

# 1

## An Anarchist of Perception

---

LUC DIETRICH: How would you describe Daumal (in body and spirit) to someone who has never seen him?

LANZA DEL VASTO: He resembles a vial full of moon milk into which an alchemist has placed an elf.

According to the French meteorological archives, it was a sunny, cold, thirty-degree day on March 16, 1908, when René Daumal was born in the Ardennes mountains of France, near the Belgian border. He inherited from his mother certain Mongolian facial features—slanted eyes and high, broad cheekbones—traits that were even more prominent in his elder sister Marianne. The Mongols had settled in the Ardennes mountains when they invaded Gaul in the fifth century A.D.; and consequently many Ardennais natives share these same facial features. His mother Zélie was a convivial, outgoing woman, according to René's younger brother Jack (born 1916). She had no intellectual pretensions and was an excellent cook. The three children were raised without any formal religious upbringing, for their father, Leon, a learned instructor and a politically active socialist, was also a confirmed agnostic. Jack Daumal reports that there was virtually no dissension in the family, ever. The basic integrity of his parents is evident in the brief glimpses gleaned from René's writings: "The familial anticlericalism was honored by receiving the esteem of the abbot, who in his sermons often referred to my father as the only honest man in the county even if he was an atheist and socialist."<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, the paternal grandfather, Antoine, with whom René was very close as a child, was more attuned to the spiritual and psychic realm. He was a healer, magician, amateur occult Mason, and beekeeper, who severed ties with the Freemasons in order to establish an occult Masonic lodge. From this distance of eighty years we will see how the strands of influence from both his father and grandfather were woven neatly together; they entwined with yet other strands and then interfaced with René's own innate nature.

In many ways Daumal's life mirrors that of his idol, the great nineteenth-century Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, who was born in Charleville, very near Daumal's birthplace. As youths they had in common an intellectual precocity, a revolutionary attitude toward poetry, passionate inner lives, and premature deaths that were due in part to the effects of dangerous exploits. They both sought a language capable of translating the Absolute.

From the beginning it appears that Daumal was not quite of this world. By all accounts it appears that even as a child his gaze was turned inward. René's younger brother Jack recalls:

At a family reunion, René remained deep in his own reflections during the meal, indifferent to everything going on around him. When a plate of food was offered to him, he did not respond. When his name was called, "René, René!" he responded, "Oui, oui," reaching out his hand, but when the plate was placed in his hands, he did not support it. He let it fall, splattering himself and everyone around him with sauce. He apologized, excused himself, went to his room, and did not appear until morning.<sup>2</sup>

Although his behavior might sound like typical modern teenage apathy, in 1920 in France it was regarded as very strange.

René's introversion did not preclude a deep commitment to his close friends and family. He was well known for his kindness and generosity. From his earliest years until the last days of his life, Daumal had an alert, inquisitive mind. His brother reports that René taught himself to read at age four. Upon discovering the existence of such a thing as a dictionary, he is reported to have exclaimed, "I'm saved!" As a precocious child and adolescent he read extensively, exploring traditional science, chemistry, and the occult. At age eleven, he was an avid chemist and beetle collector, displaying his treasures artistically in specially constructed boxes. His

brother Jack reports that shortly before the war he presented these specimens to a primary school in Gonesse, near his parents' home.

In his 1932 Surrealist-style *Treatise of Pataphotogrammes*, he gives a brief but fascinating glimpse into his childhood imaginary world:

Thanks to the flying machines that I kept in my attic (under a hinged roof that opened up) I have made numerous trips to my native Africa.

At age ten I discerned the curvature of space according to the Einsteinian laws of astronomy, and I vanquished the fear of death that had devoured my epigastrium each night for many years. In Auvergne I frequented witches, nocturnal pigs. . . .

Paris 1915. Bombardments. Basements . . . Boum Boum, like the Medrano Circus where I tried my young talents. . . . I tamed a Burgundian snail. I invented ovoid space. I had hallucinations.<sup>3</sup>

Daumal was a being who was often painfully aware of other dimensions of existence. He was born in a period of shifting patterns, a slackening of traditional belief and a gradually growing interest in various forms of spiritualism. A large majority of the French at that time were anti-Catholic and antireligion. (The official separation of church and state occurred in 1905, at which time the French government confiscated all the assets of the Catholic Church and expelled numerous congregations.) In this milieu, René was left to interpret his inner visions on his own. With his early exposure to his grandfather's occultism and Freemasonry and his lack of formal religious training, he took it upon himself to discover the strange "other world" alone, outside the Christian framework of a "God," "Heaven," or "Hell."

During his childhood René seemed to be unusually susceptible to oneiric influences, yet lacked the vocabulary or knowledge to describe or understand them. Furthermore, (from age six to ten) he lived close to World War I's worst battlegrounds. Jack Daumal wrote in a recent letter that his parents succeeded in sparing them the worst echoes of the war. Yet their elder sister, Marianne (ten years René's senior), was traumatized by the bombardments and haunted by memories of "Big Bertha," the large cannon that repeatedly bombarded Paris, Liège, and other nearby cities. René never spoke of having suffered from war-provoked anxiety, and yet his early childhood experiences of the "Infinite" often occurred as terrifying nighttime encounters. For him, God equaled not love but terror or death. Lacking the support of organized religion, which might have calmed

him and allayed his fears, he channeled all that intensity into an obsession with death; this seemed to be the only state in close approximation to the Infinity for which he yearned. Later, in his essays and letters, he refers to the physical experience of the terror-filled "Infinite," likening it to a rope tightened around his stomach. In one essay, "On the Life of Basiles," he writes:

A childhood without religious upbringing put me prematurely face to face with the fear of death. It was, as I finally realized, a tightening in the pit of my stomach, which a simple relaxation of the abdominal muscles could dispel. Then the tightening went up into the chest in the form of a knot of dread, then further up to the brain in the form of a problem: to be or not to be? This tightening turned over and over in my brain, and remained there for a good number of years. It proliferated in metaphysical speculation and almost resulted in complete decapitation.<sup>4</sup>

During the war years (1914–1918), the Daumal family eventually left the Ardennes, which were dangerously close to the war front, and relocated several times in different parts of France. Finally they sought refuge in Paris, where René's father Léon accepted a position with the Ministry of Finance. After completing several dangerous and delicate missions to areas devastated by war, Léon Daumal requested transfer to the nearly destroyed region around Charleville and Reims.

At age eleven, René attended the Lycée Chanzy in Charleville (Rimbaud's birthplace) from 1919 to 1922. His classmate Luc Périn described him as

very calm, even phlegmatic. He talked very little and was not interested in ball games. He was not outgoing but with his close friends he was charming and funny. There was a particular expression about his smile although I never saw him laugh. The originality and quality of his humor struck me. I did not know at the time nor did he, that this variety of humor was called black humor.<sup>5</sup>

In 1921, when René was thirteen years old, he entered the lycée at Reims. There he established what were to become lifelong friendships with Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Robert Meyrat, and Roger Vailland. In a city more than half destroyed by war, these four boys passed their adolescence

exploring ancient churches and abandoned war ruins, always on the lookout not only for adventure but for examples of curious architectural detail and obscure symbolism. They shared a common mania for escapades, farce, and subversive prankery, yet this did not impinge upon their scholastic achievement. They were not typical of the *âge ingrat*, the ungrateful, unfruitful teenage years. All four were budding young intellectuals and poets—high-spirited, with a flair for the bizarre and a growing disregard for societal norms.

Daumal described the experience of being the new kid at the lycée: “The others scared me. I was the tooth that hadn’t yet broken through the gums, the future gunshot through attic windows, a hard working, sad, good little boy, given to infernal debauches of reveries in his solitude.”<sup>6</sup> Robert Meyrat, the only surviving member of the group of four friends, described the impact that René’s arrival had on himself and the others:

[His arrival] completely changed everything. We had been nothing more than three jokers. René brought our minds together and was the catalyst for the group. He taught us how to view things from a much deeper point of view. In spite of his dreamy, expressionless demeanor, he thought and saw much further than we did, and he got us to read new things—Maeterlinck, Alfred Jarry, Rimbaud, authors that were not yet accepted by the academic *sylabus*—and to reflect on problems that had been foreign to us.<sup>7</sup>

As the group of four began to gain notoriety for their strange behavior, they decided to change tactics: they would present a conventional exterior so as to be free to pursue unconventional avenues of thought and behavior, unfettered by professors and less adventurous classmates. They continued to rank highest in class (since they collaborated on homework assignments) but no longer expressed their unusual ideas in their written work. Instead they discussed their true interests among themselves, and, according to Meyrat, the most original ideas usually came from René. At one point the group inaugurated their own secret society, which they called “Les Phrères Simplistes,” a name derived from the spelling technique of one of their heroes, the earliest absurdist, avant-garde writer Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). As Simplistes, they sought to attain the intuitive and spontaneous simplicity of childhood. They established special codes and elaborate rites that fortified their bond. Their experimental projects included astral projection, telepathy, extra-retinal vision, lucid dreaming, meeting in ~~clay pipe dreams and~~ automatic writing. They

sought to explore disassociated, intoxicated mind states that they referred to in “Simpliste” terms as “le Maelstrom pigmé” (“the pygmied Maelstrom”).

The group grew in size and cohesiveness as the years went by. In a letter to Maurice Henry, a young poet about to join the group in 1926, René (now eighteen years old) disclosed his admiration for his friends, especially the brilliant, charismatic Lecomte, leader of the group. He describes how shy he himself had been at first, intimidated and yet irresistibly drawn to these three eccentric companions:

When they named me “Nathaniel,” I recognized my father in the one they call Lecomte; the two others [Meyrat and Vailland] were my brothers. Little resemblance in bodies and character, but a thousand mystical affinities rapidly bonded us together: childhood dreams or a sudden word would set off the resonance of four souls, long silences of the four of us together when the Being regenerated by our union took us as witnesses of its happiness. Then the discovery that we were angels, “agglutinated angels.” Angel brothers or perhaps a single angel in four bodies. Our union was an accelerated gravitation of the four cardinal points of one soul, and the resplendent cohesion of a star being born.<sup>8</sup>

The Simpliste aim was to attain a kind of astral state, be it postmortal or prenatal. They saw themselves as visionary angels without bodies of flesh. Meyrat, in a 1978 interview, said: “We weren’t angels, but we did not have flesh-and-blood bodies, in the sense that we forbade ourselves to talk about any physical contingencies; we never mentioned being hungry or sick.”<sup>9</sup> For the most part, Daumal carried this stoic tendency to his death.

Drawing on the strength of their homogeneity, the four proclaimed their fundamental axiom, “the imbecility of individualism.”<sup>10</sup> Their affirmation of the collective soul was realized by a whole fabric of interpersonal relations, special rites, obscure jargon, and clever, cryptic letters. In a 1927 letter, Daumal wrote, “Simplism is a religion of which all members are heretics.”<sup>11</sup>

As for the attitude of the Simplistes toward religion, Daumal wrote:

Rites and doctrines, you need them—rite: rhythm of life, proof that one gives oneself one’s faith and liberty. We have created, or rather, they were born naturally from our union—doctrines: our reading of the mystics (Vaisya, Sr. Teresa, Swedenborg, the

theosophists, etc.) was a shock that clarified the revealed word. Through diverse symbols, according to the various races, all religions teach several great ideas that we recognize. (Vailland prefers the Christian language; Lecomte and I, the Buddhist language; Meyrat, primordial agnosticism.) But the dogmatic formulas are of secondary interest to us.<sup>12</sup>

In 1924, at age sixteen, René's childhood obsession with the Void and his desire to "possess" death led him to ingest the toxic substance carbon tetrachloride, an experience he describes in two later essays. This hallucinatory experience validated for him the existence of a greater reality, one that has been described by mystics, seers, and poets throughout the ages. He believed he had finally touched "une révélation sensible" (a felt, tangible revelation). For him it was a firsthand experience of what he called the "Absurd Evidence" (or "absurd obviousness") of another world. (The term *L'Evidence Absurde* was later chosen as the title of the first volume of Daumal's essays, published in 1972.) His experimentation with various drugs is alluded to in *A Night of Serious Drinking (La Grande Beuverie)*, where he disparages "the beatific mummification via opium, the theatrical and turbulent transmutation of everything by hashish, the respiratory vertigo of cocaine, the metaphysical dizziness of ether, and the disintegrating effects of several other drugs."<sup>13</sup>

Through a natural gift for experiencing superordinary dimensions of reality, sometimes through the addition of psyche-enhancing drugs, he saw that this earthly existence for the average person has become "unglued" or disconnected from its heavenly counterpart, its greater half. He had a vision of the two halves making a whole, the fusion of opposites that make up the greater reality that he sought after all his life. Perhaps because of his agnostic upbringing, he turned toward a purely spiritual view of existence that was far removed from any traditional religious viewpoint. Ribemont-Dessaignes, another Surrealist poet who defected and allied himself with *Le Grand Jeu*, quoted Daumal as saying, "Je suis religieux à me faire tuer,"<sup>14</sup> which translates as "I am religious enough to be the death of me." He sought only after the Absolute.

After finishing his baccalaureate at age seventeen, René entered another lycée, Henry IV in Paris, in October 1925, where he established a friendship with his classmate Simone Weil. Here he began preparing for the qualifying examinations for entrance into the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* while his family remained in Reims. (They later moved to Paris to be closer to him.) In June 1927, just prior to the exam,

René suffered a temporary bout of amnesia caused by a fall while doing gymnastics. Because of this he failed the examination. This seemingly unfortunate incident played a definitive role in shaping his life and changing his destiny, allowing him to pursue “free” studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne. He would later regard the accident as very “fortuitous.” He enrolled at the Sorbonne in October 1927, and earned one certificate in psychology and another in ethics and sociology.

While studying in Paris, he enlarged his horizons further by making contact with the artistic avant-garde of Montparnasse, yet he continued a lively correspondence with his friends in Reims and frequently returned to visit them. In *Le Quotidien des Livres*, Jean-Jacques Levêque reviewed an earlier French edition of the present book, and discussed Daumal’s vast poetically sophisticated correspondence with the Simplistes: They were “the fiery horsemen of the absolute who smashed themselves on the hard exigencies of life. It was a correspondence oscillating between humoristic rebus, coded signs, and hidden references, a kind of stock car race where the friendships of these provincial Rimbauds criss-crossed and chased each other.”<sup>15</sup> Ever in league with one another, their escapades continued. They began to refer to themselves as “Pataphysicians,” that is, students of Alfred Jarry’s “Pataphysics,” an absurdist worldview defined as the “science of imaginary solutions.”<sup>16</sup> For the next seven years, the Simplistes continued to delve into literary and parapsychological research, exploring the subtle relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. Vailland referred to the group as “anarchists of perception.”

They were all in their late teens when they published the first of three issues of a literary journal called *Le Grand Jeu*. In it they proclaimed their intention to “make men despair of themselves and society for from this massacre of hope will be born a Hope, pitiless and bleeding. To become eternal by refusing to merely survive.”<sup>17</sup> Given their age, this intense quest for eternity was remarkable. Their efforts spawned a review that was acknowledged by the Parisian intelligentsia. Yet even within this group of educated and ardent young writers, Daumal stood out as having a distinct passion. There was a driving quality to his search. He, more than the other members of *Le Grand Jeu*, provided the key intellectual ideas, the religious fervor, and the motivating force to complete the endeavor.

During this three-year period Daumal experimented with narcotic and hallucinogenic substances. Like Aldous Huxley and the poet Henri Michaux, his intention was to somehow comprehend their chemical effects on his brain. René soon realized that this method could not work



to advance him on his chosen path. He eventually gave up the use of drugs and strove to heal his psyche and resolve his metaphysical quandaries within a supportive intellectual community of artists, writers, and free thinkers.

Many writers interested in Daumal have exaggerated the extent of his drug taking. According to his brother, his usage was minimal and always used as a tool for his inner vision. Very early on he became an antidrug proponent. In one of his final visits with his brother Jack, then involved in planning postwar education reform, René declared: "and above all, you must warn the youth against mind-altering drugs. Some of the best and most superior young people are lost through these drugs."<sup>18</sup>

As the thirties approached, René embarked upon a period of prolific literary production within a supportive intellectual community of artists, writers, and free thinkers. His group *Le Grand Jeu* remained committed and intact until 1932. All through these years, Daumal truly believed in the magical effect of their camaraderie and their mission as a group. He put great energy into guiding the group through its endeavors, especially the publication of *Le Grand Jeu*. He was not afraid to act in the world, but neither was he caught up in it. In later years, Daumal would look back on this period with amusement and even scorn, as if it were all part of an adolescent lark; yet many of the seminal ideas that became crucial to his adult thinking were beginning to germinate during this period and only later found richer, more mature soil in which to take root and flower.

In Daumal's youth, his fascination with death fostered a rather cavalier attitude toward the value of life. Like many young people who feel invincible in their teens, Daumal was fearless and reckless in the face of dangerous challenges. The physical body was expendable; only the spirit mattered. Everything that he undertook had a spiritual aim. As a teenager he seemed to have had the selflessness and detachment of an aged sage. Apparently he was freer from the usual driving force of the ego. This lack of ego involvement allowed him to identify much less than most people with his surroundings, associates, and belongings. Instead, he viewed them as very detachable extensions of himself. The energy usually spent in bolstering and protecting the ego seems to have been available to him for other intellectual and psychic pursuits, in a manner unusual for someone so young. At age seventeen, René went through a psychological crisis, but it did not seem to stem from the usual life concerns of lost love, poor self-image, competition, or personal ambition. His crisis stemmed from his distress at the futility of the existence that he was expected to pursue. He was

extremely disenchanted with the current bourgeois structure of society and hated the capitalist goal of self-aggrandizement. He looked at the lifelong race to create a career, family, wealth, pleasure, and satisfaction and considered it trivial and absurd. He felt that there was a greater purpose for man's life on Earth.

During this period in Paris, the dominant influence on Daumal's world view came from his study of Hindu poetics and philosophy, begun in 1922. This fostered in him a rich appreciation for Eastern mystical thought as he attempted to synthesize Eastern and Western ideas in his essays for *Le Grand Jeu*. He continued to view these traditions through a political lens and was hypercritical of the priestly caste and the secular influence on pure religious thought. But gradually he dwelt less on the final outcome of popular religion and more on the original texts. He became engrossed in René Guénon's books on Indian thought, such as *An Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* and *Man and His Becoming According to Vedanta*. This interest was shared by his colleagues, though he alone proceeded to study Sanskrit. Through rigorous discipline, he was soon able to translate sections of ancient Sanskrit texts, including the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This achievement earned for him the admiration of the top Sanskrit scholar, Renou. Some of these translations, as well as various essays on Hindu thought, have been collected into a single book entitled *Bharata: L'Origine du Théâtre, la Poésie et la Musique Hindoues* (1970). Later, in 1982, this collection became available in English, published under the title *Rasa*, with a new edition soon to appear.

In deciphering Sanskrit, Daumal believed he had discovered his mother tongue. He meant this in a double sense: he saw Sanskrit as the mother of all languages, one based on a scientifically constructed grammar, making it the prototypic link between sound and meaning for all Indo-European languages. He also found in Sanskrit a "matrix" (Latin: womb) that gave meaning to other aspects of his life. The ancient writers he translated described the mysteries of life that interested him most: the interaction of the inner and outer worlds and how that affects the development of one's soul. He learned that the idea of renunciation and self-abnegation that came so naturally to him was a recurring theme spanning over two millennia of Hindu writings and could be understood on many levels. For some it meant an actual rejection of home and family and a formally structured discipleship. For others it encompassed a more subtle form of self-abnegation and did not include a withdrawal from the world,

but rather an internal awakening concomitant with a renewed way of seeing reality. Daumal discovered in the area of poetics and language that ancient Indian sages had already explored this full range of nuance. By comparison, Daumal felt that the attempts of the European Surrealists to forge a new language were merely pale reflections of an earlier, nearly perfect bridging of sound and sense that had been expertly realized by Sanskrit poets.

Daumal's gradual penetration of the Vedic mysteries resulted in a diminished sense of anguish and despair in his own writings, and an expanded feeling of fulfillment and serenity. As he entered his early twenties, Daumal became a veritable disciple of these ancient Hindu teachings. The only thing lacking was a living teacher. In his search for such a person, Daumal became the press agent for an Indian dance group led by Uday Shankar, a master dancer and elder brother of the musician Ravi Shankar who also danced in the troupe. In two essays, Daumal expressed his awe before "the immemorial beauty" of Shankar's dance and "Shankar's perfect control of the 450 muscles of his body."<sup>19</sup> But the teacher he finally chose to follow was not an Indian at all, but rather a Georgian artist of German origin named Alexandre de Salzmann, himself a proponent of the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff. For Daumal the "Gurdjieff Work" seemed to synthesize essential teachings of both Eastern and Western esoteric traditions. Since he had come to the conclusion that the core of Hindu teaching was essentially one with that of all great religious traditions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, and Buddhism, the teachings of Gurdjieff gave Daumal a practical method along with a well-defined theory of development.

In *The Heart of Philosophy* Dr. Jacob Needleman<sup>20</sup> describes how a seeker must go beyond the realm of philosophy and accept the next level of inquiry: self-confrontation. Here a guide or "school" is indispensable in order to overcome the transitory concerns of the ego. For Daumal it was time to give up struggling on his own and learning only through books and to start working directly with a teacher. This suited Daumal well and he eventually shed his feelings of alienation from the world and learned to use the external world to nourish his inner life. Working toward this aim with a small group of committed people provided an environment for him conducive to spiritual awakening.

In November 1932, as *Le Grand Jeu* began to run out of funds and energy, its members convened for what was to be their last meeting. One week later, Daumal left Paris to spend four months on the road with Uday

Shankar's dance troupe as they toured the United States. This was the first tour ever by an Indian dance troupe in Europe and America. Upon his return, Daumal reentered the Sorbonne to complete his *Licence de Lettres* and reestablished his friendship with the woman who was to become his wife, Vera Milanova. Shortly thereafter he was drafted into military service. Several letters from his father refer to the latter's efforts to arrange a deferment. After three months, he was released due to ill health.

Back in Paris and now in his mid-twenties, Daumal was recognized as a serious poet, essayist, critic, and philosopher. His work was published in the leading journals of the day—*Bifur*, *Variétés*, *Les Cahiers du Sud*, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, and *Commerce*—but his true consecration came with the inclusion of his writings in the prestigious *Anthologie des Philosophes Contemporains*, published in 1931.

Throughout 1934 and 1935, Daumal wrote a regular column of short reviews and anecdotes on the contemporary Parisian scene for the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. He also wrote a regular page-long commentary on what he found to be absurd scientific discoveries, called "Pataphysics This Month." In 1936 he began working for *l'Encyclopédie Française*, preparing the first eleven volumes to appear before the war. Because of his erudition in several fields, including natural and human science and mathematics, he was given the task of transcribing and editing scientific data. He translated numerous texts such as *Death in the Afternoon* by Hemingway and three volumes of Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism* from English to French. Several of his essays were published in French journals and reviews. Concurrently, he continued working on his compilation of Sanskrit poetics, a monumental undertaking that was finally published posthumously in 1985 under the title *La Langue Sanscrite*. In 1936, twenty of the sixty poems that he had written over the previous decade were collected and published in *The Counter-Heaven (Le Contre-Ciel)*. For this he won the Prix Jacques Doucet, awarded by the eminent writers Paul Valéry, André Gide, and Jean Giraudoux. Part of the award consisted in the publication of the book one year later. *A Night of Serious Drinking (La Grande Beuverie)*, a caustically humorous tale in which Daumal satirizes our modern-day professional and artistic elite, came out two years later.

Even in his pursuit of income work, in such varied avenues as writing, editing, and translating, Daumal always sought out pieces that would expand his knowledge of the world and the inner world of man. He continued to pass through several developmental phases, each with its own particular characteristics. Certain themes remained constant, reflecting his lifelong interests: the relentless inner search for gnosis—the indirect,

experiential knowledge of reality and the renunciation of outward manifestations—in order to attain what he perceived to be a heightened state of Oneness with the universe.



In his personal life René enjoyed a close bond with his family and was particularly fond of his younger brother Jack. Since he shared his father's radical political viewpoints he never felt the need to rebel against his family.

As an adolescent and young man René was generally indifferent to romance. Yet, according to Natalie de Salzmänn d'Étiévan, the daughter of Alexandre and Jeanne, René was in love with a young classmate in Reims during his early teenage years. René confided to Natalie many years later that one day, as his train pulled into Reims, he had a sudden feeling that this girl was no longer alive. In effect, his mother was awaiting his arrival with the sad news that the girl had died unexpectedly the previous day.

After this relationship, the only other woman in his life was Vera Milanova. She was born in Siberia, the daughter of an exiled Jewish revolutionary intellectual. As a journalist and teacher, she was a supportive member of *Le Grand Jeu* along with her first husband, the poet Hendrik Kramer. As the friendship developed, and after her marriage dissolved in 1929, she gradually fell in love with Daumal and vigorously pursued the pensive poet. Eventually he became extremely attached to her. From 1931 onward, she joined Daumal in becoming more and more actively involved with the Gurdjieff teaching. Conversations with Gallimard editor Claudio Ruffini and with Daumal's colleague Philippe Lavastine in 1977 suggest that his relationship with Vera was primarily a deep love between soul mates. Only in one poem, "Mémorables," does he refer to the concept of earthly love and it is clear in the context of this autobiographical poem that he is referring to his own experience with Vera.

Remember that love triumphed when she and you learned how to submit yourselves to its jealous fire, praying to die in the same flame. But remember that love belongs to no one, that in your heart of flesh there is no one, that the sun belongs to no one, blush while regarding the quagmire of your heart.<sup>21</sup>

In 1932, his position with Uday Shankar's dance troupe allowed him to join her in the United States. He returned after four months, while she

stayed on eleven months with her family. Daumal exhibited an obvious distress when they were separated for long periods during their relationship. In September 1932 he wrote to her "Verachka, ma Sohehinah," "Ma Vivante, ma Vraie Vera" ("My living, my true Vera"), and described spending hours with his brother Jack in the Hindu rooms of the Guimet Museum of Oriental Art, then added, "Vera Vera Vera your name dances in my head until I become dizzy." Two pages later he spoke of the difficult period of her absence and added:

During that period when you were truly absent, I could not think about you with this continuity (like air that one breathes) as I do now. Then it was more like sudden violent blows which tightened my heart, sometimes with a kind of rage: thus more passionately (in the exact meaning of the word) and painfully. Today your light looks down at me and bathes me always.<sup>22</sup>

They voluntarily separated for one year in order to test the strength of their bond and subsequently found that their relationship was still strong. According to Lavastine, René and Vera completed each other very well. Since René was often off writing somewhere secluded, she would use a whistle to call him to lunch. When Vera tried whistling for Lavastine, he retorted, "Ah non!! You can whistle for your husband, but not for me!"<sup>23</sup> Daumal, on the other hand, explained to Lavastine that he saw absolutely no offense in being whistled for, and that it was a perfectly fine arrangement. Lavastine saw this as an example of René's supreme intelligence and lack of egoism.

Vera was a hardheaded, blunt woman who protected her gentle poet husband. If the Gallimard editors failed to pay him for his translations, he would never ask them for payment. It was she who hounded the publishers to collect his writing fees. Through all the hardships their bond grew in strength. Jack Daumal feels that if Vera had been able to have children, it would have forced René to deal more effectively with the material and practical aspects of life in order to better support a family.



It is difficult to summarize Daumal's early character and personality with only his work, his letters, and anecdotal information available to us. Sometimes there are seeming paradoxes when his subtle humor is juxtaposed with his apparent shyness, or his political vehemence with his

expressionless demeanor. His friends and Grand Jeu colleagues have left poignant descriptions of him.

André Rolland de Renéville wrote:

When I first met René Daumal in 1928, I was struck initially by his beautiful face, oval and immobile. In spite of his silence and modest demeanor he gave me an impression of extreme superiority. I noticed that the most ordinary among our group could not help but feel a certain timidity at his approach. In effect, it was not possible to interact with him without feeling suddenly deprived of one's mask. In speaking with him, one suddenly became sincere with one's self and with him.<sup>24</sup>

The writer Monny de Bouilly was a former Dadaist and Surrealist who went over to the Grand Jeu camp in 1929. He does not mince words in describing Daumal's character:

Daumal was what one calls a saint, a pure being, an angel. Never did Daumal say "Impossible, I can't, I don't have the time, I'm tired." Never, never, NEVER. Such that those who loved him felt a reticence to speak because we knew that he would never refuse anything that was asked of him. No one could ask him for money since he had none. He would have just enough to get a train back to his parents' home in Gonesse. But naturally, no one was too shy to ask him for the help of a higher order. I asked him for many things in my life, essential things. He never spared any effort.<sup>25</sup>

Daumal's exceptional qualities emerge, yet it is hard to isolate the causal factors that might explain them. Like most "saints," his extreme lack of concern about the physical plane of existence caused unnecessary damage to his body, in particular his teeth, ears, and lungs. From a medical point of view, according to the paradigm of classical homeopathic diagnosis, Daumal had the symptoms of a constitutional tubercular type. He had a severe tubercular miasm (predisposition) that in his case, was aggravated by the inhalation of carbon tetrachloride. Many individuals can carry this miasm for years and transmit it to succeeding generations without ever contracting tuberculosis. One sample profile of the tubercular type is often the brainy, disembodied romantic who burns himself out by forgetting to live on Earth and take care of himself. This seems to apply

to Daumal's absorption with the life of the spirit and his total disregard for health concerns.

The implication of his nickname may throw some light on his personality. His friends called him Nathaniel, a name coined for him by Lecomte, and based on Nathaniel, the main character in André Gide's *Les Nourritures Terrestres* (*The Fruits of the Earth*). In this novel, Nathaniel was a spiritual seeker who has frequent dialogues with his elder teacher. In the early days of Daumal's friendship with Lecomte, the latter was the bolder father figure for René, the "Papa" to René's "Nathaniel." In many of his letters to his wife and close friends, Daumal signed his name as "Nath" or "Natha," even well into his thirties. Since *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, published in 1897, was the "Bible" or underground classic of an entire earlier generation of students, it had a great effect on Daumal and his peers. When, at age seventeen, he took the name Nathaniel, he fit the description in the book of the perennial listener, the archetypal student, soaking up any information he could gather about the secret of life.

In *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, Gide provides a poetic vision of how God is in the world and everything is God: "Nathaniel, the only way to talk about God is naturally."<sup>26</sup> The book is filled with precepts on the art of what Gide called "la disponibilité" ("openness" or "readiness")—always being receptive to God in the world. This is perhaps the first of Daumal's encounters with a nondualist philosophy. "Understand that at each instant of the day you can possess God in his totality. Let your vision be new in each instant. The wise man is he who is surprised at everything."<sup>27</sup> These are insights that seem to have been impressed upon Daumal's being; Daumal was the ingenuous Nathaniel, spontaneous in his response to many layers of meaning in the world around him.

A 1927 letter to Richard Weiner provides a glimpse of the buoyant yet sensitive side of Daumal.

All is well and I am happy. With the same facility that I cross from one sidewalk to another—while the street remains the same—I now leave Paris and Roger to join you: I sketch out a tango step as I cross the street. I laugh a lot in the cafés, writing short ineptitudes while waiting for Roger. You would never suspect how much Roger and I can laugh. I also have overwhelming moments of sad happiness at the sight of certain insignificant objects: a white wall, a flower, a cloud or dead leaf; a pebble or a piece of string that I hold in my hand can become



a very dear friend. That distracts me a lot from working, but so what.<sup>28</sup>

Given his psychic sensitivities, which we will discuss later, it is most likely that here he was not only responding to the literary and metaphysical symbolism of these images but also to the beauty, physicality, and magnetic frequencies of the actual substances.

Why was he so able to perceive the other spiritual dimensions of reality in the midst of his daily life? Why was he so unsatisfied with the common pursuit of happiness? One of the reasons was that he was not a very sensual, pleasure-oriented person. Except for some tender words written to his wife, nowhere in his writings is there a hint of romance or frivolity. It is not to say that he was sullen or morose; but in his writing Daumal was never interested in depicting the ordinary, personal aspects of life—man's personal joys and woes—except as they contributed to his allegories. Although he enjoyed deep spiritual bonds with his friends and with Vera, as evidenced in his letters, he rarely discussed personal relationships. Even in his later works, his two most well-developed characters—"Totochabo" in *A Night of Serious Drinking* and "Sogol" in *Mount Analogue*—are both teacher figures, fleshed out sufficiently to serve as sources of great wisdom. With minimal brushstrokes Daumal sketches in just enough details to project the power and essence of these two men. Likewise, another, fainter personage, Mugle, is the main character/teacher figure, and the title of a 1927 short story, "Mugle," published as a novella in 1978. The narrator/protagonists of these stories are even more ambiguous with their vague, ever-changing identities. Thus one sees that Daumal's characters are deliberately allegorical figures—mouthpieces for expressing an important message. The ordinary life of the narrators as mere human beings was either satirized or omitted altogether.

Daumal blatantly rejected human sentimentality and voluptuousness in his poetry. He never composed poetry about purely sensual or naturalist themes. Yet he borrowed earthy, visceral language to discuss his obsession with the beyond. In contrast, André Gide writes: "Each perfect action is accompanied by voluptuousness. TO BE became enormously voluptuous for me. I wanted to taste all the forms of life, those of fish and plants. Of all the joys of the senses, I most envied that of touching."<sup>29</sup>

Yet, for Daumal, under the influence of the Hindu philosopher Sankhya, the world of the senses was an illusion, a source of distraction from the concentration on one's interior being. In contrast to Gide, he

wrote: "Everything we adore is a cadaver, except God; the idols to which I give my life."<sup>30</sup> And in the poem "Nénie" he wrote:

Speak no more of plains with that tenderness  
 Speak no more of snows, speak no more of the heart  
 [and the incantatory phrase "speak no more" repeats another  
 eight times].<sup>31</sup>

From childhood onward, Daumal the nature lover was not impervious to the loveliness of the physical world, but he never wrote of it until the late thirties—in *Mount Analogue*, in one poem, and in some letters. His distrust of the material world, so inculcated by the Hindu Sankhya philosophy, gradually abated as his understanding matured. Just as his physical health began to waver, he returned to the nature-loving tendencies of his earliest years. He began to appreciate the physical plane of existence, seeing it as a legitimate source of inspiration for inner development.

There are some letters, dating from 1938 onward, where he praises the joy of mountain climbing and describes the mountain scenery. Published in the periodical *Argile* in 1977, "Lettres de la montagne" (1938–1941) expresses the excitement of mountain climbing and the beauty of the landscape. He describes in minute detail the scenery, flowers, food, alpine skills and techniques, and his emotional responses to all of them. In a letter to his friend, the Surrealist poet Jean Paulhan, we find one of Daumal's page-long, action-filled sentences where he alludes to the beauty before him:

hoist yourself, secure the rope, pull up, shout "I made it to the top," undo the ropes, dry them out, have a drink, have a snack, drink in the entire countryside, 'til it could make you cry, remain in perfect silence, name the peaks, point out Mont Blanc . . . (etc.).<sup>32</sup>

In another letter to Vera, Daumal exclaims in capital letters: "THE RHODODENDRONS! Finally I see the Rhododendrons in bloom."<sup>33</sup> Then he discusses them for five lines and sketches them freehand in the margin. But this renewed earthly delight was yet another vehicle for an expansion of his visionary capacities. Mountain climbing allowed him to be alone, above everything earthly, breathing a more rarefied metaphysical air.

Emile Dermenghen described his last visit with René, at the foot of the highest mountains of Dauphiné.

René passionately loved the mountain, with a love both physical and metaphysical. Although his body was already affected by illness, it seemed to gain relief and a definite freedom from mountain climbing. He had just made a solitary effortless climb of the Barre des Ecrins; nobody could believe it possible. He came down the mountain as if from Sinai or Tabor, his vision purified from the snow; or from Mount Meru, center and pillar of the world, the immutable axis around which circles the multiplicity of appearances.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Liselle Reymond, a close friend of Daumal, would later assert that even in the 1940s Daumal was not at all rooted in the material plane. Liselle Reymond had lived many years in India and was an authority on Hinduism, a teacher of Tai Chi Chuan, and later a follower of the Gurdjieff teaching. In several interviews with me in 1977 and 1983, she took issue with the premise that Daumal was interested in total renunciation. She insisted over and over that he had nothing to renounce, nothing to give up because he was interested only in God. During the war, he shared a villa in Provence with Reymond and her husband, writer and publisher Jean Herbert, an authority on India and to whose publications Daumal contributed various articles. Reymond described how Daumal would drill her on Sanskrit vocabulary, saying a new word for each row of crops and vines that they would pass. She reported that his intense search never let up for a moment, a dogged study to uncover his truer, inner self.

Likewise, during my interviews with him in 1977 and 1983, the writer Philippe Lavastine recounted his memories of René and incidents that shed light on some of Daumal's character traits. In 1931, Lavastine was anxious to meet the author of the intriguing journal *Le Grand Jeu*, but the quiet, self-effacing Daumal was not at all what he expected. Daumal had little interest in discussing *Le Grand Jeu*. He referred to it all as merely "des betises et des mensonges" (stupidities and lies), and told Lavastine not to bother with it. Instead, he urged him to accompany him and Vera to a lecture that same evening given by Alexandre de Salzman. After the lecture, de Salzman discussed Gurdjieff's ideas of the cosmos with them until nine o'clock the following morning. Immediately, Lavastine was drawn into the Gurdjieff Work and they became close friends.

This was Lavastine's first exposure to Daumal's inimitable ability to just listen. Lavastine ascribes his vast intelligence and store of knowledge in great part to this single ability. He was the archetypal listener. Lavastine

felt that he himself talked all the time so that he never listened enough or wrote very much.

Daumal was not a man full of himself; he was empty of himself. Thus he could listen—there was room inside for something to enter. Daumal and [the Surrealist leader] André Breton, although very different from each other, had one thing in common: neither man spoke much. Both men could write all night, yet I would often have to force responses out of René.

Even at meetings with Madame de Salzmänn or Gurdjieff, he would not ask many questions. He listened, then actively practiced what he learned. On the other hand, when he did speak, he could encapsulate such and such a person or situation in one sentence. He had “la dent dure” (“a hard tooth”), that is, he was incisive and harshly honest.<sup>35</sup>

Lavastine reported that Daumal was not particularly concerned about money matters. Before the war, it did not matter much if he had little ambition to earn money, but during the privations of the war years, in failing health, he had to work very hard for little recompense. Lavastine recounts how his extreme penury was matched only by his intense honesty and fear of imposing on friends. One night he walked seven miles in the snow rather than ask a friend for train fare. It seemed to Lavastine that René was following the Hindu concept of *vinaya* (discipline and humility), which Lavastine (who lived in India and wrote extensively about it) felt was one of the most valuable elements in Hinduism.

Finally, Lavastine felt that what most characterized Daumal, besides his intelligence, humility, and ability to listen, was his extreme sense of continual wonder. He quoted Aristotle: “The wise man is he who is amazed at everything!”—the same phrase incorporated by Gide into *Les Nourritures Terrestres* (a phrase that had affected me in my life and that I too had applied to Daumal). Lavastine saw him as a child first perceiving the phenomena of the world.

Monny de Bouilly gives another personal recollection of Daumal’s character:

In the world of experimental metaphysics, Daumal had something special, a “neo-will,” a “super-will” or power to affect things. He was an absolute master. Even in a drug state or in a dangerous experiment, he had the innate power to decide to stop.