

« Le Masque Verbal » : Claude Cahun's Textual Travesty

*Le masque charnel et le masque verbal
se portent en toute saison.*

Claude Cahun, « Carnaval en chambre », 1926

A now celebrated archive of photographs picturing Claude Cahun forms the basis of her worldwide reputation in the contemporary era¹. In the early twentieth century, however, Cahun was known primarily for her writings. The scion of a literary family, she published in prestigious journals such as *Mercure de France* in addition to fringe magazines such as the surrealist review *Minotaure* and the homophile periodical *L'Amitié*². She also authored book-length works that include an unpublished manuscript, « Jeux uraniens » (Uranian Games, c.1914) ; the symbolist-inspired *Vues et visions* (Views and Visions, 1919) ; and the surrealist anti-autobiography, *Aveux non avendus* (Disavowals, 1930). These were produced in the context of Cahun's lifelong relationship with the visual artist Suzanne Malherbe (*nom d'artiste* Marcel Moore) and with her participation³.

This essay takes up the problematic of identity and authorship : who is the « I » speaking in these writings ? However, the focus here is not Cahun's creative alliance with Moore, but rather the bonds of imagination the author formed with a select roster of savants and

¹ The catalogue for François Leperlier's 1995 Paris retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *Claude Cahun, Photographe*, included an extensive iconography and circulated internationally. Most English-language scholars who have written about Cahun have relied heavily on Leperlier's catalogue, and his richly researched Cahun biography, recently revised and re-released, *L'Exotisme intérieur* (Paris, Fayard 2006).

² Cahun's father, Maurice Schwob, inherited a large regional newspaper, *Le Phare de la Loire*, based in Nantes ; her uncle, the symbolist Marcel Schwob, was a cofounder of and contributor to *Mercure de France*, well known for writings such as *Le Livre de Monelle* (1894) and *Vies imaginaires* (1896) ; her great uncle Léon Cahun was the head librarian at the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris.

³ See Tirza True Latimer, « Acting Out : Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore », *Don't Kiss Me : The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, Louise Downie (dir.), London, Tate Publications, 2006.

hommes de lettres whose poetic voices, social stances, and aesthetic devices she purposefully reclaimed. Cahun references an impressive cross-section of Western cultural history, evincing such classical sources as Plato and Hadrian ; a whole catalogue of Romantics and *poètes maudits* including François Villon, François-René Chateaubriand, Percy Shelley, Arthur Rimbaud, Algernon Swinburne, and Charles Baudelaire ; symbolists in the decadent tradition of Remy de Gourmont and Marcel Schwob (Cahun's uncle) ; playwrights from William Shakespeare to Maurice Maeterlink ; and modern authors of particular significance to homosexuals of Cahun's generation, including Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, and, especially, André Gide. What traits do these inspirational figures share ? That they are all men is so obvious a point that it might well go without saying. Yet gender was always a sticking point for Cahun and warrants at least cursory acknowledgment here.

Given her own literary education and aspirations, on the one hand, and the masculine hegemony of the French Academy, on the other, it is not surprising that Lucy Schwob adopted a masculine voice along with a series of masculine or gender-ambiguous pen-names – Daniel Douglas, Claude Courlis, and finally Claude Cahun. These acts of textual travesty were not the same, though, as those performed by female precursors such as George Sand or George Eliot, for whom cross-writing facilitated publication and inflected critical reception. Such a ruse was not imperative for Cahun, given her connections ; her first publications appeared in her father's newspaper, *Le Phare de la Loire*, and its off-shoot, the literary review *La Gerbe*, followed by pieces in *Mercure de France*, a journal her uncle co-founded. The dissimulation of biological gender that

characterized Cahun's literary apprenticeship raises important questions about her cultural position and authorial ambitions : What prompted her to assume a masculine authorial voice ? And what are the artistic, intellectual, and social implications of this choice ?

To address these questions we must return to Cahun's literary sources and identify the significant threads of affiliation. The predominance of *poètes maudits* and decadent aesthetes – artists who rejected dominant social values and transgressed the boundaries of respectability, generally dying young of substance abuse, love, or suicide – provides one key. From her earliest days, Cahun inscribed herself in a lineage that, from Villon to Wilde, traversed artistic impulses such as romanticism, decadent aestheticism, and symbolism. She performed fidelity to her muses via her consumption of alcohol, ether, and opium (« the narcotic smoke that seems to slowly burn the brain⁴ »), at least one youthful suicide attempt, and the production of lengthy meditations on the virtues of vice. One « vice » in particular – same-sex love – creates an intelligible constellation out of the points of reference that orient Cahun's writings, thematically aligning the teachings of Plato, Shakespeare's sonnets, Gide's novels, the poetry of Baudelaire, Whitman, and Wilde, to mention just a few of the connections.

Cahun first mapped out these homocentric affiliations in an unpublished manuscript titled « Les Jeux uraniens ». « Uranian » is no longer a familiar term, but in Cahun's day it had currency among homophiles such as the German homosexual rights advocate Karl

⁴ *La fume narcotique qui semble brûler doucement la pensée.* Claude Cahun, « L'Idée-maîtresse », *La Gerbe*, n° 29, February 1921, p. 144.

Ulrichs. In his essay, Ulrichs used the stigma-free term « Uranian » (borrowed from Plato) to designate a type of « normal » man who desired other men. Ulrichs's notion of Uranism provided a basis of reflection for sympathetic members of the scientific community such as the German homosexual rights movement leader Magnus Hirschfeld, author of *Homosexuality of Men and Women*, and, in France, Marc André Raffalovich, author of *Uranism et unisexualité*. Cahun, who closely followed the evolution of the fields of psychiatry and sexology and was conversant with the literature, would have had access to these writings⁵.

No doubt of equal significance to Cahun, the term « Uranian » was adopted by the homophile literati in France as well as certain English aesthetes. « Uranian poetry » was, indeed, the primary medium through which writers such as Wilde and Douglas challenged the sexual taboos of the period⁶. Like Cahun, these authors were versed in the classics and their writings idealized antiquity as the golden age of same-sex love. Uranian poetry and sexological prose converged in publications by homophiles such as Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds⁷. Symonds – the co-author, with the sexologist Havelock Ellis, of a widely read study on sexual inversion – published his social history of pederasty, « A Problem in Greek Ethics », as an appendix to the jointly authored

⁵ Cahun regularly attended teaching lectures in psychiatry at the Hôpital Sainte Anne and La Salpêtrière with Henri Michaux. She translated Havelock Ellis's two-volume treatise on « Woman in Society » for publication in French ; the first volume, *La Femme dans la société. Tome I. L'Hygiène sociale. Études de psychologie sociale*, was released by Mercure de France in 1929.

⁶ Characteristics shared by Uranian poets include evocations of Antiquity (including the use of Homeric Greek titles and epigrams), idealization of relations between older men and adolescent boys, and the use of archaic verse forms.

⁷ Cahun, thanks to her early schooling in Great Britain, spoke fluent English and her personal library included many English editions. Moreover, she volunteered at Sylvia Beach's Anglophone bookstore, Shakespeare and Co., and was among the first subscribers to Beach's circulating library. The holdings included sexological texts, some provided directly by their authors. Beach's bookstore served as a reference library for those interested in consulting these treatises, which were not otherwise available to the general public.

treatise⁸. Carpenter's writings, too, intermingled reflections on the homosocial culture of Greek antiquity and modern variant sexuality. Both sexologists and aesthetes, in other words, contributed to a homophile classical revival central to the formation of elite sexual communities in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.

Cahun introduces her contribution to Uranian literature with a line drawing of a « no trespassing » sign beneath the title « Les Jeux uraniens ». The signpost warns off those for whom the book's Uranian references would have no meaning while inviting transgressive readers to enter the text. Here, handwritten epigraphs orient the narrative that unfolds in their interstices. These quotes provide starting points – literally pretexts – for Cahun's meditations on same-sex love and friendship, which take the form of an internal dialog between lover and beloved. « Les Jeux uraniens » (alternately titled « Amor amicitiae » – perfect love, the love between friends) introduces the strategy of citation as a means of forging Uranian identifications, while articulating Cahun's rejection of prevailing socio-sexual norms. The exigencies of French grammar and spelling permit readers to identify the masculine gender of the book's narrator/lover and the beloved with whom he mentally converses.

There are certain parallels between « Les Jeux uraniens » and Gide's tour de force *Corydon*. Both books take the dialogue as a literary form, and Gide, like Cahun, evokes the classical past in his title : Corydon, Gide's protagonist, is the namesake of a love-sick shepherd in Virgil's second eclogue (arguably, the most famous paean to male love in

⁸ Havelock Ellis, with an essay by John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, London, Wilson and MacMillan, 1897.

Latin literature). *Corydon* offers what one reviewer described as an « apologie de la pédérastie », in that Gide claims to have only ever encountered perfectly « normal pederasts⁹ ». *Corydon*, like « Les Jeux uraniens », represents homosexuality as a social and cultural alternative, not a symptom of degeneration. In both works, prestigious historical figures identified as cultural ancestors (from Plato to Whitman) enhance homosexuality's tacit claim to legitimacy. Both Gide and Cahun use the first-person mode of address to collapse the distance between the narrator and the reader. Although these similarities could be otherwise explained, it is possible that Cahun was aware of, and conversing with, Gide's text.

Gide self-published his book's first two dialogues in a clandestine edition, printed in Bruges 1910. He adopted the phonetically coded title « C.R.D.N. » and did not sign this private publication¹⁰. Did Cahun have access to the trial edition via her book dealer friend Adrienne Monnier, proprietor of La Maison des Amis des Livres where Gide gave readings of unpublished works ? Or, since Marcel Schwob frequented Gide socially, could an early version of the work have circulated within her family milieu ? Or could the homophile poet Marc-Adolphe Guégan – who idolized Gide and formed a close friendship with Cahun and Moore in Nantes around this time – have made this link¹¹ ?

⁹ *Il prétend n'avoir en vue que les pédérastes normaux*. Jean de Gourmont, *Mercure de France*, 1 October 1924, p. 170-176. Gide's argument for the normalcy of homosexuality was countered, Gourmont explains, by an expert in the field, Dr. Francois Nazier, who published an *Anti-Corydon* within weeks of *Corydon*'s release.

¹⁰ See Daniel Moutote, « *Corydon* in 1918 », BAAG 78/79, April-July 1988, p. 9-24, for the publication history of *Corydon*. Jennifer Shaw, in the forthcoming study *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals* (Farnham, Ashgate) also posits a connection between Gide and Cahun, pointing out that the chapter titles of *Aveux non avenues* echo Gide's *C.R.D.N.*

¹¹ Guégan contributed to *Le Phare de la Loire* and *La Gerbe*, where he, Cahun, and Moore intersected. Moore illustrated two of Guégan's books. *L'Invitation à la fête primitive* (1921), penned in the manner of Alfred Douglas, contains Moore's classicizing, homoerotic triptych, « Les Trois Époques ». *Oya-Insula ou*

Although we can only speculate about Cahun's access to an early version of *Corydon*, the fact that she, in « Les Jeux uraniens », quotes Gide more than any other literary figure evidences her immersion in his writings during the gestation period of the Uranian manuscript.

Gide's *Corydon* unfolds in a series of four Socratic dialogues between the narrator, a homophobic heterosexual man, and his estranged friend, the protagonist, Corydon. The narrator renews his acquaintanceship with Corydon as the result of an unspecified « scandalous trial [that] raised once again the irritating question of uranism¹² ». Troubled by the ethical implications of the biases against homosexuality evident in legal proceedings at the turn of the century, the narrator decides to consult Corydon, a trained physician and avowed homosexual, about the moral questions the cases raised¹³. The narrator considers Corydon an expert in such matters, since he (like Gide himself) has undertaken to write a moral, philosophical, and scientific defense of « pederasty ».

l'Enfant à la conque (1923) features a fontispiece and page headers bearing Moore's signature. The Fonds André Gide [Gamma 265 (1-5)] at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet conserves five letters written to Gide by Guégan between 23 October 1924 and 9 December 1929. I am indebted to Patrice Allain for signaling this resource and calling my attention to a 1926 letter in which Guégan notes that a passage of his work « semble s'inspirer directement du *Corydon*. » Guégan adds that his piece was written prior to *Corydon*'s release in its definitive form (the only version with which Guégan acknowledges familiarity). In other words, according to Guégan, no direct chain of influence linked his work, however similar, to Gide's *Corydon*. This may well be true of Cahun's « Jeux uraniens ». Regardless, all three of these authors adopted coded aesthetic and narrative conventions to address shared homophile preoccupations, creating the effect of a contemporary Uranian « school » (where Gide was certainly a master).

¹² André Gide, *Corydon*, trans. Richard Howard, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 3.

¹³ Gide himself conserved clippings of events such as the Wilde trials (1895), the trial of Baron Jacques Fersen for corrupting minors (1903), Germany's Eulenberg-Von Moltke affair (1907-1908). The Renard murder trial (1909) explicitly figures in Gide's fourth dialogue. See Monique Nemer, *Corydon citoyen, essai sur André Gide et l'homosexualité* (Paris, Gallimard, 2006) for a thorough contextualization of Gide's engagement with the subject of homosexuality.

Members of Gide's generation in France did not understand « pederasty » exclusively in terms of either « Greek love » – that is, an older man's sexual and moral « schooling » of a young male acolyte – or (as per the more contemporary valence) the sexual abuse of children. Early twentieth-century dictionaries document alternate usages of the term, defining pederasty as a manly paradigm of homosexuality, or, again, as the act of anal coitus. In *Corydon*, Gide clearly mobilizes « pederasty » as a privileged term for virile same-sex practices. He accepts « inversion » (the common understanding of homosexuality as a misalignment of gender and sexuality) as pathological, but defends pederasty as healthy and natural.

« Les Jeux uraniens » participates in the classically encoded defense of homosexuality glossed by Gide's *Corydon* in the aftermath of the Uranian poets. The same can be said of Cahun's first book-length publication, *Vues et visions*. Somewhere between the production of the two works, Cahun attracted the notice of Jacques Viot, a contributor to *Le Phare de la Loire*, its weekly supplement *Le Journal littéraire*, and various Paris literary journals. « I owe the fact that I came out of my shell, even a little, to Viot », Cahun confirms in her memoir. « He thumbed through my manuscripts, rejected by NRF [*Nouvelle Revue française*], and took them home to read¹⁴. » It was undoubtedly the Uranian qualities of Cahun's writings that prompted Viot, a gay man, to advocate for their publication. Viot introduced Cahun to key allies in Paris : most notably Henri Michaux (editor of the avant-garde journal *Disque vert*), René Crevel, and André

¹⁴ *Je dois à Viot d'être si peu que ce soit sortie de ma coquille. Il parcourut des manuscrits de moi, refusés par NRF et les emporta pour les lire. J'appris par lui qu'il les avait fait circuler.* Claude Cahun, « Confidences au miroir », *Écrits*, ed. François Leperlier, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 2002, p. 600.

Breton¹⁵. If these encounters would ultimately align Cahun with surrealism, no suggestion of this shift is evident in the 1919 publication *Vues et visions*, which prolongs both the pictorial and literary lifespan of decadent aestheticism¹⁶.

The title *Vues et visions* establishes the book's organizing conceit: Cahun's verses, framed by Moore's drawings, elevate a mundane « view » to the level of a « vision ». This effect is achieved by placing scenes of the mundane present face to face with idealized evocations of Antiquity. One diptych illuminates this strategy with particular clarity: a set of texts, illustrated by Moore, oppose « La Nuit moderne » to « La Lumière antique ». On the quay of the Brittany seaport Le Croisic (where Cahun and Moore holidayed) two intertwined figures, cloaked in shadows, disappear into the obscurity of the night, « feeling their way in the darkness towards the unknown¹⁷ ». Moore's engraved illustration, which frames the text in the manner of an illumination, represents a man and boy at once embracing and bracing each other against a turbulent environment. The lovers' faces, inclined one toward the other, glow like pale apparitions in the blackness that dominates the scene of their amorous encounter. In contrast, in the drawing for « La

¹⁵ In January 1925, Cahun received a letter from Henri Michaux expressing interest in publishing her meditation « Récits de rêve, » put forward by Viot: Mademoiselle, I read at the home of my friend Viot your extremely unconventional manuscript. If your dreams are forthcoming and you consecrate them to paper it would be glorious to publish them. Consider me, aside from that, attentive to everything that you write and cordially interested in knowing you better. [*Mademoiselle, J'ai lu chez mon ami Viot de vos pages qui sont extrêmement indépendantes. Si vos rêves sont à l'avenant et que vous les mettiez sur le papier, je serais glorieux de les publier. Croyez-moi par ailleurs attentif à tout ce que vous écrivez, et cordialement désireux de vous mieux connaître.*] My thanks to Mireille Cardot for sharing this letter with me.

¹⁶ *Vues et visions* was published as a special issue by *Mercure de France* in 1914, prior to its release as an autonomous and fully illustrated edition by Georges Crès & Cie in 1919. The publisher Georges Crès, a contributor to *Mercure de France*, specialized in the production of reasonably priced but high-quality literary editions: « le luxe bon marché ». *Vues et visions* was printed in Nantes, by the press Cahun's father owned, L'Imprimerie du Commerce.

¹⁷ *Vers l'inconnue, à tâtons dans l'obscurité*. Claude Cahun, *Vues et visions*, dessins de Marcel Moore, Paris, Éditions Georges Crès & Cie, 1919, p. 94.

Lumière antique », Moore imposes only the sparsest marks of black upon the pristine whiteness of the page. The composition here, like the composition of the text, restages and transforms the preceding scene. The image again foregrounds two embracing male lovers. In opposition to the shadows that cloak modernity's lovers, a « golden haze » illuminates those of classical antiquity. These dwellers of antiquity, like their modern analogues, set their sights upon a destination beyond the horizon of visibility, « towards the unknown », but this time they advance « in the light and in joyfulness¹⁸ ». The text and illustrations work in tandem to place contemporary reality in dialogue with an ideal past that affirms not only Cahun and Moore's affection for each other, and the legitimacy of their same-sex bond, but also their connections to the historical *haute homosexualité* of Wilde's era. Moore's black and white drawings, rendered in the manner of Wilde's illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, reiterate the Apollonian ideals of masculine beauty revived by the Uranian poets.

If both the poetics and the pictorial language of *Vues et visions* reverberate with Wildean homo-aesthetics, the initiative also underscores Cahun's blood kinship with Marcel Schwob. Schwob collaborated with Wilde on the French edition of the controversial play *Salomé*, and, with Gide, supported the author during his trials and imprisonment in England and exile in France¹⁹. In *Mercure de France*, Cahun editorialized about Wilde's *Salomé* around the time *Vues et visions* was released. Her article, « La Salomé d'Oscar Wilde : Le Procès Billing et les 47,000 pervers du livre noir », reports on censorship

¹⁸ *Deux formes blanches passent et s'éloignent, confondues dans une brume dorée. Elles s'en vont vers la ville, dont les toits scintillent aux premiers rayons de l'aurore, elles s'en vont plus loin peut-être, vers l'inconnue, dans la lumière et dans la joie.* Cahun, *Vues et visions*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Gide published the posthumous tribute *Oscar Wilde, In Memoriam ; Le « De profundis »* with *Mercure de France* in 1910 (re-released in 1947).

proceedings targeting a 1918 rendition of the play in London²⁰. The article evidences Cahun's awareness of a juridical history – beginning with Wilde's original condemnation in the English courts for « acts of gross indecency » in 1895 and continuing in the spectacle of the *Salomé* obscenity hearings – that encodes Wilde's works and legacy as perverted (and makes Wilde an icon of dissident sexuality).

The poetics and politics of identification that structure works such as « Les Jeux uraniens », and *Vues et visions* achieve fuller complexity in subsequent writings, such as *Héroïnes*, a collection of satirical vignettes Cahun produced in the early 1920s²¹. Written in the first person, texts such as « Ève la trop crédule » (The overly credulous Eve) and « Sapho l'incomprise » (The misunderstood Sappho) rearticulate Western civilization's foundational myths from the perspectives of a dozen female protagonists (including, yes, Salomé). Here, Cahun abandons the elegant guises of decadent aestheticism to don the ill fitting mantles of archetypal femininity. For the first time, she speaks in an unambiguously female, indeed feminist, voice.

Cahun's allegiance to masculine literary models survived this shift in gendered voice and focus. She even dared to send Gide a manuscript (perhaps, *Héroïnes*). In a letter dated 27 May 1923, she thanks Gide for his thoughtful response : « you have given me – at least I

²⁰ « La Salomé d'Oscar Wilde : Le Procès Billing et les 47,000 pervers du livre noir », *Mercure de France* n° 481, July-August 1918, p. 69-80.

²¹ Some of these pieces were published in *Mercure de France* and *Le Journal Littéraire*, but the bound collection Cahun envisioned never materialized. « Ève la trop crédule », « Dalila, femme entre les femmes », « La Sadique Judith », « Hélène la rebelle », « Sapho l'incomprise », « Marguerite, sœur incestueuse » and « Salomé la sceptique » were published in *Mercure de France*, n° 639, February 1925 ; « Sophie la symboliste » and « La Belle » appeared in *Le Journal Littéraire*, n° 45, 28 February 1925. The entire suite is reproduced in *Écrits (op. cit.)* and in the more recent volume *Claude Cahun, Héroïnes*, ed. François Leperlier (Paris, Mille et Une Nuits, 2006).

have taken, thanks to you – a little confidence²². » Bolstered by this confidence, Cahun approached the threshold of a major literary undertaking, *Aveux non avendus*, a book that engages critically with both conventions and counter-conventions of social and sexual identity.

The third chapter, titled « E.D.M. », addresses an explicit challenge to homophiles, including Gide, concerned with their social station. Posing the rhetorical question « Surely, you do not pretend to be more of a pederast than I », Cahun confronts the hierarchies and prejudices that homophile manifestos such as Gide's *Corydon* perpetuate²³. While Gide reclaimed civil rights and social recognition, Cahun, in *Aveux non avendus*, validated no social or sexual hierarchy, offered no apology, condemned no form of love, including heterosexual love. « My opinion about homosexuality and homosexuals is exactly the same as my opinion about heterosexuality and heterosexuals : everything depends on the individuals and the circumstances », Cahun pronounced in the homophile revue *L'Amitié* in 1925, at the time she was drafting *Aveux non avendus*²⁴.

The masculine voice (that is, the voice of dissident masculinities) alternates, in *Aveux non avendus*, with other verbal masks. Refusing gender determination, Cahun inhabits both

²² *Vous m'avez donné – du moins j'ai pris, grâce à vous, un peu de confiance*. Claude Cahun, letter to André Gide, dated 27 May 1923, Fonds André Gide [Gamma 415-1], Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris. I thank François Leperlier for bringing this correspondence to my attention.

²³ *Tu n'as pourtant pas la prétention d'être plus pédéraste que moi... ?* Cahun, *Aveux non avendus*, *op. cit.*, p. 41. See Jennifer Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals* (forthcoming, Farnham, Ashgate) for an in-depth analysis of Cahun's critical engagements with Gide.

²⁴ *Mon opinion sur l'homosexualité et les homosexuels est exactement la même que mon opinion sur l'hétérosexualité et les hétérosexuels : tout dépend des individus et des circonstances*. Claude Cahun, « Réponse à l'enquête de la revue *Inversions* », *L'Amitié*, n° 1, April 1925, reprinted in *Écrits*, *op. cit.*, p. 481-482.

masculine and feminine speaking positions, never resting comfortably in one or the other, as one of the book's most oft-quoted passages suggests :

Masculine ? Feminine ? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that invariably suits me. If it existed in our language one would not observe this fluctuation in my thinking²⁵.

Throughout *Aveux non avenues*, Cahun trains a critical eye on the available modes of gender expression, including the Uranian manners she had affected throughout her literary apprenticeship. Applying surrealist techniques, Cahun excerpts source materials (sometimes her own earlier writings) from their original contexts to create effects of polyvalence, temporal disorientation, and purposeful incoherence. Ten collages, created with Moore's complicity, collude visually with the text to unfix the authorial speaking position, rather than cement identifications established in previous writings.

A 1929 photograph of Cahun, one of the very few published during her lifetime, projects a similarly ambiguous persona. Bearing the caption « Frontière humaine », this manipulated image of Cahun's disturbingly elongated and shaved head appeared in the review *Bifur* one month before the release of *Aveux non avenues*²⁶. The caption, like the anamorphic portrait it describes, conjures up positions on the margins of subjective legibility. Disoriented and disorienting, Cahun incarnates estrangement, not just from gender roles but from the human species. No longer referencing homophile cultural

²⁵ *Masculin ? féminin ? mais ça dépend des cas. Neutre est le seul genre qui me convienne toujours. S'il existait dans notre langue on n'observerait pas ce flottement de ma pensée.* Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenues*, op. cit., p. 176.

²⁶ *Bifur*, n° 5, April 1930, p.61. Pierre Levy, the magazine's publisher and also the director of Éditions du Carrefour, showcased this issue of *Bifur* in the vitrine of his sixth-arrondissement store. Here, *Aveux non avenues*, also released by Éditions du Carrefour, occupied pride of place in a display that also included several original collages by Cahun and Moore.

enclaves via the equivocal coding of the dandy aesthete, or reclaiming any identity (gender, race, family resemblance, artistic or sexual disposition), she ventures here into uncharted realms of alterity. She strips away the markers that identify the « self » (whether defined as a social construct or a genetic product).

In the same élan, Cahun spliced together negatives from this photographic series to create a composite print picturing two alien and alienated selves in confrontation – Siamese twin-like figures, face to face. « Que me veux-tu ? » (What do you want from me ?), the title asks²⁷. The use of « you » and « me » in the title (which is which ?) tests another human frontier, the boundary between self and the other. This doubled portrait and other variants from the series, in turn, provide source material for a collage illustrating *Aveux non avenues*, the faceplate for the third chapter, « E.D.M. »

Like most of the autobiography's chapter headings, this one is purposefully obscure : Is it an acronym ? A monogram ? The more intelligible headings for Chapters VIII and IX, « N.O.N » and « I.O.U. » respectively, suggest that the field of possible referents ranges across both the English and French languages. The formulation « E.D.M. », sounded out by an English speaker, yields « idem » (in Latin, « the same ») : the same author, same subject, same picture, same sources. The term, used in academic citations to replace a repeated reference, would have appealed to Cahun whose « mania for citation » amounts to a literary hallmark²⁸. In the table of contents, Cahun amends the title by parenthetically

²⁷ This composite print, in turn, inspired the jacket design for *Frontières humaines* (Paris : Éditions du Carrefour, 1929), a book authored by the editor of *Bifur*, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes.

²⁸ Cahun refers to her « *exécrable manie de citation* » in a letter to Adrienne Monnier dated 23 July 1926. Fonds Adrienne Monnier [MS 8718 B' I 11] Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris.

annexing the word « sex » (in English) to what is arguably a coded signifier for « same ». Despite this and other oblique affirmations of homoeroticism, *Aveux non avenues* rigorously resists uncritical reproduction of clichés – including the Uranian cultural tropes to which Cahun earlier demonstrated such strong attachments.

Cahun’s youthful identifications with gender dissidents of historical prominence signaled her sweeping rejection of dominant relational systems, social taxonomies, and cultural values. Via the appropriation of a masculine (and sexually dissident) speaking position and the use of masculine or gender ambiguous pen-names – not to mention the shaving of her head – Cahun denounced the protocols of bourgeois femininity/masculinity that were her unwanted birthright. As the images that later surfaced in *Bifur* and *Aveux non avenues* intimate, however, these initial projections were but strategic way points « toward the unknown », to some unmapped territory already envisioned in *Vues et visions*, where, « in the light and in joyfulness », affiliations free of gender’s fetters could form²⁹.

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²⁹ Cahun, *Vues et visions*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.