Africa and Avant-Garde Anthropology

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Michael Janis

Africa and Avant-Garde Anthropology

The Psychoanalysis of Exoticism

In the early Thirties, surrealist ethnographer Michel Leiris finds that to search for the exotic is to pursue the invisible, the simulacral, or the phantasmal, an illusory sense of which he glimpses in a childhood memory: “The hallucinatory and actually ineffable character of the Dutch girl, infinitely repeated in the way licentious poses can be infinitely multiplied by means of the reflection in a cleverly manipulated boudoir mirror” (Leiris 1934a: 11). In this reflective fragment, “the Dutch girl” may be replaced, for heuristic purposes, with “selfhood”, “otherness”, “exoticism”, or “Michel Leiris”, whose phantasmagoric autobiographical *mise-en-abîme* becomes a rigorous exercise in ethnographic self-disclosure. His lifelong writing project can be seen as a hall of mirrors, where mirror-writing twists, bends, and multiplies graphic self-reflexivity, narrating an experience of ontological oblivion. In Leiris’s reflection on this childhood memory, he attributes to the seductive advertisement on a tin of cocoa—significantly a foreign female, holding in her hand her own cocoa label, a procession of selves receding into the market economy—his first contact with infinity (*ibid.*). The motif of the *mise-en-abîme*, the perceptual division that never ends, emblematic of the avant-garde writing of fragmentation as theme, parallels the exoticist and solipsistic metaphysics Leiris’s autobiographical ethnography sacrifices at the altar of the Western cult of consciousness. If Leiris’s autobiography exoticizes the self, his anthropology of African cultures de-exoticizes the other, while always contemplating the ontological subtlety of cross-cultural experience.

A mode of intersubjectivity, exoticism¹ elicits a play of idealizations and distortions of cultural manifestations, inhabiting at once the significant

1. The word “exotic” first appears in Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* in the sixteenth century, and the tendency of “exoticism” emerges in eighteenth-century France, although the term “exoticism” is not coined until the nineteenth century. See Roger CÉLESTIN (1990); *Cultural Anthropology* 5 (3), 1990, p. 310. Rabelais pioneers the use of the term to speak of foreign commodities in *Pantagruel*: “diverses marchandises exotiques et pérégrines”. Jean-Marc MOURA (2003) offers a contemporary perspective on exoticism, literature, and francophone contexts. For an overview of the history of exotic iconography and commodities in Europe, see Peter MASON (1998).

realms of surface-play and the unconscious, parallel to the ambivalence of stereotyping. Homi Bhabha deems stereotyping an “arrested mode of representation” that does not merely fashion “a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices but is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies [. . .]” (*ibid.*: 46). While Bhabha is clearly correct in asserting that this regressive form of behavior, connected with narcissism and guilt (as Frantz Fanon observes), is the dominant strategy of the colonizer, it is also important to recognize that stereotyping and exoticism are practiced in many cultures around the world. The shifting signification of exoticism ranges from stereotyping and cultural colonization, from fetishization, idealization, or distortion, to cultural aestheticism and openness—vis-à-vis the “other”.

Exoticism, like metaphysics, does not disappear after it is deconstructed, nor can it be dismissed after being filed in the endless dossier of “white mythologies”²; rather, in the twentieth century it metamorphoses, culminating in the anthropological and postcolonial criticism of exoticism. A “semantic imbroglio”, as Stephen William Foster (1982: 29) terms it, the exotic at once holds the possibility for social transformation and for meaninglessness, as a cipher, a site of perpetually shifting cultural signifiers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Victor Segalen works out a rough form of critical exoticism that has received little attention in the US until recently. His *Essai sur l'exotisme*, fragmentary notes written for the most part between 1905 and 1910 and posthumously published in 1955, has been translated as *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*. In the Introduction, Yaël Rachel Schlick presents Segalen's essay as precursor to a contemporary aesthetics of cultural difference, as Segalen's aesthetic departs from the approaches of “Pseudo-Exots”, the likes of Richard Burton or Pierre Loti, whose re/creations of distant oases rely on the conjunction of imagination and ignorance, spatial constructions of spurious nostalgia dependent upon the invention of a coeval atemporality that fetishizes what is disappearing under colonialism and what is becoming homogenized by capitalism.

Clearly before its time, Segalen's aesthetics of diversity responds to an experience of the Kantian sublime, the act of thinking what one cannot know, a kind of cultural ineffable: “Not the perfect comprehension of something outside one's self that one has managed to embrace fully, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility” (Segalen 2003: 21). His notion of exoticism as a voyage through history rather than as imaginative invention leads him to catalogue and dismiss the familiar topics of “Pseudo-Exots”: “The tropics or coconut trees, the colonies or Negro souls... camels, ships, great waves, scents, spices, or enchanted islands... misunderstandings and native uprisings, nothingness and death,

2. Metaphors of whiteness and transparency enshroud metaphysics' attempt to elude metaphor. See Jacques DERRIDA (1982), “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”.

colored tears, oriental thought, and various oddities”, for these topics have “bloated the term exoticism into meaninglessness” (Leiris 1934a: 46). He intends his essay to introduce a volume of colonial short stories and thus to criticize classical exoticism and evoke the more elusive aesthetics of diversity, which does not valorize adaptation or assimilation but rather the mystique of the cultural encounter, perhaps anticipating the appreciation of difference.

Just as this anti-assimilationist stance occupies a significant position in debates over multicultural theory, his view of the individual and of the relationship between time and the other addresses current problems in post-colonial dialogue. He summarizes the racist and progressivist presumptions of much of modernist travel literature and anthropology, when he dwells upon “Exoticism in Time: Going back: history. An escape from the contemptible and petty present” (*ibid.*: 24). Johannes Fabian describes this perspective as “anthropology’s allochronic orientation” or its “denial of coevalness” of foreign cultures. However, in this fragmentary volume, cultural time travel is not a primary motive or fantasy. As in the Sadean and Surrealist aesthetics that precede and follow him, Segalen theorizes the experience of *bouleversement* (shock), a blow to the bourgeois interior,

“[. . .] the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savor. (The sensations of Exoticism and Individualism are *complementary*) [. . .]. Let us not flatter ourselves for assimilating the customs, races, nations, and others who differ from us. On the contrary, let us rejoice in our inability ever to do so, for we thus retain the eternal pleasure of sensing Diversity” (*ibid.*: 21).

The idea that “only those who have a strong sense of individuality can sense Difference” (*ibid.*: 20) begs the question of the cultural notion of the individual. In the same era, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s (1966) influenced by Comptean positivism and Durkheimian sociology, defines the “pre-logical” primitive mentality and the rational civilized mentality³. Architects of modernist Western individualism attempt to consolidate its purportedly superior reason in opposition to what anthropologist perceive as the collective consciousness of many non-Western peoples, who are wedded to magical beliefs. The shock to the system sought by Segalen and Leiris takes the form of a foray outside of the text of solitude of the assumptions of Western science and the solitude of bourgeois life, into the novelty of cultural difference and collective experience. Leiris’s auto-ethnography makes its mark as a challenge to modernist anthropology’s methodological and cultural assumptions.

3. It is important to note, however, that in his notebooks, published posthumously, LÉVY-BRUHL (1966) writes: “From a strictly logical point of view, no difference between primitive mentality and our own can be established.” See Melville J. HERSKOVITS (1972: 29).

Quixotic Exoticism from Dakar to Djibouti

Reading Michel Leiris, more than any other modernist ethnographer, gives rise to pivotal questions on Africa and the West, and on the metaphysics of the exotic, in the expanded sense of the relation between self and other. “Exotic” as literally “foreign” is a primary definition that loses its use-value in the wake of the politically, culturally, and aesthetically over determined senses of the word revealed by avant-garde Modernism. Leiris regresses as a dadaist and reconstitutes himself as a surreal sociologist, endlessly rewriting the vicissitudes of exoticist and exoticized. While he does allude to his exoticism, the young Leiris is often concerned with writing himself out of this pigeonhole; he does so, somewhat paradoxically, by entering the community of anthropologists. He has been depressed and has pursued psychoanalysis in his native Paris for a few years when he seizes the opportunity to escape the confines of what he considers a decayed and decadent Europe, in the hope of recovering the “freshness” his life is missing. This opportunity takes the form of Africa, the 1931-1933 Dakar-Djibouti Mission, which brings back 3,600 objects—many of which are stolen—for the Département d’Afrique noire of Musée de l’Homme. With the help of Gallimard editor André Malraux, his extensive journal from the project finds the name *L’Afrique fantôme*.

This expedition, in the conventional sense of the word, albeit an ethnographic and linguistic one, falls in step with the endless procession of divisive, pilfering Europeans marching through the colonies; nonetheless, it enables valuable works by Leiris and Marcel Griaule, who later writes *Dieu d’eau (Conversations with Ogotemmêli)*, the landmark interview with the Dogon sage Ogotemmêli. In a 1931 photograph (Jamin 1996: 192-193), Leiris stands next to Griaule, the two almost identically dressed in classic colonial explorer garb, boots, khaki shorts and shirt, and pith helmet, with roosters in hand, ready to sacrifice, about to enter the Kono alter in Kemei, Mali (formerly French Sudan). Even when smeared with sacrificial blood in Ethiopia, Leiris reportedly continues to write through the ceremony. Eventually tensions begin to surface between Leiris and Griaule when Griaule discovers that he writes of art and artefacts being stolen for the museum. Despite the recognition today of the significant contribution of his genre-bending *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934b), a work that combines journalism, autobiography, and ethnography, this ethnographic travelogue defies or betrays the science of anthropology, according to Griaule, who criticizes his notes for their overly “subjective” character.

Although his long and diverse career makes him difficult to categorize in a distinct field, Leiris’s early associations with Surrealism mark him as a peripheral avant-garde figure, whose far-flung journeys initiate a courtship with exoticism and a gaze into the abyss, not without evoking traces of Rimbaud—whose revolutionary poetry he finds “capable of transforming at least a wrinkle in the face of the universe” (Leiris 1926: 7)—and of

Rimbaud's journey to Ethiopia, but with very different consequences: Leiris lives a long life, for most of the twentieth century, traveling and writing incessantly. The first half of the century's commingling of war, colonial exploitation, and cultural exchange weighs heavily on his shoulders. Anthropology becomes the means by which Leiris, as a European leftist, attempts to cope with the burden of colonialism and racism. In encouraging the colonized to "write back" against oppression in his groundbreaking address of 1950, "The Ethnographer Faced with Colonialism", Leiris points the way from a modernist to a postmodernist anthropology, contributing one of the first European texts of postcolonial theory. Initially infatuated with *négrisme* and primitivism, he begins as any other dilettante in the Trocadéro Museum in Paris (which became the present-day Musée de l'Homme), inspecting dusty mislabeled objects filched from every corner of the globe in the rambling Byzantine structure, and dies, in the age of "postcolonial theory," an important contributor to the transition.

"The Ethnographer Faced with Colonialism" is ahead of its time not only for its questioning of anthropological motivations in the late colonial era but also for its analysis of indigenous cultures facing colonial and global influences. Leiris (1950: 115) criticizes colonialism on various levels, underscoring the important point, with Léopold Senghor, that the French colonial education is robbing Africans of their identity. Making a plea to study societies in their "real state", that is, subjected to European hegemony, he argues against the problem of what contemporary ethnographers like James Clifford term "salvage ethnography" (1986b: 112), pointing out that "safeguarding" cultures is tantamount to "petrifying" them. The role of ethnography is then to create archives for use in the cultural and intellectual liberation of those studied. Ethnography is faced with the internal contradiction of its unilaterality, and thus he suggests that non-Western ethnographers must be brought into the profession. He foresees a day after emancipation from colonialism when ethnographic solidarity, impossible in the present imbalance of power relations, can take place. However, he sees the oppression of the colonial powers as a pervasive force that unites the ethnographer with the culture being studied in that this oppression, an extension of bourgeois dominance, is reflexive and all encompassing. French ethnographic exoticism is, for Leiris (1950: 124), a crisis of authenticity, and he sternly warns against an academic attachment "out of a love of a certain 'primitivism'" or "the attraction of a greater exoticism". He provides this advice, it must be remembered, nearly twenty years after the Dakar-Djibouti mission.

In his preface to the 1950 reprint of *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris (1996: 94) describes himself as "human, all-too-human" ("humain, trop humain"). Nietzsche's phrase can be taken as a sign of the excavation of human motivations that shapes the century, through Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, who initiated crucial processes of decentring on the level of the subject. As an *enfant du siècle*, Leiris experiences on the Dakar-Djibouti mission an agonizing range of emotions inherent in the clash between African and Western

civilizations' discontents. Later he regrets some of his journal entries, which reveal a kind of detached self-absorption amidst scattered sexual preoccupations, and apologizes for the misogyny of the traveling *id* and the baggage of the *ego*. Sailing to and from Africa, Leiris remains preoccupied by colonialist sexuality, the champagne that christens the ship; this eroticism is at once exposed, apparently sublimated, and never transcended. For Leiris, writing is everything, and it seems he is never sure whether the sexual experience or its narration is the more intimate act. His thousands of index cards that catalogue artworks and artefacts foreshadow the cephalic index of himself which, like a physical anthropologist, he draws on the first page of his autobiography *L'âge d'homme* (Manhood): his "bulging forehead", a head which he describes as too large for his body, his propensity for fondling his occiput in contemplation, his "straight nape, falling vertically from the back of [his] head like a wall or cliff, a typical characteristic (according to the astrologists) of persons born under the sign of the bull" (1934a: 3), linking him to his essay "The Autobiographer as Torero". Featuring his dream of the bull, symbol of ultimate masculine virility thrusting out its thanotic horns, this last chapter of *Manhood* offers a prescription for catharsis through exposing oneself in writing. The sexual component of exoticism acts as a magnet that attracts and repels Leiris, who is initially thoroughly disenchanted with modern European life and magnetically drawn to the *exotisme* sweeping Paris, leading him in and out of bordellos of sexist objectification, and ultimately, to chronicle a process of de/sublimation in the service of anthropology.

In confessional oases and mirages, erotic obsessions and emotional voids, the fantasy of paradisiacal ecstasy encircles quixotic Leirisian eroticism in a late colonial encounter with the foreign. Leiris sees in the figures of African and African-American art something he could only interpret as arrestingly pure and natural: "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" (Leiris 1934a: 109). In 1929, *négrisme* all the rage in Paris, Leiris finds the musicians and dancers in reviews like the Black Birds "creatures [. . .] as touching as trees" (translated by Clifford 1986a: 95). The mythology of the foreign and of the unknown as natural and feminine, invoking tired themes reinvigorated by colonial literature, does not end with Leiris's initial affairs but is incorporated into the hermeneutic circle of his autobiographical enterprise that infinitely prolongs the moment of closure. Not oblivious to the exploitative commodification of prostitution, yet not adverse to a kind of romanticized "mad love" or aleatory "communicating vessels", in Breton's sense, he writes of his affairs with young Somali women in Djibouti that "these amours, however absurd and unfortunate, have left me with a impression of Paradise" (1934a: 140). The art of the absurd, a soon-to-be existential category by this time, finds itself at home before exotic backdrops. His compatriot Henri Michaux shares his cynicism towards erotic adventures, describing

his *Ecuador* of 1929 as “the ironic antithesis of exoticism, a travel journal of the absurd” (*ibid.*: 56). However, through the absurdity of experiences in these quasi-Edenic brothels, Leiris evokes a romanticized sexual ineffable.

Within the male colonizing desire to discover or capitalize upon what is unknown, untapped, or virgin, “the role of the beckoning wilderness, the attractive landscape”, in Nina Baym’s (1985: 75) words, “is given a deeply feminine quality [. . .]. [W]here society is menacing and destructive, landscape [nature] is compliant and supportive”. While Baym’s paradigm of male authorship as a quest for individuation through a conquest of virgin territory, which entails an escape from an encroaching social order symbolized by the mother, may be a bit overly tidy, it explicates a history of natural metaphor and Western male conquest—from the Garden of Eden where motherless Man is first given dominion over nature to colonialist fantasies and projections of uninhibited sexuality abroad.

Reflecting on how at an early age he is aroused by dreams of the ancient social orders he imagines to be more voluptuous than those of modern Europe, Leiris lets his erotic imagination travel back in time to Europe’s intellectual and mythological sources, paralleling the time travel inherent in the mentality of colonial anthropology. He first glimpses in Greek and Roman erotic art the figure of supposedly natural woman, in a pristine state, uncorrupted by “civilized” repression. He writes, “One of the words to which I first attributed an erotic value is the word ‘courtesan’, which I understood as the feminine form of the word ‘courtier’, although I sensed there was something special and rather mysterious about it” (1934a: 27). The genre, in the sense of both kind and gender, of the erotic is engendered by a word, by wordplay. The courtesan, signified by her difference from the courtier, appears to his mind as sexual difference, as the enchantress, through the seductive slippage of language. A courtier of the exotic, Leiris continues to trace sexual experiences to his identification with the decadent pleasures of neo-Classical eroticism, his obsession with Judith and Lucretia (and with Lord Byron’s orgies, where libations were taken from human skulls), as well as with the mystical transcendence of sacrifices, one of his ongoing fascinations—sacrifices being the ultimate intermingling of sexuality, violence, and the sacred in the avant-garde conception.

After arriving in Ethiopia, having crossed French colonial Africa, Leiris falls in love with Emawayish, who:

“Was wrapped in a filthy gray toga, smelled of sour milk [. . .]. [She] looked like a wax statue, and the bluish tattoos around her neck set off her head like a transparent collar or the carcan of an old rack [. . .]. When she killed a white ram and dedicated it to one of these genies, I saw her gasping in a trance—in a state of complete possession—and drinking, out of a porcelain cup, the victim’s blood still hot from the slit throat. I never made love to her, but when the sacrifice took place it seemed to me that a relation more intimate than any carnal link was established between her and myself” (1934a: 140).

He is enchanted by this “ravaged”, syphilitic, yet majestic woman, even more so by the mystery of her religious sacrifice, but does not physically act on his sexual feelings for her. He treasures the metonymic moment when she, “in a gesture of apparent intimacy, places his hand under her armpit” (translated by Clifford 1986a: 42). His writings on sexuality illustrate this form of thwarted communion and erotic solitude, of which Georges Bataille writes, as well as the poignancy of agonizing self-consciousness and vulnerability when many of his feelings are confessed. Before the journey across Africa, Leiris fetishizes the African body just as he and other avant-garde artists fetishize the fetish of African traditional religion, yet after the journey, he cannot merely look but is forced to perceive, behind the look. It is, perhaps, *le regard*, the look of the other—the signifying chains of sadomasochism later described in his close friend Sartre’s *L’être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*)—that he must later wrestle with in psychoanalysis, in which he is grasping for his raft, adrift on the waters of his libido, floating between the “oceanic feeling” of sacred and sexual ecstasy⁴.

While a photographic plate in *L’Afrique fantôme* shows a strong, meditative Emawayish, Leiris’s description of her emphasizes her withered breasts, tattoos, and dirty clothes: she is clearly one of his Medusas. *Manhood*’s echoes of Freud’s 1922 essay “Medusa’s Head” perform the symbolic linkage between aspects of Leiris’s own sexuality and his obsession with Emawayish. “For a woman, to me, is always Medusa or the Raft of the Medusa. By this I mean that if her gaze does not freeze up my blood, then everything must ensue as if we compensated for that by tearing each other apart” (1934a: 99), he writes in the last chapter, “The Raft of the Medusa”. After emphasizing, like Freud, the entwining of primal urges and erotic desire, he quotes the passage on Emawayish from *L’Afrique fantôme* cited above and describes other exoticist dreams and fantasies, reading his own sexuality through Freud’s essay, with its obvious equation “to decapitate=to castrate”: “The hair upon Medusa’s head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes [. . .] a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration” (Freud 1922: 105). According to this schema, Leiris’s communion with the Medusan Emawayish, as she decapitates the goat and drinks its lifeblood, suggests the sacrifice of his manhood and of the boundaries of his worldview in electrically charged moment of the rite she performs, which “fascinates” him (from the Latin *fascinare*, to enchant, and *fascinum*, spell or witchcraft).

4. FREUD (1930) compares the “oceanic” to the “feeling of an indissoluble bond of being one with the external world as a whole”, the disappearance of the “boundary between ego and object” that occurs in religion and love, trans. James Strachey (1957: 65-66).

Leiris's sublime fascination when confronted with Emawayish may prompt his search for the raft of terror and pity floating to what some critics interpret to be his self-objectification; or more accurately, Leiris's erotic preconceptions, such as his predilection to search for the figure of Judith, cause him to project this vision of Emawayish and this moment of contrived communion. The play of aesthetic distance of the artist fraught with repression is charged with uncathexed desires for psychic propinquity to compensate for the vertigo of distance and intimacy in the description of intersubjective and intercultural aporias. It becomes evident that if Leiris is to achieve his goal of "objective" studies of Africa, he will have to either sublimate or sublate the eroticism that surrounds his fieldwork. He must escape the parameters of the quest to understand the other as part of a naive and impossible search for a self-definition and the effort to subsume the other in the Eurocentric *Weltanschauung* of traditional anthropology: ontological, epistemological, and sexual colonization, the masculinist hermeneutics of the self/other construction and the logocentric teleology of this intellectual enterprise—self-knowledge.

The Dakar-Djibouti mission marshals "official" science and avant-garde culture, both struggling to understand "primitives" and primitivism. The legacy of primitivism, as Marie-Denise Shelton (1995: 327) suggests, emerges "out of two contradictory propositions: the poetic, which claims that Western culture is deficient and moribund, and the official, which affirms it as the perfect and ultimate state of humanity". However, the "official" versions of "civilization" are shown to be fraught with internal contradiction by *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which Freud (1930) suggest that the three motives for hostility against civilization are the low estimation of earthly life spread by Christianity, consciousness of the neuroses caused by the privation of sublimation, and covetousness brought about by the "voyages of discovery." Already by 1930 Freud problematizes the primitivist perspectives that result from these voyages, suggesting that the "bounty of nature" of certain non-European societies obscures the "complicated cultural demands" (Freud 1930: 34) and prohibitions that are indeed present—dispelling the European fantasies of distant Edenic cultures of unrestricted pleasure. The ambiguity of Leiris's racism and sexism, inherent in the surrealist movement, would seem to indicate a subject caught between the two imaginary poles described Shelton; further, it seems that his voyage of discovery is underwritten by Freud himself.

This Occidental ambiguity is further complicated by the surrealist obsession with profanation, *i.e.*, Bataille's *expérience des limites*, and with "gratification in symbols and the practice of aggression" (translated by Shelton 1995: 337). An acknowledgment of the surrealist fetishization of transgression does not, of course, justify the mission's thievery and desecration of sacred objects but provides important context. The heretical debauchery of the pivotal surrealist film *L'âge d'or*, for instance, in which Jesus enjoys a cloistered spree with young girls in a medieval castle, may seem to evoke

Boccaccio's rational naturalism. However, this "heresy" functions primarily to bring down the walls of social mores, to stripmine the sensibilities of a bourgeois audience experiencing perceptual derailment through bizarre disjunctures, which culminate in anti-crucifixion and anti-catharsis. "Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne", the 1938 conference of the Collège de Sociologie, represents the formal organization of the avant-garde search for the sacred in postindustrial life, the attempt to reinvigorate collective experience through revolutionary art, and the attack on bourgeois hypocrisy. *Histoire de l'œil*, one of the most famous books by Georges Bataille, a founding member of the Collège de Sociologie along with Leiris, reveals how, in the violent liberation from oppressive morality, the sacred and the profane coalesce in shock experience.

The taboo eroticism of sacred profanation and science's obsession with collecting, to the point of naked thievery, combine in a mission that at once criticizes colonialism and acts as its instrument. Receiving its protection from the colonial apparatus, the ethnographic team finds its object of study, traditional culture, apparently disintegrating under oppressive French rule. What is taking place in sub-Saharan Africa is often a process of recoiling, of moving underground. Appearances are preserved in picturesque photographs but practices seem stilted or fake; participants and participant-informers become mere informers, co-opted by the mercantile ethnographic practices that demand and indeed pay for their incorruptible authenticity. Leiris's ethnographic diary reveals him to be not just a mere voyeur on the expedition but also thief and even a racist at times, as it contains an unedited stream of thoughts, like automatic writing. At one point he writes that due to their poverty he would never accuse Africans of "veniality" while at another point he suggests Ethiopian peasants are simply "avaricious". Inherent in the ideologies of both poles of modern primitivism described by Shelton, the poetic and the official, is institutionalized hypocrisy. The avant-garde approach that idealizes the sacred rites of non-Western cultures while facilitating their profanation and violent decontextualization in this sense parallels the *mission civilisatrice* that supposedly promotes the benevolent ideals Western humanism by force of conquest. The anthropological mission is protected by the colonial authorities and institutions whose practices Leiris finds deplorable. At one of his most confused moments he writes, "To the officials, however, who would take us to task because of our dealings with the Negroes, it would be easy to answer that as long as Africa is subjected to a system as repugnant as the one of levies and military service, without anything in return, they cannot be disturbed with regard to a few objects, stolen or bought at a bargain price" (translated by Shelton 1995: 336). Only after the mission does the self-described "non-specialist secretary-archivist" realize the full ramifications of pilfering 3,600 artworks and artefacts in the name of the heretical god of Western science.

In his search for the exotic Leiris is initially guilty of two prevalent forms of racism: infantilization and idealization. After traveling across the

French colonies of sub-Saharan Africa, a mixture of cynicism, delusion, and interpretive self-doubt acts as a catalyst for reaching a kind of anxious ethnographic epiphany in Gondar, where he feels "*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" (translated by Clifford 1986a: 44; italics added). In his long career he moves from seeing Africans as beatific, prelapsarian beings to realizing that he has just begun to learn about the societies whose culture he has been examining, from a certain distance: "*Je suis un enfant*", he comments. An epistemological shift takes place in Leiris in Africa, a coming into ignorance—or openness. Although his career has only just started, he will continue to make significant contributions to anthropology, a domain of cultural friction and uncertainty; herein lies the irony of his "ignorance". From infantilizer to infantilized, Leiris is not reborn, but unmade in the cross cultural experience of reaching the threshold of intersubjectivity. *La langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga* (Leiris 1948), a brief part published five years after the Dakar-Djibouti mission and the full version fifteen years later, contains an extensive lexicon and an eternal portrait of the vocabulary of cultural encounter, a glossary of the search for communicative and linguistic rapport, a contrapuntal reference to cryptic whispers from his "Glosses: My Glosses' Ossuary". In this essay, published in 1925, the germ of Leiris's intellectual conflict with the collective and individual relationship to language, he suggests that mundane and etymological meanings, or philological linguistics, are the realm of the collective, whereas an individual seeking meaning must pursue psychological linguistics, through endlessly deferred chains of word associations. Language then "changes into an oracle, and there we have a thread (however slender it may be) to guide us through the Babel of our minds" (Leiris 1925: 4). Out of the fable of Babel, the story of the destruction of common understanding and the birth of cultural division, comes the intersubjective search from the edge of something one will never touch, the secret language that connects all humans.

After traveling through mythic geographical and linguistic landscapes, Leiris's scopophilia⁵, his fixation on the exotic, gives way to consciousness of problem of positionality, generated in the textual transference of his auto-psychoanalysis. At some point in his travels across sub-Saharan Africa, Leiris finds himself—his self, which underwrites the secretary's archive—exingly exotic. Initially lured by the abyss of the unknown, the "Dark Continent" (the feminine, for Freud), he turns to a new abyss, the self,

5. FREUD (1915) uses the term "scopophilia" in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" as a mode of autoerotic fixation that involves a potential subjective reversal, a perceptual exhibitionism, through fantasies of the other (trans. James Strachey 1957: 109-140).

which he will attempt to examine, exhibit, or even to colonize. "Instead of traveling 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?" (translated by Clifford 1986a: 9) writes Leiris of Raymond Rous-sel, in an observation which becomes part of his own project. After two years as a secretary-archivist, he already longs for the glitter of life in Europe, where he can criticize bourgeois mores and customs in the comfort of its society (Leiris 1991: 134⁶). He fears his isolation, and he writes there is no one he can confide in. Upon returning from the Dakar-Djibouti mission, Leiris settles in to years of psychoanalysis and writing, ethnographic work for the museum and intermittent travels. He explores the dreams and the landscapes of his mind, traveling the paths of his notes, writing in the shadow of the myth he had recently debunked, that is, "travel as a means of escape" (Leiris 1934a: 140).

If states of possession, esoteric ecstasy, and the realm of his unconscious are all-too-human, what he recurrently describes as inhuman is research itself: the "resentment against ethnography, which makes us take so inhuman a position, that of an observer [. . .]" (translated by Clifford 1986a: 42). In Africa it is the abyss near the journey's end that becomes most significant for Leiris. Upon reaching Abyssinia (where Rimbaud met his death), Leiris, having already traveled almost entirely across the continent, writes, "How many kilometers were needed to bring us to the threshold of exoticism?" (translated by Richman 1992: 93). More than an accurate account of possession ceremonies—which he will attempt later in the formidable *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar* of 1958—*L'Afrique fantôme* marks a moment of resignation concerning his confusion in the face of African religious phenomena and the Western cult of consciousness and reason. The dustjacket blurb Leiris himself writes for his *L'Afrique fantôme* summarizes in third-person the cynicism his experience in sub-Saharan Africa engenders: "Few adventures, studies that excite him at first but soon reveal themselves to be too inhuman to satisfy him, a growing erotic obsession, a greater and greater emotional emptiness. Despite his disgust with civilized people and life in the big cities, toward the end of the trip he is looking forward to going back" (1934c: 46). The fragile roots of the avant-garde and exoticism, planted in the soil of Romanticism, begin to lose hold.

Neither an actual voluptuary nor a romantic, Leiris is necessarily both; that is, in branching from the avant-garde tradition, Leiris's pastiche romanticism, necessary to the radical, make-it-new break of avant-garde, fittingly

6. "During the summer of 1933 (I had returned from a long trip to tropical Africa a few months earlier and was getting back in touch with France again, somewhat as though this were a new country that would provide me with ample material for 'exotic sensations') [...]."

subsumes the historical influence of the classical on Romanticism and buttresses the apparent cohesion of his self-writing, its convenient literary historicity. Although the influence of Rimbaud is clearly a force in Leiris's early career, overarching psychological and historical analysis can be misleading. Renato Poggioli takes Rimbaud's sanctification of the disorder of his own spirit as emblematic of Romanticism and the avant-garde reverence for eccentric genius, directly comparable to Jarry's pataphysics, the poetic "science" of imaginary solutions and the laws governing exceptions. A strain of solitary exceptionalism and anti-traditionalism runs from Romanticism to the avant-garde, but this background of influences offers little insight into the complexities Leiris's art of alienation. A kind of cult of tempestuous or otherworldly anomaly, bowing before the chthonic *Fleurs du mal* (Baudelaire) or satanic *Là-bas* (Huysmans), often pervades the aesthetics of decadence. There is undoubtedly a link between Leiris's ontological disorder and his fascination with the transcendence of polytheistic religious orders. In his writing of a fictional self that is not one, there is also the sense in which the perspective from outside writing is purely imaginary, as is the world outside the trance of ecstasy.

What is most significant about Leiris's break from Romanticism stems from his particular use of Surrealism, its conscious levity, unconscious gravity, and the disjunctural juxtaposition that characterize its methodology. The problematic exoticism, or apocryphal novelty, of writing about distant cultures leads him to what might be called a picaresque realism, which partakes of anthropological objectivism and autobiographical subjectivism. Leiris's "turn to autobiographical prose after 1930 marks an abandonment of imagination, both surrealist and romantic, in favor of a 'parti pris de réalisme'", observes James Clifford (1986a: 15) (and Denis Hollier before him), but he finds himself writing books which must "endlessly paper over a void". There is, fortunately, plenty of paper and wordplay with which to write over the sexual and ontological voids, the struggle of the inside and the outside, from the "O" of the ex-Otic, the abyss, the metaphysical nowhere, the circle at the center of the self-devouring *uroboros*⁷. The limitless paper of the blank space is the only exploration which, as it turns out, is possible—writing: "the word game in which the combination '*en abîme*' produces rhetoric [. . .] discourse organizes what existence procures" (Glissant 1992: 25). His subjective approach, still revolutionary, aims at a purer objectivity. His realism exists between academicism and pastiche, to modify Lyotard's formula⁸, or between anthropology and autobiography. If realism's "only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality

7. In ancient Greek iconography, a snake, forming a circle, devouring its tail (also *ouroboros*).

8. "Realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art, always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch."

implicated in that of art" (Lyotard 1989: 75), Leiris's subjective anthropological project problematizes the question of reality by confronting the laws of genre and defying epochal classifications.

Subjects of Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and Possession

In the shift from the modern to the postmodern, how do the theoretical and ethical questions of Western exploration and exploitation of the world coincide with questions of discovery, self-discovery, and loss-of-self-discovery? In what way does the modernist conception of writing as an exotic elsewhere, as a Proustian voyage from star to star, or a waft of spice from a distant land, give way to the Foucauldian "non-place" of writing, a heterotopic domain of authorless allusions? In order to read Leiris's radical attempt at being an anthropologist of the self, it is important to note that he is dealing with a field of knowledge that ultimately must be considered eso- and exoteric, risking the banalization of the unknown in a *mise-en-scène* that foregrounds the metaphysics of fetishization: the self as ethnographic object substitutes for the ritual object through the *mise-en-abîme* of the exoticized fetish. Leiris's textual (de)cathexis collapses the metaphysical dualisms of inside/outside. "Leiris appeals to erotic fetishism, 'myth', and the discipline of the stage", writes Clifford. "The fetish is the luminous charged object or moment, cut out of its 'whole' context. (In fact it *produces* the effect of wholeness.) It is an exterior, objectified crystallization of desire, something distant and miraculously close, erasing the gulf between inner and outer experience" (Clifford 1986a: 14). A student of Sartre's familiar with the notion that there is no inner self, Leiris, in his ethnopoetic moments, glimpses into and beyond the bourgeois interior, piercing the integument of late-modern consciousness; he is uncertain as to whether or not his documentarian paths ever lead to ontological transgression, or ever escape the existential labyrinth of *Being and Nothingness*.

A pastiche flâneur of byzantine alienation, Leiris searches for an auto-ethnographic stance, his fumbling becoming all the more enervating for his having binged on placebos of objectivity under the guise of an aesthetics of sincerity and authenticity. The symptoms of his all-too-bourgeois psychosexual disorder evince more than a flight from the feminized "Dark Continent". Anthropological "adventure" is followed by a lingering parasitic infection of the artifices and constructs of Western subjectivity, atrophied through the act of eidetic reduction. The Husserlian phenomenology that influences the avant-garde and existentialism seeks an impossible purity: to reach the point at which knowledge need not go beyond itself because nothing is other to it—by attempting to circumvent ethics and other minds. According to Clifford, Leiris "persists in a 'naive' search for authenticity, but an authenticity always vitiated by equivocation, imperfect expression, ethical qualms" (*ibid.*: 13). Beyond his divagatory naivete cum praxis, the

pages of the interminable diary reveal him to be a Nietzschean “inoculation”, an avatar from the future. Already a cultural paradox, an anthropologist’s ego in fieldwork must in fact sacrifice the *ego* in a secret ceremony. Recognizing that at times the ethnographer is an outside interference who is unable or unwilling to spark revolution from within academic or cultural institutions, he or she must face internal contradictions, the sense in which fieldwork is a bilateral effacement of individual identity in the service of cultural identity, a mutual gift that is part of the archive.

Eluding the *ego*, Leiris’s strength is that he knows he has killed the myth of exoticism only when the myth has killed him. As early as 1936 his recognition, by sheer dint of sober aloneness with alterity, of what Deleuze describes as Foucault’s notion of “the fundamental indignity of speaking for others” (Foucault 1977: 209) opens the way to seeing the exoticist project as means of understanding the silences within dialogue. He understands that the other is susceptible to the same metaphysical problems as the self. Leiris describes the strategy of self-presentation that attempts to circumvent transcendence in being-with-others: “To aim to be simple, authentic, natural (that is to say, nothing but oneself), that comes down to prune down carefully all that would impel one to transcendence. No greatness without a minimum duplicity, without the will to come out of oneself” (translated by Blanchard 1993: 79). This coming out, standing outside of oneself in the Sartrean sense of *ekstasis*, a Being-for-others in which the “For-itself discovers that it has a Self for-the-Other, a Self which it is, without ever being able to know or get hold of it” (Sartre 1943: 802): body-more-than-body alienation, through the fetishization of the other, the “For-itself which has to be what it is—*i.e.*, which is what it is not and is not what it is—and that of the In-itself which is what it is” (*ibid.*: 785). There is no escape from the phantasmagoria of otherness, the human face of the unknown, the mirror of possibility.

Past the shifting sands of sincerity and existentialist authenticity, there is an oasis where Leiris moves from a perspective of the exoticized other as a touching tree to the forest theatre of ontological multiplicity. In *L’Afrique fantôme* Leiris attributes Ethiopian possession to “a few vague neurotic phenomena” and “quite a bit of merchandising” (translated by Clifford 1986a: 44). In 1958 he perceives the performative quality of belief and writes of the Ethiopian *zâr* possession cult that “among the faithful a belief in the authenticity of possessions never seems to be seriously impaired [. . .] by marked cases of deceit observed in others” (translated in Clifford 1986b: 113). In contrast to his feelings when he first witnesses the possession cults and ceremonies in Ethiopia and is disappointed by the apparent superficiality of the possession states, Leiris comes to appreciate the theatricality of the ceremonies, in which he can become a participant without relinquishing the role of observer, signifying a new perspective towards authorship and authenticity.

Leiris does not perform the *gourri*, the dance of those possessed by the *zâr*, and Clifford points out that he does not stop taking notes when his head is anointed in butter and animal entrails and he has tasted the blood of the sacrifice (Clifford 1988: 168). It is as if he is only possessed by writing in *L'Afrique fantôme*. Notes that ferment for fifteen years reveal in *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux* that he is indeed possessed by possession, preoccupied by the *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) that accompanies ritualistic suspension of disbelief, or living theatre. Jacques Mercier believes Leiris uses the term in a different sense than that of Sartre. *Mauvaise foi* is a notion that "permits him to complete his aesthetic edifice, to close off the last skylight through which the sacred could have intruded upon his life" ("permet de parachever son édifice esthétique, de boucher l'ultime lucarne par laquelle le sacré pouvait faire intrusion dans la vie") (Mercier 1996: 908). Editor of *Miroir de l'Afrique*, the extensive compilation of Leiris's ethnographic work, Jean Jamin suggests, on the contrary, that it is precisely the Sartrean conception of "mauvaise foi" that is Leiris's means of conceptualizing possession in Gondar; further, it is his means of documenting the momentary identification that occurs between the possessed and himself by means of theatre ("identification, au moins occasionnelle, entre les possédés et lui-même par la médiation du théâtre") (Jamin 1996: 892). Leiris has no doubt that despite the "acted theatre" ("théâtre joué") of participants who play a merely self-interested role for personal gain from the ritual, there are states of ecstasy, the "lived theatre" ("théâtre vécu") of collective euphoria, of a catharsis all the more powerful for its ability to grip in a passionate embrace the being of all participants and spectators, effectively disintegrating the aesthetic and social barriers of theatre, merging art and life.

Leiris is accustomed to Sartre's use of theatre as a philosophical conceit, yet as Jamin and Claude Reichler have observed, in his analysis of possession he finds himself caught between the ideas of Alfred Métraux, Sartre, and the priestess Malkam Ayyahou (Leiris 1958: 912-1061), who embodies at once the force of mysticism and the "reality principle". As a priestess, she facilitates the trance, and as an informant, she describes the stigma attached to possession. Métraux's conception of possession as "ritual comedy" ("*comédie rituelle*") evolves into Leiris's "wardrobe of personalities" ("*vestiaire de personnalités*") (Jamin 1996: 909). Leiris witnesses what Métraux terms a kind of advanced forgetfulness (*l'oubli avancé*), the necessarily irretrievable nature of the unconscious trance, in the cathartic release of repression. The bad faith of both possession and academic investigation reaches its climax in the moment when, like the possessed, Leiris is spiritually inhabited, but not by one but two gods, Sartre and Freud. The self-deception of *mauvaise foi*, lying to oneself about oneself, cannot be accounted for by psychoanalysis, for Sartre, who believes that the splitting of mind into conscious and unconscious components is itself a form of bad faith that cannot account for the mode of repression (Sartre 1966: 91-96).

Sartre counters the Freudian bifurcation of mind with his own conception of what he sees as a unified consciousness in-itself and for-itself, *en soi* and *pour soi*, facticity and transcendence. Leiris is aware of Sartre's unsound attack on Freudianism in *Being and Nothingness*, the text in which this famous ontological battle is staged. The third kind of bad faith he describes—destroying one self as consciousness before the other—is to become other, which Sartre considers (arguably erroneously) tantamount to being facticity and denying transcendence. The gods of existentialism and psychoanalysis seem to be purged when Leiris, as a spectator integrated into the spectacle, experiences the affect of magic practices, “with their myths and images as well as the aspect of drama and spectacle that they contain” (“avec leur matériel de mythes et d’images comme avec la part de drame et de spectacle qu’elles contiennent”) (Leiris 1958: 1061). The theatre of trance, restorative self-sundering, conscious and unconscious, becomes a means of treating authorless symptoms, atavistic permutations of collective memory, in a ceremony that reaches the individual through the force of the communal. The spectator is deceived by self-deception, as there is no self to be deceived.

The experience of limits, of possession, reveals the many levels on which the self becomes exotic, an existential and psychoanalytic problem that Leiris's writings embody. In “Michel Leiris, or Psychoanalysis Without End”, J. B. Pontalis (1992: 130) undercuts the notion of Leiris's de-exoticizing hermeneutics when he suggests that Leiris encounters in self-ethnography the danger “that he will either alienate himself in the society he is studying or take as his sole point of reference the society from which he comes. These contradictory attitudes in fact result in the same misrecognition and the same surrender to the heady delights of exoticism”. It is actually Leiris's cross-cultural alienation that enables him to forego the drive for transcendence by becoming the other who objectifies himself. He does not hide behind the guise of scientific objectivity, conceal the performativity of the act of writing, or “go native”; rather, the intersubjective moment of reciprocal immanence endures the revealing-concealing play of the gaze and the problem of the metaphysical perspective, the presence or absence of the self writing the self or the other, the aporia of both autobiography and ethnography.

How does the other expand into the mythology of the author's psyche—or can this psyche be separated from the realm of writing? Does this other represent a return of the repressed in the form of a self-colonizing ego that in turn reifies being in the act of writing? The notion of papering over the void serves to introduce the necessary trope of writing/reading the void, the possibility of a solipsistic psychoanalysis, self-mourning and catatonia, a *graphic* death of the self through its self-inscription. What Lydia Davis (1992: 4) calls “the agony of extreme-self consciousness” suffers in the expanded field of a lived life of a fictional self, one for whom all is not only *de trop* but also of tropes, a Derridean *plus de métaphore* (Derrida

1972: 219-229). The sense in which metaphysics is “relève de la métaphore” (219)—derives from metaphor or surpasses/is surpassed by metaphor (in the sense of Hegelian *Aufhebung*)—applies to Leiris’s path, *relève du texte*, the metaphysical faux pas of philosophical anthropology and the search for self. According to Anna Warby (1990: 257), however, Leiris’s “seemingly solipsistic autobiographical self is structured ethnographically, which is not to suggest that the writer is an ‘ethnographer of the self’, for ethnography is not reduced to a mere literary device for self-examination. ‘Auto-ethnography’ is only a meaningful expression in the sense that ethnography is predisposed to an ‘autobiographical’ critique of Western ethnocentrism, because the ethnographer comes under his own scrutiny as part of his observation of the other”. The mode of this scrutiny is still more complex.

Clearly, in *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux* Leiris does not use ethnography merely as a mode of self-examination, but he is an auto-ethnographer, or ethnographer of self, in Pontalis’ terms, in that his autobiographical project bears the mark of his fieldwork and reflections of and on the other. There is no doubt that Leiris’s hybrid anthropological-literary project challenges the boundaries of both disciplines; his critique of ethnocentrism in *L’Afrique fantôme* comes largely through the juxtaposition of highly personal diaries and cultural analysis. The unanswerable question of who is the matador and who the toro, between ethnographer and foreign culture, autobiographer and text, text and reader, autobiographer and reader, analyst and patient, is somehow evaded in the exhibitionistic dance of the *tauromachie*, a spectacle of nerves and narcissism. The bull, as mentioned, is emblematic of writing for Leiris; it also stands for possession and sacrifice. As he describes in “Sacrifice d’un taureau chez le *hougan* Jo Pierre-Gilles” of 1951, the moment of possession, after the ritual slaughter and consecration of the bull in a Haitian Vodou ceremony, begins with a person who is termed a “drunk”, when she submits to the beginning of possession, who may remain at this point or may achieve a complete trance. (He writes, “On dit d’une personne qu’elle est ‘soûlée’ quand elle subit un début de possession, qui peut en rester là *ou* s’achever en transe complète” [Leiris 1951: 33]). Leiris does extensive research on African culture in the Caribbean, becoming *soûlé*, drunk with observation. In these moments of intoxication, he eludes the void of solitude and experiences the oceanic feeling of cosmic oneness. The experience is both vicarious and intersubjective in that he is possessed by the shared text of the encounter with otherness. Leiris is possessed by the other, experiencing the “interpenetration” of “one-within-the other”, in Stephen Frosh’s (2003: 395) words, drawing upon Laplanche’s reminder that Freud does not hesitate over formulations which go back to the idea of possession. In writing the “talking cure”, Leiris brings his possession to the threshold of experience.

The perils of extreme self-consciousness include scopophilia, as well as agonizing psychic distance and propinquity. “The responsibility for the

other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity", in Emmanuel Lévinas (1998: 10) terms, which philosophically describe the dissolution of the *ego* in the realm of the other. Leiris's struggle coincides with twentieth-century problems in psychoanalysis and in philosophy, intersecting in the modernist paradigm of solipsism, an experience of metaphysical epiphany, paralysis, and dissolution. Can the painful consciousness of the intricacies of the perceptual warfare of colonialism, of the reification of racism, and of the metaphorically polyvalent parasitology of colonizer/colonized in some way liberate the Leirisian "I"? If psychoanalytic theory reads the literary text as a symptom, Leiris treats the symptom as a literary text, especially the symptom par excellence, according to Lacan, the *ego*, the "malady of man", which Leiris deconstructs. As Lacan writes in *Écrits*, "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (Sass 1989: 46-47). However, Leiris not only questions the integrity of the *ego*, but as Lacan prescribes, his *ego* exists in the realm of the *id*, lingering only as an idelect. Warbly elides an important question of Leiris's "seemingly solipsistic" self in terms of anthropology and the politics of otherness; it is a self confronting a monolithic Western subject with what it lacks, but also, revealing cultural phenomena as "*objets petit autre*" (Lacan 1978), between the self and the other, it is part of the psychology of both. In his dialogue between *ego/id*, subject/object, and self/other, Leiris negotiates the *mise-en-abîme* of persona and deconstructs the psychoanalysis of solipsism—which would incorporate the fear of, alienation from, and desire for the other in the symptomology of a cloistered yet ubiquitous subjectivity—and challenges the solipsism of writing as a form of auto-psychoanalysis. Crossing genres with Leiris takes the reader through a complex web of intertextuality and multidirectionality, through moments of polyvocal parapraxis (Freud's early term for schizophrenia), through analytic coquetry, through an evocative exegesis that postpones conclusion. As Philippe Lejeune (1981: 234) writes: "Everything changed as soon as I stopped wanting to be the impossible addressee, when I abandoned the attitude of communication, and I read the text like those poems where an 'I' without referent and without context belongs to whoever wants to take it."

If art sculpts modernity with the chisel of the illusory referent, solipsism is the face that emerges from the silent stone of dreams. Oneirography becomes the "talking cure" for unconscious maladies and autobiography the conscious text that attempts to contain the illusion of subjectivity. Just as Freud capitalizes on even his darkest dreams for the sake of psychoanalysis—he describes the dream of dissecting his own pelvis in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900: 452-455)—Leiris exploits the debasement of the colonial experience for autobiography. One of the most cloying images of Leiris's extensive oneirography, "The Turban Woman" in *Manhood*, extends the exoticism with which Freud surrounds a personal experience that serves as an example of a dream-state, an exemplary moment of the uncanny:

"As I was walking one hot summer afternoon through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back at the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive by another *detour* as the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny [. . .]" (Freud 1919: 237).

Freud goes on to relate the uncanny to the "omnipotence of thoughts", a phrase he borrows from a patient, a concept which leads "back to the old, animistic conception of the universe" (Leiris 1934a: 240), a time of belief in magical powers, belief characterized by the egotistical overestimation of mental prowess. The uncanny moment stirs vestiges of occult beliefs in magical powers, lost or repressed in modern life, beliefs transformed into fantasies in Leiris's dreams. Longing for contact with the sacred, he unconsciously choreographs his fantasy of holiness:

"[W]e are in a sordid colonial city: the air is sultry, there is a red sun and fog. Men in khaki shorts are walking through the streets, ill-shaven and dirty [. . .]. On a large sheet of paper I have patiently drawn signs that look like commas or Arabic letters; it is the laborious work of several months or years. I realize that this paper is a piece of cloth and that a mouth which happens to be drawn on it near the top (no doubt by the accidental configuration of a group of signs) makes of it a woman's face. I then roll the piece of cloth around my head like a turban and remain frozen in this position, my chest bare, sitting in front of my desk in ecstasy, like a kind of fakir [. . .]" (Leiris 1934a: 144).

While Freud seems to be fascinated and embarrassed by the attention he attracts in a foreign place, Leiris has crossed cultures by exhibiting himself as a kind of holy man, or anthropologist-fakir. Freud's anxiety mounts as he cannot escape the labyrinth of the unknown while Leiris, mystified by cryptic signs, revels in the limitless scroll of writing that winds around his temples. In his few sentences of analysis, Leiris informs the dreamer (in his autocritique) and the reader that he had retied his mistress' turban only the day before and that the mouth on the paper/cloth must have been suggested to him by his Venetian blinds, "a multiple colonnade of slats with a tear in one of them towards the top that looked like a mouth which gaped at me [. . .]" (*ibid.*: 145). Following the goal of surrealist automatic writing, the sheer richness of this dream imagery blurs the border between oneirography and fiction—the tawdry colonials, the sign of the alluring woman, the writing lesson, the papyrus turban, the disguised charlatan's reverie, the ecstasy of signification, writing both conscious and unconscious, poetic and hermeneutic, text and mirror, "langage tangage" (Leiris 1985⁹)—composing a narrative philosophy of cross-cultural existence.

9. His title plays on the popular phrase "Langage t'engage", or "Make good on your word". Further, language literally engages you, or is engaging to you.

A reluctantly philosophical ethnographer, Leiris's career runs alongside that of Lévi-Strauss (trained first in philosophy), who also experiments with crossing genres in literature and ethnography and thoroughly questions the perspective of anthropology. However, Leiris finds that "disenchanted reverie" underlies *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss's most literary ethnography, and wants to move beyond this kind of abstraction, towards "the material improvement of conditions for all peoples". According to Leiris (1956: 192), Lévi-Strauss fails to navigate between genres, it would seem. While the pragmatic humanistic ideology of his anthropological project is evident in his political affiliations and in essays like "The Ethnographer Faced with Colonialism", and "Race and Culture", Leiris cannot hide his concern with the ontological philosophy from which he attempts to escape. His autobiographical self-scrutiny distinguishes his career as an instance of the most rigorous questioning of the problem of subjectivity/objectivity and the peripatetic questioning of the problem of other minds. Leiris (1934a: 162) extends this philosophical quest, running from Kant to Wittgenstein, into the realms of poetics, religious ecstasy, and the foreign, all intertwined in the ineffable, the sacred: "Love—the only possibility of a coincidence between subject and object, the only means of acceding to the sacred, as represented by the desired object in so far as it is exterior and alien to us—implies its own negation because to possess the sacred is at the same time to profane and finally to destroy it by gradually robbing it of its alien character." This position of the ever-receding threshold of ultimate otherness reflects the Collège de Sociologie's backlash against the possessive individualism of the West; the subject attempting to possess (objectively, analytically) possession, for example, faces the challenge of a self-defeating quest. If love is, as Freud writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, a loss of self, a cosmic formlessness, akin to the spiritual sense of belonging to the universe, Leiris's tempestuous engagement with transcendence shows that solipsism, the philosophical nemesis of love, is not egoism and indeed eludes the *ego* and the *id*; rather, it is the yawning space—of lucid formlessness—between subject and object.

Solipsism, African Spirituality, and Ineffable Intersubjectivity

In *Paradoxes of Delusion* Louis A. Sass (1990: 68) examines some of the connections between solipsism and schizophrenia, drawing heavily on Wittgenstein and on the case of Freud's famous patient, Judge Schreber, whose schizophrenia becomes emblematic of the fragmentation of modern consciousness. He shows how Wittgenstein is influenced by the Schopenhauerian "I" as the "'dark point in consciousness': 'Just as on the retina

"Tangage" is a nautical term, "pitching" in English, which also connotes being entangled—by words.

the precise point of entry of the optic nerve is blind [...] the eye sees everything but itself". Wittgenstein also writes in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it" (*ibid.*: 69). As one of the most important of the paradoxes of solipsism, this assertion, if applied to Leiris, seems to corroborate Pontalis' idea that he objectifies himself completely, that he refuses to be subjective, that he "displaces the 'psychological' problem of sincerity on to the scientific problem of investigation" (Pontalis 1992: 132). What Sass deems "scrutinizing hyperawareness" and Pontalis the "combination of fascination and detachment" capture the nature of solipsistic reveries, such as the schizoaffective "mute particularity" exhibited by Judge Schreber, the crossdressed German judge staring at himself in the mirror and making detailed notes. However, if Leiris's autobiography flirts with the phenomenologically hectic idleness of solipsism, a category he apparently wants to avoid with all of his "I", he eludes it only through his autoreifying gaze, an attempted colonization and subjugation of the concept of selfhood. If solipsism involves an oscillation between infinite subjectivity and infinite objectivity, it may be considered, like exoticism, to reveal the limits of metaphysical discourse.

In contrast to Sass' notion of "quasi-solipsism", which has to do with a delusive schizoid disorder, with the watcher oppressed by omnipotent fascination, Leiris's pseudosolipsism reflects his hyperawareness of the pain of awareness, of being as a binary battle; his is a poetics of solipsism. Leiris may be deluded into thinking circuitous ontological transgressions can bring him victory in the form of sincerity, but if he indulges in an aesthetics of bad faith, he writes between the lines with a nonchalant dilettantism, the verve of the swerving "I", the voice of erudite dissimulation. The metatextual irony of the apparent contradiction between the political activism of his anthropological humanism and his eccentric autobiography is that Leiris elides their apparent philosophical conflicts and, without recourse to transcendence, silently achieves methodological reconciliation. The validity of an outside perspective on solipsism might be logically questioned as an *a priori* belief in the *a posteriori* and vice versa—but by whom? Wittgenstein hints at this realm of insightful uncertainty that is beyond specious subjective experience, but Leiris inhabits it.

Leiris's "subjectivity" does not hinge on his refusal to be subjective, but on the possibility of his realizing Lacan's performative interpretation of the Freudian notion that where the *ego* was, the *id* shall be (Sass 1989: 47), which is clarified in German, in terms of the question of *das Ich und das Es*, literally the "I" and the "It". "Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object", according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1984: 26). "It is, rather, the subject that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject." The "desiring 'It' lusts after the dissolution of the 'I' into abject objecthood; it desires the implosion of transcendence."

Sass concludes that the solipsist “must not assume the existence of the self but only that which is directly observed: experience” (Sass 1989: 69). Luce Irigaray (1993: 79) describes a kind of escape from the “mechanism of solipsism” in a “sublimation of the flesh” that requires “a passage through silence and solitude which leads to the existence, the emergence of a speech of one who [. . .] can also speak of himself to the other, and hear him”. Leiris’s narrative remoteness, as he describes some of the most intimate details of his life in *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu/Je*, as Pontalis indicates), enables him to auto-psychoanalyze a specimen of self, a sample from a mysterious culture, rendered by an unsteady hand. Leiris reminds the reader, however, that “to consider myself objectively is still to consider myself—to keep my eyes fixed on myself instead of turning them beyond and transcending myself in the direction of something more broadly human” (1984: 156). His “objectivity”, that of a ceaseless contextuality, the forced nonchalance of frenzied detachment, can be considered the mask of psychoanalysis, which he dons as he writes himself, the narrativized subject for whom culture, identity, and reality are everything and nothing, universal culture and improvised ephemera. It may be recalled that on the dustjacket of *L’Afrique fantôme* Leiris describes his research as inhuman. Still, the abyss of the open frame beckons him to improvise, to compose the human, which, for Leiris, involves a recondite sleight-of-hand, the attempt to lay bare neither his subject, his subjectivity, nor his art, but rather the shadows cast by being.

A lifetime of writing, of confessions, of stealing glances at himself in journal entries, an ongoing problematization of perception: Is Leiris “writing himself into existence” (Clifford 1986a: 13), or out of existence? “Message de l’Afrique” is published in *Le Musée vivant*, yet the author in the basement of le Musée de l’Homme hears the death knell of “l’Homme”, recognizes the “*museal* mortality as a necessary effect of an institution caught in the contradictions of its culture” (Crimp 1983: 43). There is the sense in which posthumous delayed gratification satisfies Leiris’s first-person project in the deferred publication of journals, the source of all his other writings, described by Leiris in 1929 as “the piece which originates all the others and yet can only be made public after the author’s death” (translated by Blanchard 1993: 77). This gaze from beyond the tomb, according to Blanchot, is a “lucid gaze by which the I, penetrating its ‘inner darkness’, discovers that what gazes within it is no longer the I, ‘structure of the world’, but already the monumental statue, with no gaze faceless, and nameless: the *He* of sovereign Death” (Blanchot 1992: 161). Through a consciously anti-philosophical attempt at a life still vigorously textually conceived, through the slow-motion glissade of solipsism, through the overcoming of the ontological paroxysms of authorship, the Leirisian conception of overcoming exoticism remains as elusive as that of selfhood, both retaining their certain romantic curiosity and engaging complexity.

The void, for Leiris, like the passive voice, so often used in French—the translucent watermark of solipsism, which veils the referentiality of the “I” and masks epistemological partiality—is self-knowledge, the self being lost in the infinite regress of the human signifying project. The Leirisan “I” is, however, a gentle presence, but if the passive voice is deceptively transparent, the first-person narration is opaque: “I will not tell you how.” De-exoticism has occurred, or exoticism has been sublimated:

« Je ne vous retracerai pas ce que fut ce premier voyage de presque deux ans en Afrique, ce voyage qui eut pour point de départ la côte du Sénégal et — après l’Afrique occidentale, l’Afrique centrale et le Soudan anglo-égyptien — s’acheva en Abyssinie où j’ai eu la bonne fortune de vivre quelques mois dans l’intimité du culte des esprits zâr, qui rappellent de très près les Iwa du vaudou haïtien. *Je ne vous raconterai pas comment*, de fil en aiguille et à mesure que je m’accoutumai à ce milieu nouveau, je cessai de regarder les Africains sous l’angle de l’exotisme, finissant par être plus attentif à ce qui les rapprochait des hommes des autres pays qu’aux traits culturels plus ou moins pittoresques qui les en différençaient. *Je ne vous dirai pas comment*, après un second voyage [...] l’idée mythologique que je m’étais faite de l’Afrique acheva de se dissiper et laissa place à une Afrique bien réelle. »

(“I will not retrace the first trip of almost two years in Africa, this trip that began on the coast of Senegal and—after West Africa, Central Africa, and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan—finished in Ethiopia, where I had the good fortune to experience intimately the cult of zâr spirits, which bear similarities to the Iwa of Haitian Vodou. *I will not tell you how*, as I gradually became accustomed to this new milieu, I ceased to regard Africans from an angle of exoticism, ending up becoming more attentive to what people of different countries have in common than to certain picturesque cultural traits that may set them apart. *I will not tell you how*, after a second trip [...] my mythological conception of Africa ended up dissipating and leaving behind a very real Africa [...]”) (Leiris 1948: 880; the translation is my own).

While the African “other”—in the form of European modernist images of Africa and Africans—remains as ambiguous as the Leirisan “I” within the pages of his writing, his oeuvre represents modernism’s struggle, at its most attentive, in its movement towards a “real” Africa. Travelling across infinite scrolls of culture, writing in the twilight of the idols of solipsism and exoticism, Leiris reveals the “ineffable character” of self-disclosure and of the texture of cultural experience—uncanny and exotic only in the sense of being replete with the wonder of difference—which must be endlessly described, but cannot be fully contained in books.

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ABSTRACT

Africa profoundly alters modernist culture, art, and anthropology in the twentieth century, leaving an impression that is nowhere better described—registered in the breadth of its psychological and philosophical complexity—than in the writings of Michel Leiris. As an anthropologist, with well-known titles such as *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) and *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar* (1958), who is perhaps still better known for his idiosyncratic autobiography *La Règle du jeu* (1955), Leiris has a long career, from life on the fringe of Dada and Surrealism as a young man seeking escape from bourgeois society in *négrisme* and primitivism to thoughtful writings on African culture as an ethnographer with the Musée de l'Homme. His avant-garde ethnography marks the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial, securing his place as a critic of colonialism and as chronicler of African culture from Mali to Ethiopia. Reading Michel Leiris gives rise to pivotal questions on the metaphysics of the exotic, in the expanded sense of the relation between self and other. If Leiris's autobiography exoticizes the self, his anthropology of African cultures de-exoticizes the other, while always contemplating the ontological subtlety of crosscultural experience.

RÉSUMÉ

Afrique et avant-gardisme anthropologique. La psychoanalyse de l'exotisme. — L'Afrique altère profondément la culture, l'art et l'anthropologie moderniste du vingtième siècle, laissant une impression qui n'est nulle part mieux décrite — enregistrée dans la portée de sa complexité psychologique et philosophique — que dans les écrits de Michel Leiris. Connue en tant qu'anthropologiste, avec des titres à succès tels que *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) et *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar* (1958), il est encore plus connu pour son autobiographie idiosyncratique *La Règle du jeu* (1955). Leiris a eu une longue carrière, d'une vie en marge du dadaïsme et du surréalisme en tant que jeune homme cherchant à s'évader de la société bourgeoise par le « négrisme » et le primitivisme, à ses écrits méditatifs sur la culture africaine en tant qu'ethnographe au Musée de l'Homme. Son ethnographie avant-gardiste, évoquant la transition entre l'époque coloniale et l'époque postcoloniale, renforce sa position de critique du colonialisme et de chroniqueur de la culture africaine du Mali à l'Éthiopie. Lire son œuvre soulève des

questions-clés sur la métaphysique de l'exotisme dans l'étendue de la relation entre le soi et l'autre. Pendant que son autobiographie exotise le soi, son anthropologie de la culture africaine dé-exotise l'autre, toujours en contemplant la subtilité ontologique de l'expérience interculturelle.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Michel Leiris, anthropology, avant-garde, exoticism, postcolonial, psychoanalysis/*Michel Leiris, anthropologie, avant-gardisme, exotisme, postcolonial, psychoanalyse.*