



A PASSIONATE ATTRACTION for Charles Fourier. TOWARDS A NEW SURREALISM 1942–1969

Fabrice Flahutez

► To cite this version:

Fabrice Flahutez. A PASSIONATE ATTRACTION for Charles Fourier. TOWARDS A NEW SURREALISM 1942–1969. surrealism, ACC Art Books, 2024, 9781788842822. <hal-04630401>

HAL Id: hal-04630401

<https://hal.science/hal-04630401v1>

Submitted on 1 Jul 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - ShareAlike - International License

A PASSIONATE ATTRACTION *for Charles Fourier.* TOWARDS A NEW SURREALISM 1942–1969

Charles Fourier first appeared on André Breton's horizon during the early months of 1942 in New York, at the same time as he was reading Victor Hugo's 'Odes and ballads'.¹ As Patrick Waldberg recalls, it was 'in this unknown city, where he didn't speak the language, [that] a sort of radar led him to the second-hand booksellers stocking French books, or to the second-hand dealers who reminded him of those at the Saint-Ouen flea market. It was in one such shop that he discovered Charles Fourier.'² Although according to Gérard Schaeffer, Breton was moved by the presence of a bouquet of violets placed at the foot of Fourier's statue in Paris early one morning in 1937,³ it should be noted that he made no mention of the philosopher until August 1945, when he decided to write his first explicit and distinctive account of him.⁴

However, he was reading Fourier at a time when the Second World War had plunged the world into terror and the surrealists in exile were becoming aware that humanity had not succeeded in its desire for emancipation, that the positivist myth of humanist progress had failed, that the means of de-alienation had been betrayed by a capitalism whose central belief was profit and

unlimited growth.⁵ In this maelstrom of history, in the shadow of the atomic mirage, the idea was put forward that man should no longer be at the centre of the universe, that it was perhaps never more desirable that he should vacate the central position to which he had been assigned since the Renaissance.

In the spring of 1942, Breton was convinced that Fourier provided a key to elaborating a new myth for the purpose of designing a more liveable future while abandoning the old world born of the industrial age, which was now definitively wrecked by the cataclysm of war.⁶ So the surrealist would carry Fourier with him from the first months of exile to the furthest corners of America as he criss-crossed the deserts of New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada to meet the Indians, a journey during which he divorced Jacqueline Lamba and soon after married Elisa Claro.⁷

It was in June 1942, during the writing of the *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Not*, that the influence

of Fourier's thought begins to become evident: in the acceptance that 'man may not be the centre, the focal point of the universe', that it is necessary to revise 'from top to bottom, without a trace of hypocrisy and without undue delay, the problem of the relations between man and woman' and that in principle 'all triumphant ideas hurtle to their own ruin'.⁸ It was Fourier who offered the theoretical and existential opening that we sense in the third manifesto. An opening full of potentialities that is embodied in the concept of 'absolute deviation' which must be considered against all existing systems. Long having abandoned or moved beyond Marxism, in the light of a history that had shown up all its contradictions and absurdities, Breton saw Fourier as someone with a programme for the future, making a *tabula rasa* of totalising thought, of the grand narratives that had hitherto organised the world. In the face of the failure of values that were thought to be immutable and eternal, Fourier imagines a world where passions are the only true cement for living together. In order to think of this other way, this 'absolute deviation', Fourier 'eschewed all known routes . . . set sail on a virgin ocean and took no heed of the fears of his century'.⁹ This model of the adventurer navigating the vicissitudes of life would act as an emblem for postwar surrealism: 'Let us do the same, let us move forward by absolute deviation.'¹⁰ In the wake of his third manifesto, Breton began writing a work on Fourier, the future guide of surrealism.

Begun in the garden of a small boarding house in Reno, on the borders of Nevada and California, the *Ode to Charles Fourier* was a 'long poem about combat', fed by his reading of the five volumes of the *Œuvres complètes* that

were loaned to him.¹¹ Inspired, Breton felt that aside from the great poet of analogy he had just rediscovered 'never in all of French history has a social doctrine of such revolutionary power and magnitude manifested itself'.¹² He also rehabilitated esoteric texts and Fourierist cosmology, as the *Œuvres complètes* offered him surprising concepts that opened up new perspectives. Fourier was included in the corpus of the second edition of *Anthology of Black Humor* in May 1950, restoring his full range as a poet as well as a philosophical and political writer.¹³

While in no way exhausting the infinite profusion of ideas developed by Fourier over the thousands of pages that have come down to us, we can describe the emancipatory ambition that Breton felt, and which still remains highly relevant in view of the challenges we face in the 21st century. First of all, the individual, according to the utopian Fourier, must find the emulation of life in the passions. Beings come together in small groups and each one is responsible for the wellbeing of the family without submitting to blood ties. In other words, Fourier proposes a system in which beings are linked together by elective affinities. It is a metaphor for living in a small, alternative and open community, whose phalanstery is the concrete outcome of an imaginative socialism. We can also see in it the image of a group of friends united as in the collective that was surrealism itself. But Fourier also thinks in terms of a solidarity economy, of co-operatives where everyone shares the means of production and the fruits of labour. Breton saw a similarity with the non-capitalist functioning of certain Native American cultures that he visited in the summer of 1945. Fourier and the Hopi Indians thus found themselves entwined in a common destiny of a quest for universal harmony, the theoretical and poetic foundations of which were laid down in the *Ode to*

Charles Fourier that he wrote.¹⁴ A certain proto-feminism is also in evidence in the *The Theory of the Four Movements and General Destinies*, with the general thesis that 'social progress and epochal change take place because of women's progress towards freedom; and the decadence of the social order takes place because of the decrease in women's freedom . . . In short, the extension of women's privileges is the general principle of all social progress.'¹⁵ These few examples clearly show what inspired Breton to renew surrealism after 1945, when the fashion was towards existentialism or a purely Marxist vision of society, subject to class struggle etc.¹⁶

That the Fourierist concepts had taken hold was evident in the Exposition internationale du surréalisme in 1947 and was reinforced in the two other exhibitions in Paris in 1959 and 1965: first of all, the Eros exhibition at Daniel Cordier's was a tribute to the utopian, including no less than two unpublished texts in the catalogue concerning love and the new rules that should give women total emancipation. The exegete Simone Debout analysed the spirit of such a conception of human relations in which the liberation of women brings new riches because, in particular: 'To abolish marriage is to annihilate the control of men and the alienation of women, it is certainly not to abolish exchanges, but to favour more flexible ones.'¹⁷ The 1965 exhibition at the Galerie l'Œil was explicitly dedicated to the founder of the Societarian School and set out to link him to a visual history that prefigured May 1968.¹⁸

Finally, as a double tribute, the last

surrealist magazine *L'Archibras*, created in April 1967, paid tribute to Fourier in its title. The first issue opened with a text by Debout entitled 'The permitted earth of Charles Fourier', which included a quotation from the utopian fantasist which claimed that at the time of Harmony a new limb would grow on our bodies, 'powerful and sensitive, like the trunk of the elephant, the archi-arm (*archibras*)'.¹⁹ Contemporaries laughed at this fantastic image; Fourier would have seen that as an admission that they did not know how to invent anything.

The poem of the *Ode*, which so disconcerted critics at the time of its publication in 1947, created an improbable echo of the extreme topicality of Fourier, a difficult thinker who bordered on the absurd. For Breton it was simply the case of a forgotten poet who, way back in the 19th century, had flagged up the inevitable collapse of civilisation because it had never really ascribed a central importance to all the passions of daily life and all the unrealised potentialities.²⁰

Fabrice Flahutez

✉

Professor of art history, Jean Monnet University, Saint-Étienne. Member of the Institut Universitaire de France

1 Breton bought Victor Hugo's *Odes et ballades* (Paris: Charpentier, 1841) at Brentano's in New York. Does this explain the ode as Fourier's chosen literary genre?

2 Patrick Waldberg, *Yves Tanguy* (Brussels: André De Rache, 1977), 223.

3 André Breton relates this event in *Ode à Charles Fourier*. See Gérard Schaeffer, 'Un petit matin de 1937', in *André Breton*, ed. Marc Eigeldinger (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1970), 241–78.

4 The *Œuvres complètes* were nowhere to be found, many other publications had been expurgated by his disciples, notably the *Nouveau Monde amoureux ou les rêveries cosmogoniques*. See Charles Fourier, *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales* followed by *Nouveau Monde amoureux*, ed. Simone Debout-Oleszkiewics (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998), 11.

5 André Breton, who did not own the volumes himself, bought his edition of the *Œuvres complètes (1846–1848)* in Paris, regretting not having bought the volumes in New York. 'I am not consoled by the fact that I did not acquire in New York the works of Charles Fourier which were on sale at M. Hoog, bookseller . . . my enthusiasm for Fourier is only growing. Would you, my dear Enrico, buy them from me?' (Letter from André Breton to Enrico Donati, dated 24 August 1946, Enrico Donati Papers, 940120, folder 6, Getty Research Institute). The purchase was quickly cancelled by Breton, as evidenced by an undated letter from Matta to E. Donati. He eventually found cheaper copies in Paris and gave the New York ones to Matta.

6 Amédée Ozenfant, *Mémoires 1886–1962* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1968), 503. 'Breton studied Fourier thoroughly and said to me: "I am working on the creation of a myth"' (13 August 1942).

7 See the letter from André Breton to Jean Gaulmier dated 21 January 1958, in André Breton, *Œuvres complètes III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 1245–46. See also André Breton, 'Entretiens radiophoniques', XV, in *ibid.*, 560.

8 André Breton, *Prologomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non* (1942), in *ibid.*, 5–15. Apart from Matta's illustration, *Los grandes transparentes* (1942), there is an engraving taken from a manual on the arts of war, corroborating the fact that the *Ode* is a combat poem: Hanzelet (Jean Appier), *La Pyrotechnie De Hanzelet Lorrain* (Pont-à-Mousson: J. et Gaspard Bernard, 1630), 252.

9 Extract from *Générique*, which opens the catalogue of 'L'Écart absolu', 11th Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Paris, Galerie l'œil, December 1965, in A. Breton, *Œuvres complètes IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 1039. *Ibid.*

11 Letter from André Breton to [Alain Gheerbrant], New York, 11 October 1945 (lot no. 53, Vente Fontainebleau, Jean-Pierre Osenat, 'Livres et autographes', 29 April 2021).

12 André Breton, 'Conférences d'Haïti, IV', *Œuvres complètes III*, 265.

13 André Breton, 'Charles Fourier 1772–1837', in *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1950), *Œuvres complètes II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 909–19.

14 Fabrice Flahutez, *Nouveau monde et Nouveau mythe. Mutations du surréalisme de l'exil américain à l'Écart absolu (1941–1963)* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2007), 385–422.

15 C. Fourier, 'Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales', *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Librairie sociétaire, 1846), 132–33. See also: F. Flahutez, 'Le surréalisme un mouvement féministe?', *Le Surréalisme au féminin* (Paris: Fine éditions d'art / Musée de Montmartre, 2023), 158–69.

16 On this topic: *(In)actualité du surréalisme (1940–2020)*, ed. Olivier Penot-Lacassagne (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2022).

17 Simone Debout, 'La plus belle des passions', *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* [15 December 1959–29 February 1960] (Paris: Galerie Daniel Cordier, 1959), 22.

18 See Anne Foucault, *Histoire du surréalisme ignoré, 1945–1969* (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 219–50.

19 *L'Archibras*, no. 1, ed. Jean Schuster, Paris, Le Terrain Vague (April 1967), 1.

20 The first edition of the *Ode à Charles Fourier* appeared in the collection 'L'Âge d'or' by Henri Parisot, at Éditions Fontaine, in February 1947.