

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

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.

- 1951 *Race et Civilisation*. Paris: UNESCO. (Reprinted, *Cinq études d'ethnologie*)
- 1955 *Fourbis. La Règle du jeu. II*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1955 *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et Guadeloupe*. Paris: UNESCO.
- 1956 *Bagatelles végétales* (with engravings by Joan Miró). Paris: J. Aubier
- 1958 *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*. Paris: Plon. (Reprinted 1980, Le Sycomore)
- 1961 *Nuits sans nuit et quelques jours sans jour*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1961 *Vivantes cendres, inommés*. Paris: J. Hughes.
- 1964 *Grande fuite de neige*. Paris: Mercure de France.
- 1966 *Brisées*. Paris: Mercure de France. (Reprints 52 essays, prefaces and ephemera)
- 1966 *Fibrilles. La Règle du jeu. III*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1967 *Afrique noire: la Création plastique* (with Jacqueline Delange). Paris: Gallimard.
- 1969 *Cinq études d'ethnologie*. Paris: Gonthier, Denoël.
- 1969 *Haut mal, suivi de Autres lanciers*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1969 *Mots sans mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard. (Reprints *Simulacre*, *Le Point cardinal*, *Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses*, *Bagatelles végétales*, *Marrons sculptés pour Miró*)
- 1970 *Wifredo Lam*. Milan: Fratelli Fabbri.
- 1971 *André Masson, massacres et autres dessins*. Paris: Hermann.
- 1972 "Conception et réalité chez Raymond Roussel," in Raymond Roussel, *Épaves*. Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert.
- 1974 *Francis Bacon ou la vérité criante*. Montpellier: Editions Fata Morgana.
- 1976 *Frêle bruit. La Règle du jeu. IV*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1980 *Au verso des images*. Montpellier: Editions Fata Morgana.
- 1981 *Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1981 Preface to Raymond Queneau, *Contes et propos*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1985 *Langage tangage: ou ce que les mots me disent*. Paris: Gallimard.

## TRANSLATIONS

- 1947 *André Masson and His Universe*. Geneva: Trois Collines.

- 1947 *The Prints of Joan Miró*. New York: C. Valentin.
- 1951 *Race and Culture*. Paris: UNESCO.
- 1953 "The African Negroes and the Arts of Carving and Sculpture," in *Interrelations of Cultures*, Paris: UNESCO. (Reprinted 1971, Westport, Conn.: UNESCO)
- 1954 *Picasso and the Human Comedy*. New York: Harcourt Brace. (Reprinted 1976, *Picasso in Perspective*. G. Schiff, ed. New York: Prentice-Hall.)
- 1959 *Sculpture of the Tellem and the Dogon* (with Jacques Damase). London: Graphic Press.
- 1960 "Fans for the Bullfight," translated by Emile Snyder. *Folio*, Vol. XXV, No. 2. Bloomington, Indiana.
- 1964 "Conception and Reality in the Work of Raymond Roussel," translated by John Ashbery. *Art and Literature*, No. 2.
- 1968 ~~*African Art*~~ (with Jaqueline Delange). London: Thames and Hudson.
- 1968 *Manhood*, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Grossman. (Reprinted 1984, San Francisco: North Point Press)
- 1970 *Wifredo Lam*. New York: Harry Abrams.
- 1972 *Joan Miró*. New York: Tudor Publications.
- 1972 "The Unbridled Line," in André Masson, *Drawings*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 1975 "Nine Poems," translated by R. and T. Shattuck, and "Interview with Madeleine Gobeil," in *Sub-Stance*, Special Leiris Issue, Nos. 11-12. (Also contains critical articles, edited by Jean-Jacques Thomas)
- 1982 "Who is Aimé Césaire?" *Sulfur*, No. 5.
- 1983 *Francis Bacon: Full Face and Profile*. Translated by John Weightman. New York: Rizzoli.
- 1984 "On the Use of Catholic Religious Prints by the Practitioners of Voodoo in Haiti," *Evergreen Review*, No. 13.

Finally, spit, because of its lack of consistency, its indefinite contours, the relative imprecision of its color, its wetness, is the very symbol of *formlessness*, of what is unverifiable, of what can't be put into a hierarchy, the soft and sticky stumbling block which, better than any sort of rock, trips up the steps of everyone who imagines a human being to be something—*something other* than an unmuscled, hairless animal, the spit of a delirious demiurge who roars with laughter at having expectorated this conceited larva, this comical tadpole who swells up into a demigod's puffy meat . . .

"L'eau à la bouche," from *Documents*, 1929; *Brisées*, pp. 42-43.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

## PHANTOM AFRICA (EMAWAYISH)

Tr. by J. Clifford

*In the course of his ethnographic study of a possession cult in Gondar, Ethiopia, Leiris becomes erotically infatuated with Emawayish the beautiful "though a bit ravaged" daughter of Malkam Ayyahou, charismatic leader of a group of initiates possessed by "zâr" genies. (See Section 6, below, and the account in Manhood, 1984, p. 140.) His journal entry for 25 August, 1932, contains the following outburst: "Bitterness. Resentment against ethnography which makes you take so inhuman a position, that of an observer, in situations where it would be best to let go." Three days later, during an intense possession seance, Emawayish contrives to leave her mother, comes over to the bed on which Leiris is sitting and, in a gesture of apparent intimacy, places his hand under her armpit. The ethnographer is entranced by the songs she sings while possessed and wants her to write them down so that he and his Ethiopian co-worker Abba Jérôme can make translations. Six days later the following entries appear:*

31 August

During the morning, letter from Emawayish. She would be pleased if I made her a gift of a blanket. Quite a natural wish, following my courtly

declarations of devotion . . . I'll never accuse a native of venality. Just imagine how insanely wealthy a European must seem to such poor people and how they must look obsessively on his smallest objects of comfort, as if they were treasures!

Right away this afternoon I go with Abba Jérôme to see Emawayish and give her pens, ink, and a notebook so she can record for herself—or dictate to her son—the manuscript [of her songs], letting it be understood that the head of the expedition, if he is pleased, will present her with the desired gift.

Her maneuver of leaving her mother at the onset of her trance the other day may have had no other object than to get close and sit on my bed, the better to check out the blanket . . .

Just before dinner Lutten says in passing that he would like (and he speaks as if it were already done) to sleep with Emawayish. Although I'm preoccupied with her, I'm not in love with the girl; nor do I desire her. Still, Lutten's words torture me, for they make me reopen the wound which is still very much present despite my belief for the past few months that travel, the active life, had effaced it: impossible for me to be content like the others, to treat matters of love with nonchalance, impossible even to feel any enjoyment, ability only to invent incredible torments for myself.

Frantic intellectual activity in which I try especially to penetrate Emawayish's thinking so as to get a better grasp of her relations with her mother, transient desire felt by a young man [Lutten] with whom, by the way, I'm friends, but for whom making love is only a matter of pleasure or hygiene! Such are the elements in the balance; such the contradictory terms I'll never manage to reconcile in myself; this is the root of my awful unhappiness and of my disease. Petrified, certain that I will never, in any sense, be able to act, I weigh the import of this word: ETERNAL. A bullet in the head would be a good way to take care of everything: end the contradiction, avoid growing old, no longer suffer, and even accomplish (since I'm attached to this sort of thing) a perfectly elegant and proper gesture. I'll never pull it off—this single act—probably for reasons of pure cowardice.

But I'm also too isolated. I'm not getting any more letters. There's no one I can speak to from the bottom of my heart. I'm the victim of phantoms produced by what amounts to an internment; they're small phantoms, to be sure, that would melt away at less than a cock's crow but still terrible in spite of their emptiness since they touch my badly hidden wound.

Emawayish's words this afternoon when I told her, speaking of her manuscript, that it would be especially good for her to write down some love songs like those of the other night: *Does poetry exist in France?* And then: *Does love exist in France?*

1 September

Very bad night. First insomnia, then, very late, a little sleep. A dream of Z . . . [Leiris's wife], a dream I get some mail, which makes me feel better. Then suddenly, the smell of the herbs I've had scattered around my room enters my nostrils. Half dreaming, I have the sensation of a kind of swirling (as if reddening and turning my head I were doing the *gourri* dance characteristic of trance) and I let out a scream. This time I'm really possessed . . . But after noting this fact I sleep until 5 AM when [from a nearby military encampment] the Italian trumpet sounds an alert: a prisoner (one of the servants of the assassinated Colonel, a suspect in the murder) has just escaped . . .

During the day, though tired and enervated, I feel better. I realize I've been overworked, that I've been too caught up with research in a dangerous area. I begin to discern also a major cause of the violent pain that has afflicted me: a sudden recognition of my own doubts about what's been going on. The poetry is probably not as beautiful as I had thought, the possession states not as intense, perhaps boiling down to a few vague neurotic phenomena and also covering up quite a bit of merchandizing . . . But above all, and in contradiction to all this, an ardent sensation of being at the edge of something whose depths I will never touch, lacking among other things, an ability to let myself go as necessary, the result of diverse factors very hard to define but among which figure prominently questions of race, of civilization, of language.

An example that somewhat clarifies this conundrum also shows me the irreducible gap separating two civilizations: yesterday Emawayish casually mentions that she no longer washes her youngest son for fear that he will be attacked with an illness by *Rahiélo*. Now, *Rahiélo* is one of the principal zârs that possesses her mother . . . In saying this she indicates her belief that one of the spirits inhabiting the head of her mother is capable of killing her son. But she does not hold her mother responsible, complaining to her — when they converse — only about economic or family matters. In this way then, each person, Emawayish, her mother, Kassahoun the hunter (with the *abbigam* of the animal he has killed), Abba Jérôme, myself, we all finally have heads populated by little genies who probably control all our acts (one for each category) without our being in any way responsible. This is what follows from all my friends' actions and from all their words. And so kinsfolk, without ceasing to frequent one another, will keep arguing over sordid interests, men will steal and kill, women will prostitute themselves . . . An atmosphere as splendid as it is unbreathable. So it is for me at least, imbued whatever I do with a civilization that leads one to give everything a moral rather than a magical tint. And this is the great boundary I will never cross . . . For example, it's hard for me to believe that it's not me suffering and rambl-

ing on at this moment, that I am surely possessed by a bad genie — maybe a succubus —, and that in any event there would be no grounds — for example, if I'm feeling lighthearted tomorrow — for giving weight to the words I pronounce today, since tomorrow, inspired by a happier genie, I will no longer be the same. But this is what any one of my local friends would think of my present state.

The attackers of Wadadjé came officially to make their excuses. Three men in turbans.

Two memories. The first recent, from a song by Emawayish:

*You look at her neck, her breasts, her waist,  
Smiling, she kills. Don't believe she's a woman!*

The other one, older, was told to me about the sorceresses of Ségou by my old friend Mamadou Vad: "Once you've eaten their couscous you forget everything. You don't recall where you've come from, or why."

*L'Afrique fantôme*, 1934, pp. 358-360.

## MIRROR OF THE BULLFIGHT

*Tr. by J. Clifford*

Looking at a *corrida* one has the impression, despite the very great part played by chance, of being in the presence of an impeccably ordered ritual: the left side of things is expertly played with, more and more openly given place, which is to say defined and drawn out in a way that lets it abruptly destroy itself and yield to the right [to the law, *au droit*].

In strictly erotic matters it is not so, even less in the extended domain of love, where analogous elements are at play but always in a wild-state (constantly swollen outside their bounds) since they are too directly rooted in life to be dominated to this degree. Moreover we find neither the majestic ordering nor the optimistic finish of the *corrida*, which admits ambiguity only to resolve it almost immediately the way one cuts a gordian knot, and where the left, finally, is completely absorbed by the right.

Erotic excitation would probably not be possible without at least a confused idea of something supremely beautiful toward which we strain

## JAZZ

*Interview edited and translated by Michael Haggerty*

*Leiris in L'Age d'homme [Manhood, p. 109, tr. by R. Howard]: "In the period of great license that followed the hostilities [of 1914-18], jazz was a sign of allegiance, an orgiastic tribute to the colors of the moment. It functioned magically, and its means of influence can be compared to a kind of possession. It was the element that gave these celebrations their true meaning: a religious meaning, with communion by dance, latent or manifest eroticism, and drinks, the most effective means of bridging the gap that separates individuals from each other at any kind of gathering. Swept along by violent bursts of topical energy, jazz still had enough of a "dying civilization" about it, of humanity blindly submitting to The Machine, to express quite completely the state of mind of at least some of that generation: a more or less conscious demoralization born of the war, a naive fascination with the comfort and the latest inventions of progress, a predilection for a contemporary setting whose insanity we nonetheless vaguely anticipated, an abandonment to the animal joy of experiencing the influence of a modern rhythm, an underlying aspiration to a new life in which more room would be made for the impassioned frankness we inarticulately longed for. In jazz, too, came the first public appearances of Negroes, the manifestation and the myth of black Edens which were to lead me to Africa and, beyond Africa, to ethnography."*

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September 2, 1982

Michael Haggerty: I thought we might begin, if you'd like, by evoking your first encounter with jazz.

Michel Leiris: Yes, my first encounter with jazz goes back to 1918, before the war was over. At that time I used to go to a *music-hall* called Le Théâtre Caumartin where a black American jazz band, The Seven Spades, would play during the intermissions. They weren't the featured attraction; they weren't really on the bill, but they provided the entertainment during intermissions for the revue performing at the Théâtre Caumartin. There is a historical footnote which might interest you: I recall very clearly that one of the members of the orchestra (which, as their name indicates, consisted of seven musicians), was Vance Lowry who later stayed in Paris and played at the *Boeuf sur le Toit*. He became a Pari-



sian personality. He was one of the first black American jazzmen to come to France.

M.H. At that time was he playing banjo or saxophone?

M.L. Usually he played the banjo but I do recall occasionally hearing him play the saxophone. . . . I don't know if he died in Paris but I know he stayed here for many years.

M.H. During that same period Louis Mitchell's Jazz Kings were also performing in Paris.

M.L. After the Seven Spades, I heard a number of different jazz bands. I always liked jazz a great deal but I never was what one could call a connoisseur. I liked it, that's all.

M.H. But you evoked jazz in a very beautiful passage in *L'Age d'homme*. In that text you link it to dancing. The period immediately following the war was one when dancing was at the height of its popularity in France.

M.L. Yes, but to be truthful, during the shows at the Théâtre Caumartin, the public did not dance. It was purely musical. It was jazz. Except perhaps in clandestine night clubs, people didn't dance during the war. It wouldn't have been possible to do more than present a little jazz during intermissions without provoking a scandal or risking a ban. But after the war, with the vogue for *les surprises-parties*, I can say that, like most of the young people of my generation, I went dancing a great deal. We formed a small band of friends who went to the dance halls almost every night.

M.H. Was one of those places Le Bal Nègre, rue Blomet?

M.L. No, these were snobbish, high society places. Le Bal Nègre was much later. I can't give you an exact date but I think that Robert Desnos must have been one of the first to frequent Le Bal Nègre. In any case we didn't go there to dance. We went there to bask in the exotic ambiance, to listen to West Indian music and to watch the others dance.

M.H. Was its exoticism at least in part responsible for the fascination with jazz at this time?

M.L. Absolutely, exoticism played a part in it, without a doubt. People have often asked me about how I became an ethnologist and a specialist on Africa after the trip I made across Africa from Dakar to Djibouti with the Griaule Mission [1931-1933]. Since I am involved with a gallery of modern art many people believe that it was simply African art which led me to become an *Africaniste*. I agree that *l'art nègre* is largely responsible, but my true discovery of *nègrisme* was made when I discovered jazz. Jazz

was my first contact with what was called – what is still called – Negritude.

M.H. In *L'Age d'homme* you suggest that it was jazz which would "lead me to Africa and, beyond Africa to ethnography."

M.L. It's possible that I said that jazz brought me to ethnography, but that would be saying a lot. What is certain is that I enjoyed jazz as something exotic and non-European, as an affront to European music and art. What also encouraged me to become an ethnographer was the desire to know non-European civilizations out of disgust with European civilization.

M.H. At that time jazz was for you, and perhaps also for Georges Bataille, *la rencontre avec l'Autre* [the encounter with the Other].

M.L. I think that's correct. As far as I can remember Bataille was never especially interested in jazz, but in 1929 when Georges-Henri Rivière introduced us to the famous revue, *The Black Birds*, Bataille also became an enthusiast of that show.

M.H. Did you see Josephine Baker when she came to Paris with La Revue Nègre?

M.L. Yes, in 1925. I was enchanted by La Revue Nègre. It has often been said that in La Revue Nègre performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925, Josephine Baker danced with a belt of bananas. I don't believe it. Perhaps my memory is failing me but I believe that she did not begin wearing the banana belt until several months or even a year later when she appeared at Les Folies Bergères. It was during that engagement that the banana belt appeared. At the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées she was of course very slightly clad but there wasn't that kind of exoticism of the virgin forest that the banana belt suggested. Even though the banana is a cultivated fruit. . . .

M.H. Do you recall an erotic dance she performed with another dancer?

M.L. No, I don't remember that. I recall that in the 1925 production her principal partner was Louis Douglas. The show was charged with eroticism and yet remained very discreet.

M.H. I'd like to return for a moment to the idea of *la rencontre avec l'Autre*.

M.L. During my career as an ethnographer, first as a specialist on Africa and later on the West Indies, I have always been attracted to the Other who is not totally Other, the Other who appears *chez vous*. What I find fascinating in jazz is the Africanization of European music. In the same way, what has always interested me in the West Indies is the extraordinary mixtures. In West Indian culture

one finds African strains but they're entwined with French provincialism and many other things. Blends have always interested me; cross breeding has always seduced me.

M.H. Along with this encounter with the Other, there also was a rediscovery of the body—with Josephine Baker?

M.L. Absolutely.

M.H. Was it important that it be a black body, *un corps autre*?

M.L. Actually it was a very light body. Josephine Baker was a very light-skinned mulatto. According to accepted beliefs she was a Negro but she was not black at all, a little tanned that's all . . . It's possible that her light skin was responsible for her powerful attraction to the French public. For example, a pure blooded, truly black, Negro woman probably would not have been acceptable. She was perfect because she was just slightly colored . . . Now it's my turn. Since you are asking me questions, would you allow me to ask you one?

M.H. Of course.

M.L. I have a cherished memory from my childhood. When I was very small I recall seeing the famous Chocolat, I believe at the Nouveau Cirque. Chocolat, whose portrait Toulouse-Lautrec painted, was usually the stage partner of . . .

M.H. . . . Footit.

M.L. Yes, Footit and Chocolat. Was Chocolat a member of the Joyeux Nègres in Paris in 1902 that you mention in your Chronology?

M.H. Perhaps, but I'm not really sure. It was at that time that the fad for the cakewalk was launched in Europe.

M.L. The cakewalk was the classic dance, so to speak.

M.H. As Georges-Henri Rivière has demonstrated, the cakewalk was derived from the English contra dance. In much the same way that Black Americans had creatively deformed European music they changed the British contra dance into their own step, the cakewalk . . . Another aspect that you and Georges-Henri Rivière have underscored is the relation between jazz and the sacred. The Belgian poet Robert Goffin in one of his poems published in 1922 called jazz "the most beautiful *Te Deum* in the world." In *L'Age d'homme* you claim that these "fêtes" after the war had a religious significance. In your provocative review for *Documents* of some of Duke Ellington's records you write: "At present jazz represents the true sacred music, in other words the music most capable of putting a crowd into a state of trance, which is almost like saying it is the only music."

M.L. Yes, although I won't disclaim it, when I see that statement now, I must admit that I was a little bit carried away. "The only music," no, it didn't take very long for me to abandon that idea. In any case there is the reservation, "almost like saying it is the only music" which means that I wasn't carrying it to such an extreme . . . What I write in that text is based on the idea of trance I had at the time. It was probably a simplistic view of the sacred but, for me the sacred *par excellence* was whatever was capable of evoking a trance-like state. At that time what was the music most capable of provoking a trance? Jazz. Hence, jazz was the true sacred music. Obviously there is a taste for paradox and a sense of provocation . . . Another striking aspect is mentioned by André Schaeffner in his book on jazz [published in 1926] which I barely remember. Jazz was not just a musical performance, it was also a visual show. Drummers would juggle their sticks. There was a kind of protocol: soloists would stand up, they would hold their instruments in a spectacular way. There were many aspects of the performance which weren't essential to the music, but were there for the show. It was almost a cross between a concert and a ballet, almost like a total work of art or music which overtly included gestures.

M.H. In an article on Albert Giacometti . . .

M.L. Giacometti, yes, there is an allusion to the *Black Birds* in the article on Giacometti.

M.H. You evoke the idea of crisis. You speak of certain very powerful moments and one of those moments is the appearance of a black woman . . .

M.L. Yes, a girl from the *Black Birds* with a huge bouquet of roses . . .

M.H. . . . damp roses, on a street in Montmartre . . .

M.L. Well, she was very black. She wasn't at all like Josephine Baker. This black girl, pretty, smiling, apparently happy, carrying a large bouquet of roses – this was a marvellous apparition.

M.H. The *Black Birds* revue seems to me the one which had the most impact on you?

M.L. Yes, I think that's true. From the point of view of artistic quality, I think the *Black Birds* revue was far superior to the Revue Nègre with Josephine Baker. In fact the two aren't really comparable.

M.H. During that same period did you go to the jazz nightclubs around Pigalle and Montmartre?

M.L. Yes, of course. I didn't go there systematically every evening but I used to go to them quite frequently. The one I was at most often

was called Le Grand Duc. The proprietor was an American colored woman, nicknamed Bricktop. You have certainly heard of her. She was a fascinating person, truly an astonishing individual. She must be at least ninety years old now.

M.H. Do you recall any of the orchestras that played in the clubs?

M.L. At Bricktop's the show simply consisted of a set of her songs and during a certain period of time there was another singer, much younger than Bricktop, named Virginia West, who would also sing. That was all the organized entertainment they had. But what was marvelous was that at about 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, when the musicians had finished their work in the different clubs they would come to Bricktop's to have supper and to play music for their own enjoyment. That was wonderful.

M.H. Just after the Second World War Sartre dedicated *La Putaine Respectueuse* to you. The play treats the racial situation in the South of the United States. More recently you published a pamphlet on racism commissioned by Alfred Métraux. Is there any link between this problem and your interest in jazz?

M.L. I have never in my life been racist but my reasoned and militant antiracist stance is something I adopted later. Spontaneously I felt an attraction toward Blacks and was immediately biased favorably toward them. I realize now that it was a kind of reverse racism, because Blacks are no more *sympathiques* than any other group. Like with any group of people there are wonderful individuals and difficult individuals. I was extremely naive to believe that Blacks were innocence personified. (Laughs). I never republished or anthologized a review of King Vidor's film *Hallelujah* published in *La Revue du Cinéma*, because I was embarrassed by it. I realized many years later that this was a thoroughly racist article, based on all the stereotypes of Blacks: "the sensual Black," "the illogical Black," etc. I was simply taking these stereotypes and presenting them in a positive light rather than giving them their usual negative connotation. That's the reason I never republished this article.

M.H. Do you recall any of your contemporaries, say Philippe Soupault or Robert Desnos, writing about jazz?

M.L. I believe that Soupault did but I can't recall anything by Desnos. Desnos was especially involved with *Le Bal Nègre*. He particularly liked South American and Cuban music. He even wrote a preface to Alejo Carpentier's article on Cuban music published in *Documents*. I remember listening to records of the Portuguese fado at his house. He loved that and perhaps also flamenco music, but I am not sure. I like flamenco a great deal, but not as much as

jazz. The flamenco is very beautiful but it has remained a folk music. What I find so striking about jazz is that it began as a truly folkloric music and then had the incredible development we all know. I think that must be a unique occurrence.

M.H. Have you followed the developments in jazz since the twenties?

M.L. Somewhat. I was never a true aficionado, never someone who is up on everything or who rushes out to hear the latest musician. I was never like that. But I do recall the indignation I felt over the attacks against Cab Calloway by people like Hugues Panassie. Panassie was an impossible pedant and a sectarian critic who talked about jazz in a very solemn manner. It was absurd. He was more tedious than most classical music critics who speak in terms of "the sublime." In any case critics like Hugues Panassie railed against Cab Calloway, calling his music commercial jazz. I don't believe that I have ever seen anyone captivate their audience the way Cab Calloway did. I have never seen anyone who was able to put an entire hall full of people in a state verging on trance the way Cab Calloway did at La Salle Pleyel. Perhaps it was in part his scat singing that created such a powerful effect on his audience. I adore scat singing. It has a dizzying, giddy effect on you . . . Of course I saw Ellington and Armstrong at the Salle Pleyel. Count Basie is also someone I like very much, because his music is very discrete, just a few notes on the piano. My family and I are very close to Count Basie's impresario, Norman Granz. Every time that Granz organizes a concert in Paris we attend. So we've heard Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald many times.

M.H. After World War II did you go to the nightclubs around Saint-Germain-des-près?

M.L. Of course. I heard Claude Luter and perhaps Boris Vian playing pocket trumpet. I used to go to Saint-Germain-des-près occasionally, never as often as Sartre or Queneau.

M.H. The bands at that time were playing dixieland or New Orleans style?

M.L. Exactly, they were playing New Orleans style and that's what I didn't enjoy. I felt that there was very little interest in limiting yourself to a historical recreation of jazz during its golden age in New Orleans, the way Claude Luter did . . . To be truthful, I enjoyed much more the music that Wiener and Doucet performed at Le Boeuf sur Le Toit. Of course it wasn't really jazz; it was "inspired by" jazz. Wiener and Doucet did something that Luter never did. They invented a style of Parisian jazz which was pretty and original.

- M.H. Did you see Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band at the Salle Pleyel?
- M.L. Dizzy Gillespie's orchestra was one of the big bands that impressed me most. He seemed to have brought about considerable stylistic innovations. At the time it seemed to be very exotic music. It was unsettling. We seemed to be carried away.
- M.H. Are there other jazz musicians that you like?
- M.L. Among the more recent musicians there is someone whom I have always liked a great deal, that's Archie Shepp. One of the most extraordinary things that I have ever seen or heard was a concert in Algiers in 1969. There was a congress for African unity and Archie Shepp came, but as usual he was very unreliable, very eccentric. He made all of us wait for the longest time. Each time his concert was scheduled it would be postponed and each time we would be disappointed. Finally one evening in a movie theater in Algiers, Archie Shepp showed up with three musicians and Ted Joans, the poet and former Black Panther who spends much of his time in Africa and who stops by to see me when he is in Paris. There was an enormous collective improvisation. Along with Archie Shepp and his musicians, Ted Joans recited a poem, and there were musicians and singers from just about every region of Algeria. It was a fabulous kind of happening. They managed to keep all of this together. Of course it was kind of *cacophonique* but nowadays we're somewhat accustomed to dissonances. It was absolutely fantastic, one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen or heard.

## THE CARIBBEAN TURN

*In L'Intention poétique Edouard Glissant, the Martinican poet, novelist and essayist, underlines the importance of Leiris's post-war research in Haiti and the French Antilles. "Leiris's effort will consist in moving ethnographic practice toward the study of real contacts: in this perspective he reconciles the search for self and the search for the other, positing their interrelation once they have been clearly separated. He will work out in the domain of reality that dialectic formerly de-formed (in the imaginary) by his first books. Two visits to the Antilles confirm his intention to sound out there the contacts of civilizations. These countries offer a*

## SECTION 6 PRESENCE

### LASSO

*Tr. by J. Clifford*

Like the ribbon at Olympia's throat, the black on white lines I write should always make something present. Yet my difficulty isn't so much that. Rather it's the problem—more general and not just one of expression—of how to catch things that for me are present enough to be communicated, as if a lasso could encircle them in just the right place, making others feel their presence.

Working primarily at the stage of capture, not of binding, the lasso obviously has it over the ribbon.

And doesn't this lasso always have to snare something *wild* (brute, ~~bare~~, untouched, really stubborn) both outside and inside me?

From *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia*, 1981, p. 203.

### FRED ASTAIRE

*Tr. by Lydia Davis*

Fred Astaire in a black suit and a top hat, Fred Astaire bare-headed in a tuxedo, Fred Astaire in Prince of Wales check and a boater, Fred Astaire in a bowler hat with an umbrella, Fred Astaire in a fedora without gloves, Fred Astaire in a double-breasted suit wearing gloves, Fred Astaire in shirtsleeves, Fred Astaire in a sweater, Fred Astaire in a travel overcoat with a suitcase, Fred Astaire knotting his cravat, Fred Astaire pulling at his suspenders, going into a restaurant, waiting in the rain, juggling with his cigarette lighter, taking a walk in the country, courting a woman, there is a whole gallery of Fred Astaires, we see him at night and in the daytime, in winter and in spring, in comfortable furnished rooms or on the pavement, in convulsions, humming, stretching or jumping, his face consumptive, but his eyes laughing, his smile wide between the tense features of an alcoholic, and with his look of a hare-brained nice guy and that inimitable distinction which only certain regally dressed hooligans can aspire to. "There was some need of our dry air," said Vaché. "A



cemetery for uniforms and liveries," said Marcel Duchamp. And Rimbaud spoke of "the cruel bearing of tawdry finery," while occupying himself with quite other matters and obviously never doubting that one day there would exist this severe jacket that suddenly becomes delirious, these shoes of beautiful quality leather that suddenly go into a trance and strike the floor as though they wanted to defy it or enrage it, this fine silk handkerchief lying over a heart that suddenly begins to bleed, for this store window mannequin, this automaton, this sylph, is also a man, and all his luxury, his multifarious outfit of costly odds and ends, his little idiosyncrasies, will not prevent him from falling in love sometimes, or becoming bored.

One of the most intense aspects of the modern malaise is embodied by Fred Astaire, this marvellous dancer and slightly macabre clown who is so well dressed (whose clothes are just skimpy enough to make him look a little shabby, but at the same time ample enough to make him look like an emaciated starveling and for him to become heartrending, if the song falls apart), and when I saw him dance in London in *The Gay Divorcee* about a year and a half ago, he reminded me irresistibly of the drawings that one of my friends and I used to scribble in our notebooks during the war and that all depicted perfectly elegant skeletons, some civilian, others military — the expression of a very special variety of *frivolity*.

"Fred Astaire," from *La Bête noire*, No. 1, 1935; *Brisées*, pp. 55-56.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

## ACTED THEATRE AND LIVED THEATRE IN THE ZAR CULT

*Tr. by J. Clifford*

*What follows are summary passages from Leiris's most developed scholarly account of his research on spirit possession undertaken in 1933 in Ethiopia: La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar, 1958. (See also the passage from L'Afrique fantôme translated in Section 2 above.) The present excerpt omits the frequent illustrative footnotes contained in the book.*

"The ability, above all, to believe every lie." This is the principal gift that the great romantic historian Michelet, toward the end of his study of sorcery in medieval times and the *ancien régime*, can confidently attribute to the sorceress. Now, among the facts of different kinds I was

able to observe while living in close proximity with a *bâla zâr* group, if there were many concerned with possession where the sincerity of the principal participant can hardly be doubted, there are as many others where this sincerity is strongly questionable. A patient like Yasi Araq, afflicted by a synovial discharge, was in great pain each time she performed the *gurri* [a dance that announces the onset of trance] and it is clear that she would not have gesticulated in so painful a way had she not been animated by profound faith in the *zâr's* power. Another patient of Malkâm Ayyahu, who was probably consumptive and of whose death I learned during the course of my research, also gave herself over to practices (trances, ablutions, etc.) that were certainly made too painful by her condition to allow of any dismemberment on her part. When the *alaqâ* Enqo Bâhrey is terrified to see Malkâm Ayyahu amuse herself pinching people in the style of Azzâj Deho [a *zâr* spirit], it may all be a harmless game for the healer, but for the initiate at least the fear is not faked, showing that he's quite convinced of the possible harmful results of such mimicry. Inversely, it is hard to believe that Malkâm Ayyahu is being completely sincere when, for example, she is possessed by Sânuqit at the exact moment this *zâr* is supposed to preside over the serving of the beer, having just been reminded by the whisper of a nearby accomplice. And without being able to accuse her of actual trickery (it being understood that a possession state is not necessarily spontaneous but is quite often brought on by ritual needs, with the help of methods like chants, hand clapping, or other evocative procedures) one can still be struck by her consistent success when circumstances require that a certain *gênîe* be present in her or in one of her initiates. Even if one excludes actual trickery, it is scarcely conceivable that opportune possessions can be so regularly obtained without a certain complaisance or willingness to play along. And what are we to make of a case like that of Abicu's friend who was ultimately willing to fake the *gurri* characteristic of her friend's *zâr* in the certitude that by so doing she would successfully appropriate the invoked spirit? As we have already seen, the possessed frequently accuse each other of fraud; for such suspicions to arise so commonly in relations between *bâla-zârs*, that is between people who are far from likely to be skeptics, *a priori*, in this domain, it must be that their suspicions arise either from their personal experiences as participants (aware of their own complaisances) or else from observations they have made in cases where the trickery was so clear that even they were not duped, whatever their respect for what is manifested under the guise of the *zâr*.

Although lying about *zâr* matters is frequently denounced, as much by believers as by those who maintain a distance from the cult, it remains true that among the faithful a belief in the authenticity of possessions never seems to be seriously impaired either by the marked cases of deceit observed in others (and even the eventual frauds they may be the first to

recognize in themselves) or by the "complaisance" they know from their own possession experience as they get used to being "taken" on demand, so to speak, by the genie appropriate to the occasion. An initiate like Abieu may declare in a temperamental moment, "If the zâr exists, let's lock the doors and windows and burn the house and all the zârs!" But her burst of impiety, from all appearances, goes no further: punished for her insolence by immediately being struck by the zâr (scenario into which she enters) she will participate in the evening *wadâgâ* as if nothing had happened, as well as taking part in the other gatherings that will occur in the coming days. Similarly, when Asâmmanac declares that the *dankarâ* (war dance) is "kid stuff" her critique doesn't involve the essence of her faith, since she adds immediately that the same isn't true of the *gurri* by which one is "dominated." To whatever extent possession is a lie, apparently for the initiates it is at least a lie they believe as a whole, accepting it overall even if it is not always and in all respects free of contestation. Alongside those cases where the lie seems preponderant and where it would be proper to speak of acted theatre, there are cases in which the reality of the possession is not in doubt either for the main participant or for the assistants and which correspond to what may be called lived theatre. Seen another way, this may in fact be acted theatre but with a minimum of artifice and free of any intention to impose on the spectator. [ . . . ]

Essentially based on ecstatic techniques and directed toward the satisfaction of individual interests (curing of ills, success in business, etc.) much more than toward a general good even limited to one class of society, directed, moreover, by specialists openly paid by their clients (although the interested party can save face by receiving payment not in his own name but in that of one of the genies possessing him), this cult which is officially condemned but widely practiced and whose collective character alone justifies the title of religion instead of pure magic, includes an element equally discrediting and attractive: the theatrical aspects that are much more apparent than in properly religious ceremonies, either Christian or Muslim. For in the zâr cult we see the intervention — in the person of possessed individuals who assume their roles — of entities who are not simply mythic or legendary beings but out-and-out characters presenting themselves before an audience, using a characteristic language and in many cases their special emblem, the *fukarâ* or motto (a fairly free collection of stereotypes that make one think of homeric epithets), as well as their own gestures, ways of behaving, and in many cases vestimentary gear appropriate to their assigned nature, all of them having, finally, their peculiar tastes and sometimes even quasi-scenic requirements with regard to lighting — characters thus hardly different, except by their function, from those produced in the most traditional forms of our theatre.

Between the possession one could call authentic (spontaneous or induced but undergone in entire good faith, seen in a magico-religious

perspective where trance does not depend on any conscious decision on the part of the patient) and what one could inversely call inauthentic possession (deliberately simulated to make a show of oneself or to exert a pressure on another for the sake of material or moral gain) there are too many intermediaries, thus making the boundary difficult in practice to trace. In quite a few cases, for example, possession provides the possessed person with an alibi allowing him to utter words or accomplish acts from which he would refrain if he had to answer for them in his normal personality; does he avail himself of this alibi in a premeditated way (in which case his possession would be play acting, since he has arranged the scenario himself) or does he limit himself to taking advantage, more or less lucidly, of a situation he hasn't created (in which case, even though his good faith is not total, it would be imprudent to accuse him of trickery)? On the other hand, doesn't the patient for whom possession represents a step toward healing and who performs its gestures passively the way he might follow a medical prescription also act with a certain bad faith, without in any way lessening the fact that he aims solely to return to health and not to make an impression on those who watch him? Aside from the fact that his goal is serious and free of any notion of a game, does his case differ markedly — with respect to the possession's authenticity — from the case of a patient who finds trance to be a pleasure and who, as is usual among the women, dreams from early morning on (as in other climes one might dream of a ball) of the *wadâgâ* where she knows she will find satisfaction? In one case as in the other, possession is at least sought out and the *zârs* coming into play are personages incited there either by an honest desire for healing or else by a more frivolous thought of the pleasures they can immediately afford. Apparently these intermediary cases are by far the most numerous and thus we are justified in calling *zâr* possession — at least as openly practiced in Gondar in 1932 and 33 — a lived theatre, not an acted theatre or the expression of a collective delirium.

Lived by the actor (who has no difficulty, as we say, getting into the role, encouraged as he is by the ambiance and by his own belief in the *zâr* as a real spirit normally manifesting itself through possession), this strange brand of theatre which can never confess its theatrical nature is lived, equally, by the spectator. From moment to moment this person can also, in effect, be possessed, and in any event he is never a pure spectator, for not only does he contribute to the evocation of the spirits with hand-clapping or singing, but once they have "descended" he has commerce with them and is far from being kept at a distance by those who incarnate them. Even if he is not possessed in his turn and intervenes only secondarily, the spectator thus put on the spot participates in an event and lives it with its protagonists instead of being simply a passive witness. Thanks to this participation by all, this osmosis between actors and audience, such manifestations (though broken off from the ordinary course

of things) do not situate themselves like normal theatrical productions in a special space where the existences that unfold are separated from others, finding themselves therefore at the margin of life. What would seem to be at stake, in short, are privileged moments where collective life itself takes theatrical form.

[. . .] In a general way then, it is probable that if the theatre as such possesses a certain virtue of *katharsis* or "purgation" of the passions (less harmful once they have been exteriorized in scenic action), then from this perspective how much greater must be the virtue of a theatre where the person, far from remaining confined in passivity or losing itself in pure play, is completely engaged and even in some degree able to invent for itself the scenes whose protagonist it becomes. Such is the case for the gatherings and ceremonies of the zâr cults, and it seems legitimate to believe that the initiate obtains from them at least a certain euphoria, a positive benefit that can only produce an attachment to these practices, however discouraging their results may be in other domains. It seems we are touching on what gives magic such great force despite the denials continually inflicted by experience: the affective elements mobilized, with their stock of myths and images as well as the share of drama and performance they contain.

From Chapter 5, "Théâtre joué et théâtre vécu dans le culte des zâr," pp. 89-103.

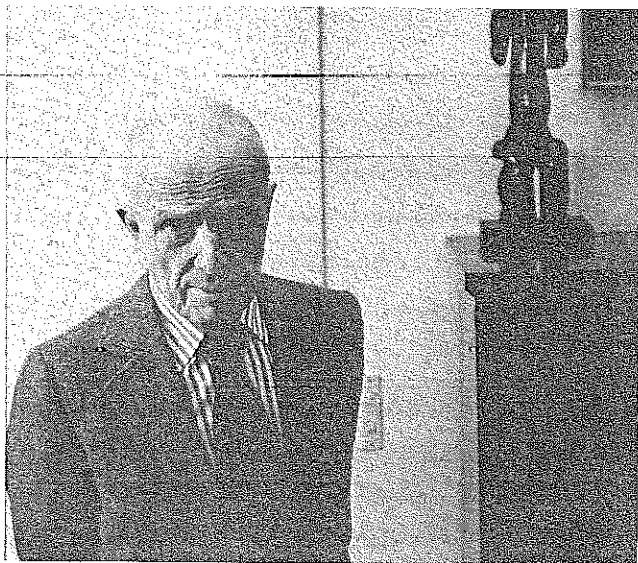


Photo credit/Christian Gauffre

Leiris in his Paris apartment, 1982.

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