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Michel Leiris: *Fibrils: The Rules of the Game, Volume 3*. Translated with an Introduction by Lydia Davis. Pp. 256. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017. Hb. £20.

Michel Leiris' *La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)* towers over late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century writing about the self. I am wary of the term 'autobiography' here, as it is a term that Leiris himself avoids – he calls *Fibrils* an 'autobiographical essay'. This hybrid definition seems a more appropriate one than simply 'autobiography.' It never fully tells Leiris' life story, but focuses on key moments, which Leiris explores retrospectively. Lydia Davis hints in her Introduction to this translation at its similarity to Karl Ove Knausgaard's *Min kamp* ('My Struggle', 2009-11), another multi-volume examination of the author's life. To my mind, it feels closer to recent feminist forms of self-writing by authors such as Maggie Nelson (*The Argonauts*, 2015) or Olivia Laing (*The Lonely City*, 2016) than more traditional autobiographies, which tend to be more conservative in form and less interested in exploring subjectivity than Leiris and these recent writers are.

Fibrils, like the two previous volumes of *The Rules of the Game*, has been translated by Lydia Davis, though twenty years separate this volume from the translation of the second volume, *Fourbis (Scraps)*. Davis has been busy in this time, with important translations including Proust's *Du Côté de chez Swann* (as *The Way by Swann's*, 2002) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2010), and collections of her stories including *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* (2001), *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), and *Can't and Won't* (2014). Recognition of her work has also increased in this time, especially with the Man Booker International prize in 2013. Hence she is a much better-known author and translator than she was when she began publishing translations of Leiris in 1989, and her current reputation might attract more attention to *Fibrils* than the earlier volumes. Yale University Press has re-released the other two volumes of *The Rules of the Game*, *Scratches* and *Scraps*, in paperback alongside this

volume, making it easier to access and understand Leiris' project. The fourth volume, *Frêle bruit* ('Frail noise') is as yet untranslated.

The publication of this volume will, I expect, renew interest in Leiris' imaginative enterprise. The volumes can be read independently, although both *Scraps* and *Fibrils* refer back to earlier parts of *The Rules of the Game*. There is some sort of chronological framework to them, with *Scratches* focusing on Leiris' youth, *Scraps* on him as a young man, and *Fibrils* much closer to middle age, referring to events in the 1950s. But that does not mean that a reader beginning with *Fibrils* will not be able to understand it, or, at least, its position in the sequence will not be the cause of that incomprehension.

Like the other volumes of *The Rules of the Game*, the writing in *Fibrils* is dense, and full of long, winding sentences where Leiris tracks down a thought or an idea. Such writing naturally poses a number of problems for the translator, of course, but this difficulty is attractive to some: Davis remarks on 'a certain pleasure in the challenge' in her Introduction. She also sensibly advises: 'The reader may want to read some sentences more than once to gather up all their meaning.'

Leiris is an interesting fellow. Born in 1901, he was a surrealist poet and an ethnographer. The two overriding concerns of language and how people live recur throughout *The Rules of the Game*. Leiris was at the centre of the Parisian intellectual sphere from the 1920s until the 1960s. After his surrealist 1920s he formed the Collège de Sociologie with Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois in 1937, served on the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, and worked at the Musée de l'Homme. *The Rules of the Game* does not, thankfully, read like a Who's Who of French twentieth-century intellectuals, although Leiris does mention people by name every now and then. Rather, he tends to focus on his own thoughts and reactions to events. There is a movement in the text from language to the social sphere, especially across the first two volumes, *Scratches* and *Scraps*. As *Scratches* focuses

on his youth, many of the sections centre on words and turns of phrase that he misheard or misunderstood, or which are especially evocative. It is a story of his initiation into language, and the volume that most reflects his vocation as a writer and a surrealist. *Scraps* is more focused on his social activities, discussing sports and his national service. A third section is called 'Mors', and its theme is death. These very short summaries cannot do justice to Leiris' ranging and associative style, which comes closer to musical than chronological development: it tends to circle around motifs, and proceed by association of ideas rather than by linear narration of Leiris' life.

Fibrils focuses mainly on two moments in that life. One is a trip to China in 1955, the other is a crisis which led to a suicide attempt. These moments serve as anchor points while Leiris ranges across his life and his own reactions. We also read about trips to Egypt and Greece, and mention is made of his trips to Africa, as well as his childhood. Leiris himself notes the lack of structure to the book, comparing himself to a stage magician who in reality has done nothing, but also argues that his point is something other than 'keep[ing] the company amused'. Leiris does not say at this moment what his point is, and the reader is at times left feeling unsure what it might be. He claims later that his goal is to 'gain mastery over it [his life] by embracing it with a single glance', though the size and complexity of *The Rules of the Game* belies this.

Fibrils, like both *Scratches* and *Scraps*, gives the impression of not being written for readers, and feels more like a process than a product. It is still interesting to read, so long as one agrees to go along with Leiris as the explorer of his own life. He is an erudite and eloquent guide, but one who chooses to linger, sometimes, on what might seem insignificant. Leiris' position as a mid-twentieth-century intellectual gives that life a historical resonance. For example, the fact that his trip to China was the same one on which Chris Marker went, and which he filmed for *Dimanche à Peking* ('Sunday in Beijing', 1956), made the adventure

all the more striking to me, as well as the fact that Leiris was one of the few Westerners travelling in China at that time (only six years after the founding of the People's Republic). Leiris' reflections on what he calls 'the New China' are certainly historically interesting, if somewhat naive-sounding when regarded from the present-day position. Towards the end, Leiris acknowledges the changes in Chinese society, and remarks that he would be 'less at ease' in the China of the 1960s than in the 1950s. The conclusion of the book feels like an attempt to bring it all together, work out what has been learned, understand what it has all been about. Leiris returns to the key events of the project, but discusses them in relation to a new trip to Copenhagen. He concludes that his life has been pursued by poetry. Yet this conclusion itself overlooks the important role of travelling and attempting to apprehend difference that *The Rules of the Game* circles back to again and again. As Davis notes in her useful Introduction, it seems Leiris had not planned to write a fourth volume when completing this one, and the attempt to conclude suggests that he wants to round off the three books.

This translation of *Fibrils* is, as one might expect from Davis, exact and careful. It reflects Leiris' long, labyrinthine sentences as well as his somewhat formal lexis. The translation sometimes presents the French where it is helpful for the reader to see a pattern: Leiris has toned down the wordplay since *Scratches*, but there still remain some occasions where rhymes or repetitions cannot be well reproduced in English. So Davis gives (emphases original) 'as though on a conveyor belt [tapis roulant], since they lack the flying carpet [tapis volant] on which the goddesses take flight'. This is less intrusive than it might seem from an isolated example, and familiar from English translations of French academic writing. It is hard to imagine that readers tackling *Fibrils* will not find this useful; the book is not aimed a popular audience, so the assumption that readers will be able to cope with such interpolations is not an unreasonable one.

Whenever there are lines of poetry in the volume, they are presented first in French with an English translation that I assume is Davis' own, as no other acknowledgement is given. Again this feels fitting, and does not, to my mind, distract from the flow of reading. The substantial French-language interpolations passages in *Scratches* have disappeared in *Fibrils*, but this is more a sign of Leiris' changing preoccupations than Davis' changing translation style. As a consequence, *Fibrils* feels less transgressive as a translation than *Scratches* does.

The title *Fibrils* is a very close cognate to the French word 'Fibrilles', meaning 'little threads'. The French titles of *Le Règle du jeu* all circle around 'f' and 'b' sounds – 'Biffures', 'Fourbis', 'Fibrilles', and 'Frêle bruit'. This pattern links the four volumes, and it is a little disappointing not to see some attempt to replicate it here, but at the same time it is obviously difficult to do so in English (although the first two volumes, *Scratches* and *Scraps*, are phonologically linked). There are other, minor instances where one might take issue with the translation: for example, 'île de la Tortue' is rendered (literally) as 'the Isle of the Tortoise', when a more familiar name for this island is 'Tortuga' (from the Spanish). However, in a work of this length and complexity there will always be places where readers might disagree with a translation decision, without it affecting the success of the whole.

The Pléiade edition of *La Règle du jeu* (2003) contains a very large number of notes that often help to give context and link events mentioned by Leiris to more precise historical data. While these notes far exceed the needs of most readers, at times I felt that some extra context could have been useful in this volume. On the other hand, notes are an intrusion in the reading process, and readers of the first edition would not have had such a scholarly framework. Furthermore, the internet leaves few potential readers in any real difficulty in looking up a reference or allusion.

Davis' Introduction includes a short description of her translation practice and the thinking behind it. Her main argument is that the structure of sentences reflects the structure of a writer's thoughts. I am not entirely convinced that this is true, given the way in which authors tend to edit what they write, and what is seen in the book is not the thought that gave rise to the sentence but a revised and polished version of it. However, if we accept that the published form of the sentence is structured in the way that the author wants the thought to be shaped – in other words, not as a spontaneous impulse, but as the result of reflection and revision – then this approach offers a useful explanation of why that shape should be maintained in translation, rather than focusing on how rhetoric differs across languages and cultures, and why, therefore, it might be useful to rewrite in translation. Davis' approach also seems most sensible for writers like Proust, Leiris, or Maurice Blanchot (who Davis has also translated often). These are somewhat *sui generis* writers whose works seldom fit easily into one genre, and push at the rhetorical and affective possibilities of what writing can do. For more conventional authors and topics, Davis often adapts their style to a more conventional English (as was the case for her translation of Françoise Giroud's book on Marie Curie), rather than following their sentence shapes, as she does – or tries to do – for Blanchot, Leiris, and Proust.

Fibrils is interesting as part of the wider project of autobiographical essay that is Leiris' *Rules of the Game*, which seems even more relevant now given the developments in self-writing that have taken place in the last two decades. It is also important as a historical document, giving insight into the French intellectual climate of the times. This edition by Yale University Press focuses on the text, leaving readers to delve into it, and the vast body of allusion it mobilizes, on their own. It is also of interest as a new part of Davis' translation oeuvre, one that links back to her earlier work on Leiris and Blanchot, before she became so

well known as a translator and writer. Seldom is a book worth reading for what it tells about both its author and its translator: *Fibrils* is exceptional in this way.

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