

**Blanchot, Leiris:  
A Question of Age\***

*for Pierre Vilar*

**Christophe Bident**

(trans. Michael FitzGerald)

“He was astonishingly silent and seemed to me remote, even absent.” This kind of statement, common to all accounts, or nearly all, of Maurice Blanchot, here concerns Michel Leiris, at the time of his writing *L'Âge d'homme* (*The Age of Man*) in 1935: it is in this way, at least, that he is perceived for the first time by Denis Paulme.<sup>1</sup> I recall this statement only to unsettle, albeit briefly, the received wisdom concerning two writers who often met, and yet – despite a mutual admiration that was steadfast, or nearly so – never became friends.

Blanchot, Leiris. Of the two men, one could quickly sketch a joint portrait: the withdrawal or *regularity* of the former, the worldliness or *secularity*

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of the latter; the few encounters, the real suspicions, but also the political proximity, as at the moment of the *Manifeste des 121*; and further, even at a distance, the shared anxieties, leading so soon to studies in psychiatry for one, to psychoanalysis for the other; the same pleasure in keeping or exuding secrets, the *night without night* or *the other night*, the childlessness after having grown up, these little last-borns, with two elder brothers and an elder sister; finally, the attitude in confrontation with death, right up to the figure of a common fascination, the desire to be able to see oneself dead. Of the two bodies of work, one could just as quickly mark the opposing choices: that of dissimulation, that of exhibition; but also the intersection of the narrative planes, the theatrical scenes, the critical inventories, the mana-words, *terror* or *toro*, for it turns out that a shared, or rather strange, gesturality sustains them, right up to the dramatisation that one and the other accord to writing: "After all, I will have hardly existed other than on paper," confides Leiris to Jean Schuster;<sup>2</sup> "his life is entirely consecrated to literature and to the silence which is proper to it," recalls the notice prefixed to the pocket edition of Blanchot's works. And finally, of the two texts of which Pierre Vilar has invited me to speak, *L'Âge d'homme* and Blanchot's commentary on it, "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," one could, no less rapidly, locate the points of anchorage and connection, the overlaps and the incongruities, direct and indirect, the openings and the silences, the endings and the deferments.<sup>3</sup> *One could*, in sum, moving hastily along all these lines, force Blanchot and Leiris back to back – sometimes in a 'heads or tails,' more often in the challenge of a duel of gazes: thus one attains to a *structure*. And one could then ferret about elsewhere and read of more striking relationships: Bataille, Bacon, Sartre, Picasso, Masson for Leiris; Bataille, Levinas, Antelme, Char, Derrida for Blanchot.

And yet. The recurrence of Bataille's name is significant, at least as an indication. It permits me to underscore a first question, which cannot be answered except in the rediscovery, some day, of a correspondence hitherto kept a secret: When did Blanchot read *L'Âge d'homme* for the first time? At its appearance, in 1939? Later, after the encounter with Bataille, and thus also with Leiris, in 1941? Or only with its republication in 1946? This last date seems the least likely, if one recalls the reference to literature as the gesture of menace in the bullring, found in the article Blanchot devotes to *Haut mal* in 1943 (*FP* 139/*Fp* 161). What can we then assume of Blanchot's reading in 1939? Without doubt, that it has undergone considerable change – not so much Proust and Valéry, Maurras and Daniel-Rops, as Woolf and Thomas Mann, Nerval and Lautréaumont. Supposing thus Blanchot, in 1939 and at the age of 32, or at 34 in 1941, opens a book which commences with the words "I have just reached 34 years of age," what re-

*flection* might be produced by so direct a proposition? He who, in 1948, one year after “Gazes from Beyond the Grave,” will publish a frighteningly autobiographical *récit*, *Death Sentence*, a partial, indirect, secret, veiled and cryptic autobiography, which it is necessary, today, to re-read as such, a *récit* which begins just as dryly: “These things happened to me in 1938,” – what had he been able to experience in his reading of the incipit of *L’Âge d’homme*? He who, in 1956, while he is writing “Battle with the Angel,” his commentary on the first two volumes of *The Rules of the Game*, will attribute the age of 38 to *the last man*, the principal figure of the *récit* which appears the following year, in what way had he thus been able to read the first phrase of *L’Âge d’homme*? The question, the question of the relation of Blanchot to Leiris, therefore comes down to just that, to a question of age, and between them, in all the distance between them, the Bataillan question of experience is lightly displaced, becoming a question of age: what can one read or write at 34 or 38 years old, between *the age of man* and the age of *the last man*? Besides, as you know, Leiris’ proposition – “I have just turned 34” – is followed by this apposition: “34 years, half a life,” which Blanchot, he who publishes his first book, *Thomas the Obscure*, in 1941 at the age of 34, after eight years of erasures, cuts and perhaps immolations, which Blanchot, then, must have read as a cutting-edge: half a life, half a death. Unless he also read it, then, this “half,” in its conjugal metaphor – inasmuch as the associations of woman, of life, of death, of thought, in books such as *Thomas the Obscure* or *Death Sentence*, are unsettled by vertigos and ricochets, impossibilities and epiphanies. I recall, in passing, that it is the death of an intimate friend, Claude Severac, that he evokes in the dramatic fiction of *Death Sentence*, and that the *récits* of the fifties resonate with appeals to Denise Rollin – the one-time mistress of Georges Bataille. And I recall, finally, the numerous names of women which haunt Blanchot’s fiction, Anne, Irene, Barbe (Saint Barbara, but then again the *femme à barbe* – the bearded lady), Colette, Nathalie, Claudia and, just as Bataille, Simone, and just as Leiris, Judith – Judith is the given name of one of the two main female characters in *When the Time Comes*, published in 1951.

One can thus begin in a delirium of dates, ages, the delirium of life, which I imagine could carry away a reader, Maurice Blanchot – of whom it is necessary to say over and again that he was not the man of a dry solitude, a lofty retreat, a spiritual criticism and an ethereal fiction – of whom it must be specified again that it quite often occurred to him to multiply arithmetical references, little games of figures and dates, beginning with the figures and dates of his own birth, which he constantly sprinkled across texts immersed in life, existence, experience, in a cyclical movement wherein the differential analysis of the very terms life, existence, experience, might to-

day permit a re-reading of the displacements of this oeuvre. Not in order to legitimate the emotive, emotional or motional framework of the reading, but so as to allow you to sense to what extent Blanchot might have been sensitive to this weighty title, *L'Âge d'homme*, to its dry and balanced opening sentence, an *independent* proposition, as grammar nicely puts it in this respect. Even if this first sentence is followed, as you know, by a series of physical observations, of which none, or nearly none, corresponds to what could be reported in a portrait of Blanchot. Here again, *one could* trace out the opposition of these paradigms: the “average build,” the “brown eyes,” the “coloured complexion” of the one, the largeness, the blue eyes, the pale complexion of the other; but also, the neutralisation of these traits in such or such a detail, the “pronounced brow,” or the “meeting of two signs,” astrological signs, Aries and Taurus for Leiris, born the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, Virgo and Libra for Blanchot, born the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September. Everything is at play, then, from the outset, the outset of the book; the real opposition, the symbolic opening, the access to the imaginary.

In fact, let us read Leiris' titles, all the titles of the intermediary sections of *L'Âge d'homme*: “*Femme de preux*” (“Lady Valiant”), “*Mon oncle l'acrobate*” (“My Uncle the Acrobat”), “*La glu*” (“Birdlime”), “*Fesse mordue*” (“The Stung Cheek”), “*Kay*,” “*L'Ombilic saignant*” (“The Bleeding Umbilical Cord”) ... none, or nearly none, could be a title of Blanchot's. With chapter headings as with physiological traits, nothing displayed, nothing visible, or *nearly nothing*, is substitutable, nor even this time comparable. Traits of men, traits of books differ, but does that say the same of their bodies? I turn to that which I wish to propose today: that Maurice Blanchot, critic, would never have been interested in *L'Âge d'homme* by Michel Leiris, autobiographer, friend of a friend, if he had read in it only a knowing rhetoric, or even a profound renewal of the genre. It was, on the contrary, the life of the man and the exposition of this life which held him in, because neither this life nor this exposition of life resembled his own, because he saw in it – lived in it – a personal and literary courage, in contrast to which he was in the process of taking the diametrically opposed route, except that in the depths of the body, in the vibrations of the throat or the latency of the sexual organs, and in the depths of writing, in the ardour of the existence and the form of experience, he did not remove himself from the vitality of this everyday struggle. Finally, and it is not the least of these paradoxes, each will have at the same time denied and sublimated his own courage. Blanchot will reveal this, if I may say so, in an aside to a text on Louis-René des Forêts' *Le Bavard*, where he places on the *same* plane the closure of the fictional  *récit* and the opening of the autobiographical text: “Michel Leiris gives us the gift, to us as readers, of the security of which he deprives him-

self. This is his generosity: we find our comfort – our ground – where he exposes himself where he will perhaps lose his footing” (“Idle Speech” [1963], *F* 119/A 139).

Distinct and irreconcilable inclinations; incomparable stances. And yet, by his veiled face or pierced mask, a Montaigne via surrealism and a Mallarmé deserting the stage to bring forth *écrits*, neither the one nor the other inscribes himself in the linear progression which seems to carry literature, as we were now commencing or recommencing to say, *always more away towards itself*. Neither avant-garde nor rearguard, Leiris and Blanchot, on their two distinct flanks, ex-centric but not marginal, shift the playing-field, force back the limits of the central body, run and discuss in a manner intensive and critical, but never extensively theoretical, both readable, but inimicable, and each overturning, in their own prodigal slenderness, this voluminous body of literature. I think here of a phrase of Roland Barthes’, who puts himself, somewhat later, “*at the rearguard of the avant-garde*,” which he explained thus: “to be avant-garde is to know what is dead; to be of the rearguard is still to love it.”<sup>4</sup> I would be tempted to say that neither Leiris nor Blanchot themselves will have ever known what is dead, will have ever been able still to love it. Or rather: that they will never have known either how to give or to decree or to recognise death. Their struggle – singular, vital, each with his own arsenal – is a struggle of exception. It ceaselessly interrogates the limits (both the frontiers and the shortfalls) of the gift, of the decree, and of recognition. From the thirties, Michel Leiris had gone several strides ahead – on the question of aesthetics and politics, surely; even as Maurice Blanchot learnt much towards his own slow revolution. But above all on the question of age: Leiris has a lead of six years, five months and two days: at 32 or 34 years old, at 34 or 38, and still at 40 or 46, this *counts*, and despite all that Blanchot knew, it was what struck him most about Leiris. In the matter of “failings,”<sup>5</sup> he had something to prove; and few others could explain to him how “one passes both well and badly (and sooner badly than well) from the miraculous chaos of childhood to the ferocious order of manhood.”<sup>6</sup> I imagine the impact, or impacts, the points of impact that such a phrase might have had on Blanchot.

How, in other words, to understand, without all these impressions of reading, the construction of the article that Maurice Blanchot devotes to *L’Âge d’homme* in 1947? I wish to trace out, with you, its three movements.

In a first movement, that of pages 244 to 249, are interlinked and intersected three questions: that of writing, that of genre, and that of the possibility or impossibility of speech. One finds here a mixture of synthesis and paraphrase of the preface, one or two long citations, some explicit references to Chateaubriand, Rousseau and Kierkegaard. The development of

the critical discussion is not especially linear. It is a more muted discussion, whose references are implicit, which frames Blanchot's reflection. And it is still the friend, Bataille, who straddles the in-between. It is necessary to refer here to the debate which crystallised the meeting of Blanchot and Bataille, at the moment when the latter is writing *Inner Experience*, a debate sometimes aired publicly in the presence of a few friends, amongst them Leiris. It would be necessary here to re-read Bataille's book, paying attention to the spoken and written citations that he makes of Blanchot; and to re-read as well the article that Blanchot devotes to the book at its appearance and which he collects in *Faux Pas*. If the terms of this debate re-surface here, it is because the question of the authenticity of experience and of the legitimacy of its communication, in particular by literature, concern no less the autobiographical, or non-autobiographical, undertaking of Leiris. (I take thus the curious phrase on page 245 of the article: "*The Age of Man* is not an autobiography.") Blanchot cannot but be aware of the distance that Leiris imposes on the "confession" or on the "aesthetic" value, in inverted commas in the preface, just as on the conception of "expression," in italicised capitals in the same preface. Performance, self-knowledge, revelation, cathartic release, psychic indulgence are the various stakes of the new debate, the newly mobilised debate, presented by Leiris and recapitulated by Blanchot *in this order*, because they culminate for him in the putting at stake of any "profound speech" which not only "is born from the vertigo that rises from the impossibility of speaking," but indeed make of this its "motive" and its "single theme" (*WF* 249/*PF* 242). One could read in this classification imposed by Blanchot on Leiris' circumlocutions, and in its final exasperation, an ascent culminating in aporia or paroxysm, an impossibility or a pinnacle, in either case purely rhetorical. But let us not forget: we are only at the end of the first movement; that Leiris will have something to add to this dilemma, for example in *Fibrilles*: "Communication, authenticity, what rotten planks such words are!" he finally spits out after a long passage which complicates the reductive opposition between authenticity and fiction, or between dissimulation and exhibition;<sup>7</sup> in the end, because it concerns there a purely fictional putting at stake which cannot be resolved by criticism, and thus I willingly turn back to the phrase that Blanchot puts in the epigraph to his novel *The Most High*, appearing the year after "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," in 1948, and in which one could with good reason hear a certain echo of Leiris or of the debate with Leiris: "I am a trap for you. Even if I tell you everything – the more loyal I am, the more I'll deceive you: it's my frankness that'll catch you" (*MH* xxxvi/*TH* 7). That Blanchot responds to Leiris above all in literature is more than apparent from the entirety of his fiction. Blanchot will always maintain the opposition, presented

in the preface to *L'Âge d'homme*, between the true and the verisimilar, the "almost raw" and the work of the imagination, in short, to what Leiris calls "the negation of a novel."<sup>8</sup> For though he responds otherwise to it, Blanchot will not be far from having the same program. The negation of the novel is what he demonstrates in 1948 with simultaneous publication of *The Most High*, last novel, and *Death Sentence*, first  *récit*, and is what he will continue to elaborate in publishing henceforth shorter and, if I can say so, more autobiographical  *récits*, reflecting all the more categorically – as in the famous text which opens *The Book to Come*, in 1958 – on the opposition between the  *récit* and the novel. But it is from May 1947 onwards – a mere month after the article on *L'Âge d'homme* – that Blanchot, under cover of another category, had tried to relaunch the same debate. This category is that of the wondrous, which Blanchot defines thus: "the more a work is imaginary, the more it disdains any graspable signification, the closer this work must be to the vital experience of the one who wrote it."<sup>9</sup> One reencounters here the concepts of life, experience, existence; one can well imagine their contemporaneity, beyond Bataille, Leiris and Blanchot. It is important to signal that in May 1947, Blanchot relates this blurring of paradigms – imaginary/vital, signification/experience – once more to Michel Leiris: "*Aurora*, in appearance an entirely unfounded work, is so near to its author that he seems, like Poe's black cat, to have shut himself up in it as though by mistake, leaving his imprint in relief upon it. Whoever, having read *L'Âge d'homme*, where the writer, in a plain-spoken autobiography, delivers to us all the details of his person and his life, reads the purely imaginary fiction that is *Aurora*, is almost frightened to discover, at every instant, buried in the deeper layers of its language, beneath the world and everyday existence, the remnants of his entirely fossilised, entirely disappeared yet always present figure, obstinately manifest in its disappearance."<sup>10</sup> One hears here the paradox of the trace to which Maurice Blanchot will so "obstinately" return. I recall also the first phrase of the preface to *Aurora*: "I was not yet thirty when I wrote *Aurora*, and the world, for its part, knew nothing of the brown plague." And I recall finally that in the closing pages of "Gazes from Beyond the Grave," Blanchot will stress *Aurora* at length – mentioning it three times. It would still be necessary to sketch the relations between this text of Leiris' and the first version of Blanchot's first novel, *Thomas the Obscure*, which each author begins at the same age, and in which numerous thematic and stylistic motifs correspond.

We turn to the second movement. If the first culminates in this dialectic of profound speech and its impossibility, it is because in 1947 Blanchot rediscovers, in Leiris' text, the kernel of questions which have concerned him for at least a decade, whether with Mallarmé or Kafka, before the first meet-

ing with Bataille. What might be noted here is the degree to which Blanchot is one of the few to take Leiris' book seriously to this extent. To this extent – that is to say, to the extent of speaking of Leiris as of Kafka, and, one might add, of Kafka as of Leiris. In fact it is necessary to see how the buoyant rhetoric which suffuses the first two articles of *The Work of Fire*, on Kafka, contrasts with the weightier tone of the article on Leiris. That Blanchot should be more immediately at ease with Kafka goes without saying. But in this gravity as regards Leiris, one detects as well the strategy of the literary columnist: to make room for a book unjustly neglected, if not simply misunderstood, refused. Neither Blanchot nor Levinas, who will also write on *L'Âge d'homme*, would however dream of stigmatising a supposed impropriety in speaking of oneself, which is a good measure of the difference between such an ideological position and, here, an ethical judgement. The question is not, for Blanchot, that of speaking of oneself or speaking of the world, but of imposing rules on a doubled speech. The rule, the constraint; these are the words which dominate the second, briefer movement of the article, pages 249 to 251, two long paragraphs where Blanchot restates, apropos of Leiris, a conception which is his own and according to which literature is organised around what it cannot say – to which he will return in "Battle with the Angel" and which he will name in a still more straightforward way: the "form capable of giving a cohesion to what does not tolerate cohesion" (*F* 133/A 154 see, esp. the whole beginning of the article).

This biting formula leads us to the essential: the third movement, whose first sentence takes us and develops this question of form. "The very 'form' of *The Age of Man*, the stiffness of expression, the ordered constraint which allows unleashing, the reticence which is frankness, all these characteristics are not simple writing procedures but are part of the existence that they help to bring into the open" (*WF* 251/*PF* 244). One sees here that what interests Blanchot in *L'Âge d'homme* is neither a rhetoric nor a stylistics, but the relation between a form and an existence, a coiled-up or walled-in relation such as he recalls of Poe's cat, and thus simply inferred or rather extrapolated. That is the formulation of a realism or of an existentialism of form, which is astonishing in Blanchot, and which probably astonishes Blanchot himself, who justifies himself straightaway with a citation from Leiris: "That corresponded to a symbolic attempt at *mineralization*, a defensive reaction against my internal weakness and the disintegration I felt threatened with; I would have liked to make myself a kind of breast-plate, pursuing the same ideal of *stiffness* in my exterior that I pursued poetically."<sup>11</sup> Thus there would be, according to Leiris, a parallel quest, and doubly symbolic, in poetry and in existence. But what interests Blanchot, again, is not this theoretic embryo, vaguely conceived in the universe of a

psychoanalyst father and an aesthete mother, or the inverse. What interests him is the writing of the sentence, starting with the italics – *mineralisation*, *stiffness*, these terms which refer to the sentence preceding the one cited by Blanchot, a sentence thus juxtaposed to the one he cites, but which he precisely does not cite: “Having skin frequently irritated by razor-burn, I had come into the habit of powdering my face (from my fifteenth year) as if it had been a matter of dissimulating beneath a sort of mask and fully imprinting my person with an impassivity akin to that of plaster.” This sentence Blanchot does not cite, but he evokes all the same: “this affectation of impassiveness, this plaster-cast mask,” he writes (*WF* 251/*PF* 245). At this point Blanchot’s reader cannot but evoke *Death Sentence*, a *récit*, let me recall, published the following year, whose entire second part revolves around plaster masks, mortuary masks, by turns hidden and revealed. It is therefore a motif – the motif of the neutral mask, one might say – which stops him here, and moreover it is his entire critical approach which he finds, in germ, formulated, between liquidity and minerality, singularity and neutrality, experience and existence, life and poetry, impression and abstraction. It is this incessant to-and-fro between terms which will not cease to preoccupy him, and the elaboration of a poetics of the neuter is itself sustained only by these vertigos of singularity.

One can thus see that once this step has been taken, Blanchot wants to go no further into the book on which he is commenting, or rather, on which he is not content to comment. “We do not wish to go into the movement of themes,” he writes at the start of the following paragraph (*WF* 252/*PF* 245).<sup>12</sup> The only possible citation is thus, for him, the following, which he elevates to a law of the book: “I cannot rightly say that *I die*, since – dying a violent death or not – I am only partly present at the event.”<sup>13</sup> This is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot the law of selection of themes, facts, images and their offshoots: always, a metaphor or metonymy of death. It is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot just as much the law of *Aurora*, citations from which begin to litter the article, in comparison with citations from *L’Âge d’homme*, on minerality or death for example (and indeed Blanchot finds in these some telling parallels). It is the law of the book since it is for Blanchot the law of his own, that of *Death Sentence* but also of *The Madness of the Day* (1949), and moreover that of the *récit* which he will not deliver until much later, *The Instant of My Death*, where he recounts how he was lined up by a firing squad, in June 1944, only to be miraculously saved, “prevented from dying by death itself,” “as if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him,” forever in deferment, whence this short interior dialogue “always in abeyance:” “I am alive. No, you are dead” (*ID* 3, 9, 11). Again, one can better understand

accordingly the commentary with which he matches the citation of this “*I die*,” since he also evokes with it the death of Claude Severac, the death of Anne in *Thomas the Obscure*, the death of J. in *Death Sentence*, and his own wartime episode in the line of fire: “The fact that we cannot experience the reality of death to the end makes death unreal, and this irreality condemns us to fear dying only unreally, not really to die, to remain as if we are held, forever, between life and death, in a state of non-existence and non-death, from which our whole life perhaps takes its meaning and its reality. We do not know that we die. We do not know either that others die, for the death of another remains foreign to us and always incomplete, since we who know it, we are alive” (*WF 252/PF 246*). And, a few lines later: “Such a vertigo between living and dying explains, according to Michel Leiris, that in life, a loss of self, which is an enactment of death, can sometimes reassure us against death and help us to face it” (*WF 253/PF 246*). To look death in the face: one finds here, partially cited, the famous formula of La Rochefoucauld and the phrase of Hegel’s so often adduced by Bataille, but also, a passage from the article that Blanchot publishes a few days after having been in the line of fire, where he evokes the one “prisoner to eyes which subjugate”;<sup>14</sup> and at the bottom of the page one comes across an occurrence of the title of the article, “gaze from beyond the grave”: “we desire to be able to see ourselves dead, to assure ourselves of our death by directing a veritable gaze from beyond the grave toward our nothingness, from a point situated beyond death.” Blanchot has just cited, in the meantime, another passage from *L’Âge d’homme*, which once more conceals, the way one series can conceal another, another citation – this one therefore invisible but *traced*, in outline, by the commentary: to live death through the ‘little death,’ real disappearance through erotic vertigo, is more or less, writes Leiris in a sentence juxtaposed anew to the one Blanchot has just cited, “as though it were a matter of settling a bill in full, sacrificing a part to be done with the whole, consigning one’s losses to the flames [*faire la part du feu*, ‘to cut one’s losses’] and gleefully watching the stables burn.”<sup>15</sup> From one title to another: “gaze from beyond the grave,” the title of the article, masks “the work of fire [*la part du feu*],” the title of the book. Or in other words, Leiris drives Hölderlin off the cover, since the title initially conceived by Blanchot was *Between Dog and Wolf*, extracted from a poem of Hölderlin which returns by way of epigraph. But let us be honest: Leiris is not alone, since the work of fire further refers to at least Bataille and Nietzsche. What’s more, the expression takes on, in Leiris’ sentence, a pejorative accent that Blanchot will reverse. But rightly so: that signals well enough the difference which separates him, even amidst these proximities, from Leiris. One dramatisation refers to another dramatisation, like the

comic to the tragic, the light to the heavy, or better yet: perhaps Blanchot and Leiris will never be in agreement as to where to agree or as to the accent to place on one or other of these terms in the undertaking that they share, that of literature.

“A veritable gaze from beyond the grave.” To see oneself dead, this impossible and purely oneiric or fictional vertigo, is the obsession which sends Blanchot back, beyond *Aurora*, to the poem *Nights without Nights* that he cites on the last page of the article, and which he will cite afresh in “Dreaming, Writing,” his 1961 article on Leiris, this time on the first page, the texts thus linking up like so many episodes in the relation of the two men and their literatures. Like so many paving-stones: for from 1947 to 1961 the question remains the same, first simply sketched, then developed more fully, a question which has long interested Blanchot and which he will have been aided by Leiris to pose on his own account, in terms of the *neutre*. In the forties and fifties, Blanchot articulates it most often around the opposition of the first and third persons: thus ends the article on *L'Âge d'homme*, and it will become, in 1955, one of the dominant leitmotifs of *The Space of Literature*. The *neutre* does not appear as such, but in the forms of the third person, the impersonal, the *that* (we are not far, still, from psychoanalysis, or from the Nietzschean *it*), the mask, death, “its eternity of marble and its cold impassivity,” Blanchot reiterates (*WF* 255/*PF* 248). One can understand then that the article is *oriented* from the outset, *polarised* by the final citation, that of *Nights without Nights*, this dream in which the subject introduces his head through an oculus [*œil-de-bœuf*], and there again is the optic metaphor, into a “cylindrical clay-plastered garret,” and there again is Africa, a “cramped space,” and there again is the black cat, this dreamt anxiety in which the subject looks in fact into himself. The whole article, yes, is oriented by this dream or rather by the commentary upon it, a line, a sentence, the last of the article and thus the first: “*The Age of Man* is this lucid gaze by which the *I*, penetrating into this ‘inner darkness,’ discovers that what is looking in it is no longer the *I*, ‘structure of the world,’ but already the monumental, gazeless, faceless, nameless statue: the *He* of Sovereign Death.” One could thus also say that the whole article of 1947 is oriented by the article of 1961; what must still be envisaged would be a comparative reading of these two articles. I will anticipate here only one term of such a reading, the *neutre*, because it enables an explanation according to Blanchot of the introspective gaze as a gaze upon the double, upon unsettling and anguishing resemblance: “this monumental ‘He’ that Michel Leiris anxiously sees himself becoming when he looks at himself in the empty, lightless depths of his silo” (*F* 146-7/*A* 169). This silo could lead to a Leirisian gloss, at least an anagram: one rediscovers in it

the *lois*, the laws of the dream, the laws of literature, brought into apposition as in Blanchot's title, "Dreaming, Writing," laws which are those of vigilance, of the *neutre*, such that literature – Blanchot's, Leiris' – becomes, like the dream, the site where "a neutral power of resembling, which exists prior to any particular designation, is ceaselessly in search of some figure that it elicits, if need be, in order to settle on it" (F 146-7/A 168). There, it seems to me, fourteen years after the first article, is the best definition of *L'Âge d'homme*.

In 1961 then, the light erotics of the work of fire is volatilised in the abstraction of the *neutre*, and *L'Âge d'homme* indirectly and belatedly receives from Blanchot its most probing rule – that which unifies in a single principle the infinite circulation, the untimely disclosure, the dissemination of figures. In sum, Blanchot specifies the content of what he had in the meantime named, in "Battle with the Angel," the "form capable of giving a cohesion to what does not tolerate cohesion." Within this paradox writing lives; one finds here animated – never fossilised, as one might have suspected from the end of the first movement of "Gazes from Beyond the Grave" – this relation between the possibility and the impossibility of speech. Again it is necessary to specify that the neutral power in question here has nothing to do with any form of neutralisation, particularly of a sexual nature. For from Leiris to Kay or from Blanchot to J. (I note in passing, though it has probably already been remarked, that the "Kay" of Daisy, in *L'Âge d'homme*, is none other than an Anglo-Saxon initial, and, specifically, Kafka's "K."), it is always a question of speech to a woman, whether or not in the desire "to bind oneself to a story," as Blanchot will write in *When the Time Comes*, of which it is the major leitmotif. Or as he will take up again in *Awaiting Oblivion*, in 1962 (note again the coincidence with the article on *Nights without Nights*), another major leitmotif, between a man and a woman: "have it so that I can speak to you." As you see, the dominant phrases of Blanchot's literature resound with a relation to Leiris. I would like in this connection to come back to a third and final veiled reference to *L'Âge d'homme* in "Gaze from Beyond the Grave": once more, a passage not cited, but which is juxtaposed to one cited in Blanchot's article. Blanchot quotes, on page 248, the extract on "the maniac for confession," the one who, paradoxically, out of timidity, overflows with intimate confidences, "especially with women." What strikes me is that the preceding paragraph recapitulates or summarises with incredible exactitude numerous situations from Blanchot's *récits*: "Here I address this woman uniquely because she is absent (to whom would one write if not to someone absent?). For by her distance, she merges with my nostalgia, insinuates herself between myself and most of my thoughts. It is not the point, certainly, that she is the *loved*

*object*, only the *substance of melancholy*, the image – fortuitous perhaps, but no less appropriate for it – of all which I lack, which is to say all that I desire and which keeps me from this urgent need to express myself, to formulate in phrases more or less convincing the always-too-little that I feel and fix it on paper, persuaded as I am of the idea that a muse is necessarily a death, that the edifice of poetry – like a canon which is nothing but a hole encased in bronze – must rest on that which one does not have, and that in the final account it is merely a matter of writing to fill in a void, to at least site, by relation to the most lucid part of ourselves, the place where this incommensurable abyss gapes open.”<sup>16</sup> The canon apart, or again, the rule apart, this abyss is that of Blanchot.

A final point. In some sentences Blanchot and Leiris will nonetheless find themselves with the same measure of the canon, will adopt the same dosage of the rule: these are short sentences, placidly balanced, all the more placidly inasmuch as they tacitly burst with affect. In Leiris’ work, and especially in *L’Âge d’homme*, one comes across them now and then, often at the beginning or end of a chapter, before or after the dissemination of figures. In Blanchot, they are particularly to be found in a *récit* published in a serial in 1949, later collected under the title *The Madness of the Day*. They are the personal expansion of this phrase from *L’Âge d’homme*: “Like many others, I made my descent into hell, and, like some, I have more or less come back.”<sup>17</sup> It would be necessary to re-read the entire *récit* – where one would find sunken eyes, a cut hand, a disemboweled bull, quack doctors. As Leiris says after the episode of the ‘cut throat’: “my every representation of life has remained marked by it.”<sup>18</sup>

Decidedly, neither Leiris nor Blanchot will have ever been able to give, to decree, nor to recognise death. Or rather, to do so took them their whole life, a whole life of writing.

*Université Paris 7 – Denis Diderot*  
*christophe-bident@wanadoo.fr*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Denis Paulme, “Michel Leiris: quelques souvenirs,” in *Michel Leiris: le Siècle à l’Envers* (Tours: Farrago, 2004), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Leiris, Jean Schuster, *Entre Augures* (Paris: Terrain Vague, 1990), p. 33. Cf. also *L’Âge d’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 181: “I had attained to the age of manhood ... I answer my vocation ... confirmed to devote all my activity to literature.”

- <sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Gazes from Beyond the Grave" (1947), *WF* 244-55/*PF* 238-48. Blanchot's other texts on Leiris are: "Battle with the Angel" (1956), *F* 129-39/*A* 150-61; "Dreaming, Writing" (1961), *F* 140-48/*A* 162-70. See also some pages in "Poetry and Language" (1943), *FP* 135-40/*Fp* 157-62; and a few lines from "Du Merveilleux" (1947), in eds. Christophe Bident and Pierre Vilar, *Maurice Blanchot: Récits critiques* (Tours: Farrago, 2003), pp. 42-3.
- <sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, "Réponses" [1970], in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 3: 1038.
- <sup>5</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 196.
- <sup>6</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 40.
- <sup>7</sup> Michel Leiris, *Fibrilles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 286.
- <sup>8</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Blanchot, "Du Merveilleux", p. 39.
- <sup>10</sup> Blanchot, "Du Merveilleux", pp. 42-3.
- <sup>11</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, pp. 183-4.
- <sup>12</sup> He will make the same gesture in "Battle with the Angel," remarking in a note: "This is why the commentator must respond to the candor of the author with an equal reserve. He must be very careful not to make the portrait of a portrait, which, always further simplified, might risk imposing itself on the living model like a death mask" (*F* 298/*A* 157). The "death mask," precisely, is reserved for literature.
- <sup>13</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 85.
- <sup>14</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Des Diverses Façons à Mourir," in *Journal des débats*, 29 June 1944.
- <sup>15</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 87. This sentence follows that which Blanchot cites in *WF* 253/*PF* 246.
- <sup>16</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, pp. 154-5.
- <sup>17</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 27.
- <sup>18</sup> Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, p. 104.