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The Myth of Melusine and its Relation to Totalitarian Ideology

Tereza Havelková[*] *& Adam Vostárek*[**]

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the medieval Melusine myth and its evolution across the centuries. We explore the return of this figure in early German romanticism and the 20th century avant-garde and its significance in distorting the narrative of human dominance. In a more general sense the article explores the ambivalent notion of totality or wholeness on one side in relation to the new mythology of art, literature and philosophy, and on the other the totalitarian ideologies that likewise instrumentalized myth. As a figure of the natural, irrational, and excluded, Melusine opposes patriarchal order and carries the promise of renewal after war. Her return signals reconciliation with what society banishes. By situating this myth in the context of new mythology and 20th century myth-making and by foregrounding the tension between wholeness and totality, the article highlights neglected aspects of the Melusine revival and clarifies the myth's role in modernity.

Keywords: Melusine, myth, romanticism, surrealism, totalitarianism

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel untersucht die Entwicklung des mittelalterlichen Melusine-Mythos und seine Wiederkehr in der frühen deutschen Romantik sowie in der Avantgarde des 20. Jahrhunderts. Im Zentrum steht die Frage, wie die Figur der Melusine – als Symbol des Natürlichen, Irrationalen und Ausgegrenzten – die patriarchalische Ordnung unterwandert und das Versprechen einer Erneuerung nach Zeiten der Zerstörung in sich trägt. Diese Rückkehr wird als Ausdruck einer Versöhnung mit dem Verdrängten verstanden. Zugleich analysiert der Beitrag die ambivalente Idee der Ganzheit: einerseits als ästhetisches Ideal der „neuen Mythologie" in Kunst, Literatur und Philosophie, andererseits als gefährliche Nähe zu totalitären Ideologien, die den Mythos ideologisch instrumentalisierten. Durch die Gegenüberstellung dieser beiden Dimensionen zeigt der Artikel, wie Melusine als mythische Figur zur Reflexion über die Rolle des Mythos in der Moderne beiträgt und vergessene Zusammenhänge zwischen Romantik, Avantgarde und Mythos aufdeckt.

Stichwörter: Melusine, Mythos, Romantik, Surrealismus, Totalitarismus

[*] PhD, during the implementation of the project: PhD Candidate at Charles University, Faculty of Arts – THavelk@seznam.cz

[**] MA, PhD Candidate at Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Pátkova 2137/5, 182 00 Praha 8 – Libeň, Czech Republic – adamvost@email.cz

1. The Origin of the Melusine Myth

The origins of the Melusine myth can be traced to Jean d'Arras's *Romance of Melusine* from 1393, in which the myth served the dynastic ambitions of its commissioner Jean, Duke of Berry. In d'Arras's version, Melusine is not only a hybrid fairy-woman but also a supernatural ancestor who legitimizes the Duke's lineage and territorial claims, including his ties to Lusignan and Cyprus. The narrative intertwines biblical, Arthurian, and crusading themes to construct a politically charged "historical" account rather than a mere allegory. At the same time, Melusine's hybrid nature and the motif of forbidden knowledge introduce a degree of openness and ambiguity that exceeds its political purpose, allowing later reinterpretations.

a) Sources and Parallels

The history of the legendary figure Melusine can be traced to the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, when, as mentioned, Jean d'Arras composed his *Romance of Melusine* in 1393, generally regarded as the first written version of her story. If we ask what inspired him, one of the best answers is offered by Kathrynn Rimmasch who claims that d'Arras drew most heavily on the *Otia Imperialia* written by Gervase de Tilbury from the thirteenth century.[1]

Jean d'Arras's story of Melusine was commissioned by Jean, duke of Berry, one of the great patrons of art at the time.[2] Similarly *Otia Imperialia* was written on commission for the Emperor Otto IV. According to Rimmasch, it is the third part that most directly shaped d'Arras's understanding of fairies.[3] The work teaches us that if a man is to marry a fairy, he must make some sort of promise. As a rule, such a promise requires ignoring or concealing the fairy's true nature. Rimmasch then identifies this concept as analogous to the biblical story of Adam, Eve, and the forbidden apple of the Garden of Eden. Man must ignore the true nature of things in favor of personal happiness and fortune. And so Melusine brings heaven on earth to her husband, Raymondin, until he betrays her and reveals her true nature. She creates a paradise, but its existence depends on voluntary ignorance of the true nature of things. Like Adam, Raymondin was bound by a promise of not-knowing, which he broke, causing suffering.

In Jean d'Arras's story, Melusine is not only a hybrid being but also the supernatural founder of the Lusignan house. As part of this mythical foun-

[1] Kathryn Rimmasch, *Hidden Doublings: A Context for Understanding Jean d'Arras's Mélusine ou la Noble Histoire de Lousignan* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2007), 39.

[2] Daisy Delogu, "Jean d'Arras Makes History: Political Legitimacy and the Roman of Melusine," *Dalhousie French Studies* 80 (2007): 15.

[3] *Ibid.*, 34.

dation, she sends her sons on crusades – a central portion of the narrative that further legitimizes the duke's political authority. Delogu suggests that the Crusades narrative can be read as legitimizing Duke Jean of Berry's military actions after 1370, particularly his conquest of the castle of Lusignan, which became the center of his power.[4]

D'Arras's Melusine combines elements of allegory, romance, and historiography to support political claims. As Delogu argues, the depiction of Melusine's sons as Christian heroes legitimizes Jean of Berry's claim to Cyprus – despite the fact that Guy de Lusignan acquired it by purchase, not conquest. In some cases the story refers to passages from Arthurian legends.[5] However, the Arthurian legends are used here only as narrative instruments that again serve mainly to legitimize power. Notably, the brothers' adventure is in fact a crusade, a religious war. This is particularly significant because it reinforces Melusine's portrayal as a devout Christian. The relationship between Christianity and her supernatural origins is a key point in understanding the specificity of this character. Melusine is a half-fairy and she wields magical powers, but she is also a devout Christian. She sends her sons off to war with three thousand men, all the necessary armaments and supplies, but also magical rings to guarantee their invincibility on the battlefield.[6]

b) Narrative Structure

D'Arras's *Melusine* presents a distinctly hybrid narrative form, mirroring the ambiguous nature of its central figure. Melusine's own story may be read as allegory, yet its structure and intent suggest a historiographical ambition; in contrast, the episodes concerning her sons follow the conventions of chivalric romance.[7] As Delogu points out, d'Arras draws on contemporary narrative models to guide the reader's perception of extradiegetic events – most notably in the depiction of Melusine's sons as Christian warriors defeating the Saracens, which implicitly affirms Jean of Berry's claim to Cyprus. Historically, however, Guy de Lusignan acquired the island not through conquest

4 *Ibid.*, 16.

5 Two unknown knights arrive at Melusine's court to announce that the kingdom of Cyprus is under siege by the neighbouring Saracen ruler.
Delogu sees this as an allegory for a classic passage from the Arthurian legends, where strangers arrive at court announcing various dangerous adventures to ensure the knights' fame and glory. This passage then loosely goes on to introduce the two sons of Melusine, by which the author is saying that this crusade is the very task by which they will gain glory.

6 *Ibid.*, 17.

7 *Ibid.*, 20.

but by purchase, making d'Arras's account a stylized reinterpretation of a much less heroic reality.[8]

This does not mean, however, that d'Arras and his contemporaries did not understand the story of Melusine as an account of actual historical events. "Jacques Legrand, a contemporary of Jean d'Arras, affirms that history is a narration of something with clear words, as opposed to fable for example, which is a narration of something in false or covered words. Legrand's allusion to covered words seems to point out to the allegory, a common medieval rhetorical device, but one which Jean d'Arras does not employ."[9] It is worth noting that even Melusine's hybridity is not presented as an allegory to be decoded by the reader, but as an explicit fact. Delogu even believes that d'Arras is trying to construct an idealized version of 14th-century history, specifically focusing on Jean of Berry's campaign and the conquest of the castle of Lusignan.[10]

In *Melusine*, d'Arras constructs an idealized account of recent history, aligning it with the political interests of Jean of Berry – particularly his efforts to reclaim Poitou and the castle of Lusignan, long contested by the English. The fairy ancestry legitimizes the Duke's lineage, and Melusine's son Urien, marked by supernatural traits, becomes a sign of divine favor rather than monstrosity.[11] As Delogu notes, such figures offer symbolic compensation for historical defeats like the Battle of Poitiers. Raymondin, though less central, reinforces this dynastic narrative: as Rimmasch suggests, his name evokes the figure of an earthly king[12] and mirrors biblical models of unexpected rise and fall, binding his authority to his pact with Melusine.[13]

c) Political Context of the Romance

The legitimation of power and the construction of a politically meaningful historical narrative are already embedded in the figure of Melusine herself. In d'Arras's version, the myth is reconfigured to support the claims of Jean

8 *Ibid.*, 21.
9 *Idem*.
10 *Ibid.*, 23.
11 *Ibid.*, 24.
12 Rimmasch, *Hidden Doublings*, 61.
13 Rimmasch argues that his very name – possibly derived from *roi mondain* – suggests his role as an earthly king. She also draws a parallel between him and King David: both are younger sons who rise to power unexpectedly and ultimately fall from grace due to a broken vow. While Raymondin himself does not slay giants, his son does, reinforcing his archetypal role. If David's kingship depends on his relationship with God, then Raymondin's rule is similarly bound to his covenant with Melusine.

of Berry, lord of Lusignan and patron of the text. This strategy becomes particularly visible in several key elements of the story:

1) Melusine's Scottish origins – explicit in d'Arras's story, where her father is a Scottish king – are significant because the Duke of Berry sought to persuade English nobles, especially descendants of the victors at Poitiers. By linking Melusine to Scotland, the narrative subtly appealed to these English bloodlines.

2) The story provides the Duke with a legendary ancestor, reinforcing his status. It parallels the Garden of Eden: Melusine creates paradise, but only on the condition of ignorance about her true nature, much like Adam before eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

3) Raymondin, like Adam, uncovers forbidden knowledge and thereby loses paradise. His character may also echo King David, whom, as Rimmasch suggests, the Middle Ages viewed as the model of a just ruler. This association casts the Duke not only as a descendant of a mythical lineage but also as embodying ideal qualities of kingship.

4) The reference to the Third Crusade reinterprets the Duke's acquisition of Cyprus. The story claims Melusine's son, Urien, gained the kingdom through marriage, whereas in reality the Duke purchased it. The text further portrays him as a Christian savior by having him rescue Cyprus from a Saracen attack.

Thus, d'Arras's *Melusine* is not simply a literary invention but a deliberately constructed narrative serving a political purpose. By linking the Duke of Berry to a supernatural ancestor, d'Arras provided him with a legitimizing myth that reinforced his rule and positioned him within a sacred historical framework. The way in which the story incorporates biblical themes, Arthurian elements, and crusading motifs suggests a deliberate effort to shape the perception of the duke's authority. At the same time, the text does not present itself as an allegory, as an allegory requiring interpretation, but as a historical record, which further strengthens its claim to legitimacy. Melusine's hybrid nature is presented not as a symbol to be decoded but as a reality, just as her role as founder and protector is woven into the fabric of history.

d) Openness and Complexity in Jean d'Arras's *Melusine*

While Jean d'Arras's *Melusine* can be understood as participating in a broader project of dynastic legitimation, particularly in the context of Jean of Berry's political ambitions, the mythological figure at its center continues to display a notable degree of ambiguity. Melusine's hybrid nature, situated between the human and the supernatural, as well as between historiographical and mythological dimensions, complicates any unequivocal reading of the text as a purely ideological narrative. Notably, the motif of the prohibition against knowing her true form – whose violation leads to the collapse of an idealized order – suggests a model of narrative integrity that relies on accepting limits to knowledge. In this regard, the text anticipates a later Romantic sensibility, wherein myth becomes a medium for exploring the idea of ontological wholeness rather than the affirmation of political totality. The latent tension between narrative closure and symbolic openness thus marks d'Arras's version not only as a politically situated text, but also as one that leaves space for alternative, more dynamic readings of myth.

The political function of Melusine as a legitimizing myth persisted in various forms, though it was never the sole or exclusive dimension of the narrative. With the rise of Romanticism, certain layers of the myth came to be emphasized differently: less as a tool of dynastic power and more as a means of personal introspection and cultural renewal. This shift is particularly evident in Goethe's *New Melusine*, where political connotations recede, giving way to a philosophical reflection on *Bildung*.

2. Melusine of Romanticism and the Concept of New Mythology

The story of Melusine has undergone numerous transformations over the centuries, reflecting shifts in cultural, philosophical, and literary contexts. This subchapter examines Goethe's *Neue Melusine* as a *Bildungsroman* influenced by Herder's philosophy of *Bildung* – the idea that human identity is shaped through a continuous process of self-development. Unlike earlier versions, such as Jean d'Arras's medieval narrative, Goethe's *New Melusine* abandons biblical and Arthurian references in favor of mythological elements. This shift aligns with the Romantic project of New Mythology, as formulated by Herder and Schlegel. By framing Melusine as a dwarf fairy rather than a serpent-woman, Goethe reinterprets the tale not as a dynastic or theological allegory but as an exploration of human self-cultivation and the evolving relationship between humanity and nature. Through this transformation, Goethe's New Melusine emerges as a reflection on modern story-

telling – an attempt to reconcile myth, education, and individual growth within the framework of *Bildung*.

a) The Context of Goethe's *Neue Melusine*

The story of Melusine first became available in the German language through Thüring von Ringoltingen's (1473) translation, which was even printed five years before Jean d'Arras's original version.[14] Over the next two centuries, the tale spread further, translated into languages such as Dutch, Czech, Polish, Danish, Spanish, and Russian.[15] Across these versions, Melusine's hybrid nature was interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways. It is, however, in the German version that this tension between human and non-human, visible and hidden, becomes especially pronounced and Goethe likely first encountered the myth through Ringoltingen's retelling.

In Goethe's *Die Neue Melusine*, the figure departs from her traditional medieval role tied to dynastic legitimacy and is reimagined within a Romantic framework. Melusine here becomes a vehicle for exploring the boundaries between different orders of reality, the natural and the supernatural, the civilized and the instinctual. Her depiction as a dwarf rather than a part-serpent being may signal a shift in symbolic emphasis: from physical monstrosity to metaphysical strangeness, shifting the focus from outward transgression to inward otherness.

Among Goethe's inspirations, Paracelsus also deserves mention.[16] His alchemical reinterpretation of Melusine, whom he identifies with the elemental spirit of water, a so-called Undine, removed the figure from a Christian framework and placed her within a vision of nature animated by invisible forces. For Paracelsus, the visible world is only the surface; it is governed by hidden principles, laws, and entities. In this light, Goethe's Melusine can be seen as a threshold figure: not only a fantastical being, but also an embodiment of the human desire to cross from the world of appearances into the realm of the unseen, where the true structure of reality might be intuited, though never fully grasped.

Goethe's version of the Melusine myth, titled *Die Neue Melusine*, appears in the fourth book of his *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*[17] (1830). The question arises as to why this is the 'new' Melusine. Goethe himself admitted

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[14] Misty Urban, Deva Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes, *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 54.

[15] *Ibid.*, 54.

[16] *Ibid.*, 102.

[17] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Norderstedt: Hansebooks, 2016).

that it is neither a completely new story nor a simple retelling of an old one. Instead, his *Die Neue Melusine* is meant to be an attempt to synthesize the old with the new, resulting in a story with a familiar basis in d'Aras's work, but reformulated to address the concerns of modern times.[18] Compared to d'Aras's version, the New Melusine is completely removed from the framework of biblical or Arthurian references. Moreover, she is not a serpent-woman but a dwarf fairy who needs to find a husband to strengthen her bloodline.[19]

b) Goethe's Mythological Reworking of the Melusine story

Goethe's Melusine no longer transforms into a half-serpent; instead, she possesses the ability to assume human form at will, so her supernatural qualities appear natural. The story also shifts its symbolic framework: biblical references give way to mythological ones. A creation myth involving dragons, giants, and dwarves is woven into the narrative, evoking a primordial world animated by elemental beings. Interpretations of this mythological turn differ, but it can be seen as part of Goethe's broader effort to rethink myth as a medium of cultural formation rather than theological instruction. In this sense, the myth does not serve merely as a fantastical background, but participates in a project of imaginative world-building with formative, even pedagogical implications. Goethe thus gestures toward a kind of creation myth that fosters reflection and self-cultivation; he pursues a narrative attuned to the *Zeitgeist* of his age.

The idea of myth as a medium for self-cultivation is closely bound to the concept of *Bildung*, which played a central role in the intellectual horizon of Goethe's time. Far from referring to institutional education (*Erziehung*), *Bildung* designates a deeper process – the formation of the human being through experience, imagination, and engagement with otherness. This understanding of *Bildung* is crucial for interpreting Goethe's *Die Neue Melusine*, where the protagonist's failure to prove himself a worthy suitor to Melusine, a supernatural being from another order, represents a failure to confront otherness and thus a missed opportunity for growth. As Rainer Wisbert points out in his essay *Herders Weimarer Konzept der Selbstbildung*,[20] the notion of *Bildung* has roots in Leibniz's idea of "the individual skill to realize the possibilities that are given to us in time, that is, to build the

[18] Urban, Kemmis, and Elmes, *Melusine's Footprint*, 303.
[19] *Ibid.*, 310.
[20] Rainer Wisbert, "Herders Weimarer Konzept der Selbstbildung," in *Der andere Klassiker*, (2022).

world."[21] Goethe's adaptation of d'Arras's tale reflects precisely this spirit: his *Melusine* seeks to lead the reader not through moral instruction but through a narrative attuned to the *Zeitgeist*, which encourages the cultivation of the self by engaging with a symbolic world. *Bildung*, in this sense, becomes a dynamic, temporal, and creative process: the shaping of inner life in response to the conditions of one's age.

Goethe's approach did not emerge in a vacuum.[22] One important intellectual influence can be found in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*.[23] In this work, Herder rejects the Enlightenment notion of myth as primitive superstition and instead sees it as a genuine expression of a people's inner world as a symbolic mode of articulating their relation to nature, time, and human purpose. For Herder, human history is not a linear march of progress but a plural, organic unfolding, in which each culture follows its own path of *Bildung*. Goethe's recasting of the Melusine myth aligns with this perspective: through a new mythology, he seeks narrative forms capable of fostering imaginative self-reflection and inner growth in the modern reader.

The whole of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* is also conceived as a *Bildungsroman*, that is, its aim is not to legitimize territorial claims, as in Jean d'Arras's story, but to educate. Here we can trace a link to J.G. Herder, with whom Goethe co-founded the Sturm und Drang movement in 1770.[24] And it is *Bildung* that is the main motive of Herder's philosophical work. We can therefore assume that Goethe and Herder shared similar views on individual education.

c) *Bildung* and the New Mythology

The concept of *Bildung* gives rise to the idea of a New Mythology, articulated most explicitly by Friedrich Schlegel in his *Rede über Mythologie*.[25] We can find both the concepts of *Bildung* and the New Mythology across all of Herder's work. From *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*[26], we know that humanity is a force of nature and that the ontological status of a man is not being (*Sein*) but becoming (*Werden*). So in Herder's philosophy a man is always becoming himself; in other words, his evolution and self-realization are ongoing. From

[21] *Ibid.*, 257.
[22] Urban, Kemmis, and Elmes, *Melusine's Footprint*, 311.
[23] Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideen zur Geschichte der Philosophie der Menschheit*, vol. 1 (Riga and Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1784).
[24] David Hill, *Literature of the Sturm und Drang* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013).
[25] Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie* (Berlin: 1964).
[26] Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (Riga: 1793).

Abhandlung der Ursprung der Sprache,[27] we also know that this evolution of an individuality is grounded in its language (*Sprache*), whereas the evolution of mankind in speech itself (*Rede*), as Michael Forster formulates it: "Thought is essentially dependent on, and bounded in its scope by, language…"[28] The third argument we must consider for our synthesis comes from Herder's *Wie die Philosophie zum Bestes Volkes allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*[29] which lies in the moral imperative to change the world rather than merely describe it. It can be said that precisely this value is behind Herder's and Goethe's aims to produce a *Bildungsroman*. So we can state that *Bildung* is the way an individual "builds" a world and his own personality – his own path of becoming – in language [*Sprache*], whereas New Mythology conceptualizes the extent to which this "building" operates in speech itself [*Rede*]. So *Bildung* concerns the individual, whereas New Mythology concerns all of mankind.

How, then, does this relate to Goethe's *Die Neue Melusine*? We may consider Goethe's tale as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, particularly in the Herderian sense of *Bildung* as an organic and open-ended process of becoming. At the very least, it resonates with several foundational premises outlined above. But how exactly does the story express these ideas, especially the relationship between humanity and nature? Unlike d'Arras's version, rooted in a Christian framework and centered around the question of sin and redemption, Goethe's Melusine emerges from a mythological cosmos animated by natural forces. She belongs to a race of dwarves who, like humans, were created by God, but who carry the burden of near extinction due to limited fertility. In her own words, dwarves are the oldest beings on earth, and so every few generations a princess must leave their realm in search of a human husband to renew their bloodline. The narrative thus abandons theological determinism in favor of a naturalized mythology, one where creation, limitation, and regeneration take center stage.

Melusine's plea to the protagonist is not framed as a moral test, but as a confrontation with an unfamiliar mode of existence. It is governed by necessity, time, and organic continuity. She herself embodies this alternative logic: she is supernatural, yet entirely natural in her fluid ability to shift forms and cross worlds. Nature in this context is not merely the physical environment, but the deeper set of laws – visible and invisible – that govern being and transformation. It is in this sense that Herder's idea of humanity as a

[27] Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Berlin: 1771).
[28] Michael N. Forster, *Herder's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18.
[29] J. G. Herder, *Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volkes allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann* (Königsberg, 1765).

force of nature becomes relevant: just as nature is in constant flux, so too is the human being in a continual process of becoming (*Werden*).

So we can say that Goethe's *New Melusine* is not merely a modernized adaptation of d'Arras's tale but a philosophical reformulation attuned to the evolving understanding of *Bildung* and New Mythology. By replacing theological authority with a mythological framework grounded in natural becoming, Goethe shifts the story's focus from divine judgment to human self-formation. This shift reflects a deeper philosophical transformation: a move away from understanding identity as something static and given (*Sein*) toward a view of the human as fundamentally dynamic, defined by process, growth, and relation (*Werden*). In Goethe's vision, to become human is not to attain a fixed essence, but to remain open to transformation – through myth, through nature, and through encounters with the unknown.

d) The Romantic Transformation of Myth

In light of Schlegel's *Rede über Mythologie*, Goethe's *Die Neue Melusine* may be read as a contribution to the Romantic project of a New Mythology, which reconciles individual self-cultivation with the collective narrative of mankind. Rather than a conventional *Bildungsroman*, the tale stages a dialectic between individual formation and collective symbolic order. The protagonist's encounter with Melusine reflects a Romantic aspiration to intuit the forces that lie beyond empirical reality. In Goethe's rendering, Melusine does not simply represent the supernatural, but as noted, gives form to what Paracelsus had called the invisible, the hidden principles of nature. Her fluidity and rootedness in an elemental cosmos offer an alternative mode of knowing, one that resists rational classification and invites poetic apprehension.

Goethe's *Die Neue Melusine* is not merely a tale of a supernatural being in search of a husband; it functions as an allegory of *Bildung*, wherein both protagonist and reader are confronted with the transformative potential of myth. Melusine, as a being who traverses natural and supernatural realms, exemplifies an alternative cosmology grounded not in theological authority but in natural becoming. Her world is shaped by necessity, reproductive limitation, and cyclical temporality, which are elements that stand in contrast to the linear, rational order of Enlightenment thought and instead gesture toward a deeper, concealed logic inherent in nature. The narrative thus negotiates the porous boundary between the real and the ideal: the real, as historically and biologically determined life; the ideal, as the imaginative projection of what humanity might become through self-cultivation.

In summary: Goethe's *Neue Melusine* thus marks a fundamental shift in the function of myth: no longer serving as a tool for affirming historical or

political continuity, the myth is reimagined as an open framework for imaginative reflection on human identity as a dynamic process of becoming. This transformation resonates with the Romantic project of *New Mythology*, as formulated by thinkers such as Herder and Schlegel, which sought to reestablish symbolic narratives capable of mediating between individual formation (*Bildung*) and collective meaning, beyond the confines of Enlightenment rationalism. Melusine, in this context, ceases to function as a legitimizing ancestral figure and instead emerges as a threshold being – inviting the protagonist, and implicitly the reader, into an encounter with otherness and with the possibility of ontological transformation. Rather than enforcing a singular worldview, Goethe's reinterpretation gestures toward an organic and pluralistic notion of wholeness – one that is not imposed from above, but *emerges through openness, relation, and imaginative engagement*. The myth becomes not a static framework, but a medium of cultivation, through which a form of *open wholeness* may be intuited. In this sense, *Neue Melusine* exemplifies a Romantic rethinking of myth, whose symbolic flexibility would later stand in marked contrast to the instrumental and totalizing uses of myth in the ideological systems of the 20th century.

Yet, the Romantic vision of myth was not static. By the 20th century, with totalitarian regimes rising and war threatening the stability of European civilization, artists turned once again to mythology—not to affirm political order, but to challenge it.

3. Melusine of the 20th Century

The Melusine myth took new form and gained new relevance during the World War II period in the context of French immigration arriving in the USA. The most explicit use of the Melusine myth can be found in André Breton's book *Arcane 17* written in his American exile, in which the myth is revived and reinterpreted. However, the myth of Melusine represents a broader and more complex idea which was present in many forms across both surrealist and abstract art of that period. The increased interest in myth, and the newly appreciated feminine energy has its roots in the Romantic new mythology, alchemy, and other alternative sources. They take new shape with the contribution of psychoanalysis and during the war. For a better understanding of the revived Melusine, it is important to briefly explain the overall revival of myth in this era. This helps us understand the evolution of the Melusine myth and grasp its political meaning in this period.

a) Surrealism and the New Mythology

The Romantic conception of new mythology discussed above was partially revived in the 20th century by Surrealism. In the 1920s myth wasn't a central theme of this movement. With the exception of André Masson, who was expelled from the group in the early 1930s, we find few attempts to create new myths for modern society, as Romantic writers had intended. The idea of collective myth and a poetic revolution was not in line with Surrealism's cooperation with the communist regime. However, this began to change in the mid 1930s, when the group became alienated from the communist party and the leader of the group André Breton talked on various occasions about the need to create a collective myth rather than individual mythologies. We find this idea initially expressed in marginal speeches, mostly delivered abroad. In his Prague lecture in 1935 and two years later in London Breton claimed that the task of surrealism is "the elaboration of the collective myth specific to our time" in the same way that Romanticism created the Gothic novel. The new myth was meant to emerge from the depths of human experience and was thus closely related to the unconscious explored by psychoanalysis. In his talks from the 1930s Breton directly links this call to action to the political situation of the time, this new myth had to be political and revolutionary. Even though Breton was a leader and a spokesman of the French Surrealist group, the approach to myth was specific to individual artists, some of them inclined to personal mythologies like Max Ernst or Freudian themes like Salvador Dali. Others were closer to the collective new myth that Breton called for and their approach to the unconscious was aligned with Jung's interpretation.

André Masson was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and the Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus already in the 1920s. His paintings from that period show the importance of metamorphoses, the constant transformation of elements and the exchange between humans, nature, and inanimate objects. At first this interest was demonstrated in his automatic drawings. "Automatic drawing, which has its source in the unconscious, was born unexpectedly. The first graphic manifestations on paper are pure gesture, rhythm, incantation and, as a result, pure scribbles."[30] Masson saw the automatic

[30] André Masson, "Anatomie de mon univers," in *André Masson: une mythologie de l'être et de la nature*, ed. Nathalie Gallissot and Jean-Michel Bouhours (Milan: 5 Continents, 2019), 41.

techniques as a tool to uncover the unconscious images. This imagery appears to be in constant flux as in his drawing *Chevaux attaqués par des poissons* (1927). The horses and fish battle in the image, intertwine with each other and with the volcanic landscape that surrounds them. Masson paints a world full of life and death, which are inseparable.

In the 1930s the traditional mythological themes started to appear in art of the Surrealists and other avant-garde artists. In 1933 the magazine *Minotaure* was published for the first time with a cover image by Pablo Picasso. The mythical monster became immensely popular as a symbol of combats, hybridity and otherness, a mixture of human and animal, the irrationality and brutalness that the civilized man wanted to abolish from human society. Its hybrid character and proximity to nature and the animal realm bring the Minotaur close to Melusine. The difference between them is that the Minotaur is a brutal and masculine figure, while Melusine is traditionally a mother and is attributed with good qualities. Unlike the Minotaur, Melusine appears very rarely in the pre-war period. Her exceptional occurrence can be found in André Breton's book *Nadja* from 1928. Breton writes about the child-like woman Nadja, who seems to be a sorceress and a lunatic, she is attractive to him by her difference from the norms yet threatening at the same time. In the drawing for *Nadja* from November 18, 1926, we see a Mermaid or Siren holding a scroll, representing Nadja, and a hybrid monster, which Daniel Zamani believes represents Breton. Nadja identifies with Melusine in the story, and she appeals to Breton until her actions "cross the line between the poetic and the insane."[31]

While Melusine remained a marginal figure, Minotaur became a core character of André Masson's imagery in the 1930s. In his painting from 1938 named *Labyrinth* the creature is depicted as transparent and his own prison becomes a part of his body. In this way Minotaur takes a new meaning. He can still symbolise the animal, bestial side of human nature but also a complex inner universe that imprisons man and forces him to search for ways to escape. Apart from Minotaur, Masson also painted his mother Pasiphaë whose intercourse with a bull led to the birth of the hybrid creature. She represents the breaking of taboo, crossing the boundaries of what is permissible in human society. The moment of violating a ban, breaking a promise,

[31] Daniel Zamani, "Magical Beginnings: André Breton and the 'Occultation of Surrealism,'" in *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, ed. Gražina Subelytė and Daniel Zamani (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2022), 29.

and transgressing boundaries is present in the legend of Melusine as well. In her story, however, it is the man who breaks the promise and Melusine is exiled from society for it.

During this period, Masson was closely associated with Georges Bataille. The writer at times collaborated with the Surrealist group but most of the 1930s he and Breton battled against each other. Between 1936 and 1939 Bataille started publishing a magazine named *Acéphale* (literally meaning "the headless") linked to a secret society of the same name. This was the last of Bataille's attempts to constitute a society in which people would collaborate on a common goal without a leader. *Acéphale*, in his words, "turned its back on politics and pursued only a religious goal."[32] These inspirations were carried over into Masson's work, a watercolor entitled *Le Labyrinthe* depicts the figure of the Minotaur with a labyrinth growing through his chest. Here we recognize Masson's earlier fascination with the four basic elements, which are water, fire, earth and wind, and the constant transformation of the elements. The image has a traditional mythological subject, which, however, takes on new significance in response to the war in Spain and the escalation of the political situation in Europe.

Bataille viewed myth as a powerful weapon against the rising fascist movement.[33] The idea of the secret society and its religious rather than political character was therefore paradoxically also a reaction to the tense political situation. The line between politics, religion, and myth was thin in the case of totalitarian ideologies.[34] Bataille was interested in the role of the sacred in tribal societies, as described by sociologists and anthropologists (Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and other scholars), and the subversive

[32] Jean-Michel Besnier and Amy Reid, "Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible," *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990): 180.

[33] In 1933 Bataille wrote a text "La structure psychologique du fascisme" in which he sees the unifying potential of fascism, which gives power to that which is neglected by the society and gives an immense power to the leader. Georges Bataille, "La structure psychologique du fascisme", *Hermès, La Revue*, 1989 / 2, nº 5-6, p. 141. https://ecole-lacanienne.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/3-G.-Bataille-1933-pdf.pdf, consulted 6 March 2024.

[34] This point was addressed by many scholars recently (e.g. A. James Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion, An Intellectual History*, Stanford University Press, 2012; Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, Princeton University Press, 2006) and even in the 1930s there were philosophers writing about the political or mythological aspect of the totalitarian movements (Eric Voegelin, Paul Ludwig Landsberg, Christopher Dawson).

elements of myth that could disintegrate the established social order. The headless figure symbolized the society without leaders and the man guided by his body rather than mind.

b) Myths of Hybrid Creatures in Immigration

The interest in mythical creatures and the theme of hybridity and metamorphoses became very attractive to Surrealists in the late 1930s. We find these themes discussed in magazines like *Minotaure*,[35] and they were also explored in the field, in contact with original and still living myths. These field trips took place even before World War II started, when some of the Surrealists visited America because of their interest in the Native American traditions. Kurt Seligmann traveled to British Columbia in June 1938. He was supported by the Musée de l'Homme to visit the Northwest Coast tribes and bring back some objects for the museum collections. In his article Seligmann noted that one of the Tsimshian men pointed out the parallel between Greek and Native American myths. He claimed "your minotaurs, your dragons and your sea monsters must be former totems."[36] Kidnapping of women by the animals or monsters was often seen as an honor in the history of the tribe, sometimes the woman died, other times she lived with the new animal family or returned to her husband. These animals were seen as magical and became totems and often they taught the tribe magic songs or predicted the future. This led Seligmann to think about the family emblems which use the animals as their symbols. One such emblem can be found in the family of Luxembourgers with a dragon emerging from a basket, representing Melusine. At the same time these relationships between man and animal, the hybrid creatures and the monsters of the myths were already explored in Surrealism. Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington had their emblematic animals and experimented with hybrid creatures in many of their paintings.


ENTRETIEN AVEC UN TSIMSHIAN

Summer by Leonora Carrington is a painting made in collaboration with Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and Roberto Matta after her arrival in New

[35] The theme of totemism was already discussed in the journals *Cahiers d'Art* and *Documents* edited by Georges Bataille. Carl Einstein characterized the art of André Masson as a form of totemism in *Documents* 2, 1929, in his article "André Masson, étude ethnologique".

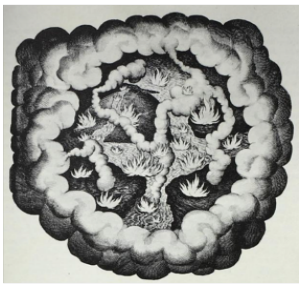
[36] Kurt Seligmann, "Entretien avec un Tsimshian," *Minotaure*, no. 12–13 (Spring 1939): 67.

York City in 1941-1942. It shows the interest in hybridity that permeated Carrington's work since the 1930s. The bird-like figure in the background was painted by Ernst, and there are other animals or hybrid beings that have symbolic meaning. The bison represented American nature for André Masson and other immigrants, in the background we see deer impaled on a pole, perhaps as a sacrificial offering, and a strange constellation of four tiger heads placed around a star with two figures resembling mermaids in the center of the composition. The left one has a bearded male face and the breasts of a woman. His crown, his trident-shaped tail, and the hooves at the base of his tail suggest that he may be Poseidon, god of the sea and horses. The one on the right has feminine features and in her hand, placed at the base of her tail, she holds a wheel (possibly a torture instrument). The wheel was one of the trials at the *Jeu de Marseille* (a tarot card deck designed by Surrealists before their exile), where it represented a symbol of the revolution, and it also appears in a few drawings by Carrington. It may refer to her self-identification with the martyr. In New York, she wrote in one of her letters: "Every time I cry alone, I put on the martyr's crown." Carrington layers different versions of herself into the painting, combining them with elements that resonate with her experiences and interests. Around 1942, these themes coincided with those of André Breton and Kurt Seligmann, especially that of the mermaid-like hybrid creature and a feminine martyr figure – Melusine.

c) Melusine, Nature and the Unknown in the 1940s

In 1943 Kurt Seligmann finished an image called *Melusine and the Great Transparents*. He implemented a motif of so-called cyclonic landscapes which he

had been working with since 1941.[37] Similarly to Masson's metamorphosis this unstable twisting motif was linked to the four elements believed to constitute the universe according to many traditions. In an image from the book *Mirror of Magic*, that Seligmann was working on during the 1940s, we recognize similar shapes vertically dividing the space. This image was entitled *The Chaos of the Elements*.



It appears in the chapter on alchemy and the process of making the Philosopher's Stone. Seligmann writes of the four essences in the universe (fire, water, earth, and air) and claims that there is a fifth essence that permeates everything. "It is the world's soul-spirit that animates all bodies."[38] This fifth essence is invisible and resides in matter, and whoever frees it can embrace all the creative potential of God. Inspired by Paracelsus he might be linking Melusine with one of the elements in his painting.

His cyclonic shapes can be interpreted as elemental forces of nature and because of the painting's title, we can understand these shapes as the "Great Transparents", supernatural beings postulated by André Breton in 1942.[39] Breton's Great Transparents were supposed to transcend man and the objective reality, they represented the unknown, but they also represented a force of nature. Perhaps this is why Seligmann linked them with the figure of Melusine, which, since its Romantic reinterpretation, had been associated with the power of nature. Melusine, represented here perhaps by the floating shape in the upper right corner, is different from the cyclonic forms. But similarly, she is more of an abstract shape, a supernatural creature rather than a figure.

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[37] He developed these landscapes by a "quasi-automatist process" in which he was "projecting broken glass through a slide projector and tracking the outlines of the image thus obtained." (Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 181.) Seligmann said about them: "They are landscapes, but they are not static. I call them cyclonic landscapes." (Timothy Baum et al., *Kurt Seligmann. First message from the spirit world of the object*, San Francisco, 2015, p. 60.)

[38] Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), 142.

[39] André Breton, "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Not," *VVV* 1 (June 1942).

Melusine was another important mythological figure explored by André Breton during the war. In 1944 he wrote a book *Arcane 17* during his stay on Bonaventure Island in Canada.[40] This book combines facts with fiction, similar to the original 14th-century story of Melusine. It is a poetic work about the power of love in situations of deep crises, where women are assigned the role of saviors. Breton combines various elements from Egyptian mythology, alchemy, and medieval legends, quoting romantic and hermetic authors, some of whom interpreted Melusine as an alchemical symbol, but throughout the book, he also creates his own complex symbolism. The title of the book refers to the practice of tarot, which Breton engaged with in the late 1930s and discussed with Kurt Seligmann, who wrote about tarot in *Mirror of Magic*. Seligmann characterized the figures of the cards as stimuli for clairvoyant individuals, who "mysteriously influence and awaken in us images of our unconscious."[41] Although many of the symbols may be linked to Christian iconography, Seligmann argued that they are of much older (possibly Egyptian) origin.

As Anna Balakin noted, the seventeenth card of the tarot comes after the cards of war and darkness in human hearts. "But after the fall of Lucifer suddenly the skies become luminous, and love and peace triumph through the intervention of the beautiful young woman who pours the contents of two urns upon the earth: containing love and intelligence."[42] The seventeenth card is assigned to the Morning Star, a symbol of hope. Traditionally, it is depicted as a naked girl pouring water from two vessels in a landscape with two trees, a bird, and stars. Roberto Matta, who designed illustrations for the book in 1945, almost perfectly replicated the composition found in *Mirror of Magic* and other traditional

[40] Breton worked on the book from August 20 to October 20 during his stay on the Gaspé Peninsula in the Canadian province of Québec. (Tessel M. Bauduin (ed.), *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics in Search of Marvelous*, New York / London, 2018, p. 95). The book is closely connected to Breton's own personal situation and his love for the Chilean-born writer Elise Bindorff-Claro, whom he met in New York in 1943. After their wedding, the couple visited the reservations of Native American tribes (Hopi, Pueblo, and Zuni) in Nevada.

[41] Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*, 409.

[42] Anna Balakian, "Introduction," in *Arcanum 17*, by André Breton, trans. Zack Rogow (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004), 10.

images of the *Arcane 17*.[43] The woman stands with one foot in the water and the other one on the land, similarly to Melusine, who is in alchemical tradition associated with water and can connect the human and natural realms.

Melusine is Breton's main heroine in this book, but she is accompanied by two more figures. First of them is the star personified by a young woman and the other one is the Egyptian Goddess Isis. Melusine and the star are closely linked, because of the association of the star card with water that was a basis for the court of Mermaid (*sirène* in French) in the *Jeu de Marseille*. For example, Lewis Carroll's Alice designed by Wifredo Lam was a Mermaid of dreams (symbolised by black star).[44] The star represents the "harbinger of hope", she is the light-bearer (Lucifer), the Morning Star. Lucifer brings light of revolt, which is supposed to lead into liberty, poetry and love. The star can be seen as the one who leads into the unknown, similarly to the Great Transparents. As Daniel Zamani noted, the symbols of star and of Melusine / Mermaid appear in Breton's *Nadja* (1928) already. However, the character of Nadja and her relationship to Breton is very different. She is not a star herself, but rather a witness of Breton's quest for the star. Nadja identifies with Melusine in the story, and her poetic nature is attractive to Breton until she "transgresses the boundaries between poetic and the mad."[45] This dimension of Melusine (the danger of the unknown) is no longer present in *Arcane 17*, where she is attributed only a positive role.

The Egyptian Goddess Isis is the last heroine of the book, she is the one who "resurrects man". She is first introduced not by her name, but as a queen adorned with symbols of stars and the moon. Later, Breton retells the legend of Isis, the queen who reconstructs the body parts of her husband, Osiris, and brings him back to life. The story of Isis and Osiris played an important role in the mythological thinking around this time, not just in Surrealism. Osiris was the counterpart of Dionysus, he was the Egyptian god of the crops, new life and rebirth. After being killed and cut into pieces, he was healed by Isis, his wife. Jung saw Osiris as a symbol of "psychological transformation" and this interpretation made him a powerful

[43] Here we used the illustration from Rider-Waite tarot deck first published in 1909, image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star_(tarot_card).

[44] Image from VVV magazine, No. 2-3, March 1943, p. 90.

[45] Daniel Zamani, "Magical Beginnings: André Breton and the 'Occultation of Surrealism,'" in *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, ed. Gražina Subelytė and Daniel Zamani (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2022), 29.

symbol for the experience of modern man during World War II.[46] Breton interprets Osiris in a similar way as Jung, as he talks about the "spiritual quest" in which "one must go to the depths of human sorrow, discover its strange capacities, in order to salute the similarly limitless gift that makes life worth living."[47] In the Egyptian myth, Osiris is killed by another male god Seth, and Isis collects the pieces of his body and heals her husband. This is what Breton highlights in *Arcane 17*. Isis and Osiris are often mentioned by Kurt Seligmann as well. He tells the story of Osiris's Journey to the Underworld and dedicates a lot of attention to Isis who symbolizes "gentleness, maternal constancy, devotion to husband, and the fertility and grace of woman" and is one of the forms of the mother goddess and according to Seligmann the highest representation of her.[48] In 1944 he painted the Egyptian goddess as a depersonalized composite figure.

Seligmann's *Isis* (1944) floats in the air, she is similar to his Spectres, phantoms and witches, she looks like an aristocratic figure with a crown with feathers and a layered flowing drapery of her dress. But the empty space around her and the cyclonic forms underneath point to her godly nature. She appears confident, carried by air. In the *Mirror of Magic*, Seligmann associates Isis with the World Soul from the 17th century. She still has attributes of Isis, "half-moon on her womb, one foot in the water, the other on land." From her breast flows the seed giving new life, she is connecting God and the man. Breton describes his goddess in a similar way: "her admirable body is now covered by a veil woven from stars and fastened with a moon over the junction of her thighs. Her hair, still uncoiled, supports a sparkling tiara in the shape of snakes and grains."[49]

[46] Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 132.
[47] André Breton, *Arcanum 17*, trans. Zack Rogow, introd. Anna Balakian (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004), 117.
[48] Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*, 72.
[49] Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 110.

Some of the elements associated with Isis by Breton and Seligmann can be found in one of Carrington's major paintings of the end of the war period, *The Giantess* (The Guardian of the Egg, 1946-1947). This monumental figure seems to symbolize the fertility of earth with her hair of wheat, and the egg she takes care of and the animals surrounding her. She connects the sky and the earth and guards the new life. Carrington might be inspired by the depiction of Isis in the Mirror of Magic, but also by the overall positive approach to femininity in the end of the war period. Women were often seen as healers, mothers, goddesses, they brought new hope for the future.

Melusine in *Arcane 17* embodies both an occult and Romantic aspect for Breton, who links her to the Hebrew letter pē פ, pronounced as "phay" (fairy). Like the Romantic Undine, Melusine is a water fairy, but she is also a hybrid being, highlighting the theme of metamorphosis (similar to other figures explored by the Surrealists such as the Minotaur and Gradiva). She is deeply connected to nature and the animal world, particularly through snakes and fish. By associating her with hope (through the figure of star) and healing (through Isis) she is endowed with more complex meaning then she ever had. The story of *Arcanum 17* has a happy ending, unlike other tales of Melusine. The heroine is redeemed and comes back to the human realm and with her she brings the lost connection to nature and the feminine powers that now belong to man as well.

d) Myth and War

Similarly to Melusine of the past, the avant garde reinterpretation has important political implications. Both of the myths explored by Breton during his exile, the newly fabricated myth of Great Transparents and the Melusine myth, have a strong political and ideological basis and react to the experience of the war. The Great Transparents symbolized the unreachable, which surpasses the human realm, Breton compares these imaginary beings to a force of nature, as he talks about the "perturbations like the cyclone, in the face of which man is powerless" or like war.[50] Breton introduced this idea for the first time in a programmatic text *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism*

[50] André Breton, "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else," *VVV* 1 (June 1942) 26.

or Else in the Surrealist magazine *VVV* published in American exile. The idea of these beings also manifested in artworks created by both European and American artists around the same time, such as the *Cosmogones* by the Surrealist painter Wolfgang Paalen or various transparent beings in Roberto Matta's paintings. In the same text cited above Breton mentions the need for a new myth.[51] This is one of the reasons why the Great Transparents were seen by many interpreters as the embodiment of a new myth that Breton started to talk about from the mid 1930s. They were also sometimes seen as a reaction to the war. Angela Miller wrote about Breton's *Prolegomena*: "clearly wary of the fascist misuses of myth, his strategy was to attack fascism with its own instruments, through a collective countermyth."[52] It is unclear if the Great Transparents are countering the fascist myth or if they somehow embody the fear and helplessness associated with the war.

However, the link between war and myth was clearly one of the central themes of the period for Breton. He addressed it in his speech to the students of French at Yale University delivered on 10th December 1942, where he talked about the fight against evil. He pointed out that Nazism and Fascism are not causes of evil, but its symptoms, its products. "There is Hitler and through him, underlying the most inexplicable racial persecutions, the revival of certain myths of Germanic origin, which seem incompatible with the harmonious development of humanity."[53] He blamed rationalism which failed in the time of war and recalled the main point of the Surrealist first manifesto, the liberation of the individual. He also talked about the "immense and dark region of the self where myths swell beyond measure, at the same time as wars are fomented."[54] Breton believed that the mythological sphere already exists and

[51] Minds very different from one another, but among the boldest and most lucid of our time – Bataille, Callois, Duthuit, Masson, Leonora Carrington, Ernst, Etiemble, Péret, Calas, Seligmann, Hénein – have all been irresistibly led to searching for a prompt answer to the question: can a society exist without a social myth?" – he reacts to this need – "To what extent can we choose or adopt and impose a social myth which we judge desirable?" (André Breton, *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else*, *VVV*, June 1942, p. 22)

[52] Angela Miller, "With Eyes Wide Open: The American Reception of Surrealism," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, ed. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 77.

[53] André Breton, "Situation of Surrealism between the Two Wars," *VVV* 2–3 (1943), 45.

[54] *Ibid.*, 51.

Fascism is able to use myths to its advantage. He believed that Surrealism can also tap into this realm and explore myth as a possible defense against fascism.

The Melusine myth has a political and ideological dimension as well and it is clearly strongly anti-fascist. *Arcane 17* centers on beings that are seen as "the other", "the irrational, feminine side of things, which counterbalances the (masculine) rationalist realism that caused the crises."[55] Femininity is mythologised through the figures of Melusine, Isis and the star and seen as a healing antidote to the masculine energies. Breton reflects on war in *Arcane 17* and it is clear that the horrors of war were one of the main impulses for writing it. Melusine is seen as a saviour, a heroine rescuing humankind. "Melusina…, she's the one I invoke, she's the only one I can see who could redeem this savage epoch."[56] The mythologisation of femininity that can be found not just in this specific book, but in many Surrealist artworks and texts was widely criticized. While some critics saw the femininity of *Arcane 17* as empowering and feminist, others rejected it for its over idealisation and stereotyping of women. Daniel Zamani, who has focused on these aspects of Breton's approach to Melusine interprets the book as "nothing short of a revolution of the traditional male-female hierarchy," and sees Breton's turn to the fairy-woman "within the broader context of his search for a new myth, and especially one that was dedicated to the project of radical social and cultural transformation."[57] The figure of Melusine has to be according to him understood in opposition to the male Aryan hero of Nazi Germany.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this article we have explored the evolution of the Melusine myth. Its symbolic role has been shaped by the societal and political contexts of each era, from its medieval roots in dynastic power to its philosophical reinterpretation during Romanticism, and later, its resurgence in the surrealist movement of the 1940s. Since Romanticism, Melusine has been linked with the conception of New Mythology, poetic creation of new myths intended to change society, creating a new political as well as poetic foundation. On the other hand, she has been linked to the concept of *Bildung* as a constant self-development. Later Melusine became one of the mythological

[55] Tessel M. Bauduin, ed., *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvelous* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 148.
[56] Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 82.
[57] *Ibid.*, 82.

figures explored by the avant garde as a symbol of alternative power in the time of the war.

The figure of Melusine can elucidate some aspects of the problematic relationship between myth and power. To understand different ways in which myths are used by totalitarian regimes and the avant-garde, it is crucial to clarify the distinction between *totality* and *wholeness* in the use of myths. *Totality* refers to the myths of totalitarian ideologies, where they are manipulated to promote an all-encompassing, unified worldview, and to impose rigid, singular narratives on society. In this context, myths are used to suppress diversity and individuality, offering a singular, overarching truth that justifies absolute control. On the other hand, *wholeness*, achieved through the reconciliation of opposites, embraces the complexity and multiplicity of human experience. Myths like the one of Melusine don't represent fixed ideologies, but rather fluid, evolving symbolic narratives. These reinterpretations suggest a more open, expansive view of existence, where the myth serves to reflect the multifaceted character of identity, nature, and humanity and to counter the dominant narratives. In this perspective the myth also possesses a power of sorts. André Breton believed that the reinterpreted Melusine myth can counter the totalitarian myth of Fascism. This approach set an example for future work with mythological material as a tool in fighting oppressive unified worldviews. Myth has a suggestive power and if used as a tool for liberation can contradict the similarly attractive narratives of oppressive regimes.

This open counter-fascist view on myth should nevertheless be approached critically as well. One of the key dangers in using the myth of Melusine, especially through the Surrealist reinterpretation, is the potential for idealization and oversimplification of femininity. Melusine has often been portrayed as an embodiment of pure feminine power, healing, and nature, but this can reduce women to one-dimensional symbols. The romanticized image of Melusine as a savior figure, as seen in Breton's *Arcane 17*, emphasizes the nurturing roles for women and associates them with the irrational forces. This can be seen as a danger inherent to myths in general: in order to be evocative and carry clear messages, they reduce reality and have a tendency to create another absolute. However, they can bring new facets of meaning to the modern world when understood as one outlook among many on the complex nature of our reality.

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