

OF SÉANCE AND SURREALISM,
POETRY AND CRISIS

Christopher Hartney

When asked by a bureaucrat what purpose poetry served a nation, A. D. Hope quipped that it justifies its existence. This might seem an exuberant claim, but in conservative times it is sometimes hard to discern the value to society of the poetic quest.¹ This paper is an examination of that period between the Great War and the onset of the Great Depression when poetry became a centre of certainty in the lives of those lost in the maelstrom of the times. It may be a broad comparison to draw, but I have chosen to look at Vietnam and its colonial master of the period, France. It is in the twenties that these two nations became the focal point for two highly influential social movements that sought to revivify not just national existence but the human spirit. In France this revitalisation was effected via the movement known as surrealism. Clearly it was a secular movement, and yet its poetic quest had much in common with religious developments bursting onto the scene in Vietnam at the same time; in particular a new religious movement called Caodaism.

The twenties were crucible years; after the Great War, many assumptions about life and civilisation had to be rethought. In France, Surrealism would create a vital social space within which this rethinking could take place. Artistically, Surrealism's primary source of influence was Dada, but Surrealists also couched the movement's heritage

¹ For example, a current indication of the place of poetry in Australia, Rosanna McGlone-Healy writes in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29-30 September 2001 (Spectrum 6) 'The support for literature is small, and the place of poetry in the national psyche is negligible.'

as coming from the growing scientific tradition of psychoanalysis. This is especially the case when we note the *ex cathedra* ruminations of the movement's 'pope', André Breton. Freud is regularly cited by Breton as the man who opened the door into the depths of the mind, an opening Breton hoped would lead to a new form of art.² This was the start of the surrealist method, which grounded itself in science and yet held at the core of its manifesto a subversion of that rationality. One could say that although it was not a religious pursuit in itself, the Surrealist movement was at least a way of reconsidering the very nature of thought in a religious way.³

The search for the marvellous and hallucinatory, religious in the way it seeks to create a new conception of life itself, is strongly emphasised by the other dimension of surrealism's heritage. The surrealist pursuit was very clearly connected to spiritualism. Particularly to the phenomenon of conducting 'voices' as the term *pensée parlée* suggests. The surrealists, despite clear links back to such a tradition, downplay the possible connections with a spiritual tradition. David Gascoyne includes a fuller account of surrealism's origins in an article by Breton entitled 'Enter the Mediums.'

A fortnight ago, on his return from holiday, René Crevel told us of the beginning he had undergone at the hands of a certain Madame D... This person, having distinguished particular mediumistic qualities in him, had instructed him in the means of developing them, and so it was, he told us that under the conditions requisite for these kind of phenomena... he was able to fall rapidly asleep to pour out words

² André Breton: *Manifestes Du Surrealisme*, Paris, n/d, chez Jean-Jacques Pauvert, pp.36-37.

³ Maurice Nadeau: *Histoire du Surrealisme*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1964. p. 43.

organised into a more or less coherent speech, to which only the awakening put an end.⁴

Soon many artists started experimenting with trace experiences to produce both visual art and poetry:

...an epidemic of trances broke out amongst the surrealists... There were some seven or eight who now lived only for those moments of oblivion when, with the lights out, they spoke without consciousness, like drowned men in the open air.⁵

It was a free-fall in thought trying to connect with something profound, not as Caodaist *séance* would have it, in the spiritual realm, but deep within the self; a profounder self that had been revealed by Freud and battered and traumatised by war, death and confusion. In this way Surrealism certainly was a cultural revolution: pushing boundaries and doing so to find a new order, a new certainty. Roger Shattuck makes this clear when he says that the surrealists were striving for a

mental vantage-point (point de l'esprit) from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, will no longer be perceived as contradictory.⁶

This *point de l'esprit* is one of many examples that illustrates the surrealists search for new certainty and a new unity. As Caws puts it, a seeking of that

...pointe sublime 'where the yes and the no meet' and are united... visible only to those in an 'état d'attente' a constant state of readiness. Poetry is at once the

⁴ Quoted in David Gascoyne: *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, San Francisco, City Light Books, p.47.

⁵ Louis Aragon: 'Une vague de rêves' in *Commerce*, Autumn ed, 1924, p.90.

⁶ Roger Shattuck in 'Introduction' in Nadeau, op cit, p.22.

open landscape where the ‘point sublime’ is located and the quality which best described the surrealists’ uncompromising attitude (‘le comportement lyrique’). So that one can, in the surrealist universe, manifest poetic behaviour in its fullest sense while never writing a line, or commit the most serious crimes against poetry while writing verses of an apparently ‘surrealist’ nature...⁷.

This amelioration of extremes, which is a regular theme in writings at this time is very *Ch’an* Buddhist in tone: suggesting that high and low, the real and the imaginary and even the division between life and death itself should not be seen as opposites but reconciled – this was also a central aim in the spiritualist pursuit. With the recent dead of Europe’s battlefields still strong in the collective mind, the trend to spiritualism and *séance* became ever more popular. This is not surprising when we consider Western Spiritualism’s early development took place in the aftermath of another war; the Civil War of America. It was during the 1840s that the Fox sisters of up-state New York found that they could communicate messages through mysterious knockings that seemed to emanate from the spirit world and answer questions about those long dead.⁸ The sisters began a trend that led to the popularising of mediumship and spiritualism. Soon, a mass movement was attempting to investigate all possible avenues of contact between world and afterworld, to breach the divide between heaven and earth, a divide that even the Surrealist sought to reconcile, although in a more metaphorical manner.

⁷ Mary Ann Caws: *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism*, Princeton University Press Princeton, New Jersey, 1970, p.18.

⁸ For a detailed account of the development of the Spiritualist movement see Ruth Brandon: *The Spiritualists*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983. She reveals that the Fox sisters eventually admitted that the knocking came from unusual joints in their toes, but by that stage the spiritualist craze was unstoppable.

Somewhere beyond the Fox sisters and Freud, the writers of Surrealist poetry were looking for a truth in the spontaneity of their work:

Both Dada and Surrealism lay heavy stress on the parallel notion of spontaneity (automatism, chance revelations of language and experience, refusal of the logical straightjacket etc) and a moral commitment (revolt against bourgeois attitudes and literary modes).⁹

Thus, the main output of early surrealism remained poetic in its nature. It was a poetry created in a manner that Caodaists would consider familiar with their knowledge of trance-like writing.¹⁰ The method of relaxing into a state that produces a writing that is beyond (perhaps we should say 'below') the social face of the writer is common to both surrealism and *séance*. Using this 'new way of thinking,' which Breton claimed it was, poets such as Paul Eluard could produce verse that struck hard with the contradictions of its imagery, but was no less wondrous for that. The mediums of Caodaism wrote verse in a similar way. While the surrealists explained their poetry in very secular terms, the Caodaists looked upon their poetry as being sent from other worlds.

In Vietnam, the immediacy of the Great War was restricted mainly to the increasingly appalling economic conditions that the country found itself sliding into after decades of exploitation by its war-torn colonial master. The effects of French occupation and the crushing together of two worldviews (the Sino-Vietnamese and the Western) began ripping the minds of the Vietnamese asunder. I stress in my forthcoming thesis¹¹ that Caodaism in many ways helped

⁹ Mary Ann Caws, *op cit*, p.6.

¹⁰ André Breton, *op cit*, pp.44-45.

¹¹ Christopher Hartney: *A Strange Peace, Caodaism and Sydney*, PhD Dissertation, Forthcoming, University of Sydney, 2002.

address what was no less than a ‘crisis in consciousness’, one which was most acute in the minds of those Vietnamese who lived in their traditional world and yet worked and studied Western ideas and were employed by the French.¹² The *séances* of Caodaism and the surrealist movement in Paris were partly solutions to these crises: that is, crises driven by a need to find somewhere new to (mentally) stand; a *point de l’esprit*.

Caodaism is a religion that was ‘made manifest’ in Vietnam during 1925 and 1926, a year or so after the publication of Surrealism’s *First Manifesto*. It brings the three great traditions of China – the Ru (Confucian) Tradition, Buddhism and Daoism – into synthesis, while being inclusive of Western traditions and culture, predominantly French culture. France remained the colonial master of Vietnam from the mid-1800s through to the 1950s. Although an independent nation for nearly a thousand years before colonisation, Vietnam was so acclimatised to Chinese ideals, philosophy and government and absorbed Chinese learning so completely that its origins became irrelevant.¹³ Vietnam was the only nation within the Chinese sphere of influence that was completely colonised by a Western power. It was the one nation where (far) East and West really did meet. They were forced to.

Woodside, Jamieson and Marr have made exhaustive accounts of how, in the 1920s in Vietnam everything was up for discussion: language, education, politics, and religion.¹⁴ As some Vietnamese promoted Chinese tracts on the foundation of the Chinese republic, others left for study

¹² Few French ever bothered to learn Vietnamese.

¹³ Alexander Woodside: *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, Harvard, Council on East Asian Studies, 1988, p.21.

¹⁴ Alexander B Woodside: *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976; David G. Marr: *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism 1885-1925*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1971. Neil L Jamieson: *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

in Japan, while still others promoted education systems that would see the fall of the Vietnamese language, to be replaced by French. School textbooks explained European concepts of selfhood and gave the terms in French and in Romanised Vietnamese. The Gia Long law code – adapted from Ming law codes in China – which recognised the responsibilities of the family to the government, were now replaced by the *Code Napoleon* in which each citizen was responsible for his or her own actions. The French, particularly in the south of Vietnam, encouraged urbanisation and the extended family unit began to disintegrate. With all of these introduced and hybrid colonial institutions, the Vietnamese, particularly in the south where French intervention was most direct, were desperate to develop their own institutions to deal with this crisis. Political avenues for such development were tightly controlled, religious avenues less so.

The practices of *Hau Bong* or spirit mediums taken by trance in a shamanic fashion pervaded Vietnam, as they did China and Korea, for millennia. Moreover, writing itself holds a very supernatural place in East Asian culture. The summoning of the written word from heaven by various means is central to the religious practice of the region. When the French invaded, bringing with them new European trends for *séance* and spiritism, these indigenous mediumistic traditions connected with and reinforced the European trends. In fact, these Eastern and Western traditions for communicating with the spirit world would seem the best ground upon which to effect a heavenly reconciliation between East and West. Caodaists see spiritism as a new religious technology where prophets and their culture-bound messages are circumvented and heaven speaks direct to humanity. Caodaism was to be the start of a new era of religiousness that would see the repair of a bifurcated cosmos.

Hanegraaff says that, in the history of the New Age in the West, the only commonality between the many types of channelling and trance and spiritual automatic writing is ‘the fact that people receive information – messages – which they interpret as coming from a source other than their own normal consciousness.’¹⁵ Group *séance*, a phenomena Hanegraaff does not cover in his study, was established by Caodaists so that no single individual could be seen to influence the outcome of the *séance*. It is even said that the person putting the questions to heaven and those receiving the messages are kept apart from each other. Unfortunately, no significant research has been done to unveil the various mental states Caodaists invoked in *séance*. This is primarily due to the fact that *séance* became a less central part of the operation of the faith during the decades before the communist-led reunification of the nation in 1975. Thereafter, communist authorities banned *séance*. Even amongst Caodaists there would be some uncertainty as to the mental preparedness required of those receiving divine messages as high-level members of the Caodaist hierarchy who operated *séance* have since passed away. There are many hints, however, both in the messages themselves and in Vietnamese religious history that illustrate what happened.

The *séance* techniques of Caodaism come from a number of influences, the first and most influential being the lifetime work of Ngo Minh Chieu [1878-1932]. With a mastery of French, this administrator was able to read the works of French mediums Kardec and Flammarion possibly as early as 1902.¹⁶ His after-work activities included attendance upon the spirit voices summoned by spirit mediums in the Daoist-Shamanistic tradition. Sometimes these trance sessions were conducted by

¹⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Leiden, E.J.Brill and Co, 1996, p.24.

¹⁶ Sergei Blagov: *The Cao Dai, A New Religious Movement*, Moscow, 1999, p.7.

women, sometimes by young children prized for their spiritual innocence. Mediums would reveal the voices of spirits, or the *Cau Co* or 'spirit pen' would be raised to heaven and from its tip, the ink would reveal heaven's will, often in the form of elaborately drawn mystical talismans. During these communications, Ngo Minh Chieu was put in contact with traditional Chinese deities including the great red-face demon slayer Guan di Gong. In time, these spirits introduced him to an extremely authoritative voice, one which revealed itself through the mystical pseudonym *Cao Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma-Ha-Tat*.¹⁷ In 1924, French authorities posted the administrator back to Saigon and it was here that he collected more disciples and continued to develop his worship of *Duc Cao Dai*.

A slightly younger generation of the French-speaking administrative class also turned towards spiritism. They are referred to most often as the *Pho Loan* group. This group included the future *Ho Phap*, (or guardian of the religious laws) and acting pope Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959). The group came together in 1925 at a time when many French-language newspapers in Saigon were carrying news of European spiritism. The *Pho Loan* group were not using ancient Chinese methods of mediumship but European and American methods of spirit communication, in particular table-tipping where members of a *séance* place their hands on a table with a shortened leg and Morse-code style message is tapped out. Following a similar pattern to Ngo Minh Chieu, the members of the *Pho Loan* were led, after some false starts, to the familiar voice of a colleague's deceased father, and then eventually to a supremely profound philosophical voice who revealed himself under the pseudonym A, A, A (...being the first three vowels of the Romanised Vietnamese alphabet).¹⁸ Thus as in many

¹⁷ 'L'immortal Cao Dai, grand Bhodisattva et Grand Sauver.'

¹⁸ It is a pattern I have found in a number of other accounts of 'heavenly communication' see in particular the story of Mrs. Marian Keech in

accounts of spiritualist *séance* ‘...unclarity (sic) and incoherence were characteristic of this first messages.’¹⁹ With practice, the nascent Caodaists became much better at transcribing heaven’s will. The voices of close dead relatives start the medium’s journey and powerful God-like voices end it. Pseudonyms as can be seen also serve as an important device.

Along the way, voices instructed the *Pho Loan* group in the use of the *corbeille à bec*, a very communal process of receiving messages, and it seems one less inclined to individual manipulation. This device, a basket held by several mediums and attached to a pen that writes messages. It became the standard instrument of Caodaist *séance* writings.

Utilising these various tools, and combining various mediumistic approaches, there are a number of levels at which *séance* is conducted in the Caodaist faith. At a very unofficial level many esoterically interested adepts pick up their pen to see if some sort of message can be conducted without the will of that individual interfering in the process. These local attempts to conduct messages are very similar to the automatic writing of the surrealists, but within the religion they carry little import. If an adept in the main branch of Caodaism begins to show that he or she has an aptitude for conducting messages, then there is a chance that they will be inducted into the *Hiep Thien Dai*. This is the judicial hierarchy of the religion which also functions also as a college of mediums. From here the adept continues to develop their skills at conducting *séance*. Eventually they can become part of the core of adepts who are selected to conduct messages officially from the *Cung Dao*. This is the specially sanctified area in front of the

Festinger, Leon, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter: *When Prophecy Fails*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1956.

¹⁹ Blagov, op cit., p.8.

main altar of the Great Divine Temple. Only messages received here are deemed worthy of canonisation.

After ritually cleaning a space and making offerings, the *corbeille à bec* is carried in and a table set in this area before the altar. The pen at the end of the basket is positioned over the table. At least two mediums will hold the basket and others will be on hand to read out the writings. Others will write down what is being read out and this becomes the message. Overall the poetic pursuit is similar to the surrealist aims of the reconciliation of extremes. Note the change in tone from the first and last stanzas of the following message.

L'esprit est prompt mais le corps est léger
 Le monde ressemble à un passager
 Qui s'égare seul dans un désert aride,
 Marche vers la mort d'un pas rapid...

Les races fraternisent, le monde est rénové
 Par un idéal plus noble et plus enviable.
 La paix mondiale sera poinçonnée
 Par le sceau de DIEU éternellement durable.²⁰

These verses are from a long poem revealed through *séance* on July 7, 1928. The passage, reportedly a quote from Christ in the afterlife, is delivered by Caodaism's spiritual guardian, Li Po. Li Po was a Chinese Tang Dynasty poet. He mostly delivers his verse in Vietnamese, but here he is 'passing' on a verse in French. The clear message of the poem is the rebirth of the world into an international fraternity under God.

²⁰ Message Received: Saint-Siège de Tayninh, le 7 Juillet 1928 (19^e jour du 5^e mois l'année Mau-Thin) by Thai Bach [the Vietnamese names for Li Po] in *Les Messages Spirites e la troisième amnestie de Dieu en Orient*, Tai Xuat Ban, Hoa Thinh Don, 1999, p.45.

There was a dramatic increase in those performing *séance* under the banner of Caodaism during the first years of the faith. Le Van Trung, the first acting pope, organised *séances* throughout the countryside. These spiritual performances moving from village to village and calling on peasants to join the faith, helped in the miraculously quick rise of the new faith (500,000 in the first four years say the more conservative sources).²¹ This quick rise also led to many splits from the main branch. Many breakaway leaders validated their departure through their own *séances*. It became clear that *séance* was both the most successful recruitment tool and also the greatest challenge to Tay Ninh (i.e., main-branch) legitimacy. During the nineteen-thirties, the Tay Ninh Caodaists declared that all *séance* outside the temple would be in some way or another corrupted. There was even one famous incident when a breakaway group brought their *corbeille à bec* to the main temple in Tay Ninh and a *séance* 'showdown' took place. Amidst these high dramas what made many of the Tay Ninh messages valid however, was not only the way in which the messages were received, but how they themselves were structured. Thus their appearance as poetry was the most important feature of their authority and validity.

Poetry is often understood as a signifier of elevated, considered and more intense language. Religious literary and scriptural developments often rely on the power of poetry to create feelings of sacredness. For example, in Islam *saja* is a mode of rhetoric where rhyme if not metre is central. It is... usual practise amongst the Muslims to start a *kutba* (oration) or a book with such words as are both appropriate and invocative of a sense of mystery, grandure and transcendence, and it could all be aptly expressed through words that rhyme and are bound by metre.²²

²¹ Victor Oliver: *Caodai Spiritism*, Leiden, E.J.Brill, 1976, p.60.

²² Sayyid Hasan Askari: *Reflection of the Awakened*, London, Zahra Trust, 1983, p.6.

Poetry serves this function in Caodaism, but it is this elevated sense of language that we see in *saja* that then combines with a particular ‘voice.’ The voice that seals the veracity of a message. As the verse is considered in relation to its spiritual source, it is little wonder that several significant poets are canonised by Caodaists as the transmitters of heavenly messages. Foremost amongst these heavenly poets is Li Po who is recognised as the spiritual pope [i.e. heavenly guardian] of the religion. Other poets such as Trang Trinh [a famous Vietnamese poet-patriot] and Victor Hugo also take their place in this saintly/poetic canon.

The primary indication of authenticity is a particular poetic metre and, in the case of Li Po, the messages he ‘passes’ to the faith conform to a particular style. His most obvious is that of the *that ngon/bat cu* style which is seven syllables set over eight lines. Moreover, the Chinese or Vietnamese ideograms must be chosen so that the tones of those syllables alternate between *trac* [high] tone words and *binh* [low] tone words. Most commonly, the poetic style of the Vietnamese language messages replicate the *tho duong* style which was popular during the Tang. Although Li Po himself had a reputation for sublimely subverting many of the poetic conventions of this period, the messages delivered by him do in fact fit these metres and make it highly unlikely that they could be composed *ad lib* during the *séance* by one or other official conducting the *séance*. In group *séance* it is reasonably unlikely that a pre-arranged poem is slipped into the group, so further investigations in this area need to be made. This is only likely upon the re-establishment of official *séance* in Tay Ninh. For that to happen, a significant change in Vietnamese political attitudes must take place. Nevertheless there are some preliminary indications of how the verses are arrived at.

The issue of authenticity is carried over into poems received through *séance* in the French language. For brevity's sake I will address these poems, rather than examine the more extensive set of Vietnamese verses. Among those spirits who deliver messages; one voice remains outstanding in both style and content. Graham Robb in his biography on Hugo, mentions Caodaism at the end of his work,

The most important of these spirits was called Nguyet-Tam-Chon-Nhon [i.e. Hugo], though he sometimes gave his name as 'Symbole'. He communicated in alexandrines and described a strange East-West blend of karma, Christian morality, metempsychosis and vegetarianism. The alexandrines were shaky and imperfectly rhymed but had an unmistakable tone – chatty and apocalyptic.²³

Hugo was read widely by many of the mediums as part of their French language education. Hugo was a very powerful force both artistically and socially. During his self-imposed exile from France during the Second Republic he developed a reputation as a spiritualist. Clearly, Caodaists would agree, such a talented compassionate and spiritual soul must have a high rank in heaven. Thus he is seen by Caodaists as their heavenly ambassador to the non-Vietnamese world. In the responses he makes we see a number of influences. To a question about the 'genesis of the Christians', Hugo replied with a very pseudo-chemical reply.²⁴ That text became a central part of the Caodaist Scriptural canon, and it is the verse, set in classic French metres that confirm this information as being passed on by the soul who was, in one reincarnation, the *immortel* of France.

²³ Graham Robb: *Victor Hugo*, London, Picador, 1997, p.540.

²⁴ Message received '21 au 22 Avril 1930' in *Les Messages Spirités*, op cit., p.54.

In such a comparison as this we must recognise that there are some startling differences between these two contemporary movements. The new Freudian tradition that fed the surrealist movement strongly connected it to a scientific heritage that allowed surrealists to sidestep the debt their movement owed to the spiritualist movement. In Vietnam, however, age-old attitudes to shamanism, spirit conduction and the pervading attitudes to the spirituality of writing itself, linked much more easily with the Western spiritualist tradition. Inside these two movements there was an extraordinary need for, and use of, poetry – so much so that in both cases it served as a centre of meaning in a highly agitated period of social crisis. Both surrealists and Caodaists were trying to open their minds to a writing that came from beyond usual paths of composition. During this period of crisis, poetry served to ameliorate many of the uncertainties these two nations faced. Occasionally poetry can strike us as a redundant or fringe artistic pursuit, yet in these two cases we see how essential an access to a profound centre of authority, art and spirituality poetry can be.