

During the epoch of my artistic beginnings in about 1930 it was demanded that a person should be predominantly authentic. (...) I, however, remember that already as a boy I knew - and this was instinctive knowledge - that it is impossible to be "authentic" or "defined"...

I admire science, (...) but I fear that it is impossible to eliminate that word "I", it is a much too strong part of us.

(Witold Gombrowicz,
Byłem pierwszym strukturalistą)

In *Byłem pierwszym strukturalistą* Witold Gombrowicz conducted an interview with himself, and responding to successive questions he "justified" his philosophical inspirations and assumed the language of scientific discourse. This is a "game played with the scientific": the author simultaneously scoffed and spoke quite seriously. In his witty, brief text, science - philosophy, anthropology - is used as a manner of keeping a distance towards oneself. The characteristic feature of this instrument is a split of the language, which creates the distance. A fissure.

That, which Gombrowicz regarded as a merely episodic game with the convention of "the scientific" - one of the many cases in his "laboratory of the form" - became a fundamental creative strategy (but also a life strategy) for several protagonists connected in their youth with Surrealism. Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois are the authors of two strange autobiographies: *L'Âge d'homme* and an autobiographical essay unpublished during the author's lifetime: *La Nécessité d'esprit*. Leiris began working on *L'Âge d'homme* before he was thirty years old, while Caillois wrote *La Nécessité d'esprit*, his first book, while aged less than twenty. Two books, treating autobiography in a truly Surrealistic manner, tell the story of a non-experienced life, which had actually just started.

L'Âge d'homme and *La Nécessité d'esprit* also pertain to another theme, albeit in a manner far from obvious: the attitude of the authors to "the scientific". Regardless how one perceives this, Leiris and Caillois were, after all, scholars (an ethnographer and a sociologist). Their learned analyses could yield the impression that science - in this case, anthropology - is not a purpose in itself, that things are not as they should be. This is the case of some sort of insincerity, of "something else" being at stake: here, anthropology can be a metaphor, a mask or a theatrical costume. At times, the texts are closer to the mocking quasi-scientific nature of Gombrowicz's *Byłem pierwszym strukturalistą* than to genuine "Science". How is one to trust Leiris if in the wake of his extremely subjective *L'Afrique fantôme*, whose premise was a negation of all scientific methods, he wrote two academic and meticulous books about the language of the Dogon people and Ethiopian possession cults?

TOMASZ SZERSZEŃ

Anthropology as a Mask, a Costume, a Metaphor: the Case of Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois

In the case of Leiris, interest in ethnography coincided in time with the commencement of work on *L'Âge d'homme*. This was also the moment when he became involved in editing the avant-garde periodical "Documents", in which anthropology and ethnography were for the first time applied as a *sui generis* quasi-scientific quality, *a scientific discourse shifted, opened, sometimes mocked and simultaneously illusively proposed precisely as a scientific discourse*.¹ It was for the needs of "Documents" that Leiris "assumed the guise of an ethnographer" and adapted himself - in the manner of one of the insects described by Caillois - to "writing science".

Interpreters ignore the fact that the publication of *L'Âge d'homme* more or less coincided with Leiris winning the title of a professional ethnographer. The time in which he wrote his curious autobiography thus ideally overlaps with becoming an ethnographer - first studied publications, first written texts, an expedition to Africa, and successive passed exams. The Leiris *Bildungsroman* is, therefore, also a metaphor of initiation into ethnography, a literary equivalent of *rite de passage*. After the publication of *L'Âge d'homme* Leiris began work at the Parisian Musée de l'Homme where he held a high post. "Being an ethnographer" thus became a fact, a social role, a permanent mask, which the author of *L'Afrique fantôme* treated very seriously, as evidenced by the fact that his studies at the Musée were used only for scientific pursuits; he wrote poetry at home.

Leiris was deeply concerned with becoming an ethnographer and the ensuing consequences. Paradoxically, probably the most interesting commentary are his theses in a book about zâr cults: *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*, with Leiris developing some of the conceptions from Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*: in the fashion of Sartre's waiter the possessed plays with his status in order to realise it.² While describing the cult and its participants Leiris metaphorically depicted his personal situation: he constantly played with the status of man of science, of

“being an ethnographer”, in order to realise this situation. Similarly as in the zâr cult where, as he wrote, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish cases of authentic possession (“the experienced theatre”) and possession feigned for the sake of gaining some sort of benefit (“the performed theatre”), reading texts by the author of *L’Afrique* we never know for certain whether he was not merely performing the role of an ethnographer.

The case of Roger Caillois is much more complicated since the costume of the scholar which he donned fits him perfectly. This personality trait was excellently captured by Emil Cioran in his sketch: Caillois commenced fittingly, by studying and even behaving like a student, as testified by the reservations he made in *L’Âge d’homme* (1939), in which he put his teachers’ minds at rest by requesting that they ignore the last pages of the book in which he took the liberty of transgressing the limits of “positive thought” and developed several metaphysical reflections. At the time, he produced the impression that he believed the history of religion, sociology and ethnology...³ Cioran, therefore, refused to be seduced and did not really have faith in the scientific guise of Caillois: there, where others saw an academician he observed an actor wearing a costume. Accounts by some students at the College of Sociology reflect this feeling of maladjustment: at the time of the lectures Caillois was only slightly over twenty years of age – “too little” for a serious scholar and desperately clinging onto theoretical language and academic distance. True, the attitude of the author of *L’homme et le sacré* to “the scientific” is something of an obsession. In his works from that early period Caillois incessantly posed and opted for the defensive. He not only “calmed the teachers”, as Cioran noticed, but also performed a series of reservations: in a preface to *La Nécessité d’esprit* he wrote that his work was a document, whose interpretation was also a document.⁴ We find ourselves in a domain of science to the umpteenth degree, science with a capital S. The same motif was broached by Denis Hollier in his essay: *Crainte et tremblement à l’âge du surréalisme: Caillois’ work is hard to categorize. But not for the same reason as Bastille’s, Blanchot’s or even Sartre’s; Caillois does not mix registers of discourse, nor does oscillate between theory and fiction. Instead, his work is hard to categorize because of the perverse way he chooses to play, almost excessively, in the less literary of those two registers: the theoretical. (...) These defensive origins may explain why it is so difficult to situate his work within the typology of theoretical writings. There is something heterodoxical, oblique, disquieting, and even occasionally hypocritical in the relation to knowledge that Caillois’ writing puts into play. In his essays erudition tilts toward destabilising adventures that function quite differently from a search for truth. Caillois was one of Jorge Luis Borges’ first French translators. In order to exorcize the temptations of fiction he adapted the mask of science in*

*a way that recalls Borges’ imaginary encyclopaedias. But the science in question is unrecognizable; it seems to have become its own double.*⁵

The author’s self-portrait as a thorough academician ceases, however, to be uniform and obvious when we reach for his posthumously published *La Nécessité d’esprit*, in which Caillois tried to capture the essence of poetic imagination *in statu nascendi* as exemplified by his own person. This poetic imagination is to be X-rayed and described with the assistance of the most scientific instruments possible – scientific rigour is to be a response to *écriture automatique* while an examination of inner “necessities” and “rigours” is to replace an unfettered game of the imagination, that prime slogan of the Surrealists.

La Nécessité d’esprit, a strange, marginal attempt at redefining Breton’s vision of Surrealism, is mysteriously connected with another text by Caillois. In his brilliant analysis contained in the essay: *Crainte et tremblement à l’âge du surréalisme* Denis Hollier drew attention that *La Mante Religieuse*, one of the earliest and, at the same time, best known texts by the author of *L’homme et le sacré*, was originally planned as part of the autobiographical *La Nécessité d’esprit*. The first version of *La Mante Religieuse* was issued in “Minotaure” in 1933, and at the end of the text Caillois announced that the next part would deal with his “personal experiences”. There was no subsequent part, however, since Caillois resigned from the publication of *La Nécessité d’esprit* and *La Mante Religieuse* appeared in the collection: *Le Mythe et l’homme*, but already without any personal or autobiographical allusions.

From the very first moment the praying mantis draws man’s attention to its silhouette⁶ – Caillois wrote. True, Hollier recalled that during the vacations of 1928 Caillois actually saw a praying mantis for the first time. The same day, we must believe the systematic researcher, marked Caillois’ sexual initiation. The connection between the praying mantis and autobiography thus becomes obvious. We are dealing with another, after Leiris’ Judith, astonishing autobiographical component involving a woman killing a man and the motif of decapitation since, the author argued, a praying mantis can live without its head. Here is a comment by Denis Hollier: *Indeed, it is difficult to avoid an impression of defeatism when one sees a man choose to expose his first person, choose to expose himself in the first person, in front of a maneater. And what the material history of the text relates, what happened to the text itself between the time Caillois wrote it and the time he published it, is, literally, the defeat of the first person, since the versions published by the author in his lifetime eliminate all personal references. It is as if the first person of the autobiography (The Necessity of the Mind) had been gnawed away, dissolved from within, before being absorbed and assimilated by the third person of the study on the pray-*

ing mantis (*Le myth et homme*). It is difficult, here, not to speculate on this double disappearance, the coincidence that inflicts on the author's first person the fate that befalls the masculine partner of the tragic love he relates. (...) The female's devouring (outside the text) of her sexual partner is echoed by the text's devouring of its foretext. It is as if the meeting with the mantis had the effect of depersonalizing Caillois' voice: his first person, at least his literary first person, did not survive *The Necessity of the Mind*.⁷ Ending his analysis, Holier returned to *La Nécessité d'esprit*, which he described as: *the autobiography of a subject literally possessed by his own absence*.⁸ The praying mantis, in the fashion of Judith, is thus associated with an autobiographical project of describing emptiness, a life not yet experienced, whose place was taken by science.

Science - sociology, anthropology - was for Caillois a mask concealing the temptation of writing an autobiography, a metaphor of his existential situation. Underneath the costume of a thoroughgoing scientific stance something else is hidden. At the time of his earliest works Caillois admired St. Ignatius of Loyola. The author of *La Mante Religieuse* recalled that Loyola's example first inspired him to start the periodical "Inquisitions", and then, in 1937, to establish the College of Sociology. Caillois described the science pursued at the College as "holy sociology". Could it be that Caillois, that exemplary researcher, authentically, albeit in a cleverly concealed manner, experienced the force of vocation? In 1947 the critic Roland (sic!) Caillois published in "Critique" an article about Caillois and the College: *Roger Caillois ou l'inquisiteur sans église*.⁹ It describes Caillois' severe intellectual rigour by comparing him to Loyola but the kind of Loyola who became familiar with Durkheim and attended courses held by Marcel Mauss. It is highly likely that inspired by the Jesuit spirit Caillois treated writing/studies as "spiritual exercise" of sort, which, after all, as Roland Barthes proved in his sketch about St. Ignatius, is a "search for the language" (*The invention of a language - this is then the object of the Exercises* ¹⁰). Jesuit discipline and severity implemented by Caillois at the College had a second, darker, and certainly less well-known side: it involved political motifs carefully camouflaged by a scientific costume. Years later, Caillois described that strange commitment on the very eve of the war (recall, the College was active in 1937-1939): *It was particularly true among those of us who had founded the College de Sociologie, dedicated exclusively to the study of closed groups: societies of men in primitive populations, initiatory communities, sacerdotal brotherhoods, heretical or orgiastic sects, monastic or military orders, terrorist organisations, and secret political associations of the Far East or from the murky periods in European history. We were enthralled by the resolve of those men who, from time to time throughout history, apparently wished to give firm*

laws to the undisciplined society that could not satisfy their desire for rigor. With sympathy we observed the progress of those people who withdrew from such a society in disgust and went to live elsewhere, under harsher institutions. However, some among us, who were full of fervour, could not readily resign themselves to merely interpreting; they were impatient to act for themselves.¹¹

While discussing stands of the French intellectuals during the 1930s, Zee Sternhell, an historian of French political thought, drew attention to the fact that resistance against fascism was never frontal, but assumed assorted forms of mimetic subversion, which adapts and reverses the direction of the words uttered by the enemy in an attempt to precede him in his own terrain and vanquish him while deploying his weapons.¹² This chameleon strategy was applied at the time by Bataille and, predominantly, by Caillois. During those years, their political ideas, disturbing and genuinely schizophrenic, oscillated between two extremes: communism and fascism. The ambivalence was expanded to such a degree that Jacques Bénét, a reviewer writing for *Cahiers du Sud* and discussing the views expounded by Caillois, accused him of fascist sympathies; then, in an erratum he significantly corrected his opinion by admitting that Caillois did harbour communist sympathies, adding that this in no way changed his thesis.¹³ This authentic story says much about Caillois: we shall not commit abuse if we say that he suffered from psychasthenia – a psychological disorder characteristic for an inability to make a decision. Caillois rendered psychasthenia the topic of one of his first texts (also published in "Minotaure"): *Mimétisme et psychasthenie légendaire*, linking it with mimicry – the assumption of camouflage. Could it be that the costume of a scholar and the mask of methodical knowledge were to serve Caillois for a masterful description of his own psychic and existential situation? Was the theory of the ambivalence of the *sacrum* and its bipolar features - recall: right and left, two elements of the *sacrum*: in the heart of one we always find a particle of the other – initiated during lectures at the College and expanded in *L'homme et le sacré*, actually a description of political ambivalence in which two extremities (right and left) were close and radically opposed the *profanum*, i.e. the (democratic) centre? Did the timid young scholar dream not only about secret societies but also about solutions far exceeding the rules of democracy?

The texts by Leiris and Caillois are the reason why we remain helpless. We shall never know for certain the nature of that, which had been proposed for a scientific discourse. Perhaps it is a metaphor, a mask? A game played with textual mirrors, in which the authors supplied the best keys for the interpretation of their texts that, in turn, function as perverse self-comments? This is a science, which, as in the case of the headless *Acéphale*, is always missing something,

in which something is not in its right place: shifted, multiplied, treated lightly. This is a science created to destroy the naïve researcher just as the cruel praying mantis would do.

Endnotes

- ¹ K. Rutkowski, *Paluch*, "Konteksty" 3-4/2007, p. 257. This text is a commentary to Bataille's essay: *The Big Toe* in the last issue of "Documents" (no. 8/1930).
- ² J. Jamin, *Introduction*, in: M. Leiris, *Miroir de l'Afrique*, Gallimard 1996, pp. 40-44.
- ³ E. Cioran, *Ćwiczenia z zachwyty*, Warszawa 1998, p. 94.
- ⁴ R. Caillois, *La Nécessité d'esprit (avant-propos)*, Gallimard 1981, p. 18.
- ⁵ D. Hollier, *Crainte et tremblement à l'âge du surrealism*, in: *Les Dépossédés (Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre)*, Paris 1993, pp. 131-132.
- ⁶ R. Caillois, *Modliszka*, in: *Odpowiedzialność i styl*, Warszawa 1967, p. 151.

- ⁷ D. Hollier, *Crainte et tremblement à l'âge du surrealism*, in: op. cit., p. 134.
- ⁸ D. Hollier, *Crainte et tremblement à l'âge du surrealism*, in: op. cit., p. 136. It is worth mentioning that the leitmotif of Hollier's book is composed of forms of this paradoxical presence-absence of the subject of an autobiography. The French title: *Les Dépossédés* and its English language version: *Absent without Leave*, excellently reflect this experience of emptiness: there is no need to lose one's life in order to die.
- ⁹ In: "Critique, no. 8-9/1947, p. 29.
- ¹⁰ R. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p. 54.
- ¹¹ R. Caillois, *Approches de l'imaginaire*, Paris 1974, pp. 92-93.
- ¹² Z. Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, p. 267. Cf. also D. Hollier, *De l'équivoque entre littérature et politique*, in: *Les Dépossédés (Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre)*, Paris 1993, pp. 109-130.
- ¹³ P. Missac, *Avec des cartes truquées*, "Cahiers du Sud", no. 216/1939.

