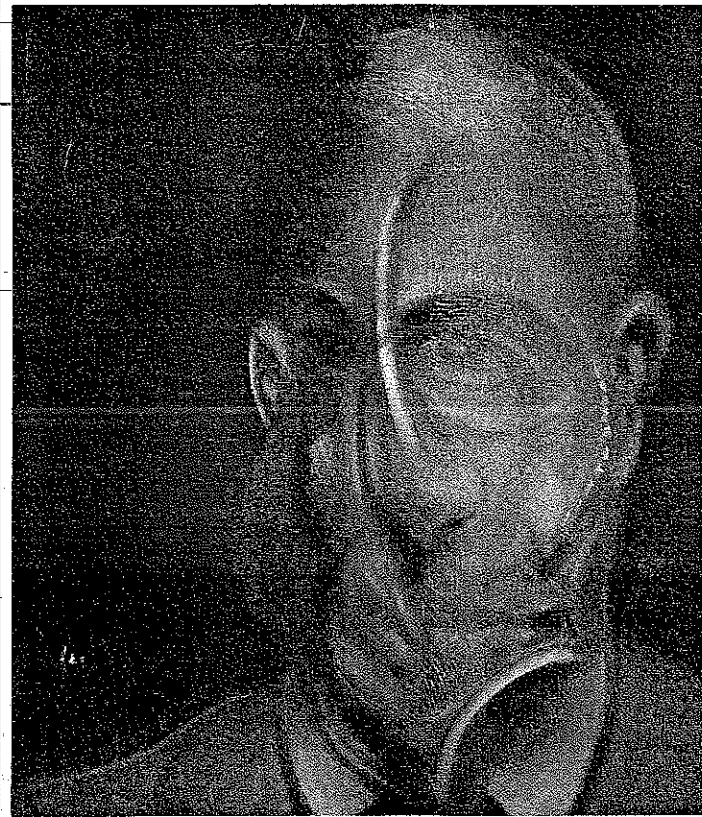


Sulfur 15

FEATURING NEW TRANSLATIONS OF MICHEL LEIRIS



POETRY BY MICHAEL PALMER, PETER REDGROVE,
CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON AND BOB PERELMAN

JOHN YAU ON LEON GOLUB AND MARCEL DUCHAMP

PAPERS ON CESAR VALLEJO AND PABLO NERUDA

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Edited by James Clifford, with translations by Clifford, Lydia Davis, Richard Sieburth, Paul Auster, and Michael Haggerty

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Cover: Francis Bacon / **Portrait of Michel Leiris**
Oil on canvas, 14 x 12 inches, Louise and Michel Leiris Collection
Color transparency courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, London

NEW TRANSLATIONS OF MICHEL LEIRIS

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THE TROPOLOGICAL REALISM OF MICHEL LEIRIS

by James Clifford

— OEUVRE — verrou?

Last year Michel Leiris published a supplement to the idiosyncratic dictionary he had begun as a surrealist in the 1920s. *Langage tangage* consists of sixty pages of words with odd definitions followed by a meandering meditation on a lifelong mania for slipping words out of their semantic slots, provoking new senses based on plays of sound or graphic form. The dictionary's first installment appeared in *La Révolution Surréaliste* of 1925. Its title was a sample of the procedure: "Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses" ("Glossary: I squeeze my gloses there" . . . or perhaps more in the spirit of the game: "Glossary: my gloses' ossuary"). The word to be "defined," *glossaire*, is split in two: the first syllable, "glos," veering toward "glose" (gloss, critique, reflection) while the second, "saire" turns into "serrer" (squeeze, keep, lock up). Recombined as a new definition the troped syllables evoke Leiris's intimate dictionary, a collecting place for poetic turns and punning associations.

Fifty years later *Langage tangage* presses the point. Its title can be heard to say: "Language entangles you" (*Langage t'engage*) while simultaneously equating language with the "pitching" (*tangage*) of a ship or airplane. And if we are engaged, bound, turned and tipped by words, Leiris also suggests we may transgress or divert the official forms and meanings, shapes and articulations. Each displacement of the word "langage" ("tangage," "t'engage") is the result of a single small alteration. The slip of a phoneme or graphic trace is all it takes to start remaking the dictionary, dislodging senses. This latest "supplement" to a lifelong personal

glossary presented by the eighty-five year old Leiris is itself glossed as both a versatile form of divination and as simple tics of the glottis ("Souple mantique et simples tics de glotte—en supplement").

Throughout his career Leiris has been passionately engaged with, lured by language—language as voyage of discovery and entangling web, as pitching vessel of the self and swaying bridge to the others. Certain of his writings, like the *Glossaire* and most of his poems, work in and out of puns and private language: they are virtually impossible to translate. The rest can be approximated in English, and the new translations gathered here give a fairly representative overview of Leiris's large and still-changing oeuvre. Still, it must be said right away that no excerpt can do justice to the painstaking labor of a writer almost literally writing himself into existence—looping through dreams, ideas, memories, current events, the moment of writing . . . searching for a personal universe in a grain of sand, syllable, or snatch of song. This process is best followed at the inimitable slow pace of *La Règle du jeu*, Leiris's four volume, thirty-five-year project that elaborates not an autobiographical "life," but a "savoir vivre," a heightened mode of being and a personal ethic. (*La Règle du jeu*: rule of the game, of the I/je.) Only a scrap of this work upon which Leiris's literary reputation rests can be included here, the opening sections from its first volume, *Biffures* (Crossouts). Anglophone readers will have to wait until Lydia Davis's superb translation in progress has been published, by Sun Books. Then they will be able to compare *Biffures* with its immediate precursor *L'Age d'homme* (*Manhood*, translated by Richard Howard and recently reprinted by North Point Press) and thus begin to form an impression of Leiris's elaborate project.

The SULFUR collection includes essays, dreams, ethnography, texts on eroticism, art criticism, and passages from sequels to *La Règle du jeu* (the game continues). The selection and juxtaposition tries to give a sense of a remarkable oeuvre's diversity and process, showing its openness to cultural, historical, and interpersonal influences. For as Edmond Jabès suggests in his meditation on Leiris in Section 4, all committed writing about the self ends in vulnerability before the other. To live intensely through writing, as Leiris does, is to give ultimate power to the reader. There is no security: writing does not settle into stable dialogues. Again and again in the process of writing, Leiris discovers the alienating, exhilarating fact he first confronted as a child: "how articulated language, the arachnean tissue of my relations with others, went beyond me, thrusting its mysterious antennae in all directions." A constant oscillation between "inside" and "outside," self and other, is a constitutive force in Leiris's oeuvre. Though he turns to himself as the only topic he can write about with sincerity, his rule has the effect of expanding the "subjective" terrain to include everything that impinges on and draws out his words: the non-Western cultures he studies as an ethnographer, the political struggles in

which he is involved, the many intense friendships with writers and artists that weave themselves into his writing.

Any representation of an "oeuvre" misses this subjectivity conceived as process rather than product, writing rather than text. The inescapable problem of the autobiographer (who in shaping a "life," misses the actual life of the present) also bedevils any account of a writer's production. In an interview shortly before his death, Michel Foucault reflected on the notion of an oeuvre (he was being asked about his first book on Raymond Roussel): ". . . someone who is a writer does not simply create an oeuvre in books . . . his principal oeuvre is ultimately himself writing these books."¹ An emergent life-in-writing: this is what Leiris strives, through an exemplary series of works, both to analyze and to enact. In the last pages of *Langage tangage* he admits a fondness for his own published books, like a child's attachment to old toys. But he is "almost exclusively concerned with the work underway – the one that shows me I'm still alive, able to line out sentences that more or less stand . . ."

PARADIS – pure idée (ou parodie)

Born in 1901, Leiris grew up in comfortable Parisian bourgeois surroundings. His father was a small banker one of whose clients and friends was the wealthy eccentric, Raymond Roussel. As a child Leiris acquired a lifelong love for the theatre, and particularly for opera, an attachment that shows up everywhere in his writing. Images of theatrical sets, costumes (including his own excessive need to dress "well"), stage fright, and the miraculous art of performance pervade his work. Among the theatre pieces that impressed Leiris as a boy was Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* of 1911–12, a sumptuous and hermetic work of exotica. Later he became friendly with its author who in 1922 was beginning to be appreciated by a few surrealists. In response to a letter praising a much denounced performance of *Locus Solus* Leiris received a note from his father's friend beginning: "Thank you, my dear Michel, for your curious and interesting letter. I see that, like myself, you prefer the realm of Conception to that of Reality."²

Leiris had begun the study of chemistry. But he soon came under the spell of Max Jacob, whose dire warnings against the poet's life seem only to have increased the young man's ardor. At the Café Savoyarde in Montmartre a group of dada and surrealist artists and writers regularly dropped in on Jacob, and it was there in 1920 that Leiris met his lifelong friends André Masson and Joan Miró. He became a regular at their studios on the rue Blomet. Masson, particularly, encouraged him to write, providing illustrations for his first texts. Through Miró, Leiris came to know Picasso,

with whom he formed a lifelong attachment. He met also Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the cubists' influential dealer who, a brother-in-law by marriage, would later join the Leiris household. His priceless gallery and collection, having been passed to Leiris and his wife during the Second World War to avoid confiscation as Jewish property, would form the core of the Galerie Louise Leiris, a major art institution in the postwar period. For many years Kahnweiler and the Leirises shared a large apartment on the Seine near Pont Neuf.

Through Masson, Leiris joined the surrealist group, while keeping a certain distance from its center, Breton, Eluard, Soupault, and Co. (Leiris has always been peripheral in organizations, while remaining intensely loyal to friends.) In 1925, rather uncharacteristically, he became a momentary hero at the famous surrealist banquet for Saint Pol Roux, shouting anti-imperialist speeches from an upstairs window, then descending into a hostile crowd where he was arrested and manhandled by the police.³ But such public displays of correct surrealist behavior were rare. During the twenties, Leiris concerned himself with poetry and with testing the limits of his own unsettled desires. A world of sexual obsessions, fetishes, brothels, and wild night-life is evoked with a kind of numb lyricism in *Manhood*. As a good surrealist Leiris recorded his dreams, and experimented with automatic writing. He started his *Glossaire* and wrote three more or less surrealist "narratives": *Le point cardinal*, *Grande fuite de neige*, and *Aurora*. These oneiric sequences pursued the metamorphoses of names and phrases, masks of a fragmented self fetishistically viewed as a "rendezvous of body parts." The influence of Nerval is evident, as is a magical or alchemical view of language derived from a variety of occult and exotic sources.

Beside these surreal fictions based on dream materials Leiris kept rather deadpan records of actual dreams, seen not as occult revelations but as waking *writing*. These were collected in 1945 and augmented in 1961 under the title *Nuits sans nuit et quelques jours sans jour* (*Nights as Day, Days as Night*). As Richard Sieburth nicely brings out in his selection and introduction below, Leiris's distinctive attitude toward dreams rhymes with his growing suspicion of the exotic. Avoiding the fabulous dream constructions of many other surrealists he cultivates a lucid, almost "objective," attention to (oneiric) dailiness.

Leiris was among the early defectors from surrealism during the schisms of the late twenties. By 1929 he had left the fold, along with Artaud, Queneau, and another close friend and important collaborator, Georges Bataille. The two struck a sympathetic chord when they met in 1924, and over the next two decades they pursued complementary research into the themes of transgression, sacrifice, the sacred, pollution, and various forms of *gaucherie*. They dedicated to one another their most important books on sexuality: *L'érotisme* (*Death and Sensuality*) and

Manhood. In the twenties both were exoticists, seeking among the Aztecs (Bataille) and in Africa (Leiris) alternatives to the reigning idealism of Western "Civilization."

In the twenties, jazz offered a source of revelation closer to home. Leiris, like many of his generation, found its apparently unchained rhythm and sheer theatrical presence irresistible. (See Section 5, below.) Raymond Roussel was wrong to say that he preferred the realm of "Conception" to that of "Reality." In fact Leiris was torn between the two poles and his life's work has been an endless, imperfect attempt to bridge the gap. A deep longing for human "contact," for "real" experience and erotic gratification, was continually blocked by a feeling of futility — an acute awareness of being condemned to a world of projected phantasms and simulacra, abstract, ideal substitutes for the objects of his desire. Leiris did not, like Roussel, respond by inhabiting a world of pure conception, submitting to strict protocols of composition and working only with their effects. While he shared Roussel's taste for the divinatory manipulation of language and like Bataille believed there could be no freedom apart from rules and constraints, Leiris continued to press "through" the screens that seemed always to separate him from life. He had married in 1926, a liaison often fraught with ambivalence. (But the marriage has endured for sixty years.) In 1929, feeling aimless and severely depressed, he entered psychoanalysis which he pursued until 1931. Then he bolted for Africa. Perhaps he could find there the direct human contact, the "freshness," lacking in a corrupt Europe.

During 1929 and 30 Leiris collaborated on a dissident surrealist journal edited by Bataille that combined art, cultural criticism and ethnography.⁴ *Documents* brought him into contact with ethnologists like Marcel Griaule, Paul Rivet, and Georges-Henri Rivière (Leiris's chief contact with the Parisian world of jazz, who would, with Rivet, play a crucial role in reorganizing France's ethnographic and folklore collections). Griaule was busy with preparations for a flamboyant museum-collecting and ethnographic expedition across the sub-Saharan rim. He offered Leiris a place on the "Mission Dakar-Djibouti." Leiris jumped at the chance, and his experience during almost two years of fieldwork was recorded in an extraordinary journal, *L'Afrique fantôme*. Two excerpts are translated in Sections 1 and 2 below, from the expedition's most important stopping places, the Dogon settlement of Sanga (in what was then the French Sudan) and Gondar, Ethiopia.

The author of *L'Afrique fantôme* sums up what he found in Africa: "Few adventures, research that initially excites him, but soon reveals itself too inhuman to be satisfying, an increased erotic obsession, an emotional void of growing proportions. Despite his distaste for civilized people and for the life of metropolitan cities, by the end of his journey he yearns for the return."⁵ The experience throws Leiris back on himself. There is no

escape, no authentic contact with Africa, only exotic phantoms. Finally, in the midst of studying a possession cult in Ethiopia he blurts: "I would rather be possessed than study possessed people!"⁶ He returns to Europe and to what J.-B. Pontalis has called his "interminable psychoanalysis," an attempt no longer to escape but rather – something slightly different from psychoanalysis – to account for himself in writing.⁷ *L'Afrique fantôme*, published in 1933, initiated Leiris's long, linked project of self-portraiture and analysis. During the mid-thirties he composed his perverse *Bildungsgeschichte*, a "Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility," *Manhood*. At the same time he maintained his participation in social science, as always from the margins, attending seminars by Marcel Mauss and Maurice Leenhardt, publishing articles on his African research, and working, on and off, on his thesis, *La langue secrète des Dogon*.

RHÉTORIQUE – érotique

Leiris continued to cultivate an "ethnographic" attitude. But the "other," or a sense of difference, was no longer sought in a place of romantic escape or in a discrete object of scientific research. Rather, it was the product of a peculiar *attention* to what was close at hand. Writing of Raymond Queneau, another friend and dissident surrealist, Leiris describes the attitude in question:

Raymond Queneau usually works at ground level as a prose writer, less as someone enamoured of the *elsewhere* than as an imaginative stroller on the paths and detours of the most down to earth reality which – an artist but without idealist tendencies – he shifts and unhinges in a way that makes it lose nothing of its immediacy. Instead of travelling in search of exoticism, scarcely knowing where we are, isn't it better to alter (distance, exoticize) what is nearby and that we know all too well? In sum, inverse the movement in a counter-exotic fashion – no longer depart from familiar shores for strange lands, but make the familiar suddenly swerve toward the strange. An operation whose instrument is language . . .⁸

But unlike Queneau – ethnographer/oneirographer of the suburbs – Leiris still felt the pull of non-Western realities. He remained deeply suspicious of Eurocentrism. Ethnographic work would still take him to Africa, and to the Caribbean – this time without illusions of escape. But it was only after World War II, with anti-colonial movements, that he was drawn again away from home.

In the late thirties he turned his attention to the near at hand, founding, with Bataille and Roger Caillois, a maverick and short-lived institution, the Collège de Sociologie.⁹ This alternative to academic social science

attempted to bring "exotic" topics, like sacrifice and the sacred, to bear on present actuality. Leiris's own chief contribution to the Collège (before resigning because of qualms about loose standards of evidence and the danger of founding a coterie) was an essay on "The Sacred in Everyday Life." In this transitional text, soon to appear in English translation,¹⁰ many of the topics later taken up in *La règle du jeu* are analyzed as components of a personal "sacré." Objects of unusual attraction and power (his father's revolver), dangerous zones (the racetrack), tabooed sites (the parental bedroom), secret spots (the W.C.), words and phrases with a special, magical resonance, and so forth—these sorts of data would evoke "that ambiguous attitude tied to the approach of something both attractive and dangerous, prestigious and rejected, that mixture of respect, desire and terror which can be taken as the psychological mark of the sacred."¹¹

In *L'Afrique fantôme* Leiris sharply questioned certain scientific distinctions between "subjective" and "objective" practices. Why, he wondered, are my own reactions (my dreams, bodily responses, etc.) not important parts of the "data" produced by fieldwork? In the Collège de Sociologie, he glimpsed the possibility of a kind of ethnography, analytically rigorous and poetic, focussed not on the other but on the self, its peculiar system of symbols, rituals, and social topographies. As this methodical research took fuller form in *Biffures*, during the early forties, the analogy with social science became less explicit. But the bridge between self-portraiture and ethnography, blatant in "Le sacré dans la vie quotidien," was an important one. Cultural analysis, the experience and method of fieldwork, oriented his approach to his own subjectivity. In fact, Leiris brought certain habits of note-taking he learned in Africa directly into his work of self-portraiture.

Leiris had been charged with organizing the Dakar-Djibouti expedition's scientific records. He kept scrupulous fieldnotes and descriptive labels on cards which could be classified, re-shuffled and analyzed. After his African experience, he began to collect similar cards which, like good fieldnotes, covered every relevant aspect of the complex reality in question (here, the field of his own subjectivity). His notes included things not understood, what Malinowski called the "imponderabilia" of actual life. Moreover, Leiris has recalled that the most valuable thing he learned from psychoanalysis, despite a later rejection of all purely psychological approaches, was the value Freud gave, especially in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, to small, seemingly banal facts.¹² Leiris's "method" for writing *Le règle du jeu* involved the methodical collection of a heterogeneous data base:

I have an enormous file which is constantly growing and where I note facts, memories, sometimes even aphorisms, ideas finally, things I rather confusedly feel are important to me and that should be used somehow,

but without knowing in advance just how they will be used, or how things will work out.¹³

In a giant "card game," a kind of patience, matches ("*marriages*") are made between similar cards, or cards of like value to the player. These are collected in piles which, recopied, with constant crossouts, yield unexpected associations. There is no overall plan, the rule of the game is to proceed card by card. Only when a passage is considered final does the player move on. Thus the final text is not written over to conform to a post-facto narration or analysis, but instead the work records, in its movement, the rhythm and manipulations of the writing—a divination or abduction.¹⁴ The result is an objective subjectivism, a realism based on facts (nothing made up, only connected and written over) portraying a process of research as it remembers, discovers, associates and arranges. Language is always both means and end, an autonomous, reflexive reality rather than simply a mode of representation or expression.

Leiris's realism excludes all fabulation. (He had once tried to write a novel, before *Manhood*, but found he was incapable of inventing characters distinct from himself.) Moreover, in his properly ethnological work, he also avoids any fictionalizing, or the importation of obvious "literary" elements. Throughout his mature writing one finds only the search for a complex lucidity and an almost documentary attention to facts of observation, language, and feeling. This attention simultaneously records and disorients, part of a realism that sees "facts" as performances, tropic productions, or heightened, cut-out elements (fetishes). Like the dreams of *Nuits sans nuit*, reality presents itself rhetorically. It is the result of *fixations*, simultaneously objective and erotic. The result is a writing, as Simone de Beauvoir has observed, always characterized by a peculiar mix of lyricism and distance.

The participant-observer strains toward presence, by means of detachment.

"[. . .] a straight nape, falling vertically from the back of my head like a wall or cliff, a typical characteristic (according to the astrologists) of persons born under the sign of the Bull: a broad, rather bulging forehead, with exaggeratedly knotty and projecting temporal veins . . . My eyes are brown, the edges of the lids habitually inflamed; my complexion is high; I am disconcerted by an irritating tendency to blush, and by a shiny skin. My hands are thin, rather hairy, the veins distinct; my two middle fingers, curving inward toward the tips, must denote something rather weak or evasive in my character."

In these passages, which open *Manhood*, Leiris's body becomes another symbolic artifact, an occasion for "oneirographic" description.¹⁵ The subject of *L'Afrique fantôme*, *Manhood*, *La règle du jeu*, *Nuits sans nuit*, and *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia* is less an intimate or private self, an inner soul revealed, than it is a kind of personal "culture," a collection of meaningful artifacts to be connected, understood, and rewritten.

OPÉRA — ses appeaux, ses oripeaux et son aura

For Leiris, writing itself comes to be, like the dream for Nerval, a "second life." But it is a lucid, waking practice, a research that includes dreams (stripped of any metaphysical privilege) along with various other categories of significant "data." Since the field of potential research includes professional ethnographic work, travels, friendships, daily experiences and political engagements, Leiris's writing reflects a tension between the centripetal pull of the personal pronoun "I," and the centrifugal attraction of others, events, history. Leiris, one of the most self-absorbed writers of any age in any language, is not solipsistic. Since his existence is not circumscribed as a fiction but is openly played out through social processes of language and writing, he endlessly confronts what is beyond himself.

Leiris continues to travel, to write on African art, on Ethiopian possession cults, on culture contacts, on the politics of folklore and ethnography. After World War II he emerges from the solitary card-game of *Biffures* to serve on an official commission for the reform of labor policy in colonial West Africa. He travels to the French Antilles and Haiti where, with Alfred Métraux, he studies Voodoo and culture contacts. He becomes a friend of Aimé Césaire and a publicist for the emergent Negritude movement. He serves on the editorial committee of *Les Temps Modernes*, writes for *Présence Africaine*, for UNESCO on racism and the diversity of cultures. In a new preface to *L'Afrique fantôme* (1951), a book judged subversive by the Vichy authorities and burned, he situates his former field journal within a complex of colonial attitudes, highlighting its excessive estheticism and radical-chic posturing. During the same year, 1950, he composes "L'Ethnologue devant le colonialisme," a lucid discussion of a social science inextricably involved in imperial power inequalities. *La Règle du jeu* begins to reflect these historical, "external" pulls. In Volume 2, *Fourbis*, Leiris melds the exploration of childhood memories that had dominated *Biffures* with recent travels and political commitments, probing the (irreconcilable?) conflict between his need for gratuitous poetic experience and the demands of political work. Volume 3, *Fibrilles*, turns on both the public experience of a trip to Communist China in 1955 and the private crisis of an attempted suicide.

Leiris's close involvement with the art world continues. He writes texts on Giacometti, Miró, Masson, Picasso, Duchamp, Wifredo Lam, and Francis Bacon. He also contributes essays on the work of Michel Butor, Queneau, Sartre, Roussel, Lévi-Strauss, Eluard, Alfred Métraux, Bataille, Césaire — nearly all of these texts emerging from personal relationships. (His oeuvre can be seen as a loose web of interpersonal ties.) Leiris attends the Havana Cultural Congress of 1968 and participates in the May rebellions of that year as well as in demonstrations supporting the rights

of immigrant workers.¹⁶ He continues his work at the Musée de l'Homme in a research and curatorial post in the "Department d'Afrique Noire." His daily routine is established: mornings of literary work at his home, Quai des Grands Augustins, afternoons of ethnology in his basement office at the Museum. He comes to regard this oscillation as emblematic of his life.

The relation of self-portraiture and ethnography, two poles of his writing, is crucial for Leiris. One activity looks inward, the other outward; one begins with the self, the other with different people. He keeps them apart, as distinct work-spaces, for if they become too close an effect of alternation and questioning is lost. (An oeuvre can be seen as a form of travel.) But the two activities are part of a common project. While Leiris's pursuit of an individual "savoir vivre" cannot exclude politics and history, conversely his ethnography, directly focussed on others, provides models or allegories for his personal identity. What is at stake in both domains is an elusive conception of "authenticity."

In some ideal circumstance both self and culture would be meaningful, present, and truthful without hypocrisy or constraint. Leiris always yearns for this condition. But he encounters mediation, rules, play-acting, and evasion everywhere, both in his own life and in the life of social groups. A vision of Africa, in the twenties, had seemed to promise real immediacy, spontaneous emotion and contact. But Leiris is disillusioned by his encounter with the realities of travel, colonialism, and abstract social science as well as by his discovery of duplicity among Africans, even those apparently "lost" in trance. His response is complex. It embraces artifice in order to transcend it.

Like Roussel, Queneau or Duchamp he is attracted to the idea that adherence to specific rules is the only route to novelty of expression (spontaneity and genius being romantic myths). Moreover, this attitude resonates with Bataille's principle of eroticism, that "fulfillment" presupposes lack, or violence, and that "freedom" is always dependent on the very constraints it violates (a principle confirmed, at a cultural level, by Mauss who commented in his lectures that taboos existed to be transgressed).¹⁷ Embracing the "rule of the game," Leiris does not, however, give up the search for a reality or presence beyond artifice. He is stubbornly, romantically devoted to a goal of immediacy, spontaneity, and "poetry." He never goes over to irony, semiotics, or rhetoric, though he feels their claims intimately. He persists in a "naïve" search for authenticity, but an authenticity always *vitiated* by equivocation, imperfect expression, ethical qualms. But this is the paradoxical source of a certain power, and even beauty. As Philippe Lejeune puts it, the attraction of Leiris's writing is "the extraordinary energy of a desire that, however thwarted it might be, does not renounce expression, but sees itself forced to always flee in advance, where discourse, at the same time prudent and daring, is exasperated by being able to touch the truth only lightly."¹⁸

In this permanently "exasperated" access to the real, Leiris appeals to erotic fetishism, "myth," and the discipline of the stage. The fetish is the luminous, charged object or moment, cut out of its "whole" context. (In fact it *produces* the effect of a wholeness.) It is an exterior, objectified crystallization of desire, something distant *and* miraculously close, erasing the gulf between inner and outer experience. The sense of erotic plenitude produced by fixation on the fetish is not, however, narrowly limited to sexual experiences; it gives a sense of intense reality to the commonest perceptions and encounters. For Leiris, Giacometti's sculpture powerfully embodies this charged presence. And in his recent sequel to *La Règle du jeu, Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia* (The Ribbon around Olympia's Neck), Leiris probes the expressive power of fetishism in many domains of writing and experience.

In a related fashion, Leiris uses the word myth to denote an access to the real that is not rational or representational, but evocative and performative. Among the sources for this understanding are the mythic inventions of André Masson, the ethnographic lectures of Maurice Leenhardt on Melanesian "lived myth," the *nouveau roman*, particularly the writing of Michel Butor, and his own research on possession cults in Ethiopia.¹⁹ The Ethiopian research is particularly revealing. In *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris is disturbed by the apparent insincerity of many of the possessions he observes. People go in and out of trance as if on cue, and they "use" their repertoire of spirits (zâr genies) for crass, personal gain – including economic exploitation of the ethnographer. Yet the psychic power of the zârs is undeniable. In the Paris twenties Leiris thinks of trance (like jazz) as a privileged form of abandonment and loss of self, a direct access to non-rational and emotional powers. But in Africa everything seems contrived and impure. He cannot know when anyone, including himself, is being really "sincere." Thus in 1933 *L'Afrique fantôme* ends with disillusionment. It is not until the mid-1950s that Leiris makes his peace with the ambiguous experience, in a monograph, *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar*. Here the presence of mythic powers is analyzed as "theatrical," an intense "lived theatre" where artifice is a means for controlling, and thus becoming, the role. The reality of trance is always to some degree staged, but its deceptions – like the "art" of a great actor – produce an undeniable presence, a reality finally transcending art.

Between 1933 in Ethiopia and the publication of his book on spirit possession in 1958, Leiris's research interests had shifted from Africa to the Caribbean. Doubtless the latter context – where all identities are hybrid and impure, where there are no unspliced cultural roots, and where peoples have historically had to "make themselves up" – helped open the ethnographer to a theatrical conception of authenticity. One sees his shift of emphasis, for example, in a recent conversation with Michael Hagger-

ty on Jazz (in Section 5, below). Leiris is drawn to Jazz less as a source of transcendence and pure emotionality (what it had been for him in the twenties) and more as an example of cultural impurity and creative syncretism. And here we see an important way that his ethnographic and personal research activities finally coincide. For what Leiris pursues in *La Règle du jeu*, a personal identity endlessly worked out, textually and rhetorically "played," is mirrored and confirmed by an open-ended view of culture as improvised, spliced, historically acted.²⁰

KNOCK-OUT ou K.O. — (autrement dit: "chaos")

But for Leiris all such performances are at best a *modus vivendi*. They merely cover up a deep, ineradicable fault. And if in his later writings he seems to achieve a troubled tranquility, the achievement occurs under a general sign of failure:

And so, a lot of noise for nothing. I've sweated blood and spat fire to end up, in my daily practice, as another of those bourgeois who think themselves progressive, an anthologized author who will perhaps be praised for his attempt at sincerity and exactitude of expression; and even for his ingenious connections and interweavings, in the absence of that special something which (for some) flashes in the slightest phrase, and which I believe to be the essence.²¹

The "special something" is an inspired, visionary poetry. Leiris never stops lamenting its absence. Indeed he finds that his only truly poetic gesture — a willingness to go all the way — is his attempted suicide. Otherwise he proceeds without "inspiration," shuffling and writing over his documentary note-cards, laboring to give form to the traces of a passing reality. As Denis Hollier finely observes, his turn to autobiographical prose after 1930 marks an abandonment of imagination, both surrealist and romantic, in favor of a "parti pris de réalisme." His oeuvre is a cenotaph, the tomb of an impossible poetry, a silent oracle.²² But in mourning his lack of inspiration, Leiris produces another kind of poetry, and like his friend Edmond Jabès, he finds himself writing a book whose words must endlessly paper over a void. Wholeness is denied to the real: a poetry of visionary imagination is replaced with a poetic prose severely ruled by games of language, history, and personality. This prose can only — and it is not nothing — turn or trope what is given by the real: the evidence of events, thoughts, dreams, words.

Words swerve. Leiris is a longtime fan of Fred Astaire, whom he once evoked as a kind of stylish automaton able, for a frantic moment, to be breathtakingly *present*, a dandy whose vestimentary elegance had

something tawdry, even corrupt about it. This "frivolity"—a costumed dance or excessive dressing in the face of malaise—defines what may still be possible in the domain of artistic "creation." For there is something splendidly frivolous about Leiris's latest book, *Langage tangage* . . . where it seems as if an old, punctiliously attired man has asked his intimate partner, language, to take just a few more turns around the floor, breaking suddenly into an awkward jitterbug or tango.

But a more poignant image of Leiris's career may be found in his recollection—ending the present collection—of a minor character from Aimé Césaire's play *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*. The ambassador Franco de Medina walks on stage, stutters some words, and is led away to his execution. His failure is complete. But in the performance described by Leiris, a skilled actor unexpectedly gives life to this pathetic role and for a moment, with a few burlesqued gestures, creates a real person.

TOTAL: le totem de tantale

The texts that follow are grouped thematically in six sections. While there is a very general progression from early to late writings, chronology is often violated. For example, the last-written passage, from *Langage tangage*, occurs in the first cluster. Leiris returns again and again to certain problems, and the sequence of selections below tries to show his oeuvre as a field of repetitions, juxtapositions, and variations. There are frequent shifts of voice: Leiris in different tones, interventions by friends and translators—an oeuvre aerated by others.

Leiris's "sentences" are peculiar objects. They often proclaim their artificial status and regularly transgress the taboo, learned by every schoolchild, against "run on sentences." One senses a certain hostility and fascination for syntax. The well-formed utterance, always a drastic selection of linguistic possibilities, is made to seem awkward, to stagger under excessive demands of meaning, allusion or qualification. Leiris's most complex constructions show a baroque process of thought, association, and analysis occurring *in writing*. He is suspicious of summary, peremptory expressions, preferring elaborate, careful, self-limiting performances. But there is also a subversion in this "precision" which frequently borders on belaborment and in extreme cases flirts with glossolalic overload. There can be no question, then, of breaking up Leiris's sentences for clarity of translation. As a matter of policy they have not been simplified, even though the transfer from French to English syntax may bring, inevitably, even more awkwardness.

Headings within sections are mine. Each piece's original title, or lack of title, can be determined from the reference immediately following it.

Leiris often uses ellipses and parentheses. Brackets are reserved for editorial cuts or clarifications.

NOTES

1. *Magazine Littéraire*, July 1985, p. 104.
2. Michel Leiris, "Conception et réalité chez Raymond Roussel," in R. Roussel, *Épaves* (Paris: 1972) p. 9.
3. See Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (New York: 1965) pp. 112-114.
4. See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol. 28, No. 4 (1981) pp. 548-553; also Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible Documents," *Brisées* (Paris: 1966) pp. 256-266.
5. On *L'Afrique fantôme* see James Clifford, "Interrupting the Whole," *Conjunctions* 6 (1984) pp. 282-295.
6. *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: 1951) p. 324. (See excerpt in Section 2 below).
7. J.-B. Pontalis, "Michel Leiris ou la psychanalyse interminable," *Les Temps Modernes*, December 1955, pp. 925-933.
8. Leiris, "Préface" to Raymond Queneau, *Contes et propos* (Paris: 1981) pp. 6-7.
9. See Denis Hollier, ed. *Le Collège de sociologie (1937-1939)* (Paris: 1979); Jean Jamin, "Un sacré collège ou les apprentis sorciers de la sociologie," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 68 (1980) pp. 5-30; Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," pp. 560-561.
10. Elizabeth Wing is translating the Hollier volume in which the text appears (pp. 60-74) for the University of Minnesota Press (1986 or 87).
11. Hollier, *Collège*, p. 60.
12. Leiris, "Propos recueillis par Madeleine Chapsal, 1966," in Pierre Chappuis ed., *Michel Leiris* (Seghers Poètes d'aujourd'hui, Paris: 1973) p. 116.
13. Leiris, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal, 1961," *Ibid.* pp. 112-113.
14. There are affinities with the science of the singular sketched out by Carlo Ginzburg in "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (1980) pp. 5-36.
15. "Oneirography," and the affinity of descriptive rhetoric with that of the vision and the dream are discussed by Michel Beaujour in "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981) pp. 27-59.
16. Jean-Pierre Faye, "Leiris and Militancy," in *Sub-Stance* 11-12 (1975) pp. 65-71. (This special issue on Leiris, edited by Jean-Jacques Thomas, is the fullest critical introduction to Leiris in English.)
17. Alfred Métraux, "Rencontre avec les ethnologues," *Critique* 195-196 (1963) p. 683.

18. Philippe Lejeune, "Glossaire," *Sub-Stance* 11-12 (1975) p. 127. See his *Lire Leiris* (Paris: 1975).
19. André Masson, "The Unbridled Line," in André Masson, *Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, no pagination); James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: 1982); Leiris, "Le Réalisme mythologique de Michel Butor," *Brisées* (Paris: 1966) pp. 215-238: ". . . the entire story is situated on the mythic plane, without ever betraying what I'm tempted to call its *vérisime* (truth effect) so close are we to the ground." (p. 236, on Butor's *La Modification*).
20. See especially; Leiris, "Folklore et culture vivante," in Robert Jaulin ed., *Le Livre blanc de l'ethnocide en Amérique* (Paris: 1973).
21. Leiris, *Frêle bruit* (Paris: 1976) pp. 287-288.
22. Quoted from *Manhood* by Denis Hollier, "La Poésie jusqu'à z," in *L'Tre des vents*, special issue on Leiris, Spring 1981, pp. 141-159.

THE PRINCIPAL WORKS OF MICHEL LEIRIS

- 1925 *Simulacre* (with lithographs by André Masson). Paris: Galerie Simon.
- 1927 *Le point cardinal*. Paris: Editions du Sagittaire.
- 1929- Many short essays in *Documents*. Paris. (Georges Bataille, ed.)
- 1930
- 1934 *L'Afrique fantôme*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1951, 1968, 1983)
- 1938 *Miroir de la taumachie*. Paris: G.L.M. Collection Acéphale. (Reprinted 1964, and 1981: Editions Fata Morgana)
- 1939 *L'Age d'homme*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1946, 1964, 1966, 1973)
- 1939 *Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses* (with lithographs by André Masson). Paris: Galerie Simon.
- 1943 *Haut mal*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1969)
- 1945 *Nuits sans nuit*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted and expanded, 1961)
- 1946 *Aurora*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1978)
- 1947 *André Masson et son Univers* (with Georges Limbour). Geneva, Paris: Editions des Trois Collines.
- 1948 *Biffures. La Règle du jeu. I*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1948 *La Langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga (Soudan français)*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie.
- 1950 "L'Ethnographe devant le colonialisme," in *Les Temps Modernes*, No. 58. (Reprinted in *Brisées*, 1966, and *Cinq études d'ethnologies*, 1969)