

## Claude Cahun's Iconic Heads: from 'The Sadistic Judith' to *Human Frontier*

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### Abstract

This essay uses a photographic self-portrait by Claude Cahun as a focus for examining the ambivalences of photography and gender identity within surrealism. It sets Cahun's striking photograph in the context of her texts on historical 'heroines' and in relation to other self-portraits within the framework of surrealist autobiography. The complexities of her lesbian identity are explored through her own strategies of both textual and visual 'masquerade.' Drawing widely upon photographic theory, the essay addresses the tensions between manipulation, indexicality and tactility in Cahun's photograph, to suggest its fundamental instability of meaning. As a 'surrealist counter-archivist,' this essay argues, Cahun pursued a project which investigates the human condition and its very 'frontiers.'



Fig. 1: Claude Cahun, *Frontière humaine* (Human Frontier), in *Bifur*, 5, 1930.



In the only photographic self-portrait published by Claude Cahun in her lifetime, *Human Frontier* from 1930, and in 'The Sadistic Judith,' one of the sketches collectively entitled 'Heroines' and published in different journals in 1925, Cahun puts into play the question of what is human and how a human being knows who and what she is. This question of knowledge is perhaps most significantly articulated in the photograph *Human Frontier* as photography would seem to represent a reliable medium with which to record what can be known because of the indexical way in which it captures what may be seen. A photograph constitutes a trace of the real, of a moment captured in time through light and chemistry. However *Human Frontier* puts into doubt what is seen - a human head - and thus questions the knowledge projected and suggested by the head itself, questions which carry over from Cahun's story, 'The Sadistic Judith,' which also questions what and how we know. Consequently, this photograph also destabilises common assumptions about photography itself, its reliability and its indexicality, by seeming to capture not only what seems familiar to any human being but also the suggestion of what does not, of what seems to escape familiarity with a hint of the interference of otherworldly, even ghostly, elements in an otherwise familiar world.

### **Judith at the Cutting Edge**

In 1925, at a time when Cahun was making multiple photographic self-portraits in myriad disguises, she also tried out alternative voices with a sequence of short verbal sketches. Entitled 'Heroines' and published in *Le Mercure de France* and *Le Journal littéraire* these texts took the shape of monologues by famous women from Eve to Helen, Sappho, Penelope, Salomé, and also Judith, in the tradition of Ovid's 'Heroides.'<sup>1</sup> Unlike Ovid, however, Cahun avoids reinforcing the myths attached to these iconic women; she also rejects the tragic passivity that characterises so many of them in Ovid's treatment. Her stories desacralise these 'heroines' in an effort to humanise them, on the one hand, and to suggest that humanity is not heroic, on the other.<sup>2</sup> Cahun's distortions of these mythic stories make the reader realise how two-dimensional these women have become. What if, she asks, they could be declassified as icons of virtue, beauty, nobility, patience, tragic genius, or



feminine whimsy, and seen anew as human, which, as *Human Frontier* will make clear five years later, is an open-ended category?

Cahun's choice of Judith is of particular interest because, like Cahun, she was Jewish. (This choice would also find a later coincidence in Cahun's resistance against the German occupiers of the isle of Jersey, just as Judith had defied an invading army.) She entered legend when chastity and bravery prompted her to save her besieged town by decapitating Nebuchadnezzar's commander, Holofernes.<sup>3</sup> What happened 'off camera,' so to speak, in Holofernes's tent prior to his decapitation, however, remains a mystery that has tantalised artists and writers for centuries; the biblical chroniclers, unlike Cahun, and, later, Michel Leiris in his autobiography *Manhood*, which also takes on Judith's story, make no mention of sexual relations. Judith is visually iconic as well in paintings by Mantegna, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Veronese, and Lucas Cranach, among others.

Cahun irreverently distorts the biblical Judith's story in 'The Sadistic Judith' by making her 'heroine' into an involuntary serial killer. Cahun's Judith would prefer *not* to kill Holofernes and deeply regrets her inability to prevent herself from doing so because she has fallen in love with him: 'Am I truly condemned, a criminal since childhood, to destroy everything I love?', she asks.<sup>4</sup> With this Judith's involuntary need to kill small animals, from her own dog to an infant bird, Cahun questions the assumption that a woman would not kill for pleasure. Cahun also questions the assumption that this heroic widow would not have felt love, even desire, for an enemy general. And she questions Judith's piety by portraying her as disrespectful.

Rather than highlighting her righteousness, Cahun underscores the extent of Judith's abjection in her desire for Holofernes by opening her sketch with a portrayal of him as an ugly man who despises women, detailing Judith's enchantment with his head: his 'receding hairline,' 'dead eyes,' 'bestial mouth,' and the 'reptilian folds' of his neck.<sup>5</sup> She also emphasizes Judith's disdain for her own body when she has her comment: 'I give what I have learned to cherish least,' while thirsting, with her body, for the 'crudest body' of her victim: 'Beware of this mouth, this nape, these ears - beware of all that can bite, tear, and suck until your foreign blood is exhausted - delicious!'<sup>6</sup> She is crestfallen when he allows himself to be killed: 'It's your fault! Why didn't you see into me? Why didn't you free me from my



executioners? I still loved you, I would have died happy. I wanted to conquer you and you let yourself be conquered!’<sup>7</sup>

Cahun also questions Judith’s response to the applause she receives when she emerges from Holofernes’s tent holding his head, horrified at having killed the man she loves and by their response, which she experiences, at first, like ‘a baby whom one mistreats.’ ‘People!’ she exclaims without much heroism, ‘*What do we have in common?* Who allowed you to [invade] my private life? To judge my acts and find them beautiful? To burden me (I who am so weak and weary, eternally hunted) with your abominable glory?’<sup>8</sup> How can we know for certain, Cahun seems to be asking, what Judith’s motivations and desires were, the only person in her town willing to enter Holofernes’s tent? How can we know that Judith lost interest in sex once she was widowed, that she became pious and chaste and shared her townspeople’s dislike and disdain for the enemy commander? Are not these assumptions based on clichés tied to sexuality?

In Cahun’s telling of the Judith story Holofernes is particularly bestialized before he is dismembered. Judith is portrayed as ‘terrible,’ although Cahun sees her also as abject. Leiris will later admiringly label her a ‘patriot prostitute,’ but Cahun sees neither patriotism nor prostitution in Judith’s desire, nor is Cahun’s Judith admirable.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Cahun empathizes with her, whereas Leiris empathizes with the fatally wounded Holofernes. Cahun’s ironic concern seems oriented towards the consequences of having been the author, not the victim, of violence - not only in the case of Holofernes, but throughout her life. She is a revered biblical heroine re-imagined as a twentieth-century ‘femme fatale.’ Cahun’s version of the Judith story lies literally at the ‘cutting edge’ of our own understanding and, as such, comes close to Mieke Bal’s reading of the biblical version of the Judith story which, she argues, challenges ‘our assumptions . . . about what it is and how it is that we can *know*.’<sup>10</sup> For the human condition is necessarily always fundamentally ambiguous, always at least double for Cahun, as her anti-heroic ‘heroines’ as well as her photographic self-representations suggest.



## On the Human Frontier

Cahun has recently become famous for her fascinating and prolific self-portraits, which have earned her international recognition as an important twentieth-century artist.<sup>11</sup> Her photographs are stunningly visible to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century because of the ways in which they anticipate contemporary investigations of sexuality, probably best articulated by Judith Butler, although they were contemporaneous with Joan Rivière's essay, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade,' from 1929.<sup>12</sup> Despite the multitude of photographic self-portraits she produced, however, particularly between 1915 and 1930, Cahun published only one, *Human Frontier*, in *Bifur* in 1930.<sup>13</sup> This photograph stands alone as representative of the extensive body of work that mesmerizes audiences today. It is haunted by that work in a way that the head's anamorphic distortion and its ghostly aura seemed to anticipate.

*Human Frontier* deflects the viewer's gaze in a manner uncharacteristic of Cahun's unpublished self-portraits where she usually looks directly into the camera lens. It is a bust shot that shows her upper body from just above her waist to the top of her head, which has been distorted by the camera so that the skull is elongated and its curves exaggerated - an exaggeration underscored by the fact that the head is shaved, putting into question the subject's sexual identity. The effect is unsettling because it seems to be a straight photograph and yet it clearly is not. At once documentary, 'straight,' and manipulated through photographic style, the figure depicted is decidedly uncanny - strangely difficult to determine as animate or inanimate, male or female. It is both straight and not, two in one. The chest is flattened by the black cloth draped over it, as Laurie Monahan suggests, which highlights the three-dimensional roundness of the shaved head.<sup>14</sup> The fact that it takes a bust as its stylistic model triggers an association with sculpture in the viewer's mind, with three-dimensionality. Indeed, its curves and shadows texture it, causing it to extend beyond the flatness of the lower body and the medium itself to suggest another, more palpable dimension.<sup>15</sup> The inclination of the head, the slight fuzz of the shaved skin, the figure's patent vulnerability, all invite empathy through the fact that not only is this head touching, she (or he) seems eminently touchable.<sup>16</sup>



Another way to see this figure's vulnerability is through the elongated skull's anamorphic quality and, through it, to catch an intuitive glimpse of the most famous historical anamorphic painting, Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*, with its reminder of human mortality in the shape of a distorted skull.<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes claims that we are always aware of mortality, at least subliminally, whenever we look at a photograph of a human being.<sup>18</sup> In his study of Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Richard Stamelman summarizes Barthes's argument about the photographic image: 'whatever it represents, it mortifies.'<sup>19</sup> The frontier of the 'human' for Cahun is thus at the limit of touchability, the edge of mortality. It is, to use Gayle Zachmann's analysis of Cahun's oeuvre, 'grotesque' in the sense of hybrid, open-ended.<sup>20</sup> It is haunted in life by death, by other worlds, a sense heightened by this head's egg-like fragility, its eerie resemblance to a baby's head as well as to that of an old person.<sup>21</sup>

This haunted sense, this touchability of the head in *Human Frontier* are also characteristic of photography itself as a medium, of the photograph that technologically documents what the head can see, interpret and know. In his memorial essay on Barthes, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the way in which photographs are haunted by the past moment when they were taken, because they take with them the trace of that moment.<sup>22</sup> Derrida asserts: 'Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the *punctum* [its piercing detail] in the *studium* [its commonplace element] the dead other alive in me. This concept of the photograph *photographs* all conceptual oppositions, it traces a relationship of haunting which perhaps is constitutive of all logics.'<sup>23</sup> And, indeed, a photograph does constitute a physical trace of that moment in the past, as Geoffrey Batchen explains:

Photography is privileged within modern culture because, unlike other systems of representation, the camera does more than just see the world; it is also touched by it. Photographs are designated as indexical signs, images produced as a consequence of being directly affected by the objects to which they refer. It is as if those objects have reached out and impressed themselves on the surface of a photograph, leaving their own visual imprint, as faithful to the contour of the original object as a death mask is to the newly departed. On this basis, photographs are able to parade themselves as the world's own chemical fingerprints, nature's poignant rendition of herself as memento mori. And it is surely this combination of the haptic and the



visual, this entanglement of both touch *and* sight, that makes photography so compelling as a medium.<sup>24</sup>

Combining touch and sight, photography entangles our understanding of the index and the icon, as delineated in the turn-of-the-century work of semiotician Charles S. Peirce to which most recent theoretical studies of photography refer. Peirce identified photographs as indices because they have a 'physical connection' to what they represent, as opposed to an icon, which 'may represent its object mainly by its similarity.'<sup>25</sup> He summarizes the functioning of the index as follows: 'Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations.'<sup>26</sup> For a photograph is indeed linked by contiguity, by touch, to the thing photographed, and yet it also represents the thing photographed by means of its *a posteriori* similarity to it, combining, as Batchen argues, *both* a sense of touch and a sense of the visual. Denis Hollier links index to icon in an article on surrealist shadows, in which he shows how the shadow, clearly indexical in reality, becomes iconic once it is transformed into a two-dimensional work: 'Passing from index to icon, one passes from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional art, from sculpture to painting,' or, one could say, from the photographic moment to the photograph.<sup>27</sup> Photographs may be understood as *both* indexical and iconic, as linked both to the sense of touch and to the visual aftereffects of that touch, which transform index into icon – icons which retain their indexicality. *Human Frontier* is a particularly good example of this phenomenon since its association with portraiture identifies it as iconic and two-dimensional, while the form of the portrait as a bust together with its particular three-dimensional quality of touchability retains the clear imprint of indexicality.

Recent theorists have also problematised the photographic moment, particularly when the photograph would appear to represent a direct, straight, or documentary version of the reality photographed. Rosalind Krauss, in her influential essays on surrealist photography in *L'Amour fou*, seems to valorise a photography that had been manipulated according to George Bataille's idea of the *informe*, thus rejecting the supposedly uncomplicated representation inherent in documentary or straight photography. Batchen, on the other hand, along with John Roberts and Ian Walker, insists, as Walker asserts, that: "surrealist



documentary” photography is in fact more disruptive of conventional norms than the contrivance of darkroom manipulation.<sup>28</sup> Walker claims that Krauss’s *Amour fou* ‘failed to represent a whole other way of working with the medium: a Surrealist photography which, on the contrary, exploits its very “straightness,” its apparent realism, to Surrealist ends.’<sup>29</sup> In opposition to Krauss, he reads ‘the Surrealist use of straight photography as a simultaneous exploitation and subversion of the standard realist frame within which the medium was then primarily situated.’<sup>30</sup> For him the photograph is inherently double, as it is for Batchen, who sees it as ‘both an icon - a picture of something - and an index.’<sup>31</sup> Walker effectively rescues straight photography from dismissal within surrealist studies, even though he and Batchen both echo Krauss’s comparison of surrealist photography to automatic writing. ‘What the camera frames, and thereby makes visible,’ Krauss eloquently states, ‘is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs.’<sup>32</sup> Walker concludes the introductory chapter to his excellent book, *City Gorged with Dreams*, in terms remarkably similar to Krauss’s:

[T]he Surrealists’ own use of both photography and the images made by photographers influenced by surrealism were manifestations of a desire to exploit the camera’s ability to simultaneously render the surface of the world *palpable* and render it marvelous - to reveal it as an hallucination that is also a fact that is also an hallucination.<sup>33</sup>

As a work that is both documentary and manipulated, Cahun’s *Human Frontier* magnifies photography’s inherent doubleness through its style as much as in its content, and through how we attempt to categorize the image as well as how we interpret what it represents. First of all it does so through the ways in which it is representative of Cahun’s other work, which haunts this work, especially the photomontages she made for *Aveux non avenues* (‘unrealised avowals’), her fragmentary, autobiographical book, also from 1930.<sup>34</sup> Various unpublished yet now familiar self-portraits were pasted together for some of these images, which Cahun created together with her partner Marcel Moore, particularly the final one.<sup>35</sup>





Fig. 2: Claude Cahun, illustration from *Aveux non avendus*, Paris, Editions du Carrefour, 1930.

However, the sheer abundance of these pasted portraits together with their collage-composition draw attention away from Cahun's singularly arresting face.<sup>36</sup> In these photomontages she often appears 'disguised,' as Dawn Ades has indicated, in ironic visual references to 'the socially imposed shells of feminine or masculine identities.'<sup>37</sup> Cahun herself refers to these 'faces' as disposable 'masks.' In plate 10 of the book, a tower of self-portraits on a single neck rises from the lower left-hand corner, around which curves the line: 'Under this mask another. I will never finish lifting up all of these faces.'<sup>38</sup> In contrast to this collage, *Human Frontier* suggests an ambiguity occurring within a single figure, which is paradoxically 'masked' by its nakedness.



The emphasis on the head in *Human Frontier* would seem to masculinise it, insofar as head, thought and gaze are stereotypically more masculine and Cartesian attributes than feminine ones. Yet this head's tactile quality opposes any Cartesian tendency towards sublimation; its corporeality tends to feminize it, just as the bare upper body revealing fragile shoulders paradoxically suggests a woman's body disappearing into the flat darkness below the shoulders. The bust seems to float in the center of the image, as though unattached to a human body — at the 'frontier' between humanity and sculptural representation. Although distorted and seen only partially, the body is at the same time intact, as Stamelman affirms about Cahun's work overall: 'The woman is never presented as nude or mutilated, never made the object of male desire, never reduced to one representative easy-to-appropriate sign.'<sup>39</sup>

Masculine and feminine traits overlap in a manner typical of Cahun's unpublished self-portraits, subtly suggesting a cross-dressing of the sort favored by Marcel Duchamp in his *Rose Sélavy* disguise in Man Ray's photographs from ten years earlier, in which Duchamp's masculine self clearly shows through his performance of 'womanliness.'<sup>40</sup> Like Duchamp but in reverse, Cahun performs masculinity not in order to 'pass,' but to let femininity visibly shine through.<sup>41</sup> For Cahun as for Duchamp, dressing as a member of the opposite sex shows the extent to which dressing as a member of one's own gender constitutes an equivalent 'masquerade.'<sup>42</sup> For Cahun, all dressing was performative, including the undressing involved in shaving one's head and in 'cross-dressing' femininity with masculinity, so as to refuse identifying clearly with either one or the other. As Monahan specifies: 'it was precisely through this indistinct subject position that the coherence of the self was most vulnerable, and therein lay the revolutionary potential of subjectivity itself.'<sup>43</sup> Fifteen years later, in an unpublished autobiographical essay dedicated to Moore-Malherbe entitled *Confidences au miroir* ('Secrets Told to the Mirror') from 1945-46, Cahun declared: 'Do signs have a sex? My multiple is human. A hermaphroditic sign would not render it (do it justice).'<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, Cahun shows references to masculinity and femininity for what they are: cultural signs triggering unconscious attempts to categorise against which she explicitly struggles throughout her work.<sup>45</sup> In *Aveux non avenues*, for example, she examines the



functioning of cultural signs within an everyday social context. Here in its entirety is the dialogue she imagines:

Sappho.

- I'm going to buy some socks. – Do you really wear socks? - No... (what's the word?) some... stockings. Oh well, it's just a manner of speaking.

...Instinctively I reached for the buttons on my fly on the right-hand side (the men's side), but the tailor (you've really got to tell them everything!) had sewn them on the left-hand side.<sup>46</sup>

This short self-contained scenario entitled 'Sappho' signals to the reader that the narrator, like Cahun, is lesbian, and then proceeds to demonstrate the extent to which cultural assumptions create practical difficulties for the woman whose needs do not fit the dominant cultural heterosexual paradigm, the woman who refuses to be 'classified.'<sup>47</sup>

In the 1920s, before women commonly wore trousers, the expressed desire to wear socks could readily be misunderstood as a slip of the tongue - an accidental substitution of socks for stockings. The phrase, 'it's just a manner of speaking,' underscores the fact that one phrase may be substituted for another depending on 'the manner' in which one speaks, on the words one chooses, as in the parenthetical phrase '(what's the word?).' A lesbian cross-dresser's style, her 'manner of speaking' and dressing, would most likely involve wearing not stockings but 'socks.' Similarly the speaker in Cahun's dialogue had clearly assumed that her tailor would custom-make men's trousers for her, as she requested, because that was her 'style.' Yet the parenthetical phrase '(you've really got to tell them everything!)' implies that the tailor has substituted his own understanding of what she wanted - a man's suit tailored for a woman - for and against hers: a man's suit, sewn *as if for a man to wear*.

This brief scenario underscores the tensions particular to the lesbian cross-dresser's place in society: namely, the degree to which her wishes, distorted by others and not readily understood, challenge assumptions and do not fit into pre-determined categories. It posits a strategy resembling Luce Irigaray's idea of mimicry, according to which a woman may 'recover the place of her exploitation by discourse' through deliberate 'play with mimesis' just



as in the photograph *Human Frontier* Cahun deliberately plays with expectations about what both women and men should look like.<sup>48</sup> With subtle exaggeration this sketch illustrates the fundamental lack of transparency of accepted social conventions, of society's classifications, in a style that parallels Cahun's photographic strategies.<sup>49</sup> For, particularly in a pre-World War Two, pre-chemotherapy era, not all human beings with shaved heads, or who wear socks instead of stockings, are necessarily men. Nor are all human beings with vulnerable shoulders necessarily women. These social conventions cannot serve to classify humans as men or as women with any reliable consistency and, as Cahun suggests, should such categorization be desirable?

In *Aveux non avenues* Cahun asks the question: 'Masculine? feminine? it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender which always suits me. If it existed in our language, my thought would be less nebulous.'<sup>50</sup> She enacts this resistance to categorization in *Aveux's* collage-like narrative and in a multitude of textual masks, through which the narrator alternately loves a man - a barman named Bob - and a beloved woman.<sup>51</sup> She anticipates Butler's conclusion from *Gender Trouble* - namely that 'the "coherence" and "continuity" of the person are not logical or analytic features of personhood but, rather, socially instituted' - by situating her narrators in a series of different situations.<sup>52</sup> Her undressing as a form of cross-dressing works because it enacts the kind of transvestism Marjorie Garber defines as 'a *space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.'<sup>53</sup> In this way, Cahun's project is also pertinently surrealist and follows Elizabeth Wright's idea that Bretonian surrealism aims at 'the failure of the category' in its subversive 'disturbance of the structure of our old desires.'<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in the first *Manifesto* Breton wrote critically: 'our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable.'<sup>55</sup>

The head's distortion in *Human Frontier* casts doubt on the subject's classifiability as human. Could this be a different sort of being? To what expanded frontier of human possibility has Cahun extended this head, which seems to illustrate what Elsa Adamowicz has called the 'exploded space' of the head within surrealism.<sup>56</sup> In late-twentieth-century American popular culture, the shape of Cahun's head in *Human Frontier* is immediately recognizable as a 'cone head' from 'Saturday Night Live,' the popular television show that



premiered in the 1970s. Elongated heads were used to identify the characters as 'aliens' in a gesture not unlike Cahun's. What exactly is familiar about this head, she seems to be asking, and what is strange? It typifies Freud's insistence on the conceptual and linguistic instability of the notion of the uncanny.<sup>57</sup> It certainly seems to illustrate Bataille's idea of the *informe*, which he defined in *Documents* in December 1929, possibly around the time Cahun was shooting *Human Frontier*, as 'a term serving to declassify' the 'academic' impulse to see 'the universe take on a form.'<sup>58</sup>

Cahun's head also appears to enact what Krauss has described as the 'job' of the *informe* in photography: namely to challenge the illusion of 'wholeness' which, according to Krauss, is promoted unproblematically by straight photography and which supposedly allows a spectator to experience a moment of hallucinatory recognition where his or her own subjectivity is perceived as illusory.<sup>59</sup> In *Aveux non avenues* Cahun specifically embraces Bataille's push towards declassification. Using the verb *déclasser*, meaning 'to downgrade' but also referring to that which is not readily classifiable, she insists: '*J'ai la manie de l'exception. . . . Ainsi je me déclasse exprès. Tant pis pour moi*' ('I'm mad for exceptions. . . . Thus I downgrade, declassify myself on purpose. Tough for me').<sup>60</sup>

*Human Frontier* is in fact exemplary of both styles of surrealist photography - the manipulated (*informe*) and the realist (straight); it reveals aspects of Cahun as she actually looked and yet masks this look through distortion. For it is not necessary to see *Human Frontier* as exemplary of the *informe* to understand it as surrealist. Much surrealist photography is straight - realist and documentary - and can be just as subversive as so-called *informe* photography, particularly in the form of what John Roberts calls surrealist *counter-archives*: 'the archive of female sexuality, of the animalistic body, of the uncanny object, and...of the city as a screen for desire.'<sup>61</sup> Cahun's self-portraits could certainly be understood as constituting a private and realist counter-archive of this sort. They resist all predetermined, unequivocal categories, including such a category identified as *informe*.

Cahun's photographic play with styles and identities echoes the narrator's frustration with the tailor in Cahun's 'Sappho' story and with those categories established by social convention that restrict rather than expand understanding. Cahun clearly prefers social behaviour that exceeds categorical definition, wherein one mode of conduct could double or



haunt another. Accordingly, she often wore disguises when she went out because, disguised, she was visibly both herself and another. She thus physically displayed the instability she wishes to institute in any unitary and bounded notion of the 'self': 'One evening, thanks to a disguise, I was able to cross the threshold,' she writes.<sup>62</sup> Cahun seems most at ease when the phrase 'it's just a manner of speaking' from 'Sappho' is apparent, when, that is, the fact that one is adopting a style, a 'manner of speaking,' of dressing, as a form of expression, becomes as obvious as a disguise worn and shown off to the world: a situation where the ghost of the persona one claims to be always hovers visibly over and beneath the display of alternate identities.

### Autobiographical Statements

The question of autobiography haunts surrealism, beginning with the opening question of Breton's *Nadja*, from 1928, with the question: 'Who am I?' with which he mediates his encounter with the mysterious woman who called herself Nadja.<sup>63</sup> Hollier argues that the shadow of the real conveyed in autobiographical writing, distinguishing it clearly from fiction, makes it essential to the surrealist project: 'Breton wants tales that would be more realistic than the novel ... Breton gives both the names and the snapshots of the beings who enter his book.'<sup>64</sup> In *Aveux non avenues*, Cahun stages autobiography's lack of transparency through the use of reversal and negation. The book opens with the poetic image of an 'invisible adventure,' which may be imagined from the perspective of a photographer, who, seeing as opposed to being seen, can feel 'invisible' and whose 'adventure' involves capturing light on a negative.<sup>65</sup> This idea of the photographic negative appears textually a little further into the book's opening section with the word 'no,' an echo of the palindromic *non* at the pivotal center of the title *Aveux non avenues*: 'No. I will follow the wake in the air, the trail on the water, the mirage in the pupil. . . . I wish to hunt myself down, to struggle with myself.'<sup>66</sup> This initial 'no' haunts the affirmations that follow and reveals them for the shadows they are: a wake, a trail, a mirage: 'I will follow the wake in the air, the trail on the water, the mirage in the pupil.' What she seeks is elusive, 'the mirage in the pupil,' a glimpse of self in the eyes of another, in the 'eye' of a camera, seen as in a mirror, which is a reverse image as in a photographic negative. In fact, she prefers this shadowy double to her



own body, as she suggests: 'I am a terrible bother to my shadow and cannot escape it.'<sup>67</sup> It is the body that cannot be escaped, whereas the shadow double is bearable because it, like a photographic image, can be manipulated and shaped.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the shadow bears witness to presence, to a person *having been there* and having existed.

A series of unpublished self-portraits from 1925 show Cahun's head in a bell jar, not as a bust but as though decapitated yet very much alive. Unlike in *Human Frontier*, in three of the four shots published by Cahun's biographer François Leperlier, Cahun looks directly at the camera with expressions that range from thoughtful to sad to confrontational. The shininess of the glass and the reflections which play on it counter any of the sense of touchability inspired by the shaved head in *Human Frontier*. These images double and render visible the glass separating photographer and model. For a camera lens, while transparent, distances, and can always distort what is seen through its rigidifying material and technology. That 'mortifying' quality of photography here is staged as a head separated from its body; yet it is belied by the vitality of this head's lively and thoughtful gaze. Rather than looking as though she were from another world, the head in the version that looks most directly at the camera seems ready to depart in search of other worlds, like a scientist in a space suit. The sense is not at all one of death, but of a kind of renewed energy focused on intellectual keenness. The shiny glass adds sharpness to the head's gaze and disconcerts the viewer who feels caught by the eyes and vulnerable to the capacity of glass to cut, to sever, to separate, to see one version of the self, one part, at the expense of the rest in a space created to form a vacuum in which objects might be preserved *from* life's temporal degradations not *in* it. The bell jar's glass, doubling the glass camera lens, isolates the head, making it unknowable and untouchable, unlike the empathetic bust in *Human Frontier*. These head shots tell a story about 'the mirage in the pupil' from *Aveux non avenues* through the lens that the photographer turns self-consciously upon herself in an autobiographical gesture that confounds more than it reveals.

The image of a head serves as a point of departure for the textual self-presentation of Leiris in *Manhood*, as well.<sup>69</sup> It is not his own head that prompts these confessions in the unconventional autobiography he published in 1939, however, but that of Holofernes, from the story of the biblical Judith that Cahun retold in her 'Sadistic Judith.' 'By detaching itself,'



writes Hollier, 'Holofernes' head indeed marks the point of departure of the autobiographical project.<sup>70</sup> Leiris identifies with Holofernes's severed head and admits to an abject attraction to Judith: 'Like Holofernes with his head cut off, I imagine myself sprawling at the feet of this idol.'<sup>71</sup> He describes Judith as 'a heroine terrible twice and three times over because, first a widow, she becomes a murderess, and a murderess of the man with whom, the moment before, she had gone to bed,' who, once she emerges from Holofernes's tent, seems 'to ignore the bearded ball she holds like a phallic glans.'<sup>72</sup> He is the one who is abject in this telling, not Judith, whom Leiris admires as much as he fears. The decapitated head that triggers Leiris's autobiography, therefore, may be seen as specifically representative of a fear of castration. Leiris's motivating fear has been interpreted by Hollier not as 'a masochistic weirdness exclusive to a neurotic bourgeois male named Michel Leiris' but as 'an exemplary power that inaugurates and structures the self-representative exercise as such. A castrating mimesis: the mirror cuts. I recognize myself in a mirror that reduces me to a head.'<sup>73</sup> This uneasy recognition of the self that is the head-in-the-mirror inspires the autobiographical impulse, suggests Hollier, and motivates the thinking head 'to undertake the mission of rejoining his body' through the binding process of autobiographical narrative.<sup>74</sup>

However, in *Human Frontier* Cahun does not separate the head from the body as she did in her bell jar photographs or as Leiris does. Nor does she seek to reconnect the head with the body as Hollier suggests. Neither acephalic, nor even, I would argue, phallic, Cahun's head is anything but severed or disembodied, even though the figure's 'body' disappears beneath the black cloth.<sup>75</sup> Her *Human Frontier* does not represent a head in search of its body because, through its hyperbolic exaggeration, it already *is* body. She distorts the thinking, Cartesian head by stretching and materializing it, and by refusing to give it clear gender identification. Her autobiographical image begins *and* ends with the head, which, through the head's distortion, already is clearly embodied. Cahun shocks her viewers into recognizing in her self-image a glimpse of ourselves - not of our 'wholeness' in the sense that Krauss suggests is encouraged by straight photography, but of our most poignantly touchable mortality, which we feel partially, not entirely. Cahun also seems to hint that this head has access to worlds other than the one represented by realism or reason, that in its



familiar strangeness it compels us to understand ourselves as less familiar and more partial than we might wish to think we are.

One might argue that for Cahun as well as Leiris autobiography starts with the head. That the photograph *Human Frontier* is autobiographical, since it is *of* Cahun as well as *by* her, presupposes a double reading that only her friends in 1930, knowing who she was and what she looked like, would have understood. The writing identifying the photograph's title and subject - *Human Frontier* and 'Claude Cahun'- identify and mirror the image. The writing and the photograph together in mirror relation, with Cahun's bust at the top and her name and the title below, reinforce the sense that a photograph is closer to writing, particularly surrealist automatic writing, as Krauss has argued, than to a painted or sculpted image, because it represents the graphic imprint of light on photosensitive paper. In *Human Frontier* text and image both identify Cahun as a person named Claude Cahun and as a living body representative of the human at its 'frontier.'

For writing and photography may indeed be understood as parallel in terms of their indexicality. A photograph is 'a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables,' as Krauss puts it.<sup>76</sup> Batchen, moreover, emphasizes the link between the photograph and the human hand by quoting a text by Henry Fox Talbot written in 1839, the year that photography was 'conceived.' Commenting on photographs of his house, Talbot declares that 'this building, I believe to be the first that was ever known *to have drawn its own picture*.'<sup>77</sup> From the year of its conception, in other words, photography was recognized as hand-drawn reality not so far removed from automatic handwritten reality. Photography is thus always self-referential, always autobiographical, as if the real were self-consciously writing itself through light. As an image-text, *Human Frontier* may thus be seen as typical of all of Cahun's work, in which she consistently blurs 'frontiers.'

Cahun's *Human Frontier* invites the viewer to see at least double: to look up, down, and behind the human head; to look at and with the head's gaze; to imagine a man, to see the ghost of a woman; to wonder which is more human and to criss-cross the boundaries between them. This double vision distances Cahun's work from Cartesian clarity, sublimation, transcendence and abstraction. It gives body back to thought and blurs the



subject's singularity in the best surrealist tradition in which identity is anything but stable. *Human Frontier* suggests that seeing double, *feeling* double, is human, just as her 'Sadistic Judith' emphasized the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. For Cahun, only images and texts that shed light on the invisible dimensions that haunt the visible come close to capturing the human experience in its full complexity, in its fully three-dimensional, tactile mortality. This iconic photograph of Cahun's head enacts a haunting of the present by a past moment which literally touched the negative out of which the image emerged. It is also one of her most indexical photographs as a result, and thus most representative of the medium in which she worked. In the hands of this surrealist counter-archivist, photography, at once a technology of distance, rigidity, and archival objectivity, is restored to its most indexical, tactile, origins.

<sup>1</sup> A complete set of the remaining 'Heroines,' including some unpublished in her lifetime, have recently been published by Shelley Rice in English translation. See Claude Cahun, 'Heroines,' (trans. Norman MacAfee) in Rice (ed.), *Inverted Odysseys*, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Dean insists that 'all of these figures . . . perform roles whose meaning they do not understand' in a psychoanalytic reading that suggests that they all 'eternally reproduce figures (the homosexual, the sinful woman) that justify witch hunts,' 'Claude Cahun's Double,' *Yale French Studies* 90, 1996, 85. I would argue that what they do not understand are the roles that history and legend have ascribed to them, not necessarily the roles they saw themselves as playing.

<sup>3</sup> Although her story is generally believed to be a fiction, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* claims 'that a historical basis for the incident may be found dating from the late Persian Period in Palestine' (Dr R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Dr Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, New York, 1966, 219).

<sup>4</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 53.

<sup>5</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 52.

<sup>6</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 53.

<sup>7</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 53.

<sup>8</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 53, modified translation.

<sup>9</sup> Cahun, 'Heroines,' 93.

<sup>10</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Head Hunting: "Judith" on the Cutting-Edge of Knowledge,' *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield, 1995, 263. For Bal this is because the violence of her act seems anything but objective and also because the act itself takes place off camera, so to



speak, it constitutes an 'invisible adventure' (to quote Cahun) about which assumptions were made afterwards.

<sup>11</sup> See Whitney Chadwick (ed.), *Mirror Images*, Cambridge, MA, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Rivière, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade,' *Formations of Fantasy* (eds V. Burgin, J. Donald and C. Kaplan), London, 1986, 35-44.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the fragmentary collaged self-portraits in *Aveux non avenues*, only one other self-portrait of her was published in her lifetime, in the form of a drawing. It was a sketched version of a staged photographic double self-portrait of herself with her head shaved that was included in *Aveux non avenues* and used on the cover of Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes' novel from 1929, *Frontières humaines*, a title very similar to Cahun's photographic self-portrait *Frontière humaine*, published in *Bifur*, for which Ribemont-Dessaignes was editor-in-chief.

<sup>14</sup> My thanks to Laurie Monahan for our e-mail conversation of March 17, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> It seems to contradict Roland Barthes's assertion that photographs are flat (*Camera Lucida*, New York, 1981, 106). His discussion of this quality, of course, is framed in reference to straight photography.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Armstrong has argued about André Kertész's *Distortions*, from 1933, that photographic distortions of the body invite heightened empathy and self-reflexivity in the viewer. Armstrong, 'The Reflexive and Possessive Nude: Thoughts on Kertész, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude,' *Representations* 25, Winter 1989, 67. Steven Harris insists that for Cahun, 'the sense of touch was very important to the erotic dimension of the objects' she made. Harris, 'Coup d'oeil,' *Oxford Art Journal* 24: 1, 2001, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Therese Lichtenstein, 'A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun,' *Artforum* 30:8, April 1992, 67. David Bate elaborates: 'But if Claude Cahun's image evokes death it is (as in Holbein's painting), as a *metaphor* for what cannot be represented.' Bate, 'The Mise en Scène of Desire,' *Mise en scène*, ICA, London, 1994, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, Ithaca, 1990, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Gayle Zachmann, 'Surreal and Canny Selves: Photographic Figures in Claude Cahun,' *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 27: 2, Summer 2003, 393-423.

<sup>21</sup> My thanks to Barbara Kreiger and Keith Walker for discussing their impressions of this image with me.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes' (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas), *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty* (ed. Hugh Silverman, Evanston, IL, 1998, 281).

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes,' 267. I borrow here from Stamelman's definitions of Barthes's terms as 'the *punctum* (piercing detail) and the *studium* (commonplace element) of a photograph' (*Lost Beyond Telling*, 256).

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, Cambridge, MA, 2001, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, 'The Icon, Index and Symbol,' *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, MA, 1932, 159, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Peirce, 'The Icon, Index and Symbol,' 172.



<sup>27</sup> Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows don't cast Shadows' (trans. Rosalind Krauss), *October* 69, Summer 1994, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, Manchester, 2002, 3. Batchen complains that for Krauss, 'reality continues to precede a photography that is "merely" its "faithful trace,"' using Peirce to argue against 'a division between photography and the real. . . . Real and representation, world and sign, must, in line with Peirce's own argument, always already inhabit each other,' (*Burning with Desire*, Cambridge, MA, 1997, 197-198); John Roberts reiterates this complaint: 'Because the naturalistic or documentary image is constructed as *truth*, it is argued, then the relationship between the photograph and the pre-photographic event is considered irrelevant, or beside the point. . . . On the contrary, realism's understanding and recovery of the world is based on the socially produced and self-qualifying nature of signification, in which things and their relations and representations are in *dynamic* movement and tension' (*The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester, 1998, 4-5).

<sup>29</sup> Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA, 1985, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, 23, my emphasis. It should be noted that Walker's final phrase rejects the oppositions upon which Krauss tends to rely. Batchen explains: 'Notwithstanding the deployment of a certain amount of poststructural rhetoric, contemporary photographic criticism remains bound to a structuralist mode of thinking, with its phallanx of unacknowledged binary oppositions' (*Burning with Desire*, 194).

<sup>34</sup> *Aveux non avendus* has been translated as 'Unavowed Confessions' by Therese Lichtenstein; 'Cancelled Confessions' by Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Honor Lassalle ('Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun's Photomontages,' *Afterimage* 19, March 1992, 10-13); and 'Confessions Null and Void' by Solomon-Godeau (in 'The Equivocal "I": Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject,' in Rice (ed.), *Inverted Odysseys*, 111-125); Laurie Monahan suggests 'Disavowed Confessions' and 'Voided Confessions' ('Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness,' *Inside the Visible*, ed. Catherine de Zegher, Cambridge, MA, 1996, 125-136); Harris proposes 'Abrogated Vows.'

<sup>35</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits* (ed. François Leperlier), Paris, 2002, 405. Born Lucy Schwob in 1893, Cahun chose her androgynous pseudonym when she was twenty-three years old (see Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'Ecart et la métamorphose*, Paris, 1992, 31). She spent her life with Suzanne Malherbe, the daughter of her father's second wife, who became her partner and lover, adopted a male pseudonym, Marcel Moore, and collaborated with her on her photomontages. They lived first in Nantes, then in Paris for almost twenty years where they came in contact with surrealism, and later on the Channel island of Jersey where they survived imprisonment for 'acts of Resistance' during World War Two (see Leperlier, *Claude Cahun*, 273-278).

<sup>36</sup> For an insightful study of Cahun's photomontages see Lassalle and Solomon-Godeau's 'Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun's Photomontages.'

<sup>37</sup> Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Male-Female,' *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, Tate, London, 2001, 194.

<sup>38</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 405.



<sup>39</sup> Stamelman, 'Convulsive Beauty: The Image of Woman in Surrealism,' Williams College Museum of Art, 1995, n. p.

<sup>40</sup> Monahan analyses Cahun's work in light of Rivière's essay, as do Chadwick, and Solomon-Godeau in 'The Equivocal "I".' Nanda van den Berg expands her reading of Cahun's use of the masquerade to include an analysis of the 'masquerades' of male surrealists ('Claude Cahun: La révolution individuelle d'une surréaliste inconnue,' trans. Cecilia M. van de Biezenbos, *Avant Garde: Femmes Frauen Women* ed. Françoise van Rossum-Guyon 4, 1990, 71-91).

<sup>41</sup> In *Bachelors* Krauss calls this phenomenon 'a kind of directional reversibility' (*Bachelors*, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 47).

<sup>42</sup> Rivière specifies that 'Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it' ('Womanliness as a Masquerade,' 36).

<sup>43</sup> Monahan, 'Radical Transformations,' 130.

<sup>44</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 586.

<sup>45</sup> Dean, 'Claude Cahun's Double,' 89. Elisabeth Lebovici also makes the point that there is no 'original' identity with Cahun's theatrical play of images, with reference to Butler ("I am in Training Don't Kiss me", ' *Claude Cahun Photographe*, Paris, 1995, 21).

<sup>46</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 333 (nothing left out, ellipses all included).

<sup>47</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau accurately emphasizes the fact that even though Cahun did not explicitly identify herself as lesbian in her work, her lesbianism probably 'facilitated if not fostered' her 'enunciative position' ('The Equivocal "I"', 122).

<sup>48</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter), Ithaca, NY, 1985, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Gayle Zachmann skillfully illustrates this point: 'Both woman and text emerge as hybrid creatures, analogous to the figures of the androgyne.' She underscores Cahun's play with *both* genders and genres and characterizes Cahun's literary approach as equivalent to the 'montage effect' of her photographs ('Surreal and Canny Selves').

<sup>50</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 366.

<sup>51</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 185, 191.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, 1990, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, New York, 1997, 17. Although not in terms of cross-dressing specifically, or with reference to Garber, similar readings of Cahun's work as a 'challenge to determinate meaning . . . as a challenge to stable, singular subjectivity' (Dean, 'Claude Cahun's Double,' 87) have been presented by Dean, Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau, and Lichtenstein, although in more psychoanalytical terms in the latter two cases - linking her work to the 'unspeakable' (Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau, 'Surrealist Confession,' 13) and with 'that moment existing paradoxically before the symbolic, before the rationalization of language and image' (Lichtenstein, 'A Mutable Mirror,' 67). Monahan also analyzes Cahun's 'desire to "dematerialize" the limits of the self' ('Radical Transformations,' 131). Katy Kline analyzes 'the absence of fixity' in her writings and sees her overall achievement as stretching, permeating, and infiltrating 'the established boundaries of gender definitions' ("In or Our of the Picture": Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman,' in *Mirror Images* ed. Chadwick, 73, 76).

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Wright, 'The Uncanny and Surrealism,' *Modernism and the European Unconscious* (eds Peter Collier and Judy Davies), Cambridge, 1990, 275. Katy Deepwell



similarly affirms that Cahun's confounding of categories should be understood in the larger context of the 'Surrealist, anti-fascist and anti-bourgeois politics she embraced' ('Uncanny Resemblances,' *Women's Art Magazine* 62, January-February 1995, 18).

<sup>55</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane) Ann Arbor, MI, 1972, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Elsa Adamowicz, 'Monsters in Surrealism: Hunting the Human-Headed Bombyx,' *Modernism and the European Unconscious*, 297.

<sup>57</sup> Anneleen Masschelein, 'The Concept as Ghost: Conceptualization of the Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory,' *Mosaic* 35: 1, 2002, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Critical Dictionary,' *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, London, 1995, 52-53.

<sup>59</sup> Krauss, 'Corpus Delicti,' *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, eds Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, Washington DC, 1985, 64, 95. Krauss postulates that such a spectator would 'find unbearable a photography that effaces categories and in their place erects the fetish, the *informe*, the uncanny' ('Corpus Delicti,' 95).

<sup>60</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 367.

<sup>61</sup> Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, 111, 106.

<sup>62</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 276. Leperlier describes her as frequently dyeing her hair exotic colours such as pink, gold and silver (*Claude Cahun Photographe*, 10). He affirms that her entire life, 'Claude Cahun played with masks,' which 'she bought on a regular basis,' and 'liked to wear at home with friends or visitors' (*Claude Cahun Photographe*, 111).

<sup>63</sup> Breton, *Nadja* (trans. Richard Howard), New York, 1960, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates,' 126.

<sup>65</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 177.

<sup>66</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 178.

<sup>67</sup> Cahun, *Ecrits*, 395.

<sup>68</sup> Georgiana Colvile has identified Cahun's discomfort with her own body as symptomatic of anorexia. See Colvile, 'Je est un(e) autre: Structures de l'anorexie dans les autoportraits de Claude Cahun,' *Mélusine* 18, 1998, 252-259. See also Florence Brauer, 'L'Amer/la mère chez Claude Cahun,' *La Femme s'entête: la part du féminine dans le surréalisme*, Paris, 1998, 117-125.

<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, in 'Surrealist Precipitates' Hollier argues that it is a *shadow* that precipitates Leiris's autobiography: 'What Leiris called the literary equivalent of the shadow of the bull's horn should propel the autobiographical text in the shared space of history,' 124.

<sup>70</sup> Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, 108.

<sup>71</sup> Michel Leiris, *Manhood* (trans. Richard Howard), Chicago, 1984, 95.

<sup>72</sup> Leiris, *Manhood*, 51-52, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, 109.



<sup>74</sup> Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, 112. Leiris's specific fascination with Holofernes fits into the more general fascination with headlessness of his friends, Bataille and André Masson, who started a journal entitled *Acéphale* in 1936. It succeeded *Contre-Attaque*, the short-lived anti-fascist group Bataille formed together with Breton and Cahun in 1935. *Acéphale* sought to revalorize humanity by other means than by the head by exploring drives, violence, sensuality, mortality. In the inaugural issue of *Acéphale* Bataille declared: 'Man has escaped his head just as the condemned man has escaped from prison. . . . Beyond who I am, I have met a being who makes me laugh because he is headless. . . . He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death' (3). It was in the July 1937 issue that plans for a College of Sociology were laid.

<sup>75</sup> I disagree here with Harris, after Bate, who sees this head as a 'phallic distortion' that 'proposes an image of female desire that is also phallic' ('Coup d'oeil,' 99; see Bate, 'The Mise en Scène of Desire,' 10).

<sup>76</sup> Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' 110; see Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 197. Barthes in Stamelman also appears to argue for photography as a kind of writing, despite his claim that it cannot 'say' what it shows (*Lost Beyond Telling*, 266; *Camera Lucida*, 106).

<sup>77</sup> Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 66.

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