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0521495741 - Michel Leiris: Writing the Self - Sean Hand

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## *Introduction: the deaths of Michel Leiris*

‘Michel Leiris est enfin mort.’<sup>1</sup> *Libération’s* reaction to Leiris’s death at Saint-Hilaire on 30 September 1990, aged 89, may initially have seemed like a cruel valediction, and one emphasizing all the ‘brutality of fact’ that Leiris himself admired in exemplary painters of modern sensibility, such as Picasso and Francis Bacon. The world was evidently not listening to the increasingly muted meditations of a twentieth-century Montaigne: the same issue of the newspaper was taken up mostly with the geopolitics of the post-cold war fallout, applying linguistic analysis to President George Bush’s statement to the United Nations about Kuwait, Iraq and the Arab–Israeli conflict, psychoanalysis to the projection and demonization of Saddam Hussain, and something approaching ethnography to the preparations for the opening of ‘Eurodisneyland’. This unconscious and discursively unremarkable use of what had once been revolutionary practice in the hands of Leiris could be read by us as the ultimate compliment and a crowning of his work; more realistically, though, it here betokens his survival into an age of complete mediatization and globalization against which his aesthetic and political endeavours had always struggled, and in which Leiris had perhaps come at the end to represent literally the last of a dying breed. The brutality of *Libération’s* phrase therefore feels mixed also with a sense of relief and even pity, for the inevitable not to say overdue passing of a torturously complex voice in an age of simplified and simultaneous commentary.

The rest of the article, however, and the remaining synopses and testimonies, extending over the issue’s first six pages, and drawing on the judgements and recollections of Lévi-Strauss, Marc Augé, Jack Lang, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, makes clear how the phrase was intended in fact to summarize the heroic endurance of Leiris’s work, its vital cumulative contribution to twentieth-century French writing, and its canonic status as the exemplary autobiographical practice of the previous ninety years. The writer who, in Mathieu Lindon’s words,

had remained all his life a ‘marginal’ to the point of being ambiguously described as ‘Leiris fantôme’ (p. 3), whom Lévi-Strauss described as ‘un phénomène à part’ (p. 4), and whom Marc Augé confined to the past as ‘un écrivain d’une certaine époque’ (p. 4), was therefore also hailed more historically as ‘un grand maître’ by (Jack Lang, p. 6), ‘exemplaire’ and ‘remarquable’ (Maurice Blanchot, p. 6), and ‘incontestablement l’un des grands écrivains du siècle’ (Claude Lévi-Strauss, p. 4).

The brutal facts governing the primary subject of Leiris’s work, namely his own personal life, can be swiftly and banally established. Born in Paris on 20 April 1901 into a comfortable middle-class family (his father being a stockbroker’s clerk who advised, among others, Raymond Roussel), and the youngest of four children, the eldest of whom died in childhood, Michel Leiris graduated eventually (with some counselling by Max Jacob) from studies at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, before associating himself via André Masson with the Surrealists, and producing from 1924 on a series of surrealist poems, narratives, and dream notations. He subsequently acted as ‘secretary–archivist’ on the 1931–3 Dakar–Djibouti ethnographic expedition led by Marcel Griaule, the experience of which generated the transgressively reflective ethnographic journal *L’Afrique fantôme*, published in 1934. On his return, interrupting his psychoanalysis and becoming a CNRS research assistant, he eventually joined the staff at the Musée de l’Homme, where he was to spend his entire career until retirement in 1971 (replaced in one account by a computer), as director of the department for sub-Saharan Africa. Related by marriage to the cubist art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, whose collections and exhibitions after the second world war gravitated around the Galerie Louise Leiris, Leiris also consistently published throughout the rest of his life a series of appreciative and involved essays and monographs on key painters and artists, many of them close friends who themselves produced portraits of Leiris, including Picasso, Miró, Laurens, Masson, Lam, Giacometti and Bacon. As a committed intellectual, he was in 1928 briefly a member of the Communist Party, contributed to the journals *Critique sociale* and *Documents*, and co-founded with Georges Bataille the Collège de Sociologie. After the war, he co-founded with Jean-Paul Sartre and others *Les Temps modernes* in 1945, was one of the signatories of the *Appel des 121* concerning the right to insubordination during the Algerian war, supported the movement of May 1968 and, with Simone de Beauvoir, helped to direct the Association of Friends of the Maoist paper *La Cause du peuple*. Such commitment did not prevent Leiris from also noting his love of

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opera, whether in the form of private reviews and reflections, or in the mythographic *mises-en-scène* of his autobiographical works. And throughout all this time, of course, Leiris the writer tenaciously produced a continually evolving body of writing, including surrealist-inspired poetic texts, ethnographic studies centring on language and possession in sub-saharan Africa and the Caribbean, and above all the work for which he has become known more widely, a remarkable collection of autobiographies. These include not one but two henceforth classic texts of autobiography: the terse and corrosive one-volume *L'Âge d'homme* (1939), inspired methodologically and ethically by ethnography, psychoanalysis and existentialism; and the sinuous and labyrinthine four-volume *La Règle du jeu* (1948–76), wherein immense temporal prolongation and minute linguistic analysis brought the art of autobiography to a new pitch of self-conscious sophistication and phenomenological registration, driven by a traditional apprehension of cowardice, failure and death. As *Libération's* phrase suggests, the work finally met its fate. Michel and Louise Leiris remained childless, and her death preceded his by just over two years. Michel Leiris was cremated on Thursday 4 October 1990 at 11.45 am, and placed in Père-Lachaise's columbarium.

These facts, barely adumbrated, suffice to change the resonance of *Libération's* blunt phrase. As part of a consciously public oration, rather than as a private dismissal, the newspaper's reaction summarizes how Leiris's writing, in part by virtue of its temporal endurance, had become synonymous with the evolution of key twentieth-century cultural movements, and in effect salutes the heroic persistence of a practice which wove a complex of aesthetico-political ideals raised by different disciplines into an exemplary artistic conscience. In addition to the instances of intellectual collaboration mentioned above, Leiris worked actively on such key journals as *Minotaure* (1934), *La Bête noire* (1935–36), *Présence africaine* (1948–55), *Critique* (1955), *Cahiers d'études africaines* (1960–90), and *Gradhiva* (1986–90). Indeed, through obsessive concentration on Leiris's autobiographical output, it is sometimes overlooked how intensely collective Leiris's work also was, the list of active collaborators including at the very least Breton and Aragon, Bataille and Souvarine, Rivière and Griaule, Sartre and Lévi-Strauss, Métraux and Césaire. In the course of these fraternal undertakings, Leiris's work gradually assumed an encyclopaedic weight and resonance, recording both as professional *prises de position* and more intimate reaction the events surrounding the rise of Fascism and the Front populaire, world war and cold war, the work of UNESCO and decolonization, the birth of nations and the death of world

leaders (Che Guevara, De Gaulle, Franco, Mao). And from this perspective, *Libération's* valedictory pronouncement does indeed signal that Leiris was the last survivor of a disappearing generation, the final witness of a century of fervent historical change and intellectual revolution. But this in itself also begins to indicate the driven singularity of Leiris's work. For all the fraternal efforts and enthusiasms, extending from jazz and revolutionary art to political and historical *témoignage*, Michel Leiris remained fundamentally an obsessive autobiographer. Through all its formal and intellectual transformations, Leiris's *œuvre* was propelled forward by the one essential and impossible goal, summed up in the title of his greatest work, *La Règle du jeu*: that of seizing the rule of its own singular game, a task whose logical and existential termination could be marked only by his final demise.

One central effect of this heroic singularity was the renewal and expansion in Leiris of the nature of self-writing. In postmodern debate this area has become progressively represented as a key symptom and recording site of fragmentation and transgression, in which the eurocentric mentality in particular has encountered new, contesting histories, greater psychological complexity, and formal innovation and rupture. The exemplarity here often afforded to Leiris is not merely the result of temporal or social coincidence, but of a confluence of liberating ideas all worked through in the professional knowledge and political support of suppressed causes. In this light, Leiris's aesthetic (and political) quest for the impossibly perfect balance between self-determination and the autonomy of the other led him to push the limits of autobiography, as well as to raise and exhaust the potential of related genres, including the article, the dictionary entry, the review, the diary, the poem and the card index (and beyond that the testimonies of an oral tradition, ritual, secret languages and sacred and artistic objects). One specific effect of this work was that Leiris became an exemplary model of self-expression and self-liberation to succeeding generations of intellectuals and artists often concerned consciously with psychological or political emancipation. Similarly, another equally important effect of this protracted but always committed writing of the self was the successive trace it uniquely fashioned of the century's most revolutionary theorizations of identity. Thus Leiris's autobiography was initially fuelled by the emerging theories of the self propounded by psychoanalysis, linguistics, phenomenology, anthropology, political engagement, sexual and political revolution, decolonization and deconstruction, but subsequently became itself the field of study and discovery for each of these disciplinary approaches.

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Though historically Leiris was never as notorious or public a figure as Breton or Bataille or Sartre, then, he can be seen in comparisons typically to have not only shared ideas but also predicted and inspired them, arguably producing in the process an exemplary working-through of their otherwise partial and partisan positions. Certainly Leiris is at the heart of contemporary intellectual and aesthetic debate for the *quality* as well as range of intellectual responses which his self-analyses have provoked, from the most consciously dynamic and contractual, through to the most aporetic or deconstructionist. Here we can note in passing the appreciation of major critics and philosophers such as Lejeune, Beaujour, Mehlman, Blanchot, Derrida, Nancy, Genette, Pontalis, Levinas and Glissant, the last of these summarizing well why Leiris continues to be a touchstone for continued intellectual enquiry given that he ‘wanted to unfold speech that would be a live fabric, patient and revealing, of those very things that are true to the one who lives them, feels them, and refuses to name them in an ideal conclusion’.<sup>2</sup>

This last statement brings me uncomfortably closer to my own intentions in this study. *Libération’s* spontaneous reaction was also a cultural gesture of anamnesis, that is to say a recollection that the existential effort of Leiris’s work proposes for us all a moral and aesthetic example if not obligation. This is apposite for the academic reader whose tendency (in books such as this one) towards autopsy and necrology is of course implicitly confronted and denounced by Leiris’s dissatisfied *conscience*. Philippe Lejeune, like others previously mentioned, has grasped this paradox in his foregrounding of the way in which autobiography is as much a way of reading as it is a type of writing.<sup>3</sup> In general, however, it is an existential stake that few critics can hope to live up to, and my own reading of Leiris will be a very pale imitation of his enormous performance of fragmentation and integration. As the first full-length monograph in English on Michel Leiris, this book was somewhat obliged to offer an initially chronological and thereafter thematic survey for the purposes of orienting the new reader and any subsequent investigations. I was also concerned to place the precise nature of Leiris’s artistic resolutions and reassessment within the relevant social and intellectual contexts, and to do this I again needed to conform to an initially chronological and thereafter potentially synthetic approach. Next, given the centrality of Leiris’s autobiography and the theme of writing the self which I had isolated as the key artistic issue, I once more needed to follow the complex unfolding (and refolding) taking place in Leiris firstly through the autobiographies’ progressive publication, and thereafter more synchronically

and synthetically through an accumulation of themes, figures and determinations.

For these reasons, the main body of my work is divided into two parts. In the first part, I review each of Leiris's major works produced in a seventy-year period from 1924 to 1992, both in context and as part of an evolving practice of writing the self. In the second part I turn to the underlying obsessions in Leiris which transcend such contiguity, and which lead primarily via an ongoing phenomenology of perception through ways of being in the world, to the inevitable recognition by autobiography of death, together with its equal recognition of autobiography as a fundamental thanatography, that is to say a record and rehearsal of death as the limits of writing the self. The theoretical approaches of my first part therefore necessarily take their cue in large measure from the historical perspective, tending therefore to accentuate the work of Breton, Bataille, Sartre, Lacan and Derrida, for logical reasons. Those of the second part, in keeping with the emerging unificatory vision, are more obsessively phenomenological, tending therefore to draw on the insights and formulations of Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida and Levinas. Strategically, the 'fil conducteur' uniting the two parts, beyond the continuity of approach, is a constant rereading of the famous '... Reusement!' scene which opens *La Règle du jeu*, this strategy deriving from Leiris's own revisions and rewritings of this primary moment as the beginning of self-emergence and hence of autobiography.

Each key text is therefore extensively contextualized, with reference to works and debates involving other major intellectual figures of the day. I delineate Leiris's contribution to the major disciplines of the time, such as surrealism, ethnography or existentialism. I draw out his absorption and transformation of key contemporary texts such as the Surrealist manifestoes, the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *L'Expérience intérieure*, or *L'Être et le Néant*, or canonic autobiographically related texts such as the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, or the work of Proust and Freud; but also more personally significant if less well-known works such as those of Jouhandeau or Melville, to name only two.

The opening chapter of the first part, 'Unities and identities: Leiris and surrealism', examines the early emergence through surrealism of Leiris's technical attention to writing the self, and the way in which neurotic sensitivity was even here already being resolved by him as the mutability of modernity itself, leading to an increasingly pronounced move from rapid and inconsequential fulgurations to more prolonged and discursive formations. The key texts examined in turn here are

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*Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses, Le Point cardinal, Aurora, and Nuits sans nuit.* The second chapter, 'Recasting the self: from surrealism to ethnography', charts the rapid superseding of a surrealist conceptual unity of self and world by an anti-idealist view of selfhood encouraged by *Documents* and given methodological and political underpinning by this ethnographic vision of the self, in its rituals and sociality, as a material and cultural collection. The key text of this period, *L'Afrique fantôme*, is read as a relocation (and subterranean persistence) of surrealist dualism in social and political construction, of absolutism in cultural and methodological relativity, of identity in critical and increasingly distopic *témoignage*. *L'Afrique fantôme*, then, is the site of a personal struggle involving competing ways of conceptualizing and writing the self: surrealism or realism, magic or science, possession or analysis, poetry or politics, languages as thing or languages as sign. I also chart the emergence into this complex of psychoanalysis as a key critical tool for both analysing self-repression and simultaneously challenging the prevalent scientism of ethnographic practice. The third chapter, 'Autobiographical frameworks: from ethnography to *L'Age d'homme*', details Leiris's rapid development, following his reflexive use of scientific objectivism, of transferential principles of self-analysis. Through the key text 'Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne', I show how Leiris evolves an academic prototype of the autobiographical fieldwork with which he will subsequently occupy himself for the next few decades. This new approach therefore focuses unambiguously on the linguistic, heterogeneous and psycho-sexual formation of the self within a specific cultural situation. This in turn is shown to involve a transformation and re-integration of previous phases of surrealist resonance and ethnographic reciprocity, in the sacred sociology of the domestic initiation of the boy into the painful and humiliating passage to manhood. This move from irrational negativity to psycho-social realism is seen to generate a new compositional approach, one involving specifically an adherence to an existential ethics of language and generally a shift from Bataille's dilapidation to Sartrean *dépassement*. Leiris gives this a brilliant reframing by introducing the analogy of the bullfighter, and relocating the *littérateur's* language play in the purposeful arts of the self-moderating intellectual. This in turn leads to a close reading of the final key text in this chapter, *L'Age d'homme*. Here I follow closely the implications of this new methodological determination for writing the self. The syntagmatic adherence to time is overlaid by paradigmatic conceptualization and explanation drawn from psychoanalysis and ethnographic categorization. *L'Age d'homme* demonstrates the view that the autobiographical

subject's veracity is culturally and reactively constructed, through a privileging of the regulatory, the repetitive, the archival and archaeological, the heterodiegetic and the referential, over individuality, immediacy, experience and homodiegesis. The chapter also shows, however, that this resolute control of a chthonian unconscious gives rise within the text to a persistent subject-in-language that resists ethical prescriptions and emerges above all through the unfinished, undetermined and unconscious elements at play within the text itself. This leads directly to the fourth chapter, 'Positional play: *La Règle du jeu*', where I offer an extended analysis of the key four-volume autobiography that is undoubtedly Leiris's crowning achievement. I emphasize the shift in temporal, philosophical, formal and moral positions in the move from *L'Age d'homme* to these later works. The former's static and composite approach gives way to a mobile and constellatory vision foregrounding chronology and change. The cognitive and clinical objectification of self becomes a more affective and sensual structuration. The reactive emphasis on the rule of the game becomes inverted into an active exploitation of the game of the rule. The reverential, sacred, iconographic and tragic tenor of *L'Age d'homme*, concerned above all to categorize otherness, is transformed into the atmosphere of social *commedia* punctuated by event, diversion and the alterity within self-identity. Key to this fundamental shift is the opening scene of *Biffures*, the chapter '... Reusement!', wherein the enunciative and creative act of remembering, rather than the representation of the object of remembrance and composition, takes precedence. The principles of bifurcation and erasure, inherent in this autogenerative act, are shown to inhabit the mythic object of self-representation as a primary and irreducible otherness. From this first apprehension, and the endlessly deferring structure of self-enquiry it produces in the rest of *Biffures*, wherein the name is revealed as a privileged locus of such *méconnaissance*, I turn to the second volume in the series, *Fourbis*, in order to read how the child's initial pedagogy is then situated in a series of wider social and political lessons. Here I observe the return of the existentialist poetics and ethics, as consciousness moves beyond the proto-social *scene* of linguistic revelation and into the concrete and coenaesthetic *situation* out of which is generated solidarity, anguish and the apprehension of mortality. A social *énoncé* overtakes the solipsistic *énonciation*, to create a newly valorized self-identity from communion with others. This new aspiration to reconcile poetical and political authenticity in an elaborate *dépassement* is then shown to reach crisis point in the third volume, *Fibrilles*. I chart his fall from admiration of a socialist utopia into a depressive vortex leading



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to a suicide attempt, and subsequent convalescence, in order to detail the *autobiography's* recovery through its re-examination of its own writing principles and in particular that of the rule of the game. Here we observe the realization that the failure to find the rule, together with the temporal expenditure involved in the acquisition of such knowledge, are the very constitution of the autobiographer, that is to say, constitute the *non-events* through which the self can emerge *as* the event. This belated recognition of non-climactic irresolution is then shown to generate the decision of the final volume of the series, tellingly entitled *Frêle Bruit*, to approach the writing of the self as an open architecture, and the self as an unended enunciative modality. This accepting relocation of the self in destructured *non-savoir* paves the way for a reading in the fifth and final chapter of the book's first part, 'Secreting the self: *Journal 1922–1989*', of a posthumously published, designedly modest and unfinished, if massive, journal. Here I focus firstly on the *Journal's* primarily derivative status in relation to the polished *oeuvre*, its complex reinagination of the previously read and 'finished' work, its temporal and formal accentuation of historical, ideological and stylistic irresolution, and its accompanying foregrounding of non-finite forms of representation, such as *opera buffa*, happenings, and free jazz. I point up how a journal, with its essential subject of temporality, allows the unambiguous emergence of the fundamental cyclomythic structure subtending all Leiris's work; and test its discreet and intimate status in order to expose both the secrets which it openly is held to contain, and those secrets which it hides (with the collusion of some readers) through the exposure of others. The specific homographesis which I uncover at work here within the highly gendered projection of secrecy held within and around the journal emerges in my analysis as a further intricate instance of the logical and unisolatable *biffure* as ab-original opening of the writing self.

The conclusion to the book's first part, with its largely chronological review, forces me to dwell thereafter on the underlying impulse driving each one of these distinct and occasionally desperate versions of writing the self: namely, the quest for 'presence'. In four successive chapters, I review again the key aesthetic and intellectual attempts to achieve a form of autobiographical closure in *La Règle du jeu*. The first chapter, 'Excess of joy: the beginnings of presence in '... Reusement!', looks in detail at how pure presence is presented and exposed in *Biffures's* opening chapter, the attempt to capture such a state revealing the *différance* already within the language and structure of self-representation. The metaphysics of self-presence is shown graphically to be outdone from the beginning by the

operations of the *biffure* and *décalage* inherent in self-presence. Building on this realization of pre-figural alterity, the second chapter, 'Organs of learning: sensing presence in *Biffures*', focuses on the normally effaced organs of self-perception. These are shown to hold and project the drama of presence in *La Règle du jeu*'s opening volume, with initial shifts from visual through phonic and then aural immediacy leading to later, more sophisticated figures of sonic registration. As each of these attempted internal simultaneities serves to show up the burrowed *biffure*, however, Leiris changes tack in *Fourbis*, determining instead to forge pure presence as a pure authentic action. The sublation is the subject of the third chapter, 'The act of union: being-in-the-world in *La Règle du jeu*', which focuses on Leiris's will to give permanent authenticity at least a series of dramatic realizations, gravitating around such key existential phenomena as the act of falling. The chapter analyses how the grasping of such a personal event is projected outwards as an authentic assumption of existential being. I follow how Leiris extends this figure into metaphors of sport and thence to socio-political engagement, as dramatized by precise historical involvement, such as being caught in a cross-fire. Thereafter I trace the irruption and attempted significance of similar historical contexts, including the Occupation, the Liberation and May 1968, and through them the ambiguous network of obligations and failures opened up within the homophonically related terms 'tache' and 'tâche'. We then observe how the final volume, *Frêle Bruit*, recognizes how these attempts are at best flashes that illuminate an increasingly crepuscular psychological landscape. The paradox gradually borne in on Leiris is that the presence represented by the *tache* constantly confirms its own death; and through this he comes to the fundamental recognition that presence as self-determination exists within representation as part of a culture of general thanatography. This statement leads logically to the final chapter, entitled 'Thanatography: non-being as the limit of autobiography'. Beyond the presence of death as a major content of Leiris's *La Règle du jeu* lies the revelation of death as inherent in autobiography's technical splitting of selfhood, as predicted and reflected from the beginning in the *biffure*. The key signs representing self-presence in Leiris point up the objectification and mortification which their existence entail. Leiris's working-through of this paradoxical limit shows, then, how autobiography depends on a drive to the death: from *Biffures*'s insectile otherness, we move through *Fourbis*'s resolve to face the real death of others, and *Fibrilles*'s failed attempt to sublimate death in a feverish, poetic resolution, to