TO D. H.

Fiches

File cards: in imitation of Michel Leiris’s habit, first developed as an ethnographer, of writing down notes, dreams, memories, and reflections on fiches. The new Pléiade edition of La Règle du jeu (2003) provides a useful glimpse of this compositional practice by giving us, as an appendix, some of le fichier underlying Leiris’s great autobiography.

La Règle du jeu as a card game. Leiris dipping into his Duchampian box of tricks to shuffle and reshuffle his fiches into ever-new configurations. “Donne et maldonne.” Dealing out straights, flushes, three of a kind, pairs, yet ever holding the face cards close to his chest. And in the process discovering, as he admits in Fibrilles, that no matter how he cuts the cards, the one that comes up again and again (just as it does in “l’air des cartes” in Bizet’s Carmen) is: “La Mort, encore, toujours, la Mort.”

“La Mort,” Arcana 13 of the Tarot deck, whose divinatory meaning is “transformation, change, destruction followed by renewal.” As in Gérard de Nerval’s line: “La Trizième revient, c’est encor la première.” Which, in the order of the Tarot deck, is preceded by the equally Nervalian Arcana 12, the Hanged Man, “Le Pendu.” Indeed, well before Leiris discovered the Rousselian resources of the fichier in the course of writing La Règle du jeu, he was already experimenting with Tarot cartomancy in one of his earliest published works, the 1925 Point Cardinal, his first homage to Nerval—the secret structure of whose Chimères, many Surrealist-inspired critics believed, was governed by the permutations of the Tarot deck.

Although recent scholarship has tended to downplay the cartomorphic dimensions of Nerval’s work, it has nonetheless revealed that from a purely

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genetic point of view, his compositional practice was not that different from Leiris’s. “Sylvie,” for example, was initially composed in pencil on a number of stray pieces of paper that Nerval kept in his pockets while rambling through his childhood Valois (shades of Rousseau writing his *Rêveries* on playing cards). But the subsequent twining together of these scattered strands of reverie into the intricately patterned lacework of his final text caused him, by his own accounts, considerable anguish—“J’efface tout à mesure que j’écris,” he confessed. Like Freud’s Mystic Writing Pad (or Penelope’s web), “Sylvie” is a parable about the raveling and unraveling of fictions, or more precisely, about the kind of ever-shifting palimpsest created by a memory engaged in the simultaneous pressures of recollection and repression, inscription and obliteration. By its very method of composition, which involves the laborious suturing of disconnected paradigms into narrative syntagms, “Sylvie” anticipates the vast *combinatoire* that Leiris will generate from his Pandora’s box of fiches.

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**Café Totem**

I met Michel Leiris only once. It must have been in the spring of 1986; I had already translated portions of his *Nuits sans nuit et quelques jours sans jours* for a special Leiris issue of the magazine *Sulfur* edited by my friend Jim Clifford, and had asked Jean Jamin, Leiris’s associate at the Laboratoire d’ethnologie at the Musée de l’Homme, whether a meeting could be set up to discuss a full translation of the book. Much to my surprise and delight, Leiris accepted and we lunched at the museum’s little restaurant, the Café Totem. Typically reserved and ill at ease at the outset of the meal, Leiris positively lit up when the conversation turned to Gérard de Nerval, on whom I was at that point also working. Denis Hollier has since shown me a short entry Leiris made in one of his agenda books around 1967 that reads: “Gérard de Nerval: de toutes les figures littéraires, ma préférée”—and this predilection became increasingly evident over the course of our lunch, as Leiris ranged far and wide over the entirety of Nerval’s oeuvre. I was amazed at his command not only of Nerval’s own work, but of the corpus of scholarship surrounding it: he seemed, to my impressionable eye, to have read everything. This is borne out by Leiris’s catalogue of the contents of his “Bibliothèque Idéale,” included as an appendix to the new Pléiade (*Règle*, p. 1271). Whereas all the other authors in this Borgesian ideal library are represented by the titles of single, exemplary works, Nerval falls between Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables*) and Stendhal (*Le Rouge et le noir*), with the simple, sweeping injunction: *Oeuvres complètes.*

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**Je suis l’autre**

Late in life, having come across a lithograph of himself in a recently published biography, Nerval inscribed the frontispiece with the enigmatic phrase “Je suis
l’autre.” I am the other. Or: “I am the other one.” Or even possibly: “I follow the other.” Perhaps not as strong as the Rimballdian slogan “je est un autre,” so beloved of the Surrealists—with its “I” impersonalized and cast into the third person—but a suitable credo for a self-portraitist observing himself in his mirror of ink. “Je suis l’autre.” Like Nerval, Leiris constantly adjusts Lejeune’s autobiographical pact with the following caveat (to himself, to his reader): beware of mistaking me for myself.

But next to this ironic and, as it were, postmodernist reading of the inevitable noncoincidence of the “I” with itself, there is, of course, a more “romantic” interpretation of “je suis l’autre,” which, in the case of Leiris, might describe his lifelong identification with the idealized other who is Nerval. To choose only two examples among many, Leiris informs us in Fourbis that, in a major “geste moral,” it was under the pseudonym of “Gérard” (“tribut au rêveur d’Aurélia”) that he formally joined the Communist resistance in 1944. And toward the end of Fibrilles, he in turn notes that all the “grandes prises de parti” in his life have taken place “sous l’égide d’êtres ou de peuples considérés comme des modèles (Nerval par exemple ou maintenant la Chine...)” (Règle, p. 789). (Only a Leiris could have rhymed Mao with Nerval as Virgilian guides.)

There is something far deeper at work in this process of identification than a mere question of literary “influence.” To fully plumb Leiris’s relation to the “other” who is Nerval, one would probably have to turn to his anthropological work on possession cults, for as he writes in his preface to Alfred Métraux’s study of Le Vaudou haïtien, “Être un autre que soi, se dépasser dans l’enthousiasme ou dans la transe, n’est-ce pas l’un des besoins fondamentaux des hommes” (Règle, p. xxix)?

Leiris first begins reading Nerval in depth in late 1923, while frequenting the “lieu initiatique” of André Masson’s studio on the rue Blomet, whose other regular visitors included Roland Tual, Antonin Artaud, and Georges Limbour. Under the tutelage of Masson, Leiris is above all drawn to Nerval as an adept of “les sciences occultes”—a thaumurgic poet whose “alchimie du verbe,” like that of Paracelsus, involves “l’évocation magique des démons intérieurs” in order to transmute their dark psychic energies into spiritual gold.2 One of the fiches for Fourbis reads: “Vers 1924, transmuer était pour moi le maître-mot”—and I refer you to Michel Beaujour’s essay, “Moi-‘Transmuer’” for a trenchant analysis of just how what he terms “la vulgate ésotérique” developed during the Renaissance (and, I would argue, transmitted by the work of Nerval) massively informs not only Leiris’s early Surrealist writings but the entire transmutational project of La Règle du jeu.3

It is during this rue Blomet period that Leiris also begins noting down his dreams: Nerval, not Freud, is his master when it comes to the deadpan registration of the oneiric, as in the following text from *Nuits sans nuits*, dated 1923, which I give here in toto in my translation:

One evening, upon entering my room, I see myself sitting on my bed. With a single punch, I annihilate the phantom who has stolen my appearance. At this point my mother appears at a door while her double, a perfect replica of the model, enters through a facing door. I scream very loudly, but my brother turns up unexpectedly, also accompanied by his double who orders me to be quiet, claiming I will frighten my mother.⁴

Almost every element in this family romance is lifted directly from *Aurélia*—the unconscious plagiarism of dream expressing itself as a veritable epidemic of self-replication. Indeed, throughout Leiris’s oeuvre, the uncanny apparition of the figure of the double is regularly accompanied by the explicit or implicit intrusion of Nerval into his text, whether in the form of direct quotation or indirect allusion—intertextuality as *Doppelgängerei*.

Nerval not only provides early Leiris with a double identity (or with an identity as a double), but also with the histrionic model of a life performed as a theatrical role. The epigraph of chapter 7 of *L’Age d’homme* cites a diary entry of 1924; I quote Richard Howard’s translation: “First I wanted to play the part of Rolla, then that of Hamlet, today that of Gérard de Nerval. Which tomorrow? / I have always chosen masks which did not suit my nasty petit-bourgeois face, and I have imitated only what was easiest to imitate in my heroes. / I shall never hang myself, nor poison myself, nor be killed in duel.”⁵

*L’Age d’homme* is in a sense Leiris’s confession of the échec of his secularized version of *imitatio Christi*: unlike his alter-ego Nerval, he has failed to achieve transcendence by dissolving himself into madness, and unlike Nerval, he has failed to hang himself, that is, to enact what he calls “the profound meaning of suicide: to become at the same time oneself and the other, male and female, subject and object, killed and killer—the only possibility of communion with oneself.”⁶ Often flirted with but never fully actualized, Leiris’s most fully Nervalian attempt at self-transmutation through the self-sacrifice of suicide will have to wait until the midpoint of *Fibrilles*—where, of course, it will again misfire.

**Illuminati**

In 1925, Leiris publishes a review in the Surrealist journal *Clarté* of two works of Nerval included in a recent reissue of his *Oeuvres complètes*. The first of these

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⁶ Ibid., p. 93.
works is *Les Illuminés*, a collection of biographical essays whose title refers to a semi-clandestine order of freethinkers and esotericists founded in Germany in the mid-eighteenth century and who, according to Nerval, were among the crucial harbingers of the French Revolution, constituting a sort of secret society whose Valois headquarters was the castle of Ermenonville, a site associated with the final days of that other utopian visionary and Nervalian alter ego, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Provocatively subtitled “Precursors of Socialism,” Nerval’s portrait gallery limns the lives and works of a series of forgotten or marginalized “eccentrics” (as he calls them), all to varying degrees participants in his own Promethean dreams of a mankind redeemed by the purifying fires of the communitarian Imagination. Reviewing this counter-tradition of illuminati in 1925, Leiris converts them into the precursors of Surrealism: “L’amour, l’esprit de révolution, l’aventure, une certaine forme de mysticisme, [Nerval] fait converger tout cela vers un point unique, la suprême libération, que lui-même trouva dans la folie, puis le suicide. Le livre fermé, pensons à l’avenir, au grand bouversement qui se prépare.” In short, Nerval “au service de la révolution.” “Changer le monde.” “Changer la vie.”

Nerval’s depicts his illuminati as an enlightened conspiracy of the elect, something along the order of the Freemasons. Biographers continue to speculate whether Nerval himself was or was not a Mason: the letter G of his first name, in any event, is an emblem of the fraternal order, and his *Voyage en Orient* is filled with Masonic scenes: the initiation rites of the adepts of Isis inside the pyramids of Egypt, the esoteric religious practices of the Druses in Lebanon, the tale of Adoniram (or Hiram), builder of Solomon’s Temple and legendary founder of Masonry.

Leiris’s grandfather, it so happens, was a prominent Freemason in Paris, and coursing through his grandson’s work is an obsession with “sociétés secrètes,” whether they be the teenage fraternities evoked in *L’Age d’homme* (devoted to the worship of “Baïr, Castles, Cauda” [alcohol, tobacco, masturbation]), or, for that matter, the “communautés inavouables” represented by Marcel Jouhandeau and Max Jacob, or by the rue Blomet or the initial core of Surrealists—of whom Bataille remarked, “Leiris était, de nous deux, l’initié.”

Further secret societies in Leiris’s life and work: the Collège de Sociologie, the Communist Party (perhaps), the journal *Les Temps modernes*, the Dogon and their secret language, possession cults in Gondor, voodoo ceremonies in the Caribbean, the inner sanctums of bullfighting or jazz.

In a late melancholy line from *Images de marque*, written after the death of his wife, Leiris describes himself as “An initiate of a secret society with a membership of one.”

Further notes: Leiris’s fascination with Jean Jamin’s work on the “Anthropology of Secrecy.” Jamin’s discovery that the Kahnweiler clan was a kind

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of secret society bound together by the pact of silence shrouding the precise kinship
relation between Leiris’s wife Zette and her soi-disant sister—a key to Jamin’s reading
of Leiris’s “secret” journal.

Leiris and Nerval, the most secret of writers. Secret sharers. Sharers in secrecy.

*Salt Smugglers*

The other work of Nerval’s reviewed by Leiris in *Clarté* was his 1850 serial
novel, *Les Faux-Saulniers*, whose title refers to those smugglers who, in violation of
the brutal *gabelle* tax of the Ancien Régime, engaged in the contraband commerce
of salt. Leiris indulges in a certain amount of Surrealist bombast about “les faux-
saulniers de l’esprit, tous ceux qui passent en contrebande le sel de leurs idées,
narguant le contrôle dérisoire d’une logique étriquée,” but in fact Nerval’s *roman-
feuilleton* has less to do with salt smuggling than with the bootlegging of fiction
into a text that ostensibly presents itself as a work of straight historiography.
Leiris’s *Règle du jeu* will similarly play with the porous boundaries between fact and
fiction—see also his bemused discussion of the touristic existence in Verona of
Romeo and Juliette’s entirely fictive balcony—what Marianne Moore would call
“real toads in imaginary gardens,” an apt description of the trompe l’oeil referen-
tiality of Leirisian autobiography.

*Les Faux-Saulniers* earned Nerval his sobriquet as “le Sterne français,” for it
tells the shaggy-dog story of its first-person narrator’s quest all over the map for
a mislaid book containing the biography of a certain abbé de Bucquoy—a wild-
goose chase that leads him into digression after digression and whose parody of
the serial novel’s tactics of deferral and delay radically throws linear narrative
into question. More than any other text of Nerval’s, *Les Faux Saulniers* antici-
pates the arabesque style and pacing of Leiris’s *Fibrilles*, where “rebûté par le
plus court chemin d’un point à l’autre,” he accumulates “les fioritures et les
digressions au lieu de marcher droit”—a style he describes as baroque or rococo
“puisqu’il montre à la fois la règle et ce qui la viole, la ligne droite et les lignes
courbes ou brisées qui tendent à s’y substituer” (*Règle*, pp. 738–41). Just as the
picaresque adventures of Nerval’s *Les Faux Saulniers* follow the zigzag quest for
a lost, ever-elusive book (or Mallarmean Livre?), so *La Règle du jeu* will, in all its
mnemonic meanderings, be driven by the desire to recapture a series of lost or
imaginary objects—be they the “tetable,” the “tambour-trompette,” or the “carte
postale disque de phonographe,” just to mention some of the childhood grails
in *Biffures*—and of which Leiris comments, entirely in the vein of Nerval:
“j’aligne des phrases, j’accumule des mots et des figures de langage, mais dans
chacun de ces pièges, ce qui se prend, c’est toujours l’ombre et non la proie”
(*Règle*, p. 17).
The Lost Letter

L’alphabet magique, l’hiéroglyphe mystérieux ne nous arrivent qu’incomplets et faussés... retrouvons la lettre perdue ou le signe effacé, recomposons la gamme dissonante, et nous prendrons force dans le monde des esprits.

Leiris cites this passage from Aurélia as an epigraph to his 1927 essay “Le Monade hieroglyphique,” on the English Renaissance Kabalist and alchemist, John Dee, whose mystical manipulations of numbers, letters, and astrological signs he compares to recent advances in atomic physics. The lost letter or effaced sign as radioactive trace, akin to those particles of language or swirls of sound that Leiris in Biffures will call “tranche-syllabes,” having typically misheard Hugo’s lines from “Les Djinns” (“D’étranges syllabes / Nous viennent encor”: “des tranches ou bouts de syllabes hachées menu ou coupées au couteau qui persistaient à trainer dans l’air... après le passage des génies en ouragan” (Règle, p. 53). Sliced-up syllables, ur-syllables, ghost-syllables. Revenants.

Like that other great illuminé and suicide, Raymond Roussel, Gérard de Nerval positively haunts Leiris’s entire oeuvre. And as in the case of Roussel, the locus of this haunting is to be discovered in the very letter of the text, that is, at the molecular level of individual phonemes or graphemes—hieroglyphs or rebusstexts of intertextuality.

“Langage tangage.”

Or

The most Nervalian of all syllables, its occult, primal powers at work in the titles: “Voyage en ORient,” “LORéley,” “AUrélia,” “PandORa,” as well in the Chimères: “Vers DORés,” “HORus,” and “A Louise D’OR Reine.”

The final tercet of the sonnet “El Desdichado” mirrors the OR of “Orphée” into its reverse image in the RO of “Achéron”—death morphed into song:

Et j’ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l’Achéron
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d’Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.

A similar reversal occurs in “Artémis,” where the thanatos of the syllable “OR” (“la mort” / “la morte”) is anagrammatically transmuted into the eros of “rose”:

C'est la mort—ou la morte... O délice, ô tourment!
La rose qu'elle tient, c'est la Rose trémière

Out of such Nervalian paranomasia will emerge the Leiris of Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses, where we read, among the many other entries beginning in OR:

OREILLES—à leur treille s'enroule l'ortie des sons

In Nerval’s case, this acoustic matrix, OR, is rooted in the magic geography of his childhood, which he spent in the small Valois town of MORtefontaine, which translates as dead fountain, or perhaps “fontaine de la MORt”—site of the spectral absence/presence of his dead mother, la Morte, this lost object who died in Germany when he was only two while she was accompanying his father, Etienne Labrunie, on the Grande Armée’s Russian campaign.

The maiden name of Nerval’s mother, the necronym “de la Mort” or “de la Morte” is: Laurent, L-a-u-r-e-n-t, which contains the lost muse “Laure”—or which, pronounced backwards, and palindromically rearranged with its u transformed into a v, yields up the nom de plume Nerval. The writer thereby transforms himself into the cryptonym or onomastic tomb of Lauren(t)—le nom de la mère, “La Morte.”

The radioactive traces of the Nervalian ur-syllable OR shine through virtually every page of Leiris’s Surrealist novel, Aurora, which refracts the (failed) “voyage initiatic” he made to Egypt and Greece in 1927 in the footsteps of Nerval’s Voyage en Orient. Its title condenses the two anima figures governing Nerval’s final prose texts, namely, the angelic “muse” Aurélia and the diabolical “méduse” Pandora (whom Leiris defines in his Glossaire as “qui se pendra l’aura”).

The epigraph to Nerval’s Pandora is taken from his own translation of Goethe’s Faust: “Deux ames, hélas! partagent mon sein, et chacune d’elles veut se séparer de l’autre”—a psychomachia that will be allegorically projected in Leiris’s L’Age d’homme into the two polar figures of male desire, Judith (“la femme dangereuse,” i.e., Pandora) and Lucrèce (“la femme blessée,” i.e., Aurélia).

But whereas the later L’Age d’homme gives itself over to the psychoanalytical exploration of the opposition between Judith and Lucrèce, that is, between woman as agent versus woman as victim of castration, the Leiris of Aurora (who appears in the text under the Nervalian pseudonym “Damoclès Siriel”) is still desperately trying to repress this mark of difference, operating almost entirely within the logic of Surrealist fetishism in order to achieve what Sean Hand has nicely defined as “an ideal sublime aphasia that supposedly sustains plenum and void in numinous union.”

The agent of this apocalyptic union is the syllable OR, associated with the gold produced by the philosopher’s stone, emblem of petrified male desire.

Rewriting the deliriums of _Aurélia_ (particularly those turning on phantasms of the “corps morcelé”), Leiris traces his Aurora through a number of Rousselian avatars: Egyptologically, she becomes the hieroglyphic rebus “Eau-Ro-Rah”; possessed of a golden ring decorated with chiseled rats, she is in turn “or aux rats”; in her more horrific incarnations she metamorphoses into “Horrora, mot armé d’un H comme le spasme d’un hoquet”; or, associated with American screen stars of the 1920s, she acquires the Irish moniker “O’Rora.”11 But behind all these avatars, she remains throughout the ghostly Nervalian figure of “La Mort,” “règle qui fait que tout discours n’est qu’un piètre mirage recouvrant le néant des objets, quels que soient les mots que je prononce et quel que soit le JE que je mette en avant….”12

Aurora, or the deadly power of metaphor: infinite unity, yet at the price of infinite substitutability or repetition. A mirage in a mirror.

Or: Marx’s universal equivalent.

The letter _O_, the full circle of totality, or the ouribouros snake biting its own tail.

Omega, the apocalyptic trump of doom at the end of Rimbaud’s “Voyelles.”

All adding up to zero, “la Mort.”

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The 1927 _Aurora_ marks the dead end of Leiris’s investment in the phantas-magoric gold standard of Surrealism. Other economies, notably those of Georges Bataille, would soon open up to him via the Collège de Sociologie.

But the Nervalian death-drive of the syllable OR will nonetheless continue to haunt his writing, particularly in the first third of _Fourbis_, published in 1955, and entitled “Mors.” The childhood memories of this section cluster around the early electric cars called “voitures ‘Mors,’” which replaced the buggies pulled by horses whose reins were attached to their mouths by bridles or “mors,” as well as memories of the Morse code or of the walrus (“le morse”) glimpsed at the zoo, and finally the crucial word, at once foreign and all too familiar: “Mors, la mort, comme on l’appendra quand on fera du latin” (_Règle_, pp. 313–14).

The pivotal scene in this chapter entitled “Mors” is Leiris’s symbolic death (and rebirth?) while he gives a public funeral oration, later published as “Saint Matorel martyr,” for his former mentor, the poet Max Jacob, who had died in the Drancy concentration camp in March 1944. Leiris relates that while he was delivering his “oraison funèbre,” he felt blinded by the stage lights, and sensing that he was “à l’orée d’un vaste grotte où je ne voyais rien,” he was turned to stone like a sightless statue, “nimbé de l’intangibilité des idoles,” yet mysteriously infused by

12. Ibid., p. 41.
an “exaltation orgueilleuse” (*Règle*, pp. 324–25). Momentarily possessed by the shade of the dead Max Jacob and thus having passed into the Rousselian *gloire* of immortality, he recognizes that at this necromantic instant he has finally (almost) become identical to the mythic hero of Nerval’s poem “El Desdichado”: “je crus presque avoir franchi le pas et—tel celui qui a ‘deux fois vainqueur traversé l’Achéron’—n’avoir plus à redouter les atteintes de la mort.”

**Merveilleux Nerval**

In the course of a long rumination on “le merveilleux” in his 1976 *Frêle bruit*, Leiris reviews the four or five events in his life that might be classified as truly miraculous or “fulgurents.” Significantly enough, he compares the Nervalian “descente en enfers” that occurred during his homage to Jacob to a similar descent into the underworld while in the arms of his Algerian Persephone, Khadidja—which, in turn, reminds him of the uncanny “passage de l’autre coté du miroir” that occurred while he was at the deathbed of Bataille’s “Laure,” Colette Peignot, and suddenly realized she was the very incarnation of the “sainte de l’abîme” who figures in Nerval’s sonnet “Artémis” (*Règle*, pp. 1011, 1030).

This late, autumnal meditation on the marvelous in *Frêle Bruit* is Leiris’s revisionist rewriting of his 1927 “Essai sur le merveilleux,” now included in the Pléiade, which was largely devoted to the work of Nerval (*Règle*, pp. 1059–1084). Suspicious of the transcendental or supernatural claims of the Surrealist “merveilleux”—which in 1927 he had defined as that “catastrophe logique” that occurs when one is struck down by “la grande foudre de l’absolu”—Leiris in *Frêle Bruit* argues for a more soft-core version of the marvelous, no longer grounded in myth or madness, but bathed in the nostalgic mists of rural folklore, “un merveilleux en sourdine,” as he calls it, or a “merveilleux rassérénant, comme, chez Nerval, il y a le gentil folklore de Sylvie, à côté de ce merveilleux à haute tension, les délires d’Aurélia” (*Règle*, p. 1031).

Aurélia versus Sylvie.

Or versus Vie. *O* versus *V*.

Taking his distance on the high-voltage “merveilleux” of *Aurélia*, Leiris at the same time puts behind him the febrile delirium of the failed suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization recounted in the previous volume *Fibrilles*—an account massively modeled, often down the most minute textual detail, on Nerval’s narrative in *Aurélia* of his own commitment to a clinic for the insane as a result of his mental “fevers.” The sylvan landscapes evoked in *Frêle Bruit* are instead suffused with the Valois of Nerval’s “Sylvie”—as in frail fricatives that emerge on the page immediately following Leiris’s discussion of the “merveilleux en sourdine”: “soupir étouffé de Weber, frôlant sylves et lacs puis rencontrant, si je m’abandonne à une course aux échos, Ver-en-Valois où est passé Nerval, et, dans les Ardennes, Verviers où l’on va par Villers- Cotterêts” (*Règle*, p. 1032).
The letter V makes a brief appearance at the end of Aurora, when its heroine mutates from a monadic O into a giant column of sand and in turn divides into a huge branching V. But the letter only begins to take on a more insistent importance in Leiris’s notebook of the late 1930s. Entitled L’Homme sans honneur (also included in the new Pléiade), it is at once a brouillon of Biffures and a sketch for “Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne.”

In a Cratylistic “Note sur la lettre V,” which looks forward toward the “Alphabet” chapter of Biffures, Leiris observes that he is above all attracted to its sound and form because of the “brusque torsion de son sillage: sillage des sens impairs” (Règle, p. 1134).

This slide from O to V, from Aurora to Biffures (passing through L’Age d’homme) can be read as Leiris’s attempt to move beyond the totalizing operations of metaphor (grounded in the transmutational magic of the syllable OR) into the metonymic splittings and forking of the I associated with the bifurcated V—whose ramifications of self and sense he will so minutely explore in the first volume of La Règle du jeu.

In the linguistic turn of L’Homme sans honneur, at any rate, the splayed limbs of the letter V would seem to stand for that principle of heterogeneity that Leiris, following Bataille, locates as the écart at the heart of the sacred—“L’ombre du corne du taureau,” as it were.

V, the sign for that which is odd-numbered, torqued, out of whack, off-kilter, crotched, self-divergent, scarified, marked, castrated, heterogeneous, incomplete. The fluttering veil or “voile” of the word “rêve,” for example (including its circumflex), or the way in which “rêve” veers into “veille” (Règle, p. 1136), as in Nerval’s: “le rêve est une seconde vie.”

Leiris en VO.

Or to cast this into (crude) Lacanian allegory:

O or OR, the primal narcissistic order of the “Imaginaire” (“la Mort,” “la Morte”). Versus V, emblem of that “déviation et décalage” of which Leiris speaks in Biffures (Règle, p. 6), the necessary acceptance of which ushers him into the rules of the game governing the social domain of “Symbolique.”

Ermenonville

As Leiris branches back into the sacred, heterogeneous memories of his childhood in L’Homme sans honneur, he also begins to imaginatively inhabit Le Valois, or “Le Nervalois” as he sometimes calls it, site of his own mother’s (and her mother’s) rural villégiatures, and rhymed with his own early memories of violence and sexuality in the country garden of Viroflay.

One of the entries of this notebook describes a Sunday trip to the Valois in
the summer of 1938, whose high point is a visit to Rousseau’s tomb on the Isle of Poplars in Ermenonville as evoked in Nerval’s “Sylvie”—V’s and O’s again (Règle, p. 1141). Subsequently transposed and reworked at length in the coda to Fibrilles, this passage has been commented upon in detail by Denis Hollier in a superb essay, “La poésie de A à Z,” whose analysis I here follow.13

The landscape of Ermenonville presents itself to Leiris as a vertiginous example of mise-en-abyme, a series of plenums containing voids: within the “plein” of the park, the “vide anneau d’eau” (VO), within the empty ring of water, the isle of poplars whose plenum contains an empty circle in which is set the plenum of Rousseau’s tomb—which in turn contains the empty “cave” where “comme dit Nerval, manquent les cendres de Rousseau.”

Hollier ingeniously connects these missing Pantheonized ashes of Rousseau’s cenotaph to the broader “cénographie” of Leirisian autobiography, which, particularly after the suicide attempt of Fibrilles, is constructed as a tomb for a missing or lost original that it must constantly contain by the work of mourning.

Like Nerval’s Valois, the locus of this loss in Leiris’s work is most frequently associated with voice or with song—poetry, opera, popular song, folk song (whose study Nerval pioneered in France). Even visiting Martinique in 1949, Leiris nostalgically mourns the rural voices of his childhood when encountering a Caribbean “Sylvie” singing the folk songs of Old France.14

Leiris’s move into the sustained autobiographical prose of La Règle du jeu, Hollier suggests, constitutes “son deuil de la poésie,” a mastication of the vanished ashes of song. Just as Orpheus sings the loss of Eurydice, so Leiris writes the loss of voice.

La Règle du jeu as the Mallarmean “tombeau” of the poet—or of the ideal Nerval—he had failed to become.

The mysterious titles of this four-part tomb run: Biffures, Fourbis, Fibrilles, Frêle bruit—all sharing the letters B, F, and R. Could this be a hidden anagram of the name of his secret sharer—in which the R’s register the traces of Gérard de Nerval and, by some private Grimm’s Law, all the V’s have evolved into B’s?

And as for all the F’s? Phonologically speaking, V is a voiced fricative. Eliminate its voicing in the throat (which is what happens when Leiris falls mute after the tracheotomy he undergoes in the wake of his suicide attempt), and you get the scarred letter F—the voiceless spirant governing the silent writing of Biffures, Fourbis, Fibrilles, and Frêle bruit.

Signed, not “Leiris en VO” but “Leiris en FO”: Leiris fantôme.