

**The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader**, edited by Claudine Frank, translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2003, 423pp., £17.95, ISBN 0-8223-3068-7 (paperback)

Surprisingly, this reader is the first single volume collection of Roger Caillois' writings to be published not only in English but in any language. Although this is a crucial addition to the very few existent translations of Caillois' work, its publication serves to underscore how neglected this writer is in the English-speaking world. One of the reasons for this neglect perhaps is that Caillois' writings resist categorisation. Like his colleagues at the College of Sociology, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, Caillois writings were diverse. Spanning the domains of literature, ethnography, mythography, social theory, and science, Caillois' writings could be said to outshine even Bataille and Leiris as examples of the multidisciplinary achievements in the evolution of surrealist thought. *The Edge of Surrealism* selectively represents the diversity of Caillois' writings whilst providing the reader with an astonishing bibliography, which is a gift to those who can read French and cruelly tantalising to those who cannot.

Claudine Frank's selection of texts is in itself interesting, and carries with it a subtle thesis of its own in terms of her situating Caillois with regards to surrealist and post-war French thought. Like the texts themselves, Frank's authoritative introduction maps the shifts in Caillois' thought from his short-lived involvement with André Breton's surrealist group in the 1930s to his late writings on the 'natural fantastic' of the 1970s. In addition to the introductory essay, Frank precedes each text with a useful commentary, which both serve to situate the texts in terms of Caillois' oeuvre and to draw attention to any specific contemporary events or debates to which the writer was responding. Whilst this might sound like a matter of course, Frank's skill as a commentator comes from her grasp of the complexities of Caillois' thought and a thorough knowledge of his intellectual environs. Furthermore, in the context of a writer who was so close to his times, Frank is extremely helpful to the reader in drawing our attention to just who and what Caillois was responding to in his essays. Thus we are prompted to read Caillois' texts with an awareness of their relations to a number of influential figures in twentieth-century French thought: not only Breton and Bataille, but also Gaston Bachelard, Georges Dumézil, Emile Durkheim, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Claude Lévi-Strauss, André Malraux, Marcel Mauss, and Jean Paulhan, amongst others. To a student of surrealism, this book is crucial in highlighting the degrees to which Caillois' writing can be seen in many ways as a continuous response to Bataille and to surrealism.

The commentary reflects what Frank defines as her 'two coordinated axes of interpretation,' which she loosely defines as 'the dialogical and the self-reflexive' (p. 6). The former axis refers to the various dialogues which motivated much of Caillois' writings, and the latter to the inner evolution of his thought. The book clearly presents Caillois as a writer who cuts right



across intellectual territories. Whilst this aspect of Caillois' thought is fairly self-evident for any reader, the question of self-reflexivity reveals Frank's perspicacity as a commentator, for it is here that she draws out the threads running through Caillois' oeuvre: where they are paradoxical, and where they reflect a self-conscious shift in his thought. Frank's commentary here is useful in clarifying Caillois' mobility on certain issues, as well as providing the reader with an account of the internal development of his thought as well as the external historical factors that shaped it. This is particularly important with respect to his writings from the late 1930s to the immediate post-war period, following his return from Argentina. This period Frank characterises as one in which Caillois underwent 'a progressive intellectual, ideological, and cultural change which left him a convert to "civilisation" – or what he had previously sought to overturn and destroy' (p. 33). Frank thus defines this change as one from revolution to civilisation; from the whirlwind of theories on the sacred, mythology, and power developed during the College of Sociology, to what Frank terms as Caillois' 'humanist awakening' (p. 33), epitomised by the essay 'Patagonia' in the second chapter.

Essentially, the book situates Caillois' writing into three periods. Since Frank's focus is on Caillois' situation at 'the edge of surrealism,' these three chapters combine texts which, although diverse and almost entirely at odds with either the surrealists or with Bataille, nonetheless reveal the extent to which Caillois' writings are a part of the history of surrealism. The first chapter, titled 'Theory and the Thirties, 1934-1939,' represents Caillois' early relations with surrealism, his use of biology and mythography following his split with surrealism in 1935, and his writings from within, and later reflections on, the College of Sociology. Importantly, however, the writings concerning the College of Sociology do not repeat anything within Hollier's edition of *The College of Sociology*, and in fact present Caillois' writings from this period as having little in common with such College essays as 'The Winter Wind,' in which Caillois appears at his closest to Bataille.<sup>1</sup> The second chapter, titled 'Writing from Patagonia, 1940-1945,' maps Caillois' war-time exile in Argentina, where he participated in the avant-garde journal *Surr*, led by Victoria Ocampo, and from where he established the free-French journal *Les Lettres françaises*. This chapter helps to give a context to Caillois' turn to humanism after the war, his establishment of the review *Diogenes*, and his work with UNESCO. The third chapter, entitled 'Post-War Stances, 1946-1978,' surveys the period from the immediate post-war writings to Caillois' death. This chapter, which tackles the difficult task of finding a coherent structure to Caillois' thought over such an extensive period, presents a selection of texts that reflect the writer's post-war return to literature and in particular his objections to surrealist poetics.

Caillois joined the surrealist ranks in 1932, following a period of involvement with the group known as Le Grand Jeu, whose central figures, René Daumal and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, had befriended the young Caillois in their home town of Reims. While Caillois exists in the English-speaking world as a neglected but nonetheless recognised figure within surrealist



environs, *Le Grand Jeu* remain unrecognised, misrepresented, and generally scorned, most notably, for example, by such marginal surrealist figures as André Thirion.<sup>2</sup> In her Ph.D. thesis, Frank was one of the first scholars to argue for the important influence of *Le Grand Jeu* on Caillois' thought,<sup>3</sup> and in *The Edge of Surrealism* her references to *Le Grand Jeu* certainly shed light on what are possibly Caillois' most recognised ideas, at least in connection with surrealist studies. Frank writes that in part she traces back to *Le Grand Jeu* Caillois' 'lifelong obsession with depersonalization, the dissolution of the self, and the *instinct d'abandon* (instinct of letting go)' which 'he explored from "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" to *Le Fleuve Alphée*,' (p. 9) – the latter being Caillois' autobiographical text. 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' is possibly Caillois' most familiar text for students of surrealism. Published in *Minotaure*, 7, 1935, it has generally been seen to reflect Caillois' interest in Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, in particular Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and to have influenced Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'mirror stage,' published in 1936. This withstanding, Frank's commentary brings to this well-known text a greater contextual complexity by drawing it into relations with *Le Grand Jeu*'s negation of selfhood as well as Bachelard's ideas on the disruption of spatial distinctions developed through his interpretation of contemporary physics.

In *The Edge of Surrealism*, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' is preceded by another of Caillois's *Minotaure* articles, 'The Praying Mantis,' and although they were both published under the aegis of surrealism, Frank emphasises how both essays developed through Caillois' dissatisfaction with what he considered surrealism's lack of objectivity and scientific rigour. This dissatisfaction, Frank observes in her introduction, was symbolised by the clash between Breton and Caillois that occurred during the famous episode of the Mexican jumping bean. As the story goes, Caillois, in the spirit of scientific enquiry, wanted to open up the object but Breton absolutely insisted that it must retain intact in order to retain its mysterious animate character. (We are given another example of Caillois' peevish enjoyment in spoiling Breton's desire to retain the mystery of objects in Caillois' post-war essay, 'Surrealism as a World of Signs'; this time in relation to the revelatory mask of *L'Amour fou*: 'I doubt that Breton was pleased when I brought him the complete object: a fencing mask worn by students during the Romantic era,' p. 331). Caillois' split with Breton led him to join forces with Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, Bachelard, and Jules Monnerot in establishing the review *Inquisitions: Organe de recherche de la phénoménologie humaine*, which ran for only one issue in June 1936 and, Frank writes, attempted to 'uphold the Popular Front with ideological innovations reflecting the latest scientific breakthroughs' (p. 16).<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of Caillois' article for this review, 'For a Militant Orthodoxy: The Immediate Tasks of Modern Thought,' is important for bridging Caillois' surrealist break and his turn towards Bataille and the College of Sociology in 1937. Caillois' essay follows the multi-disciplinary nature of his earlier surrealist explorations into entomology, mythography, and psychopathology, and marks the beginning of his attempts to theorise this multi-disciplinary methodology into a theory of 'generalisation,' which would



develop in the post-war years into the notion of a 'diagonal science.' This idea, according to Frank, 'proposed an open series of new classifications based on creative, interdisciplinary taxonomies' (p. 49), and it is represented in this anthology by Caillois' essay published in 1970, 'A New Plea for Diagonal Science.'

Caillois' attempts to establish a form of imaginative science was formed by his reaction to surrealism's lack of objectivity as he saw it, and yet, one can read in his essay for *Inquisitions* an argument against the tyranny of reason that further belies Caillois' roots in surrealism: 'A certain abstract and crudely reductive mentality (the terms "rationalist" and "positivist" here denote this sufficiently well) has obtained nothing by expelling into outer darkness all the irreducible elements of real-life experience that did not fit into its narrow framework. Such an uncomprehending attitude, which bore the seeds of its own demise, inevitably brought about various kinds of deadly results' (p. 133). Recalling Breton's manifestos and prefiguring future surrealist articulations of this theme in the 1940s, such as in *Situation of Surrealism Between the Wars*, it also prefigures Bataille's reflections on surrealism of the 1940s.

Another important inclusion in this book is Caillois' 'Letter to André Breton' of December 1934, in which he articulated certain criticisms of surrealism to which he would return in later writings. These ostensibly hinge upon his opposition to the surrealists' poetic stance, and specifically their reliance on the 'privileges' of poetry, which he felt the surrealists utilise to absolve themselves of the need to develop the kinds of rigour that scientists have been forced to adopt. This poetic privilege Caillois perceived to be manifest in the surrealists' insistence on mystification, intuition, and their lack of any coherent theory on the irrational: 'The irrational: granted. But first and foremost, it must be coherent (I am thinking of that coherence in favour of which logic had to yield all down the line of the exact sciences). I want the irrational to be continuously overdetermined, like the structure of coral; it must combine into one single system everything that until now has been systematically excluded by a mode of reason that is still incomplete' (p. 85). Very much like René Daumal's 'Open Letter to André Breton' of 1930, which was written as a response to Breton's criticisms of *Le Grand Jeu* in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, Caillois here admits that he shares many goals with the surrealist leader, but they must agree to differ on their methodologies: 'Of course, you and I still share, for example, a great number of common exigencies. Even so, because we have totally different views as to the methods most likely to fulfil them, collaboration is out of the question; we can merely offer each other support' (p. 86). Frank's selection of texts and her commentary help to guide the reader through these 'common exigencies' and provide a focus for Caillois' differences with surrealism.

In the first chapter of the book, Frank draws our attention to Caillois' early attempts to develop what he considered to be the shortcomings of surrealism's lack of scientific objectivity concerning its theories of the image. Although his essays on the praying mantis and mimicry



may well contain ideas and obsessions shared with the surrealists, Frank emphasises how these essays attempt to 'grant the image a systematic, scientific ground' (p. 10), which Caillois felt lacking in surrealism. Frank notes that while Caillois considered Dalí's paranoiac-critical method as the most successful surrealist attempt to provide an objective theory for the image, he nonetheless found it too subjective. Thus, Caillois' *Minotaure* essays and his book *The Necessity of The Mind* (which remained unpublished until 1981) are significant for their introduction of the idea of the 'ideogramme,' which André Chastel defined to the editor as 'a quest for the fundamental structures of the individual and collective imagination' (p. 10). Caillois' turn to the questions of myth and the sacred in the late 1930s, and politics and morality in the 1940s, suspended his writings on the image. However, in the final chapter of the book, Frank has included several essays which represent Caillois' return to the question of the image and surrealist poetics in general during and after the war. His critique of surrealism after the war is not only consistent with the issues he raised in the 1930s, but, thanks to the insights gained from reading texts of the intervening years, can also be seen to have been strengthened by his humanistic turn during the war. Several essays, including 'The Situation of Poetry,' 'The Pythian Heritage (On the Nature of Poetic Inspiration),' 'The Image,' 'Fruitful Ambiguity,' and 'Surrealism as a World of Signs,' all follow in some way the critique of surrealism offered in 'Letter to André Breton.' Published here in the final chapter of *The Edge of Surrealism*, following a diverse range of texts which correspond more strictly to Caillois' relations with Bataille, these essays on poetry show how much Caillois was still invested in surrealist thought, albeit as an implacable critic.

In parallel with the clarification of Caillois' relations with surrealism, this book offers a reading of Caillois' debate with Bataille, initiated through their involvement in the Contre-Attaque group in 1935 and the College of Sociology in 1937. With the recent glut of writings on Bataille, Caillois has certainly appeared the lesser figure in discussions of either the attempted anti-fascist mobilisation of Contre-Attaque, or the quest, by the College of Sociology, for social renewal through a modern recapitulation of the sacred. Frank's commentary attempts to provide a more balanced view, emphasising the importance of the exchange of thought which took place between Caillois and Bataille over the years. She underlines, for example, how much Caillois was influenced by Bataille's essay 'The Notion of Expenditure,' published in *La Critique sociale* in 1933, and interestingly suggests how this influence can be seen to have been manifest early on his career in 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1935), specifically in Caillois' observations on the anti-utilitarian instincts of insects. In turn, Frank draws our attention to how it was Caillois' academic studies in the sociology of religion with Mauss, and in comparative mythology with Dumézil at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, which led to his writing *Man and the Sacred* in 1939 at the age of twenty-six, and which earned him an authority that was very well respected by Bataille. We are reminded, for example, of how Bataille thanked Caillois in his text *L'Erotisme* (1957) for



'having provided the first theoretical elaboration of "transgression" with *Man and the Sacred* (p. 398).

With regards to this intellectual relationship, Frank is keen to present Caillois as a restraining and corrective force upon Bataille, whose personal allure and Dionysian ideologies Caillois seems to have resisted. This would appear as much for intellectual reasons, such as his reservations over Bataille's less cautious responses to the threat of fascism, as perhaps for fear of a very real dissolution of self in Bataille's Acéphale group. Frank notes in her introduction to 'The Function of Myth' (1937) that Caillois had been influenced by Nietzsche's notion of the *orgiastische Selbstvernichtung* (orgiastic self-destruction) in his writing on myth. This followed his writings in *Minotaure* on the deathly instincts of insects in 'The Praying Mantis' and 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,' with all three essays constituting the first two chapters of his book *Le Mythe et l'homme* (1938). What Frank does not suggest in her commentaries, however, is that Caillois' fascination with the instinct of self-dissolution or destruction, nurtured through *Le Grand Jeu*, may have had some determining influence on some form of self-preservatory instinct necessary to resist Bataille. Frank thus avoids the kind of psychobiographical speculation that Hollier cannot resist in his commentary on Caillois.<sup>5</sup> She presents a specific selection of texts which serve to represent Caillois' writings on myth, society, and the sacred as far more tempered than those of Bataille, arguing for how Caillois brought 'a note of scholarly calm and rigour' (p. 110) to the debate on myth in the 1930s, specifically in response to the drive to use myth as a political weapon led by Bataille and the surrealists.

As much as Frank attempts to present Caillois' writings on myth as crucially different to those of Bataille, in that they do not dwell on bloodshed and sacrifice but rather on festival, she does not shy away from addressing the problematic nature of what it was that Caillois was himself proposing in his ideas for the reinvigoration of society, and concomitantly his opposition to fascism. As an example of the more problematic aspects of Caillois' writings at the time of the College of Sociology, Frank includes the essay 'Aggressiveness as a Value' (1937), which she describes as 'unacceptable to contemporary readers in any political sense' (p. 4), in that it promotes the use of violence for political ends, to be initiated by a militant elite order. Throughout her commentary though, Frank is careful to provide specific contexts for Caillois' essays, and maintains that at the heart of Caillois' position on fascism was his consistent opposition to its violence, irrationalism, and anti-intellectualism. This, she insists was not ambiguous in any way.

It is evident from this selection of writings that the idea of an elite was an obsession of Caillois' and was central to his opposition to liberal bourgeois democracy. Whilst this idea never loses its problematic nature, Frank draws our attention to its different modulations and sources of influence, and includes two texts in which Caillois reflects upon his involvement



with two forms of contemporary 'sects,' the College of Sociology and Acéphale. On the former Caillois commented in an 'Interview with Gilles Lapouge, June 1970': 'The war had shown us just how inane the College of Sociology's endeavour had been. The dark forces we had dreamed of setting off had unleashed themselves entirely of their own accord, with results quite different from what we had expected' (p. 145). While Caillois may have given his support to the ambitions of the College, this book serves to emphasise his resistance to the Acéphale adventure. His 'Preamble to the Spirit of Sects' was part of an 'Essay on the Spirit of Sects,' written in 1943 but not published in its entirety in France until 1964, due to the still sensitive nature of discussing Acéphale. This study of sects, Frank states, marked Caillois' definitive break with Bataille. Frank's commentary is extremely helpful here in grounding Caillois' fascination with the notion of a ruling elite within his studies of mythography and literature. The idea was, it seems, influenced by Baudelaire's ideas on a ruling aristocratic elite, which he saw as having much in common with James Frazer's 'The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings,' and 'The Magic Origins of Royalty.' It was also inflected, Frank informs us, with Caillois' readings of ancient Chinese pre-Dynastic history, in which the positions of ruling moral authority and political administration were distinct. Whilst in exile in Argentina during the war Caillois continued his discussion of sects with the group gathered around the review *Surr*. One such discussion is published here as 'Discussions of Sociological Topics: On "Defense of the Republic",' wherein Caillois' definition of a ruling elite is defined as an 'Order, in the religious sense of the word' (p. 214). This 'order' would ideally, he suggests, exert power, not through coercion, but through 'influence,' which takes on the meaning of the contagious effect of the sacred as theorised in the College of Sociology. Interestingly, the group considered Gandhi as the most exemplary contemporary figure whose power arose from a moral and spiritual authority.

The second chapter of *The Edge of Surrealism* provides the reader with texts and commentary that help to situate Caillois' aforementioned 'humanist awakening,' a major part of which was his critical reflection upon the College of Sociology and his obsession with sects. Frank includes comments by Caillois on his rejection of the idea of sects as belonging to youthful predilections that were 'novelistic,' 'personal,' 'imaginary,' 'futile,' and caused by 'excessive romanticism' (p. 206). Perhaps the most astonishing of texts published here – astonishing in that it so clearly marks a huge shift in Caillois thoughts on power and revolution – is 'Patagonia,' first published in the review *Renaissance*, 1943. Written after his journey down the Argentine coastline and back up along the Chilean shore, this essay is a meditation upon the bleak coastline of Patagonia and how it represents for him the enormous efforts of the past to build a civilisation in the face of natural obstacles – both those of the external environment and the internal obstacles in mans' own nature. The essay reads as the work of a man humbled, disgusted at his previous destructive urges and turned to contemplate the moral value of even the smallest of collective efforts. He contemplates the most basic of tasks carried out by the first settlers in the New World and their transposition of traditional



knowledge: 'the precepts for harnessing animals and pruning fruit trees, for lace patterns and embroidery stitches; the recipes for distilling and bottling spirits; advice on how to serve them, and on the proper way to drink them ...' (p. 247). Caillois thus marvels at the efforts of rediscovering 'every rule of a secret, delicate syntax that was never formulated,' and the careful, constructive values that generate community, build civilisations, and nurture the 'invisible treasures' that constitute the soul of man. This essay, Frank notes, marks Caillois' new respect for mans' achievements and his rejection of his previous insistence on the powerful potential of harnessing mans' violent and vertiginous natural instincts. Poignantly inspired by a wind-swept Patagonian beach strewn with the carcasses of animals, 'the absence of man,' Frank writes, 'drew Caillois away from nature' (p. 242). Not entirely, though, and the last essay in *The Edge of Surrealism*, 'The Natural Fantastic,' reveals how Caillois' thought went full-circle, and how he returned to meditations upon mans' part within nature in the development of, what he called, his 'materialist mysticism' (p. 2).

This is a truly important book for students of surrealism, which covers a significant range of Caillois' writings and provides the reader with a good grounding from which to explore further Caillois' thought. In its insightful presentation of the complex and multi-disciplinary aspects of Caillois' thought, Claudine Frank's commentary is invaluable for both students new to Caillois and for the more advanced reader.

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<sup>1</sup> For Caillois' writings in the College, see Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, trans. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> See Thirion's *Revolutionaries without Revolution*, London, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> See Claudine Frank, 'Roger Caillois's Logic of Participation in the 30s: from Le Grand Jeu to the College de Sociologie,' Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See Henri Behar (ed.), *Du Surréalisme au Front populaire. Inquisitions. Facsimilé de la revue augmenté de documents inédits*, Paris, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> In his afterword to *The Necessity of the Mind*, Denis Hollier does discuss Caillois' theories as possibly having certain personal determinations. Here Caillois is presented as a man struggling with the temptations of the imagination and the dissolution of self, who shores up his ego with scientific defences. *The Necessity of the Mind*, trans. Michael Syrotinski. Venice, CA, 1990, 153-161. Frank has translated this text as *Necessity of Mind*.

