# Leiris, Michel (1901-1990)

Eluding easy categories, French poet, essayist and autobiographer Julien Michel Leiris was affiliated with literary surrealism, existentialism and ethnography. Involved with the surrealist movement through his friendships with André Masson, Max Jacob and Georges Bataille, Leiris published texts of surrealist inspiration, such as *Simulacre* (1925), featuring Masson’s lithographs; *Le Point cardinal* (1927), ‘a prose narrative of erotic transcendence’ (Hand 29); and *Aurora* (1946), his only novel, written two decades earlier. A former student of French sociologist Marcel Mauss, Leiris subsequently chose anthropology as his main trade; he assisted Marcel Griaule during the ethnographic Dakar-Djibouti mission and recounted his experiences in *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934) in a blend of ethnographic observation and personal introspection. He took a position as a researcher at the Musée de l’homme (established in 1938) and participated in the Collège de Sociologie with George Bataille and Roger Caillois. In *L’Âge d’homme* (1939), Leiris integrated autobiography and ethnographic study within a complex narrative form resulting in a tentative portrayal of a uniquely modern subjectivity. His lifelong autobiographical project, characterized by chance, chaos and uncertainty, culminated in *La Règle du jeu* (1948-1976, 4 vols.), which weaves together numerous disparate materials with apparently no satisfactory ordering or narrative resolution tying them together. A friend of Jean-Paul Sartre during the 1940s, Leiris also shared a long-lasting friendship with Pablo Picasso, strengthened by Leiris’s 1926 marriage to Louise Godon, the stepdaughter of Picasso’s art dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler.

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**List of works**

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------ (1939) *L'Âge d’homme,* Paris: Gallimard, trans. R. Howard as *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*, New York: Grossman Publishers, 1963.

------ (1946) *Aurora*, Paris: Gallimard, trans. A. Warby, London: Atlas Press, 1990.

**References and further reading**

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Hand, S. (2002) *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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