Reports

A Conversation with Michel Leiris[1]

SALLY PRICE AND JEAN JAMIN
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Introduction [SP]: More than most participants in the anthropological world, Michel Leiris eludes pigeonholing in terms of traditional categories of intellectual activity. With one foot in anthropology and another in literature, his life has also been centered on close personal relations with a diverse network of creative artists and thinkers, from Picasso to Sartre. In the realm of anthropology, both his recognition of the importance of the ethnographer's subjectivity and his fascination with "hybrid" social and cultural situations (particularly in colonial settings) place his work of the 1930s a half-century ahead of its time.

Many Anglophone anthropologists know Leiris best as a participant in France's first major scientific expedition in Africa, the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931–33, led by Marcel Griaule. It is therefore curious that his conscientious, sensitive, and introspective journal of that undertaking, published in France as *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), has never been translated. Indeed, relatively little of his anthropological writing has come out in English. The journal *Sulfur* has produced the beginnings of a corrective to this gap in the form of a special issue devoted to Leiris (no. 15 [1986]); in addition to an opening essay by James Clifford, it includes new translations of a variety of Leiris's anthropological and literary writings.[2]

The production of the following pages has conformed to the *Paris Review* model, as described recently by John Updike, allowing the participants "the opportunity to peruse and edit the transcript, to eliminate babble and indiscretion and to hone finer the elicited *aperçus*" (*New York Times Book Review*, August 17, 1986, p. 1); for Michel Leiris fully shares the views of most of the *Paris Review* interviewees, whose cooperation before a microphone represented more of a courteous and goodwilled concession to friendly pressure than an active enthusiasm for laying one's thoughts on the oral line. The participation of Jean Jamin, Leiris's close friend and colleague at the Département d'Afrique Noire of the Musée de l'Homme, was explicitly designed to nudge the exchanges out of the realm of a formal interview and toward a more spontaneous conversation. Even so, the enterprise was hardly—as Leiris notes at the end—one built on his favorite medium of communication.

Given the current attention being paid in anthropology to the nature of dialogue and its transcription and translation, the steps that led to the text deserve comment. In the spring of 1986, Leiris accepted my proposition to participate in this project on the condition that he be given the opportunity to rephrase his comments in writing. Two sessions were held at Leiris's home, on October 28, 1986, and March 12, 1987. Jamin kindly undertook the laborious task of converting the three and a half hours of recorded conversation into word-processed pages and made substantial editorial modifications (deletions, amplifications, and reordering) with the aim of pulling together related points in the discussion; he also drafted many of the notes. This text was submitted to Leiris, who reworked pieces of his own commentary, making further abridgments and elaborations. I reviewed this text (lightly rephrasing some of my own questions, deleting a few exchanges, and reintroducing two or three phrases that had been omitted in the first written version) and translated it into English. I then added to the notes, drafted this introduction, and showed the whole manuscript to Leiris, who made a few final revisions. Responsibility for the editing of this version rests with me; Jamin has prepared a French version for the Paris-based journal *Gradhiva*. In short, this "conversation" represents (like its French variant) a text based on recorded discussions, rather than a transcription in the strict mechanical sense. The illustrations were selected by Leiris.

After the conversations were held, I read for the first time a 23-page typescript entitled "Titres et travaux," a kind of discursive curriculum vitae which Leiris produced in 1967 for his promotion to the rank of Directeur de Recherche at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). As a preface to the following pages, I have translated (rather literally) the introduction to this previously unpublished document, in which Leiris, referring to himself in the third person, summarized his anthropological career.

> Born in Paris, April 20, 1901, Michel Leiris participated in the surrealist movement from 1924 until 1929; at that time he broke with the movement, though he did not renounce the aims of broadly defined psychological and social liberation which it espoused. Motivated by these "humanist" concerns, he became—even while pursuing his activities as a

2. Available for U.S. $6 plus $1 postage from *Sulfur*, 210 Washtenaw Ave., Ypsilanti, Mich. 48197, U.S.A.

writer—a professional anthropologist upon return from his first trip to Black Africa: the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931–33, which he had been invited to join by Marcel Griaule, with whom he was in contact through Georges Henri Rivière, then Associate Director [*sous-directeur*] of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. *L'Afrique fantôme,* the diary he kept over the course of the expedition, can be seen at once as marking his debut into anthropological writing and setting the stage for the series of autobiographical writings that represent the core of his work as a writer, of which the best-known is *L'âge d'homme* (1939) and of which a more recent volume, *Fourbis,* won the Prix des Critiques in 1956. It was after returning from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition that Michel Leiris took courses with teachers such as Marcel Mauss (with whom he had previously studied as an auditor), Marcel Cohen, and Paul Rivet.

As a poet, Michel Leiris has published, among other works, *Glossaire j'y serre mes glosses* (1939), a very special testimony to his long-standing interest in language as a lever to the imagination, as well as *Haut mal* (1943) and *Aurora* (1946); all three of these books emerge directly from a surrealist perspective. As a critic, he has written numerous studies, devoted particularly to his writer and artist friends, including Max Jacob, Raymond Roussel, Georges Bataille, Pablo Picasso, André Masson, Joan Miro, Alberto Giacometti, and Francis Bacon. His fascination over the years with bullfighting, to which he attaches a strong aesthetic value, led to the appearance of *Miroir de la tauromachie* (1938), as well as other writings of taurine inspiration, and he established the text for a feature-length documentary film called *La course de taureaux,* which was realized by Pierre Braunberger (1951).

In addition to the professional travels that took him to Black Africa and then the Caribbean, a field site inspired by his Africanist experience and his friendship with the Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire, Michel Leiris has made trips of varying length to Egypt, to parts of North Africa, and to several European countries. The mobilization of 1939, by sending him to the Sud Oranais [Algeria], provided the opportunity for a Saharan experience. In 1955 he participated in a delegation of the Association of French-Chinese Friendship which traveled to the People's Republic of China. Finally, he made a brief trip to Japan in 1964 and went to Cuba in 1967.

Originally conceptualized as a kind of intellectual expatriation and later chosen as a second profession, anthropology now represents to Michel Leiris an activity that is intimately tied in with his literary activity. Given that poetry was his primary interest, he was in a privileged position to conduct a study of the language of initiation among the Dogon of Sanga and to go on, afterwards, to a stylistic analysis of the texts that had been gathered. In addition, the importance that theater and performative spectacles more generally held for him could hardly help but lead him to examine, with an obstinate determination to discern the psychological underpinnings, the "ritual comedy" (in the words of Alfred Métraux) which is practiced by initiates to possession cults like that of the *zâr* in Ethiopia or like Haitian *vodu.* Had art criticism not been a familiar pursuit, it would have been more difficult for him to adopt, aside from an anthropological perspective, a truly aesthetic perspective for his latest publication, *Afrique noire: La création plastique,* which was written with Jacqueline Delange, a colleague at the Musée de l'Homme. At the same time, it is absolutely clear to him that his experience as an ethnographic observer has contributed to his attempts at self-description. For is it not, in addition to a psychoanalytic cure, the habit of assuming the position of an observer, when faced with human phenomena, which has allowed him to become the witness, in some sense external, to things that were happening within himself?

SP: Perhaps I should start out by saying just a few words about the original idea behind this conversation. Adam Kuper, who first proposed it, was particularly interested in your reflections on the intellectual environment of French anthropology over the past 50 years or so. I'm hoping that we can talk about anthropology not so much in a narrow sense as in terms of its ties with the literary world, the artistic world, and the political world.

ML: Ties which were rather tenuous, in fact. There wasn't much. It's true that I had some connections, but you mustn't imagine that that was true for everyone.

SP: How should we proceed? Shall we set ourselves an agenda, or would you prefer to wander around freely among different subjects?

ML: I think the simplest thing is to wander around a bit all over. I even believe that that's the only way to arrive anywhere. In any case, we have Jean here who might be willing to start out by making either a grand declaration or else perhaps a short but incisive statement.

JJ: Not at all. I have no grand declaration to make. But we could begin by using the CA interview with Edmund Leach as a model; in that case what would be involved is a kind of intellectual autobiography in spoken form. In your case, Michel, it strikes me that although you have written and talked quite a bit about yourself, you have said relatively little about the intellectual itinerary that led you into anthropology.

ML: In terms of my own experience, I can say quite frankly that it was surrealism, which I was involved with during the first four years (1925–29) and which represented for me the rebellion against the so-called rationalism of Western society and therefore an intellectual curiosity about peoples who represented more or less what Lévy-Bruhl called at the time the *mentalité primitive.* It's quite simple.

JJ: But did you talk much about anthropology, as such, in the company of surrealists?

ML: Hardly. No, we talked rather about the Orient in the Rimbaldian sense: Orient with a capital O, meaning all that is not part of the Occident. Artaud, and the rest of us after him, vomited up the Pope and developed a kind of cult of the Dalai Lama [(Artaud) 1925]. It was a bit convoluted.

JJ: In the end, you were replacing one cult—that of Reason—with another.

ML: Exactly, but we didn't realize that at the time. We stood firmly against the West. And this was evident in a fairly blatant way in the surrealist statements and manifestos. What was going on was a rebellion against Western civilization, plain and simple.

JJ: But the Western civilization that you were rejecting—didn't you reduce it, sometimes rather crudely, to a few key elements, or perhaps even just to capitalism?

ML: Yes. But then—not right away. That happened only later, and that's the reason that most of us moved in the direction of communism. At the beginning it wasn't conceptualized in terms of capitalist society. Within these developments, given that we're adopting an anthropological perspective for present purposes, there is one thing that is perhaps worthy of mention: it's that our first political manifestation was the Saint-Pol Roux banquet, which was, in effect, a protest against the war in Morocco.[3] The cry was "Vive Abd el-Krim!"

JJ: And "Down with France!"

ML: Yes, naturally. But all that had nothing to do with anthropology or with an interest in what is now called the Third World. At any rate, our first political statement was the adoption of an anticolonialist stance.

SP: Can you describe how the ideology you've been talking about evolved over time, in terms of your own position?

ML: I never really rejected surrealism as such. Like several others, I rejected the tutelage of Breton, but that's not the same thing. Since then, a lot of water has passed under the bridge, and the issues have been examined more dispassionately. Breton had enormous strong points—that goes without saying—but he also had a fault: he was a difficult person, and rather authoritarian. There were quite a few of us who rebelled against him. And then, at that time it was primarily Bataille, who had never been a surrealist, who accused Breton of being an idealist in spite of his claims of materialism. All of this is so terribly complicated that I think I should simply refer you to the history of surrealism written by Nadeau [1964 (1944)]. But in the end, what matters and what is, I think, really important is that our first political position was an anticolonialist position, opposed to the Guerre du Rif. Basically, we were concerned about the situation of colonized peoples well before we were concerned about the situation of the proletariat. It seems quite likely—this is the aesthetic dimension—that exoticism played a role. We were much more inclined to be solidary with "exotic" oppressed people than with oppressed people living here.

JJ: How did you first get involved in surrealism?

ML: I was very close to Masson; at the time he was more or less my mentor [*maître à penser*], and he had become a surrealist. In terms of how I got to know Masson—I had met someone named Roland Tual who also became a surrealist but who never wrote anything; I first met him through Max Jacob in Saint-Benoit sur Loire, when Max Jacob had retired to the Benedictines. I became close with Tual immediately, and he told me I should absolutely get to know his friend André Masson, whom he considered a marvelous painter. I met him in 1921, and we hit it off from the very first [see Leiris 1982]. But it was Max Jacob who was my mentor in terms of poetry. I used to send him poems and he would correct them for me. Well, not exactly. He generally told me that they were very bad. He wasn't wrong. That's how I did my apprenticeship. Masson's influence was through his painting and as a person. He was a very cultured man who had a tremendous store of knowledge. I used to go to his studio in the afternoon while he was working. We talked. We talked about things we were reading. Sometimes I would do some work. It was really an *atelier* in the full sense of the term. Miro was already there; he was Masson's immediate neighbor. Masson is the one who got me involved with surrealism. He had an exhibition at the Galérie Simon, which was run by Kahnweiler [see Kahnweiler 1982]. Breton went to the exhibit and was very taken with a painting by Masson called *Les quatre éléments*, so he wanted to meet him. Later it was Masson who introduced me to Breton. I also knew Limbour, who had already become a surrealist, though not a very orthodox one and not very disciplined. Through him I got to know Desnos. I might have already mentioned to you, because it's interesting in terms of *la petite histoire littéraire:* I was talking a walk one afternoon with Limbour—we must have had lunch together—and by pure chance we ran into Desnos,

3. The banquet given in honor of the poet Saint-Pol Roux (1861–1940), whom Breton considered a precursor of surrealism, took place in July 1925 at the Closerie des Lilas in Paris. It was the stage for one of the great scandals of surrealism, as the surrealists present gave a particularly hard time to one of the invited guests, Mme. Rachilde, reproaching her for her chauvinistic patriotism. Breton (1969 [1952]:115–17) later noted that "Leiris barely escaped a lynching for having uttered expressly seditious remarks, first crying them out at the window and then on the boulevard." The Guerre du Rif was one of the first major colonial wars; first Spain and then France fought, from 1921 to 1926, against the Berber tribes who were united under the military and political authority of Abd el-Krim and who had been opposing European attempts to penetrate their territory since the early 19th century.

whom Limbour knew pretty well.[4] Desnos caught us up on news of the French ex-Dada group and told us that there was going to be a new journal called *La Révolution Surréaliste*—a title, Desnos added, along the lines of *La Bataille Syndicaliste*. Later I saw Breton pretty regularly in the famous Café Cyrano. But I was attached principally to Aragon, who was much more "with it" [*beaucoup plus dans la vie*] than Breton. Breton took on the role of guru to some extent, but with Aragon we used to wander around at night in Montmartre.

JJ: In a sense wasn't this a break with the Catholic upbringing and bourgeois background that your family gave you?

ML: I never considered it as a break. Quite frankly, I had no ambition whatsoever to have any kind of a profession at all. I just wanted to write.

SP: If you were 20 or 30 years old today—at a time when surrealism has settled in as part of our cultural heritage but is no longer a contemporary dynamic movement—what are the associations that you would develop? Who are the people in the literary or artistic or political world that you can imagine getting involved with?

ML: At the present time I don't know of anyone, like Breton or like Sartre later on, who could really be called intellectual leaders [*maîtres à penser*]. I really see no one at all. I don't mean to say that there aren't very able people of absolutely top quality, but as for people who could really be called *maîtres à penser,* who inspire a lot of people to follow them, who persuade others of their vision—I don't see whom you could say that of today.

SP: In other words, you were fortunate in being born into a moment of history that was particularly receptive—

ML: Yes. I believe that the situation of young intellectuals during the twenties was a great deal better than it is now. After all, the political and economic problems were less severe. It was therefore more normal to engage in almost purely intellectual activities. Today there are certainly people, as I said, of real worth, but things are more dispersed. There really is no intellectual movement worthy of the name.

JJ: And then there was the influence of jazz, which you wrote about in that famous passage in *L'âge d'homme.*

ML: Of course. Jazz was very important to me.

JJ: Coming back to what you were saying earlier: was jazz seen as being something exotic?

ML: For me, it represented exoticism within the context of American industrial society. Jazz was simultaneously part of industrial civilization and Africa.

SP: I remember reading in something you wrote that you conceptualized jazz almost as a kind of spirit possession.[5]

ML: A litle bit, it's true. I was very ready to think of jazz as being something like trance. And I don't think that's totally wrong.

SP: Did your experiences seeing trance in Africa modify your perception of jazz?

ML: I once wrote a review of a film by King Vidor called *Hallelujah* [Leiris 1930] in which I suggested that blacks were people who were particularly able to abandon themselves and to enter into states of trance.

JJ: It seems as though the surrealists could have been expected to have an interest in jazz. And yet that wasn't the case.

ML: Breton couldn't stand music. But there were others who liked it well enough.

JJ: There was surrealist poetry, surrealist painting, and surrealist sculpture, but was there ever any surrealist music?

ML: There's no way you could have had surrealist music. In order to have surrealism, there first has to be realism. There has to be a reality to manipulate. Music (and I am not denigrating it when I say this) has absolutely nothing to do with reality. It's a system that has no signs. Music has no signification. What matters are the relationships between sounds. Surrealist music is inconceivable. Literary surrealism, yes, because literature is made of words. Pictorial surrealism, yes, because pictures are made of images. But a musical surrealism? What could it be based on?

JJ: You wouldn't consider jazz surrealist in a way?

ML: Not at all. At least not as I see it. It does have one feature that also contributes to surrealism, though—improvisation.

JJ: There's also a subversion of values—that is, of Western musical values. Sometimes even an explicit attempt to mock them.

ML: OK. But that's a very secondary aspect. The essential thing is that literary or pictorial surrealism implies that signifying things are being played with. In music, in jazz, there are no signifiers. I've always liked and

4. Georges Limbour (1900–1970) was a writer and art critic who signed Bataille's anti-Breton pamphlet, *Un Cadavre,* in 1930. Robert Desnos (1900–1945) was an early star of surrealism, gifted in the practice of automatic writing.

5. See Leiris's 1982 discussion of jazz with Michael Haggerty, translated in *Sulfur* 15:97–104.

thought highly of René Leibowitz, my good friend the composer, conductor, and musicologist, whose intelligence and sensitivity I have always admired. But he once wrote a little book in which, as I see it, he was completely off-base, and Sartre's preface to it was too. At the time he wrote it, when people were talking about a *littérature engagée,* he thought he'd shown that there was such a thing as a *musique engagée,* and he used as his example Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw.* Well, the fact is that the *A Survivor from Warsaw* is absolutely not *musique engagée;* it's the *words* that are *engagés,* not the music.[6] One of the sad proofs that music can't be *engagée* is the famous chorus from *Nabucco,* Verdi's opera, which was almost a Risorgimento-type anthem and has now been called into service by the extreme right as the anthem of the Front National!

JJ: Returning to the idea of exoticism, it's interesting that the surrealists' interest in exoticism was played out more by thought than by action. Contrary to what many people think, they traveled very little. And you were the only one who became an ethnographer.

ML: In fact, it wasn't just a matter of exoticism. It was more a hatred of ways of thinking and ways of being which were accepted as a matter of course in our own society. You have to realize that there was a very marked Parisianness in surrealism. For example, Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* [1953 (1926)], which I consider one of the great books of the surrealist movement, is in a way a search for the *merveilleux,* for mythical elements, within Parisian life—for example, on the grand boulevards or the Passage de l'Opéra. And a little later on, *Nadja* [Breton 1964 (1928)] was the same thing. Essentially, *Nadja* is an exclusively Parisian *merveilleux.* You could say that surrealism was basically a validation of the irrational; whether that happened somewhere else or here was absolutely beside the point. You say that I'm the only surrealist to have become an anthropologist, and it's true that I'm perhaps the only one to have become a professional anthropologist, but for example there's also Benjamin Péret, who published a collection of Indian myths [1960], in Mexico I think, and there's also a younger fellow, Vincent Bounoure, who's become a specialist in Oceanic art.

JJ: But they're not professional anthropologists!

ML: No, that's true.

SP: Perhaps that's not the essential distinction here.

ML: I was probably the one who went farthest in that direction. But you certainly couldn't say that I was the only one. Even Breton—Marguérite Bonnet, who's directing a new edition of Breton's work about to appear in *La Pléiade,* has discovered some notes that Breton took among the Hopi.

JJ: In looking through some surrealist declarations and manifestos, I came upon a "Read/Don't Read" list [Pierre 1980], which included Lévy-Bruhl's *Mentalité primitive* in the banned column, as well as Durkheim!

ML: Yes, but Lévy-Bruhl was inspirational for me, not for the surrealists. I think that for the surrealists, and for Breton in particular, Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl must have seemed too academic.

SP: Turning toward a different branch of the surrealist movement, can you tell us something about your friendship with Aimé Césaire [Leiris 1965]?

ML: That happened relatively late. My friendship with Césaire, which quickly became a very close one, dates to about 1945 or 1946, maybe even 1947. I met him through Pierre Loeb, the art dealer. I must have known him for about a year before I made my first trip to the Caribbean, on the occasion of the centenary of the 1848 Revolution.

SP: Did he influence your decision to go to the Caribbean?

ML: Absolutely, it was really because of him that I went the first time. There's one thing that should perhaps be mentioned about my involvement with the Caribbean. In the same way that what attracted me in jazz was its mixedness, its hybrid aspect—that is, the fact that it combined African roots with contributions from Western civilization—I was attracted to the Caribbean because of the cultural *clash* that took place there.

SP: One of the things that I find striking about Césaire is the fact that, although his writing is so strongly Antillean in expression, he has never (that I'm aware of) written anything purely in Creole.

ML: He considered the idea of writing in Creole inopportune. Since he had a message to get across—a message of negritude and a pro-Antillean statement—he needed to do that in a language that was widely used. He couldn't do that in a language that's semifolkloric the way Creole is.

SP: On the other hand, you argued very vigorously, almost 40 years ago [1950*a*], that Creole should be included in the educational curriculum in Martinique.

ML: Of course. It's not good to pull people away from their native language. But a writer who sees himself as having a message to get across—it's quite reasonable that he would use a language more widely understood than his native language.

6. See Leibowitz (1950). Leibowitz prepared the final score of the 1947 work for Schoenberg, whose eyesight was failing, and conducted its first European performance, in Paris.

SP: How would you characterize the relationship between negritude and surrealism [see Leiris 1950*a*:106–16]?

ML: For Césaire, negritude is essentially the condition of those who were viewed as blacks by the society in which they lived. The term and the idea were invented by Césaire and Senghor and Damas when the three of them were students together. It was a matter of showing nonwhite students who were working here that they had something in common with each other, and that was their negritude—that is, the fact that they were all treated as blacks by the other students, who were whites. Obviously, one can say that among blacks rationalism is not as greatly valued as it is among us, or at least as much as we claim to value it.

SP: Another question, still thinking about the Antillean response to surrealism: The surrealist movement is often viewed as a particularly French—and even, as you pointed out earlier, a particularly Parisian—phenomenon.

ML: That's true.

SP: And as "rebellions" go, surrealism seems to have been an unusually "civilized" one in the strictly Western European sense of the term. It strikes me that Antillean intellectuals like Césaire who became surrealists were not only making a statement of rebellion like their Parisian colleagues but also and in the same breath displaying their classical erudition and affirming their mastery of a very European French culture.

ML: Yes, that's a legitimate way to view it. For a very long time Caribbean writers—if I may be critical, and perhaps even a bit hard on them—were under the influence of the Parnassians and then later the surrealists. That is to say, they took their cues from outside in both cases. Now, Césaire did not just receive; he also contributed—enormously. He and his friends who were involved in the journal *Tropiques* could hardly not sympathize with surrealism, which was the enemy of a kind of culture that represented above all, for them, the system that an authoritarian metropolitan power was trying to impose upon them. As a student, Césaire first developed (with Senghor and Damas, as I mentioned) the idea of negritude; and several years later, at the beginning of the last war, he was taken on as a traveling companion by Breton, who met him in Fort-de-France. In becoming one of the major voices of surrealism, Césaire may have shown his mastery of certain French values, but it's also important not to forget that those very heterodox, even revolutionary, values had nothing to do with official French discourse.[7]

7. For a discussion of the journal *Tropiques* and of Césaire's ties with Léon-Gontran Damas and Léopold Senghor, see Eshleman and Smith (1983).

JJ: Isn't there something rather shocking about the way surrealists viewed other cultures as being more irrational than ours, or as being totally irrational? Wasn't this a denigration more than a validation of them?

ML: I mentioned earlier my review of the film by King Vidor. I realize now that it was racist, given that it accepts with approval all the ideas that were used to stereotype blacks—unbridled sexuality, predisposition to trance, etc.

JJ: If you looked at things another way, you could argue that validating the "irrational" you've been talking about had the effect of imbuing it with a positive aspect, which is exactly what no one ever said. It took on as much value as our rationalism, or our so-called rationalism.

ML: Certainly, the surrealist point of view assigned the irrational greater validity, a more human quality.

JJ: So that the cult of rationalism was being replaced by a cult of the irrational. But let's come back to anthropology. Would you say that in the beginning, and because of the fact that anthropology focused attention on primitive societies, which were seen as irrational, that it undermined the notion of rationalism in something of the same way that surrealism did? And this even though it was thought of as a science?

ML: Yes, but it was a science of the irrational. I thought for a long time that members of Western society could learn from the experiences of certain non-Western societies and that these societies could have a very positive influence.

JJ: In what sense?

ML: As if one way of life was more valid than another. It was only later, after reflecting on the matter quite a bit, that I arrived at what's known as cultural relativism. But at the beginning, I truly thought that so-called primitive societies were superior to ours. It was a kind of inverted racism. You might say that it took me a very long time to realize that within these splendid societies that ethnographers study there could be idiots and assholes exactly as in ours.

SP: Edmund Leach recently suggested that the central problem for anthropologists today "is not whether we should approach our data as scientists or as poets but whether we can fully convince ourselves . . . that the distinction between savage and civilised upon which the whole edifice of traditional anthropology was constructed deserves to be consigned to the trash can" [1986]. As I've understood your own fascination with hybrid (and especially colonized) societies, it's as if you're envisioning them as somewhere between these two poles.

ML: Not exactly between them; it's more that they embrace both poles, they represent a conjunction of the two.

SP: In terms of the Caribbean, in what sense do you see it as European and in what sense as African?

ML: In terms of what's European in the Caribbean—and I'm speaking now of the French Antilles—it's relatively simple. I've often heard schoolgirls there singing little songs that I had sung as a child in France. And then, you're familiar with Fort-de-France and other such cities; they seem a lot like cities in the French provinces. In addition, the creole language, with its black African syntax and its lexicon deriving essentially from French, is a striking expression of the *clash* that happened there. In terms of what might be called "primitive," that's visible at least within the popular sector and can be seen, for example, in the frequent recourse people have to magic and the strong inclination toward dance and music.

JJ: In this regard but returning to the subject of jazz, it's interesting that even though its African origins are the dominant ones (on the level of rhythm), it was the West that went farthest in recognizing and appreciating and valuing it. I'm thinking of that remarkable anecdote related by Schaeffner [Jamin 1981*a*]. In 1931, during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, the "boy" on the mission showed little or no interest in the pieces of jazz that Schaeffner played on the phonograph, but he did like to whistle the melody of Ravel's *Bolero,* which Schaeffner also liked to play on the phono. Schaeffner was surprised and, to tell the truth, terribly disappointed—being the author of one of the first books to explore the African roots of jazz [Schaeffner and Coeuroy 1926].

ML: I might point out that Ravel's *Bolero* is above all a dance with an extremely strong rhythm.

SP: Over the past few years there's been a lot of interest in the influence of ethnographic materials on modern artists, Picasso and many others—

ML: Picasso never bothered with ethnography! Certainly, he had an appreciation for certain African objects, but it was a purely aesthetic appreciation. He paid absolutely no attention to any meaning these objects might have had.

SP: What was your reaction to the exhibition on ties between "primitive art" and modern art that was mounted a year or two ago at the Museum of Modern Art in New York?

ML: The one put on by William Rubin, yes. Rubin came to the Musée de l'Homme several times. We cautioned him quite strongly about making hasty comparisons. And I believe that he ended up making those comparisons in spite of all our warnings.

SP: You wrote in "Civilisation" [1929] that the modernism sometimes perceived in African art is the result of pure coincidence. Since that time, a lot of people have worked on this question. Do you think our understanding of the issue has become any clearer as a result?

ML: I think that since the work of Jean Laude[8] the issues have become much clearer; that is, we now know not to overestimate the degree of influence. I don't have a personal evaluation I can give you; Laude is the one who tackled this question, and he had some extremely good things to say. It's undeniable that there were some influences of African art on Western art at the beginning of the century—at least a *few* examples can be found. I know that there are many African and Antillean intellectuals (I've known some of them) who like to think that without African art there would never have been such a thing as Cubism. That's completely untrue! Cubism derived essentially from Cézanne. Picasso could well have done what he did without *art nègre.* And if one were to get involved in that sort of comparison it would be necessary to consider Iberian art as well, since that was a significant influence on his work. He never denied that [see Richardson 1987 for a recent development of this point].

JJ: Continuing on the subject of art, but thinking also about ties between surrealism and anthropology, it strikes me that you were one of the first to treat so-called autochthonous art as art, to discover that there might be something universal in it. I'm thinking in particular about what you've written on Wifredo Lam.

ML: Yes, but here I should engage in a little self-criticism. The book I wrote about Lam (published in Milan [1970] but never in France) puts a lot of emphasis on his mixed parentage (a Chinese father living in Cuba and married to a mulatto) and on the very real influence (but as if he were the product only of inherited traits) of his native environment and especially of his godmother, who was a professional "sorceress." (He was, in fact, very proud of that.) I talked about him basically in ethnographic terms; I didn't talk about him the way I would have talked about another artist. For another artist, it never would have mattered a bit to me whether he was of Breton origin, or Basque, or whatever.

JJ: You didn't talk about Lam at all the way you talked about Bacon.

ML: Right. But of course Bacon never went around talking about being born in Ireland of an English father who raised racehorses. What interested me in Bacon was that he communicated through paintings what my friend David Sylvester calls (after an expression that Bacon used in talking about Picasso) [English:] *the brutality of fact* [see Leiris 1974].

8. See Laude (1968) and a special issue of the journal *L'Ecrit-Voir* (no. 6, 1985) devoted to his work.

JJ: That's hardly surrealist!

ML: True. But because of the influence of Freud and other influences as well, surrealism retained a strong symbolist, and therefore idealist, character.

SP: In 1950 [Leiris 1950*b*], you argued that the essential aim of education in colonial societies should not be passing on the colonizers' systems of ideas but rather equipping colonized people intellectually enough so that they can determine their own destiny. Now, almost four decades later, Martinique and Guadeloupe are still part of the state of their colonizers, though most of the other islands of the Caribbean have become independent. Do you think it's possible that French colonialism in the Antilles has shown more reluctance to grant this transfer of responsibility for the destiny of the people? Said a little differently, do you think France has been more "successful" than other European colonizers of the region in imposing its own ideas and values?

ML: France did there what it has always done. It's the same as all French colonialism—which means that, in contrast to British colonialism, which at least shows some respect for local ideas, it's an assimilationist version of colonialism: "our ancestors the Gauls," the metric system, and all that. As for labeling this "successful," I don't think so.

SP: In certain ways, Martinique seems to me to be the most "Europeanized" of all the islands in the Caribbean.

ML: That's a direct result of French colonial policy, which is assimilationist rather than associative.

SP: And yet that's not at all the case for the French territories in Africa.

ML: There's an enormous difference between Africa and the Caribbean due to the fact that the Caribbean has no autochthonous population. All its people are immigrants, either from the top of the society, the youngest sons [without inheritance] and so forth, or blacks who were brought there through the slave trade. The only autochthonous population, the Caribs, has completely disappeared. Africa is a different situation; there the Europeans were superimposed on autochthonous groups. In the Caribbean, where nobody was "at home," France's assimilationist policy had a better chance of succeeding than it did in Africa.

SP: One of the things I'd like to talk about with you concerns the evolution of the goals of the Musée de l'Homme. You once told me that during the 1930s there was a strong concern in the museum about proving that anthropology was a true "science."

ML: As anthropologists, we were supposed to deny being literary. Unfortunately, anthropology became jargonizing, because it's through the use of jargon that you show yourself to be a scientist.

SP: But when did this develop? Was it sudden?

ML: It didn't happen all at once, but it was already visible in the very austere installations that were made in 1937, and which are still there. Rivière is the one who decided to get rid of the wooden cases and install metal ones, in order to make them look more sober and austere and severe. And then there was the antiaestheticism of Rivière and his peers at the time. They didn't want to hear any talk of "*art nègre*"; it had become too fashionable. Besides, anthropology couldn't be reduced to what was called "*art nègre*" or to the study of exotic arts.

SP: You were at the museum when this was going on?

ML: Yes, I was there from the beginning. And I went along with these ideas, I don't deny it. But at the time, it was a normal enough attitude, because it represented a reaction against the terribly aesthetic way people were viewing civilizations. We were against both the explorers who wanted above all to romanticize and glorify relations with the people under study and the aesthetic view of these peoples' material products.

JJ: That reaction against aestheticism might also account in a way for the dryness of ethnographic writing, these monographs that, at least in France, often make such tedious, even boring, reading. I don't think it's exclusively a problem of how they're written; some are actually quite well written.

ML: That's true. It's rather a question of their point of view.

JJ: Right. I have the feeling that anthropology in English, especially the British literature (in spite of the fact that ties between anthropology and the artistic and literary world are less pronounced there) has fewer boring monographs.

ML: Although I don't know British anthropology terribly well, it seems to me that it reflects a closer contact with the subject of study. With the French, there's a possibility that the famous Cartesian spirit plays a role. I would even say that's very likely.

JJ: To come back to the Musée de l'Homme, can you tell us how you first met its founders, Rivière and Rivet? First Rivière.[9]

9. Paul Rivet (1876–1958) was, in 1928, elected to the Chair of Anthropology at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, which he rebaptized the "Chaire d'Ethnologie des Hommes Actuels et des Hommes Fossiles" and under which he placed the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro; founder of the Musée de l'Homme in 1937, Rivet was also, during the Front Populaire, Député Socialiste and Conseiller Général of the Seine. Georges Henri

ML: It must have been in 1921, at the home of a cousin of mine who was married to the musician Roland-Manuel. When they learned that I was interested in modern art, they invited me to their house, where they had people in every Monday. That's where I met Max Jacob; I met Ravel there, too. One evening, a person named Georges Rivière showed up (he didn't yet call himself Georges Henri then) with two associates, and he was immediately sat down at the piano, where he began to play melodies that were more or less jazz with a great deal of brio. We lost sight of each other after that, and I didn't meet up with him again until *Documents*.[10]

JJ: But isn't he the one who got you into anthropology as a career?

ML: Anthropology as a career, there's no doubt about it. What I owe to Griaule, on the other hand, is that he was the one who gave me the opportunity to make my first really big voyage and who trained me as a fieldworker. Rivière is the one who introduced me to Rivet, and he was also the one responsible for the fact that I had a monthly stipend for a time from D. David-Weil;[11] that doubled my salary, which was rather paltry. I was immediately captivated by Rivière, with his casual manner and the eyes of an extraordinarily intelligent beast. He made me think of Sade's character Dolmance, in *La philosophie dans le boudoir.*

JJ: What about Rivet?

ML: He was an impetuous person, with the clear talents of a man of action. On the whole, he had an excellent record in terms of political positions; in 1934 he was one of the most active alongside Langevin in the antifascist struggle,[12] and in his teaching he was consistently and firmly antiracist. I took his course when I was studying at the Institut d'Ethnologie. His lectures were beautifully prepared and extremely clear—you could almost take them down as dictation. But compared with those of Mauss, they were nothing. I should admit, too, that I never had much liking for physical anthropology. The main problem with Rivet was that he was very imbued with his own self. But he did put together a Musée de l'Homme that was openly antiracist and populist. He was, of course, antinazi, and he became a strong partisan for peace with Vietnam.

JJ: At that period within anthropology (which was a new discipline) there was an ideology, or perhaps better an ethic, that was generally accepted. Would you say that it was a science based on an ethic of commitment and responsibility?

ML: There's no doubt about it. It was much stronger in Rivet—and this is the thing that can be said in his favor—than in Mauss.

JJ: And how did you get to know Bataille, who was, if not the founder, at least the driving force behind *Documents*?[13]

ML: It was through one of his older colleagues at the Bibliothèque Nationale, a quite remarkable person named Jacques Lavaud. He had done a thesis on the poet Desportes and ended up as dean of the Faculté des Lettres at Poitiers. It must have been shortly after I met Masson. I remember very clearly the Bataille of that era: a young man, romantic, impeccably dressed, as prone to going off and losing himself in the stars as to rolling in the muck.

JJ: What got you involved in the *Documents* adventure?

ML: I believe that Rivière was the one who had the idea to start *Documents,* and he must have thought that Bataille would make a very good general secretary. First there was the pre-Columbian exhibition at the Pavillon de Marsan,[14] which Rivet, with the assistance of Rivière, got involved in. Métraux, as an Americanist, got involved in working on the exhibition and the catalogue; in any case, he was the one who thought of calling on his former friend from the Ecole des Chartes [National School of Palaeography], Bataille, to do an article on the Aztecs [Bataille 1928]. I met Métraux in 1934, when I got back from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. Until that time, my relationship with him was essentially epistolary. Métraux was on a list to receive *Documents,* but he was teaching at Tucuman [Argentina] and never received his copies. He used to write fulminating letters to complain about not having received *Documents,* and I, without knowing him, would send him letters of appeasement.

SP: In your "Regard vers Alfred Métraux" [Leiris 1963], you described Métraux as a poet, not in the sense of someone who wrote poems but because he was capable of going beyond simple scientific description in a way that seemed to belong in the realm of poetry.

Rivière (1897–1985) was recruited by Rivet in 1928 as Sous-Directeur of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro; he was largely responsible for the conception of the future Musée de l'Homme and, in 1937, the founder and first curator of the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires.

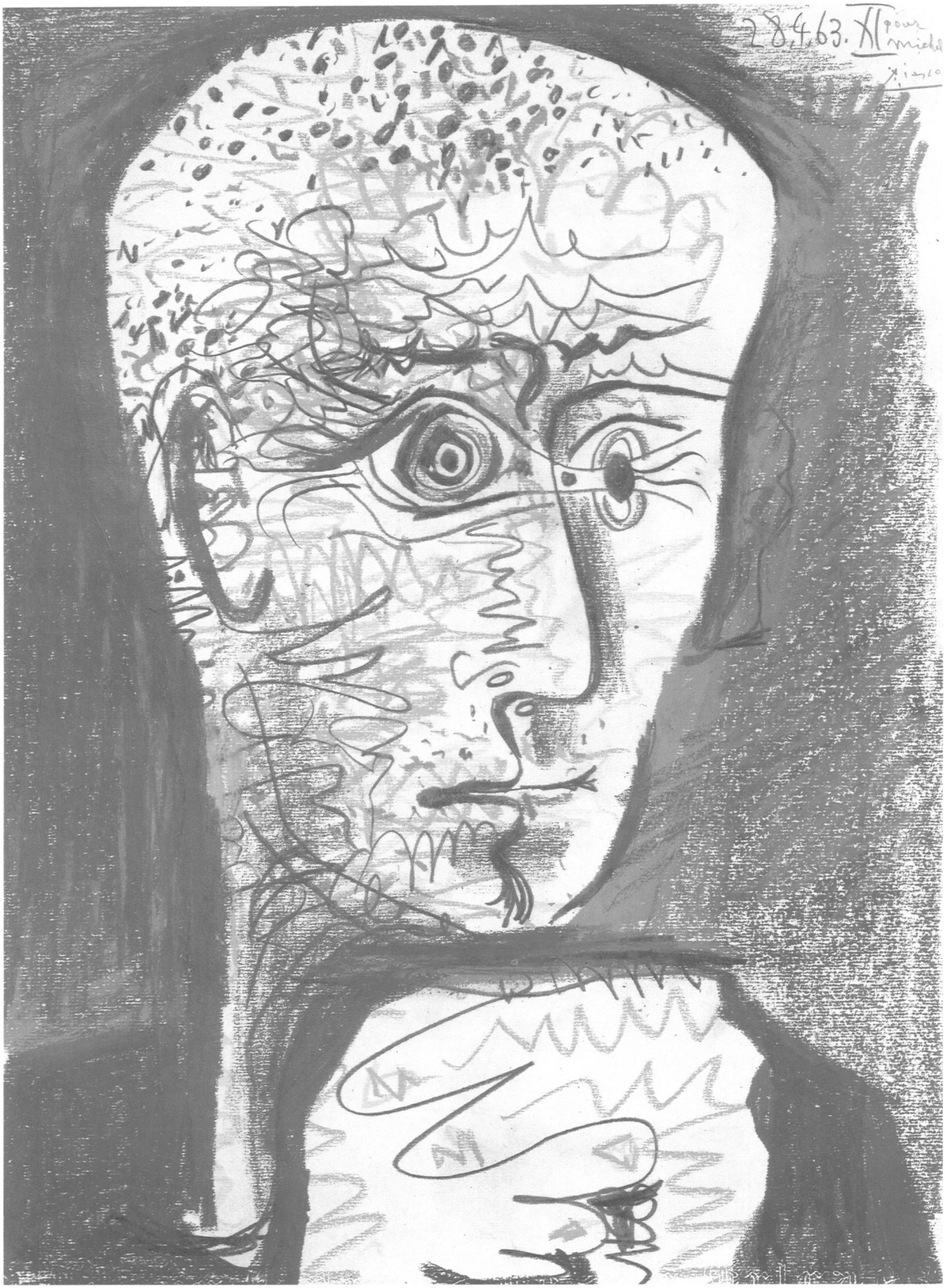
10. *Documents* was a journal edited by Georges Bataille (n. 13) to which Leiris contributed seven articles during its two-year run in 1929–30 (see Clifford 1981).

11. D. David-Weil was a collector and patron of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro; Rivière served as his secretary and adviser before becoming Sous-Directeur of that museum.

12. The Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes was founded in 1934 by the philosopher Alain, the physicist Paul Langevin, and Paul Rivet.

13. Georges Bataille (1897–1962), librarian, writer, and philosopher, was frequently critical and even hostile toward the surrealists. In addition to *Documents,* he founded and directed the journal *Critique,* which is still published in Paris (see Leiris 1966).

14. An exhibition entitled "Les arts anciens de l'Amérique" was mounted in 1928 by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the Pavillon de Marsan.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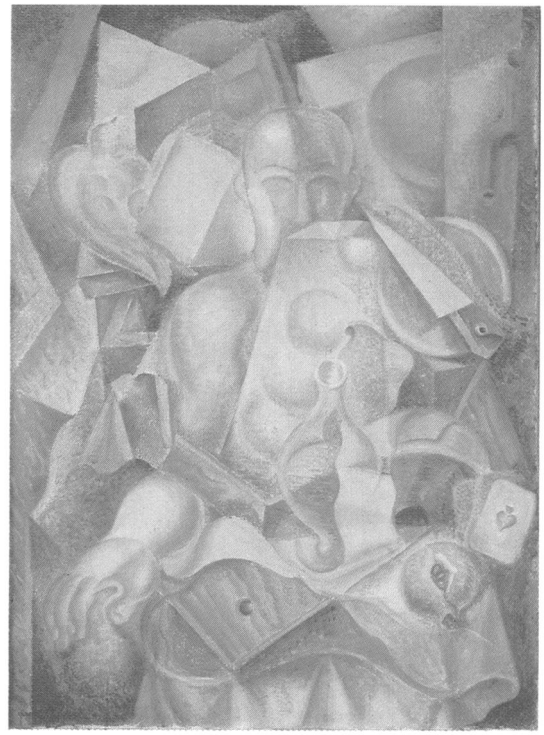

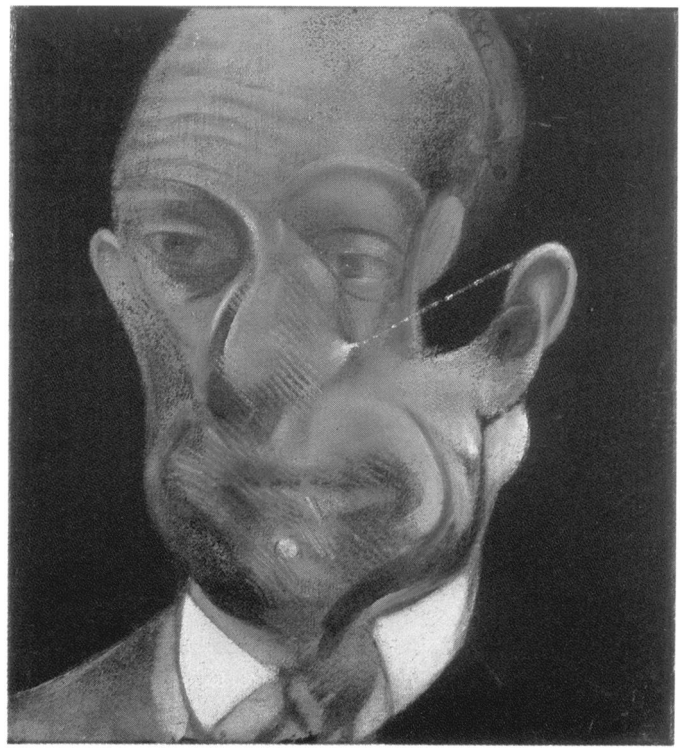

Facing page, *Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)*, Michel Leiris, *1963 (collection of Louise and Michel Leiris)*; above, left, *Francis Bacon (1909–)*, Study for Portrait (Michel Leiris), *1978 (Tate Catalogue no. 102, Louise and Michel Leiris Collection, reproduction courtesy of the Marlborough Gallery, London)*; above, right, *Alberto Giacometti (1901–66)*, Michel Leiris, *1961 (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, gift of Louise and Michel Leiris)*; right, *André Masson (1896–1987)*, Homme attablé (Homme dans un intérieur), *1924 (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, gift of Louise and Michel Leiris)*.

Erratum

Because of a printer's error introduced after the authors had read proofs, the three portraits of Michel Leiris that appeared on p. 167 of the February 1988 issue were incorrectly identified. The legends should have read as follows:

Facing page, *Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)*, Michel Leiris, *1963 (collection of Louise and Michel Leiris)*; above, left, *Alberto Giacometti (1901–66)*, Michel Leiris, *1961 (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, gift of Louise and Michel Leiris)*; above, right, *André Masson (1896–1987)*, Homme attablé (Homme dans un intérieur), *1924 (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, gift of Louise and Michel Leiris)*; right, *Francis Bacon (1909–)*, Study for Portrait (Michel Leiris), *1978 (Tate Catalogue no. 102, Louise and Michel Leiris Collection, reproduction courtesy of the Marlborough Gallery, London)*.

Please insert this page in your February issue (vol. 29, no. 1) of CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY.

ML: Yes, because he lived poetry. For me, a great deal of what Métraux wrote has this kind of poetic value. His very person was poetic. He was someone (and this was proven by his death) who was completely maladapted to contemporary life; he roamed around all over without ever managing to find contentment; he was thoroughly poetic.

SP: Did Métraux have an influence on your vision of trance?

ML: No, I can't say that he did. Well, yes, maybe. There was one thing. Métraux did precede me in thinking about the theatrical aspect of trance. It might even have been in his book, *Le vaudou haïtien* [1958], that he used the term *comédie rituelle,* which is an excellent expression.[15]

JJ: But when Schaeffner wrote about the Dogon funeral rituals he saw in 1931, didn't he use the term *opéra funèbre* in a similar sense?

ML: No, *opéra funèbre* is my expression! All Schaeffner said, after attending a grandiose funeral ceremony, was that "these are people who have an operatic sense." But it was in the context of bullfighting that I talked about *opéra funèbre.* It's in one of my poems about bullfighting [1943].

SP: Since coming to France last year, I've heard several people say that it was their reading of *L'Afrique fantôme* that first inspired them to think about becoming anthropologists. But the aspect of it that they've cited as being most crucial is its literary quality, rather than its anthropological content.

ML: I would point out that when I edited those daily notes which made up the content of *L'Afrique fantôme* (which Malraux, who was a reader for Gallimard at the time, judged worthy of publication), I didn't intend at all to be writing ethnography. It was peripheral, really very peripheral, to my ethnographic work.

JJ: But you once told me that the travel log—

ML: Yes, it was praised by Mauss, of course. But as far as I was concerned, the travel log was mainly a pretext.

JJ: Did you begin studying under Mauss when you returned from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition?

ML: I had taken a couple of his courses before, but it was only after the expedition that I did them assiduously.

JJ: What led you to take Mauss's courses?

ML: It was my reading of Lévy-Bruhl—or, rather, reading Lévy-Bruhl secondhand, I should admit. I had a little book that was a summary of *La mentalité primitive,* I believe by someone named Blondel [1926]. I was literally charmed by that little book—always with the surrealist idea that there was something else, different ways of thinking from Western rationalism.

SP: What was your relationship with Mauss?

ML: The relationship of teacher and student. I was the respectful student of Mauss.

JJ: Wasn't *La langue secrète* [1948 (1938)] written under his direction?

ML: No. At the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, I don't think we had a director as one does for a Thèse de Troisème Cycle; we had examiners. Louis Massignon was my examiner, and he made some hard criticisms of the first draft. He told me that instead of proceeding according to the Cartesian method, which was so dear to the university, though he couldn't stand it (but which did constitute the officially approved method!), I proceeded by "successive explosions of thought." I had to do the whole thing over. But I came out of that meeting ecstatic, because he was such a manifestly exceptional person, and with expressions like that! I was charmed even though he had demolished me—demolished me so much that I ended up taking ten years to write *La langue secrète.*

JJ: If we were to turn around Sally's comment of a few minutes ago about anthropological careers that began with a reading of *L'Afrique fantôme,* what would you say was the original inspiration for your own career?

ML: Perhaps Rimbaud. After all, Rimbaud spent time "in the field," he did indeed! I knew Rimbaud mainly through his poems, but I was also aware, like everyone else, that he had given up everything in order to set out for Ethiopia. He was a poet who abandoned the Parisian literary world to go to the devil, to take up a life of adventure.

JJ: You once remarked to me that Rimbaud probably abandoned poetry because he realized it wasn't working, that it was all fiction. You could as well have said that from the beginning Rimbaud had a realist's conception—even perhaps a positivist conception—of poetry.

ML: In a way, Rimbaud is very realist, but it was a hallucinated reality. After all, hallucination is realist in that the person believes it's the truth. Seeing a parlor at the bottom of a lake was meant to be taken absolutely literally.[16] But he saw that it wasn't working, and he was

15. Métraux had already used this expression in "La comédie rituelle dans la possession" (1955).

16. "Je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple: je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine, . . . un salon au fond d'un lac" (I became accustomed to straightforward hallucination: I saw very clearly a mosque in the place of a factory, . . . a parlor at the bottom of a lake) (Rimbaud 1873).

sufficiently honest with himself to throw the whole enterprise out the window. In terms of my reading, Conrad was also important to me. I read *Victory* of course, but also *Lord Jim*; I was fascinated by a hero who, as a kind of atonement, passes over to the other side and becomes a sort of tribal chief. And then there was also Fletcher's book [1923]. Prévert was the one who recommended that to me. It must have been around 1928–29, maybe even just before the Dakar-Djibouti expedition.

JJ: Can you tell us a little about the two versions of surrealism represented by Prévert and Breton, that is, the rue du Chateau and the rue Fontaine?[17]

ML: I wouldn't really say that there were two versions. It's true that Prevert's cohort (Prévert, Tanguy, Duhamel) ended up dividing itself off, like the rue Blomet group that I belonged to, and being unfaithful to Breton. But you certainly mustn't conceptualize it in terms of rival bands; it was a question of tendencies, what the Communist party calls tendencies [*fractions*].

JJ: To your friends in the surrealist movement, there were those two mottos: "Change life" and "Transform the world."

ML: Yes. "Transform the world" was Marx. "Change life" was Rimbaud. So for us it was a question of getting the two to coincide. Rimbaud wanted to "change life," Marx wanted to "transform the world," and a motto of the surrealists was to "transform the world and change life."

JJ: Mightn't one say that one of the objectives of French anthropology in the thirties was precisely, if not to transform the world, at least to transform ways of thinking and maybe even change the life of colonized peoples?

ML: In the brochure that announced the founding of the Institut d'Ethnologie Lévy-Bruhl expressed what was, after all, a neocolonialist idea that anthropology provided a way of developing a more rational and more humane version of colonialism [1925]. Hence the idea that it could change something, a kind of return to the scientism of the 19th century, when people thought that Science would lead to Progress, not only of a technical sort but also in the morality of humanity. In this respect it was an old idea.

SP: In the radio program on Lévi-Strauss last Saturday, someone posed a question about whether Lévi-Strauss was a moralist.[18] What if we were to ask the same thing of you: Did you and your close peers see yourselves as moralists?

ML: I never considered myself at all in those terms. In retrospect, I can see that I did have moralistic ideas, but it was all very implicit; I wasn't aware of that at all. I would come back to what I was saying a minute ago—this idea that just occurred to me for the first time—that essentially we were still living with a kind of 19th-century scientism. There was a confusion between science and progress, and between scientific progress and humanitarian progress.

JJ: I imagine you've had some second thoughts about that!

ML: Terribly. And I'm not very pleased about it. To convey my feelings in very broad terms: anthropology doesn't serve any purpose, it changes nothing. It doesn't change things any more than art does. In the final analysis I would locate anthropology in the realm of art. It brings about change even less than philosophy does. If you include morality in philosophy, well, morality can have a certain degree of influence on customs.

SP: If you think, for example, of the situation of Indians in Brazil, would you say that anthropology has no possibility of influencing things?

ML: Anthropology has an effect, certainly, if only to show that the sacred is an important factor in the life of societies. But in the end, the practical results are just about nil. I would not have written "L'ethnographe devant le colonialisme" [1950*b*] if I hadn't thought that anthropologists should denounce bad things that they come to observe, but I don't see, up till now, that this has had much of an effect. All the same, I find myself signing this or that petition if I agree with it even though I have no belief in its effectiveness. It's a moral gesture.

SP: I noticed your name on a letter of protest a few weeks ago in an American periodical.[19]

ML: My name is seen only too often in those sorts of situations! I've often decided to stop, but when you agree with a text and someone asks you to lend your support, it's very difficult to refuse. I remember one argument that I found marvelous. A woman I didn't know phoned me to sign a petition about something or other. I agreed with it in principle, but I told her that my name had been spread around so much that it didn't mean anything anymore. So she said to me: "Exactly! If you don't sign the letter, people will assume that you're against it!"

JJ: I'd like to ask you a somewhat more personal question. After the career you've had (and I'm referring to your anthropological career), how would you sum the

17. The rue du Chateau, in Paris's 14th arrondissement, was where Marcel Duhamel hosted such friends as the poet Jacques Prévert and the painter Yves Tanguy. Benjamin Péret and Raymond Queneau also spent time there. Breton's own apartment was on the rue Fontaine.

18. "Le Bon Plaisir de . . ." Claude Lévi-Strauss. France-Culture, October 25, 1986, 3:30–7 P.M.

19. Letter regarding a biography of Alberto Giacometti, *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 1987, p. 33.

whole of it up? Are you satisfied with it? Do you feel that you've made a contribution, provided a kind of sensitivity or some sort of clarification?

ML: I admit very willingly that I have contributed my drop of water. I've helped a few people to see things a bit more lucidly. To me, the duty of lucidity is a personal duty. But that doesn't mean that it serves any useful purpose at all. As for the second part of your question, I believe that the work that has carried the most weight in that respect is *L'Afrique fantôme,* if you consider it as an anthropological work.

JJ: You once told me—if I remember correctly—that you were very touched by the fact that the community of professional anthropologists not only accepted you as a member but also acknowledged your anthropological work.

ML: Yes, because that's a kind of compensation. At first I was thought of as a sort of bum. Well, now I'm happy to be taken at least a little seriously!

JJ: And after a rather curious publishing record, *L'Afrique fantôme* has recently been reissued in the Sciences Humaines series at Gallimard [see Jamin 1981*b*].

ML: That brought me the satisfaction a hoodlum would feel at being awarded the Legion of Honor!

SP: Still sticking to the subject of moral issues, I'd like to talk about the collection of ethnographic objects, especially in the 1930s. In *L'Afrique fantôme,* you describe with great candor both the nature of your collecting and your feelings about what you were involved in.

ML: One never tells all, of course, but in *L'Afrique fantôme* I tried to record maximally. The notion that anthropology had a usefulness that was in some sense moral led to the belief that, since the ends justified the means, there were some situations in which it was permissible to do almost anything in order to obtain objects that would demonstrate, once they were installed in a Parisian museum, the beauty of the civilizations in question. I would never have done what I did for commercial ends. Never. I always faulted Malraux for the business of the bas-reliefs, because his goal was to sell them. Ours was to show them in a museum.

SP: What's your position about the restitution of artifacts by Western museums to their countries of origin?

ML: In principle, I'm for it. In practice, it's clear that it's not possible, for example, to return art objects that were acquired by France under, say, François I^{er}! Not everything can be returned to its country of origin. But in principle I understand very well that newly independent countries would want to reclaim such objects. I can think of historic objects, for example—such as the Dahomean thrones that we have in the Musée de l'Homme—that it would be very appropriate to return.

SP: Is the Musée de l'Homme making efforts toward the restitution of objects?

ML: I believe that no effort at all is being made. There are objects that were seized, either in wartime or in peace (as was sometimes the case during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition), but the great majority of objects that are now in anthropology museums were bought, fair and square. And it could be argued that the buyers are the legitimate owners.

SP: But does the fact that an object was paid for necessarily mean, in your view, that it should belong to the buyer? There is a question of the balance of power between buyer and seller.

ML: It could be argued that these objects were bought at very low prices and that the market was not, therefore, a fully proper one.

SP: I know, for example, that the Republic of Suriname sent representatives to the United States to explore the possibility of the restitution of certain museum pieces but without making any kind of distinction between those that were paid for and those that weren't; for them, it wasn't a relevant variable.

ML: I understand their reaction, and it is legitimate. But so is the opposite point of view. I don't believe in taking a position in general. You have to examine each case on its own terms.

SP: You mentioned a while ago the distinction between Malraux's removal of the bas-reliefs and your own collecting activities during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. Has your attitude toward these issues changed since that expedition?

ML: In terms of Malraux, too, you have to be careful; his behavior did not make me feel indignant. And there's another thing that I'd like to clarify. Occasionally we did get involved in acquisitions where we conducted ourselves rather casually. But it was rare. We paid for almost everything. Looking back now, I think that some of what we did was very wrong, in that it deprived people of things that they were very attached to, and in the end to absolutely no good purpose. Or at least not in any way to their advantage.

JJ: Then what's it all for? What I mean is that, later on, perhaps we'll make the same judgment about the kind of anthropology that's being done today.

ML: I know. In terms of writing, which is the only activity that I indulge in these days, I've come to think that it's a kind of drug. Well, there's no sense to drugs. And

yet one becomes incredibly dependent on them, and then it's not possible to do without them.

JJ: Wouldn't you say that with such a drug, if you will, one can have insights into reality?

ML: Do you mean literature?

JJ: Yes.

ML: Like any other drug. Just ask an addict. He'll tell you that when he's under the influence of his toxicant, he enjoys an extraordinary lucidity.

JJ: But an addict takes drugs for himself. He doesn't exhibit himself, much less read.

ML: I grant that there's a very big difference. But then I ask myself whether, when one writes and publishes, one isn't simply an addict afflicted with vanity.

JJ: Leaving that aside, do you think you have a message to transmit?

ML: No, I don't think I do.

JJ: In that case, why do you write, and whom do you write for?

ML: I've already told you. It's like a drug.

JJ: But if, after all your writing and publishing, no one was responsive, if what you wrote left people indifferent—

ML: I would be very disappointed.

JJ: Would you continue to write?

ML: Yes, of course. And I would think of the possibility of receiving recognition later on. I might think about posterity.

SP: When I read *L'Afrique fantôme,* I often found myself wondering whom you were writing for. There were moments when I had the impression that you were doing it really for yourself, and then others—

ML: Essentially I wrote it for myself. I believe I've already mentioned that it was an experimental book. I'd had my fill of literature, especially surrealism; I'd had more than I could take of Western civilization. I wanted to see what would result when I forced myself to record virtually everything that happened around me and everything that went through my head. That was essentially the idea behind *L'Afrique fantôme.*

SP: How did Marcel Griaule react? Did you show it to him?

ML: At one point I was going to show him the proofs, but I admit that I didn't do it—though I had said I would—because I could see, given the way he was behaving, that he was a completely different kind of person from me and that, being opposed to the spirit of the book in spite of our camaraderie, he would have asked me to cut it in ways that I wasn't willing to accept. So I decided not to show him the proofs. He was absolutely furious when the book came out; he felt that I had compromised future field studies, and so forth.

SP: It seems to me that your metaphor of a drug addiction could be fairly applied to that book. Your daily entries almost never missed a beat for the entire expedition!

ML: Practically never. I wouldn't go to bed without setting down the report of my day. There were times when I set down things from my file cards, notes that were essentially ethnographic—during my investigation of the *zâr,* when I didn't have a lot of time. In those cases I simply recopied my file notes, for example, reports on possession sessions. But otherwise I wrote a diary entry absolutely every night before going to bed.

JJ: What did Mauss think of this "travel log" approach?

ML: He reprimanded me, in a fatherly, good-natured way; but he was not approving.

JJ: And Rivet?

ML: I think I've already told you about that. In order not to damage my image of him as a man of distinction and a perfect liberal, he quibbled about questions of pure form, pointing out errors in French or bringing up that business I had mentioned in the course of reporting a dream (completely forgetting that it came from a dream) about the Hudson Bay being located in New York, and also my use of the verb *recoller* instead of *récoler* ["to stick back together" and "to check over," respectively]. I really wasn't pleased at all by that; I would have preferred him to be straight with me, the way Mauss was. But my relationship with Griaule was the only one that was spoiled by *L'Afrique fantôme.*

JJ: If one were to evaluate your admittedly marginal (nonacademic) position in French anthropology, mightn't one say that you played something of the role of an iconoclast, or rather of a demystifier, given that you have rather frequently, shall we say, put your foot in it?

ML: I don't deny it, but I would prefer to think of it as a question of demystifying. It's not so much some destructive motive that drives me as a desire to demystify in order to arrive at something more legitimately proven and solid.

JJ: Even *L'Afrique fantôme* represented a demystification of field research.

ML: Yes, and also a demystification of travel and of travel literature.

JJ: On the other hand, the same couldn't be said of your work on African art. *Afrique noire: La création plastique* [Leiris and Delange 1967] strikes me as a much more conventional book.

ML: More orthodox.

JJ: Overall, its form is more like *La langue secrète,* which is also rather orthodox.

ML: Yes. I would point out that *Afrique noire* was written on commission, for a series whose character I knew rather well from the start.

JJ: Literary critics, and even anthropological commentators, have claimed that you were one of the first to propose the idea of an *ethnographie de soi-même* [ethnography of the self], though that's not a term you yourself have used.

ML: I think that if you look at the claim carefully it's entirely false. The analysis that I've given, for example, of the effect on me when I was a child of certain words that I didn't understand well—what does that have to do with an ethnography of the self? When I write in *L'âge d'homme* of my first sexual arousals, there's nothing ethnographic about that! One thing that may cause confusion is that in my "Titres et travaux" I said that on a fundamental level I was pursuing a single goal along two different tracks, that is, I wanted to arrive at a *general anthropology* through the observation of myself and through the observation of people from other societies. But that's not the same thing. Obviously, you know that *La règle du jeu* (1948–76) was written mainly from file cards; well, the handling of file cards is something that I started when I was doing ethnographic research. I believe that if I hadn't been an ethnographer I would never have had the idea of using file cards. I would have taken notes, but it wouldn't have been the same thing, I wouldn't have used file cards that I manipulated and changed around and so on. The ethnographic element is nothing more than the manipulation of file cards. I think it's a bit cryptic to talk about "ethnography of the self." I've never talked much about my surroundings. If I'd done an "ethnography of the self," I would have gone on at length about who my parents were, what they did, what my family's social background was, etc.

JJ: What was Mauss referring to when he spoke of *"ethnographie littéraire"* [literary ethnography]?

ML: He gave examples like Lafcadio Hearn. Beginning with projected prefaces for *L'Afrique fantôme,*[20] I felt that the subjective element should be part of ethnography, but as a function of objectivity. It's objectivity, it's the exterior, it's others that, in the end, must be legitimately described. It's not yourself. You introduce yourself into the scene in order to allow the *calcul de l'erreur* [calculation of error].

JJ: What do you mean by the "calculation of error"?

ML: I believe it was in philosophy courses that I first encountered the idea of the calculation of error. I know that I was transported by the idea. For me it was a kind of validation of error. If it appears in both plans for a preface to *L'Afrique fantôme,* it's for my own defense. Those are almost plans for a legal defense, with the kind of *mauvaise foi* [Sartrean "bad faith"] that can enter into a lawyer's plea.

JJ: Thinking in terms of two poles that structure much of our intellectual universe—that is, Sartre and Lévi-Strauss—I would locate you much more on the side of Sartre.

ML: The fact is that at a certain point in time I was very strongly influenced by Sartre. I believe it's fair to say that, despite having very great respect and friendship for him, I have never been in any way influenced by Lévi-Strauss, not in any way at all.

JJ: How did Sartre influence you?

ML: By his dedication to living according to his philosophy. I also had much more intimate contact with Sartre than with Lévi-Strauss. What interested me in him was his search for a morality, though he never managed to define it.

JJ: Don't you think that has to do with the fact that, in spite of your pessimism today, you still have some confidence in the future, that you remain fundamentally a "humanist"? It's also true that Lévi-Strauss has been more interested in societies that are dying out rather than societies that are undergoing change as a result of culture contact, which you've been more involved with.

ML: I would say that, in my current state of mind, my hope (which has no social or humanitarian dimension) is the notion that, after all, if I can manage to find a little poetry somewhere, not all is without meaning.

SP: That's a very general kind of hopefulness, but what about anthropology?

20. The entry for April 4, 1932, in *L'Afrique fantôme,* includes two proposed prefaces under the thesis: "It is through subjectivity (carried to its paroxysm) that one can reach objectivity."

ML: Well there, truly, in terms of anthropology, I see no basis for hope.

SP: Do you read anthropology these days?

ML: No. Not at all. I'm much too lazy. I believe that anthropology can produce interesting findings, for example (and this isn't directly ethnological, but it's related), the work that Lévi-Strauss has done on comparative mythologies or the work of Dumézil. But what I'm really trying to say is that in my opinion none of that changes anything. It adds to knowledge. There's nothing wrong with that, but in terms of producing change, in terms of improving things even one iota, I absolutely do not believe it does.

JJ: As we were discussing earlier, the 19th century had the idea that Science could do positive things, but now people tend rather to see Science as producing harm more than good.

ML: Quite. If Science is harmful, it's best not to get involved with it. Then what you get to is total obscurantism. What I would say, though, and this is a thoroughly idealistic view, is that a person in our day and age who has self-respect owes it to himself to be as lucid as he can possibly be.

SP: You once wrote [1934:503]: "I curse my entire childhood and all the education that I received, the imbecilic conventions that I was raised in, and the morality that others judged best to inculcate in me." Could you elaborate a bit on what inspired this outburst?

ML: It was mainly Catholic education that I was aiming at, because I was raised, well, not in a bigoted way—that would be an exaggeration—but I was raised as a Catholic, first in a tiny little school, and then later I did catechism and had my first communion, and so on. When I vituperated with the kind of thing you've cited, I was thinking primarily about sensuality: all the behavior that has to do with that, and especially sexual acts, which were considered, to sum it up in a single word, immoral. After all, children are taught to value chastity enormously. Masturbation in particular was seen as a hideous thing, and so on. I know that I experienced horrible shame about that practice.

SP: Did you intend in any sense to be indicting Western education on a more general level?

ML: My criticism was not of education in general but rather of the education that I had received. Clearly (and even then I didn't see it any differently), all children should be educated. But it seemed to me that my own education had not been sufficiently liberal and that my Catholic education was responsible for the strong sense of guilt that I had developed. That's essentially what I had in mind when I wrote that comment.

SP: What's your reaction to the kind of anthropology that's now being referred to as "reflexive anthropology" and the return to an interest in subjectivity? It almost seems as though the kind of subjectivity that you were trying to introduce into anthropology 50 years ago has finally been integrated into the discipline.

ML: I think the subjective element should always be present. In fact, it always is present, so it's better to recognize it openly than to deal with it secretly. You've got to lay your cards on the table, in effect. "Here I am, I'm like this. And I, who am like this, have seen things in such and such a way." To me, it's quite elementary. I will make a concession to absolute objectivity and state that that is what it would be most desirable to end up with, but it just isn't possible; the subjectivity is always there. That's why it's infinitely better to acknowledge that subjectivity than to dissimulate. It's important to be clear about it.

SP: Could you comment on the role of dreams and of psychoanalytic theory in your work?

ML: I don't credit my psychoanalysis for the fact that I've written; I had already started writing before. But I would say that it allowed me, after the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, to be well-adjusted enough to do a Licence de Lettres and then to establish myself as a professional anthropologist. What I'm saying is that, if I hadn't undergone analysis, I would still have participated in the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, which had nothing to do with my psychoanalysis (even though my analyst Borel[21] actively encouraged me to accept Griaule's offer to take part in the trans-African expedition he was planning). I believe, however, that at the beginning of my treatment I was in a sufficiently disturbed state that I never would have had the courage to undertake a degree program when I returned from that trip. And that would have meant that I never would have become a professional anthropologist. I'm not fanatical about psychoanalysis, but I do believe that it's an effective kind of therapy when it's well performed and that I for one benefited from it. The same can be said of Bataille, who'd been a patient of Borel and who was the one to recommend that I see him; Bataille's first book, *Histoire de l'oeil*, was written following his analysis. So analysis helped him. As for dreams, my view has always been much more surrealistic than psychoanalytic. That is, it's the manifest content, as Freud called it, rather than the underlying meaning that interests me in dreams. At the same time, it's certainly true that a book such as Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* influenced me on a literary level; reading that book sparked my interest in

21. Adrien Borel was one of the founders of the Société Psychanalytique of Paris and of *L'Evolution Psychiatrique*. A specialist in drug addiction, he was analyzed by Rudolph Loewenstein. In 1950, at the end of his life, Borel played the role of the curé de Torcy in Robert Bresson's film version of Georges Bernanos's 1936 novel, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*.

small details that carried great significance. I should also say that I got much more from the Freudian idea of the primacy of sexuality than I did from Marx's idea of the primacy of economics. Obviously, it's important to be wary of all retrospective views like the ones I'm trotting out in front of you; one has a nasty tendency to rationalize them and to talk as though one had very positive intentions when in fact it was all completely implicit. Besides, you have to take into account that everything I'm saying is further distorted by the fact that oral expression is not really my forte!

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