

***Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle*, by Robert McNab, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, 266 pp, 40 b/w and 80 colour ill., £25.00, ISBN 0300-10431-6 (hardback)**

What the explorer might have to say, André Breton argued in his 1924 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,' is unfairly regarded as more important and more 'real' than what the poet has to say.¹ If our human instinct is to require 'proof' that certain things happened, Breton proposed that the banality of the explorer's 'trophies' be surpassed by other kinds of evidence, like the creation of objects glimpsed in dreams. Certain 'anti-trophies' of exploration made their way into the surrealist orbit, like the rose taken by that well-travelled anti-traveller Raymond Roussel from the 'tomb' of Pierre Loti's (fictional) heroine Aziyadé in Constantinople and later found at a flea market by Jacques Hérold. The reality and authenticity of travel, its coordinates mapped out and debased by mass tourism, was to be questioned and subverted by surrealist writers and artists, seeking to undermine both the blithe cultural appropriation of the tourist, and the blustering macho rhetoric of the adventurer-hero. In this way, surrealism could also probe travel's colonial underbelly, the inevitable framework for the exploration of unfamiliar, foreign places. If Breton's stance favoured the 'internal voyage,' other surrealists submitted themselves to the ambivalences of escape and exploration in the external world, including Paul Eluard, whose 1924 round-the-world trip, an early instance of surrealist travel, forms the central subject of Robert McNab's book *Ghost Ships*.

Breton dated his 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,' published in the winter 1924 issue of *Commerce*, to September of that year. The end of that month saw Eluard's return to Paris after a significant absence, having spent almost seven months travelling in Asia and the Pacific with little or no contact with his friends in France. Surrealist activities during this period had been gathering pace, culminating in the opening of the *Bureau de recherches surréalistes* in October and the launch of its organ *La Révolution surréaliste* in December. Eluard's journey, which saw him vanishing suddenly from Paris one day in March 1924 in the midst of his unhappy marriage to Gala and close friendship with her then lover, Max Ernst, both of whom later caught up with him in Saigon, was brushed aside by him and subsequently neglected by surrealist historians. McNab's book, however, takes this forgotten episode as its central focus, and uses it to raise important questions about



surrealist attitudes towards travel, particularly when this brought them into contact with the realities of French colonial rule. In this way, the book exposes a pressing concern at the heart of surrealism's engagement with the 'outside world,' where its claims for the imaginative transformation of reality through 'surrealist revolution' could be severely tested and subjected to scrutiny.

'Dear Father, I've had enough,' Eluard wrote in March 1924. 'I'm going travelling. Take back the business you've set up for me.'² This letter, quoted by McNab, sets up the co-ordinates of certain surrealist ideas in the early 1920s: the desire to 'leave everything,' as Breton's famous exhortation had it, and the rejection of bourgeois commerce and of patriarchal authority.³ McNab links Eluard's gesture of refusal and departure to the strong surrealist interest in suicide in this period, the ultimate form of disappearance and rejection of 'civilised' values. Eluard's sudden departure from Paris could not help but be placed under the sign of other famous disappearing acts which fascinated the surrealists, like that of Arthur Rimbaud, famously leaving behind his poetic 'career' in order to run guns in Ethiopia, as legend has it (or indeed Arthur Cravan, a crucial dada precedent that McNab does not mention). In fact, these models were prefigured in Eluard's interaction with his father, who worked as a town planner laying out suburban streets that he let his son name, inadvertently giving rise to the 'rue Arthur Rimbaud' and the 'rue Jacques Vaché,' amongst others.⁴ Rimbaud, seen in the 1920s through the lens of Victor Segalen's retracing of his journey to Djibouti, was joined by a series of other seminal writer- and artist-travellers in the avant-garde imagination, whose surrealist reception and impact McNab traces adroitly: Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, Pierre Loti, Joseph Conrad and Paul Gauguin. Closer to home, Blaise Cendrars and Robert Desnos provided Eluard and others with exciting and mysterious images of modern international travel. The telescoping of time through the jump-cuts of travel impressions seemed appropriate to surrealism's layering of memory and experience: 'I know all of the timetables,' wrote Cendrars, while Louis Aragon described Desnos as having 'strange ships in every fold of his brain.'⁵

Eluard's voyage, however, was not fast but slow, dependent on a series of decommissioned warships turned passenger liners, like the *SS Antinous*, formerly *SMS Wolf*. The irony of the resonances between this fallout from WW1 and the relationship between Eluard and Ernst, their friendship cemented in the knowledge that they had fought against one another during the war, is not lost in



McNab's book. Eluard, however, remained famously reticent about his trip, forcing Desnos at one point to intuit via clairvoyance his whereabouts (Desnos made an educated guess at the New Hebrides and was not far wrong).⁶ Upon his return he let little slip, throwing himself back into surrealist activities as if nothing had happened. Not for a surrealist the banality of 'telling me about your trip,' the run-of-the-mill souvenir or the casual smiling snapshot (even the passport photograph was diverted from its authoritative and bureaucratic ends in the surrealists' hands). Two photographs of Eluard and Gala together, and Ernst alone in Saigon, posed beside the same piece of Khmer statuary, show their serious faces, thrown into relief by the presence in one of them of their smiling Cambodian guide.⁷ McNab's task in this book is to uncover through ingenious detective work at least some of the secrets of what Eluard had dismissed as his 'stupid trip,' pinpointing in passenger lists and ships' logbooks the movements of his alias Eugène Grindel through the ports of Asia and the Pacific, and of Ernst and Gala in his wake.

The evidence that McNab has to work with is teasingly scant. Lloyd's Register of Shipping serves as an unlikely but intriguing source for a work of art history, furnishing dates and times of journeys and names of passengers, but for the experiences of either Eluard or Ernst in New Guinea or Indonesia, among other locations, McNab has to rely on accounts such as Segalen's diary to provide a suggestive equivalent. In other cases, the impact of Eluard's trip in particular is extrapolated from his later writings and activities: McNab points out that the trajectory of his journey took him close to a whole series of colonial black spots, including the notorious colonial prison on the island of Poulo Condore in the South China Sea, famous for its harsh conditions and high death rate.⁸ While he may not have commented directly on this place, or indeed have even visited it at all, it certainly came to feature in surrealist condemnations of colonialism, particularly in the pages of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. Another location that Eluard passed through and held his attention, New Mecklenberg (now New Ireland in Melanesia), had been the site of a famous episode of French colonial exploitation and deception, resulting in the 'disappearance' of more than three hundred settlers.⁹ The sober realities of the exotic elsewhere inevitably haunted Eluard's journey and coloured his subsequent anti-colonial writings, giving him, in McNab's words, 'a truly modern, global view of oppression.'¹⁰ But this was arguably always held in tension with the surrealist 'inner experience,' the



artist and poet 'ceaselessly exploring this mysterious domain of the silent caves of the heart,' as Eluard put it in his evocative prose piece 'Savage Art' of 1929.¹¹

The ambivalences of surrealism's anti-colonial stances were often brought into focus in their attitudes towards non-western artefacts, seen as rather indeterminate magical things. The efforts of disciplines like ethnography to shed light on the colonial booty collected and shipped back to Europe was regarded with suspicion by surrealists, but this did not prevent Breton and Eluard in particular from assembling collections of Oceanic, African and Aztec art (and from selling these off at a carefully-timed moment during the 1931 Paris Colonial Exhibition, spectacle-driven scourge of the protesting surrealists). Eluard, Ernst and Gala almost crossed paths in Indochina with André and Clara Malraux, whose attempts to smuggle carvings from Angkor Wat back to France resulted in his imprisonment and her desperate rallying of the surrealists around Breton to their cause. Breton did indeed defend Malraux's actions in the French press, apparently distinguishing between the acceptable needs of a writer's 'inspiration,' and the shame of colonialist appropriation.¹² It is probably too easy to judge the seemingly naive surrealist delight in non-western 'art' from our vantage point today, just as it would be easy to condemn their attraction to the 'exotic,' but McNab's book tackles these contradictions with care, as part of a complex and period-specific worldview. Michel Leiris, the former surrealist turned ethnographer whom McNab does not treat in any detail, would address more explicitly than figures like Breton and Eluard the contradictions of colonial collecting in his account of the 1931-33 Dakar-Djibouti expedition, and dramatise with striking frankness the problems of the western traveller's 'exotic' seduction versus the need for objective ethnographic analysis and observation.¹³

If Eluard's 1924 travels opened his eyes to colonialism's dark side, as well as heightening his taste for a necessarily imaginary 'otherness,' the impact of a similar trip on Ernst is more ambiguous. McNab claims in the note that opens his book that while his reconstruction of Eluard's journey rests on shaky ground, his discussion of Ernst draws upon the more solid 'concrete evidence' of his paintings.¹⁴ However, the nature of this 'evidence' surely remains questionable. Ernst's own impressions and experiences of Indochina and the Pacific seem scarcely more penetrable than Eluard's. While we know that Ernst read widely, including anthropological texts, his paintings in fact give little of this away, referring as much to art historical precedents (McNab points indeed to the impact of Angkor Wat upon



Gustave Moreau's work) and to layers of elliptical psycho-sexual subject matter as to actual locations seen and experienced. Ernst travelled close to the site of Angkor Wat in Cambodia; that much is verifiable from the journeys McNab is able to trace. According to Patrick Waldberg, he mentioned having seen 'Khmer ruins' and, as McNab argues, it is unlikely that these were anything but Angkor Wat.¹⁵ The forms and textures of the temple then seem to recur in a whole series of paintings by Ernst from the 1920s onwards, although often veiled or overlaid with other references. One of the central questions that McNab's discussion of Ernst's work raises haunts much enquiry into modernist 'sources' and inspirations. Does it really matter, we may ask, whether Ernst actually saw Angkor Wat? Did he really have to be there in person to be able to evoke it again and again in subsequent works, when, of course, reproductions in books of the period would equally have provided him with the 'source' he needed? Indeed, it has become commonplace to argue that photographic reproductions provide artists with 'better' source materials than their real-life three-dimensional subjects, by heightening contrasts of light, throwing textures into relief and flattening forms into discrete shapes for ease of composition. What might it mean, then, not only to 'see the sites,' but to touch, smell and hear them? Even these phenomenologically-charged sensations can arguably be constructed, informed in advance by the traveller's notions of 'the exotic,' 'the jungle,' or 'the East,' for example.

Such questions, of course, are highly pertinent to the surrealist enterprise, where imaginative projection was posited, in a largely experimental and tentative way, as a possibility competing with the real. Hence the production of 'dream-objects,' and the exploration of other ephemeral, fleeting and unrealisable things. The paradox that McNab's book raises points to this deliberately contradictory surrealist project: the detective-like search for the 'truth' of Eluard and Ernst's movements stands at odds with a problematisation precisely of such 'evidence.' That does not mean to say that as good empiricist art historians we should not seek more accurate knowledge about such events. Equally, however, we need to beware the lure of historical re-enactment and recreation, especially in relation to the production of art works. The surrealists themselves were well aware of this in their suspicions towards cod-historical narrative, as witness the elaborate games played by the narrator 'Breton' in *Nadja* of 1928 in providing a fictionalised 'true' account of surrealist activities, accompanied by photographic 'documentation.' The problems of reconstruction also came to the fore in the 1931 Colonial Exhibition so hated by the surrealists, particularly in the replica of Angkor Wat that proudly



graced the Bois de Vincennes. Strangely, though, as McNab points out, Eluard and Ernst appeared indifferent to this piece of colonial theatre and its relationship to a 'real' spectacle that they both had probably witnessed, and we can only guess at their reaction to it. Here again, we suspect that a ruin that had become an over-hyped mainstay of many a tourist trail would hold little interest. Only through a more nuanced and oblique approach could travel and exploration retain their significance for surrealism: inspiring neither escapism nor explicit political commentary but an uneasy mixture of both. The 'ghost ships' of McNab's title themselves reflect this shadowy understanding. If Breton famously asked in *Nadja*, 'Who am I?,' pointing to surrealism's central interweaving of experience and the self, the answer to this question might be transformed accordingly in the light of McNab's book: it all depends *where* I haunt.

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¹ Breton, 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality' (1924), in *Break of Day*, trans. Mark Polizzotti and Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln, 1999, 16.

² McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 53. The letter was originally reproduced in Robert D. Valette, *Eluard, Livre d'identité*, Paris, 1967, 49.

³ Breton, 'Lâchez tout,' *Littérature* 2, April 1922.

⁴ Both of these streets are in Saint Denis.

⁵ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 15 and 107.

⁶ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 106. Eluard never actually reached the New Hebrides, getting as far as New Ireland, 70.

⁷ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 87.

⁸ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 112-116.

⁹ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 70.

¹⁰ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 115.

¹¹ Eluard, 'Savage Art' (1929), in Flam and Deutch (eds), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003, 209.

¹² McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 102 and Breton, 'Pour André Malraux,' *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 16 August 1924.

¹³ See my forthcoming book, *Art and the Ethnographic Encounter: The Life of Objects, Paris c.1925-1935*, Manchester, 2006.

¹⁴ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, viii.

¹⁵ McNab, *Ghost Ships*, 123, and Waldberg, *Max Ernst*, Paris, 1958, 185.

