



## What is Anthropological Autography?

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**Abstract.** – This article is about anthropological autography, which is defined as writing about oneself by oneself, with a view to understanding human beings and not necessarily social facts. The author differentiates autography from auto-ethnography and from the reflexive discourses of the researcher on his field. He makes anthropological autography a key exercise in existential anthropology. After showing how little Lévi-Strauss was sensitive to writing in the first person, the author focuses on the work of Michel Leiris. He shows, above all, Leiris' tension between his literary objective and his anchorage in ethnology, without really succeeding in considering his autographs as an anthropological issue. [autography, auto-ethnography, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, existential anthropology, diary, methodology]

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Nota bene: These first lines are intended to indicate the origin of this article, even if it is not about that origin. My anthropological work has been based for the most part on my existence, for many years, even if it has also focused on other fields, such as rituals, festivals and also on Catholic parishes in France. As a field, I have retained from my own existence in particular an experience of

mourning and analyses of certain moments (driving my daughters to school, doing a lecture). The aim was above all to test concepts. My existence is central to my work as an anthropologist, to such an extent that on January 19, 2016, I offered to be filmed continuously for one day. The film, *Réellement, douze heures*, was made by two artists, Catherine Beaugrand and Samuel Dématraz, with the objective of focusing as strictly as possible on the human entity. This film exists unedited, exposing the continuity of my day (Piette 2017). To tell the truth, I consider this film an important experiment: it is perhaps unique in the history of anthropology. I never thought that with such exercises I was practicing autoethnography. The aim was not to say something about social experiences or social facts, but to specify descriptive and conceptual modes about the human being as an entity with its modes of presence. I refer to these experiments as autographies.

What I call autography is a form of writing about oneself. Self-observation and self-description, fragments of texts and journal entries are the basic components of autography.<sup>1</sup> I want to emphasize the autographic practice as a decisive heuristic for an existential anthropology, with a

<sup>1</sup> I am far from the dictionary definitions. For the meaning of autograph, the *Collins English Dictionary* (2021) says: “the writing of something in one’s own handwriting; something handwritten” and “the precise reproduction of an illustration or of writing.” The only meaning mentioned in the *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* (2005) is: “The process by which handwritings or drawings executed on special paper and with greasy ink are transported on a lithographic stone or other suitable material to enable the desired number of copies to be made.”

strict focus on the human entity and understanding of its structuring as a volume of being. In view of such an anthropological autography, one should not think of the philosophies of existence as a ready-made resource. The presence of the anthropologist with his concepts, which is not simply that of the ethnographer in his fieldwork, but that of an individual, existing, with the circumstances of his life, in all his work, could almost have the work of Kierkegaard for reference. As a critic of the philosophical systems in which the philosopher forgets himself, Kierkegaard's philosophy is marked by his explicit presence. Vincent Delecroix, commenting on the work of Kierkegaard, writes, "No relevant category can be elaborated without being born of a lived experience, the one that the philosophizing subject lives" (Delecroix 2006: 86). Let us not forget: "He spoke of himself, and only of himself, 'always of the same thing,'" to use the Socratic formula cited by the author of "Philosophical Fragments" (Delecroix 2006: 209). Existential thought has certainly not neglected first-person expressions, but neither has it favored the diary form. For example, the following is what Sartre writes in "Nausea," which is composed as a fictional diary, or as fiction in diary form:

The best thing would be to write down everything that happens from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand. To neglect no nuances or little details, even if they seem unimportant, and above all to classify them. I must say how I see this table, the street, people, my packet of tobacco, since *these* are the things which have changed. I must fix the exact extent and nature of this change ... So much for exterior. What happened inside me didn't leave any clear traces. There was something which I saw and which disgusted me, but I no longer know whether I was looking at the sea or at the pebble ... There was also that series of coincidences and misunderstandings which I can't explain to myself. But I'm not going to amuse myself by putting all that down on paper (Sartre 2020: 1f.).

Could anything be more autographical than these opening lines from "Nausea"? Sartre's skepticism is largely perceptible about the truth and relevance of the exercise. He writes a little later: "I'm going to bed. I'm cured, and I'm going to give up writing down my impressions, like a little girl in a nice new notebook" (Sartre 2020: 3). Existentialists do not like moments. Upstream, there is the heideggerian concept of existence as an "ecstatic structure," associated with the "fact of being outside of oneself" (Dastur 1998: xxx). To me, it seems empirically regrettable that the idea according to

which "the 'authentic' meaning of the temporality of a finite being springs from the future, that is, from the anticipation of death" (xxx) moves away from a thought of succession of "nows" along on a timeline (Heidegger 2010: 422). It is indeed this succession of punctualities that is criticized by Heidegger, thus almost automatically suppressing any interest in the microcontinuity of the human entity from moment to moment, with its overlaps and its constancies. What preoccupies me, in contrast, is examining the entity in its successive moments, in particular from diaries and filmic images, without letting it slip away in its characteristic jumping of existentialist thoughts.

As I will show, autography does not find legitimacy in the history of anthropology either. I will first try to define autography, what it is, what it is not.

### Anthropological Autography

So, what is autography? The psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis defines autography as a "graphy of self who creates an I by writing" (Pontalis 2012: 126). I prefer to define it as a graphy of self by self, which does not seek to create an "I" or an "Ego" and especially not to construct a "self-portrait" in the form of an organized memoir, a life story or an autobiography. Thus autography, without any specific work of rewriting, is not the umpteenth expression of the famous or less famous confessions and memoirs that abound in literature. When I use the notion of autography, it is to avoid the mention of "biographical": autography is not meant to be a narrative discourse like the autobiographical narrative. In anthropology, autography would be a raw notation of facts about oneself, observed, introspected, but which can also be filmed and described from there. In the form of a diary or fragments, anthropological autography does not have the aim of "laying oneself bare," nor of wondering what effect a literary work of unveiling would have on others – something that can be identified in the work of Michel Leiris (2017a: 187) – I will come back to this. Not associated with a possible parallel literary work aiming at self-understanding nor considered as almost forgotten notes, autography, as I define it, would have to produce a knowledge integrated in a "scientific" research, and, crucially, without the autographic exercise aiming at the understanding of a specific social situation, event or context. It would be a human being as an entity that is at stake in detailed analyses. Let us clarify this.

## What autography is not

For a long time now, and probably increasingly so, anthropologists have been writing about their roles, their affects or their relational games during their ethnographic field experiences. Georges Devereux was one of the first to value an analysis of the anthropologist's defense and counter-transference mechanisms, in the face of the difficulties inherent in the observation of human beings and the possible "anxieties" of the observer (Devereux 1967). Self-observation would in this case be a kind of guarantee of the scientificity of ethnographic work, with the aim of observing others. When I use the notion of autography, I am not referring to this reflexivity of the researcher on his field and the writing of it. In my view, autography is not the ethnographer's field diary, focused on his ethnographic experience, on what he notes in notebooks as he goes along, with his methodological doubts, in order to understand others. With autography, the anthropologist would claim an observation of himself – outside a specific ethnographic fieldwork –, that is, of his own existence, in acts, thoughts and emotions – and not necessarily an observation of a particular experience or activity.

Is the theoretical side of autography autotheory? Autography as self-observation does not aim to shed light on oneself, to analyze oneself and one's life trajectory. It seems important to me to dissociate autography from autotheory. This term appears here and there. It is mostly found in feminist literature and queer theories, criticizing in particular the essentialism of other theories. Whether the word designates a theory of self, an understanding of oneself as Beatriz Preciado writes in the first lines of her book (Preciado 2013), or whether it proposes, beyond and from this level, a political critique of society and power, it is not the scale that I intend to privilege. Autography does not aim to project itself beyond the self to society and the world in general, nor does it aim at a theory or explanation of the self. Similarly, autography is not an auto-socio-biography, as would be, for example, the literary work of Annie Ernaux, with a sociological perspective on her life trajectory and an objective of understanding it. In a way, this is also what Pierre Bourdieu proposes, when he seeks to understand and explain his own trajectory in retrospect, with the categories that are his own, "to explain and understand myself," in his words (Bourdieu 2004). With autography, neither the "I," nor the sociological analysis are the goal of understanding.

In this sense, and in more direct debate with anthropology, autography wants above all to avoid the reference to "ethno," which from the outset puts it into a socio-cultural perspective, which implies explaining social situations, facts of society, and thus going beyond a focus on a human being. This "sociological" condition of ethnography is thus what is meant by "autoethnography," which has found a place in academic circles, particularly in the USA. The autoethnographic method, based on a focus on the researcher's experience, often a striking, critical or decisive experience, seeks to shed light on an event, a social situation, thus claiming a place in the social sciences, with specific modes of representation and more or less literary writing. Beyond its aim to counteract social science concepts (Bochner 2013: 53), in order to better describe the indeterminacy of life, autoethnography does not escape the oscillation between the personal and the socio-cultural. It is thus presented as research that uses the researcher's personal experience to describe cultural practices or experiences, to interrogate the relationship between self and society, between the individual and the political (Adams et al. 2015: 2f.). Carolyn Ellis, for example, defines the auto-ethnographic approach as "writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis 2003: xix). Similarly, Norman Denzin indicates that it is about placing the self in social contexts, "the personal in the social" (Denzin 2013: 124). "It allows the researcher to take up each person's life in its immediate particularity and to ground the life in its historical moment" (124). Chang notes that autoethnography does not dissociate personal narratives from cultural analyses and interpretations (Chang 2008: 43ff.).<sup>2</sup> In a very significant example, Carol Rambo Ronai uses her own experience as a victim of sexual abuse and presents a layered narrative with different layers of writing: accounts of her childhood with incestuous parents, her present experience as a "survivor of sexual abuse," statistical data and sociological reflections (Rambo Ronai 1995). She claims each of these situations as an integral part of her personality and her layered narrative allows both the author and the reader to move through different points of view on the same phenomenon that is ultimately illuminated. The aim is not to talk about oneself in the first

2 Much has been written about reflexivity in general and in anthropology in particular. There are even courses and seminars on how to become "reflexive" (for example Etherington 2004).

place, but about a social experience, more generally about a social fact.<sup>3</sup> Thus, auto-ethnography does not correspond to what I mean by anthropological autobiography.

### **This is not a legitimate exercise in anthropology**

As self-writing, observations and note-taking about oneself, autobiography cannot be dissociated from anthropology, in the strong sense of that term. Thus, autographic soliloquy cannot remain soliloquy. It only makes sense if it becomes anthropological teaching and, for this, it must debate with methods, epistemologies and concepts. To this end, the autographic exercise cannot be separated from a set of questions: in what way does what is noted contribute to an existential anthropology, which I want to consider as focused on the human entity, thus with a specific object? How is it relevant to theoretical or methodological controversies? In what way precisely can autographic notes nourish epistemological debates, capable of being inserted into the tradition of anthropology and of questioning it? The autographer must necessarily create conceptual and theoretical debates. The “self” can only be relevant and legitimate if it is associated with this methodological, conceptual or theoretical questioning. It must also allow or promise an advance, a possibility of an existential anthropology. The challenge is to make autobiography slide towards a radical anthropotheory, and thus to leave the “auto” and reach “Anthropos.” “It is in pushing the particular as far as it will go that one attains the general, and it is with a maximum of subjectivity that one touches objectivity,” writes Leiris (2017b: 322). And this “general” must be made explicit in the history of a discipline, by discussing it, claiming it or questioning it.

But precisely this work is not a legitimate exercise in anthropology for two intersecting reasons. Their obviousness makes anthropological autobiography an improbability. A first difficulty of autobiography is its objective to detach an entity, this volume of being, as I called it (Piette 2017; 2019), as much as possible from its social and cultural background. This brings us face to face with the entire

history of anthropology and its lack of interest in the human entity in itself. I am not pointing here to the long-standing criticisms of anthropologists, as Huon Wardle reminds us, “against structural understandings of character and personhood that implied a systematic dehumanizing of the human subjects of study, regarding them as the bearers of an impersonal ‘culture’, or wax to be imprinted with ‘cultural patterns’” (Wardle 2018: 315). Indeed, many anthropologists have integrated this critique but the solutions do not satisfy me. Indeed, when, with a more or less humanistic concern or literary dimension, anthropologists focus on a particular individual in life stories or portraits, it is insofar as he or she is living a particular experience in a specific situation and context. This results in a focus on his or her characteristics corresponding to this one and that one, but more importantly, in doing so, such a perspective associates with the human entity other beings, this situation, this context that are actually the objective of understanding (Heiss 2015: 241–251). In this case, anthropology makes the individual a “person-centered” methodology, yet with a view to talking about such social experiences, characteristic events, political situations or social structures, but does not make the individual a topic for itself, in itself, in itself and exclusively. In reality, anthropology, whose holism seems consubstantial to its entire theoretical history, does not close its object around the entity itself. The latter is looked at with regard to the situation encompassed in the research focus. No doubt anthropologists inspired by phenomenology or psychology could object that the human being is their objective. But I would also say that it is the experience, the lived experiences that are their focus, detaching a part of the human being, putting it in connection with other humans and in particular contexts. In this case, the human entity always remains secondary, reduced to this or that dimension relevant to the context studied, or diluted with other things. This critique seems to me essential (Piette 2019: 81–115).

Another difficulty comes from what anthropology itself is looking for: others, really others, otherness, while the autographer observes and describes himself. Historically, anthropology has been built explicitly or implicitly as a science of social and cultural diversities. That in this perspective the human entity is diluted in the contextual background is almost self-evident – there is no way out. What is the point of being interested in a human entity for its own sake? And being interested in oneself makes no sense in such a configuration of thought.

3 I indicate the specific use of autoethnography in the narrative approach “career writing”: “Career Writing is a narrative career identity formation approach where people use creative, expressive, and reflective writing to develop a new story about who they are and where they are going. In the method those writing work actively with life themes” (Lengelle and Meijers 2019: 540).

At best, I just said that, this entity can be good to think about, but to understand rather specific societies, groups, situations and social experiences. And this is what happens to autoethnographies.

One only has to re-read the first pages of “Cannibal Metaphysics” to grasp this inextricable link between anthropology and peoples and cultures. While Viveiros de Castro intends to propose a new anthropology, an anthropology of the concept, of “conceptual imagination” focused on “the styles of thought proper to the collectives” (Viveiros 2014: 43), he deplores the fact that anthropologists have remained “Narcissus” contemplating themselves through the other, looking only for what distinguishes them “from everything it is not: them (which really in the end means us), the non-Westerns, the nonmoderns, the nonhumans” (43). Thus, he posits that anthropology (the real one, according to Viveiros de Castro) must continue to be “an art of distances keeping away from the ironic recesses of the Occidental soul” and that if there is an “endo-anthropology,” it can only depend on the “theoretical ventilation” emanating from other societies (42). In short, autography would lack ventilation. And so, such is the history of social and cultural anthropology.

I also do not think that the solution would be to associate autography with a postmodern configuration that is critical of a rigid scientificity. The autographic goal is not to bring personalness or emotion to social sciences, to humanize them, to build a narrative in the face of the rigidity of concepts that are too simplistic in relation to the complexity of human behavior and feelings.<sup>4</sup> To position oneself in this way against the sciences, concepts and methodology is not the perspective I want to take. These kinds of considerations can to some extent be found among anthropologists whose text sometimes characteristically mixes ethnographic field experiences with events from their own lives. In some of the writings – for example of Michael Jackson (1989), Paul Stoller (2009) or Renato Rosaldo (2013), in which illness and death are discussed in particular – it seems important for these anthropologists, in connection with this humanistic concern, to talk about oneself – but not too much. As if information about their own lives could only be conveyed through insertion in a narrative, a literary work (which could also be a poetic text) on their ethnographic journey on the one hand, and with a constant appeal to forms of otherness as obligatory anthropological

passages, whether it be daily life in Niger, the religion of the Kurango or the Ilongo headhunters, on the other hand. We find in a classic way a valorisation of the researcher’s presence as constitutive of his fieldwork, the heuristic power of the “between” – between two cultures, between two languages –, and the need to think of a subject in a field of social relations, all of which are well-known characteristics of anthropology.<sup>5</sup> It is not actually about autographic expressions, nor especially about the self as an entity to be explored.

Anthropological autography wants to consider that each human being is irreplaceable in his or her competence to know his or her states of mind, emotions and mental scenarios, to spot the nuances of these. Everyone could at least acquire this skill (Piette 2022). It would be, first and foremost, and I would say a fortiori, an indissociable asset of the anthropologist’s profession. Better than anyone else, the anthropologist trained in the methods of observation and description could thus note down the facts of his or her existence or feelings and be precise about his or her thoughts and emotions, not just limited to this or that experience. Such would be the autographic pact, accompanied by readings on the themes concerned, starting from what an anthropologist wants to understand, in order to analyze and deepen a human entity. It is with this posture and the requirement of a very detailed attention to oneself, to one’s actions, to one’s ways of thinking or believing that the passage from autography to anthropotheory can take shape. And if the aim is to go beyond the contextual information of social and cultural events and to do anthropology in the strict sense of the term, i.e., to contribute to a theory of the human being, which would be valid for every human, the question of passing through oneself or through distant others becomes quite secondary. Kant exaggerates the methodological difficulty of self-observation because, he writes, “to concern oneself in the least with spying and, as it were, the affected composition of an inner history of the involuntary course of one’s thoughts and feelings ... is the most direct path to illuminism or even terrorism” (Kant 2006: 72). It is always possible – it is almost trite to say – to introduce some distance, lucidity and objectivity. Being filmed in one’s continuity, one’s gestures, one’s various actions, for example, implies viewing the images, almost as if they were of another. The film will have the advantage of helping to explicit mental states, various thoughts,

4 The theoretical statements of “Final Negotiations” are one example, among others, of this perspective (Ellis 1995).

5 Thanks to Samuele Poletti for drawing my attention to these books and for the discussion about them.

based on the questions and reminders of an interviewer (Petitmengin 2006; Petitmengin and Bitbol 2009; Petitmengin et al. 2015).

Let us remember this. The autographer speaks of himself, without seeking a sociological perspective, without seeking to explain its personality, to construct a biographical narrative, a story, and without having a literary requirement. Thus, autography is not associated with an autotheory or a sociotheory, with a theory of the self or a social theory. As I understand it, autography also becomes a heuristic to contribute to an anthropology of the volume of being, i.e., of the human entity – this is why I also speak of existential autography. To accept such self-observations is to accept a fortiori the observation of each human entity for its own sake and not to understand situations. And likewise, if it were self-evident that anthropology is interested in the human entity, the exercise of self-observation would gain in evidence. Thus, with my autographic notes, I do anthropology, while asking myself what anthropology is and what a human being is. Such would be an epistemological autography, seeking what anthropology is, helping to seek it, to specify it.

### Lévi-Strauss, Rousseau and Montaigne

In the history of French anthropology, there are at least two moments of confrontation with autography: Lévi-Strauss as a reader of Rousseau and Montaigne; the work of Leiris, an autobiographical writer and also an ethnologist. Lévi-Strauss himself has made clear part of anthropology's fate and its avoidance of subjectivity. Neither Rousseau nor Montaigne are really autographers, according to the definition I have given to autography. Lévi-Strauss' interpretation leaves little chance for the autographies of anthropologists, for the possibility of their legitimization. This is hardly surprising if we recall the words of Lévi-Strauss: "Humanism does not begin with itself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for others before self-interest" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 508).

In "Confessions," Rousseau proposes a "portrait of man" that would be "painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth" (Rousseau 2008: 3). That he should be considered, on the basis of these words, as the founder of the sciences of man would seem to me to be relevant. It is significant, however, that Lévi-Strauss considers him as such a founder (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 33), but almost ignores these points, mentioning too

furtively that Rousseau intended to perform on himself "the operations which physicists perform on air to test its daily state" in order, according to Rousseau, "to become aware of the modifications of my soul and their successive states" (37). From Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss prefers to retain above all his invitation to "travel around the world, in order to study, not always stones and plants, but for once men and morals" (34) "to look into the distance", "see the differences in order to discover characteristics" (35), in the words of Rousseau quoted by Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss certainly points out that "every ethnographic career finds its principle in 'confessions', written or untold" (36), but he does not seem to be upset by Rousseau's exclamation that he was "detached" from others, "unknown strangers, non-beings to me" (36). On the contrary, he wants to see in Rousseau the one who breaks the Cogito, "the hypothetical evidences of the self", "speaking of himself in the third person", the one who "anticipates", writes Lévi-Strauss, "the famous formula: 'I is another'" (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 36). In a long plea, Lévi-Strauss considers Rousseau as the one who expresses that "there exists a 'he' who 'thinks' through me" (37) as the one who puts at the center of human life the principle of "identification with others", "other" possibly including the animal (39). In fact, it is not the confessions of a self and an "essence" that count for Lévi-Strauss, but the "refusal to identify with one self in other words, refusal of all that can make the self 'acceptable'" (39). And yet Rousseau insists: "Myself alone". And he adds: "I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any that I have seen, I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different." And this, not least: "As to whether nature did well or ill to break the mould in which I was cast, that is something no one can judge until after they have read me" (Rousseau 2008: 5).

Ultimately, in this configuration and the Lévi-Straussian reading, self-description would only be admissible if the narrative makes us discover an other than ourselves, makes us doubt our identity, unlike Descartes' procedure immersed in the evidence of the self (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 36). Rousseau would therefore only be intelligible to an anthropologist if he helps to refuse "forced identifications" (40), retaining this from the author of the "Confessions": "I feel ecstasies, inexpressible ravishings to melt myself, as it were, into the system of beings, to identify myself with all the nature" (43). Thus, the discovery of the "Confes-

sions” would be for Lévi-Strauss that “I am not me, but the weakest, the most humble of ‘others’” (39). “To attain acceptance of oneself in others (the goal assigned to human knowledge by the ethnologist),” Lévi-Strauss continues, interpreting Rousseau’s achievement at the basis of the human sciences, “one must first deny the self in oneself” (36).

And Lévi-Strauss is therefore delighted to find in Rousseau a founder of anthropology, on the condition that he detects in him the thought that there are no entities, that they are intertwined in rapture or ecstasy, that there are generalized identifications and thus “societies, civilisations – in other words, worlds of men” (36). Need we simply recall the “first walk” which begins as follows: “I am now alone on earth” (Rousseau 1992: 1), “I am a hundred times happier on my solitude than I could ever be living among them” (4). The destiny of anthropology might have been different if self-exploration had been otherwise recognized by Lévi-Strauss, such as the idea of keeping “a faithful record of my solitary walks and of the reveries which fill them” (12).

The history of anthropology thus reiterates what anthropology is, the science of others. Let us say more precisely: of others among themselves, of others together, of the relationship itself of these others with others, of the relationship of the observer or of each one with others. Anthropology seems to exist only if it describes relationships and identifications. Thus, to speak of the self as a volume of being would make no sense, with respect to such axioms. And yet, Rousseau is indeed a writer of the barometers of the soul, of his own and of its daily states. In this sense, he could have been the founder of existential anthropology. Lévi-Strauss is not so comfortable when he quotes Rousseau: “I exist ... this the first truth which strikes me and *with which I am forced*” (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 37), adding that “Rousseau’s strictly anthropological teaching” is to be found in the “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality ....”

Lévi-Strauss valued Montaigne as much as Rousseau, another self-writer, but again not for this reason. And yet Montaigne himself quotes Pliny: “each man is an excellent instruction unto himself provided he has the capacity to spy on himself from close quarters” (Montaigne 1991: 424). The autography is summarized as follows. “The target of my thoughts, Montaigne continues, has been myself alone” (424). He thus recognizes a “thorny undertaking – more than it looks – to follow so roaming a course as that of our mind’s” (424). He even adds: “it is not what I do that I

write of, but of me, of what I am” (426). And Montaigne reminds us of Socrates who “speaks of himself and leads his disciples to speak of themselves” (425): “What does Socrates treat more amply than himself?” (425).

Lévi-Strauss could not really make relevant these points. When he mentions Montaigne, it is not to comment on the latter’s intention to deliver to readers, in his words, “some traits of my character and of my humours” or “my simple, natural, everyday fashion because, he writes, it is my own self that I am painting” (1). What interests Lévi-Strauss in the “Essays” are the ethnographic references to the New World which “is everywhere present in his work” (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 208), with the reflection on the arbitrariness of customs and beliefs. He is “the defender of otherness, the one who shows himself capable of perceiving that there are humanities very different from ours,” in the words of Emmanuel Désveaux (2016: 24). It is therefore not surprising that Lévi-Strauss acknowledges in Montaigne “cultural relativism to its extreme” (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 214). He thus recalls Montaigne’s characteristic skepticism insisting on the permanent change of beings and on the uncertainties of the knowledge that results from it: “There is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects, wrote Montaigne. We ourselves, our faculty of judgement and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judged and judging are ever shifting and changing. We have no communication with Being; as human nature is wholly situated, forever, between birth and death, it shows itself only as a dark shadowy appearance, an unstable weak opinion” (Montaigne 1991: 680).

Nothing stable, nothing permanent. Commenting on the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” where ethnographic information is discussed, Lévi-Strauss refers to this thought of Montaigne on the skepticism of knowledge. Commentators are often more sensitive to this dimension of Montaigne’s reflections, insisting on change, relativism, skepticism and division. Thus, for example, he notes that “we are all lumps, and of so various and inform a context, that every piece plays, every moment, its own game, and there is as much difference betwixt us and ourselves as betwixt us and others” (Montaigne 1991: 417). And Montaigne acknowledges a difficulty: “Such as make it their business to oversee human actions, do not find themselves in anything so much perplexed as to reconcile them and bring them into the world’s eye with the same lustre and reputation; for they

commonly so strangely contradict one another that it seems impossible they should proceed from one and the same person" (409).

It is true that Montaigne offers descriptions of himself in his movement and variations. But beyond his variations, he also evokes his dispositions and propensities, his character, his temperament, his reactions in general, which provide some stability ... He speaks of his language, his memory, his soul, his mind. Let us say, there are ligatures which create internal links and stability. And it involves looking at himself, transporting himself "in himself", being "concerned with no one but me" in himself (747), discovering his solid ideas born "in me", "entirely mine" (748). In chapter 18 of Book 2, Montaigne almost methodologically evokes the elaboration of his portrait: putting his own house in order, making an inventory of himself with the demands that this implies: "Those who merely think and talk about themselves occasionally do not examine the basics and do not go as deep as one who makes it his study, his work and his business, who with all good faith and with all his might binds himself to keeping a long-term account ... With the aim of teaching my mental faculty even to rave with some order and direction and so as to stop it losing its way and wandering in the wind, I need simply to give it body and to keep detailed accounts of my petty thoughts as they occur in me" (755).

To the proponents of Montaigne's "multiplication," I would remind them of the famous phrase about his friendship with La Boétie – "because it was him, because it was me". Lévi-Strauss is not concerned by this. For him, anthropology is elsewhere, decidedly inseparable from the paradigm of distance, of the other and of relationships.

### Leiris or the Separation of Activities

It seems important to me, in order to situate the difficulty of autography in anthropology, to mention the work of Michel Leiris – born in 1901, died in 1990, he is thus Lévi-Strauss' contemporary. Leiris is the author of an important autobiographical literary work<sup>6</sup> – explicitly recognized as such – as well as of "diaries" with their autographic dimension. This can be of interest for a reflection on anthropological autography, when we

6 Among the best-known books in this category is "Manhood," which is part of a set entitled "The Rules of the Game." A reading of Leiris' work can be found for example in Hand (2002).

know that he is also an Africanist ethnologist and author of academic works, praising the merits of ethnography that "places all civilisations on the same footing," concerned with all men "whom it studies in their relations with each other and not in an arbitrary individual way" (Leiris 1992a: 28). Exoticism, then. He sees in it "the fulfilment of certain childhood dreams, as well as a means of fighting against old age and death by throwing oneself headlong into space in order to escape the march of time in an imaginary way (also by forgetting one's own transitory personality through concrete contact with a large number of apparently very different men)" (Leiris 1992a: 33f.).

In a report to the CNRS, Leiris claims this dual aspect – ethnology and literature – which he seems to integrate into an anthropological design, as he himself expresses it in the third person: "Michel Leiris wishes to carry out for as long as he has the faculty to do so the two combined activities which are for him like the two sides of anthropological research in the fullest sense of the word: to increase our knowledge of man, both by the subjective path of introspection and that of poetic experience, and by the less personal path of ethnological study" (Leiris 1992b: 61).<sup>7</sup>

But that is not really what happened. Leiris himself separated his activities, ethnographic work being carried out in his office at the Musée de l'Homme and his autobiographical writing at home. From these two activities, beyond the autographic scope of his diaries, I can identify three expressions: offering descriptions and information about oneself in the experience of the ethnographic field; offering narratives of oneself and episodes of one's life in order to understand situations or social facts; claiming the literary register. These distinctions are very illuminating of Leiris' work and his use of autography.

In the practice of ethnography of others, there is, central to the words of Jean Jamin describing Leiris' ethnographic mode, "what the ethnographer usually hides or conceals, either the echo of his presence or the furtive back and forth between his informant and himself, or even himself and those few (ideological, mythological) mental snip-

7 In an interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*, Lévi-Strauss said that there are analogies between Leiris' way of writing "The Rules of the Game" and his books on ethnology: the rigour, the uncompromising restitution of reality, the cards he files for his writing. On these autobiographical books, he writes: "this work to which he has applied himself all his life, of observing himself, second after second, of recording the smallest details of his life, it would not be very interesting if he were not a great writer" (see Lévi-Strauss 2009).

pets that the culture from which he comes hangs surreptitiously but firmly on his panoply of ‘man of science’” (Jamin 1994: 14).

This can be seen in the diary that is “Phantom Africa.” In it, Leiris makes daily notes of the facts and situations he observes in Africa during his “fieldwork” between 1931 and 1933. His descriptions resemble those of a classical ethnographer. He also records his various activities and encounters, as well as his moods and dreams, during the two years of his ethnographic mission. On this subject, in the outline of a preface he wrote on 4 April 1932 with a view to the future publication of his notes, he wrote the following, as if apologizing for it: “Some will reproach me for attaching too much importance to MY individuality ... Indeed, I relate few incidents of the voyage aside from those in which I was personally involved. I only recount events in which I myself took part” (Leiris 2017b: 320).

Reflexivity and subjectivity, but in relation to an ethnographic field: this is what will be mainly retained, with different degrees, by anthropologists, readers of Leiris. When asked about reflexive anthropology “today in fashion,” Leiris indeed replies that “the subjective element must be present”, that “there is always subjectivity,” and thus that it is “infinitely better that this subjectivity be confessed than concealed” (Leiris 1992b: 55).

Today, Leiris’ fame seems to me not primarily in the diary of his ethnographic field in Africa, nor in his other “Journal” (Leiris 1992c), but in his literary project of describing himself. In this regard, he distinguishes between what can be called an ethnography of the self and the experience of exposing the self. The former corresponds to an enumeration of objects, places, circumstances of his childhood, his “sacred,” as he puts it. An ethnography of the self would also involve, he explains, “dwelling on who my parents were, what they did, what background they came from” (Leiris 1992b: 49f.). This point of view is not so surprising, seeming to extend the work of the ethnographer, focused on situations, contexts, actions, more than on human beings themselves. This could be similar to the auto-ethnography I mentioned above. About “the sacred in everyday life”, he acknowledges: “it is not me I am describing, it is basically the atmosphere in which I lived” (50). The environment, the background, in a way. Of his childhood, he thus evokes his father’s hat, his parents’ bedroom or the Auteuil racecourse, “facts (places, events) that seem to me, he writes, marked by the ‘sacred’” (Leiris 2016: 47). It is the ethnog-

raphy of his social, cultural, and environmental background. Leiris will go little in this direction.

Indeed, Leiris aims to talk about himself rather than social situations, to “acquire as intense and precise a knowledge of himself as possible” (Leiris 2016: 34). But when it comes to himself more directly, he notes that this is not ethnography, even though he is methodical in his records and indicates that ethnography has helped him in his self-description (Leiris 1992b: 61). He then privileges the literary narrative: “When I talk in *Manhood* about my first sexual awakenings, there is nothing ethnographic about it” (49), noting indeed that he did not talk much about his entourage in his literary work. It is certainly a question of telling “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” (Leiris 1984: 16), even if in autobiographical writing, not in diaries, the submission to facts and chronological order are not decisive. It is also a question, explains Jean Jamin, of “thinking through writing, which is itself an adjustment of meaning and words” (Jamin 1992: 17). This writing belongs, for Leiris, to the literary experience, that of poetry and myth, that which “colours my life,” in his words (Leiris 2017a: 65), and is meant to be opposed to ethnography, which Leiris dislikes and considers jargonizing (Leiris 1992b: 28).

“To talk about myself (which is my full right) but as little as possible about others. Even my wife, about whom I speak a lot, I never speak of her in herself. Same for everyone close to me” (quoted in Lejeune 1996: 277): this is the rule he gives himself, an ethical rule for Leiris. I would make it an epistemological rule and the one inherent to a science in particular. It is indeed what I believe to be a principle of an anthropology of human beings, of each human being, and as a guarantee that it could thus be less diluted in the descriptions where others and contexts infiltrate. But Leiris aims to elucidate what I might call his personality, as psychoanalysis would (Leiris 1984: 157). This is not what I have reserved for the autographic posture, which does not want to construct an understanding of the self and produce a “self-portrait” from which Leiris does not escape. He is thus concerned about the effect on others, especially those close to him (156f.). He has his eyes fixed on himself, as he writes: “instead of turning them beyond and transcending myself in the direction of something more broadly human” (156) and he insists on the care given to writing and on the literary aim of making intense states communicable. In this third expression, alongside the field diary and auto-ethnography, Leiris’ project oscillates between himself, self-awareness and the literary

exercise. Certainly, the ethnographic operation is reversed, as Lejeune comments: “If ethnography is based on the study of groups, the exteriority of the observer and the descriptive attitude, Leiris’ situation is exactly the opposite, since he examines the ‘sacred’ of an individual, which is none other than himself” (Lejeune 1996: 266). It seems significant to me, however, that when he does ethnography, it is not particular individuals that interest him – he considers, for example, that it would be arbitrary to choose this one over that one (Leiris 1930) – but the classical themes of ethnology or social anthropology, such as language and rituals. And in this third expression, Leiris himself indicates, contrary to the objective mentioned in his report to the CNRS (Leiris 1992b: 49), the risk of his leaving anthropology and its aim of general knowledge about the human being: “Seeking what would be my truth, I started from my own examination, and I was threatened by a danger from which I did not, moreover, guard myself very well: to allow myself to be captivated by the portrait I would make, and no longer attach myself to anything but it” (Leiris 2017a: 187).

The conclusion is actually not surprising: Leiris closes his “object” around himself when he makes literature. He then speaks of himself, but without inserting an anthropological stake in it, without putting it in explicit and sustained debate with anthropology. In ethnography, he talks about himself in two cases: when he adds the family environment or in his field diary in which he talks about himself in the field, also about others, about their activities, without any objective of targeting an individual in its details. The face of anthropology could have changed without such a separation of its activities.

## Coda

From there, what about his “Journal” (kept between 1922 and 1989, with interruptions and without daily regularity, different from “Phantom Africa,” a field diary)? Michel Leiris wrote the following on 17 May 1929: “Today I took a shit in such and such a way, I made love in such and such a way, I thought that of such and such a person, I jerked off, I ate with a good appetite, I laughed at such and such stupidity, at such and such a time of day I thought I had genius, I was flattered by such and such a thing that was said to me, I hoped to be published in such and such a magazine, by such and such a publisher, I was afraid of such and such a thing, etc., etc.” (Leiris 1992c: 168).

Most diaries – he cites Novalis, Amiel and Baudelaire – are not, he points out, “true diaries, but rather collections of notes and meditations, in any case collections of a very literary form” (Leiris 1992c: 168f.). “It would be necessary, he continues a little further on, to manage to give a detailed account of a whole day. To describe how one gets up, washes, dresses ... what one thinks while doing so, the conversations at the table and outside the table, the phases of optimism and pessimism that may follow one another in the course of the day, the organic sensations experienced, the memories that come back to us, – all of this recorded scrupulously, hour by hour” (169).

Indeed, it does not get more autographic than this. I find it remarkable that Leiris mentions this possibility. But he invokes a lack of courage to write such acts of everyday life, which he also considers uninteresting (168). And why does he not put this point in debate with anthropology and its history? Was it too early? And Leiris then notes more generally encounters, moments of his intimate life, dreams, various assessments of this or that event. Lévi-Strauss’s remark on Leiris’ work (“second after second” – Lévi-Strauss 2009) is in any case excessive ....

In “Phantom Africa,” which is not separable, as I have indicated, from the ethnographer’s presence in the field, he also returns to this point on 4 April 1932: “Some will say that, speaking of Africa, I don’t need to say whether, on such-and-such a day, I was in a good mood, or even how I defecated ... I do not see why, if all else fails, I should let such an event pass in silence. Not only is it just as important in itself as the fact that this or that tree, or a native dressed in this or that fashion, or this or that animal happened to be at a given moment on the side of the road. But this phenomenon of defecation also must be recounted because it is valuable from the perspective of the narrative’s authenticity” (Leiris 2017b: 322).

Leiris clarifies his argument for authenticity, while then indicating that it is the lack of time that is problematic: “Not so that the narrative is complete – for, since the note-taker does not have enough time, it can never be mentioned for a single moment (and yet, how interesting it would be, in a diary, to note not only the most fleeting thoughts but also all the organic states at different times of the day, how one eats, for example, how one makes love, how one pees?) – but in such a way as to expose the personal coefficient to the light of day in order to allow the calculation of error, which is the greatest possible guarantee of objectivity” (322).

Such details are like “proof that no censorship, no concern for propriety, has come to be inserted into the composition of the journal” (Debaene 2014: 192). They unfold as a “raw literality” (191), that of the journal, for which Leiris insists on the absence of secondary rearrangement or subsequent interpretation. This naked literality is thus an ambition-limit, which the literary text is obviously more likely to miss than the diary itself. But even with the latter, he would also say, “one lets oneself go to literature” (Leiris 1992c: 151).

In “Scratches,” Leiris reports that his “Journal” first consists of notes in a “chequered notebook with the blue card” (Leiris 1997: 154): “day after day – with intervals that can last for months, sometimes even years – I write down this or that detail of my life to be noted for my personal use, a dream from the previous day, a reflection inspired by an external event, or by my state of mind at the time” (155). And this becomes “an album of memories, keepsake, much more than a diary or a collection of thoughts. An album almost in the same sense as an album of postcards or photographs. There are documents pasted on many pages, in fact: separate sheets of paper, scribbled at random and inserted as they are, sometimes because of the fetishistic value I may have attached to these original documents (still very layered, in their very physical being, in the circumstances in which they are written), sometimes simply because I was too lazy to copy them” (155).

To these notebooks, Leiris only attributes “positions to which I can withdraw”, “a certain undeniable comfort” (157), when his “literary work” and “creative activity” do not give him satisfaction (156). In his diary, too, the notations are not regular. He states that he “poured out his heart” especially during “periods of depression” (156).<sup>8</sup> Leiris has indeed taken other directions in his thinking and writing, those of the “I” to be delivered through literary work, explicitly preoccupied with himself, which he does not dissociate from a kind of quest for “marvelous” effects. It was his literary work that preoccupied him most.<sup>9</sup>

Far be it from me to reproach Leiris for not having better accomplished this literality in the follow-up of moments. The most regrettable thing is that this ambition of “literalit y,” for which one

must take the time no matter what, have courage, be regular and not necessarily leave it to depressive moments, was not really taken up and discussed by Leiris in debate and in tension with anthropology, except by remaining in this avowal of the “personal coefficient” in the ethnographic field. This is what I consider to be the problem with Leiris’ work.

It seems to me that the challenge of literality is indeed “anthropological” and in a central way. The word “literal” designates a type of interpretation which, avoiding the search for meanings, conforms to the text word for word. In the same way that literality concerns the word-for-word of the text, the anthropologicality of a description lies in what it says about what the human being does to the letter and how he does it: his step by step, his successive moments, his ways of passing them. The value of the text is then in what is written, and nothing more, about a human being, the basic “letter,” continuing from moment to moment, from situation to situation. This is the reality with which each observer is confronted, without necessarily retaining it, noting it, limiting himself to specific moments diluted in the theme of selected studies. There is no other reality than that of a human being in his successive moments. It is the scale of what we are not really used to seeing or describing, focused on a human being, that of the continuous literal: I do this, I feel that, then this, then that. Thus, anthropologicality does not indicate a possible discourse, punctual or general, on the human condition that would come after analyses of cultures or actions and would be dependent on them. Rather, it would indicate an anthropology that is literally anthropological, starting from a description of the moments of a single individual, without injecting other entities and additional meanings at this level. This is even the challenge of anthropology that Leiris did not try to develop. Such anthropologicality is the opposite of literary narrative, it is not a step in a literary work. It is valuable for its own sake, in what it teaches about the existence and existential structuration of a human entity.

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8 I refer to Catherine Beaugrand’s work (2026) on the construction process of certain “diaries,” including that of Leiris.

9 As Nathalie Barberger explains, Leiris did not want to be a “memorialist” or reconstruct his life “step by step”: he preferred to “condense”, totalise, overlook and transcend the moment (Barberger 1998: 38–45).

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