent d’hiver*; Caillois’s humility and humanism are patent. Lest the reader have any doubt on the matter, he shows he can rise to the occasion and reach out to his fellow man, among whom he counts himself.

In *Le Fleuve Alphée*, Caillois acknowledges the significance of *Patagonie* in his career as a writer. It was the first time he permitted himself to publish a work with undeniable lyrical qualities. As he recalls this departure from his previous style of writing, his inner struggle against allowing his natural, lyrical vein to express itself is evident:

Je ne pus m'empêcher de jeter sur le papier quelques-unes des impressions que j'y avais ressenties. Le jour où je les publiai, épurées cependant de tout détail anecdotique ou pittoresque pour donner à mes pages la même nudité que celle de la contrée qu'elles s'efforçaient de décrire, ce jour-là, je devins écrivain malgré moi. (FA, p.68)

Admitting that he gave in to an instinct too strong to resist, Caillois is keen to point out that lyricism was kept to the minimum, and that he sought to model his writing on the perceived qualities of the subject, as he would do decades later with stones. He removed exactly the kind of details that are so plentiful in Chatwin's book. For Caillois, however, there was still a gap between becoming a writer, and being proud to call himself a writer. That moment would have to wait decades, and is dealt with in Chapter Nine.

Having been so appalled by French society in the 1930s, Caillois's return to the fold, as expressed in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*, has all the force and enthusiasm of a fresh convert. The highly moral tone that runs throughout the work, his calls for integrity and courage, that each individual be active in the development and preservation of civilisation, are striking and, of course, unobjectionable. 'C'est de tous les hommes qu'il importe de se sentir solidaire': this ringing line from 'Sources de la morale' (p.140), sums up the opinions expressed in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*. Caillois too, for example, referred to Saint-Exupéry's notion of the 'sourire d'intelligence' (p.141) as the common mark of humanity, 'par lequel frères ou inconnus se réconfortent ou seulement s'identifient, se reconnaissent comme hommes et embarqués dans le même voyage' (p.141). There was too the very broad definition of civilisation in *Patagonie*, where the act of burying one's dead symbolised the values on which a civilised society could be based.

There is nothing here that is not admirable. The views expressed complement Caillois's roles as introducer of South American literature into France, co-compiler of an anthology of world poetry, indeed also compiler of an anthology of tales of the fantastic from around the world. These activities all suggest an openness, a receptivity to other cultures, an acknowledgement of their worth. It is sobering then to contrast these worthy attitudes and activities with the views outlined in 'Illusions à rebours', an article in two parts published in the then *NNRF* in 1954 and 1955. Despite his own claims to the contrary, this article is mainly a reaction to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Race*

et Histoire, which makes the case for cultural relativism, or the need to respect and accept a range of societal mores and values. Caillois's article, and reaction to it, has received very little critical attention, possibly because of the unflattering light it casts on Caillois. Nevertheless, it gives a more complete picture of his beliefs and value systems, and while it would be quite inaccurate to consider him as racist, it is all too apparent that 'civilisation', for Caillois, is Western Civilisation.

In response to the massacres carried out in the name of racial superiority during World War Two, and as part of a series of measures designed to combat racism, UNESCO had commissioned Claude Lévi-Strauss to write *Race et Histoire*, which was published in 1952. In it, Lévi-Strauss, as I have said, argues the case for cultural relativity, meaning that as no one culture can be regarded as superior to another, comparisons are invalid. It is unfortunately still a concept struggling for universal acceptance, as events in the Balkans and Rwanda have demonstrated in the nineties.

There were of course previous studies of the phenomenon of racism. Ruth Benedict's excellent *Race and Racism* appeared in 1943.¹⁷ She makes the point that race does not equate with superiority or inferiority and examines physiological, psychological and historical evidence to prove her point. She points to the importance of good social conditions for all races if optimal development is to be promoted. Lévi-Strauss's study, however, seeks to go beyond demonstrating this point, however central it may be. He wished to tackle the visible inequality pertaining in different cultures and to show the dynamic role played by cultural diversity in the development of civilisations.

In December 1954 and January 1955 Caillois published his 'Illusions à rebours'. It is essentially a reflection on the views expressed in *Race et Histoire*. It was to spark off a series of angry exchanges between Caillois and Lévi-Strauss in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes*.¹⁸ The Martinican poet and statesman Aimé Césaire was also drawn into the controversy in the pages of the 1955 edition of his *Discours sur le colonialisme*. This book was first published in 1950, obviously before this controversy. It is significant, given the heated tone of Césaire's reflections on the

¹⁷ Ruth Benedict, *Race and Racism* (London: The Scientific Book Club, 1943).

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Diogène couché', *Les Temps Modernes*, 110 (1955), 1187-1220 and Roger Caillois and Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'A propos de "Diogène couché"', *Les Temps Modernes*, 111 (1955), 1533-36.

matter in the 1955 edition, that comparatively little time had elapsed between his reading Caillois's article and his inclusion of a reference to it in his book. As Caillois himself was an employee of UNESCO, this adds a further dimension to the exchange, and indeed his article caused problems for him at work. He refers to these in a letter to Victoria Ocampo, 'j'ai de gros ennuis avec l'Unesco à cause de mes articles de la *NNRF*. de déc(embre) et janv(ier) dernier. C'est insupportable. Il faudrait bien que je quitte (l'Unesco). Si tu peux convaincre une fondation de m'aider...'.¹⁹ He did not eventually leave UNESCO, although evidently for a period of time must have felt himself to be the object of some opprobrium. Even in the nineties, Caillois's essay has the power to arouse strong feelings, and Panoff too revisits this incident.

Given the gap between the publication dates of *Race et Histoire* and Caillois's articles, Lévi-Strauss suggests that a favourable reference to his book in a Surrealist journal *Médium* (the February 1954 issue) motivated Caillois to respond as he did, 'reconnaissons à ce *Médium* le don d'avoir plongé M. Caillois dans les transes'.²⁰ Panoff, as he tends to, also attributes a base motivation to Caillois: professional jealousy, 'peu importe de savoir s'il y eut alors autant de jalousie de sa part que d'hostilité intellectuelle'.²¹ Césaire's still fresh anger at Caillois's opinions comes through all too clearly in the pages he devotes to his essay. For him, Caillois personified the lack of humanism that characterised Western Imperialism, his work symbolised the fact that 'jamais l'Occident, dans le temps où il se gargarise le plus du mot, n'a été plus éloigné de pouvoir assumer les exigences d'un humanisme vrai, de pouvoir vivre l'humanisme vrai — l'humanisme à la mesure du monde'.²²

In fairness to Caillois, the matter is more complex than these hostile speculations allow. I have mentioned Caillois's extreme disillusionment with society around the end of the Third Republic, and then, following on his move to Argentina, his conversion to Western civilisation, classically conceived, and its ideals. World War Two posed a threat to these, and having so nearly lost these values, Caillois regained a perception of himself as part of a worthy enterprise, with duties and responsibilities to the wider group. His defence of Western civilisation in 'Illusions à rebours' needs to

¹⁹ *Correspondance Roger Caillois/Victoria Ocampo*, ed. by Odile Felgine, with the collaboration of Laura Ayerza de Castilho (Paris: Stock, 1997), p.337.

²⁰ Lévi-Strauss, 'Diogène couché', p.1189.

²¹ Panoff, p.47.

be seen, in part at least, in the context of that still fresh embracing of what he too had once denigrated. It is the more controversial face of the views expressed in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* and is interesting to explore as a fresh and not always flattering perspective on Caillois. We have previously seen Caillois's desire to provoke controversy and to push arguments to the limit lead to some serious charges being made against him. This further incident made him run the risk of being seen not just as fascist, but racist too. The accusation of fascism can be countered with reference to Caillois's political ignorance and a certain insensitivity. I do not believe Caillois can be considered as racist, if that term is taken to mean not just a belief in the superiority of one race over another, but, allied with this, the intention to incite hatred towards or to discriminate against another racial group.

If Lévi-Strauss's agenda is to disprove the idea that any one culture was superior to another, then Caillois's agenda is just the opposite of this. In his opinion, the lack of self-confidence in the West has led to an overvaluation of other cultures, and Caillois sees it as his task to halt that self-depreciation and reinstate the superiority of Western culture. He states his case strongly, rejecting 'la conviction passionnelle que la civilisation dont on participe est hypocrite, corrompue et répugnante, et qu'il faut chercher ailleurs, n'importe où, et pour plus de sûreté aux antipodes géographiques ou culturelles, la pureté et la plénitude dont le besoin est ressenti' ('Illusions', part 2, p.67). His concern is primarily with seeing Western civilisation resume its position as leader. Such a stance certainly makes him guilty of pro-Western prejudice, and he is again insensitive in stating his case; but he is not racist, as that term is commonly understood.

Caillois, in his article, documents how, in the past, history was seen as a succession of eras, leading to the present superiority of Western civilisation. There is now however, and Caillois cites the work of Spengler and Toynbee, a sense of the West's decline and, for Caillois, Lévi-Strauss fits right into this way of thinking. (In his reply to Lévi-Strauss's reaction to 'Illusions à rebours', Caillois rather disingenuously denies that Lévi-Strauss is the main subject of his article, writing of his 'présomption' in assuming this.²³ It has to be said that if all the references to *Race et Histoire* were

²² Césaire, p.54.

²³ 'A propos de "Diogène couché"', p.1533.

removed, very little would be left). In a way that is seemingly general, but is actually preparing the ground for his attack on Lévi-Strauss, Caillois charts the various symptoms of this decline, which include ‘le goût pour les images des rêves, pour les aberrations de la luxure, pour les délires des aliénés, les dessins des enfants et les sculptures des primitifs’, leading to a ‘parti pris [...] indifféremment en faveur des cultures rudimentaires’ (‘Illusions’, part 1, p.1014). This fits in too with a later ‘outing’ of the Surrealist connections of Lévi-Strauss (‘Illusions’, part 2, p.67), which is wholly inaccurate as Lévi-Strauss points out to him and which Caillois has to withdraw.²⁴ Panoff accuses Caillois of concealing his own Surrealist links, but this is not actually true. Caillois writes, ‘ce n’est pas un hasard si les noms de Claude Lévi-Strauss, de Michel Leiris, d’Alfred Métraux, de Georges-Henri Rivière, figurent au sommaire de revues comme *La Révolution surréaliste*, *Documents* et *Minotaure* (le mien aussi, d’ailleurs)’ (‘Illusions’, part 2, p.67).

Caillois refers to, and his target is clear, ‘de nombreux intellectuels européens’ (‘Illusions’, part 1, p.1013), living in and off the West, who ‘s’acharnent à renier les divers idéaux de leur culture’ (p.1013). This bias in favour of any culture rather than Western civilisation has led to a number of mistaken attitudes, Caillois argues, the excessive respect paid to the pre-Columbian calendar, for example, or Paul Valéry’s contention that civilisations are mortal and totally vanish; important things often remain. Lévi-Strauss refutes these two arguments convincingly in his reply. Firstly, Saurat, the writer Caillois quotes in respect of the calendar, had limited his claims of superiority to the latter. Caillois distorts his argument, adding to it the implied suggestion that, for example, astrophysics and giant telescopes allegedly lag behind the pre-Columbian calendar. This is indeed a ‘procédé falsificateur’²⁵ and one that reappears in Caillois’s treatment of Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss supports Valéry by arguing that discoveries in mathematics and physics have shown that understanding a system relies on knowledge of its total structure rather than just a partial analysis).²⁶

While paying what is most likely ritual praise to Lévi-Strauss’s work as ‘l’exposé magistral d’un ethnographe et d’un savant [...] un modèle du genre’ (p.1018), Caillois cannot accept his view that all cultures are equivalent and have their own peculiarities

²⁴ Caillois, ‘A propos de “Diogène couché”’, pp.1534-35.

²⁵ Lévi-Strauss, ‘Diogène couché’, p.1205.

²⁶ ‘Diogène couché’, pp.1202-03.

and modes of development. Caillois calls into question Lévi-Strauss's objectivity as a scholar, alleging that 'son érudition, du moins, paraît au service d'une conviction qui s'en laisse malaisément séparer. Celle-ci, préalable à toute recherche objective, dérive de la crise de conscience générale' ('Illusions', part 2, p.58). This conviction, as Caillois sees it, leads Lévi-Strauss to draw questionable parallels, to downgrade Western achievements and values. Despite Lévi-Strauss's assertion that comparisons are unjustified, Caillois claims that he nonetheless has drawn some, always at the expense of the West. This would be a damning assessment, if it were true. The problem with Caillois's case, however, is that he misrepresents Lévi-Strauss's argument, quoting him entirely out of context.

In *Race et Histoire*, Lévi-Strauss argued against the theory of *faux évolutionnisme*, according to which some, more primitive cultures are seen as previous stages in the development of other more advanced cultures. Development is seen as linear and neat, all societies progressing towards the same ultimate point of perfection. Such a theory eliminates cultural diversity while pretending to recognise it. Lévi-Strauss maintained that one culture cannot be judged by another's system of references. Changes in that culture may be imperceptible to the eyes of an onlooker. Caillois accepts that this is a sustainable argument but one which does not give Lévi-Strauss the right to compare unfavourably the West to other cultures; but Lévi-Strauss does not do this. A brief look at what Caillois claims and then what Lévi-Strauss actually wrote will clarify the matter.

Caillois quotes Lévi-Strauss as saying that the East and Far East have 'une avance de plusieurs millénaires' over the West because they have come up with 'ces vastes sommes théoriques et pratiques que sont le yoga de l'Inde, les techniques du souffle chinoises ou la gymnastique viscérale des anciens Maoris' ('Illusions', part 1, p.1021).

In relation to Australians, Lévi-Strauss argues, according to Caillois, that it would be 'nullement exagéré de saluer en eux non seulement les fondateurs de toute sociologie générale, mais encore les véritables introducteurs de la mesure dans les sciences sociales' (quoted by Caillois, 'Illusions', part 1, p.1023). Lévi-Strauss, according to Caillois, 's'extasie sur l'extrême complexité des liens de parenté des Australiens' ('Illusions', part 2, p.58).

Caillois refers to Lévi-Strauss's assessment of Melanesians, and their talent for integrating 'dans la vie sociale les produits les plus obscurs de l'activité inconsciente de l'esprit'. Their achievement in this regard is 'un des plus hauts sommets que les hommes aient atteint dans ces directions' (quoted by Caillois, 'Illusions', part 1, p.1023).

As regards Africans, Lévi-Strauss writes that if we have insufficient appreciation of their contribution to culture, it is European science that is at fault, rather than any supposed cultural poverty on their part. He finds much to praise in African culture, its laws, philosophies, music, arts, its bronze and ivory artefacts, far more sophisticated than anything being made in the West at the same time. Nothing Lévi-Strauss wrote about African civilisation justifies Caillois's dismissal of it, 'il semble s'agir ainsi d'une des cases blanches du damier du savoir dont [Lévi-Strauss] parle ailleurs et qui marqueraient notre ignorance plutôt que le vide. Mais si la case était réellement blanche, si le vide existait véritablement?' ('Illusions', part 1, p.1023). Far from suggesting that African culture is 'une case blanche' Lévi-Strauss was at pains to list what we owe to it.

These points, superficially, seem greatly to undermine Lévi-Strauss's argument and credibility. But Caillois has completely twisted and turned around Lévi-Strauss's point, which was that, depending on what criterion is chosen, societies will be classified in different orders of merit. His argument could not be more clearly made, and shows the arbitrary and subjective nature of comparisons between cultures, 'selon le point de vue choisi, on aboutirait [...] à des classements différents'.²⁷ If ever more powerful machines were the criterion, then the West's superiority in this respect would be manifest. If the criterion were the links between body and mind, then the East and Far East are ahead of other cultures; if Australians are judged according to the criterion of family organisation, then they are ahead. Far from praising specifically the complexity of their family ties, it is clear in *Race et Histoire* that Lévi-Strauss is struck by their capacity to reflect on and analyse their own experience, 'avec une admirable lucidité, les Australiens ont fait la théorie de ce mécanisme et inventorié les principales méthodes permettant de le réaliser, avec les avantages et les inconvénients

²⁷ Lévi-Strauss, p.46.

qui s'attachent à chacune'.²⁸ Panoff points out that Lévi-Strauss in a later edition of *Race et Histoire* does modify his praise of Australians somewhat. They are presented as the 'précurseurs de toute sociologie familiale' rather than the 'fondateurs' of sociology in general.²⁹

Caillois states that Lévi-Strauss attributed the superiority of one culture over another to 'une suite de hasards féconds. Ceux-ci sont d'ailleurs favorisés par les échanges entre cultures, par la mise en commun de leurs inventions, qui permet le cumul des coups heureux à la grande loterie du sort' ('Illusions', part 1, p.1019) Caillois favours the theory of 'open' and 'closed' societies, an open society making the most of developments and innovations that come its way. In relation to his portrayal of Lévi-Strauss's argument, Caillois is prioritising the role of chance, which Lévi-Strauss did not. Lévi-Strauss's argument is a great deal more complex than that. In the chapters entitled 'Hasard et civilisation' and 'La collaboration des cultures', he specifically argued against the simplistic approach of attributing progress to chance, preferring the concept of *probability* and stressing the importance of timing, and that the cultures collaborating be different from each other. It is not a question of one society being more 'cumulative' than another by virtue of its nature; what counts is the behaviour of cultures, 'leur *manière d'être ensemble*'.³⁰ The greatest impediment in the way of the development of a culture, 'c'est d'être seul'.³¹ This depiction of a society that can capitalise on the innovations coming its way is not essentially so different from Caillois's open society.

In the context of discussing attitudes to other nationalities, Lévi-Strauss had drawn a parallel between the native inhabitants of the Greater Antilles who killed white people to see if their bodies would rot, and the Spanish who sent envoys to the Greater Antilles to see if its inhabitants had souls.³² In Caillois's eyes, this is an untenable argument; the methods and motivations involved were quite different ('Illusions', part 2, pp.59-61). Taxing Caillois with showing more respect for Spanish theology than Dogon or Bambara theology, Lévi-Strauss reminds his readers (and Caillois) that thirty years after sending their envoys on this mission, the Spanish had exterminated

²⁸ Lévi-Strauss, p.48.

²⁹ Panoff, p.53.

³⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *Race et Histoire*, p.73.

³¹ Lévi-Strauss, p.73.

the entire native population of the Greater Antilles.³³ Caillois is unfounded in according dignity and seriousness solely to the representatives of Europe.

For Caillois (and it can be imagined that this was directed at Lévi-Strauss), the one sure sign of a civilisation's superiority is that it can produce ethnographers. Bringing to mind Saul Bellow's rhetorical question, 'Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?', Caillois writes, 'il n'existe aucun ethnographe bantou ou bororo' ('Illusions', part 2, p.65). Or if there is, he has studied in Cambridge or Paris. It could be expected that Lévi-Strauss would not leave this point unanswered and indeed he makes the point that the West produced ethnographers 'au moment même où il entreprenait la destruction de l'objet des études qu'il leur reconnaît'.³⁴ There is not much room for smugness when the full picture is given.

The inaccuracies and distortions in Caillois's article make it understandable that Lévi-Strauss should have sought a right of reply. It is unfortunate, however, that he went beyond rational argument and entered the domain of personal invective. Linking Caillois with Senator McCarthy in the United States, he referred to him as 'McCaillois',³⁵ and dismissed his arguments as 'des bouffonneries de table d'hôte' and, for example, 'des déclamations de prédicateur'.³⁶ An offensive tone runs through much of what he writes, which inevitably detracts from rather than reinforcing his legitimate argument.

This debate clearly stayed very much alive in the minds of Caillois and Lévi-Strauss. As far as Caillois is concerned, Panoff argues that his book *Ponce Pilate*³⁷ continues, obliquely, the discussion on cultural relativism, as do *La Pieuvre* and *Pierres*.³⁸ The matter arose again when Caillois (at the request of Lévi-Strauss, who was touched to learn Caillois had voted for him) made the speech receiving him into the Académie Française. That Lévi-Strauss should have invited him to do this after their acrimonious exchanges in the fifties shows, not just his generosity of spirit, but surely suggests also that he did not believe Caillois to hold racist opinions. In an interview with Didier

³² *Race et Histoire*, pp.21-22.

³³ Lévi-Strauss, 'Diogène couché', pp.1210-11.

³⁴ Lévi-Strauss, p.1214.

³⁵ Lévi-Strauss, p.1214.

³⁶ Lévi-Strauss, p.1202.

³⁷ Panoff, pp.58-61.

Eribon, Lévi-Strauss recalls this moment, and his disappointment at what he saw as Caillois's pettiness in re-opening the dispute following on his generous gesture.³⁹ He went on to make the following unflattering remarks about Caillois:

Nous aurions dû nous entendre. Mais il a délaissé la recherche au profit du style. Il voulut cantonner ses spéculations sur le plan littéraire et poétique: la forme l'intéressait plus que la substance. Qu'on s'efforce de traiter celle-ci avec un peu de rigueur et dans un souci objectif, il ne le tolérait pas. Par un curieux paradoxe, il inversait, mais toujours dans un esprit conservateur, les termes de sa vieille querelle avec les surréalistes.⁴⁰

Caillois had accused him of a lack of objectivity and rigor. Now, decades later, he is returning the compliment and seeking to deprive Caillois's work as a whole of any intellectual credibility. This is no more justified than was Caillois's distortion of *Race et Histoire* and it is regrettable that what is a serious intellectual question was associated with so much petty personal unpleasantness.

While on the one hand it is surprising that Césaire devoted so many pages to a relatively minor article in the context of a wider work on colonialism, it is all too easy to understand the strength of his reaction to Caillois's words. While Lévi-Strauss was concerned with his academic reputation, the matter is more immediate for Césaire. Caillois's lofty disregard for the achievements of non-Western cultures and the level of some of the examples he uses to put forward his case, inevitably elicited a response from Césaire, in which sarcasm and ridicule dominate. These are rhetorical tools whose impact is sharp, if short-lived, and it is generally unfortunate, as I have said, that all those involved in the controversy (Caillois himself, Lévi-Strauss in his response to Caillois, Césaire and Panoff) engaged in an at times unseemly squabble.

Gregson Davis in his study of Césaire describes the cultural alienation he experienced from his early days as a student in Paris at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and how he and other black students 'found themselves drawn, if only in self-defence, into a radically critical stance towards European civilization and its arrogant claims to superiority'.⁴¹ Césaire's links with Surrealism are also highly relevant in considering his reaction to

³⁸ Panoff, p.48.

³⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *De près et de loin* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1988), p.122.

⁴⁰ *De près et de loin*, pp.122-23.

⁴¹ Gregson Davis, *Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.7.

Caillois. Surrealism was his preferred form of modernism and he would develop his own brand of Caribbean Surrealism. Davis comments on how Surrealism's 'combination of the socially progressive with the artistically iconoclastic could not but appeal to a sensitive black intellectual who was being drawn, by education and temperament, into the struggle against colonialism and racism'.⁴² Césaire counted among his personal friends André Breton, Pablo Picasso, Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret.

Aimé Césaire composed his reaction to Caillois's article just months after the start of the Algerian war in late 1954. It is natural that, in the course of his writing, his thoughts should turn to this. The French policies of assimilation (administering Algeria as part of France) and association (creating a second electoral college enabling the election of representatives to regional and town councils, but not to the French parliament) had failed to quell the desire for independence, which grew all the stronger after World War Two. Following on the atrocities committed in Algeria on 1 November 1954, the French Government increased its military presence there. François Mitterrand, then the French Minister of the Interior, revealed an attitude surely galling to Césaire when he proclaimed days after the massacres, 'L'Algérie c'est la France et la France ne reconnaîtra pas, chez elle, d'autre autorité que la sienne'.⁴³ After World War Two, the colonial tide had begun to turn, and the right of Europeans to rule was being challenged, by argument and by violence. The French Government and armed forces were prepared to resort to new means of counter-insurgency, including violence, although it should be said that Pierre Mendès-France and François Mitterrand did also put together a programme of reforms. Césaire, and many others like him, could well feel that the use of torture and violence by the French made a mockery of their claim to be the protectors and exponents of high values. Césaire was deeply aware of what was happening in Algeria when he was writing:

à l'heure même où j'écris ceci, tant de vaillants fils d'Occident, dans le clair-obscur des cachots, prodiguent à leurs frères inférieurs d'Afrique, avec tant d'inlassables soins, ces authentiques marques de respect de la dignité humaine qui s'appellent, en termes techniques, "la baignoire", "l'électricité", "le goulot de bouteille".⁴⁴

⁴² Davis, p.67.

⁴³ Quoted by Jean-François Sirinelli, *La France de 1914 à nos jours* (Paris: PUF, 1993), p. 298.

⁴⁴ Césaire, p.51.

The sarcastic way he presents Caillois to his readers is an indication of the approach he will take, 'M. Caillois, à qui mission a été donnée de toute éternité d'enseigner à un siècle lâche et débraillé la rigueur de la pensée et la tenue du style, M. Caillois donc vient d'éprouver une grande colère'.⁴⁵ This mocking style is followed by an unjustified *rapprochement* with an author in a Belgian colonialist review who had written an aggressive attack on ethnographers for having destroyed the previous hierarchical relationship between colonisers and colonised.⁴⁶ Caillois's arguments in favour of Western science, morality and religion are, understandably, intolerable to Césaire, 'Pensez donc! M. Caillois n'a jamais mangé personne! M. Caillois n'a jamais songé à achever un infirme! M. Caillois, jamais l'idée ne lui est venue d'abrégé les jours de ses vieux parents!'.⁴⁷

Césaire develops a stronger argument in relation to Caillois's claim that ethnography is in itself a sign of Western superiority. Perhaps it would have been better if the museums of which Caillois boasts had never been established, if non-European cultures had been allowed to develop 'non mutilées'.⁴⁸ At any rate:

le musée par lui-même n'est rien; qu'il ne veut rien dire, qu'il ne peut rien dire, là où la béate satisfaction de soi-même pourrit les yeux, là où, avoué ou non, le racisme tarit la sympathie; qu'il ne veut rien dire s'il n'est pas destiné qu'à fournir aux délices de l'amour-propre [...].⁴⁹

This is the only time Césaire explicitly uses the word 'racisme', but it would seem clear that he is charging Caillois with at best a kind of closet racism. His point is a telling one and shows a deep understanding on a human level which Caillois's abstract arguing never reaches. As Césaire writes, 'le poids de tous les musées du monde ne pèsera autant qu'une étincelle de sympathie humaine'.⁵⁰

Caillois had made a distinction between 'égalité de droit' and 'égalité de fait', arguing that a blind person, or a poor one, to cite some of his examples, cannot be said to be the same as a healthy or an affluent individual ('Illusions', part 1, pp.1018-19). The

⁴⁵ Césaire, p.47.

⁴⁶ Césaire, pp.48-49.

⁴⁷ Césaire, p.50.

⁴⁸ Césaire, pp.51-52.

⁴⁹ Césaire, p.52.

disadvantaged are clearly meant to represent non-Western races, whose lifestyle, in Western eyes, seems inferior. In a manner which incenses Césaire with what he sees as a lofty, patriarchal assumption of superiority, Caillois concludes that biological or historical advantages ‘ne justifient aucunement une inégalité de droits comme le voudrait le racisme. Elles leur confèrent plutôt des charges supplémentaires et une responsabilité accrue’ (p.1018). Césaire could have tackled Caillois coolly and analytically on his cultural assumptions and the implication that non-Western races could be, even implicitly, compared with the blind and the foolish. Instead he writes, ‘Et Caillois-Atlas de s’arc-bouter philanthropiquement dans la poussière et de recharger ses robustes épaules de l’inévitable fardeau de l’homme blanc’.⁵¹ It is a striking image, but it is not an argument.

In a world in which ethnic conflicts have caused and continue to cause such suffering and tragedy, arguing the case for cultural relativism is still of vital importance. Lévi-Strauss was central in launching this concept, and his efforts to further cultural understanding are widely acknowledged. Caillois can overstate his case at times, when the matter at hand is of central importance to him; some of his writings on poetry bear testimony to this tendency. It seems that in this instance his deep-felt need to halt what he saw as a worrying decline of confidence in the West led him to misrepresent arguments and to cause offence in particular to those whose knowledge of this question exceeds the intellectual. In this he is certainly regrettably limited in his world view. Caillois was very much an absolutist, in all the areas he touched (his views on poetry again demonstrate little tolerance for modern innovativeness). It is therefore in keeping with his outlook that the concept of relativism would elicit little sympathy from him. The constant presence of Surrealism in his life recurs in this debate; he would never miss an opportunity to condemn its practice or its practitioners. Aimé Césaire had first-hand experience of the ills of colonialism, the West’s dismissiveness towards other cultures. The anger and hurt so apparent in his reaction to Caillois are all too understandable. Greater detachment, debate on a higher level, would have ultimately served his purpose better, but he was obviously driven forward by the strength of his rage, Caillois encapsulating for him the presumptuousness and lack of humanity of the West. None of the participants in this exchange (with regard to Lévi-

⁵⁰ Césaire, p.52.

⁵¹ Césaire, p.54.

Strauss, I refer to his response to Caillois's review) emerges covered with glory. These are serious questions, and personal attacks and cheap rhetorical tricks are unworthy strategies and leave unanswered the real questions at the heart of the topic. Caillois seems to have abandoned the broader concept of civilisation expressed in *Patagonie*, and if he cannot fairly be called a racist, then it must be admitted also that his world view is not an inclusive one; guaranteeing Western superiority means creating a hierarchy in which his own civilisation must come first. His aspiration to inclusiveness ends, in effect, in a patronising exclusiveness.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES: FROM THE SACRED TO THE SECULAR

Caillois's concerns in *Les Jeux et les Hommes* contrast quite sharply with those expressed in *L'Homme et le Sacré*. Caillois is still looking for that 'passe universel' mentioned by Alexandre Pajón. Whereas previously he sought to restore cohesion, 'wholeness' to society by re-instating the sacred, and described societies in which this was the sole regulating factor, Caillois's outlook is more secular now. Decades later, games appear to him to underlie the functioning of society. There has been a shift in emphasis and motivation. He no longer desires to alter society, merely to explain it. The sacred was a topical subject when Caillois was writing on it in the thirties. Games, following on Huizinga's work, were now a popular theme and Caillois was, to an extent, responding to and participating in this new vogue. As the title indicates, his brief is mixed here, extending beyond the study of games themselves to include mankind.

Caillois had naturally read Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* – he refers to it – but he felt he could offer a broader study of the subject. From the outset, he seeks to reassure his reader that his premise is sound (much as he sought to assert his credibility at the beginning of *L'Homme et le Sacré* by naming his sources): 'des historiens éminents, après enquêtes approfondies, [...] des psychologues scrupuleux, après des observations répétées et systématiques, [ont] cru devoir faire de l'esprit de jeu un des ressorts principaux, pour les sociétés, du développement des plus hautes manifestations de leur culture, pour l'individu, de son éducation morale et de son progrès intellectuel' (p.10). Eminent and scrupulous scholars have already made this link; it must therefore be valid, so Caillois's reasoning would seem to run. There is some confusion in Caillois's choice of terms between 'esprit de jeu' and games themselves. 'Esprit de jeu' refers to the principles behind games, their driving and defining force. It is not synonymous

with games, yet, confusingly, is often so used. Caillois describes this 'esprit' as 'un des ressorts principaux', not as the sole or even main factor in the development of a civilisation. There is a lack of clarity in *Les Jeux et les Hommes* on this point, as Caillois will sometimes allow for the existence of other factors (not specified) and on other occasions attribute sole responsibility to games; or the 'esprit de jeu'. He writes, describing the progress of civilisation 'd'un univers fruste à un univers administré, reposant sur un système cohérent et équilibré, tantôt de droits et de devoirs, tantôt de privilèges et de responsabilités. Le jeu inspire ou confirme cette balance' (p.20). Apart from the difference between inspiring and confirming, here the role of games (and not their guiding spirit) is central. In the following sentence, Caillois himself distinguishes between these terms. In defining games, their 'idées de limites, de liberté et d'invention' (p.12), Caillois writes, 'ce sont là des significations variées et riches qui montrent en quoi, non pas le jeu lui-même, mais les dispositions psychologiques qu'il traduit et qu'il développe peuvent en effet constituer d'importants facteurs de civilisation' (p.15). These 'dispositions psychologiques' would correspond to the 'esprit de jeu'; Caillois should have tightened up his use of terminology to avoid confusion.

Caillois starts by defining a game as an activity in which the players freely participate, one that takes place in its own space and time, whose outcome is uncertain, which produces nothing, which is subject to rules or may follow a spontaneous fantasy. Jacques Ehrmann points out that both Caillois and Huizinga, in their definitions of games, make an assumption about the nature of reality. For both of them, reality is a 'given'. In defining games, they should have considered more deeply the nature of reality, the norm against which games are measured, since 'il n'y a pas de "réalité" [...] en dehors de ou avant les manifestations de la culture qui l'exprime'.¹ In a later work, *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, Caillois would undermine the whole concept of 'reality', but for the moment he is content to accept it as an absolute.

Ehrmann sees other difficulties in Caillois's definition, challenging, for example, his assumption that games produce nothing, the time, energy and sometimes money spent

¹ Jacques Ehrmann, 'L'homme en jeu', *Critique*, 226 (1969), 579-607 (p.581).

being consumed within the game itself, 'la liberté même de la dépense qui s'y fait participe d'un circuit qui franchit les limites spatiales et temporelles du jeu.'²

Ethnologists with whom Caillois and Huizinga are familiar have shown that the 'pure' gift is an exchange, 'on donne, on dépense *pour* recevoir'.³

There are some difficulties then both with Caillois's interchangeable use of the terms 'esprit de jeu' and 'jeux' and the – legitimate – assertion by Ehrmann that his definition erred through various flawed assumptions.

Having defined games, Caillois proceeds to classify them, based on the characteristic mindsets of the participants. Huizinga had established one category, Caillois can better that and suggests four, 'je propose [...] une division en quatre rubriques principales selon que, dans les jeux considérés, prédomine le rôle de la compétition, du hasard, du simulacre ou du vertige. Je les appelle respectivement *Agôn, Alea, Mimicry* et *Ilinx*' (p.47). Caillois refers to participants' 'attitudes' (p.47), or, for instance, their 'impulsions' (p.50). While Maurice Blanchot has no problem with Caillois's classification, he does comment on his imprecise terminology:

Ce qui nous embarrasse, c'est le problème que pose la référence à ce qu'il appelle tantôt instincts, tantôt impulsions, parfois attitudes psychologiques élémentaires, parfois principes ou ressorts. L'incertitude de ces noms (appliqués à des mouvements aussi différents que le goût de la compétition, l'attente du hasard, le plaisir du simulacre, l'attrait du vertige) montre que la classification renvoie à une conception psychologique et philosophique de la nature humaine que cet essai n'a pas cherché à élaborer et qui fait difficulté.⁴

Les Jeux et les Hommes is certainly marked by a certain imprecision, then, as regards terminology (pointing to lack of deeper reflection, as Blanchot points out). There are also, as we shall see, occasional problems in the elaboration of Caillois's argument, all of which suggests perhaps a degree of haste on his part in writing the book.

Of the various kinds of games put forward by Caillois I shall focus on mimicry, as Caillois has already dealt with this topic in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*. I have already

² Ehrmann, p. 589.

³ Ehrmann, p. 590.

mentioned how Caillois changes his theory completely, referring only in a footnote to his abandonment of his previous hypotheses. He has now adopted the theory he would further adhere to in *Méduse & Cie*, two years later. In describing mimicry, Caillois writes, 'le jeu peut consister, non pas à déployer une activité ou à subir un destin dans un milieu imaginaire, mais à devenir soi-même un personnage illusoire et à se conduire en conséquence' (p.61). The player may disguise himself and take on another role. Caillois's choice of the term mimicry is significant. It normally of course refers to the behaviour of insects and animals, so in adapting and expanding its use Caillois is underlining his belief in the oneness and continuity of the universe. He explains that he is using it here to 'souligner la nature fondamentale et élémentaire, quasi organique, de l'impulsion qui les suscite' (p.61). He will admit that the insect world is very different from the human one (as he did in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*) although this does not discourage him from elaborating theories linking the two species, 'le monde des insectes apparaît en face du monde humain comme la solution la plus divergente que fournisse la nature. Ce monde est opposé terme à terme à celui de l'homme, mais il est non moins élaboré, complexe et surprenant' (p.61). The complex nature of insect society is enough justification in Caillois's eyes to draw parallels between it and human society:

À une conduite libre de l'homme, versatile, arbitraire, imparfaite et qui surtout aboutit à une œuvre extérieure, correspond chez l'animal, et plus particulièrement chez l'insecte, une modification organique, fixe, absolue qui marque l'espèce et qu'on voit infiniment et exactement reproduite de génération en génération chez des milliards d'individus; par exemple, les castes des fourmis et des termites en face de la lutte des classes, les dessins des ailes des papillons en face de l'histoire de la peinture. (JH, p.62)

This is a statement, made authoritatively, and yet it must be pointed out that Caillois is not advancing (and cannot advance) any proof whatsoever. It is a creative, visionary assumption, impossible to argue, futile to reject. Caillois admits to 'la témérité' of this theory, something he is always willing to do, but sticks with it anyway. The disguise is an integral part of the insect, in man it is something voluntarily added but it serves the same ends.

Alain Bosquet is not convinced by Caillois's theory of mimicry:

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, 'L'attrait, l'horreur du jeu', *NNRF*, 65 (1958), 856-65 (p.862).

Rien de ce que Roger Caillois avance ne peut passer pour plus qu'une séduisante hypothèse. Les émotions des autres règnes ne sont pas des émotions; ni leurs initiatives, des initiatives comparables aux nôtres. L'incompatibilité demeure totale, et l'incommensurabilité paralysante pour notre esprit. C'est dire qu'en raisonnant, notre logique fabule. Roger Caillois est troublé, du seul fait qu'il veuille nous faire croire à des lois explicables. Mais ses explications, déraisonnables d'être raisonneuses, ont précisément l'attrait d'un absurde remarquablement organisé.⁵

This is as dismissive a criticism as, say, Panoff's rather less subtly expressed one. Panoff accuses Caillois of resuscitating 'les idées les plus fausses du XIXe siècle sur les animaux'.⁶ Caillois is not alleging that human/insect emotions and motivations are comparable (it is interesting he feels this is not necessary for making his point). Is it wrong to give in to the persuasive power of this remarkably organised 'absurde'? Should the usual academic criteria be applied? Or is his point best understood on the metaphorical level? I suggest the last possibility. Caillois's fanciful parallel is pointing to his desire for and perception of the possible wholeness of existence; its superficial (in both senses) aspect should not be what detains the reader.

As was the case in Caillois's writing on the sacred, where he took that one factor and attributed the functioning of society to it alone, so too in *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, in which he attempts to elaborate a sociology based on games, there is a failure to acknowledge the vital contribution of other factors. These pages are furthermore not very carefully constructed, with Caillois often shifting positions. The lack of order and clarity in the construction of the argument surely testifies to an argument not fully thought through. The reader may assume Caillois is not very deeply involved in what he is attempting to prove.

It is clearly relevant for him to try and solve the classic conundrum of whether games influence society (as Huizinga argued) or vice versa. He does this by making an absolute distinction between the principles underlying games and games themselves, 'l'esprit de jeu est essentiel à la culture, mais jeux et jouets sont bien les résidus de celle-ci' (p.126). Activities that were formerly an integral part of lay and religious institutions have become more frivolous. He cites the mask as a primary example of

⁵ Alain Bosquet, *Roger Caillois* (Paris: Seghers, 1971), p.37.

⁶ Panoff, p.78.

an ‘objet sacré universellement répandu et dont le passage à l’état de jouet marque peut-être une mutation capitale dans l’histoire de la civilisation’ (p.127). Caillois, typically, has many other examples of this, referring to China, Egypt, Korea, Greece... Having witnessed Caillois argue his case with all the appearance of conviction, it is then all the more surprising to read, ‘je me demande néanmoins si pareille doctrine, qui consiste à tenir chaque jeu pour la métamorphose ultime et humiliée d’une activité sérieuse, n’est pas fondamentalement erronée et, pour tout dire, une pure et simple illusion d’optique, qui ne résout aucunement le problème’ (p.130). Further examples now follow to illustrate this new angle. Children enjoy playing at being soldiers, for instance, and armies are still very much part of reality. So now Caillois thinks, ‘on est amené à soupçonner qu’il n’y a pas dégradation d’une activité sérieuse en amusement enfantin, mais plutôt présence simultanée de deux registres différents’ (p.133). Perhaps these later examples he wished to mention could not be fitted into his previous theory, so a new one had to be found to provide them with a vehicle. This is the problem with an examples-led approach; without deep analysis it is not possible to reach the heart of an issue.

Caillois goes on to describe games as ‘une activité parallèle, indépendante, qui s’oppose aux gestes et aux décisions de la vie ordinaire par des caractères spécifiques qui lui sont propres et qui font qu’il est un jeu’ (p.134). This can be interpreted as meaning that games belong to an area quite distinct from that of ‘real life’, with no overlap between the two. Previous writers on games, according to Caillois, have failed to see that ‘jeu et vie courante sont constamment et partout domaines antagonistes [*sic*] et simultanés’ (p.135). What this indicates to Caillois is that studying the transformation of games over time does not tell you as much about the nature of games as those who have tracked these changes imagined. These changes, however, ‘établissent, comme par ricochet, que le jeu est consubstantiel à la culture, dont les manifestations les plus remarquables et les plus complexes apparaissent étroitement associées à des structures de jeux prises au sérieux [...]’ (p.136). It is not surprising that Caillois can think of no clearer explanation than ‘comme par ricochet’, because his thinking is getting confused here. Games and everyday life were ‘antagonistes’, now games are ‘consubstantiel à la culture’.

It is understandable at this stage that Caillois wishes to abandon the question, 'à la fin, la question de savoir qui a précédé l'autre, le jeu ou la structure sérieuse se présente comme assez vaine' (p.136). Caillois seems to have lost confidence in his own argument now.

Attempting to distinguish between reality and games, Caillois argues that it is the 'activities' going on within the two 'structures' that are relevant, 'les structures du jeu et les structures utiles sont souvent identiques, mais les activités respectives qu'elles ordonnent sont irréductibles l'une à l'autre en un temps et en un lieu donnés' (p.136). Just when this point seems firmly established:

Cependant, ce qui s'exprime dans les jeux n'est pas différent de ce qu'exprime une culture. Les ressorts coïncident. Certes, avec le temps, quand une culture évolue, ce qui était institution peut sans doute se trouver dégradé. [...] Mais le seul fait qu'on puisse reconnaître dans un jeu un ancien élément important du mécanisme social, révèle une extraordinaire connivence et de surprenantes possibilités d'échange entre les deux domaines. (JH, pp.136-37)

It seems that Caillois reverts here to the theory with which he started out, and which he himself discarded.

The same attitudes or impulses can be found in games and in the 'real world', though not playing the same role or being equally respected, for instance, 'le besoin de s'affirmer, l'ambition de se montrer le meilleur, le goût du défi, du record, ou simplement la difficulté vaincue' (p.138). This suggests the two worlds may not be quite so antagonistic. Each culture will differ on the values it finds socially useful. There will be

Une répartition [...] dans chaque culture entre les valeurs à qui est reconnue une efficacité sociale et les autres. Celles-ci s'épanouissent alors dans les domaines secondaires qui leur sont abandonnés et où celui du jeu occupe une place importante. Aussi est-il possible de se demander si la diversité des cultures, les traits particuliers qui donnent à chacune sa physionomie originale, ne sont pas sans relations avec la nature de certains des jeux qu'on y voit prospérer et qui ne bénéficient pas ailleurs de la même popularité. (JH, pp.139-40)

It seems here that it is the values not deemed socially useful by a society – and therefore not adopted by it – that are being allied here with games. But Caillois surely intends to draw a parallel between productive values and games.

Caillois, working his way towards declaring that he wishes to establish a sociology based on games admits, with a complete lack of sincerity, that this venture is ‘une opération téméraire et probablement fallacieuse’. He goes on to argue the case against such an undertaking:

Chaque culture connaît et pratique simultanément un grand nombre de jeux d’espèces différentes. Surtout, il n’est pas possible de déterminer sans analyse préalable lesquels s’accordent avec les valeurs institutionnelles, les confirment, les renforcent, et lesquels, à l’inverse, les contredisent, les bafouent et représentent ainsi, dans la société considérée, des compensations ou des soupapes de sûreté. (JH, p.140)

These factors will not weigh with him, however. It seems enough to have shown his awareness of them.

Remembering how he had described the activities within the ‘structures’ of games and societies as ‘irréductibles l’une à l’autre’ (p.136), it is surprising to read how ‘le jeu occupe un domaine propre dont le contenu est variable et parfois même interchangeable avec celui de la vie courante’ (p.141).

Caillois closes this section with a new reason for why games can tell you more about the society in which they are played:

Cette liberté, cette intensité, le fait que la conduite qui s’en trouve exaltée se développe dans un monde séparé, idéal, à l’abri de toute conséquence fatale, expliquent, selon moi, la fertilité culturelle des jeux et font comprendre comment le choix dont ils témoignent révèle pour sa part le visage, le style et les valeurs de chaque société. (JH, pp.141-42)

The significant factor now, and one he has not focused on previously, is the state of mind of the player.

Despite the reservations he has mentioned, Caillois is happy to continue with his games-based sociology:

Il ne me paraît pas au-delà de toute conjecture raisonnable de rechercher si le destin même des cultures, leur chance de réussite, leur risque de stagnation, ne se trouvent pas également inscrits dans la préférence qu'elles accordent à l'une ou à l'autre des catégories élémentaires où j'ai cru pouvoir répartir les jeux et qui n'ont pas toutes une égale fécondité. (JH, p.142)

Caillois is making a major claim here for the importance of games. They will not only enlighten you about a particular society, they can determine the fate of that society.

On the shaky foundations he has laid, he is not afraid to take on a task whose scope, he admits, is extremely broad, 'je n'entreprends pas seulement une sociologie des jeux. J'ai l'idée de jeter les fondements d'une sociologie *à partir des jeux*' (p.142).

The reader is put on notice that this is no small undertaking.

The different categories of games which Caillois has previously identified do not exist just in isolation, he argues; they can also be combined. In his sociological study, he focuses on the combination of mimicry and vertigo, on the one hand, and chance and merit on the other. The former societies he would refer to as 'sociétés à tohu-bohu' (p.171), the latter as 'sociétés à comptabilité' (p.172). I will focus on Caillois's treatment of primitive societies.

In discussing the interdependence of games and culture, Caillois asserts that games are in a passive role as regards the culture in which they are played, 'les jeux sont largement dépendants des cultures où ils sont pratiqués' (p.162). He assumes that the most popular games in a society will have similar characteristics, values and attitudes, 'ces jeux préférés et plus répandus manifestent, pour une part, les tendances, les goûts, les façons de raisonner les plus communes et, en même temps, ils éduquent et entraînent les joueurs dans ces mêmes vertus ou ces mêmes travers, ils les confirment insidieusement dans leurs habitudes ou leurs préférences' (pp.163-64). As he himself pointed out, however, the most popular games can differ widely in their characteristics. To take one of the examples he gives: in the Anglo-Saxon world golf is undeniably a popular game and one in which, if the players should cheat, the whole game becomes pointless. Caillois links this with the claim that in the Anglo-Saxon world, citizens are honest in paying their taxes, and in their dealings generally with the state. This is little better, however, than an idiosyncratic observation. So many other factors would have to be considered, which would undoubtedly outweigh the playing

of golf in importance (and for how long have significant numbers been playing golf relative to the many centuries of taxes?). Caillois, with commendable honesty, himself deprives his argument of much of its validity:

Il est clair que des diagnostics de cette espèce demeurent infiniment délicats. Il convient de recouper sévèrement, à partir d'autres données, ceux qui paraissent les plus évidentes. Généralement d'ailleurs, la multitude et la variété des jeux simultanément en faveur dans une même culture leur enlèvent à l'avance toute signification. Enfin, il arrive que le jeu apporte une compensation sans portée, une issue plaisante et fictive aux tendances délictueuses que la loi ou l'opinion réprime et condamne. (JH, p.167)

Caillois is again reminding us of the shakiness of his theory. These reminders, and the uncertainty generated in the reader by his lapses in logic and some rather unconvincing examples, do not make for a very cohesive project. It certainly would be a more rounded and deeper analysis if Caillois were to consider the other factors of importance to which he occasionally refers. These arguments have a potentially devastating impact on his work and yet he does not rebut them. The existence of a link of any kind between games and society – be it evident or very small – is justification enough for Caillois, 'dès lors, le chemin semble ouvert pour concevoir une entreprise plus ample et en apparence plus téméraire, mais peut-être moins aléatoire que la simple recherche de corrélations épisodiques' (p.168). He has not really demonstrated credibly that it is not an arbitrary exercise, however.

The principles underlying and regulating games, Caillois argues, must filter out beyond their closed world into the wider society. Now these principles are alleged to play an active role, 'les principes des jeux, ressorts tenaces et répandus de l'activité humaine, si tenaces et si répandus qu'ils paraissent constants et universels, doivent marquer profondément les types de société' (pp.169-70). Caillois's project seems, as he has already made clear on a number of occasions, to be really significant. It is 'un projet qui ne vise à rien moins qu'à tenter de définir les mécanismes ultimes des sociétés, leurs postulats implicites les plus diffus et les plus indistincts' (p.170). But just as the reader is wondering at the extent of the insights to be imparted, Caillois, rapidly and immediately, limits his study:

Ces ressorts fondamentaux sont forcément d'une nature et d'une portée si étales que d'en dénoncer l'influence ne saurait à peu près rien ajouter à la

description fine de la structure des sociétés étudiées. C'est au plus proposer, pour désigner celles-ci, un choix nouveau d'étiquettes et de dénominations génériques. (JH, p.170)

Is there a note of disappointment in 'au plus'? Any revelations, in any case, will remain superficial. His sociology will produce 'au plus' a new terminology: we are not in fact to learn about the 'mécanismes ultimes des sociétés' in any depth. Caillois, in the next sentence, is more upbeat suddenly. He is hopeful that these fresh terms will in themselves provide satisfying insights into societies:

Cependant, si la nomenclature adoptée est reconnue correspondre à des oppositions capitales, elle tend à instituer du fait même, pour la classification des sociétés, une dichotomie aussi radicale que celle qui, par exemple, sépare les cryptogames et les phanérogames pour les plantes, les vertébrés et les invertébrés chez les animaux. (JH, pp.170-71)

This is putting a brave face on what Caillois may well feel is an anti-climax, or at least an acknowledgement that it is not possible for him to do everything he might wish to achieve. His previous build-up has failed to yield everything it promised. Now he is advancing a major new claim of a different kind. We have now moved into the area of classification alone, where Caillois divides societies, as I have mentioned, into 'sociétés à tohu-bohu' and 'sociétés à comptabilité', according to whether mimicry and ilinx, or agôn and alea respectively dominate. This, then, is the heart of his games-based sociology.

Caillois is interested in identifying the cohesive factors in primitive societies (interestingly, he makes no overt reference to the sacred here). He focuses especially on their use of masks in festivals, with which he has of course already dealt in *L'Homme et le Sacré*. Masks allow the wearer to imitate and identify with – to become, even – the powers that normally intimidate him. Excitement mounts, in the mask-wearer and his audience and vertigo takes the place of mimicry. The excesses of the festival 'font du vertige partagé le point culminant et le lien de l'existence collective' (p.175). These societies do not normally hang together, Caillois claims. This is quite the opposite of what he wrote in *L'Homme et le Sacré*. Now this shared vertigo

renforce une cohérence fragile qui, morne et de peu de portée, se maintiendrait difficilement s'il n'y avait cette explosion périodique qui rapproche, rassemble et fait communier des individus absorbés, le reste du temps, par leurs préoccupations domestiques et par des soucis quasi exclusivement privés. (JH, p.175)

I give this description of a primitive society in full as it contrasts so sharply with the tightly knit, interdependent groups presented in *L'Homme et le Sacré*. There the common good seemed of primary importance. What has become, for instance, of the complex system of mutual services? Masks, no longer now the sacred, constitute 'le vrai lien social' (p.176). Panoff accuses Caillois of ignorance of well-established facts here. He writes that Caillois is incorrect 'quand il affirme péremptoirement que les sociétés à masques étaient toujours en même temps des sociétés dans lesquelles l'extase jouait un rôle essentiel, les porteurs de masques entrant nécessairement en transe, ce qui est une généralisation abusive'.⁷

Whether it be cause or consequence, 'chaque fois qu'une haute culture réussit à émerger du chaos originel, on constate une sensible régression des puissances de vertige et de simulacre' (p.193). Panoff cannot let Caillois escape with some of his cultural assumptions here and in relation to the expression 'haute culture' writes 'on croirait lire un auteur allemand de la fin du XIXe siècle'.⁸ Panoff has a valid point to make but his argument suffers, as it often does, from his exaggeration. He has a more serious point to make in relation to the inadequacy of Caillois's research for this book:

Hormis deux ouvrages, *Mitra-Varuna* (1948) de Dumézil, [...] et *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (1951) de Mircea Eliade, il ne se réfère pas à des travaux ethnologiques ou historiques publiés dans les vingt années précédant son propre livre. Comme si rien n'avait été fait ni aucune lumière nouvelle apportée sur le sujet au long d'une période qui vit précisément l'épanouissement de l'ethnologie scientifique!⁹

What Panoff sees as Caillois's desire to be original at all cost led him to proceed in a way quite different from normal scientific endeavour, which builds on what has been previously established.¹⁰ Caillois's scant references to other authorities certainly make him appear to be working outside the well-established sociological field. It is not

⁷ Panoff, p. 78.

⁸ Panoff, p. 80.

⁹ Panoff, p. 76.

¹⁰ See Panoff, p.87.

certain that this is because of vanity on his part, however. There may be a simpler reason. This is manifestly not a carefully written book. The first part of *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, in which Caillois divides games into four categories, is coherent and well-argued. There is always the possibility of course that, just as Caillois expanded on Huizinga, some other writer may add to what he has achieved here. There has been a great deal of research in this area since Huizinga's and Caillois's work. Caillois's contribution is not definitive, then, although he did advance our understanding of the phenomenon of games. The problems arise in the sociological section of the book. Caillois seems not to have thought through what he was doing. He is aware of the complexities of his task. This should have inspired him to greater, not lesser care. His argument is poorly structured and indecisive, and in the presentation of societies in which masks were central, very different from his previous treatment of the subject. He did not invest a great deal of thought – or of himself – in this book. He saw, perhaps, a glimmer of an interesting possibility, which attracted him as someone looking for that key to universal understanding. While the undertaking requires a lot more than what he was willing to give it, there is no doubt that individual insights and formulations can both fascinate and stimulate the reader. First Huizinga, then Caillois, were pioneers in realising the importance of games and making them objects of study.

An appendix to *L'Homme et le Sacré* entitled 'Jeu et sacré' by providing a link between games, the sacred and warfare shows the inter-connectedness of Caillois's thinking. Caillois, firstly, while generously praising Huizinga's work on games, cannot agree with his linking of games with the sacred. While engaged in games, man is in control, in Caillois's view: 'par le sacré, source de la toute-puissance, le fidèle se sent débordé. Il est désarmé en face de lui, et à sa complète merci. Dans le jeu, c'est opposé: tout est humain, inventé par l'homme créateur' (HS, p.207). For Caillois, there is a hierarchical relationship between the sacred, everyday life and games, and that is the order in which they should be placed 'sacré – profane – ludique' (p.211):

Sacré et ludique se rassemblent dans la mesure où ils s'opposent tous les deux à la vie pratique, mais ils occupent vis-à-vis d'elle des situations symétriques. Le jeu doit la redouter: elle le brise ou le dissipe au premier choc. A l'inverse, elle est suspendue [...] au pouvoir souverain du sacré. (HS, p.211)

Huizinga had written of the declining importance of games in society (a state of affairs which certainly no longer holds true). Caillois, with some misgivings, agrees, and this ties in with his generally pessimistic stance on man and society:

Monde non sacré, sans fêtes, sans jeux, par conséquent sans repères fixes, sans principes de dévouement et sans licence créatrice, monde où l'intérêt immédiat, le cynisme et la négation de toute norme non seulement existent, mais sont érigés en absolus à la place des règles que supposent tout jeu, toute noble activité et honorable compétition: qu'on ne s'étonne pas s'il s'y rencontre peu de choses qui ne conduisent pas à la guerre'. (HS, p.212)

It is not even a question of 'la guerre-tournoi', which at least calls for some skill and conventional regulations; the threat looms of 'la guerre-violence' (p.212). Caillois's bleak view of a fractured society is unequivocally expressed here. It is clear that man, in Caillois's estimation, needs transcendent values if moral standards are to be maintained. Society needs rites, rules, in order to be cohesive. We have seen that Caillois has a somewhat less depressed view of society in *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, where he attributes a major place and major importance to games, even in modern society. Despite differences of emphasis, however, these major societal questions are all interlinked for Caillois, and it is not surprising that his sociological researches should have included an analysis of warfare, *Bellone ou La Pente de la guerre*.

Bellone continues Caillois's interest in 'total phenomena'. War is a time when a nation as a whole comes together and works towards a common aim. It is a time of great intensity and unwavering sense of purpose. As a sect is characterised by its cohesion, so too society in time of war presents a unified appearance. It could not fail to attract Caillois's interest for these reasons, and also because it exemplified his theories regarding renewal in society.

Bellone is a work in two parts. That placed second, 'Le Vertige de la guerre' was in fact written first, in 1951. It was published together with the first part, 'La Guerre et le Développement de l'Etat', eleven years later in 1962. As will be argued, Caillois's treatment of the subject is somewhat perfunctory and compares unfavourably with even the work of other generalists.

'La Guerre et le Développement de l'Etat' is a selective account of the evolution of war from its limited, rule-bound and specialised practice in the European Middle Ages (and in certain ancient societies such as China) into the all-out, total war of the twentieth century. Caillois seems more interested in theories of war and of warfare than in its actual practice or its social and political implications, contemporary or historic. His account of the history of war is rather literary and leans heavily on a small number of theorists: for example, Sun-Tze, Hippolyte de Guibert and Joseph de Maistre.

Caillois starts, as he often does, by defining his terms. War is an 'entreprise concertée de destruction' (p.13). The differing kinds of warfare emerge from, and reveal, different sorts of societies. As was the case with games, Caillois looks for the link between an activity and the society in which it is practised. Caillois offers a number of categories:

La guerre des sociétés peu différenciées, qui met aux prises des tribus aux moyens et aux institutions rudimentaires; la guerre des sociétés féodales ou hiérarchiques, qui apparaît comme la fonction d'une aristocratie spécialisée; la guerre impériale qui se produit quand une nation de cohésion et de culture plus complexes étend par la force sa domination sur les peuplades qui l'entourent et les inclut dans un ensemble organisé; la guerre nationale enfin qui oppose les ressources en hommes et en matériel de puissants Etats. (B, p.15)

With his propensity for seeing analogies, each type of war has parallels for Caillois with some other form of human activity. Nothing exists in isolation, 'chacune de ces sortes de guerre fait penser à une autre activité humaine avec laquelle elle offre de saisissantes analogies. La guerre primitive est apparentée à la chasse: l'ennemi est un gibier qu'il s'agit de surprendre' (p.15).

The scale of Caillois's undertaking is, potentially, so vast relative to the amount of space devoted to it that his study of each kind of warfare necessarily consists of a highly compressed summary. Inevitably, each contains many broad statements, which are frequently not backed up by reference to any academic authority.

Caillois starts his panoramic view of the evolution of warfare with an analysis of primitive society where war was scarcely distinguished from peace, and where

festivals were the highpoint of existence. As stated in *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, they are 'le lien social par excellence' (p.16). War moved on quickly from this early stage. The emergence of rules and disciplined troops indicates that 'la société est devenue un Etat' (p.18). Caillois does not necessarily agree with those historians who argue that war is at the origin of the creation of states. For him, cause and effect cannot satisfactorily be distinguished, 'mieux vaut constater en des cas précis que le progrès des institutions politiques accompagne effectivement la pratique de la guerre' (p.20). Wars bring leaders to prominence, and lead to more settled living conditions and the development of two separate classes, soldiers and farmers, the former being a small élite. Victory may also bring with it a third class, of slaves, who must be regulated and put to work. The system is feudal in nature and can be contrasted with primitive republicanism, which is not characterised by clearly defined castes.

Caillois goes on to consider imperial wars. These wars are characterised by total dissymmetry, one force far exceeding the other in strength. This factor leads to their disappearance, as potential victims are swallowed up.

Courtly warfare, Caillois's next focus of attention, will lead nicely into his digression on war in classical China. It takes place in feudal societies and is more 'une lutte réglée qui offre tous les caractères du jeu' (p.26). The prized qualities are 'courtoisie, modération, formalisme, goût du combat singulier où l'on rivalise de bravoure et de générosité' (p.30). Courtly war reflects and underlines social structures. The analogy Caillois draws between Classical China and eighteenth-century France is original and evocative. This period in China demonstrated 'la tentative [...] la plus persévérante et la plus méthodique que l'humanité ait connue, pour tempérer la violence des conflits armés' (p.32). All of the Chinese writers cited by Caillois viewed war as a catastrophe, albeit one that cannot sometimes be avoided. Sun-Tze, for example, writes that if a prince or general is obliged to go to war, he will attain excellence if he is victorious without actually entering into battle, 'un stratège averti sait vaincre sans courir le risque du combat' (p.40). The principal virtue in the conduct of war is moderation, which thus vitiates the nature of war itself. With the exception of Chinese treatment of 'Barbarians' who had to endure 'lutte à mort, combat opiniâtre et persécution du vaincu,' formalism made of war 'une joute de prestige plutôt qu'un combat véritable' (p.48).

In the West, such an undermining of the savagery basic to warfare characterised the period between the Middle Ages and the French Revolution:

Il est peu de caractéristiques de la guerre selon Sun-Tsé, Se-Ma et Outsé qui ne se retrouvent dans la guerre selon Puységur, Joly de Maizeroy, Montecuculli ou Maurice Saxe.

Le rapprochement serait encore plus significatif avec la guerre féodale, où le classement des honneurs entre les chevaliers joue le rôle fondamental, cependant que les fantassins n'apparaissent guère que comme les domestiques des seigneurs. En Chine aussi, les piétons ne comptent pas. (B, p.54)

Amiot's translations of these Chinese writers appeared in 1772. That same year saw the publication of Hippolyte de Guibert's *Essai général de tactique* in which he attacked the limited and ceremonious nature of war in his time. The situation would be different, he argued, 'si, des sujets du prince, on faisait des citoyens; et des citoyens, des soldats' (p.54). Two thousand years previously, war had changed in China because of ideas that would emerge in France during the Enlightenment:

Aux deux extrémités du monde, à deux millénaires de distance, des révolutions symétriques ont eu lieu, répondant sans doute aux mêmes besoins, entraînant certainement des conséquences parallèles. Dans les deux cas, l'égalité des droits nouvellement acquise, paraît avoir inauguré un style de guerre inédit et farouche. De fait, quand le peuple est admis à combattre, la guerre doit nécessairement cesser d'être un jeu, un tournoi et une parade. Elle devient sérieuse. (B, p.56)

The structure of the army had changed with the invention of fire-arms. The infantry acquired a greater significance, and this coincided with the surge of democracy in revolutionary France. Caillois uses Hippolyte de Guibert's writings to take the reader through this period, paraphrasing and quoting him at some length. He finds him superior to Clausewitz, as he foresaw and even proposed the transformation of the army under the influence of democracy. Guibert believed in a national army, and soldier citizens. Half a century before Clausewitz, Caillois points out, he saw how competition between opposing forces would lead to excess. He proposed many reforms in his writings, such as proper pay, provision for soldiers' families and for their retirement. What he could not foresee, says Caillois, is that these changes, which eventually came about, would, by heightening the effectiveness and commitment of armies, actually increase the scale of war and destruction. Guibert, though he does not

use the term, in effect suggests that a republic would be the form of government most compatible with an efficient and dedicated army:

Il pressent, il se rappelle que la guerre ne fut, ne redeviendra sérieuse, qu'autant que le peuple, que la nation y prendront part. C'est en ce point qu'il est plus révolutionnaire que tous les Philosophes réunis. On dirait qu'il sait qu'il existe entre la guerre et la démocratie une mutuelle connivence, une complicité naturelle et féconde, car c'est dans la république seule que l'Etat est tout entier militaire. (B, p.94)

Caillois, still focusing on the army itself, goes on to chart how, under the influence of the American Revolution and its own experience in Corsica, it chose to serve the *Assemblée Nationale*. Officers who had served in America had learned that victory is often achieved by not following the rules of formal warfare. From 1790 on, the army was open to all and conscription soon became a reality, both because of the enthusiasm inspired by defending the new Republic and later, the necessity to do so, 'la Révolution a établi le suffrage universel et le service militaire obligatoire' (p.115). War now becomes total, involving all the population and resources of the State. Caillois quotes the reservations of contemporary writers, such as Joseph de Maistre and Chateaubriand, about these changes. He refers too to Clausewitz who knew everything had changed, that the principles previously governing warfare no longer applied.

Caillois portrays the seemingly inexorable evolution of early twentieth century society from liberal democracy to totalitarianism. Caillois argues that his analysis could be used to explain the genesis of totalitarian states, which are modelled so clearly on the army – no private ownership, absolute authority, universal conscription, complete equality. Society in fact adapts to its kind of army, 'elle cherche à s'ordonner spontanément et intégralement selon la formule éprouvée et prestigieuse que l'armée lui propose' (pp.119-20). Society can indeed appear to be a less developed form of army and in wartime can be mobilised in military fashion.

Caillois refers to the writings of Jean Jaurès, who strongly felt that, for the citizen-soldier's morale, the army and the nation should be identified with each other. Jaurès recommended that soldiers be recruited on a regional basis and maintain links with their community. Caillois seems to have used Guibert and Jaurès to cover changes that

would come. Prophetic writers, in their works, they called for reforms that would be realised, with results they could not have anticipated:

Guibert désirait essentiellement donner au soldat la conscience du citoyen. Les événements, avec le passage de l'ordre monarchique à l'ordre républicain, amenèrent également le règne de la nation armée et des guerres nationales, passionnées et meurtrières. Jaurès souhaitait identifier l'armée et la nation, faire coïncider le domaine civil et le domaine militaire. Le rapprochement se produisit et il en sortit la société militarisée où, dès son enfance, le citoyen est revêtu d'un uniforme, instruit aux exercices guerriers, élevé dans le culte et la pratique de la discipline. (B, p.133)

Caillois's basic thesis in this section of the book – that war has become more terrible and destructive as it has ceased to be the arcane craft of a minority and been democratised – is unoriginal and is indeed orthodox. The impact of the French Revolution and of the *levée en masse* on warfare has been exhaustively demonstrated and is nowhere disputed. Likewise, other contemporary writers explored, in more depth than Caillois, the links between industry, democracy and mass warfare.

For example, Raymond Aron,¹¹ in his essay, 'War and Industrial Society', examined Comte's thesis that the development of industrial society would make war impossible, because the military spirit belonged to earlier and more primitive forms of society. He noted that Comte's optimism has of course been disproved by the events of the twentieth century. As Aron shows, industrialisation, through allowing for the systematic production on a large scale of ever more powerful weapons, and the development of mass society (which has aided the development of both conscription and propaganda), while not the cause of wars, has made them larger and more destructive. Those who believe that history is cyclical, not a linear progression towards improvement, and that war is a recurrent feature of all types of society (for example, the German historian Spengler, Nietzsche) appear to have been vindicated. Aron himself sees similarities between the causes and effects of the wars between 1914-1945 and the Peloponnesian Wars of the fifth century BC (a search for hegemony by Germany/Sparta, the weakening of the European/Greek civilisation). Most of Aron's paper consists of a careful analysis of the explanations offered by various theories (in particular Marxism) of the causes of the first and second world

¹¹ 'War and Industrial Society', in *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology*, ed. by Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals, 2nd edn (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp.359-402.

wars, and of the likelihood that the contemporary situation (principally the superpower rivalry) would lead to a catastrophic nuclear war.

Aron's essay is more focused than Caillois's book. He is concerned not with the history of warfare but with the causes of war in contemporary society. His argument is much more detailed, and less idiosyncratic and selective. While ambitious in scope, it is more solidly grounded in an empirical analysis of political, economic and diplomatic factors, and less prone to sweeping generalisations. He shows less interest than Caillois in what could be termed the aesthetics of war, or in the literature of military theory narrowly defined, being more concerned with the context in which wars occur. In short, Aron appears to approach the issue from the perspective of an historian/political scientist, rather than that of a philosopher or literary critic.

Curiously, in this first section of *Bellone*, Caillois omits to mention in any detail the ways in which the two World Wars were fought – though both would have supported his thesis that in their different ways the rise of egalitarianism and the industrial revolution made possible the vast, technically advanced conscript armies which fought those wars. He also makes no direct mention of the French experience in those two wars. Equally, he does not draw from the contemporary French experiences in Indochina and Algeria, which demonstrated both the connection between the strength of the popular will and success in war, and the limitations of technically advanced armies pitted against unorthodox opponents. He may not have wished to descend into journalism or current controversy, but his book would presumably have had a much greater and more direct impact had he done so, and he would have found various contemporary wars to be a valuable source of material.

Caillois also overlooks other significant issues. In his discussion of the idea of the national army, for example, he does not discuss the revival during the Renaissance (above all in Machiavelli), and the subsequent continuation in English and then American thinking, of the republican Roman concept of the citizen army as a bulwark against tyranny, a school of citizenship. Thus Guibert's ideas were by no means as novel as Caillois suggests, and might indeed be seen as simply one expression of a commonly held view.

The second part of *Bellone*, 'Le Vertige de la guerre', is perhaps more interesting, largely as an exercise in cultural criticism and anthropology (though there are substantial areas of overlap with the first part). Caillois offers some account of the fascination war has exerted over artists, emphasising the perverse, indeed nihilistic attractions of destruction and death – the horror of war, much greater in the twentieth century than ever before, having for some an almost aesthetic pull. He also stresses, in terms familiar from the first part, the role of war in the evolution of the state and economy. He suggests that war is ultimately more a totalitarian than a democratic endeavour (though of course, by the time he was writing, the democracies, especially the United States, had proved more effective than the Axis powers in mobilising their resources in the cause of total war).

Of the arguments advanced in this second part of his book, Caillois seems most committed to suggesting that war – modern, total warfare – is a manifestation of the sacred in our times. It is 'la seule manifestation du sacré que le monde contemporain ait su produire à la mesure des moyens et des ressources gigantesques dont il dispose' (p.195). In subverting the values people hold dear 'elle dispense des respects et lève les interdits qui sont les conditions de la vie en société. Elle remplit le rôle du "sacré de transgression", celui qui apparaît dans la fête' (p.198).¹² To illustrate his point about the now divine nature of war, he refers to some 'prophètes de la guerre' as he calls them (title, chapter 2). Writers now render homage to war 'parce que de plus en plus, elle est sentie comme toute-puissante et inexorable, et par conséquent comme sacrée' (p.154). He profiles in particular Proudhon, Ruskin and Dostoievsky, writing between 1860 and 1880. A century earlier, Caillois suggests, none of them would have bothered writing on war. It was not seen as significant until it was practised on a large scale.

Proudhon published his *La Guerre et la Paix* in 1861. He presented war as a 'fait divin', distinguishing man from animals. It is the 'expression plastique du droit divin, la source suprême de la justice et de la poésie' (p.158). Proudhon demonstrates the ambivalence of his attitude, however, by stating at the end of his book that man no longer desires war. History would unfortunately show him to be incorrect. Caillois

¹² Apollinaire had an equivalent intuition in 'Fête' (*Calligrammes*), writing about the carnival-like atmosphere on the battlefield, 'Feu d'artifice en acier/ Qu'il est charmant cet éclairage/ Artifice d'artificier/ Mêler quelque grâce au courage'.

points to Ruskin's ambivalence too. Dostoievsky, in *Un homme paradoxal* (1876) exalts war and its beneficial effect on the human character.

René Quinton's *Maximes sur la guerre* was published in 1930, and, while not a great work, came to be seen as typical of a certain viewpoint. It clearly saw war as a manifestation of the sacred. Quinton saw it as the natural state for men, the equivalent of motherhood for women. Battlefields are holy places. Caillois summarizes as follows the difference between Quinton and others and those writing in the nineteenth century:

Joseph de Maistre, Proudhon, Ruskin, Dostoïevsky vantent la guerre à cause des bienfaits dont ils la croient l'origine. Ils affirment qu'elle fonde l'honneur, l'art et la culture. Ils l'exaltent dans la proportion où ils la tiennent pour féconde et civilisatrice. Au contraire, Quinton l'estime dans la mesure où, détruisant la civilisation, elle rend l'homme aux lois simples et brutales de la nature. (B, p.178)

Ernst Jünger exalts, exaggerates even, war's technical side. Technology for him will make war perfect. Jünger saw war as an end in itself. Man's true nature breaks through the thin layer of civilisation and he is freed from all pretence, 'des théories comme celles de Quinton, un lyrisme comme celui de Jünger sont si bien accordés aux tendances de l'époque que des régimes s'établissent, qui s'en réclament ouvertement' (p.183). Heads of State would now exalt war too.

Caillois has already compared war's disregard for normal rules and principles to the 'sacré de transgression', so much a part of ancient rituals. He now elaborates on the similarities – and differences – between wars and festivals. Both are periods of excess and waste. Emotions run high. The concerns of the group take precedence over individual ones. The war/peace cycle reproduces that of rituals and ordinary time. The normal moral order is overthrown – eating the totem animal becomes acceptable during festivals, for example. Caillois, ever alert for parallels, finds one with the animal kingdom, 'le renversement des normes est si fort qu'on songe presque, dans l'univers animal, au cycle qui fait succéder chez les criquets pèlerins une génération d'insectes nomades et grégaires, munis d'ailes puissantes qui les portent au loin par nuages épais, à une génération d'insectes aux ailes atrophiées, sédentaires et vivant chacun dans son trou' (pp.210-11). Like festivals, wars are a force for renewal, 'les

remèdes uniques d'une inévitable usure' (p.212). There are some differences. For example, some wars are not at all bloody, while festivals can be. Festivals are essentially 'volonté de communion, tandis que la guerre est d'abord volonté de nuire' (p.216).

In his brief conclusion Caillois turns his attention principally to the threat of nuclear warfare: war now is 'planetary'. The only hope of salvation for mankind lies in 'l'éducation de l'homme' (p.234), although Caillois is not hopeful, 'toutefois, je demeure effrayé de la lenteur inévitable de pareille démarche, quand je me souviens qu'il s'agit de gagner de vitesse la guerre absolue' (p.234).

Caillois seems happier as analyst of the aesthetic of war and as anthropologist than as an historian or military theorist. Nevertheless, none of his themes is developed very fully. Each would repay fuller study. For example, in writing about artists and war, he makes no reference to the anti-war writing of, say, Remarque, Barbusse or the English war poets, or to the role of the cinema in diffusing images – glamorous or bloody – of war. In consequence, the whole seems both uneven and rather hastily composed.

The work on war of the prominent anthropologist, Malinowski, bears some comparison to aspects of Caillois's work.¹³ His analysis demonstrates that it is not a biological necessity, but that all forms of fighting are complex cultural responses due not to the direct dictates of any biological or psychological impulse, but to collective forms of sentiment and value. Malinowski cites several instances from his own researches and those of other anthropologists. Aggression may be natural, but it can be channelled into other expressions, some involving symbolic rather than actual conflict. Again, not all forms of organised violence (e.g. armed raids on other tribes) equate to modern warfare. Many involve clearly understood limits to the degree of violence actually inflicted, and do not lead to any changes in relative standings. However, war is closely connected with the evolution of the state: wars of conquest, and group survival necessitated the development of clear forms of administrative, political and legal organisation, which in turn made it possible to wage war on a more ambitious scale. The development of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century represents the

¹³ Bronislaw Malinowski, 'An Anthropological Analysis of War', in *War: Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology*, pp.245-68.

ultimate conclusion of this process – the entire nation is mobilised to strengthen the aggressive capacities of the state. Like Caillois, Malinowski evokes the theatrical, almost choreographed nature of much violence in primitive societies, and the close connection between the evolution of the modern state and the increase in the deadliness of war. His arguments are, however, based more closely on his anthropological research and are more fully developed.

Overall, both parts of *Bellone*, and the work as a whole, seem too incomplete, and too sketchy, to amount to more than a series of reflections. Caillois has fallen between two or more stools. He has neither provided a comprehensive history of war (which was scarcely his intention), nor has he offered a detailed analysis of those questions which appear most to interest him. While his references are diverse, they are also eclectic and curiously assorted. It is difficult to decide at which audience he was aiming this work, and hard to see how he would have satisfied either historians and political scientists, on the one hand, or anthropologists/psychologists on the other. A more general audience would have had many other, more coherent alternatives to choose from.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that, since Caillois wrote almost half a century ago, the rise of technology, which he identified as a key factor in universalising the experience of war, has in the developed world actually led to armies becoming, once again, smaller and more professional. Conscription is being ended, even in France. The armed forces can less plausibly be seen as the embodiment of society as a whole, and are in general less socially or politically conspicuous than before. Military dictatorship has for now vanished from Europe, if not from the world. Likewise, the total destruction of which nuclear weapons are capable has probably led to much greater public opposition to war than ever before, and an appreciation of the futility of many traditional martial values. Sports and sports stars, and ‘pop’ stars, have in many ways replaced soldiers and armies as objects of popular admiration. On the other hand, in many ‘regional conflicts’ in the developing world (Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda and Cambodia) war does seem, in the way identified by Caillois, to have become progressively more savage and to have more completely taken over and destroyed civil society.

Caillois's sociological enquiries span many decades and cover an extremely wide range of subjects. His concerns range from the sacred to the secular, from wishing to re-instate the sacred in society to, years later, the more modish study of the portrayal of death in American cinema.¹⁴ Overwhelmingly, the majority of these topics are linked by a single preoccupation: his search for coherence, cohesion, this to be accomplished through the application and force of the intellect. The work itself can be uneven. In his early days, he tended on occasion to be extreme, heavy-handed, even, when passionately involved in his subject. His analyses are not always consistent or clearly thought through. A possible explanation for this is that Caillois may lose interest after a certain point. He may wish to establish his viewpoint, but is not very interested in the details. His strong points are compelling: his talent at description, his delight in unusual information, presented with obvious interest, his personal vision, convictions and concerns which, despite himself sometimes, come through firmly. Caillois gave a great deal of his life to sociological research yet ended it with a move away from the outside world, finding a deeper satisfaction in the solitary contemplation of stones. In his observation of the world he perceived in them, there would be no unevenness or inconsistencies; there is no doubting which world genuinely held his interest.

In his sociological writings, Caillois made accessible to non-specialised readers the research of leading sociologists and anthropologists. This virtue is also a potential drawback, as the general reader may not be able to assess knowledgeably the material presented. Caillois does not just popularise or synthesise the work of others, however. He took this information and used it for his own purposes, as a springboard for his own reflections; he could never not be an independent thinker.

¹⁴ 'La Représentation de la mort' in *Instincts et Société*, pp.115-129.

CHAPTER SIX

DREAMS AND THE FANTASTIC

Caillois's work on dreams and the fantastic contains two completely opposing views of reality. On the one hand, he argues that the power of dreams undermines our hold on reality, while on the other hand for his theory of the fantastic to work, he needs to present reality as a given. This inconsistency does not trouble Caillois, who nowhere refers to it. He simply needs a working definition of reality, one that will fit in with the task in hand.

His research into these areas was very much part of his searches for wholeness. The areas may not represent mainstream, predictable scholarly choices. This was no deterrent to Caillois. In a unitary universe, all phenomena are significant, all play an important part in helping to tease out the cosmic puzzle. This approach neatly freed Caillois to follow his own interests and inclinations, though in an active rather than a passive way. The darker side of nature represented both a threat and an attraction to Caillois, and the primacy of the intellect was his weapon of choice in dealing with this.

To wake, perchance to dream

The importance of *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* exceeds its immediate subject matter. It is a work in which Caillois, among other things, becomes aware for the first time of the inherent coherence of his apparently diverse writings. In the epilogue he writes how his work on the sacred, on war and on games all form part of his desire to 'percer l'obscurité qui couvre les laboratoires interdits' (p.162). The fact of having written on such a variety of topics was clearly a matter of concern to him and it was important for such a believer in wholeness and patterns to establish that in his own output he endorsed these qualities too. At various points subsequently, the 1972

preface to *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, for instance, he would reiterate this point. Caillois also wrote on dreams in *Puissances du rêve*,¹ *Le Rêve et les sociétés humaines*² and *La Lumière des songes*.³ He considered dreams to be in their own way just another natural phenomenon, requiring his attention if his work was to be properly thorough. Since everything is connected in his world view, then each area of investigation will have truths to yield:

L'univers est innombrable, mais fertile en symétries, en coïncidences, en pléonasmes, en contradictions. Rien n'y est suspendu, isolé, flottant dans une totale indépendance. Sans cesse il se répète et sans cesse on y découvre de nouveaux prodiges. Les rêves, qui à leur façon appartiennent à l'univers, eux aussi constituent une cohérence, à un niveau du monde qui possède comme les autres ses constances et ses aberrations. (LS, pp.46-47)

Caillois's work on dreams is commonly considered to form part of his sociological investigations, but it is not immediately obvious why this should be the case. Their interest to psychologists is better established. Roger Bastide puts it bluntly in 'Sociologie du rêve':

La sociologie ne s'intéresse qu'à l'homme éveillé, comme si l'homme endormi était un homme mort. Elle laisse le soin à l'ethnologie d'étudier la place du rêve dans les civilisations traditionnelles et à la psychologie celui de découvrir dans la trame de nos songes les motivations profondes de notre action.⁴

Bastide does not accept this position, arguing that a sociology of dreams is a valid proposition. It would analyse how 'la moitié obscure et sombre de l'homme prolonge le social tout comme le social se nourrit de nos songes'.⁵ Its focus would be the function of dreams in society and their social backdrop. His essay is primarily devoted to an effort to re-socialise dreams. Bastide states clearly the issue and his own position in relation to how best dreams may be studied. Caillois's work on dreams outside *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* (a quite abstract, philosophical book) is more obviously 'ethnological' than 'sociological' and his 'agenda' is quite different from that outlined by Bastide. His preface to *Puissances du rêve* is almost identical to the essay, 'Prestiges et problèmes du rêve' published in *Le Rêve et les sociétés humaines*.

¹ *Puissances du rêve* (Paris: Club français du livre, collection "Récits", 1962).

² *Le Rêve et les sociétés humaines*, ed. Roger Caillois and G.E. von Grunebaum (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Sciences humaines, 1967).

³ *La Lumière des songes* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984).

⁴ Roger Bastide, 'Sociologie du rêve' in *Le Rêve et les sociétés humaines*, pp.177-88 (p.177).

To take the preface to *Puissances du rêve*, for instance, Caillois starts with an overview of the interpretation of dreams in various cultures at different times. All show traces of the same tradition. He returns to a dilemma he first examined in *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, the at times conflicting, at times complicitous relationship between dreams and reality. He makes no further efforts here at the kind of in-depth analysis of this issue we will see in *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, happy now to deal with the conundrum by looking at different facets of this intellectual dilemma, as treated in world literature. These two essays by Caillois testify to his wide reading and the ease with which he can move between quite differing cultures. I shall focus on *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* as it has a greater personal input from Caillois and is more revealing of his attitude towards and assessment of his work as a whole.

L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves is a book that functions on more than one level. It is concerned of course with studying dreams and the question mark they throw over reality. It also, however, as I have mentioned, provides an occasion for Caillois to examine why he is drawn to the analysis of phenomena such as the sacred and dreams. Indeed, in the closing pages, he even finds time to warn his readers about *vanitas mundi*. Caillois's enthusiasms and preoccupations often prevent him from writing books with a perfect linear structure. We have seen already in analysis of other works how he can lose the plot occasionally – even the constant addition of appendices suggests someone who cannot bear not to include all the fascinating information he knows.

In the epilogue to *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, Caillois seems momentarily beset by self-doubt. Since no-one, in truth, has any difficulty in distinguishing between dreams and reality, he wonders if his work resembles the 'logomachie laborieuse' (p.154) of philosophers, who toil away at self-inflicted dilemmas. He quickly consoles himself that his work has not been in vain, 'toute analyse reconnue rigoureuse demeure acquise' (p.156). Exercising his intellect is for him an absolute value. His attitude is not solely analytical, however. Felgine quotes his brother Roland, who observed that Caillois's concerns are dictated by 'une attitude poétique envers les

⁵ Bastide, p. 177.

choses”. Toute son œuvre, même sociologique, en est empreinte’.⁶ Caillois’s analysis, however, is not free from flaws. But, even allowing for the possibility of imperfection, Caillois sees in the light *L’Incertitude qui vient des rêves* sheds on his work to date sufficient justification for having written it. He was concerned by the diversity of topics on which he had written and now sees the ‘cohérence souterraine’ of his previous output. Now he knows what has been driving him forward:

Je veux parler d’un attrait ininterrompu pour les forces d’instinct et de vertige, du goût d’en définir la nature, d’en démonter autant que possible la sorcellerie, d’en apprécier exactement les pouvoirs, de la décision, enfin, de maintenir sur eux, contre eux, la primauté de l’intelligence et de la volonté, parce que, de ces facultés seules, surgit pour l’homme une chance de liberté et de création. (*IR*, p.156)

The concept of the ‘primauté de l’intelligence’ is primordial in understanding Caillois’s work. It underwrites everything he wrote about; his is a constant battle on behalf of the powers and capabilities of the intellect, an intellect in the service of *coherence* rather than *reason*, as I shall discuss later in this chapter. Caillois, having criticised himself, however insincerely, for writing *L’Incertitude*, abandons very quickly the case in favour of this book. The satisfaction he derives from discovering that his work is, after all, coherent, is quite short-lived and Caillois soon starts into an exposition of the trials and tribulations involved in what he is trying to do. While his analyses have not been flawless, they nonetheless represent a massive attempt on the part of one individual to take on the cosmos and account for it satisfactorily. This Herculean – Sisyphean – task could not possibly succeed. The value of Caillois’s contribution lies in the mixture of erudition and vision we have seen him bring to the undertaking, ensuring that, if at times imperfect, he will never fail to stimulate or intrigue his reader.

Caillois, by now, knows all the pitfalls in his venture. Man may think he has obtained a valuable insight; it could be ‘un mirage, peut-être un faux-pas’ (p.158). The task of grafting onto nature ‘un enchevêtrement inextricable de stratagèmes fragiles’ (p.158) is ‘une aventure entièrement hasardeuse’ (p.159). With no possible guarantee that one is on the right track, it is easy to lose heart, ‘la fatigue se compose avec l’irritation’ (p.159); this observation seems to have been borne out of experience. The ‘forces de

⁶ Felgine, p.327.

frénésie' (p.159) are ever-present, ready to lure the willing into facile and lazy solutions, which are nothing more than 'la revanche et l'empire de l'abîme originel' (p.158). Caillois admits he has experienced the temptation of giving in to these forces, but his whole work stands as testimony to his refusal to abandon the search for coherence.

Caillois's attitude to nature is interesting. He fears it, seeing it as one and the same as 'les forces d'abîme' (p.161). The perceived threat posed by nature leads to the need for Caillois to engage in 'la lente édification d'instances et de conventions assez puissantes pour permettre de la dominer et pour hâter l'avènement d'autres lois' (p.161). Dominating nature: an enormous and impossible task, even for one so given to structure and classification.

Returning to the main thesis of *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, Caillois did not find any previous work on dreams adequate. Freud's approach seemed limited to him. Nor was Caillois following in the tradition of philosophers from Sankara to Leibniz who presented reality as a tightly woven set of dreams. Caillois was struck by the coherence of dreams, their ability to mimic reality, 'parce qu'il arrive nécessairement qu'on [...] confond [les rêves] avec la réalité, au moins pendant qu'on rêve, on ne peut pas être assuré, quand on ne rêve pas, de ne pas confondre en retour la réalité avec eux' (p.10). This is the heart of his argument.

Caillois builds up his argument well, initially. He appeals to his readers' experience regarding the coherence that characterises dreams, the failings of memory (did something really happen or was it just a dream?) and the intensity of dreams. These are the qualities that enable them to mimic reality so perfectly. Everyday life is not characterised by order and while Caillois does emphasise the coherence of dreams, he also writes elsewhere, 'l'imagerie du songe, sa turbulence, sa fantaisie, ses contradictions, loin d'apparaître comme les caractères qui l'opposent au monde de la veille, sont aussi les épaves clairessemées qui continuent de témoigner de celui-ci dans une nuit qui en signifie d'abord le naufrage et la dislocation' (pp.60-61).

In a way that is reminiscent of *La Nécessité d'esprit*, Caillois's own dreams feature largely, and the tone is personal, chatty, even, in the opening pages. His dreams are

certainly ‘des merveilles d’horlogerie’ (p.18) as he describes them himself. He experiences no difficulty in reconstituting them in some detail. He avails himself of another opportunity to distance himself from the Surrealists in discussing dreams. Caillois finds Kafka’s accounts of dreams particularly convincing because, like Caillois, he multiplies in his descriptions, banal, everyday details. Surrealists accentuated the fantastic side of dreams and had a less complete understanding of them than Kafka, in Caillois’s opinion.

However persuasive Caillois’s personal tone is, it is of course neither rigorous nor objective, and so the importance of what he is saying is limited. To avoid being merely anecdotal, Caillois turns to philosophers for assistance. In apparently minimising the size of the problem they must solve, he is actually highlighting its difficulty:

Je ne leur demande, après tout, que d’abolir en raison une ombre d’incertitude, que pratiquement il ne tient qu’à moi de négliger, qui ne me gêne nullement dans la vie de tous les jours, mais que j’aimerais aussi avoir, pour la bonne règle, un motif péremptoire, irréfutable, de tenir pour nulle et non avenue.
(*IR*, p.47)

He even writes, ‘il me semble qu’un enfant devrait pouvoir le résoudre’ (pp.47-48). The sarcasm will fool no-one. He will compare his theories with those of famous great minds and – not surprisingly – his will triumph. He warns his reader now, lest he perhaps feel too relaxed after the informal opening pages of the book, ‘il me faut maintenant argumenter avec précision et porter à l’extrême la sévérité, la sécheresse de la déduction’ (p.47). The next stage of the argument does not get quite as grim as this sounds, and in fact these are the pages that could profitably be tightened up.

Caillois’s arguments are simultaneously unanswerable and unprovable. Philosophic argumentation may have no basis in reality at all as a philosopher analysing the matter may be doing so while dreaming. If a child could settle the question, then surely Pascal will have no difficulty. Caillois turns to this French thinker who was himself influenced by Descartes. In essence, Pascal argues that it is the continuity inherent in daily life that helps distinguish it from dreams, which all vary greatly. Caillois asks, if that were reversed, and dreams were to offer the continuity that characterises reality,

would dreams then seem real? Caillois then digresses to consider a new factor, the role of sleep, to which he will attribute a decisive role in this analysis:

[Le sommeil] passe pour l'intermédiaire obligatoire qui mène de la veille au rêve et inversement. Pour ma part, je n'en crois rien. Il me semble que le mot *intermédiaire* [...] s'appliquerait plus justement au rêve qu'au sommeil. J'imagine qu'il s'agit plutôt de deux variétés d'un même état. L'une – le rêve – ne peut se présenter sans le sommeil, auquel il introduit. Mais le sommeil tend au contraire à éliminer, à dissoudre le rêve, à le submerger du moins dans une nuit assez profonde pour qu'au réveil, il ne subsiste aucun indice qu'il soit jamais survenu. (IR, pp.54-55)

Perhaps Caillois is being over-clever here in wishing to abolish sleeping as the traditional intermediary between waking and dreaming. He seems to be suggesting that dreams are an intermediary, between what two states is not immediately clear. Of what state can both dreaming and sleeping be variations? Dreams seem suddenly again to be dependent on sleep. If dreaming is made possible only by sleeping, then how can dreaming lead into sleeping? Sleeping seems both vital for and inimical to dreaming. Finding a logical thread here is not easy.

Caillois writes that Pascal and other philosophers considered sleep to be 'une manière de milieu neutre' (p.55) in which falling asleep and waking up are 'indiscernables' (p.55). Caillois cannot allow this. In sleeping and waking respectively, 'il y a plongée dans l'obscur et perte de sentiment. Dans l'autre, restitution de privilèges, reconquête des pouvoirs de conscience et de gouvernement' (p.55). Here Caillois writes of sleep as a 'frontière' (p.56) and mentions 'chaque côté de la limite' (p.56) – all synonyms of 'intermédiaire' which he did not previously wish to acknowledge sleep to be. He states again that dreaming and waking are indistinguishable, as dreaming can simulate all aspects of waking, but that waking and sleeping are quite different. This is surely not in contention, however. Having rather emphatically postulated the difference between falling asleep and waking up, and that this difference is absolute and significant, he does undermine this point with the acknowledgement that dreams can include the illusion of waking up, 'il est des rêves qui comprennent un réveil' (p.57). This is certainly so, but the reader may wonder at what point Caillois's argument now stands.

Returning to Pascal's theory of the importance of continuity in distinguishing between dreams and reality, Caillois seeks to disprove it by reversing it. He presents an individual dreaming by suggestion the same dream every night and transported while he is dreaming to a different place. In that way dreams would enjoy the continuity normally granted to reality, but that would not be enough to confer on them a sense of reality, Caillois argues. This unfortunate individual would realise that, even in his changing surroundings, he was in full possession of his mental faculties. Memory would play an important role too, recalling to him his sensation of paralysis in the stable world, and the fact that there he remembers nothing. Seeming further to disprove the value of continuity, Caillois points to the inevitable amazement the hapless person transported from place to place will experience on waking up each morning. In dreams, as a rule, nothing amazes the dreamer, because this amazement testifies to his passivity, rather than his lucidity. It is not possible to mistake one state for the other:

Leur réversibilité se heurte à deux obstacles insurmontables: la connivence profonde du rêve et du sommeil, qui sont pertes de conscience et de liberté; l'incompatibilité essentielle du rêve et de la veille, qui vient du fait que la veille implique l'alerte de la conscience et la volonté redevenue disponible. Aussi aperçoit-on que ce n'est pas le rêve et la veille qu'il convient d'opposer, mais plutôt le sommeil et la veille. Ce sont des antipodes définis par des lois exclusives l'une de l'autre: la présence ou l'éclipse de l'attention. (*IR*, p.59)

Sleeping and dreaming certainly share a 'connivence profonde'. If dreaming and being awake are so incompatible, and we are here provided with a tool for distinguishing between them, how then does the opposing couple, abruptly, as it seems, come to be sleeping and being awake? These states are self-evidently 'des antipodes'.

Shortly after declaring the 'incompatibilité essentielle' (p.59) of dreaming and waking, Caillois goes on to write, 'd'une façon générale, le rêve s'éloigne de la veille seulement dans la mesure où il a partie liée avec le sommeil et où il le requiert comme l'atmosphère qui lui permet de naître et de prospérer' (p.60). Quite apart from the contradictory statements on the relationship between dreaming and sleeping – here now the latter enables dreaming to prosper – dreaming and waking have reverted to what might be called their 'compatibilité essentielle'.

Sleep now becomes the factor ensuring that we will never be able to distinguish between dreaming and waking:

C'est grâce au sommeil que l'alternative de Tchoang-Tseu et que l'argument de Descartes acquièrent leur pleine force. Ils signifient que nous ne sommes jamais assurés de ne pas rêver, c'est-à-dire que nous ne sommes pas certains que nous ne nous réveillerons pas à l'instant qui va venir, de sorte qu'à aucun moment nous n'avons le droit d'être entièrement persuadés que le monde où nous nous débattons est bien celui de la réalité, et non pas la scène fallacieuse du songe ou du cauchemar. (IR, p.61)

We might be sleeping, so we might be dreaming. This cannot be contradicted, so no other theory can possibly assert itself as more likely.

Having put forward an invincible argument, Caillois takes on Sartre's theory, argued in *L'Imaginaire*, according to which an individual's consciousness can tell him with complete certainty whether or not he is sleeping or awake as perception brings with it the certainty that it is perception. Sartre's theory does not of course allow for the fact that dreams can mimic all activities associated with being awake. No theory could stand up to this. Joseph Bertrand objects to this particular conceit:

Descartes estime qu'il n'est pas de marques certaines pour distinguer la veille d'avec le sommeil. Jean-Paul Sartre avait répondu à l'objection en montrant que seule la conscience réflexive est capable de perception. Mais Roger Caillois refuse d'attribuer à l'intuition sensible de la conscience une valeur de certitude inhérente à son contact avec le réel. Dès lors, logiquement, il n'y a plus qu'une attitude possible: nier la réalité ou du moins admettre qu'elle est en toute rigueur inconnaissable. Même la solution de l'idéalisme intégral qui lie l'être à la perception est impossible. On est en pleine absurdité. On conviendra que c'est là, pour le moins, une singulière façon de défendre la primauté de l'intelligence.⁷

It is a particular use of the intelligence, an intellectual exercise in cleverness in which words triumph over intractably mysterious phenomena. In that way the human intelligence – or Caillois's – can be said to have brought dreams within a structure of its own devising. He has not always been clear or consistent on his way to establishing his theory, although it is a theory that in fact requires little arguing, as no proof is possible. Bertrand, while calling *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* a 'brillant essai'⁸

⁷ Joseph Bertrand, 'L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves', *Revue Générale Belge*, 6 (1957), 156-57, (p.157).

⁸ Bertrand, p.156.

has little tolerance for this abuse of the intellect and his *reductio ad absurdum* is meant to highlight what he sees as Caillois's foolishness:

Certes, Roger Caillois n'est pas dupe de ses machinations oniriques. En fait, il se comporte comme s'il était tout aussi certain de la vérité des saisies immédiates de la conscience. Sinon, il n'aurait même pas écrit son livre. A moins que ce ne soit pas vraiment un livre, mais un rêve! Dès lors, comment ne pas voir en tout ceci un divertissement assez byzantin d'une intellectualité qu'il suffirait d'orienter vers l'ordre moral pour l'assurer qu'une conscience génératrice de valeurs échappe à cette incertitude prétendument insurmontable.⁹

Caillois, though, does admit it is not a problem for him or anyone else and again, it is important to realise that he is giving words an absolute power. André Chastel praises in particular Caillois's collection of data on dreams, especially noticeable in *Puissances du rêve* and his essay in *Le Rêve et les sociétés humaines*, 'peu concluantes du point de vue de la psycho-physiologie; étonnantes comme rassemblement de données empruntées aux folklores, aux conteurs et en particulier à ceux de la Chine; impressionnantes par l'interrogation: réel/irréel liée au phénomène'.¹⁰ He is not globally impressed by Caillois's work although he rightly praises Caillois's impressive erudition.

Exploring the fantastic

Caillois's interest in the fantastic is reflected principally in three works, his *Anthologie du fantastique*, *Au cœur du fantastique*¹¹ and *Images, images*.¹² There is also an important article entitled 'Le fantastique naturel' in *Cases d'un échiquier*¹³ (pp.60-73). It must be said of course that everything, not just the obviously mysterious, was a source of fascination to Caillois until he had explained it to his satisfaction and incorporated it into his world view. Jean-Max Tixier describes as follows Caillois's approach:

Contrairement à André Breton, et aux autres tenants du surréalisme, le mystère en tant que tel n'attire pas Roger Caillois. Il tâche de le résorber, c'est-à-dire

⁹ Bertrand, p.157.

¹⁰ Chastel, p.50.

¹¹ All references to *Au cœur du fantastique* are from *Cohérences aventureuses*.

¹² *Obliques*, précédé de *Images, images* (Paris: Stock, 1975).

¹³ *Cases d'un échiquier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

de le détruire afin de l'intégrer à la connaissance. Dégager la cohérence – non encore visible – qu'il suppose en lui.¹⁴

Perhaps 'to understand', rather than 'to destroy', would be a fairer choice of verb.

Marcel Schneider, author of *Littérature fantastique en France*, argues that the application of reason to the mysterious is missing the point, 'peut-on pénétrer jusqu'au cœur quand on adopte une position aussi rationnelle, extérieure et critique?'¹⁵

Caillois's writing on the fantastic is a robust answer to this question. Schneider spells out their essential differences, his being clearly the better approach, in his opinion, 'Il cherchait à *déchiffrer*, et moi à ressentir'.¹⁶ Nowhere in Caillois's work is there room for unfiltered feelings. In a rather heavy-handed way, Schneider will not allow either that tales of the fantastic can be 'un JEU avec la peur' as Caillois suggests in the preface to his anthology. Schneider wishes to banish reason completely and (a very extreme stance) demands nothing less than total belief on the part of the reader, '[Caillois] s'oppose du tout au tout à la profession de foi de Nodier, qui est aussi la mienne: "Pour intéresser dans le conte fantastique, il faut d'abord se faire croire, et une condition indispensable pour se faire croire, c'est de croire"'.¹⁷ Schneider is taking no account of suspension of disbelief.

Caillois's writings on the fantastic join his search for wholeness as part of the attempt to account for the world surrounding him, not just aspects of the external world, but also its darkest, most secret side. Roger Bozzetto places Caillois's writings in the same French tradition as those of Pierre Castex, Tzvetan Todorov and Irène Bessière.¹⁸

Caillois's method of approach is however significantly different, as Jean Molino points out. Castex approached the fantastic from an historical perspective, Todorov from a structuralist one. Caillois chooses 'le modèle thématique ou sémantique'.¹⁹ His focus is less on fantastic literature, than the world of the fantastic. Both Molino²⁰ and Laserra²¹ bring out the links between the fantastic and the sacred, the hero in such stories feeling that mixture of attraction and repulsion Otto first characterised in the sacred. The

¹⁴ Jean-Max Tixier, 'Notes sur le fantastique', *Sud*, hors série (1981), 210-214 (p.212).

¹⁵ Marcel Schneider, 'Roger Caillois, déchiffreur du fantastique', *NRF*, 164 (1966), 307-310 (p.307).

¹⁶ Schneider, p. 307.

¹⁷ Schneider, p.308.

¹⁸ Roger Bozzetto, 'Le fantastique dans la littérature des Etats-Unis', *Europe*, 707 (1988), 3-10 (p.4).

¹⁹ Jean Molino, 'Trois modèles d'analyse du fantastique', *Europe*, 611 (1980), 12-26 (p.16).

²⁰ Molino, p.18.

²¹ Laserra, p.146.

‘irruption’ of the fantastic is like that of the ‘sacré de transgression’. The influence of Bataille, and the Collège de Sociologie, still then remains.

Robert Bréchon describes ‘le merveilleux’ and ‘le fantastique’ as ‘les deux grandes catégories de la surréalité’.²² Caillois wishes to dissociate himself from the Surrealist approach of passive enjoyment of mystery. His objective is to pierce the mystery, ‘je n’aime pas ne pas comprendre’ (ACF, p.71). An implicit criticism of surrealism can be read in the following lines, ‘au lieu d’estimer aussitôt l’indéchiffré indéchiffrable et demeurer devant lui ébloui et comblé, je le tiens au contraire pour à *déchiffrer*, avec le ferme propos de venir, si je puis, d’une façon ou d’une autre, à bout de l’énigme’ (ACF, p.71). Caillois will not indulge himself in writing on these matters unless he can clarify them.

Compiling collections of the fantastic and thereby defining it are features both of *Anthologie du fantastique* and *Au cœur du fantastique*. Caillois’s anthology is a massive piece of work, bringing together tales of the fantastic from cultures around the world. Previous collections of this kind had focused on Western culture, so Caillois again expands our understanding of an area and his ability to synthesise facilitates our familiarisation with hitherto unexplored territory. Felgine refers to his ‘activité de pionnier’ and points out, ‘il est à noter que le souvenir de Caillois est souvent lié, dans le “grand public”, à ce type de publications répondant à la sensibilité de son époque’.²³ Forty years later, this kind of publication would still find a ready target audience.

Caillois’s correspondence with Paulhan on this anthology, quoted by Felgine, raises various issues. Grouping the various tales together robs them of their impact:

“C’est peut-être que l’horrible ne peut être saisi que de biais et dans l’instant, que l’anormal n’est pas chose qui s’additionne (...). Mais je crois bien que votre idée de derrière la tête est de nier le paranormal, comme vous avez nié le rêve”. Caillois acquiesce: “Ce fantastique, accumulé, perd sa vertu”. Quant à l’hypothèse de Paulhan, elle est bonne: “l’existence du paranormal me semble presque contradictoire”.²⁴

²² Robert Bréchon, *Le Surréalisme* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1971), p.90.

²³ Felgine, p.330.

²⁴ Felgine, p.331.

The evidence of Caillois's later writings suggests however that his interest lies in defining and explaining the fantastic, rather than in disproving its existence (indeed, his analyses in *Au cœur du fantastique* reveal that he himself is susceptible to its appeal). While Caillois may have for a period of time denied the existence of dreams, the major question for him, and which he tackled in *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*, published two years before the *Anthologie*, was the way in which dreams undermined our perception of reality. Caillois may not rationally accept the existence of the paranormal, as rationally he could perfectly well distinguish between dreams and reality; he chose, however, to follow a different path in dealing with these subjects.

From his very first writings on the fantastic, in the anthology, Caillois saw that it is inoperative if it is the norm:

[Le fantastique] n'a aucun sens dans un univers merveilleux. Il y est même inconcevable. Dans un monde de miracles, l'extraordinaire perd sa puissance. Il n'épouvante que s'il rompt et discrédite une ordonnance immuable, inflexible, que rien en aucun cas ne saurait modifier et qui semble la garantie même de la raison. ('De la féerie à la science-fiction', *AF*, p.9)

Caillois is much concerned in this opening article with drawing a distinction between 'le merveilleux', where the supernatural is the norm, and therefore ceases to have any impact on the reader, and 'le fantastique', where the supernatural, through being an exceptional phenomenon, surprises and terrifies:

Le féérique est un univers merveilleux qui s'ajoute au monde réel sans lui porter atteinte ni en détruire la cohérence. Le fantastique, au contraire, manifeste un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable dans le monde réel. (*AF*, p.8)

Marcel Schneider attributes this distinction to Pierre Castex, 'comme l'a fait naguère dans une thèse célèbre Pierre-Georges Castex, Caillois distingue le merveilleux du fantastique'.²⁵ In fact this distinction would seem to have been accepted in France for a long time:

[Le terme Fantasy] englobe [...] à la fois ce que nous appelons "le merveilleux" et "le fantastique" – et toutes les nuances intermédiaires, ce qui

²⁵ Schneider, p.308.

implique que, dans l'acception anglo-saxonne, il n'y ait pas de rupture entre ces deux "genres". [...] On peut considérer que la littérature de *fantasy*, dont la source est dans le mythe, est largement antérieure à la littérature dite "fantastique" en français, qui s'est détachée d'elle en se spécialisant aux 17^e et surtout 18^e siècles. Sans doute faut-il attribuer au trop grand éclat des Lumières le fait que le fantastique français ait si longtemps depuis ignoré ou renié cette filiation avec le mythe; en milieu anglo-saxon, il semble que la rupture n'ait jamais eu totalement lieu.²⁶

The fantastic followed on the world of fairy-tales and became possible, Caillois argued, only when science altered our perception of reality, 'si désormais le prodige fait peur, c'est que la science le bannit et qu'on le sait inadmissible, effroyable. Et mystérieux: on n'a pas assez remarqué que la féerie, parce que féerie, excluait le mystère' (*AF*, p.9).

We will see more fully the importance, as always, of the world being assumed to be finite in Caillois's theory of the fantastic, and 'le fantastique naturel'. The number of possible themes in the fantastic is finite, too, Caillois argues, going so far as to suggest that a kind of Mendeleyev's Table, but comprising themes, would be a feasible exercise:

Je continue néanmoins à les estimer dénombrables et déductibles, de sorte qu'on pourrait à l'extrême conjecturer ceux qui manquent à la série, comme la classification cyclique de Mendeleïev permet de calculer le poids atomique des corps simples qu'on n'a pas encore découverts ou que la nature ignore, mais qui existent virtuellement. (*AF*, p.23)

The stories in the anthology hide, 'sous des jeux différents de symboles, des nostalgies et des craintes qui se perpétuent à travers l'histoire et qui évoluent avec les changements que l'homme apporte à sa condition' (p.24). Schneider does not accept Caillois's criterion in selecting tales for inclusion in the anthology, namely, that they be capable of inspiring terror:

Il me paraît que la terreur n'est qu'une des manifestations possibles du fantastique, qu'il en existe d'autres, le délire, la vision, l'extase. Le fantastique est le truchement du sacré, il a partie liée avec "l'horreur poétique", il est transcendance sans lien avec aucune religion établie. Il existe par lui-même, il

²⁶ Elizabeth Vonarburg, 'La fantasy ou le retour aux sources', *Europe*, 707 (1988), 105-12 (p.105).

se situe à côté de la science, de la logique, de la magie, de l'ésotérisme. C'est un moyen particulier de connaissance qui possède sa propre perfection.²⁷

This is not completely clear, and it is not certain that by opening up the domain of the fantastic almost infinitely, choices made would be any more effective.

Caillois felt very keenly the inadequacies of the human condition, knew the temptation of imagining the perfect, and easy solution to the different challenges man encounters. He wrote feelingly on this at the end of *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*. The fantasy world offers a temporary escape from the boundaries of the human, from the omnipresent threat of mortality – and herein must lie too its interest for Caillois, who would finally find a kind of liberation and peace in his contemplation of stones:

Comme ce même être est besogneux et fatigable, elles [féerie, narration fantastique, science-fiction] le bercent de l'éternel mirage de l'efficacité magique, instantanée, totale, qui ne lui coûterait que de faire un maître signe ou de prononcer un maître mot. Comme il est prévoyant et calculateur, elles tiennent contre lui en réserve l'inaccessible prédestination et l'inexorable fatalité; comme il est curieux et ignorant, la menace du mystère et la tentation de l'omniscience; comme il doit vieillir et mourir, en même temps que les fontaines de jouvence et les élixirs de longue vie, les larves, les femelles et les ténèbres de l'abîme; enfin, comme il est prisonnier de la distance, de la durée et du déterminisme, le rêve de se trouver soudain affranchi de l'espace, du temps ou de la causalité. (AF, pp.23-24)

There is some comfort for man here. André Breton's vision of the fantastic and its effect on man is somewhat more negative. For him 'le fantastique est peut-être une manière de lui rappeler qu'il n'est ni seul ni tout-puissant. [...] Le surréalisme déloge la conscience paresseusement installée dans le confort d'une vision du monde arrêtée'.²⁸

Au cœur du fantastique answers Caillois's need to put together his own collection of the fantastic (and here not confining himself to purely literary offerings). The stories included in the anthology came from a variety of sources, including some of his colleagues in UNESCO. Now he is being a kind of pioneer, 'j'ai réuni les pièces d'un dossier, personnel il est vrai et par conséquent partiel et arbitraire, mais neuf en grande partie' (p.79). Caillois's capacity for detailed and vivid description, such a feature of

²⁷ Schneider, p.309.

²⁸ Quoted by Bréchon, p.95.

his writing on stones, for example, is evident in his descriptions of the differing works he feels illustrate his theory of the fantastic – not having the works before one's eyes is scarcely a disadvantage. André Chastel also raises the point that Caillois, in his assessment of, for example, Giovanni Bellini's *Allégorie du purgatoire*, overlooked the all-important historical and cultural context of the work:

Quand on tient pour insolites ce pavement, ces *putti*, ces saints, ce More enturbanné qui s'éloigne, je crains de devoir [...] réclamer la donnée historique et culturelle comme contexte très définissable de l'ouvrage qui rend compte d'un bon nombre des éléments qui interviennent dans le thème rare. De toute façon, ce qui se dégage de si original et que Roger Caillois rattache à la veine du "fantastique" est peut-être plus simplement la propriété d'un art à son meilleur moment. Ce qui devrait entraîner une révision des perspectives à laquelle il ne consentait pas.²⁹

This may weaken the status of his choices, but the general principles remain valid. Caillois wished to move away from a definition of the fantastic which 'désigne tout ce qui, d'une manière ou d'une autre, s'éloigne de la reproduction photographique du réel, c'est-à-dire toute fantaisie, toute stylisation et, il va de soi, l'imaginaire dans son ensemble' (p.83). His vision of the fantastic as 'd'abord inquiétude et rupture' (p.74) naturally leads him to reject 'le fantastique de parti pris' (p.72) and 'le fantastique d'institution' (p.73). The subject matter is not the significant criterion, rather the way in which it is treated, 'de préférence à un fantastique déclaré, je recherche décidément un fantastique insidieux' (p.77). Most of the work of Hieronymous Bosch is dismissed, although his work would normally be a staple of anthologies of the fantastic, 'cet univers apparaît si bien inversé, disloqué, brouillé comme puzzle après brassage des pièces, que l'insolite n'y a plus de place, parce qu'il est partout' (p.89). Caillois's reaction to this type of work is similar to that of Paulhan's to his first anthology – the cumulative effect of the 'merveilles accumulées' is to deprive them of their effect, they begin to 'constituer une cohérence' (p.87). Caillois favours rather 'Les Enervés de Jumièges' by the little known Evariste Vital Luminais. The title of the work, the substantivised adjective 'énervés' and something oppressive about the picture influence his choice. Neither the subject, nor the intention of the artist determines whether or not a work will belong to the realm of the fantastic:

²⁹ Chastel, p.48.

TANT LE FANTASTIQUE EST RUPTURE DE L'ORDRE RECONNU,
IRRUPTION DE L'INADMISSIBLE AU SEIN DE L'INALTERABLE
LEGALITE QUOTIDIENNE, ET NON SUBSTITUTION TOTALE A
L'UNIVERS REEL D'UN UNIVERS EXCLUSIVEMENT MIRACULEUX.
(ACF, p.174)

Caillois's view of the fantastic hinges on a perception of reality diametrically opposed to that put forward in his work on dreams. There, reality was presented as treacherous and, largely for intellectual amusement, Caillois argued we can never be sure we are not dreaming. Now reality is presented as 'l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne' (quite different, then, from what is argued in *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*). It is interesting to note how Caillois, normally the enemy of mystery and vague concepts like 'inspiration', nevertheless feels constrained, in the case of the fantastic, to permit at least some kind of involuntary acceptance of ideas:

Il faut au fantastique quelque chose d'involontaire, de subi, une interrogation inquiète non moins qu'inquiétante, surgie à l'improviste d'on ne sait quelles ténèbres, que son propre auteur fut obligé de prendre comme elle est venue et à laquelle il désirait parfois éperdument pouvoir donner réponse. (ACF, p.105)

The author – almost as much as the hero of his stories – is portrayed as some kind of helpless and hapless victim of a force stronger than he is. This is so different from the requirement of lucidity and deliberate choice that we see in Caillois's writings on poetry.

Caillois moves between different ages and genres in compiling his own collection of the fantastic. Alchemical emblems, art from the Renaissance onwards, Christian art, treatises on anatomy, metallurgy, artillery... all provide examples of his vision. In Christian art, for example, '[le fantastique] surgit à nouveau de l'irruption dans ce monde révéral, où le recueillement est de rigueur, d'un élément de frivolité qui en devient sacrilège' (p.162). In old medical treatises, for example Mandino de Luzzi's work, skeletons disturb the spectator as they are depicted as though they are alive, 'le fantastique surgit d'une contradiction qui porte sur la nature même de la vie et qui n'obtient rien de moins que paraître abolir momentanément, par vain, mais troublant prestige, la frontière qui la sépare de la mort' (p.173). The anatomical drawings in Renaissance medical tracts illustrate his point so well that Laserra is led into an amusing speculation:

Si direbbe che gli artisti di quel periodo abbiano colto con estrema lucidità quanto alcuni secoli più tardi, in seno al Collège de Sociologie, Bataille e Caillois avrebbero teorizzato intorno alla forma degli istinti, alle forze di “attraction” e “répulsion” che muovono l’affettività umana, abbiano previsto quanto Caillois avrebbe teorizzato nel saggio sulla dissimetria, e cioè la particolare forma di fascinazione legata all’interruzione dell’omogeneità [...].³⁰

In the final chapter, and tempted by ‘le démon de l’analogie’, Caillois effects an intriguing *rapprochement* between poetry and the fantastic. Both deal with dark and deep areas of the soul and Caillois, while warning against ‘impostures’ (p.185), comes close to allowing that, after all, the ineffable does exist, ‘les mots ni les images ne peuvent cerner exactement ces réalités intérieures qui n’ont ni forme ni stabilité, qui défient la description et le dessin. A leur égard, la périphrase est de rigueur’ (p.184). This is to take a broader, more permissive view than he would normally when writing on poetry. It is in dealing with these ‘réalités intérieures’ that ‘l’art fantastique comme la poésie font jouer cette fertilité de l’ambigu où je ne suis pas loin d’apercevoir leur véritable vocation’ (p.184).

In poetry and in art, only *images* can satisfy ‘une ambition si malaisée à soutenir’ (p.185). These images are situated ‘au cœur même du fantastique’ (p.185). Caillois distinguishes between ‘images infinies’ and ‘images entravées’ (p.185), the former so incoherent as to have no meaning, the latter, once a ‘key’ to their mystery is provided, turning out not to be mysterious at all. In art, even where the artist’s aim is to ‘dérouter’ (p.186), involuntary traces left by the artist in his work can reveal a hidden coherence, ‘ces signaux épars rendent aux images infinies la chance de recéler un lointain message’ (p.186). These signs are comparable to metaphors in poetry, whose value to Caillois is that they reveal ‘un réseau de concordances et d’exclusives, d’interférences multiples, de correspondances de registre à registre, qui remplace en cet empire de l’allégorie la lumière crue de la connaissance analytique’ (p.187). Caillois cites the example of Nerval’s ‘Chimères’, highly obscure sonnets which require alchemical keys to be understood. Caillois argues that Nerval was not completely clear on what he wanted to communicate ‘et qu’il a recouru à un labyrinthe d’allégories, se persuadant que chacun pourrait y trouver son bien, à condition qu’il fût suffisamment appâté par la cohérence souterraine d’un réseau

³⁰ Laserra, p.152.

d'images déconcertantes' (p.188). The enriching experience of working out this secret is the great benefit provided by art:

Il s'agit toujours d'évoquer un univers labile par relais analogique, par métaphore interposée [...]. Ici, de façon combien incertaine, l'artiste ou le poète souhaitent rendre perceptible avec des formes ou avec des mots la trop fine substance qui échappe au dessin ou au vocabulaire. (ACF, p.191)

It is interesting to note the lingering influence of Surrealism and the admission that poetry is not *all* about rigour and clarity.

Caillois is never slow to raise potentially fertile ideas which time or circumstances may prevent him from exploring further. He writes in *Au cœur du fantastique* how he would have wished to confront the fantastic in art with the fantastic in nature, but for now must content himself with placing 'sous l'invocation de la taupe au nez étoilé, plus monstrueux qu'un hybride de Bosch, un ouvrage exclusivement dédié aux images ambiguës où l'homme s'est plu à associer les vertus complices du mystère et de la beauté' (p.80). As Jean Dorst writes, this does highlight the fusing in Caillois's mind of reality and imagination:

N'est-il pas révélateur que son livre *Au cœur du fantastique* s'ouvre par une photo en pleine page de la taupe à nez étoilé, alors que tout le reste de l'ouvrage sera consacré à ce qui est sorti de l'imagination des hommes? L'imaginaire lui-même était réalité, puisqu'on pouvait le rencontrer dans la nature et que les hommes de science étaient capables d'en fournir les témoignages. Il a sa logique puisque ses racines plongent dans le réel. La nature est plus forte, puisqu'elle en contient les racines.³¹

Caillois did return to this topic, and *Cases d'un échiquier* includes an article entitled 'Le fantastique naturel'. Caillois deals with the fantastic in various fields, but Tixier suggests that his writing on the fantastic in nature is done 'avec plus de prédilection et, peut-être, de pertinence'.³² The central importance in all of Caillois's theories of the universe as a finite entity continues to be pivotal here.

The 'fantastique naturel' may seem like a paradoxical juxtaposition, since the fantastic, far from being natural, is rather an 'invention délibérée de l'esprit, qui la

³¹ Dorst, p.77.

³² Tixier, p.213.

connaît pour telle. Aussi, le fantastique ne peut-il *exister* à proprement parler: faire partie de l'univers attesté' (CE, p.60). In everyday language, however, and on condition that they are rare and strange-looking, we may refer to a tree, a flower or an insect, for example, as 'fantastic'. Caillois, not exempt from the pressure of language within a culture, is therefore led to write of the 'fantastique naturel'. In a footnote, he points out that he has already touched on this subject, his awareness dating back to *La Mante religieuse* published in 1935, *Méduse & Cie, Au cœur du fantastique*, and *Images, images*.

He cites as examples of the fantastic in nature the 'fulgore porte-lanterne' and a North American mammal, the 'taupe à nez étoilé' (CE, p.62). His basic criterion is that 'n'importe quoi de naturel, bête ou plante, pierre ou paysage, ressortit au fantastique, chaque fois que son aspect, par des voies toujours les mêmes, saisit et mobilise efficacement l'imagination' (CE, p.66). The distinguished naturalist Jean Dorst points out that Caillois cannot be called an ordinary naturalist, as his approach to the natural world is a selective one, 'il ne faut pas lui reprocher un attrait exclusif, car les choses naturelles lui servent de tremplin pour évoquer, et avec quelle ampleur, des sujets que tout naturaliste n'aurait pas su atteindre'.³³

The mineral world, so rich in suggestions of an imaginative nature, supplies no instances of the fantastic. The images that can be read into the appearance of stones are a different kind of phenomenon, and Caillois seems loath to say directly if it is an objective or a subjective one:

aucune de ces analogies, pour saisissantes qu'elles paraissent, ne fait mystère. Elles sont plutôt miracles, rencontres quasi merveilleuses dont le hasard est seul responsable, sinon la complaisance de la perception, avide d'identifier et de rapporter toute figure qui l'étonne à quelque autre qui lui est familière. Rien ici qui fasse frissonner. (CE, p.67)

It is no coincidence that the mole or the sea-horse resemble other forms in nature:

les formes et les forces, les compensations et les concurrences qui régissent toutes choses sont relativement en petit nombre, de sorte qu'elles se répètent jusque dans leurs conséquences les plus rares. Chaque figure, chaque structure même complexe, depuis l'origine connut la chance d'une interférence possible.

³³ Dorst, p.86.

Certaines firent surface en plusieurs lieux de l'inextricable labyrinthe des règnes. Elles le parsèment d'un dédale second d'échos et de reflets. (*CE*, pp.69-70).

These 'relais mystérieux' (p.70) tell the observer that 'si les structures de l'univers sont en nombre limité, des modèles privilégiés doivent immanquablement faire retour' (p.70). It is 'convergence', not 'influence' (p.70).

It is interesting to look at some of Caillois's techniques of persuasion in trying to convince his reader. He meets possible objections by referring to his 'audace' (p.70) and that he is proceeding 'imprudemment' (p.70). In the following sentence he has an off-beat theory about Plato to put across. Plato, or any geometrist, seems to Caillois

une sorte d'avatar lointain de radiolaire. Qui plus est, l'affirmation me semble séduisante, presque irréfutable, sitôt que je franchis, imprudemment il est vrai, de multiples étapes et dès que je tiens compte des paramètres à modifier, dont les principaux sont le passage du squelette de l'extérieur à l'intérieur, celui de l'automatisme à l'image, celui de l'organique au spéculatif. (*CE*, pp.70-71)

Caillois may be persuaded, but his reader may find this rather unclear and jargon-ridden exposition less than convincing. Caillois's theory of the unity of the universe is what permits him to be so bold, 'je veux bien que l'hypothèse paraisse folle. La réflexion toutefois finit par l'estimer la plus économique. Après tout, elle ne fait que tirer les conclusions qui découlent d'un postulat quasi inévitable pour la recherche rigoureuse: celui de l'unité du monde' (*CE*, p.71). He seems to be putting forward an eminently reasonable theory but he is using a broader principle, according to which all links are possible and justifiable, to save him from the tedium of following his point through with detailed argument, while making him invincibly right.

The unity of the world brings with it a second assumption, that the world is finite:

s'il est infini, non pour les dimensions ou pour l'échelle, mais si une nouveauté imprévisible peut être constatée [...], alors il ne reste à l'homme que le désarroi, l'absurde et l'impuissance. La condition de la pensée utile est que le monde soit fini. Or dans un monde fini et foisonnant, les choses se répètent et se répondent. (*CE*, p.71)

This criterion, 'la condition de la pensée utile est que le monde soit fini', is central to every aspect of Caillois's work.

In a search for wholeness, the clues given by the fantastic in nature lead the way, and Caillois writes lyrically about them:

Les signes avarement concédés par le fantastique naturel font mieux que stimuler le démon de l'analogie. Ils lui indiquent la voie. Ils devancent et nourrissent sa rage d'interpréter. Ils l'exaucent en lui découvrant, du moins en lui laissant présumer l'existence d'un imaginaire sous-jacent, appartenant au réel, tremplin et garantie de l'autre, celui que tisse l'esprit et qui n'en est peut-être qu'une sorte de répercussion incertaine ou de mirage lyrique, mi-proposé, mi-sollicité, qui égare sans tout à fait mentir. (CE, p.72)

Caillois's own fascination for uncovering what is secret comes through, and it has an emotional basis as well as an intellectual one:

Lettres à la dérive, vocables sans lexique, ces bornes-témoins, dont la disposition aberrante ne répond à nul cadastre ou arpentage commensurable à l'homme, ne comptent pas moins parmi les indices qui l'émeuvent le plus, et le plus obscurément. [...] Le réseau des jalons étonnants constitue une couverture secrète, inépuisable, une sorte d'or intellectuel qui soutient toutes opérations fiduciaires de l'intelligence et de l'imagination. (CE, p.72)

This network validates the work of the imagination. Man must pay a price for this 'or intellectuel'. He must admit to his lowly place in the scheme of things:

Il n'est pas le joueur, ni même le dé, mais une marque presque passive promenade de case en case, à son tour, parmi d'autres emblèmes réitérés. Parfois l'arrête une image qui le trouble, qui lui en remémore ou qui lui en promet d'autres. Le retour du simulacre lui fait entrevoir les lambeaux déchiquetés d'un ordre dissimulé qu'il atteint mal et jamais sûrement. Ebloui ou illuminé, il essaie d'entendre, parfois d'étendre les règles d'un jeu où il n'a pas demandé de prendre part et qu'il ne lui est non plus permis d'abandonner. (CE, p.73)

His view of the human condition is quite bleak. Man is not just passive, he is almost helpless in his passage through life, receiving random clues about an underlying wholeness and unity with which he will never completely come to terms.

Caillois's theory of the fantastic has its roots, then, in the time he spent in the Collège de Sociologie and in his earlier work on the sacred, and anticipates his very adventurous writing on the role of dissymmetry. While his account of the fantastic is

undoubtedly subjective in parts, it is persuasive. As with certain of the examples from the world of art, it must be said that the selection from the natural world may reflect the attitudes of a twentieth-century French intellectual, and would not obtain universal assent. This is an inevitable problem in personal selections but the coherence of Caillois's argument is its ultimate strength. Despite Schneider's objections, analysing the effect of the fantastic does not lessen its impact. The same is true after all of literary or artistic criticism. It is a subjective account at times, but one displaying Caillois's customary wide-ranging erudition. Through his *Anthologie* Caillois introduced some major writers from a range of cultures to the French public, and Roger Bozzetto pays him due tribute for this:

Cette universalité du fantastique, comme la situation spécifique de l'univers qu'il donne à percevoir, c'est à Caillois que nous en devons l'idée. Il en fournit aussi une première illustration avec cette *Anthologie de la littérature fantastique* qui présente des textes de toute culture, et fait découvrir Borgès et Cortazar aux Français médusés.³⁴

It is significant that Caillois refers disparagingly in *Au cœur du fantastique* to 'la lumière crue de la connaissance analytique' (p.187). Even a critic as perceptive as Odile Felgine writes that 'le jeu suprême' for Caillois is 'l'élucidation cartésienne'.³⁵ While his desire certainly is to understand, explain and absorb various phenomena, the way in which he does this owes little to Cartesian analysis and much to his theory of *coherence* which I explore in the next chapter.

³⁴ Roger Bozzetto, 'Roger Caillois et la réflexion sur le fantastique', *Europe*, 726 (1989), 191-201 (pp.200-01).

³⁵ Felgine, p.360.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AESTHETICS AND DISSYMMETRY

Je crois à une logique flexible (CA, p.17)

The adventure of logic

As topics, aesthetics, the fantastic and dissymmetry, though there are certain connections between them, would not seem to be a particularly inevitable combination. Caillois, notwithstanding this, grouped together his writings on these topics in a volume he intriguingly entitled *Cohérences aventureuses*. In effect, it is Caillois's *approach* that links these three pieces of work (one of which, *Au cœur du fantastique*, has been examined in the preceding chapter). All three analyses are good examples of his 'logique flexible', logic in the service of *coherence* rather than what Caillois saw as the restricting, narrow path of *reason*.

The title *Cohérences aventureuses* is a significant grouping of words, indicating to Caillois's reader the imaginative leaps that will be necessary but promising too that it will nonetheless all come together. The same balance is suggested in the term 'logique flexible', rigour and severity being honoured by 'logique', imagination and vision not finding themselves overlooked by the tempering presence of 'flexible'. This volume brings together *Esthétique généralisée* (1962), *Au cœur du fantastique* (1965) and *La Dissymétrie* (1973). The scope of each work continues the pattern of attempting to provide a total, all-embracing theory of the phenomenon under consideration. This is especially true of *La Dissymétrie*, whose ambition is nothing less than explaining how the universe works. There has been a sharp progression from looking at the underlying motor of society, be it the sacred or games, to finding the principle governing the universe. Regarding the links between these books, Caillois writes in the preface to *Cohérences aventureuses*, 'les trois dissertations ont un caractère commun: leur

démarche quasi déductive et ma décision de partir non pas de l'expérience, toujours incomplète et changeante, mais du dénombrement théorique des possibilités concevables' (p.13). He clearly wishes here to tone down the adventurous side of his 'cohérences'. The title, *Cohérences aventureuses*, as well as providing a succinct summary of much of Caillois's work in this period which in *Le Fleuve Alphée* he would label a 'parenthesis', brings out his desire for wholeness, a wholeness that would not be achieved by following an orthodox route. It is this search for wholeness that binds his work together and which is no less operative here. Caillois is open to the suggestions coming at him from the universe:

Je crois à une logique flexible, quoique intraitable sur sa syntaxe fondamentale, j'entends qui ne s'accorde aucune facilité dite dialectique, mais qui s'accommode au contraire de tout assouplissement à quoi l'oblige une donnée inattendue dûment constatée. (CA, p.17)

Caillois is basically saying here that his reader need not expect him to be predictable, but he can be trusted. His 'logic' is the best way forward in the search for wholeness. Unlike those bound by the rigidity of reason, as Caillois would see it, his approach will enable him to absorb even unexpected data, and so he can be truly comprehensive. His search for coherence is wide-ranging and certainly many different areas have been examined by him:

Mon propos est une cohérence extensive, une articulation à la fois rigoureuse et ouverte qui, s'il le faut, sacrifie allègrement une opinion reçue, un truisme accrédité, afin de pouvoir, dans les cases vacantes du puzzle général, situer des faits inédits ou afin de conférer à l'organigramme une rigueur supplémentaire. (CA, p.18)

These are certainly easy things to sacrifice; Caillois's strategy to win his reader's confidence is quite obvious here. His emphasis on rigour, and the implicit reference to Mendeleyev should be noted, as should his use of the word 'organigramme' for the light it sheds on his world vision. This is the pioneering spirit Caillois has always demonstrated in his writing. Not only is he not led by previous research, he is more likely to react against it, to clear the way for his theory or insight. Filling in the blanks in the 'puzzle général' is very much part of his searches for wholeness. If he can prove that an unlikely theory has a basis in fact, then this must be accepted, 'l'évidence', what is self-evident, and not 'la vraisemblance' (p.19), is what counts.

He seeks to pre-empt critics and dissenters by writing confidently, 'si une raison abusée ou une logique fallacieuse en sont scandalisées, c'est à elles qu'il appartient de se réformer' (p.19). This attitude is not acceptable to Panoff:

Sous prétexte que la plupart des savants à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, et notamment le grand Lavoisier, ont nié l'existence des météorites, que ces hommes éminents ont douté que des pierres pussent tomber du ciel, Caillois se croit pleinement autorisé à relier les uns aux autres tous les phénomènes qui excitent sa fantaisie. Et tant mieux si les savants d'aujourd'hui y trouvent de quoi se scandaliser, il y verra sans hésiter la confirmation qu'il est décidément sur la bonne voie!¹

This is of course an exaggeration. Caillois will certainly be provocative, but not self-indulgent, his will be 'une articulation rigoureuse et ouverte', *coherent* and *adventurous*. Caillois invoked these scholars, not to confer on himself an open-ended licence to speculate, but as examples of those who prefer 'la vraisemblance'.

An important element of truth for Caillois, from the outset of his writing career, is that it be multi-disciplinary. In *Méduse & Cie*, he made the case for 'sciences diagonales'. In *Cohérences aventureuses* he writes, 'les cohérences proposées sont enfin des cohérences diagonales. C'est-à-dire qu'elles ne se résignent pas au compartimentage croissant, nécessaire sans doute au progrès des sciences spécialisées, mais qui fait parfois obstacle aux hypothèses de vaste envergure' (p.19). It is a logical conclusion for a theory such as his, based as it is on the oneness of the universe, again a conviction expressed from *Le Mythe et l'Homme* on, 'il ne s'agit que de tirer les conséquences correctes du fait que l'univers est un tout et qu'à chacun de ses niveaux, les mêmes lois doivent y trouver, sous des aspects souvent déconcertants, des applications homologues' (p.20). His almost imperceptible use of the adjective 'correcte' cleverly hides two assumptions – that he is right and that the universe is finite.

Aesthetics: the artist and nature

Esthétique généralisée is Caillois's attempt to provide a comprehensive aesthetic theory which would encompass 'jusqu'aux aspects les plus téméraires de l'art

¹ Panoff, p.123.

moderne' (p.24). His belief in the unitary nature of the cosmos had major implications for his writings on aesthetic judgement. As part of the whole, man can play only what amounts to a passive role in creation and appreciation of art. Independent achievement or inspiration are only illusions.

Marc Jimenez writes that 'les premières théories de l'art moderne ne sont élaborées, de façon cohérente et systématique, qu'à partir des années 60'.² The need to know what was legitimate stimulated reflection on the subject. In this way Caillois was part of a trend, but his search for wholeness, his views on man as an integral part of nature, rather than its master, led him to some controversial views, as this chapter will demonstrate. Henri Raynal comments on how little it seemed to bother Caillois that his views were not shared by the majority, 'Caillois [...] allait droit au but, exposant ses vues sous la forme d'une déclaration concise, abrupte, n'éprouvant nul besoin d'atténuer ce que sa pensée pouvait avoir d'extrême, de radical. [...] J'admira la vigueur avec laquelle Caillois allait à contre-courant'.³

Philosophical aesthetics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been dominated by Kant and Hegel. Form is the major aesthetic consideration in Kantian aesthetics, while Hegelian aesthetics focuses on the meaning and content of the work. Caillois does not fit neatly into either camp. Philosophical aesthetics first became an academic subject in German universities in the mid-eighteenth century, and since then has been mainly concerned with the fine arts. Aesthetics itself can be seen as a 'diagonal science'. Jimenez writes of how its setting up in the eighteenth century was

un événement majeur dans l'histoire de la pensée occidentale. Non seulement elle contribue à cette unification du savoir à laquelle aspirait Descartes au siècle précédent, mais elle permet de distinguer entre divers domaines jusque-là indistincts et que l'on confond parfois aujourd'hui encore. Ce qui signifie [...] que toutes les disciplines qui s'intéressent à l'art, aux œuvres, aux artistes ou aux beaux-arts ne relèvent pas de l'esthétique au sens désormais admis même si ces domaines lui sont apparentés.⁴

In *Esthétique généralisée* Caillois employs an implacable logic (based on his own world view) to make the point that man, as regards artistic endeavour, cannot be an

² Marc Jimenez, *Qu'est-ce que l'esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p.13.

³ Henri Raynal, 'Le sévère rapatriement de l'art', in *CPT*, pp.131-35 (p.132).

⁴ Jimenez, p.21.

initiator. This applies both to the creation and to the appreciation of art. As an integral part of nature, man operates within its laws. Caillois is all the more effective, and deadly, in his destruction of man's illusions for employing (mostly) an impersonal, unemotional tone. He writes with a certain emphasis, reflected by his occasional use of capitals to draw attention to a point he is making. His syntax is elegant and carefully constructed. Caillois's control only lessens somewhat towards the end of *Esthétique généralisée* when he permits his opinions on modern art to lead him into that verbosity which is always a danger for him when writing on topics about which he feels strongly.

Caillois's theories on beauty need to be seen in the context of earlier views expounded in *Méduse & Cie*. In 'Les ailes des papillons', Caillois had argued that the beautiful wings of butterflies, as they serve no functional purpose, constituted their 'painting'. In the patterns on their wings, there is 'dessin', not 'dessein' (p.37). For Caillois, art can be reduced to a biological determinism, a 'tendency' with similar expression in all living forms, 'il existe, chez les êtres vivants en général, une "tendance" à produire des dessins colorés et [...] cette tendance donne notamment, aux deux extrémités de l'évolution, les ailes des papillons et les tableaux des peintres' (p.38). Butterfly wings can be said to exemplify beauty and to have entered the domain of art 'car il y a création par la biologie de combinaisons heureuses de formes et de couleurs, qui ne s'expliquent pas par la simple économie' (p.47). The human insistence on believing that everything has a purpose is fundamentally erroneous, Caillois argues, and constitutes real anthropomorphism. The beauty of butterfly wings, and the lack of purpose this serves, lead Caillois to conclude that there is in nature 'un ordre esthétique autonome' (p.52). This idea of an autonomous aesthetic order is further explored in *Esthétique généralisée*.

Caillois examines the concept of beauty, and, for him, there are two kinds, 'la beauté que l'homme trouve dans la nature et celle qu'il crée de sa propre initiative' (EG, p.40). He defines art as man's effort to create 'UNE BEAUTÉ CONCURRENTÉ DE CELLE QU'ON CONSTATE DANS L'UNIVERS INERTE' (p.24). All imaginable beauty must be measured against nature, although beauty is a human idea, 'mais comme l'homme appartient lui-même à la nature, le cercle se referme aisément et le sentiment que l'homme éprouve de la beauté ne fait que réfléchir sa condition d'être

vivant et de partie intégrante de l'univers' (p.25). Caillois is stressing man's essential passivity, and controversially denying him any real aesthetic judgement. For Caillois, art, like man, is 'un cas particulier de la nature, celui qui advient quand la démarche esthétique passe par l'instance supplémentaire du dessein et de l'exécution' (p.25). He is putting it on the same level as any other natural phenomenon, and certainly demystifying it. Equally, when listing the four ways in which forms are produced, 'par ACCIDENT, par CROISSANCE, par PROJET ou par MOULE' (p.29), art and technical products are included, along with animal constructions, in the third category. Odile Felgine sees in his classificatory attempts an effort to embrace the oneness of the cosmos, 'en classificateur mystique, il s'évertue à capturer dans sa grille implacable les diverses formes d'un Univers des formes qui n'est qu'"Un". Rien ne saurait échapper à ce structuraliste marginal'.⁵

Many philosophers have examined the notion of beauty. Kant, for example, was one of the last philosophers to consider nature on an equal footing with the arts. For him, beauty applied primarily to natural objects, and only secondarily to works of art. He was, however, more concerned with the act of aesthetic judgement itself, 'toute son entreprise vise à déterminer sous quelles conditions s'exprime le jugement de goût, que ce soit relativement à l'agréable, au sublime, au beau, plutôt qu'à définir dans l'absolu ces notions mêmes'.⁶ Despite some similarities with Caillois, the latter is clearly not wholly in the Kantian tradition. The idea of beauty can vary with time, place and the individual. Hegel was the first to recognise the importance of setting works in their cultural context. Properly understood in this way, they tell us about the period in which they were created. Caillois too recognises this. We see the world, Caillois writes, through a filter, 'un écran qui influe sur la manière de voir et qui suggère de secrètes préférences, lesquelles s'excluent en principe' (p.40). How can people agree to find beautiful, for example, 'un art des antipodes ou d'un autre âge' (p.40). While Caillois allows for cultural differences, for him nature is the ultimate unifying factor, the 'SUPPORT COMMUN UNIVERSEL' (p.41).

Aesthetic judgements are commonly separated into two opposing categories, the objective and the subjective. Objective judgements are made on the basis of whether

⁵ Felgine, p.341.

⁶ Jimenez, p.23.

certain qualities or relations are seen to exist in the object. The judgement does not consider the feelings of any spectator judging. It is assumed that all other spectators will find the object beautiful too. Subjectivism is based on the pleasure or displeasure perception of the object affords. Caillois is closer to the objectivist camp, but with a twist. We have seen how for him nature is the only conceivable source of the idea of beauty, ‘est estimé beau, senti comme beau, tout ce qui est naturel ou qui s’appareille à la nature, qui en reproduit ou en adapte les formes, les proportions, les symétries, les rythmes’ (p.41). This fits in perfectly with Caillois’s world view, which he re-states here, ‘l’homme ne s’oppose pas à la nature, IL EST LUI-MEME NATURE: matière et vie soumises aux lois physiques et biologiques qui gouvernent l’univers’ (p.41). These laws generate beauty, or rather ‘LEUR APPARENCE VISIBLE’ (p.41) may be held by man to be beautiful. They supply the material from which man will select some objects as beautiful. Man will find harmonious any object resulting from these laws. He may believe he is actively selecting objects as beautiful, but his decision is no more than an ‘ACQUIESCEMENT AU JEU UNIVERSEL, et l’aveu qu’il y participe’ (p.42). Caillois’s view necessarily downgrades man’s creative function:

L’homme demeure animal et corps et matière, lorsqu’il prolonge la nature ou y ajoute, lorsque, peintre ou sculpteur, il trace des lignes ou modèle des volumes. Il n’est nullement arbitre et créateur, mais ESCLAVE CONSUBSTANTIEL, homogène, qui s’imagine docile ou plus rarement révolté, et qui n’est même pas autonome ni, pour son support, différencié. (EG, pp.42-43)

Beauty is not something man creates, but is rather ‘une lente découverte’ (p.43). The aesthetic experience is a passive one ‘toute joie plastique est dans l’assentiment. Les mêmes structures produisent ici le décor, ailleurs le pouvoir de l’apprécier’ (p.43). For Caillois, even the term ‘beauty’ is superfluous, ‘il n’y a que signes d’intelligence entre êtres de même famille’ (p.43). He sums up nature’s role in fulsome terms, ‘la nature: seul registre, seul répertoire, inspiration manifeste ou occulte, tenant et aboutissant total, norme subreptice, table de référence latente et exclusive’ (p.43).

For Caillois, what is pleasing in the object originates in nature, and he will not allow that man makes any kind of independent critical assessment. His aesthetic judgement is an ‘acquiescement’, the term ‘beauty’ ultimately offers a false understanding of the aesthetic process. Felgine sees this as a prolongation of the views expressed in *Patagonie* and *Espace américain*, in which Caillois wrote of the human condition as

being an integral part of the universe, and ugliness only existing through man's efforts:

Mais cette approche antiprométhéenne, et tranchante, où l'on lit déjà une mystique matérialiste, exclut le sujet – Caillois se plaçant au sein du naturel –, et en devient extrême, paradoxale, autodestructrice presque. Ainsi, Caillois éprouve, jusqu'au vertige, le besoin de dégager une cohérence et de s'absenter de son objet d'étude.⁷

Academic aesthetics has taken on Hegel's view that nature is 'aesthetically defective and just sits there in its dumb way as subject-matter for the creative artist. This assumption, although understandable, has had some bad consequences for aesthetic theory'.⁸ Caillois's thinking could not be further from this view.

Ugliness is introduced into nature only when a living being (not necessarily man) takes the initiative to create something, 'la spirale des *xenophora* est impeccable, mais ces mollusques l'ornent malencontreusement de toutes sortes de débris de coquilles et de fragments calcaires' (p.46). Man too is fallible in his efforts at creation, 'IL PEUT ECHOUER DES QU'IL PEUT REUSSIR' (p.46). In nature, everything is naturally beautiful. Man can take no credit for beauty, but must unfortunately accept the blame for creating ugliness. This beauty may go unnoticed, however, and, in the effort to bring it out, lies the role of Art. As regards the apparent diversity of nature, it is more instructive to realise that it is a question of countless applications of basic, unchanging structures:

Et ces formes, ces structures, ces équilibres de qui viennent nécessairement le modèle et la semblance de la beauté ne sont ni libres ni foisonnants, mais si rares qu'il faut assurément beaucoup de science et de patience pour les déceler et les saisir dans leur radicale pureté, sans rien qui vicie ou qui masque leur perfection. (EG, p.50)

In the section entitled 'L'Art', Caillois considers both representational and abstract art, which he defines respectively as follows, 'L'une choisit de REPRODUIRE LES FORMES DE L'UNIVERS, celles que l'artiste a sous les yeux; l'autre COMPOSE CELLES QUI N'ONT PAS DANS LE MONDE DE MODELES IMMEDIATS et qui

⁷ Felgine, p.342.

⁸ Mary Mothersill, 'Beauty', in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. by David E. Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992; 1996 reprinting consulted), pp.44-51 (p.49).

sont comme issues de spéculations pures' (p.52). Caillois undertakes to follow both art forms to their 'POINT D'ECLATEMENT' (p.55).

He refers to representational art as 'art discursif, parce qu'il exprime avec des images, qui sont nécessairement des signes, ce que le discours dit avec le vocabulaire' (p.55).

Others have made similar points concerning representational art:

Goodman is the most prominent advocate of what we may term the denotation view of representation. He writes: 'A picture that represents – like a passage that describes – an object refers to, and more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation' (Goodman, 1976, p.5). On such accounts, the relation of a picture to its object is similar in some respects, if not identical, to the relation between [...] a description and what it describes.⁹

There are recognised objections to this viewpoint. Linguistic systems take time to learn, for instance, whereas pictorial systems can be mastered at once. Flint Schier, in *Deeper into Pictures* (1986), quoted by Crispin Sartwell, has developed a theory of representational art that further shows the difference between pictorial and linguistic systems:

Schier takes the fact that pictorial interpretation displays natural generativity to show that pictures call up the same 'recognitional capacities' as typical experiences of seeing items in the world. This is obviously not true of linguistic systems, which do not display natural generativity [...]. This suggests that pictorial systems are much less conventional than linguistic systems.¹⁰

Representational art does permit interpretation of the object depicted, but this interpretation may result in a work that has become incomprehensible – the 'point d'éclatement' for representational art.

Pure abstraction, focus on colour and form in their own right, became widespread in Western painting and sculpture in the early twentieth century, the Impressionists being instrumental in this development. Pointillism, for example, seemed to engage in realistic portrayal and yet, when a pointillist picture is looked at close up, its underlying abstract nature becomes apparent. There is no shortage of great European and American abstract artists this century – Georgia O'Keeffe, Constantin Brancusi,

⁹ Crispin Sartwell, 'Representation', in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, pp.364-369 (p.367). Sartwell's reference to Nelson Goodman alludes to the latter's *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Robert Morris, Martin Puryear, to name but a few – and yet Caillois is certainly hostile to this movement.

Modern literature, representational and abstract art: all seem, in their abandonment of meaning to be experiencing ‘une aventure symétrique qui semble alors répondre à quelque obligation générale’ (p.61). Representational art increasingly represents the personality of the artist, more than anything else. Eventually, such a form ‘CESSE D’ETRE DECHIFFRABLE’ (p.56). This is the fate too of abstract art. Around this point in *Esthétique généralisée*, Caillois becomes more verbose, more impassioned.

Techniques such as collage, which artists considered to be exciting and innovative, Caillois sees as honouring ‘un ANONYMAT IMMÉMORIAL ET INFAILLIBLE qui le repose d’une beauté tributaire du labeur et nourrie d’artifices’ (p.65). The actions of such artists are similar to those of crabs, ‘par les emprunts qu’ils font au monde qui les entoure, ramassant bois morts, bâches souillés et vertèbres rongées, peintres et sculpteurs agissent un peu comme les crabes oxyrhynques qu’on a vus s’habiller d’algues, de graviers et de dépouilles de menus animaux’ (p.65). Marc Jimenez, writing of the Dadaists, gives an alternative and positive view of the technique of collage:

Dada, ce sont des peintres, des poètes, des sculpteurs qui [...] poussent le même cri de désespoir et de révolte contre la guerre, contre l’art illusion, contre le beau trompeur, contre l’égoïsme d’une société capable d’exterminer des millions d’hommes. [...] Aucune forme artistique ne saurait convenir pour exprimer et dénoncer cette réalité mutilante et mutilée sinon celle qui résulte de l’agencement aléatoire de fragments de matière et de matériaux collés selon les lois d’un arbitraire en fait rigoureusement contrôlé.¹¹

The artist seeks the least possible active involvement in his work, in Caillois’s view. Caillois writes evocatively of nature’s power, the many different techniques at its disposal. In comparison, man inevitably seems pathetic, hasty and furtive even:

La nature est lente. Elle dispose de la durée géologique, de la paresseuse majesté des sédimentations, mais aussi de l’action violente des très hautes températures et des pressions écrasantes, celles qui broient, qui liquéfient et qui volatilisent, qui provoquent l’incandescence et la fusion des plus rétives

¹⁰ Sartwell, p.368.

¹¹ Jimenez, pp.316-17.

substances. L'homme, à qui les instants sont comptés, EST REDUIT AUX BRUSQUES DEMARCHES. Il doit agir vite et d'autant plus qu'il désire se préserver du soupçon de frelater subrepticement l'alchimie extérieure dont il attend merveille. (EG, p.67)

Caillois clearly does not care for modern art but it fits perfectly into his theory on the predominance of nature. His aesthetics may be off-beat in many respects, yet within the parameters he has established *Esthétique généralisée* is entirely coherent and persuasive. He is surely harsh in his judgement of abstract art. There may certainly have been excesses, but form is by no means always divorced from content. Themes may include either spiritual or emotional exploration, for example, and these are vital to a correct understanding of the work. Caillois's portrayal of abstract art is unfortunately limited.

Dissymmetry and the dynamics of the universe

La Dissymétrie, published in 1973, was a development of Caillois's Zaharoff Lecture, given in Oxford in 1971, and itself based on an earlier talk on symmetry Caillois had given in Venice. While published towards the end of his career, the essential ideas put forward in *La Dissymétrie* were present in his work from the very beginning. In the preface he writes of dissymmetry:

Je m'aventure à faire de cette anomalie, que l'on tenait jusqu'alors pour un accident, un des principaux moteurs de l'univers, celui qui s'oppose à l'entropie et qui en apparaît comme la contrepartie nécessaire, en sorte qu'elle explique le développement, l'enrichissement et la ramification de toute donnée ou mécanisme du monde, la symétrie n'intervenant jamais que comme équilibre passager et à titre de verrou, destiné un jour à sauter. Je me flattais ainsi d'avoir articulé l'enseignement de Carnot, à savoir le second principe de la thermodynamique, avec celui de Darwin, la transformation et l'adaptation progressive des espèces. (preface, CA, pp.12-13)

Caillois here sounds quite happy with the results of his work but it is, as we shall see, the very scope of his objective, nothing less than accounting for the dynamics of the universe, which some of his critics will find excessive. Panoff could have accepted *La Dissymétrie* if only Caillois had imitated Borges, 'tout cela aurait pu être un sophisme délicieux égrené sur des dizaines de pages, érigé en attitude d'indifférence souriante pour la gent scientifique, s'il avait seulement imité Borges, dont il connaissait pourtant

à merveille les jeux subtils'.¹² Panoff seems to have reserved his most cutting criticisms for *La Dissymétrie*, a work that should have been a 'sophisme'. He is again missing the point. Caillois undoubtedly had taken on an immense task, requiring far more scientific knowledge and research than he was capable of. But the essence of the book, which operates perfectly well at a serious level, is a worthy attempt – an 'approche', to use a word favoured by Caillois – at tackling a very fundamental question. But Panoff sees only his effrontery (as though a writer cannot raise an issue without having a standard accepted reply):

il faut remonter aux philosophes du XVIIIe siècle et aux plus frivoles de leurs continuateurs du XIXe pour retrouver ce mépris des faits, ces affirmations péremptoires et cette recherche d'effets rhétoriques. De nos jours, seul le bavardage journalistique pourrait en offrir l'équivalent.¹³

Panoff exploits a weakness in Caillois's undertaking – its vastness – and exploits it to engage in a facile *reductio ad absurdum*.

In *La Dissymétrie* his brief is not now the uncovering of underlying patterns, his need for coherence and wholeness has urged him on to study cosmic functioning. Caillois used the term 'dissymmetry' for the first time in his *Procès intellectuel de l'art*:

Ainsi une même proportion mathématique régit la morphologie de la plupart des organismes marins et les perspectives d'un moment ou d'un tableau. Une même loi (*la dissymétrie* est la condition d'un phénomène, la symétrie de sa cessation) commande à la fois les modalités des réactions chimiques, la formation des cristaux et le rythme d'un poème ou d'un morceau de musique. (*AI*, p.53)

This reveals the constancy of Caillois's thinking and creates a symmetry of its own between the beginning and the end of Caillois's work. Laserra refers to Valéry's *L'Homme et la coquille* which seems here to have influenced Caillois. Valéry too wrote of marine organisms and their morphology, using the term 'dissymmetry', 'attribuendone, in campo scientifico, la paternità a Pasteur : "Tous les coquillages dont la forme dérive de l'enroulement d'un tube manifestent nécessairement cette *dissymétrie*, à laquelle Pasteur attachait une si profonde importance, et dont il a tiré l'idée maîtresse des recherches qui l'ont conduit de l'étude de certains cristaux à celle

¹² Panoff, p. 124.

des fermentations et de leurs agents vivants”¹³.¹⁴ Notwithstanding this, and despite himself tracing in his book the evolving role of dissymmetry in science, Caillois is ‘reclaiming’ the concept and is, he insists, the first to give it its full importance. It is a phenomenon ‘auquel est [...] accordé, pour la première fois peut-être, une valeur aussi fondamentale, sinon décisive, en tout cas incontestablement créatrice’ (p.16).

The disruptive, if creative, force of dissymmetry has clear links with Caillois’s theories on the ‘sacré de transgression’, festivals, the fantastic, even poetic images – as he himself will outline in appendices to the book. Laserra has written in some detail of the indebtedness of Caillois’s later ideas to the earlier ones, bringing out the links between his early days in the Collège de Sociologie and his writings on the sacred, the fantastic and symmetry/dissymmetry. She has drawn links between Bataille’s concept of homogeneity/heterogeneity and Caillois’s order/rupture of order:

Nel bagaglio comune c’è dunque una attenzione ai fattori di stabilità e di rottura implicati nel gioco simmetria – dissimmetria per il primo, omogeneità – eterogeneità per il secondo. Essi non potranno che convergere in una riflessione sulle forze di ordine e di disordine necessariamente sottese a questi concetti.¹⁵

The influence of Marcel Mauss on both writers is evident:

Per i due “congiurati sacri” del Collège, ordine e disordine equivalgono a *ordo rerum* e *trasgressione*, e cioè a due categorie fondamentali nell’insegnamento di M. Mauss. E infatti a partire dai suoi studi che come si è visto, Bataille e Caillois analizzano il fenomeno della nascita simultanea dell’*ordine* e del *sacro*.¹⁶

In *La Dissymétrie*, Caillois, ‘puisant dans sa vaste érudition’,¹⁷ covers topics ranging ‘des particules infra-atomiques jusqu’au fonctionnement des institutions sociales et aux lois de la rhétorique et de la prosodie’ (p.16). Caillois’s opening chapter is bluntly called ‘Le problème’ and the problem is the increasing, if necessary specialisation of science. I have mentioned how in *Méduse & Cie* he called for ‘sciences diagonales’; he does so here again:

¹³ Panoff, p.127.

¹⁴ Laserra, p.153-54.

¹⁵ Laserra, p.154.

¹⁶ Laserra, p.155.

¹⁷ Felgine, p.376.

Des sciences diagonales sont à naître, qui composeraient les aberrations que les chercheurs constatent ça et là dans les compartiments où ils sont contraints d'opérer. Il est possible, il est probable que les mêmes désordres qui, isolés, les déroutent, conjugués s'éclaireraient mutuellement. (*D*, p.202)

The call for 'sciences diagonales' is a natural consequence of his belief in the unitary nature of the universe. From the outset, he was looking for the key to the workings of the universe; in the play between symmetry/dissymmetry, he thinks he has found it. Despite the seeming variety of the universe, 'les aspects innombrables qu'il présente relèvent tout de même, à plus ou moins long terme, d'une structure identique, d'une organisation commune, de lois cohérentes qui s'articulent entre elles' (p.203). These laws would regulate 'aussi bien les relations des nombres, la matière inerte ou organique, les démarches de la pensée rigoureuse et jusqu'aux égarements de l'imagination amusée ou séduite' (p.204). The existence of such all-inclusive laws is a condition of useful thought for Caillois, and the seeming diversity of the world does not blind him to underlying patterns of similarity. For Caillois, these laws relate to the play between symmetry and dissymmetry:

Cherchant la plus ample, celle qui aurait prise dans les divers départements du savoir, susceptible d'être transportée de l'un à l'autre et de fertiliser un canton nouveau par les services qu'elle aurait rendus dans les précédents, il m'a paru que les jeux de la symétrie, ses lacunes, ses ruptures, étaient aptes à procurer un modèle de ces caractéristiques universelles dont j'avais hâte de faire reconnaître l'ubiquité. (*D*, pp.204-05)

His theory, as befits someone whose interest is wholeness, will be 'une solution globale' (p.205).

As to whether any possible *rapprochements* actually constitute *science*, opinion is divided. In the opinion of Robert André:

[Les sciences diagonales] incitent à repérer, à explorer des ressemblances souvent inouïes, dont la description est délectable au merveilleux écrivain, mais dont il ne saurait y avoir science, dans l'acception moderne, car elles constituent des séries d'exceptions, et liées à une perception archaïque de la nature. Les cohérences ne peuvent y être "qu'aventureuses".¹⁸

¹⁸ André, pp.111-12.

Jean Dorst, while recognising the need to ‘éviter l’écueil des généralisations hasardeuses et des rapprochements injustifiés’,¹⁹ argues that such an approach is the way of the future, ‘les hommes qui domineront les sciences de demain seront ceux qui se révéleront [*sic*] capables de réaliser de vastes synthèses et de dégager les lois générales à des hauteurs que l’on ne peut dorénavant atteindre que par les *sciences diagonales*. Nous ne sommes pas loin du *holisme* défendu par Arthur Koestler’.²⁰ Dorst, referring to the common denominators uncovered by Caillois between apparently different domains, writes, ‘Roger Caillois les a imaginés, mieux, il les a découverts’.²¹ The slightly ambiguous phrasing suits the idea of *cohérences aventureuses*. Professor André Lwoff, a Nobel prize-winning scientist in physiology and medicine, read the proofs of *La Dissymétrie* and Jean Dorst, himself a noted scientist, mentions the favourable reaction of another eminent scientist, ‘Prigogine qui n’était pas encore Prix Nobel, accueillit son livre avec enthousiasme, bel hommage de la science à l’esprit universel’.²²

Caillois, as ever, defines the terms he will be using:

Asymétrie, l’état qui précède l’établissement d’un équilibre, en l’occurrence d’une symétrie, dissymétrie, l’état qui suit la rupture d’un équilibre ou d’une symétrie tout en laissant conjecturer ou induire l’ordre désavoué c’est-à-dire en apparaissant clairement comme une intervention ultérieure, subversion devenue nécessaire ou modification préméditée. (*D*, p.206)

Following a lengthy discussion of the properties of symmetry, Caillois traces the fortunes of dissymmetry in the scientific world, as a scholarly backdrop and justification for his theory. Pasteur, in 1848, found in molecular dissymmetry the biggest difference between organic and inorganic chemistry, and he acknowledged fully its importance, seeing in it ‘le secret du passage de l’inanimé à l’animé’ (p.243). Scientists following Pasteur continued their interest in dissymmetry, now an ‘instrument de découverte’ (p.246), discovering in micro-organisms ‘une sensibilité physico-chimique à la droite et à la gauche’ (p.245). Dissymmetry was seen as having a creative role, symmetry as leading to inertia, ‘le grand nombre de phénomènes biochimiques où la présence de la dissymétrie se montre décisive a convaincu les

¹⁹ Dorst, p.83.

²⁰ Dorst, p.83.

²¹ Dorst, p.80.

²² Dorst, p.77.

savants de la fécondité de la voie inaugurée par Pasteur' (p.246). Various scientific discoveries are quoted by Caillois to highlight the central role he wants to give to dissymmetry:

La dissymétrie constatée au niveau de la structure élémentaire de l'univers, le rôle joué par les molécules qui devient le plan de la lumière polarisée et par les cristaux énantio-morphes, sinon dans l'explication de l'origine de la vie, du moins dans l'établissement de la ligne de démarcation qui la sépare de la matière inerte, constituent un faisceau de phénomènes généraux et convergents, qui inversent les données du problème. *La dissymétrie n'apparaît plus seulement comme une innovation qui peu à peu se fraie un chemin difficile dans une pesanteur paralysante, avec laquelle elle doit sans cesse ruser. On s'aperçoit qu'elle existait déjà dans le délicat tissu des particules fines dont le développement a donné la richesse diversifiée du monde.* (D, pp.250-51. Caillois's italics.)

The more complex the life-form, the higher the levels of dissymmetry. Dissymmetry is most fully present in man therefore, whom Caillois analyses 'come in una tavola di un trattato di medicina'.²³ In humans, dissymmetry relates not just to the functional difference of arms and legs but to 'deux univers métaphoriques irréconciliables. Car la fonction symbolique a joué, faculté inédite, issue précisément d'une ultime conquête de la dissymétrie: la hiérarchie des hémisphères du cerveau' (p.254). Unlike other contrasting pairs, for example, high and low, mind and matter, 'l'éventail des antithèses symboliques entre la droite et la gauche ne dispose pas, tant s'en faut, d'assises morphobiologiques aussi péremptoires' (p.256). But these antitheses are deeply embedded in cultures, not just in vocabulary but in institutions and usage in general, and the religious, legal, moral and emotional worlds are all cited by Caillois to back up his argument. One thing is certain, 'le monde n'est pas neutre. Dès le début et plus encore vers le terme de son histoire, il est réellement droit et gauche' (p.260). It may not be the most obvious contrast to man, but he has little choice in the matter, having been introduced 'bon dernier dans une partie où toutes les cartes étaient déjà distribuées' (p.261).

Man, 'excroissance chétive et clairsemée d'une des dynasties du règne animal' has introduced two new factors into the game, 'l'intelligence et la technique' (p.262), although the overriding opposing forces in his life remain symmetry/dissymmetry. In

²³ Laserra, p.150.

view of mankind's boldness and daring, symmetry has an unexpected role with a psychological orientation – it provides a kind of comfort:

[l'homme] a basculé si fort du côté de la dissymétrie que la symétrie lui apparaît comme une sorte d'ultime garde-fou quand, dérégulée, sa faculté de percevoir ou de raisonner se trouve prise de vertige. Le recours à la symétrie devient alors une bouée de sauvetage à laquelle se raccroche le malade: menacé de tomber dans le chaos, il y voit la dernière manifestation perceptible de la régularité de l'univers. Il se réfugie, loin du tumulte de la vie, dans une géométrisation et une mécanisation apaisantes. La symétrie le délivre de l'absurdité qui le ravage. (D, p.263)

It is interesting to note Caillois's choice of terminology. Mankind, overdosed on dissymmetry, is referred to as 'le malade'. Caillois, perhaps, with his great need for order and structure, for the definable and the predictable, is writing from personal experience of his gladness at the existence of this 'bouée de sauvetage'.

Caillois refers to experiments revealing the acute need schizophrenics and depressives feel for symmetry, in other words for Caillois 'l'ordre et [...] l'équilibre' (p.264).

Without symmetry, these troubled minds experience 'aussitôt un vertige général, où disparaissent à la fois la cohérence du monde extérieur et la personnalité du patient' (p.264). Caillois, worryingly, seems to be drawing on psychiatric disturbances to back up his point on the importance of symmetry/dissymmetry in imagination:

De cette manière, à l'extrémité de la chaîne, dans l'imaginaire, là où s'évanouissent ou semblent s'évanouir les servitudes inhérentes à la matière, la hiérarchie et le rôle respectif de la symétrie et de la dissymétrie apparaissent en pleine lumière: la symétrie, première conquête et tout de suite élément de stabilité, frein par conséquent; la dissymétrie, élément de vitalité novatrice, donc risque et aventure. Il s'agit à peine d'une extrapolation: les constatations de la pathologie ne font qu'apporter une conclusion attendue à une longue montée de phénomènes toujours mieux assurés et de portée toujours croissante. (D, pp.264-65)

In an appendix to this work, Caillois, in a retrospective examination of his work which is typical of him, fits in his theory on dissymmetry with his earlier writing. In his book on the sacred, he has already described in some detail the workings of primitive societies, the role of phratries and the mutual services these groups provide. To prevent inertia and paralysis, such societies look to festivals, or the 'sacré de

transgression' to provide a revitalising force. Caillois offers a brief résumé of this and concludes:

Telles pourraient devenir, traduites dans le langage des démarches de la symétrie, les descriptions, la syntaxe qui lentement émergent des enquêtes anthropologiques, syntaxe significative en ce sens qu'elle laisse apercevoir comment symétrie et dissymétrie continuent de s'imposer comme lois naturelles jusque dans l'univers humain. (D, p.277)

In music, architecture, poetry, symmetry has a part to play but the potential of dissymmetry in avoiding monotony is not overlooked either by artists, 'la surprise apportée dénonce et fait mieux percevoir la cadence latente, que la répétition risquait de faire oublier' (p.278).

Caillois finishes on a topic close to his heart, the image in poetry. An overly predictable image will do little other than disappoint the reader:

Au contraire, si elle scandalise en un premier temps, à cause de l'éloignement et du caractère apparemment incompatible des termes confrontés, et si l'imagination pourtant est ensuite amenée à reconnaître la justesse du rapport, la joie de la découverte est à la mesure de la disparité surmontée. (D, p.280)

A thinly veiled reference to Surrealism raises issues which are central in my next chapter:

Des écoles poétiques ont voulu que la relation imposée fût tout à fait arbitraire. Elles ont même situé la force de l'image dans l'impossibilité pour l'imagination de percevoir la moindre ressemblance, de jeter le moindre pont entre les deux réalités comparées. [...] L'échec atteste une fois de plus que dissymétrie ne vaut que là où elle est garantie par symétrie bien tempérée. (D, p.281)

Caillois's deeply felt outrage at this poetic malpractice is evident in the way that he returns to this point again and again in his writings. Caillois saw the image as the defining characteristic of poetry – as did the Surrealists, although for different reasons and with a different understanding of its nature. For Caillois, the role of the image as an instrument of discovery in the quest of the fragmented self for wholeness was primordial. An image in which dissymmetry was dominant would be unable to fulfil its central role.

Because of the impossibility of the task Caillois has set himself – situating the fragmented self in a world finally made comprehensible in *all* its aspects – a standard academic approach, *pace* Panoff, is just not possible. Visionary *rapprochements*, *cohérences aventureuses*, these must be his tools. We will see that his realisation that the puzzle is too difficult, the maze too intricate, was a determining factor in his ultimate dedication to stones.

Esthétique généralisée is in a way an anti-aesthetics, since it effectively denies man's capacity either for judgement or creative initiative. It is a coherent and well-organised book, entirely consistent with and based on Caillois's world view. Because its approach could not take the field of aesthetics any further, it is not difficult to see why it might repel those not sharing Caillois's view of the role of man in nature.

His most adventurous 'cohérence' is undoubtedly *La Dissymétrie*. It is easy to see the attraction of the theory for him, how it retrospectively endorses and lends increased credibility to his previous theories. But it is extremely short – less than one hundred pages. Certainly the topic merits more attention than that, but it is an *insight*, a flash of brilliance, a thought Caillois leaves with his reader, further enriching his interaction with the surrounding world and stimulating the imagination – one of Caillois's primary talents. This has its own value.

Caillois has some interesting insights to offer in *Le Fleuve Alphée* into his various *cohérences aventureuses* and how, in retrospect, they make him view his career prior to his beginning his work on stones. As we have seen previously, Caillois regarded the publication of *Patagonie* as a defining moment in his career, a 'fêlure' (FA, p.70) that would continue to grow, if clandestinely, and which would result finally in the radical career change represented by his writings on stones. He tries in *Le Fleuve Alphée* to reconstitute the stages of this process. This 'fêlure', which in keeping with the dominant metaphor in *Le Fleuve Alphée* he also refers to as a 'filet étranger' (FA, p.71), guided him in his choice of research topics: 'il en dirigeait l'inspiration' (p.71). It is interesting to note Caillois's suggestion of his helplessness in the hands of this strange impulse, his attributing to it the responsibility for his choices:

il donnait le change à ma vigilance, de sorte qu'en me flattant de la conduire en des terrains nouveaux, j'y introduisis à mon insu un ferment capable de la corrompre ou de la déconcerter, mais qui se révélait aussi – du moins, je m'en persuadais bientôt – propre à lui adjoindre un complément salutaire. (FA, p.71).

Caillois is wrong, however, in claiming that his 'impassibles argumentations' (p.72) masked his emotions during this period. Several of the books analysed in these chapters give many personal insights into Caillois. His irregular topics and methods link him to the perceptions and insights of his early childhood, before he entered so fully into the universe of the written word:

Je me flattais [...] de défricher des terres relativement vierges, en tout cas marginales. Je croyais employer au mieux, quoique à des usages inédits, les méthodes où j'avais été instruit. Je n'étais pas sans soupçonner que je les retournais de plus en plus contre les desseins qu'elles avaient été inventées pour servir. Je ne pouvais faire que le côté nocturne de la nature fût en fin de compte le seul qui me séduisît. M'attachant à l'explorer dans la mesure de mes moyens, je redevenais fidèle à mon instinct premier. Je me servais de la cohérence comme d'une arme pour avoir raison de la raison et en démontrer la dangereuse, l'injuste étroitesse. (FA, p.72)

Caillois's subversiveness is fully apparent here, he admits readily that his 'cohérences aventureuses' are outside the orthodox academic tradition, but this inclines him to look more favourably on an output that, as we shall see in Chapter Nine, he otherwise regards with distaste, as belonging to the 'parenthesis' in his life before he engaged in his real vocation. He operates outside the bounds of reason, is in fact employing a rival weapon, his well-honed 'logique flexible'. He bypasses reason in favour of coherence in the many works he wrote before turning his attention to stones, and shows the primacy of the latter at least as regards the complex endeavours in which he is engaged as part of his searches for wholeness. Reason is not only narrow, in Caillois's perspective. It is here portrayed as 'dangereuse' and 'injuste'; there could be no firmer repudiation of the Cartesian tradition.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POETICS OF RIGOUR

A la poésie revient la science concrète des données concrètes de la nature.
(AP, p.246)

It is not coincidental that the adjective ‘concrete’ occurs twice in this sentence. From the outset, poetry, for Caillois, had to be anchored in the real. He never changed his viewpoint, only refined it, and gave it poetic expression in his writings on stones. In ‘Spécification de la poésie’, written in 1933, Caillois quotes Hegel’s aphorism, ‘Rien n’est plus réel que l’apparence en tant qu’apparence’ (AI, p.18). Nothing for Caillois could match the fascination of reality; the syntax of the universe was written on the surface of things.

We have seen in Chapter One Caillois’s involvement with Surrealism, the reasons that led him to this movement and equally his reasons for leaving it. In this chapter I shall be looking in greater depth at his poetic theory (including the lingering importance of Surrealism) and how his writing on poetry relates to the overall orientation of his work, to his searches for wholeness and coherence.

An indication of his hostility and rigorous attitude to art is contained in the title of his first published book, *Procès intellectuel de l’art*.¹ Before going on to a broader overview of Caillois’s poetic theory, I shall look in some depth at this work as it contains so many views that would remain important to him: an interest in the objectively verifiable and a corresponding sense of the limitations of subjectivity, the oneness of the universe, his complex relationship with Surrealism. In the *Procès* it is striking to observe the extent to which his view of the wholeness of the universe influenced his theory on art and the analysis of Caillois’s poetic theory must begin with this short, but dense and important book. He wished to ‘analyser scientifiquement les pulsions qui aboutissent à l’œuvre d’art, faire subir à celle-ci son “procès”, tenter

¹ All page references are from *Approches de l’imaginaire*, in which it is reprinted.

l'analyse phénoménologique de l'imagination que le surréalisme repousse'.² Caillois as prosecutor is in trenchant and combative form. Art is put on trial here, found guilty, and if not precisely condemned to death, then certainly left to die, 'la crise de la littérature entre dans sa phase critique. C'est aussi souhaiter que cette crise soit irréparable' (p.54). In this short book, published at the author's expense, Felgine sees signs of Caillois's future preoccupations:

Dans toutes ces pages intransigeantes, hardies, on trouve l'esquisse de l'œuvre à venir, de la réflexion sur la dissymétrie, sur l'esthétique généralisée et le signe de cette fascination pour les procédés de la science appliquée à l'étude de l'imagination.³

The letter Caillois wrote to André Breton on breaking from Surrealism serves as an introduction to *Procès intellectuel de l'art*. In it Caillois wishes to mark their differences – even referring ungallantly to their age difference – and points out, 'vous êtes donc décidément du parti de l'intuition, de la poésie, de l'art, – et de leurs privilèges. [...] Mais vous savez que j'ai adopté le parti pris inverse' (p.36). Caillois manages to make the words 'intuition', 'poésie' and 'art' seem somehow negative. Anticipating the 'cohérences aventureuses' he would make in later life, he declares: 'toute philosophie qui ne compose pas avec cette nouvelle science du *pourquoi pas* est ridicule' (p.36). His future role as a stimulator of his reader's imagination is evident here. While breaking away officially, part of Caillois would always remain sympathetic towards Surrealist interests, even if he sought to apply greater rigour to his objects of investigation. Even now, at the height of his disaffection, he describes himself as henceforth 'une sorte de correspondant du surréalisme' (p.38) – some affiliation remains.

In 'Décision préliminaire sur la métaphysique', one of the sections of *Procès intellectuel de l'art*, he states his belief in the oneness of the universe, a central view in all his future writing, 'la nature est partout la même. Les mêmes lois régissent le monde extérieur et le monde intérieur et aucune solution essentielle de continuité n'apparaît à des yeux avertis entre le milieu et l'organisme qui y vit. Tout est milieu' (p.40). This very much prefigures *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, and a life-long belief that

² Felgine, p.105.

³ Felgine, p.109.

man is not separate from the world surrounding him. Again, on his belief in the oneness of the universe, he writes:

Il existe une structure mathématique de l'univers régissant aussi bien l'homme que le milieu [...], dépendant sans doute en dernière analyse du principe d'économie [...] et dont dépendent à leur tour aussi bien la morphologie des cristaux que le rythme de croissance des coquillages et des plantes. (*AI*, pp.44-45).

Caillois would spend the greater part of his life seeking to uncover this 'chiffre universel'.

Much of the *Procès* is taken up with questioning the validity of 'pure' art, poetry etc. Abbé Bremond is perhaps the best-known writer on the subject of pure poetry. D.J. Mossop writes that, for Bremond, 'what is valuable in a poem is not its art in any rationally demonstrable sense of the word, but its necessarily mysterious power to convey to the reader the same mysterious pleasure that was felt, Bremond holds, by the poet – a pleasure which is itself explained in terms of mystical inspiration'.⁴ This abandonment of reason confronted by the supposedly 'ineffable' was just what Caillois objected to. Mossop refers to Bremond's hope that artists could join with philosophers and scientists in asserting the supremacy of what was above reason, these hopes being fuelled by publications such as Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme*.⁵ Caillois, as in other sections of this book, is particularly acerbic in dismissing such a pretention, 'si ces mouvements n'avaient pas été si inintelligents, ils auraient droit au respect dû au courage malheureux' (p.41). In the appreciation of form, in Caillois's eyes, it is always 'un rapport numérique de la nature invariable qui est perçu' (p.43). Felgine rightly finds some of his aesthetic judgements rather limited:

Caillois [...] se montre simpliste dans ses analyses picturales. Le scientifique qui se cache en lui – pour fuir quels abîmes? –, l'ignare musical, juge "possible de réduire les proportions des formes à des expressions numériques relativement simples (...) qui peuvent passer pour l'expression mathématique de l'harmonie": il en va ainsi de celles de la musique, l'architecture, la sculpture (qu'il définit comme "peinture sans couleurs à trois dimensions"!) et de la danse...⁶

⁴ D. J. Mossop, *Pure Poetry: Studies in French Poetic Theory and Practice 1846 to 1945* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p.168.

⁵ Mossop, pp.168-69.

⁶ Felgine, p.107.

The unfinished sentence ably conveys the extent of Felgine's disagreement.

The 'impure' subjective aspect of art is what provides material for his phenomenology. To undertake research into this 'phénoménologie générale de l'imagination' (p.50), 'lucidity' is the quality required, which the reader may infer Caillois possesses. In tones that recall *Le Vent d'hiver*, Caillois writes of setting up an environment favourable to this study, 'à cette fin, une atmosphère salubre est d'abord nécessaire. Pour l'imposer, il faudra sans doute compter sur la brutalité plus que sur la persuasion, ce qui, après tout, n'est pas si déplaisant' (p.51). He has lost nothing of his desire to stir up reaction and interest, to shock his reader out of his complacency.

Summing up his demolition of the cult of pure form, it is interesting to note, amidst his reduction of form to mathematics, shades of later theories on dissymmetry and 'poétique généralisée':

En tout cas, la plastique des sons, des formes ou des couleurs, sous son double aspect de rythme et d'harmonie naguère encore considérée comme la partie de l'art défiant le plus l'analyse apparaît maintenant comme une simple structure formelle dont la réduction est à peu près effectuée et l'intérêt réel à peu près nul, et qui surtout, n'apportant rien de plus que les phénomènes naturels, n'exige par conséquent aucun supplément d'explication. Ainsi, une même proportion mathématique régit la morphologie de la plupart des organismes marins et les perspectives d'un monument ou d'un tableau. Une même loi (la dissymétrie est la condition d'un phénomène, la symétrie de sa cessation) commande à la fois les modalités des réactions chimiques, la formation des cristaux et le rythme d'un poème ou d'un morceau de musique. La science pure, pourrait-on dire, a absorbé avec facilité l'art pur. (*AI*, p.53)

'Pure' art, the ineffable, the mysterious, has been exposed as something science is perfectly capable of explaining, in Caillois's opinion. The relationship between science and poetry is essential in Caillois (as it was in Surrealism) and will be considered later in this chapter.

Caillois would characterise as 'chocs en retour' (preface, *Babel*)⁷ much of his writing on poetry following on his break from Surrealism, and these works do not always achieve the detached tone he would have liked. They are frequently polemical, arising

⁷ *Babel* précédé de *Vocabulaire esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p.13.

cut of Caillois's aversion to Surrealist poetry. Their tone, therefore, is often forceful and unbridled, and in his desire to get down to the basics of the problem, Caillois's expression can be at times simplistic. In this they contrast sharply with the subtle and perceptive analyses done by Caillois of various writers. In correspondence with Saint-John Perse, Caillois writes, 'l'état présent de la littérature me navre sans cesse davantage. Je vais publier en février un "Babel", où je n'ai pas pu assez me retenir de le crier. Comment conquérir plus de sérénité? Je ne puis'.⁸ The prevailing literary climate disturbed him deeply. Daniel Oster describes the literary world in France in the 1940s as follows:

En 1944, tout le monde en France était poète, ou plutôt adepte de cette idéologie poétique de la fraternité, de la sincérité, de la spontanéité, de la faute à rédimier, de la souffrance sacralisante, où les plus écœurants remugles du romantisme se dispersaient dans les chromos d'un stalino-christianisme dispensateur d'un consensus culturel national qu'on appelait, hélas, la poésie. Jamais tant qu'en ces années d'après-guerre on n'aura pataugé dans la boue de ces *impostures* qui suggérèrent à Roger Caillois le titre d'un petit livre encore plus salubre que salvateur.⁹

Personal expression was taking precedence over poetic discipline. Form was viewed by poets as an obstacle to their lyrical pretensions. With the collapse of all external poetic signs, poets had recourse to increasingly far-fetched images in order to instil some poetic presence in their work. Visionaries, on the one hand, claimed strange, mystical powers and insights, while alchemists put forward the belief that there was such a thing as the essence of poetry, which they could distil. Caillois saw many imperfections in modern poetry:

Les articulations du discours ont presque disparu, la ponctuation est souvent bannie, la syntaxe réduite à la simple juxtaposition. On cherche en vain une phrase organisée: une liste de noms ou d'épithètes en tient lieu. On emploie de préférence les verbes à l'infinitif, comme si les conjuguer sentait sa [*sic*] prose. Enfin, les mots sont associés entre eux [...] au rebours de leur sens, de façon que l'esprit ne semble pas avoir cédé le moins du monde à la pression malgré tout puissante de leur signification. En somme, au terme d'une suite d'efforts négatifs, car il n'est pas naturel ni même aisé de se servir ainsi des mots en évitant leurs rapports essentiels, on entreprend d'investir le langage d'une mission fabuleuse, [...] dont on refuse de préciser les avantages afin de mieux les proclamer infinis, mais qui correspond en revanche à un besoin facile à

⁸ Quoted by André Chastel, p. 41.

⁹ Daniel Oster, 'L' "effet" Caillois', *Sud*, hors série (1981), 154-58 (p.154).

reconnaître: celui de détourner le langage de sa raison d'être. (*Babel*, pp.324-25).

Trenchant language. But even if Caillois wrote elsewhere, 'je me suis toujours senti plus disposé à combattre la poésie qu'à m'y abandonner' (*IP*, p.23), his was a complex relationship with it. Poetry was of central importance to him and anything interfering with its mission, as he saw it, he would have to condemn. Marie-Louise Goffin makes the important point that Caillois is not attacking poetry, he is defending it and she cites his admiration for Saint-John Perse (a point to which I shall return) as proof that he is no reactionary, but rather someone whose criterion is excellence:

Pour bien voir qu'il n'y a pas là un préjugé ni une fin de non-recevoir de toute poésie moderne, pour trahir le moins possible la pensée de l'auteur et montrer qu'il ne souhaite pas un néo-classicisme ni un retour en arrière mais seulement et uniquement l'excellence, rappelons-nous qu'il a voué une admiration entière à l'œuvre de Saint-John Perse.¹⁰

Caillois's horror at what he perceived as poetic self-indulgence was not merely aesthetic, it was moral too, 'ce n'est ni par sévérité gratuite, ni par rationalisme que l'écrivain se fait le moraliste des poètes, mais par amour de la cohérence, de la vérité, et d'un style'.¹¹ In an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1974 Caillois himself made clear, 'j'avais pour [la poésie] et j'ai continué d'avoir les plus grandes et les plus précises ambitions. Pour cette raison, je n'ai jamais aimé qu'elle fût galvaudée'.¹² He felt that his views were not in keeping with mainstream opinion, 'je ne tardai pas à me convaincre que j'avais les idées les plus opposées à celles qui étaient en faveur généralement. [...] Je résolus à la fin d'exposer [mes opinions] très franchement et même avec quelque vivacité' (avertissement, *Babel*, pp.19-20). A review of *Les Impostures de la poésie*, however, sees Caillois as fitting into a certain trend. It is possible he saw himself as more of a lone voice than was actually the case:

Que pareil manifeste, qui pourrait s'intituler (à la manière de telle œuvre de Maritain) l'"Anti-moderne", paraisse chez Gallimard, sans rencontrer de veto du redoutable Jean Paulhan, voilà qui montre que quelque chose a changé dans l'air du temps. Caillois n'est d'ailleurs pas seul à parler ainsi. Camus a fait récemment des déclarations dans le même sens. Benda a, lui aussi, attaqué le

¹⁰ Marie-Louise Goffin, 'Art poétique de Roger Caillois', *Synthèses*, 167 (1960), 87-90 (p.88).

¹¹ Goffin, p.88.

¹² Hector Bianciotti, 'Le dernier encyclopédiste: Roger Caillois', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 521 (1974), 72-73 (p.72).

byzantisme poétique du temps [...]. Enfin, le dernier mais non le moindre, André Gide, dans ses "Interviews imaginaires", constate que le goût de la perfection va se perdant.¹³

Hughes Labrusse also sees Caillois as following a tradition. His work is situated 'au cœur d'un débat qui ne cesse de souligner la complexité de la poésie de langue française. Plus qu'aucune autre, elle exige, en raison de sa diction, de son registre peu étendu, de la densité de son vocabulaire, une architecture supérieure'.¹⁴

It is well to recall that from 1939-1945 in Buenos Aires, Caillois was responsible for publishing the work of several French and foreign writers in *Lettres françaises*, the journal which he founded in Buenos Aires in 1941 with the assistance of Victoria Ocampo – André Malraux, Paul Valéry, Max Jacob, Saint-John Perse, Paul Eluard, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriela Mistral, Marguerite Yourcenar and others saw their work published in its pages. He also published Breton's *Fata Morgana* in 1942. We have seen in Chapter Two the radical change in his attitude towards humanity and civilisation, and Odile Felgine describes *Lettres françaises* as 'la matérialisation de cette évolution et l'expression d'une maturation'.¹⁵ This evolution also included an embracing of classical standards:

Cette réconciliation avec la culture qui l'avait formé, celle de Montesquieu, de Corneille plus que de Bataille ou de Sade, née du traumatisme de la guerre, de la séparation d'avec la terre natale et de l'approche – capitale – d'autres civilisations, l'amène au constat amer que ses entreprises passées ont été "dérisoires". Elle prend aussi la forme d'un raidissement presque intransigeant autour du classicisme et de sa langue, annoncé par les derniers écrits d'avant-guerre, il est vrai. Celle-là devient souvent emphatique, contrôlée à l'excès, comme amidonnée par trop de sévérité, dans nombre de textes.¹⁶

On his return to France after the War, he introduced major South American writers, Borges, for example, to the French public, in the 'Croix du Sud' series. The 'magic realism' of the South American writers is of course very close to Caillois's conception of the fantastic and of dissymetry and it is easy to understand the appeal of these writers for him. Caillois, in his 'Reconnaissance à Saint-John Perse',¹⁷ finds time to

¹³ *Les Impostures de la Poésie*, *Synthèses*, 10 (1948), 102-104 (p.103).

¹⁴ Hughes Labrusse, 'Suite improbable, effets ambigus et vraisemblances triés dans l'ouvrage: *Les Impostures de la poésie* par Roger Caillois', *Sud*, hors série (1981), 84-103 (p.86).

¹⁵ Odile Felgine, 'Lettres françaises: le virage américain', in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.314-27 (p.318).

¹⁶ Felgine, p.318.

¹⁷ All page references are from *Approches de la poésie*.

pay tribute to other poets too and to point out that his severe views were never held against them in their company:

Je fus sérieux, rétif, parfois plus intraitable que de raison. J'ai eu le privilège de vivre peu ou prou dans la familiarité de plus d'un grand poète, Supervielle, Eluard, Neruda, pour ne citer que des morts. Aucun d'ailleurs ne me tint jamais rigueur de mes sévérités, qu'ils devinaient circonstancielles, envers la poésie. Il me semble qu'elles ajoutaient plutôt à leur confiance. De son côté, chacun – est-il besoin de le souligner? – m'apporta beaucoup. D'autres, plus nombreux, de jadis ou d'hier, m'ont enrichi ou réconforté par ceux de leurs vers qui ne quittaient pas ma mémoire. Un seul toutefois m'entraîna bien au-delà du terme où de moi-même j'aurais pu parvenir: Saint-John Perse. (AP, p.228)

If this is an apparent contradiction, it is important to remember that his relationship with Surrealism was complex also. While condemning – often virulently – their various practices, he remained aware of his attraction to them. Odile Felgine writes perceptively in relation to his attitude to Saint-John Perse, 'A Perse, il doit le plaisir mais aussi l'apaisement d'un esprit "trop vulnérable aux sortilèges et de ce fait devenu à leur égard plus rétractile et urticant que les herbes appelées sensibles". N'est-ce pas l'aveu de sa fascination-répulsion pour le surréalisme?'¹⁸

In the 1978 preface to *Approches de la poésie* Caillois outlined the main 'impostures' denounced in his writings:

La croyance à l'inspiration absolue et incontrôlée, sous forme de l'écriture automatique; l'image que j'ai désignée ensuite indifféremment comme "nulle" ou "infinie" et qui me semblait avoir comme caractère principal d'être à la lettre "in-inimaginable"; enfin le refus systématique de la cohérence et de l'émotion, en somme, de toute transparence ou évidence, même sensible, – ostracisme qui refusait jusqu'à la sensation naïve. (AP, p.10)

In all of Caillois's writings on poetry, and as he himself wrote in his letter to André Breton, what he was looking for and demanding is coherence, a form of expression both based on and revealing the world around us. The personal, the purely subjective, the abandonment of external restraints, none of that can fit into his desired system. He had a deep distaste for and objection to personal lyricism, which he saw as a travesty of poetry, 'l'œuvre d'art cesse d'être une expression privilégiée, mais soumise de

¹⁸ Felgine, *Roger Caillois*, pp.318-19.

l'univers où elle vient au jour et qu'elle s'applique à bien réfléchir; elle devient le témoignage d'une âme douloureuse et vindicative' (*Babel*, p.121). Such a limited frame of reference could not interest someone for whom the only worthwhile knowledge was 'totalitaire', which we might best understand as 'holistic', rather than 'totalitarian'.

Concepts such as the ineffable Caillois dismisses roundly. A poet's job is to express. As for sincerity, judged to be an absolute value and to justify the collapse of poetic discipline, Caillois has this to say: 'je vous vois déjà bannir la plus mince intention, le plus timide contrôle [...]. Beau résultat d'une sincérité semblable à la barbarie' (*VE*, p.42). In the absence of formal constraints, the artist feels free to give full rein to his emotions, '[l'écrivain] rejette toute rhétorique et toute prosodie. Toute règle lui pèse' (*Babel*, p.127). In *Impostures de la poésie*, Caillois exposes this false concept of freedom. In rejecting all artistic conventions, the artist is in effect rejecting a valuable poetic aid, 'chaque fois qu'il rompt avec une discipline, il croit gagner une liberté: il accepte un joug' (*IP*, p.31). Caillois can only respect those works of art that show evidence of discipline, 'je ne sais quoi m'entraîne à n'estimer l'art que dans la mesure où il manifeste une discipline pour l'intelligence, pour le cœur, pour l'âme enfin, pour ce tenace appétit de perfection et d'immortalité qui me semble qui est ce qu'on appelle ainsi d'ordinaire' [*sic*] (*IP*, p.18).

Caillois values simplicity, clarity, imagination tempered by having a basis in objective reality. He dismisses free verse as a 'pure illusion d'optique et mirage de l'imprimerie' ('Art poétique', *AP*, p.103). Modern poetry, a mixture of free verse and arbitrary rhymes in Caillois's eyes, leads him to conclude: 'après la rime, elle perd la raison' (*AP*, p.115).

For man to abandon all discipline and the conscious creative process is to lose his advantage over nature, 'il n'a fait que redevenir nature et abandonner ses privilèges' (*IP*, p.32). This man/nature polarity is something Caillois would later resolve.

Referring to both poles, he wrote in the 1978 preface to *Babel*:

Je ne leur ai guère entrevu de résolution éventuelle que dans mes derniers ouvrages, lorsque la pierre et le discours ont fini par me suggérer, pour rejoindre ces inconciliables, l'axe de référence qui me manquait. J'ai cessé peu

à peu de considérer l'homme comme extérieur à la nature et comme sa finalité. Il va sans dire que, de la nature, je n'exclus pas, au contraire, le minéral dont l'homme me semble le prolongement extrême et dont il continue aux antipodes de l'univers par d'autres moyens les démarches obscures. (*Babel*, p.15)

These topics will be touched on in greater detail in the next chapter.

Caillois understands the pleasures for artists in yielding to 'sortilèges' as a source of poetic inspiration. He writes lyrically of their charms, 'si l'on pouvait, sans déchoir, succomber à leur charme! S'il ne coûtait rien de s'en rassasier!' (*IP*, p.31). He has a good deal to say on the topic of inspiration. Poets are not inspired by 'un souffle surnaturel' or in receipt of 'un don des dieux' (*IP*, p.47). They are, simply put, 'gens de métier' (*IP*, p.47), instructed by their poetic predecessors. No artist has ever received inspiration in excess of his own personal input or talent, 'dès qu'on interroge la nature de l'inspiration, on aperçoit qu'elle ne fait jamais que restituer' (*IP*, p.37). In his *Art poétique* he uses the same verb in relation to inspiration, 'elle restitue' (p.125). Caillois brings to mind here the Platonic idea that *knowledge is recognition*.

Caillois is of course being highly prescriptive here. It is perfectly possible to argue – without falling into laxity – for a more liberal view of inspiration. While protesting that he could make his any of the rules of Caillois's *Art poétique*, Philippe Jaccottet cannot share Caillois's insistence on the completely rational. He writes, for example, 'le poète a peut-être besoin d'abord d'un point de départ plus obscur, d'une source plus cachée et moins parfaitement définissable que le voudrait Roger Caillois'.¹⁹ Hughes Labrusse warns against excessive rigour in poetical criticism in view of the very particular nature of the poet's work, 'la démarche poétique obéit à une maîtrise, à une rigueur qui lui appartiennent en propre et dont l'originalité se reconnaît à l'impossibilité de les codifier par avance'.²⁰ Looking back on his poetic theory in *Le Fleuve Alphée*, Caillois remembers it as rather more permissive than it often appears, 'quand il m'est arrivé de tenter de définir les pouvoirs de la poésie, j'ai constamment pris soin de réserver cette part de mystère comme l'un des éléments essentiels du sortilège' (*FA*, p.109). It was precisely his refusal to acknowledge a role for

¹⁹ Philippe Jaccottet, 'Arts poétiques', *NNRF*, 81 (1959), 494-99 (p.498).

²⁰ Labrusse, pp.91-92.

suggestiveness or mystery in poetry that led Breton on one occasion to refer to him as a ‘parfait philistin’.²¹

Caillois, in his earlier writings on poetry in particular, emphasised its necessary human dimensions, going so far as to write in connection with emotions, ‘il n’est pas peut-être pour la poésie de vocation plus sûre que de leur inventer un langage ferme et comme éternel’ (*IP*, p.27). It was not until *Art poétique* that Caillois attributed a central position to the image, because of its capacity to reveal the hidden system of patterns in the universe. This is somewhat paradoxical, in view of the importance attributed to the ‘stupéfiant image’ by the Surrealists. Before *Art poétique*, Caillois saw poetry’s primary vocation as reflecting ordinary human concerns, educating people about their emotions. As we will see, he would come to see poetry as operating parallel to the scientific adventure of discovery. Unfortunately Caillois saw the prevailing view as favouring obscurity – the more obscure the poem, the more it was considered to be the receptacle of some prestigious, mysterious source of inspiration, ‘on exige que [la poésie] soit absurde et incohérente: on vérifie de la sorte qu’elle a bien jailli de l’intermédiaire de ces profondeurs louches, où la conscience refoule pêle-mêle ses déchets, ses copeaux et ses ordures’ (*Babel*, p.323). Practices such as automatic writing were considered all that was necessary to achieve immortal works of art. While acknowledging that they sometimes found ‘des merveilles insoupçonnées jusqu’à eux’ (‘Aventure de la poésie moderne’, *AP*, p.60), their mistake was to assume that they had no active part to play in writing up these wonders, ‘or il n’est gemme qu’il ne faille tailler’ (p.60). All around him Caillois saw ‘le dédain de la raison et de la volonté’ (*Babel*, p.140). He cites not just society but the isolated nature of literary activity as causes for this flight from reason and feelings, considered to be ‘grossières impuretés’ (*IP*, p.43).

Isolation is relevant too to the poet’s understanding of his role in relation to human responsibility in general. Echoing opinions expressed in *Patagonie*, Caillois writes ‘il dépend de chacun, dans une proportion imperceptible mais efficace à la longue, d’entamer le patrimoine accumulé par ses compagnons ou de contribuer à l’accroître selon les moyens dont il dispose pour le léguer enrichi à ceux qui suivront’ (*Babel*,

²¹ André Breton, ‘Martinique charmeuse de serpents: un grand poète noir’, *Tropiques*, 11 (1944), 119-126 (p.123).

p.358). Not that Caillois's view of man is lofty. There can be, as here, a cutting phrase or image designed to puncture any illusions of self-importance, 'la société de ses semblables l'aide à s'élever au-dessus de ce limon dont il reste, quoi qu'il fasse, la scabreuse descendance' (*Babel*, p.359). Problems arise when the artist thinks the cause of art is separate from that of man. This isolation leads to 'la ruine de l'art lui-même, qu'il dépouille tout ensemble de contenu, de devoir et de portée' (*Babel*, p.361).

Showing his fearlessness in the face of contemporary trends, Caillois has harsh things to say on the topic of 'engagement' and writers. The very ones who insisted on shaking off any artistic or social constraints unquestioningly allied themselves to a cause. Going from one extreme to the other, having glorified in composing 'pour le plaisir des oisifs de délicieux régals [...] il s'intéresse avec passion à la politique militante' (*Babel*, p.366). Caillois sees no honour in their choice, 'je ne puis m'empêcher de songer qu'ils ne s'acharneraient pas à revendiquer des devoirs qui sont étrangers à leur office, s'ils n'avaient pas pris d'abord tant de soin de récuser ceux qu'il implique' (*Babel*, p.368). Caillois's desire for consistency, and indeed coherence, shines through here.

Poets, having abandoned either prosody or meaning or both, turned to the image as the very source of poetry. For the Surrealists, the image had to shock the reader, 'il fallut que l'image surprît et même qu'elle scandalisât, qu'elle démentît du moins la vraisemblance' (*VE*, p.66). For Caillois, the image, to be successful, must of course be fresh, but above all it must be 'juste' (*VE*, p.66). From the beginning, that was mandatory for him. In *Approches de la poésie*, in the section entitled 'L'énigme et l'image', Caillois attacks explicitly Breton's theory of the image:

La thèse d'André Breton est, au fond, que tout, strictement tout, en ce domaine, se trouve susceptible d'être ratifié par l'imagination. Le mérite de l'image viendrait alors de sa nouveauté absolue, du caractère inédit, déconcertant et – à la lettre – *in-inimaginable* – du rapprochement. C'est là pure contradiction. Il importe au contraire que l'image demeure imaginable. (*AP*, p.185)

Caillois concludes, 'il faut étonner justement' (p.187). It is significant that he focuses on Breton's extreme views rather than on, say, Reverdy's. Pierre Calderón spells out Reverdy's approach, '[il] [...] n'a jamais opposé *lointain* et *juste*. Au contraire. La

troisième des fameuses propositions du 13 mars 1918 sur l'image énonce: "Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte – plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique".²² As Calderón comments, however, 'Caillois aime à hanter les extrêmes, et fort peu l'entre-deux: d'une part le surréalisme le plus orthodoxe, et de l'autre le classicisme le plus strict'.²³ The concept of the 'imagination juste' was for Caillois the most important one, although he has the honesty to admit, in his 'Résumé sur la poésie', 'je ne cache pas l'éblouissement un peu craintif que j'ai toujours ressenti pour les images fortuites, arbitraires et, si je vais jusqu'au bout, pour les images in-imagin-ables (cette séduction a joué son rôle dans mon adhésion passagère au surréalisme)' (p.225). The adjective 'craintif' is very significant. As with the *forces du vertige*, he is afraid of a possible hold over him, overriding reason and control. So here he must elaborate a theory on images that, while allowing for the unexpected, in no way gives in to any secret attractions he may feel.

Caillois's theory on the image in poetry provides a bridge to his science/poetry parallel. He writes in 'L'Agate de Pyrrhus':

Sans cette manie permanente de tout interpréter à tort et à travers, selon la vraisemblance ou contre elle, qui sait si les démarches de la connaissance ne manqueraient pas à la fois de l'impulsion dont elles ont besoin et de l'instrument premier, de la méthode même de leur réussite?²⁴

He came to see the image as the distinguishing characteristic of poetry, 'l'emploi de l'image est propre à la poésie: elle constitue le risque poétique par excellence, le mode d'exploration du monde sensible qui lui est particulier' ('Résumé sur la poésie', *AP*, p.240). Prosody alone is not a sufficient condition of poetry. A poet must reveal in his choice of image, 'une propriété cachée, mais essentielle, de l'univers' (p.241). Caillois, like Mallarmé, was susceptible to the 'démon de l'analogie'. A condition of all meaningful activity for Caillois is that the universe is finite. Given, or assuming this, it is the poet's job to open our eyes to the consequences of this finite world:

²² Pierre Calderón, 'Roger Caillois l' impatient ou Un singulier art poétique', *Sud*, hors série (1981), 70-83 (p.74).

²³ Calderón, p.76.

²⁴ Reprinted in *Images, images in Obliques*, précédé de *Images, images*, pp.89-109 (p.109).

L'univers est fini en ses mécanismes et démarches. Aussi n'est-il rien qui ne s'y chevauche et n'y soit répercuté en résonances communes ou rares. La science essaie de définir et de compter à la racine de la totalité écrasante le nombre infime des composants – corps ou énergies – qui s'y ramifient sans fin ni répit. A la poésie reste dévolue l'étincelante surface du monde, la frondaison irréductible à jamais étalée dans un foisonnement disparate. (AP, p.241)

Caillois maps out the role of the poet here, using lyrical language resolutely to exclude the possibility of personal lyricism in poetry. In this the poet's job is similar to Caillois's vision of his own undertaking, as expressed in the preface to *Cases d'un échiquier*:

Ce ne sont pas les idées que j'aime, mais les données du monde, les appels des larges pans de ténèbres derrière lesquels l'univers dérobe vite ses lois et ses manières, la pénombre où il dissimule les modèles de ses rouages comme la source des énergies qui les meuvent. D'où le semis de notes, d'analyses, d'aveux où je me suis appliqué tantôt à traquer des secrets évasifs et fraternels, tantôt, plus simplement, à consigner l'enseignement, les préférences que j'en retirais et qui, elles aussi, se révélaient évasives et parentes, sinon complémentaires. (CE, p.8)

The world is Caillois's interest and he would have it that of poets too. But it has to be said that this is too prescriptive. Successful and valid poems have been written on an infinitely varied range of subjects. In Caillois, this attraction to the concrete, as the gateway to discovering the hidden laws of the universe, generated the works that I have been analysing and that constitute the 'parenthèse' in his career – something the following chapter will consider more fully. He too has been building up links:

Ces relations, j'ai pris un plaisir presque enfantin à les aligner en long et en large en m'émerveillant des perspectives obliques qui surgissaient comme en supplément. J'ai vu de cette façon se dessiner les cases clairsemées d'un échiquier incomplet, où je devine que, figure errante ou myope, je zigzaguais depuis le début. (CE, p.8)

The vulnerable self-image here conveys the magnitude of the task, and is similar to some self-descriptions in *Pierres réfléchies* especially.

A successful image, unexpected and yet appropriate, has a key role to play in revealing a hitherto concealed cosmic unity:

la plus modeste atteste l'unité et l'ordonnance de l'univers. Elle les prolonge et s'y ajoute. L'âme [...] s'en trouve un instant rassérénée. Une *image* qui d'abord la déconcertait, une fois que l'*imagination* l'a reconnue juste, l'exalte à proportion de son étrangeté, car elle établit une complicité entre des termes dont rien jusqu'alors n'avait laissé prévoir qu'ils pussent confirmer à leur tour que formes et élans se répètent dans l'univers et qu'il n'y existe ni monstre, ni prodige, ni songe qui n'y connaisse de répondant. ('Résumé sur la poésie', *AP*, p.243)

They are an instrument in the search for cosmic wholeness. This viewpoint is very close to that of Reverdy.

In some of the paradoxical terms coined by Caillois, 'lyrisme objectif', 'fantastique naturel', 'mystique matérialiste', 'sciences diagonales', Calderón sees links with Caillois's theory of the image, 'nous avons là une spécification de l'image telle que Caillois l'entend'.²⁵ Caillois himself links his theory of the image with his views on dissymmetry, 'je me convaincs aujourd'hui qu'à sa manière l'image poétique est elle-même une manière de dissymétrie' ('Ouverture', *AP*, p.252). He highlights the increasing role he attributed to analogy, it seemed to him 'le ressort même d'une "poétique" s'appliquant à la totalité de l'univers' (p.252).

Writing on Baudelaire ('Place de la poésie de Baudelaire', *CE*), Caillois defines as follows the task of poetry:

Etablir des relations inédites et justes, constituer des séries dédaignées, mais exactes, multiplier les grilles d'analogies inaperçues, de façon à constituer un savoir second et vérifiable, où les données immédiates de l'expérience trouvent leur cohérence, comme les analyses et les constructions de la science découvrent la leur dans le support intelligible et mathématique des phénomènes: voici les tâches dont la poésie est de plus en plus invitée à s'acquitter et qui définissent pour elle un programme de très longue haleine, qu'il n'est peut-être pas possible à l'homme de mener à bien. [...] [L]e but ultime est mieux cerné, si l'on sait qu'il se confond avec l'établissement de quelque immense table cyclique des données du monde. Elle ne porterait pas, comme celle de Mendeleïev, sur les poids atomiques des corps simples, mais à l'inverse et complémentirement sur le scintillement de la nature, là où les corps simples dilués, composés, éparpillés en sensations, émotions, sentiments, connaissance et plaisir de soi-même et de l'univers, ne sont plus identifiables ni quantifiables. (*CE*, pp.254-55)

²⁵ Calderón, p.80.

The poetic adventure runs parallel to the scientific one. Poetry's job, like that of science, is to impose an order, a structure, on reality, to unveil its coherence. And here we rejoin Caillois's searches for wholeness. Poetry was for him the instrument best suited to the labyrinthine task of exploring the real.

His reference to a Mendeleev-like table, but here a table of subjective elements, is very significant. *Approches de la poésie* is dedicated to Mendeleev and Saint-John Perse, 'qui, par les voies opposées du nombre et de la sensibilité, m'ont également montré la possibilité d'une intelligence rigoureuse de la poésie'. Both Mendeleev and Saint-John Perse, scientist and poet respectively, played a central role in reassuring Caillois that the practice of poetry was a valid activity, Mendeleev, in confirming Caillois in his view of the finite nature of reality and Saint-John Perse, by focusing his poetry on the real. Caillois quotes Baudelaire and his search for '... Ordre et beauté/Luxe, calme et volupté' (CE, p.256). To these Caillois would add three nouns central to him, 'rigueur, justesse et joie' (p.256). The inclusion of the idea of joy is interesting, and softens slightly the grim impression created by 'rigour'.

Echoing views expressed as early as *La Nécessité d'esprit*, Caillois writes, '*la poésie n'est possible que s'il existe un fonds commun objectif de l'imagination*' (CE, p.249). The finite nature of the universe, without which everything would be meaningless, renders possible this 'fonds commun objectif'. Science does not sufficiently deal with the links and parallels between even the most differing areas. Here poetry takes on its full significance:

L'exercice bien conduit des facultés poétiques est parallèle à l'effort du génie scientifique. Il apporte des ivresses et des illuminations de même sorte, quoique toujours liées à une expérience personnelle et passagère. Virtuellement généralisables, elles demeurent suspendues et téméraires, vivaces et fluides, frémissantes et furtives, purs parisiens de l'imagination s'entraînant à plus d'acuité et de justesse. Le poète est le savant des apparences, de toute chose insaisissable et fugace qu'il s'agit de fixer aux pièges du langage, dans la conviction qu'elles forment un tissu secret, dont l'armure, elle aussi, peut être rendue perceptible. (CE, p.249)

While acknowledging the delicate nature of some of the poet's subject matter, it is important to note how this can be made tangible via language, and that it can all serve to help uncover the 'tissu secret' of reality. The poet, through language, pierces

through the appearance of things to reveal the underlying cosmic pattern. Caillois's writing here recalls how he himself described Victor Hugo's view of poetry:

Il découvrit naturellement [...] dans la vision poétique le seul instrument qui permette à l'homme d'appréhender les rapports mystérieux qui relient entre eux les éléments de l'univers, le seul aussi qui puisse par l'intermédiaire de l'image manifester ces connexions cachées ou en établir d'éclatantes entre les termes les plus inattendus. (*AP*, p.55)

Hughes Labrusse finds in Caillois's poetic theory

un équilibre conscient des difficultés à saisir, de nos jours, le rapport essentiel de la poésie à la science. Il n'élude pas la nécessité de le penser; il protège la poésie contre l'affabulation ou l'excentricité; avec pleine sagesse, il ne fourbit pas les armes de la science pour qu'elle accapare à son tour la trame poétique. Il ne superpose pas la science et la poésie, il ne procède pas à cette mutation monstrueuse et inflexible.²⁶

In conferring on poetry a kind of scientific status, 'Caillois adhère [...] au surréalisme, dans un premier temps, et à son intention d'extirper la poésie de la littérature insignifiante'.²⁷ Jean-Pierre Duso Bauduin comments on Caillois's particular approach to literature and science:

Il ne songe guère à appliquer les sciences humaines à l'espace littéraire mouvant; il se sert plutôt de la littérature comme d'un guide pour traverser les sciences humaines, pour y pratiquer des chemins de traverse, pour y mesurer ce que leur surdité constitutive leur interdit d'entendre.²⁸

Discouraged as Caillois was by poetic malpractice, already in the forties a vision was forming in his mind of an acceptable form of poetry, 'j'avais toujours présent à l'esprit comme salutaire antidote l'œuvre si rigoureusement concertée de Saint-John Perse' ('Reconnaissance à Saint-John Perse', *AP*, p.221). Saint-John Perse played a pivotal role in orientating Caillois towards poetry as a science of the concrete, as 'la moitié complémentaire de la science' (*AP*, p.227). In Perse's work, 'chaque phénomène, le moindre accident, toute loi, toute hiérarchie comme toute sensation ou émotion devait en effet trouver sa place prévue, sa case inévitable dans un gigantesque

²⁶ Labrusse, pp.101-02.

²⁷ Labrusse, p.97.

²⁸ Jean-Pierre Duso Bauduin, 'Roger Caillois: critique littéraire', in *La Pensée aventurée*, pp.302-13 (p.306).

damier encyclopédique. Je commençais de concevoir la poésie comme une science du concret' (*AP*, p.223). The adjective 'encyclopédique' is significant too in understanding Caillois's attraction. Absorbed as he was by the totality of the universe, how could he not empathise with a poet who 'fait appel à la totalité du monde pour établir, dans l'infinie variété des phénomènes offerts, des homologues fragiles et ténues' (*AP*, p.224). As it says in the introduction to the correspondence between Saint-John Perse and Caillois, 'l'un comme l'autre ont classé et répertorié l'infinie variété du monde'.²⁹ Both were engaged in their own search for wholeness. Caillois devoted his only work of direct literary criticism to Saint-John Perse, a book still respected and found useful today. Roger Little describes it as a 'volume indispensable que connaissent tous les amateurs du poète'.³⁰ Caillois's familiarity with the work of Saint-John Perse also led him to put the image at the centre of poetry:

Dès lors, il ne me restait plus qu'à désigner l'image comme le fondement quasi permanent de la poésie, comme sa caractéristique institutionnelle, plus fréquente et plus répandue que la rime et la cadence, que le nombre ou la quantité des syllabes, en un mot plus distinctive que quelque obligation métrique que ce fût, puisque grâce à elle la poésie surgissait aussi en prose. (*AP*, p.224)

In the preface to *Approches de la poésie*, Caillois elaborates on his dedication of the book to Saint-John Perse and Mendeleyev:

la poétique de Saint-John Perse m'avait montré le champ de son domaine propre, qui n'exclut rien; mes recherches sur la syntaxe des rêves, tels que les écrivains les utilisent comme ressort de leurs récits, sur les rubriques dénombrables du féerique et du fantastique, sur les problèmes posés par le mimétisme animal, me confirmaient dans l'idée d'un univers redondant. La table périodique de Mendeïev m'en apporta enfin le gage et la clé. L'image irrécusable et qualitative est possible en poésie au même titre que des lois exactes et sans cesse plus précises sont la raison d'être de la science. Seulement, émotions et sensations circonscrivent l'empire de la première, les phénomènes mesurables celui de la seconde. (*AP*, p.13)

Caillois wrote of the 'apaisement intellectuel' offered to him by the work of Saint-John Perse ('Reconnaissance à Saint-John Perse', *AP*, p.228). Because of the unifying glimpse an image gives, it offers the fragmented consciousness a transitory sense of

²⁹ Roger Caillois/ *Saint-John Perse: Correspondance 1942-1975*, ed. by Joëlle Gardes Tamine (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p.15.

the possible oneness of the universe. Because of the image, and because poetry uses words in a more evocative way than prose, it possesses ‘une vertu de rencontre et de heurt, qui émerveille et parfois suffoque’ (‘Résumé sur la poésie’, *AP*, p.245).

Conferring on poetry a status similar to that of science is the final step in his decades-long bid to legitimise it, ‘comme celles des sciences dont les lois et les nombres constituent l’apanage et la fin, ses découvertes exigent labeur, lucidité, imagination. Seule différence: en place du calcul exact et du raisonnement irréprochable, une sensibilité à vif et l’acuité de la saisie analogique’ (‘Résumé sur la poésie’, pp. 246-47). The ‘only difference’ is actually a very considerable one. In his desire to make poetry ‘respectable’, Caillois cannot of course make any allowances for the role of language alone – that would be approaching the ‘pure art’ to which he was so opposed.

Rencontres provides another instance of Caillois focusing on specific authors, rather than poetry or literature in general, and it shows how Caillois, when writing on particular authors he likes, can be so much broader and sensitive in his views than he will allow himself to be when writing on poetry in the abstract. In it he expresses his own indebtedness to a range of authors, in tones that are sufficiently formal for an academic exercise yet still allow the personal impact of these writers to come through.

In describing his ‘meetings’ with various writers, it is interesting to see his personal concerns mirrored in his reflections on their work. Paul Valéry, for example, ‘aspirait à aiguïser les vertus de l’intellect’ (p.24). Caillois too was concerned to assert the primacy of the intellect. Writing on their shared demand for purity and precision, Régine Pietra observes, ‘c’est cette exigence que Caillois partage avec Valéry (ou qu’il lui a empruntée) dans une sorte de fraternité aristocratique’.³¹ Both were opposed to facile views on inspiration and to automatic writing, and in favour of prosody – and both found their views earned them as many enemies as friends. Valéry applied a rigour and severity to his work of which Caillois could only approve, ‘il avait recours à telle sensualité exquise, purgée de la moindre émotion qui ne vînt pas de la sensation elle-même. Il la stérilisait, je veux dire la privait par artifice de cette faculté de se

³⁰ Roger Little, ‘Pour une esthétique sévère: Roger Caillois lecteur de Saint-John Perse’, *Sud*, hors série (1981), 62-69 (p.64).

³¹ Régine Pietra, ‘Caillois et Valéry’, in *La Pensée aventuree*, pp.394-403 (p.394).

répandre [...]. Dans la poésie, il n'a pas cherché l'indicible, mais l'immuable' (p.19). Caillois's language conveys a view of emotions as some kind of sickness, needing to be kept in check.

Writing on magical realism in Miguel Angel Asturias in *Rencontres*, it is the appropriateness of this approach to the topic that attracts Caillois's approval – as ever, the idea that literary creation needs to be anchored in the real (when the real is surreal, as Caillois considered the Argentinian countryside to be, then that leads to, for him, the happy blend of magical realism):

Miguel Angel Asturias exprima avec une intensité inégalée la perception originelle du monde ambiant et les sortilèges végétaux qui, au cœur de la sylvie [...] la peuplent sans répit de mirages et de fantômes. Il y parvint par des voies et façons qu'il semblait inventer alors qu'ils les recevait de la réalité même qu'elles lui servaient à restituer. Loin d'être des artifices esthétiques, encore moins des procédés rhétoriques, ses ressources d'écrivain lui sont imposées par l'objet même de sa description, avec lequel il fait corps tout naturellement, tant il s'en découvre partie vive. (R, p.32)

This absorption in the object being described brings to mind Caillois's writings on stones.

The last 'rencontre' evoked is that with André Breton, certainly a decisive one. His lasting obsession with Surrealism comes through in that Caillois evokes again the episode of the jumping beans, and reiterates his opinions on automatic writing. But it is touching that *Rencontres* ends with Caillois recalling two warm dedications written to him by Breton in two books, in 1952, 'A Roger Caillois, qui ne parviendra pas à contrarier l'estime et l'amitié que j'ai pour lui', and in 1962, 'A Roger Caillois – à nos divergences près – à mes yeux peu de choses – en vive estime et affection' (p.294). Above and beyond their differences, Caillois wishes to make clear what bound them, their 'entente' (p.294). Breton's persistent affection and admiration is evident, as is his shrewd perception that at heart, there is more that unites them than divides them.

The reception afforded Caillois's various writings on poetry could be hostile. *Impostures de la poésie* came out 'dans le plus grand silence'³² and earned Caillois

³² Felgine, p.280.

‘des détracteurs virulents, comme André Breton’.³³ Francis Ponge, on the other hand, found much of it commendable.³⁴ Panoff, not surprisingly, is hostile, seeing in what he refers to as Caillois’s literary conformism a rather base motivation:

Il n’existe pas de contradiction entre la gesticulation contestataire de Caillois face à la science et son conformisme quand il s’agit de littérature. Le classicisme et le boulevard sont portés aux nues, tandis que sont condamnés les auteurs d’avant-garde, y compris Rimbaud devant qui même le pharisaïsme de Claudel s’était pourtant incliné vingt ans plus tôt! Dans les deux cas, il s’agit de la même complaisance qui s’ingénie à flatter un même public bien identifié.³⁵

Panoff provides no evidence for this very spurious charge. Caillois was never concerned with flattering anyone, his sole focus being the subject about which he cares so passionately. Philippe Jaccottet expresses more measured reservations and has a fair point to make:

Je me demande si Roger Caillois, dans son souci de mesure et de limpidité, ne se laisse pas aller à son tour à quelque excès, et si ce n’est pas une grave erreur que de négliger l’importance de ces expériences toutes convergentes, à l’aube de notre époque, simplement pour réagir contre l’exploitation que des médiocres en ont faite.³⁶

In focusing only on the negative, Caillois inevitably seems so obsessed by what is bad that in his critical writings on poetry in general he can fail to take a broader view and indicate the appreciation and sensitivity that come through when he is writing on particular authors. By concentrating on the mediocre, Caillois missed the chance to reflect on the exciting if sometimes uncertain adventure of modern poetry. The vital mission he assigned to poetry meant that he could not cultivate the sanguine detachment necessary for this.

Jean-Pierre Duso Bauduin makes the valid point that Caillois cannot be considered a standard literary critic:

L’étiquette “critique littéraire” convient mal à Caillois: il ne fit pas profession d’orienter les lectures des amateurs, il eut encore moins la tentation “de

³³ Felgine, p.280.

³⁴ Felgine, p.280.

³⁵ Panoff, pp.128-29.

³⁶ Philippe Jaccottet, p. 498.

perfectionner un code descriptif des œuvres littéraires” à l’usage des universitaires et des étudiants.³⁷

For Bauduin, it is the variety of Caillois’s critical activity that has marginalised him. Recalling his many and varied pieces of work, Bauduin writes, ‘à cultiver toutes ces formes de critique, l’atypique Caillois se condamnait à n’entrer jamais dans les manuels d’histoire littéraire’.³⁸ This is true for the same reasons of Roger Caillois’s other contributions in various fields. Caillois’s writings on poetry and literature are scattered throughout his work as a whole and in this Bauduin sees a reflection of Caillois’s times:

Ces déplacements trahissent [...] une extrême sensibilité à une époque, une conscience vive de l’impossibilité où nous sommes d’assigner à la littérature une place propre et au discours critique qui la prend en charge un site assuré. La question littéraire serait vouée à la complicité et au mélange, condamnée à adapter une posture instable.³⁹

According to Germaine Brée, Caillois’s criticism was not sufficiently all-encompassing to form a complete approach. She compares Caillois and Paulhan, who both sought a move away from subjectivity:

La critique, selon Caillois, devait être une stylistique essentiellement descriptive; selon Paulhan, une poétique. [...] Cependant, s’ils abordent l’un et l’autre la critique par un examen objectif du langage, ni l’un ni l’autre n’a proposé une théorie qui donnerait à la critique le statut d’une discipline autonome.⁴⁰

How criticism can ever be a ‘discipline autonome’, given its dependence on original work, Brée does not make clear. In all fairness, however, that was not Caillois’s objective. He was concerned – perhaps overly so – with defending poetic qualities, and an approach to poetry in which he absolutely believed. It was not sufficiently broad-based to launch a literary theory, and it was very intimately bound up with his life’s quest – not anyone else’s motivation or approach necessarily. There is too undoubtedly some imbalance in his approach notwithstanding the general validity of the points he makes.

³⁷ Bauduin, p.302.

³⁸ Bauduin, pp.302-03.

³⁹ Bauduin, p.304.

In some of his writings, Caillois can appear to lay himself open to the charge of being an arch-conservative. Some of his pronouncements on poetry ('après la rime, elle perd la raison') seem set to please the most reactionary. But this would be a seriously distorted conclusion. His concern for high standards in an area which literally meant the world to him may reveal concerns and prescriptions not everyone has to accept, but he was no narrow conservative. His profound admiration for the work of Saint-John Perse shows his capacity to recognise *control* in poetry underneath the *appearance* of disorder (judged by traditional verse practice); a subtlety some of his rather hasty critics do not take into account.

Caillois's writings on poetry, which begin with fury and condemnation, end with a sense of peace, acceptance of poetry and the central mission he assigns to it in his search for wholeness. Jacqueline Reboul writes, 'théoricien de la poésie, on pourrait dire qu'il en fut également le philosophe'.⁴¹ His attitude towards poetry mellowed considerably with time. Referring to his earlier books in *Le Fleuve Alphée* he admits, 'Je m'y montrais impitoyable. Je suis revenu depuis sur mon intransigeance' (*FA*, p.115). Caillois even accepted himself as a poet towards the end of his life. Asked by Hector Bianciotti and Jean-Paul Enthoven what image he would like for himself and his work, he replied, 'peut-être, et exclusivement, celle d'un poète'.⁴² It is a very remarkable evolution, in which the work of Saint-John Perse, and the insights it gave Caillois into poetry and its possibilities, is central. Equally too Mendeleev and his periodic table played a pivotal role, in indicating to Caillois that a quest for wholeness had a basis in science. The sense of peace Caillois attained is very much a part of his 'poétique généralisée' and work on stones, and all of this forms the substance of the final chapter, which examines the last stage in Caillois's search for wholeness. 'Ouverture', which closes *Approches de la poésie*, looks forward to that phase in his thinking:

[La poésie] qui se laisse parfois deviner dans le duvet du bonheur et du monde, où rien n'est jamais parfaitement superposable, restitue l'âme parcellaire à la

⁴⁰ Germaine Brée, *Littérature française. Le XXe siècle: 1920-1970*, vol.2 (Paris: Librairie Arthaud, 1978), pp.176-77.

⁴¹ Jacqueline Reboul, *Critique universitaire et critique créatrice* (Paris: Aux amateurs de livres, 1986), p.97.

⁴² *CPT*, p.25.

totalité convoitée, elle la réconforte pour un instant fugitif, mais qui reviendra à son seul appel, enrichi, peut-être d'un éclat que la durée avive, au lieu qu'elle en évapore la fragrance. (*AP*, p.255)

CHAPTER NINE

THE WORLD OF STONES

Je parle des pierres
(*P*, p.9)

Mineral meditations

Si, maintenant, je ne m'occupe plus que de décrire des pierres, c'est pour montrer qu'à l'intérieur de ces pierres, et dans la façon dont elles trouvent leur forme, il y a des espèces de réduction, de miniaturisation, de toutes les choses qui sont au monde. L'imagination se flatte de broder à sa guise, et voici que l'intérieur d'une pierre proclame que rigueur et dérive ne font que besogner un canevas immortel, invariable. Les mêmes consignes mystérieuses gouvernent l'inextricable liberté mentale et la gravité minérale [...].

Caillois is talking here in interview with Hector Bianciotti and Jean-Paul Enthoven, not long before his death.¹ Having spent a lifetime searching for wholeness, trying to explain the totality of the universe, and to account for all its structures, Caillois was finally to find ease and tranquillity in holding in the palm of his hand a reduced version of the immensity he had tried – and inevitably failed – to embrace.

‘Comme les anciens Chinois, je suis porté à considérer chaque pierre comme un monde’, he wrote (*PR*, p.9). For the possessor of stones, the images they evoke ‘miniaturisent à son bénéfice personnel chaque objet du monde. Elles lui en remettent un double stable, qui tient dans le creux de sa main, qu’il peut déplacer à son gré ou enfermer dans une vitrine’ (*EP*, p.15). There is the idea of control here too, which is much easier when dealing with a miniature universe. Caillois was only ever interested in the totality of knowledge; stones, for him, effortlessly encompassed this. In the quotation from the interview he expresses too his belief that, man or mineral, we are

¹ *CPT*, p.17.

all subject to the same laws and that every production man thinks his uniquely is in fact echoed in the mineral world.

I have already mentioned how, from his earliest writings, Caillois, feeling the burden of consciousness, desired to lose it in different ways. In the *Récit du délogé*,² ‘la métaphore la plus achevée et la plus convaincante de son syndrome de dispersion’,³ this is taken to extremes when a mollusc takes over the ‘je’ of the story. In his writing on stones, Caillois would finally come to immerse himself fully in the written word, ‘ce dédoublement volontaire par le langage ne se substitue-t-il pas à une dissociation autrement plus périlleuse, contre laquelle il pourrait avoir lutté sa vie entière: la sienne?’⁴

In this chapter I shall discuss how and why stones represent for Caillois the last step in his search for completeness. I shall consider his different writings on stones, and also *Le Fleuve Alphée* and *Le Champ des signes*, the latter book a logical extension of earlier works in which he sought to explain and express the totality of the universe. Caillois may well know the vanity of such pursuits, but it is his life’s work and a considerable source of pleasure to him to track down and uncover analogies. The title of the book evokes very clearly his world view – the universe really is composed for him of signs of its unity, that is how he has always looked on it. In *Le Champ des signes* his theories on the oneness of the universe find their full expression in the development of Caillois’s ‘poétique généralisée’, a development that helps give his *œuvre* its own completeness. By spreading the capacity for poetry so widely, Caillois is diminishing the importance of man’s activity in this field. Caillois would see this as redressing the balance.

For Caillois, as we have seen, the concept of the ‘imagination juste’ was central, and its importance will be seen in the context of his writings on stones. Caillois explains this idea to Bianciotti and Enthoven:

Ce que j’appelle “imagination juste”, c’est ne rien écrire qui ne soit garanti par quelque réalité, étant donné que la réalité garantit infiniment plus de choses que l’on ne croit. Je déteste l’arbitraire, le fantaisiste. Il ne suffit pas qu’il y ait

² Included in *Cases d’un échiquier*, pp.308-31.

³ Panoff, p.148.

⁴ Felgine, p.357.

imagination, il faut en outre que la mise en images corresponde à un système d'échos, de repères, dans les données du monde. Le monde étant fini, [...] nécessairement les choses se répètent, s'y recourent, s'y chevauchent. Et c'est cela qui permet la poésie, qui est la science des pléonasmes de l'univers, la science des correspondances.⁵

Caillois's view of 'reality' seems quite broadly based here. We have seen Caillois's refusal of the limitations of the personal, the subjective. His repetition of 'science' in the last sentence confers on poetry a detached, analytical status. He sees it as an activity to be practised in the laboratory of the real. Poetry is acceptable only if it taps into the oneness of the universe, by opening our eyes to links and parallels of which we may not have been aware. Caillois only finally allowed himself to write poetry when he believed he was anchoring his work in the objectively verifiable.

In 'L'Agate de Pyrrhus', writing of the human susceptibility to *le démon de l'analogie*, and in the context of his reaction to stones, he has this to say: 'certes, l'image est équivoque, sollicitée, reconstruite, mais elle est là, comme est présente la pierre qui la supporte, l'une et l'autre irréfutables, tellement hors de portée de l'homme et de l'art, tellement antérieures à eux, en un sens tellement inadmissibles' (*Images, images*, p.102). Caillois here is both positing objectivity, and subtly undermining it. Throughout his writings on different topics, Caillois allowed that it was impossible for him, as an integral part of the cosmos about which he was writing, to achieve objectivity. This is no less the case when it comes to 'objective' description. Even allowing for this, Panoff very spectacularly misses the point, alleging that Caillois's real topic is not the stones themselves, but what others have written on them. His work is a 'discours sur le discours', with all 'les charmes, les facilités et les dévoiements qui en sont l'accompagnement le plus ordinaire, même si Caillois a cru se charger de chaînes en se bornant à puiser dans ce que d'autres avaient écrit avant lui'.⁶ In no way can Caillois's work be reduced to a commentary on the work of others. His acute awareness and description of the physical reality of stones is striking, and while his contemplation of them may lead him to other speculations, he also returns to them, his starting point and his end point too.

⁵ CPT, p.15.

⁶ Panoff, p.165.

Caillois counted all human culture as nothing in comparison with the material world, 'écritures des pierres: structures du monde' (EP, p.95). This is not to say he is anti-intellectual, 'je ne suis pas contre la pensée [...] je suis contre la cogitation, c'est-à-dire la pensée qui a perdu son sol, qui se nourrit exclusivement de controverses et d'originalité'.⁷ The products of this 'cogitation' stand between man and truth:

Je pense que la vérité, la vérité de l'univers – que j'essaie de cerner en décrivant les pierres ou les insectes ou n'importe quel objet tombant sous mes yeux –, je pense que cette vérité totale existe. Elle existe, mais elle est à tout instant altérée par les idéologies [...] par la confusion des mots, par cet énorme cancer que représentent l'écriture, la pensée et la philosophie, par le monde cancérogène des bibliothèques, des livres et des journaux: prolifération, absolument aveugle qui empêche de voir la vérité.⁸

Caillois's words convey his horror at the 'cancer' of the written word, paradoxical of course in someone for whom writing was and would remain centrally important. His early relationship with the material world, described in *Le Fleuve Alphée*, was direct, unfiltered by the written word. His writing seeks to recreate this direct contact. Caillois, at this moment of his life, can finally recognise the futility of man's efforts to seek the truth, as he had done for much of his career:

Je sais [...] que, vivant dans un monde que je considère comme une totalité, une totalité inextricable, la vérité y est inaccessible, parce qu'une toute petite partie, infinitésimale, ne peut avoir une vision, même lointaine de la vérité du tout. Comme membre d'une espèce, l'espèce humaine qui est tardive et provisoire et passagère [...] je suis voué à l'erreur. Toutes mes recherches ne sont qu'un petit paragraphe ajouté à cette bibliothèque occidentale qui, de toute façon, m'enveloppe.⁹

Caillois spells out here the essential – and determining – flaw in his enterprise. In *Le Fleuve Alphée* Caillois assesses more fully his 'petit paragraphe' and seeks to account for the last stage in his intellectual trajectory. Alain Bosquet writes:

Quatre années séparent *Esthétique généralisée* de *Pierres*, le chef-d'œuvre de Roger Caillois. Pendant ce temps, le penseur, le chercheur, le critique, le savant a vu éclore en lui la nécessité, sur des bases lucides, de succomber à l'émerveillement qu'avec patience il s'était choisi. Auparavant, il tenait à apprendre, à comprendre et à rendre à autrui ce qu'il avait ainsi acquis, avec

⁷ CPT, p.21.

⁸ CPT, p.21.

⁹ CPT, pp.21-22.

tour à tour des éblouissements et de la méthode. Désormais, une osmose devenait indispensable entre ce qu'est l'univers face à lui et lui-même. Aucune discipline ne vaut le contact direct: le contact par le mot qui non seulement fait renaître le phénomène, mais précipite l'auteur dans celui-ci, au point qu'ils doivent, sinon se confondre, du moins, au plus haut du verbe, mener des vies parallèles qui tendent à se pénétrer.¹⁰

Bosquet captures very accurately Caillois's working method prior to devoting himself to stones: that very unorthodox mixture of erudition and metaphor. Stones (via the word, and the paradox is at the heart of Caillois), bring him into contact, oneness with the physical world.

Caillois, in the various prefaces to his works, and in these works themselves, reassesses and analyses his writings. *Le Fleuve Alphée*, a 'livre bilan',¹¹ is a stock-taking on a larger scale. The title of this intellectual autobiography owes itself to Greek legend. The river Alpheus flows into the Mediterranean but finally becomes a river again when it reaches the island of Ortygia. Caillois, having more than most been immersed in the written word for most of his life, has finally regained a more complete kind of contact with the physical world, a contact which, in his writing on stones, will bring him the peace and fulfilment for which he has spent a lifetime searching.

Despite the many impassioned detours in his own intellectual path through life, his early childhood experiences remained the most formative and meaningful, 'je retrouve l'existence exiguë et personnelle, dont j'avais conservé contre courants et marée, une mémoire lancinante' (p.10). His choice of adjective 'lancinante' indicates the primary and keen importance of that relationship with the surrounding world, untainted by the written word as, because of the First World War, Caillois started school at a later age than usual.

Embracing the new generally involves casting off the old, and Caillois now sees his work of many decades as a 'parenthesis', a harsh assessment but a term conveying very exactly his sense of having returned to what he was always meant to do:

¹⁰ Bosquet, p.54.

¹¹ Felgine, p.387.

Petit à petit, j'en suis même arrivé à tenir la presque totalité de mes recherches et travaux pour une gigantesque *parenthèse*, que j'ai laissé se refermer sur moi, qui aura duré presque toute ma vie et à laquelle appartiennent presque tous mes livres. (FA, p.67)

He also refers to this period as a 'circuit inexorable' (p.49), a 'bulle' (p.53), or a 'redoutable nasse' (p.84), all terms suggesting a feeling of imprisonment. His attitude to this period is not entirely negative, however. We have seen in Chapter Seven that Caillois, in *Le Fleuve Alphée*, is somewhat reconciled to his earlier output because of his unconventional choice of topics and the appliance of his 'logique flexible'. In its own way, then, the work done in the 'parenthesis' constitutes a triumph over reason, and so is not as narrow and derivative as he might have feared. There are other consolations too, for Caillois, as the 'presque' in the above quotation suggests. The publication of *Patagonie* was a major break from the kind of material Caillois normally produced, and he refers here to other 'detours', 'j'alimentais mes poisons secrets au cours de mes voyages ou par des objets insolites ou par des réflexions sur la condition végétale, enfin par la description méticuleuse de pierres, paradoxalement aussi par l'intermédiaire d'une certaine espèce de livres d'images' (p.54). The risky, clandestine nature of this is well summed up in 'mes poisons secrets'. It is interesting, if indeed paradoxical, that Caillois acknowledges the role of certain books and pictures in breaking out of this 'parenthesis'. In *Le Fleuve Alphée* he describes how he is drawn to paintings and poems that possess a 'fertilité vacante' and can therefore assume the same qualities as 'les objets-fées' (p.107). Their 'susceptibilité lyrique' (p.107) generates an imaginative response on his part. 'Vacante' is a significant adjective. It means that Caillois can fill the space with his own rêveries, his own lyrical capacities. This is precisely the process underlying his reaction to stones, also.

Caillois may first have come to stones 'accidentellement et dans la perspective des rapprochements interrègnes [*sic*] qui m'attiraient avec une très haute priorité' (p.145). There are many reasons, however, for the attractions stones held for him. While Caillois's movement towards the mineral world primarily responded to personal imperatives, it did also reflect a tendency of his times. Roger Little writes of the 'Cratylan nostalgia' among modern poets who 'prefer not to acknowledge the division between words and things which modern linguisticians, agreeing with

Hernogenes, insist is there'.¹² In considering Caillois's efforts, the work of Francis Ponge must be mentioned. Ponge too rejected the lyrical and sought to demonstrate veritally the relationship between man and the objects that surround him. Ponge focused on a variety of everyday objects, seeking to match his language to the object, 'cette naissance verbale contrôle la forme unique que prendra ce que Ponge nomme [...] "la volubilité" de l'objet; c'est-à-dire les rouages linguistiques qu'elle met en mouvement dans l'épaisseur mystérieuse du langage'.¹³ For Ponge too, the French language was all-important. The similarities should not cloud the differences, however. Ponge's objectives are not those of Caillois's, whose work has, as we shall see, a more mystical orientation and which is focused mainly on the mineral world. Caillois himself sought to differentiate his writings from those of Ponge's, 'il a fait plutôt une description lyrique de couleurs ou d'éclat'.¹⁴ Caillois's writings on stones also recall Paul Valéry, who, thirty years earlier, published 'L'homme et la coquille'. Both are poetic meditations on matter, although Valéry is introspective in a way in which Caillois is not.

Caillois saw little in his own era to admire. He found his soul-mate in the wonderfully named Mi Fou, an Ancient Chinese administrator and collector of stones, about whom he writes in *Pierres*. It is a testimony to his malaise and sense of isolation that he had to go back thousands of years and to another culture to find someone with whom he could really identify. He writes of him with great warmth and empathy. Caillois reaches across the centuries to express his sympathy for Mi Fou on the theft of his favourite stone:

Je partage le désespoir de Mi Fou. Je sens qu'il a subi une perte irréparable et je devine qu'il n'aura pu s'en consoler. Par-delà les siècles et les méridiens, malgré les oppositions de caractères et de destins, j'éprouve pour lui une complicité singulière que je n'ai avec personne d'autre. (*P*, p.88)

Mi Fou was also a painter, and Caillois, in his admiration of him, attributes to him a career choice of which he would fully approve: abandoning his artistic career on realising the superiority of nature, 'un jour, il dut s'apercevoir [...] que, dans les dessins et les couleurs de ses pierres, il tenait des taches plus naturelles que les

¹² Roger Little, *The Shaping of Modern French Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), p.27.

¹³ Germaine Brée, p.248.

¹⁴ Roger Caillois, quoted by Felgine, p.356.

siennes: et immémoriales, incontestables' (p.89). Caillois occasionally cites the example of Rimbaud in this respect. It is an important part of his admiration of Mi Fou that – as presented by Caillois – he accepts the latter's view of the essential inferiority of human artistic endeavour. This of course is entirely speculation on Caillois's part, creating a kind of ideal, imaginary friend. He does admit in his account of Mi Fou, 'sans doute ai-je perpétré un détestable mélange d'histoire et de fantaisie' (p.90). Michel Panoff is critical of what he calls Caillois's 'ethnologie-fiction':

il ne dédaigne pas de jouer avec des peuples, des cultures, ou des pratiques rituelles qu'il invente de toutes pièces comme pour compenser son évitement du "terrain" et snober les ethnographes qui acceptent d'y passer les plus belles années de leur vie.¹⁵

Caillois is not writing here as an ethnologist, however, and interpreting literally references to cultures in his writings on stones is being unduly heavy-handed. Caillois may well have projected certain qualities and opinions onto Mi Fou, but not in any culturally imperialistic way. Mi Fou was necessary to him, as he is described, both finding fulfilment in 'la contemplation intense et prolongée d'une pierre, monde en réduction, où l'âme éblouie pénètre et goûte une jubilation exaltante' (pp.75-76)

Stones provided Caillois with a deep satisfaction and yet, strangely, in ruminating on the source of their appeal for him, the images he employs are far from positive:

Qui ou quoi m'inocula la folie d'envier les pierres? Pris au piège, hypnotisé, je ne puis faire rien d'autre, comme qui, poursuivi dans une impasse, se heurte au mur final. (PR, p.135)

Caillois uses different images here in an attempt to explain his fascination. Through the unexpected analogy with someone trapped in a blind alley, he evokes a certain frozen horror. Stones seem to be at once liberating and literally and figuratively captivating. Felgine focuses on the more positive attractions they hold for him. Stones are

son refuge, d'abord, contre l'idée angoissée qu'il se fait du monde, en même temps que l'expression de sa fêlure, le terme de sa quête mystique, et le lieu de son épanouissement poétique: pierres qui cernent le vivant, pierres qui

¹⁵ Panoff, p.91.

fascinent et figent le mythologue en un solitaire recueilli, mais pierres qui l'accueillent aussi et vont le libérer de ses contradictions douloureuses en les cristallisant.¹⁶

Felgine highlights here the permanence stones represented, contrasted with the ephemeral nature of man and life, the fulfilment and peace they offered Caillois, and the breaking free of his poetical, lyrical self. They are 'le terme de sa quête mystique' – having searched for wholeness for so long, Caillois would eventually find it embodied in stones. Panoff writes of the connection between aridity and meditation:

Selon les mystiques juifs et musulmans, le désert est le lieu de la parole; c'est là que, l'homme ayant été convaincu une bonne fois de sa nullité, le verbe peut se manifester. [...] C'est [...] lorsqu'il parle des multiples déserts dont il a gardé le souvenir ou lorsqu'il se trouve devant ce désert miniature qu'est pour lui une pierre que sa voix est la plus distincte, la plus pure, et nous touche le plus.¹⁷

Panoff, normally so negative, is approving here. For a long time, Caillois's preferred landscape was an arid one. In *Randonnées*¹⁸ he writes of how he has always loved solitary landscapes, but wanted to go back even further to 'la naissance de la matière' (p.51). Stones enabled him to do this, 'dans les coupes d'agate, ce sont les archives de la Genèse que je m'applique à déchiffrer' (*Randonnées*, p.51). Stones offer a world complete in itself. They are a perfect contrast to mankind, a transient species destined never to achieve perfection:

Situées à l'extrême de la taciturnité, elles étaient placées du même coup aux antipodes de l'homme et de la pensée. Je les devinais contenir en leur masse impassible et perdurable la totalité des transformations possibles de la matière, sans rien en exclure, ni même la sensibilité, l'intelligence, l'imagination. (FA, p.86).

The latter point may shock Caillois's reader but his theory of cosmic oneness inevitably means that all matter, organic and inorganic, shares the same potential. This hints at Caillois's proposal of a 'poétique généralisée', expounded fully in *Le Champ des signes*. Stones contain all this knowledge, without recourse to the written word, 'pierres, archives suprêmes, qui ne portent aucun texte et qui ne donnent rien à lire...' (FA, p.86). It was, for Caillois, a return to the source, a definitive rejection of the

¹⁶ Felgine, p. 349.

¹⁷ Panoff, p.131.

personal, 'l se dirige vers la pierre comme vers le simple, l'élémentaire – l'assise ou le noyau antérieurs aux développements, extrapolations, divagations de la vie, puis du psychisme domaines *particuliers* dont il aspire à s'affranchir pour retourner au général'.¹⁹ Caillois's distrust of lyrical poetry comes to mind here.

The mineral 'masse' is not only 'impassible', it is 'perdurable'. Caillois's inevitably increasing sense of mortality is central to his relationship with stones. Human transience, physical frailty and failing of all kinds are humbling, if not humiliating destinies for the 'espèce passagère', 'l'homme leur envie la durée, la dureté, l'intransigence et l'éclat, d'être lisses et impénétrables, et entières même brisées' (*P*, p.9). 'Entières'; again the importance of wholeness. This sense of mortality, of the loss of physical confidence induced by the ageing process, is especially evident in *Pierres réfléchies*: 'qui connaît ajoute à soi-même et qui ajoute à soi, fût-ce la mémoire, meurt, s'use ou se transforme' (p.14). The need he feels as he faces his own mortality is relieved, not through spiritual guidance but rather by looking to stones for assistance, 'aussi, à l'heure tôt venue du dépouillement, dans la chute des feuilles où je suis l'arbre, est-ce aux pierres que je demande les repères moins labiles dont je ressens le besoin' (*PR*, p.122).

Caillois is determined to reduce man's sense of his own unique importance and never are negative epithets referring to mankind as numerous as in *Le Fleuve Alphée*. One of the chapters is entitled 'L'espèce épisodique'. Man is described as a 'mammifère voué, contrairement aux autres, à la création d'œuvres extérieures à lui-même' (pp.149-50), 'un animal ambitieux' (p.185), 'une excroissance de la nature' (p.186), 'un primate obscur' (p.189), 'l'espèce retardataire et industrielle' (p.201), 'parasite d'un jour' (p.205). Henri Raynal writes, 'il récuse la suffisance de l'homme en prenant le parti de ce qui en est le plus éloigné, [...] le plus radicalement différent, la pierre. La révéral, il nargue une intelligence dont l'excessive prétention l'incommode'.²⁰ The fact that stones are an 'immuable inhumain [...] à l'abri des faiblesses de l'espèce' (*FA*, p.184) is central in their attraction for Caillois. His dissatisfaction with the human species was not just general. He profoundly questioned the value of his own output. He was acutely aware that the effort of writing books produces 'un résultat

¹⁸ *Randonnées*, frontispice de Zao-Wou-Ki (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1986).

¹⁹ Henri Raynal, 'Le visionnaire méticuleux' *Critique*, 347 (1976), 447-50, p.448.

²⁰ Raynal, p.448.

manifestement fugace' (FA, p.176). Not only that, he came to see himself as interchangeable:

On ne peut écrire [...] qu'à partir des ouvrages de même sorte, écrits antérieurement, qu'on se trouve connaître et qu'on se met en tête de prolonger, de commenter, de compléter ou, à l'inverse, de discuter et de réfuter. De telle sorte que les livres qu'on écrit en dépendent presque entièrement. (FA, pp.177-78)

Stones were central in reconciling Caillois to writing, to poetry. First came the realisation and the acceptance of what he saw as the futility of writing, 'je ne me suis réconcilié avec l'écriture qu'au moment où j'ai commencé à écrire avec la conscience que je le faisais de toute façon en pure perte' (p.201). For Caillois, believing that he was anchoring his writing in the objectively verifiable was essential:

ma première défiance envers la littérature et les réticences que j'avais professées au moment où je morigénais en vain une certaine poésie un peu facilement vertigineuse, cette défiance, ces scrupules se trouvent apaisés, du fait que je suis assuré de ne pas mentir et parce que je parle de minéraux insensibles. En un mot, je me sens approuvé dans la singulière entreprise de chercher dans l'exactitude une poésie inédite. (FA, p.204)

The stones may be 'insensibles', Caillois, of course, was not and I shall be discussing how this militated against his achieving the desired total objectivity. For now, it is the 'poésie inédite' of his writing that I shall be examining.

Pierres was appropriately published in a poetry series by Gallimard. Caillois writes in the *dédicace*:

négligeant la minéralogie, écartant les art [sic] qui des pierres font usage, je parle des pierres nues, fascination et gloire, où se dissimule et en même temps se livre un mystère plus lent, plus vaste et plus grave que le destin d'une espèce passagère. (P, p.9)

Man, as ever, is humbled. The lofty, majestic refrain, 'je parle des pierres' runs through the *dédicace*, signalling that this account will be a personal one. Bruno Tritsmans writes, 'la composante sociale – omniprésente dans les textes des années 30 – est refoulée, et Caillois se situe maintenant, par un mouvement d'implosion, de repli

sur soi, sur le plan d'une mystique individuelle, qui ne met en jeu (ou ne veut mettre en jeu) que le je et la pierre'.²¹

The voice which Caillois finds to speak of stones is powerful, lyrical, poetic.

Caillois's critics are unanimous in their praise of his writing. Pierre Gascar writes, 'quand il s'agissait des pierres, Roger Caillois ne montrait nullement cet esprit de méthode hérité de l'Université. Devant le minéral, rejetant toute science, ne se référant à aucune analyse, il adoptait une démarche intuitive, pour ne pas dire inspirée'.²²

Dominique Autié sees the *dédicace* as a prose poem, 'l'écriture qu'il invite à méditer est celle de la matière, devant laquelle s'ouvre toute une poétique, attestée cette fois par l'irrécusable nécessité de son objet'.²³ Emilie Noulet also emphasises its poetic nature, 'du seul point de vue musical, rien n'y manque. Ni le ton, ni la disposition en strophes, ni le leitmotiv ni les représentations rythmiques, ni naturellement la poésie'.²⁴ Romantic ideas about inspiration find little favour with Caillois: 'l'alphabet, préféré au poème; la précision d'un langage chiffré au souffle de l'inspiration: Caillois est ici tout près de Valéry'.²⁵

Caillois sought to infuse his writing with 'la même dureté, si possible – pourquoi pas? –[le] même éclat que les pierres'.²⁶ The creative process involved was not an easy one, entailing a metamorphosis on the part of words, as this unpublished letter from Caillois to Jean Bazaine (whose watercolours embellish *Images de l'univers*²⁷) suggests, 'ce n'est pas un "blocage" qui vous arrive, mais les "nécessités" de la métamorphose, les mêmes que j'éprouve chaque fois que je m'efforce de transposer un minéral en mots qui en soient le calque lointain'.²⁸ Caillois always championed simple, clear writing and vocabulary, and yet his writings on stones are full of extremely rare or technical words. It was the language, rather than the content of the book, that touched the public, 'pour de nombreux lecteurs, plus attentifs à la littérature

²¹ Bruno Tritsmans, *Livres de pierre: Segalen, Caillois, Le Clézio, Gracq* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1992), p.42.

²² Pierre Gascar, 'Le bonheur des pierres', in *Les Cahiers de Chronos*, pp.246-60 (p.255).

²³ Dominique Autié, 'Roger Caillois: Pour une "poétique généralisée"', *Sud*, hors série, 1981, 43-53 (p.52).

²⁴ Emilie Noulet, 'Une philosophie de la minéralogie', *Critique*, 252 (1968), 533-35 (p.533).

²⁵ Pierre de Boisdeffre, 'Roger Caillois et le langage des pierres', *Sud*, hors série (1981), 53-58 (p.56).

²⁶ Quoted by Felgine, p.356.

²⁷ *Images de l'univers* (Paris: Deyrolle, 1991), unnumbered pages.

²⁸ Unpublished letter, dated 11/9/78, consulted in the Fonds Roger Caillois, Bibliothèque Valéry Larbaud, Vichy.

qu'à la minérlogie et qui n'avaient jamais accordé un regard aux cailloux des chemins, les pierres se sont mises à exister fortement au cours des dix dernières années. On peut dater ce réveil de la publication d'un poème de Roger Caillois.²⁹ And it really is poetry under discussion here. Finally freed from any blocks in relation to poetry, he reached a 'fièvre tranquille' (*FA*, p.214). Stones themselves influenced his style, 'pierres qui m'imposez ainsi jusque pour la manière d'écrire, une référence étrangère, laconique, intraitable' (*PR*, p.43). There is a deeper purpose too to his stylistic richness, which he is deploying in an effort to become one with stones: language is to operate this fusion. There is of course a paradox here; his detachment as writer is necessary if the required linguistic standard is to be met. Caillois loses himself as much in the word as in stones.

He is only interested in certain types of stones, 'le prodige intervient seulement lorsque la configuration s'impose immédiatement et sans équivoque' (*PR*, p.105). He draws a parallel with the image in poetry, 'comme il arrive pour l'image poétique, un échantillon est d'autant plus estimé, il fascine d'autant plus qu'il présente des ressemblances à la fois plus despotiques et plus inattendues' (p.103). The design must also bring together 'une cohérence complexe d'éléments divers, inexplicables, infiniment improbables, je veux dire qui ne soient pas issus des modes de formation ou de la structure obligée de l'espèce minérale' (p.106). Caillois has always shown an attraction towards the exotic, in the varied researches he has pursued. It is a taste he maintains in his dealings with the mineral world.

His interest is tireless, 'je ne me lasse pas de prendre les pierres une à une' (*PR*, p.41). As Emilie Noulet writes, 'indicatif d'amour, la minutie de l'évocation, une connaissance par le tact'.³⁰ He describes firstly and in some detail their external appearance before moving on to whatever speculation or truth they may reveal to him. Sometimes his tone is brisk, immediate. The opening sentence in 'Cristal vivant' is 'je crois avoir sous les yeux l'extrémité trapue d'un tuyau d'orgue lumineux' (*PR*, p.111). Similarly, 'Sémaphore' begins:

D'abord l'apparence d'une surprenante calligraphie polychrome. Elle s'étale, fourvoyée au centre d'une plaque de cristal de roche. On dirait un caractère

²⁹ Jean Blot, 'Roger Caillois: *Pierres Réfléchies*', *NRF*, 279 (1976), 86-88 (p.86).

³⁰ Noulet, p.533.

chinois de grande taille, de ceux qui sont peints sur la soie à larges traits d'encre épaisse et terne, demeurée huileuse, organique et sécrétion de céphalopode. (*PR*, p.60)

Effortlessly, Caillois brings his reader from an image of Chinese script to the world of the cephalopods, using analogy to evoke the stone. He describes the distinctive markings on it as follows:

Des nuances furtives, nonchalantes, qui glissent ou qui s'attardent comme des mèches de brume sur une nappe d'eau. Des verts anémiés, des violets frileux, des bistres fades, toutes couleurs amorties et lentes. Un vitrail naturel et, au sein du cristal qui jamais ne présente le moindre dessin, une jonchée expressive de gemmes naissantes. (*PR*, p.62)

The rarity of the patterning is suggested by the adjective 'furtives' – this really is something unusual, maybe even forbidden. The delicate nature of these marks is very successfully suggested by the adjectives 'frileux' and 'lentes', both surprising choices in this context. It is strange to see Caillois incorporate an image that suggests the vegetal world, 'une jonchée'. Interestingly, this stone seems deprived of the total perfection enjoyed by most. This, for Caillois, can only link it to the human. It is made up of

des barres qu'un apprenti s'est repris à plusieurs fois pour conduire à leur terme et où il a utilisé plusieurs encres, plusieurs pinceaux. Il n'a évité ni les bavures ni les repentirs. Il aligna des bâtons, la langue pendante. [...] J'examine une œuvre de tâcheron; et ambiguë: entre le minéral et le vivant. (*PR*, pp.63-64)

What toil and endeavour Caillois manages to suggest with 'la langue pendante'.

Caillois's images can evoke sound too to enhance further the impact of the picture created. In describing a crystal, he writes 'il est ainsi des aiguilles fournies d'impuretés, de voiles, de vapeurs, de clivages mystérieux, qui font retentir dans le silence du minéral les coups de cymbales de la lumière' (*PR*, p.114). The 'loudness' of light suddenly seems an excellent contrast to the murky silence of the mineral. This crystal speaks more to man because it is imperfect, 'aussi ces transparences gangrénées touchent-elles davantage un être lui-même fluctuant et impur' (p.115). The level of activity suggested in his description of this stone is exceptional, and yet it is also of course strangely still, truly a 'brouhaha immuable', alive with light:

Des flammes sont ancrées dans l'eau solide, des échardes y restent plantées.
Des tentures d'aurore boréale s'y déploient. Il s'y ouvre des corolles glacées.
Des aiguilles, quoique ensevelies et ankylosées au sein du grand prisme qui les
enferme, y dardent une pointe personnelle, y multiplient par gloire des reflets
surnuméraires. (PR, p.115)

What can explain the appearance of a certain quartz stone, not subject to the elements?
Caillos's writing here shows the sheer fun he can have with stones, too, putting
forward various hypotheses: 'quelle explication inventer pour rendre compte de la
structure déconcertante? Elle semble une géométrie du vide. Il convient ici d'avancer
lentement, de disjoindre les cas voisins, de commencer par le plus clair, de
s'acharner pas à pas, si l'on peut, vers la solution qui apaise' (PR, p.83). As his
words suggest, he takes his time, examining various possibilities. It is the thrill of
trying to solve a mystery, with Caillois finally settling for an explanation which he
acknowledges may not be correct but which has the merit of effort, 'dans la limite de
mon savoir et de mes exigences, j'ai tenté de ramener à une cohérence ce qui d'abord
m'était apparu pur chaos. [...] Je m'accommode de m'être abusé: de toute
gymnastique de la pensée, un acquis demeure, sans compter le plaisir' (p.92). Caillois
argued something similar at the end of *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves*; he never fully
loses his faith in exercising the intellect.

His use of alliteration in the following lines perfectly evokes the smooth, undulating
surface of the crystal he is describing, 'sur la soie de la suie s'attardent parfois des
taches de fraîcheur' (PR, p.120). In these lines the age and dignity of these stones are
reflected, the recurring nasal sound seeming like an echo through time: 'tout prisme
naturel perpétue une rigueur ancienne, rétractée en son ombre, en son antre; en son
aire, en ses nombres; inaltérable enfin, d'une fatalité qui prime la violence' (PR,
p.121). He is modest about his achievements, 'il n'est en ces pages que simulacres
vides et analogies pauvres' (p.121) – an overly harsh self-assessment.

Caillois uses alliteration to evoke a delicate, precise touch on the part of nature, 'une
bordure intermittente de touches azurées, peintes à la pointe du pinceau' (PR, p.141).
In 'Autre Cuivre', the passionate attention to detail reveals Caillois's excitement and
fascination. He sees in the stone a whole spectrum of green:

ici, le vert lustré, presque noir des mousses après la pluie; là, le satin vert des monnaies de fouilles, attaquées par les carbonates, les sulfites; plus fréquents, des bleus louches, qui tirent sur le vert, ceux des turquoises, des aiguës-marines et des autres pierres bleues quand elles n'ont pas la bonne nuance; à la limite, le vert tremblé, hésitant, des très jeunes amandes dont le duvet est encore d'argent. (P, p.35)

The shades of green, and the range of objects exemplifying them, greatly enrich our image of the stone.

Not all those contemplating stones may be as cultured in their projections. In

L'Ecriture des pierres Caillois writes:

La vision que l'œil enregistre est toujours pauvre et incertaine. L'imagination l'enrichit et la complète, avec les trésors du souvenir, du savoir, avec tout ce que laissent à sa discrétion l'expérience, la culture et l'histoire, sans compter ce que, d'elle-même, au besoin, elle invente ou elle rêve. Aussi n'est-elle jamais à court pour rendre foisonnante et despotique jusqu'à une presque absence. (EP, p.95)

Caillois fills in this 'presque absence' with all the richness of his culture and imagination. In 'Autre Cuivre', for example, he thinks he can make out a human form in the stone:

Niobé, peut-être, assistant impuissante au massacre de ses fils, ou Héraklès achevant d'exterminer les oiseaux de Stymphale et, quoique fatigué, bandant une fois de plus un arc invisible. Chacun puise dans le répertoire de ses légendes pour identifier un fantôme indistinct. (P, p.37)

Not everyone's referents would be so distinguished. His language certainly meets the challenge he gave himself of matching the grandeur of the mineral world. Describing the 'pupille noire' in the centre of an agate, he writes:

On dirait des ocelles, des moignons, des mamelles suppliciées qu'une mystérieuse chirurgie eût laissées intactes et même rendues incorruptibles, au moment où les amputait une lame-fée, plus qu'hémostatique, héritière de Méduse, tranchant toute chair et la changeant en pierre au passage. L'agate ainsi traitée évoque un de ces monstres-gardiens de la mythologie, à l'épiderme couvert d'yeux, ou les divinités orientales sur la poitrine desquelles sont alignées plusieurs rangées de seins, ou encore un tronc humain récemment mutilé de ses membres. (P, p.46)

It seems horrible, but on a very grand scale. Sometimes after indulging fully his fantasy in describing a stone, Caillois can break the mood abruptly by taking away any reality from his words. After elaborately describing a silica geode, he admits:

Il ne figura jamais, comme j'ai prétendu tout à l'heure, larve ni lémure, qui au vrai n'ont d'apparence que celle que leur prête l'imagination de l'homme; et il arrive qu'elle les fabrique à partir justement de ces dons du hasard. Il n'y eut jamais d'image, jamais de signe, mais l'imprévisible résultat d'un jeu de pressions inexpiables et de températures telles que la notion même de chaleur n'a plus de sens. (P, p.99)

This brief scientific explanation of the stone's appearance – and how much flatter the tone – contrasts effectively with his flights of imagination.

In *Images de l'univers*, Caillois, apparently rather perversely in view of his beliefs on the artist and nature, finds himself, 'puisque il faut un mot', using the terms 'artiste' and 'peintre inconcevable' in attempting to account for certain effects on an agate stone. Deliberate, if impossible artistic involvement is suggested, 'son pinceau part du cadre, traverse le tableau et vient s'écraser sur le bord opposé'. Caillois argues that he is not being a visionary or fantasist in so doing, but is doing this deliberately

pour stimuler en moi l'exercice de facultés qui appartiennent en propre à l'homme, mais dont je suis persuadé qu'il s'égarerait s'il se confinait en un espace exclusif et s'il ne prenait pas garde au contraire de les prêter par feinte et discipline à tout être ou matière, même à la plus maussade et à la moins susceptible d'être émue de toutes celles qui meublent l'univers dont il fait partie. (IU)

In conferring on inert matter capacities normally associated with mankind, Caillois is in fact being faithful to the basic precept outlined in works such as *Esthétique généralisée* and later, *Le Champ des signes*: in the continuum that is the cosmos, all matter participates on an equal basis, superficial differences only conceal the same basic traits and tendencies. No one form of matter can lay claim to special, unique talents. And, as in Caillois's opinion we have all come from stones, he writes, 'quand j'attribue aux pierres mes réactions humaines, je soupçonne que je leur retourne par métaphore et réverbération le legs sans mémoire que mon espèce a reçu d'elles' (IU). Caillois is comforted in thinking that he is actually performing an act of cosmic

balancing; even his most subjective, lyrical thoughts are a legacy of a mineral past, and therefore enjoy prior justification.

A significant evolution can be detected between *Pierres* and *Pierres réfléchies*, as regards tone. The latter volume is much more personal. There is a greater effort in *Pierres* to suppress subjective projections, to resist the desire to lose oneself in contemplation of stones. In *Pierres réfléchies*, Caillois permits himself a greater connection with his thought processes and feelings, and can finally lose himself in his writing, rather than in stones themselves. There is a new opening in attitude and in style. In his previous incarnation as a contributor to 'cogitation', Caillois had expounded ideas based in part at least on what others had written. His work was objectively verifiable in that sense. Now the justification for his activity is to be the physical reality of the objects described. The constant is the need for anchoring.

It is important to highlight the tensions and paradoxes Caillois's desire for objectivity faces. He writes, 'je pars de l'objet' (*PR*, p.10), stones are his 'supports d'exercice spirituel' (*PR*, p.9). This can be interpreted in two ways. Stones are certainly his starting point, but maintaining uninterrupted objectivity is not a possibility. He does acknowledge this in *Pierres réfléchies*, 'je leur attribue mes angoisses, mes hésitations, mes carrefours. Mais ces projections, je n'oublie pas qu'elles sont mirages' (pp.14-15). For someone who has always championed rigour and severity, there is a new opening up in his approach, 'je ne les suscite que faute d'avoir atteint le degré d'abstraction ou d'indifférence nécessaire pour m'en passer' (*PR*, p.15). For once, objective facts are not his only concern:

Il est infiniment plus malaisé et plus rare de découvrir, de calculer un alphabet que de composer ou de laisser de soi jaillir un cri, un aveu, une brève splendeur, je veux dire: un poème. J'ai cherché, je cherche dans le monde, qui est limité pour un dieu, mais inépuisable pour un mortel, l'élémentaire, le chiffre, plus précisément l'alphabet. C'est démarche vaine. Trop fortuné encore si, au cours d'une quête qui toujours l'a refusé, il m'arrivait de buter contre le poème. (*PR*, p.15)

This is a very important statement from Caillois, recognising the impossibility of what had been much of his life's work, the inevitable failure written into such an

undertaking. It is not a search he can quite give up completely, but he is admitting that poetry is a satisfying alternative route to wholeness.

Laurent Jenny has written very perceptively on the topic of Caillois's attraction to the mineral world.³¹ Jenny recalls Caillois's revulsion at the 'forces femelles, [...] passives, sournoises et voraces' (*FA*, p. 126) of the vegetal world (similar to the preoccupations aroused in him by the praying mantis). The mineral world is, Jenny suggests, the 'antidote' for Caillois to the threatening femininity of the vegetal.³² Panoff suggests that Caillois can, in this respect, be linked with other intellectuals of his generation:

Tout autant que Sartre, Beauvoir et bien d'autres intellectuels de cette génération [...] Caillois ressentait horreur et même frayeur de la matière vivante, de sa propensité à se répandre partout et à se reproduire, des maladies qui l'affectent et des monstruosités dans lesquelles elle peut se fourvoyer [...]. De ce point de vue, et malgré ses efforts pour se singulariser, Roger Caillois ressemblait à la plupart des intellectuels de son temps.³³

Panoff's insight – essentially interesting – cannot come without an unpleasant and demeaning implication.

Towards the end of *Le Fleuve Alphée*, in 'Les embellies de l'âme', when Caillois is discussing his description of stones, he writes that to share his impression of what he is beholding he thinks of having recourse to 'des mots amphibies, à des vocables pivots, à double, à multiples sens, dont les résonances et les analogies émettent des échos qui se répercutent entre eux avant de s'évanouir' (p.206). These 'mots amphibies' are the alphabet that Caillois has created in his writings on stones, for mediating between the object and the subject who is contemplating it. The way in which Caillois succeeds in spreading his net wide linguistically gives him that feeling of 'plénitude' which is none other than 'le signe d'un accord avec le monde' (*FA*, p.206). Tapping into the network of analogies hidden under the surface of things always brought with it serenity for Caillois:

³¹ Laurent Jenny, 'Roger Caillois: Esthétique Généralisée ou Esthétique Fantôme', *Littérature*, 85 (1992), 59-73.

³² Jenny, p.66.

³³ Panoff, p.140-41.

Je ne puis rien tenter d'autre que de poursuivre les métaphores grâce auxquelles il me faudra faire entendre que j'ai retiré d'un simulacre vacant comme un rêve, un pressentiment, une promesse; une certitude apaisante; sans contenu, mais peut-être abolissant tout discours. Et paradoxalement, me justifiant d'écrire. (FA, p.207)

The poetry of the universe

Caillois's theory of a 'poétique généralisée', as outlined in *Le Champ des signes*, is, for him, a logical extension of his belief in the oneness of the universe. He writes, 'la recherche repose en effet sur une conjecture quasi inévitable dans un univers fini' (p.60). The qualifier 'quasi inévitable' is intended to shore up the rather more uncertain 'conjecture'. It is again a theory for which no scientific proof is offered – nor would any be either relevant or appropriate. This is truth on a metaphorical plane. *Le Champ des signes* is too massive an undertaking to succeed in traditional terms. In the absence of hard proof, Caillois does employ various persuasive techniques. Given his belief in the inextricably linked nature of the universe, and his view that man enjoys in this world a position no better than that of any other constituent part, animate or inanimate, it was surely only a matter of time before he would come to write, expressing a dreamy mysticism:

Je réussis de moins en moins à distinguer les deux sortes d'images, celles qui sont gelées dans la pierre et celles qui sont issues des vapeurs de la fiction. [...] Je me persuade qu'elles partagent une destinée fraternelle, dont je m'efforce en vain de découvrir la racine commune. Je devine qu'il n'est pas à la portée d'un être local, momentané, sinon excédentaire, d'y parvenir. D'avoir seulement conçu et tenté l'entreprise m'apporte une satisfaction douce-amère [...]. (CS, p.80)

We see here the impossibility for man, as just a tiny part of the whole universe and subject to its laws, of ever reaching a complete overview. The reward lies in the effort and in those fleeting moments when some object, or image, serves as a reminder of the underlying unity of the world. It was inevitable that, at the end of his life, Caillois should have felt so little the desire to differentiate between images in stones and those in poetry. Earlier in his career, in *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, for example, when considering the nature of imagination he did quite specifically distinguish between the nature of the activity engaged in by man and insect: 'Phantasme pour l'homme, idée fixe de délire ou motif légendaire, cette situation est pour l'insecte la forme même de

son destin' (MH, p.83). What to most might seem like a quite unjustified leap, disregarding as it does so many dearly held views on human talent and creativity, for Caillois is a logical extension of earlier beliefs.

In *Le Champ des signes*, he sets out his belief on a single page, before commencing the book proper. In the first two sentences below, he wishes to let his reader see how sensible he can be in distinguishing between stones and stories. Having got that out of the way, he is free to develop his theory:

Je traite les pierres avec déférence, mais en minéraux insensibles qu'elles sont et demeurent. Je tiens les fables pour fables, avec la prudence, l'incertitude et l'incrédulité qu'elles commandent. Plus d'une fois, cependant, il m'est arrivé de penser qu'il convenait aussi de regarder les pierres comme des sortes de poèmes et de chercher en revanche dans les fictions la pérennité des pierres, leur inébranlable signification, c'est-à-dire d'essayer de réunir par quelque biais même ténu les parties disjointes et contrastées de notre indivisible univers.

Bringing together the two areas that mean most to him – stones and poetry – would evidently be a particular source of pleasure.

Caillois begins by describing the hyperbolic patterns he noticed on stones in Tonnerre and Kleim Kens. He noticed the same shapes on wood. Relative to the disposition of forms, he writes: 'des couches plus claires ou plus foncées régulièrement alternées, organisées en courbes algébriques, évoquent inmanquablement les phénomènes acoustiques, où la rencontre des ondes répartit des nœuds et des ventres selon des motifs prévisibles' (p.34). The adverb 'inmanquablement' is well chosen by Caillois for his purpose, because indeed these layers could evoke anything. Caillois tries to make the link seem necessary, inevitable. Finding links between the organic and the inorganic is something which pleases him very much and he speculates that they have been brought about by 'par exemple l'effet de vibrations cadencées' (p.25). This serves very neatly as an introduction to an intriguing eighteenth-century scientist, Chladni – another friend of his, like Mi Fou. Caillois admires him for his courageous, independent thought. By putting forward the correct explanation for the origin of meteorites, at a time when this was not acceptable, he showed the real characteristics of the scientific thinker. His liking for 'vérités invraisemblables' (p.38) or 'évidences dérobées' (p.38) is shared by Caillois, 'entre la vraisemblance et l'évidence, c'est

l'évidence qui toujours doit l'emporter, c'est-à-dire, en fin de compte la cohérence bien établie d'un ensemble de données aussi étendu que possible' (p.38). This is a point Caillois has already made in *La Dissymétrie* and this definition of coherence is at the heart of his *cohérences aventureuses*. Caillois is likely here preparing the way for his own thesis. He will be presenting his argument as self-evident; there will certainly be no proof.

Chladni carried out a strange experiment, using sound to generate various forms:

En 1787, Chladni eut l'idée de faire vibrer au moyen d'un archet le bord de plaques maintenues horizontales par une tige soudée en leur centre et saupoudrées au préalable d'une fine poussière obtenue en broyant chaque fois une espèce minérale différente. Les ébranlements reçus distribuent alors cette poudre en bourrelets symétriques, où elle se rassemble et s'accumule sur les lignes nodales par le jeu des interférences et des ondes stationnaires. (CS, pp.38-39)

From a description of Chladni's experiment, Caillois moves almost imperceptibly into broaching his own theory, '[des longueurs d'ondes spécifiques] ont amené un talc à des prouesses topologiques de haute spéculation. Elles ont agi comme les sons d'une flûte magique sur les rats et sur les enfants extraits successivement de Hameln' (p.40). The story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin does not follow any of the usual norms of fairy-tales. It does not enjoy the traditional happy ending and virtue is not rewarded. Because of its rather sinister nature, Caillois interestingly includes it in his own catalogue of the fantastic, along with, for example, the praying mantis and the painting 'Les Enervés de Jumièges'. When he imagines the children 'pétrifiés' (p.52) inside the mountain, it is easy to infer that his choice of adjective, with its roots in the Latin 'petra' is not random. While he has earlier written of the need to be very careful indeed in drawing any links between the physical world and that of the imagination – it would be an 'idée plus qu'aventureuse' (p.28) – this naturally does not stop him. He is comparing two totally different things, but making them seem apparently connected. He posits 'une correspondance entre une postulation intermittente de la songerie et une propriété non moins sporadique de la matière' (p.58). There is an interesting choice of adverb in the following sentence, in which Caillois reviews the claims he is making, 'j'ai seulement insinué qu'une sensibilité générale aux rythmes et aux cadences permettait de conjecturer une continuité insoupçonnée entre pierres et

discours' (p.59). He is seeking to minimise the magnitude of his claim. Thanks to the Piec Piper of Hamelin, 'la puissance bien réelle de l'archet de Chladni reçoit dans l'imaginaire un prolongement remarquable, grâce à l'influence efficace d'une flûte un peu particulière' (p.57). Caillois makes further links with a legend in the Koran and a late twelfth-century Japanese tale to show that, whatever superficial differences there maybe in the actual details of the tale, unity of purpose remains. Referring back to theories he elaborated decades earlier, he argues the likelihood of his case:

Un même moteur peut en effet y avoir provoqué des manifestations qui se répondent, tout comme les ailes des papillons et les tableaux des peintures trahissent une postulation identique, ou encore comme la nature inerte fournit spontanément (ou comme l'ingéniosité d'un Chladni la contraint de faire apparaître) des courbes sophistiquées que le développement de la géométrie a conçues plus tard et qui répondent à de strictes exigences mathématiques, sans que leur définition soit le moins du monde issue des échantillons minéralogiques où, depuis toujours, elles demeuraient enfouies. (CS, p.60)

This is a combination of speculation and statement. Caillois relies on his authority to carry the argument. His persuasive strategies are again revealed in the following sentence, 'les figures de Chladni m'avaient rappelé la puissance des rythmes et des vibrations sur la ventilation de la matière. Il était naturel que je pense à la flûte du preneur de rats de Hameln' (p.62). Again, one phenomenon seems to lead effortlessly into another. Caillois is very specific that while the examples he has chosen may be subject to criticism, the truth of his basic assertion cannot be challenged, 'la témérité ou l'extravagance que j'ai confessée ne sont pas du tout situées dans mon affirmation d'une continuité sans fissure entre les différents règnes. Elles ne résident que dans l'imprudence, le choix, des illustrations' (p.74).

Caillois, throughout his career, has fought against a romantic idea of the imagination, against man's exalted idea of his capacities. Here too he argues again his controversial opinion that imagination, like everything else, is determined:

L'imagination prolonge par des sentiers personnels des voies et démarches dont l'origine comme la fonction lui demeurent cachées. Elle se flatte de broder à sa guise, comme la philosophie de spéculer selon ses normes, et voici que l'intérieur d'une pierre proclame qu'entre rigueur et dérive, elles ne font l'une et l'autre que besogner sur un canevas immortel, invariable. (CS, p.70)

'Besogner': the choice of verb is humbling. Now, at the end of his life and his work as indeed at the very beginning, it seems to him that everything in the universe is repeated in some other shape or form, perhaps expected, perhaps unexpected:

je soutiendrais volontiers que l'ensemble des données du monde [...] se trouvent enchevêtrées dans un labyrinthe immense qui englobe l'univers entier, y compris les fantasmes d'un cerveau malade. [...] Il n'existe rien dans le monde dont on ne risque, et plutôt plusieurs fois qu'une, de rencontrer quelque part l'homologue, sous une forme attendue ou sous une autre, d'abord déconcertante, mais qui, à l'examen, s'avère y correspondre terme à terme, à l'issue de substitutions adéquates. (CS, pp.71-72)

Cailliois's reading of the universe, he would argue, is not just his own opinion. He draws his reader into his vision, 'chacun d'ailleurs a eu l'occasion d'en pressentir la vérité' (p.72). The world is finite, man and matter are subject to the same laws. He refers to the biology of the brain to demonstrate this. He is being slightly less than honest, however, because to the findings of biologists, he adds his own. To the qualities presumed to reside in the first part of the brain, 'j'ajouterais volontiers que c'est là que réside également la sensibilité aux influences magnétiques et aux vibrations: celles qui agissent déjà dans les silex de Tonnerre' (p.74). He asserts very positively, 'contes, légendes et mythes sont encore des réponses générales à des conditions extérieures, comme étaient très lointainement les trains d'hyperboles des silex' (p.75). In his summing up, and contrary to what he has previously written on the enviable permanence of stones and their general superiority to men, he writes:

modèles, simulacres, intentions, ambitions ou ce qui les annonce, sont les mêmes de la pierre jusqu'à la pensée agile, impalpable, instantanée, et pourtant, à l'occasion, plus dure et plus durable par sa rigueur, que la pierre que l'érosion effrite, que l'acide attaque, qu'un heurt ou justement un son peuvent réduire en poudre. Un argument correct est plus difficile à ébranler qu'un roc. (CS, p.78)

This is quite a tribute from Cailliois, so awed at the permanence of stones. In *Trois leçons des ténèbres*,³⁴ for example, he wrote of human creativity, 'tandis que sont dégradées les prouesses de l'inspiration et du génie, les dessins minéraux retrouvent leur monopole silencieux' (p.25). He writes of keeping by his side a 'caillou écorné' (p.62) to remind him of the futility of human endeavour, and also, because it alone is

³⁴ *Trois leçons des ténèbres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978).

‘capable d’apaiser’ (p.62). His view of the human capacity for logic and reason is evidently more positive than his view of human artistic activity.

At the end of his career, the image he sought for himself and for his work was, in his own words, ‘peut-être, et exclusivement, celle d’un poète’.³⁵ Alain Bosquet writes:

Le verbe le tient, qui n’est pas qu’analyse et moyen de connaissance, mais création pure. [...] Entre celui qui écrit – qui chante – et la chose chantée, un pacte vient d’être conclu; ils sont responsables l’un de l’autre, le créateur faisant acte de foi en se voulant partie de la chose créée, qui est à la fois la chose vue et la chose mise en poème.³⁶

In his different writings on stones, he became reconciled to his creative self, finally allowed full expression. We have seen how Caillois is highly critical of much of modern poetry. In ‘Malversations’ (*PR*), the markings on stones seem to Caillois to be forerunners of our alphabets. These signs arise from ‘la syntaxe même de la matière’ (p.54) and while decoding them may seem to be pointless, ‘il reste que, dans les archives de la géologie, était déjà présent, disponible pour des opérations inconcevables, le modèle encore sans affectation ni harmonique, ni postérité, de ce qui serait beaucoup plus tard un alphabet’ (p.55). All matter, living or not, is engaged in the same activity:

Moi aussi, quand j’écris ces pages, assemblant mes mots avec peine et liberté, j’accomplis, mais autrement, la même tâche, qui n’était pas encore tâche ni rien de tel, et qui pourtant fut celle des pierres que j’ai tenté de décrire. (*P*, pp.102-03)

Je m’exprime avec le lexique de ma condition [...]. Les pierres n’ont pas de lexique. Mais ce n’est là, dans ma conviction, que différence locale [...]. (*P*, p.104)

Finally, he can say of himself, ‘écrivain, comme je n’ai pas honte d’être’ (*P*, p.104). Signing his name to his works causes him problems, because of course in his opinion, he, as part of a much larger whole, is not writing in total independence:

comme d’autres Chinois, qui signèrent plus tard des plaques de marbre qu’ils n’avaient pas peintes, à mon tour, aujourd’hui, faillible et outrecaidant comme sont aussi les hommes, coupable et juge de mon texte, et puisque c’est en outre

³⁵ Interview with Bianciotti and Enthoven, *CPT*, p.18.

³⁶ Bosquet, p.55.

l'usage en ce canton exigü de la nature, j'ajoute à mes confidences balbutiées
et y compromets risiblement mon nom éphémère. (*P*, p.104)

It may seem like carrying his own logic to the extreme but Caillois, having never granted mankind a special position in the universe, is just honest enough not to claim anything for himself he feels is not his due. Each part of the universe is getting on with the activities appropriate to its condition; his is writing.

CONCLUSION

eadem in diversis
(epigraph, CS)

With this epigraph Caillois leads into *Le Champ des signes*, meaning that underneath the seemingly endless variety of the cosmos, just a few fundamental structures exist and recur. This is the basis of Caillois's analogical approach to knowledge. Caillois accepted gratefully from Plato and Mendeleyev the idea of the finite nature of the universe, finding it a lot more fruitful than Pascal's vision of infinity. Only in a finite world is any human undertaking, be it creative or analytical, possible. The parallels drawn by Caillois in his efforts to highlight the unity of the universe, whether between butterflies' wings and modern art, or between the human imagination and the mating habits of praying mantises, in his view revealed the existence of such underlying fundamental structures. They are there to be teased out by the acute observer.

Caillois could not accept not seeing the whole picture, 'je n'aime pas ne pas comprendre' (CA, p.71), and for him both the motivating and the frustrating nature of his project was that the task could be done, in theory if not in practice. The universe, in his view, did lend itself to a study such as his, 'le monde n'est pas une sylvie inextricable et confuse, mais une forêt de colonnes dont les alignements rythmés répercutent le même message: la prééminence, sous le vacarme général, d'une architecture dépouillée' (CE, p.81).

Caillois's own output, ultimately more striking for its consistency than its variety, shows itself too to be 'eadem in diversis'. The preceding chapters indicate the range of subjects about which Caillois chose to write, but also stress the unity of purpose which was his from the outset of his career: his searches for wholeness. It is finally Caillois's consistency which is remarkable. He never deviated from his initial purpose and beliefs. His intellectual integrity should be recognised too. Daniel Oster describes

him as the kind of intellectual 'qui n'a pas à chercher d'autre légitimité ni d'autre garantie que celles que procurent le désir de connaître et l'extrême ambition critique'.¹ Rather than carving out a traditional academic career, Caillois followed his intellectual curiosity, so central a part of his search for wholeness. His capacity for wonder is something he reclaims with pride towards the end of his life: 'il manque quelque chose à l'homme qui ne s'est jamais senti éperdu' (*FA*, p.45).

Caillois set himself no limits, either in the scale of his general undertaking or in the specialised fields of study he was willing to tackle. As an example of this boldness, we have seen how this 'douteur émerveillé à l'affût des sésames'² did not hesitate to take on the laws of the universe and explain its dynamics in terms of symmetry and dissymmetry in fewer than two hundred pages. To some, as we have seen, this boldness seems sheer folly, if not effrontery. But Caillois was an abstract thinker, an 'ideas writer', guilty certainly at times of not fully thinking or working through all his ideas, but guilty then too of having had particularly intriguing and stimulating ones. I have mentioned some of the problems regarding clarity of exposition in, for example, *L'Incertitude qui vient des rêves* and *Les Jeux et les Hommes*, but these are far outweighed by the strength of his ideas – it is these which remain in the mind.

It is interesting on this point to compare what René Huyghe and Claude Lévi-Strauss had to say about this aspect of Caillois, Huyghe expressing himself with great formal politeness on the occasion of Caillois's reception into the Académie Française, Lévi-Strauss rather less politely. I have already quoted them separately but will return now to what they said. Huyghe: 'fuyant l'exposé dogmatique, vous lui avez toujours préféré la force incantatoire d'évoquer, qui dépend des rythmes du verbe et de la suggestion des images'. Lévi-Strauss: 'il a délaissé la recherche au profit du style. Il voulut cantonner ses spéculations sur le plan littéraire et poétique: la forme l'intéressait plus que la substance'.³ The academic is pitted here against the writer, every word Lévi-Strauss chooses condemning Caillois, Huyghe taking a broader view and seeing that ideas do not necessarily have to be expressed within the confines of an 'exposé dogmatique' in order to have substance *and* style. Bertrand Poirot-Delpech

¹ Daniel Oster, 'Roger Caillois: l'unique et l'universel. Le retour à la source', *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 2667 (1979), 3 (p.3).

² From an epitaph by Michel Butor in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 2667 (1979), p.5.

³ Huyghe, p.41 and Lévi-Strauss, *De près et de loin*, pp.122-23.

unwittingly reveals some of the confusion critics may feel when confronted by Caillois's more creative theories. Referring to *La Nécessité d'esprit*, he writes that Caillois did not yet possess 'toute la prudence scientifique qui va rendre fascinantes ses avancées au bord de l'invérifiable'.⁴ Poirot-Delpech is reluctant to imply carelessness on the part of Caillois, but cannot either confer the status of dogma on his theories.

A life's output that includes, for example, writings on anthropology, ethnology, sociology, poetics, aesthetics and mineralogy firstly suggests Caillois's broad-based erudition and secondly points to the fact that he was searching, tapping into all these areas in the hope of finding the missing pieces of the cosmic puzzle. The fact that Caillois worked outside the context of a university freed him from any academic restraints and enabled him to follow his interests more independently. Caillois's ideal and his weapon of choice in his search for wholeness was 'la primauté de l'intelligence', but a particular use of intelligence, focusing on uniting, aiming at coherence. From the beginning of his career, in *Procès intellectuel de l'art*, we saw how he chose coherence over reason, an approach he would continue to maintain, 'L'irrationnel: soit, mais j'y veux d'abord la cohérence (cette cohérence au profit de laquelle la logique a dû céder sur toute la ligne dans les sciences exactes)' (*AI*, p.36). The breadth of his vision drove him to look beyond the purely rational, and, within the parameters of his own 'logique flexible', he wrote nothing that is not strictly coherent. Order preferred to disorder, the construction of a system that could account for everything; Caillois's goals were not small-scale. Caillois looked to his own particular application of intelligence to conquer 'les forces de l'abîme', having always disliked anything – vegetation, lyricism – that proliferated without control.

Caillois's wide-ranging interests point not to instability or superficiality, therefore, but to a sense of urgency and, for a time at least, an absolute belief in knowledge and in acquiring – and transmitting – as much of this as possible. Caillois himself was aware of the variety that, outwardly, characterises his writings, and explained it and commented on it himself. In his final interview three weeks before his death, with Hector Bianciotti and Jean-Paul Enthoven, the following reply to one of the questions asked shows both a certain unease about the apparent variety of his work and at the

⁴ Poirot-Delpech, p.11.

same time an underlying confidence in the fact that it had a broader, more unified purpose than might seem apparent:

J'ai toujours regardé les mouches voler, que les mouches soient des papillons ou des idées, et j'ai une espèce d'incapacité, que je regrette d'ailleurs, à me fixer un but unique. Seulement, au fur et à mesure que j'étudie des thèmes, sans lien, sans parenté, comme les métaphores, les guerres, les sociétés, les rêves, je m'aperçois que cette diversité est convergente et que ce n'est pas pour essayer d'expliquer l'inexplicable, mais pour aller vers la cohérence.⁵

It is apparent that Caillois does not believe – nor should he – his first and more unflattering diagnosis of himself and knows quite well that the vast work of synthesis upon which he has been embarked has a definite direction. In this same interview, he draws a distinction between being a rationalist, a narrow perspective in his eyes, and having coherence as an aim. Caillois interestingly describes coherence as 'un système d'idées liées, mouvantes, dévorantes'.⁶ This suggests in itself a certain restlessness. The last adjective is especially interesting and helps explain how, when an idea has been 'assimilated', 'la cohérence est changée, elle est devenue plus large et plus compréhensible...'.⁷ Caillois's understanding of coherence transcends both the rational and the irrational, depending on acuity of perception for its implementation; this perception must be free too from conventional modes of thinking and observing. Caillois has explained – very coherently – the essential unity of his work yet does not seem to have satisfied his two interviewers, who go on to ask, 'en fait, malgré votre sens de la rigueur, vous aimez le vagabondage intellectuel...'.⁸ Their persistence may serve to highlight a lingering misconception of Caillois. The terminology suggests a degree of irresponsibility, self-indulgence, and unfortunately Caillois replies:

Oui, ma pensée a toujours été très marginale. Peut-être parce que je me suis aperçu très tôt que la science était très changeante, qu'une découverte y chassait l'autre et qu'il n'était en elle de stable que l'intention qui le soutenait.⁹

The stability, or instability of science was not what was leading Caillois's research. Suffering from curiosity on a cosmic scale, he was following a pattern of study which

⁵ CPT, p.23.

⁶ CPT, p.23.

⁷ CPT, p.23.

⁸ CPT, p.24.

⁹ CPT, p.24.

suited his needs and his approach. His interviewers seem so convinced of some basic instability that even his election to the Académie Française is referred to in these terms, ‘votre entrée à l’Académie française répondait-elle à un besoin de stabilité?’¹⁰ In response to this Caillois has to remind them of his attitude towards and use of the French language.

While his work can seem almost an embarrassment of riches, as Caillois himself wrote in the 1972 preface to *Le Mythe et l’Homme*, subsequent books return to and expand on themes treated in this book, so fundamentally it is a question of ‘unity in diversity’. Oster describes as follows the kind of coherence displayed by Caillois in his *œuvre*:

la cohérence secrète d’un labyrinthe, mais d’un labyrinthe en mouvement qui, par ailleurs, serait sa propre carte. Organisation, analogies, concordances, symétries, autant de termes qui définissent son obsession. Tissu interstitiel, mosaïque sans canevas, cases de l’échiquier: autant de métaphores qui précisent sa démarche.¹¹

Caillois’s concept of coherence, then, was not a static one; it was an ongoing *activity*.

From the outset, Caillois’s world view quashed any ‘them’ and ‘us’ attitude to nature on the part of his fellow man. Man is just another link in the unbroken chain that is truly all-embracing, including everything from the intangibility of a dream or an idea to the solidity of a stone. The human imagination is not free to wander and invent at will; it is rigorously determined by the same laws of nature to which all the links in the chain are subject. This is the sense of his ‘esthétique généralisée’ and ‘poétique généralisée’, which are both a logical extension of his basic tenets. *Le Champ des signes* shows how towards the end of his life the unity for which he had spent so long searching now seemed almost overwhelming, in the sense that his awareness of cosmic oneness was so heightened it was beginning to make it almost impossible to distinguish between things. Caillois’s early perception of man’s role never faltered. In his later writings he developed it, teasing out the full implications for man’s output, both creative and critical. In Caillois’s eyes, however we may delude ourselves, the work of man is just a variant on the mechanistic activities of other species, nothing for which we can congratulate ourselves. It must be said that the many unflattering

¹⁰ *CPT*, p.24.

epithets he chose to describe mankind show not just neutral observation. He took some pleasure at least in deflating any undue sense of importance.

Caillois employed striking *rapprochements* to convey his intuition of the seamless nature of the universe, as we have seen in the preceding chapters. These *rapprochements* function most convincingly as metaphor (no proof is possible and it would be meaningless to argue the case for or against in detail – at any rate Caillois does not) and show how from the earliest stages the poet was present in the writer. The significance of metaphor in his work cannot be over-emphasised. The idea of ‘approches’ is central to Caillois in his many writings, and metaphor too has a role to play in conveying and expressing suggestions of cosmic unity. Caillois called for rigour and severity so trenchantly it would be easy to conclude these were his dominant qualities. In fact, in his writings, he takes impressive imaginative leaps, and makes this seem quite effortless and plausible. His use of the French language, honoured by his election to the Académie Française, plays a part, not just in his reader’s pleasure, but in helping to put across, in an apparently seamless fashion, some quite astounding ideas. His skilful use of French to persuade, describe, argue and suggest is one of his strongest advantages. His linguistic talents, along with his erudition, are central to the impression of plausibility he needs to create. Caillois was poetic from the start in his vision and conscious use of language, showed an intriguing mixture of poetry and science, even before the fullest expression of his poetic self in his writings on stones. We have seen Caillois invoke and evoke an intriguing mixture of man, myth, mantis, octopus and other unaccustomed creatures, primitive and remote peoples and landscapes, precious stones. His delight in the examples he cites, whether from the insect or animal world, bespeaks the non-specialist in him; he revels in their, to him, rare nature and parades them in front of his readers like so many exotic delights. These are Caillois’s ‘working tools’, some inevitably better suited to the task than others.

Despite his erudition and his obvious enjoyment of facts, Caillois is by no means a neutral writer in tone. One of the many interests for his reader is to follow the emotional trajectory evident in his work, from the arrogance of *Le Vent d'hiver* and other works of that period, to the lofty humanism of *Le Rocher de Sisyphe*, for

¹¹ Oster, p.3.

example, to the impassioned attacks on poetic malpractice, to the deep tranquillity of his mystical materialism, when he found in stones the full meaning and realisation of his earlier searching, and the necessary comfort and support in the face of an increasing awareness of mortality. No state is necessarily a final one. The noble sentiments expressed in *Le Rocher de Sisyphe* were, after all, followed by the polemical, sometimes offensive viewpoints expressed in 'Illusions à rebours'. The emotional journey complements the intellectual one, from the extreme certainties of youth to the more modulated thoughtfulness and at times touching humanity of the later Caillois. Despite what he might have wished, his writings are by no means 'confidences impersonnelles d'une ombre cachée à des ombres anonymes...'.¹²

His attempt at uncovering the syntax of the universe led him inevitably to formulate his call for 'sciences diagonales'; his own approach was diagonal, cutting through different cultures and organic and inorganic matter to try and reach the essential truth. In Caillois's work, the boldness of his vision was justified by the acuity of his observations. He linked scientists and poets, each involved in filling in the cosmic puzzle in their differing yet complementary ways. What enriches Caillois's work and adds complexity and depth to his vision, his willingness to draw on many different disciplines, may also have prevented him from becoming an authority in any one field. This of course was not his aim; it would doubtless have appeared to him to be a narrow one. This openness highlights an important positive quality, his receptivity to the contributions of the new sciences, his ability to extract with some skill and synthesising ability what suited his own purposes. This is not always without its drawbacks; I have shown that it can lead to distortion or omission of important material, for example. But his capacity to bring his particular vision to a discipline, and enrich it with his own insights and perspective can only be positive, not just for his general readers but for those engaged in a more orthodox way in these fields. His was never a routine academic approach, and it would be futile to assess him as though this was or should have been the case. He had a subtler, but still tangible role as a stimulator of the imagination, a visionary (however much he would have disliked the term). Freed from academic restraints, he could take an overview, at times a highly personal one, of what he was about.

¹² *CPT*, p.25.

For whom was Caillois writing? A non-specialist himself, his books' primary audience would not be specialists in the various disciplines tackled by him. Panoff, we have seen, accused him of flattering the prejudices of the common reader, but this is scarcely so. Caillois, in his writings on poetry, for instance, was seeking to create a common ground he must often have felt eluded him. Reading the works from Caillois's sociological period, for example, as much as offering the reader the edited fruits of Caillois's sociological researches, offers a window into Caillois's own preoccupations and concerns.

I have mentioned Caillois's diagonal, inclusive approach. He figures among other pioneers of his time in calling for an interdisciplinary approach in research. Leonardo Da Vinci's ideal of a 'Renaissance man', proficient in many areas, was supplanted by the rapid development of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. There is now, however, an increased awareness of the benefits of a more holistic approach, and there is considerable debate on the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. Many different forces and thinkers played their part in creating this new and bracing interdisciplinary research climate, with all its promise and undeniable complexity, but Caillois must be credited for his work in making this vision possible. The journal *Diogenes*, founded and edited by Caillois under the auspices of UNESCO, represents a further not inconsiderable contribution by Caillois to interdisciplinarity. It was intended to provide a forum for specialists in different fields to write about their discoveries and read about the progress made by other researchers, and Caillois endeavoured not to make these contributions monologues. A wide range of disciplines were represented in the differing articles under Caillois's editorship, and an attempt was made to look beyond the Western world, to include Asia and South America (suggesting a greater depth of vision than his own writings would always reveal). It was in no way a political journal, and steered clear of the post-war debate on existentialism and Marxism. While necessarily reflecting Caillois's concerns, Alexandre Pajón has shown in his excellent article on Caillois's relationship with *Diogenes*, that the latter was not merely another platform for Caillois, 'la revue, reflet de son temps, glissait vers des analyses où les notions de diversité, de complexité l'emportaient. Elle échappait alors au dessein "cailloisien" pour lui être plus fidèle.'¹³

¹³ Alexandre Pajón, 'A la recherche d'une revue : Caillois et Diogenes', *Diogenes*, 160 (1992), 117-141 (p.141).

If Caillois championed the collaboration of the different sciences, collaboration in general was of little interest to him. Despite his range of external involvements, essentially he worked most happily on his own terms. An early pattern of enthusiastically embracing a new idea or coterie, followed shortly by repudiation of that same concept or group, gave way to a more steady pattern of solo work, culminating in the very solitary meditations on stones. He has no overt disciples, no followers, did not establish any well-implanted school of thought. His quest was a personal one, whose range and concerns are not, as I have shown, typical of this century. This is not to deny him any lasting influence, but it must be understood as diffuse, less easily quantifiable than that of a mainstream writer.

Caillois was totally receptive to the 'surface étincelante' of the world. Appearances were not a trap, or something false to him; they were reality itself, and in that reality lay poetry for him. Richard Dawkins, scientist and author and currently the first Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, in his recent book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*,¹⁴ shares (almost certainly without knowing it), Caillois's views on poetry. Dawkins centres his book around Isaac Newton's creation of an artificial rainbow, using a prism. This experiment showed the spectrum of colours that exist in white light. Keats accused him of destroying the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours. Dawkins devotes his book to refuting this charge, writing of the consequences of Newton's work – soundwaves, human DNA, for example – all containing enough wonder in themselves to inspire any poet. Dawkins stands firm against 'bad' science, pseudoscience, astrology, the paranormal and superstition; reality, 'good' science, is sufficiently marvellous. Science can be the inspiration for great poetry, as Dawkins writes in his preface:

Newton's unweaving of the rainbow led on to spectroscopy, which has proved the key to much of what we know today about the cosmos. And the heart of any poet worthy of the title Romantic could not fail to leap up if he beheld the universe of Einstein, Hubble and Hawking.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Dawkins, p.x.

He equally supports a science inspired by a poetic sense of wonder, and calls for more 'interdisciplinarity' between the two:

It is my thesis that poets could better use the inspiration provided by science, and that at the same time scientists must reach out to the constituency that I am identifying with, for want of a better word, poets.¹⁶

As Caillois railed against bad poetry, so Dawkins finds it necessary to lead science away from the cheap popularisation that seeks to attract the lowest level of interest, and which will in reality do his field nothing but harm. Anyone who can understand and therefore properly appreciate the wonderful complexity of reality will find enough in it to hold his attention and inspire his meaningful interest, whether this be expressed in poetic or in scientific terms.

While Caillois's interest in the world of objects reflects a certain tendency of his times, as I mentioned in my introduction, it also stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of some other intellectuals of his time. As the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography, *Les Mots*,¹⁷ suggests, Sartre felt none of Caillois's reservations about the written word. *Le Fleuve Alphée* saw Caillois swept back to his point of origin, the physical world, away from what he had come to see as the self-replicating, 'cancerous' even, secondary world of books. Sartre, on the other hand, writes:

J'ai commencé ma vie comme je la finirai sans doute : au milieu des livres. Dans le bureau de mon grand-père, il y en avait partout; [...]. Je ne savais pas encore lire que, déjà, je les révérais, ces pierres levées; droites ou penchées, serrées comme des briques sur les rayons de la bibliothèque ou noblement espacées en allées de menhirs, je sentais que la prospérité de notre famille en dépendait.¹⁸

The comparison of books to stones cannot fail to strike a reader of Caillois. The latter, in his early pre-reading years, was immersed in and entranced by, the world of things. Sartre, unable yet to read, was enthralled by his grandfather's collection of books, which had for him the solidity of things, of stones. Sartre grew up in Paris and was at

¹⁶ Dawkins, p. 17.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

¹⁸ Sartre, pp. 35-36.

pains to stress that the joys of the outdoor world were unknown to him. The secondary world offered by books held enough promise and excitement:

Je n'ai jamais gratté la terre ni quêté des nids [...]. Mais les livres ont été mes oiseaux et mes nids [...]; la bibliothèque, c'était le monde pris dans un miroir; elle en avait l'épaisseur infinie, la variété, l'imprévisibilité.¹⁹

For Caillois, as we know, 'la substitution verbale n'a jamais été chez moi victorieuse que de justesse et pour un temps. Elle n'a jamais oblitéré tout à fait le monde des choses' (FA, pp.46-47). To take the contrast even further, for deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida, words no longer have that solidity attributed to them by Sartre – the text can take on a reality of its own, about which we can make no assumptions. Caillois's interest in the world of things was also accompanied by his equally strong interest in poetry, in the image. Indeed, these two interests were for him complementary, the real acting as a kind of protection against the excesses of subjectivity.

In summing up Caillois, the many paradoxes that characterise his work come to mind, and some of these paradoxes have at times impeded a full understanding of his work. Caillois eschewed the intellectual trends of his time, knowing more quickly and with greater clarity what he did not like than what he did. He is not an 'existentialist', nor a 'structuralist', for example. Caillois's involvements with various groups such as Surrealism were doomed to failure, given his highly individualistic vision and his unwillingness to compromise on principles of importance to him. This is another aspect of his rather marginalised position. This lack of attachment to any movement has not prevented, perhaps has encouraged, some from applying other rather hasty labels. He has been called 'fascist' and 'reactionary'. These labels, as I have shown, are either wholly inaccurate or fail to tell the whole story. Caillois's early work must be seen both in the context of the totality of his writings and in the context of the unstable and ineffective government of his day. Caillois's choice was for culture, not politics. He really is 'un homme de lettres, au sens fort du terme' as Marguerite Yourcenar observed.²⁰ In none of his writings could he be said to be political, as the

¹⁹ Sartre, p.42.

²⁰ Marguerite Yourcenar, *Discours prononcés dans la séance publique tenue par l'Académie Française pour la réception de Madame Marguerite Yourcenar* (Paris: Institut de France, 1981), p.8.,

word is normally understood. He was taking at once a broader and more general, more abstract view than that. While some of his observations on poetry may do him less than credit, and can be repetitive, simplistic, even bombastic, this must be set against his more lasting contribution in this field, his perceptive and sensitive literary criticism, his promotion of French literature while in exile via *Lettres Françaises* and of South American literature in France. He had the openness to spot and promote this new kind of literature, 'magical realism', which does not destroy reality but makes us take a fresh look at it. As Odile Felgine and Laura Ayerza de Castilho remark in their book on Victoria Ocampo, 'sans Caillois, la littérature sud-américaine aurait de toute façon jailli dans le monde d'après guerre; mais plus tardivement et, peut-être, pas d'abord en France'.²¹

Caillois's interest in Surrealism was paradoxical in itself; that a writer for whom reality would be so central should have entertained these sympathies is some sign of his complexity. Though he broke away from Surrealism, he never fully shook off the influence of this movement on him. It can be detected in his fondness – despite what he wrote – for 'unimaginable' images (much like his own metaphors of unity) and in his lingering attraction to nature's darker forces, an attraction he felt safe indulging in if he adopted an analytical, rather than a complacent approach. It is clear from his writings that he and André Breton continued to look to each other, Breton even referring to him generously as a 'boussole mentale'.²²

A further paradox is that Caillois, a prolific writer, developed deep doubts about the validity of the written word, doubts which he expressed very eloquently and elegantly by writing a book. This is not unlike the Surrealists, who, while deprecating a focus on literature in favour of living the life of the free mind and free association, nevertheless spent quite some time writing on literature. In reality, the kind of work done by Caillois during the 'parenthèse' did not really come to an abrupt stop. Publication of *Le Champ des signes* testifies to this, and no doubt Caillois would have continued in this way, alternating his writings on stones with the kind of concerns demonstrated in *Le Champ des signes* and his other books, his depiction of stones compensating and consoling him for the necessarily imperfect nature of the latter. Yet the appeasement,

²¹ Odile Felgine and Laura Ayerza de Castilho, *Victoria Ocampo* (Paris: Critérion, 1991), p.265.

²² Quoted by Béhar, p.31.

the peace brought to Caillois by his occasional perceptions of the unity of the cosmos were too strong for this searching to be abandoned. He might well be aware of its impossibility; it was not something he could resist. It should be borne in mind too that the sense of completeness Caillois achieved through his contemplation of stones would be, by definition, short-lived. Returning to the painful sense of the fragmented self is a common place in mystic writing, and whether that mysticism finds its expression through spirituality or materiality makes little difference. Caillois's 'mystic materialism' is not in itself an end-point, but represents a state or condition requiring, each time, a fresh start.

This mystical materialism was his final apparent paradox. In fact, having sought all his life oneness with the universe through analysis, he is merely here choosing the 'royal road' to that union, in using language to achieve his goal of becoming one with matter. His mysticism testifies to his absolute, ardent and searching nature, his sense of incompleteness. Having inevitably failed to incorporate his fragmented self into the greater totality via knowledge, he sought that oneness via language. This was no negative withdrawal from this world into the mineral one. Caillois's 'parenthesis' was not in vain. He could not have begun at this point, both from the viewpoint of the depth of his perceptions and working out the necessary compromise with himself on poetic writing. In his involvement with stones, he completes the trajectory, from the passionate plans for society that characterised his youth to a contemplative detachment.

Caillois has, in the main, been well-served by his critics, especially those who have focused on the totality of his *œuvre*. The focus, or methods, of critics such as Laurent Jenny or Annamaria Laserra may well vary but they do provide a disinterested, well-researched and profound understanding of Caillois's work. Odile Felgine, concentrating more on biographical elements, nevertheless offers extremely perceptive insights into his writing. There is obviously a greater capacity for distortion among those critics who seem to focus on just one aspect, and this is especially evident in the work of Jean-François Fourny and Daniel Lindenberg, for example. Their failure to understand Caillois's work in context or in its totality leads them to make accusations of guilt by association. Their rush to judgement and imputations of fascism are unfair and unfounded. Panoff is so evidently on a mission to destroy

Caillois's credibility through a mixture of venom, innuendo and ridicule that it is his own academic credibility that ultimately suffers. Even the title of his book, '*Les Frères ennemis*', is overstating the case. Caillois and Lévi-Strauss certainly had professional disagreements, but they were not engaged in the same enterprise, so could not properly be called either 'brothers' or 'enemies'. The field of sociology is surely only enriched by a variety of approaches. Saint-John Perse, speaking in Stockholm at the banquet in his honour following on his being awarded the Nobel Prize for poetry, requested that the poet and the scholar no longer be considered as 'frères ennemis'. Car l'interrogation est la même qu'ils tiennent sur un même abîme, et seuls leurs modes d'investigation diffèrent'.²³

Critical response to Caillois in the English-speaking world has been very limited. *Méduse & Cie* was published in English as *The Mask of Medusa* (Gollancz, 1964) and it attracted reviews in *The Guardian*,²⁴ *The Listener*²⁵ and the *Sunday Times*.²⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith is receptive to what he describes as the 'clandestine relationship' coming into being between science and aesthetics. He welcomes the light Caillois's theories on camouflage shed on art, 'one sees here a way of argument which makes the work of art no longer a wandering star, but something geared to the other motions of the universe'. The wholeness of Caillois's vision does not shock Lucie-Smith, or seem far-fetched or excessive to him. Alex Comfort's reaction is a great deal more dismissive. He writes of 'national schools of nonsense', and of Caillois's 'pseudophilosophy' as 'plausible subscientific guff in the tradition of Teilhard and du Noüy'. The analogies detected by Caillois are better understood as brought about by the phenomenon of convergence, and the anthropomorphism of entomologists, according to Comfort. Anthony Storr's reaction lies somewhere between the two. While he finds unconvincing some of the parallels drawn by Caillois between men and insects, and argues that Caillois's lack of acquaintance with human psychology makes these parallels seem naïve, he does give him credit for raising the problem of human freedom, and its relation to man, 'much human behaviour which has hitherto been thought of as freely chosen by the individual is probably not so. Even the most

²³ Saint-John Perse, 'Allocution au Banquet Nobel du 10 décembre 1960', *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp.443-447 (p.443).

²⁴ Alex Comfort, 'Of ants and men', *The Guardian*, June 5 1964, p.675.

²⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, 'Science and aesthetics', *The Listener*, July 9 1964, p.60.

²⁶ Anthony Storr, 'Instinct, free-will and automation', *The Sunday Times*, July 5 1964, p.36.

individualistic work of art may be much more the product of instinct than some had imagined'. Critical reactions, therefore, range from welcoming the opportunity to air some of the issues raised by Caillois (even if there is some disagreement about the validity of some of his points) to a blanket dismissal, seeing in Caillois a personification of what is held to be the worst kind of French tradition.

Exactly what kind of writer Caillois *is* causes his English critics as many problems as his French ones. For John Sturrock,²⁷ '[Caillois] has been a cultural force in France (notably in the introduction there of writers from South America)'. For Matthew Hodgart,²⁸ he is 'the master of a minor art that has had few practitioners since Ruskin: that of describing in words the peculiar beauty of semi-precious stones and minerals'. Peter Collier, on the other hand, sums him up as 'a noted sociologist'.²⁹ Each assessment focuses on an aspect of his work, to the exclusion of its totality. At any rate, nobody seems to consider him an 'essayist'. Writing again on Caillois sixteen years later, in the context of reviewing Odile Felgine's book, Sturrock changes his perspective somewhat, now offering the opinion that 'it was as some kind of social anthropologist that he wrote his best books' and seeing in him an 'aloof rationalist, the I. A. Richards figure, who opposed science to poetry'.³⁰ This is a very distorted view of Caillois, who, as we have seen, explicitly favoured coherence over reason, and stressed the parallel adventure of science and poetry. Sturrock further writes that 'the unbiddable Caillois consorted with the mystifiers the better to show them up'.³¹ Presumably the 'mystifiers' are the Surrealists, but Sturrock is alone (and without justification) in explaining in this way Caillois's association with this group. Felgine's book is certainly not the source of these misguided insights; these are Sturrock's own errors of judgement.

Matthew Hodgart, reviewing *Pierres réfléchies*, is honest enough to raise a problem that might discourage English-speaking readers: reading Caillois's work on stones in French demands a wide-ranging, high-level vocabulary. Caillois's efforts to match the grandeur of the mineral world by a careful selection of rare and beautiful lexical items

²⁷ John Sturrock, 'The message of the rocks', *TLS*, 3988 (1978), 995.

²⁸ Matthew Hodgart, 'Metaphors in stones', *TLS*, 3872 (1976), 640.

²⁹ Peter Collier, 'Roger Caillois: *La Nécessité d'esprit*', *Modern Language Review*, 78 (1983), 195-96 (p. 195).

³⁰ John Sturrock, 'Man of Stones', *TLS*, 4760 (1994), 27.

were not totally appreciated by Hodgart. The essence of Hodgart's complaint is that, unlike *L'Ecriture des pierres*, which he had enjoyed, *Pierres réfléchies* has big words and there are no pictures, 'this book has no plates and very difficult words. [...] Never have I had to look up so many words in the dictionary and to so little avail because often I did not understand the English translation'. It is particularly 'the wealth of metaphorical vocabulary' to which Hodgart objects, opining it 'will perhaps be too much for any but the most semantically gifted – and these are not likely to be amateur mineralogists'. For Hodgart, at least, Caillois's attempts to enrich his writing by drawing on all the wealth of his culture and knowledge has not had the desired effect. The photographs in *L'Ecriture des pierres* certainly give a striking and immediate understanding of the fascination of the mineral world, and the vocabulary and allusions in *Pierres réfléchies* are complex. But Caillois is not writing solely for semantically gifted amateur mineralogists. Beyond questions of vocabulary and dictionary use, he is writing for anyone who can understand beauty, obsession, desire for transcendence, and who can further understand the very human drama that unfolds between the lines in *Pierres réfléchies* and which has to do with intimations of mortality.

Caillois assumed the full burden of the human condition, and tried to make sense of it. He speaks to his reader's curiosity, always seeing the bigger picture, expanding, rather than restricting his readers' interests. As a thinker, he is consistently independent, battling against received ideas and any kind of inferior 'cogitation'. From the beginning of his career, at first instinctively and later with complete awareness, he furthered his intuition of the oneness of the universe by choosing *coherence* over *reason*. His vision, and the immense undertaking it imposed on him, necessitated this fresh, subversive approach to logic to find full expression. Many of his books have all the outward signs of traditional academic output, and yet contain visionary leaps of the imagination, persuasively argued. Whether his chosen term be 'imagination juste', 'logique flexible', or 'cohérences aventureuses', Caillois's argumentation explores new and unconventional paths. He is never indifferent, is always wholly committed to what he is doing, and his own passionate convictions must solicit an equally strong response from his readers, whether it be one of agreement or, on occasion, of disagreement. He held out the promise of acquiring a 'connaissance totalitaire' at the

³¹ Sturrock, p.27.

beginning of his career; together he and his readers can find out the impossibility of this and explore how the mystical, poetic side of Caillouis achieved a different kind of totality. He was on a search, as are all humans, in differing ways. His prestigious academic background did not make his search a remote, impersonal one: Caillouis was passionate about his endeavour. In his haste and urgency sometimes his results are less than perfect, but this is an integral part of the whole process. What search proceeds unflinchingly?

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This bibliography is organised as follows:

- A. 1 Books by Roger Caillois
- A. 2 Articles by Roger Caillois
- A. 3 Published Correspondence to/from Roger Caillois
- A. 4 Speeches

- B Books and issues of journals on Roger Caillois

- C Articles on Roger Caillois

- D General background reading

A

1. Books by Roger Caillois

This section lists works by Roger Caillois referred to in this thesis. Because the thesis has been organised thematically rather than chronologically, and for ease of reference, this list is in alphabetic order. Many of Caillois's books from the thirties through to the sixties are more readily available in subsequent collections such as *Approches de l'imaginaire*, *Approches de la poésie* and *Cohérences aventureuses* than as originally published. These are the volumes which I have used, but original publication dates are included for the more significant works. Several books were published posthumously. A chronological listing of Caillois's works can be found in Odile Felgine's biography of Roger Caillois (details given in section B). The bibliography in Felgine's book also provides a list of Caillois's translations, prefaces to volumes, catalogues of exhibitions, as well as radio and television appearances etc. In addition to the

information given by Felgine, Roger Caillois was the subject of the France 3 programme, 'Un siècle d'écrivains', on June 9 1999, and in conjunction with this programme, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel launched an interactive site which can be accessed at <http://www.ina.fr/Production/Studio/caillois.fr.html>. A complete list of Caillois's articles can be found in Laurent Jenny's *La Pensée aventurée* (details in section B).

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Anthologie du fantastique, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966)

Apprentissages de Paris (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978)

Approches de l'imaginaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1974)

[Includes *Procès intellectuel de l'art*, 1935, *Le Vent d'hiver*, 1938, *Puissances du roman*, 1942 and *Description du marxisme*, 1950]

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Books, issues of journals on Roger Caillois

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