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HENRI MICHAUX: POETRY, PAINTING, AND THE UNIVERSAL SIGN

Margaret Rigaud-Drayton

OXFORD MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE MONOGRAPHS

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For Richard, Lucie, and Sarah

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ABBREVIATION

Michaux, *OC*	Henri Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 published vols., ed. Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, 1998 and 2001)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1931, Henri Michaux went East, travelling from India, to Indonesia, Japan, and China. He did not speak any of the languages spoken in the countries which he was about to visit. But he did not think that this would be an obstacle between him and the local people. He was convinced that with 'l'homme de la rue . . . l'homme qui joue de la flûte et l'homme qui joue dans un théâtre, et l'homme qui danse et qui fait des gestes, j'ai ce qu'il faut pour tout comprendre . . . à peu près'.[1] As soon as he set foot in India, he was forced to recognize his mistake. Indians, as it turned out, did not gesture much.[2] How was he to understand their gestures if they refused to move? To make matters worse, his own gestures appeared to be incomprehensible to those around him. Waving his arms in a sign of impatience, he found that not only did the Indians to whom he was addressing himself not understand that he was in a hurry, but they did not seem to register that he had gestured to them.[3] In the end, he had to come to the conclusion that India was the last place in the world where one could communicate through the types of movements that he had envisioned before his departure.[4] But this was only a minor concession to the vicissitudes of experience. Clinging to the idea that his journey to the East constituted a *voyage en Cratylie*,[5] Michaux began to redefine what constitutes gesturality rather than relinquish his belief in the universal expressivity of the movements of the body.

Throughout his life, Michaux longed for an immediate, transparent language that would be at once intimate and universal. In 1922, the year when he first began to publish, he proclaimed the need of the writers of his generation for an 'ESPÉRANTO'.[6] The following year, he suggested in his first book, *Les Rêves et la jambe*, that this 'Esperanto' might be found in the language of dreams. From the mid-1920s onwards, he began to experiment with the

[1] Michaux, *OC* i. 279. [2] See ibid. i. 285. [3] See ibid. i. 337.
[4] See ibid.
[5] See Gérard Genette, *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).
[6] Michaux, *OC* i. 13.

expressive possibilities of his semi-pictographic 'alphabets'.[7] In the 1933 *Un Barbare en Asie*, he sought to discover the universal language that he dreamt of in the languages of Asia. In 1938, he suggested in *Plume* that he was working on 'une étude sur le langage'.[8] In the 1951 *Mouvements*, he longed for epiphanic 'signes pour retrouver le don des langues'.[9] In *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (1969), he reiterated his wish for '*une langue où tout le monde enfin se comprît vraiment*'.[10] In *Par des traits*, which was published in 1984, the year of his death, he again reaffirmed this desire, and recalled some of the many experiments which this lifelong desire had provoked, including his failed 1938 project, 'Rudiments d'une langue universelle idéographique contenant neuf cents idéogrammes et une grammaire'.[11]

Michaux's desire for a universal language, and the intuitions which it brought to bear, at first may appear rather anachronistic. In 1922, the study of the origin of language and the elaboration of artificial languages had been banned by the Société linguistique de Paris for half a century already, relegating universal languages to the realm of fantasy. With the publication of Saussure's seminal *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916, the arbitrariness of the sign had become an incontrovertible principle of linguistics, it seemed. But Hermogenes' intellectual descendants were yet to convince all Cratylus' spiritual heirs.

Even among linguists, there was—and is—disagreement with the idea that all languages are completely arbitrary systems of signs. To varying degrees, figures such as Jakobson, Benveniste, or Chomsky have challenged this thesis.[12] Indeed, Jakobson has pointed out that Saussure's own position was not without ambiguities,[13] while Starobinski's work on Saussure's predilection for anagrams has highlighted the limits of the arbitrariness of signs for Saussure.[14] Unsurprisingly, the development of Saussurean

[7] For reproductions of these drawings, see *Henri Michaux: Peintures*, ed. Alfred Pacquement (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 22–3.

[8] Michaux, *OC* i. 561.

[9] Ibid. 441.

[10] Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 36.

[11] Michaux, *Par des traits* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984), no page numbers.

[12] See e.g. Émile Benveniste, Noam Chomsky, Roman Jakobson, et al. (eds.), *Problèmes du langage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

[13] See Roman Jakobson, 'A la recherche de l'essence du langage', ibid. 26.

[14] See Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots: Les Anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

linguistics in the first decades of the twentieth century also met some resistance among French writers of the period, most notably Claudel, for whom words and letters resonated with mystical echoes.[15] Even when writers accepted that languages were constituted of arbitrary systems of signs, this did not so much quell their desire to remotivate the language in which they wrote, as it made it seem all the more pertinent. As Ponge remarked, there would be no need for poetry if languages were motivated rather than arbitrary.[16] In *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* (1941), Paulhan even argued that the desire to recover (or reinvent) a mythically transparent language of origins had underpinned the best French poetry since the mid-nineteenth century:

> Il est un courant secret de la littérature—secret mais d'où sortent les œuvres les plus vivaces que l'on ait vues de nos jours—[qui] exige du poète, par quelque alchimie, une *autre* syntaxe, une grammaire nouvelle et jusqu'à des mots inédits où revivrait l'innocence primitive, et je ne sais quelle adhésion perdue du langage aux choses du monde.[17]

If modern writers are up in arms against 'literature', Paulhan argues in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, it is because they long for a perfect language in which signifiers would be motivated by nature rather than by convention: a language in which signs would be whole. Rimbaud's denigration of 'la vieillerie poétique', Verlaine's wish to wring the neck of 'l'éloquence', and Laforgue's prediction that 'la culture bénie de l'avenir est la déculture',[18] all appealed to this shared longing for a lost primordial language in Paulhan's view. Michaux's yearning for a universal language evinces the same nostalgia. As Verlaine before him, he disliked 'l'Éloquence'.[19] After Rimbaud, he declared that 'la poésie n'est plus l'art de faire des vers'.[20] Like Laforgue, he called for a cultural tabula rasa, cautioning his readers that 'toute une vie ne suffit pas pour désapprendre'.[21] Even his complaint in 1936 that language is 'un mauvais véhicule de la poésie'[22] points to what Paulhan would

[15] See Jacques Madaule, *Claudel et le langage* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968).
[16] Francis Ponge, 'Les Bucoliques de Virgile', *Œuvres*, i (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 309.
[17] Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Folio, 1990), 46.
[18] Ibid. 41–2.
[19] Michaux, *OC* i. 11.
[20] Ibid. 976.
[21] Michaux, *Poteaux d'angle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 9.
[22] Michaux, *OC* i. 976.

have called his literary 'terror'. By describing himself as an inventor of 'mots directs et évocateurs, intuitifs, sans souvenirs étymologiques',[23] Michaux treads in the footsteps of Rimbaud and Mallarmé even as he alludes to the radical contemporaneousness of his poetics.

The nostalgia of French poets for a universal language of origins has deeper roots than even Paulhan acknowledges. In particular, their belief that, in the words of Mallarmé, it is the task of the poet to correct 'le défaut des langues',[24] is inseparable from the conflation of poetry with a mythically transparent language of origins in the Western intellectual tradition since at least the eighteenth century. Rousseau's celebrated assertion in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1772) that 'd'abord on ne parla qu'en poésie'[25] concisely recapitulates a thought often voiced by Enlightenment philosophers after Vico. But if poetry participates of the language of nature, in this tradition, the writing of poetry can only be a doomed attempt to recover its irretrievable loss. Whereas Rousseau suggests that the ancients were all poets who made music even as they spoke, he only finds proof of the French language's loss of its original musicality in the rules of prosody to which his contemporaries resort.[26] However, even if he devalues the poetry of his contemporaries, he glorifies the office of the poet, whose impossible task it is to recover a mythic idiom in a language that bears few traces, if any, of its original poetry. The same idealization of poetry and ambivalence toward their contemporaries' achievements marked the writers that Paulhan examines in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. Michaux, who liked to undermine his and his contemporaries' poetic achievements even as he valorized poetry as 'une chose proche de la mystique', was no exception.[27]

There is a metaphysical drama at stake in the contrast that Rousseau and Michaux (among others) draw between what poets write and what they would like to write. In the same way that in Rousseau's essay a language's gradual loss of expressivity coincides

[23] Michaux, *OC* i. 976.
[24] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 364.
[25] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, ed. Jean Starobinski (Paris: Folio, 1990), 68.
[26] See ibid. 68 and 83.
[27] Michaux, *OC* i. 997.

with its speakers' increasing loss of innocence, if not corruption,[28] so in Michaux's writings it is prelapsarian 'primitives' who have access to the poetic language of nature, not the fallen self. Underlying the ontological premiss on which the eighteenth century's construction of poetry is founded lies an even older tradition of thought on the language of nature: the idea that the 'Book of nature' was divinely ordained, and that it is only our lapsed condition that prevents us from being able to understand it. A universal language, the divine poetry of nature can nevertheless be incomprehensible: not only can the fallen not write it, but they cannot understand it. Moreover, in this medieval tradition, doubts as to whether Adam heard animals tell him their names or saw them inscribed onto their bodies spurred mystics and the Fathers of the Church to locate his divine language in audible natural sounds and/or visible natural patterns.[29] Following in their footsteps, Rousseau and his successors developed twin theories suggesting that the original poetry of nature was not just for the ear, but also for the eye. Believing that 'la langue du geste et celle de la voix sont également naturelles',[30] Rousseau founded the origin of writing in painting, in the same way that he located the origin of language in the music of poetry. Echoes of the belief that painting and poetry are different but equivalent manifestations of the poetic language of nature could still be heard in the twentieth century. In the same way that Sartre identified poetry with painting (as opposed to prose) in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), Michaux regularly described poetry as the Other of prose, but not of visual expression.[31] Constructing the poet as a 'Seer', like Rimbaud, he conceived of poetry and painting as modalities of the visionary—and the unlapsed. Nature and its poetic, visionary, language, was to be found locked inside the self, as much as outside it. But whereas the self retains a degree of integrity for Rousseau, even if it is reflected in the world outside it, it no longer

[28] See Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, 138–42.

[29] See Umberto Eco, *La Quête d'une langue parfaite dans l'histoire de la culture européenne* (Paris: Collège de France, 1992), 8–10.

[30] Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, 60.

[31] In spite of such theoretical assertions, however, Michaux's poetical practice can challenge the distinction that Sartre makes between prose and poetry, forcing readers to reconsider received ideas of what poetry is or is not. (See Raymond Bellour, *Henri Michaux ou une mesure de l'être* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 178.)

does for Michaux and his generation. Relegating the unified self to an alienating linguistic fiction, Michaux attempts to map the Protean and ill-defined phenomena from which our sense of identity derives in works which seek to inscribe rather than describe. To yearn for the 'poetry' of nature, for him, is not merely to seek a perfect language: it is to find a voice and a signature through a corpus that might function as a 'Book of self'.

Although Michaux was dubious of Freudian psychoanalysis, and little versed in its developments under Lacan and others, he was nevertheless keenly interested in nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychiatric theories of the self and its relationship to language. Dreaming of reinventing a primordial universal language in his works, he searched for an intimate voice in the unconscious. Although most of his critics have pondered his fascination with universal languages and pasigraphy, they have traditionally tended to consider his turn to the visual arts as an escape from writing, without giving enough attention to the work of self-construction involved in his exploration of the difference and overlap of verbal and visual signs. Until the end of the Second World War, Michaux remained a fairly obscure writer, with few publicists or critics, with André Gide a notable exception.[32] After the Second World War, he began to attract more critical attention, but his critics were more interested in those early days in coming to grips with a strikingly diverse body of texts than they were with his visual works and the question of their relationship to the work of self-exploration in his texts. Although René Bertelé, whose monograph *Henri Michaux* (1946) was the first book-length study of Michaux's works, devoted some important pages to what he has famously called Michaux's 'espéranto lyrique' as well as to his ideograms,[33] on the whole Michaux's critics tended to pay more attention to the existentialist undertones in his writings until the mid-1960s. According to Robert Bréchon in 1959, Michaux's works were written 'pour approcher le problème de l'être',[34] while Laurent Badoux declared in 1963 that, underlying Michaux's thought, was 'le mouvement philosophique partant de Kierkegaard, passant par Husserl, pour aboutir à Heidegger et à Sartre

[32] See André Gide, *Découvrons Henri Michaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941).
[33] René Bertelé, *Henri Michaux* (Paris: Seghers, 1946), 18.
[34] Robert Bréchon, *Michaux* (Paris: La Bibliothèque idéale, 1959), 27.

et à Camus'.[35] This existentialist period of Michaux criticism probably culminated in Raymond Bellour's *Henri Michaux, ou une mesure de l'être* (1965). With the special issue that the *Cahiers de l'Herne* devoted to Michaux in 1966, a new era of Michaux criticism opened. Besides publishing the pillars of this critical tradition, Bellour, the editor of the *Cahiers*, gave a voice to a younger generation of critics, many of whom brought new approaches to the debate, such as those of structuralism or of psychoanalysis. Closer attention also began to be paid from around that time to Michaux's use of language. Malcolm Bowie's important 1973 monograph, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works* exemplifies this shift by looking at Michaux's 'search for self' in the light of his 'search for adequate linguistic means' and of his 'agitated relationship with language'.[36] This added emphasis on the texture of Michaux's texts spawned many interesting analyses. In England, Peter Broome called attention to Michaux's humour in *Henri Michaux* (1977). In France, the focus on Michaux's use of language led to often illuminating collections of essays, such as *Ruptures sur Henri Michaux*, edited by Roger Dadoun (1976); *Passages et langages de Henri Michaux*, edited by Jean-Claude Mathieu and Michel Collot (1987); or, more recently, *Henri Michaux: Plis et cris du lyrisme*, edited by Catherine Mayaux (1997). Since the 1980s, Michaux's commentators have tended to opt for more specialized approaches to Michaux. François Trotet, in *Henri Michaux ou la sagesse du Vide* (1992), examines the relationship of Michaux's texts to Far Eastern philosophies, while Anne-Elisabeth Halpern, in *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète* (1998), looks at the importance of scientific discourse in shaping his poetry. Another recent critical tendency has been to concentrate on particular periods of Michaux's creativity. Jean-Pierre Martin, in *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* (1994), bears upon Michaux's previously neglected early works, while Anne Brun, in *Henri Michaux ou le corps halluciné* (1991), and Filippo Zanghi, in *Un hérétique de l'espace: Notations de l'expérience chez Henri Michaux* (2002), concentrate on his later works on the effects of hallucinogenics. The 1980s and 1990s also saw an increased interest in the hybrid nature of Michaux's verbal and

[35] Laurent Badoux, *La Pensée de Henri Michaux: Esquisse d'un itinéraire spirituel* (Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1963), 93.

[36] Malcolm Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 176 and 177.

visual corpus, although Virginia La Charité began paying sustained attention to this aspect of Michaux's work in the late 1970s. Michaux's fascination with what Bowie has called 'the intermediate' and the 'indeterminate',[37] in particular, has become a *passage obligé* of Michaux criticism since the 1980s in France and elsewhere. But this question has perhaps been most assiduously treated by such English-speaking critics as La Charité, Laurie Edson, and Adelia Williams. Whereas La Charité, who sees in Michaux's verbal and visual creativity a polymorphous need to 'intervene in the real', has a proto-existentialist view of his hybrid output,[38] Edson, in *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (1985), reads Michaux's shifts between the two forms of expression in the light of his 'ideology of perpetual movement'.[39] Constructing this 'ideology' around Michaux's systematic and pervasive operation of 'dialectical reversals', she argues that Michaux's versatility has its roots in 'the continual desire to go beyond what is already known, already accomplished, or already said'.[40] In *The Double Cipher: Encounter between Word and Image in Bonnefoy, Tardieu and Michaux* (1991), Williams looks at the ways in which Michaux rejected 'the dichotomy reinforced throughout the Western tradition by such figures as Lessing, Kant and Gombrich between figurative and semantic fields'.[41]

This study seeks another path. It seeks to take seriously the aim at the heart of Michaux's somewhat absurd journey to Asia: the desire for a language which might offer immediate access to meaning and to the self. Like the *lingua adami* of the Renaissance magus, the language that he dreamt of and attempted to re-create in his works would reintegrate both the world and his own split self. If he sought a universal language, it was not only in order to find a voice, but a name. But even as he rebelled against the French language and declared the subjectivity that it fosters self-alienating, Michaux could not relinquish its fictions easily. Dreaming of universal signs, he looked for intimate utterances. Courting

[37] Malcolm Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 129.
[38] Virginia La Charité, *Henri Michaux* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 92.
[39] Laurie Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1985), 91.
[40] Ibid. 115.
[41] Adelia V. Williams, *The Double Cipher: Encounter between Word and Image in Bonnefoy, Tardieu and Michaux* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 149.

anonymity, he turned his works into the repository of his identity. It is to these tensions and their consequences for his articulation of the self and its relationship to verbal and visual signs that we now turn. We begin in Michaux's native Belgium, where his trauma of identity and language has its concealed roots.

1

MICHAUX BETWEEN FRANCE AND BELGIUM

Michaux is perhaps best known as an explorer of the self, and his indefatigable probing of the outer reaches of consciousness has attracted critical attention since the 1940s. But little attention has been paid to his articulation of the self in relation to his double literary and national identities. In consequence, his works tend to be read as though they unproblematically find their place in either the French or the Belgian tradition, when they do not. As strong as his desire to belong in France was Michaux's belief in his ineradicable Belgianness, and the conflicted sense of his double identity as a 'Belge, de Paris' haunts his works.[1] Because of his apparent rejection of Belgium, and perhaps also for fear of marginalizing Michaux by emphasizing his peripheral origins, the issue has tended to be overlooked. However, it is not because he became a self-declared Parisian that he did not share the predicament of those non-metropolitan francophones whose works until recently had to find their place within the French tradition in order to be received without bias both in France and at home. Although he shared many of the aesthetic concerns of his French contemporaries, Michaux remained self-consciously aware of his cultural difference long after he was naturalized French.

Born in Belgium in 1899, Michaux spent much of his adult life trying to put Belgium at a distance. In 1924, he moved to Paris, having spent the previous eighteen months planning the move.[2] Although he returned regularly to Belgium, sometimes for months at a time, he conceived of this departure as a definitive break with his mother country.[3] From as early as 1928, he started voicing his

[1] Michaux, *OC* i. 705; and see Margaret Rigaud-Drayton, 'Henri Michaux: "Belge, de Paris" ', *Modern Language Review*, 97 (Jan. 2002), 36–46.

[2] See letter to Hermann Closson, 12 Oct. 1922 (*A la minute que j'éclate: Henri Michaux, quarante-trois lettres à Hermann Closson*, ed. Jacques Carion (Brussels: Didier Devillez, 2000), 48).

[3] 'Belgique définitivement quittée' (Michaux, *OC* i. 705); see also letter to Franz Hellens, 9 Jan. 1924 (*Sitôt lus: Henri Michaux, lettres à Franz Hellens (1922–1952)*, ed. Leonardo Clerici (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 58).

desire to become a French citizen.[4] In 1955, this wish came true, allowing him formally to sever his ties with Belgium. As he became more established in the French literary world, his early desire to leave his native land behind became bound up with an increasing ambivalence about the Belgian literary scene. In 1924, lauding the virtuosity of young Belgian poets, he enthusiastically had included himself in a panorama of contemporary Belgian writing.[5] But by 1931, he hesitated to allow the reprinting of a selection of his works in an anthology of Belgian poetry, sneeringly suggesting that one would be hard pressed to find more than seven or eight Belgian poets worth the name.[6] Finally, in 1934, he categorically refused to have anything to do with such an anthology.[7] Reluctant to be identified as a Belgian poet, Michaux gradually turned his back on his early literary friendships. In a 1971 Festschrift for Franz Hellens, Robert Goffin recalls Hellens's early discovery of, belief in, and promotion of, Michaux's literary talent, only to note bitterly that Michaux rapidly began to refuse 'tout contact avec la Belgique qu'il ne connait plus'.[8] Yet, Michaux had once been impressed with Hellens's writing. In *Les Rêves et la jambe* (1923), which he originally wanted to dedicate to Hellens, he had lauded *Mélusine* for achieving the oneiric literary style to which he aspired in his own writings.[9] In the spring of 1923 he even contemplated writing a monograph on Hellens's works.[10] Michaux was as ruthless with his own early works, published in Belgium, as with those of his former friends. In 1962, he no longer wished to acknowledge the 'horrid' *Les Rêves et la jambe*.[11] Refusing to allow the reprinting

[4] See letter to Jean Paulhan, 15 July 1928 (Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. xc).

[5] See ibid. i. 52.

[6] 'Y-a-t-il de quoi faire une anthologie de poètes belges? Enfin où vont-ils les chercher? Et de qui pourrez-vous parler? . . . au mieux on en trouvera sept ou huit', letter to Hellens, 9 Nov. 1922 (*Sitôt lus*, 33).

[7] 'Si un inconnu m'avait envoyé une lettre à propos de cette anthologie de poètes belges j'aurais été fort à l'aise pour répondre. J'aurais refusé catégoriquement. Mais c'est toi. Donc je suis embarassé. Mais il s'agit de moi. Donc je ne le suis pas. JE N'AI AUCUNEMENT L'INTENTION D'ACCEPTER.' Letter to Camille Goemans, 4 Apr. 1934 (ibid. 148).

[8] Robert Goffin, 'Le Disque vert', in Raphaël de Smedt (ed.), *Franz Hellens: Recueil d'études, de souvenirs et de témoignages offert à l'écrivain à l'occasion de son quatre-vingt-dixième anniversaire* (Brussels: André de Rache, 1971), 244.

[9] Michaux, *OC* i. 25, and see p. lxxx.

[10] Ibid., p. lxxxi.

[11] Michaux (quoted in Alain Bosquet, 'Le Premier Livre d'Henri Michaux', in Raymond Bellow (ed.), *Les Cahiers de l'Herne: Henri Michaux* (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 1983), 424); see also Michaux, *OC* i. 1029.

of his early writings, he preferred that they should stay scattered in literary journals, away from the gaze of the general public. As a result these remained mostly unknown to non-specialists, until the first volume of the Pléiade edition of his complete works came out in 1998. Indeed, even his commentators tended to neglect them until Jean-Pierre Martin's 1994 monograph, *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* set the balance right.

Leaving Belgium for Paris, refusing to be identified as a Belgian poet, forgetting about the Belgian literary figures who first had encouraged him, and repudiating his own early writings, Michaux nevertheless was not able unproblematically to shake off his Belgianness. Conversely, his wish to become a French writer did not stop him from feeling ambivalent toward France and its tradition. Born in a bourgeois Walloon community, which historically has tended to efface its cultural specificity by describing its identity as 'French',[12] Michaux's refusal to be identified as a Belgian writer can be said to exhibit his internalization of the anxiety that until recently plagued francophone Belgians: the fear of seeing their works dismissed as 'de la littérature de province, eu égard au centre, au foyer de la vraie littérature française de Paris'.[13] But for him as for the francophone community of which he was a product, laying claim to the French cultural tradition came at a price. Although this identification allowed francophone Belgians to assert their difference from their Flemish counterparts, it was at the cost of their own cultural specificity. As was already recognized shortly after the creation of the Belgian state in 1830, it was not because francophone Belgians spoke French that their writings would seamlessly find their place in the French literary tradition:

> Une même langue, a-t-on souvent dit, n'enfante pas deux littératures différentes. Cette opinion, pour être banale, n'en est pas moins erronée. Que deux peuples parlent le même idiome, mais que l'un soit sceptique et matérialiste, l'autre naïf et religieux, l'un voluptueux et sensuel, l'autre guerrier et turbulent, l'un accoutumé au despotisme, l'autre à la liberté,

[12] See e.g. Albert du Bois, *La Catéchisme du Wallon* (1902), discussed in Xavier Mabille, *Histoire politique de la Belgique: Facteurs et acteurs de changement* (Brussels: Centre de recherches et d'informations socio-politiques, 1997), 200.

[13] H.-J. Évrard, *Proverbes dramatiques* (1845) (quoted in Gustave Charlier, *Le Mouvement romantique en Belgique (1815–1850)* (Brussels: Palais des académies, 1959), 524–5).

leurs livres écrits dans l'idiome commun seront aussi peu semblables que leurs mœurs.[14]

In his 1924 'Lettre de Belgique', Michaux exhibited similar misgivings on the place of francophone Belgian writers in the French literary canon, by claiming for his own work, as well as for that of contemporary compatriots, the heritage of writers associated in the 1880s with *La Jeune Belgique*, the rallying cry of which was 'Soyons nous'. Foregrounding his overview of Belgian writing in the early 1920s with a salute to some of the key figures associated with *La Jeune Belgique*—Camille Lemonnier (1844–1913), Georges Eckoud (1854–1927),[15] and Eugène Demolder (1862–1919)—Michaux explicitly links the importance of 'la joie de la chair' in the works of these predecessors to the fascination with the body of his contemporaries: for them too 'l'inspiration naît du sang chaud, de la chair'.[16] Even if he suggests that this common concern with the body exhibits a peculiarly Belgian hot-bloodedness, Michaux nevertheless emphasizes his own generation's diffidence towards this national literary trait: 'Mais l'écriture [contemporaine] est de sang-froid. Cela est saisissant, net, incisif, rapide, de style bien moderne.'[17] Repudiating the stylistic excesses of some of their forebears in their cold-blooded search for concision, Michaux's generation is not described as a challenge to the Belgian literary heritage, however. Far from displaying the loss of interest which was characteristic of many of his Belgian contemporaries at that time for the idea of a Belgian voice,[18] Michaux roots the more austere aesthetics of his generation in an alternative Belgian tradition:

Reste un caractère belge, dont on savourait seulement le ridicule, qui est le caractère 'bon enfant, simple, sans prétention'. Maintenant il lève et fait notre meilleure production. . . . Le retour assez général à la simplicité qui s'est fait sentir dans les arts trouve donc les jeunes littérateurs d'ici merveilleusement disposés, et déjà à l'œuvre. Je pense nommément à Charles van Leberge, tel en 1880, et à cet égard notre précurseur,

[14] Édouard Wacken, 'L'Avenir des hommes de lettres en Belgique', *Revue de Belgique* (1846) (quoted in Charlier, *Le Mouvement romantique en Belgique (1815–1850)*, 525).

[15] I have adopted Michaux's spelling of the name: Georges Eckoud is more generally known as Georges Eekhoud.

[16] Michaux, *OC* i. 51 and 53.

[17] Ibid. 53.

[18] See J. P. Bier, 'Dada en Belgique', in Jean Weisberger (ed.), *Les Avant-gardes littéraires en Belgique* (Brussels: Labor, 1991), 312.

comme l'appelle M. Gaston Pulings. Les poètes actuels en Belgique, volontiers, je les appellerais des virtuoses de la simplicité et j'aurais à les citer presque tous.[19]

Anchoring the stylistic economy displayed by his Belgian contemporaries in their national literary tradition by invoking another figure associated with *La Jeune Belgique*, Charles van Lerberge (1861–1907),[20] Michaux presents their tendency to concision as though it exhibited their national sensibility, at a time when it was more usual to consider this new aesthetic to have been imported from Paris and Berlin.[21] Rather than celebrating the rare achievements of a few outward-looking figures, Michaux feels compelled in 'Lettre de Belgique' to evoke the virtuosity of almost an entire generation, by virtue of their very Belgianness. Indeed, not only is the 'style bien moderne' of his compatriots not so much a foreign import as it is native to Belgium, but the French language is depicted in the same text as though it were the principal enemy of Belgian poets and ordinary Belgians alike. Speaking and writing in Michaux's 'Lettre de Belgique' involve a constant struggle against the alienating 'prétention' of French words.[22]

Michaux's 'Lettre de Belgique' is the only text where he so straightforwardly identifies himself as a Belgian writer steeped in the Belgian literary tradition. It is also one of the only texts where he unambiguously presents his difficult relationship with the French language as a direct consequence of his native identity. By 1930, he had publicly rejected his affiliation to Belgium and his Belgianness with the publication of 'En Belgique', a relentlessly derogatory portrait of his native land and compatriots. In parallel with his repudiation of all things Belgian, his writings from that time onwards emphasize his identification with his adoptive country, France. Composed for the biographical section of a volume dedicated to his works,[23] his 'Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence' (1958), is a case in point. Often read as a somewhat unreliably idiosyncratic source of autobiographical data providing a screen behind which Michaux hides even as he purports to reveal himself, the 'Renseignements' nevertheless have a lot to tell. Written just three years after Michaux was naturalized

[19] Michaux, *OC* i. 52. [20] Lerberge is also known as Lerberghe.
[21] See Bier, 'Dada en Belgique', 312. [22] Michaux, *OC* i. 52.
[23] See Robert Bréchon, *Michaux* (Paris: NRF, Collection 'La Bibliothèque idéale', 1959).

French, they weave his life and works together through the exploration of his identity. Although they appear, on the surface of it, to describe the issues of Belgium and Michaux's Belgianness as increasingly insignificant from the time of his move to Paris in 1924, a closer look at the text belies this impression. Instead, Michaux's self-portrait as someone torn between dichotomous personal and creative identities is inseparable, one discovers on a second reading, from his exploration of his relationship to Belgium as well as France. At once repeating and throwing new light on the self-portraits that came before the 'Renseignements', particularly those in which he accounts for his creativity, the text highlights the complexities of Michaux's articulation of his different personae. Even as it represents him struggling to become a writer by leaving Belgium for France, it simultaneously undermines the legitimacy of his literary identification with France.

Right from the opening of the 'Renseignements', Michaux exhibits his uneasiness with the autobiographic project which he has launched himself on. Although he begins conventionally with the date and place of his birth, followed, equally conventionally, by a portrait of the bourgeois family in which he was born, he voids both of any subjective or emotional charge:

1899 Naissance dans une famille bourgeoise.
24/5 Père ardennais.
Namur. Mère wallonne.
Un des grands-parents, qu'il n'a pas connu, d'origine allemande.
Un frère, son aîné de trois ans.
Lointaine ascendance espagnole.

1900 Indifférence.
à 1906, Inappétence.
Bruxelles. Résistance.

Inintéressé.

Il boude la vie, les jeux, les divertissements et la variation.
Le manger lui répugne.
Les odeurs, les contacts.
Sa moelle ne fait pas de sang.
Son sang n'est pas fou d'oxygène.[24]

[24] Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. cxxix.

Who is Henri Michaux at the beginning of this autobiography? Nobody. *Né sans*, as his 'Naissance' punningly suggests, he can only be defined negatively, by his lacks—of appetite, health, and interest in life and games. Subjectless, he is merely a body: illnesses and reactions to food, smells, or touch are all that define his early existence. Devoid of an individual self, this body is reduced to an impersonal 'il', the identity of which is entirely the product of its entwined familial and national origins. Indeed, with its Hispanic and Germanic roots retracing Belgium's history, his familial identity is a trope for his Belgianness, and vice versa. Michaux was born Belgian, and his Belgianness is an intrinsic part of him. It is a hereditary condition. Whatever the attempts he describes himself making to expatriate himself from the land of his fathers later on in the 'Renseignements', he can never escape his heritage. It is in his bones, as he acknowledges in the closing lines of the text: 'Malgré tant d'efforts, en tous sens, toute sa vie durant pour se modifier, ses os, sans s'occuper de lui, suivent aveuglément leur évolution familiale, raciale, nordique . . . '.[25]

Interestingly, Michaux describes his bones as displaying not merely the legacy of his familial ancestry, but of an entire 'racial' group, which he defines as 'Nordic'. Yet, at the opening of the 'Renseignements', his Germanic forefathers are offset by his distant Spanish ancestry, endowing his heritage with a dual polarity which is confirmed a few generations down the line, when Michaux describes himself as the product of a mixed Walloon and Ardennais union. As opposed to those Walloon and Flemish nationalists who thought, as Jules Destrée famously asserted, that there are no Belgians, only Walloons and Flemish,[26] Belgians, in Michaux's view, belong to a 'race de métis', as he had declared almost thirty years before in 'En Belgique'.[27] However, this Belgian *métissage* does not entail a harmonious cultural melting pot so much as a clash between radically different cultures. On the one hand, with the blood of his German grandfather running through his veins, he has inherited a Nordicity, which, by analogy with nineteenth-century ideas of what constitutes the Germanic

[25] Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. cxxxv.

[26] 'Il y a en Belgique des Wallons et des Flamands. Il n'y a pas de Belges', Jules Destrée (quoted in Mabille, *Histoire politique de la Belgique*, 200).

[27] Michaux, *OC* i. 269.

identity, he founds on a racial bloodline.[28] In the same way that 'la famille Germanique', as Renan called it, subsumed all 'Germans' regardless of their nationality,[29] so Michaux's construction of his inherited Fatherland extends beyond the frontiers of Belgium to what one might broadly term 'Germanic' parts of Europe. Rather than a strictly defined geographical location, his *Vaterland*, as it were, is a shifting space, the Nordicity of which emerges by contrast with the Latinity of other spaces. It fluctuates in the 'Renseignements' between Belgium and Germany, by contrast with France. Within Belgium, however, it is associated with Flanders as opposed to Wallonia. In spite of his Spanish ancestors and francophone parents, Michaux's Latinity, on the other hand, is associated in the 'Renseignements' with a self-determined, rather than hereditary, identity. As with Frenchness in the French revolutionary tradition, this Latinity is a freely embraced cultural identity where 'race' is immaterial.[30] Whereas Michaux was born (and will die) Nordic, he becomes Latin, and his inherited Belgianness stands in stark contrast in the 'Renseignements' with his acquisition of his French citizenship in 1955.

Throughout his autobiography, Michaux pits his Nordicity and his Latinity against each other. As those French writers and intellectuals who, in the Germanophobic aftermath of the First World War, opposed '[la] pensée du midi' to that of the North,[31] associating the former to what Charles Maurras called 'l'intelligence française',[32] francophone Belgians traditionally founded their supposed intellectual superiority over Nordics in their Latinity. The contrast that the sociologist Marcel Bolle de Bal draws

[28] See Hans Kohn, 'Romantic Concepts of History, State and Liberty', in *Prelude to Nation-States: The French and German Experience (1789–1815)* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1967), 187–93.

[29] See Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce-qu'une nation?: Conférence faite en Sorbonne le 11 mars 1882* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1882), 13.

[30] See Kohn, 'Self-Determination and Equality', 35–9; see also Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, 7–10.

[31] See e.g. A. Thibaudet, *Les Idées de Charles Maurras* (Paris: NRF, 1920), 73: 'Cette pensée du midi, on pourrait la définir comme . . . exigeance de la distinction par la pensée, d'une fin par la pensée. Elle s'oppose . . . au Nord . . . qui aime[ ] la pensée fondue, la pensée absolue, la pensée indéfinie' (quoted in Jean David, 'Orient et intelligence dans les lettres françaises de la première après-guerre', *Revue de littérature comparée* (Oct.–Dec. 1956), 525).

[32] Charles Maurras (quoted in David, 'Orient et intelligence dans les lettres françaises de la première après-guerre', 509).

between 'la culture latine, portée vers la réflexion théorique' and 'la culture flamande proche des préoccupations des gens, orientée vers l'action pratique, pragmatique, concrète' is a classic example.[33] Perpetuating the same prejudices, Michaux in the 'Renseignements' presents his Latinity as a highbrow cultural identity, as opposed to his Nordicity, which he confines to the world of practical experience. An acquired, rather than biological, identity, his Latinity is associated with cultural pleasures. By contrast, his Nordicity evokes experiences of alienation and repression. Early on, the four years that Michaux spends in a Flemish boarding school are represented as a forced exile from the bourgeois comforts of francophone Brussels into an uncivilized world of Flemish-speaking peasants, even though the boarding school where he was sent catered mainly to the francophone bourgeoisie, which it taught in French.[34] This rural universe is clearly contrasted to Brussels, where, on his return, he discovers the joys that the dictionary (French but also Latin) can yield. At the same time, by separating him from others, his learning of Latin sets him off on a first journey that at once negates and repeats his earlier exile to Flanders, but also his learning of Flemish while there—a traumatic experience, according to him in an important undated letter to Bertelé.[35] Later, the German occupation of Belgium during the First World War coincides with the revelation of the pleasures of writing (in French). Finally, in Michaux's long-awaited return to Paris in 1943 during the German occupation, after years spent in exile, mostly in the South of France, all these episodes are brought together.[36] While the qualification of the occupation as 'la seconde' explicitly links it to his previous experience of the German occupation of Brussels, his 'Retour à Paris' after years of 'exodus' repeats the sense of salvation of his childhood 'Retour à Bruxelles'.[37]

Michaux's gradual discovery of his literary vocation is closely connected to his acquisition of a separate Latin identity, at odds with his family's Nordicity. Indeed, Michaux in the 'Renseigne-

[33] Marcel Bolle de Bal (quoted in Jean-Émile Humblet, *Le Petit Livre du jeune wallon* (Charleroi: Institut Jules Destrée, 1990), 224).
[34] See Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. lxxvii.
[35] Ibid., p. cxxx and see 995.
[36] Ibid., p. cxxxiv.
[37] Ibid., pp. cxxxiv and cxxx.

ments' describes his turn to reading and writing as an attempt to murder his forefathers and to exile himself from the Fatherland. During his adolescence, the discovery of Latin marks a symbolical 'premier départ', whilst, shortly after, his discovery of a number of literary father figures allows him to replace his biological family with 'ses vrais parents'.[38] This period marks the beginning of a process of individuation and coincides with a dawning sense of belonging to the world. Repeating this cycle of Oedipal self-discovery, the year when he first starts to publish, 1922, is also a time of rebirth to the world, following the despair of the previous year. In the 'Renseignements', if not in fact,[39] this episode occurs during the same year that he leaves Belgium. At the same time, exile is once again matched by symbolical parricide. Oblivious to the details of chronological accuracy, Michaux hints at the displacement of his Belgian mentor, Franz Hellens, by Jean Paulhan during the year when his 'first pages' were published, even though it is unlikely that he was in touch with Paulhan before 1924.[40] A last Oedipal cycle opens in 1929, when a new desire for openness and 'assimilation' is made to coincide with the (once again misdated) death of his parents, as well as with a series of 'voyages d'expatriation'.[41] Although he does not mention it, 1929 is also the year of the publication of the first texts that he did not disown later, *Écuador* and *Mes propriétés*. However, in spite of these parricidal attempts at 'expatriation', and in spite of Michaux's apparently successful reinvention of himself as a self-made French writer, the 'Renseignements' close on his failure to redefine himself. As his recalcitrant bones threaten to return him to the impersonal Nordicity of his ancestors, his hard-won Latinity appears to have been no more than a mask.

Presenting his literal and metaphorical 'voyages d'expatriation' as ever-repeated but eventually doomed attempts to achieve a self-determined identity that would disentangle him from his Nordic heritage, Michaux in the 'Renseignements' portrays himself as a would-be French writer at war with his Nordic biology. Before his discovery of Latin culture, the protagonist of the 'Renseignements'

[38] Ibid., pp. cxxx and cxxxi.
[39] Michaux did not leave Belgium until 1924 (see ibid., p. lxxxiii).
[40] Ibid., p. cxxxii; Michaux is unlikely to have been in touch with Jean Paulhan before 1924 (see ibid., p. lxxxiii).
[41] Ibid., p. cxxxiii.

is reduced to a quasi-animal physicality: as late as 1910, the child Michaux is described burying his food underground outside, like a dog—or an ant.[42] But with his discovery of the dictionary the following year, begins a gradual process of dissociation from the animal world and of integration in human society. No longer behaving like an animal, the child becomes a spectator of animal behaviour as suggested by his fascinated watching of fighting ants from 1911 onwards.[43] After a long eclipse which coincides with his intellectual development, particularly with the onset of his literary vocation and career, Michaux's body re-enters the text in the entry for 1957 in the guise of a broken right elbow which temporarily leaves him unable to use his right hand and, therefore, write.[44] Finally, the 'Renseignements' close on his Nordic body's reassertion of its empire over his self-made Latin self, much as in the Postface to *Plume* (1938) 'toute sa vie [est] harmonisé[e] sans qu'il le sache, aux organes, aux glandes, à la vie cachée de son corps, à ses déficiences physiques'.[45] As his body reasserts itself, and, through it, his Nordic heritage, Michaux at the close of the 'Renseignements' returns to the anonymity of those who, like his compatriots in 'En Belgique' (which, interestingly, he subsequently retitled 'Sa patrie') are no more than the sum of the characteristics which they have inherited from their ancestors.[46]

Going further than he does in the 'Renseignements', Michaux in 'En Belgique'/'Sa patrie' explicitly described Belgianness as a hereditary taint. 'Race de métis qui n'est ni Nord ni Sud', Belgians in this earlier text were portrayed as 'une race infecte' by the former medical student, whose familiarity with a number of the teratological theories elaborated during the nineteenth century leads me to suspect the influence over him of those nineteenth-century discourses suggesting that human hybridization results in atavism.[47] Even if the 'Renseignements' do not portray Belgians as 'une race infecte', illness and fatigue nevertheless

[42] See p. cxxx.
[43] See ibid.
[44] See ibid., p. cxxxiv.
[45] Ibid. 664.
[46] See ibid. 268–9.
[47] See ibid. 269 and 995; see Anne-Élisabeth Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète* (Paris: Séli Arslan, 1998), 166–77, esp. 168; and see Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 129.

metaphorically point to the close association of heredity and infection in Michaux's autobiography. As in the Postface of *Plume*, it is in his physical deficiencies that his Nordic heritage triumphs. Contrasting the German roots of a grandparent with the Spanish antecedents of another, and describing his father as an Ardennnais and his mother as a Walloon at the opening of the 'Renseignements', Michaux does not merely give his readers a factual account of his origins: he suggests elsewhere that both his parents were Ardennais.[48] It is for a purpose that he emphasizes the hybridity of his ancestors, and this is not only in order to retrace Belgium's tangled national past through his family tree, as I have suggested earlier. Instead, as is suggested by the anaemia that afflicts the child at the opening of the text, this mixed heritage metonymically points to Michaux's pathological construction, in 'En Belgique', of the 'race de métis' from which he is issued.[49] In the same way that in 'Portrait de A.' (1930) his childhood disease manifests itself in the refusal of food and explicitly comes to an end with his simultaneous acceptance of nourishment and the alphabet, so the child's anaemia in the 'Renseignements' is associated with his 'dégoût des aliments' and is implicitly cured at the time of his discovery of the dictionary.[50] In both cases, the return of health heralds the protagonist's accession to a new literary (or, rather, cultural) identity. Just as the disease of the blood affecting a child still entirely defined by his bloodline at the opening of the 'Renseignements' exhibits his impersonal Nordicity, so osteoporosis, at the close of the work, dramatizes the reassertion within his bones of the forgotten skeletons of his ancestors. With this manifestation of his heritage comes the promise of his impending annihilation.[51]

Pitting his cultural Latinity against his biological Nordicity in the 'Renseignements', Michaux does not consistently associate his creativity with the elaboration of a triumphant Latinity at odds with his native Nordicity, however. Instead, he presents his turn to painting in 1925 as an event that at once mirrors his decision to write three years before and stands in contradiction with his literary identity:

[48] Michaux, *OC* i. 995. [49] See ibid., p. cxxix.
[50] 'A l'âge de sept ans il apprit l'alphabet et mangea' (ibid. 609); see also p. cxxx.
[51] See ibid., p. cxxxiv.

1922, Bruxelles	Lecture de Maldoror. Sursaut . . . qui bientôt déclenche en lui le besoin, longtemps oublié, d'écrire.
1925	Klee, puis Ernst, Chirico . . . Extrême surprise. Jusque-là il haïssait la peinture et le fait même de peindre, 'comme s'il n'y avait pas encore assez de réalité, de cette abominable réalité, pensait-il. Encore vouloir la répéter, y revenir!'[52]

At odds with both his childhood dreams 'sans images sans mots' and the broken right hand which makes writing and painting impossible toward the end, the double creative impetus provoked by Lautréamont on the one hand, and Klee, Ernst, and di Chirico on the other, is at the centre of the 'Renseignements'.[53] Just as the reading of Lautréamont's masterpiece led Michaux to write, so the viewing of Surrealist paintings led him to experiment with the visual arts: although there is no mention in the 'Renseignements' of his first ventures into visual expression in 1925, it nevertheless is believed that Michaux started to draw and paint that same year.[54] Emphasizing the similarities between his encounters with the works of Klee, Ernst, and di Chirico, and with *Maldoror* through his use of rhetorical and structural echoes, Michaux further isolates the two seminal events from the rest of the text by framing them on either side with two years of voyages and 'emplois divers'.[55] But his first encounter with Klee, Ernst, and di Chirico does not merely expand on his discovery of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*. His '*sur*prise' at the discovery that painting need not be a mimetic art alliteratively echoes not just his '*sur*saut' on reading Lautréamont for the first time, but also the taste which he had during his adolescence for reading about the lives of the most '*sur*prenants' of saints.[56] Similarly, if the desire to leave behind 'cette abominable réalité' undoubtedly informed his taste for Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* as much as it did his contemporaries' in the 1920s, it nevertheless also recalls the pleasure which he took as a child in isolating himself from the world through the study of Latin.

For all their parallels, Michaux's discovery of Lautréamont in 1922 and of Surrealist art in 1925 are nevertheless presented as antithetic moments. Indeed, the double discovery mediates the

[52] 'A l'âge de sept ans il apprit l'alphabet et mangea' (ibid. 609); see also p. cxxxii.
[53] Ibid., p. cxxix. [54] See ibid., p. lxxxvi. [55] Ibid., p. cxxxii.
[56] (My emphasis) ibid., p. cxxxi.

shift of focus between the concern with writing which dominates the first part of the 'Renseignements', and the interest in visual expression which is pre-eminent in the second. If Michaux's experiences with words, languages, and literature are at the centre of the first half of the 'Renseignements,' the second part of his autobiography privileges a record of his increasing confidence as a visual artist and mostly neglects his literary achievements. In contrast with the 'pays sur lesquels il écrit trop vite' in 1930–1, and the implied failure of *Un Barbare en Asie* (1933), not mentioned in the text, Michaux notes the date of his first exhibition in 1937 and the steadfastly growing commitment to visual expression that it manifests.[57] Although he documents his editorial work for the journal *Hermès* in 1938, he passes under silence the important publication that same year of *Plume précédé de lointain intérieur*. In consequence, the 'voyages de convalescence loin des maux' on which he embarks with his tuberculous wife in 1947 appear to herald not just an attempt to escape illness, but, by homophony, an effort to be rid of words. Whereas Michaux first described writing and reading as liberating voyages of expatriation in the first part of his autobiography, then, he hints in the second that he travels (and paints) in order to avoid words. Indeed, whereas the discovery of words cured the anaemia of the child who preferred to bury his food in the ground in the first half of the text, it is language, implicitly, which is linked to illness in the second half. With the death of his wife from fatal burns the following year, these associations and Michaux's increasing reluctance to write seem confirmed, anticipating his representation of Marie-Louise's horrible death as an event which crushed his poetic voice but unleashed his vocation as a visual artist in *Épreuves-exorcismes* (1972): 'Février 1948. Mort de sa femme des suites d'atroces brûlures. 1951–52–53. Il écrit de moins en moins, il peint davantage.'[58]

Yet Michaux was not, in fact, stunned into silence by this tragedy. On the contrary, the event led him to write some of his most moving texts, from 'Adieux d'Anhimaharua' (1954) to 'Iniji' (1972). Indeed, the 1950s coincided with a period of literary renewal as he embarked on the experiences with mescaline which were to inspire some of his more experimental verbal, as well as visual, works. Although he kept on writing up to his death

[57] Ibid., p. cxxxiii. [58] Ibid., p. cxxxiv.

in 1984, Michaux nevertheless consistently declared a loss of interest in verbal expression in his texts and interviews, as though it were not possible to claim a simultaneous devotion to both activities. Indeed, the antithesis and structural parallelism of 'Il écrit de moins en moins, il peint davantage' not only mirrors the shift of interest between the first and the second parts of the 'Renseignements', but reflects the belief which he states from at least *Peintures* (1939) onwards that painting and writing are parallel yet mutually exclusive endeavours.[59] The apparently irresoluble dichotomy that Michaux suggests separates verbal and visual expression metonymically re-enacts the larger conflict underlying his creativity in the 'Renseignements': that of the self torn between its Latinity and Nordicity, between the desire for a self-created individual identity and the acceptance of the illusoriness of that individuality. Just as the discovery of the singular French figure of Lautréamont by one who sought to reinvent himself as Latin contrasts with the impetus given to Michaux's artistic career by a trio of painters whose Mediterranean and Nordic identities recall his Dutch and Spanish heritage, so Michaux's progressive loss of interest in writing recapitulates his gradual renunciation to Latinity. With 'la peinture toute Germanique'[60] for him as for Maeterlinck, the reassertion of Michaux's Nordicity at the end of the 'Renseignements' coincides not just with the defeat of his fragile literary Latinity in the face of the onslaughts of his biological heritage, but with the development of his identity as a visual artist.

But is Michaux's Nordicity quite so unambiguously at odds with his literary identity as the switch in emphasis between his vocations as a writer and as a visual artist in the 'Renseignements' appears to imply? Mediating his discoveries of Lautréamont and of Surrealist art, his discussion of his fraught relationship with his patronymic suggests that this is perhaps not the case:

> 1924, Il écrit, mais toujours partagé.
> Paris. N'arrive pas à trouver un pseudonyme qui l'englobe, lui, ses tendances, ses virtualités. Il continue à signer de son nom vulgaire, qu'il déteste, dont il a honte, pareil à une étiquette

[59] 'A l'âge de sept ans il apprit l'alphabet et mangea' See 705.

[60] Maurice Maeterlinck, *Le Cahier bleu*, ed. Joanne Wieland-Burston (Ghent: Éditions de la Fondation Maurice Maeterlinck, 1977), 102.

> qui porterait la mention 'qualité inférieure'. Peut-être le garde-t-il par fidélité au mécontentement et à l'insatisfaction. Il ne produira donc jamais dans la fierté, mais traînant toujours ce boulet qui se placera à la fin de chaque œuvre, le préservant ainsi du sentiment même réduit de triomphe et d'accomplissement.[61]

Situated halfway between the beginning of his literary career in 1922 and of his artistic vocation in 1925, these lines suggest the centrality of Michaux's split self to his creativity. Counterbalancing the assertiveness of 'il écrit' with the cautious 'mais toujours partagé', Michaux plays on the ambiguities of the phrase: pointing to the intimate split underlying his half-hearted adhesion to his literary project, he simultaneously suggests that, still true in 1924, the situation will never change. Although the 'surprise' that he feels on discovering Surrealist painting does, to some extent, appear to heal the rift opened by his decision to write in the 'Renseignements', writing itself, it becomes clear, is not about articulating a unified voice so much as managing the split self's dissonant utterances. Signing one's works is therefore a fraught activity. With the self an unstable fiction, no single signature can be adequate. Not only are all names, including one's own, reduced to ill-fitting pseudonyms, but no one name or pseudonym can do justice to the multiplicity of authorial voices at play in any one work. The would-be novelist who finds himself writing philosophy in spite of himself in *Qui je fus* (1927), the poet dispossessed of his own inspiration in 'L'Avenir de la poésie' (*c.* 1936), and the author who did not write his works in the Postface of *Plume*, all find an echo in Michaux's ill-fated quest for a name.[62]

Michaux's account of his decision to sign his works with his family name mirrors his failure successfully to repress his Nordicity and turn himself into a Latin writer in the 'Renseignements'. Although his French-sounding surname might be said to point to his Latinity, its 'vulgarity' nevertheless undermines any pretensions to singularity. Condemning him instead to the quasi-anonymity of one who is lost in a crowd of similarly named others, it robs him of the individual identity which it appears to suggest. Indeed, vulgar in the sense that it does not distinguish him as a separate individual but forces him to blend in with the crowd of his predecessors, his name inevitably recalls the shameful vulgarity

[61] Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. cxxxii.
[62] Ibid. 79, 968, and 665 and see Chapter 4.

which he has associated with Belgium from childhood, when he was '*honteux* de ce qui l'entoure, de tout ce qui l'entoure, de tout ce qui depuis sa venue au monde l'a entouré, *honteux* de lui-même, de n'être que ce qu'il est'.[63] In the same way that, in 'Portrait de A.', the child's mortified sense of self spurred him onto a lifelong exploration of all the ways of suffering that exist, 'les honteuses surtout', Michaux can be said to project his early self-loathing onto his works by signing them with his name.[64] Dragging his texts down like a metaphorical ball and chain, his signature at once exhibits his Nordicity and exposes the fictional nature of the self-made Latin self. Under the guise of endorsing his authorial status as a Latin writer, Michaux displays the elusiveness of that mythical status through his signature.

At the same time, Michaux's body, a privileged trope for his Nordicity in the 'Renseignements', is not quite so at odds with his literary identity as might appear from its association with the defeat of his Latinity at the end of the text. Just as the onset of Michaux's hereditary bone disease announces the end of any illusions that he might have entertained about the possibility of self-reinvention in the 'Renseignements', what he more generally calls his 'déficiences physiques' in the Postface of *Plume* manifest the fragility of the conscious self in the face of the unconscious or subconscious.[65] The body, particularly the ailing body, is the locus of the unconscious for Michaux, who was profoundly influenced by the nineteenth-century French psychologist Théodule Ribot in his youth.[66] If weariness is so treacherous in 'Fatigue II' (1927), for example, it is because it menaces the integrity of the self: 'Une fatigue, c'est le bloc "moi" qui s'effrite.'[67] It is not only his physical existence that Michaux's Nordicity conditions, but his entire personality: 'ses intentions, ses passions, sa *libido dominandi*, sa

[63] (My emphasis) ibid., p. cxxx. [64] Ibid. i. 612.

[65] As many writers of his generation, Michaux did not distinguish clearly or consistently between the two terms. For the sake of simplicity, I shall therefore speak from now on of the 'unconscious'. Unless specified otherwise, this will not be in order to describe a specific psychological or psychoanalytical concept, but rather with reference to Michaux's own hybrid conception of what constitutes the underside of the conscious self. (For examples of Michaux's indiscriminate use of the notions of unconsciousness and subconsciousness, see Postface to *Plume* (Michaux, *OC* i. 663 and 665) and *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit et les innombrables petites*, 20).

[66] See Jean-Pierre Martin, *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* (Paris: Corti, 1994), 107.

[67] Michaux, *OC* i. 90.

mythomanie, sa nervosité, son désir d'avoir raison, de triompher, de séduire, d'étonner, de croire et de faire croire à ce qui lui plaît, de tromper, de se cacher, ses appétits et dégoûts, ses complexes, et toute sa vie'.[68] Not only will Michaux's efforts to assert himself as an individual through literature eventually fail, then, but even attempting to escape his heritage is impossible, as he makes clear at the opening of the Postface of *Plume*:

> J'ai, plus d'une fois, senti en moi des 'passages' de mon père. Aussitôt, je me cabrais. J'ai vécu contre mon père (et contre ma mère et contre mon grand-père, ma grand-mère, mes arrière-grands-parents); faute de les connaître, je n'ai pu lutter contre de plus anciens aïeux.
>
> Faisant cela, quel ancêtre inconnu ai-je laissé vivre en moi?
>
> En général, je ne suivais pas la pente. En ne suivant pas la pente, de quel ancêtre inconnu ai-je suivi la pente?[69]

With unconscious ancestral influences pervading his conscious self, it becomes clear that not only can there can be no reinvention of the self as a Latin writer for Michaux in the Postface of *Plume*, but literary inspiration itself is intimately bound up with the correlated impersonal forces of the past, the body, and the unconscious. 'Lecteur,' declares Michaux at the end of the essay, '*tu tiens donc ici*, comme il arrive souvent, *un livre que n'a pas fait l'auteur*, quoiqu'un monde y ait participé.'[70]

What then of the apparent dichotomy between Michaux's Nordicity and literary identity in the 'Renseignements'? In spite of the negative overtones that he gives his Nordicity, and in spite of the prestige with which he endows French culture in the 'Renseignements', Michaux both acknowledges the influence of his Nordicity over his creativity and subtly subverts the authority of the French tradition in the same text. Displacing his progenitors with literary father figures in order to reinvent himself, he does not unambiguously lay claim to the French literary tradition. Only a minority of the literary father figures that he invokes in the 'Renseignements' are French. These are Ernest Hello and Lautréamont: Paulhan was his guide in the maze of the Parisian literary world, rather than one of those who inspired him to write. By contrast with Paulhan, who was very much a Frenchman and a pillar of Parisian letters, both Hello and Lautréamont were marginal figures with ambiguous literary and personal identities.

[68] Ibid. 664. [69] Ibid. 662. [70] Ibid. 665.

A Catholic of Breton origin, Hello (1828–85) was a hagiographer whose mysticism would have been considered a by-product of his 'primitive' regional roots by his Parisian contemporaries. In the same way that he thought that nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century primitivism reacted to the proliferation of scientific and technological discoveries at those times, the adult Michaux conceived of mysticism as an antidote to the blind faith in science that he felt affected his own contemporaries as much as it did Hello's.[71] As an adolescent, Michaux's attraction to Hello had been founded in a youthful mysticism which had culminated in a desire to achieve sanctity, or at least take vows.[72] At the same time, the texts translated by the hagiographer had presented an alternative to the canonical and mostly classical writers to which he was being exposed at school.[73] This aspect of his interest in Hello survived into adulthood: as late as 1925, Michaux was still contrasting '[l]es petits hommes qui aiment écrire'—Cicero, La Bruyère, and Bazin—to Hello, whom he put on a par with Christ and Lautréamont.[74]

Also soaring above literary mediocrity, and at least as much at odds with the French classical tradition, were Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* (1869). With one foot in a mythic 'bord[ ] des Amazones' inspired by his Uruguayan childhood, and another on a fifth-floor Parisian garret,[75] Lautréamont had in common with Michaux the predicament of a double identity. Although Michaux never commented on Ducasse's South American past, this double identity may well have been a factor in the strength of an identification which is most evident in 'Il se croit Maldoror' (1922), where his voice resounds with the echoes of Lautréamont's. If Michaux distanced himself from his Belgian mentors and literary friends shortly after his move to Paris, he nevertheless seems to have sought out the company of writers who were not entirely at home in France, as is suggested by his friendships at that time with Alfredo Gangotena and Supervielle. There are in fact curious

[71] See Michaux, *OC* 12 and 177–8. [72] See ibid. 996.

[73] 'Il [Hello] me galvanisait et me servait à rejeter tous les autres écrivains qu'on me faisait étudier' (Michaux quoted in Bréchon, *Michaux*, 208).

[74] Michaux, *OC* i. 68; Michaux was not continually enthusiastic about Hello, however: in the Postface of *Plume*, for example, he relegated him to the rank of minor great figure from the past (see Michaux, *OC* i. 663).

[75] Lautréamont and Germain Nouveau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Pierre-Olivier Walzer (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 205 and see 186.

correspondences between the accounts that Michaux made of Gangotena and Supervielle, on the one hand, and of Lautréamont, on the other. In the 'Renseignements', Michaux's portrait of the Ecuadorian Gangotena as 'un poète habité par le génie et le malheur [qui] meurt jeune' is oddly reminiscent of the figure of the *poète maudit* that Lautréamont popularly incarnates, as indeed was his earlier assessment of the nineteenth-century poet as '[un] désespéré' and '[un] maudit' in a 1932 review.[76] Similarly, his account in that earlier text of Gangotena's predilection in his writings for 'le complexe sang-maladie-malédiction', evokes Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*[77]—or indeed Michaux's own association of his un-French Nordicity with a similar sense of doom. Although not mentioned in the 'Renseignements', Supervielle, who shared a 'deuxième patrie' in Uruguay with Lautréamont, was the only other literary figure whose influence Michaux ever acknowledged with comparative enthusiasm to the South American poet's. In the mid-1920s, in particular, Michaux had considered Supervielle to be the incarnation of 'la poésie vivante', rhetorically identifying him with Christ, in much the same way that he had Lautréamont (and Hello) around the same time.[78]

But Hello and Lautréamont may do more than simply point to Michaux's ambivalence toward the classical French tradition or suggest his affinity with those 'French' writers, who, like him, are haunted by an 'elsewhere'. Viewed collectively with his other self-confessed literary fathers in the 'Renseignements'—Ruysbroeck, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and the 'Jeunes Belgique'—a broader picture emerges, both of Hello and Lautréamont's significance, and of the other writers whose influence Michaux acknowledges. Rather than merely suggesting his diffidence toward French classicism by invoking these figures, Michaux may in fact be paying a quiet tribute to the Belgian literary tradition. Read in France at the end of the nineteenth century by decadent writers such as Huysmans, followed at the beginning of the twentieth by conservative Catholics such as Claudel, Hello was also an important figure for the Belgian symbolists at the turn of the century. Maeterlinck, in particular, put Hello on a pedestal, side by side with Emerson and Pascal.[79] Similarly, although Michaux mentions Angela of

[76] Michaux, *OC* i. 962. [77] Ibid. [78] Ibid. 996 and see 68.
[79] Maurice Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles* (Paris: MDF, 1896), 131–3.

Foligno and Joseph of Cupertino (on both of whom Hello has written) in *Écuador*, for example, it may not be insignificant that only the Flemish mystic 'Ruysbroeck l'Admirable' gets a mention in the 'Renseignements'.[80] By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Ruysbroeck had become something of an emblem of the Flemish—or indeed Belgian—genius, through Maeterlinck's 1891 translation of *L'Ornement des noces spirituelles*. Criticizing Hello's own French rendition of Ruysbroeck for being somewhat dull and monotonous, Maeterlinck had pointed out that, rather than having been made from the original Flemish, Hello's translation was based on a Latin version which was oblivious to the 'bizarre colours' of the original.[81] Arguing that Hello's text further edited out the savagery, naivety, and barbarism of Ruysbroeck's work, Maeterlinck had suggested that Hello and his predecessors had failed because of their Latin insensitivity to 'l'âme flamande'.[82] Implying that it took a Belgian to translate a Flemish text into French, he had hinted at important divergences between the French and the Belgian sensibilities and literary traditions. Ruysbroeck became emblematic of these differences for a whole generation.

At least as important for the 'Jeunes Belgique' was Lautréamont. If the *poète maudit* remained obscure enough in nineteenth-century France for Gide to declare his infuence to have been 'null' until the twentieth century,[83] this was not the case in Belgium. Lautréamont was first discovered in 1884 by the editor of *La Jeune Belgique*, Max Waller, who rapidly spread his admiration for the *Chants de Maldoror* to the journal's other contributors and readers.[84] Indeed, claimed by the 'Jeunes Belgique' over twenty years before the French avant-garde, Lautréamont has been seen as an emblem of the flair of an avant-garde Belgian literary tradition which all too often is thought merely to have been derivative. It is of course quite likely that Michaux's discovery of Lautréamont in

[80] Michaux, *OC* i. 178.

[81] See Maurice Maeterlinck, Introduction to Jan van Ruysbroeck, *L'Ornement des noces spirituelles*, trans. from the Flemish by Maeterlinck (Brussels: Les Éperonniers, 1990), 84–5.

[82] Ibid. 85 and 33.

[83] André Gide, Preface to the 1925 special ed. of *Le Disque vert* on 'Le Cas Lautréamont' (quoted in Lautréamont and Germain Nouveau, *Œuvres complètes*, 38).

[84] See Walzer, introduction to Lautréamont and Germain Nouveau, *Œuvres complètes*, 38.

1922 was the result of the enthusiastic following that the latter had started gathering in France from the mid-1910s,[85] rather than the manifestation of any literary debt to the 'Jeunes Belgique'. What is certain, however, is that he knew the importance of Lautréamont for the Belgian tradition when he invoked the seminal role played by the *poète maudit* for his literary vocation in a 1925 issue of *Le Disque vert* which appears to have been dedicated to Lautréamont at his suggestion.[86] In the same issue of the Belgian avant-garde literary journal, George Eckoud, the former 'Jeune Belgique' who Michaux mentions in his 1924 'Lettre de Belgique', reported the role of his generation in discovering the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror* in the mid-1880s.

Although I am not aware of anything that might suggest that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were particularly significant for the Belgian literary tradition in and of themselves, it is nevertheless worth noting that when, in the mid-nineteenth century, Belgians sought to distance themselves from the French literary tradition, it was to 'l'esprit du Nord' that they turned—and in particular to the Russian tradition.[87] Not only was the Nordicity of Russian writing considered an alternative to the Latin classicism of French letters, but the sensibility of the Russians (and of 'Nordics' in general, from the Germans to the English and the Scandinavians) was felt to have close affinities with the Flemish sensibility. Indeed, Maeterlinck, in *Le Cahier bleu*, suggests that it is by looking to these other Nordic traditions and forgoing their Latin education that Belgians might achieve the literary breakthrough that they needed in order to carry their own tradition forward: 'A quelles étranges choses n'arriverons-nous pas quand nous aurons oublié une fois pour toutes l'éducation classique; car c'est là seul que gît l'inconnu et les races latines n'y parviendront jamais qu'après les races germaniques (ou slaves) comme l'indique la littérature du siècle.'[88] Although it was very attentive to French literary developments,

[85] See e.g. André Breton, '*Les Chants de Maldoror* par le Comte de Lautréamont', *La Nouvelle Revue française* (1 June 1920), in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 233–5 and 1254–5.

[86] See Michaux, *OC* i. 1041–2; and see Robert Frickx, 'L'Influence de Lautréamont sur les poètes de la "Jeune Belgique" ', in Paul Delsemme, Roland Mortier, and Jacques Detemmerman (eds.), *Regards sur les lettres françaises de Belgique* (Brussels: André de Rache, 1976), 146–7.

[87] See Charlier, *Le Mouvement romantique en Belgique (1815–1850)*, 469.

[88] See Maeterlinck, *Le Cahier bleu*, 114.

Le Disque vert—the avant-garde Belgian literary journal edited by the nationalist Franz Hellens, which Michaux co-edited on a couple of occasions, and where he regularly published his writings between 1922 and 1925—had inherited Maeterlinck's curiosity of Nordic traditions. Perhaps best exemplified by the title of one of its sections, 'Écrits du Nord', the interest that *Le Disque vert* exhibited in Nordic writing cannot have escaped Michaux, whose 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur' (1922) was a contribution to the column.[89] Throughout his literary career, moreover, Michaux closely associated the qualities of mysticism and childlikeness that Dostoevsky's eponymous 'Idiot' embodies, and that Maeterlinck (among others) linked to Nordicity. In the 'Renseignements', in particular, Michaux's portrait of himself as a Nordic child '[qui] rêve à la permanence, à une perpétuité sans changement'[90] is not without spiritual overtones. Although they are not developed explicitly in the 1958 text, they recall Michaux's overtly spiritual construction of his childhood in his largely autobiographical 'Portrait de A.' (1930).[91] At another level, Michaux's predilection for the mystical and the childlike can be said to inform his choice of literary father figures, particularly 'Ruysbroeck l'admirable qui faisait tout de travers'.[92]

Last but not least from the point of view of Michaux's self-inscription in the Belgian literary tradition in the 'Renseignements' is his inclusion of the 'Jeunes Belgique' among his literary fathers, in a line that recalls the homage that he paid to the same movement thirty-four years before in 'Lettre de Belgique': 'Lectures aussi des excentriques, des extravagants ou des "Jeunes Belgique" à la langue bizarre qu'il voudrait plus bizarre encore.'[93] Depicting Belgium and his Belgian heritage as though they were radically at odds not only with his French literary identity, but with literature and culture in general, as we have seen, Michaux in the 'Renseignements' nevertheless acknowledges both that there is a Belgian literary tradition and that it has marked him. Indeed, retrospectively illuminating the claims which he has just laid to Hello, Ruysbroeck, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Lautréamont, his invocation of *La Jeune Belgique* suggests that the movement was seminal to the development of his literary identity. However, even if it self-consciously dedicated itself to the publication of

[89] See Michaux, *OC* i. 1022. [90] Ibid., p. cxxix. [91] See ibid. 609.
[92] Ibid. 178. [93] Ibid., p. cxxxi.

contemporary Belgian writing, *La Jeune Belgique* was a rather derivative literary movement, which remained heavily indebted to the French tradition and fearful of distancing itself from the Parisian centre.[94] In consequence, Michaux's invocation of *La Jeune Belgique* in his autobiography could hardly be said to exhibit his enthusiasm for Belgium's assertion of its marginal literary identity, if it were not for the positively connotated extravagance, excentricity, and stylistic bizarreness that he attributes to it. These, however, are hardly the terms that one would spontaneously associate with the rather stilted aesthetic of *La Jeune Belgique*. Instead, these words would more appropriately describe the works of those writers whose exasperation with the conformism of *La Jeune Belgique* led them to break with it and found the at once more daring and more nationalistic *Le Coq rouge* in 1895. The contradiction between the terms in which Michaux describes the 'Jeunes Belgique' and the Francophile movement's reluctance to endorse literary experimentation that had not originated in the Parisian centre is typical of his simultaneous attempts to exhibit and repress the influence of his Nordic heritage over his writings in the 'Renseignements'. As we shall see in the next chapter, such contradictory impulses extend far beyond Michaux's construction of his particular identity in 'Quelques renseignements', to his entire examination of the self.

[94] See Raymond Vervliet, 'Proto avant-garde' and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, 'Le Phénomène "Jeune Belgique": Un accident historique', in Weisberger (ed.), *Les Avant-gardes littéraires en Belgique*, 88–90 and 91–9.

2

SELF AND OTHER

Far from being solipsistic, Michaux's quest for self-knowledge embraced the outside world. Through the exploration of his differences from those set apart from himself by gender, 'race', or age, or indeed by historical, cultural, or social circumstances, he probed the *unheimlich* within. Non-Europeans, women, children, peasants, lunatics, prehistorical people, even animals and plants: nothing escaped his curiosity. As with his primitivist predecessors and contemporaries, from Rousseau to Cendrars, whose *Anthologie nègre* (1921) directly inspired his *Fables des origines* (1923),[1] this fascination with the otherness of others, as it were, expressed a desire to experience identity through alterity.[2] There are no clear-cut boundaries between Self and Other in Michaux's works. If on the one hand he emphasizes the difference of children from adults in 'Enfants' (1938), the first-person narrator of 'Mes rêves d'enfant' (1925), on the other hand, speaks with the voices of both an adult and a child. Similarly, if according to Michaux men are irreconcilably estranged from 'l'étonnant phénomène, à jamais inconnu, mystérieux, d'être femme',[3] the narrators of a number of his texts, such as 'La Ralentie' and 'Je vous écris d'un pays lointain' (both 1938) are feminine. Indeed, the gender of the protagonists of Michaux's texts can be as unstable as their age: in 'Cas de folie circulaire' (1922), the first-person narrator's persona shifts rapidly from little girl, to schoolboy, and to elderly woman. In texts such as 'Épervier de ta faiblesse, domine!' (1944) the narrator is at once male and female, father and mother. In the same way, if the narrator of 'Les Ravagés' (1981) is a sane observer of mentally ill patients, in 'Tapis roulant en marche' (1967), by contrast, it is him who is out of kilter. Although these slippages question the boundaries between Self and Other, Michaux nevertheless hesitated

[1] See Jean-Pierre Martin, *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* (Paris: Corti, 1994), 146.
[2] Henri Meschonnic, *Modernité, modernité* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1988), 283.
[3] Michaux, *OC* ii. 301.

between the ecstasy of communion and the fear of being completely absorbed by the Other. It is his negotiation of questions of identity and difference that I will explore in this chapter.

In his quest for self-knowledge, Michaux placed himself in that modernist tradition where 'la première étude de l'homme qui veut être poète est sa propre connaissance, entière'.[4] But he denounced the vanity of solipsistic introspection. Even in those of his works written in the first-person, he does not endow the self with any stability. Instead, first person utterances are constantly threatened with dissolution by the insubstantial and unstable self to which they give a voice:

> Aujourd'hui, je proclame dur et sec que je suis comme ceci. Fixe là-dessus!
> déclarant que je maintiendrai serré sur cette affirmation
> et puis . . . arrive demain . . . a tourné le vent, ne reviendra plus
> il ne s'agit pas ni d'être ni de ne pas être
> il s'agit du *de ce que*
>
> Qu'il se trouve enfin pour de bon et s'exprime
> cet être de gaz et de mystification
> avec son 'moi, moi, moi, moi' toujours et tout gros dans la bouche;
> on voudrait tant penser à autre chose[5]

Infinitely slippery, the self that Michaux describes in these lines from 'Toujours son "Moi"' (1927) eludes the clear-cut ontological categories of Hamlet's neatly dichotomous dilemma. 'To be or not to be' is beside the point if being merges with non-being. Reduced to a deceptive whiff, or indeed to a misleading myth, the self defies conventional linguistic expression. Attempts to define it merely exhibit the inability of words to deal with what escapes ready-made categories, as the furiously italicized but flatly inexpressive 'il s'agit du *de ce que*' suggests, for all its open-ended vagueness. Unable to think of anything but that wind-like self, yet not confident that his thoughts on the subject can be verbalized, Michaux confronts the failure of solipsistic writing in 'Toujours son "Moi"'. As the confidently subjective 'je' on which the text opened turns into a more interpersonal 'on', introspection becomes a concern

[4] Arthur Rimbaud, Letter to Paul Demeny (15 May 1871) (Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 251).
[5] Michaux, *OC* i. 112–13.

with the Other as much as with the individual self. Once again, 'JE' is revealed to be, and to reveal itself in, 'un autre'.[6]

If the limits of linguistic self-exploration eventually led Rimbaud to relinquish the fictive tam-tams of *Une saison en enfer* in favour of those of Africa, Michaux, in contrast, was not seriously tempted to displace writing with travel. Instead, travelling both anticipates writing and gives it its significance. Just as, in 'Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence', it is on his return from Flanders that the schoolboy Michaux discovered the pleasures of language, so it is on his return to Brussels in 1922, after a year at sea, that he started to write. In the same way that he turned to writing after a stint as a sailor in 1920, so his 1927 journey to Ecuador later started him on the eponymous book. Just as there is no travelling without writing, so there is no writing without travelling for Michaux. Declaring in *Passages* (1950) that he wrote 'pour [s]e parcourir', he even represented his literary activity as a form of travelling, drawing a familiar comparison between his inner voyages and geographical wanderings.[7] From his travel books of the late 1920s and early 1930s to the imaginary journeys of *Ailleurs* (1948, 1967) to the writings on drugs of the 1950s and 1960s, with their extraordinary accounts of the landscapes of the mind, Michaux's texts move seamlessly from explorations of the unknown that lies outside the self to explorations of the areas of darkness within.

'Il est et se voudrait ailleurs, essentiellement *ailleurs, autre*,' writes Michaux in 'Qui il est' (1939) further entwining the geographical and the ontological.[8] In *Mes propriétés* (1929) introspection takes the shape of land surveys. Conversely, in *Écuador* (also 1929) Michaux's South American adventure doubles as an introspective journey. Sailing towards the American continent, an altogether different kind of voyage begins. Sinking into a dreamlike space at the bottom of the ocean as much as moving across geographical expanses, he describes himself simultaneously bound for introspective depths and for Quito. The two journeys continue to coexist on land: the Ecuadorian scenery doubles into the screen on which he projects intimate thoughts. 'Couleur d'ecchymoses', the soil reflects the colour of his flesh bruised by days of horseback

[6] Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes*, 250.
[7] Michaux, *OC* ii. 345.
[8] (My emphasis) ibid. i. 705.

riding, while the 'livid' houses of Quito evoke 'une lente circulation de caillots de sang' to the poet concerned with the effects of altitude on his heart.[9] Indeed, Michaux's body and the Ecuadorian landscape are so closely intertwined that it can be difficult to dissociate them from each other. Whereas the crater of the Atacatzho through which the wind blows functions as an image of the hole in his heart (his *souffle au cœur*), his heart itself is repeatedly described as though it were a crater.[10]

Because 'tous les spectacles de la nature sont des spectacles en écho'[11] for Michaux, his travel narratives are not without affinities with the medieval and Renaissance travel narratives, whose literary influence he acknowledged in his 'lettre mémo' to Bertelé.[12] Travelling in search of self-knowledge, Michaux betrayed the belief of his early predecessors that, in the words of Claude Kappler, 'les structures de l'univers ont avec les structures mentales d'étonnantes correspondances'.[13] The distinction between what is 'real' and what is imaginary is as inoperative in his works as it was in the medieval and Renaissance travel narratives that he liked to read.[14] Just as in the world described by these early travellers, mythic creatures coexisted with existing ones, and sometimes informed their portraits of the latter, so Michaux juxtaposes and intermixes the natural and the imaginary in his writings. This is particularly striking in *Mes propriétés*:

> . . . Là je vis aussi l'Auroch, la Parpue, la Darelette, l'Épigrue, la Cartive avec la tête en forme de poire, la Meige, l'Émeu avec du pus dans les oreilles, la Courtipliane avec sa démarche d'Eunuque; des Vampires, des hypédruches à la queue noire, . . . le Cartuis avec son odeur de chocolat, . . . les singes Rina, les singes Tirtis, les singes Macbélis, les singes 'ro' s'attaquant à tout, sifflant par endroits plus aigu et tranchant que perroquets, barbrissant et ramoisant sur tout le paysage . . .
>
> Marchaient au milieu les grands Cowgas, échassiers au plumage nacré, si minces, tout en rotules, en vertèbres et en chapelets osseux, qui font résonner dans leur corps entier ce bruit de mastication et de salivation qui accompagne le manger chez le chien ou chez l'homme fruste.[15]

[9] Ibid. i. 174 and 154.
[10] See e.g. ibid. 202 and 189.
[11] Ibid. ii. 299.
[12] See ibid. i. 994.
[13] Claude Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles à la fin du Moyen-Âge* (Paris: Payot, 1980), 12.
[14] See ibid.
[15] Michaux, *OC* i. 488–9.

Opening in midstream on a deictic that fails to locate anything, 'Notes de zoologie' explores the shifting boundaries of science and fantasy in the gap that separates names from their referents. In this ambiguous world, the invented names of fictional animals with comical attributes ('la Cartive avec la tête en forme de poire', 'la Courtipliane avec sa démarche d'Eunuque', 'le Cartuis avec son odeur de chocolat') exist side by side with beasts the names of which are familiar to us. But it is not easy to distinguish between imaginary and natural creatures. If the 'Vampires' that Michaux describes could be mythical creatures, they might equally be more mundane vampire bats. Similarly, 'aurochs' can be said to be part of nature, because they once had a place in it, and quasi-mythic animals, because they have been extinct for such a long time. Even familiar animal names appear to refer to animals other than those which one would expect because of the descriptions that follow them. The pus which Michaux's emus hoard inside their ears leaves one unsure whether they have much in common with the Australian running bird. The unknown 'Rina', 'Tirtis', 'Macbélis' and ' "ro" ' species of monkeys throw doubt on the status of these animals. Similarly, although Michaux's comparison of the piercing cries of monkeys with the squawking of parrots sounds fairly realistic, the neological 'barbrissant' and 'ramoisant' reinforce one's impression that these creatures do not dwell in nature through their transgression of that other nature that, for francophones, lies in the French linguistic order. Whereas apparently natural creatures have a strangely unnatural aura, more straightforwardly imaginary beasts can seem perfectly ordinary. Michaux's invented 'hypédruches à la queue noire' have both a plausible name evoking the word *perruches* with a Greek prefix, and credible attributes. Despite its incongruously rattling bones, the 'Cowgas' also has a naturalistic aura lacking in the emu, with its foreign-sounding name and portrait as a tall slim wader. Constantly blurring the line between the natural and the fictional, Michaux forces us to confront the ambiguous delimitations of our concepts of nature.

Questioning the boundaries of the mythic and the factual, Michaux refuses not only to segregate the realm of fiction from the observations of naturalists, but even to distinguish between 'scientific' modes of enquiry and imaginative ones. Creative and scientific activities should not be separated, according to him: his

only criticism of Paulhan's *Fleurs de Tarbes* was that it focused on 'la simple littérature' at the expense of the sciences.[16] A former medical student, Michaux never lost his youthful passion for psychology and the natural sciences. Like a number of his contemporaries, from Breton, whose Surrealist aesthetics were influenced by the psychiatric and psychoanalytical theories to which he had been introduced while working at military hospitals during the war,[17] to Leiris, whose works bear the traces of both his unfinished analysis and his affiliation with the Collège de sociologie, Michaux attempted to conciliate scientific and imaginative modes of investigation in his writings.[18] From 'Cas de folie circulaire' (1922), named after a mental disorder diagnosed by the nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Théodule Ribot, to those works in which he records experiences with mind-altering substances that he conducted in collaboration with Henri Ey, Alajouanine, Jean Delay, or Roger Heim, Michaux's writings exhibit his commitment to psychology and psychiatry. They also betray his curiosity about Freud, whose theories and experiments he ambivalently paraphrases and discusses, particularly in *Les Rêves et la jambe* (1923), *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (1969), and *Face à ce qui se dérobe* (1975).[19] Referring his readers back to his own works as well as to those of established psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in his writings on drugs, Michaux even presented himself as a scientific authority in his own right in those works.[20] As fertile a source of inspiration as the sciences of the mind for Michaux, are those which attempt to make sense of the physical world. However, as Anne-Élisabeth Halpern remarks in her study of Michaux's relationship with the sciences, Michaux's interest in the natural sciences was backward-looking. Whereas he kept himself abreast of psychological research, Michaux was more familiar with the texts and theories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural scientists such as Buffon, Darwin, Réaumur, and Haeckel than he was

[16] Ibid., p. cxvii.

[17] See J. H. Matthews, *Surrealism, Insanity, and Poetry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 13–17.

[18] See Michaux, *OC* i. 995; and see Anne-Élisabeth Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète* (Paris: Séli Arslan, 1998).

[19] See Michaux, *OC* i. 23; Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 144; and Michaux, *Face à ce qui se dérobe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 8.

[20] See Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète* (Paris: Séli-Arslan, 1998), 18–19.

with those of twentieth-century geneticists.[21] At one level, this double fascination with the sciences of the mind and with those concerned with the natural world reflects his belief that 'il y a deux réalités: la réalité, le panorama autour de votre tête, le panorama dans votre tête,' and that it is the task of the writer to do justice to both.[22] But it also suggests their unclear demarcation. Just as one's inner 'panorama' is rhetorically duplicated in the 'panorama' of the outside world in the sentence above, so contemporary sciences of the mind recapitulate past theories of the natural world in his works. This ambiguity, together with the parallel which Michaux posits between these two 'panoramas', provides the basis for his metaphors for the unconscious. After a rapid overview of some of the most recurrent of these metaphors and their context, I shall look at some of their more problematic consequences for the reception of Michaux's writings today.

Like many writers since the nineteenth century, but also like many psychologists and psychoanalysts, Michaux exploited the popular analogy between the relationship of the unconscious to the conscious self and that of the animal to the human in the natural sciences. Metaphorically represented as what lies beneath consciousness by nineteenth-century French psychologists such as Janet, as well as by the early Freud, the 'subconscious' was also commonly described as the unevolved, indeed animal, part of the human psyche. The topographical metaphor which situated it beyond one's consciousness found an echo in the position of the animal relative to the human in the Darwinian evolutionary tree. In the 1925 special issue of *Le Disque vert* on 'Freud et la psychanalyse' to which Michaux contributed, for example, Dr Hesnard portrayed the unconscious as 'le *fond animal* des honnêtes gens'.[23] A similar conflation occurs in Freud's own writings, where metaphors for the unconscious are found both in the subterranean world, as exemplified by the buried city of Pompeii in Jensen's *Gradiva*, and in humankind's repressed 'primordial animal condition'.[24] In much the same way, the discov-

[21] See Halpern, *Henri Michaux: Le Laboratoire du poète*, 20–1.

[22] Michaux, *OC* i. 61.

[23] (My emphasis) Dr Hesnard, 'L'Opinion scientifique française et la psychanalyse', *Le Disque vert*, 4–5 (Winter–Spring 1924), 9.

[24] See Sigmund Freud, 'Delusion and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*', in Sigmund Freud *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey and ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin Freud Library xiv, 1985), 76; Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust, Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 18–21; and Sigmund

ery of the unconscious manifests itself through two privileged metaphors in Michaux's texts: the fall 'dans quelque abîme profond' and the 'invasion' of the familiar self by a savage animality.[25] In the texts gathered in *Ailleurs*, in particular, forays into the unconscious are presented as explorations of a strange world of underground rivers, cities, and caves, teeming with wild beasts and other menacing nocturnal creatures.

Whether he represents the part of the self that dwells in one's inner depths as a strange aquatic animal developmentally arrested at the branchial stage, as a gorilla-like primate, or as a half-animal and half-human creature, Michaux conjures a portrait of the unconscious as atavistic.[26] In a proto-Darwinian perspective, animal representations of the unconscious give it a temporal dimension. They locate it at the beginning of time, usually prehistory. In his 1925 review of the impact of psychoanalysis in France, Dr Hesnard, for example, moves seamlessly from the 'fond animal' of humankind to the 'sentiments dignes de la pierre polie' which it reveals.[27] Similarly, when he describes the elaboration of the super-ego in historical terms by situating its birth at 'the beginning of history' when primitive humans renounced animal instincts in favour of laws and morality in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud finds traces of 'the darkness of prehistoric times' in the unconscious.[28] Not only did the unconscious reveal our psychological past for psychologists and psychoanalysts, but prehistorical researches were often thought to shed light on the modern psyche, as the success of works ranging from Rosny's fictional *La Guerre du feu* (1909) to Lévy-Bruhl's *Mentalité primitive* (1922) testifies. In much the same way, Michaux thought that the unconscious hoarded the secrets of humanity's origins as well as of an individual's past. Explicitly describing the unconscious as ancestral, or indeed racial, as we have seen in Chapter 1, he portrays it in the Postface of *Plume* as an axe-wielding brute ever-ready to deal the conscious self a fatal blow.[29] Indeed, in the many texts where Michaux

Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton and cie, 1961), 10.

[25] Michaux, *OC* i. 473; ii. 16.

[26] See ibid., ii. 141, 117, and 13.

[27] Dr Hesnard, 'L'Opinion scientifique française et la psychanalyse', 9.

[28] Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 11; and Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton and cie, 1959), 54.

[29] See Michaux, *OC* i. 663.

dramatizes the combat of the unconscious against the super-ego as that of a bloodthirsty and rebellious crowd against its king, it is difficult not to be reminded of Darwin's theory of the 'primal horde', and of its psychological implications for Freud.[30] In the same way that the exploration of the unconscious is described by Michaux as a voyage toward humanity's prehistorical origins, prehistorical humanity is a privileged trope for the unconscious in his works. From the grunting figures of 'Le Grand Combat' and 'L'Âge héroïque', to the 'Prince pétrifié à la robe de Panthère' of *Peintures*, and to the 'grand velu' and other cave-dwellers of *Ailleurs*, his writings teem with barbaric prehistorical figures pointing to the chaos underlying the civilized conscious self.[31]

Although Bataille declared in 1930 that 'le temps n'est plus où une formule comme "l'ontogénèse répète la phylogénèse" para[isse] devoir venir à bout de toutes les difficultés présentées par l'étude de l'évolution',[32] this belief was not abandoned quite so readily in the first third of the twentieth century. Indeed, Bataille's own criticism of Haeckel's theory did not stop him from giving a very favourable review to Marcel Griaule's *L'Art primitif* (1930), a book based precisely on the premiss that ontology recapitulates phylogeny. Even scientists were not always exempt from such comparisons, as is suggested by Freud's analogy, in *The Future of an Illusion*, between the collective evolution of humanity from prehistorical savagery to civilization and the individual child's transformation from amoral infant to moral adult.[33] But Michaux continued to believe that ontogeny recapitulated philogeny long after most of his contemporaries had ceased to do so. In the posthumously published 'Essais d'enfants, dessins d'enfants' (*Déplacements, dégagements*, 1985), in particular, he not only compares the stages through which children pass as they grow up to those of the embryo in the womb, but he implicitly likens the child's developmental milestones to those that marked human evolution.[34] Indeed, on the road to humanity, children, for him, are lost in a primordial state of nature: his fascination in the same work with what he calls 'l'enfant-singe du Burundi' is telling, as is

[30] Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 54.
[31] See Michaux, *OC* i. 118, 713, and 447; and ii. 43 and 126.
[32] Georges Bataille, 'L'Art primitif', *Documents*, 7 (1930), 389–97.
[33] Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 11.
[34] See Michaux, *Déplacements, dégagements* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 59 and 74.

his suggestion that the lost child was closer to cercopithecus than to human beings.[35] Michaux's persisting belief in Mockel's theory informs his construction of the unconscious. If the exploration of the unconscious leads one to rediscover humankind's collective origins, it simultaneously takes one back to one's own childhood. In as late a work as *Par surprise* (1983), a drug trip takes Michaux's first-person narrator on a journey back in time towards a simultaneously ontological and phylogenetic past: 'il ne remonte pas seulement l'évolution de sa personne, mais de l'espèce humaine en lui [et retombe] en bien des points à l'antérieur, à l'arriéré, avec des fonctions . . . primitives'.[36]

In line with a Western 'cultural tradition that represents "woman" as madness and that uses images of the female body . . . to stand for irrationality in general',[37] Michaux also genders his exploration of the underside of the self. Voyaging backward in time as he delves deep into himself, the first-person narrator of *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961) returns to the bosom of the archaic mother, Eve. Suggesting that 'c'est par les singes qu'on serait hystérique' and asserting that hysteria can therefore be described as 'une conduite de régression', Michaux implicitly lends his voice to those nineteenth-century theories of hysteria which suggested that the disease revealed the atavism of females.[38] Just as the unconscious is indissociably retrogressive and feminine, so women, in Michaux's texts, are 'sans je'.[39] Indeed, they are animals that can easily be displaced by large otter-like beasts in 'La Race urdes' (1929).[40] This allows Michaux unproblematically to map the relationship of the conscious self with the unconscious onto the usual clichés of gender relations, much as Claudel does in his 'Parabole d'Animus et Anima' (1925). Playing with words in 'Slave' (*Affrontements*, 1986), for example, Michaux embodies the

[35] Michaux, *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 87 and see 89.

[36] Michaux, *Déplacements, dégagements*, 108.

[37] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 4; on the impact of the same tradition in France, see Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), ch. 1.

[38] Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 275 n. 1; on women and retrogressive mental illness, see Showalter, *Female Malady*, 106–7.

[39] Michaux, *OC* ii. 305.

[40] See ibid. i. 494.

relationship of the rational conscious self and the unconscious in the relationship of a male student who lords it over an uneducated female slave, but is disturbed by her presence.[41] Similarly, in 'Une voie pour l'insubordination' (*Affrontements*) a child locked in a conflictual relationship with her domineering father is indifferently described as girl and id.[42] This conflation of the feminine and the unconscious is repeated in the second part of the same text, when Michaux speculates that the sensuality that is being acted out by the brutish doppelgänger of the pious curé d'Ars is feminine.[43] In the same way, Michaux's forays into his unconscious culminate in unsettling encounters with his own intimate femininity. In *L'Infini turbulent*, in particular, the first-person narrator's bewildered sense of self-loss while in the throes of mescaline peaks with his shocked (re-)discovery of his femininity: ' "moi" n'est plus. . . . Elle est devenue moi. . . . Être fille même cinq minutes! Je m'en souviendrai de ces minutes!'[44]

The analogies that Michaux draws between the relationship of the conscious self and the unconscious, and those of human beings and animals, civilized and prehistoric people, children and adults, and men and women, or the masculine and the feminine, extend to Europeans and non-Europeans. Foreign places and people are important metaphors for the *unheimlich* for Michaux, whose 'real' and imaginary travel narratives transpose the promotion by his Orientalist predecessors of 'the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")' onto the drama of the self.[45] In particular, it is by reference to *Écuador* and *Un Barbare en Asie*, that Michaux's *Ailleurs* should be read, as is suggested his by 1936 introduction to one of the works in that collection, 'Voyage en Grande Garabagne': 'Que dirais-je d'autre? Comme après mes voyages aux Indes, en Chine, en Équateur, une fois de plus, à présent, j'en suis à ce désespoir de n'avoir pu traduire toute la personnalité de ces peuples étranges, impression que connaissent tous ceux qui sont plutôt explorateurs qu'écrivains.'[46] Like *Un Barbare en Asie*, in the immediate aftermath of which it was published, *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, aspires to the indissociably literary and scientific status of narratives of

[41] See Michaux, *Affrontements* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 125–6.
[42] See ibid. 189. [43] See ibid. 204. [44] Michaux, *OC* ii. 879–80.
[45] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1985), 43.
[46] Michaux, *OC* ii. 133.

exploration. Investigating what is in French known as *l'inquiétante étrangeté de l'être* under the guise of an ethnological exploration of 'strange' peoples, the *Voyage* resonates with disturbing echoes of nineteenth-century theories of racial and cultural hierarchy.[47] The same is true of its precursor, *Un Barbare en Asie*. As uneasy with this state of affairs as his readers, Michaux attempted through the writing of new prefaces in 1967 to rescue both works from the accusations of racism which his various 'croquis et portraits . . . des différentes races observées' did not fail to provoke.[48] Shifting the focus of his imaginary travels from racial difference to geographical diversity, his 1967 Preface to *Ailleurs* displaces the ethnological metaphor of 'peuples étranges' with the less loaded 'pays un peu étranges'.[49] As for Michaux's 1967 Preface to the *Barbare*, it presents the book as a document to a lost era, after a mortified look back on his inability, in 1931, to foresee the changes in the relationship of Europe and its soon-to-be ex-colonies. However, these belated prefaces notwithstanding, the texts which they introduce remain indebted to the inter-war's casually racist worldview, as do earlier works like *Fables des origines* (1923) and *Écuador* (1929). Several of Michaux's metaphors for the relationship of the conscious self to the unconscious have problematic resonances. But even the stereotyping on which his gendering of that relationship is founded has not been as potentially damaging to his reputation as the assumptions that appear to underlie his representation of the relationship of non-Europeans with Europeans.[50] Because of this, I shall focus in this chapter on Michaux's articulation of that particular metaphor. As I determine the extent to which his accounts of the relationship of Europeans with non-Europeans perpetuate the racist discourses which he has inherited, however, Michaux's efforts to subvert such discourses should also become clear.

'Mon vieux, l'Europe ça existe. L'Europe et l'Asie. Le reste, de la blague', Michaux declared to Paulhan in 1939.[51] Reducing the world to a binary opposition between East and West, he gave each geographical region mythical proportions. But he was not alone in polarizing the world along these lines. Increased opportunities for travel among the post-war generation had done little to dispel the

[47] See Said, *Orientalism*, 43. [48] Michaux, *OC*. ii. 133 and see i. 1110.
[49] Ibid. ii. 3. [50] See ibid. i. 1110 n. 2. [51] Ibid., p. cxviii.

'free-floating mythology of the Orient'[52] of nineteenth-century exoticism. Indeed, the extra-European world still often appeared as a space of spiritual and aesthetic redemption. Although information on India, Africa, Japan, and even China, had become more widely available by the end of the nineteenth century, these societies continued for the most part to be idealized by writers wary of the Industrial Revolution and its effects on Europe. Alive with the dream of a mythic Orient, the majority of the first-person travel diaries that proliferated between the 1920s and 1930s reproduced France's paternalistic outlook on colonized extra-Europeans. Actively promulgated by regular colonial exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s, this outlook was not so much challenged by contemporary writers and intellectuals as it was reinforced. Although the Surrealists boycotted France's 1931 colonial exhibition and organized an 'Exposition anti-impérialiste', they were an isolated voice at a time when French modernist aesthetics tacitly endorsed France's 'civilizing mission'.[53]

As Segalen noted in his *Essai sur l'exotisme*, the lure of the exotic has a temporal as well as a geographical dimension. His successors, as much as his contemporaries, played freely on the overlap in the popular imagination of 'les ailleurs et les autrefois'.[54] Michaux, who described the vogue for 'art nègre' as a phenomenon exhibiting the desire of Europeans for a return to roots, was no exception.[55] But the assumptions underlying the conflation of *les ailleurs et les autrefois* are rather problematic. Implying that European society is more 'advanced', the equation of extra-European travels with journeys in time, in particular, can be seen to have its foundations in the nineteenth-century attribution of different 'degrees of civilisation'[56] to different races. Indeed, it can be seen not so distantly to echo the idea that the European

[52] Said, *Orientalism*, 53.

[53] See Herman Lebovics, *La 'Vraie France': Les Enjeux de l'identité culturelle (1900–1945)* (Paris: Belin, 1995), 80 (French trans. of *The True France: The Wars over Cultural Identities, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992)), 61 and 101.

[54] Victor Segalen, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henry Bouillier, 3 vols. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), i. 753, and see 747; see also Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 18.

[55] Michaux, *OC* i. 12.

[56] Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122.

'passes during its uterine and infantile life, through stages... which are the adult characteristics of . . . the Mongolian and African'.[57] Being critical of colonialism, and of its 'civilizing' methods, need not imply being immune to metaphors that implicitly rehearsed these ideas. Despite its exposition of the brutality of the colonial system, Gide's *Voyage au Congo* (1927), for example, compares the elderly Congolese to 'macaques', and portrays their women as Eves '[au] sexe ras, parfois caché par un bouquet de feuilles'.[58] Similarly, Cendrars's *Anthologie nègre* (1921) conflates the prehistoric with the African. Michaux does the same in his own *Fables des origines* (1923). Opening on a mythic account of the origin of the world that is peppered with parodic echoes of the biblical book of Genesis, his *Fables* juxtapose clichés of prehistorical humanity with stereotypical vignettes of non-Europeans. On the one hand, readers are presented with fables that are implicitly set in prehistory, such as 'Origine du feu' and 'Origine de la peinture'. On the other, we are given tales set in the extra-European world, like 'Origine du petit pied des femmes chinoises' and 'Le Blanc est menteur', which, in an earlier version, obliquely referred to the African tribe of the Wolofs.[59] The twin preoccupations of the *Fables* with nudity and cannibalism further conflate their association of the prehistorical with the non-European. While nudity is generally seen to present a 'stereotype of the uncivilized',[60] cannibalism can be said to situate its practitioners on the 'low[est] rank . . . on the scale of human civilization'.[61] In the first third of the twentieth century, both practices were popularly assumed to have been at once prehistorical and, in the wake of nineteenth-century colonial expansion, extra-European.[62]

Far from attenuating the confusion of a humanity that is remote in time from one that is geographically distant, the presence of both 'white' and 'black' characters in *Fables des origines* only serves to reinforce the presumed differences of East and West. In 'Origine des microbes', God asks humankind what animal it wishes to

[57] Thomas Laycock, *Naming and Classification of Mental Diseases and Defects* (1863) (quoted in Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 122).
[58] André Gide, *Journal: Souvenirs (1939–1949)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 722.
[59] See Michaux, *OC* i. 1034.
[60] Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 19.
[61] Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 210.
[62] See ibid.; and Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 18.

be nearest to. Whereas the 'white man', who speaks in the first-person singular, opts for the smallest of creatures, bacteria, anonymously plural 'black' voices choose the largest: the elephant. Killed by their choice of animal, the former implicitly are in conflict with the natural order. In contrast, 'black' people are part of nature, as suggested by the double entendre in their justification of their decision: 'l'éléphant est près de nous'.[63] This dichotomous relationship to nature is developed in 'Le Blanc est menteur', where a 'white man' tells an implicitly non-white tribesman that the orang-utan is its tribe's ancestor.[64] With hindsight, the racist overtones of 'Le Blanc est menteur,' where the orang-utan is declared by the 'white' character to be the ancestor not so much of humankind as a whole, as of a non-white tribe, are reinforced by 'Le Vêtement est une ruse'. The story of three brothers whose increasingly complex names, Phi, Daphi, and Daphida, suggest their relative stage of evolution, the fable describes the three brothers' attempts at seducing a tribal chief's wife. Whereas Phi and Daphi fail, Daphida succeeds. The first two brothers' nakedness betrayed their intentions as well as the state of nature in which they lived. In contrast, Daphida's cunning decision to wear a loincloth is a mark of his superior intelligence. Unlike his brothers, who were at the mercy of the natural expressivity of their bodies, Daphida manifests his ability to cut himself off from the natural order through his ruse. The moral of the fable—'Défiez-vous de l'homme blanc, car l'homme blanc approche vêtu'—gives a racial evolutionary twist to a text which, at first, may have appeared a more innocent comment on human evolution.[65]

Michaux's conflation in *Fables* of the racial Other with prehistorical humankind could be ascribed merely to a literary convention in the long tradition of mythopoetic writing to which it belongs, along with Cendrars's *Anthologie nègre*. However, not only does it seem hardly anodyne that the vogue for this sort of writing should have coincided with a period of high colonialism, but the lure of the exotic is equally inseparable from that of the past in Michaux's other writings. In *Ailleurs*, the strange imaginary societies and creatures through which Michaux portrays the *unheimlich*, are implicitly described with reference to those of

[63] Michaux, *OC* i. 28. [64] See ibid., 32. [65] Ibid., 31.

the extra-European world, particularly Africa.[66] At the same time, they are poised at the beginning of time, having 'resisted civilisation'.[67] Similarly, it is explicitly with the desire to go back in time ('remonter l'Histoire') that Michaux set off for Asia in 1931, according to his 1967 Preface to the *Barbare*.[68] The same is true of him in *Écuador*. Obliterating any thoughts on the future as soon as he boards his liner, Michaux describes a voyage backwards in time toward a primordial space populated by primeval creatures. Africans, in his version of Ecuador, dwell at the boundary of humanity and animality, as suggested by their comparison to orang-utans.[69] More subtly, perhaps, the anthropological terminology to which Michaux resorts in the same work when he depicts Amerindians as 'brachycéphales'[70] not only emphasizes their physiognomical difference by pointing to their rounder heads, but undermines their claim to full humanity by evoking the classifications of naturalists. In *Un Barbare en Asie*, Michaux also resorts to phrenological observations, echoing the nineteenth-century discipline's classification and hierarchical organization of human races. The low brows that he attributes to Indians, in particular, allow him both to present Indians as a 'race', and to intuit that they lack intelligence.[71]

By implicitly drawing parallels between the wonders of exotic nature and cultures in *Écuador* and *Un Barbare*, Michaux further challenges the humanity of the non-Europeans that he describes. In the central section of *Écuador*, his account of the strange creatures that dwell in the Amazonian forest functions as a counterpoint to his portrait of the country's 'brachycephalous' inhabitants. Similarly, midway through *Un Barbare en Asie*, the section entitled 'Histoire naturelle' has the same levelling effect on his comments on Asians. Whereas Michaux attributes quasi-human traits to the animals featured in the *Barbare*, from the pigeon, described as 'un obsédé sexuel', to local birds of prey, deemed 'de grands incapables', he portrays the Asian human population as though it were animal-like.[72] Reflections on the small size of Indian women relative to Indian men, for example, cause Michaux to exclaim that 'on se croirait dans une société

[66] 'L'Ouglab a encore plus mauvaise mine que le gnou d'Afrique' (ibid. ii. 29).
[67] Ibid. [68] Ibid. i. 280. [69] Ibid. 149. [70] Ibid. 158.
[71] Ibid. 324. [72] Ibid. 352–3.

d'insectes'.[73] Similarly, Michaux's portrait of Chinese women refers the reader to the animal world: he compares them both to ants, because they are always busy, and to birds, because of their musical intonations.[74] In retrospect, moreover, Michaux's portrayal of the Asian fauna can be seen to comment on the societies depicted in the other sections of the *Barbare*. Whereas the sexual obsessions of pigeons reflect the centrality of the lingam in Hindu culture, for example, the calm countenance and subtly musical language of the Malay is mirrored by the chirruping of Malay birds in 'Histoire naturelle'.[75] Such slippages between the discourses of the naturalist and the ethnographer legitimate the dehumanization of the people described. Shocking as it is, however, Michaux's reduction of the societies that he visited to human zoos was not without parallels with the 1931 'Exposition universelle', where non-Europeans confined to roped-off areas had to pretend to be going about their usual activities for the benefit of the Parisian public, as did the exotic animals at the exhibition.[76]

As in *Fables*, the nineteenth-century ideas on race and evolution that Michaux echoes in *Écuador* and the *Barbare* lead him to posit the supposedly different relationships to nature of 'whites' and non-'whites': 'Craie, argile, roc, ou feuilles, couleurs de la nature. Mais le rose blanc du corps! Le Blanc est nu parce qu'il est seul de son type. . . . On parle du Nègre nu. Le Blanc seul est nu. Le Nègre n'est pas plus nu qu'un scarabée', he exclaims in *Écuador*.[77] Standing out from the colours of the earth, 'whites' alone do not merge with the landscape according to Michaux, and this difference is what founds their individuality, as opposed to members of other races, whose quasi-animal nakedness represents their supposed lack of individuality. Accordingly, the non-European people that Michaux introduces to his readers in *Écuador* and *Un Barbare en Asie* are mostly anonymous, suggesting his perception of them as generic beings.[78] The only Ecuadorians that Michaux names are prominent people of mostly European origin: Gustavo Mortensen

[73] 'L'Ouglab a encore plus mauvaise mine que le gnou d'Afrique' (ibid. ii. 29), 338.
[74] See ibid. 362 and 363. [75] See ibid. 400, 407, and 354.
[76] See Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 23. [77] Michaux, *OC* i. 158.
[78] See Jan Mohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', in Henry Louis Gates Jr (ed.), *Race, Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 83 (discussed in Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 7).

and Pacifico Chiriboga, both affluent relatives of his friend and host Alfredo Gangotena, don Nicolas Torres, 'le roi de la contrée', etc.[79] Less prominent Ecuadorians tend to be characterized by their racial group, whether or not Michaux got to know them personally: the guides who led his expedition across the rainforest, for example, are merely introduced through phrases such as 'notre Indien' and 'ce juif Portugais'.[80] Generalizing remarks such as 'quand on a couché avec une indienne on se demande si on l'a vue' similarly imply that personal relationships with Amerindians are not possible, and that even close encounters will merely reveal a generic racial truth.[81] Although Michaux eschewed such social and/or racial distinctions between those who are named and those who are not in *Un Barbare en Asie*, generalizing singulars in that book nevertheless do tend to undermine individual variation. Remarks about how 'l'Hindou ne tue pas la vache' or about how 'le Chinois . . . marchande' serve only to reinforce the cultural stereotyping that went hand in hand with the colonial enterprise.[82] But even these conventional cultural and/or racial typologies ultimately are revealed to be inconsequential. In the end, there are no more ethnic and national differences between non-Westerners, it seems, than there are individuals. If Michaux appears to point to differences between Indians and Chinese people when he expounds on the 'air bêta' of the former and the 'air fort spirituel[ ]' of the latter, for example, it is the better to contradict himself a few pages down.[83] In time, we duly learn of the Hindu's psychic power and of the underlying animality of the Chinese.[84] Even Asians and South Americans are only superficially set apart by Michaux, who notes that the name of the Ecuadorian Yumbos means 'Indiens de l'Orient'.[85] Whatever the distinctions which Michaux establishes between the people whom he describes in the *Barbare* and in *Écuador*, then, a common nature is eventually revealed to lie beneath superficial marks of cultural difference.

Underlying the animal impersonality that Michaux, like primitivists in general, attributes to non-Europeans is the premiss that the people in question are merely vacant bodies. With their 'air . . . indifférent', the faces of Ecuadorian women appear at

[79] Michaux, *OC* i. 217. [80] Ibid. 217 and 229. [81] Ibid. 158.
[82] Ibid. 326 and 368; and see Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 17.
[83] Ibid. 324 and 359. [84] See ibid. 330 and 358. [85] Ibid. 206.

once indistinguishable and expressionless to him, as do the 'figures agréables, mais peu expressives' of the women of Bali.[86] Their faces reduced to blank slates, Michaux redirects his attention onto their bodies, further objectifying them. Like Gauguin in Polynesia, or indeed André Maurois when he delighted at having a chance to see 'Gauguin''s langorous women at the 1931 Exposition universelle,[87] Michaux blurs the edges of political and sexual conquest with his gaze. Casually comparing the erotic merits of women whose defining characteristics are confined to their different ethnic groups in the *Barbare*, he even flirts with the colonial novel's tacit attribution of a droit de seigneur to colonizers.[88] This conflation of virility and political domination leads him to question the masculinity of non-European men. In the *Barbare*, in particular, Indian men appear as uncertainly gendered as their cross-dressing god, Ramakrishna, who wishes to experience what it would be like to be Krishna's mistress.[89] 'Sans épaules, sans jambes, sans mollets, sans muscles, féminins', theirs is a negative femininity which evokes Freud's symbolic equation of femininity with castration.[90]

Despite his attempts to seduce and conquer the feminine world that he describes lying outside Europe, Michaux remarks repeatedly how unerotic it appears to him. In both *Écuador* and the *Barbare*, non-Europeans are endowed with an innocence which borders on asexuality, while the sexuality of Europeans is represented as obscene.[91] Judging Chinese erotic art to be spiritual rather than lascivious, Michaux even implies that it barely suggests adult knowingness, by metaphorically locating the sexuality of the Chinese in 'un printemps frais et encore proche de l'hiver'.[92] In much the same way, Michaux can see only virgins and matrons in *Écuador*, and writes that it is as though 'pour devenir femme, l'Indienne dut changer de race'.[93] He endows non-European desire with a familial quality that neutralizes any

[86] Michaux, *OC* i. 157 and 405.
[87] See Lebovics, *La 'Vraie France'*, 80.
[88] See Michaux, *OC* i. 362; and see Alain Buisine's reading of Jean-Jacques Neuville's *Sous le burnous bleu* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1927) in 'Vertiges de l'indifférenciation', *Itinéraires et contacts de cultures*, special issue on 'Littérature coloniale', 12 (2nd semester 1990), 55.
[89] See Michaux, *OC* i. 290.
[90] Ibid. 298.
[91] See ibid. 378.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid. 157.

potential subversiveness. Judging Chinese actors miming sexual intercourse to be amusing without being coarse, Michaux pronounces their act 'moins extra-familial' than its European equivalent might have been.[94] Similarly, he declares sexual curiosity to be at odds with the Hindu's 'amour naturel de la femme et de la famille'.[95] Despite the importance of the lingam and of the *Kama Sutra* for Hinduism, he asserts that 'l'Hindou . . . préfère voir en la femme la maternité plutôt que la féminité'.[96] The de-eroticized femininity that Michaux attributes to non-Europeans is the mother's as much as it is the virginal child's. From the male Hindu children who are called '*maman*' by their fathers to the yogi whose breathing technique makes him look as though he has a 'foetus' inside his belly, this motherly femininity is the province of non-European men of all ages as much as it is that of their female counterparts in *Un Barbare en Asie*.[97]

The failure of non-Europeans to achieve separate identities in *Un Barbare en Asie* largely reflects Michaux's own sense of the precariousness of his identity, however. On his way to the Asian continent, Michaux fantasized that he was returning to the origins of his own being, as much as he imagined himself to be heading for the dawn of civilization. Closing on the voice of the Buddha calling for an end to precisely that curiosity about difference that had motivated his journey, the *Barbare* ends on an introspective note:

'A l'avenir, soyez votre propre lumière, votre propre refuge.
Ne cherchez pas d'autre refuge.
N'allez en quête de refuge qu'auprès de vous-même.
Ne vous occupez pas des façons de penser des autres.
Tenez-vous bien dans votre île à vous.
COLLÉS A LA CONTEMPLATION.'[98]

It may seem ironical that when the Other does speak up, at the end of a long journey that was ostensibly spurred on by the desire to encounter alterity, it is essentially to tell Michaux to return home. Nevertheless, the withdrawal inside the self advocated by the Buddha throws light on Michaux's quest more than it challenges it. Emphasizing through these words the inner world from which his Orientalist fantasy has emerged, Michaux appears to

[94] Ibid. 380. [95] See ibid. 310 and 311. [96] Ibid. 290.
[97] Ibid. 307 and 324. [98] Ibid. 409.

allow the voice of the Buddha to displace his own. But even as he exhibits his silencing at the hands of the non-European Other, he dramatizes his return to his childhood self: the inward-gazing child with 'de grosses lèvres de Bouddha fermées au pain et à la parole' of 'Portrait de A.',[99] whose impersonal animality and femininity anticipate the *Barbare*. In consequence, it may appear as though Michaux's identification with the Buddha at the end of the *Barbare* marks the culmination of the 'simultaneous attraction and repulsion of difference' which characterizes the French colonial novel, according to Elizabeth Ezra.[100] Indeed, the narrator's regression to a pre-Oedipal stage of fusion with the feminized Other may even be said to evoke another topos of the colonial novel where, according to Buisine, 'tout se passe comme si l'espace colonial autorisait et même favorisait une régression vers la mère'.[101]

Yet, even if he cannot be said to have been entirely successful, Michaux worked hard to avoid the pitfalls of literary exoticism, and of the colonial novel in particular. As early as *Écuador*, he devised strategies emphasizing the problems raised by his attempts to write about difference. One of these was to let his reader know the difficulty of his task, and to lead him or her to question his success. His admission, toward the middle of *Écuador*, that he was confronted with '999 999 spectacles mal foutus sur 1 000 000 et que je ne sais comment prendre',[102] throws doubt on the reliability of his account. At the same time, such statements on the difficulties inherent to the experience and the verbal representation of the unfamiliar are part of a more general questioning of the gap between what is in the world and one's ability to perceive it, let alone write about it. Threaded through *Écuador*, these reflections put the more banally exotic parts of the work in perspective. On approaching Curaçao, Michaux's account of his inability to take in the port's hustle and bustle after a long and dull sea voyage from Amsterdam conveys the confusion inherent to radically new experiences: 'On est entouré, à moins d'une encablure, de toutes choses, et notre œil ne voit rien, et notre cerveau ne comprend rien.'[103] Having come all this way to encounter difference, he

[99] See Michaux, *OC* 609. [100] Ezra, *Colonial Unconscious*, 8.
[101] See Buisine, 'Vertiges de l'indifférenciation', 57.
[102] Michaux, *OC* i. 161. [103] Ibid. 149.

laments his failure not just at understanding what is in front of him, but at seeing it. In the same way, Michaux reflects toward the end of the work, almost a year after his arrival in Ecuador, and after several weeks spent travelling along the Amazon, that the great river has eluded him.[104] A sense of defeat overshadows his return to Paris. Just as the vastness of the Amazon has prevented him from seeing anything more than ill-defined expanses of muddy water, so the radical unfamiliarity of the American continent has led him to question his ability to acquire what Victor Segalen called 'le pouvoir de *Concevoir autre*'.[105] However, Michaux's dramatization of his doubts about his capacity to perceive a radically different world, to react to it without reference to familiar modes of thought, and to put this reaction into words, point to *Écuador*'s achievement even as they allude to the failure of his imagination. Through its representation of its author's search for a voice in which to articulate difference, *Écuador* escapes the confines of the faded clichés and categories on which it cannot help but be built, and becomes a self-conscious meditation on the limits of individual creativity.

In *Un Barbare en Asie* too, Michaux was aware that he had not set foot on the Asian continent without preconceptions as to what he would find there, but with 'la mémoire . . . agacée par des relations de pédants'.[106] As in *Écuador*, he set out to thwart these preconceptions. Although he engages in the *Barbare* in the Orientalist's trademark attempt at classifying those whom he encounters, Michaux simultaneously seeks to undermine such attempts through self-contradiction. The illogicality of contradictory assertions such as 'le Chinois est peu sensuel, et tout à la fois, l'est beaucoup'[107] strip stereotypical statements of any stable meaning. Cumulatively, they not only subvert the individual clichés on which they rely, but encourage the reader to hold all statements in doubt, leading us to question the differences separating Europeans from non-Europeans. Indeed, if non-Europeans are routinely compared to animals, so are Europeans. On occasion, they even appear to be more animal than their non-European counterparts: by comparison with the 'wise' visages of the Chinese, their faces are said to evoke the snouts of wild hogs.[108] Such role

[104] See ibid. 232–3.
[105] Segalen, *Œuvres complètes*, i. 747.
[106] Michaux, *OC* i. 279.
[107] Ibid. 378.
[108] See ibid. 359.

reversals also can culminate in the transformation of the observer into observed 'other', and vice versa. If Michaux looks at the extra-European societies which he visits with a zoological eye, non-Europeans themselves cast a similar eye upon European tourists: 'Ils vous regardent comme au jardin zoologique on regarde un nouvel arrivé, un bison, une autruche, un serpent.'[109]

Moreover, if Michaux shared the primitivist dream of a space that could exist '[sans] passer par l'Occident, par ses sciences, ses méthodes, ses idéologies, ses organisations sociales systématiques', this dream did not stop him from recognizing that the extra-European world was not in fact isolated from Europe.[110] These contradictory impulses are particularly clear in the *Barbare*. If 'Un Barbare en Inde' opens on an account of Calcutta that conventionally emphasizes India's exoticism, it nevertheless closes on a challenge to the meaning of this exoticism: 'Il ne faut pas trop vite juger un collégien tant qu'il est "à la boite." Il n'y est pas ce qu'il est en réalité. Or l'Hindou est depuis huit siècles sous des dominations étrangères.'[111] Reflecting on the fact that India does not exist separately from Europe, Michaux is led to construct the supposed immaturity of Indians as a consequence of European colonization, rather than as the inherent racial trait which we have seen him evoke elsewhere in the same text. Although Michaux does imply that Indians had a 'pure' identity before colonization, its irrecoverable loss in effect points to its mythic status and challenges the idea that Indians are intrinsically different from Europeans. If Indians and Europeans can be difficult to tell apart from each other in the *Barbare*, it is not just because of the 'simultaneous attraction and repulsion of difference' at the heart of the French colonial writing, then. It is also because the cultural and racial categories separating them are illusory barriers erected between intimately entangled peoples. As Michaux emphasizes in the closing pages of the text, 'il y a eu partout tellement d'invasions de races diverses . . . que personne n'est pur, que chacun est un indicible, indébrouillable mélange'.[112]

Michaux's emphasis on cultural and racial hybridity in *Un Barbare en Asie* is part of a larger reflection on nature's (and the self's) resistance to ready-made categories. Challenging the

[109] Michaux, *OC* 343. [110] Ibid. 280.
[111] Ibid. 334. [112] Ibid. 408.

pseudo-scientific classifications of which race is an offshoot, he stresses the limits of categorical thinking. In *Écuador*, this emphasis on hybridity is less pointedly associated with a reflection on non-Europeans. But it nevertheless is central to his reflection on nature and the self. In the same way that eighteenth-century naturalists exhibited the inadequacy of zoological categories when they described the platypus 'as an amalgam of bird, reptile, and mammal',[113] so Michaux's animal portraits in *Écuador* call attention to nature's disregard for scientific classifications. Through pointedly grotesque portraits of the fauna of the tropical rainforest, Michaux forces his readers to rethink any preconceived notions of what constitutes the 'natural':

> la forêt . . . fourmille de *tigrillos* et de tigres, de serpents, de la *vibora chuchupi* surtout, qui ne sort que la nuit, la plus terrible, grosse comme le bras, caquette comme la poule . . . [et] d'un plus grand empoisonneur encore, le *chuchora machacu*, insecte baudruche, qui a la forme—c'est saisissant—de la tête de l'hippopotame (et tout à fait en arrière sont des petits yeux noirs insignifiants), à moitié aveugle qui vole la lancette en avant, qui la plante à fond, tout droit, où il rencontre de la résistance, s'y empale et y injecte un liquide qui ne pardonne pas.[114]

Moving from an account of dangerous animals the names of which will be familiar to us (tigers, snakes) to one of even more potentially lethal creatures, the names of which are unlikely to be familiar to francophone Europeans, Michaux leads us into an increasingly fantastic account of nature. Referring to some of the animals with their Spanish names, and juxtaposing them with rough French equivalents, he emphasizes the gap between the francophone European's sense of the natural and the Hispanophone South American's. *Tigrillos* sound stranger than tigers, the *vibora chuchupi* seems much more frightening than a mere snake, and the *chuchora machacu* infinitely more worrying than any European insect. Pointing to the cultural limits of the francophone European's understanding of nature through these borrowings, Michaux highlights the narrowness of the linguistic and cultural frame of reference which we use to think of nature and the natural. Similarly, by portraying the *vibora chuchupi* as a snake that cackles like a hen, and the *chuchora machacu* as a back-to-front balloon-like insect with a body shaped like the face of a hippopotamus, he

[113] Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 132. [114] Michaux, *OC* i. 222.

exposes the inadequacy of familiar zoological categories. Respectively evoking a bird and a snake, and an insect and a mammal, the *vibora chuchupi* and the *chuchora machacu* exhibit nature's disregard for even the most apparently clear-cut zoological categories and challenge the preconceptions underlying them. Monsters, it becomes clear, are not so much exceptions in nature as the norm.

Following in the tradition of the voyage of discovery, Michaux seeks to achieve self-discovery through the strange landscapes, animals, and peoples of the world outside Europe. But unlike his primitivist predecessors and contemporaries, he does not just seek the self in the Other. Rather than merely projecting his intimate *unheimlichkeit* onto what apparently stands at odds with himself in order to be revealed as 'other', he challenges the very categories of Self and Other. Where the primitivist's rejection of one identity in favour of another implies stable modes of identity that can be pitted against each other (culture versus nature, the civilized versus the primitive, the human versus the animal, 'male' principles versus 'female' principles, etc.), Michaux's own explorations highlight the illusoriness of such dichotomies by emphasizing their interpenetration. The 'indicible, indébrouillable mélange' that discredits well-defined racial and cultural identities at the end of the *Barbare*, like the living amalgams that populate the South American rainforest, pervades everything in texts where nature is part and parcel of culture, where the primitive lives within the civilized, where the human is an animal, and where 'feminine' principles are at work in 'masculine' agency. This collapse of clear differences between traditionally separate categories leads him to question the possibility of thinking rationally about the hybrid 'pâté d'on ne sait quoi'[115] that he calls nature, and correlatively, the self and the human at large. Challenging the capacity of the well-defined and arbitrary concepts that we use in conventional linguistic expression to do justice to the inexpressible chaos of experience, Michaux casts doubt on the capacity of the writer to escape language's prefabricated version of the world and the self. It is this doubt, and the dreams of perfect expressivity that it spawned, that I will examine in the next chapter.

[115] Michaux, *OC* 151.

3

DREAMING OF A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Michaux's construction of the self as hybrid and ever-changing is intimately linked to a reflection on the limits that language imposes upon the articulation of identity. Just as the stability of linguistic concepts allows little space for the instability of the Protean self, so the formal and conceptual boundaries separating different signifieds and signifiers from each other cannot do justice to the complexity of the self. If Michaux wrote 'pour [s]e parcourir'[1] for over sixty years, he nevertheless was acutely aware of the limits imposed upon self-discovery by conventional linguistic expression. A significant proportion of his writing is devoted to exploring these limits, mourning them, and dreaming of substituting French with another language in which there would be no gap between the self and the words that represent it, and between signifieds and signifiers. Although Michaux's disappointment at the expressive limits of French and fantasy of a universal language are not unusual, the close interweaving in his works of these concerns with his need for a language that would circumvent the elusiveness of the self gives them a particular urgency. At the same time, Michaux's unstable representations of French and the mythic language of nature can make it difficult to pinpoint the extent of his distrust of French. It is these representations, and the paradoxes and contradictions that suggest their ambiguous delimitations, that I will examine in this chapter.

Throughout his literary career, Michaux was haunted by what Harold Bloom has called the 'anxiety of influence'.[2] As late as 1981, three years before his death, he still stressed the importance and the difficulty of articulating an intimate voice rather than surrendering to the voices of others. Portraying himself as a 'parfait massacreur des pères',[3] he gave his relationship to

[1] Michaux, *OC* ii. 345.

[2] See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); and see Jean-Pierre Martin, *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* (Paris: Corti, 1994), 101.

[3] Michaux, *Poteaux d'angle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 30.

language an Oedipal charge. The same parricidal impulses which underpinned his relationship with his biological father contaminated his relations with each 'père . . . choisi':[4] the writers who inspired him to reinvent himself as a writer. If he undermines La Bruyère in 'Le cas Lautréamont', ridicules Boileau in 'Glu et gli', declares Pascal a lesser great writer in *Plume*, and drums against Bossuet in *Passages*, it is in part because 'le style XVII^{ème}' played an important part in the development of his own voice in the 1920s and 1930s, as he himself acknowledged.[5] The violence of Michaux's relationship toward the writers who influenced him is especially clear in the account that he gave of his debt to Lautréamont in an interview with Robert Bréchon. Implying that the relationship had been emasculating, Michaux suggested that it could only find resolution in symbolical parricide: 'Lautréamont m'a possédé. Au point que je dus me délivrer de lui. Il ne me laissait pas exister.'[6] Displacing his father more completely than any other writer in the early 1920s, Lautréamont endowed Michaux with his new identity as a writer, as we have seen in Chapter 1. Yet, even as Lautréamont gave him a voice and launched him on the path that would be his for the rest of his life, he simultaneously robbed Michaux of an individual voice. With the revealingly entitled 'Il se croit Maldoror', Michaux did not just open his literary career with a homage to Lautréamont, but with a text bearing testimony to his inability, at that early stage, to articulate a separate voice.[7] Once he had overcome Lautréamont's spell, finding a voice that could more properly be called his own, Michaux remained highly sensitive to the importance of intertextuality in shaping individual creative acts. Although he wished to shake himself free of the influence of other writers, he never stopped acknowledging the futility of this desire.

If a writer did not have much room for self-expression in Michaux's view, it was not merely because of the difficulty of eluding the voices of one's literary predecessors and contemporaries. Instead, language itself was at the root of the problem.

[4] Michaux, *OC* i. 163. [5] Ibid. 994; and see 68, 111, and 663; and ii. 343.
[6] Robert Bréchon, *Henri Michaux* (Paris: NRF, Collection 'La Bibliothèque idéale', 1959), 208.
[7] See Anne-Marie Dépierre, 'Henri Michaux: "Il se croit Maldoror": Figures et images', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1976), 794–811.

Writing, he suggests in a 1934 review of the works of Alfredo Gangotena, requires 'la soumission à une langue créée par d'autres, dans un autre âge [et] conventionnelle, destinée à la masse, ou au moins à une société utile et accablée de compromis'.[8] To speak or write in this conventional language is not so much to express oneself as to be party to one's own alienation while articulating the fictitious subjectivity of the masses. It is to enter a cycle of alienation bearing witness to the hold exerted by one's predecessors over oneself. Indeed, it is to be paradoxically silenced: it is to be condemned to 'le malheur de l'empêchement de parler'.[9] There is for Michaux as for Lacan an unbridgeable gap (or 'fente') between the subjectivity articulated by language (and the symbolical order) and one's own self. Michaux's quest for an individual voice thus encompasses much more than a revolt against the insidious influence over him of all those who have written before him, let alone the rejection of a handful of chosen literary ancestors. With language itself depriving him of the possibility of self-expression even as it allows him to speak, Michaux casts the same Oedipal light onto his relationship with language as he does onto his relationship with his literary predecessors. In 'Immense voix' (1945), in particular, he likens language to an 'immense père' drowning both his voice and those of his contemporaries.[10] Indeed, 'Immense voix qui boit nos voix', language in this text not only forces its speakers into submission, but symbolically castrates them: paronomastically evoking an *immense doigt*, the injunctions of its 'Immense doit' breaks the metonymical fingers of its speakers, 'nés, doigts cassés'.[11]

'Phallogocentric' and inimical to self-expression, language is repeatedly described by Michaux as an oppressively monolithic, rigid, and permanent structure through architectural metaphors which contrast with the unstable fluidity of its speakers. In *Émergences-résurgences* (1972), language is an 'immense préfabriqué qu'on se passe de génération en génération . . . pour condamner à

[8] Michaux, *OC* i. 960.

[9] Michel Butor, *Improvisations sur Henri Michaux* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1985), 87.

[10] Michaux, *OC* i. 776.

[11] Ibid. on Michaux's metonymical displacement of the phallus with the finger, see Jean-Claude Mathieu in Roger Dadoun (ed.), 'Légère lecture de "Plume" ' in *Ruptures sur Henri Michaux* (Paris: Payot, 1976), 153.

suivre, à être fidèle'.[12] In 'Immense voix', it is an overbearing 'immense Toit . . . qui couvre nos bois', but also *nos voix*.[13] At odds with the Protean self, these rigid structures point to the alienation and the petrification of the speaking subject by the *immense Toi* of language. In the 'Voyage en Grande Garabagne' (1936), the Émanglons hide behind statues when they feel the need to speak, ostensibly in order to pretend that it is these rigid representations of their 'grands hommes du passé' that are speaking.[14] Ironically, however, these ancestors do in fact usurp the voices of the alienated Émanglons, whose usual cause of death is a disease of tongue.[15] Unwittingly articulating the voices of their forefathers when they speak, they allow themselves to be silenced by ready-made utterances, and their living bodies to be displaced by lifeless statues. Michaux gives a similar thrust to his interpretation, in *En rêvant à partir de quelques peintures énigmatiques* (1964), of a painting by Magritte that probably belongs to the 1950s series entitled *L'Art de la conversation*. In a picture representing two tiny figures so overshadowed by an enormous stone construction that they are barely visible, he sees an image not only of the unwitting alienation and enslavement of humankind by and to language, but of our active connivance with our own annihilation.[16] Not only is the massive stone monument which dwarfs the two protagonists of the painting the product of generations of past conversations, but their very verbal exchange contributes to its enlargement, shrinking them yet further into insignificance. The more they speak, the more they condemn themselves to a literally stony silence.

Michaux records the ravages effected by language onto the bodies of its speakers. Through their role in the dissemination of words, the brain, the head, the face, and the organs of speech often suggest the nefariousness of language in his texts. When in *Affrontements* Michaux writes that 'c'est la tête coupée qui parle',[17] he describes the silencing of the body by the head, the locus of conventional linguistic expression, while implying that it is severed from the body. The similarly disembodied 'visages-canons' of speakers in *Au pays de la magie*[18] are even more explicitly lethal. At the same time, the fateful phallic attributes of these canon-like

[12] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), 18.
[13] Michaux, *OC* i. 776. [14] Ibid. ii. 20. [15] See ibid. 16–17.
[16] Michaux, *Affrontements* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 19–20. [17] Ibid. 137.
[18] See Michaux, *OC* ii. 94.

faces point metonymically to the patriarchal language against which Michaux rebels in 'Immense voix', as does the knife-like tongue in other texts.[19] As the imagery of war that Michaux deploys in relation to the organs of speech suggests, to speak is to engage in an intimate conflict against oneself. The same is true of writing: 'Mais écrire, écrire, tuer quoi!', he exclaims in *Écuador*.[20] Indeed, if he describes the written page as a scene of carnage in texts such as 'Les Masques du vide' and 'La Paix des sabres',[21] Michaux also equates writing with a form of suicide. Displacing the fluid self with an alienating 'Spectre . . . de la personne',[22] writing entails the writer's own death even as it points to his or her assumption of the deadly mask of language. 'Le mort, c'est moi', writes Michaux in 'En vérité'.[23] Just as one cannot speak without first sacrificing oneself on the altar of the symbolical order, so one cannot write without assuming a fictitious identity and allowing oneself to be displaced by it.

Against the violence and self-censorship that he associates with conventional linguistic expression, Michaux dreamt of an immediately motivated language that would give a voice to the self. As in the Western tradition, where attempts to invent universal languages have tended to be linked to older traditions of enquiry into the original language of humankind, he both turned to artificial language projects and speculated on what a 'natural' language might be. Whether he called for an Esperanto in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', or hoped to compose the 'Rudiments d'une langue universelle idéographique contenant neuf cents idéogrammes et une grammaire' in 1938, it was with reference to the mythical language of nature—or languages of nature, rather. If he shared the nostalgia for a perfect Adamic (or pre-Babelic) language which underpinned Western enquiries into the language of nature, Michaux did not believe that this myth would find expression in a single lost language. Indeed, although he evokes the Babelic catastrophe in texts such as *Les Rêves et la jambe* (1923) and 'Portrait de A.' (1929), he does not suggest that the natural language that he dreams of has disappeared from the face of the earth. In the same way that Rousseau argues that primitive gestural and vocal

[19] See ibid. i. 510 and Michaux, *Face à ce qui se dérobe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 29.
[20] Michaux, *OC* i. 144. [21] See ibid. 782 and 783.
[22] Ibid. 1351. [23] Ibid. 502.

languages survive among some non-European and Southern European groups, so Michaux finds different incarnations of the language of nature in the gestures and utterances of the Other. Setting off for Asia in 1931, his unfamiliarity with the several languages spoken on that continent seemed unimportant to him, compared with the natural expressivity of 'l'homme de la rue . . . et l'homme qui joue de la flûte et l'homme qui joue dans un théâtre, et l'homme qui danse et qui fait des gestes'.[24] But Michaux did not only hope to supplement his ignorance of the many Asian languages that he was about to encounter by turning his attention to the music and gestures of the inhabitants of that continent. He believed that the natural expressivity which he would find in Asian languages would be that of the Other within the self. Imagining the language(s) of nature to be as intimate as they were foreign, Michaux's dream of a perfect language was at once more complex and more subtly articulated to French than his rage at the latter's limitations initially suggests.

Michaux counters the immobile statues and stone constructions which in his texts emblematize the petrification of the speaking and writing subject with dreams of an unstable architecture of 'forteresses faites de remous et de secousses', of a 'cinéma plastique' where sculptures would be animated, and of naturally expressive dancers and actors.[25] However, all dancers and actors do not possess this natural expressivity, according to him. Michaux is as impatient with classical French theatre as many of his contemporaries, wary of its reliance on grandiloquent delivery. 'Tout le monde sait que le Théâtre meurt,' he declares in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', denouncing the prominence which this theatrical tradition gives to what he calls 'la phrase gueulée'.[26] Somewhat like Artaud, he wishes for another form of theatre, where the natural expressivity of the gesturing body would displace classical verbosity.[27] Like Artaud, Michaux discovers this theatre outside Europe. In particular, it is the Chinese art of mimicry that gives him the revelation of 'ce que c'est qu'une représentation théâtrale' in *Un Barbare en Asie*.[28] Similarly, and unlike Mallarmé, he does not believe that what is known in

[24] Michaux, *OC* 279. [25] Ibid. 145 and 458. [26] Ibid. 11.
[27] See also Antonin Artaud, 'La Mise en scène et la métaphysique', in *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 58–9.
[28] Michaux, *OC* i. 379.

Europe as 'classical' dance gives rise to an 'écriture corporelle'.[29] Instead, he writes in 'Danse' (1938) that Western dance forms stifle the body's gestural expressivity, in contrast with those of the East.[30] Implying that Western dances are as petrifying as conventional linguistic expression, Michaux roots the expressivity of Oriental dancers in their non-differentiation from nature. Whereas Westerners are cut off from nature and their bodies, Eastern dancers are at one with the world and themselves, according to him.[31] Indeed, in 'Danse' as in *Un Barbare en Asie*, Michaux endows Easterners with a prelapsarian quality which is directly related to their ability to signify with their bodies. Recreating the 'Paradis perdu du mouvement', their dancing bodies exhibit the fusion of signifier and signified.[32] The dances and theatrical forms that Michaux valorizes do not depend so much on the movements that they entail, then, as on the relationship that their performers entertain with their bodies and with nature. If in 'Danse' Michaux opposes the petrifying movements of Western dancers to the naturally expressive motions of their Eastern counterparts, this is not to say that the first are quasi-motionless while the latter move freely. On the contrary, Michaux contrasts the 'agitation' of Western dances with the 'imperceptible' movements of Eastern dancers.[33] Similarly, having left for India assuming that he would be able to understand its inhabitants through their gestures and dances, Michaux discovers in *Un Barbare en Asie* that not only do Indians not understand his gestures, but they are immobile. Portraying them as 'figés' and 'bétonnés', he even concludes that they live 'sans gestes',[34] and endows them with precisely the petrified physical inexpressivity that he associates elsewhere with Westerners and their languages. Nevertheless, his recognition of the immobility of Indians does not stop him from declaring them to be alive with movement in a paradoxical sentence that emphasizes the contradictions at the heart of his accounts of the languages of nature: 'Jamais je ne vis autant de

[29] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henry Mondor and G. Jean Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 304.
[30] See Michaux, *OC* i. 697.
[31] See ibid.
[32] Ibid. 698 and see 699.
[33] Ibid. 697.
[34] Ibid. 285.

gestes (L'Indien vit sans gestes).'[35] At one level, such openly paradoxical statements can be said to exhibit Michaux's probing of the ambiguous delimitations of motion and motionlessness. As in 'Dance', he focuses in the *Barbare* on the tenuous respiratory movements of Indian yogis, whose bodies heave gently even as they appear immobile. Suggesting that if they seem motionless, it is only because their movements merge with (and are) natural rhythms, he turns around preconceived ideas of what constitutes movement and immobility. However, Michaux's contradictory interpretations of the immobility and movements of Eastern and Western dancers also exhibit the double standard underlying his views on what constitutes the language of nature. Whereas one group is a priori valorized because of its supposed naturalness, the other is a priori devalorized because of its supposed distance from nature.

Michaux does not put the subtle movements of Easterners entirely beyond the reach of Westerners, however. Even if he denies that Western dancers share the physical expressivity of Oriental performers, he does locate the latter's gestural language in the Westerner's unconscious. Constructing the unconscious as the primitive Other in the self, he suggests that the Westerner's repressed body finds expression in its unconscious, particularly as it manifests itself in dreams and daydreams. Declaring in *Les Rêves et la jambe* that 'les rêves sont mouvementés',[36] he implies, under the influence of Ribot (and, to some extent, Freud), that dreams give a voice to the repressed body in symbolical narratives.[37] In much the same way, in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (1964), it is the immobile daydreamer who experiences 'la véritable vie gestuelle'.[38] Freed from the constraints imposed by the laws of physics or by morality, he or she imaginatively satisfies 'un désir inapaisé de mouvements, d'intenses, excessifs mouvements, [l]e faisant vivre surtout de gestes, de rythmes, d'actes'.[39] The daydreaming narrator of *Liberté d'action* (1945) epitomizes this desire for movement through violent fantasies that go beyond the limits of the physically possible and the socially acceptable. With the body merely a linguistic construct for Michaux, as for Lacan, or Paul

[35] See Michaux, *OC* 288. [36] Ibid. 21. [37] See Ch. 1, above.
[38] Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 206.
[39] Ibid. 202.

Schilder whom Michaux had read,[40] these fantasies simultaneously allow him to rebel against the limits imposed upon the body by language. Deforming bodies, tearing them apart, crushing them, turning them inside out, compressing them or elongating them at will, the daydreamer is a movement artist, as it were: a sculptor whose works achieve the mutable 'vie plastique' of living bodies.[41] Not only does the gestural language of the East not elude Westerners, but its manifestation in each and every daydreaming Westerner suggests that the gestural language of nature is as prevalent in the West as it is in the East.

Westerners, however, only have access to the gestural language of nature through their daydreams so long as they do not attempt to verbalize them. In *Poteaux d'angle*, Michaux makes a similar connection between daydreaming and the desire to write to that of Freud in 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', only to warn readers that to write down one's wonderfully unbridled daydreams is to reduce them to 'la honte de l'imagination escomptée, linéaire, littéraire'.[42] Implicitly, it is in French that these thoughts should not be transcribed. In the same way that the Other tends to elude the complexities of the fallen self, languages other than French (particularly those of the extra-European world) elude the expressive constrictions imposed upon French by its arbitrarily linguistic nature. When he accounts for Chinese as 'une sorte de brise, une langue d'oiseaux' in *Un Barbare en Asie*,[43] for example, Michaux not only suggests that Chinese is a natural language constituted of natural sounds, but challenges its conventionally linguistic status. Even when he acknowledges some of the linguistic characteristics of Chinese, it is the better to question them:

> La langue chinoise, elle, n'a pas été faite comme les autres, forcée par une syntaxe bousculante et ordonnatrice. Les mots n'en ont pas été construits durement, avec autorité, méthode, redondance, par l'agglomération de

[40] See Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (New York: Int. University Press, 1950); mentioned in *Les Grandes Épreuves de l'esprit et les innombrables petites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 142 n. 2.

[41] Michaux, *OC* ii. 169.

[42] Michaux, *Poteaux d'angle*, 44; See Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', in Freud, *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey and ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin Freud Library xiv, 1985), 137.

[43] Michaux, *OC* i. 363.

retentissantes syllabes, ni par voie d'étymologie. Non des mots d'une seule syllabe, et cette syllabe résonne avec incertitude. La phrase chinoise ressemble à de faibles exclamations. Un mot ne contient guère plus de trois lettres. Souvent une consonne noyante (le *n* ou le *g*) l'enveloppe d'un son de gong.[44]

Michaux's version of Chinese dwells in a linguistic grey area. Asyntactic and monosyllabic, it recalls Mallarmé's equally fictional version of English in *Les Mots anglais* (1877),[45] while its musical near-silence evokes the latter's 'Musicienne du silence'.[46] Even more than these buried references to a long tradition of dreaming of a perfect language, what suggests that Michaux gives his readers an account of the mythic language of nature rather than of an existing human language are the number of contradictions and paradoxes contained in these lines. On the one hand, Chinese is a language, but on the other it has none of the characteristics of other languages; on the one hand, it has no syntax, but on the other it has sentences; on the one hand, its words are brief, but on the other their echoes linger on; on the one hand, it is almost inaudible, but on the other it resonates as loud as a gong; etc. These proliferating paradoxes are directly related to the lack of discursivity of Chinese utterances to Michaux's untrained ear. Valorizing the sonorities of Chinese signifiers over their unknown signifieds, Michaux reduces that language to its sensory impact over him, and overlooks the signification of the sounds that he hears in favour of their *signifiance* to his ears alone. As he makes clear a few pages later, when he acknowledges that what he hears when a Chinese person speaks probably has little to do with what they actually are saying,[47] Michaux's Chinese is a private fiction not to be shattered by the arbitrariness of linguistic realities, let alone by any interaction with the Chinese.

Although Michaux opposes Chinese to all other languages, his reverie on Chinese is only really contrasted with one language: French. The absence (according to Michaux) of an ordering syntax in Chinese stands in contrast with the order and rationality of French in the French Enlightenment tradition. Rivarol (whose

[44] Michaux, *OC* i. 361.
[45] See Gérard Genette, *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 259.
[46] Mallarmé, 'Sainte', in *Œuvres complètes*, 54.
[47] See Michaux, *OC* i. 362.

theories Michaux was somewhat familiar with, as suggested by his epigraph to *Les Rêves et la jambe*) associated the syntax of French with reason, declaring it 'fidèle à l'ordre direct'.[48] Similarly, the absence of method that Michaux ascribes to Chinese implies its indifference to that intellectual process which has been synonymous with French rational thought since Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*. Representing Chinese as an asyntactic language of monosyllabic 'exclamations', Michaux constructs it instead as a language of affect, much as Rivarol did German and other 'langues qui suivent l'ordre des sensations, leur syntaxe étant . . . corrompue, bouleversée'.[49] But whereas Rivarol's account of French as a rational language, in contrast with other supposedly more emotional languages, was meant to establish the former's superiority over the latter,[50] Michaux draws the opposite conclusion. The rationality that he attributes to French contributes to its devaluation in his eyes. Conversely, the emotional qualities that he finds in the languages which he does not understand lead him to valorize them as languages that give a voice to the body and unconscious. Describing Chinese as a language of 'faibles exclamations', Michaux implies that it is a lexically limited language akin to what Jakobson called a phatic language: a primitive language common to human beings and animals alike.[51] Implicitly, Chinese words are unevolved etyma. In contrast, their French counterparts, although ancient ('on se les passe de génération en génération'), are estranged from the locus of their origin: the bodies of their speakers. Thus, if in *Un Barbare en Asie*, Michaux describes Chinese as the language of love, it is not only because that language, like Chinese, is monosyllabic and asyntactic.[52] It is also because it is indistinguishable from its speakers, as suggested

[48] Rivarol, *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (quoted in Louis-Jean Calvet, *La Guerre des langues* (Paris: Payot, 1987), 74); on Michaux's familiarity with Rivarol, see Ch. 1, above.

[49] Rivarol, *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (quoted in Calvet, *Guerre des langues*, 74).

[50] See Calvet, *Guerre des langues*, 75.

[51] 'L'effort en vue d'établir et de maintenir la communication est typique des oiseaux parleurs: ainsi la fonction phatique du langage est la seule qu'ils aient en commun avec les êtres humains. C'est aussi la première fonction verbale à être acquise par les enfants' (Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), 217).

[52] See Michaux, *OC* i. 362–3.

by the casual slippages in his text from an account of the way in which Chinese women love to one of Chinese as the language of love, or from a description of the Chinese language to one of Chinese women.[53]

Just as the gestures of Easterners find their counterpart in the imagined movements of Western daydreamers, so the dreams of Westerners share many of the paradoxical characteristics of Chinese. In the same way that Chinese manages to be the sublime language of love precisely because it is a phatic language, so the 'vulgaire matériel d'expression' and 'langage bas'[54] through which the body and unconscious speak in dreams are conducive to the expression of the most elevated thoughts, according to Michaux. Similarly, Michaux finds in his dreams the same conflation of lexical paucity and rich evocativeness that he attributes to Chinese.[55] In 'Une montagne dans une chambre', in particular, exalted feelings of love are suggested merely by the concrete and unelevated evocation of 'matière et terre et horizons'.[56] Remarking that it is 'sans rien dire' that the dream is 'arrivé à tout redire',[57] Michaux does not only emphasize the indirectness of the language of dreams and its condensed austerity, as Freud does in the *Interpretation of Dreams*.[58] He also endows dream images with the non-discursive *signifiance* and concentrated expressiveness of Chinese words. As with Chinese, moreover, Michaux attributes the evocativeness of oneiric narratives to their archaic vocabulary. Dreams, according to him, are constituted of 'les images les plus usées' and unfold in 'une langue . . . faite surtout du très vieux'.[59] Constructing the language of dreams as a regressive language predating the constitution of the self, he even implies that dreaming (like travelling outside Europe in *Un Barbare en Asie*) entails a voyage backward in time: 'Comme s'il [= le rêve] était incroyant à tout, et surtout à vos buts, à votre évolution, à vos progrès, à votre "personne", à votre finalité, sans cesse il ramène le nouveau à ce qui l'est le moins, notamment aux besoins animaux les plus archaïques qu'à une lointaine époque il ressentait alors

[53] See Michaux, *OC* i. 362–3.
[54] Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 53 and 180.
[55] See ibid. 48. [56] Ibid. 135 and 136. [57] Ibid. 139.
[58] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), 383.
[59] Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 50.

primordialement.'[60] Indeed, both the dreamer and the primitive Other share a similarly archaic language pre-dating 'la séparation du décent et du répugnant' and 'la distinction du haut et du bas',[61] according to Michaux, whose theory of the affinities of the language of dreams with the 'primitive' languages of non-Europeans evokes Freud's suggestion that both 'have only a single word to describe the two contraries at the extreme ends of a series of qualities or activities'.[62] With the blurred language of dreams merging into Chinese, it is as though the Chinese spoke the language of dreams and Westerners dreamt in Chinese.

Both *Les Rêves et la jambe* and *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* are profoundly indebted to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, despite Michaux's continued ambivalence towards Freud's so-called 'pansexualism' long after the mid-1920s.[63] Just as Freud suggests that the 'dream-content' and the 'dream-thoughts' present 'two versions of the same subject-matter in different languages', so Michaux suggests that the vocabulary of his dreaming self and of his waking self participate of two different languages.[64] Yet, Michaux does not suggest any more than Freud does that his dreams elude all verbalization. If he suggests that his dreams translate (French) words into dream symbols,[65] he nevertheless does not imply that these dream symbols necessarily elude French. Instead, the dream narratives that he transcribes often contain words or phrases in inverted commas that he remembers dreaming. In those cases, his hermeneutic task consists in interpreting these words and phrases in the context of the dream. This allows Michaux to highlight the discrepancies between the French that he dreams in and the French that he speaks. Transcribing a dream of treason in which 'his people' are plotting to betray him, for example, he asks 'qu'est-ce que c'est que "mes gens"?'.[66] Calling attention to the different frames of reference of 'mes gens' in the dream and in conventional French, he suggests that 'mes gens'

[60] Ibid. 74. [61] Ibid. 78.

[62] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey and ed. Angela Richards (London: Perguin Freud Library iv, 1991), 430 n. 1.

[63] See Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Histoire de la psychanalyse en France: 1885–1939* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 232; and see e.g. *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 144–5.

[64] Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 381; and see Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 51.

[65] See Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 47.

[66] Ibid. 153.

does not allude to any servants, but metaphorically represents a hotel room door that would not lock, failing to protect him from the outside world, as good footmen might. With a signified that only very indirectly alludes to the conventional meaning of 'mes gens', the phrase exemplifies the semantic instability of the language that Michaux dreams in in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*. At the same time, the 'mots à double sens, prononcés pour seulement inquiéter, mettre mal à l'aise'[67] that make up the fabric of his dreams, exhibit the problematic overlap of French and the language of dreams. In *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, this overlap is mirrored in the ambiguous delimitation of Michaux's accounts of his dreams and the interpretations that he provides for them. In the section entitled 'Quelques rêves, quelques remarques', in particular, his attempts to delimitate his dreams from their interpretations are constantly challenged by his interpretative participation in the creation of his dreams. Not only are his obscure dream narratives subjected to interpretation even as they are written down, but the process of remembering them is inextricably entangled with his attempts at elucidation.

If in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* the difference of the language of dreams from French is challenged both by Michaux's accounts of his dreams and by his interpretations of them, this is in part because it is not dreamers who write, only the awake. As Michaux notes in *Les Rêves et la jambe*, 'des fous se sont racontés *pendant* qu'ils étaient fous. Mais . . . celui qui a rêvé se raconte *après* son rêve.'[68] In contrast, Michaux experimented with writing while under the influence of mind-altering substances, in the belief that such works would allow for a more direct exploration of the unconscious. From the more or less illegible manuscripts included in *Misérable miracle* (1956) to the strange 'Tapis roulant en marche' from which stems much of *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1967), such pieces provide a striking insight into the disturbance of the self and of French in states of mental alienation. In the same way that dream narratives spawn attempts at interpretation in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, these documents of mental and linguistic perturbation provoke detailed commentaries and analyses. If the boundaries between the two are somewhat blurred by the reminiscences included in the commentaries, their language nevertheless is

[67] See Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, 152.

[68] Michaux, *OC* i. 24.

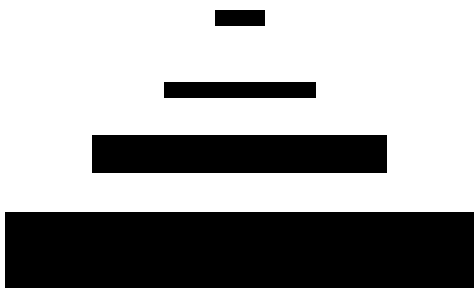
more clearly contrasted than in *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé*, allowing for a better delimitation of the language of the unconscious from conventional French. In *Connaissance par les gouffres*, 'Tapis roulant' is followed by a section entitled 'Derrière les mots'. Written when the effects of cannabis had long subsided, it is a very different text from 'Tapis roulant'. 'Tapis roulant' is a brief, elliptic, and discontinuous document. It is riddled with suspension points, suggesting that not everything can be put into words. 'Derrière les mots' is a long and well-articulated text where little is left unsaid or unexplained. 'Tapis roulant' tests the limits of metaphorical invention by radically ignoring categorical differences, as in 'des têtes s'accouplent' or 'brume à toute vitesse'.[69] Step by step, 'Derrière les mots' attempts to re-create the associative logic of which such metaphors are the product. In 'Tapis roulant', signifiers are often objectified, making their displacement by the signifieds to which they are conventionally associated difficult, or impossible: a printed page is reduced to figuring a rainy landscape, a line to musical nonsense ('obnubile les encéphalopodes en ob').[70] In 'Derrière les mots', signifiers stand for their signifieds. 'Tapis roulant' transgresses the conventional French linguistic order. It resorts to foreign borrowings ('cañon', 'swept away'), and coins new linguistically hybrid concepts ('pensées open-door').[71] It reduces words to sonorous echoes, as in the aforementioned 'ob'. It distorts the signifiers of familiar words and phrases, creating portmanteau words through paronomasia ('envahisse-mots'), alliteration ('Tohu-touché'), or assonance ('tac à tac').[72] 'Derrière les mots' explores what provokes this linguistic inventiveness. Describing the collapse of categorical and semantic differences and the overdetermination of signifiers for the drugged narrator, it gives an account of the language of 'Tapis roulant' that recalls Deleuze's analysis of the language of schizophrenics in *Logique du sens*. In particular, the drugged Michaux appears to exhibit something akin to the schizophrenic's inability to allow words to express 'un effet incorporel'.[73] Indeed, his inability, in

[69] Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 100 and 110.
[70] Ibid. 112 and see 119.
[71] See e.g. ibid. 93, 108, and 109.
[72] Ibid. 108 and 111.
[73] Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 107; on the loss of discursivity of conventional words under the influence of drugs, see also Jean-Claude Fintz, *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 202.

this altered state, to accept the boundaries separating French signifiers and their signifieds from each other and from himself extends beyond his relationship to words, to dimensions of space and time.

Having inherited the symbolists' 'imagination du rythme comme mode de concordance entre l'être et la représentation',[74] the drugged Michaux allows all differences to collapse into a single 'cosmic rhythm'.[75] By displacing words with blocks of different length and width at the end of 'Tapis roulant', in particular, he at once exhibits the continuity of its 'French' with its conventional alter ego and challenges it:

Effarante progression
empoignant toute sonorité
laissant le sens
fonçant vers plus de retentissement
vers plus de
plus de
plus
Plus
PLUS



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As the alliteration in [s] in the opening lines of the extract becomes increasingly insistent, the narrator begins to lose control over his words. Whereas at first he describes the overdetermination of the sonorities of words and the ensuing menace that this presents for their ability to signify, gradually his narrative voice is reduced to incoherent repetition and silence. In the process, conventional

[74] Pierre Citti, 'Symbolisme', in *Encyclopedia Universalis*, 21 (Paris, 1996), 946.
[75] See Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres*, 83.
[76] Ibid. 120.

signifiers detach themselves from their signifieds and from the syntactical structure which provided a context for their interpretation. As 'vers plus de' is reduced to 'plus de', the phrase reaches a state of semantic limbo. With its insistent repetition and typographical alteration, the latter gradually shifts from meaning 'more' to suggesting 'no more' to evoking nothing and both simultaneously. As stable meanings vanish, so do words and even sounds. Yet, even as these disappear, their rhythm subsists. Mirroring the decreasing length of the last words of 'Tapis roulant', the increasing length and density of the blocks at once manifests their continuity with the text that precedes it and exhibits their departure from it. On the one hand, the shared rhythmic structure of the text and the blocks suggests that they both participate of the same cosmic rhythm. On the other, the text's nonverbal ending creates the suspicion that the French of 'Tapis roulant' is as much at odds with the ending's purely rhythmic language as 'Derrière les mots'. As the difference of 'Tapis roulant' from 'Derrière les mots' is reduplicated within that of words and blocks at the close of 'Tapis roulant', even the distorted French of 'Tapis roulant' is left hovering uncertainly between nature and convention. The ambiguous status of the language of 'Tapis roulant' is indissociably linked to both the hybridity of the self to which it gives a voice, and to its ambivalent relationship with conventional French. On the one hand, 'Tapis roulant' exhibits the 'foreignness' of conventional French forms for the alienated self through expressive distortions; but on the other, it relies for effect on Michaux's familiarity with conventional French.

This double predicament points to the complexity of Michaux's relationship with French. Not only is French not necessarily entirely at odds with the natural language that he dreams of, but it is through French that this prelapsarian language is glimpsed in some of his texts. Thus, if in 'Portrait de A.' the prelapsarian A.'s Fall follows his learning to read, it is nevertheless through the reading of books that the lapsed A. returns to his former state of grace:

> Dans les livres, il cherche la révélation. Il les parcourt en flèche. Tout à coup, grand bonheur, une phrase . . . un incident . . . un je ne sais quoi, il y a là quelque chose . . . Alors il se met à léviter vers ce quelque chose avec le plus qu'il peut de lui-même, parfois s'y accole d'un coup,

comme le fer à l'aimant. . . . Il est là quelque temps dans les tourbillons et les serpentins et dans une grande clarté qui dit 'c'est là'.[77]

It is not merely a revelation, but the Revelation, that A. seeks and finds in books. The imprecision of the locutions through which Michaux describes it ('un je ne sais quoi', 'quelque chose'), the enigmatic words that trail off unexplained, the referentially vague use of the deictic 'là', and the act of levitation with which reading culminates, all hint at the spiritual nature of the experience from the outset. Eluding conceptualization if not verbalization, A.'s indefinite felicity recalls the 'grands trains d'une matière mystérieuse' which passed through his felicitously preverbal infant self. Similarly, his levitation brings back to mind the latter's propensity to 'les miracles, la lévitation'.[78] Even his fusional experience of 'accolle[ment], comme le fer à l'aimant' echoes the godlike child's blissful 'fusion dans l'amour'.[79] Losing himself in his text, the postlapsarian A. achieves the Christlike capacity of his former self for transubstantiation. As the assertively personal '*Il* est là' which opened the sentence is displaced by a 'clarté qui dit "c'est là" ', he has not so much disappeared as become light.

As A. is transfigured, his text is transformed. The word or words which enraptured him fade away into abstraction. A sentence becomes a mere incident, and that incident in turn dissolves into fragmented whirls and streamers, which themselves become at once reduced to, and sublimated into, 'une clarté qui dit "c'est là" ', like their reader. This is not to suggest that A. has been enlightened, in the discursive sense of the term, by the displacement of signifiers with signifieds. On the contrary, A.'s 'reading' eludes stable discursive meanings: much as the Chinese language, the dream, or the drugged self's alienated text, A.'s 'reading' culminates in an experience of confusion. As he loses his sense of himself as a separate being, he comes to see his own boundlessness reflected in the spiritual and physical world from which he is no longer separated: 'tant que son fond restait indécis et mystérieux et peu palpable, son attention consistait à trouver dans un livre *ce même univers fuyant et sans contours*'.[80] Whatever A. 'reads', whether it is a book on arithmetic or on François Coppée, the text unravels until it reflects his own nebulousness, when it does not dissolve altogether into that

[77] Michaux, *OC* i. 611. [78] Ibid. 609.
[79] Ibid. [80] (My emphasis) ibid. 610.

mystical light in which he has lost himself: 'Et s'il se mettait à lire voulant "retenir": *néant*! C'était comme s'il regardait des pages blanches'.[81] A sublime *degré zéro* of reading, A.'s experience not only bypasses hermeneutic acts, but eludes consciousness, dramatizing his regression to a preliterate (and pre-Oedipal) state.

Published one year before 'Portrait de A.', *Écuador* describes a very similar experience of 'reading', in the sense that it eludes the conventional displacement of signifiers with their signifieds and culminates in the narrator's inability to remember what he has 'read'.[82] Sharing important characteristics with A.'s, this experience also bridges the gap between A.'s ecstatic 'reading' and the perturbed language of 'Tapis roulant'. Unlike in 'Portrait de A.', *Écuador*'s narrator gives his readers a glimpse of the deformation of the original text entailed by his idiosyncratic way of reading. Describing himself as someone who cannot allow words or ideas to survive the eye's perusal of the written page, only 'les phrases', the narrator quotes a series of rather nonsensical sentences which he asserts that he has read in 'une étude sur le peintre Papazoff par Zeixe Man':[83]

Après son mariage, son instinct le fit geindre Mallarmé.
Sa pose, son goût des frictions ne facilitèrent pas son abcès.
Geindre était pour lui un homme qui n'avait pas besoin de self, un roteur obscur 2enregistrant les actes de naissance. . . . [84]

Not a forgery, but inspired by an actual text by the art historian Marc Seize on Georges Papazoff, a Bulgarian painter who lived in Paris from the mid-1920s, this 'reading' consists in a series of mutilations of the original (not included in *Écuador*):

Après son mariage, son instinct le fit peintre malgré lui. Son sens des réalités et son dégoût des fictions ne lui facilitèrent point l'accès de cet état vague et insubordonnable. Un peintre était pour lui un homme qui n'avait pas besoin d'une self-justification, un notaire obscur enregistrant les actes de naissance de nos affections.[85]

In Michaux's version of Seize's text, enough has been left out and enough words have been altered for the meaning of the art historian's piece to be corrupted, or indeed voided of all discursive

[81] Ibid. [82] See ibid. 176. [83] Ibid. [84] Ibid.
[85] Marc Seize, 'Georges Papazoff', *Arts plastiques*, 6 (Apr. 1926) (quoted in Michaux, *OC* i. 1094).

coherence. However, even if Michaux's 'reading' offers few semantic links with Seize's text, it nevertheless does reproduce its 'music' fairly accurately. Rather than Seize's sentences, it conserves his *phrasé*. The rhythm of Seize's writing finds an echo in Michaux's version through paronomastic deformations of the original text. As with the drugged self's quasi-schizophrenic language in 'Tapis roulant', these point to his inability, or refusal, to allow words to describe anything that eludes the realm of the body. As abstract concepts come to refer to bodily sensations ('fictions'/'*frictions*'), symptoms ('accès'/'*abcès*'), and sounds ('peindre'/'*geindre*' and 'notaire'/'*roteur*'), the text loses its original discursivity. At the same time, the 'non-sens apparent' of the narrator's metonymical alteration of the original signifiers recalls the metonymical logic that Lacan attributes to the unconscious, and its inability (as in the elliptic 'Tapis roulant') to arrive at the signified. Yet, although they recall the language of 'Tapis roulant', the deformations imposed upon French by *Écuador*'s narrator are not constructed so much as the product of his unconscious, as a failure of the intellect: 'Je lis très mal, repoussant incessamment, avec haine, refus et mauvaise foi.'[86] Indeed, much as the practice of reading described by *Écuador*'s narrator evokes A.'s, it does not culminate so much in a simultaneously spiritual and erotic experience of transubstantiation, as in an experience of hatred and alienation.

In the same way that reading both coincides with the prelapsarian A.'s exile from the paradise of infancy and with his return to that lost paradise, and just as the textual deformations that it entails are described in terms of both communion (in 'Portrait de A.') and alienation (in *Écuador*), Michaux at once describes his turn to writing in terms of loss and of revelation. In the 'Renseignements', his adolescent wish to write is depicted as a temptation to be resisted, a sin to be forgone. Over and against 'la tentation d'écrire qui pourrait le détourner de l'essentiel',[87] the silence for which he opted at that time implicitly points to the spirituality of the adolescent who went in search of knowledge in hagiographies.[88] Indeed, as in 'Portrait de A.', where vague 'grands trains d'une matière mystérieuse'[89] flow through the godlike eponymous protagonist before his learning of the alpha-

[86] Michaux, *OC* i. 176.
[87] Ibid., pp. cxxx–cxxxi.
[88] Ibid., p. cxxxi.
[89] Ibid. 608.

bet, the silent adolescent of the 'Renseignements' has access to an equally ill-defined but sublime 'essentiel'. Conversely, just as A.'s learning of the alphabet entails his Fall, so Michaux's literary beginnings coincide with a sense of personal failure. With his discovery of writing, he is cast out into the world for good: with Belgium 'définitivement quittée', he definitively loses access to the silent world of 'rêves . . . sans mots' that characterized his early childhood.[90] Even as Michaux's literary beginnings stand for his loss of the oneiric world of childhood, however, they coincide with a sense of renewed hopefulness. The paradise of childhood is not without ambiguities in the 'Renseignements', and the infant's dream world exhibits the defeated passivity of the anaemic child at least as much as it points to a sublime meditation on permanence. Michaux's double-edged construction of his literary beginnings is clearer still in his hastily composed 'lettre-mémo' to René Bertelé. Written about ten years before the 'Renseignements', this document describes his Belgian youth as a time of both disease and spiritual elevation:

> J'étais réservé et triste avec de grands fous rires intérieurs—anémie profonde et dont je [*sic*!] guéris . . . qu'en venant à Paris vers l'âge de 26 ans—Mon père refusa de me laisser entrer chez les Bénédictins—
> Le rêve de mon enfance . . . eut été d'être un Saint.
> —Je tombai de haut—très désemparé quand je perdis la foi vers l'âge de 20 ans.[91]

Somewhat as in the 'Renseignements', Michaux's exile to Paris brings him relief even as it is made to appear to coincide with his Fall. But unlike in the 'Renseignements', writing is clearly associated with Michaux's redemption as much as with his downfall in the letter to Bertelé. If he describes himself disenchantedly as someone who is 'dans la littérature faute de mieux'[92] in that text, he also implicitly suggests that poetry (as opposed to 'literature') is a mystical path back to the sanctity of his youth. If he appears to criticize 'ceux qui parlent de poésie comme d'une chose proche de la mystique' a few lines down in the same document,[93] he nevertheless associates these ideas himself. In particular, he portrays his meeting of Supervielle as a life-changing spiritual experience:

[90] Ibid. pp. cxxxii and cxxix.
[91] Ibid. 996.
[92] Ibid. 997.
[93] Ibid.

'Rencontre Supervielle—révélation pour moi de la poésie vivante—
Je voyais enfin un homme formé et transformé en poète—Un homme qu'elle habitait comme je croyais jusque-là que seul [*sic*!] la musique le pouvait—Un des très rares dont la personne dégage une impression de grandeur—Il eut une influence sur moi.[94]

The mystical overtones that are characteristic of Michaux's portraits of his childhood reappear in these lines. Punning on the Revelation, and evoking the transubstantiation, as the Christ-like person of Supervielle comes to incarnate *le verbe fait chair*, this portrait presents Supervielle (whom Michaux was not always so enthusiastic about) as the incarnation of a divine principle, much as the child in 'Portrait de A.'. Holy yet not religious, as suggested by the displacement of the holy spirit by music, Supervielle—and, through him, 'Poetry'—at once recalls Michaux's lost spiritual ambitions and represents their survival in a new form.

With an idealized 'Poetry' standing for the lost prelapsarian language that Michaux dreams of in his texts, the question arises of the status of Flemish relative to French in his writings. Although Michaux was not from a Flemish-speaking family, the assertion of his literary vocation coincided with the purification of his French through the elision of his native Flandricisms. If he unselfconsciously used phrases such as 'Klach façade' and 'fils de Zeep' in early letters to his countrymen, for example, this was no longer the case soon after he began to be published in 1922.[95] Indeed, in his published works, he was careful from the beginning not to lapse into Flemish. When he did use a Flandricism, as in his 1924 'Lettre de Belgique', where he uses the word 'stoeffer',[96] he emphasized the foreignness of the term by putting it between inverted commas and translating it for his readers. Even as Michaux excluded his other language from his writings, however, his efforts to normalize his French were marred by difficulties with its conventions, as is suggested by the many spelling mistakes and grammatical errors

[94] Michaux, *OC* 996–7.

[95] See an undated letter to Hermann Closson, *c.*1921 (quoted in *A la minute que j'éclate: Henri Michaux, quarante-trois lettres à Hermann Closson*, ed. Jacques Carion (Brussels: Didier Devillez, 2000), 34); and see an undated letter to Franz Hellens, *c.*1922 (quoted in *Sitôt lus: Henri Michaux, lettres à Franz Hellens (1922–1952)*, ed. Leonardo Clerici (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 28).

[96] Michaux, *OC* i. 52.

in his early letters to Hellens.[97] Although these mistakes might possibly be construed as a consequence of the haste with which he wrote his correspondence rather than as the mark of his discomfort with French, some evoke the Flandricisms of his hybrid mother tongue. His early misspellings of 'Proust' as 'Proost',[98] in particular, suggest the foreignness, to Michaux, of the French version of the name. Paradoxically, then, the development of the literary career of the francophone Michaux went hand in hand with his assumption of a (relatively) 'foreign' language, and his repression of his hybrid native tongue. Interestingly, it seems as though Michaux assimilates this lost native tongue to Flemish in his 'lettre-mémo' to Bertelé:

> Ai vécu sous l'occupation—sous l'occupation allemande à Bruxelles de l'âge de 14 ans 1/2 à 18 ans 1/2—et de l'âge de 7 ans à l'âge de 12 ans en pension, dans une campagne f[lamande] belge, entoutré de petits paysans f[lamands] puants dont je n'entendais ni la brutalité, l'insensibilité ni la langue—le Flamand—Je l'appris il devint ma 2ème langue que je parlais comme le français, sinon mieux—oublié depuis mais je pense souvent 'en flamand' ou du moins je ne pense pas toujours directement en français[99]

The hesitations which these lines betray typographically and stylistically, testify both to the importance of Flemish for Michaux's development, and to his uncertainty as to the role which it plays in his adult life, if any. On the one hand, Michaux represents his acquisition of Flemish as an experience of violence that he was forced to endure, both by implicitly comparing his stay in the Flemish boarding school to the German occupation of Brussels during the First World War, and by associating the brutality and insensitivity of his classmates to their language. On the other, he asserts that, as a child, he spoke Flemish as well as he did French, implying that, instead of remaining the language of the oppressor, as it were, it eventually became his own language. If anything, the

[97] See e.g., 'la plus part', 'écopperaient', 'Parigo', and 'pettante'; and 'quoique ce soit', 'l'ouvrage Que vous m'envoyer', 'restez-vous à Bruxelles où allez-vous à Paris?', 'J'ai été trouvé les deux dépositaires' (in letters to Hellens, 3 Nov. 1922, 9 Nov. 1922, 17 Jan. 1923, 18 Jan. 1923, 11 Dec. 1922, 5 Oct. 1923, 28 Nov. 1923, and 14 Jan. 1924 (*Sitôt lus*, 31, 33, 44, 46, 38, 50, 54, and 60)).

[98] See an undated letter to Hellens (*c.* 1922) and another dated 3 Nov. 1922 (*Sitôt lus*, 29 and 32).

[99] Michaux, *OC* i. 995.

rejet of 'sinon mieux' suggests that Michaux may in fact have temporarily felt more 'at home' with Flemish than with French. The contradiction between these different constructions of his early relationship to Flemish is echoed in his assertion of his bilingualism in a first movement followed by its uncertain denial in a second. Having asserted that he has forgotten Flemish, he then declares that he often thinks in Flemish, only to settle on a more ambiguous formulation, with the litotes 'pas . . . en français'. Saying that he does not always think directly in French is not the same thing as saying that he often thinks in Flemish, however. In fact, it sounds like a pointed refutation of the previous statement, especially when one takes into account the inverted commas inserted around the phrase 'en flamand'. If Michaux actually believed that some of his thoughts occurred to him in Flemish, there would be no reason for him to modify these words. Implicitly, the words 'en flamand' stand for something else than 'in Flemish', and his forgetting of an intimate language, the learning of which is associated with violence and misery, may be interpreted as a form of repression. Its residual survival in an altered form in his adult consciousness hints that his 'Flemish' may have muted into a fantasized prelapsarian language. This is the pre-Oedipal language 'sans images sans mots' which it appears to have displaced in the 'Renseignements', along with other avatars of the language of nature, including all those conventional languages which owe their expressivity to being spoken 'pas en français'.

As it became a metaphorical, rather than a literal, language, Flemish, for Michaux, came to lose its association with the brutality of the 'petits paysans puants' of Putte-Grasheide. On the contrary, it became a language which he associated with a poetic and spiritual tradition which he admired. As he told Liliane Wouters in a 1976 interview, his admiration for the Rheno-Flemish mystics, and for Guido Gezelle in particular, even led him to decide to try and write in that language during his adolescence.[100] By then, however, he was no longer living in Campine, despite his claims to the contrary in the same exchange with Wouters.[101]

[100] 'Savez-vous que, pendant mon adolescence, j'ai un moment pensé écrire en flamand?' (H. Michaux to Liliane Wouters, 'Circonstances d'une rencontre', *Le Carnet et les instants*, 89 (1995), 8 (quoted in Jérôme Roger, 'La Traversée des formes', *Magazine littéraire*, 364 (Apr. 1998), 50)).

[101] 'J'étais en pension, n'est-ce-pas. En Campine.' (Ibid.)

Instead, as he records in 'Quelques renseignements' and in his letter to Bertelé, he had returned to Brussels in 1911, at the age of 12. Just as, once back in Brussels, he embraced the study of Latin because it gave him the ability to distance himself from his French-speaking compatriots, as we saw in Chapter 1, so his love of Flemish grew once he had left ordinary Flemish-speaking people behind him and could begin to idealize their language. Indeed, his construction of Flemish as a mystical language probably coincides with the time when he started to forget it. For, Michaux, who told Bertelé in the 1940s that he had forgotten his Flemish, and who only began to idealize it once he had left Flanders, explained to Wouters that the reason why he had decided against writing in Flemish as an adolescent was that he sensed that he could not match Gezelle 'au plan de la langue'.[102] Although this assertion may suggest that Michaux felt that the Flemish poet was a more gifted writer, it may just as well point to his loss of his grip over his Flemish. Michaux, who to my knowledge never mentioned Gezelle again, was not given to excessive literary humility: even if his own writings appeared mediocre to him, he judged 'les réalisations de presque tous les autres, également misérables, sinon pires'.[103] Rather than testifying to a literal desire to write in Flemish, then, Michaux's adolescent ambition to write in that language may merely reveal his wish to write in a language other than French. 'Je ne *pense* pas toujours *directement* en français', declares Michaux in the same letter to Bertelé, hinting that, to his adult self, Flemish, like the language of dreams, participates of that 'poetic' language which both is and is not French. It is Michaux's strategies to re-create this 'poetical' language in his texts that I will examine in the next chapter.

[102] Ibid. and see Michaux, *OC* i. 995.

[103] Michaux, *OC* i. 997.

4

WRITING IN ANOTHER (FRENCH) LANGUAGE

En poésie, il vaut mieux avoir senti le frisson à propos d'une goutte d'eau qui tombe à terre et le communiquer, ce frisson, que d'exposer le meilleur programme d'entraide sociale.

Cette goutte d'eau fera dans le lecteur plus de spiritualité que les plus grands encouragements à avoir le cœur haut et plus d'humanité que toutes les strophes humanitaires.

C'est cela la TRANSFIGURATION POÉTIQUE.[1]

Rather than participating in the desecration of conventional French, 'poetry' is a spiritual experience, according to Michaux. Its capacity to transfigure its readers recalls the illumination of the 'reader' in 'Portrait de A.' and *Écuador*, and prefigures his account of Supervielle's poetic transfiguration in his 'lettre-mémo' to Bertelé. Privileging a simultaneously physical and spiritual 'frisson' over the beauty of ideas, it speaks of and to emotions rather than the intellect, in that concrete language of 'things' which Michaux described in *Les Rêves et la jambe* as the pre-Babelic language of humankind.[2] Written in French yet at odds with conventional French, it both does and does not participate of another language, like the language of the unconscious which Michaux valorizes as an avatar of the Adamic language. But how is this redeeming, if ambiguous, act of linguistic transubstantiation to be performed and communicated? Although he shared the desire of the Surrealists to explore the language of the unconscious, Michaux did not believe their claim that automatic writing might allow for its exploration. Instead, as early as 1925, in a review of André Breton's *Poisson soluble*, he emphasized the difficulty of achieving the necessary 'relâchement complet', remarking that although 'Breton ne fait pas attention aux phrases à écrire, . . . *le crayon de l'homme de lettres veille sur son maître*'.[3] Comparing the 'phallogocentric' language to which he assimilates

[1] *OC* i. 968. [2] See ibid. 18. [3] (My emphasis) ibid. 60.

French to a repressive super-ego, Michaux does not believe that there is such a thing as automatic writing. In his view, letting go of one's creative control, as automatic writers do, is not so much to open up to the repressed contents of one's psyche, as to allow oneself to be silenced by a conventionally linguistic super-ego. In the place of the Surrealists' uncritical trust in the possibilities of automatic writing, Michaux advocated a practice of (re-)writing which would self-consciously and systematically assault the French linguistic order through 'une fusion de l'automatisme et du volontaire' in texts that were 'travaillés après coup'.[4] If Michaux's 'hypertrophy of the imagination' does not entail 'hazy thinking and stylistic excess', as Bowie remarks,[5] the desire to articulate a redeeming voice in French nevertheless does involve systematic attempts to transgress the French linguistic order. Invoking in his review of *Poisson soluble* the transformation of French through 'des pages entières d'onomatopées, des cavalcades syntaxiques, des mêlées de plusieurs langues, et bien d'autres choses',[6] Michaux constructed his poetics around a practice of hybridization which at times seriously challenges his sense of restraint.

Michaux's attempts to hybridize French are plainest in his cross-pollination of French with other languages. Some of his texts, such as 'A Rotten Life' and 'The Thin Man',[7] even have English titles. Most, however, merely incorporate foreign-language terms within an otherwise conventionally French lexis. In those cases where they are likely to be unfamiliar to Michaux's francophone readers, such borrowings focus attention on the musicality of enigmatic words, rather than on their discursive meaning. In the process, they indirectly call attention to the music of the conventional French words surrounding them. In *Un Barbare en Asie*, in particular, Michaux often relies on the musical echoes of Asian words to call attention to those of his French text. The magic of Sinhalese names rubs off onto his text, for example: 'Vous avez probablement vu, au moins dans les atlas, ces noms superbes, des merveilleux et longs serpents aux voyelles de

[4] Ibid. 61.
[5] Malcolm Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 38–9.
[6] Michaux, *OC* i. 60.
[7] See ibid. 520 and ii. 971.

tambour: *Anuradhapura, Polgahawela, Parayanalankulam, Kahatagasdigiliya, Amabalantola.*'[8] Distinguishing Sinhalese words from French by drawing attention to their signifiers and italicizing them, Michaux nevertheless creates the illusion of continuity between the two languages through rhythmic effects. Through his use of commas, the French introductory words have a cadence that mirrors the flow of the catalogue of Sinhalese names that follows them. Through alliteration and assonance, they anticipate the music of Sinhalese: the [p]'s and [a]'s that resound throughout the exotic place names, in particular, already punctuate his French introduction. In those texts where Michaux fully integrates two different languages with each other, the emphasis on the musical beat of the hybrid text is even greater. In 'Articulations' (1929), for example, it is alliteration and assonance, rather than semantics, that give the lines 'Et go to go and go | Et garce!'[9] their overall coherence. As the discursive intelligibility of the conventional French words is subsumed by the music of the English, they come to participate of a hybrid other language. Even if these English borrowings are unlikely to be quite so unintelligible as Sinhalese words to francophone readers, their deviance from French norms of spelling and pronunciation still slows down the displacement of signifiers with signifieds. Indeed, the overlapping English and French pronunciations that Michaux's *franglais* invites simultaneously can evoke other languages, real or imaginary. Through assonances in [ɔ], for example, 'Articulations' covertly invokes a fantasized African language—the language of Togo, perhaps, or Wolof. For if Michaux deplored the 'style . . . nègre . . . où les verbes sont à l'infinitif présent', Africa and its languages nevertheless did embody a certain 'poésie primitive' for him.[10] The sound [ɔ] resounds throughout those of Michaux's texts that were more directly inspired by this primitive poetry, particularly in *Fables des origines* and 'Télégramme de Dakar' (1937).[11]

Hybridizing French with English, and perhaps with fantasized African languages, the emphasis placed in 'Articulations' (1929) on assonantal and alliterative expressivity can also evoke the irresistible rise of bodily sounds.

[8] Michaux, *OC* i. 350. [9] Ibid. 507. [10] Ibid. 53.
[11] See ibid. 32, 1034, 60, 1278.

> Bourbourane à Talico,
> Ou te bourdourra le bodogo,
> Bodogi.
> Croupe, croupe à la Chinon.
> Et bourrecul à la misère.[12]

Although the invented words 'bodogo' and 'bodogi' may recall the Spanish 'bodega', the conventional French words in this part of 'Articulations' point to the hybridization of French with an altogether less conventional language. Obscure at first, Michaux's invented words gradually come to point to the body. Through their juxtaposition with 'croupe' and 'bourrecul', in particular, alliterations in [b] and [R] come to suggest borborygmic sounds. Similarly, in 'Glu et gli' (1927), the discursive coherence of conventional French is gradually submerged by flatulence, through assonantal and alliterative echoes of the line 'Un homme qui n'aurait que son pet pour s'exprimer':

> Un homme qui n'aurait que son pet pour s'exprimer
> pas de rire
> pas d'ordure
> pas de turlururu.[13]

Alliterations in [p], followed by the anaphoric 'pas', mimic the unfolding 'pet' on which this section of 'Glu et gli' opens. The text's increasing emphasis on the phatic expressivity of signifiers, rather than on their discursive signifieds, leads to the deformation of the conventional exclamation 'turlu*tutu*': evolving in a crescendo of liquid [R]'s, Michaux's rendition of wind peaks with the farcically expressive neologism, 'turlururu'. As words lose their fixed shape, the text is overtaken by a new semantic, as well as morphological, fluidity. Even then, however, the expressivity of the text remains rooted in the conventionally discursive 'pet', despite its exploitation of the word's onomatopoeic resonances. Natural sounds, it seems, are never far from French sounds for Michaux.

Hybridizing the language of his texts with foreign borrowings and invented words, Michaux does not so much strive to displace French with another perfect but imaginary natural language as attempt to construct an idealized version of French. This is

[12] Ibid. 507. [13] Ibid. 110–11.

perhaps clearest in *Écuador* (1929), where his enthusiasm for the hybrid lingua franca spoken on board the liner exhibits his francophone sensibility to the music of words:

—*Haben sie fosforos?*
—*No tengo, caballero, but I have un briquet.*
Telle est la langue du bord.

Si l'on retient 'fosforos' c'est que c'est peut-être plus flambant qu'une allumette, par contre 'briquet' est bien cet instrument à pierre qui fait du feu. Un artiste européen avec beaucoup de tact écrirait ainsi une jolie langue quadrupède.[14]

A mixture of German, Spanish, English, and French, the language spoken by Michaux's seafaring companions has him dreaming of an embodied 'langue quadrupède', where words are carefully chosen not only for their conventional meaning, but also, and above all, for their sonority. Both 'fosforos' and 'briquet' seem to owe the privilege of their superior motivation to what Genette calls 'onomatopoetic' fictions of language ('la théorie mimétique du langage ou de la parole comme *onomatopée*'):[15] we are made to understand that 'fosforos' has the sound of fire and 'briquet' that of a lighter. On closer examination, however, the onomatopoeic Esperanto which Michaux describes here appears far less cosmopolitan than he implies. Although the multilingual exchange which he records does not seem at first to privilege French, it nevertheless does just this. If the Spanish word 'fosforos' appears more motivated than 'allumette', this is because its alliteration in [f] gives it a sonority closer to that of 'flambant'—as well as to that of the French lexical field of fire in general ('feu', 'flamme', 'flamboyant', etc.). Clearly, Michaux's preference for 'fosforos' over 'allumette' is based on a francophone's idea of the sound of fire, rather than on any objective description of the noise made when one strikes a match. Through his choice of 'fosforos', he attempts to correct a perceived imperfection within the particular linguistic system which constitutes the French language. Exhibiting his internalization of the music of French, his predilection for 'fosforos' confirms Henri Meschonnic's observation that 'le paradoxe de l'écriture de la nature est de faire la nature . . . par le discours'.[16] Indeed, it is

[14] Michaux, *OC* i. 143.
[15] Gérard Genette, *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), 161.
[16] Henri Meschonnic, 'La Nature dans la voix', Preface to Charles Nodier, *Dictionnaire raisonné des onomatopées* (Paris: Trans-Europe Presse, 1984), 30.

once again Michaux's French text that provides the basis for the *signifiance* of his borrowings. 'Fosforos' is alliterated with 'fait du feu' at the end of the sentence, as well as with 'flambant', and also echoes the sigmatism in the first part of the sentence. Similarly, the definition which Michaux gives of 'briquet' resounds with rolling 'r's and assonances in [i] and [e]: 'par contre "briquet" est bien cet instrument à pierre'.

For Michaux as for Mallarmé, then, it is the poet's task to correct 'le défaut des langues'.[17] The 'philosophical' importance that Mallarmé attached to the task[18] takes on a rather more personal edge in Michaux's writings, however. Indeed, the often openly aggressive and vindictive quality of Michaux's attempts to correct French is very much at odds with Mallarmé's rather more controlled manner. In 'Glu et gli', in particular, Michaux's hybridization of French transparently appears to be motivated by a desire for revenge. Boileau, whose '*Art poétique*' (1674) prefigured Rivarol's theory of the rationality of French, with its demand that French texts be weighed down by the 'joug de la raison',[19] personifies in 'Glu et gli' the strictures imposed on Michaux by that language and its literary tradition:

> Ah! que je te hais Boileau
> Boiteux, Boignetière, Boiloux, Boigermain,
> Boirops, Boitel, Boivery
> Boicamille, Boit de travers
> Bois ça.[20]

Having declared his hatred of Boileau, Michaux deforms his name, vengefully ridiculing it and tearing it apart until he can hit back at its bearer with it. Through a series of alliterations and assonances, Boileau re-emerges as a series of bodily manifestations (the limping 'Boiteux', the belching *Bois rot*, the choking 'Boit de travers'), and is symbolically dismembered with the fragmentation of his name in up to three different words. In the end, the oppressive command which Michaux inscribes at the heart of

[17] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 364.
[18] See ibid.
[19] Nicolas Boileau, *Œuvres classiques*, ed. C.-M. Des Granges (Paris: Hatier, 1918), 212.
[20] Michaux, *OC* i. 111.

Boileau's name, literalized into *bois l'eau*, backfires onto the theoretician of French classicism. It is no longer Michaux that is silenced by Boileau's 'Immense voix qui boit nos voix'.[21] Instead, it is Boileau who must 'drink' a newly liquefied French: an embodied and irrational language of 'glous-glous'[22] which shares many of the characteristics of the deviant language that Boileau attributed to the 'méchant écrivain' in his 'Art poétique'.[23]

As well as a riposte to the literary and linguistic dogmatism of Boileau's 'Art poétique', the former Namurois's poem may be read, perhaps, as his answer to Boileau's triumphant account of France's conquest of Namur in his 'Ode sur la prise de Namur' (1693). Ordering Boileau to 'drink' an embodied language, it is as though Michaux forced the hybrid language of Belgium onto the canonical French writer. Suggesting, in his 'Lettre de Belgique', that Belgians resist the French language with their bodies, Michaux simultaneously implies that the language of the body is the language of Belgians:

> Reste un caractère belge . . . qui est le caractère 'bon enfant, simple, sans prétention'. . . .
>
> L'injure à Gand, à Bruxelles, à Louvain, l'injure la plus courante est 'stoeffer' qui se traduit de la sorte: homme prétentieux, poseur.
>
> Le Belge a peur de la prétention des mots dits ou écrits. De là son accent, cette fameuse façon de parler le français. Le secret est tel: le Belge croit que les mots sont prétentieux. Il les empâte et les étouffe tant qu'il peut, tant qu'il soit devenu innofensif, bon enfant.
>
> . . . encore parle-t-il avec force gestes, ceux-ci faisant passer le mot.[24]

Indicting the pretentiousness of French words, Michaux implies that the French are the pretentious poseurs that Belgians despise. Drawing attention to the differences between francophone Belgian and French attitudes to French, he not only points out the former's access to another language, Flemish, but suggests that French, as spoken by his compatriots, is no longer the 'stoeffer"s stuffy French. Instead, it is another language, which they have reappropriated through their bodies. 'Empât[és]' and 'étouff[és]', French words not only elude clear pronunciation in Belgium, but they are silenced. Reducing them to a harmless pâté before swallowing them, Belgians elude the death that Michaux associates

[21] Michaux, *OC* i. 776. [22] Michaux, *OC* 110.
[23] See Boileau, *Œuvres classiques*, 219; and see 218. [24] Michaux, *OC* i. 52.

with the assimilation of French in texts such as 'L'Hôte d'honneur du Bren Club'.[25] Instead, their pronunciation anticipates Michaux's own liquefaction of Boileau's French in 'Glu et gli'. At the same time, the authority of the unpleasantly pompous language which they nevertheless speak is further undermined by their gestures. Redoubling their speech, these point to the independent expressivity of their bodies, as much as to the role of their bodies in the war against French.

'Retirer son être du piège de la langue des autres':[26] here lies the greatest challenge which Michaux faced. French both was and was not his language, as is suggested by his 'Lettre de Belgique' and his violent attempts to subvert the precepts of canonical French figures such as Boileau. If the francophone writer's imagination of nature is shaped mostly by French sounds, then, his hybridization of French with real or invented words nevertheless silmultaneously points to that language's foreignness for the Belgian poet. Indeed, it implies his desire to reappropriate it, as do the accent and gestures of conversing francophone Belgians. Even if in his 'lettre-mémo' to Bertelé, Michaux suggests that he thinks 'in Flemish' rather than in French, as we have seen in Chapter 3, he cannot reappropriate French with Flemish. Not only did Michaux not speak Flemish any more, as he asserts in the same letter, but Flemish never was his first language. Michaux's attempts to transform French into a foreign language only may be seen to exhibit his nostalgia for a metaphorical Flemish language: the lost language of his childhood. This, I suggest, is the hybrid francophone language which, as I showed in Chapter 3, he self-consciously began to 'forget' as he started to publish. Through their use of borrowings and their deformation of the French lexis, Michaux's texts metonymically re-create that hybrid francophone language, evoking its deformed return despite occluding the Flandricisms of his native language. Indeed, Michaux's use of borrowings and lexical inventiveness inscribe him in a Belgian literary tradition which historically has asserted its difference from France, as much as its resistance to the monolingualism sought by both conservative Walloons and the Flemish movement, through the hybridization of French. His hybridization of French recalls the 'langue bizarre' of the nineteenth-century writers associated

[25] See Chapter 3, above. [26] Michaux, *OC* ii. 440.

with *La Jeune Belgique* (or *Le Coq rouge*, rather) that he so relished in his adolescence. It also evokes the linguistic cosmopolitanism of the Belgian Dadaists in the early 1920s, with whom he had some ties through *Ça ira*, which published *Les Rêves et la jambe* in 1923. As well as publishing books, *Ça ira* edited a journal of the same name, which, among other things, published Behrens-Hangeler's phonetic poems written with invented words and Schwitters's multilingual texts.[27] Michaux's hybrid French may even be said, in a sense, to prefigure '[l']espèce de baragouin, de métissage, . . . de pidgin' written today by Jean-Pierre Verheggen and other Belgian francophones, who, unlike Michaux, openly construct their linguistic deviance as a marker of their cultural difference.[28]

Covertly reappropriating French through the hybridization of its lexis from the mid-1920s, Michaux also attempted to undermine conventional French by meddling with its syntax. The year before he began to publish, he wrote to Hermann Closson of a new practice of (re-)writing which he had devised. Prefiguring his idiosyncratic 'readings' in 'Portrait de A.' and *Écuador*, this experiment involved the dislocation of syntax, rather than the deformation of vocabulary: 'l'on s'amuse à déplacer les mots dans la phrase, ceux de queue en tête, ceux de tête au milieu . . . le tout comme des dés'.[29] He illustrated the practice with scrambled sentences such as 'Le chef doit aimer la discipline et faire asseoir ses troupes au cœur ardent sur sa volonté froide.'[30] According to him, the upside-down logic that resulted from the new-found literary technique fostered 'une signification . . . "émotionnelle" ' in what originally was a piece that he had found on the art of war.[31] Implying that the emotional text that resulted from his experiment was at odds with the cold rationality of the original, Michaux echoed Rivarol's belief that conventional French syntax reflects the rational order.[32] Indeed, his assumption also recalls

[27] On the multilingual writings of the Belgian Dadaists, see Jean-Paul Bier in Jean Weisberger (ed.), *Les Avant-gardes littéraires en Belgique*, (Brussels: Labor, 1991), 288.

[28] Jean-Pierre Verheggen (quoted in Lise Gauvin, *L'Écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues: Entretiens* (Paris: Khartala, 1997), 171).

[29] See Michaux, letter to Hermann Closson, undated (*c.*1921), *A la minute que j'éclate: Henri Michaux, quarante-trois lettres à Hermann Closson*, ed. Jacques Carion (Brussels: Didier Devillez, 2000), 38.

[30] See Michaux, letter to Closson, undated (*c.*1921), *A la Minute que j'éclate*, 39.

[31] Ibid. 38.

[32] See Louis-Jean Calvet, *La Guerre des langues* (Paris: Payot, 1987), 74.

Boileau's earlier assertion that a syntax where 'chaque chose [est] mise en son lieu' and where 'le début, la fin, répondent au milieu'[33] exhibits a writer's love of reason, in the same way as does his or her proper choice of words. At the same time, Michaux's comparison of this literary game to dice-throwing evokes the Dadaists's valorization of the challenge posed to rational logic by chance, as well as Mallarmé's non-linear syntax in *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Although the doubts which Michaux cast on chance as a literary process when he questioned automatic writing in the mid-1920s had already led him to abandon this particular technique when he started publishing in 1922, he nevertheless continued to experiment with French syntax throughout his life. In particular, he sought an aesthetic of simplicity which led him to favour ellipsis and aphorisms. Even if his predilection for the paring down of language and literary forms has led some of his commentators rightly to see echoes in his writings of his beloved 'style dix-septième', Michaux's subversion of rational logic through syntactical condensation simultaneously subverts the ideals of French classicism. Whereas Boileau called for stylistic condensation ('Ajoutez-quelquefois, et souvent effacez'[34]) in order that the light of reason would shine through straightforwardly discursive texts, Michaux's simplification of the French syntax invariably emphasizes obscurity and ambiguity. Similarly, if Michaux can conceivably be described as a 'Yoghi voltairien . . . qui met[ ] le savoir au-dessus de la folie des pratiques',[35] the 'knowledge' that he sought through syntactical condensation was nevertheless very much at odds with Candide's. Indeed, in 'Immense voix', Michaux, a self-described 'mauvais cultivateur', emphatically proclaims his preference for obscurity over enlightenment, as he exasperatedly exclaims, 'non, n'apportez pas de lumière!'[36]

Michaux's quest for 'simplicity' was also a very twentieth-century phenomenon, as is suggested by his comparison in 'Chronique de l'aiguillleur' (1922) between the expressive minimalism of primitive and primitivist art forms, and the desire for stylistic simplicity of the writers of his generation:

[33] Boileau, *Œuvres classiques*, 219. [34] Ibid. 215 and 219.
[35] Gabriel Bounoure, *Le Darçana d'Henri Michaux* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1985), 23.
[36] Michaux, *OC* i. 775.

Le XX° siècle-Art est blasé de la complexité, du luxe, des détails. *(2° indifférence)*

Le XX° siècle-Art entre à la trappe, veut manger des racines, s'enfoncer dans le désert:

CUBISME, ART NÈGRE
LITTÉRATURE ENFANTINE

Auparavant. Une école artistique donne à l'école précédente de la même région un coup de poing, enfonce une bosse-procédé, soulève à côté une autre bosse-procédé et une nouvelle . . . et . . .

Actuellement. Magazines, cinéma, téléphones, électricité, ont à l'homme contemporain fait don d'*Ubiquité*. Actuellement, lui sont connus 5 continents, 200 pays où vécurent 5,000 écoles qui peignirent chacune selon un procédé propre et une originalité propre à chacune, quelques millions de maisons, d'architecture et de situations différentes.

Nos bibliothèques connaissent les anthologies de tous les pays, des milliers de styles originaux.

Le moyen d'enfoncer toutes ces bosses-procédés?

Mais nous en littérature, en peinture, 'LA MAISON C'EST QUATRE MURS, UNE FENÊTRE, UNE PORTE, ET DU RESTE JE M'EN FOUS . . . '

Hygiène excellente!

Le cubisme, en peinture et sculpture, naît du même besoin actuel d'universalité et de simplicité que l'Espéranto.[37]

In these lines, directly inspired by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (i.e. Le Corbusier) and Amédée Ozenfant in *L'Esprit nouveau*, Michaux quite conventionally constructs the stylistic simplicity of early twentieth-century writers in light of a modernist quest for the universal primitive. Indeed, even if his reference to Esperanto appears to exhibit a longing for a primitive universal language, rather than betraying a literal interest in that universal language movement, Esperantists themselves justified the claim that their artificial language was universal by stressing the simplicity of its syntax and vocabulary.[38] Contrasting his contemporaries' asceticism with the implicit decadence of the nineteenth-century taste for complexity, luxury, and details, Michaux presents the

[37] Michaux, *OC* 12.

[38] John Cresswell in an 'introductory lesson' to Esperanto, describes this artificial 'universal' language as one which 'shows enormous *simplification* when compared with any national language', with a syntax comprising '*only* 16 short rules', and a vocabulary '*only* one-tenth the size of one in a national language' ((my emphasis) John Cresswell and John Hartley, *Teach Yourself Esperanto* (London: English University Presses, 1968), 9–10).

twentieth-century search for simplicity as a desire for spiritual redemption through images of Trappism, the desert, and the eating of roots. Prefiguring Michaux's later accounts of the pre-Babelic language of nature as being both spiritual and original, this account simultaneously foreshadows his suggestion that the Belgians have a particular affinity with simplicity in his 1924 'Lettre de Belgique'. Describing the Belgian character as 'simple, bon enfant, sans prétention',[39] he asserts in that text that these characteristics make his compatriots particularly suited to the modern aesthetic of simplicity. Indeed, aesthetic simplicity, he suggests in that text, is a peculiarly Belgian trait: 'Le retour assez général à la simplicité qui s'est fait sentir dans les arts trouve donc les littérateurs d'ici merveilleusement disposés, et déjà à l'œuvre. . . . Les poètes actuels en Belgique, volontiers, je les appellerais des virtuoses de la simplicité et j'aurais à les citer presque tous.'[40]

A reverie on the universal language which pre-dated the Babelic catastrophe, Michaux's *Les Rêves et la jambe* (1923) suggests that this aesthetic of simplicity mimes the language of dreams, itself implicitly an avatar of the pre-Babelic language evoked at the opening of the text. Like dreams, Michaux's 'style rêve'[41] is composed of absurdly juxtaposed 'symbolic' but otherwise apparently unsophisticated images. These, according to him, have their origin in the body, whether they merely arise from stimuli, as he suggests after Mourly Vold and Ribot, or whether they express frustrated (mostly sexual) desires, as he proposes, paraphrasing Freud. Stressing the opacity and antagonism towards verbalization of dream images, Michaux emphasizes the antagonism of the 'style rêve' towards the rational French language. Similarly, the simple and apparently straightforward language of 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur' exemplifies the way in which Michaux's aesthetic of simplicity subverts the univocal clarity advocated by Boileau, by relocating signification in the body. As '*Coq-à-l'âne*'[42] as a dream, the extract from 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur' quoted above abounds in rhetorical figures of juxtaposition. This aggressive process of syntactical purgation results in an elliptical style which

[39] Michaux, *OC* i. 52. [40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid. 24; on this oneiric language, see also Jean-Pierre Martin, *Henri Michaux: Écritures de soi, expatriations* (Paris: Corti, 1994), 135–6.

[42] Michaux, *OC* i. 22.

privileges nouns over other parts of speech, as suggested by the asyndetic catalogues of nouns unfolding in the extract. As in the dreams described in *Les Rêves et la jambe*, moreover, the 'Chronique' is written in, and advocates, a down-to-earth vocabulary, the polysemic evocativeness of which is inversely proportional to its simplicity. Individual words in the passage from the 'Chronique' which I quoted earlier are laden with multiple resonances, either through homonymy or because of their resonances in the popular imagination. If the phrase 'le XX° siècle-Art veut entrer à la trappe' primarily evokes the supposed yearning of twentieth-century art for the spirituality and poverty of Trappist monks, through homophony it also constructs this spiritual yearning as a regressive wish to go underground, to explore the subterranean regions of the unconscious, or body. Similarly, if 'manger des racines' suggests the material poverty and spiritual enlightenment of the Trappist reduced to eating roots like John the Baptist in the desert, it simultaneously conjures up the desire of twentieth-century art for a return to primitive forms. As for the phrase 's'enfoncer dans le désert', it evokes the physical barrenness of the desert, endowing it with the symbolic sacredness of the space where John the Baptist and then Christ triumphed over evil. At the same time, however, it constructs that sacred space as subterranean through the use of the ambiguous verb 's'enfoncer', which implies both a horizontal journey across the surface of the desert and a vertical one to the depths. If, as Maurice Mourier has observed, Michaux can be 'difficile à force de transparence', then, it is perhaps because simplicity need not in fact entail transparency.[43]

As in 'Glu et gli', Michaux's attempts to anchor signification in the body lead him to transgress the boundaries of conventional French in even as apparently 'non-literary' a work as 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur'. The syntactical condensation of coinages such as 'bosse-procédé', in the excerpt quoted above, or 'le nutétisme'[44] elsewhere in the same text, express complex ideas through neologisms, which depend for signification on the concrete evocativeness of metaphors centred on the body. When Michaux writes that 'les gens riches en été pratiquent le nunétisme. Mais parvenus et

[43] Maurice Mourier, 'A Propos de "Moriturus": Une écriture de la mort', in Michel Collot and Jean-Claude Mathieu (eds.), *Passages et langages de Henri Michaux* (Paris: Corti, 1987), 81.

[44] Michaux, *OC* i. 13.

pauvres gens n'osent pas aller nu-tête,'[45] for example, 'nutétisme' invites a reading where the bare heads of the rich are metaphors for the triumphant defiance of his stylistic dressing-down. Similarly, Michaux's evocation of the stylistic deformations which result from constricting aesthetic dictates through the neologism 'bosse-procédé' relies on a physiological image, which is part of a running metaphor ascribing abnormal bodily excrescences to the forced containment of the body in a 'pot'.[46] Making abstract aesthetic theories concrete by relating them to the universal experience of embodiment, such metaphors simultaneously give a voice to the body by turning it into a signifier. Indeed, they point to the exhibitionism of a stylistically bare text.[47] Echoing Freud's theory of censorship and displacement, Michaux asserts in *Les Rêves et la jambe* that dreams, born of a compromise between the 'bloc homme public' and 'le morceau homme sexuel', speak in 'symbolic' images (the leg) which ultimately refer to what cannot be represented directly (the phallus).[48] In the same way, Michaux's 'style rêve' creates literary metaphors which have their origin in the unspeakable body and in the even more unspeakable ontological vacuum of which the hole in his heart is a metonymy in *Écuador*. The image of 'la trappe' in the extract of 'Chronique' quoted above anticipates that ontological as well as physiological abyss. Even words like 'les racines' and 'le désert' may be said indirectly to point to the fragility of the self, when read in the context of Michaux's later writings. In *Un Barbare en Asie*, for example, impersonal Chinese women are 'comme la racine du Banyan', while in *Écuador*, the empty landscape of the desert figures the self's ontological vacuum.[49] If Michaux, who was by all accounts a very private person, was 'anti-exhibitionniste', as Fintz suggests, this did not stop him from indirectly exhibiting himself in his texts.[50] It is this metaphorical exhibitionism that Michaux told Jouffroy that he regretted in works such as *Plume* and *Mes propriétés*, which were so painfully confessional that he

[45] Ibid. [46] See ibid. 10.

[47] As Bréchon remarks, the face and the head are almost always obscene in Michaux's texts (see Robert Bréchon, *Michaux* (Paris: NRF, Collection 'La Bibliothèque idéale', 1959), 47).

[48] See Michaux, *OC* i. 22–3.

[49] See ibid. 362 and 196.

[50] Jean-Claude Fintz, *Expérience esthétique et spirituelle chez Henri Michaux* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 20.

exclaimed 'je n'aurais pas dû me livrer à ça . . . à des choses qui me mettent autant à nu'.[51]

Michaux's aesthetic of simplicity and desire to anchor signification in the body did not necessarily entail the disruption of French syntax or the deformation of the French lexis, however. The overdetermination of conventional French words was enough, as the following piece from *Écuador* suggests:

> *Ma chambre donne sur un volcan.*
> *La fenêtre de ma chambre donne sur un volcan.*
> *Enfin un volcan.*
> *Je suis à deux pas d'un volcan*
> *Il y avait dans notre propriété un volcan.*
> *Volcan, volcan, volcan.*
> C'est ma musique pour ce soir.[52]

If the often apparently 'instrumental' use that Michaux makes of words in his texts has prompted critics such as Bowie to declare that 'we would scarcely turn to Michaux's work in any search for ambiguous . . . poetic meanings',[53] Michaux is nevertheless a master manipulator of semantic certitudes. Disconcertingly, this text, which seems almost childishly straightforward to begin with, or when its reading is fragmented line by line, seems to lose its discursive clarity as its uninterrupted reading progresses. In particular, the semantic status of the word 'volcan' seems to change as the text proceeds. Opening on a series of statements of 'fact', it appears at first simply to assert in different ways the narrator's present proximity to a volcano. By the fifth line, however, an ambiguous reference to '*notre propriété*' throws doubt on the validity of such a plainly referential reading. Instead, more complex associations seem more pertinent since '*notre propriété*' suggests both the place where Michaux and his friends are staying in Ecuador and his inner 'propriétés'. The shift from the present to the past tense in this line reinforces this feeling of discontinuity. After a series of statements which seemed to point to objective facts, then, the text slides into the introspective mode of the contemporary *Mes propriétés* (1929). By the sixth line, the word 'volcan', repeated three

[51] Michaux (quoted by Alain Jouffroy in *Avec Henri Michaux* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1992), 30).
[52] Michaux, *OC* i. 161.
[53] Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works*, 134.

times, is reduced to a sonorous shell, anticipating *Écuador*'s account, in 'Je suis né troué', of the self as empty crater. Shortly after 'Volcan', Michaux encapsulates his *art poétique* in a brief formula: 'Peu de phrases. Le gong fidèle d'un mot.'[54] Privileging the evocative power of individual words over the discursive clarity of their arrangement in sentences, this poetics echoes his 'style rêve' in *Les Rêves et la jambe* and the aesthetics of simplicity which he advocates in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur'.

Although in 'Volcan' Michaux privileges *la signifiance* over discursive signification and relocates meaning in the body through the unaltered repetition of a single word, most of his writings achieve similar effects through simple echoes of sound. Rhetorical figures of repetition, as well as paronomasia, homophones, and homonyms, are central to the progression of such texts. Shifting the discursive ground on which individual words would otherwise be settled, these figures emphasize the non-discursive musicality of words through deformed echoes which radiate an unstable and non-linear multiplicity of meanings. 'Télégramme de Dakar' (1937), the title of which points to Michaux's aspiration to telegraphic condensation, is a text born of, and sustained by, a reverie on Africa centred around the word 'noir'. From the opening line, 'Dans le noir, le soir',[55] the word ushers forth the rest of the vocabulary of the text through metonymic and metaphorical associations. But as 'noir' acquires and loses shades of meaning in a process which Jean-Michel Maulpoix has called 'la sublimation du sens',[56] it comes disconcertingly close to nonsense. In the opening line of the text, the paronomastic 'soir' is prompted by 'noir', and the two rhyming words echo each other semantically. In that line as in the tenth, which repeats it, 'noir' takes on the meaning of 'soir'. A few lines down, this semantic shift comes into its own:

> Noirs
> Noirs combien plus noirs que de hâle
> Têtes noires sans défense avalées par la nuit.
> On parle à des décapités.[57]

[54] Michaux, *OC* i. 162. [55] Ibid. 600.
[56] Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *Henri Michaux, passager clandestin* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1984), 132.
[57] Michaux, *OC* i. 601.

The word 'noir' of the first and tenth lines of the text, which signified 'soir' even if literally referring to the colour black, now reappears capitalized and in the plural. Although 'Noirs' unambiguously designates 'black' people to a reader, to a listener the word nevertheless might recall the 'noir' which phonetically and semantically echoed 'soir'. On hearing *noir, noir combien plus noir* one might easily assume that Michaux is further developing the 'noir'/'soir' theme, and therefore that what is black is the night. To a listener, then, the end of the line would introduce a moment of nonsense, as the ground shifts under what until then appeared to be the stable semantic conflation of 'noir' and 'soir'. However, the momentary panic created by this encounter with meaninglessness would quickly subside, as the unambiguous 'têtes noires' of the next line restore discursive clarity to the text by invalidating the semantic and phonetic equivalences between 'noir' and 'Noirs', 'Noirs' and 'soir', and 'noir' and 'soir'. Yet, these conflations are reasserted just as they have become inoperative, when the heads of the depersonalized subjects of the text disappear into the night ('soir'). With the line 'On parle à des décapités', the 'Noirs' have ceded ground to the 'noir' which is the 'soir'. With 'noir' now the semantic as well as the phonetic equivalent of 'Noirs', the initial conflation of 'noir' and 'soir' is re-established. As the 'Noirs' are metaphorically decapitated by the night, rational coherence and semantic certitudes cede their place to a newly destabilized and shifting French language.[58]

It is no coincidence if the metaphorical decapitation of the 'têtes noires' in 'Télégramme de Dakar', or the prefiguring of the vacuum at the centre of the self in 'Volcan' and 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', happen at moments of semantic incertitude. Self-effacement correlates semantic ambiguity in Michaux's texts. As is suggested by his call in *Poteaux d'angle* for a simultaneous and interdependent 'retour à l'effacement, à l'indétermination',[59] Michaux's subversion of the French linguistic order emphasizes the instability of identities. In some cases, the will to challenge the fictitiously stable subjectivity that linguistic expression articulates leads him to a style of writing where personal pronouns have been

[58] On Michaux's strategies to undermine the contextual meanings of signifiers, see also Jean-Jacques Paul, 'Le "Peu" rhéthorique', in Jean-Pierre Giusto, Maurice Mourier, and Jean-Jacques Paul (eds.), *Sur Henri Michaux* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 1988), 122.

[59] Michaux, *Poteaux d'angle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 89.

occluded altogether. In the posthumously published *Par des traits* (1984), for instance, these have been removed in favour of nominal and infinitive sentences, present participles, the impersonal pronoun 'il', and generalizing singulars and plurals, all of which combine to give the text an impersonal quality. In other texts, such as the much earlier 'Quelque part quelqu'un' (1938), Michaux undermines ideas of subjectivity by resorting to the repetition of the indefinite 'quelqu'un' to characterize one or several protagonist(s) who is, or are, full of contradictions. Even as the texts proffers a 'typically modern awareness of diversity',[60] its ambiguous protagonist(s) is, or are, at once 'quelqu'un' and '*autre* quelqu'un',[61] male and female, human and animal, animated and inanimated, one and multiple. Although the protagonist(s) of this text appear(s) more individualized than those of *Par des traits*, because of the idiosyncratic and often contradictory qualities which each line attributes to each one of these someones, the Protean nature of its protagonist(s) simultaneously undermines any claims to a stable identity.

In the majority of his texts, however, Michaux does use personal pronouns. But even in such narratives, the coherence of the subjective voice implied by first-person pronouns or of the subjects presupposed by second-or third-person pronouns, is uncertain. If 'La Ralentie' (1938) opens on a monologue where an indefinite and quasi-impersonal voice addresses a similarly indefinite other ('on', 'quelqu'un'[62]), the monologue nevertheless evolves into one where a first-person narrator speaks to a second-person other. At intervals, however, the text turns into a singular (but also plural, at times) third-person narrative about another or several other absent third-person protagonist(s). The effect of these Protean voice changes and shifts in narrative perspective is not so much to personalize the indefinite pronouns as to depersonalize the personal pronouns. Although the indefinite 'on' of the opening of the text is named as 'la Ralentie',[63] suggesting that the impersonal pronoun refers to a single protagonist, it quickly becomes clear that the text challenges conventional ideas of individuality. Hovering ambiguously between the personal and the impersonal, 'la Ralentie' gradually becomes indistinguishable from the first-person

[60] Bowie, *Henri Michaux: A Study of His Literary Works*, 156.
[61] (My emphasis) Michaux, *OC* i. 550 and 554. [62] Ibid. 573. [63] Ibid.

narrator, as well as from the third-person female protagonists.[64] One would have to take a very catholic view of individual identity to argue that this voice (or these voices) is (or are) personal. Transpersonal, rather, it is (or they are) simultaneously singular and multiple: 'fatiguée', they are also 'épuisées'.[65] The blending in of these superficially different voices into that of the enigmatic 'Ralentie' is mirrored by their gradual dissolution in the eponymous text. As the barriers separating the self from the Other collapses, language hovers on the edge of silence. Disintegrating into smoke and then into the shadow of shadows, bodies merge with a world which has lost all solidity, and words are reduced to indistinct mumbles as the text abandons any attempt at rational clarity and linear progression. Increasingly interrogative, discontinuous, repetitive, and elliptic, its language performs the dissolution of the 'feminine' self 'plus qu'à moitié dévorée'[66] by silence.

Even in more apparently straightforward first-person narratives, Michaux undermines the fiction of a stable and unified identity by inscribing the alterity of the self to itself within the first-person narrative voice: as Laurie Edson has remarked, 'je' cannot 'clearly indicate self', since even the 'self' is discontinuous.[67] Already in the early 'Mes rêves d'enfant' (1925), the first-person narrator covers at least two separate selves: an adult and a child, Henri Michaux as he now is and as he once was, 'qui-je-suis' and 'qui-je-fus'. Generally speaking, the more elaborate language of the adult is at odds with the child's lexis and syntax. However, just as the child lives on in the adult, there nevertheless is a degree of overlap between their voices, and it is not always possible to determine who is speaking. The adult narrator's language is infiltrated with infantile words, such as '*Poussy*'.[68] Conversely, if

[64] 'Oh! Fagots de *mes* douze ans, où crépitez-vous maintenant? | *On* a son creux ailleurs' ((my emphasis) ibid. 574). 'Tandis qu'*on* cherche sa clef dans l'horizon, *on a la noyée au cou*, qui est morte dans l'eau irrespirable. | *Elle* traîne. Comme *elle* traîne! *Elle* n'a cure de nos soucis. *Elle a* trop de désespoir . . . *le cou serré sans trêve par la noyée*' ((my emphasis) ibid.).

[65] Ibid. 578 and 575. (On the indistinction of plural and singular identities in Michaux's texts, see also Didier Alexandre, 'Je suis foule; l'énonciation plurielle chez Michaux', in Catherine Mayaux (ed.), *Henri Michaux: Plis et cris du lyrisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 29–31).

[66] Michaux, *OC* i. 577.

[67] Laurie Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1985), 34.

[68] Michaux, *OC* i. 63.

the child calls for 'Maman' whereas the adult refers to his mother more restrainedly as 'Mère', the same word 'mère' nevertheless finds its place in a passage where the situation suggests early childhood: 'Oh! Henri, dit mère, tu n'es pas honteux à ton âge? Hi! Hi! ce n'est pas moi . . . et fessé je me réveille.'[69] An ambiguous reference to the narrator's age, and his assertion that someone else is responsible for the reprehensible act (passing wind), further emphasizes the ambiguity of the speaking voice, suggesting its hybridity. In later texts, Michaux went even further, deciding to forgo the first person altogether. In *Connaissance par les gouffres*, in particular, he writes that 's'agissant de lui-même, il répugne à dire "je". Il ne dit plus "moi", il dit "celui-ci", il dit "lui". Distance.'[70] Although, as Edson argues, these lines may be a way for Michaux to 'pretend' that the destabilizing experiences with drugs that he relates in *Connaissance* 'are not his personal experiences',[71] they also point to the fact that the multiplicity of selves that Michaux discovers within himself through his experiences with drugs radically invalidates the unified identity that first-person narratives conventionally suggest. At the same time, the distance that Michaux seeks to establish with his own self throws an interesting light on his inscription of his identity in his other writings: his exploration of alienation in *Connaissance par les gouffres* is inseparable from an investigation of aesthetic practices. The effect of this strategy is to make apparently confessional texts appear impersonal and fictional, undermining the difference between fiction and autobiography. This is perhaps best exemplified by 'Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d'existence', in which there is no explicit coincidence between Michaux-as-author and Michaux-as-protagonist. If in Chapter 1, I have read this text as an autobiography, it is because Michaux composed it specially for the biographical section of Bréchon's monograph, and because the facts that he describes generally coincide with those of his life. But it is no conventional autobiography, as Michaux's decision not to use the first person, and his reluctance unambiguously to identify himself as its protagonist, suggest.[72] The identity of author,

[69] (My emphasis) ibid. 64.
[70] Michaux, *Connaissance par les gouffres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 261–2.
[71] Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement*, 74–5.
[72] On the importance of straightforward identification in conventional autobiographies, see Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 14–15.

narrator, and protagonist(s) can be seen to remain an open question, particularly as the 'Renseignements' reads like the rather detached and sketchy story of someone else's life. Indeed, when the protagonist is not reduced to an impersonal 'il' who could be anybody, he is omitted from the text altogether, in asyndetic sentences where even the third-person pronoun has been elided. The text's many nominal sentences contribute to enhance this impression: devoid of a verb, they also lack a subject. Although 'Quelques renseignements' ostensibly describes a particular life, then, it can seem as though 'Monsieur' is as "absent' from his autobiography as he is from 'Toujours son "Moi"'.

Michaux's reappropriation of French through its depersonalization finds interesting echoes in his attempts, from the start of his literary career, to undermine both the stable subjectivity implied by personal names, and what in Chapter 1 I called the myth of the self-made Latin writer. In the 'Renseignements', Michaux's dissatisfaction with his signature does not just exemplify his conflicted relationship to his Latinity and Nordicity. Instead, it emphasizes his unease with the stable identity suggested by personal names, and his discomfort with the lip-service which their use pays to the myth of the self-made writer. Michaux attempted to subvert the assumptions underlying his signature, by either deforming his name, undermining its authority, or using pseudonyms which, he hoped, would point to 'ses tendances et ses virtualités'.[73] From 1922 to 1929, in particular, it was not exactly with his 'nom vulgaire' that Michaux signed his writings: his pen name, 'Henry Michaux', was at once his name and not his name. Anglicizing 'Henri', he sought, perhaps, to reinvent himself, emphasizing his distance both from the francophone family that had given him his name, and from France. Hinting at his foreignness while nevertheless not explicitly pointing to his Belgianness, 'Henry' simultaneously emphasizes the difference between Henry-the-self-made-writer and Henri-the-biological-son-of-*monsieur-et-madame-Michaux*, who sought 'ses vrais parents' in his literary predecessors during his adolescence. The death of his parents in 1929 coincides with his readoption of his 'prénom véritable qui est Henr*i*'.[74] Even if it seems that the death of Michaux's genitors

[73] Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. ii.
[74] Michaux, letter to Jean Paulhan (10 Mar. 1929) (quoted ibid. p. iii).

went some way towards liberating him from the hold of the past, Michaux nevertheless remained uneasy with his name, as his simultaneous adoption and rejection of his name on signing *Écuador* that same year, suggest. Although conventionally signed, the work is nevertheless pointedly not countersigned, undermining the validity of its signature.[75] In his Preface to *Écuador*, Michaux refused to sign a text which nevertheless bore his name on its cover, attributing it instead to an anonymous 'AUTEUR', whom he described equally anonymously as 'un homme'.[76] Michaux's unease with his signature is made even more explicit in his 1938 edition of *Plume*. Although *Plume, précédé de lointain intérieur* also bears its author's name on its cover, Michaux's assertion in the Postface that the work is 'un livre que n'a pas fait l'auteur, quoiqu'un monde y ait participé'[77] challenges the status of his authorial signature. When Michaux did, on at least two occasions, choose to sign his texts with straightforward pseudonyms, the imaginary names that he substituted for his own further emphasized the elusiveness of the figure of the author. Indeed, pseudonyms such as 'D'un certain Plume' and 'Pâques-Vent' did not merely undermine the idea of a stable signature or identity. They also underlined the fiction of authorship by relegating his signature to further anonymity. Similarly, Pierre Emmanuel—Mathieu Noël Jean—attributed his own decision to choose a pseudonymous name to a 'désir d'anonymat, presque de non-être, avivé par une sensibilité à mon manque d'unité, à l'incohérence de mes *moi*'.[78] The signature which Michaux affixed to *Tu vas être père* (1942)—'D'un certain Plume'—is a literal nom de plume locating his identity in that of a fictional character whose name defines him as an anonymous *homme de plume*, and whose absurd adventures suggest that he is an actor of the unconscious. At the same time, by referring to *Un certain plume* (1930), the pseudonym simultaneously implies that authorial identity is to be found not so much in any one name as in one's Protean textual corpus. 'Pâques-Vent', the signature which Michaux affixed to 'La Marche dans le tunnel' (1944), has

[75] 'Toute signature n'est signature qu'à condition d'appeler et de promettre une contresignature' (Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 141–2).

[76] Michaux, *OC* i. 139.

[77] Ibid. 665.

[78] Pierre Emmanuel, 'Changer de nom', *Corps écrit*, 8 (Dec. 1983), 89.

much the same effect. Denoting the resurrection ('pâques') and connoting Passover by homonymy ('la Pâque'), the name suggests an identity in exile from itself, unstable and mutating. Evoking the wind, and, through this image, 'Toujours son "Moi"', where identity changes with the direction of the wind, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the pseudonym simultaneously points to Michaux's corpus for an understanding of its mutability.

In light of such attempts to undermine the cult of the author by redirecting the attention of readers onto his texts, the sometimes dazzling onomastic inventiveness which Michaux displays in his texts may be read as an attempt to name the elusive Protean identity which stable individual names cannot name. If 'Plume', for instance, 'lacks a sense of self'[79] as Edson has suggested, he nevertheless also names an ideal version of the self, 'Plus-me', according to Jean-Claude Mathieu, who describes the character as 'le moi idéal dont la littérature est le dépot'.[80] Similarly, characters such as Juana, Lorellou, A., 'Emme', or 'N.', are to Michaux what By is to the first-person narrator of 'Souvenirs': 'semblable à moi et plus encore à ce qui n'est pas moi'.[81] If Emme phonetically transcribes the initial of Michaux's surname, for example, A. and N. paronomastically echo those of his first and last name. In this sense, if the fictional names Emme, A., and N. evoke 'Henri Michaux', it is through difference as much as through similarity. They name an Other which both is and is not Henri Michaux. Even names which ostentatiously point to people other than Michaux can evoke his construction of his own identity through the challenge which they pose to stable identities. It has been suggested that, in 'La Ralentie', 'Lorellou' stands for Marie-Louise Ferdière, and/or for Aline Mayrisch ('Loup'), and that 'Juana' may refer to Susana Soca, Angelica Ocampo, and/or the Mexican mystic Iñes de la Cruz.[82] Articulating the voices of these various women, these ill-differentiated personae nevertheless can also be said, on a more general level, to inscribe the threat posed to personal identities by the impersonally feminine Other. The name 'Lorellou' contains a menace to the integrity of the

[79] Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement*, 38.
[80] Jean-Claude Mathieu, 'Légère lecture de Plume', in Roger Dadoun (ed.), *Ruptures sur Henri Michaux* (Paris: Payot, 1976), 105.
[81] Michaux, *OC* i. 205.
[82] See ibid. 1243–5.

narrative voice with which it blends: evoking the dangerous animality of the wolf ('loup'), it correlatively recalls the threatening femininity of the half-animal 'lorelei', whose song entices men to their death in 'Les Fées du Rhin'.[83] Similarly, the feminine youthfulness suggested by the name Juana, through an interlingual pun, invites one to identify the character bearing that name as a *jeune fille*, a category of person that Michaux describes in 'Visages de jeunes filles' as impersonal and animal-like.[84] Coupled with Juana's paronomastic negation of the first person (*je . . . ne*), the uncertain difference between the first-person narrator and *la jeune fille* points to the narrator's depersonalization in the text. The Protean signature which Michaux displaces from the jacket covers of his texts onto the texts themselves is not only to be found in the names of their more or less indistinguishable narrators and protagonists, but in the texture of the texts themselves. More often than not, names are dissolved in the text through alliteration and assonance. Alliterations in [l] and [ʀ], coupled with assonances in [u], anticipate Lorellou's name in 'Quelqu'un roule, dort, coud, est-ce-toi, Lorellou?'[85] In much the same way, the French pronunciation of the name Juana is repeated through alliterations in [ʒ] and [n], as well as through assonances in [y] and [a] in 'Juana, je ne puis rester, je t'assure. J'ai une jambe de bois dans la tirelire à cause de toi.'[86] Similarly, alliterations in [ʀ], [l], and [t], and assonances in [a], [ã], and [i] echo the name La Ralentie even as they disperse it in the following line: 'Ralentie, on tâte le pouls des choses; on y ronfle; on a tout le temps; tranquillement; toute la vie.'[87] The ambiguous (non-)differentiation of 'la Ralentie', 'Lorellou', and 'Juana' is further reflected in their names, through alliterations in [ʀ] and [l] and assonances in [a]. As a result, such lines as those quoted above do not merely scatter the fragmented echoes of one individual name. Reflecting one, they reflect them all.

The dissemination of the dismantled name in the texture of the text in some of Michaux's writings, is such that it sometimes almost seems as though the text as a whole amounts to an onomastic reverie. In the elegiac 'Iniji' (1965), in particular, the name of the eponymous protagonist echoes throughout the text,

[83] See ibid. ii. 394. [84] See ibid. 305. [85] Ibid. i. 573.
[86] Ibid. 578. [87] Ibid. 577.

dramatizing her reduction to elusive but pervasive 'fluides' and 'vent'.[88] Variously addressed in the first, second, and third person, Iniji is unclearly differentiated from others, including the first-person narrator and those whose different names metaphorically point to hers, such as the lost 'Ariane', or the celestial 'Aurora' and 'Stella'.[89] Even those names in the text which do not evoke Iniji metaphorically tend to suggest phonologically scrambled versions of it, as with the 'Djinns', the 'rails d'Iritilli', or the 'montagnes de Niniji'.[90] At times, the text reads like an onomasticon. This is particularly the case in those passages which enumerate lists of names that evoke Iniji through assonance and alliteration, endowing the repetition of her name with an incantatory momentum: 'Anania Iniji | Anna Animha Iniji | Ornanian Iniji | . . . | Annaneja Iniji | Annajeta Iniji | Annamajeta Iniji'.[91] Echoed in the proper names which the text enumerates, the name also pervades the flow of its unravelling language, as in 'La Ralentie'. But the undoing of language that accompanies the deformed repetition of names is taken further in 'Iniji' than in 'La Ralentie'. For in 'Iniji', it is not just the elliptic syntax and circular logic of the text that mirror the dismemberment of names in the text. Instead, words themselves are often reduced to fragmented echoes, deriving their expressivity from their alliterative or assonantal relationship with Iniji and its correlates (Ariane, in this case) as much as from any conventional word they might recall: 'Si tu vas Nje | Nja va da | Si tu ne njas | njara ra pas'.[92] At the same time as it dismantles any notion of the stability of the self, 'Iniji''s denominative poetics evokes the primitive language '[qui] ne reconnaît aucun nom propre connu' that Michaux was already dreaming of in 'Cas de folie circulaire'.[93] For names are no more fixed in 'Iniji' than discredited personal identities and words. As it modulates a multiplicity of interrelated names, or a single but infinitely shifting name, 'Iniji' simultaneously returns French to a lost *langue mère* through a rhetoric of dissolution where 'les formes s'en vont en flocons | plongent, s'étendent, se déforment' before being invaded by silence.[94] Rehearsing an elusive name while staging the dissolution of personal identities and linguistic conventions, 'Iniji'

[88] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 80 and 79.
[89] Ibid. 80 and 85. [90] Ibid. 82 and 83. [91] Ibid. 81.
[92] Ibid. 82. [93] Michaux, *OC* i. 7.
[94] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps*, 87.

invites a reading as a Protean signature. If, as Edson argues, Michaux's writing is an 'exorcism of the void',[95] then, it nevertheless also actively conjures it.

'Iniji' is one of the texts in which Michaux most successfully solved the double question of how to articulate an unalienated identity in French, and how to 'sign' a text without giving in to the fiction of authorship that he denounces in the Postface of *Plume*. But 'Iniji' cannot be read in isolation. Michaux's texts are very closely interrelated, despite their author's experiments with different genres and voices. Even if the boundaries of the individual texts making up his scattered corpus appear well defined, since they usually have titles differentiating them from one another, they seldom are quite so clear-cut as might at first appear. Except for those very early texts which he preferred to forget, and for the late works which he did not have time to rework, Michaux continued to alter his texts after publication, only to reprint them later. As a result, texts with the same title often are not in fact exactly the same, varying a little with each new edition. Conversely, texts with different titles can be very closely related, suggesting the intensive reworking of previous works. To read 'Iniji' (1973), in particular, is to have the curious feeling of encountering a deformed but insistently recognizable version of earlier writings. In particular, it resounds with echoes of 'La Ralentie', the confessional and elegiac tone of which it shares. The doubt which 'Iniji' casts over rationality mirrors that of 'La Ralentie', while the negativity, the interrogations, and the recurrent invasion of the text of 'Iniji' by silence evoke it. Alive and dead, feminine and masculine, single and plural, natural and supernatural, the protagonist of 'Iniji' recalls the equally ambiguous 'la Ralentie'/'Lorellou'/'Juana'. Indeed, 'le tremblant qui dissipe tout l'univers' in 'Iniji' already blurs the world of 'la Ralentie', where even 'les poutres tremblent',[96] while the dissolution of 'Iniji''s arms ('Iniji ne sait plus faire bras') is foreshadowed in the fate of 'La Ralentie''s hands: 'Mes mains, quelle fumée!'[97] As well as sharing their imagery and themes, the two texts draw on a very similar lexis. Almost each line finds an echo in the other text, sometimes word

[95] Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement*, 44.
[96] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps*, 89; and *OC* i. 574.
[97] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps*, 80; and *OC* i. 576.

for word. The invocation of silence in 'Iniji' ('Silence | silence') reduplicates that in 'La Ralentie', except for minor alterations in the typography and punctuation of the lines ('Silence! | Silence!'), while both recall Verlaine in *Sagesse* ('Silence, silence!').[98] Similarly, the opening line of 'Iniji'—'*Ne peut plus*, Iniji'—is an almost exact quotation from the third paragraph of 'La Ralentie': '*Ne peut plus* . . . quelqu'un'.[99] Such is the suggestive force of these echoes, that throwing light on some of the more apparently enigmatic lines of 'Iniji' usually involves going back to 'La Ralentie', or vice versa, undermining the idea of the closure of either text. At the same time, self-conscious intertextual echoes with Hugo's 'Djinns' and Verlaine's *Sagesse*, further relativize the signature which 'Iniji' articulates, encompassing the voices of Michaux's literary ancestors as well as those of his own literary past. For Michaux was not so 'amnesiac' a reader as he liked to assert.[100] Opening on an Oedipal wish to silence the voices of his literary ancestors for fear of never finding a voice of his own, his literary career rapidly evolved into a celebration of the many voices that spoke through his pen. Indeed, it was arguably by relocating his signature onto his onomastic poetics that he found his voice.

[98] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps*, 87; *OC* i. 576; and see Paul Verlaine, 'Un grand sommeil noir', in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec and Jacques Borel (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 279.

[99] Michaux, *OC* i. 573; and Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps*, 79.

[100] See Martin, *Henri Michaux*, 35.

5

WRITING AND PAINTING VISION

The same year that saw the publication of *Épreuves-exorcismes*, where Michaux rebels against the murderous 'Immense voix' of conventional linguistic expression, also saw that of *Liberté d'action* (1945). Closing on his renunciation of murder and writing, the book announces his turn to painting: '*Après tuer, les caresses*. . . . J'en ai trop dit. A écrire on s'expose décidément à l'excès. . . . D'ailleurs je ne tue plus. Tout lasse. Encore une époque de ma vie de finie. Maintenant je vais peindre.'[1] In the 'Renseignements', Michaux's 1947 'voyages . . . d'oubli des maux'[2] similarly suggest, through a homophonic pun with *mots*, that from that period of time onwards he began to draw away from the pain of linguistic expression. His assertion that from 1951 onwards 'il écrit de moins en moins, il peint davantage'[3] presents this proclaimed retreat from words as a turn to painting. Such announcements have encouraged many of Michaux's commentators, such as Virginia La Charité, to argue that the early 1950s mark . . . 'a decrease in Michaux's poetic productivity and an increase in his interest in painting' and in 'prose analyses of art, drugs, and dreams'.[4] Although La Charité's comment is backed up by Michaux himself, it nevertheless invites a challenge. By the time Michaux published *Liberté d'action*, he had been drawing and painting for nearly twenty years and had found '[s]a façon de peindre' almost ten years before: he dated the latter to 1 January 1936 in a letter to Paulhan.[5] By that time, he had already had three exhibitions devoted to his paintings, at which he had managed both to attract the interest of the likes of André Gide and Jean Paulhan, and to incur the wrath of the academic circles of the Beaux-Arts.[6] By the end of the war he also had already published four books juxtaposing some of his texts with reproductions of his

[1] Michaux, *OC* ii. 171. [2] Ibid., vol. i, p. cxxxiv. [3] Ibid.
[4] Virginia La Charité, *Henri Michaux* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 99.
[5] Michaux, letter to Jean Paulhan (5 Jan. 1936) (quoted in *OC*, vol. i. p. civ).
[6] See Adrienne Monnier, 'Exposition Henri Michaux', in *Correspondance Adrienne Monnier & Henri Michaux (1939–1955)*, ed. Maurice Imbert (Paris: La Hune, 1995), 37.

visual works: *Entre centre et absence* (1936), *Peintures* (1939), *Arbres des tropiques* (1941), and *Le Lobe des monstres* (1945). Even if Michaux did paint very regularly from the 1950s onwards, then, his interest in the possibilities of visual expression had been increasing steadfastly for over fifteen years. But this is not to say that poetry was no longer a central concern for the writer who never ceased to experiment with attempts to reappropriate French. Indeed, it is in later writings such as 'Iniji' that he was most successful. More importantly, perhaps, the idea that the second phase of Michaux's literary career saw the publication of more 'prose' than 'poetry', rests on a misleading distinction between these genres. As we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4, 'poetry' for Michaux is not a stable literary genre that exists in contrast with prose, but a natural language which gives a voice to the self, rather than silencing it as conventional French does. If Michaux's analyses of dreams and of the self under the influence of drugs enquire into this unalienated language, they also perform it by recording or re-creating it. It is in the performative qualities of their language that their 'poetry' lies.[7] This 'poetry' can overstep the boundaries of verbal expression, however. Like the graphic rhythm which (as we have seen in Chapter 3) prolongs the verbal body of 'Tapis roulant en marche', the antagonism that Michaux posits between his verbal and visual activities in texts such as *Liberté d'action* and the 'Renseignements' calls for further exploration.

In those of his texts in which he reflects on his identity as a visual artist, Michaux generally defines painting (or drawing) by contrast with writing, as if the two activities were mutually exclusive. 'Qui-il-est' (*Peintures*, 1939), in particular, prefigures later assertions that his literary self was displaced by his painterly self. Describing himself in that text as someone who wishes to be 'essentiellement *ailleurs*, *autre*',[8] Michaux suggests that visual expression allows better than writing for the exploration of alterity which motivates his texts:

> Le déplacement des activités créatrices est un des plus étranges voyages en soi qu'on puisse faire.
>
> Étrange décongestion, mise en sommeil d'une partie de soi, la parlante, l'écrivante . . . On change de gare de triage quand on se met à

[7] See also Laurie Edson for another argument on the 'poetic' nature of Michaux's writings on his experiences with intoxicants (Laurie Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1985), 62–76).

[8] Michaux, *OC* i. 705.

peindre. La fabrique à mots, mots-pensées, mots-images, mots-émotions, disparaît, se noie vertigineusement et si simplement. Elle n'y est plus. Le bourgeonnement s'arrête. Nuit. Mort locale. Plus d'envie, d'appétit parleur. La partie de la tête qui s'y trouvait la plus intéressée, se refroidit. C'est une expérience surprenante.

Étrange émotion aussi quand on retrouve le monde par une autre fenêtre. Comme un enfant il faut apprendre à marcher. On ne sait rien.[9]

In this account of his double activity as writer and visual artist, Michaux pits the one against the other through the repetition of familiar dichotomies. His description of the switch between the two activities as a voyage, together with his use of the ambiguous word 'déplacement', suggest that his move to painting both repeats and continues his 'real' and imaginary travel narratives. Echoing his discovery of 'peuples étranges' in the 1936 *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, Michaux's emphasis on the 'strangeness' of the experience of painting suggests that this metaphorical form of travel makes possible the discovery of '*l'inquiétante étrangeté de l'être*'. Similarly, images suggesting the death of the familiar self and its rebirth as a child recall the displacement of the narrator's voice by the Buddha's at the end of the *Barbare*, and the regression which this implies for one who represents his child-self as the Buddha in 'Portrait de A.'. But Michaux's portrait of the painter as an infant who knows nothing and has a radically new perspective on the world also suggests that it is visual expression, as opposed to writing, that can best achieve the aesthetic tabula rasa that he called for in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur'.

The dichotomous relationship which Michaux establishes between painting and writing in 'Qui-il-est', and partly rehearses in *Liberté d'action* and the 'Renseignements', is further developed in his artistic autobiography, *Émergences-résurgences* (1972). Echoing 'Qui-il-est', *Émergences-résurgences* represents the turn to painting as a 'voyage en moi'[10] and expands on the earlier text's opposition of visual expressivity and writing. Indeed, Michaux in *Émergences-résurgences* describes visual expression as not merely different from verbal expression, but antithetic to it. From the Foreword, painting is presented as a form of rebellion against writing by one who was 'né, élevé, [et] instruit dans une culture uniquement du

[9] Ibid. [10] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), 18.

"verbal" '.[11] Coinciding with this revolt against verbal expression and the speaking and writing self is a rebellion against the West: Michaux dates his discovery of painting to his encounter with the East.[12] Correlatively, it is a revolt against rational thought by one who, when he paints, has 'autre chose à faire que de penser'.[13] More generally, it is a revolt against repression, as suggested by the Dionysian release which Michaux associates with painting in *Émergences-résurgences*. Emerging from the chaos of 'destruction', visual expression culminates with the liberation of the self from 'de[s] dizaines années d'inharmonie, de heurts', and 'de gêne'.[14] Psychological unchaining is inseparable in the text from physiological catharsis.[15] Indeed, declaring that he paints in order to satisfy 'un besoin . . . naturel',[16] Michaux represents paints and other materials as though they had poured out of his body: Indian ink, in particular, implicitly is described in terms of both saliva and excrement in *Émergences-résurgences*.[17] Engineering the return of the repressed, painting is valorized as an ahistorical form allowing for the emergence of the 'primordial' in the self,[18] in contrast with verbal expression 'qu'on se passe de génération en génération'.[19] From the very beginning of *Émergences-résurgences*, Michaux refuses to place visual expression in its historical context. He asserts in the epigraph that he pre-dates 'l'époque de l'invasion des images'—the very 'invasion' of which, ironically, Apollinaire was already celebrating in 'Zone' in 1914.[20] Later, he asserts: 'je ne veux apprendre que de moi',[21] in an attempt to undermine the perceived influence of other artists over him. Further reinforcing the myth of his painterly innocence, as it were, is his proud proclamation of his 'incapacité à peindre préservée jusqu'à cet âge avancé', couched in a language usually associated with virginity.[22] Whereas Michaux assimilates his literary beginnings to an ontological 'Fall' in 'Portrait de A.', 'Quelques renseignements', and his 'lettre-mémo' to Bertelé, then, his construction of his relationship to visual signs in *Émergences-résurgences* nevertheless suggests

[11] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences* (Geneva: Skira, 1972), 9.
[12] See ibid. 17. [13] Ibid. 64. [14] Ibid. 38, 39–40, and 43.
[15] See Ibid. 26. [16] Ibid. 14. [17] Ibid. 58 and 59.
[18] Ibid. 18. [19] Ibid. 18.
[20] Ibid. 9; and see Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Zone', *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. André Billy (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 39.
[21] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences*, 17.
[22] Ibid. 39.

that he still has a foot in paradise. Through 'l'image [qui] est un certain immédiat que le langage ne peut traduire que de très loin',[23] he has retained access to nature, the body, and the unconscious.

Suggesting that painting and drawing are primitive means of expression, as opposed to writing, and that the visual artist is more innocent than the writer, Michaux plays with familiar myths. In particular, his articulation of such dichotomies relies on the Western logocentric tradition's suggestion that mimetic visual representation pre-dates writing.[24] Long before him, Rousseau contended in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* that 'la peinture des objets convient aux peuples sauvages; les signes des mots et des propositions aux peuples barbares, et l'alphabet aux peuples policés'.[25] Implicitly, in Rousseau's perspective, the closer representation was to mimesis, the more primitive it was, and the more primitive its practitioners. Conversely, the further it was from mimesis, the more civilized it was, and the more civilized its practitioners. Suggesting that painting is the prerogative of savages still at one with nature, Rousseau implicitly constructed painting as though its representations reflected natural forms. In contrast with the implied transparency of painting, the opacity of conventional signs was seen to reflect the distance of their inventors from nature. Indeed, the further signs were from mimetic representation, in his view, the more arbitrary they were and the further their inventors were from nature. Thus, he perceived Egyptian hieroglyphics to be more primitive than Chinese ideograms, and Chinese ideograms to be more primitive than alphabetic writing.[26] Whereas Rousseau believed that painting did not pertain to a conventional semiotic system but was the prerogative of prelapsarian noble savages, he considered that the relative arbitrariness of writing systems reflected the degree of their practitioners' alienation from nature. The similarly polarized assumptions behind Michaux's accounts of painting and writing, coupled with his self-portraits as someone who does both, allow him to

[23] Ibid. 84.

[24] See Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 21–31; more on this in Ch. 6, below.

[25] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, ed. Jean Starobinski (Paris: Folio, 1990), 74.

[26] See ibid. 73–4.

create parallels between his double activity and his conflicted identity. Indeed, the very contradiction between his reiterated assertions of his desire to stop writing in order to paint, and his continued double activity as writer and painter, are as illustrative of his split self as his ambiguous accounts of his relationship to the Other. Michaux, who depicted his turning to painting as a 'passage à l'Orient',[27] openly emphasized such parallels by playing on the racial and cultural articulation of the relationship of the visual arts to verbal expression in the Western imagination. At the same time, his painterly self-portrait as a non-European finds implicit echoes in Europe's construction of itself since Romanticism. Michaux's construction of his painterly identity as primitive, in contrast with his literary identity, covertly plays on the association of Nordicity with primitivism and painting, and of Latinity with civilization and literature. In particular, his articulation of his double identity as painter and writer recalls Maeterlinck's opposition of the Flemish, with their 'tentation de communion immédiate avec la nature', to the French '[qui] ne semblent porter aux choses qu'un intérêt de convention', condemning themselves to words.[28]

If he exploited the idea that verbal and visual representation are antithetic and that they articulate dichotomous identities, Michaux nevertheless sought to challenge such simplistic polarizations. Already in *Écuador*, the suggestion that visual expression, as opposed to writing, allows for the unmediated experience and communication of the real, is counterbalanced by a reflection on the role that conventional linguistic expression can play in the perception of visual works:

> *Le nom.* Je cherchais des noms et j'étais malheureux. Le nom. Valeur d'après-coup, et de longue expérience.
>
> Il n'y en a que pour les peintres dans le premier contact avec l'étranger; le dessin, la couleur, quel tout et qui se présente d'emblée! Ce pâté d'on ne sait quoi, c'est ça la nature, mais d'objets non, point du tout. C'est après de mûrs examens détaillés, et un point de vue décidé qu'on arrive au nom. Un nom est un objet à détacher.

[27] Michaux, letter to Jean Paulhan (12 Mar. 1928) (quoted in Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. xc).

[28] Maeterlinck, *Le Cahier bleu*, ed. Joanne Wieland-Burston (Ghent: Éditions De la Fondation Maurice Maeterlinck, 1977), 139 and 141; see also 114.

Tandis que les peintres (je parle des fidèles copistes des choses extérieures), voilà des gens qui se trouvent bien de la nature et de son mimétisme.

Il faut écouter le public dans un salon de peinture. Soudain, après avoir longuement cherché, quelqu'un, montrant du doigt sur le tableau: 'c'est un pommier', dit-il, et on le sent soulagé.

Il en a détaché un pommier! Voilà un homme heureux.[29]

As in the lines from 'Qui-il-est' and *Émergences-résurgences* that were quoted earlier, the distinction that Michaux makes between verbal and visual expression in this passage from *Écuador* is founded on the assumption of their dichotomous relationship to nature. Lamenting the 'valeur d'après-coup' of names, as opposed to 'le premier contact avec l'étranger' allowed by visual expression, in particular, Michaux reiterates the familiar myth that words are at odds with nature, but visual expression is not. The conflation of nature and visual expression is further developed in the phrase 'ce pâté d'on ne sait quoi', which at once refers to nature (which he describes elsewhere as a 'pâte pas bien spéciale'[30]), the blob of paint on the canvas, and the blur of drawn lines. Distinguishing no more between drawing and painting than he does between visual expression and nature, Michaux defines 'mimetic' art as though it not only reproduces the formless chaos of nature, but performs it and is part of it.

Michaux's account of 'mimetic' art is very different from the more widely accepted definitions of mimesis where, as Louis Marin explains, 'les images des choses (en peinture) sont d'abord les noms des choses (en langage)'.[31] Michaux's version of pictorial mimesis leaves the onlooker as lost for words as nature does. As opposed to being 'discursive', a mimetic painting, according to Michaux, is 'figural', to use Jean-François Lyotard's terminology in *Discours/Figure* (1971), or Norman Bryson's in *Word and Image* (1981). (Bryson defines the 'discursive' aspect of an image as involving 'those features which show the influence over the image of language', and its 'figurality' as made up of 'those features which belong to the image as a visual experience independent of language, its being-as-image'.[32]) Unlike in 'discursive'

[29] Michaux, *OC* i. 151. [30] Ibid. 492.

[31] Louis Marin, *De la représentation* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1994), 225.

[32] Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 6.

mimetic works, Michaux's version of pictorial mimesis suggests a painting that cannot be read. His opposition of 'le dessin, la couleur' to 'le nom' plays not so much on the dichotomy of visual and verbal expression, as on that of the figural and the discursive. Texts privileging the figural (those which Michaux calls 'poetic') may not in fact be at odds with his version of 'mimetic' art. Conversely, visual works where visual signs offer themselves straightforwardly to discursive interpretations are at odds with what Michaux describes as 'mimetic' painting. Even to be able to say 'c'est un pommier' when looking at a painting or drawing entails the devaluation of the work by emphasizing its discursive signification at the price of its figurality. Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, Michaux himself consistently left his own paintings and drawings untitled and demanded that exhibitions of his visual works elude all attempts at 'nomenclature'.[33] As opposed to the straightforward interpretations that discursive visual signs aim for, figural visual works defy fixed interpretations. In a nature where 'pas une chose . . . ne ressemble autant à un nuage qu'une île', and where there is 'rien d'arrêté',[34] Michaux's version of mimesis (which I will call 'figural' from now on, to minimize confusion) challenges straightforward significations with an ambiguous and polysemic blur. As in primitive art according to Bataille, whose theory of *l'informe* finds many echoes in Michaux's account of nature, the infinite multiplicity of readings that such figural works invite, function as 'une extravagance positive, portant partout à ses conséquences les plus absurdes une première interprétation schématique'.[35] If the ambiguity of such works is positive because of the challenge which it poses to reductive discursive interpretations, the proliferation of interpretations which it makes possible nevertheless raises questions about the status of representation in such figural works. Might it be that they make so many readings possible because they in fact represent nothing?

The challenge presented to viewers by the infinite hermeneutic possibilities of the figural is inseparable from Michaux's construction of sight. It raises questions about whether there is anything to

[33] Michaux, letter to Henri Parisot (18 Apr. 1942) (quoted in Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. cxviii).
[34] Ibid. 150 and 151.
[35] Georges Bataille, 'Le Cheval académique', *Documents*, 1 (Apr. 1929), 28.

see in nature and in figural painting, and, if there is, how it is seen. Martin Jay, in *Downcast Eyes*: *The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, explores the challenges posed by twentieth-century French writers, artists, and intellectuals to the 'ocularcentric premises' of the Enlightenment tradition.[36] Evoking Roger Caillois's suggestion, in 1935, that 'visual experience meant a crisis of the boundaried well-informed self', and recalling Bataille's theory of *l'informe*, he looks at the cultural context behind Lacan's theory of the mirror stage.[37] Michaux, who, from the end of the 1920s explored the role of ocular vision in the constitution of the self, was part of the same cultural context. In 'Portrait de A.', in particular, the eponymous protagonist's Fall and individuation are not merely described in terms of his relationship to the alphabet. Instead, A.'s Fall is indissociably linked to his loss of his ability to see God: 'La Chute de l'homme est notre histoire. La perte de la vue de Dieu est notre histoire.'[38] As the pun with *perdre quelqu'un de vue* suggests, A.'s loss of sight is experienced in terms of dispossession, rather than as blindness per se. For him as for the Other in *Un Barbare en Asie*, the question 'A-t-il *vu* Dieu' really means 'A[-t-il] *eu* Dieu':[39] losing sight of God, A. is dispossessed of a simultaneously erotic and spiritual experience of 'fusion'.[40] It is his 'yeux intérieurs'[41] that are blinded by this loss, not his organs of sight. Indeed, it is arguably when A. is kicked out of the pre-Oedipal paradise of infancy that he acquires the linguistically driven gaze of *les yeux extérieurs*. For on losing access to God, and, more generally, to being ('Dieu seul est'), he finds himself confined to the fallacious 'façade' of appearances.[42] Just as he does not so much oppose writing to painting as the discursive to the figural, then, Michaux does not so much polarize the relationship of sight and language, as he contrasts two different forms of vision with each other. In the first, *le voir* is experienced as *l'avoir* by the prelapsarian and prelinguistic self who exists at one with itself and others. In the second, sight is experienced as separation by

[36] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 344.
[37] Ibid. 343 and see 342.
[38] Michaux, *OC* i. 609.
[39] Ibid. 303.
[40] Ibid. 609.
[41] Ibid. 607.
[42] Ibid. 610.

the lapsed conventionally linguistic self, and that separation itself reflects his alienation from himself and others.

Michaux tends to associate these antagonistic forms of vision either with the head or with the body, adding a twist to the linguistic divide which he projects onto the mind/body split. The prelapsarian A.'s 'yeux intérieurs', for example, are firmly rooted in his body: not only does their closed-in sphericality repeat that of the 'boule hermétique' formed by his undissociated body/head, but their rolling movement echoes its 'grande rotation'.[43] In texts such as 'Les Yeux' (*Mes propriétés*) Michaux locates even more explicitly this ocularly blind gaze in the body. Evoking a less obscene version of Bataille's attempt to re-embody the gaze at the end of *Histoire de l'œil* (1928), 'Les Yeux' suggests that 'les véritables yeux des créatures' are to be found in 'les yeux de lait du ventre, . . . l'œil roux du foie', . . . l'œil d'ébène du menton', and 'l'œil englouti de l'anus', among others.[44] At odds with these embodied eyes is the ocular gaze. In 'Ceux qui sont venus à moi', for example, the eye of the 'Roi au cerveau-œil, à la plume bifide'[45] is associated with the conventionally linguistic conscious self, or even with the super-ego: what in 'Surréalisme' Michaux calls 'le crayon de l'homme de lettres [qui] veille pour son maître'.[46] Indeed, through its confusion with the royal head, the king's eye is also indissociably linked to the authority of the king over his unruly subjects, of the head over the body, and (through these images) of the conscious self over the unconscious. The difference between the embodied gazes of the prelapsarian A. and 'les véritables yeux', on the one hand, and the disembodied gaze of the 'Roi au cerveau-œil', on the other, is also constructed in terms of gender difference by Michaux. The embodied gaze of 'les véritables yeux', in particular, is often explicitly feminine, as in 'l'œil fessu des femmes acrobates' and 'les yeux mères et d'autres qui allaitaient déjà'.[47] When it is not, its femininity tends to be implicitly suggested, either through attributes which Michaux constructs as feminine in his texts (inwardness, impersonality, fluidity, etc.), or through characteristics which point to a lack of masculinity ('l'œil eunuchoïde'[48]). In contrast, in 'Ceux qui sont venus à moi', the king's 'phallic' attribute, his pen, is mirrored by

[43] Michaux, *OC* 608. [44] Ibid. 497. [45] Ibid. 787.
[46] Ibid. 60. [47] Ibid. 497 and 498. [48] Ibid. 498.

his outward-bound gaze: 'Yeux phares', his eyes project into the outside world 'comme une tête passée par la fenêtre', or 'comme un bœuf passe ses cornes entre les fils barbelés'.[49] However, the difference between this masculine 'œil qui fore et qui force', as Bounoure describes it without following on the metaphor,[50] and the feminine embodied gaze is unstable. Like Freud in 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood', Michaux conflates the desire to see with a desire for (sexual) knowledge.[51] But for Michaux as for Freud in his essays on 'The Sexual Theories of Children' and on Little Hans, this masculine desire culminates in a terrified fear of castration: Michaux's protagonists, like Little Hans, construct the female sex as an absence of sex. This fear generally coincides in Michaux's texts as in Freud's with the fear of blinding. In 'Portait d'homme', for example, children who have been looking at 'la mer' (and *la mère*) fear being blinded by their Oedipal father.[52]

This is a justified fear. The masculine desire to see the unnamable absence, or void, that characterizes the feminine (and the self) in Michaux's texts is indeed blinding. Nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in 'Rencontre dans la forêt' (1934). Originally entitled 'Viol dans la forêt', the text describes a rape, actual or imaginary, by a voyeur whose 'ocular desire'[53] nevertheless culminates with his feminization:

> D'abord il l'épie à travers les branches.
> De loin il la humine, en saligoron, en nalais.
> Elle: une blonde rêveuse un peu vatte.
>
> Ça le soursouille, ça le salave
> Ça le prend partout, en bas, en haut, en han, en hahan.
> Il pâtemine. Il n'en peut plus.
>
> Donc, il s'approche en subcul,
> l'arrape et par violence et par terreur la renverse
> sur les feuilles sales et froides de la forêt silencieuse.

[49] See Ibid. 787.

[50] Gabriel Bounoure, *Le Darçana d'Henri Michaux* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1985), 14–15.

[51] See esp. 'Plaisir de savoir' (Michaux, *OC* i. 62).

[52] Ibid. 532.

[53] I am borrowing this concept of 'ocular desire' from Norman Bryson who argues that 'in its carnal form the eye is nothing but desire', in *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 209.

Il la déjupe; puis à l'aise il la troulache
la ziliche, la bourbouse et l'arronvesse,
(lui gridote sa trilite, la dilèche).

Ivre d'immonde, fou de son corps doux,
Il s'y envanule et majalecte.
Ahanant éperdu à gouille et à gnouille
—gonilles et vogonilles—
il la ranoule et l'embonchonne,
l'assalive, la bouzète, l'embrumanne et la goliphatte.
Enfin! triomphant, il l'engangre!
Immense cuve d'un instant!
Forêt, femme, terre, ciel animal des grands fonds!
Il bourbiote béatement.
Elle se redresse hagarde. Sale rêve et pis qu'un rêve!
'Mais plus de peur, voyons, il est parti le vagabond . . .
et léger comme une plume, Madame'.[54]

The stranger the lexis of 'Rencontre' becomes, the more the voyeur's predatory gaze becomes embodied, and the closer he comes to committing an actual rape. At first, the masculine protagonist is described watching a female character from a distance, in perfectly ordinary terms ('il l'épie à travers les branches'). But he rapidly switches from watching to smelling or ruminating: or, rather, to watching-as-smelling-or-ruminating. In the process, the language of the text, though still more or less discursive, begins to be expressively deformed: 'De loin, il la humine' (*hume/rumine*). In the third line, the text returns to an ocular mode of description and becomes more lexically conventional again. But in the second stanza ocular description and conventional lexis are abandoned. As the unspeakable physiology of desire takes over, the language regresses from the expressively idioglossic ('Ça le soursouille, ça le salave') to mere panting ('en haut, en han, en hahan'). The third stanza switches back to the mode of ocular description and reverts to an altogether more conventional lexis, even if the portmanteau word 'subcul' (a conflation of *subrepticement*, *calcul*, and *cul*?) and the coinage 'il . . . l'arrape' (il *l'attrape/la happe/la rape*) continue to point to the central role played by the body in both the unfolding violence and the disjointing of French words. The fourth and longest stanza, which is the most consistently and insistently

[54] Michaux, *OC* i. 416.

overtaken by expressive idioglossia, gives a barely veiled account of the rapist's deeds. In this stanza, however, doubt is sown over the status of the text's graphic account of the rape. As it appears that it may merely have been experienced as a bad dream by the female protagonist, it becomes unclear whether the male protagonist's 'rape' was more than the hallucination of touch.[55] Even the difference between the two protagonists becomes uncertain at the end of the text. Falling into a feminine 'immense cuve d'un instant! | Forêt, femme, terre, ciel animal des grands fonds!', the male protagonist appears not only to lose himself in nature, but to become the feminine Other. 'Il bourbiote béatement. | Elle se redresse hagarde': it is as though, feminized by an ecstatic experience of fusion, (s)he has experienced A.'s prelapsarian gaze, where *le voir* is *l'avoir*. This fusional experience coincides with the radical loss of that masculine ocular gaze where what is seen is what can be named. Reduced to the beatific *balbutiement/barbotement de l'embourbé*, he has lost sight of himself, the female protagonist, and his French. Engulfed into a primordial chaos, s/he dissolves into the visual and linguistic formlessness of nature. As male and female, self and nature, and earth and water mingle into the visual non-differentiation of mud, French words are overtaken by alliterative echoes and lose their conventional shape. The blind experience of *l'avoir* coincides with a regressive return to the slurred language of nature.

The terrifying yet ecstatic blinding of the voyeur on which 'Rencontre dans la forêt' ends relegates ocular sight to a linguistic fiction fuelled by a desire to see what cannot be seen: the void, or absence, at the heart of nature, the Other, and the self. The same 'denigration of vision' underpins Michaux's attitude to visual expression. In 'Quelques renseignements', in particular, this 'denigration' is central to the discovery of Surrealist painting that led Michaux not only to reassess his assumptions about visual expression, but to become an artist himself. The Surrealists gave Michaux a glimpse of the painter's possible freedom from the linguistically constructed optical 'reality' which he denounces in *Écuador* and deconstructs in 'Rencontre dans la forêt'. 'Klee, puis

[55] On the idea of seeing as touching, see Max Milner, 'Toucher du regard', in *On est prié de fermer les yeux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 9–17; or Jean-Claude Gandelman, 'le Toucher de l'œil', in *Le Regard dans le texte: Image et écriture du quattrocento au XX^ième^ siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986).

Ernst, et Chirico . . . Extrême surprise. Jusque-là, il haissait la peinture et le fait même de peindre, "comme s'il n'y avait pas encore assez de réalité, de cette abominable réalité, pensait-il. Encore vouloir la répéter, y revenir!" '[56] As the rhetorical parallels between his discoveries of painting in 1925 and writing in 1922 suggest, the encounter meant that, no longer opposing his hatred of the visual arts to his love of books, Michaux began to consider both media in a similar light. Significantly, the works which achieved this change of perspective were the product of painters who also had an interest in writing. Even more significantly, perhaps, the 'visionary model'[57] on which the aesthetics of these painters was founded appealed to a Romantic myth that had its literary equivalent in the idea of the poet as 'Seer', as exemplified by Lautréamont. If the visual works of Klee, Ernst, and di Chirico, suddenly became of interest to Michaux three years after his discovery of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, then, it seems likely that the fact that these artists explored a myth of vision which was in part literary played a crucial role in his enthusiasm. Certainly, in discussions of his own artistic practice, Michaux is at pains to undermine the importance of ocular sight for his creativity. In *Émergences-résurgences*, he describes himself drawing blindly, producing a 'ligne d'aveugle investigation'[58] guided by his hand, rather than his eye. This drawing process implicitly helps him to elude that mimetic representation where what is seen can be named: existing 'sans apercevoir d'objet, de paysage, de figure', the drawing does not submit to a linguistically motivated version of reality.[59] Blindness, it appears in another passage from *Émergences-résurgences*, is also central to Michaux's painting technique: 'jamais je n'ai pu faire une peinture à l'eau sans absence, sans quelques minutes au moins de véritable aveuglement'.[60] As with Michaux's drawings, this style of painting eludes mimesis by courting a formlessness that impedes all verbalization: 'Il y faut le trouble . . . un je ne sais quoi dont je ne tiens pas à prendre conscience ni en mots, ni en pensées, ni en vagues souvenirs. De quoi je me rapproche, je ne veux pas le savoir, pas le chercher.'[61]

[56] Michaux, *OC*, vol. i, p. cxxxii. [57] Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 237.
[58] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences*, 12.
[59] Ibid. [60] Ibid. 46. [61] Ibid. 49.

The desire to eschew mimesis on which Michaux's blind drawing and painting techniques rest has led commentators such as Adrienne Monnier to declare that his visual works 'ne disent rien et ne laissent rien dire'.[62] Yet, Michaux wrote a lot about his own non-discursive visual works, as well as about those of his contemporaries. At the very least, this suggests that non-discursive visual representation need not repel interpretation. Indeed, it may not repel all forms of representation. Just as the impending blindness of the first-person narrator of 'Magie', in *Mes propriétés*, coincides with his ability to 'mentalement . . . peindre un tableau',[63] so Michaux's blind drawing and painting technique does not hamper what he calls his 'fonction imaginogène'.[64] As with those writers and artists grouped around *Documents*, Michaux's valorization of formlessness and non-discursivity strove to challenge what Jay describes as 'the hegemonic scopic regime of the modern era, Cartesian perspectivalism',[65] by emphasizing alternative visionary modes. Like Bataille in 'Le Cheval académique', Michaux stressed primitive absurdities over scientific arrogance, the nightmarish over the geometrical, and the freedom of the imagination over the strictures of academism.[66] Indeed, Bataille's call in 'Le Cheval académique' for 'les chevaux-monstres imaginés' over academic representations of the horse finds a direct echo in Michaux's account in 'Dessins commentés' (1934) of a drawing which he made of a flame-like horse with insects' antennae in the place of legs. Just as Bataille suggests that the dislocation of the classical horse achieves 'l'expression exacte de la mentalité monstrueuse de peuples vivant à la merci des suggestions',[67] so Michaux asserts that, despite its strangeness, no horse looks more like a horse than the one which he has drawn, implying that it is psychologically mimetic, if not ocularly and discursively so.[68] Indeed, just as in exotic and archaic art, according to Carl Einstein in an article from the same issue of *Documents*, artists seek to represent the '*kâ*' or 'âme d'ombre' of the dead rather than strive for a likeness of their

[62] Adrienne Monnier, 'Les Peintures d'Henri Michaux', in *Correspondance Adrienne Monnier & Henri Michaux*, 42.
[63] Michaux, *OC* i. 484.
[64] Michaux, *Émergences-résurgences*, 84.
[65] Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 113.
[66] See Bataille, 'Le Cheval académique', 29.
[67] Ibid. 30.
[68] See Michaux, *OC* i. 439.

physical appearance,[69] so Michaux, in 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture' (1946), declares 'la reconstitution des traits' to be of no interest, as opposed to that of 'l'âme de l'individu'.[70] Like the primitive (and primitivist) artists whose aesthetics Einstein describes, it is through 'de l'invention hallucinatoire' that Michaux seeks to achieve this.[71]

If what Michaux calls 'le FANTÔMISME (ou le psychologisme)'[72] produces hallucinatorily mimetic works, these often can seem to portray not so much the model they purport to represent, as Michaux himself. In 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture', the more Michaux insists on the alterity of the model, the more explicitly he calls attention to the referential ambiguity of the ensuing portrait. Describing himself painting the portrait of a terrified woman whose picture he has seen in a magazine, for example, he depicts a painting process and an outcome which appear to privilege self-expression over the representation of his subject:

> La photo de sa tête . . . je l'ai observée tout un temps sans bouger.
>
> Elle est maintenant en moi. Bon! J'attrape le fusain et, en quelques traits écrasés, voilà mon dessin fait, sans reprise, sans hésitation. Le portrait est vivant.
>
> Sur le moment je ne suis pas particulièrement frappé de ce que ce n'est pas elle qui est portraiturée, tant le portrait convient à la situation. Il faut quelques heures . . . pour m'apercevoir que malgré les cheveux dans le cou, c'est un homme, indubitablement un homme qui se trouve devant moi, au front noble et philosophe, et dont la lèvre exprime une moue indicible. Mépris non-inhumain d'ailleurs qui s'applique admirablement à cette fille affolée, sans self-control, et qu'elle appelait comme son juste complément.
>
> Je croyais, l'ayant bien regardée, m'être imprégné d'elle alors que je ne m'étais imprégné que de dédain pour elle . . .
>
> Cet homme à cheveux longs, au grand front métaphysicien, plus je le regarde, moins j'en puis détourner les yeux: sympathique, proche surtout: le témoin.[73]

With Michaux's composed voice suggesting his remoteness from the terrified woman that he wishes to portray, it is clear that there

[69] Carl Einstein, 'Aphorismes méthodiques', *Documents* (Apr. 1929), 32.
[70] Michaux, *OC* i. 858 and 860.
[71] Einstein, 'Aphorismes méthodiques', 32; see *OC* i. 861.
[72] Michaux, *OC* i. 860. [73] Ibid. 859.

are limits to his identification with his model. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, his painting bears little likeness to the original, psychological or otherwise. The calm and critical philosopher that he has represented is in almost every way at odds with the terrified woman that he initially had wanted to paint. Instead, as his description of the portrait unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the work is a self-portrait of sorts. Not only does the gender of the portrayed figure correspond to Michaux's, but his composure recalls Michaux's controlled voice. Even more tellingly, Michaux's initially detached, but gradually more engaged, account of the painted figure's disdainful expression, suggests that his painting mirrors his own scorn at the model's agitation. If the portrayed figure appears so 'sympathique' and 'proche' to Michaux, it is because he recognizes himself in it. However, the work is not a conventional self-portrait, insofar as it does not represent Michaux in isolation, but projects his reaction to the initial model. Although absent from the finished work, the photographed woman is nevertheless not irrelevant to it: it is she who unwittingly has provoked the existence of the painting's 'juste complément'. The recognizable but nevertheless different self that Michaux has projected onto the canvas could not have come into being without her, and Michaux is as enticed by the divergence of the portrayed figure from his familiar self as he is by its similarity to himself.

Privileging the blind experience of 'fusion' over mimetic representation, Michaux's *fantômiste* paintings exhibit the fluidity of the boundaries separating the self from the Other, and portraits from self-portraits. The breakdown of these categorical differences leads him to question the interplay in his visual works between presence and absence, the visible and the invisible. If Michaux's *fantômiste* paintings relegate their original model to invisibility, they nevertheless achieve the feat of making the invisible visible by giving viewers the hitherto unseen spectacle of 'les effluves qui circulent entre les personnes . . . le meilleur de lui qui est en dehors de lui'.[74] Similarly, if the original model is absent from Michaux's finished pictures, the representation of the invisible that the works nevertheless achieve endows them with a quasi-mystical sense of presence: Michaux exclaims in front of one of his pictures, 'Ô monde que je ne sentais plus qu'à peine et fuyant, tu reparais à nouveau . . . [je] suis

[74] Ibid. 862 and 863.

renversé en Ta Présence.'[75] Inseparable from what Jay calls 'the denigration of the gaze', Michaux's association of this mystical sense of presence with a spectacle that had previously been invisible leads him to emphasize the role of the viewer in the perception of *fantômiste* visual works. Recalling a dream which he had of himself looking at his paintings with an unsympathetic friend, he remembers seeing nothing, 'rien que des feuilles intactes'.[76] But, gradually, as he warmed to his works in the dream, these started to come to life for him. When at last they had become magnificent to his eyes, they gave him a simultaneously mystical and visionary insight of presence, in an experience similar to the one which I have already described: 'Enfin je voyais, non plus l'esquisse fuyante, mais le monde comme je le conçois dans son étalement prolifique. . . . J'étais donc un peintre!'[77] Implicit in Michaux's account of his dream, is the suggestion that, in order for a *fantômiste* painting to be seen, the viewer must sympathetically engage with the work, indeed participate in its creation. Mirroring the elusivity of the 'monde . . . fuyant', Michaux's 'esquisse fuyante' invites the viewer to compensate for his or her inability to see an undiscursively mimetic work in which, as in nature, 'on ne voit rien que ce qu'il importe si peu de voir'.[78] Displaying a promise of vision rather than a visible spectacle, the work implicitly provokes the viewer to project a hallucinated *voir* where there is nothing to see, much as children in search of (sexual) knowledge do, according to Freud: or indeed as Isriel does in 'Origine de la peinture', when she sees a phallus represented where there is nothing but a formless mass of decomposing matter on a cave wall.[79]

Arguably, it is precisely because texts such as 'Dessins commentés' and 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture' are not illustrated, that Michaux unproblematically can make this hallucinated *voir* a central tenet of the reception and of the composition of his visual works. Unillustrated ecphrastic texts (i.e. texts which describe or comment on visual works) demand that readers supplement absent paintings and drawings with their individual imagination and fantasies, allowing them mentally to participate in their creation. But what happens when Michaux's ecphrastic writings are juxtaposed with his visual works? In spite of his dichotomous articulation of his

[75] Michaux, *OC* 862. [76] Ibid. 864. [77] Ibid. 864–5.
[78] Ibid. 592. [79] See ibid. 8.

literary and artistic practices, and in spite of his reluctance to associate any 'nomenclature' with his art, Michaux produced several books juxtaposing verbal and visual works. The year (1936) of the publication of *Entre centre et absence*, which consists of seven drawings and nineteen texts, marks the begining of his many attempts to bring together his careers as writer and visual artist. Because works such as *Peintures* (1939), *Labyrinthes* (1944), or *Peintures et dessins* (1946), describe the visual works which they contain as 'des illustrations de l'auteur' on their title page, commentators have tended to refer to them as 'illustrated books'. But whereas the phrase 'illustrated book' appears to suggest a homogeneous genre, Michaux's attempts at juxtaposing his verbal and visual works were everything but homogeneous. To a large extent, this contradiction is only superficial, and reflects the conceptual blur in which the 'illustrated book' dwells. If, for Anne Mœglin Delcroix, an illustrated book is rare and 'précieux, voire luxueux' and a *livre d'artiste* 'd'apparence plus modeste' and easier to come by, the opposite is true for Renée Riese Hubert, for whom 'the illustrated book [is] a more modest volume with, generally, a wider circulation'.[80] Similarly, if for Mœglin Delcroix, in the *livre d'artiste*, which she dates from the 1960s, by contrast with the illustrated book, 'l'artiste est l'auteur des textes—quand textes il y a—autant que des images', for Hubert, both pre- and post-1960s works which were both written and illustrated by the same artists are 'illustrated books'.[81] Even among those of Michaux's works which juxtapose his own verbal and visual works, most of these different formats are to be found. Although some, such as *Peintures et dessins*, came out in the form of expensively produced editions, they were not all destined for rich collectors. Some, such as *Arbres des tropiques* (1942), were more modestly produced affairs inviting a different reception. However, these differences have been undermined by recent developments in the printing industry, which have made it possible to reprint illustrated works more cheaply and easily. The Pléiade edition of Michaux's complete works makes both *Peintures et dessins* and *Arbres des tropiques* available to the wider public, for example, but at the price

[80] Anne Mœglin Delcroix, *Livres d'artistes* (Paris: Herscher & BPI Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985), 9–10; and Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 20.

[81] Mœglin Delcroix, *Livres d'artistes*, 10–11; and see Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book*, ch. 3.

of unwittingly giving the illusion that the two books were produced in similar ways.

At least as problematic as the ambiguities pertaining to the nature of the 'illustrated book', and to the editorial decisions made possible by new developments in printing, is the perceived subordination in 'illustrated books' of the visual works to the texts. The subjection of visual expression to writing that is suggested by the phrase 'illustrated book', with its implicit limitation of the place of visual works to illustrations, has not escaped critics. Hubert, quoting Anne Greet, writes that in 'the *livre de peintre* the picture creates an atmosphere', whereas it 'is content to accompany the text' in the illustrated book.[82] Similarly, Mœglin Delcroix contends that if the illustrated book is 'l'œuvre d'un écrivain . . . suivant le préjugé qui confère à la poésie une supériorité native sur les arts plastiques', in the *livre d'artiste* 'c'est dans [l']agencement réciproque [des textes et des images] que [l]a fonction d'auteur trouve pleinement à s'accomplir'.[83] In view of such assertions, Michaux's production of what the jacket cover of some of these works calls 'illustrated books' inevitably invites speculation as to the role that the texts play in the reception of the visual works in these books. In a number of cases, the visual works do appear to be subordinated to the texts. This is unlikely to be the result of an uncritical editorial decision: as we have seen, Michaux pondered the relationship of visual expression to its verbal counterpart from at least the mid-1920s onwards. Instead, this apparent but deceptive subordination is part of a continuing reflection on the interaction of verbal and visual signs. In 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface', in *Apparitions* (1946), in particular, Michaux highlights the status of the visual works in his illustrated books through an account of the flickering dialectic of apparition and disparition entailed by the juxtaposition of texts and images:

Il bat de l'aile, il s'envole. Il bat de l'aile, il s'efface.
Il bat de l'aile, il réapparaît.
Il se pose, et puis il n'est plus. D'un battement il s'est effacé dans l'espace blanc.
Tel est mon oiseau familier . . . [84]

[82] Anne Hyde Greet, *Apollinaire et le livre de peintre* (Paris: Minard, 1977), 7.
[83] Mœglin Delcroix, *Livres d'artistes*, 9–10.
[84] See Michaux, *Apparitions* (Paris: Le Point du jour, 1946); the text of 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' is reprinted without its illustrations in *OC* ii. 172.

This account of the eponymous bird's alternating presence and absence, invisibility and visibility, recalls Michaux's suggestion that his visual works not only represent the unseen but invite a hallucinated *voir* from their viewers in 'En pensant au phénomène de la peinture'. When one takes into account the visual work opposite 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' in *Apparitions*, however, the lines quoted above simultaneously appear to comment on the uncertain visibility of visual works in 'illustrated books': the drawing opposite 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' competes for attention with the text, and the two cannot be perceived at once, but only in the alternation of *un battement*. Whether or not the drawing is at first perceived independently of the text opposite, it rapidly finds itself at risk of being stripped of any figural ambiguity once the text has been read. Indeed, it is all the more easily reduced to a visual translation of the text because its rather conventionally stylized evocation of a

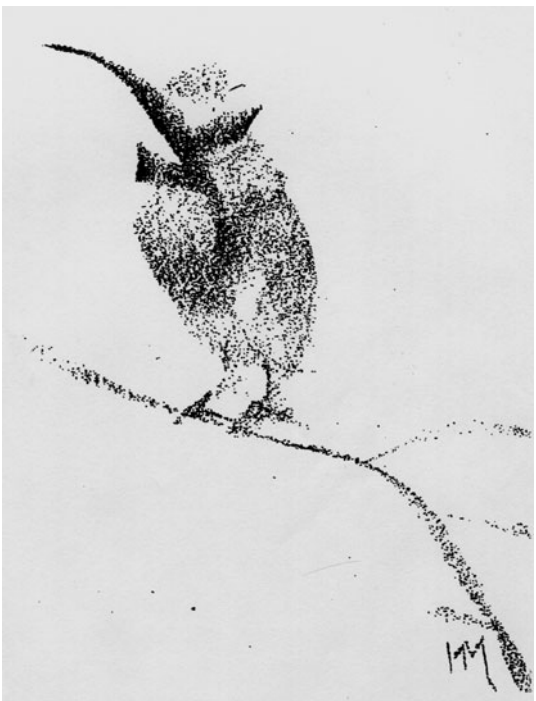

Fig. 1. Drawing juxtaposed with 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' in *Apparitions* (1946)

bird appears to echo the text's, and because its pointillist technique gives the impression of an apparition menaced by dissolution. Whereas Michaux in *Écuador* deplored the reduction of a painting to 'un pommier' by some of its viewers, he flirts with the danger that the drawing opposite 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' may be dismissed as *l'oiseau qui s'efface* by readers. Indeed, in the same way that, as Butor remarks in *Les Mots dans la peinture*, painters who give titles to their works not only alter our perception of them but risk blinding us to them,[85] Michaux can even be said to court the possibility that 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' will displace the drawing from view. Conversely, however, the discursive mimetism of the drawing will just as inevitably inflect the reading of 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface': the reader's mental image of 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' very likely will be determined by the drawing. Rather than seeking to valorize visual expression over verbal expression, or vice versa, then, *Apparitions* arguably pits the one against the other. With the visibility of the apparently discursively mimetic drawing opposite 'L'Oiseau qui s'efface' so easily hijacked by the eponymous text, and with the readers' imagination of that bird so heavily indebted to the drawing, *Apparitions* challenges the visible with the visionary.

In those numerous 'illustrated books' where Michaux's paintings and drawings cannot possibly be regarded as discursively mimetic, this conflictual dialectic is heightened further as textually induced visions determine the visibility of drawings which nevertheless resist translation. Adrienne Monnier's remark in a letter to Michaux that in *Mouvements* (1951) 'les taches s'animent prodigieusement'[86] once the text has been read, is exemplary. Affirming the power of Michaux's text to shape the viewer's perception of the ink drawings, her remark nevertheless implicitly acknowledges the drawings' figural resistance to the text. As a result, her enthusiastic endorsement of Michaux's textual commentary on the drawings at once betrays her relief at the text's alleviation of the difficulty of

[85] See Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira, 1969), 24–7; on the risk of a text occluding the perception of a visual work in illustrated books, whether or not the visual works actually 'illustrate' the texts, see also Gérard Bertrand, *L'Illustration de la poésie à l'époque du cubisme (1900–1914): Derain, Dufy, Picasso* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 67–122.

[86] Monnier, letter to Michaux (7 Feb. 1952) in *Correspondance Adrienne Monnier & Henri Michaux*, 24; similarly, La Charité argues that 'a blot' takes on the shape of a horse in 'Un Tout Petit Cheval' under the impetus of the text (see La Charité, *Michaux*, 61).

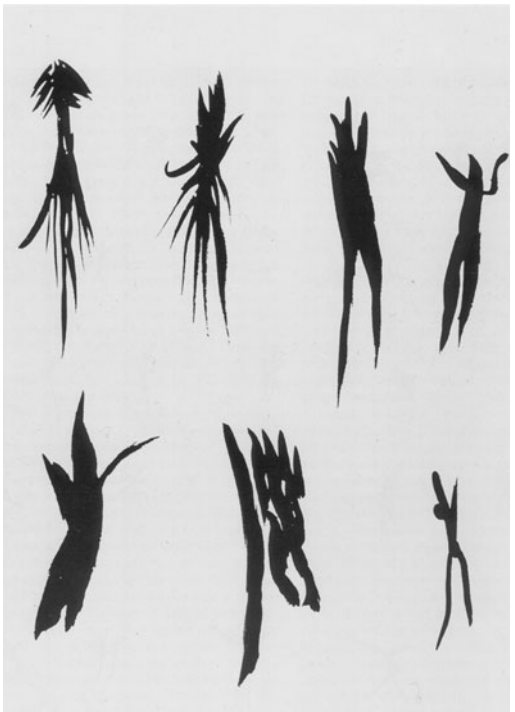

Fig. 2. Drawings from *Mouvements*, 1950–1, Indian ink.

seeing what eludes verbal expression, and exhibits the way in which it has blinded her to the drawings by allowing her to dismiss their problematic figurality. In this sense, rather than the theatre of the 'marriage' or 'reconciliation' of painting and writing, as La Charité suggests,[87] Michaux's 'illustrated books' can be said to question the limits of visibility through their conflict. Informing the gaze which we pose on the visual works juxtaposed with them, the texts participate in the 'cunning attempt to transform and master the image by inscribing it' to which Grant F. Scott has drawn attention in ecphrastic writing.[88] This may even be said when the text accompanying the visual works in Michaux's 'illustrated books' does not propose any discursive interpretation of

[87] La Charité, *Michaux*, 90.

[88] Grant F. Scott, 'The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology', *Word and Image*, 7 (Oct.–Dec. 1991), 302.

those works. If in *Émergences-résurgences*, for example, Michaux celebrates the multiplicity of interpretations which might be applied to his undiscursive works in Indian ink, including any that may be at odds with his own,[89] his own analysis of the genesis of these works will nevertheless affect their perception. Engaging viewers to reassess their interpretations of these works, his commentary subtly allows him to determine, or at least orient, their reception. Such is the power exerted by the texts over the visual works in Michaux's 'illustrated books' that even when a text ostensibly comments on a painting or drawing, the latter can appear to have a merely exemplary function. This is not very problematic in *Émergences-résurgences*, where the only function of the visual works included appears to be to exemplify different moments in Michaux's artistic development. But it is problematic in some of his other 'illustrated books'. In *Peintures et dessins*, for example, Michaux juxtaposes a different painting with 'Tête' than he has with 'Têtes' in *Peintures*. In spite of their slightly different titles and of their unequal lengths, however, the two texts are nevertheless very similar: composed of an extract of the earlier 'Têtes', 'Tête' echoes 'Têtes' word for word. Given the minimal differences between the two texts, this can appear to suggest the interchangeability of the two visual works with which they are juxtaposed at least as much as it can be said to emphasize textual divergence. This impression is reinforced in both works by ambiguous references to 'ces têtes'[90] where it is unclear whether the deictic is pointing to the painting on the opposite page of each text, or to an imaginary spectacle. Indeed, in the plural, the phrase clearly does not refer the reader to any one painting so much as it evokes the infinite repetition of a virtual and everchanging spectacle of which the painted head opposite may at the most be a fleeting representation. Asserting in the epigraph to 'Têtes' that 'quand je commence à étendre de la peinture sur la toile, il apparaît d'habitude une tête monstrueuse', Michaux poses a similar challenge to singularity by emphasizing repetition. This emphasis on repetition is as intimately linked to the displacement of the material painting with an apparition, as the plural 'ces têtes' is to the displacement of the specific visual works opposite 'Têtes' and 'Tête' by Protean visions.

[89] See Michaux, *Emergences-résurgences*, 62.

[90] Michaux, *OC* i. 708 and 870.

The problematic status of the visual works and of the visible in Michaux's 'illustrated books' is compounded by Michaux's decision to reprint several of the texts of his 'illustrated books' in unillustrated collections of texts. Although his occlusion of his visual works in such texts was undoubtedly in large part the consequence of editorial constraints, the different titles that Michaux sometimes gave to unillustrated versions of previously 'illustrated' texts suggests that it need not always have been so. His decision to change the title of the 'illustrated' *Meidosems* to 'Portrait des Meidosems' in the unillustrated *La Vie dans les plis*, for instance, points to the difference of the two texts by emphasizing the latter's capacity to evoke mental images unaided. Unlike *Meidosems*, 'Portrait des Meidosems' does not stand on its own as a separate work, but finds its place in *La Vie dans les plis*, in third place after 'Liberté d'action' and 'Apparitions'. A reading of 'Portrait des Meidosems' will thus come after Michaux's declaration, at the end of 'Liberté d'action', that he is now going to paint (or caress) rather than write (or kill), and after his exploration of vision in 'Apparitions'. Although, as I remarked earlier, one might interpret Michaux's assertion in 'Liberté d'action' that he was going to stop writing and begin to paint as though it heralded the end of his literary creativity, the three texts that constitute *La Vie dans les plis* nevertheless point to Michaux's decision to locate vision in texts which achieve 'une chose extraordinaire, une *apparition*'.[91] Michaux's emphasis in this work on the spectacular function of texts, what Lyotard calls in *Discours/Figure* 'la vue bordant le discours',[92] is central to his literary project. As he asserted in a mid-1930s conference paper on 'L'Avenir de la poésie', 'le plus grand avenir immédiat de la poésie' lies in the ability of poets 'à créer parallèlement une nouvelle optique'.[93] In a world where the sciences allow for 'une connaissance de plus en plus circonstanciée des rapports cerveau-intelligence, cerveau-glandes, cerveau-sang, esprit-nerfs', Michaux called for poets to be the first to find 'une fenêtre à ouvrir' onto the inner self.[94] Whereas in 'Qui-il-est', he evokes the opening of this window through a turn to visual expression, in this paper, he advocates its opening through a literary practice

[91] (My emphasis) ibid. 985.
[92] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours/Figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 13.
[93] Michaux, *OC* i. 970. [94] Ibid. 969–70.

which seeks to give a voice to 'la région poétique de l'être intérieur'.[95] The evocation of this inner region is inseparably musical and visionary for Michaux, whose courting of aporia through linguistic dissolution invites readers to hallucinate something that cannot be said or seen. In this sense, rather than 'une vue bordant le discours', the visionary spectacle which Michaux inscribes in his texts may be more aptly described as a *vue dans les plis*. Hidden from the eyes, this spectacle is to be found in the 'folds' of the texts as they relentlessly circle what cannot be said.

In his 1924 'Réflexions qui ne seraient pas étrangères à Freud', Michaux derisively compared Freud to a lubricious cloth merchant with an instinct for commerce '[*qui*] *dans les plis* des étoffes . . . *cachait des photographies lubriques*'.[96] Although this comment was meant as a mockery of Freud's so-called 'pansexualism', it nevertheless can be read as an ironic comment on Michaux's own visionary writing practice. Not only does he suggest scornfully in this text that 'vous et moi, tout le monde, nous pouvons faire de la psychanalyse', but he declares that 'nous en avons fait comme Monsieur Jourdain faisait de la prose',[97] at once attacking Freud's presumed lubricity and identifying with it. The pornographer's crude imagery metaphorically does underlie the introspective agenda which Michaux pursues in his works through the exploration of the irrepressible spectacular language which Freud analyses in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Gendering sight, and conflating it with the patriarchal French language, Michaux dreams of another mode of seeing, in which the 'feminine' and ever-elusive spectacle of absence at the heart of the self and nature may be apprehended. This quest for the invisible splendours of the imagination and the self leads him to privilege virtual spectacles over material ones. As we shall see in the next chapter, it also leads him to challenge the difference between writing and drawing, through the exploitation of the visual qualities of verbal signs and of the discursive aspects of visual expression.

[95] Michaux, *OC* i. 969 [96] Ibid. 48. [97] Ibid. 49.

6

NATURAL SIGNS BETWEEN WRITING AND DRAWING

Michaux's exploration in his illustrated books of the tensions between the figural and the discursive, and between the visionary and the visible, finds interesting echoes in those works where he plays with the ambiguities surrounding Western ideas of what does and does not constitute writing. In the illustrated books that I looked at in the previous chapter, Michaux's analyses of the discursive and figural qualities of verbal and visual expression implicitly question their difference by pointing at some of the ways in which they overlap. In other works, he takes this challenge to the delimitation of verbal and visual modes of signification further by experimenting with the visual qualities of texts. However, just as it is impossible simultaneously to look at the visual works and read the texts in an illustrated book, so one cannot at once read a text and see it. By submitting his readers to the temptation of a visual spectacle even as he offers them the possibility of conventional legibility in graphically expressive texts, Michaux tests the limits of reading and seeing, and of writing and drawing. If his probing of these limits appears to exhibit his internalization of the 'logocentric' equation of visual signs with primordial natural signs, Michaux's exploitation of the visual dimensions of writing nevertheless also seeks to subvert the Western metaphysics of the sign. It is these contradictory impulses that I will analyse in this chapter, together with the dream of a natural signature that their articulation gives rise to in Michaux's works.

Il n'y a que deux systèmes d'écriture:

1) Le système idéographique, dans lequel le mot est représenté par un signe unique et étranger aux sons dont il se compose.

2) Le système dit communément 'phonétique', qui vise à reproduire la suite des sons se succédant dans le mot.[1]

[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), 47.

The neatly dichotomous definition of writing systems that Saussure gives in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) rests on the assumption that the ideogram is the antithesis of the phonetic sign, particularly the alphabetic letter. Whereas the ideogram is a silent synthetic visual sign, the phonetic sign reproduces a sound unit. Whereas the former eludes speech, the latter transcribes it. Such clear contrasts are not unprejudiced. As Saussure himself rapidly concedes, ideograms do in fact represent 'des sons isolés'.[2] Conversely, Roy Harris demonstrates in *La Sémiologie de l'écriture*, that 'l'écriture phonétique est une illusion sémiologique', if only because the representation of sounds by alphabetic letters is, to say the least, imperfect.[3] Just as ideographic script has a phonetic dimension, so alphabetic writing has a visual (or ideographic) aspect. The scriptural Orientalism which Saussure unwittingly perpetuated by ignoring the 'ethnocentric bias'[4] underlying his dichotomous articulation of European and non-European writing systems, continued well into the twentieth century. Despite well-accepted evidence to the contrary, Chinese ideograms, in particular, continued for a long time to be perceived as purely visual signs in the popular imagination, as well as in the texts of some who knew better. As late as 1961, Étiemble, in his cultural history of writing systems, followed in the footsteps of Leibnitz by describing Chinese ideograms as a potential 'espéranto pour les yeux'.[5] If the belief that alphabetic and ideographic writing systems are antithetic survived scientific discredit for so long, it is in large part because of the hold over the Western imagination of the 'logocentric' tradition's opposition of the fallen, conventional, and imperfect alphabet to a divine, motivated, and perfect 'écriture naturelle'.[6] St Augustine's theory that the lost Adamic language was not a verbal language, but a language of visual emblems inscribed in the 'Book of Nature', profoundly affected the reception of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese ideograms in Europe from the Renaissance onwards, orienting their perception as avatars of the divine 'écriture naturelle'.[7] If the decipherment of

[2] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), 48.
[3] Roy Harris, *La Sémiologie de l'écriture* (Paris: CNRS, 1993), 86.
[4] Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (London: Duckworth, 1986), 41.
[5] René Étiemble, *L'Écriture* (Paris: Robert Delpire, 1961), 110.
[6] See Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 21–31.
[7] See Umberto Eco, *La Quête d'une langue parfaite dans l'histoire de la culture européenne* (Paris: Collège de France, 1992), 8–10.

these writing systems dampened such speculations, Chinese ideograms nevertheless retained their mystical aura well into the twentieth century. The esoteric interpretations of the seventeenth-century Jesuits who sought traces of the Revelation in Chinese ideograms inform Claudel's own fascination with China's writing system.[8] Even those who steered clear of such religious interpretations still tended to construct Chinese ideograms as simultaneously visual and natural signs. In his *ABC of Reading* (1934) Ezra Pound suggests that the sculptor Gaudier Brzeska 'could read a certain amount of Chinese writing without ANY STUDY' simply because he 'was accustomed to looking at the real shape of things'.[9] Indeed, ideograms were so closely identified with a motivated visual language that Raymond Queneau proposed that Miró's *Femmes aux chevelures défaites saluant le croissant de lune* (1939) was based on the Chinese ideogram for 'woman'.[10]

Michaux's projection onto the Chinese ideogram of his desire for a natural sign, where word and image would be one, participates of the same double misapprehension that these signs speak to the eyes, rather than the ears, and that they are motivated, rather than arbitrary. Far from presenting Chinese ideograms as transparently discursive signs, however, Michaux, in *Un Barbare en Asie*, emphasizes the difficulties that they present to the untutored: 'il n'y a pas cinq caractères qu'on puisse deviner au premier coup d'œil'.[11] Although he underlines the idiosyncratic choices guiding their representations, and although he stresses their increasing allusiveness as they evolved in time, he nevertheless describes them as motivated signs. Declaring that 'Même si le Chinois représente tel quel l'objet, au bout de peu de temps, il le déforme et le simplifie',[12] Michaux does not imply that Chinese ideograms are arbitrary signs so much as suggest that, imperfect and sketchy though they may always have been, they nevertheless originally aspired to mimetic representation. In *Idéogrammes en Chine* (1972), Michaux examines in more detail the evolution of Chinese

[8] See Gilbert Gadoffre, *Paul Claudel dans l'univers des idéogrammes chinois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 229–32.

[9] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), 21.

[10] Raymond Queneau, *Bâtons, chiffres, lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 285–6; and see Étiemble, *L'Écriture*, 84.

[11] Michaux, *OC* i. 365.

[12] Ibid.

ideograms, and its implications for their motivation. Although he evokes with relish the supposed 'lisibilité primitive'[13] of early ideograms, he nevertheless does not consider later ones to have lost their expressivity, unlike the majority of Westerners who have written on the subject until the early twentieth century, from Warburton to Segalen.[14] On the contrary, if he begins *Idéogrammes en Chine* rather conventionally by mourning the passage of primitive ideograms, Michaux nevertheless ends it with a paean to contemporary Chinese writing. Underpinning his valorization of contemporary ideograms in the second part of *Idéogrammes en Chine*, is a switch of emphasis from what, after Peirce, one might call the 'iconic' quality of the early signs to the 'indexical' quality of later ones. Having lost 'leur mimétisme d'autrefois',[15] modern ideograms derive their expressivity from the gestures accomplished by the calligrapher's hand. Through the movements of their hands, calligraphers inflect the expressivity of signs, so that the same ideogram acquires new shades of meaning with each calligrapher, or indeed with each new inscription.[16] No mere scribes, then, calligraphers are more akin to visual artists for Michaux, who locates the expressivity of their ideograms in the calligrapher's gestural artistry rather than in the stable signifieds which they are meant to convey.

Indeed, rather than becoming more conventional, or arbitrary, contemporary ideograms are even more akin to natural signs than primitive ideograms, according to Michaux in *Idéogrammes en Chine*. With the loss of that discursive mimesis where what is represented is mapped onto linguistic concepts, contemporary Chinese ideograms further elude the univocal interpretations of linguistic signifiers. Impossible to reduce to their signifieds, they simultaneously eschew discursivity. This, for Michaux, is a sign of their naturalness: 'comme fait la nature, la langue en Chine propose à la vue, et ne décide pas'.[17] Having lost the discursive mimetism of their primitive counterparts, they have developed a figurality

[13] Michaux, *Affrontements* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 77.
[14] See Jacques Derrida, 'Scribble', introduction to Warburton's *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des égyptiens* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1977), 17–18; and see Victor Segalen, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Henry Bouillier (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), ii. 37.
[15] Michaux, *Affrontements*, 99.
[16] See Ibid. 103.
[17] Ibid. 99.

that conjures nature's 'pâté d'on ne sait quoi'.[18] Remarking, in *Un Barbare en Asie*, that contemporary ideograms represent 'des ensembles' rather than detached objects, for example, Michaux emphasizes their naturalness by implying that, like nature, they blur differences.[19] As in nature, this blurring of differences challenges their visibility, according to Michaux who exclaims: 'Si encore on voyait les différents éléments [d'un idéogramme]! Mais si on ne les connait pas d'avance, on ne les trouvera pas.'[20] Eluding verbalization and mimetic representation, ideograms function as non-discursive visual signs in his works: indeed as natural signs. In *Idéogrammes en Chine*, the Chinese ideograms are printed on separate pages in red ink. Highlighting their difference from his own black and white alphabetic text, this layout recalls *Mouvements*, where Michaux's idiosyncratic signs function as 'images', as opposed to the eponymous text. Similarly, in *Un Barbare en Asie*, Michaux does not differentiate between visual signs, conventional ideograms, or even the gestures of actors. Instead, Chinese writing, Chinese painting, and the Chinese theatre are accounted for in the same breath in that work, as though they were scarcely distinct from each other.[21]

The same confusion of visual expression and ideographic writing systems that leads Michaux to describe ideograms as visual signs, also leads him to account for drawing and painting as forms of writing: as avatars of that mythic 'écriture naturelle' that is at odds with conventional alphabetic writing in the logocentric tradition. Just as he declares in *Idéogrammes en Chine* that the contemporary Chinese writing system 'propose à la vue', he asserts in *Jeux d'encre* that the lithographs of the artist Zao Wou-Ki call for readers.[22] Even more tellingly, perhaps, the drawings and paintings by the mentally ill which Michaux discusses in the unillustrated 'Les Ravagés' (in *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions*, 1981), are interpreted by him as though they were natural texts—or indeed ideograms. Paradoxically, the visual works under discussion in 'Les Ravagés' are equated with natural texts because, like later Chinese ideograms (according to Michaux) they exhibit a

[18] Michaux, *OC* i. 151; and see Ch. 5, above.
[19] Michaux, *OC* i. 365.
[20] Ibid.
[21] See ibid. 364–5.
[22] See Henri Michaux, *Jeux d'encre: Trajet de Zao Wou-Kî* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 1993), 10 (*Lecture par Henri Michaux de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Kî* (*OC* ii. 263–79) differs slightly from *Jeux d'encre*).

'désir de tenir caché' as much as a desire for communication.[23] The troubled artists behind these works hide even as they purport to reveal themselves, and reveal themselves as they try to hide.[24] Suggesting that the works function as lures behind which the artists hide their private torment, Michaux locates the hidden secrets that they nevertheless inscribe in their non-discursive elements. In one work, for example, he describes the lurid sexual fantasy that is ostensibly represented as a distracting red herring. If there is any confessional dimension in that work, according to him, it lies in the violence of the marks that the artist's hand has inflicted onto the sheet of paper, rather than the image of a dominatrix trailing broken homonculi in her train.[25] In the same way, it is the obssessive tangling of lines which renders another work illegible that catches Michaux's attention, not the conventional text which the work may or may not inscribe.[26] Redirecting his attention from the discursive visual image or text presented by such works onto the gestures which they inscribe, Michaux's interpretations privilege their figural qualities over their discursive elements. Like Chinese ideograms, these works participate of 'natural writing' precisely because what is being discursively represented or written is of less importance than what is being obliquely signified through the mark left by the artist's body on the page.

If the logocentric myth of a motivated 'écriture naturelle' leads Michaux to valorize the non-discursive aspects of ideograms and visual expression in general, it does not, however, automatically lead him to devalue alphabetic script. On the contrary, in one of his first articles for *Le Disque vert*, 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', he suggests that print has helped to remotivate spoken language:

> De tous temps, usage, morale, lois, parents ont mis les intelligences des enfants, des jeunes générations en pot.
>
> . . . On a changé les pots! Les parties qui étaient dedans ne sont plus dedans, celles qui étaient dehors ne sont plus dehors. Voici ce qui est arrivé: . . . deux fois on a changé la disposition des parties du cerveau dans le pot et deux cornes ont poussé.

[23] Michaux, *Affrontements*, 79.
[24] Henri Michaux, *Chemins cherchés, chemins perdus, transgressions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 7.
[25] See ibid. 30.
[26] See ibid. 44.

AUPARAVANT PRÉDOMINANCE DE L'IMAGE VERBALE: INTELLIGENCE VERBALE.

A la Renaissance se développe l'imprimerie. Depuis, on lit . . . . . papier . . . . . on écrit, on écrit . . . . . on lit.

C'est la première trompe. DÉVELOPPEMENT SOUDAIN ET PETIT A PETIT PRÉDOMINANT DE L'IMAGE GRAPHIQUE (LECTURE, ÉCRITURE, IMPRIMÉ).

Tout le monde sait que le Théâtre meurt, la phrase parlée, la phrase gueulée, la phrase, l'Éloquence.

Le centre de Broca pour la parole, pour la parole parlée, entendue, le centre est dedans, dans le pot! (Peut-être une autre trompe, milieu du XIX^{ème} siècle, romantisme, photographie imprimée, extension de l'image virtuelle).

Et maintenant, il y a une autre trompe. Le Cinéma la pousse:

3,000 images pour dix lignes de texte, et 300,000 gestes pour une page écrite.

Prédominance, développement prodigieux de l'image visuelle et prédominance sur celle-ci de L'IMAGE MIMIQUE, l'Intelligence mimique.

Croyez-vous que l'expressionnisme en peinture et en sculpture n'ait rien, rien du tout, rien rien rien à voir avec cette trompe du centre des images mimiques?[27]

In this brief overview of Western means of expression from oral culture to the printed word and the cinema, Michaux finds that, during the Renaissance, speech was remotivated by the invention of print, which in turn was remotivated in the twentieth century by the cinema. Earlier in the text, the practice of confining parts of the bodies of children to 'pots' in order to stunt their physical development, provides the basis for this account of the expressive constraints presented by certain media and for the cunning rechannelling of expressivity that other media make possible. As with Chinese ideograms, and contrary to what generally happens in the 'logocentric' tradition, it is not more recent expressive forms that Michaux judges to be deadened by convention, so much as older ones. Indeed, Michaux's construction of the evolution of Western means of communication recalls his interpretation of the evolution of the Chinese writing system. If he valorizes print over speech because of its visual dimension, he valorizes the cinema's gestural language over the visuality of print.

[27] Michaux, *OC* i. 10–11.

Although the extent to which the invention of print has favoured silent reading is challenged in contemporary debates on the question, historians of the book have traditionally contended that printing revolutionized reading by drawing attention to the written sign rather than to the spoken word.[28] Even if the separation of words and the typographical and spelling rules which were invented when reading became silent, strive to inscribe the rhythm of speech onto paper, these conventions cannot obliterate the fact that written signs create a language which exists in parallel to speech. By ignoring these conventions in *La Botte à nique* (1973), Jean Dubuffet humourously demonstrated their importance for the reading process.[29] Celebrating the new expressive possibilities which came from the duplication of oral 'verbal images' with printed 'graphic images', Michaux's account of the advent of print emphasizes the difference between the spoken word and its written counterpart. However, instead of making a printed text more visible, typographical conventions arguably blind readers to its graphic image by encouraging the unproblematic displacement of signifiers with their signifieds. It is only when a text is unconventionally laid out, that its graphic image can contravene the linear reading process. In the lines quoted above, Michaux's capitalization and centring of a part of his text interacts visually with other similarly capitalized and centred sections in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur'. As in advertising posters, this technique invites the reader's attention to wander, even as the text prompts him or her to move forward.[30] Unlike in conventionally laid out texts, where 'le chemin est tracé, unique',[31] according to Michaux in *Lecture de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki* (1950), 'Chronique' tempts the eye to roam. But it does not quite allow one to proceed 'comme on veut, où l'on a envie, selon ses trajets', as visual works do according to him in a different version of the same text.[32] Nevertheless, this first exploration of the possibilities of graphic images in 'Chronique de

[28] See Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, *Histoire de la lecture dans le monde occidental* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 31–3.

[29] 'La première déchoze ifo biné avèque une binète pour biné sète une binète quonsse sère ou alore une pèle ou otchoze' (Jean Dubuffet, *La Botte à nique* (Geneva: Skira, 1973), 2).

[30] On making reading less linear, see Claude Gandelman, *Le Regard dans le texte: Image et écriture du quattrocento au XX^ième siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986), 24.

[31] Michaux, *OC* ii. 263.

[32] Michaux, *Jeux d'encre*, 9.

l'aiguilleur' lays the foundation for Michaux's later attempts at blurring the boundaries between reading and looking.

The printed word is only the first of two ways of remotivating the spoken word which Michaux presents in these lines from 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur'. The other is the 'image mimique' introduced by the cinema. Yet, even if Michaux was keen enough on the cinema's expressive possibilities to co-direct *Images d'un monde visionnaire* (1963) with Éric Duvivier, this was an isolated event. In the context of Michaux's praise of expressionism, his advocacy of 'l'image mimique' may be interpreted to suggest that the cimema might allow for the remotivation of writing, rather than sounding its death toll. In the early 1920s, Michaux would not have been alone in believing that the gestural language on which silent cinema relied might open up new expressive avenues for writers. The aesthetic gambits of Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1918), in particular, were partly founded on this belief. 'Ma foi, les gens s'habituent vite au mutisme | La mimique suffit bien au cinéma,'[33] Apollinaire exclaimed in 'La Victoire', calling for a new language with which to reinvigorate French poetry. Like Apollinaire in his *Calligrammes*, Michaux explored the expressive possibilities presented both by the graphic image of unconventionally printed texts and by 'la mimique', through the gestures that handwritten texts exhibit. As with Chinese ideograms, he privileged the gestural expressivity of handwritten alphabetic script over their discursive signification in 'Apparitions-Disparitions' (1973):

Les lignes qu'une main a tracées
que c'est surprenant!
L'autre à cœur ouvert
Son écriture que je respire . . .
De l'inconnu d'emblée familier
son écriture
son écriture en mon âme
les lignes d'un manuscrit écrit il y a deux siècles
comme si, à l'instant même
elles sortaient de la plume
délivrées par l'esprit, qui en fait sur-le-champ
la découverte toute fraiche[34]

[33] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres poétiques* ed. André Billy (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 310.

[34] Michaux, *Moments, traversée du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 38–9.

Culminating with the first-person narrator's ecstatic communion with the text, the simultaneously sensual and spiritual experience that Michaux describes in these lines evokes his accounts of reading in *Écuador* and 'Portrait de A.'. The immediate experience explicitly contrasts with the manuscript's antiquity. It also is at odds with the necessity for signification to be mediated by arbitrary signifiers in the conventional reading process, suggesting that Michaux constructs handwritten letters somewhat as he does visual signs. Indeed, as with visual signs, the manuscript text brings self-discovery to the onlooker. Just as, in 'Qui-il-est', Michaux suggested that visual expression allowed him to explore the Other in the self, so handwriting allows him to glimpse 'De l'inconnu d'emblée familier': the *unheimlich*.

Despite his early foray, in 'Chronique de l'aiguilleur', into the possibilities presented by the graphic image of printed texts and by the gestural language that the silent cinema and expressionistic art relied upon (and handwritten texts, by extension), Michaux's bolder experiments with 'l'image graphique' and 'l'image mimique' date from the 1950s onwards. Although he experimented with proto-writing from the begining of his career as a visual artist, Michaux kept such experiments distinct from his literary endeavours until *Misérable miracle* (1956). Even if, in *Mouvements* (1951), his juxtaposition of his idiosyncratic 'signs' with the eponymous text seeks to pit dichotomous but equally powerful modes of 'legibility' and signification against each other, the two systems of signification nevertheless are kept separate in that work. However, by the time he published *Misérable miracle* and *Quatre cents hommes en croix* (1956), Michaux had been exploiting the graphism of his texts for some time. As Butor remarks, the use that Michaux makes of repetition in his texts can highlight the visual dimensions of print as much as it can emphasize rhythmic patterns of sound: anaphora, for example, can take on the appearance of columns, or falling drops of water.[35] On another level, Michaux, like Claudel, Apollinaire, Rimbaud, and Hugo, among others, was fascinated by the ideographic potential of alphabetical letters. With its central void and circular shape, the

[35] See Michel Butor, *Le Sismographe aventureux* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1999), 25.

letter 'o', in particular, inspired Michaux. 'Les Omobuls' (1936) is a striking example:

> Les Omobuls vivent dans l'ombre des Émanglons. . . . Ils les copient en tout et quand ils ne les copient pas, c'est qu'ils copient les Orbus. . . .
>
> SUR LA PLACE D'ORPDORP
>
> Quelques Omobuls obèses causent eaux et climats. . . .
>
> Chapeaux à glands, robes à glands, parasols à glands. Oisifs et oisives se prélassent.
>
> Douces confiseries de toutes parts apportées.
>
> On goûte, on mâche, on salive.
>
> On avale en vous regardant dans le blanc des yeux. On se gargarise longuement, on crache.[36]

Obese *hommes bulles*, the Omobuls visually incarnate the letter 'O', even as they transcribe its sonority in echoing [o]'s. Phonetically repeating the echo at the heart of their name, the chameleonic relationship of the Omobuls with the Emangl*ons* and *O*rbus, and its reduplication in other assonances in [o] in the opening line of the text, sets the tone: from the place where they dwell ('*O*rpd*o*rp'), to their conversation ('c*au*sent *eaux*'), and to the things that they eat (*bonbons*), the Omobuls live in a world alive with echoes of their name. In turn, their rotundity is repeated in their hats, parasols, sweets, mouths, and eyes. Pointing to the circularity of the letter which they emblematize, this motif simultaneously designates them (and the letter 'o') as feminine. Indeed, the clichéd femininity suggested by their attire, idleness, and sweet tooth, merely repeats that suggested by their sphericality: according to the essentialist Michaux, 'le physique de l'ovule de la femme ressemble étonnamment au caractère de la femme'.[37] However, with the feminine a metonymy for the impersonal for Michaux, and with the impersonal pronoun 'on' a privileged means for the inscription of this feminine impersonality in his texts, as we have seen in Chapter 4, the text simultaneously points to the void at the centre of the letter 'o', the Omobuls, and 'Les Omobuls'. As in a number of other texts redolent with assonances in [o], the effect is one of playful vacuousness.[38] Repeated in their air-filled bodies and empty

[36] Michaux, *OC* ii. 30–1. [37] Ibid. i. 434.

[38] See Jean-Pierre Martin, 'Rires et murmures de la voix ou l'horizon de la motocyclette', in Catherine Mayaux (ed.), *Henri Michaux: Plis et cris dy lyrisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 224; and see Roger Dadoun, 'Ho', *Europe* (June–July 1987), 104;

personalities, this vacuousness extends beyond their phatic modes of communication (chewing, swallowing, staring, gargling, spitting, etc.) to the text as a whole. Its discursive content reduced to developing the visual and phonetic aspects of the letter 'o', the text reverses the displacement of the signifer by the signified in the conventional reading process: again and again, we are brought back to the signifier.

It is in the experimental *Quatre cents hommes en croix* (1956) that Michaux goes the furthest with what La Charité calls 'the drama of graphic writing'.[39] *Quatre cents hommes* is constituted of discontinuously numbered fragments evoking Michaux's (failed) attempt to recapture his lost sense of connection with Christ in a series of ink drawings. Each of these fragments is differentiated from the others by its typography: the font, the size, and the directionality of print changes from one fragment to the next. Unlike in 'Les Omobuls', which can be read without one taking any notice of the text's play on the letter 'o', *Quatre cents hommes* is laid out so unconventionally that its graphic image cannot escape attention. Subtitled *Journal d'un dessinateur*, the work presents itself as bringing together verbal and visual expression. However, this is not exactly an 'illustrated book': the 1953 ink drawings that the text ostensibly comments upon are mostly absent from the work. Only two have been included, at the work's opening and ending. But *Quatre cents hommes* nevertheless may be described as a visual work: its typographically unconventional fragments take on the function of visual signs, even as they remain discursively legible texts. Simultaneously verbal and visual documents, they transcend the opposition between 'montrer et nommer; figurer et dire; reproduire et articuler; imiter et signifier; regarder et lire', somewhat as calligrams do according to Foucault.[40] In fragment 215, for example, what is visually represented mostly repeats what is verbally described:

and Dadoun, 'Ténuité de l'être', in Michel Collot and Jean-Claude Mathieu (eds.), *Passages et langages de Henri Michaux* (Paris: Corti, 1987), 13.

[39] Virginia La Charité, *Henri Michaux* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 105.

[40] Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe: Sur deux lettres et quatre dessins de René Magritte* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973), 21–2.

EN CELUI-CI, C'EST LA TÊTE QUI EST LE GROS BLOC, LE BLOC NON ÉQUARRI, DUR RUDE, ÉNORME, QUI DOIT RESTER ENTIER PRÉSERVÉ. QUI EST CONTRE *la sinuosité des hommes, leurs danses, leurs allées et venues, leur évolution* TÊTE SOMBRE, MASSIVE, RABOTEUSE, BLOC QUI DIT TOUJOURS CE QU'IL DIT UNE FOIS.[41]

Block-shaped, the text visually represents the block-like head that it describes. In turn, the fragment's rectangular shape is visually echoed by the angularity of the block capitals, particularly in the dropped 'E' on which it opens. As in 'Les Omobuls', Michaux exploits the letter's phonetic resonances as well as its visual appearance, as suggested by the simultaneously phonetic and visual puns implicit in 'Tête' (*Tête E*), 'énorme' (*énorme E*), 'sombre' (*sombre E*), etc.—or, indeed in words such as 'équarri' (*E carré*), 'rester' (reste E), or 'entier' (E entier), as [œ] mutates into [e], [ɛ], and [ã]. Repeatedly echoed in the ubiquitous third-person singular 'est', in particular, the letter 'E', and the block-like head and text which it emblematizes, are also associated in the fragment with the permanence of being, and, through it, with other words and phrases suggesting changelessness. Through their architectural overtones, the block described in the text, the block-like head, the text, and the letter 'E', all come to be associated with the oppressive rigidity of the 'Immense voix' of conventional linguistic expression.[42] In sharp visual contrast with the capitalized and block-like text that surrounds it, the use of curvaceous italics in the midst of the text introduces movement and change in the brick-like structure. The text's discursive content merely presents the conflict opposing the living to constricting geometrical structures, and, by extension, to the static notions of being conveyed by conventional linguistic expression. But its graphic image

[41] Michaux, *OC* ii. 795. [42] See Ch. 3, above.

has a more ambiguous story to tell. The visual edifice of the text pinpoints the faultlines in the block and in the modes of being and expression which it stands for. Like a crack in the wall, the italicized section forecasts the development of new expressive beginings, even as its encasement in the rigidly block-like text suggests their subjection to oppressive structures.

Despite the simple visual metaphors and contrasts on which it relies for expressivity, the graphic image of fragment 215 only fully comes to life after the text has been read. Yet, even if this fragment derives much of its visual expressivity from a conventionally linear reading, it challenges the displacement of signifiers by signifieds which is central to such readings. Readers curious to make sense of the fragment's unusual format are invited to return to an examination of its signifiers, once these have been translated into signifieds. However, fragment 215 leaves its readers free to decide whether or not to take this step, since one need not examine its unconventional graphic image to read it. In contrast, other fragments in *Quatre cents hommes* mediate signification through their graphic image more forcefully. Fragment 232, in particular, challenges the linearity of the conventional reading process, constraining the reader to find his or her own way into the text's verbal and visual signification:

F	*p*	*s*	*p*	*d*	*c*	*e*	*l*
r	*a*	*e*	*r*	*i*	*h*	*n*	*a*
a	*r*	*s*	*o*	*s*	*a*		*n*
p			*p*	*c*	*ng*		*i*
p			*r*	*i*	*é*		*è*
é			*e*	*p*	*s*		*r*
			s	*l*			*e*
				e			s
				s			

Even more clearly than in fragment 215, image is moved by word here. The belts figured by the fragment's vertical lines can only be 'seen' once the text has been successfully deciphered. To approach the fragment as a visual work, where 'dans un instant tout est là . . . mais rien n'est connu encore',[43] is to be struck by its resistance to discursive interpretation. Read linearly, it is radically

[43] Michaux, *OC* ii. 263.

non-discursive. If it perhaps prefigures the lost *langue mère* of the incantatory 'Iniji' when one ignores the spaces between the letters (' . . . raerihna arsosan . . . '), it also can recall the gong-like monosyllables that Michaux attributes to Chinese in *Un Barbare en Asie* ('ng'). Indeed, as one gradually discovers, it shares the vertical directionality of Chinese ideograms. However, even if it alters the conventional reading process, the vertical reading that the text demands is as directive as the horizontal linearity which it displaces. Readers of this fragment are as constrained as ever to follow a 'chemin . . . unique'. It is not possible to both read the text and proceed freely, 'comme on veut, où l'on a envie, selon ses trajets'. Ultimately, our perception of the fragment's graphic image as flagellating belts depends on our discovery of this single reading path. As the fragment's initial evocation of a non-discursive 'foreign' language written in a strange proto-ideographic script is succeeded by the realization that it is a conventionally discursive French text, its initially puzzling graphic image yields a discursively mimetic *voir*. The challenge presented to the reader by the directionality of writing in fragment 232 merely delays its reduction to its discursive content. Perhaps because of this, Michaux judged *Quatre cents hommes* to have been a failed experiment. Nevertheless, no discursive reading of their verbal and visual content can alter the air of provisionality that the fragments exhibit. Discontinuous, elliptic, and invaded by the white of the page, the discursive texts and their tautological graphic images do locate the Protean Christic figure that *Quatre cents hommes* seeks to represent, but not where one expects to find it. 'Pas de spectacle. Ce qui compte est ailleurs,'[44] writes Michaux in fragment 212. Like God in negative theology, Christ, that elusive 'homme de cristal',[45] can only be apprehended negatively, in the silences and gaps that punctuate *Quatre cents hommes*.

For all its attempts to make the reading process less linear, *Quatre cents hommes en croix* does not overstep the boundaries of conventional legibility more radically than Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*. Michaux does go further in some of his other works. Completely displacing conventionally legible words with the graphic expressivity of handscripted lines and signs, *Par la voie des rythmes* (1974), in particular, takes his probing of the boundaries of

[44] Ibid. 795. [45] Ibid. 800.

verbal and visual signs to their limit. However, because they do not exclude conventional legibility, and because they self-consciously trace the shifting frontier of verbal and visual signification in the graphic images of printed texts and in the gestural expressivity of handscripted signs, Michaux's writings on his experiences with mind-altering substances from the 1950s onward are more interesting. The first of these hybrid works, *Misérable miracle*, in particular, engages the reader in a multifaceted reflection on the practices of reading and writing. Although it is neither as polished as *Paix dans les brisements* (1959) nor perhaps as broad-ranging as *L'Infini turbulent* (1957, 1964) and *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1967), *Misérable miracle* conducts the most clearly articulated reflection on semiotic liminality. Juxtaposing a printed text, manuscript pages, and drawings, it both problematizes the uncertain frontiers separating 'les mots, les signes, les dessins'[46] and exhibits their ambiguous interaction.

Misérable miracle is organized like a carefully orchestrated hall of mirrors. On the printed page, the text is dislocated into three different parts: a central text, covering the larger portion of the page, a slim italicized text in a column on the external margin of the page, and, lastly, footnotes in small print at the bottom of the page. The reader engrossed in the central text is regularly summoned to refer to a footnote, and constantly solicited by the side text. Although each section can be read linearily, the reader's eye is systematically distracted from its onward course by their juxtaposition. These marginal texts play different roles in *Misérable miracle*, even if they do re-create the dispersion of the drugged subject when taken together.[47] Through references to scientific works and elaborations on what is being described, the footnotes aim at validating the notion that the central text relates a scientific experiment. In contrast with the footnotes, the italicized and column-like side text does not have an informative function. Instead, it tersely repeats and/or summarizes what is being described in the main narrative. Visually exhibiting the drugged narrator's sense that he is being torn apart by disjuncted and overlapping experiences, this section competes with the central

[46] Michaux, *OC* ii. 619.

[47] Laura Edson, *Henri Michaux and the Poetics of Movement* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1985), 68–9.

narrative in an interesting way. Relinquishing the traditional role of marginal inscriptions—commentary—to the footnotes, it not only disrupts the linearity of the reading process, but challenges the pre-eminence of the central narrative. In much the same way that, in medieval works, marginal notes create 'une sorte d'encadrement où premier plan et fond peuvent osciller entre eux . . . au point de rendre flottante la subordination de l'un à l'autre',[48] the parallel development of the side and main narratives makes it difficult to gauge their hierarchical importance. Whether the side text lies at the origin of the central narrative, or whether it was written after it, their juxtaposed spatialization on the page means that both compete simultaneously for the reader's attention.

Reduplicating and condensating the central text, the side text simultaneously 'illustrates' it through its graphic expressivity:

de la pointe *terriblement* *haute* *à la base* *terriblement* *basse*	Des Himmalayas surgissent brusquement plus hauts que la plus haute montagne, effilés, d'ailleurs de faux pics, des schémas de montagnes, mais pas moins hauts pour cela, triangles démesurés, aux angles de plus en plus aigus jusqu'à l'extrême bord de l'espace, ineptes mais immenses.
chevauchements *chevauchements* *iMMense* *terremoto* *Mense*	Tandis que je suis encore à regarder ces monts extraordinaires, voilà que, se plaçant [*sic!*] la poussée intense, qui me tient, sur les lettres 'm' du mot 'immense' que je prononçais mentalement, les doubles jambages de ces 'm' de malheur s'étirent en doigts de gants, en boucles de lasso, qui démesurément grandes, s'élancent à leur tour vers les hauteurs . . . [49]

Both the side and central texts describe the sensations provoked by mescaline, but in very different ways. In the central narrative, the narrator exhibits the challenge of putting his experiences into words. Through an excessive use of superlatives, absurd or referentially uncertain statements ('faux pics', 'bord de l'espace', etc.), and repeated qualifications of his account of his vision, Michaux gives his readers a sense of his frustration with the inadequacy of

[48] Jacques Neef, 'Marges', in Louis Hay (ed.), *De la lettre au livre: Sémiotique des manuscrits littéraires* (Paris: CNRS, 1989), 58.
[49] Michaux, *OC* ii. 624.

conventional linguistic expression. At the same time, however, his text gives us an insight into the way in which the mind works under mescaline, by allowing us to follow the abruptly antithetic movement of his thought processes in long-winded but disjuncted sentences. Proceeding from mountains, to 'immense' triangles, to the arches of the letter 'm', to the fingers in a glove, etc., his vision follows a pattern of systematic reversals that anticipates those which follow this passage. Just as he will go on to be blinded in turn by whiteness and colour, or to be obssessed in turn by slits and protuberances, and just as the peaks that assail him in these lines entail ravines, so concrete images morph into abstractions, and vice versa. In contrast with the frustrated logorrhea unleashed by the central narrative's attempt to recreate the disjuncted chaos of mescaline, the side text appears strangely reticent. But it more than makes up for its verbal restraint with its graphic expressivity. Although the central narrative does not just describe the perturbing quality of the experience, but also re-creates it in the cadence of sentences broken into sections of sometimes wildly different length, as well as through verbal echoes, the side text introduces the subversive effect of mescaline more immediately. Even before one has read it, its column-like succession of irregularly spaced lines of unequal length visually suggests the sismographic rhythm that animates Michaux's mescaline drawings.[50] This pattern of repetition and antithesis is replicated within the language of the side text. However, whereas the impact of the words and sounds repeated in the central narrative is diluted by the overall flow of language, the more condensated side text is often expressively reduced to repetition and antonym, as in the first section of the lines quoted above. In contrast with the central narrative's attempts to transcribe the narrator's deranged state of mind in conventional French, the side text also directly confronts readers with the breakdown of conventional structures of signification under the effect of mescaline. While the central text traces the process through which the alienated narrator gradually dissociates a signifier from its conventional signified, as the letter 'm' in 'immense' begins to take on a life of its own, the side text makes this phenomenon immediately visible by exploiting the graphic expressivity of print in 'iMMense'. Standing out from the word

[50] See Michaux, *OC* ii. 633.

which they nevertheless conventionally spell, the two capitalized 'M's ideographically represent the drugged narrator's vision of mountains and other metaphorical ups and downs. Resounding with the echo of 'immense', the truncated 'Mense' further evokes the threat that mescaline poses to the discursivity of conventional signifiers. The central text describes the narrator's mental pronunciation of 'immense' adequately, but it does not convey the perturbing quality of an experience where words are reduced to empty sound and where letters take on an independent life. At once ideographic and non-discursively musical, 'iMMense' and 'Mense' participate of a fantasized foreign language, as is suggested by their juxtaposition with 'terremoto'. At the same time, 'teremotto' both paronomastically suggests Michaux's terror, and, through an interlingual pun, points to the mental 'earthquake' in the midst of which he finds himself. Shattering Michaux's hold on the French linguistic order, then, this earthquake simultaneously exhibits his increasing loss of his grip on himself. However, the narrator's self-dissolution heralds the birth of a newly expressive language, as much as it coincides with the dislocation of French.

Juxtaposed to the fragmented printed text of *Misérable miracle* are thirty-two pages of the manuscript which Michaux wrote while under the influence of mescaline. The inclusion of a manuscript in a finished book is unusual. But the way in which Michaux chose to print only a truncated version of this early work, without any indication of an ordering device organizing the manuscript pages, chronological or otherwise, is even more so. Equally unusual is the fact that these pages are on the whole unreadable, and that, like the drawings which *Misérable miracle* also includes, series of five or more manuscript pages alternate with large sections of the printed text. Even more so than the side text, which can be conventionally 'read' even as its graphic image appeals to the eye, the manuscript pages included in *Misérable miracle* appear to function as visual 'illustrations'. Their uncertain semiotic status is at the heart of Michaux's foreword to *Misérable miracle*:

> Ceci est une exploration. Par les mots, les signes, les dessins. La Mescaline est l'explorée.
>
> Dans la seule scription des trente-deux pages reproduites ici sur les cent cinquante écrites en pleine perturbation intérieure, ceux qui savent lire une écriture en apprendront déjà plus que par n'importe quelle description.

Quant aux dessins commencés aussitôt après la troisième expérience, ils ont été faits d'un mouvement vibratoire, qui reste en soi des jours et des jours, autant dire automatique et aveugle mais qui précisément ainsi reproduit les visions subies, repasse par elles.

Faute de pouvoir donner intégralement le manuscrit, lequel traduisait directement et à la fois le sujet, les rythmes, les formes, les chaos ainsi que les défenses intérieures et leurs déchirures, on s'est trouvé en grande difficulté devant le mur de la typographie. Tout a dû être réécrit. Le texte primordial, plus sensible que lisible, aussi dessiné qu'écrit, ne pouvait de toute façon suffire.[51]

As in *Idéogrammes en Chine*, 'Les Ravagés', and *Lecture de huit lithographies de Zao Wou-Ki*, Michaux plays in these lines with the ambiguities surrounding ideas of writing and reading. Through his use of apparently synonymous words such as 'scription', 'écrites', 'écriture', 'texte', and 'écrit', he rehearses the overlap, in the logocentric tradition, between dichotomous ideas of writing: between an arbitrary (and implicitly alphabetic) writing system and the motivated (and implicitly ideographic) writing of nature. By inviting his readers to read his manuscript, he also exploits the confusion in the same tradition between antithetic ideas of reading: between the linear process that allows one to decipher a conventional alphabetic code, and the simultaneous perception of visual signs constructed as transparent. Underlying Michaux's ambiguous and at times self-contradictory presentation of his manuscript and its signs is a desire to overcome the logocentric tradition's opposition of words and images. Indeed, Michaux can be said in these lines to attempt to expose the cultural construction of the word and image dichotomy which was particularly encouraged by the normalization of the text to which printing has led.[52] Strategically placed between 'les mots' and 'les images', his 'signes' implicitly participate of both. Neither constituted exactly of drawings or of writing, the manuscript is presented as a liminal document. 'Texte primordial', it explicitly antedates both the drawings, that were only begun after the third mescaline experiment, and the printed text, which imperfectly transcribes the manuscript's original notations. 'Plus sensible que lisible' and 'aussi dessiné qu'écrit', it mostly defies conventional reading. When its hastily scribbled words can be deciphered, these rarely yield thoughts

[51] Michaux, *OC* ii. 619.
[52] See Louis Hay, 'L'Écrit et l'imprimé,' in Hay (ed.), *De la lettre au livre*, 7.

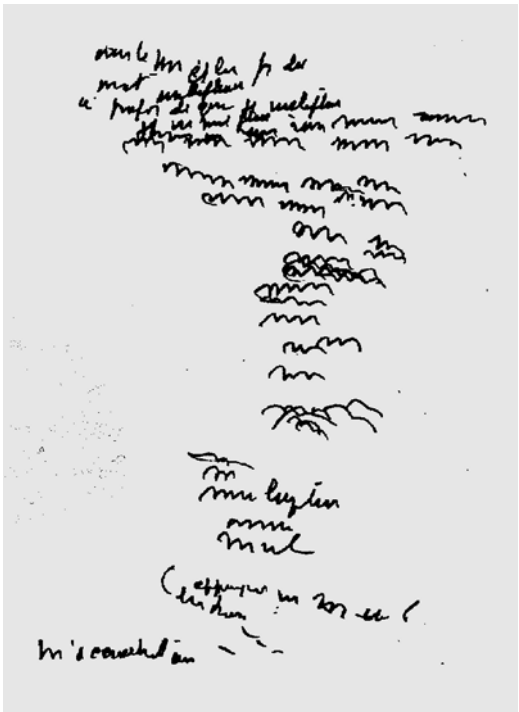

Fig. 3. Page from the manuscript of *Misérable miracle* (1956).

that are either interesting or coherent. As with Chinese ideograms in *Idéogrammes en Chine*, however, its signs are not valorized for their disappointing and elusive discursive content, so much as for their gestural expressivity. Figurally, rather than discursively, transcribing the ordeal of the narrator under mescaline, they are invested by the same 'mouvement vibratoire . . . automatique et aveugle' as the drawings. It is this movement that Michaux invites his readers to 'read' in the manuscript, rather than any word. As in the side text, where Michaux's expressive deformation of conventional words and their graphic image exhibits an inner 'earthquake', the traces recorded in the manuscript transcribe the dissolution of the subject in the breakdown of conventional linguistic structures of signification. 'Reading' this manuscript thus involves sympathetically experiencing the narrator's perturbation oneself, in the same way that, in 'Apparitions-Disparitions',

Michaux does not so much read the manuscript that he discusses as apprehend it sensually as an extension of his own intimate yet impersonal corporeal rhythm.

Because of their reliance for expressivity on the gestures of his hand, Michaux's experiments with non-discursive 'signs' in the manuscript of *Misérable miracle* and in his visual works may be said to function as intimate but impersonal signatures. Like signatures, they privilege the inscription of a trace manifesting 'la présence d'un corps unique, singulier, inscrit sur la page' over conventional legibility.[53] Indeed, their very illegibility may be seen to exhibit what Bennington and Derrida call the desire for a 'texte totalement signé':

> Un texte n'est jamais clos sur lui-même, malgré l'effort du signataire qui veut se l'approprier. Ce désir est aussi paradoxal: ce serait barrer toute lecture, même par soi-même, que de rendre son texte absolument propre à soi, idiomatique, et le texte totalement signé, propre à son signataire, approprié par lui, ne serait donc pas un texte.[54]

As we have seen in Chapter 4, Michaux's desire for a non-alienating language and authorial signature is intimately linked to the challenge that his writings pose to the forms and discursive content of conventional French. Just as his verbal attempts to find a voice for the intimate but universal language of the body made him risk obscurity, so his predilection for the non-discursive expressivity of the trace led him to flirt with the idea of producing conventionally illegible 'texts'. But just as, despite his desire for an intimate language, Michaux's nonsense writing tends to rely on echoes of conventional French for signification, so his 'illustrated books' and drug narratives juxtapose conventionally legible texts with works which rely for expressivity on the gestures that produced them. If he defied his readers to 'read' the conventionally illegible manuscript section of *Misérable miracle*, Michaux nevertheless provided them with a rewritten version of it. Indeed, acknowleging that 'le texte primordial . . . ne pouvait de toutes façons suffire', he implicitly recognized that the manuscript on its own was at least as opaque as it was transparent.

[53] Béatrice Fraenkel, *La Signature: Genèse d'un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 10.

[54] Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 153–4.

However, Michaux arguably did give in to the temptation of producing 'un texte totalement signé' in those of his works which completely forsake both conventional legibility and discursive mimesis. His *Grandes Encres noires* are a case in point: in a 1957 interview with Alain Jouffroy, he put them on a par with 'le cri, qui est la première chose qui m'ait semblée vraie' because they shared the same 'façon asyntaxique de procéder'.[55] But his *Grandes Encres noires* go further than his attempts at forging a private language in his nonsense poems, if only because the latter elude barks and cries, as Michaux remarks.[56] Indeed, because of their radical non-discursiveness and freedom from the constraints of linguistic expression, the *Grandes Encres noires* are not only as 'confessional' as any of his texts, as he asserts, but even more so.[57] Unlike conventionally legible texts, they make uncensored self-expression possible:

> Il y a encore quelques temps, j'avais deux cent lecteurs, et encore n'étais-je pas tout-à-fait sûr de les avoir. Du seul fait que j'en ai maintenant deux mille au lieu de deux cent, je suis obligé de ne plus dire certaines choses. Je peindrai de plus en plus et j'écrirai de moins en moins. Ou alors, je n'écrirai plus que sous la forme de poèmes très difficiles à traverser pour les autres: je reviendrai, si vous voulez, à mes deux cent lecteurs.[58]

Describing a possible turn towards painting in terms of, as much as in contrast with, a turn towards the writing of 'des poèmes très difficiles à traverser', Michaux implies that his non-discursively mimetic visual works can be constructed as conventionally illegible texts. As with the fantasy of a 'texte totalement signé' that Bennington and Derrida describe, they bypass all conventions of verbal (or pictorial) representation in favour of the totally idiosyncratic language of the body. This language is at once universal, since it speaks to and of our shared experience of embodiment, and motivated, since it does not rely for expressivity on arbitrary conventions. Yet, just as the manuscript in *Misérable miracle* will only be able to unlock Michaux's experiences for a very small minority of 'readers', as Chinese ideograms exhibit 'le plaisir de

[55] Michaux (quoted in Alain Jouffroy, *Avec Henri Michaux* (Monaco, Éditions du Rocher, 1992), 31).
[56] See Michaux (quoted ibid.).
[57] See Michaux (quoted ibid. 35 and see 30).
[58] Michaux (quoted ibid. 35).

tenir caché'[59] despite their gestural language, and as lunatics in 'Les Ravagés' displace the confessional elements of their drawings into their figural aspects in order to protect themselves from prying eyes, this universal language is nevertheless obscure, if not impenetrable.

The traces that Michaux exhibits in his non-discursively mimetic visual works are at once deeply personal and anonymous, allowing him to hide himself behind the very marks that exhibit his singular existence. In works such as the *Grandes Encres noires*, this paradoxical effect is not so much undermined by the fact that Michaux affixed his signature to them, as it is enhanced by it. By the time Michaux produced the *Grandes Encres noires*, the often illegible monogram that constituted his signature did not locate his identity so much in his name as in the movements of his hand. Indeed, unlike in the early works where his name, legibly spelt out in full, stands out from the sheet of paper or canvas, Michaux's signature to the *Grandes Encres noires* can be difficult to detect. Relying on the same gestural language as the ink drawings, and produced by the same instrument using the same ink, it tends to

Fig. 4. *Grande Encre noire*, 1959, 71 × 104 cm, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.

[59] Michaux, *Affrontements*, 79.

merge into each work. Disappearing into the rhythm of the picture, which it echoes and of which it participates, it can appear to dismiss the individual but quasi-anonymous identity that it professes to assert. However, if it can sometimes seem that the works have been left unsigned, it can also seem that the *Grandes Encres noires* as a whole consist of series of variations on their author's anonymously gestural signature, in the same way that 'la peinture gestuelle' (action painting) is 'un développement de la signature' according to Michel Butor.[60] In these works Michaux, like the action painters that Butor comments upon, 'prétend ne nous intéresser que par son graphisme, c'est-à-dire la façon dont il manie son pinceau ou sa plume, ce qui l'identifie véritablement dans sa griffe, fait qu'elle est indubitablement sienne'.[61] However, by locating Michaux's identity in the intimate rhythms of his body rather than in his name, the *Grandes Encres noires* confront viewers with a disturbing spectacle of self-fragmentation. At once coherent, because of their common gesturality, and dislocated, because of their formal variations and dispersion, these 'signatures' achieve the simultaneous dissolution and assertion of self that Michaux sought from his earliest writings onwards. As self-effacing as they are self-affirming, the 'signatures' which these works inscribe point to the 'Big Bang' of the person, as it were. They evoke absence as much as they do presence. Even the 'passage' that they record is undermined by the vacuum which surrounds them, as much as it is thrown into relief by it. If they allow Michaux to articulate a signature, then, the self that the *Grandes Encres noires* manifest nevertheless has the threatening inconsequentiality of footprints in the sand, always on the verge of being dusted away by the wind.

[60] Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira, 1969), 101.
[61] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Michaux began his literary career with a call for Esperanto, and closed it, in *Par des traits* (1984), with a reflection on his search for universally expressive visual signs. But he never made any serious contributions to the artificial language movement. The 'Rudiments d'une langue universelle idéographique contenant neuf cents idéogrammes et une grammaire' which he announced in 1938, and the failure of which he recalled in *Par des traits*, was probably his only properly pasigraphic project. Unfinished and unpublished, it is a lost testimony to the limits of his interest in the grammatical fine points of language-making. Aborted and long-forgotten though it may be, it nevertheless holds the key to many of the tensions underlying Michaux's creativity. The grammar and lexis that he wished to give to his invented ideographic language suggest a certain ambivalence towards radical non-discursivity.

Michaux did not necessarily favour the figural over the discursive. His collections of nonsense poems are published alongside more directly intelligible pieces. If, in his more 'visionary' texts, he courts moments of aporia and self-loss, such episodes tend to be followed by lucid critical commentaries. *Connaissance par les gouffres* is a case in point, with its attempts to find rational interpretations for the more disconcerting lines of 'Tapis roulant en marche'. In his illustrated books, the texts that Michaux juxtaposes with his enigmatic 'signs' also tend to have something of a discursive function. If in *Misérable miracle*, the manuscript and the drawings convey the disruptive effects of mescaline with an intensity that the printed text cannot rival, the printed text nevertheless brings them to life. Paulhan's sarcastic remark that Michaux preferred visual expression to writing from the 1960s onwards because 'il ne [se sent plus] tout à fait honnête (très naïvement honnête) que dans ses grandes gouaches et ses dessins'[1] was only partially perceptive, then. Although it reiterated a sentiment that Michaux himself voiced regularly from the 1950s onwards, it missed Michaux's continued commitment to artifice. Even if he misguidedly

[1] Letter to Dora Bienaimé-Rigo (8 Sept. 1966), in Jean Paulhan, *Le Don des langues: Choix de lettres (1946–1986)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 263.

constructed visual expression as more 'honest' than writing, Michaux never lost the ambition to forge more articulate truths. He resented the ready-made vision of the self and the world that conventional French and mimetic visual representation articulate. But, he was equally suspicious of the inchoate forms that radically undiscursive modes of self-expression give rise to. Refusing to choose between the two, he juxtaposed and confronted them with each other. Just as his self-portraits pit his Latinity against his Nordicity, or his 'femininity' against his 'masculinity', so his works stage unresolved tensions between competing modes of signification and voices. It is in conflict that he best dramatized the intermittences of the self and resolved his desire for a language that would be both intimate and universal.

The wilful eclipses of the self underpinning Michaux's verbal and visual experiments bring him into dialogue with his contemporaries. If Michaux wrote about his own visual works, he also wrote about those of other artists, such as Klee, Magritte, or Matta in 'Aventures de lignes', 'En rêvant á partir de quelques peintures énigmatiques', and 'The Thin Man'. Conversely, artists such as Tapiès and Matta respectively illustrated *Poésie pour pouvoir* (1949) and *Vigies sur cibles* (1956). In turn, Boulez was inspired by *Poésie pour pouvoir*. As Michaux's voice becomes assimilated into those of others in truly collective enterprises, such collaborations and borrowings further widen the scope of his reflection on the limits of individual authorship in the Postface of *Plume*. Even the fluctuating identity which Michaux inscribes in his works has been transformed and disseminated by those who have nourished their own works from his verbal and visual corpus. This, from Jean-Marie Le Clézio to Claude Roy and Michel Butor and from Philippe Jaccottet and Eugène Guillevic to Jean-Michel Maulpoix in France; and from Allen Ginsberg to Francis Bacon, Lawrence Durrell and Richard Ellmann, who translated several of his works into English, in the English-speaking world; or from Octavio Paz to Jorge-Luis Borges in the Spanish-speaking world, to Paul Celan in Germany. It is perhaps in the dissemination of his voice and traces in those of others that Michaux's corpus best demonstrates its simultaneous singularity and universality.

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